

# School of Consciousness

## Spirit and Matter

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### Summary

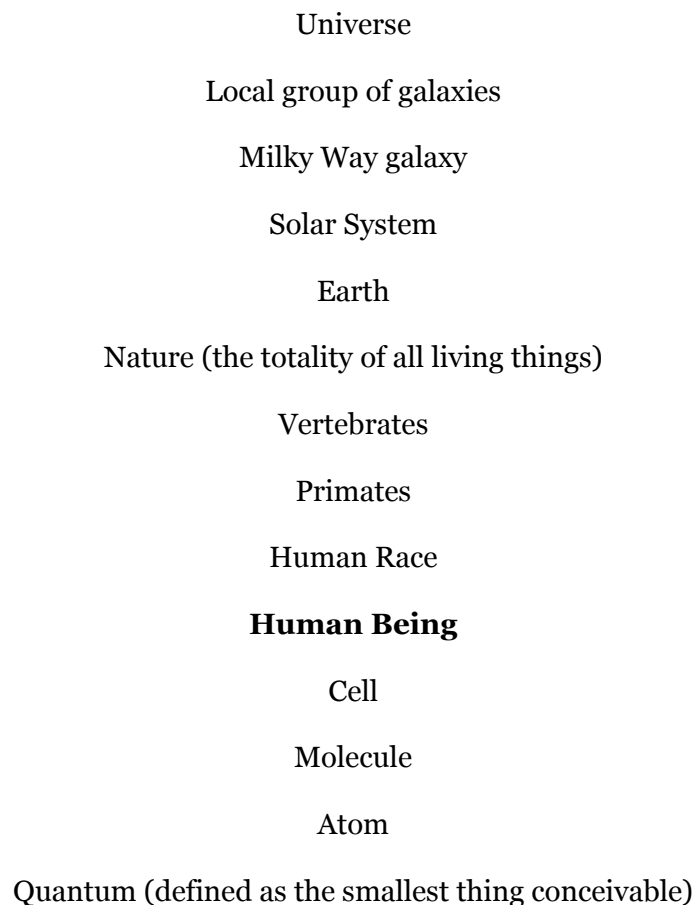
The universe can be understood as a “holarchy”, in which everything is part of higher levels and, at the same time, physically consists of lower levels. Everything in the universe, ourselves included, has a material constitution (matter) and a spiritual constitution (spirit). Matter and spirit are complementary aspects of each other. And they allow us to view the world (and ourselves) from the material perspective and the spiritual perspective.

### The Deeper Nature of the Universe

Everything is part of something larger. That may be obvious, but the significant implications are not immediately obvious. I had no vocabulary for this until I came across something Arthur Koestler wrote. Koestler coined the terms “holarchy” and “holon”. (There is a diagram of a well-known holarchy on the next page.) Every holon is a part of all the larger holons above it. And, at the same time, every holon contains all the smaller holons below it. This gives holons a dual nature - an “integrative” nature and an “assertive” nature. What this means is that every holon is a member of all the higher holons in its holarchy, and therefore has to comply with, or *integrate* with them. At the same time, every holon consists physically of all the smaller holons below it, and therefore *asserts* its personality on them. Since we are also part of a very large

holarchy, this dual nature applies to us too. Each one of us is unique and to some extent free and independent and can therefore assert ourselves, yet at the same time each one of us is part of something greater and must therefore cooperate and be interdependent and integrate.

We see in the diagram below that each one of us is a member of many higher holons. Some of this is obvious and uncontroversial, some of it less so. For example, we are all members of the human race, which is itself a holon. The human race is a member of a larger holon, Nature – defined here as “the totality of all living things”. Nature, in turn, is an integral part of this planet, which is part of the solar system, and so on, through successively larger holons until we reach the largest possible holon of all, the universe itself. We know it is the largest possible holon simply because we have chosen the word “universe” to denote “absolutely everything in existence”. (There cannot be more than one universe. That would be a contradiction in terms). The holarchy that we know best is:



Please note that this particular holarchy is merely illustrative. It makes no claim to be the only one or the comprehensive one. We have no idea, for instance, how many holons there are between a star and the galaxy of which it is a member, nor between a galaxy and the universe itself. There are probably many that we have yet to discover. In addition, not every molecule forms part of organic life, and not every star has its own solar system of planets. These and other similar considerations suggest that the universe may consist of a very large number of parallel holarchies that look more and more similar to each other at their tops and bottoms. An image of a vibrating violin string comes to mind!

The concept of the holarchy is not new, but it is potent. As Joseph Needham wrote in 1936: “The hierarchy of relations, from the molecular structure of carbon to the equilibrium of the species and ecological whole, will perhaps be the leading idea of the future.”

