

Meditation on Mediation: Direct Experience as Spirituality

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Disclaimer: Any time one tries to articulate or define that which is only captured and constrained by words, there is bound to be a great degree of limitation, repetition, and vagueness. Hopefully, this can be minimized, but also, this lesson can point out the larger meaning of this essay.

He was lying banged and battered, skewered
and bleeding
Talking crippled on the cross
Was his mind reeling and heaving hallucinating
Fleeing what a loss
The things he hadn't touched or kissed his senses
Slowly stripped away
Not like Buddha not like Vishnu
Life wouldn't rise through him again
I find it easy to believe
That he might question his beliefs
The beginning of the last temptation
Dime store mystery¹

There is all of this senseless, unhealthy, and intrusive stuff (some physical, but most not) *between* our world and us. Some of it is inherent to civilization with its logic of dislocation and disembodiment, some of it is socialized or installed in us as methods of control, and some of it we temporarily embrace in our attempt for efficiency, comfort, or for coping within this overwhelmingly dismal reality. This is, in essence, alienation; the separation of us from ourselves, from each other, and from life itself (although these are not truly distinct categories from each other). This is the complete opposite of the direct unmediated experience that I believe to be the fulfillment and celebration of our unique individual spirits connecting. Spirituality, for me, is a life-long process of ridding myself of this mediation. It is not a concept or idea, but the absence of abstraction and linear perception. It is not a place, but an ongoing unconscious linkage of liberatory moments within a lived context. It is not a path, but a life (worth living). It is not a practice, but simply being. We are all encrusted with horrific scars and are weighed down with clunky armor, but we still have an essence or spirit that, for many of us, is not yet broken or tamed. Connecting more fully to this spirit is to more deeply understand who I am, what I feel, and what my authentic desires might be. To be *spirituous* is to be refined or pure. Now, it seems odd to speak in such absolute terms (especially from where we are right now), but one could use this simple definition as meaning to be unmediated, unfractured, or whole — the essence of who we are. While this may seem like an abstract or ideal condition, the process of becoming less mediated, could be an important step in a spiritual reconnection to life. I feel that my spirit flows through (and in fact is) the physical, emotional, intellectual (and any other distinction we could arbitrarily make) together within and without me; there is no separation.

I would define a direct experience as an immediate situation or way of being that does not rely on the symbolic to understand and define our experience, and one that is not mediated by ideology, agenda, and personal baggage (that is, what is imposed upon us through various experiences and socializations). It is understandable that in our current reality, where the symbolic

¹ Lyrics by Lou Reed, "Dime Store Mystery" (from the *New York* album)

methods of understanding, communicating, and navigating through the world are almost all we have to operate with (the rules of engagement), that we temporarily consent to a certain degree of its control in our lives (explaining complex situations, communicating over long distance, making plans, traffic lights, etc). But the one realm where this is absolutely unnecessary, and in fact, where it is ultimately inhibiting, is our spiritual endeavors (and possibly sexual experience, which can deeply relate to spirituality as well, but that's another essay). On a fundamental level, how we view ourselves and how we are connected within the context of our bodies, our minds, our relationship to others, and the world, inform how we move through the world and relate to others, and are therefore relevant to any anarchist discourse.

Mind and Body: Philosophical Traditions of Separation, Dualism, and Resolve

The duality of nature, godly nature,
Human nature splits the soul
Fully human, fully divine and divided
The great immortal soul
Split into pieces, whirling pieces, opposites
Attract
From the front, the side, the back
The mind itself attacks
I know the feeling, I know it from before
Descartes through Hegel belief is never sure
Dime store mystery, last temptation²

The concept of the interconnectedness of everything and within ourselves is in opposition to most conventional philosophic traditions, which attempt to compartmentalize, sever, and dissect rather than see the confluence within. The influential Western thinker who first comes to mind, Rene Descartes, clearly articulated what has always been the basis for domestication throughout civilization, a strict mind-body dualism. His Cartesian model of the world rigorously cuts the connection between our bodies and our mind, viewing our physicality as merely complex machinery willed by God.

This is at the root of Western society, and in a general way, civilization itself. Disconnected from our bodies, Descartes believed in three sources for our ideas: the adventitious (from outside the mind), the factitious (manufactured by the mind), and the innate (imprinted on the mind by God). In his various *Meditations*, he explored how we understand the world and used "reason" to deduce his thoughts on materiality and divinity, giving most credence to the latter. Believing God to be perfection and truth, he held that every mental act has two distinct elements moved by God: understanding, which observes and perceives; and the will, which approves or agrees with the belief in question. Since God gives both, he saw them as virtually flawless, and that "error" or "unreasonableness" is a moral failing or a *going against* of truth. The idea of a mind-body split, supports the idea that the mind is created, and more or less controlled by God, while the body independently performs an assortment of repetitive and mundane physical tasks. This concept

² ibid

follows through to the idea of immortality of the human mind or “soul”, unaffected by death of the physical organism.

