CONNECTEDNESS: A TRANSFORMATIVE FEELING AND SPIRITUAL VIRTUE

T. Ryan Byerly

Department of Philosophy, University of Sheffield, UK
Correspondence email address: t.r.byerly@sheffield.ac.uk

ABSTRACT: This paper develops an account of one trait involved in living the spiritual life well and argues that this trait can be recognized by both the religious and non-religious as a virtue. The virtue, which I call "spiritual excellence," involves making skilled use of a worldview for which one has ambiguous evidence or better in order to cultivate transformative experiences of connectedness. I begin by describing the experience of connectedness and considering its value. Taking my cue from recent psychological research on awe and related phenomena, I explain how connectedness relates to other experiences, including mystical experiences of ego dissolution and I consider its potential instrumental and non-instrumental values. I then consider the relationship between religion and spirituality and experiences of connectedness. I explain how religious worldviews provide fertile resources for cultivating experiences of connectedness, although non-religious worldviews can also serve this role. I develop my account of spiritual excellence in detail, showing how the account attractively integrates various features included in other leading accounts of what is involved in living the spiritual life well, and responding to objections to thinking that what the account identifies is a virtue.

KEYWORDS: connectedness, awe, mystical experience, worldview, virtue, spirituality

Introduction

Philosophers and psychologists alike have recently been drawn to the idea that there is a virtue or cluster of virtues involved in living the spiritual life well, where these traits can be recognized as virtuous from multiple religious perspectives as well as by the non-religious. This paper contributes to this line of inquiry by developing an

account of one trait that is involved in living the spiritual life well and which I will argue is a good candidate for being recognized by the religious and non-religious as a virtue. The virtue, which I call "spiritual excellence," involves making skilled use of a worldview for which one has ambiguous evidence or better in order to cultivate transformative experiences of connectedness.

I begin by describing the experience of connectedness itself and defending its uniquely transformative potential in more detail in Section 1. I take my cue from recent psychological research on awe and related phenomena, explaining how connectedness relates to other experiences including mystical experiences of ego dissolution and considering its potential instrumental and non-instrumental values. I then turn in Section 2 to the relationship between religion and spirituality and experiences of connectedness. There I explain how religious worldviews provide fertile resources for cultivating experiences of connectedness, although non-religious worldviews can also serve this role. I develop my account of spiritual excellence in detail, showing how the account attractively integrates various features included in other leading accounts of what is involved in living the spiritual life well, and responding to objections to thinking that what the account identifies is a virtue.

Feeling Connected

I begin by examining experiences of connectedness. The experiences of connectedness that I am concerned with are closely related to experiences of awe. Following the seminal work of Keltner and Haidt (2003), awe has received increasing attention from psychologists in the past two decades. As awe has become better understood, it has also become increasingly clear that it can involve or prompt experiences of connectedness and, as I will argue, these experiences appear to bear significant responsibility for observed relationships between awe and prosocial, morally valuable behaviors. In this section, I review this research, highlight the nature and role played by experiences of connectedness, and discuss several ways in which experiences of connectedness may be valuable, including the question of their veridicality.

Awe and Connectedness

Awe is understood to be an emotion experienced in response to phenomena that are conceptually or perceptually vast, such as a grand theory or a sweeping panoramic view (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). It tends to provoke feelings of a small self in relation to these vast elicitors (Piff et al., 2015), and is often accompanied by physiological reactions such as widened eyes and an open, gaping mouth (Shiota, Campos, & Keltner, 2003). Awe is typically experienced as pleasant, and those who experience awe usually want the experience to continue. Those who experience awe may feel as

though time is slowing down as they become absorbed with an object of attention outside of themselves (Yaden et al., 2019). Awe may facilitate or involve an experience of feeling connected to a much larger whole, such as one's social group, or humanity, or reality (Shiota, Keltner, & Mossman et al., 2007).

As this brief description conveys, awe is a complex emotion. Appreciating its complexity has been a gradual process for researchers. Often awe has been measured in a way that does not allow for clean differentiation between its varied aspects. Researchers might simply ask participants to answer single questions about whether or to what extent they are experiencing awe versus other emotions. Or they might assign participants to different conditions, making reasonable assumptions about whether one of these conditions would elicit greater experiences of awe than another. More recently, however, researchers have begun to disentangle the varied aspects of awe in a way that allows for a more fine-grained analysis. I will argue that their work makes increasingly clear the distinctiveness of the experience of connectedness and its transformative potential.

One of the most interesting findings in recent research on awe has to do with its potential to promote prosocial actions which tend to be evaluated in a morally positive way and promote cooperation between the experient and other people. For example, people with stronger tendencies to experience awe are rated as more humble by their friends (Stellar et al., 2018), they display more generous behavior (Piff et al., 2015), and they have stronger prosocial dispositions (Guan et al., 2019). When experiences of awe are experimentally induced, they lead people to present a more balanced account of their own strengths and weaknesses (Stellar et al., 2018), to display more helping behavior (Piff et al., 2015), and to display less aggressive behavior toward others (Yang et al., 2016).

This raises the question of how awe could have these social effects. After all, awe can be experienced privately on one's own at the top of a mountain in response to natural, non-social elicitors, far away from other people. How, then, does it bring about these consequences for social life?

The leading current explanation appeals to the aspect of awe involving the small self (Piff et al., 2015). When individuals experience awe, they feel as if they are smaller, their concerns less important, and their selves demand less attention. This frees up attentional resources to be given to other people, which could promote prosocial behaviors. As Perlin and Li (2020) summarize the hypothesis, attributing it to Piff and colleagues (2015), "According to this position, awe promotes prosociality by diminishing attention to self-oriented concerns, which in turn makes more attention available for other-oriented concerns" (p. 292).

While this small self explanation seems to be on the right track, it does not, as stated, appear to be the whole story, as Perlin and Li (2020) emphasize. It is not just that, when experiencing awe, one comes to care less for oneself – which might also occur when experiencing depression or apathy. But one also has an experience that more actively directs attention outward toward others. One comes to view oneself as being related

to others in a way that promotes prosociality. It is here that I argue the experience of connectedness has a distinctive role to play.

Awe researchers have not always clearly differentiated the experience of oneself as small from the experience of oneself as connected to larger wholes. Consider, for example, the series of studies performed by Piff and colleagues which they appealed to in support of their original formulation of the small self hypothesis. The "small self" was measured in different ways in each of their studies. In their Study 2, it was measured by participants' agreement with a single item measuring the extent to which they felt "the presence of something greater than myself." In their Study 3, it was measured by their agreement with four statements: "I feel small or insignificant," "I feel the presence of something greater than myself," "I feel part of some greater entity," and "I feel like I am in the presence of something grand." And, in their Study 4, it was measured by agreement with the last three items from Study 3 together with two additional items: "I feel like I am a part of a greater whole" and "I feel the existence of things more powerful than myself."

The difficulty here is that conceptually – and, as we will see, empirically – distinct aspects of awe experiences are being run together across these studies. In Study 2, the "small self" is measured by items that pertain only to experiencing oneself as smaller in relation to something vast. In Studies 3 and 4, items that measure experiences of connectedness (e.g., "I feel part of some greater entity" and "I feel like I am a part of a greater whole") are mixed together with items measuring the experience of smallness ("I feel small or insignificant") and items that focus on the greatness of the awe elicitor ("I feel like I am in the presence of something grand"). This intermingling of potentially distinct aspects of awe experiences gets in the way of identifying whether specific aspects associated with awe experiences play a more pronounced role in promoting awe's prosocial effects.

More recently, researchers have performed studies that allow for a more careful consideration of the potential distinctiveness of these elements of awe experiences. Yaden and colleagues (2019) developed the first multi-dimensional measure of awe experiences, the Awe Experiences Scale (AES). This scale has six separate factors that each tap conceptually distinct features common to awe experiences: slowing of time, self-diminishment, experiencing connectedness, experiencing something vast, physical sensations (e.g., goosebumps), and need for cognitive accommodation (i.e., feeling that one's frame of reference has been challenged). Of central importance for us here is that the experience of oneself as small or diminished, measured by such items as "I felt my sense of self shrink," was found to be empirically distinct from the experience of oneself as connected to larger wholes, measured by items such as "I had the sense of being connected to everything." Confirmatory factor analysis revealed that these experiences form separable factors of the overall construct of awe experiences, and attempts to conflate these or other factors of awe experiences led to models with a worse fit for capturing the phenomenon of awe.

