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1067. The Life of Soul¹

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¹The red highlights in this essay are added by Jan H. Boer, not by Van Belle, the author.

Introduction

In today's western world time is a surprisingly scarce commodity. This is ironic because we enjoy a far wider array of labour and time saving devices than ever before. As it is, we seem to hurry from here to there without ever catching up. From outer space our civilization easily resembles an anthill with people scurrying from one job to another, from this appointment to that, and from one place to the next, all in pursuit of a culture and commerce in which happiness seems to be defined by inventing, fabricating, selling, buying and possessing a maximum number of the things we don't really need.

In such a lifestyle there is no room for the question, let alone the answer about the worth of all this doing. There is no time! Late in the evening, after our overly busy day is done, we might sometimes question the value of what we had accomplished that day. But that moment of contemplation happens at the expense of the sleep we need in preparation for the next day's activities. Yet the question about the value of what we accomplish is essential to a well-lived life.

Undoubtedly, we in the west have succeeded in developing a life world that is uncommonly free from want and war. But, given what I have just described, **is it not valid to ask whether in gaining that world we have lost our soul? That is the question I wish to explore in this article.**

I want to begin this exploration by asserting the following: Whether or not it is to our liking, and without us being conscious of it, **whenever we frame our experience of living today we inevitably do so in terms of "reason" and "soul"**. They form the DNA, so to speak, of our lives. Or so I argue. These two terms are not just arbitrary labels or pegs on which I hang my story. They hail back to two metaphorical mainstays of our Westernized thought world. **"Reason" has been with us ever since the time of the Greeks, who, by all accounts started Western civilization. The term "soul" came into use in our culture a few centuries later with the introduction of the Christian gospel.** Since then these two terms have lived along side one another in our thought world, our feeling world and our world of action, often as each other's opposites. Together they shape the unique way we Westerners experience life and they distinguish our experience, for example, from that of people living in the Far Eastern world. In other words, within the confines of Western civilization we can talk about the life of reason and about the life of soul.

A brief imperfect history of the problem

Let me begin with a description of how, in my view, historically we have come to frame our existence in terms of our life of reason and our soul life. Constrained by the scope of this article this description can only be suggestive. **A more adequate account may be found in my book, *Explorations in the History of Psychology*, (2013).** This brief look at our history does serve the function, however, of making us aware that our present predicament has been a long time coming.

Ancient Greece and Platonism

The preeminence of reason as the central ordering principle in the Western world began with Ancient Greek culture, which generally is said to be the origin of our Western Civilization. **Briefly, the history of Greek thought was preoccupied with the relation between order and chaos, clarity and confusion, the definite and the indefinite.** Historically Greek philosophy ricochets from one to the other. Thinking/reason was seen to be the principle of order, clarity and of definite being. Life as we live it was seen as generally chaotic. According to the Greek mind, thought/ reason is our gateway to reality. It connects us to the "eternal verities", to the "Forms" of the world, to the truth of the way things really are *behind* this chaos. What gets in the way of our connection to that reality is our experience of the world via our senses, our emotions and our desires. These cloud our ability to think straight and thus obstruct our contact with the Forms of the world.

Plato incorporated these two emphases of Greek thought, thinking/reasoning and sensing/feeling, by constructing two worlds, a world of ideal forms, or eternal verities, a world where all is predictable and nothing ever changes, a world accessible by thinking/reason alone. And he constructed world of bodies, of matter, accessible via sense perception/emotions, a much more colourful world, to us a more familiar world, but also a world where nothing is predictable or lasting, where everything changes and everything you believe depends on your point of view. Two worlds, the one definite, orderly and predictable, the other, not.ⁱ

Hellenism and neo-Platonism

Fast forward five centuries or so to the Hellenistic philosophy of *neo*-Platonism. (i.e. Platonism with a new twist) **This way of thinking about life was all about *escaping* the unpredictable everyday world we live in, the world of sense perception, emotion and desires via an ascetic lifestyle into a world of pure thought. Thinking about the world of eternal verities became the preferred way to live.** This *otherworldly* emphasis continued to predominate in a Christianized form of neo-Platonism throughout the Middle Ages that followed.

Enter the Christian Gospel

While this was going on, however, another theme was also developing in the history of

Western thought, a theme that is more akin to the life of soul, and in opposition to the life of reason. It started when the Christian Gospel was introduced into the Western world in earnest during the heyday of Hellenistic philosophy at around 300 AD. This event was revolutionary because the Hebraic-Christian way of thinking about life was quite different from the Hellenistic Greek way sketched above and it was generally opposed to it. Hellenistic Greek thinking tended to be abstract. Hebraic-Christian thought was essentially concrete. Another difference concerned the relation of the world to a higher being. Our relation to a Divine being has always been a topic of discussion in Western thought. To the Greek Mind the relation between the Divine and the world, including its relation to human beings, was essentially one of thought/reason. For Christians the relation was one of feeling/love. That was a major difference.

But the most fundamental difference between these two mindsets relates to the *direction* they wanted human life to go. **For the Hellenistic Greeks of that time, the meaning of human life was to *escape this evil world*.** It was an attempt to deny that one has feelings, emotions and desires, in short it denied that human beings are embodied. It was an attempt by means of a life of asceticism and intellectual contemplation, to reach *outside* of this world for contact and union with what they saw as a divine Mind, who/which was believed to be eternally beyond this world.