This separation also sets the stage for scientists to rely on observation for their mechanistic view distinct from “divine” or “mystical” explanations. Other Cartesian metaphysicians built on Descartes’ ideas, describing varying degrees of synchronization or paralleling concepts between mind and body, but all accepting a fundamental split, and all seeing us essentially as minds linked to God, or at best, a mode or piece of the wholeness of God, who coordinates our actions. Cartesian philosophers have in common with many spiritual thinkers the orientation of moving beyond the physical, or *transcending* the material to the spiritual. In hopes of escaping the “dirty”, “bloody”, and “painful” aspects of life, they create this distinction in order to elevate above the “profane” and “foulness” to the “sacred” and “pure”. The *somewhere* or *somehow* or *someone* that is elsewhere, that we can “link to” (through prayer, meditation, devotion, etc) relieves us of the immediate difficulties of our physical reality. It allows us to tolerate intolerable conditions and behaviors, as well as rationalizing the acceptance of power over us. Attempting to find significant or ultimate meaning detached from the physical is at the core of our dysfunctional society, yet being open to, believing in, or feeling things that conflict with our “knowledge” of physicality can be a powerful non-rational perspective, provided it is coupled with deep and integral connection to the physical. While I feel the need to place a higher value on what I can see and touch, I also don’t want to be purely a materialist. Rather than seeing the spirit as something separate that we fasten to, like a power plant, or something that adjoins or travels through both body and mind like electricity through a wire, spirit could be understood as the essence of the unseparated (unalienated) wholeness.

Another common philosophical thread is that of exploring the tension between the subjective and the objective. With Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s “absolute idealism” (and idealists who followed), we see a critique of traditional distinctions between objective and subjective understanding and the development of dialectical accounts of human consciousness, including the individual sensation through the social to that of a World-Spirit. A tension is then seen between intelligence and object, or the knower and the known. Hegel believed in a fundamental unity or absolute consciousness to connect all subjective egos and a logic (dialectical in character) to study its fundamental structure of reality. Seeing Spirit as the grand synthesis of the self-knowing and the self-actualizing totality of all that is, Hegel saw human thought as one portion of the Becoming of Absolute Spirit. Considered subjectively, Spirit may be observed through the structure of thought in each individual, with consciousness striving for perfect knowledge through a movement of thesis through antithesis to synthesis. Considered objectively, Spirit involves the interaction among multiple selves. Most purely, Hegel viewed the synthesis as the Absolute Spirit, a historical process of expanding human awareness of the fundamental unity of all reality, gradually discovering and expressing its true nature. This idealism, and its promise of inherent or underlying unification, complete with “logical” explanations, is progressive in nature, and essentially leads to a dependence on religion, nationalism, utilitarianism, and optimism. Max Stirner took Hegel’s resolution of dualisms further to create a triad of Materialist-Idealist-Egoist, attempting to collapse idealism and connecting philosophy to the individual outside the fixed idea proposing a synthesis found in the interest of the *unique* – the egoist. While Friedrich Nietzsche set the goals for the egoist as creation beyond oneself, Stirner focused on consumption and the temporary and finite ego’s appropriation of the world as is, to make it one’s own. Stirner pointed out that lords and gods obey nothing beyond themselves and set themselves up

as the supreme morality to serve. Rather than serving these “great egoists”, Stirner proposed to be the egoist himself (and ourselves), but rather than imploring us to follow, entices us by example, avoiding the creation of a new illusion to submit to. Stirner’s egoism becomes merely the following of one’s own interests and desires as a unique being, and the investigation of what that might be. There is no external moral or reference point outside the values of the egoist. All relationships then are willed and hold no intrinsic status or permanent bonds, and are simply the union of independent and conscious egoists. Perhaps most important in Stirner’s realizations is the relation to one’s self. He sets up mere “valuing” life against “enjoyment” of life, in which the former one is the object to be secured, and the latter one is the subject of all valuing relations. In the question of “who am I?” which has its response in the person who asks it, Stirner speaks of a “nothing” which is not one of emptiness, but instead one without imposed or predetermined value, a “creative nothing” to be filled with spontaneous passions and relationships.