Experimental research has also suggested that when it comes to explaining awe's prosocial effects, what is most important is the experience of connectedness – and not the experience of feeling small. The clearest and most compelling example I know of to examine this is a multi-study paper focused on the relationship between awe experiences and prosocial behaviors during the coronavirus pandemic (Luo et al., 2022). In their Study 3, the authors assigned participants to either a condition designed to elicit awe, one designed to elicit amusement, or a neutral condition, and subsequently had them complete measures of awe, the small self, connectedness, and prosocial tendencies to fight the pandemic, including willingness to offer financial support to both in-groups and out-groups. The experience of the small self was measured by participants' responses to two items adapted from (Piff et al., 2015): "I feel relatively small" and "I feel insignificant." Connectedness was measured using the five items for connectedness from the AES together with five new items concerned with the unity of humanity (e.g., "Human beings is [sic] a community with a shared future"). The researchers found that experiencing awe rather than amusement or the neutral condition led to greater prosocial tendencies toward both in-groups and out-groups, and that this relationship was significantly mediated by participants' experience of connectedness but not their experience of the small self. Their Study 4 revealed a similar pattern. The experimental set-up was the same as in Study 3, except that prosociality was measured by participants' willingness to donate blood. In this study, too, awe was found to promote prosociality, and its relationship with prosociality was mediated by connectedness but not the small self.

Some publicly available data of my own (Byerly, 2023) collected for a related purpose described in more detail in Section 2 confirms a similar pattern. I conducted an experiment in which 460 participants engaged in a meditative exercise designed to promote their experience of awe, and examined the relationship between their experience of awe and their willingness to be contacted about different kinds of volunteer opportunities in their local area. I used a shortened version of the AES with the three top-loading items for five of its six factors (the time factor was not represented). Examination of this data reveals that when the small self factor is entered alongside connectedness as a predictor of participants' willingness to be contacted about volunteer opportunities in a hierarchical regression, only connectedness (B = .19, SE = .02, p <.001) and not the small self (B = .03, SE = .03, p = .43) is significant. Similarly, if the four other awe factors are entered together as a predictor alongside connectedness, then only connectedness (B = .15, SE = .03, p = .01) and not this other predictor (B = .07, SE = .04, p = .27) is significant.

The experience of connectedness, then, is closely related to awe experiences, and seems to be of particular importance for accounting for their transformative social effects – more so than the distinguishable feeling of the small self and perhaps other aspects of awe experiences as well. Often, when a person has an experience of awe, this either involves or leads to an experience of connectedness, and it is especially by doing so that the experience is likely to promote moral improvement.

Thus far we have only examined the relationship between connectedness and awe and the prosocial consequences of connectedness. But it remains to say a bit more about the experience of connectedness itself, as well as to more thoroughly interrogate its potential values.

The experience of connectedness is, first and foremost, an experience. It is perception-like. It is not just that the individual in question believes certain propositions about their relationship to other things, because they often will have held these same beliefs prior to the awe experience that prompts their feeling of connectedness. Rather, when they feel connected, they come to represent themselves as related to other things through their experience in a way that involves phenomenological change. They experience or feel themselves to be connected. This shift in self-representation manifests in several ways empirically. When people experience awe, they are more inclined to categorize themselves using inclusive terms such as "human being" that signal their shared relationship with the rest of humanity (Shiota et al., 2007). When asked to draw pictures of their social networks, they draw pictures that exhibit either more connections or more intimate connections after experiencing awe (Bai et al., 2017). The feeling of connectedness seems to make a difference for individuals' schemas of self-understanding.

What people feel connected to is some kind of larger whole. It is notable that the larger wholes identified in the items used in the AES are all very wide wholes – "everything," "all living things," "all things," or "humanity" (Yaden et al., 2019). As other researchers have pointed out, however, it needn't be that experiences of connectedness target wholes that are this wide in scope (Coomber & Harré, 2022). Earlier in evolutionary history, it may have been more common for experiences of connectedness to target scopes that included only the experient's own in-group. Experiencing awe could in this way promote their feelings of connectedness with their tribe, potentially over against other tribes. Experiences of awe and connectedness may still work in this way in some instances, potentially contributing to prejudice toward out-groups. We will return to this topic below when considering the potential virtuousness of cultivating experiences of connectedness.

To summarize what we have said so far, we have seen that connectedness is an experience closely associated with awe, which involves feeling oneself to be connected to a large whole, and which plays a significant role in accounting for the transformative power of awe to promote prosocial actions toward the whole of which the experient feels a part. In the remainder of this section, I will further address the potential value of this experience as well as how it is related to other similar experiences more frequently studied in the philosophy of religion. This will also allow for some additional insights into the nature of connectedness experiences.

Thus far we have primarily considered an instrumental value of the feeling of connectedness. Feeling connected may promote more prosocial behaviors toward

those groups included within the scope of that to which one feels connected. The wider the scope, the larger the group of others for whom connectedness will promote prosocial behavior. But, we should also ask about the non-instrumental value or disvalue of the experience of connectedness.

We did see above that the experience of awe is typically pleasant. This is likely also true of the experience of connectedness (cf. Garfield et al., 2014). So, if pleasure, or the distinctive sort of pleasure that accompanies feeling connected to a large whole, is non-instrumentally valuable, then experiencing connectedness will tend to have this non-instrumental value also.

A trickier question concerns its potential broadly epistemic value or disvalue. Experiencing connectedness involves somehow representing oneself as connected to a wider whole, even if it doesn't require beliefs about this connection (a topic we will return to in Section 2). The following would seem to be true in that case: either these representations are accurate, in which case they have a certain positive alethic value, or they are inaccurate, and so have an alethic disvalue (cf. Siegel, 2021, Section 2). Either one represents oneself as connected to a larger whole and one is so connected, which seems to include an additional positive non-instrumental value, or one represents oneself as connected to a larger whole but one is not so connected, thus involving a non-instrumental disvalue.

I said this question about broadly epistemic value was trickier than the question about pleasure. The reason is that it is debatable how we should understand the content of the representation involved in feeling that one is connected to a larger whole.

Thus far I have described this experience in very broad and abstract terms. Doing so is encouraged by psychological measures used to capture the phenomenon, such as the AES. Items such as "I had a sense of being connected to everything" or "I felt closely connected to humanity" do not specify exactly how this connectedness is understood. Nor do they specify how the "whole" to which one is connected is understood. Is "humanity" or "everything" or "all things" understood to constitute some addition to being – some unified substance beyond individual humans or things? Or are these terms just convenient ways of referring to a plurality of things which exist in their own right but do not together constitute a further substance? How should the connectedness relationship itself be understood? Is the self experienced as being identical to the target? As sharing a common essence with it? As forming a larger composite substance with it? As being interdependent with it?

On the face of it, it would seem that the kinds of items typically used to measure experiences of connectedness do not discriminate between these alternative readings. It would seem that someone who had an experience of being literally identical to a genuine metaphysical whole formed by everything may respond positively to the item, "I had a sense of being connected to everything." Likewise for someone who felt that they were one part of a larger, genuine composite whole formed of all things. And similarly for the person who would say that the content of their experience of

connectedness was not specified in any such determinate way, but was just some sort of vague connectedness with everything else.

These different possibilities for understanding the content of connectedness experiences are worth discussing for several reasons, one of which is that they make a difference to what we say about the broadly epistemic value of these experiences. A priori, it is more likely that each of us is vaguely and indeterminately connected to everything else than that we are connected with everything else in some particular, narrow, specific way. The point is supposed to be a simple one: that the more generic, less specific claim about connectedness is, on account of its lack of specificity, more likely to be true than the more specific claims (cf. Le Poidevin, 2010). There are more ways for it to be true than there are for the more specific claims to be true. If this is right, then it suggests that a more generic, more vague experience of connectedness is more likely to be veridical than are more specific experiences of connectedness.

Indeed, it seems fairly plausible that each of us is connected in some way or other to all things, where "all things" isn't necessarily conceptualized as forming a composite whole. If, then, an experience of connectedness has a vague content such as this, then it is likely to have the non-instrumental alethic value of representational accuracy in addition to the other positive values noted previously. It may be representationally accurate, if imprecise, regardless of how exactly the connectedness relationship is constituted in reality.

What of the alethic value of experiences of connectedness, supposing they have more narrow and specific contents? This will depend, of course, on whether things are in fact the more specific ways that the experiences represent them to be, at least to some extent. It may be sensible to talk of representations being more or less accurate. An experience of connectedness with narrow, specific content may fail to be accurate in its details while being accurate at least about the fact that the experient is in some way or other connected to everything else. In this way, even connectedness experiences with inaccuracy in their details may not be wholly inaccurate, and may be accurate regarding certain important facts. Nonetheless, the danger of some broadly epistemic inaccuracy in a connectedness representation's details increases as the representation becomes more fine-grained. Of course, on the other hand, as a representation becomes less fine-grained, the possibility for accuracy in its details also dissipates.

