

# The Rational Quest For Our Spirituality\*

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## 1 – Introduction

Human beings have always tried to understand the world surrounding them. The driving force for this quest can be related to two main factors: an inherent curiosity to understand the great variety of natural phenomena and how humankind fits in the grand scheme of things, and more pragmatically, a constant need to learn how to utilize the available natural resources for survival as well as to attain a better quality of life. From the earliest times, it has always been important to know the best time to plant crops, how to fabricate better tools and weapons, how to process and preserve food, how to build a safer shelter or how to treat various illnesses.

For a long time humans relied almost exclusively on their senses to extract or infer information about nature, which is why at one point in time general wisdom held that the earth was flat, or that the stars were mere fixtures in the sky. At the same time, there have always been many facets of nature that could not be explained according to conventional knowledge. In these cases it was not uncommon to attribute a natural phenomena to a supernatural or divine source. Having no knowledge about meteorology and electricity, peoples of many early cultures believed in the Thunder God. Unaware of the mechanics that govern the solar system, ancient Egyptians believed in the Sun God, who every night bravely fought the evil forces of darkness to emerge victorious the next morning. Thousands of years later and after extraordinary improvement in the knowledge of natural laws, what used to be viewed as religious concepts of lightning and day and night completely migrated from the realm of religion to become part of a scientific knowledge accepted by everyone. What used to be discussed only among priests, today is taught in science classes of elementary schools.

In this endless process of knowledge acquisition, two questions have always engaged philosophers, religious leaders and scientists of all times in a quest for answers. They are: “*How is the world made?*” and “*Is there life after death?*”. Sections 2 and 3 discuss how western thinkers have addressed these questions since the ancient Greeks, emphasizing the significantly different approaches that have been employed to deal with each one of them. On the one hand, an astonishing progress has been achieved in the understanding of our observable universe by searching the answers to the question “*How is the world made?*” through rational inquiry followed by scientific observations and data analysis. On the other hand, the answers to the question “*Is there life after death?*” have been mostly

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\* The author would like to thank Dianne King and Alexander Moreira-Almeida for the valuable comments and suggestions.

restrained to different religious beliefs where, in most cases, dogmas prevail over reason and spirituality remains largely disallowed to scientific examination. Section 4 describes some successful scientific endeavors to understand the spiritual nature of human beings, and Section 5 contains the concluding remarks.

## 2 – From the Ancient Greeks to Middle Ages

The ancient Greeks set a different tone in the western civilization's quest for knowledge, by using reason far more than religion to understand the intricacies of the natural world. The Greek thinkers started to search for a more rational and logical order in the universe. For the first time the question "*How is the world made?*" had a natural, non-religious answer when Thales of Miletus (624-548 B.C.) conjectured that everything in the universe was made of water. It doesn't matter that the answer was wrong but it is quite remarkable that an attempt to explain the world was made without invoking any divine cause or revealed truth.

From Thales of Miletus to Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), almost two centuries of a philosophical thought based on rational inquiry laid the foundation for the Greek view of the world where the correct way to understand nature must occur primarily through reason. (The importance of methodic observation in conjunction with mathematical data analysis as a method to acquire scientific knowledge was established over a thousand of years later by Galileo.)

Greeks still answered the question "*Is there life after death?*" based on their religious beliefs. Ancient Greek religion was polytheistic, i.e., consisting of the worship of many gods. They believed that their souls survived the death of their bodies and were carried on to another dimension to an afterlife whose fate was determined by their conduct and behavior in the present life.

The Aristotelian view of the universe dominated the western world's scientific thought for many centuries. It consisted of a very clear distinction between the objects on earth and in heaven, with respect to their behavior and composition. Objects on Earth were formed by the combination of only four components: fire, earth, water and air. The motion of any earthly object was governed by its inherent tendency to find its natural place, the center of the Universe, which happened to be located at the center of the Earth. On the other hand, the heavenly objects were formed by a fifth element, called quintessence, considered to be immutable and incorruptible. The natural motion of any heavenly object was circular, which was the basis of the geocentric system, where all celestial bodies were thought to move in a circular orbit around the Earth, which stood static at the center of the Universe. Although wrong, the Aristotelian view was rational, absent of any attribution to a divine cause and consistent with the observations and astronomical information he had available at that time.

