

On Spirit



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On Spirit

Brother Incognito

edited by

Karl von der Graduate

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Editor's introduction

I arrived by train in the city P. in the end of May, on a nice, warm afternoon. It was a journey I had long wished to make: Four weeks through Russia. And just outside the city I found myself at one of the places I had been most looking forward to visit, an orthodox monastery.

I stayed there for two nights, and it was as calm and beautiful as I had imagined it would be. Still, it was a place filled with more *emotion* than I'd expected. Maybe I mistook the word "orthodoxy" for meaning nothing but chill and rigorous religious practice. Anyway, I was wrong. The beauty of the place, which I had imagined to be a product of strict discipline, was rather the product of warm caring. And, of course, a product of the landscape, simple and handsome as it is, especially in spring.

On the second day, as I came to the refectory to pick up some rye bread and gherkins for lunch, the monk invited me to supper with the abbot in the evening. The invitation was an ordinary procedure for guests who had travelled far. In the afternoon I went for a walk, over fields and through forests, with all the freshness of nature around me. At one point I was almost beginning

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to think I was lost, but then I passed a small lone cabin I had been told about, and found a path that went through the forest one *verst* or so to take me back to the monastery.

The refectory was a large, square room with wooden floor, unpainted but very clean. I was welcomed and seated around the middle of the table, and soon after the abbot entered, greeting me and some other guests especially before he sat down opposite me. After the prayer, he addressed me, with a serious look, in English: "We don't talk about the coronavirus here. That is the latest amendment to our rule." Then he broke into a smile. "You see, here we have no contact with the world. In theory. In theory, we don't even know the coronavirus exists. And as orthodox, we keep to theory, as you probably know." Now he was almost giggling.

Although I appreciated the humour I just nodded, smiled back, and began to eat the beetroot soup. Then the abbot spoke again: "Now, what is your purpose out in the world?" And as I told him I was in the publishing business, editing books of philosophy, our conversation began to run more fluently. It turned out that the abbot himself had been a few years in academic philosophy before he turned to the monastic life. We talked a bit about the particular qualities of the monastery and the landscape around it as location for

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philosophical reflection, and the abbot made some good remarks about the significance of *walling in* when making intellectual efforts.

As we had finished the soup, he stood up and excused himself, but then returned a few minutes later with a pile of paper in his hand. "We recently had a man here," he started, "who stayed for almost three months in a small cabin at the other side of the little forest to the north. He was a westerner, like you, very fond of Dostoevsky. He told one of the priests that he read *The Brothers Karamazov* once every year, starting on new years day. During his stay here he wanted absolute solitude, so he only came by twice a day to pick up food and charge his laptop computer. We soon began to call him 'brother', since he appeared more monastic than us. It is only about a week ago that he left, and I had him here for supper the evening before he went. That was when he gave me this." The abbot held up the paper sheets. I read the title: "Matters of Spirit".

"I told him, too, that I used to be a philosopher before I came here. When he heard that, he came very much alive, and he asked me if I knew what being a philosopher really comes to. I said I had some ideas, but no simple answer. Then he started to give his own account of what he thought about the subject of philosophy. He also revealed a view on what *spirit* is that

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was different from any I have heard before. And I have heard some.

“His idea was that being a philosopher is a matter of *spiritual configuration*, which should be understood as a blend of *emotional* and *rational* configuration. The philosopher is emotionally configured so that he prefers the emotion of purity to other emotions, and rationally configured so that he appreciates the idea of clarity above any other idea. Together, that emotion and that idea form an alliance, which is ‘the spirit of philosophy’, or of ‘truth-seeking’, as he also called it. The question of what philosophy is cannot, he claimed, be answered without reference to spiritual life.

“I first got the impression that he advocated philosophy and tried to blame me, or maybe comfort me for turning my back to it. He said things that were quite disrespectful to the monastic way, which have never been spoken around this table before.” The abbot again revealed a smile. “But his gestures suggested that he did not mean anything unfriendly by it, and after a while he began to say disrespectful things about philosophy too. For his concern was really neither the subject of philosophy nor the ways of monasticism, but what he called ‘the phenomenon of spirit’. And he revealed that

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his stay with us had been devoted to writing a thesis on that phenomenon.

