Editorial

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Taken by the word, the notion of spirituality refers to spiritual matters, namely matters of the spirit or the soul, or in other words: matters of the non-material. Clearly, this is not a definition as crisp as desirable. Often the spiritual is considered as something hidden behind the apparent tangible reality that we are all aware of day to day. In this sense, the spiritual is related to the mystic, and spirituality to mysticism. A recommendable overview of various aspects of spiritual, viz. mystical, experiences is due to Gellman in his entry on "Mysticism" in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

According to some traditions, spirituality basically characterizes an attitude, a stance toward the life and death of an individual. Its essence is regarded to show in the way a person lives his or her life. For a spiritual life in this respect, existential and ethical dimensions are always predominant. Most influential traditions of this kind have developed and matured in the Eastern systems of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism as well as blends and variants thereof. They all require a delicate balance of conceptual abstract thinking with concrete exercise and practice.

Such attitudes and stances have not been completely absent throughout the history of Western culture, as may be seen in key elements of early neo-platonist, hermetic, and alchemist movements, continued by their successors until today. However, their impact on the broad public was usually less than significant, some would even say repressed. Although the modern sciences and humanities have undoubtedly emerged from those early traditions, their successes and their contemporary appearance are, not quite incorrectly, celebrated as a departure, or a liberation, from the obscurity and superstition of the old traditions.

As a consequence, present-day academic perspectives on spirituality focus mostly on theological or philosophical discourse rather than occult knowledge or contemplative exercise. On the other hand, it is easy to observe, and well documented, that large parts of the population in Western civilizations show strong interests in a huge set of esoteric varieties of all brands, from astrology and numerology to psychic research and the paranormal, and so forth. These areas, today sometimes vaguely summarized as new-age esotericism, play no major role in academic discourse. But their demographic abundance indicates that the enlightenment of the 17th century cannot really be considered as successfully finished.

A fair assessment of this situation requires us to distinguish carefully between two basically diverging tendencies that have not much in com-
mon. On the one hand there are those who find delight in the publicity that overly simplistic assertions and irresponsible promises may yield for a while. On the other hand there are serious attempts to understand what spirituality can mean to us in the Western culture of today, a truly tedious task with progress in small steps, if at all. Such efforts are typically far too subtle to be suitable for arrant cover features of esoteric (and other) magazines or gatherings.

It is not always easy to draw the distinction between these two tendencies for a given instance, and it requires experience and expertise. As a rule, the sincerity of attempts to understand spirituality decreases with increasing propaganda – as in many other fields. Evidently, such a difficult and important topic cannot be resolved by full-sounding advertisements and airy-fairy marketing strategies alone.

In addition to the status of spirituality in the humanities, scientific approaches toward an understanding of its mysteries, in both practical and theoretical respects, have become increasingly attractive within recent decades. For instance, the annual meetings of the Dalai Lama with representatives of consciousness research, neuroscience, physics, and philosophy are well known. They stand for a number of less widely received, though not less challenging efforts to look at spirituality from a Western perspective.

Two major difficulties that hamper sound and solid research along those lines arise due to two key features of spiritual experiences. First, there is their ineffability: Different from “conventional” first-person accounts it seems not possible to describe them in an intersubjectively accessible way. And second, there is their paradoxicality: There seems to be something inherent to spiritual experiences which eludes their description in terms of the classical Boolean logic of most of science.

Nevertheless, there have been attempts, recently with increasing visibility, to explore the dimensions of spiritual traditions in front of scientific backgrounds. The relationship of mind and matter plays a significant role in most of these approaches. The collection of articles in this issue addresses some of them.

Vittorio Höele leads us back to the roots of European culture by addressing various aspects of mind-matter relations in the style of Platonic dialog. His four protagonists are Encephalius (who stands for most of present-day brain science), Philonous (representing the perspective of psychology and cognitive science), Theophilus (arguing in favor of metaphysical viewpoints), and Hylas (whose favorite approach is Donald Davidson’s anomalous monism).

Theophilus reminds us of the second dialog in the first book of Spinoza’s “Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being”, while Hylas and Philonous, with roles slightly different from those Höele ascribes to them, are the dialog partners in Berkeley’s “Three Dialogues Between Hylas and
Philonous”. Hösle’s “Conversation about the Mind-Body Problem” refers to virtually all hot topics of current consciousness research and provides an inspiring picture of the author’s own inclinations and reluctances.

In his contribution, Harald Walach proposes to distinguish the conscious mind that is related to an individual’s body from mind as a conception transcending the individual in a transpersonal sense. This opens the way to address issues of spirituality in the rapidly developing field of transpersonal psychology with a quite non-standard notion of consciousness. Walach shows that corresponding ideas have always been present in the history of European culture.

He describes a number of core elements of spiritual, mystical, and religious experiences and indicates, with examples, the complications that arise when such experiences are to be studied scientifically. As interesting candidates for such studies he suggests near-death experiences and mind-matter anomalies. The way in which he relates elements of Metzinger’s thinking to spiritual frameworks is particularly thought-provoking.

Gordon Globus analyzes the position that, for instance, Metzinger and Revonsuo have taken on the “virtuality” of experience, especially the experience of the self. He argues that their conception is coupled with a realism that assumes that a world in fact exists of which we all have our virtual versions. Globus criticizes the sharp distinction between such a “world in fact” versus a (virtual) “world in effect”.

His alternative, denoted as monadological realism, puts together elements of Leibniz’s philosophy with Bohm’s proposal of a dynamic implicate order, sometimes called holomovement. Globus’ notion of a monad refers to a dynamical sea of possibilities that mutually interpenetrate each other and form an implicate order à la Bohm. Its explication unfolds the possibilities into a manifold of actualizations that can be subject to conscious perception.

The article by Doris Feil addresses how mystic and spiritual experiences can be addressed from the viewpoint of contemporary cognitive neuroscience. The experiences she focuses at are referred to as mental states between stable representations, which are inherently unstable and evasive. Gebser has coined the notion of acategoriality for such states, emphasizing that they transcend an analysis based on conventional categorial representations.

Feil’s article provides evidence that Gebser’s proposal has eminent precursors in the epoch of German idealism, most clearly visible in Herder’s and Hölderlin’s writings. She argues that Hölderlin indeed gave accurate descriptions of acategorial states in his novel Hyperion. These descriptions can be consistently understood within a formal framework that derives from an attractor network model for mental states and their temporal dynamics.

The final contribution in the present issue is an obituary for Markus
Fierz by Karl von Meyenn. Fierz is well known as an outstanding theoretical physicist of the twentieth century, but he was also a deeply interested and scholarly educated expert in natural philosophy. The first chapter of von Meyenn’s account is entitled “A Life in the Platonic Tradition” and puts Fierz’s life and work in the proper context.

Fierz was in close contact with Wolfgang Pauli for most of his career, and he had a strong influence on the spiritual ideas that Pauli developed together with Jung. Much of Pauli’s knowledge about neo-platonism, alchemy and so forth was conveyed to him by or resulted from discussions with Fierz. The article by von Meyenn quotes a number of texts, unknown so far, from the private heritage of Fierz and offers a comprehensive bibliography of his publications.

The papers in this issue offer stimulating reading, or so I hope, but they do not provide ultimate solutions to the pivotal problems that spiritual experiences raise. If practice and exercise are truly crucial in spirituality, scientific approaches will always leave a residuum, an element of mystery whose significance may be more than simply an urge for elucidation. As Einstein says in his essay “The World as I See It” of 1931:

The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of true art and true science. Whoever does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his eyes are dimmed.