Stirner had a very positive influence in the realm of philosophy, but still, somewhat limited as an anthropocentric perspective, unless the egoist could also be a bird, a river, a rock, or a constellation. Ultimately, the intellectualization of spirituality (philosophy) has severe limitations.

Releasing the Flow: Detouring from Paths, Rituals, Specialists, the Sacred, and Religion

I was sitting drumming thinking thumping
pondering
The mysteries of life
Outside the city shrieking screaming whispering
The mysteries of life³

Some people see spirituality as a path to travel, and the more worn the path, the more “true” or “meaningful” it must be. This only reveals fear and laziness. Fear, because people distrust themselves, being stripped of confidence, and are only partial beings dependent on experts in a society fragmented and stratified by specialization. Lazy, because they are encouraged to take a path of least resistance and “rewarded” for being uncritical and uncreative, willing to accept a belief system rather than dwell in the realm of experience and mystery. They develop a *practice*, rather than a spiritual life of *being*. Often, we mistake the specifics of the process for the energy that moves it, or that it *is*. Instead, the method is infused with meaning rather than the experience itself. For instance, we can understand and experience a forest in many ways (scientifically, historically, emotionally, etc), each revealing a particular aspect but not its spirit (although, within the symbolic, sometimes poetry and music offer tingly glimpses). Typically, we move through a forest on a path, one made through ritualistic habit by humans or through repetitious instinctual usage (by deer for instance). We ordinarily stay on this path, making slight excursions off it to encounter “unique spaces” (epiphany or temptation). This mode of encounter is typical of the “spiritual path” model. We place a higher value on what has come before (because “they must know best” or “others have done it”) than in our own spontaneous and passionate desires.

I propose that a more direct, less mediated, and more experiential way to open up is to skeptically distinguish the path as one limited route, and to fully immerse oneself in the forest (bush-

³ ibid

whacking, climbing, swimming, rolling, sleeping, eating, shitting, breathing, singing, remembering, etc). In the first method (the path), we actually go around the forest. It is on either side of us, rather than into the forest, and the forest into us. We are alienated from it through the method, rather than *part of it* through experience. Again, this hints at the object-subject dualism that creates problematic relationships and barely partial comprehension. Mediation is a *path around* rather than *immersion into*.

Ritual, including ceremony, prayer, chanting, sacrifice, etc, is the typical form of mediated spirituality or “spiritual expression” (a phrase which should hint at its alienated attributes). It funnels our experience and motivations into premeditated and rehearsed ceremonial conformity. When we define our spirituality by others’ previous accounts or standards, we submit and define our spirit to their limitations. Ritual has all but replaced spiritual being and is the manifestation of a spiritually impoverished and fractured society. We ritualize every aspect of our lives, replacing authentic moments with predetermined ones. Like neurotic obsessive-compulsive drones, we go through the motions (Rosary Beads, Buddhist chants, Pagan dances, etc) thinking this is connection and substance. Even if we knew the supposed “purpose” of these rituals, which we often do not, their meanings are specific to very particular places, people, and times. Even these “original” meanings were mediated expressions or alienated procedures, so their postmodern imitations are surely doubly dubious. New Age, the salad bar of spirituality, sifts through the many spiritual manifestations and religions in an attempt to glean “positive” aspects from each and re-contextualize them into one’s particular world-view, typically filling spiritual emptiness with the de-spiritualized motions and rituals of others. It is the spiritual cop-out for the lethargic and uncreative and for those who view everything as a commodity to consume, or who eternally search for the miracle cure or magic pill (or those who purchase metaphysical lottery tickets). New Age is not a specific path (although there are some common trajectories used), but instead, a postmodern excuse for tiresome superficiality. New Agers will pull out the “appropriate” ritual for any situation or the “suitable” prayer for each moment, and yet reek of eternal emptiness, buzzing from one path to the next more often than many of us change our socks.

Another unsettling aspect of traditional and conventional spirituality is that of the specialist (shaman, master, guru, priest, etc). While making it more convenient to approach a certain spiritual paradigm, these experts actually move us further from our direct experience into that of ceremony and religion. If spirituality were merely a technical matter, it would almost seem reasonable to approach an expert for advice, guidance, or even direction, temporarily forgetting the issues of power and lack of subjectivity that surround them. Shamans, for instance, throughout the history of external spiritual expression and ritualized practice, have monopolized the link to the “other”. While there has also been the role of shaman as healer and visionary (which also contain problematic aspects of hyper-specialization), typically they are at the root of a stratified society based on division of labor and of specialized knowledge and power. This limits the individual’s access to a spiritual life, and again, funnels it through a vessel with one finite and ritualized perspective. As a society increases in scale, power becomes multiplied, and a class of priests collaborates and creates a body of “knowledge” and customs as a mystified society within a society. While the dynamics of gurus, masters, priests, and other specialists have varying levels of power depending on the situation, they all share the intrinsic element of mediator.