“Anyway, supper here at the abbey is not a symposium, for the rule decides when it is time to break up. So even if he had me interested in his theme, there was no room for more discussion, and he seemed somewhat disappointed when I cut him off to read the prayers. That eagerness in talking after so much solitude is well known to us monks, and so is the embarrassment that follows it.

“After the prayer, in order to cheer him up again, but also out of interest, I asked if I could read his work. Having regained his taciturn form, he accepted briefly and thanked me for my interest. So, we went to the office and printed a copy, and he told me I could do whatever I liked with it. He said something like, ‘just trash it if you don’t like it. Or print it as your own work if you want. It’s not of any more use to me. I’ll probably delete it from my computer, for I have other things to do now, and I must not be disturbed by the existence of this material. And I am stupid enough to let it disturb me. So I am very happy that you accept to take it, since I just want to get rid of it.’ That was the sort of things he said.

“I began to read it the same evening, and I found that there was insight in it. It is not a religious work, but not heretic either in my view. It is a philosophical work

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on spirit.” Now the abbot handed me the manuscript. He ate some potato and cold meat as I looked briefly through it. Then he started to talk again.

“A monastery is the archetypical place of spirit, you know. A place for spiritual development. Or, of spiritual struggle and failure, I shall have to add, for there are those who fail. There are some who go through spiritual deterioration here. As, you know, Alcibiades deteriorated by contact with Socrates.

“Whatever you learn about spirit here or anywhere else, the case is this: You can be moved by the learning and guidance you receive, and gather all the wisdom provided by others – and there are really a lot of universal spiritual truths to discover. But even if you find all of them, you only possess half of the truth about spirit. The other half is to be found in *silence*.

“It is fundamental in the Gospel that there are spiritual laws governing the world. Spiritual healing, growth, and peace is available for those who bring their troubles to God and remain with him. But to really do that is essentially only to be silent. Silence is the onion's kernel.

“What I think is that our brother may have been close to understanding these things.” The abbot pointed to the manuscript. “Especially because he just left the

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fruit of three months' hard efforts here with us. I think he tried to remain with that holy silence.

The abbot sat back, now looking smilingly around him at the other monks and guests, who were all listening to his words with total attention. Then he gazed at the clock hanging above the door, picked up the book of prayers, and began to read in a monotonous voice.

Afterwards, as I tried to return the manuscript to the abbot, he looked at me as if he didn't understand what I wanted. I thought he might just be distracted, so I held it forward again, but he cut me off, "Do you take me for a fool? You must surely realise that this is an act of Providence: first a philosophical writer visits us and leaves a manuscript, then, a week later a philosophical publisher comes by. It is for you to take it with you, read it and find out what to do with it." Then he nodded, again with a little smile, rose from the table and left.

I took the papers with me, went back to my room and read a few pages. It wasn't an easy read, so I realised it was going to take some time to get through it.

The next day I walked through that little forest to the north of the monastery to the small cabin in which the "brother" had stayed. It was the same one I had passed the day before. I went to the window and looked in at the simple interior. That deep concentration of the

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philosophical brother was now gone, although I almost felt that there was still some mysterious remains of the effort lingering in the air. I walked back, packed my things, and returned to the world.

After having read the manuscript, not more than a few pages at a time, I decided to publish it. I have set the author name as “Brother Incognito”, and the main title as “On Spirit”.

Karl von der Graduate

Matters of Spirit

The question of spirit

a)

This collection of observations, reflections and arguments is the result of a long-time curiosity about the question of *spirit*.

This thing “spirit” has occurred to me as *something* of great importance. It’s surely an elusive something, but also possibly key for understanding human life. So, a while ago, I decided to try to answer to myself the question of what this thing “spirit” really is.

That question, I hasten to say, is not *one* question with *one* answer, but many questions with many answers. Or, if you like, one *problem*, for which the solution might hopefully be a collection of questions and answers.

My survey, for reasons too obvious to explain, does not contain all questions and answers that could have been retrieved. I’ve only written about the things that have seemed to me central for solving the problem as it occurs

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to me. The value of these writings hangs, therefore, on my judgement of what is central for understanding what “spirit” is.

b)

The first question I have – which may be called a preliminary one – is this: What is the meaning of the word “spirit”?

