Spirituality, spiritual sensibility and human growth

Carr, David

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

CrossMark

Spirituality, spiritual sensibility and human growth

David Carr[1,2]

Abstract While notions of spirituality, spiritual experience and spiritual development seem much neglected in the literature of modern analytical philosophy, such terminology continues to be current in both common usage and religious contexts. This author has previously taken issue with some recent attempts to develop (educational and other professional) conceptions of spirituality and spiritual experience as substantially independent of religious attachment. Notwithstanding this, the present paper considers whether such a 'religiously-untethered' notion of spirituality, spiritual experience or sensibility might yet be sustainable in terms of two key criteria: (1) as a capacity for non-instrumental perspectives on, or interpretations of, the world of ordinary experience; and (2) as a corresponding capacity to identify goals and values that transcend or are not reducible to the meeting of immediate natural or material—either individual or social—needs.

Keywords Spirituality · Religion · Virtue · Sensibility · Narrative

Introduction: aims and argument

It is the main aim of this paper to explore the sense or coherence of an all-purpose conception of spirituality or spiritual sensibility that has wider human significance than the religious. To this end, the paper pursues a fairly complex argument over the course of seven substantial sections. To begin with, the "Concepts of spirit,

✉ David Carr
dcarr@staffmail.ed.ac.uk

1   Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, University of Birmingham,
     Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK

2   University of Edinburgh, Moray House, Holyrood Road, Edinburgh EH8 8AQ, UK

🙌 Springer

spirituality and spiritual experience" section addresses the analytical task—regrettably neglected in much latter day literature on spirituality—of distinguishing a number of key senses of spirit, spirituality and the spiritual, arguing that few of these have essential religious connotations or significance. The "Normative and developmental dimensions of spirituality" section emphasises the distinctively normative dimensions of spirituality as a capacity or sensibility available only to rational human agents. This is not, of course, to say that spiritual sensibility is a form of reason as such, only that non-human brutes incapable of reason or cognition could not be credited with such sensibility. In this light, the "Reason not the need: beyond getting and spending" section elaborates on the reasons for supposing that no reductive naturalistic understanding of the 'higher' human capacities and virtues commonly associated with spiritual sensibility would seem possible. That said, the "The natural ground of 'trans-natural' sensibility" section engages in some 'folk-psychological' speculation about how such sensibility may have emerged from more basic human concerns with natural necessities. Still, the "The narrative form of spiritual normativity" section argues that the essentially normative character of spirituality or spiritual sensibility has a quite distinctive 'narrative' character that is invariably linked to or rooted in particular kinds of sacred or other stories. However, following some analysis in the "Narrative and truth" section of the complex epistemic relationship of such narratives to reality and truth, the "The non-literal character of spiritual truth" section concludes with further exploration of the distinctively non-literal or figurative truth of the narratives of spiritual sensibility.

Concepts of spirit, spirituality and spiritual experience

We may begin with the commonly assumed connections of the spiritual and/or spirituality with religion. In the past, concepts of spirit and spirituality have been most commonly associated with, or located in, contexts and discourses of religious commitment or faith often presupposing or implying beliefs in a metaphysically distinctive non-material dimension of spirit or soul. In fact, it might be held that little sense can be attached to ideas of spirit and spirituality apart from such contexts and associations. In this light, the present author has in several places (Carr 1995, 1996, 2002, 2003a) previously pressed such sceptical claims against more recent attempts to develop more secular or religiously 'untethered' (for this term, see McLaughlin 2003) concepts of the spiritual and spirituality. However, the case for some such broader or more accommodating conception of spirituality may not yet be entirely ruled out and it is the main aim of this paper to give this idea a further run for its money.

To begin with, it would appear that such terms as 'spirit', 'spiritual' and 'spirituality' have wide application in ordinary usage and that by no means all of such applications have inherent religious connotations or associations. The present author has previously (Carr 2008) distinguished a number of different commonly used senses of such terms:

1. There is the simple and simplistic association (or equation) of the spiritual and spirituality with the religious.
2. Terms such as 'spirit' and 'spiritual' have sometimes been associated—not least in the 'occult' sections of bookshops or libraries—with the supernatural, ghostly or 'spooky'.
3. While certainly separable from both (1) and (2), 'spirit' is often used as a synonym for what has been more formerly or archaically called the 'soul'.
4. Perhaps related to (3), the term 'spiritual' has been applied to human experiences of a psychically 'transcendent' or less earthbound kind.
5. The basic terms of spiritual usage have been employed to characterise forms of contemplation or meditation associated with such practices as yoga or other spiritual exercise.
6. In a sense that goes back to Plato (1961), to speak of people as spirited may be to characterise them as lively, energetic or motivated by contrast with the de-motivated, listless condition of the dispirited.
7. It is fairly common to hear people speak of spiritual experiences in relation to aesthetic enjoyment of nature or art.
8. A certain spiritual sense or value has often been ascribed to such moral qualities of character and virtue as compassion, generosity, gratitude and forgiveness as well as (following Pauline scripture) to the scholastic 'theological virtues' of faith, hope and charity.