None of the preceding discussion tells us what the contents of experiences of connectedness in fact are. It only tells us something about the likelihood that they would have alethic values or disvalues, depending on what their contents are. In my view, it is an open question, including from an empirical standpoint, what the typical contents of experiences of connectedness are.

Some studies do seem to provide evidence that individuals' experiences of connectedness may have different contents. For instance, Bai and colleagues (2017) found that there were seemingly representational differences between how individuals from collectivist cultures and individuals from individualist cultures

experienced connectedness. Experiencing connectedness led individuals from collectivist cultures to draw their social networks in such a way that the members were closer to themselves, while experiencing connectedness led individuals from individualist cultures to draw their social networks as having more members. It might seem, then, that individuals from individualist cultures tend to experience connectedness as involving greater breadth of connections, while individuals from individualist cultures experience connectedness as involving greater depth or closeness in existing connections.

Coomber and Harré have also identified empirically distinguishable types of what they call "oneness" experiences – experiences in which the individual feels "a psychologically salient sense of connection between the self and an entity that transcends the self" (2022, p. 49). They complain that in previous research, authors have tended to conflate different types of oneness experiences, and they attempt to provide a typology that distinguishes these and allows for their differentiation empirically. Ultimately, they suggest not only that oneness experiences can differ in terms of the scope of their object as noted previously, but in terms of the "perceived ontology" of the connectedness relationship. They identify three different perceived ontologies, while not aiming to be exhaustive. These are expansion (in which one experiences one's own self as incorporating entities typically thought to be beyond that self), interdependence (in which the self and entities beyond it are felt to depend on each other for their well-being), and essential (in which the self and entities beyond it are perceived to share a common essence). Coomber and Harré developed a scale for measuring these different kinds of oneness, and found that they do indeed load on different factors.

There is an important note of caution to strike, however, when it comes to trying to discern what this research can teach us regarding the contents of connectedness experiences. It is a lesson that is deeply engrained in the related literature on mystical experiences. Namely: we may need to distinguish between the experience itself (and its content) on the one hand and the interpretation of the experience on the other (Hood, 2006). It may be that the variation in connectedness experiences highlighted in the research just noted tells us more about differences in the way these experiences are interpreted than about what their contents are. In fact, in the case of Coomber and Harré, this point is one that the authors themselves endorse. They distinguish between oneness "experiences" and oneness "intuitions." The former experiences are characterized as "pre-interpretive, fleeting feelings of oneness that are typically characterized as ineffable, but that tend to be conveyed using language that refers to inclusiveness and closeness" (2022, p. 51). They quote approvingly Yaden et al.'s (2017, p. 2) comment that these experiences involve "transient mental states of decreased self-salience and/or increased feelings of connectedness." Intuitions, by contrast, are "more stable over time and include propositional content about the world." The scales discussed previously are designed to measure intuitions, rather than experiences.

Of course, we might question whether the scales or something like them must be limited to measuring "intuitions" only and not also "experiences" – most importantly for us, the experience of connectedness. But I think we would be wise here to recognize that there may be no compelling resolution to this debate readily available. Just as there has been debate about whether there is a common, largely ineffable core to mystical experiences (Hood, 2006), or whether they are richer in content (Katz, 1978), so that debate recurs here with respect to experiences of connectedness. Perhaps the content of these experiences is best understood in terms of the very kind of vague, unspecific feeling of connectedness to some larger thing or things that is well reflected in measurement instruments used to target it; or, perhaps at least in some cases the content of these experiences and not just their interpretation is richer in detail.

While I have suggested a certain parallelism between understanding connectedness experiences and understanding mystical experiences, more should be said about the relationship between these. According to a leading approach to studying mystical experiences, exemplified by Hood (2017), mystical experiences tend to come in two chief varieties – extrovertive and introvertive. The way Hood develops this distinction, introvertive mystical experiences involve "a loss of ego," while extrovertive mystical experiences involve "a sense of unity with all things" (Hood, 2017, p. 290). Introvertive experiences are measured by items such as "I have had an experience in which everything seemed to disappear from my mind until I was conscious of only a void" or "[I felt] my everyday self absorbed in the depths of being," which seem to involve a loss of a sense of self. Extrovertive experiences are measured by items such as "[I felt] at one with the universe" or "I have never had an experience in which I became aware of the unity to all things" (reverse scored), which seem to indicate perceptions of connectedness between oneself and larger wholes. Hood treats both kinds of experience as preceding interpretation.

Sometimes authors on mysticism give the impression that it is only the introvertive experiences that ultimately deserve the title of "mystical" experiences, or at least that these are somehow more exalted or paradigmatic instances of mystical experiences. Certainly the kinds of examples that are often identified as paradigmatic of the phenomenon, such as certain examples documented by William James (see Hood, 2017, p. 287), meet the criteria of introvertive and not just extrovertive mysticism. Extrovertive experiences are also claimed to be more common (Hood, 2017, p. 290), and it has been claimed that these are often experienced prior to introvertive experiences (Stace, 1960), as if they are a step along the way to achieving something that requires greater skill to cultivate.

What I want to emphasize here is that extrovertive experiences, even if somehow sub-par as mystical experiences, are prime candidates for experiences of connectedness. To feel that one is connected to a larger whole in the way that seems to be involved in such experiences is definitive of experiences of connectedness. In contrast, losing one's sense of self in the way characteristic of introvertive mystical experiences fits only somewhat uneasily into the category of experiences of

connectedness, and more clearly involves a sense of the small or diminished self discussed earlier. We might understand at least some introvertive mystical experiences as involving an experience of connectedness in the sense that they involve a kind of experience of union or identity of one's self with a larger whole. Yet it could be that some individuals who would score highly on a scale designed to measure introvertive mystical experiences would do so primarily because of an experience of self-loss, and not because of this more unitive kind of experience. It seems appropriate, then, not to conflate the study of experiences of connectedness with the study of mystical experiences. Even a vague sense of connectedness to a large whole will qualify as a paradigmatic connectedness experience, but it is questionable whether it will qualify as a paradigmatic mystical experience. And some paradigmatic mystical experiences which primarily involve ego dissolution may not qualify as experiences of connectedness.

To summarize the results of this section, what we have seen is that feelings of connectedness are fleeting experiences, closely associated with awe, which play a significant role in explaining awe's prosocial effects. They are conceptually and empirically distinguishable from experiences of the small self and other aspects of awe experiences, as well as from mystical experiences. They are valuable instrumentally for promoting morally valuable behaviors, and non-instrumentally for the pleasant feelings they involve. Whether they are also broadly epistemically valuable depends to some extent on their precise contents, which we noted is a debatable topic that is difficult to resolve. It may be, following a kind of common core hypothesis, that experiences of connectedness themselves include only minimal, unspecific content regarding the self being somehow connected to other things. If so, it seems they are likely to have only positive alethic value. Alternatively, they may include more specific content, in which case there is greater chance for alethic disvalue (as well as alethic value) in their details, though we may still suppose that they have a degree of accuracy insofar as they represent the self as somehow connected to larger wholes.

A Spiritual Virtue of Cultivating Connectedness Experiences

Thus far I have said very little about religion or spirituality and their relationship to experiences of connectedness. But it should not come as a surprise that experiences of connectedness are deeply intertwined with spirituality and religion. We saw previously that connectedness is closely related to awe and bears significant responsibility for awe's prosocial effects. But it is well-documented that there is a close relationship between awe and religion and spirituality (e.g., Kearns & Tyler, forthcoming). One idea that is suggested by this relationship between religion and awe is that religious traditions may somehow provide resources that are useful to practitioners for promoting experiences of awe and connectedness. I want to explore this idea here, focusing primarily on how the worldviews of religious traditions

contribute to these resources. Ultimately I will offer a proposal about how we might understand the nature of a human virtue that involves making skilled use of such worldview resources to prompt transformative experiences of connectedness.

Connectedness and Worldviews

We can make a start toward developing these ideas by beginning with the notion of a worldview. I do not mean anything very fancy by "worldview." A worldview in my sense is just a way of conceptualizing one's place within reality as a whole. Worldviews can vary quite a bit in how fine- or course-grained they are. Moreover, given this understanding, there can be both religious and non-religious worldviews. That is desirable from my vantage point because I wish to identify a virtue that can be recognized as such, and even equally possessed, by both religious and non-religious individuals alike.