By contrast the meaning of the Christian life was entirely defined by the *incarnation* of the Divine. It was in essence the idea that God (be)comes down-to-earth. It held that by entering our complex world God comes down to us and lives in the neighbourhood, dwells with us there, and like us, takes on a body of flesh, blood and bones, suffers, dies even, and in effect becomes matter. **In this way the central theme of Christianity asserted that meaning is to be found in the everyday events of our ordinary lives. The direction of the Greek mind was upward to God; the direction of the Christian mind was downward to us.** For the Greeks union with God was *achieved* by walking the difficult uphill life path of denial. Christians view union with God as a free gift of grace. To get it takes no effort. All you have to do is accept and *receive* it.

Synthesis and neo-Platonic Christianity

I believe that the teaching about the importance of ordinary life, which can/must be received as a free gift of grace is the essence of the Christian religion. It is, however, incompatible with the Hellenistic Greek perspective. These two opposing visions of life, Greek Hellenism and Hebraic Christianity, initially lived alongside one another and competed with one another. The Church Fathers who were leaders of the early Church after the apostles had died were faced with these two opposing sources of inspiration,. To harmonize these two ways of living they formed a synthesis between Hellenistic Greek philosophy and the tenets of the Christian religion. This had as an effect that the lives of the members of the Church during the Middle Ages became more Hellenistic Greek than Christian. **Greek Hellenism turned medieval Christianity into a world-avoiding religion, in which the most important activity of life became the intellectual contemplation of the Divine, who was principally hidden from view.** It promoted a way of living that had as its aim to come to know that hidden God *in our minds*. The

observable, evident things of this world, with which we have contact via our sensations, emotions and desires were said to obstruct this process. (*The idea of*) God became the most important reality in life. Everything else had to fall into place around it. (Note how this became the triumph of thought/reason *within* medieval Christianity)

This sentiment was evident in attempts by scholars like Anselm and Aquinas to logically prove the existence of the Divine. The aim of this highly intellectualistic exercise was to provide a rational ground for belief in the Christian God. But paradoxically, it had as a result that it made this God subject to logical necessity. It restricted the freedom of God. In this frame of mind God could only do what was logically possible. This way of thinking about God produced such logically unsolvable problems, earnestly debated by the medievals, as whether God can create a stone so big that he Himself can't lift it.

The Voluntarism of Scotus

To safeguard the freedom of God against the onslaught of this abstract theological type of reasoning another medieval scholar, Duns Scotus by name, formulated his philosophy of *Voluntarism*, in which he placed the *will* of God above the *reason* of God. He argued that God is free to do as he pleases, whether this makes logical sense or not. By implication, this doctrine of free will as transcending reason soon became applied to human beings as well by scholars of the Renaissance movement. Human beings are essentially free, they taught. The thinking of human beings is governed by the choices they make. To understand human beings one must know what motivates them, one must understand their *internal frame of reference*.

This debate between Anselm/Aquinas and Duns Scotus actually represents a clash between the Greek Mind and the Hebraic-Christian Mind in the history of Western thought. At a minimum it points to the fact that there are two main sources of inspiration operative in that history.

The idea of will is not of Greek origin, which was far more deterministic, but has Hebraic-Christian roots. When Scotus formulated his philosophy of Voluntarism he appealed to Augustine, who lived some nine hundred years earlier and who is often called the last Greek thinker and the first Christian thinker. Augustine taught that the relation of God to the world and to humanity is one of love. Scotus taught that the free will of God, while it supersedes the bound of reason, is not arbitrary because it is rooted in love. **It is impossible to love on command.** To love someone entails that you have freely chosen for that person. Love also implies an awareness of the uniqueness of the other. What we love frequently is the otherness of others, is the fact that they possess qualities that we lack. This kind of love is also spontaneous, unpremeditated, uncalculating and not thought through, or non-reasoning. Love is blind, we say.

All of these characteristics we find in the Voluntarism of Scotus. Historically these values of love, will, individuality, spontaneity and intuition prompted Pascal, some four hundred years after Scotus to exclaim that "the heart has reasons of which reason knows

nothing.” The debate between Anselm and Aquinas on the one hand and Scotus on the other has had as its result for the history of Western thought that in many ways reason/thought and will/feeling came to be seen as each other’s opposites.

Scientific Rationalism of the Modern period: this-worldly Platonism?

After the Middle Ages, during the so-called Modern period of philosophy, the attention of scholars turned away from a focus on God and returned once again to our relation to *this* world, the world of every day experience. But what continued to be emphasized was that thought/logic/reason is the preferred way to understanding that world. This emphasis came to expression in the philosophy of Rationalism. It had two variants: Metaphysical/Continental Rationalism and Scientific Rationalism/Empiricism. In the latter philosophy thought/reason now took the form of constructing a scientific picture of the world we live in, i.e. a rational/reasonable world picture, to guide the lives of human beings. It was initially believed that every human being, by virtue of being alive, potentially has within him/herself this ability to reason, to mentally construct, or at least to recognize such a rational world order infallibly. People have this ability, it was thought, by birth, provided they think straight and do not let their perceptions, emotions or desires cloud their ability to reason. (So, this could be called a *this-worldly* Platonism?)