Leaving aside use of the term 'spiritual' to refer to occult literature, it would seem that while the religiously indexed sense of spirituality—or the idea of spirit as 'soul'—might be linked to non-naturalist ontologies at some odds with modern empirical science, they could also be readily accepted by those with no such 'supernatural' leanings. Indeed, it is worth noting that insofar as many traditional religions—such as the non-theistic faith of Buddhism—are not obviously committed to such metaphysically controversial or empirically transcendent senses of God or soul, they may speak of spirit or spiritual experiences without such commitments. That is to say, while people of faith could speak of God or the soul as spiritual in some non-material sense, other—no less religious—folk need not: to be sure, they would not exactly be talking of the same things, but there is little case for refusing either party some ownership over such usage. Insofar, talk of soul as spirit may well be religious but it need not be, as it were, 'Cartesian'.

So far as other lately identified senses of 'spirit', 'spiritual' and 'spirituality' go, they are familiar enough from ordinary non-religious contexts of discourse and association and there may be no compelling reason to preclude such usage in these contexts. Thus, to speak of certain forms of worldly distanced awareness or contemplation as expressive of 'spirituality', of those with energy or personal presence as 'spirited' (and those who lack such qualities as 'dispirited'), of certain forms of artistic or aesthetic experience (either appreciative or performative), or of such virtues of character as love, gratitude or forgiveness, as 'spiritual' would seem to be well within the bounds of accepted as well as relatively unobjectionable usage. Moreover, if spirituality so construed as a particular dimension or expression of common psychological experience and sensibility—rather than as, say, the property

of some Cartesian 'ghost in the machine' (for this term, see Ryle 1949)—one might hope for some clear enough account not just of what is distinctive about such sensibility but of how it might, if so desired, be developed or 'educated'.

Normative and developmental dimensions of spirituality

On this note, however, one might ask why or whether it is desirable to cultivate or educate putative spiritual attitudes, propensities or sensibilities. To begin with, there is clearly a *normative* dimension to many of the attributes lately mentioned. First, while we are not inclined to criticize anyone for failing to contemplate, meditate or take up yoga, such activities are widely regarded as conducive or contributory to mental and physical health in many cultures—but as perhaps especially beneficial for countering the stresses of modern western post-industrial living. However, we are certainly inclined to admire or consider positive qualities of spiritedness, liveliness or zest—at least if not in Aristotelian excess—and to regard dispiritedness or apathy as humanly deficient. Likewise, while not perhaps considering complete insensitivity to the arts or aesthetic experience to be exactly vices, we are also inclined to regard this as a considerable human deficit and may label those in whom such failure is marked as 'philistine'. On the other hand, we do commonly regard lack of generosity, ingratitude, deep distrust of others or lack of any capacity to love or forgive others—even on the part of those who may be impeccable in their observance of the conventional rules or requirements of moral association—as something approaching spiritual deficiencies or vices.

Of course, it may now be complained that such deficiencies are not obviously the same, or even clearly related—so that what may be thought a remedy for one may not remotely be regarded as such for the other. Thus, someone may well be listless or dispirited without being philistine; be spirited and philistine without being ungrateful or unforgiving; be sensitive to arts and nature while listlessly ungenerous and unloving; and so forth. In this light, one could hardly argue that all such deficiencies are the same thing: indeed, it should be clear that even listlessness or dispiritedness far from describes one single thing and that what is often generally so called may be different qualities with quite different mental, physical, emotional or moral causes. Still, the present paper aims to identify a significantly distinctive sense of the spiritual and spirituality that may serve to distinguish spiritual concerns fairly clearly from other forms of human engagement with experience. It will be argued that while the spiritual need not be focused on other worldly concerns of a religious or other metaphysically or ontologically problematic kind, there is nevertheless a sense in which such concerns are yet not completely amenable to understanding in naturalistic terms. In this sense, spiritual experience escapes naturalistic purview even though it may not take us out of the natural world as such.

Still, where might the capacities through which spiritual experience is accessed be sought? Insofar as the spiritual qualities or capabilities of agents have often been considered the 'highest' expressions of human nature, one might first look to the sort of qualities that have been regarded as such by past philosophers. For the Greeks, especially Plato and Aristotle—and perhaps most analytical philosophy that has

followed in their wake—the highest of human capacities or attributes has usually been considered the power to comprehend the world through cognition and reason. On the essentially naturalistic perspective of Aristotle what distinguishes human agents from no less naturally evolved non-human brutes is their capacity for rational reflection and deliberation upon, not just their day to day business, but those larger existential ends and purposes which such daily business may be said to serve. Following Aristotle, the naturalistic drift of subsequent analytical philosophy has also been towards quasi-biological explanation of such reflection and deliberation in terms of evolutionary adaptation of human agents to the needs of survival in hostile environments in competition with other animals and other humans. In this light, even much recent neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics has been prone to such modern naturalist and instrumentalist construal.