### **“Essential natures”**

Now, let us explore what it means to be “part” of something bigger. Each of us is a part of something larger, the human race. This much is obvious. What is less obvious is the fact that each of us is imbued with the “essential nature” of the human race. What do I mean by this? I mean that each of us has those qualities which distinguish human beings from all other forms of life, and which make us recognisable as humans. I call the totality of these qualities the “essential nature” of the human race. Just to be clear, I am not talking about qualities we share with other forms of life. The “essential nature” of the human race is the set of qualities unique to it.

It is also obvious that each of us is also part of the many greater holons. For example, each of us is part of the whole of Nature. This means that we have within us the “essential nature” of Nature – i.e. those qualities that are unique to all living things. So, as with all other forms of life, we are born, we mature, we adapt and develop, we reproduce, and we die. This is the cycle of life through which all living things appear to go. Yet, although these qualities are apparent in us, they are apparent only at a very general level. At a more specific level, we are vertebrates. At a more specific level still, we are primates. At an even more specific level, we are human beings. And at the most specific level of all, each of us is unique. Of course, we are all very similar to

each other, yet at the same time very different from each other, with our unique faces, fingerprints, DNA, personalities and destinies. The similarities represent our integrative nature and the differences our assertive nature. What we are of speaking here is the principle of *unity in diversity*. There are countless examples of this. Perhaps the best known is the snowflake. All snowflakes are undoubtedly snowflakes - with their familiar hexagonal crystal patterns - yet every snowflake there ever has been, and ever will be, is unique. What applies to snowflakes applies equally to fingerprints, starfish, black cats, oak leaves – the list is endless. It is an awe-inspiring thought, and a testimony to the creative potential of the universe.

Continuing up the holarchy, Nature herself is imbued with the essential natures of the many larger holons that she forms part of. In our diagram, the holon above Nature is planet Earth. So, we would expect Nature to be imbued with the essential nature of our home planet, i.e. those qualities that are unique to this planet. This seems to be the case. There can be little doubt that Nature - i.e. life as we know it - is shaped and determined by this planet's unique features. Life here has adapted to, and been formed by, all the many unique characteristics of this planet, the strength of its gravitational field, its mean surface temperatures, its magnetic fields, the many forms of electromagnetic radiation which affect it, the relative proportions of its chemical elements and compounds, as well as all the many other unique conditions which we know about or have yet to discover. In all these respects, Nature on this planet is imbued with the unique nature of the planet. Another way of saying this is that Nature contains the essential nature of planet Earth.

Moving up a level, planet Earth is in turn a “child” of the Sun in so many similar respects, and so it goes on. Each holon is part of, and determined by, the holon above it, *and* by the holons above that. As members of the Milky Way galaxy, for example, each one of us contains its essential nature, whatever this turns out to be. That is a fascinating discussion, but beyond the scope of this article.

### **Emerging levels of consciousness**

One way of visualising all this is to imagine that we contain within ourselves successively deeper levels of order, rather like the layers of an onion. The larger the holon of which we form part, the deeper will its essential nature be contained within us. At our deepest core lies the

essential nature of the greatest holon, the universe itself. But since everything is part of the universe, this means that everything, including us, is imbued at their deepest core with the essential order, the essential intelligence, of the universe. Perhaps this is the “divine spark” in everything.

I believe that some of the layers of our “onion” have come to the surface and have manifested as levels of consciousness. This happens because we have inside us the counterparts of the things we eventually get to know in the world outside us. If you like, the “essential natures” in our onion come to the surface and are then able to “resonate” with their counterparts in the world. They are able to resonate because, in some mysterious way, they are the same – they are on the same wavelength. I believe that there is some evidence that this actually happens. We are privileged to have witnessed in the last 100 years or so the emergence of what we might call “human race consciousness”, “Nature consciousness”, and “planet earth consciousness”. First, we became aware of the idea of the human race as a whole, as a single entity. This awareness has taken many forms, such as the emergence of the United Nations, the concept of the human family, and so on. Second, we have developed an awareness, a consciousness, of Nature as a whole, as a single entity. This has taken the form of our interest in wild life, threatened species, the environment, ecology, and the fact that we are all part of these things. Third, and thanks to pictures of Earth taken from space and to writers such as James Lovelock, we are beginning to think of the planet as a single entity. Some of us even think of it as an intelligent, living being - Gaia. Three things, in particular, have accelerated all this emerging consciousness in the last 25 years or so – the internet, globalisation, and David Attenborough.

The point I want to make is that each of these three forms of consciousness was always there , in the form of layers of our “onion”, waiting to be awoken and brought to light at the right moment. If this is true, then the likelihood is that, at some time in the future, even deeper levels of consciousness, corresponding to even greater levels of order in the macrocosm (larger holons), will awaken within us and come to the surface as forms of consciousness. What it will be like to have “Solar consciousness” and “Galactic consciousness” remains to be seen. Meanwhile, we might note that an important part of the process of growing in consciousness might be gaining access to the higher levels of order and intelligence already latent within us.

## **Redefining Spirit and Matter**

The concepts of holarchy and “onion” can also be useful in exploring the nature of spirit and matter and the relationship between them.