As for the immortality of the soul, contrary to his master and mentor Plato as well as the Greek religious traditions, Aristotle considered the soul as part of the body, from which it

could never be separated, thus precluding any possibility of an afterlife. With the advent of Christianity a few centuries later, his view of the soul was to be seriously challenged.

The Aristotelian view of the world, including geocentrism, which was in agreement with the scriptures, continued through the Middle Ages and remained untouched for many centuries. However, Aristotle's view about the fate of the human soul was, of course, rejected by the Church and replaced by the one where a mighty God judges and sentences the soul after death to an eternal life in Heaven or Hell, or awaiting Heaven in Purgatory. This view has survived thousands of years and is still shared by many people today.

### **3 – From Renaissance to Recent Times**

The end of the Middle Ages is characterized by the revival of interest in arts, intellectual pursuits and new scientific endeavors, during the Renaissance, which spanned from the 14<sup>th</sup> through the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Faith as the foundation to understand the observed world started to gradually shift to a framework where mathematical patterns were sought to explain the more accurate astronomical observations then available as well as the motion of objects on Earth. Eroding thousands of years of the geocentric world view, Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) defended that Earth and the other planets actually orbited the stationary Sun. Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) discovered that the orbits of the planets were actually elliptical and Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), with the aid of his pioneering telescope, observed that the hills and craters on the surface of the moon resembled more what is found on the surface of the Earth, rather than what would characterize an immutable and incorruptible celestial object. Galileo also studied the mechanics of falling objects, which led to the introduction of the concept of acceleration and got very close to the idea of inertia. As important as Galileo's scientific discoveries was the methodology he introduced to study the laws of nature (which are still being practiced today), in which experiments are designed and performed with the goal of testing a hypothesis, and data are collected and analyzed in order to further be modeled by a mathematical formulation. The Aristotelian view of the universe was finally collapsing.

The scientific environment and the knowledge gathered by the mid 1600's were very conducive for Isaac Newton (1642-1727) to write one of the most influential scientific works in the history of humankind, in which he formulates the laws of motion and the law of gravitation. His work buried forever the distinction between celestial and earthly bodies: an apple falling from a tree and the motion of the Earth orbiting the sun obey the same set of natural laws. The success of Newton's work drew a group of the brightest physicists and mathematicians of that time to, throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, expand his work and successfully apply it to a variety of different physical systems. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the quest to make sense of our universe proceeded with scientists laying the foundation for the laws of electromagnetism and thermodynamics. Electromagnetism, among other things, explained the nature of light, made possible the creation of electrical motors and batteries and gave rise to the field of telecommunications. Thermodynamics allowed the improvement of the steam engine, a central piece of technology that fueled the Industrial Revolution.

With the birth of quantum mechanics, the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw an extraordinary advancement in understanding the building blocks that form matter. It also witnessed Albert Einstein's (1879-1955) formulation of the special and general theories of relativity, which prescribed a new mechanics for objects traveling with speeds close to the speed of light and increased our understanding of the laws governing the formation and evolution of galaxies, black holes and stars that inhabit the observable universe. Relativity and quantum mechanics unveiled aspects of nature never imagined by Newton: time and space inextricably dependent on one another, the uncertainty principle dictating the impossibility of simultaneously measuring certain physical quantities with the same level of precision, and the warping of space and time due to the presence of gravitational fields.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>th</sup> century, it is undeniable that tremendous progress has been made in the understanding of the universe we live in, and the answers to the original question "*How is the world made?*" are dramatically different from the ones given thousand of years ago. Yet although so much has been learned about our universe, there are still plenty of unanswered questions whose answers will require the devotion and brilliance of scientists for many generations. Just to give one example, a central question in cosmology today is to understand the fact that everything that can be observed in the universe represents only 4% of what is predicted to exist. The remaining 96% is attributed to the "dark mass" (23%), a hidden mass without which galaxies could not even be formed, and the "dark energy" (73%), an unknown force that permeates the empty space and accelerates the expansion of the universe [1].