Still, not all past major philosophers have succumbed to such naturalistic and reductive inclinations: Plato (1961) argued (in terms that have never, on the present view, been satisfactorily answered) that no naturalistic explanation of those aspects of human mind concerned with the conceptualization required for thought is at all possible—and similar arguments have been given by modern philosophers such as Geach (1957). Moreover, the latter day anti-foundationalism of Wittgenstein and his followers has persuasively shown that the complex and diverse discourses in which different forms of human reason, understanding or meaning making are implicated resist easy reduction to any basic instrumental aim or purpose. Thus, in addition to its uses for describing or manipulating objects and events, language is also deployed for the explanation and evaluation of experience, for the articulation or expression of human emotions, for the celebration of those events and experiences that human agents consider meaningful or significant, and so forth. In this regard, notably, language does not just describe experiences or practices already given through sense perception, but actually makes possible or brings into being new human realties and practices. While human agents share with their non-human cousins, feelings and reactions describable as fear, anger and sexual desire, the latter do not—lacking the language through which such emotions are possible—experience pride, envy, resentment, gratitude or sympathy. By the same token, they also lack the sensibilities and capacities for respect, admiration, honour, celebration and reverence characteristic of the many human social, cultural and religious practices and institutions within which such capacities, sensibilities and sentiments find intelligible place.

Reason not the need: beyond getting and spending

Die-hard reductive naturalists will no doubt continue to seek purely instrumental explanations for any and all human endeavour: just as non-human animals kill as a means to eat, eat as a means to survive, survive as a means to reproduce, and so on in endless tail-biting cycle, so human inclinations to appreciate, love, celebrate and worship may be explained in terms of survival-conducive ego-satisfaction or social solidarity. In psychological—and even ethical—theory, such explanations are commonplace. Indeed, in psychological literature, instrumental accounts of such

virtues as gratitude are more or less the norm (see, for example, many essays in Emmons and McCullough 2004)—thanking others improves social relations or lowers the blood pressure—and in moral theory, virtues in general have come to be justified in terms of needs for psychological wellbeing (for a recent representative example, see Besser-Jones 2014). But such accounts seem difficult to sustain in any very unforced or credible way. Here, it is not just the logical point that all instrumental justifications must end somewhere in what is desired for its own sake—since, of course, instrumentalists may still claim scientifically ulterior motives for whatever agents take themselves to be intrinsically seeking. It is rather that insofar as much human aspiration is directed to goals that have their own objectively intelligible ends, such instrumental justifications seem simply beside the point.

Thus, when Shakespeare's King Lear says: 'O reason not the need! Our basest beggars are in the poorest things superfluous. Allow not nature more than nature needs, man's life is cheap as beast's' (Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act 2, Scene 4)—he is not just saying that he needs the knightly retinue that his daughter Regan proposes to dismiss in order to feel better, but that there are such objective goods and values as respect, honour and dignity (and, in this case, filial piety) that Regan threatens to override or violate. Of course, one might say that what is uppermost in Lear's mind at this point is the respect, honour and dignity to which *he* is owed by others: but when agents admire the moral example of another, appreciate the beauty of a painting or piece of music, or worship their god, it is not themselves that they admire, appreciate or worship, but precisely the objects of such attitudes. To be sure, the admiration, appreciation and worship may not be justified if the objects to which they are directed are false or non-existent. But the responses of admiration, appreciation and worship are not always or obviously means to any material end, and—if appropriately directed—they are justified or otherwise by reference to their intentional objects rather than by virtue of any lowering of blood pressure or other means to natural survival. This is how we ordinarily make sense of such matters and any other explanation seems rather beside the point: to amount to what philosophers term a 'category mistake' (Ryle 1949).

In this light, the present paper aims to sketch the general direction of a non-reductive account of such 'higher' human attitudes and values as respect, admiration and reverence, as well as of aesthetic sensibility and artistic appreciation and such particular 'spiritual' virtues as gratitude, generosity, forgiveness, compassion and humility. The heart of this account is that what is often called 'spirituality' is a distinctive *human* capacity—one not possessed by other non-human species—for evaluative transcendence of the world of immediate practical and material concerns with what the romantic poet William Wordsworth described as 'getting and spending' (Nichol-Smith 1921). Such evaluation is enabled by: (1) a capacity for non-instrumental perspectives on, or interpretations of, the world of ordinary experience; and (2) a correlative capacity to identify goals and values that transcend or are not merely means to the meeting of immediate natural or material—either individual or social—needs. Still, while neither of these perspectives or capacities is available to non-human brutes, it may nevertheless be useful to start with some

conjecture about the sources or provenance of such 'higher' capacities in more instrumental human concerns.

The natural ground of 'trans-natural' sensibility

While it may be futile to hope—at least on the present view—for any strictly empirical scientific account of the emergence of such non-instrumental human sensibilities and capacities from the more readily intelligible survival-conducive powers of utility-focused deliberation, some folk-psychological speculation on this may be in order. To begin with, it would make sense to suppose that what we have called the 'higher' rational powers of human agents would have evolved or emerged later than more immediate or basic survival-conducive abilities, rather than vice versa. Moreover, given that early humans would have greatly shared the concerns of their non-human rivals with basic survival, one may suppose that their first more than likely language-mediated deliberations—however these may have developed— would also have focused primarily on problems of finding life preserving sustenance and shelter from the elements.

