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# Proceedings of Presented Papers

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# 3 Towards Making Sense of Spiritual Intelligence: Two Contrasting Approaches

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## Abstract

*This paper provides an overview of, and comparison between, two contrasting approaches to spirituality, as sketched in Stephen Hayes' classical paper* Making sense of spirituality, *and in* Spirituelle Intelligenz, *a book by Julius Kuhl, respectively. The former approach is firmly grounded in behaviourist psychology, and Hayes' paper constituted a crucial stepping stone in the development of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), a popular and evidence-based form of "third wave" cognitive-behavioural therapy. The latter approach is an outgrowth of Kuhl's Personality Systems Interaction Theory (PSI), an elaborate theory of human motivation that is close to theories that are popular in Positive Psychology (e.g., Richard Ryan, one of the founders of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), referred to PSI as a "sibling theory" of SDT). Related topics include: Relationships of these two approaches to mindfulness, modern holistic somatic practices (in particular the Feldenkrais method), Vallerand's theory of Harmonic Passions, and Carl Roger's Person-Centred Psychotherapy (which has been recently argued to be deeply related to Buddhist meditation practices).*

***Important Note:*** *These are preliminary notes for conference proceedings; a more elaborate and complete version will appear elsewhere in due course.*

## Introduction

Scientific interest in 'spirituality' has increased considerably during the 1990s and early 2000s, and has remained at a high level since then. This can be seen from the share of publications

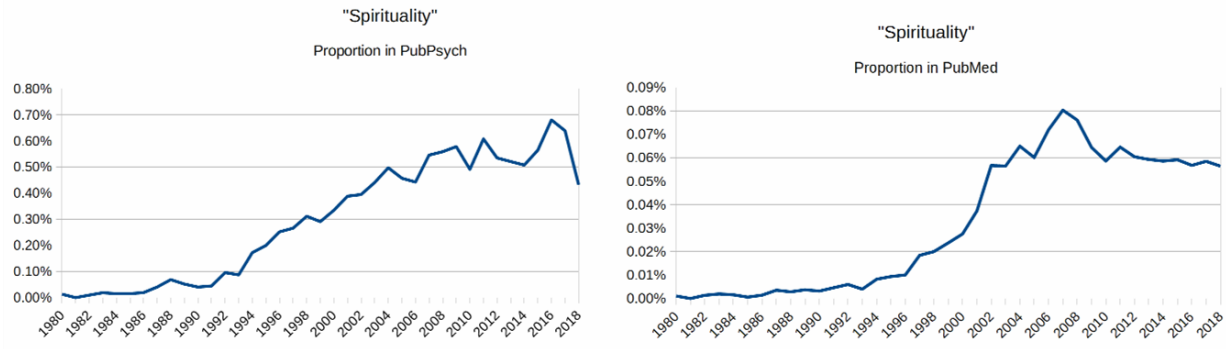


*Figure 1.* Proportion of publications relating to spirituality (1980-2018)

relating to it both in psychology in general (as measured by publications in PubPsych) and even in therapeutically oriented work (as measured by publications in PubMed); see Figure 1.

No comprehensive survey of this topic will be attempted here. Rather, this brief note contributes to this field of research by outlining and comparing two radically different approaches to spirituality: one emanating from an attempt to bring personality and motivational psychology into a common framework with Christian religiosity (Kuhl, 2015), the other rooted in an attempt to understand spirituality as behaviour within a modern behaviourist framework (Hayes, 1984).

## Approach 1: Personality Systems Interaction Theory

Personality Systems Interaction (PSI) Theory is a general theory of personality that grew out of an attempt to understand why some people seem more easily able to enact their intentions than others (Kuhl & Beckmann, 1994, p. 1f, p.9), a theory whose main exposition amounts to over 1200 pages and is available in German only (Kuhl, 2001); outlines available in the English language include Kuhl (2000); Kuhl and Koole (2004); Kuhl, Kazén and Quirin (2014); Koole Sander, Caroline, Tobias and Nicola (2019) as well as the recent volume edited by Baumann, Kazén, Quirin and Koole (2018). One aspect of this comprehensive theory is a theory of the self (Kuhl, Quirin & Koole, 2015), which in turn is the basis for Kuhl's attempt to prove compatibility of religious (specifically, Catholic) faith with today's scientific knowledge (Kuhl, 2015).

### Intelligence, Cognition

Talking about spiritual *intelligence* puts the subject matter in an obvious relationship with psychological theories of cognition. A widespread psychological approach to the latter is based on dual process models of cognition (Kahneman, 2011; Evans & Stanovich, 2013), which distinguish between what roughly can be described as an intuitive, fast, unconscious, automatic, inflexible, error-prone type of cognitive processing on the one hand, and a deliberate, conscious, slow, flexible, rational, intelligent way of processing on the other hand.