## 4 – Researching our Spirituality

As for the question "*Is there life after death?*" how much scientific progress has been made in the past thousand years in the attempt to scientifically answer it? Some, but the answers to this question still remain largely confined to the realm of religious beliefs. Today, this subject is much more likely to be discussed in a Sunday Bible school classroom than in an auditorium of a School of Natural Sciences or the Psychiatry Department of a university.

The first attempts to scientifically address the survival of the soul after death occurred in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The famous episode of the Fox sisters, which took place in 1848 in the small town of Hydesville, NY, triggered the first studies involving allegations of communications from a disembodied soul. The teenagers Kate and Margaret Fox, after hearing, for months, unexplained rapping noises in their house, claimed to have succeeded in establishing a communication with the source of those sounds. Using a code based on the number of knocks, the sisters and many other witnesses were told by the source of the rapping sounds that he was the spirit of a peddler who had been murdered in that house five years earlier. This case quickly gained notoriety because it was witnessed by many neighbors and documented by the press. On many other occasions, strange and unexplained phenomena, like flying objects and other rapping sounds followed the Fox sisters. In many cases the phenomena showed to have sprung from an intelligent source. For many years the Fox girls used their gift mainly to

entertain crowds of curious people who paid to be amused and thrilled by what is presumed to be the actions of spirits. Various scholars submitted the two women to rigorous studies, but the genuineness of the occurrences has never been conclusively disproved<sup>1</sup>. A detailed account of the life of the Fox sisters can be found in [2].

The practice of communicating with spirits by decoding rapping sounds or the unattended movement of small objects or pieces of furniture rapidly became a source of entertainment in the US and Europe. A small group of people sitting around a table with the palm of their hands on top, but not necessarily touching it, enabled the table to move up in the air and down. The members of the group then asked questions that were answered by the table according to a pre-arranged code associating the letters of the alphabet to the taps of the leg's table on the floor. The phenomenon became known as dancing or turning tables.

In the spring of 1855, in Paris, Hyppolyte L. D. Rivail (1804-1869), reluctantly accepted an invitation to participate in a dancing table experiment. Professor Rivail was an educator who taught math, sciences and French and a scholar who wrote mathematics and French Grammar textbooks as well a number of papers suggesting improvements to the French public educational system. His scientific mind scoffed the idea that tables had the capacity to think. But after attending one séance and conducting some experiments he was very impressed with the results. There was no doubt in his mind that the table did jump independently of the participants' will and logically responded to their queries. Intrigued by the nature of the phenomenon, he participated in other meetings to continue his observations. When he asked the table how it could think without having a brain and a nervous system, the answer was that it was not the table that was thinking, but the souls of people who once lived on Earth. Surprised by this revelation, he started to ask questions in his own mind (without vocalizing them), to which the table gave proper answers. In order to avoid being deceived, he brought to the meetings questions written in a sealed envelope and unknown by any other participant. The questions were answered appropriately.

Convinced that the table was being handled by an intelligent being, Prof. Rivail wanted to expedite the communication with it since it tapping out the alphabetic code was tedious and slow. He placed a small basket on the table with a pencil attached to it. He realized that just one person in the group, with a hand on top of the basket, could make the basket move and write whole sentences. Later he found that the basket was unnecessary and the person could directly hold the pencil and serve as the medium (or intermediary) to intermediate the communications from the intelligent sources he called spirits. He continued conducting these meetings, asking thoughtful questions in order to exploit the scientific, philosophical and religious aspects of this new reality that it was being presented to him by the spirits. In order to rule out the influence of the medium in the communications, Prof. Rivail asked the same questions through several mediums in different meetings. After two years of intensive work, asking questions, compiling the

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<sup>1</sup> 56 years after the Hydesville episode, the skeleton of a man along with a peddler's tin box was found in the cellar of the house where the Fox sisters lived in 1848. This news was reported by the Boston Journal of November 23, 1904 [2].

answers and adding his commentaries, he published in 1857 *The Spirit's Book* [3] under the pseudonym of Allan Kardec. This book is the foundation of the doctrine he called Spiritism [4], which is a science that studies the origin, nature and destiny of spirits as well the relationships that exist between the corporeal and spiritual worlds.