However, while non-human animals also need to act to find food, their abilities for this are exclusively determined or conditioned by instinct, natural faculty and habituation (grounded in trial and error) and they need not be supposed to engage in the explicit means-end deliberations of human agents. In this light, the language-mediated deliberation of human agents—their capacity to represent or map objects and their properties, states of affairs and events on the mental whiteboard of inferentially connectable propositions—might be expected to have given early humans some competitive edge over non-human rivals for survival-related resources. For one thing, such practical deliberations would allow some behavioural flexibility, precisely by enabling appreciation or entertainment of *alternative* routes to desired ends or goals. Indeed, while a given pattern of practical deliberation might successfully identify this or that *sufficient* means to a given goal, a rational agent could recognise that—insofar as there may often be other ways to secure the same goal—such means may be far from *necessary*: while there may be only one way to hammer a nail into a plank, there may be more ways to skin a cat, transport goods or settle a dispute.

However, one might now suppose that any appreciation of alternative options enabled by basic language-mediated practical deliberation is also the basis of that capacity for relatively free *choice* between alternatives that distinguishes human agency from non-human behaviour. For, while human agents may still be significantly constrained by their biological nature, they are nevertheless able to transcend that nature to the extent of appreciating alternative practical options and possibilities that could not be envisaged by their non-human cousins. On this view, the human freedom that has perplexed philosophers down the ages, while not unlimited, is nevertheless a significant by-product of that capacity for rational agency that—as philosophers from Plato and Aristotle have recognised—distinguishes humans markedly from other animals. While the conduct of early primates would have been largely ruled or driven by natural necessities—precisely, by the

need to secure the minimal conditions of survival in often hostile environments, the no doubt language-mediated deliberations of human agents would have enabled rational choice between alternative options that other animals could not possibly appreciate.

That said, it should be clear that—as social philosophers from Aristotle onwards have emphasised—humans are not only rational, but *social* animals. Indeed, if rationality is a by-product of language, then this power could hardly be understood other than as a product of social living, required—at least in the first place—to enable more effective communication between agents whose survival would also depend on social cooperation. From this viewpoint, an important function of language-mediated reason—in addition to its instrumental value for effective food gathering—would have been to understand the affective and other reactions and motives of other members of the social group and to reinforce survival-conducive human attachments. But now, while it may be that such early human pro-social and empathetic reflections were no less instrumental or self-interested than their food-gathering deliberations, one can nevertheless begin to see how the close human associations and attachments wherein these were implicated might or would give rise to sentiments of liking, love, appreciation, respect, honour, and so on, and to the possibility of seeing the subjects or objects of such sentiments as worth pursuing for their own sake or as intrinsically valuable.

That said, the notions of intrinsic worth or valuing things for their own sake have proved troublesome and caused no end of mischief in social science, psychology and educational philosophy and theory. The main trouble, on the present view, is that they are ambiguous between the ideas of desiring or valuing something of one's own free will or without external constraint on the one hand; and valuing something for the qualities or properties that make it an appropriate object of value on the other. In the predominantly instrumental climate of modern social scientific explanation—and the subjective or sentimentalist perspectives on value that have followed in its wake—there has been a tendency to reduce the second sense of intrinsic value to the first (motivational) sense, if not to find the second sense simply incomprehensible. All the same, such reduction seems unwarrantably revisionist and certainly at odds with ordinary usage which clearly recognises this distinction. Thus, for example, I may spend my days playing computer games, and—in the sense that I play such games freely, without constraint and with no further end in view—I may be said to play them for their own sake. Still, while also freely playing such games I may also appreciate that they are time wasting and entirely without any serious value.

Likewise, despite a prevailing contemporary trend (not least, I find, among students) to regard aesthetic or artistic taste as a matter of subjective preference—so that what is of value is so only by virtue of my valuing it—I might well enjoy listening to fairly crass popular songs, while fully appreciating that other music (of any genre) that I do not enjoy is in a wide range of technical, expressive or other artistic respects superior to that which I do presently enjoy. Indeed, it is on much this common human sense that there are good things out there that I do not yet appreciate or value, but would be worth some effort to appreciate and value, that the very possibility, prospect and project of education depends. In this light, the not

uncommon construal of what is valuable in terms of my inclination to value it, proceeds in precisely the wrong direction: in general, we seek to value what is worth valuing, rather than regarding things as valuable only because we value them. On the present view, to be sure, it would not be unintelligible to suppose that some things—works of art such as the plays of Shakespeare, Bach's *B Minor Mass* or the paintings of the Sistene chapel—would have been of consummate (albeit anthropocentric) value even if, as a matter of contingent fact, no human agent had ever valued them as such.

