Keynote 1: Spirituality and the Challenge of Evolution and Compassion

Paul Gilbert¹
University of Derby, UK
P.Gilbert@derby.ac.uk

Abstract: Science is revealing more about the physical nature of our universe and more about the nature of biological life; for example how it came into being, takes the forms it does, can become diseased, and how all life-forms flourish, decay and die. Science offers challenges to spiritual beliefs but also opportunities for evolving spiritual orientations in line with our deepening understanding of the nature of life in the universe. Two key themes are linked to developing more insight and awareness. One is mindfulness of the kinds of minds nature has given us and the second is cultivating a particular kind of motivation within us which is to be aware of the suffering of self and others and to take steps to alleviate it. Opening our eyes to the reality of suffering is also to discover the meaning of compassion and its link to spiritualities past and present.

Keywords: attention; compassion; consciousness; evolution; mindfulness; spirituality; suffering.

Introduction

About two million years ago our pre-human ancestors began to evolve high-level cognitive abilities. Basically we got smart. This enabled us to think about ourselves, each other and the world in which we live in new ways. We could anticipate, imagine and create scenarios in our heads; we could understand that we can get injured and suffer; we could understand that we grow old, decay and die. We became aware that all that we love also

¹. Paul Gilbert is Professor in Clinical Psychology and Director of the Mental Health Research Unit (MHRU), Kingsway Hospital, Derby. MHRU focuses on mood disorders, psychosis, social anxiety, shame, self-criticism and compassion. This has resulted in the development of Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT) which addresses people’s difficulties in self-acceptance or self-kindness, especially when faced with distressing situations.
decays and dies. So it was not long before humans were asking the questions: Why do we get sick? Why do we die, and given that we all do, what is the meaning of this life? What can we do to soften the harshness and arbitrary tragedies and the ups and downs of life?

To the pre-scientific mind, life was a creation of some super being(s) and it was part of his/her/their design for life to be the way it was. Many of the early religions had an ambivalent relationship with their Gods whom they saw as potentially beneficial but also highly punitive, capable of sending floods and diseases. These Gods were ones that you needed to get on your side. The ways to do that were to appease and please them, often with sacrifices or dedications and committing yourself to their rules and regulations. South American religions, in particular, used sacrifice on a large scale.

Many monotheistic religions evolved from these ways of thinking about the world of threat, danger and loss. For most of them, this was a life of suffering and it was to be the next life that was the life of paradise. However, to get from here to there required individuals to be followers, believers, engage in certain behaviours, belong to a tribe and so forth. Many of these religions are tribal and therefore there are people who can be included and are allowed into paradise and those who are not.

As Karen Armstrong points out in The History of God (1999), around 2,000 to 3,000 years ago there was a change in the constructions of deities. The God of Jesus was not a God of punishment but one of love and fellowship. The desire to be loved by God, to be close to God, and to be chosen were new motivations that were introduced into the relationship with the Gods. The South American Gods and also, to some extent, the Greek and Roman Gods were seen as individuals who had super powers to help or hinder you, and certain Roman emperors aspired to become Gods. But being loved by God as a parent may love their children was not part of these religions. The shift from the fear of God, to God as a loving attachment, was an interesting historical move but, of course, introduced new fears about losing the love of God and being ‘cast out’.

However you regard the relationship between God and humanity, it is based upon the realities of life in which people find/found themselves; a life which is short, vulnerable and often full of loss. So, within most religions, ‘earning your place’ became part of what this life is about. Although Buddhism lacks concepts of deities whom one must please or impress, it has the concept of different realms of being, including the idea that the good life now offers the opportunity for a favourable reincarnation.
Evolutionary Challenge

With the advent of evolutionary science, many of the questions about life as short and often tragic and replete with suffering began to be re-framed. Why do all life-forms have to feed off other life-forms? Why do bacteria and viruses wreak such havoc in our lives? Evolution is certainly not interested in happiness – the whole process simply rumbles forward through very competitive processes of individual life-forms (and their genes) using, competing with, and (when it benefits them) helping, other life-forms. Rather than being created by some predetermined design, humans are part of the flow of life. So we, like other animals, come into the world with genes that build our bodies of a certain type – basically we are primates with eyes to see, ears to hear, four limbs, a cardiovascular system and immune system, and so on. We, like other animals, have a range of motives such as forming attachments to our parents, joining groups, seeking out sexual partners, and fighting over territory and material objects. We, like other animals, have a range of emotions such as anger, anxiety, lust and joy. And that fact is a tragedy for other animals because millions upon millions of them have been used in experiments to study these functions, particularly in the brain. If it had been shown that animals were quite different from humans, and that drugs that work on animals have no effect on us, then many would have been spared.