The growth of the modern spiritualism movement in England (which started in the US following the events that took place at the Fox family's home in Hydesville, as described above) prompted the chemist and physicist Sir William Crookes (1832-1919), a Fellow of the Royal Society, to conduct, in 1870, a series of experiments to investigate the validity of the claims that certain people had the capacity to interact with spirits. He did not believe in these claims and thought that there was a lack of scientific evidence to support them. His initiative was very well received by the British scientific community, who trusted his academic credentials and authority to expose once and for all the pretenses of Spiritualism. His research program consisted of submitting different mediums to a number of rigorous tests at his home, where he had total control of the environment, in order to avoid any possible behind the scene preparation by the subjects under study. During four years of experimental work with a number of mediums, including Kate Fox, he observed a variety of extraordinary events that could not be attributed to trickery or forgery. He divided those events into classes of phenomena, some of which are:

- the movement of heavy bodies with contact, but without mechanical exertion (the turning tables described above fall into this class);
- the phenomena of percussive and other allied sounds (the rapping sounds heard at the Fox family's home is an example);
- the levitation of human beings;
- movement of various small articles without contact with any person, materialization of objects; and
- special instances which seem to point to the agency of an exterior intelligence.

The reports of his experiments were published in *The Quarterly Journal of Science* and they are compiled in the book *Researches in the Phenomena of Spiritualism* [5]. In the issue of January 1874, Crookes wrote:

The phenomena I am prepared to attest are so extraordinary and so directly oppose the most firmly rooted articles of scientific belief that there is an antagonism in my mind between reason, which pronounces it to be scientifically impossible, and the consciousness that my senses are not lying witnesses when they testify against my preconceptions.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the research work initiated by Dr. Ian Stevenson (1918-2007) in the U.S. represented an important contribution to the understanding of our spiritual nature. Dr. Stevenson was the Director of the Division of Personality Studies of the Department of Psychiatric Medicine of the University of Virginia, where he was also a Professor in the Department of Psychiatry. He and his team collected, for the period of 40 years, detailed documentation about children from all over the world who could remember facts that occurred in their previous lives. The analysis of over 3000 cases revealed a match between the children's descriptions of details of their previous lives (such as their own names, the names of relatives or friends, names of places, occurrences, or the cause of their death) and official documentation and/or spoken reports from those who knew the

deceased person alluded by the children. In some cases, children's birth marks coincided exactly with the location of the wound (confirmed by autopsy reports) that caused the death of the person, as reported by those children. The Division of Personality Studies also investigates cases of near-death experiences, out-of-body experiences, apparitions and after-death communications, and deathbed visions. Its website [6] contains more detailed information about the research programs as well as a list of publications.

The faculty of mediumship has been used in one of the research programs (called VERITAS) conducted by the Laboratory for Advances in Consciousness and Health of the Department of Psychology at the University of Arizona. The group is led by Dr Gary E. Schwartz and Dr. Julie Beischel and its goal is "to test the hypothesis that the consciousness (or personality or identity) of a person survives physical death." [6]. Double and even triple-blind experiments have been performed to analyze communications of mediums who report information from deceased individuals who were emotionally close to persons they call sitters. The level of correctness of the information provided by the medium is assured by the multi-blind method where the mediums, sitters and experimenters have no previous knowledge about the content of the information or the relationship between the deceased person and the sitters. The result of their experiments as well as a list of publications by the VERITAS research program can be found in their website [7].

## 5 - Conclusions

The studies described above – which are not an exhaustive account of the work done in this area to date [8] – illustrate that although some progress has been made in the past 160 years in the understanding of the spiritual nature of human beings, it has not occurred at the same pace in which the understanding of our material world evolved.