But time changes things. In time, people in the Western world began to doubt that this ability to think up such a reasonable world was universal. They came to believe that one could construct a scientific picture of our life world *only* if one used the right *method* of thinking. During the Nineteenth Century Industrial Revolution, the philosophy of Positivism became popular. It championed the *experimental* method as the best way to get at the truth. Now everything that could be experimentally demonstrated was considered to be real and true. All that could not be demonstrated in this way was considered “unscientific” and therefore fanciful or false. This way of formulating the way toward truth has continued to hold sway until this day. With that we have essentially arrived at our present emphasis on the life of reason in which a scientific picture of the world dominates the life we live.

Continental Rationalism

To get at the historical roots of the life of soul we must dig a little further into the history of Western thought, to the development of Metaphysical/Continental Rationalism, and its successor, Romanticism/Anti-Positivism.

Continental Rationalism had this in common with Scientific Rationalism/Empiricism, (which eventually led to Positivism’s emphasis on experimentation) in that it too asserted that thought/reason was the way to truth and reality. However, it differed from Scientific Rationalism in that it did not attempt to form a scientific picture of the world. Rather, it saw in thought/reason a means for self-perfection. It stressed the *therapeutic value of thought/reason*. Descartes, who started this movement called thinking the “sanitation of the soul”. By means of it, one could rid oneself of faulty living patterns, unify one’s mind, integrate one’s thoughts, and raise one’s consciousness to higher levels.

Romanticism

This movement toward self-perfection by means of thinking straight over time proved to be much too intellectualistic to have any therapeutic value. In typical Rationalist fashion it had little good to say about feeling and emotion as a way of getting at the truth. Eventually this perceived lack led to the movement of Romanticism, which had as its centrepiece the life of passion.

The Romantics reacted negatively to the exclusive emphasis on reason and logic during the Modern period. Pascal, the forerunner of Romanticism, for instance, stressed the importance of the heart as an alternative to reason in the pursuit of knowledge. There are things, he held, which can be known by means of logic, but there are also things that can only be known by heart, intuitively. This naïve form of knowing is an immediate, pre-logical, pre-reflective, spontaneous grasping of the truth of a thing. It depends more on feeling and choice than on logic.

One unfortunate by-product of the exclusive emphasis on reason by the Rationalists was that they saw themselves as the pinnacle of social and cultural development. They did not value history as the study of past events since they considered past civilizations inferior to their own. Nor did they think much of cultures other than their own culture. As proof of their superiority they cited the scientific discoveries their culture had made in the physical sciences and elsewhere.

The Romanticist who most strongly and effectively opposed the devaluation of history and culture by the Rationalists was Vico. He asserted his opposition by stating that history is the greatest science because it is the study of the process of human self-creation. Human life is a project of self-improvement. Human beings make themselves through history. History is a *Geisteswissenschaft*, as Dilthey was to call it later, literally a “science of the human spirit”, a “social” science rather than a natural science.

Anti-Positivism

The upshot of this development was that during the Nineteenth Century a group of scholars who studied the “process of human self-creation” and who were disturbed by the inroads that Positivistic research methods were making into the human sciences began to argue that these sciences needed their own method of investigation. They considered the method of the natural sciences, of experimentation and statistical analysis, which Positivism was promoting, to be completely unsuited for the study of human experience. These Anti-Positivists were opposed to treating the human sciences as if it were identical to the natural sciences like physics and chemistry. They argued that an experimental approach to the study of human nature, which views the human mind as one physical system among many, fails to deal adequately with the higher functions of the mind like thought, judgment and valuation. It also ignores completely other equally important human functions such as feelings, affects, emotion and motivation. So, a natural scientific, experimental approach, they argued, in fact excludes from the purview of study the very essence of human experience.

According to the Anti-Positivists reality as experienced by human beings is of an entirely different kind than physical reality. It is subjective, rather than objective experience. It deals with experience that is always connected to an individual subject, or to an “I”, or a mind, or some kind of personality structure. For one thing, the experience of one individual differs fundamentally from that of another, so that a general theory of human experience is an impossibility. For this reason an Anti-Positivistic approach to the study of human experience generated typologies rather than theories. Furthermore, according to the Anti-Positivists the mind, which is the subject pole of human experience, is always active. It *generates* experience. The structure of the mind is *intentional*, teleological or goal-directed and *dynamic*. It is a structure of choices, of motives, purposes, ideals and goals. The human person who does the experiencing is always up to something.

Finally, a natural scientific, experimental approach to the study of human experience is in the nature of the case compelled to view that experience as a mechanism of causal relations, the elements of which are entirely determined by external forces. Thus, it is unable to deal with what are possibly the most essential characteristics of subjective human experience such as spontaneity, choice, creativity, imagination, meaning and value.

The life of soul: this-worldly Voluntarism?

Looking back, it will be clear by now, I hope, that Positivism hails back to the Greeks and that the life of reason is its birth mother. Anti Positivism on the other hand, is very much a child of Scotus’ Voluntarism, and looking forward it anticipates basic characteristics found in the life of soul. In the main, this retrospective description of the history of Western civilization, even if it is only suggestive, hopefully lends support to my assertion that two sources of inspiration decisively influence our way of framing our everyday experience today and that the life of reason is currently hijacking our life of soul.