Despite the fact that the description of a worldview just given is exceptionally bare-boned, it is nonetheless enough for us to begin to gain some grasp of how it might be that worldviews provided by both religious and non-religious sources could serve as an aid for cultivating experiences of connectedness. For, feeling connected is ultimately about perceiving oneself to be related somehow to wider wholes; but worldviews identify some way that one is connected to everything else. If, then, a person can come to shape their experiences so that they align with a worldview, they may have experiences of connectedness.

Let me give some specific illustrations. Take the worldview provided by certain Neo-Confucian thinkers, as developed by Philip Ivanhoe (2018). Ivanhoe highlights how Neo-Confucian authors such as Chen Hao (1032–1085) and Wang Yangming (1472–1529) affirmed a metaphysical view according to which each person forms one body with all other persons, creatures, and things. According to this way of thinking, most of us wrongly think of our selves as too small. Rather than being contained within our skin or our brains, our selves extend outward in a way reminiscent of the "expansion" type of perceived ontology discussed above, reaching beyond the boundaries of our individual bodies to include all people, creatures, and things in the universe. Our "faculty of pure knowing" retains awareness of this unity with all else, and this is why we experience sympathy with other creatures' distress. But often our understanding of this unity is obscured. Coming to appreciate it better and indeed to experience the world in accordance with this metaphysical vision can lead to our moral transformation – to manifesting benevolence (*ren*) in which we care for all others as for ourselves.

Central tenets of Buddhism concerned with impermanence and dependent co-origination provide another example. According to impermanence, everything is impermanent; nothing lasts or endures or has a fixed, enduring essence. According to dependent co-origination, everything depends for its existence on everything else in a

way reminiscent of the "interdependence" type of perceived ontology noted above; and all is in constant flux. These ideas of impermanence and dependent co-origination apply to selves as much as to anything else. Thus, the complementary doctrine of no self teaches

> not only the denial of a substantial, fixed entity we call the self but also a recognition of the self and reality as processes in immanent relationship with one another in their dynamic unfolding. The 'great chain of being' is dynamically linked in a stream of creative processes in which nothing persists or endures. (Davis, 2014, p. 308)

Understanding and learning to experience the world (cf. Garfield, 2015, Ch.6) in terms of these foundational ideas through practices such as mindfulness is thought to help individuals to overcome their wrongful attachments to themselves and to other things in the world, so that they can eliminate their own and others' suffering (see especially Bodhi, 2011).

Each of these worldviews might be employed to prompt experiences of connectedness. In fact, leading philosophers who display an attraction to the morally transformative power of these worldviews often point to the importance of experiencing the world in terms of these worldviews and not just treating them as idle philosophical speculation. Ivanhoe, for example, recommends the value of "living one's life *as if* one were a traditional […] neo-Confucian." He claims that "One might believe, like Pascal, that by immersing oneself in such a form of life […] one will over time come to feel it as true and act accordingly" (2018, p. 56). Owen Flanagan (2018) similarly advocates the value of having "metaphysical hallucinations" that accord with Buddhist metaphysics. "Grasping interconnectedness," he writes, "provides reason for caring about the whole of which one partakes, as well as acting for its good" (p. 270). But "the true belief that all is one and even the entire set of true beliefs that reveal the interdependency of all things are not in themselves sufficient to motivate" transformation. Rather motivating transformation with Buddhist metaphysics requires experiencing a probably false but beneficial metaphysical hallucination which "involves embracing the relevant beliefs and then trying to imaginatively project oneself into a world in which the relevant beliefs seem as true as true can be, and are thus action-guiding" (p. 274).

Notably, what seems to be key for these authors is not so much belief in the worldviews of Neo-Confucianism or Buddhism, but having a relationship to these worldviews that enables experiences that accord with them which in turn guide the experient's actions and promote moral growth. The idea that one might have vivid, action-guiding experiences that accord with a worldview without believing that worldview is not novel. It is a phenomenon that has been frequently documented among anthropologists, for instance, who become so engrossed in the culture they are studying that they begin to have remarkable experiences they often later disavow

which accord with that culture's distinctive worldview (McClenon & Nooney, 2002). In a similar way, authors in the contemporary philosophical literature on faith have often suggested that those who lack belief in religious (or nonreligious) claims can nonetheless adopt alternative positive cognitive attitudes toward these claims which are action-guiding (e.g., Howard-Snyder, 2013; Jackson, 2022; McKaughan, 2016; Schellenberg, 2009).

A leading candidate – and as I argue elsewhere (Byerly, 2024), the only ultimately successful candidate – for an alternative cognitive state that can play this action-guiding role similar to belief is the state of beliefless assumption (cf. Howard-Snyder, 2013). Even without believing some worldview to be true, one can assume that it is true, and even act on the assumption that it is true. This may take work, as anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann has emphasized. Luhrmann's (2020) work points out how difficult it can be for individuals to cultivate and maintain a genuine, action-guiding commitment to certain worldviews, such as those that posit an invisible other and especially a God of the sort envisioned in the Abrahamic religions. It takes much practice and effort to kindle the presence of these invisible others – to make them real in the sort of way involved in adopting what Luhrmann calls a "faith frame."

My suggestion here, which is reminiscent of but goes beyond the ideas of Ivanhoe and Flanagan, is that a person can develop a faith frame, cultivating action-guiding assumptions regarding a worldview such as that provided by Neo-Confucianism or Buddhism, and can thereby experience the world in light of these metaphysical visions in a way that prompts transformative experiences of connectedness. Believing the metaphysical vision is not of primary importance. But adopting an action-guiding positive cognitive attitude toward them that enables experiencing the world in accordance with them is. By making this sort of use of these or other metaphysical worldviews, one might experience greater feelings of connectedness than one otherwise would.

There is some empirical evidence for this latter claim – that cultivating experiences of the world that accord with worldviews can prompt greater experiences of connectedness. For instance, research has found that individuals who engage in mindfulness meditation and loving-kindness meditation, derived from Buddhism, tend to experience greater feelings of connectedness. Aspy and Proeve's (2017) experimental study with a group of 115 undergraduate students showed that both mindfulness and loving-kindness meditation predicted increased feelings of connectedness to other people and to nature compared to an active control group, complementing previous findings.

In my own work (Byerly, 2024), I have been examining whether both theists and agnostics with a more faithful orientation toward theism might experience greater feelings of connectedness if they make use of the worldview of theism when engaging with known awe-elicitors. For purposes of my study, theists are individuals who believe that God exists, where God is understood to be a supernatural creator of the universe who loves all creatures within it. Agnostics claim to neither believe nor

disbelieve that there is such a God. I randomly divided 230 theists and 230 agnostics into two groups. The control group viewed a series of awe-inspiring images – of a flower, a galaxy, the moon reflecting off water, a lightning strike, and a sleeping baby – each for 30 seconds. Prior to viewing the images, they were instructed to contemplate each image using a prompt, which was "Focus on the details" in each case. Before the exercise and afterward, they reported their state of connectedness using the three top-loading items from the AES. The intervention group viewed the same group of images for the same length of time and was given the same instructions, but in their case the prompts that accompanied the images were prompts that made use of a theistic worldview – e.g., "The swirling galaxy reveals God's extraordinary wisdom and design" (for the galaxy) and "Every creature is treasured and loved intimately by God" (for the baby).

Results revealed that theists experienced a significantly greater increase in feelings of connectedness in the intervention condition in comparison to the control condition. The mean change in connectedness for theists in the control condition was .09, while the mean change in the intervention condition was .48. As a whole group, agnostics experienced significantly greater increase in connectedness in the control condition as compared with the intervention condition. However, this experience was moderated by agnostics' non-doxastic assumptions of theism. Agnostics who tended to agree that they "assumed" or "accepted" or "hoped" or "acted as if" or "had faith" that God exists and loves them tended to experience greater increases in connectedness in the intervention condition than in the control condition. A regression equation fitted to the data predicted that agnostics who scored comparably to theists for non-doxastically assuming theism will experience a comparably sized gain in connectedness in the intervention condition as opposed to the control condition, averaging a loss of .28 in the control condition and a gain of .21 in the intervention condition. These results confirm the possibility that both believing a worldview as well as adopting sub-doxastic, action-guiding commitments to a worldview can enable some individuals to experience greater feelings of connectedness when that worldview is activated in contemplative engagement.