Looking at the holarchy in the diagram, we can see that everything has a physical nature and another nature. Everything has a physical nature simply because everything is physically composed of smaller parts. Take the Milky Way, for instance. We know that it is physically composed of stars, interstellar matter, planets, moons, Nature (wherever there is life), human beings (we know this because we live in it!), cells, molecules, atoms, particles, and quanta. We can think of the totality of all these smaller things as the physical nature or **material constitution** (or “matter”) of the Galaxy. It is not difficult to visualise this. But what applies to the Galaxy applies to everything else. Everything has a material constitution, everything is made of matter, because everything is physically composed of smaller parts. Our own “matter” consists of all the parts we are made of – our organs, cells, chemicals etc. However, this is only half of the picture. There is another, equally important, part of the picture that the modern world largely ignores. For convenience, I call it the “spiritual nature”, but only because the word “spiritual” is widely accepted to mean something very different from the physical and the material.

The spiritual constitution (or “spirit”) of anything is its “onion”, the “essential natures” of the larger holons above it in its holarchy. Matter and spirit are clearly very different from each other. One has a physical presence and the other does not. And, significantly, one is defined by looking down the holarchy, to smaller things, while the other is defined by looking up the holarchy, to larger things. Before we discuss the implications of this, we should first dispose of the exception to the rule, the quantum, which we defined as the smallest possible thing. By definition, there can be nothing smaller than a quantum. That means that it can have no physical nature and no material constitution because it has no parts. That is obvious. Less obvious, and very surprising, is the possibility that the smallest thing in the universe may have within it the greatest range of spirit because all quanta are imbued with the essential natures of *all* other levels, all other levels being higher than quanta in every possible holarchy. Another way of saying this is that quanta are to be found not only in everything that exists and has existed, but will be found in everything that will exist in the future. That is amazing!

For the avoidance of doubt, this way of understanding spirit and matter implies that *everything* is imbued with spirit. There are no exceptions. Since everything - an ant, a rock, a tree, or a star - is imbued with the essential natures of all the bigger things of which it forms part, it means that everything has an “onion”, a spiritual nature. We make a mistake if we assume that spirit is confined to animate or sentient things. It is also worth noting that spirit and matter are relative concepts. Whether something is seen as spirit or matter depends entirely on the viewpoint of the observer, on their perspective. From the point of view of the quantum, every other level in any possible holarchy is greater than it. It can look only up the holarchy because there is no “down” for it to look at. That means that, from the standpoint of the quantum, the whole universe is spirit. And the situation is similar for all holons near the bottom of the holarchy, such as particles, waves, atoms and molecules. From their point view, most of the universe is spirit. Looking from the other direction, however, from the point of view of holons near the top of the holarchy, most of the universe is matter.

We are now in a position to define “material perspective” and “spiritual perspective”.

### **The Spiritual Perspective**

The material perspective is to look downwards through the holarchy, and to see and understand things in terms of their parts, and in terms of their physical nature. We are all familiar with the material perspective. It is the dominant perspective of our time, just as physical perception is the dominant form of perception. The material perspective is, for example, to take the “electronic” or “molecular” point of view, to see the world through the “eyes” of electrons or molecules. When we think about it, we realise that this is how the facts of science are presented. The world as described by science is the world seen in terms of particles and waves (physics); atoms, elements and molecules (chemistry); giant molecules and cells (biochemistry); tissues and organs (anatomy and medicine), and so on. *When scientists study holons higher than us in the holarchy, they see only their material aspects.* All they see are those aspects that happen to correspond with matter as seen from the human standpoint. Similarly, we do not associate stars, planets and galaxies with higher levels of intelligence. This is because we see them only from the material point of view, and therefore think of them only in terms of chemicals, particles and radiation etc. However, we have become so accustomed to believing that the *material viewpoint* is the only possible one that when we observe anything’s material aspects,

we mistakenly believe that we are observing *all* its aspects. We mistakenly believe that planets and stars are only material and inanimate. Only when we learn to use spiritual perception and take the spiritual perspective will we see that the universe is much less physical and inanimate than we imagined. We have become too anthropocentric for our own good.

If we are ever to understand the deeper nature of the universe and ourselves, then *we need to learn how to apprehend up the scale, as well as down it*. We need to learn to adopt the *spiritual perspective* in addition to the material one. When we do, our understanding of the universe and humanity will change significantly. What, then, is the spiritual perspective? It is to look upwards through the holarchy, to understand things as wholes and unities, to understand the influence of the higher on the lower (“downward causation”), to understand the bigger picture, and to understand things in terms of their spiritual nature.

The fact that the material perspective and physical perception have become the norm throughout the world is having profound consequences for all of us. If, however, we were also able to adopt the spiritual perspective and learn how to use spiritual perception, not as substitutes for the material and the physical, but as complements to them, we would get a fuller, richer understanding of the nature and history of the universe. I believe that the time for this is long overdue.

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