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The life of reason

This then brings me to a description of the life lived according to the dictates of reason, which, historically, forms the first metaphorical mainstay that inspires our lives in the Western world. It is probably the most important determinant of the lives we live today and in many ways it is also more familiar to us than our life of soul. Our reason for living, so to speak *is* reason. We base our lives on the conviction that if we but think straight, and do not let our emotions cloud our judgment we can achieve the impossible.

As I see it **the life of reason is governed by an overriding desire to control “nature”, our human nature first of all in the form of self-control over our emotions, but by extension, control over the natural world, and of late, the world of culture surrounding us.** This impulse to control comes to expression in the invention, fabrication, (mass) production, sale, ownership, use and consumption of “things”. It is the practice of extracting “raw materials” and converting them into “machines”, i.e. into things useful for the convenience of living our lives. The ultimate goal is to possess a maximum number of these things: household appliances, furniture, packaged and processed foods, means of transportation, communication devices, places to live, labour saving tools, recreational facilities, products that insulate us from the vagaries of weather, etc., etc. Ownership of these enhances our sense of well-being and security. When we possess many of them we feel rich, when we own few of these we are considered poor.

As individual members of our culture we are embedded in this gigantic collective commercial project aimed at the production of goods. It starts with the activity, which we have dubbed “science”. Science involves a process of formulating “models” of segments of our every day experience, which we subsequently subject to “experimentation”. This process reduces our experience to the smallest possible elements, which we then proceed to combine with one another in a series of cause and effect or correlative relations. It starts with a hunch, or “hypothesis” on how these elements might be combined. If our hunches about these relationships prove to be correct, they then result in discoveries, which we call “facts”. Together these facts form what we call a “scientific picture” of our experience.

Our world adores the activities and the results of science far beyond any other action we might perform. **Science is the basis of how we solve problems. And with good reason.** Over the centuries it has enabled us to construct a magnificent edifice of what we are about. Proof of its efficiency and power is found in the reality that its efficacy is not restricted to our western developed world. It has now begun to refashion the traditional cultures of so called “third world” countries into a global village in which economic values dominate, albeit not always with beneficial results.

Facts, or the products of scientific research need to be transformed into tangible results to be useful. This occurs in the second phase of our production process, called “technology”. It entails the application of scientific results to the ongoing production of goods. It starts with an “invention”, or an idea more often than not derived from scientific research of how a certain desired result may be achieved most efficiently. It

then is (usually mass) produced, or fabricated in factories to be distributed to consumers of the product for a price.

This brings us to the final phase, which we call “commerce”. It makes no sense to produce goods unless they are sold to and bought by consumers. This is the task of commercial entities called “corporations”. These (most often multi-national) organizations or companies do not produce anything themselves but they decisively control the production and distribution with their all-important weapon – money, simply because money is the means by which we obtain goods. The corporations procure these funds from individuals and institutions, which invest in their organizations in exchange for shares in their companies. These shares are then publicly traded, i.e. bought and sold on a “stocks and bonds market”. This market is a most important influence in all our lives. When shares go up we feel content, when they go down in price we worry regardless whether or not we own any of them ourselves.

The importance of this commercial enterprise is evident in **the inordinate amount of attention we pay to what we call “the economy”**. It is highlighted in daily newscasts, it is the central topic of political discourse, and forms the most essential component of the decisions we make. When we want to have something, or do something, the first question we ask is whether we can afford it.

The overall aim of corporations is the promotion of economic growth and the bulk of their activities is for the enrichment of the shareholders. They achieve these goals by manipulating the delicate balance between the supply of, and the demand for goods. They control an over supply by reducing production. When goods are scarce they raise their prices. Either way they make a profit. Central to all that corporations do is the perpetuation of economic growth or the prevention of a stagnant economy.

They chiefly attain this goal by means of their most interesting, if not also their most pernicious tool available to them -- advertising. In essence advertising seeks to restrict the desires of consumers to goods produced and offered for sale in the market place, chiefly in large department stores and in shopping malls. Market research aims at finding the most efficient ways to condition consumers via advertising to want the things corporations have to offer. **The bottom line in all such efforts is the maximization of profits.**

Commercial enterprises have more than advertising at their disposal. Other tools that could be mentioned are controlling labour costs, restricting or liberalizing the supply of money, credit or offering things on time, and of course, pricing. In our world things no longer have intrinsic value, the value of a thing is its price, and the price of a thing is whatever someone is willing to pay for it. Control of pricing is therefore a powerful tool.

One last tool corporations have is planned obsolescence. In this enterprise things are built to break down in a predetermined length of time to be repaired or preferably replaced by new things. It is perhaps the most potent way in which to guarantee the perpetual economic extraction, production and distribution growth machine indefinitely.

This formulation of the life of reason may not be the most exhaustive way to describe the way we live, but few of us would deny *that* this is for most of us the normal way we make our living. We spend much of our days making and consuming goods in response to the dictates of commercial enterprises. Another way of saying this is that we live in a capitalistic society. Guided by reason few of us question whether we *ought* to live this way.

The life of soul

There is, however another equally important way of living in our Western world. It may not always be at the forefront of our daily consciousness, but it is real nonetheless. It comes to expression during times when we wonder whether the way we live makes any sense at all. Such questions arise in us most often when our lives threaten to cascade *out of control*. Then we anxiously worry that, instead of making a living we are being lived.

