

Commentary

The Conflict Between the Self and Otherness: The Authenticity of Spirituality

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To appreciate spirituality in all its guises, one might first have to beg the question of whether true spirituality exists. The modern narrative often portrays spirituality as an individual-oriented sense of connection with non-material existences and a sense of transcendence into the beyond. However, the authenticity of spirituality in its purest form that rises from within the human consciousness is constantly under scrutiny. ‘Spirituality, German’ by Ludger Viefhues-Bailey and ‘Spirituality, Revolutionary’ by Joel Kovel perfectly capture such a tension between the different speculations of spirituality. While Viefhues-Bailey subscribes to the perception of spirituality as both a product and reactant of socio-cultural, political, economic, and ethical movements, Joel Kovel would downgrade this definition of spirituality to a mere function of human discourse rather than authentic spirituality that could overcome “the corruptions of idolatry embedded in these social frameworks”. While I largely align with Viefhues-Bailey, I do believe that Kovel’s argument offers us great insight into humans’ perennial inquiry into the construction of identities through the internal and external understanding of the “self”. In this short essay, I will attempt an exposition and defense of Viefhues-Bailey’s view points and a critique of Kovel’s, subsequently uniting them into an investigation into the conflict between the self and otherness that has shaped all the social constructs throughout human history, including religion and spirituality. Ultimately I strive to offer an angle from which we can answer the question of whether pure spirituality exists.

Viefhues-Bailey’s deliberation on spirituality essentially deals with the mechanism of how social, economic, political, and ethical frameworks configure individualities. Facilitated by ‘a market product for consumption’ (Spirituality, German) and affiliated with ‘the ideals of citizenship’ (Spirituality, German), spirituality becomes a manifestation of people’s economic habits and orientation, which in turn policies the ethical, political, and social dimensions of one’s life. As Marx’s theory of economic determinism suggests, economic relationships create the foundation upon which all other social arrangements are based. To take a step furtherer, I believe that Richard King, in ‘Selling Spirituality’, builds upon this idea and establishes a link between the manipulators, the power figures, of neo-liberal economic hierarchy and the masses whose individual spheres, where spirituality flourishes, are geared towards the ideals of capitalism. Viefhues-Bailey not only affirms this notion of social, economic, and political interaction as a driving force of spirituality, but also extends this complication to the ethical realm where civic obligations and the morality of goodness are concerned.

Contrary to Viefhues-Bailey, Kovel construes spirituality as an inherent and natural existence that possesses some form of universal truth that is innate to human consciousness. He describes 'spiritualities mediated by their social vision and relations' (Spirituality, Revolutionary) as unauthentic and calls for resistance to these external power relations through 'authentic spirituality' permeated by the fluid soul-form of the self. Kovel fails to consider the fundamental nature of an interactive society and the inevitable process of enculturation that drives the formation of individuality. Thought, knowledge, and perception are all essentially purposeful constructs, or products of some purposeful constructs by which human existence is validated and rationalized, which thus would render any attempt to isolate an idea from external social construction futile and unreasonable. The notion of a pure form of spirituality that rises from some sort of natural cosmic law is falsified by the very idea that humans' understanding of nature is an 'unnatural' construct in itself. Therefore I believe that Kovel's argument for authentic spirituality that omits and rejects the social functionality of human faculty does not quite stand.

Nevertheless, the conflict between Kovel's and Viefhues-Bailey's perspectives does allow us to catch a glimpse of the conflict between the self and otherness that has defined various human endeavors throughout history. The everlasting social, economic, political, religious, ideological reconstitutions all revolve around mankind's formation, re-formation, evaluation, and re-evaluation of the relation between the internal self and the external otherness, of which the evolution of sciences, religious movements, class conflicts, social revolutions are just a few of the many examples. The complexities of spirituality are no exception, but a new expression of the old pattern of self-otherness reconciliation. Hence, to wrestle with the question of whether pure and authentic spirituality exists is to determine whether one would view human existence as a physical and deliberate construct or a metaphysical deterministic product. The former would render all forms of existence, including the very idea of spirituality, artificial and unnatural constructs shaped by the interactions in a fabricated mechanism, whereas the latter would provide justification for claims of authentic spirituality. As my philosophical bend on the idea of creation and humanity corresponds to the first interpretation, I would have to favor Viefhues-Bailey's view over Kovel's.

In conclusion, through the above argument, I have justified my defense of Viefhues-Bailey's opinion and digression from Kovel's by inquiring into notion of authentic spirituality through a social, historical, and philosophical lens that captures the perpetual conflict between the self and otherness.