In addition, it is worth noting other factors, beyond believing or non-doxastically assuming a worldview, which seem to be relevant for whether someone will be able to make use of a worldview to experience connectedness. In my study, I found that, beyond being a theist or non-doxastically assuming theism, further factors that were related to experiencing greater connectedness through the meditative exercise were how comfortable the participant was with the exercise, how engaged they were with the exercise, and their level of trait absorption – a tendency to become fully immersed with objects of attention through multi-sensory imaginative engagement (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974). These findings cohere well with previous research on facilitators of awe experiences.

Previous research has found that actively engaging with and becoming absorbed with an awe-elicitor is related to experiencing greater awe. In one study, participants

who were given the simple instructions to focus on the details of their surroundings when sitting in a grove of tall trees experienced greater absorption with their surroundings, which prompted greater experiences of awe (Ballew & Omoto, 2018). Possessing trait absorption, too, has been confirmed to be related to experiencing greater awe, as well as more unusual spiritual experiences generally (Maij & van Elk, 2018). It seems to be a kind of skill for cultivating spiritually transformative experiences.

To summarize the results of this sub-section, what we have found is that worldviews – accounts of how one is related to everything else – can be employed in order to prompt greater experiences of connectedness. Both religious and non-religious worldviews can serve this purpose, and it is not so much a matter of believing the worldviews, but of adopting some sort of action-guiding positive cognitive commitment to them that enables experiencing the world in accordance with them that is key. Not everyone is equally skilled in making use of a worldview to cultivate experiences of connectedness, and there appear to be particular practices and orientations that contribute to the ability to do so well.

The Virtue of Spiritual Excellence

We are now in a position to tie together the strands of the previous discussion and offer a proposal for how we might conceptualize a virtue of spiritual excellence concerned with cultivating experiences of connectedness. Spiritual excellence, as I conceptualize it, is a tendency to make skilled use of a worldview for which one has ambiguous evidence or better in order to cultivate transformative experiences of connectedness, which one appropriately values. I propose that spiritual excellence so conceived is one virtue involved in living the spiritual life well. In the remainder of this section, I will unpack this account of spiritual excellence, highlight some of its attractive features, and respond to two objections to its being considered a virtue.

Spiritual excellence is, like other personality traits such as trait absorption, a general tendency to display a broad range of behaviors in relevant triggering circumstances. Someone who possesses this trait, for example, may be quick to draw connections to a worldview ideology in the presence of awe-elicitors. They may actively seek out awe-elicitors. They will possess a tool-kit of practices that draw on their worldview, which they tend to put to work when opportunities arise for cultivating connectedness.

Their tendency is a character trait, because it is ultimately motivated and oriented by particular values they possess. The spiritually excellent person appropriately values experiencing connectedness. They grasp that connectedness experiences are pleasant and morally salutary, and that they can be veridical. They value these experiences in all of these ways. It is because they do that they are inclined to behave in the ways characteristic of spiritual excellence when opportunities arise.

Because spiritual excellence is regulated by placing an appropriate value on experiences of connectedness, this safeguards the practitioner of spiritual excellence from developing experiences of connectedness that might lead to immoral behavior rather than moral behavior. I have in mind here chiefly the possibility raised in Section 1 that experiences of connectedness can take a scope that includes only the practitioner's in-group, and may cement or promote out-group prejudice. To mitigate against this possibility, I suggest that those characterized by spiritual excellence will use this tendency to cultivate experiences of connectedness that have a wide scope, including, for example, all of humanity, all living things, the earth, or everything.

Like many other virtues, spiritual excellence involves skill. Not everyone is equally good at making use of a worldview to prompt experiences of connectedness. Those with spiritual excellence are good at it. As noted, they will develop a toolkit for making use of their worldview. Given the documented importance of multi-sensory engagement for cultivating awe, it is plausible that this toolkit will involve multi-sensory means for making use of their worldview. For example, it might incorporate auditory experiences of music, bodily movements, smells, and more. Consideration of the diversity of embodied religious practices is helpful for getting an idea of what might be involved. We often find in religious practices carefully curated means whereby a person can make skilled use of a worldview to shape their experiences.

On my account, spiritual excellence involves making skilled use of a worldview for which one has ambiguous evidence or better. By ambiguous evidence, I mean evidence that neither strongly supports the truth of the worldview nor strongly supports its falsehood. A person needn't think that their evidence strongly supports their worldview in order to make skilled use of that worldview to shape their experiences. We see this idea confirmed in the same sources noted earlier which confirm the possibility that individuals who lack belief in a worldview can still cultivate experiences that accord with that worldview. A charitable interpretation would claim that many of these same individuals who lack belief in the relevant worldview also have evidence regarding that worldview that does not strongly support it but may instead be ambiguous. They certainly seem to think so themselves: in the sample of agnostics and theists discussed above, I found that there was a significant difference in their self-ratings for their evidence for God, with theists claiming their evidence on average made God's existence 87.76% likely and agnostics claiming their evidence makes God's existence 36.62% likely. If many of these individuals lacked strong evidence for God, then the data surveyed above shows that one can make use of a worldview for which one lacks strong evidence in order to cultivate experiences of connectedness.

Yet, by requiring that the individual with spiritual excellence has at least ambiguous evidence for their worldview I stop short of some of the stronger claims made by Ivanhoe and Flanagan. In his defence of the value of metaphysical hallucinations, Flanagan takes care to highlight how his view is stronger than that of William James. Flanagan advocates cultivating hallucinations in which one comes to experience the

world in accordance with a worldview that is "extremely unlikely," whereas James is concerned with cases more like that which I have in mind in which the truth of the worldview in question is "underdetermined by the evidence" (2018, p. 277). In a similar vein, Ivanhoe advocates the value of "embracing what one at least initially regards as improbable, impossible, or even a hallucination" (2018, p. 56). The way I am characterizing spiritual excellence here requires that one make use of a worldview for which one has stronger evidence than this – evidence that at least does not strongly support the falsity of the worldview.

Why make this requirement? Addressing this question fully would take more space than I have here[1], but the basic idea is that abandoning the requirement would introduce too much risk of epistemic disvalues being incurred by the exercise of spiritual excellence – and unnecessarily so. Comparatively speaking, at least, it is easier to defend the epistemic innocence of assuming a worldview when one's evidence only weakly supports its falsity than when one's evidence strongly supports its falsity. While the topic of the epistemic norms governing assumptions is one that epistemologists have not yet explored in any detail, at least this comparative claim seems defensible – even a constraint on development of a literature on the topic. Yet, risking such epistemic disvalues in the practice of spiritual excellence is likely to be unnecessary for attaining the values one can achieve through cultivating experiences of connectedness. This is because, given the nature of the worldview needed to promote these connectedness experiences as indicated above, it is very likely that most people have available a worldview of the relevant sort which is better epistemically credentialed ready at hand. Opting to cultivate metaphysical hallucinations in Flanagan's sense for the sake of cultivating connectedness experiences is unnecessarily epistemically risky. Perhaps there is some further value that could be attained via cultivating these hallucinations which cannot be as well attained by other less epistemically risky means. But if one's aim is the aim of spiritual excellence – to cultivate experiences of connectedness – then the risk is unnecessary.

The account of spiritual excellence that I have just explicated has much in common with features that other philosophers and psychologists have highlighted as playing an important role in living the spiritual life well. Yet it also differs in its details from alternative proposals.

For instance, in their landmark work that initiated the Positive Psychology movement, Peterson and Seligman identified "spirituality" as one of the four character strengths of the virtue of "transcendence." Indeed, they describe spirituality as the "prototype" of the whole cluster, which also includes appreciation of beauty, hope, gratitude, and humor. What unites the entire cluster is that the various traits enable "individuals to forge connections to the larger universe and thereby provide meaning to their lives" (2004, p. 519). People with the character strength of spirituality are

---

[1] See Byerly (2024) for a fuller discussion of relevant issues. I argue that assuming p when one's evidence strongly supports not-p is epistemically unjustified.

described as "hav[ing] a theory about the ultimate meaning of life" which is "linked to an interest in moral values and the pursuit of goodness" (2004, p. 533), and it is claimed that "spiritual people are likely to experience frequent and powerful awe" (2004, p. 539).