At such times our awareness reverts back to the most basic level of human experience, to the life of immediate experience, to our soul life. In this frame of heart and mind vulnerability rather than expertise and mastery predominate. It is the place where basic questions of human life confront us. **It is the place where the issues of life reside. It is the realm of our spirituality. It is that basic layer in which we attempt to live our lives out of and unto something or someone.**

All our pronouncements about reality, be they scientific or non-scientific, originate in that layer, such that nothing we utter can ever be rightly understood as a bare statement of fact. Everything we say about our existence is already an evaluation based on these choices in life.

We may not always appreciate this dimension of our existence because our life of soul can be a place of turmoil. But it is a place of reflection, which gives our lives a chance of renewal and makes us feel alive.

This realm of soul in our lives is the place where we think, feel, speak and act from the heart, the place where love and hate transcend reason. It is what Pascal alluded to when he uttered his famous phrase, “The heart has reasons of which reason knows nothing

It is hard for us to define the life of soul because of its complexity. If we dare to open ourselves to the dimension of soul, we find ourselves confronted with a bewildering, often contradictory set of experiences: we come to know ourselves to be accepted warts and all by others and by ourselves, prized and treasured even for who we are, or rejected, debased and misunderstood in our deepest intensions. There does not seem to be a middle ground. Soul is the place where the inevitable hurts of everyday living affect us to the core and where we can celebrate with intense joy the healings that also happen. Soul is where both tragedies and miracles are real to us. In the life of soul things happen, good events and bad, which we believe should not happen but they happen anyway. Soul is the place where we cry tears of sadness or happiness and where we can laugh uproariously at the telling of a good joke. In soul we respond to the evil that people devise and commit with attitudes and action of righteous indignation or with callous indifference. It is also the place where honesty forces us to admit that we ourselves have the capacity to murder in our hearts, that in extreme circumstances we might think or act no different. Soul tells us that we need to be loved to be able to love and that we need to love others to be loved by others.

If we live the life of soul we know ourselves situated in a world not of our own making, where much of what we think, feel, or do is in response to what is out there. For better or worse we are out there, dependent on good fortune and the good will of others. We warm ourselves to their company and feel utterly alone when that is lacking. Soul is the place where identity and intimacy clash at times and some times complement one another. In soul we are thankful and we complain. It is a place where truth counts and where we hide ourselves defensively in a lie. Soul is a place where integrity and authenticity are at a premium and where we are deathly afraid of both. Soul is when we risk being vulnerable and insecure with someone and rejoice when she or he reciprocates. In soul, life often does not add up and we don't know why, but it is also a place where we attempt the impossible and pull it off.

In soul brick walls at times surround us on all sides with no way out in sight. But there are also times when one of them turns out to be an open door. At times the future is utterly closed off. At other times it is surprisingly friendly. In soul hope and despair are alternating realities. Some days take an eternity. But in other days time flies.

We live in a world of green and colour. A sure way to rest and relax is to take a walk in the woods. In the life of our soul this natural world is a given, not fabricated by us, but there we also become aware what happens when do not take care of it or protect it to sustain it. **We readily call cyclones, hurricanes, floods and earthquakes “acts of God”, as if s/he has anything to with them and thereby abdicate ourselves from responsibility for them. But only in our soul do we sometimes wonder what our part is in bringing about such so-called “natural” disasters.**

This and so much more is what we experience in our soul life. Especially today, it is an extremely complex world. **The life of soul is full of paradoxes. Many of them we cannot solve, most of them we learn to live with.** When we are initially confronted with this complex world, full of contradictions our immediate experience is one of vulnerability. The experience is naïve, raw and unrefined. We are compelled to respond to it from out of ourselves if we want to live and go on living, but we hardly know how. When we are born into this world and for some time thereafter we know (next to) nothing. We depend on others to frame our existence. At the start of our lives this is our human condition. Our responses are naïve. Then, gradually, as time passes our responses become more and more refined. This is the process of maturation. As we grow older we may become better at handling the complexity of our lives but at no stage of the life span is it easy.

spirituality

What does it feel like to experience life so naively? Can we describe it as a phenomenon in our everyday life? One way to do that is to sum up the experience this way: The essence of naïve experience is spirituality. The essence of spirituality is humanity, and the essence of humanity is vulnerability. I want to discuss each of these in more detail.

Spirituality has once again become a popular topic of discussion in the Western world. What's new is that in addition to traditional Christian or Roman Catholic forms of spirituality, which have always been with us, kinds of spirituality inspired by Far Eastern religions have now also become topics of popular discussion. Such discussions are providing a healthy antidote to the crass secularism and commercialism so familiar to the lives of people living in the Western world. Today, bookstores and websites offer a veritable smorgasbord of diverse ways of practicing spirituality in our lives.

The one thing that all or most of these seem to have in common is that they offer an *escape from ordinary day-to-day living*. These popular notions of spirituality have a *decidedly otherworldly character*. They are reminiscent of an earlier kind of spirituality propagated during the Hellenistic phase of Western philosophic thought. During that time, life in the Western world, much like our own today, was in an uproar, with many world-and-life views vying for attention, and with none of them gaining the upper hand. In order to deal with this confusion of values the Epicureans proposed a minimalist life style, specifically a search for *ataraxia*, roughly translated as “a search for peace of mind”, by *opting out of* the hustle and bustle of everyday living. These ancient forms of spirituality seem strangely familiar to us today. What we seem to have forgotten is that spirituality (which is at the centre of the life of soul) is the most essential ingredient of living a full life. In gaining the whole world I fear that we Westerners have collectively lost our soul.