But it would clearly be no less reductive to construe early human approval, love, appreciation, respect, loyalty and honour as only instrumentally or self-interestedly focused on personal stress relief or reduction of in-group conflict, even if these were beneficial side effects of such sentiments. On the contrary, as human agents came to appreciate the contribution of order, justice, self-control, courage, gratitude and generosity to personal and social prosperity and flourishing, they would have valued and honoured the objective possession of such qualities by others, even perhaps while recognising their own shortcomings in such respects. Indeed, the valuing of such objective qualities and virtues is readily apparent in the earliest literature of so-called heroic societies that is primarily concerned to celebrate the exploits of legendary personages precisely honoured and renowned—and hence often accorded immortal or eternal life and status—for such objectively valuable virtues.

The narrative form of spiritual normativity

Transpersonal recognition and celebration of admirable human values and virtues would no doubt have assisted early deliberative progress from more local focus on the brute contingencies of immediate sensory experience towards some quasi-Platonic objectification or idealization of such qualities. Indeed, one significant outcome of such relatively transpersonal or 'impersonal' appreciation of heroic virtues would be the identification of standards by which the world as immediately experienced by the senses and one's own natural reactions to such experience might be judged and found wanting. So, in such deliberation, recognition of the objective value of heroic virtues of honour, nobility, justice and courage might well go hand in hand with yearning for or vision of a better world in which such virtues prevail over the human evils of vice, injustice, disease and death. To be sure, all these concerns are clearly present in the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* (George 2003)— perhaps the earliest sustained philosophical and theological exploration of the ultimate question of how human life can have any meaning in the face of mortality and death.

What is, of course, most striking about the search for meaning in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is that it is a *narrative* about the search for a narrative. For, as such latter day philosophers as MacIntyre (1981), Taylor (1989) and Ricoeur (1984, 1985, 1987) have variously argued, it is precisely through the construction of narratives that humans make any sense of themselves as agents engaged in meaningful global or local projects. In this regard, narratives—unlike the brute contingencies of immediate sensory experience—are inherently purposive,

teleological and normative and therefore also in at least the most general, formal or categorial sense, *moral*. Of course, this is not to say that there are not in a more substantial or particular sense, wicked, corrupt or immoral narratives—in thrall to which human agents can and have lived their lives. It is also true that there may be adherence to inherited or imposed narratives, which—insofar as such attachment is unreflective, uncritical or blindly conformist—would lack the voluntary or authentic commitment that ethical theorists have often regarded as a requirement of any genuine moral engagement. The key present point, however, is that the primary—if not the only—mode of evaluation of the narratives which have served to shape human identity and agency is normative or moral.

That said, it would be mistaken to construe the normative character of narratives in the narrower terms of those modern ethical theories for which moral evaluation is exclusively focused on the rectitude or otherwise of actions. Clearly, narratives are of different varieties and they play equally diverse roles in the economy of human psychological, moral and spiritual life. Thus, while they have in common that they transport us beyond the present and particular into different realms of meaning and value, the places to which they take are of varying significance and lend themselves to richer normative appraisal as not only right or wrong, but true or false, honest or dishonest, shallow or profound and serious or trivial. In this light, some philosophers—perhaps notably, in modern times, Murdoch (1992)—have urged a distinction between imagination and fantasy, taking the latter to be a morally debased rival of the former. In the present view, however, this distinction—with its implied moral censure—should not be too sharply drawn. Fantasy is fairly clearly a species of imagination—rather than its negation—and it is by no means always morally untoward. Thus, past and present popular works of fantasy—from, say, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* to Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings*—may have no (certainly avowed) moral content whatsoever, but have yet been sources of morally unobjectionable delight to countless numbers of readers. Still, there seem to be two main worries about fantasy—perhaps both, in Murdoch's case, a residue of her deep-rooted Platonism. The first is that fantasies are not true: the second is that they may well be morally corruptive.

Narrative and truth

Taking the second point first, as lately noted, fantasies are certainly liable to be (at any rate factually) untrue—though, as we shall shortly consider further, the general epistemic status of narratives is complex and rarely a matter of purely factual representation. All the same, fantasies can clearly be morally dangerous if they involve serious evasion of reality or the indulgence of the lower or murkier tendencies of human nature. Thus, many read pulp fiction romances or watch violent action movies on television—and such pastimes may be for many no more than harmless entertainment that they can take or leave at will. But if romance readers seriously confuse the sentimentalised plots and their invariably contrived happy endings with real life, or television viewers consume violent movies to feed their sadistic impulses, then they do so at some obvious risk to their moral and

psychological health and wellbeing. In this regard, a one-sided diet of romantic fiction may well foster a view of life that is not just untrue or dishonest, but shallow and trivial. In that case, while we might not want to discourage such reading entirely (say for light relief or relaxation) such readers might be educationally encouraged to balance this diet with other works that address more seriously significant human concerns. And, of course, in the case wherein someone could be shown to be reinforcing their sadistic inclinations, this would be a reason stop watching them.