Nevertheless, this kind of model is not universally accepted: psychotherapist Milton Erickson is usually associated with the idea of a 'smart unconscious', and the philosopher and client-centred psychotherapist Eugene Gendlin emphasized the importance of the pre-logical 'felt' dimension of experience (Gendlin, 1997), to name only two among many examples from psychotherapy;

there are also a number of critics within psychology, as well as in applied research (e.g., Klein, 1998). Concerning type 2 (rational) processing, Stanovich (2010) distinguishes between two subtypes thereof, resulting in three types of cognitive processing in his theory.

By comparison, PSI splits *both* conscious and unconscious processing into an elementary and a high-level type, resulting in four distinct cognitive systems (*Erkenntnissysteme*); see Table 1.

Table 1.
*Fourfold processing model in PSI*

| | Sequential Processing, Conscious | Parallel Processing, Unconscious |
|---|---|---|
| "High Level" | Keeping goals in mind that currently cannot be enacted:<br>**Intension Memory (IM)** | Extensive memory of life experiences ("self"):<br>**Extension Memory (EM)** |
| "Elementary" | Conscious processing of details (e.g., for context-independent recognition of dangerous objects):<br>**Object Recognition (OR)** | Unconscious perception and cognition for enacting behaviour: Grasping, Walking, etc. (cf. blindsight)<br>**Behavioural Activation System (BAS)** |

*Intention Memory (IM)* is the 'intelligent' part of conscious cognition; it is concerned with keeping available for later action those goals that can for some reason not be acted upon immediately.

*Object Recognition (OR)* is the low-level aspect of conscious cognition, concerned with recognizing objects even when they appear in a new context (e.g., 'is this the same kind of plant I ate, which made me sick last week in the other forest?').

*Behavioural Activation System (BAS)* is responsible for immediate action; it has its own information processing ability (as reveals itself, for example, in the phenomenon of blindsight, where someone is able to grasp something without being conscious of seeing it).

Finally, *Extension Memory (EM)* is the accumulated experience which allows one to put new events into context and is theorized to be (essentially) the Self.

Crucially, there are posited to be antagonistic relationships between these systems, relationships that are in turn moderated by emotions: Delayed action (IM) and immediate action (BAS) are

antagonistic, as well as contextual processing (EM) and context-independent processing (OR); in both cases strong emotions tend to inhibit high-level processing and facilitate elementary processing: increasing positive emotions tend to lead to immediate and unconscious action, whereas negative emotions favour conscious and de-contextualized processing.

**Personality Systems**

These four types of information processing map into a hierarchy of seven levels of personality functioning that were derived from a survey of the relevant psychological literature:

At the top is self-regulation, based on global personal goals as represented in EM; next comes high-level conscious cognition (e.g., IM); below that are motives. The fourth (middle) level comprises stress responses and is crucial in determining whether under stress one uses high or low level processing; below are the remaining three layers of low level processing: Importantly,

> *…Instead of regarding these ... as different "perspectives on personality" ... or trying to decide which one provides the best approach to explaining behavior, PSI theory considers them as seven levels of functioning and, thus, potential sources of behavior and experiencing.* (Kuhl & Quirin, 2011)

**Spiritual Intelligence**

Based on the theory outlined above, Kuhl (2015, p. 145) uses the term "spiritual intelligence" to describe the cooperation of all systems in the psyche (*psychische Systeme*). According to Kuhl (2015, p. 315), analysis of the four cognitive systems (*Erkenntnissysteme*) implies that the combination of systemic intelligence, respect for the complexity of Being and existential *ur*-trust, which is taken to be constitutive of spiritual intelligence, is best provided by the Self (thus by the EM), which in turn has developed during human evolution to deal with what is claimed to be the most complex system of all: oneself and other *persons*. Furthermore, this is taken to imply that spiritual intelligence is best developed in contact with other persons, and even more so in contact with what is taken to be the ideal other: the loving personal god of Christianity (Kuhl, 2015, p. 141ff).

## Approach 2: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

### Behaviourism and Spirituality

Few scientist (or philosophers, for that matter) today are substance dualists. Despite this, contemporary psychology is replete with mentalist concepts. One branch of psychology that is consistent in its rejection of dualism is the branch which developed out of Skinner's 'radical behaviourism'. Such an approach may appear to be far from fertile ground for the study of spirituality and/or the self. Nevertheless, behaviourist Stephen Hayes (1984) pointed out that talk of spirituality is just another form of verbal behaviour and argued for the importance of a behavioural analysis of the same.