The Epicureans had a major flaw: At best they offered an otherworldly spirituality *next to everyday living*, but not an ordinary spirituality *within or for the life that we live every day*. The life of spirituality has both a collective and an individual component. In an individual person's life the importance of spirituality for everyday living is evident. I can illustrate this for starters from an example out of the psychology of adolescence. The life of a teenager, it says, is characterized by “Sturm und Drang”, (a period of turbulence). Typically, adolescents experiment with all sorts of life options, drugs, alcohol, sex, music, dress. Their choices are for a time all over the map. It is as if they are trying on these life options like a suit to see which life style fits them. Once they have settled that question their lives tend to become more stable, with the choices and actions they now make lining up behind that one choice on what to live out of and what to live for. This then, it is said, spells the end of adolescence and the beginning of adulthood.

This formula worked well in times past. In today's global world, however, young men and women (the so called millenials) are more likely to continue this spiritual quest for a personal identity for another decade, during what now is called *emerging adulthood*. They typically do not settle into an adult life style, of marriage, family and work until they approach age thirty. Most theorists view this quest for identity as a psychological matter, and it is that of course. But this process of identity formation by twenty-something young people is so pervasive and all determining in their lives that characterizing it as a psychological quest does not seem to do justice to it. It belongs to everyone's life developmentally at some time to be spiritually busy, in the sense of deciding what to live out of and what for.

In my view the practice of spirituality as I just described is essential to a well-lived life at any age. None of us can escape engaging in it. The process is ongoing but the goal is a well-lived life characterized by our humanity.

We commonly view spirituality as restricted to religion, organized or not. I think that is a mistake. Let me try to define religion as I see it. To me religion has to be lived to be real. A religion that consists of church attendance on Sunday morning and no more is only a hobby. So, I define lived religion as characterized by what or whom we live our lives *out of* and by what or whom we live our lives *unto*. From this vantage point religion is on par with ideology. It is what or whom we trust with our lives and what or whom we serve with our lives. It is based on what we have experienced in the past and what we hope for in the future. Viewed from this perspective everyone's life is faith, or trust based. The difference between a religion and an ideology is not that religious people's lives are faith based, whereas the lives of those who adhere to an ideology are not. Rather, the distinction is that the former has something to do with God and the latter with something other than God.

The function of spirituality, religious or ideological is that it gives our lives both faith and purpose. In our complex world it gives our lives a basis and a direction. Together these two provide us with the courage to live out our humanity. They teach us what it means to be human. Many formulations have been given in the Western world of the meaning and purpose of human life. Each of these spiritual life choices has implications for how we conduct our lives.

Hijacking the life of soul

With that **we have at long last come to a potential diagnosis of what ails us in the twenty-first century**. I am not the first to decry the crass commercialism of our culture. Others have done that much better before me. It is becoming increasingly clear that our single-minded pursuit of an ever-higher standard of living is not without its costs. All we need to mention is the degradation of our natural environment. **It is said that no species on earth dirties its nest like the human race.**

We could even say that the problem we face is one of an unequal distribution of goods. There is abundant evidence today that the haves increase their holdings *at the expense of* the have-nots. Individually we can point to the exorbitant salaries of the CEO's of corporations compared to the wages of the other people they employ. Collectively we can mention the wealth of developed nations in comparison to the subsistent living standards of aboriginal communities and of the neighbour nations in the third world. But this diagnosis continues to keep us stuck in a lifestyle where the accumulation and the consumption of things is considered the gold standard of life. It precludes the question regarding the worth of all our doing.

To get at a more profound understanding of our malaise we must look farther and dig deeper. I submit that **the essential problem we are facing today is that we have allowed the life of reason to hijack the life of our soul**. It is not just that our focus on reason as the way to live diminishes our life of soul. More to the point, in this mindset what should be the *result* of our life of soul has now become *determinative* of our life of soul. We have come to define who we are in terms of how we think, how we think in terms of what we do, and what we do in terms of what we have. In essence we have created a world up side down. We attempt to solve the problems of the heart exclusively by using the power of our head. In short, we have come to believe that questions of value and worth are best answered scientifically.

In the logic of science there is something that is known as the “naturalistic fallacy”. It is in error in that it reasons from *is* to *ought*. It holds that what ought to be the case is decided by what is the case. It is generally accepted that you cannot do this. It is a logical fallacy. Yet it happens all the time. A case in point is opinion research. In this approach whether something is valuable or not is determined by how many people believe it to be valuable. This is essentially a variant of modern scientific research, which is exclusively a matter of counting, of computation. In it something is the case when the number of instances for a proposition exceeds the number of instances against it, limited only by the size of a margin of error. This practice forgets that what can be counted is not necessarily what we can count on and that what we can count on cannot always be counted. A currently popular variant of this is the mistaken belief that when something has gone viral it is worthy of following.