The concept of “the sacred” is another questionable notion often linked to a quest for spirituality. This encompasses themes in which certain domains are viewed as sacred, everything is sacred, or nothing is sacred, each with its own specific rationale, reactive position, and custom.

The human/divine split is encompassed within the idea that certain things, beings, actions, or realms are exclusively sacred, in which we, as humans, inhabit a corrupt and profane world, and that the sacred is “untouchable” by the mortal and “lesser” being, except through mediated and specialized customs and people. This is the basis for a complete separation. The concept of everything being sacred, views all of this world, and beyond, as divine and proposes specific morally grounded methods and practices for interaction with our world. The concept of nothing being sacred (while of most interest to me as an independent unique being relating to my world) is often, unfortunately, a rationale for self-indulgent destruction of the world and the whimsical oppression of everything outside ourselves. Probably the most helpful way to approach the concept of profanity/sacredness, is to avoid the abstraction altogether and develop unique relationships outside this false dichotomy.

Paths, rituals, specialists, and concepts of the sacred are all vital components of the institutionalization of spirituality — religion. Obviously, the discussion of this particular subject is a long one, and best left for anarchist ABC’s, but it does represent the fulfillment and summation of all of the negative and alienated projects of spirituality, and in fact, stands on the opposite extreme to an unmediated spirituality.

The perpetuation of ideological, moral, or religious confinements are, in essence, a profound form of mediation from a free, willed, direct experience absent of imposed bonds and limitations. Another significant problem with any religious-centered view (beyond the personally limiting and inadequate nature of it) is that it creates, like any form of ideology, an abstract bias, self-righteous attitude, and the conception of an “other”. Once traveled down, this slope gets slipperier as morality and dogmatism become all-consuming. Religion is the endpoint, and complete deadness of spirit.

Neither Here Nor There: Living Outside of the Mediated Framework

There’s a funeral tomorrow
At St. Patrick’s the bells will ring for you
Ah, what must you have been thinking
When you realized the time had come for you
I wish I hadn’t thrown away my time
On so much human and so much less divine
The end of the last temptation
The end of a dime store mystery⁴

Spirituality, for me, is the ability to directly connect without defining or creating a solidified framework or even desiring to express the experience. By its very nature it is unexplainable. Anytime we try to express these experiences, by the very character of representation, they cannot be direct experiences; they are outside us and move further from us as an abstract medium that is only a pale reflection. Anytime we limit our experiences through ritual, paths, specialists, ideology, religion, morality etc, we mediate our lives through an imposed and artificial condition that is inherently repressive and stifling to our spirit. The experience of expanding ourselves, opening ourselves, and understanding ourselves in a free and unlimited way is where I derive significance

⁴ ibid

of being. Spirituality can be burning a church, the Grand Canyon at sundown, a snowflake on your tongue, a flash of *deja vu*, a tingle up your spine, an unrestrained orgasm, sharing deep intimacy... really anytime we are fully present in ourselves and in the world without barriers. How we relate or connect to our spirit or our unmediated being is always different from person to person, and even within ourselves; in other words, always in a perpetual state of flux.

We are all part of the earth. All detachment, elevation, or transcendence is an illusion. All we can do is move closer or further from life and ourselves. This should not be mistaken, however, for a “return to Eden” undertaking. Sure, in my opinion, life for humans (and all other beings) was qualitatively richer and healthier before civilization’s annihilation of connectivity, but “return” is merely a reversal of the linearity of progressivism. Just as wildness is not something to preserve or restore, but something *inside us* to connect to and present in all of our relationships. Living free now and ultimately being released in a complete physical sense as our flesh becomes the nourishment for future life is all we can “know”. “We’re all gonna be just dirt in the ground” (meditate on that for a while). Our ego is for now, the moment, and is the basis for infinite possibilities of connection. Our ideas and thoughts are the expression of our ego, the now, and helps us to momentarily distinguish ourselves from everything else of which we are intricately a part. There is no way out (this is not merely an objective analysis, but also a subjective celebration)... we are connected! We are influenced and we influence. Under all our mediation, we are spirit.

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