I ask because it has been said, and often repeated, that the meaning of a word is its *use*. Which is, in a way, an all right rule of thumb. If you listen well to how a word is used, you’ll gradually understand what the word means. And if you understand what a word means, you’ll also know more about *the world*. Therefore, if you know the meaning of the word “spirit”, you’ll probably know something about what spirit is and is not in the world.

But what if the use of the word confuses me? What if there are multiple ways of using the word, and some of them are unsound? For although we obviously need to pay attention to how words are, there are frequently cases where we must not only listen, but also *judge*. We must often work to circle in on the *correct* use of words, which is a use that at minimum will not *destroy* the word.

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For example: You can't use the word "hate" as a synonym of "criticism" – for then you destroy the meaning of both. As we know, there are plenty of people who do just that – and maybe a little trespassing against correct use isn't worth worrying about – but if that sort of dealing with words is allowed to go on without corrections, a word's real meaning can be annihilated.

We should maintain that speaking is, at the bottom, serious business of real problems; words aren't toys one can play around with. I should like to say that language is no *game*. The meaning of a word is its correct use, which can surely be wide, varied, and surprising, but it's not borderless.

So, when I ask about the correct use of the word "spirit" I ask about the logic of using it correctly. This should not, *nota bene*, be taken to mean that this word or any other has as its true and full meaning the *reference* to some kind of item in the world. Language isn't a picturing device.

What I want to maintain is only that any word has borders to its sense. It is in that meaning we may enquire about its "correct use".

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c)

What is the meaning – the correct use – of the word “spirit”?

I’ll answer that question by applying a simple theoretical trick: The correct use of the word “spirit” can be found by retrieving the meaning of the *concept* ‘spirit’.

By dividing words and concepts we also divide language and thought, and proclaim two different sorts of items. Then we may in the next movement assume *a connection* between items in language and items in thought. The idea of the simple theoretical trick is that speaking and thinking are distinguishable, but connected activities.

So, I pass the question of the meaning of the word “spirit” on to the next philosophical laboratory, that of thought-items: What is the meaning of the *concept* ‘spirit’?

d)

When we use the word “spirit”, we ‘allude’ or ‘point’ or ‘gesture’, towards some thought-item or concept ‘spirit’ assumed to be commonly known. The word can call forth some specific thought, if necessary. The “dictionary meaning” of a word is sometimes (though

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not always and not systematically) an articulation of concepts: The dictionary tries to make clear “the thought behind the word”.

From this perspective we can see one reason why *spirit* appears as an *elusive something*. For there isn't just *one* concept ‘spirit’ to which the word can refer, but several, of which I think the following are the most prominent:

Spirit 1 noun [C] - The concept of supernatural and/or imaginary persons/characters, e.g. “demons”.

Spirit 2 noun [C] - The concept of a part of the human being contrasting the bodily part, more or less synonymous with the concept ‘soul’.

Spirit 3 noun [U, C] - The concept of movements within the soul, more or less equivalent with the concept ‘general feeling’.

These are three distinctly different concepts connecting to the same word, “spirit”. So, one must wonder how these etymologic connections have developed. What do these three concepts have in common? “A demon”, “the soul”, and “general feelings” are clearly different items – so how come the word “spirit” can mean all of them?

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The only possible answer to the etymological question is that *Spirit* 1-3 are all *derived* concepts, either from one among them, or from some concept *Spirit* 4.

Of these alternatives I think that the former is unlikely: I don't see how either "demon", "soul" or "general feeling" can have led to the development of the other two. Consequently, their relation must rather be sought in shared connections between each and some fourth concept. The concept *Spirit* 4, then, is necessary for explaining the origins of the concepts *Spirit* 1-3.

To my mind, the only tenable explanation of the riddle, is:

Spirit 4 is the concept of a phenomenon SPIRIT.

The word "spirit", in order to hang together through all its valid uses and conceptions, must point or relate to a phenomenon SPIRIT, like the word "wind" through all its uses and all conceptions points or relates to a phenomenon WIND.

The other concepts of *spirit* (1-3) are derived from the concept of a phenomenon SPIRIT, either by reification (*Spirit* 1 and 2), and/or by metaphorical use (*Spirit* 2 and 3).