Hayes' behaviourist understanding of the 'self' was based on Skinner's observation that there is a difference between behaving and talking about one's behaviour – which of course is also a form of behaviour, but not the same behaviour as the one that is being reported on. According to Skinner, this behaviour of reporting on one's behaviour is what constitutes *self-knowledge*. Skinner's analysis was augmented by Hayes (1984) with the observation that it is "also critical to the verbal community that this behavior occurs from a given and consistent perspective, locus, or point of view" (p. 102). Furthermore, Hayes posits that "in some real sense, 'you' *are* the perspective" and – crucially for his following discussion of spirituality – that "you-as-perspective is not itself fully experienceable as a thing or object by the person looking from that perspective".

'Spiritual is usually seen as an antonym of 'material', and synonymous with terms like bodiless, formless or immaterial. Hayes (1984, p. 104) put it this way: "Spirit is defined as an 'immaterial' being; and matter is the stuff of things. Spirit is thus a being non-experienceable as a thing." The crucial connection to the above behaviourist discussion of the self was provided by arguing that "[y]ou-as-perspective seems to fit this definition rather well ... It seems plausible, then, that the matter/spirit distinction has as its source the content/perspective distinction established as a necessary side effect of language." Furthermore, Hayes argued that various aspects widely believed to be characteristic of spirituality can be explained in this framework.

For example, when people speak of "God as love" they usually are referring to a quality of a metaphysical God of absolute acceptance. In a sense, God is seen as the context of all contexts.

Note that you-as-perspective is perfectly accepting of all content. Pain and pleasure are equally welcome. The fact that we do not like pain (and so on) is just more content that is also equally welcome (Hayes, 1984, p. 105).

### Acceptance Commitment Therapy and Spiritual Intelligence

This work of Hayes was an important step in the development of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT[2]; for a definition see Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012, p. 97) out of an earlier therapeutic approach called 'comprehensive distancing' (Zettle, 2011, p. 78). In ACT, you-as-perspective is usually referred to as *self-as-context* (Hayes et al., 2012, p. 85ff), which in turn is one of the six processes that contribute to the general goal of ACT: increasing *psychological flexibility*. In fact, "spirituality ... on empirical and conceptual grounds ... appears to be foundational for psychological flexibility" (Zettle, Hayes, Barnes-Holmes & Biglan, 2016, p. 57). Here, psychological flexibility denotes "the ability to contact the present moment more fully as a conscious human being, and to change or persist in behavior when doing so serves valued ends" (Hayes, n.d.). This in turn suggests that psychological flexibility has at least considerable overlap with those (broad) conceptualizations of intelligence that stress the ability to adapt to one's environment so that one's decisions lead to actions in line with one's goals (Stanovich, 2009, p. 12), at least under the assumption that one's goals are indeed in line with one's values (for the importance of this, compare Grund, Fries, & Rheinberg, 2018, Baumann, Kaschel, & Kuhl, 2005, and Chase, Houmanfar, Hayes, Ward, Vilardaga, & Follette, 2013). If so, then it seems fair to interpret self-as-context, in cooperation with the other five basic processes of ACT, as a possible conceptualization of spiritual intelligence.

## Towards a Discussion

Two approaches to spiritual intelligence were outlined above, one explicitly argued for by Julius Kuhl and grounded in personality systems interaction theory, and a second one that appears to be at least implicit in ACT. This section contains some observations that may provide the basis for comparing and contrasting these approaches and drawing general conclusions. *Please note that what follows are just ideas that are far from having been worked out in anything like final form.*

[2] ACT is embedded in a general behavioural theory of language called RFT (relational frame theory); see, for example, Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, and Roche (2001) and Dymond and Roche (2013). Discussing this would considerably exceed the scope of this short article.

**Possible Issues with Kuhl's 'Spirituelle Intelligenz'**

Viewing spiritual intelligence as an integrative, holistic, non-verbal, essentially intuitive way of understanding seems congenial with many forms of spirituality. Nevertheless, there are a number of issues that make Kuhl's approach look less attractive than it might appear at first sight. Concerning PSI in general, the modulation assumptions seem overly simplistic. For example, will high positive affect really always encourage immediate action? This seems implausible for deep serenity, tranquillity, or other forms of low-arousal positive affect.