It is not difficult to understand why so little effort is being made today by the scientific community as a whole to broaden our knowledge in this area. Topics like reincarnation, clairvoyance, telekinesis, spirit communications and mediumship, for instance, are not generally perceived as subjects that can be included in the domain of standard science. This phenomenology is commonly labeled as "paranormal" and studies in these areas are very often referred to as pseudo-science or would-be science and, therefore, not worth to be properly credited. As a result, research in these fields does not attract the interest of many scientists, or funding for those who desire to scientifically explore these areas of knowledge. Not to mention the risks that those scientists would run of tainting their reputation and jeopardizing the advancement of their academic careers. Besides, there are still many interesting and important scientific problems to be resolved in the so-called standard science, enough to keep generations of scientists at work. On the other hand, the still limited knowledge we have of our universe gives scientists plenty of room for scientific explorations in the spiritual sphere.

However, the scientific studies reveal strong and compelling evidence that a human being is not only a collection of organs commanded by the brain, but it also contains an essence (called differently by different researchers: consciousness, spirit, personality, etc) that

survives the death of the body. Once disincarnated, it preserves its individuality, its knowledge, its ability to have emotions and think, and is able to interact with matter and other human beings. It also shows that this essence might even reincarnate again in another physical body as a next step in its journey. Of course, there is still much more to be learned about the spiritual world and its interface with the better understood material world. But this knowledge can only be obtained by means of laborious scientific research based on facts and observations, free of prejudices and pre-conceived ideas about how nature should or should not be. As the history of science has showed us in many instances – some of them briefly discussed in this article – the great scientific discoveries that reshaped the human perception of the world were achieved by those brilliant and open minded individuals who dared to raise their capacity of abstraction, ingenuity and creativity to a level that went way beyond the current knowledge and beliefs of their times.

Fraud in this area is, and has always been, a reality and greatly contributes for the general perception that spiritual phenomena are nothing but a pre-staged set of well performed tricks with the sole purpose of extracting money from credulous and uncritical people. Although true in many instances, the generalization that any spiritual phenomenon is a hoax and that any medium is an impostor is an error that blinds those who refuse to accept the possibility of genuine spiritual manifestations. These manifestations do occur and have been occurring since the beginning of times simply because they are an intrinsic part of the universe we live in, and, as such, governed by well defined natural laws, which we do not yet completely understand. Rejecting or simply ignoring the reality of these phenomena, or attributing them to trickery or the fertile imagination and wishful thinking of those who aspire immortality, just delay our journey on the inevitable path to the understanding of the natural laws that govern them.

The perception that spirituality is a religious affair that should be dealt exclusively by the followers of different religions according to the incontestable dogmas dictated by their faith certainly plays an important role in keeping it out of the reach of the rational scrutiny of scientific investigation. But religion (from the Latin *re-ligare*, meaning a re-attachment to the divinity) should not, in principle, represent an impediment to the progress of science. The personal decision to embrace a religion and live a life based on its moral teachings should not be a reason to shutdown one's mind to the pursuit or acceptance of new scientific discoveries. Throughout history and even today, the fierce opposition that certain religious leaders have made to well-established scientific findings is not due to their religiosity, but rather to their intolerance and close mindedness to accept a world view that conflicts with their personal ones. Unfortunately, in the quest to understand the spiritual nature of human beings, close mindedness is also present in many non-religious, atheist or agnostic men and women of sciences.

In the continual pursuit of knowledge, humankind has diligently and successfully (many times against the religious and political establishment of their times) unveiled the workings and mysteries of nature. It is just a matter of time until the scientific community becomes more receptive to the reality of the spiritual realm as an inherent component of

our universe and embarks in the endeavor of deciphering its laws and the mechanisms through which they manifest themselves.

## 6 – References

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  - Society for Psychical Research, <http://www.spr.ac.uk/expcms/index.php?section=1>
  - A valuable source of research papers can be found at <http://www.survivalafterdeath.org/articles.htm>.