Yet another victim of the scientific approach to determining the value of things is the loss of confidence we experience in our ability to make our own decisions. We no longer feel that it is safe to decide what to do purely by consulting our own “gut”, simply by whether

or not it feels right. It is my observation that women have retained more of this ability than men. Instead, we feel constrained to consult the experts when questions of worth and value are concerned. Typically, when searching how to be happily married, how to raise our children properly or what to do to maintain a healthy life style we turn to books and websites produced by people who research these matters.

And with meager results, because by and large these “authorities” do not agree with one another. Take, for example the advice that we should ingest certain food stuffs, chocolate, wine, vitamins, organic vegetables, etc., etc., because they are “good for” us. Sooner or later research will be published that some or all of these are *not* good for us, leading the exasperated consumer to wonder whether *life* isn’t bad for living. The advice of experts not only lacks reliability because it is based on correlational research. It cannot tell which of the factors researched causes which. But, more to the point, scientific research cannot help us decide questions of worth because it deals with means rather than ends. Let me not be misunderstood, research *can* help us in making difficult life decisions. But it cannot be a substitute for making those decisions. Only *after* the decisions on what is desirable have been made can it tell us how to get there. Researchers themselves cannot do their work until they have made certain life choices. The facts resulting from their research only have meaning in terms of those choices. The reason why researchers do not always agree with one another is often because they don’t make the same choices.

Finally, if we do feel the need to consult authorities in deciding the worth of what we do, we do better, in my view, to allow ourselves to be taught by the artists among us. Poets, visual artists, song writers, music makers, word smiths of any kind and story tellers are more reliable guides because they understand and have a deep respect for the complexity of our soul life. They never tell us straight out what they are trying to get across. Instead they allude to it, hint at it, preferably with as few words, few strokes, few tones as possible, and they leave it to us to fill in the blanks. To me, the artist who best understands my life of soul is Leonard Cohen when he writes, “There is a crack in everything. That is how the light gets in.” It betrays a lifetime of making difficult choices.

One last negative result of the life of reason hijacking the life of soul is what we have come to label as “**spinning**”. It is also the most cynical of all because it involves making repeated statements, which at best are hyperbolic, promising more than they can deliver. At worst they are statements, which we consciously know to be contrary to fact. The assumption underlying such practices is that if people are presented with certain statements often enough they will come to accept them as truth. In advertising the function of such actions is to get consumers to buy a product. Its worst form is the presentation of personal testimonies played by actors, of people endorsing a product. In politics the aim of spinning is to get citizens to vote for a certain party platform. The tactic of spinning is pervasive in the lives of people living in the Western world. It appears to be effective in spite of the fact that we all know what is going on. It would be discontinued if that were not the case. But the cost of spinning is a loss of a sense of integrity and authenticity in our soul. 1)

1) I have two sources of evidence that advertising conditions consumers. Admittedly these sources are anecdotal and therefore probably not very scientific, but they are close to my heart because they involve the experiences of our children. Many years ago, when our children were small, McDonalds came on the scene with TV commercials aimed at enticing children to buy their hamburgers. They did this by promising them a visit with their clown Ronald McDonald, billed as a very wonderful attraction. For weeks our children pestered us to take them to McDonalds for this coveted event. My wife and I decided to do a bit of counter conditioning of our own. We told our children that we had heard McDonalds put a little bit of chicken poop in their hamburgers. For several weeks thereafter our children stopped asking us to take them. But in the end the lure of TV advertising proved to be too strong and they again began to bother us with their requests for a visit.

The second, more poignant story involves our eldest son who then was about to become five years old. It also illustrates the fact that spinning causes us to lose a sense of integrity and authenticity. He became fascinated by a TV commercial, which showed that when you put a mixture of plaster of Paris in a mold resembling a troll, after a while a real live troll would come out, dancing. This commercial was played repeatable during the children's programs he watched. Our son announced that the only thing he wanted for his birthday was that toy. Against our better judgment we decided to buy him one. When it arrived he was overjoyed with anticipation. He carefully followed the instructions in putting the plaster in the molds. And then he waited. But nothing happened. No dancing live troll appeared. At long last he turned to me and said with tears in his eyes, "TV lies, doesn't it, dad? His childlike innocence was shattered by someone wanting to make a buck.

A possible solution: communal soul discourse

With that I hope I have succeeded somewhat in answering the question with which this article started, concerning what is involved when we gain the whole world but lose our soul. Can anything be done to remedy the situation? I think so. Succinctly put, communally we can engage in an ongoing dialogue with one another about questions of worth and value in human life.

There is one basic characteristic that we have, which makes such a dialogue possible. It points to the fact that we, human beings are never satisfied with just existing. Without exception we all have a strong need to give an account of our existence. Talk to any man, woman or child and they will soon tell you who they are, where they came from, what their world is like, what they are doing and where they are headed. Human beings are storytellers by nature. They have something to say. They have a persistent urge to describe themselves and the world in which they live. This need to know and to name sets us apart from any other creature in this world. It is a uniquely human quality.

Human beings are creatures who have something to say...and who need to be heard. That goes to the heart of our humanity. All our words are publications, designed to reveal, to make our insides public, meant to address others:” This is what I think”, this is how I feel”, we say. “What do you think? How do you feel about it?” When we speak, we want to be heard, received, and listened to. It is a terrible thing not to listen to someone when she is speaking. It violates her humanity. It negates our deepest need.