The issue of the relationship of narratives to truth, however, is more philosophically complex. One might set out to persuade consumers of sentimental romances at least to balance their diet with some more 'serious' reading of such time-honoured literary classics as (for example) Jane Austen's *Emma*, Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* or Charles Dicken's *Great Expectations*. Still, the obvious objection to any claim that such works are less the creations of fantasy than pulp romances—insofar as they are somehow more closely related to truth—is that such stories are no more true in the common literal sense of this term than the romances. So, any suggestion that such works are truer or deeper than pulp fiction would clearly need to be based on some other non-literal sense of truth. And, to be sure, one such sense of truth has probably never been more clearly articulated than by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, where he remarks that poetry: 'is a more philosophical and higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular' (Aristotle 1941). By this, Aristotle evidently means that poetry—broadly conceived as great or serious literature—is successful in (amongst other things) discerning or laying bare archetypal themes in which certain general patterns of human character and conduct are implicated for objective human good or ill. While these are still expressed in fictional stories, readers can nevertheless recognise the follies, failings, vanities and self-deceptions of a fictitious Agamemnon, King Lear, Emma, Lord Jim or Anna Karenina in themselves and might therefore hope to learn something of human value about themselves via such reading. It is in this non-literal sense that such narratives are 'truer' than the cosy sentimentalities, happy endings and cheap thrills of romantic and pulp fiction.

So, while not literally true, much of such great or serious literature—from Greek tragedy to present day novels—might well be fairly evaluated as 'true to life' or 'realistic' insofar as such imaginative explorations strike us as affording genuine, albeit 'virtual' or vicarious, insight into the vagaries of human psychology, character and conduct. That said, there may be nothing in the psychology of such literature, other than extraordinary imagined circumstances, that need transport us beyond the world of (at least possible) natural human experience into any 'transcendent' or spiritual experience. However, there are clearly other human narratives that aim to do precisely this. Thus, for example, the already mentioned *Epic of Gilgamesh* is not (at least primarily) a literary exploration of human character, but a narrative that raises profound (philosophical) questions about the very meaning of human existence, invoking supernatural entities and forces to explain or suggest answers to such deep metaphysical questions. It also hardly needs saying that the human/cultural narrative literature concerned to explore such issues from ancient to modern times is voluminous and perhaps centrally includes the great (religious and other) myths of bygone cultures (east and west) and the numerous re-

workings of the perennial themes and issues raised by such myths in much later literature.

The question of the relationship of such narratives to truth is clearly more problematic and sensitive than that of the relationship of ancient and modern fictional literature to truth. This is especially so, since some of the culturally significant narratives of human literary heritage have maintained, more or less strongly, that the events depicted in such narratives are not just allegorically but literally true, and such narratives have also been foundational for organised religions that have sought to emphasise such historicity. In short, while modern readers may be drawn to the myth of Persephone, classic tragedies of the Trojan wars, or John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* for the moral or spiritual insights they may find therein, few would (at least nowadays) worry over much about whether Persephone, Odysseus or Pilgrim existed in real life. On the other hand, the idea that the stories of Jesus' life and actions contained in the Christian Gospels—or perhaps those about the life of Buddha—are only allegorically or figuratively true would be anathema to many (indeed, some might say, the only true) followers of Christianity or Buddhism.

Certainly, it is no part of this author's present purpose (as someone of religious sensibility and commitment) to deny any historical or factual content to the Christian Gospel: what is more than likely true of Christianity—I cannot speak for Buddhism—is that, like many other significant human cultural and other narratives, it is a complex web of historical fact, moral insight and allegorical or figurative truth. What I would hold, however, is that in order to grasp the essence of Christianity (or Buddhism or Hinduism), one has to advance well beyond any historical truth—or even beyond such more banal moral insights as the golden rule—to truths that are, and can only be, expressed or revealed in something like metaphorical, figurative or poetic terms. Indeed, on any accurate reading of the Gospels, this would seem to have been the view of the founder of Christianity Himself, who insists repeatedly that the inherently spiritual knowledge of the Father and the Kingdom can be communicated only though images and parables and not through literal description. Interestingly, this is a point forcibly made nearly two millennia later by the romantic poet William Wordsworth, who—in the very same verses that he deplores the modern spiritually myopic and philistine pre-occupation with 'getting and spending'—laments that he is not 'a pagan suckled in a creed outworn' who might yet be capable of perceiving the world though those nature myths with which the ancients enchanted or 'spiritualised' it (see Nichol-Smith 1921).

But is it not precisely the modern natural scientific sensibility that to perceive nature through such myths would be to *misperceive* it? In what sense can myths and parables tell us anything that is worth knowing: for what indeed might it profit a man to be told that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed? This is certainly a fair question and it is hard to deny that this parable could have little or no significance for anyone ignorant of the precise theological context for which the spread of the specifically Christian word is a spiritual priority. However, earlier in this paper, we undertook to show the possibility of a conception of spiritual insight or development that is not religiously or theologically tethered in this way and some

such conception may indeed be possible to grasp even from imaginative narratives that are themselves religiously inspired. To this end, we may turn to one such striking literary example that this author has explored on previous occasions (Carr 2003b).