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This entails, of course, that if there's no phenomenon SPIRIT, then all talk about spirit (and all talk about "spirituality") is empty, and the word "spirit" ought strictly to be banned from use or always be used only in jokes, as otherwise it's a source of confusions. I say this in the spirit of logical empiricism, which is of course an old-fashioned and wry way of going about with language and thought – but nevertheless a correct way, if we want to maximise the clarity of our account. (And it is always good to begin an enquiry with trying to maximise clarity.)

e)

Now, is the phenomenon SPIRIT a phantasm?

It is obviously necessary to pose the question, for it seems that SPIRIT may well be an illusion; that there's no such thing among the things that are, except negatively as confused ideas in people's minds.

And indeed, we can safely judge that quite some of the experiences people claim to have of *spiritual phenomena* are illusive in one way or another. Still, to deduce from this that *all* spiritual experiences are illusions in all ways would be rash. There are plenty of experiences

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commonly described as “spiritual” that are obviously not illusory in all ways. For example, when people speak of being spiritually touched or moved by artworks or religious practice they’re clearly talking about something rather than nothing – only it’s not obvious exactly what the phenomenon is.

The possibility remains, of course, that all experiences of a phenomenon SPIRIT are illusory, meaning that what people call being “spiritually touched” is not a special phenomenon deserving an own proper name, but just a variation of some other psychic phenomenon, such as emotion or dreaming. In that case, SPIRIT is a phantasm, and the concept *Spirit* 4 empty.

To have a factual investigation of the case isn’t straightforward: the phenomenon SPIRIT, whatever it is or isn’t, is not claimed to be an empirical thing, and consequently it is not a matter suitable for empirical study. Any empirical scientist setting out to verify or falsify that there is such a phenomenon would be making a category mistake. To understand the super-empirical, no empirical means are fitting. So, the question of whether it’s altogether an illusion or not, must be given over to non-empirical modes of enquiry.

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In one variation, the question I have resembles an outright *religious* one: Do you believe, or not, that there is a phenomenon SPIRIT? It is a question to which the answer can only be belief or disbelief.

In another variation, though, the question is a *philosophical* one; it requires a conceptual investigation. The question is: What can the concept of a phenomenon SPIRIT mean, if it means something? It is this philosophical question that is the question of this book.

I'll be the first to admit that the meandering philosophical questioning about some thing called SPIRIT is and will continue be confusing – but it's exactly because it's confusing that I'm asking. (So, I'm not *pardoning* for it.)

f)

It is as a philosopher I ask about SPIRIT. Which is to say that I ask without either asserting or denying that there is really such a phenomenon. It may turn out on reflection that it's all certainly illusion – that there is no acceptable way to imagine the existence of such a thing. It may also turn out that there's certainly something, and even something that might be understood quite distinctly

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– or that the case must be further postponed. My task is just to travel through the topic with proper patience.

g)

A lot of people with various intents and all sorts of abilities have been wrestling with the phenomenon SPIRIT before. And quite possibly, the most prominent answers to the question have been given not by philosophers, but by *story-makers*. Many famous tales bid to explain what *spiritual phenomena*, or the *spiritual realm* is.

The stories I have in mind are allegories of the inner life of humans. That inner life is a life, it appears, that takes place in an inner sphere distinguishable from the outer sphere. The spiritual phenomena that take place in that *spiritual realm* aren't directly perceptible for the 'outer eye', only for the 'inner eye'.

Religious myths are one rich source of stories that attempt to describe and explain human inner life. For example, the myth of Prometheus can be said to give us an image of a battle between a spirit of *creativity and freedom*, and a spirit of *stability and obedience*. The tree of knowledge in Eden is an object of craving, giving

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occasion to represent by the figure of the snake an image of the spiritual phenomenon called *temptation*.

Spiritual story-makers, however, have not only appeared within the grand religions, for allegorical tales about a spiritual reality have continued to flourish throughout the centuries of human civilization. To mention only a few examples, think of Milton's biblically inspired *Paradise Lost*, in which a band of angels and demons fight the battle of spiritual power. For a modern example, think of the film series *Star Wars*, in which the *Force* – a spiritual phenomenon – in a neat reductionist allegory is pictured as an effect of physical processes dependent on so-called “midi-chlorians”. Again, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* gives us an account of the grand spiritual thing *evil*, in the form of an allegorical story of heroes that must find and destroy magical items representing that evil.