John Cottingham is another author who has written widely on spirituality, religion, and ethics. He claims that the "two main components of spirituality" are "spiritual *praxis*" and "spiritual *experience*" (2017, p. 14). The former comprises "spiritual techniques" such as prayer, meditation, or fasting which may or may not be derived from or at home within a religious tradition. Spiritual experiences, according to Cottingham, contain both a "human dimension" that concerns our deep human responses and aspirations, as well as a "cosmic dimension" that "draws us forward and beyond ourselves […] and enables us somehow to be part of, or one with, something mysterious" (2007, p. 18). Both spiritual praxis and spiritual experience contain ineliminable moral aspects. Cottingham writes that "the overriding aim of authentic spiritual praxis is to facilitate the emergence of a better self" (2007, p. 24), while paradigmatic spiritual experiences are "infused with awe and charred with moral significance, where the individual feels him or herself to be checked, to be scrutinized, and to be called on to respond and to change" (2007, p. 25).

David McPherson is another recent author on spirituality, who has vigorously defended its importance in the good life against contemporary versions of Aristotelianism that threaten to exclude it. McPherson offers a definition of spirituality as "a practical life-orientation that is shaped by what is taken to be a self-transcending source of meaning, which involves strong normative demands, including demands of the sacred" (2017, p. 64). As with Cottingham, spirituality is understood to be expressed through practices such as "self-examination, repentance, mindfulness, study, contemplation" and many others. To practice spirituality, one must adopt "a way of seeing and directing one's life as a whole" in which one seeks "to orient one's self better toward the good" (2017, p. 65). Moreover, the spiritual life is not just concerned with any old goods, but is particularly concerned with qualitatively superior and superlative goods of a sacred, holy, or reverence-worthy nature which are taken to generate strong normative demands on the practitioner's life. "Spirituality" itself is not a virtue, and can be practiced both well and poorly. Rather it is piety that is "the virtue concerned with a proper relationship in feeling and in action to the sacred or the reverence-worthy" (2017, p. 74).

Finally, Pierre Hadot is well known for his characterization of all of the ancient schools of Hellenistic philosophy as spiritual traditions. On Hadot's account, these schools each combine together a certain practical ideal as to how to live one's life with a philosophical worldview or discourse which supports practitioners in pursuing that ideal. Epicureanism, for instance, is "a philosophy which seeks, above all, to procure peace of mind" (1995, p. 222). The atomistic worldview of Epicureanism articulated in its philosophical discourse aims to "liberate mankind from everything that is a cause of anguish for the soul: the belief that the gods are concerned with mankind; the fear

of post-mortem punishment; the worries and pain brought about by unsatisfied desires" (1995, p. 222).

Mark Wynn outlines Hadot's view in more detail as follows:

> The 'philosopher' begins with a conception of the good human life […] Granted some such conception, the sage then seeks to adopt the requisite means for realizing the good life so understood, and to this end engages in various spiritual disciplines, which are designed to help them internalize the world view specified in the relevant philosophical discourse. If these exercises are efficacious, then the adept will become habituated to thinking of themselves in terms of that world view, and will thereby achieve a way of life in which their favoured psychological and moral condition can be enduringly realized. (2020, pp. 12–13)

Importantly, Hadot does not require that the worldviews of philosophical discourse be endorsed by the adept as true in all their details for them to play this role. Rather, as argued by Wynn, the adept need only take the world view to have "some prospect of providing at least an approximation to the truth" (2020, p. 161) or to be "a serious contender for truth, considered as a general guide to the nature of things" (2020, p. 15). They cannot, however, "treat their world view as simply a matter of make-believe" (2020, p. 161).

Clearly there are many points of overlap between my account of spiritual excellence and these authors' ideas about the features that contribute to living the spiritual life well. All of these accounts make some use of the idea of a practitioner's worldview and its importance in the spiritual life. With Hadot and Wynn, I stress the possibility of internalizing a worldview for which one lacks strong evidence and making use of it in pursuit of practical aims. With all of these authors, I place an emphasis on moral transformation as a goal of spiritual excellence and spiritual practice more generally. With Hadot, Wynn, McPherson, and Cottingham I centre the role of skilful practice in the spiritual life. And, with Peterson and Seligman and Cottingham, I focus on the role of engaging in spiritual practices to cultivate transformative experiences of awe and connectedness.

Yet, my conceptualization departs from each of these authors in some subtle way. For instance, in contrast to Hadot, it focuses on just the one practical aim of experiencing transformative connectedness, suggesting that this aim can be pursued using multiple distinct worldviews. Also in contrast to Hadot, it does not require that one lacks strong support for the worldview one employs.[2] In contrast to McPherson, it does not focus on strong evaluative meaning, particularly the qualitative distinction between sacred and profane values. There is no requirement that the practitioner of spiritual excellence conceptualizes their connectedness experiences as being of the

---

[2] On this element of Hadot's view, see Wynn (2020, pp. 15–16).

sacred, though this is left open as a non-essential possibility. In apparent contrast to both Cottingham and McPherson, the account places less emphasis on the practitioner's worldview being true. Whereas Cottingham claims that genuine spirituality must involve experiences that "disclose" something "important about the way things are" (2017, p. 20) and McPherson claims that piety involves "awe or reverence for what *is* sacred" (2017, p. 75, n.36, emphasis added), my account does not require that the practitioner's worldview is true but only that it enables experiences of connectedness. Finally, my account does not stress doxastic elements of the practitioner's relationship to their worldview in the way that Peterson and Seligman do when they "define the strength of spirituality and religiousness as having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe and one's place within it" (2004, p. 533).

These differences generally serve to make spiritual excellence a more widely available virtue, and one that can be equally possessed by individuals who make use of quite different worldviews. It is a virtue available even to those who lack belief in a worldview, in contrast to Peterson and Seligman. It is available both to those who have ambiguous evidence for a worldview as well as those who have strong evidence for a worldview, in contrast to Hadot. It is available to those who do not experience the world as including qualitatively superlative sacred values, as well as those who do, in contrast to McPherson. And it does not require that the practitioner's worldview be true, in apparent contrast to McPherson and Cottingham. Indeed, contrasting with these authors, the account allows different individuals to make use of contradictory worldviews and, in doing so, to equally display spiritual excellence. As long as the practitioner is making use of a worldview for which they have ambiguous evidence or better and is making skilled use of this worldview to cultivate transformative experiences of connectedness because they appropriately value these experiences, they can practice spiritual excellence to the full.

The preceding discussion, I hope, highlights some of the attractive features of the proposed account of spiritual excellence. It integrates many important ideas about living the spiritual life well identified by other authors. It also does so in such a way as to make spiritual excellence a widely available virtue which can be recognized as such by adherents of multiple contradictory religious perspectives and none, as well as a virtue that can be equally possessed by such adherents. Moreover, there is empirical evidence supporting the reality of such a feature. At least, there is evidence that some people are more characterized by the feature than others and that individuals can act in accordance with it to experience the kind of connectedness with which it is concerned, and that the latter in turn is morally beneficial.

All of this suggests that spiritual excellence as spelled out above is a good candidate for a virtue. We can perhaps see this more clearly with a flexible, plausible account of what virtues are in hand. For this purpose, consider Christine Swanton's account of virtue, which is intended to provide a "minimalist definition of virtue" that "is compatible with a great variety (if not all) rival conceptions of virtue" (2021, p. 206).

On Swanton's account, a virtue is "a disposition of good or excellent responsiveness to evaluatively significant features of the world, within its field" (2021, p. 221). Each character trait focuses upon some field of concern, and is concerned with evaluatively significant features within that field. When a character trait "latches onto these features in a characteristically good or correct way," that is when it is a virtuous trait. Put simply, a virtue is a tendency to respond well enough to some value or values.

If we think of virtues in this way, then it is indeed quite plausible that spiritual excellence as described is a virtue. It involves a disposition of good responsiveness to certain values – chiefly, experiences of connectedness and moral growth. The person who possesses spiritual excellence appropriately values experiencing connectedness both for its non-instrumental values and for its instrumental value in promoting moral behaviors. This valuing of connectedness and its downstream effects regulates their attempts to cultivate connectedness experiences by skilfully employing worldviews for which they have ambiguous evidence or better.

Of course, not all virtue theorists will be happy with Swanton's minimalist definition. Some – and I am thinking here especially of certain neo-Aristotelians – may worry that Swanton's definition is too minimal, and that there are additional features that a trait needs to possess in order to qualify as a virtue which may seem to be lacking in the case of spiritual excellence. I will consider two candidates for such features, treating the charge that spiritual excellence lacks these features as an objection to the account I have provided. By responding to these charges I will complete my case on behalf of spiritual excellence's status as a good candidate for a widely recognizable virtue of the spiritual life.