The non-literal character of spiritual truth

At one level, the various medieval western European ballads and narratives of knightly chivalry clearly belong to an 'heroic' literary tradition in which one might also include Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, *Beowulf* and Icelandic sagas. Thus conceived, such stories seem mainly concerned with the physical struggles of white alpha males to overcome by sword and much oily muscle various perfidious rivals or non-human monsters. However, the stories of the medieval troubadours and balladeers—featuring the likes of King Arthur, Lancelot, Tristram, Percival, Siegfried and others—are also undoubtedly religious narratives in which the martial exploits of such heroes have been shaped by a code of chivalry informed by specifically Christian moral and spiritual ideals and aspirations of respect for and service to others, particularly lower social orders and the 'weaker' sex. This is nowhere clearer than in Sir Thomas Malory's ambitious attempt—in *Le Morte D'Arthur*—to weave the disparate stories of the troubadours into a single narrative focused on the legendary (Dark Age) British King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table (Malory 1986). Precisely, the central cohering theme of *Le Morte D'Arthur* is the quest for the Holy Grail—variously understood as the chalice shared by Christ with His disciples at the Last Supper or the cup in which His blood was collected at the crucifixion—but which is perhaps better allegorically conceived as a general aspiration to Christian perfection.

In this light, one of the great puzzles in Malory's narrative is that of why Sir Lancelot—who is obviously the very paragon of chivalry in the story—conspicuously fails (unlike his son Galahad) to achieve the vision of the grail. As I have argued elsewhere (Carr 2003b), the most conspicuous reason that might be given for this—namely, Lancelot's potentially adulterous passion for Arthur's queen Guinevere—is not wholly compelling, since this is a love he cannot help and it is not obvious in all versions of the story that it causes him to act dishonourably. There is, however, an interesting detail of Malory's account that does seem to come closer to identifying the key issue (Malory 1986, book xv, chapters v and vi). On his return from his failed grail quest, Lancelot encounters a skirmish between two bands of knights, respectively dressed white and black. Since the black knights are clearly losing, Lancelot pitches into support them and is routed along with them. At this Lancelot falls into further dejection, convinced that this setback marks his final dishonour. But he then meets a Holy woman whose (allegorical) explanation of this episode is that whereas the black knights represented the pride and vainglory of worldly reputation, the white knights stood for higher moral and spiritual repudiation of the vanity of such aspirations. From a spiritual perspective, the trouble with Lancelot, as the ultimate medieval overachiever, is not that he is dishonourable—far from it—but that he sets too much store by worldly values and

attachments and by the false sense of self which is grounded in such values and attachments.

Is this a religious—or distinctively Christian—idea? Well, it certainly resonates with much New Testament teaching—such as Christ's admonition: 'For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?'—and also with the writings of later Christian mystics. But some such theme seems also central to Buddhism, which also emphasises the vanity and delusion of human desires and attachments to the world. Moreover, a closely related notion is to be found in the work of the philosopher Iris Murdoch for whom—drawing on her primary Platonic influence—the goal of human moral and/or spiritual life is liberation from the 'fat relentless ego' (Murdoch 1970). To be sure, these may not all be quite the same idea—or at least there seem to be stronger and milder versions of it. While the New Testament idea of saving one's soul is consistent with the idea of an empirical self who renounces worldly ambition in favour of other more moral priorities of service to others, the Buddhist idea (for all I know) seems to involve more radical metaphysical renunciation of any natural human desires or appetites whatsoever—which may seem to deprive the idea of Buddhist compassion of much purchase in this world or the next.

On the other hand, Murdoch's notion—which she explicitly distances from any religious commitment—may seem weaker than the Buddhist aspiration to freedom from all desire, but somewhat stronger than the New Testament advice to change one's moral and spiritual priorities. Indeed, her idea—evidently derived from her reflections on Plato's cave allegory, but also no doubt inspired by other Platonic dialogues such as the *Symposium*—seems focused precisely on human development of a particular sort of disinterested *love*—perhaps not far from the New Testament (*Corinthians*) notion of *caritas* or charity. For Murdoch, the key to this purely unselfish and other-regarding love, compassion or concern is an 'unselfing' detachment from those vain and egotistic feelings and desires that prevent us from seeing the world and others as they truly are—and hence having due sympathetic understanding of why they are what they are.

In terms of the main concerns of this essay, what is interesting about such 'selfless' love or concern is that it seems firmly locatable within the sphere of ordinary natural—or non-supernatural—human association: in this regard, it need not involve the abnegation of any and all empirical properties of self as in the metaphysics of Buddhism or perhaps of Kant's *noumenal* practical rationality (Kant 1967). Indeed, it is a quality that might seem required for any full understanding of such fairly familiar human aspirations as forgiveness—or even genuine generosity or gratitude—which would also seem to demand serious Platonic relinquishing of egotistic attachments. But, on the other hand, it is a quality that insofar as it involves—by definition—some letting go of self-interested motives and inclinations, would also appear to resist reduction to the default self-interested motives of social scientific explanation. Indeed, such idea of selfless love seems not only at odds with modern social scientific explanation, but also with the current reading of human virtues in terms of Aristotelian naturalism. For while many latter day virtue ethicists would want to insist—according to a reasonable interpretation of Aristotle—that virtues are worthwhile for their own own sake, it is surely no less

clear that the basic Aristotelian justification of virtues is in terms of their contribution to a fairly naturalistically conceived idea of *eudaimonia* or human wellbeing or success.