But evolution has also created human brains that are capable of thinking and reflecting, imagining and anticipating, and that also have insight into the very nature of consciousness itself. Our clever ‘thinking brain’ gives us huge advantages. We can think in symbols, use language, and can reason systemically – and for these reasons we have science, art and culture. We have sometimes been called the ‘Thinking Ape’. While this provides fantastic advantages, it also causes serious trouble. This is not uncommon in the evolutionary process and is called a ‘trade-off’. For example, an advantage in one area can cause a serious disadvantage in another. A classic example for humans is that we evolved an ability to stand and move upright which left our hands free and, amongst other developments, changed how we scan the environment. However, this movement had a negative impact on the female pelvis, at a time when the human baby’s head was evolving to become larger, with the consequence that human childbirth is probably the most painful among all primates and with far more complications and risks of death to both mother and infant. It is a trade-off.

The trade-off for our thinking brain is that, while it can solve all kinds of problems, it can get itself into all kinds of tangles. For example, imagine a zebra has just escaped a lion. Shortly after, when the zebra recognizes
the lion is no longer around, it will calm down and go back to grazing. Humans, however, are unlikely to calm quickly, partly because they will start imagining — “What would have happened if I had got caught …? Oh my gosh, can you imagine being eaten alive …?” They wake up in the middle of the night with flashbacks, or worry that they may miss detecting the lion tomorrow, or the lion may get their children. The link between anxiety and the anticipation of danger may well be helpful in some contexts but it also locks one into fear. This is the classic situation for people who have mental health problems: their emotions and their ruminations, their ways of thinking, imagining and anticipating things in the world, are locked into very threatening themes. And, of course, vengeance and tribal defence can recruit our smart brains in the service of intense destructiveness. Animals may fight with each other — but none plans and builds weapons for ethnic cleansing. Only humans have invented torture and horrendous ways to die such as crucifixion. Because we can think and imagine we can put these competencies to the most compassionate or cruel and terrible uses.

So, it turns out that we can use this fantastic, recently developed, new mind for good or for ill — and it all depends on the motivations that are stimulated in us as to how we use its faculties.

Understanding Motives and Mentalities

We often like to think that the sense of ourself that we have now is somehow linked to something definite about us, even some kind of soul. But reflection suggests how careful we must be. Firstly, so much of what we are is accidental, linked to the genes that we inherit. Our sense of self could be radically altered by accidents at birth that might result in brain damage. Consider, too, that if I had been kidnapped from hospital as a three-day-old baby and brought up in a violent drug gang, then this version of Paul Gilbert (writing this piece) would not be here. In its place would probably be a rather violent man, possibly one who had killed people, or who might be dead himself, or in prison — even though he had had no say over the kidnapping. Genetic contributions to personality, the way in which our brains can be changed by life circumstances and even by the illnesses we contract, and the fact that any kind of brain damage can produce major changes in a personality, all have very major consequences for spiritual and religious beliefs. Concepts such as soul and free will, and the idea of evil and retribution for evil, become extremely difficult in a genetic/evolutionary ‘accidental’ context, and we certainly run the risk of lacking compassion. Indeed, many scientists now believe the concept of evil is extremely unhelpful.
There are two points to this story. First, it actually begins the opening of our hearts to compassion and the recognition of how lucky we are to have the minds that we have and that (in my case) I was not brought up in a violent drug gang or subject to abuse. The moment we begin to see that, we shift from blaming and shaming towards understanding and empathizing. How often do we reflect on the fact that perhaps in every version of a criminal or even a murderer there is an alternative version of a Saint who might have come into existence in a different environment? How often do we reflect that 2,000 years ago many of us would be quite happy going to the Roman games to watch people being ripped to pieces as entertainment, or to take a stroll outside the city gates to hear the screams and moans of the crucified that we would simply ignore? Romans are not aliens; they are you and me in a different historical social context. They are not bad souls/spirits any more than we are good souls. We are so wedded to this concept of an individual self who can be judged good or bad that these reflections, of just how much we are created by our genes and social conditions, can be very difficult. But when we do open our eyes to this reality, we also recognize a responsibility to do what we can to eradicate those environments that create versions of people who are likely to be destructive, or have destructive values that so damage our children’s minds. The new spirituality asks us to think of ourselves as ‘us’ not as ‘me’; of ‘we-ness’ not ‘I-ness’. One of the implications of karma and rebirth as ideas is that, if we do not address the slums of the world or the child trafficking, or countless other injustices, then in the next life, rather than owning the BMW we may be there – it will be our children who are starving to death or dying for the lack of a cheap immunisation.