This need to speak and to be heard forms the basis for the possibility of dialogue. When we speak and when we listen we affect one another and are mutually affected by one another. Two rocks, even when they are touching never communicate. You can grow two plants, or plant two trees in the same garden. Though they stand next to each other for days or months or even years on end, they have nothing to say to one another. You can put two chairs in a room, the one toppled over, the other upright. You can leave them there till dooms day but the up right chair will never be able to put the other chair back on its feet. However, put two people in a room and pretty soon they will start to converse and to affect each other. What we say to one another and how we respond, affects us. It can hurt or help us. Words can heal and words can kill.

This is especially true when the discussion is about the worth and value of living. Wars are currently being fought to safeguard one’s view on what life is all about. Think of ISIS. Healing conversation can only begin when we are willing to listen and learn from one another. This is most important when we are confronted with people who disagree with us. What could I learn from someone who thinks exactly like I do? Healing dialogue can take place when we learn to appreciate, to prize even, the otherness of the others in the discussion, when we are willing to consider that what the other has to say to us may be a source of wisdom for us. **Knowledge that matters in life, or wisdom, is a gift rather than an achievement. It is not something we master or produce but something we receive. Wisdom comes from outside. It is revealed to us. It master us. We must open ourselves to it and allow ourselves to be changed by it. We must listen to it.**

This kind of listening means more than listening with our ears (or for that matter seeing with our eyes) in search of “information” (as in “surfing the net”). Rather, it means that we are called to listen (or to see) with our *lives*. What is intended with this is a lifestyle of receptivity (See my thought piece, *listening to nothing*). This style of living is by no means easy. The hard part of choosing to take a listening attitude in life is that it requires an admission on our part that in and of our selves we know very little and can’t do much. It requires the awareness that we don’t own a lot that has not been given to us. For example, we come into the world utterly dependent on others and remain so for years to come. Unlike most animals, which are born fully equipped because they mature inside their mother’s womb, human beings mature for the most part outside the womb and therefore need a long period of learning.

This means that at least for several decades of our lives we are more or less dependent on the care of others, and, therefore, vulnerable to the way others treat us. But, even after that, we continue to be affected for better or worse by the influence of others. **The idea of a self made solitary individual, so popular in the Western world, is a myth. Vulnerability is the most basic characteristic of human life.**

Vulnerability is a relational construct

An awareness of our vulnerability is the necessary and sufficient condition for a communal dialogue on the worth of living, provided that this awareness is mutual. If one person is willing to listen to another because she is aware of her vulnerability to the other, but the other lacks this awareness or willingness, the relationship has a high potential for abuse. Intimate relationships are the best of all inter-human relations because they are characterized by *reciprocal* vulnerability. In such relationships the partners have nothing to hide or to prove. Vulnerability is of necessity a relational construct.

There is another most important characteristic of healing dialogue that needs to be mentioned. It also underscores the essential difference between the life of reason and the life of soul. When we are willing to listen to other human beings with our lives we are of necessity faced with the question whether the stories they tell us are authentic or not. The important thing is not how well their stories are crafted or how well they are told. What gives their story the authority it has over us is the experience to which it refers.

The question of authenticity is central to the life we live in the world of today. In our postmodern world, is it at all possible for one person’s story to have authority over another? There no longer exists an overarching narrative in terms of which we can judge whether an individual person’s story is reasonable or not. What we seem to be left with is that a story is authoritative *only* for the person who tells it. It is *their* story, we say, and therefore we have no right to judge it. But such a view makes dialogue impossible. At a very minimum there must be *something* that we can discuss.

If the stories we tell to one another can no longer be judged on rational grounds determined by logical criteria we can all agree on, what then may we appeal to in our

discussions about the worth of living? Succinctly put, a story is authoritative when it accurately relates an experience one has had. For example, my wife and I being older now, like to tell stories about past experiences we have had. When my wife tells a story you can count on it that it contains all the facts about what happened. When I tell a story she is likely to challenge me by saying, “But that is not what happened!” My response to that is usually, “No, but my version tells a better story.” My story is usually more entertaining, hers is more authentic.

But this evaluation still sounds to me like the language of the life of reason. For us to be convinced that someone is telling a true story we also need to know how much the experience has affected him or her. What we listen for is the way the voice breaks as the story is told or the way the eyes mist over. These emotional cues often give us better access to the experience behind the story. What actually happened to the person is what counts more than the story he/she tells about it.

My point in all of this is a suggestion that we can all interpersonally relate to the personal experiences of others. To quote Carl Rogers about human experience: “What is most personal is at the same time most universal.” Or to put it in my terms, “The universality of experience, which we can no longer experience in the life of reason we can recapture in the life of soul.”

One last factor that aids dialogue, and therefore the clarification of values, in my view, is an awareness of the primary importance of group membership for the formation and maintenance of individual identity. The life of reason is predicated on the primacy of individual persons, who, only secondarily relate to and form communities with other individuals. As a matter of fact human beings are embedded into larger social wholes, not to mention a natural environment, from conception onward. **In the life of reason relationships are optional. In the life of soul they are indispensable. In the life of reason relationships are competitive, in the life of soul they are collaborative. In the West we have lost what is still *en vogue* in non-Western cultures: that we need each other to be ourselves.**