In short, while many if not most contemporary virtue ethicists may steer successfully clear of any narrower explanations of virtuous sensibility in terms of ego-satisfaction or social conformity, it is hard to gainsay that the primary object of virtue ethical accounts is nevertheless the cultivation of natural or empirical selves via the development of certain personal and pro-social qualities that serve this or that individual or social interest. On the other hand, it would seem not to be the point of the neo-Platonic selfless love or *caritas* of Murdoch that it need serve any such end. The spiritual point, value or quality of such love lies not in making the lover feel better or in improving his or her social relations—even it does this—but that, to the extent that it is grounded in wholly other-directed appreciation of the objective human condition or plight of others, it precisely transcends such interests.

To be sure, such un-self-interested love would seem to be the limiting case of the transcendence of spiritual attachment and so perhaps thereby rarely humanly achievable. Clearly, however, there may also be other more common—albeit more controversial—forms of self-transcendent spiritual attachment, to God, works of art, beautiful sunsets and so forth. That said, the possibility should also be admitted of self-transcendent attachment to objects or ideals that are morally or otherwise suspect or reprehensible: to gods that do not exist; to beliefs that are false; to goals that are unworthy or evil; to artworks that are shallow, trivial or vulgar. From this viewpoint, the latter day literature of spirituality and spiritual education seems to have all too often cheerily assumed that spiritual development, however conceived, is invariably a *good* thing and always to be encouraged. But the seriousness and significance of spiritual development, no less than of moral development, is that there can be good no less than bad spiritual or moral development. Thus, whether spiritual development and/or education is understood in the present loftier terms of un-selfing in the service of transpersonal goals, or in the less elevated terms of being transported by a piece of music that takes one 'out of oneself', it is nevertheless no less apt for evaluation as good or bad, enobling or degrading, healthy or unhealthy, than other forms of human engagement with experience. Insofar, it is no less important to ensure that such spiritual growth is pointed in a normatively or morally justifiable direction.

References

Aristotle, (1941). Metaphysics, nicomachean ethics and poetics. In R. McKeon (Ed.), *The basic works of Aristotle*. New York: Random House.

Besser-Jones, L. (2014). *Eudaimonic ethics: The philosophy and psychology of living well*. London: Routledge.

Carr, D. (1995). Towards a distinctive conception of spiritual education. *Oxford Review of Education, 20,* 83–98.

Carr, D. (1996). Rival conceptions of spiritual education. *Journal of Philosophy of Education, 30*(2), 159–178.

Carr, D. (2002). Metaphysics, reductivism, and spiritual discourse. *Zygon, 37*(2), 491–510.

Carr, D. (2003a). Three concepts of spirituality for spiritual Education. In D. Carr & J. Haldane (Eds.), *Philosophy, spirituality and education*. London: Routledge.

Carr, D. (2003b). Spiritual, moral and heroic virtue: Aristotelian character in the Arthurian and Grail narratives. *Journal of Beliefs and Values, 24,* 15–26.

Carr, D. (2008). Music, spirituality and education. *Journal of Aesthetic Education, 42*(1), 16–29.

Emmons, R. A., & McCullough, M. E. (Eds.). (2004). *The psychology of gratitude*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Geach, P. T. (1957). *Mental acts*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

George, A. (Ed. and Trans.). (2003). *The epic of gilgamesh*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics.

Kant, I. (1967) *The critique of practical reasoning and other works on the theory of ethics* (T. K. Abbott, Ed., Trans.). London: Longmans.

MacIntyre, A. C. (1981). *After virtue*. London: Duckworth.

Malory, T. (1986). *Le Morte d'Arthur*. London: Omega Books.

McLaughlin, T. H. (2003). Education, spirituality and the common school. In D. Carr & J. Haldane (Eds.), *Philosophy, spirituality and education*. London: Routledge.

Murdoch, I. (1970). *The sovereignty of the good* (p. 1970). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Murdoch, I. (1992). *Metaphysics as a guide to morals*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Nichol-Smith, D. (1921). *Wordsworth: Poetry and prose*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Plato, (1961). Republic. In E. Hamilton & H. Cairns (Eds.), *Plato: The collected dialogues*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Ricoeur, P. (1984). *Time and narrative I*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Ricoeur, P. (1985). *Time and narrative II*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Ricoeur, P. (1987). *Time and narrative III*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Ryle, G. (1949). *The concept of mind*. London: Methuen.

Shakespeare, W. (2009). *King lear*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.