The first concern is based on the idea that Swanton's minimalist view of virtue does not adequately reflect the humanness of virtue. It offers an account of a way that a character trait may count as a virtue, perhaps, but not an account of how a trait may count as a human virtue. Advocates of naturalistic approaches to ethics will find this suspicious, because in their view ethics must be founded upon a conception of human nature, and the minimalist view is not so based. This is important, because there may be ways of valuing well things that are valuable that are alien to human beings. To be a virtue, a trait must not only involve valuing something valuable well, but it must involve doing so in a way that is accessible to human beings and reflective of their nature as human beings. It must not involve valuing something valuable in a beyond-human way. As Martha Nussbaum puts it, "there are some very general conditions of human existence that are also necessary conditions for the values that we know, love, and appropriately pursue" (1990, p. 79).

The concern may be clear enough couched in these general terms, but we can also develop a more specific version of it by referring to a leading example of this kind of neo-Aristotelian theory. Rosalind Hursthouse's approach is as good as any. On Hursthouse's view, the broad structure of ethical evaluation for human beings is similar to that involved in the evaluation of plants and animals. We evaluate any of these things as a good specimen of its kind insofar as its evaluative aspects tend to

foster the ends characteristic of its species. Human beings are by nature social animals whose ends are individual survival, continuance of the species, characteristic enjoyments and freedom from pain, and the good functioning of their social group. Thus, "human beings are ethically good in so far as their ethically relevant aspects foster the four ends appropriate to a social animal, in the way characteristic of the species. And the structure – the appeal to just those four ends – really does constrain, substantially, what I can reasonably maintain is a virtue in human beings" (1999, p. 224). To count as a virtue, a trait must not just involve valuing something valuable well, but it must involve doing so in such a way as to adequately promote the four ends of social animals and not be inimical to them.

I think a promising response can be made to this concern, both in its generic form and its specific articulation appealing to Hursthouse's view, by modifying the minimalist view of character virtue and arguing that spiritual excellence satisfies the modified view. In response to the generic objection, for example, we could modify the minimalist view so that it says that a character trait is a human virtue if it involves valuing well something valuable in a way that fits well with human nature or is characteristic of human beings. Exactly what it is for some way of valuing to "fit well with human nature" or to be "characteristic of human beings" is a fraught notion. But, however we understand the notion, there is a great deal of plausibility to the claim that spiritual excellence as described ought to count as a way of valuing something valuable that fits with human nature and is characteristic of human beings. As David McPherson argues, the recorded history of humanity to the present indicates that human beings are "*homo religious* – i.e., naturally drawn to spirituality" (2017, p. 74). Practicing spiritual excellence is something human beings can do; most human beings do it to some extent and some do it very well. Spiritual excellence is a very human way of valuing valuables.

A parallel approach can be made in response to the concern as expressed through Hursthouse's view. Though we could perhaps attempt to resist her claim that human beings have just the four ends she lists, I don't think doing so is necessary for answering the concern. We can again modify our basic view so that it now claims, for example, that a character trait is a human virtue if it is a way of valuing valuables well that when exercised by human beings tends to promote their four ends and not be inimical to them. We then need to argue that spiritual excellence, when practiced by human beings, tends to promote the four ends and not be inimical to them. And again, I suggest a plausible case can be made for thinking this is true.

First, if practicing spiritual excellence is indeed conducive to developing other prosocial, morally valuable behaviors, and it is granted – as it is by Hursthouse – that these behaviors tend to promote the four ends and are not inimical to them, then spiritual excellence will be indirectly conducive toward promoting these ends. Second, I suggest that spiritual excellence is directly conducive to the third end of human beings without being inimical to the other ends. It is directly conducive to human beings experiencing characteristic enjoyments in the form of experiencing awe of the

awesome and connectedness with large wholes. These experiences, we have noted, are pleasant, and they are characteristically available to human beings. As John Cottingham puts it, they are part of our "ordinary human birthright" (2014, p. 63).

Talk of these experiences being characteristically available to human beings brings us to a second concern that is focused on one way of spelling out exactly what the characteristic human way is. As Hursthouse explains the view, "Our characteristic way of going on, which distinguishes us from all the other species of animals, is a rational way. A 'rational way' is any way that we can rightly see as good, as something we have reason to do" (1999, p. 222). One might worry that even if practicing spiritual excellence is characteristic of human beings in some other sense of fitting with their nature or being generally available to them as a way of valuing that promotes their four ends, it could still fail to be a virtue on account of involving irrationality – as not being something humans have reason to do. Indeed, Hursthouse offers some remarks about theistic spirituality, or piety, in particular that seem to suggest this view.

Hursthouse asks us to imagine an atheist evaluating a theist's practice of theistic piety. The sort of piety in view is a sort that "prompts them to pray, to refrain from blasphemy, to go to church, to spend time thinking about God and trying to get closer to an understanding of Him" (1999, p. 233) and the like. An open-minded atheist making such an evaluation may well grant that such piety in the pious "is inseparably intertwined with, and positive reinforces, their other virtues" (1999, p. 232) and so in this way indirectly "fosters the four ends" (1999, p. 233) of human beings. They may grant, moreover, that "piety undoubtedly brings great joy and serenity to its possessors" (1999, p. 233). In these respects, it would otherwise be a good candidate for a virtue. The problem, however, is that "from the atheist's standpoint [practicing piety] is based on a complete illusion; reason cannot endorse it." Indeed, "the right reasons [the pious] think they have […] for doing these things, are no reasons at all" (1999, p. 233). Thus, "the atheist cannot judge piety to be a virtue without abandoning her atheism" (1999, p. 234).

Now, this argument from Hursthouse is not exactly an easy one to interpret. One might take it to be claiming that no atheist could judge that practicing theistic piety is rational for any theist. If that is the view being defended, then it may indeed seem to be presenting a challenge for my account of spiritual excellence. This is because it would seem that the objection is based on the idea that in order to be rational, piety would need to be – to use my idiom above – guided by a worldview that is correct. It is because the atheist judges that theism is a false worldview that they cannot judge a theist's piety to be rational.

While Hursthouse's comments present a challenge to my account of spiritual excellence if interpreted in this way, I think this way of interpreting Hursthouse is uncharitable and saddles her with an unattractive view about the sort of rationality that virtue requires. The problem is that rationality is widely regarded to be perspectival (e.g. Foley, 1987). What is rational for one agent given their evidence or perspective may not be rational for another agent given their evidence or perspective.

The atheist's judgment that the theist's piety is irrational may be too quick if the theist has different evidence from the atheist, evidence that renders theism more likely for them than the atheist's evidence renders it for them.

This point suggests a different and more charitable reading of Hursthouse's comments, but one that will not enable a criticism of the account of spiritual excellence developed above. On this reading, Hursthouse is assuming that whatever reasons the theist in question thinks they have for practicing piety, the atheist possesses exactly those same reasons. The atheist knows what the reasons are that the theist thinks they have for practicing piety, and judges these to be no reasons at all. Since these reasons the atheist also possesses are the only reasons the theist has for engaging in theistic piety, and the atheist does not regard these "reasons" as reasons, she cannot judge the theist's practice of piety to be something the theist has reason to do. If she did, she'd have to give up her own atheism, because she would have to judge that she too has reasons to engage in theistic piety, since she possesses the same reasons for this that the theist does.

Interpreted in this way, Hursthouse's point about rationality would seem no longer to challenge the status of spiritual excellence as a virtue. It will no longer sustain the view that in order for the practice of spiritual excellence to be virtuous, the worldview made use of must be true; instead, it would seem only to require that the practitioner's perspective provides enough evidence for that worldview for it to be rational for them to make use of it to cultivate connectedness experiences. How much evidence is required for this? Hursthouse doesn't seem to comment on this in any detail. It is interesting that she describes the atheist as regarding theism as a "complete illusion." While Flanagan and Ivanhoe's views, as described above, may support practicing something like spiritual excellence even when the worldview in question is a complete illusion, this is not a requirement of my own, more modest Jamesian view. It would seem that as defined here, spiritual excellence is much less susceptible to this charge of irrationality, since it requires that the practitioner at least has ambiguous evidence for their worldview. To insist that it is irrational to act when one has ambiguous evidence for some claim would seem to conflict with the human predicament. Too often we must act when having only ambiguous evidence on a topic, and when we act on our ambiguous evidence our doing so is not always irrational. So here in the case of spiritual excellence.

Thus, it seems that the account of spiritual excellence presented above can escape from both of these challenges to its status as a virtue. It is a very human way of responding to values, and it is also one that is not easily convicted of the charge of irrationality. Spiritual excellence is a way of responding well and skilfully to the instrumental and non-instrumental values of connectedness experiences which accords with human nature and involves making good use of human capacities for rational reflection. As such, it is a good candidate for a human virtue.