So when we look into this we see a second point, that the environment in which we grow up can mobilize a certain kind of motivation and a sense of self-identity. Currently we are living in environments that are increasingly threat-focused and ‘me-focused’ and that stimulate within us competitive motives and desires, not co-operative or compassionate ones. A combination of media, recent governments and businesses has created a value system around us which is deeply materialistic, non-compassionate and focused on individual self-interest and the competitive edge. This, tragically, is a major shift away from the hopes and dreams of the post-war builders of the National Health Service (NHS) and other services. The point about this is that, just as I and the kidnapped Paul Gilbert would be created according to the environment in which we live, so we all are. Yet we do so little to take responsibility to recognize that the environments create us; and so little to try to ensure psychologically healthy environments for all of us. It is like our diets. Many of us know that our diets are not the healthiest for our bodies and yet we carry on supporting the companies that feed us this unhealthy
stuff. Many know that pure capitalism and the pursuit of self-interest and profit is, in the end, a corrupting and ecologically disastrous way to be in the world – and yet we continue to elect politicians who have nothing else to offer us but exactly these values. They appeal to self-interest and they know that we are not able to resist that.

**The New Spirituality**

The new spirituality is pointing to ways in which we can become more mindful and more aware of our interconnectedness and mutual responsibility for each other rather than ‘self’ salvation. It is pointing less to obedience to authority and more to waking up to the reality of the life on this planet of which we are part, and taking responsibility. This means that we use our capacity for *attending to the present moment on purpose* in order to understand and look more deeply into the nature of our motivations, desires, emotions and sense of self-identity – and at how easily these are triggered or defended. The fact is we only exist in this present moment – not in the moment to come, nor in the moment just gone, but only *now*. Despite this many of us don’t actually ‘live’ in this moment but we live in our heads, in our thoughts, fantasies, imaginations and rehearsals about things from yesterday or possibilities for tomorrow, in our fears and hopes. Our attention is everywhere but here right *now*. The reason for this is that our attention is constantly being captured by various emotions and desires. This is not our fault but it can cause serious problems if we do not wake up to what is happening in our minds.

In these new ways of thinking, consciousness is seen as rather like water. It can carry a poison or a medicine but *it* is not the poison or the medicine. It is pure and can always be purified; it is, in its own way, empty and yet full at the same time. So the sense of moment-by-moment awareness is the source of the essence of the self. Everything else – such as our socially shaped motivations and emotions that have been built by genes and their environments – is content. Content is arbitrary; the awareness of awareness, that can only exist in this moment, is more mysterious. The new spirituality is beginning to understand the distinction between content and consciousness of content.

In this way of thinking, what we think of as ‘soul’ turns out to be evolutionary and socially created content or mind; and what turns out to be spiritual is linked to attention within consciousness and the type of awareness we have. This opens into new dimensions of experiencing if our attention is trained. So, for example, spirituality is increasingly now
linked to contemplation and reflection; to the ability to stand back and pay attention in an observing non-judgemental way to the nature of one’s mind, learning to loosen gently the identification with our personal motives, desires, wants and fantasies (be they judged as good or bad). That is all content. Consciousness of consciousness is something else and, although scientists argue as to whether it is simply the biologically created tricks of neurochemistry, this is by no means a resolved issue.

**Compassion**

The way we respond to suffering is crucial (see Gilbert 2010). One way, of course, is to close down and try to survive as best we can by focusing on ourselves, owning as much money as we can, trying to get the best medical insurances, and living in a sort of golden bubble hoping that life does not send too many slings and arrows. We can try to make an individual connection to God and hope s/he will look after us and protect us. We can try to make ourselves feel special in God’s eyes and can sometimes feel rather let down or dismayed when horrible things happen to us. Our child is dying of cancer or our spouse has been diagnosed with dementia and we think ‘but I’ve always been a good Christian/Jew/Moslem, I prayed and I’ve loved God so why is this happening to me?’ And sometimes we would go further and say ‘what have I done wrong?’, bringing with the question the fear that somehow these natural but tragic events are to do with our relationship with God. Indeed, some religious people even deliberately activate this tragic belief. At the time of tsunami in 2005 some religious leaders were preaching that this was God’s punishment for decadence. This is not part of the new spirituality – quite the reverse. When we look deeply within we will discover that there is an evolved capacity for caring and taking an interest in the wellbeing of others. Rather than locking ourselves into our own individual salvation we can focus more on others. Originally, this motivation for caring evolved in the context of parental care of the young and also of alliances. Compassion taps into and cultivates this basic motivation so that we focus not only just on those close, loved others and friends, but also on people we do not know and, indeed, on all sentient beings who, by virtue of being caught up in this material universe, are living and dying and suffering. This basic sentiment is at the root of all spiritualities. It transcends issues of deserving and/or blaming. A fifteenth-century monk once said, ‘My soul can never be happy in heaven if one soul is suffering in hell’. This is a form of spirituality that is inclusive, that does not seek specialness, that does not seek to have ‘included’
or ‘excluded’ beings. It does not seek these things because this spirituality knows that we are all versions of ourselves and that those who are ‘chosen’ because they are seen as good are often those who have been lucky in having grown up in loving, caring families, or in a certain place. This spirituality is rooted deep in the sense of the desire to end suffering. It is as much a part of our nature as is the desire to cause suffering in pursuit of tribal aims.