So, if one seeks understanding of what the phenomenon SPIRIT is, there are plenty of *stories* to confer with. And maybe, after all, allegoric tales *are* the most suitable means for enquiring the topic.

However that may be, any allegoric tale is unsatisfying to someone who wants to know what *spirit really is*. And

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the fate of the philosopher is to dig into that question of what the thing “*really is*”.

h)

The durable popularity of many grand allegories serves, if no more, to show how commonplace the thought of a phenomenon SPIRIT is. It's a phenomenon easily accessible to anyone who takes a look into himself or herself. There *appears*, at least, to be something there, inside, which is not perceptible at the outside: A world disconnected from the physical world, as there seems to be no necessary causal connection between outside and inside phenomena. It is fully possible for a human person to be in physical pain, but in spiritual peace, and even *joy*.

The concept ‘spirit’ arguably reaches deeper into human inner life than any other concept of the inner, such as ‘feeling’, ‘thought’, or ‘value’. These other concepts have much more restricted meanings, which make them more tangible, but also less satisfying for someone who wants to discover the general logic of the inner world.

The problem with that wonderful concept of ‘spirit’ is that it's so elusive it can hardly be used for any serious investigative purpose. Its true meaning – and therefore

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the correct use of the word “spirit” – is up in the clouds. These days at least, when religious language in the western world is so on decline, we have no *commonly spoken language* of spirit, understood and accepted as meaningful among philosophers and scientists.

I suppose that one thing I should have liked to achieve if it were at all possible, was to find a way of talking about *spirit* that helps me say what I mean without resorting to allegories. I’d have liked to discover a language that is both *ontologically* sound and commonly comprehensible. I doubt that any such language is available – but that would be the ideal outcome of the effort I’m starting.

i)

“What is *spirit* really?” is a question of *ontology*, so at this point I can finally present a question I have that is not a preliminary one. “What is *spirit* really?” or “the reality of spirit”, is the question I’ll be presenting some reflections on in chapter II.

In one way, the question of what *spirit* really is, is *unanswerable*. There can be no clear and definitive account of what *spirit* really is. This is not to say, of course, that nothing can be known about the topic, only

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that the question has no answer in the ordinary sense. *Spirit* cannot, as a super-empirical phenomenon, be explained as an empirical phenomenon. And by this insight it becomes clear that the problem of understanding what *spirit* is, is partly one of knowing what can be known and not, which brings us to ask about the *epistemology* of the matter.

j)

The epistemological question is, “What can be known about *spirit*?”

This question, however, splits up into two kinds of questions: One kind concerns what it makes sense *to speak of*; how a language (or languages) of spirit can sensibly be construed. These questions concern epistemological complications introduced by Wittgenstein.

The other kind of epistemological questions concerns *what can be known* in a more traditional sense: it’s the question of what we *can be certain of*; what it makes no sense to doubt, and what it makes no sense to believe. This is “epistemology proper” – questions arising from the classical epistemological complications discussed by enlightenment philosophers, from Descartes to Kant.

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The questions I have of the epistemology of spiritual phenomena will be answered in part III and IV respectively.

k)

In the end, knowing things is pointless if there isn't a point in knowing it. So, if this effort to understand matters of spirit is to be of any value, it's necessary to outline a practical use of the insights gained through the enquiry.

This question, "what can knowledge of *spirit* be used for?" or in what science knowledge of *spirit* belongs, is the final question I'm going to take on, in part V.

l)

I have now mentioned the questions I have about spirit, which are four in number. I'll try to answer them with the resources I have available.

Finally, I'd like to say that in case this project appears naïve to some reader accustomed to the ways of 21st century philosophy, I'm ready to defend my approach. I have no faith in the analytic tradition's systematic cleaving up and redistribution of grand philosophical

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problems into ever-smaller bits and pieces. I don't think analytic philosophy, as it has evolved, is to the purpose. Or, to put it differently: as I see it, whatever the purpose of philosophy is, it can't be what most analytic philosophers currently assume it to be. Consequently, this book is written in a spirit that is intolerable to any form of scholasticism, be it ancient or modern.