Conclusion

This paper has developed and defended an account of spiritual excellence as a virtue recognizable as such from multiple religious perspectives and none. On the account provided, spiritual excellence is a tendency to make skilful use of a worldview for which one has ambiguous evidence or better in order to cultivate transformative experiences of connectedness, because one appropriately values these. I began by describing connectedness experiences and defending their instrumental and non-instrumental value, taking my cue from recent research in the psychology of awe. I then explicated this account of spiritual excellence and demonstrated some of its attractiveness when compared with other leading ideas about the features involved in living the spiritual life well. I finally responded to two charges against the virtuousness of spiritual excellence focused on its humanness and rationality, arguing that it is indeed a human virtue and one that needn't involve objectionable irrationality.[3]

References

Aspy, D. & M. Proeve. (2017). Mindfulness and Loving-Kindness Meditation: Effects on Connectedness to Humanity and to the Natural World. *Psychological Reports*, 120(1), pp. 102–117.

Bai, Y., Maruskin, L. A., Chen, S., Gordon, A. M., Stellar, J. E., McNeil, G. D., & D. Keltner. (2017). Awe, the diminished self, and collective engagement: Universals and cultural variations in the small self. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 113(2), pp. 185–209.

Ballew, M. T. & A. M. Omoto. (2018). Absorption: How nature experiences promote awe and other positive emotions. *Ecopsychology*, 10(1), pp. 26–35.

Bodhi, B. (2011). What Does Mindfulness Really Mean? A Canonical Perspective. *Contemporary Buddhism*, 12(1), pp. 19–39.

Byerly, T. R. (2023). An Intervention for Connectedness with Theists and Agnostics. Dataset available at 10.6084/m9.figshare.21896781

Byerly, T. R. (2024). *Faith, Flourishing, and Agnosticism*. Oxford University Press.

Coomber, T. & N. Harré. (2022). Psychological Oneness: A Typology. *Review of General Psychology*, 26(1), pp. 49–67.

Cottingham, J. (2017). Philosophy, Religion, and Spirituality. In D. McPherson (Ed.), *Spirituality and the Good Life: Philosophical Approaches*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 11–28.

Davis, L. (2014). Mindfulness, Non-Attachment, and Other Buddhist Virtues. In S. V. Hooft (Ed.), *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*. Durham: Acumen, pp. 306–317.

Flanagan, O. (2018). Hallucinating Oneness: Is Oneness True of Just a Positive Metaphysical Illusion? In Ivanhoe, P., Flanagan, O., Harrison, V., Sarkissian, H. & E. Schwitzgebel (Eds.), *The Oneness Hypothesis: Beyond the Boundaries of the Self*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 269–284.

Foley, M. (1987). *The Theory of Epistemic Rationality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Garfield, A. M., Drwecki, B. B., Moore, C. F., Kortenkamp, K. V., & M. D. Gracz. (2014). The oneness beliefs scale: Connecting spirituality with pro-environmental behavior. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 53(2), pp. 356–372.

Guan, F., Chen, J., Chen, O., Liu, L., & Y. Aha. (2019). Awe and Prosocial Tendency. *Current Psychology*, 38, pp. 1033–1041.

Hadot, P. (1995). *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. M. Chase. Oxford: Blackwell.

Hood, R. (2006). The Common Core Thesis in the Study of Mysticism." In P. McNamara (Ed.), *Where God and Science Meet*. Westport, CT: Praeger, pp. 119–138.

Hood, R. (2017). Mysticism and Hypo-egoicism. In K. Brown & M. Leary (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Hypo-egoic Phenomena*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 285–296.

Howard-Snyder, D. (2013). Propositional Faith: What it is and What it is Not. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 50(4), pp. 357–372.

Hursthouse, R. (1999). *On Virtue Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ivanhoe, P. (2018). *Oneness: East Asian Conceptions of Virtue, Happiness, and How We are All Connected*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jackson, E. (2022). Faith, Hope, and Justification. In L. Oliveira & P. Silva (Eds.), *Propositional and Doxastic Justification*. New York: Routledge, pp. 201–216.

Jiang, L., Yin, J., Dongmei, M., Zhu, H., & X. Zhou. (2018). Awe weakens the desire for money. *Journal of Pacific Rim Psychology*, 12(4), pp. 1–10.

Katz, S. T. (1978). Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism. In S. T. Katz (Ed.), *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 22–74.

Kearns, P. & J. Tyler. (forthcoming). Examining the Relationship between Awe, Spirituality, and Religiosity. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*.

Keltner, D. & J. Haidt. (2003). Approaching Awe, a Moral, Spiritual, and Aesthetic Emotion. *Cognition and Emotion*, 17(2), pp. 297–314.

Le Poidevin, R. (2010). *Agnosticism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Luhrmann, T. (2020). *When God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Luo, L., Zou, R., Yang, D., & J. Yuan. (2022). Awe experience triggered by fighting against COVID-19 promotes prosociality through increased feelings of

connectedness and empathy. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. DOI: 10.1080/17439760

Maij, D. & M. van Elk. (2018). Getting Absorbed in Experimentally Induced Extraordinary Experiences: Effects of Placebo Brain Stimulation on Agency Detection. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 66, pp. 1–16.

McClenon, J. & J. Nooney. (2002). Anomalous Experiences Reported by Field Anthropologists: Evaluating Theories Regarding Religion. *Anthropology of Consciousness*, 13(2), pp. 46–60.

McKaughan, D. (2016). Action-Centered Faith, Doubt, and Rationality. *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 41(9999), pp. 71–90.

McPherson, D. (2017). *Homo Religiosus*: Does Spirituality Have a Place in Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics? In D. McPherson (Ed.), *Spirituality and the Good Life: Philosophical Approaches*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 64–83.

Nussbaum, M. (1990). *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Perlin, J. & L. Li. (2020). Why Does Awe Have Prosocial Effects? New Perspectives on Awe and the Small Self. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 15(2), pp. 291–308.

Peterson, C. & M. Seligman. (2004). *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Piff, P. K., Dietz, P., Feinberg, M., Stancato, D. M., & D. Keltner. (2015). Awe, the small self, and prosocial behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 108 (6), pp. 883–899.

Preston, J. & F. Shin. (2017). Spiritual Experiences Evoke Awe through the Small Self in Both Religious and Non-Religious Individuals. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 70, pp. 212–221.

Schellenberg, J. (2009). *The Will to Imagine: A Justification of Skeptical Religion*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Shiota, M. N., Keltner, D., & A. Mossman. (2007). The nature of awe: Elicitors, appraisals, and effects on self-concept. *Cognition and Emotion*, 21(5), pp. 944–963.

Shiota, M., Campos, B., & D. Keltner. (2003). The Faces of Positive Emotion: Prototype Displays of Awe, Amusement, and Pride. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1000, pp. 296–299.

Siegel, S. (2021). The Contents of Perception. In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta. Available at: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/perception-contents/

Stace, W. T. (1960). *Mysticism and Philosophy*. London: Macmillan.

Stellar, J. E., Gordon, A., Anderson, C. L., Piff, P. K., McNeil, G. D. & D. Keltner. (2018). Awe and humility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 114(2), pp. 258–269.

Swanton, C. (2021). *Target-Centred Virtue Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tellegen, A. & G. Atkinson. (1974). Openness to Absorbing and Self-Altering Experiences ('Absorption'), a Trait Related to Hypnotic Susceptibility. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 83(3), pp. 268–277.

Valdesolo, P. & J. Grama. (2014). Awe, Uncertainty, and Agency Detection. *Psychological Science*, 25(1), pp. 170–178.

Van Cappellen, P. & V. Saroglou. (2012). Awe activates religious and spiritual feelings and behavioral intentions. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 4(3), pp. 223–236.

Wynn, M. R. (2020). *Spiritual Traditions and the Virtues: Living Between Heaven and Earth.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Yaden, D. B., Haidt, J., Hood, R. W., Vago, D. R., & A. B. Newberg. (2017). The varieties of self-transcendent experience. *Review of General Psychology*, 21(2), pp. 143–160.

Yaden, D., Kaufman, S., Hyde, E., Chirico, A., Gaggioli, A., Zhang, J., & D. Keltner. (2019). The Development of the Awe Experiences Scale (AWE-S): A Multifactorial Measure for a Complex Emotion. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 14(4), pp. 474–488.

Yang, Y., Yang, Z., Bao, T., Liu, Y., & H. A. Passmore. (2016). Elicited awe decreases aggression. *Journal of Pacific Rim Psychology*, 10: e11.

How To Cite This Article

Copyright Information