So, for many spiritual traditions, compassion, which can be conceptualized as the sensitivity to suffering with a motivation to do something about it and prevent it, is central to the higher values of human nature. And when we think about it, this is core to many religions too. Although Christianity owes its popularity to the third-century Roman tyrant Constantine, who believed the Christian God helped him win a battle, and so turned Christianity into a conquering religion, in fact at the heart of Christianity is: Love of thy neighbour, help for the poor, weak and sick; the removal of privilege (all are equal in God’s eyes); and non-judgement (he who is without sin throw the first stone). The essence of the Christ story is suffering to save others without judgement of who they are. And, of course, one of the most profound themes is one of compassion: ‘Forgive them for they know not what they do’, a sentiment that can be meditated upon and understood at many different levels.

Science has also revealed that the ability to turn towards suffering (as opposed to away from it or to justify it), and the abilities to hold it and to alleviate it, use different psychologies. For example, compassion requires some degree of empathy so that we can imagine ourselves in the place of the other person. This is not ‘if I was him/her I would or wouldn’t do X or Y’. It is not imagining ourselves in their place; it is imagining being them, with all the background that went to making them the way they are.

We can understand other people partly because we can understand ourselves. That is important because if we do not really understand our own emotions, or if we are fighting and denying our own motives, how can we possibly understand them in others? And empathy without the motive to be caring can be destructive. Empathy can be used to manipulate or even hurt. So, once again, it is motivation that is crucial to compassion. But to choose to become compassionate in order to dedicate yourself to a compassionate way of living means you have to become aware of the other potentials with the new spirituality that could equally become central to your being. You have to become familiar with your own mind.

Being able to engage with suffering, and to understand the sources and causes of suffering, is not enough. Indeed, if one stays there one simply gets overwhelmed. There have to be ways of dealing with it, accepting what is unchangeable but also finding that which is changeable. Here again
compassion can operate as an individual process where we might meditate or practise bringing compassion into the world. That is an important process for each of us. However, compassion on a big scale requires all of us working together. One of the greatest acts of compassion was in 1984 when pop star (now Sir) Bob Geldof mobilized the world in Live Aid to raise money for those who were starving in North East Africa. As far as I am aware, he was not a deeply religious man, nor had he been practising mindfulness or compassion meditations for many years. He simply responded with urgency and some anger to the tragedy that was unfolding. More important was his ability to mobilize all of us to join together, to take joy in joining together to do something to help others. Fund-raising activities such as the annual ‘Children in Need’ event run by the BBC are other examples. Compassion can be joyful, especially when we come together in groups, and evidence suggests that this form of joyfulness may be especially good for our own wellbeing.

Spiritual traditions can, of course, help us to pay attention to our own minds and salvation – but the new spirituality helps us to see that we are all caught up in the same journey of life, vulnerable to the same arbitrary influences of diseases and tragedies, and that only by working together can we address the suffering of the world. We can spend our money on medicine and cure diseases like smallpox or we can vote to spend it on weapons, or on enabling the rich to become richer, enabling them to put in their orders for their expensive cars or mansions – or we can choose a different way. Spirituality addresses these issues.

There is an interesting story of a man in India many hundreds of years ago who was desperate to find enlightenment and his way into Paradise. He travelled the country learning how to meditate. He spent many hours by himself in a cave meditating. The weeks flowed into months and into years. Then gradually he realized his life was coming to an end and in his final moments he saw a ladder reaching to heaven. With great delight he felt he had now found enlightenment and climbed the ladder. There at the top sat the Buddha. ‘I have found enlightenment’, the man said eagerly. The Buddha beamed. ‘That is wonderful’, he said, ‘when are all the others coming?’

The issue of interconnectedness is important to the new spirituality. In fact, when people have what they feel to be a spiritual experience, it often comes with a sense of being connected and part of something greater and more mysterious than themselves. These experiences may provide insights into what our minds are up to and the possibility of new avenues of spiritual awareness and thinking. What does it mean to have evolution give rise to a conscious mind in a material universe – is it just a biological trick?
References