Related more specifically to Kuhl's portrayal of spiritual intelligence, the following problems seem to arise:

Growing as a human being involves both learning from one's parents (or other caregivers) and also learning at a suitable time to become independent from them and finding one's own way. Even if the former may be plausibly associated with a role for religion in human development via god(s) as some kind of *über*-parents, the second seems incompatible: becoming independent of the god(s) seems no part of any religion I am aware of (except maybe some interpretations of Buddhism) and certainly not of Christian religion. More importantly, the claimed superiority of belief in a personal (e.g., Christian) god over a less personal religion (e.g., Buddhism) for enabling human development (e.g., Kuhl, 2015, p. 228) seems incompatible with empirical data available, as can be seen in Montero-Marin, Perez-Yus, Cebolla, Soler, Demarzo, and Garcia-Campayo (2019) or Huang and Wang (2019).

The belief that your point of view as provided by your accumulated experience (EM) – without any need for additional critical analysis – provides the highest possible form of intelligence might be construed to imply that nothing outside one's EM exists (or at least that nothing outside it has any relevance), thus leading us right into solipsism.

Finally, many of the examples that Kuhl gives for the exercise of spiritual intelligence (e.g., his discussion of the Christian cross sign: Kuhl, 2015, p. 78) look to me more like ex-post rationalizations of rather limited interpretations of facts and experiences rather than deep wisdom arising from EM taking into account all available relevant information.

Assuming these thoughts are on the mark, could recourse to ACT help remedy some of these deficiencies? Concerning the first two points, ACT does stress the need not to become dependent

on the therapist. A popular ACT metaphor is that everyone is climbing his own mountain; the therapist can be useful in as far as from his more distant point he may see things differently (and likely has more experience in mountain climbing). The importance of the personal therapeutic relationship, which ACT does recognize, need not compel the acceptance of belief in personal god(s); as can be seen for example by the many points of contact between ACT and Buddhism (Hayes, 2002). An optimistic interpretation is that ACT might also defuse issues three and four by allowing us to get less entangled in (i.e., fused with) our inner lives, via de-fusion from cognitions and emotions and recognizing self-*not*-as-content.

I am calling this an optimistic view since, in practice, many opinions in the ACT community seem far from being de-fused from mental rigidity. It is fair enough to put exclusive emphasis on pragmatism, on what works to further one's valued goals, but how can you possibly know whether you indeed do further them if you dogmatically declare that you find "[n]o place for reality and truth" (Barnes-Holmes, 2000). Or do you not care? Is the only thing that counts whether in your mind there is the impression that you further your goals (so that we are back to solipsism)?

I also sense a major problem with the declared goal in ACT: prediction-and-influence of behaviour. Skinner argued that there is nothing wrong with manipulating others (Skinner, 1972, p. 91ff); however that may be, letting others manipulate us seems hardly an attractive approach to life in many circumstances. There are presumably situations where we can expect others to act in our best interest (like our parents, or – hopefully – a therapist that we consult), but in general it might not be such a great idea to rely on the kindness of strangers. This becomes a particular problem once one maintains a background philosophy of pragmatism-without-reality, as many in the ACT community profess to do: with no recourse whatsoever to reality, how do you know whether you are being manipulated and maybe manipulated to your disadvantage? If I am right in claiming that ACT overemphasises controlling others' behaviour relative to dealing with oneself, and also that PSI neglects low-arousal-affect (see modulation assumption), then these two problems may be related, in that our society's underappreciation of low-arousal emotions is arguably tied to a preference to influence the behaviour of others (Tsai, Miao, Seppala, Fung Helene & Yeung, 2007).

One point where I see Kuhl's approach as distinctly superior to what ACT provides is that Kuhl recognizes that a comprehensive, contextual viewpoint is necessarily too complex to be

expressed in language, whereas ACT easily falls into overemphasizing verbal behaviour (e.g., the claim that values are necessarily verbally constructed (Hayes et al., 2012, p. 92ff).

Finally, both approaches seem to me to be quite literally too self-centered. As I understand it, spirituality has to do with awe in the face of the vastness of the universe[3] and the mystery of existence, and/or with living in accordance with the natural way of things (e.g., *dao*, *dharma*) or submission to the will of god(s) (which is, for example, the root meaning of *islam*). Elevating my haphazardly accumulated life experiences (i.e., extension memory) to the highest possible form of intelligence, or my gut feelings about what seems pragmatic to the sole guideline of behaviour, makes me feel like something important has been left out. But then, feeling like this is just another form of behaviour (presumably produced by one or the other of my personality systems in combination with momentary circumstances).

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[3] After all, we sit on the crust of a mediocre planet in an unremarkable solar system somewhere close to the suburbs of a reasonably respectable galaxy among a myriad of other galaxies in one of the galaxy clusters contained in one of the superclusters ...

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