

One Among Many

The self in social context
by Joachim I. Krueger, Ph.D.



Joachim Krueger is a social psychologist at Brown University who believes that rational thinking and socially responsible behavior are attainable goals. [See full bio](#)

September 13, 2009, [Social Life](#)

Harnessing spirituality

Positive emotions underlie spirituality.



For many people with a scientific mindset, [spirituality](#) is a dirty word. Look at the semantic space of the term. Religion-organized or otherwise-comes to mind, along with Mesmerism, the Ouija board, reincarnation, angels, and belief in a benign and caring universe. All of these semantic associates are either based on untestable ideas or ideas that have been tested and refuted. If you call yourself spiritual you must be dim or naïve.

For spirituality to be rescued from such devastation, it must be redefined. I thought this was impossible until I read George Vaillant's book "Spiritual evolution: A scientific defense of [faith](#)" (2008). Though I still cringe at the book's subtitle, I endorse Vaillant's project. Vaillant searches for spirituality in a part of the mammalian [brain](#) called the limbic system. The limbic system is a collection of brain structures regulating emotional experience. There is a lot of recent neuroscience that literally illuminates, by way of fMRI, what's going on in these parts of the brain. Admittedly, the term 'limbic system' is a bit of shortcut because the structures it comprises are phenomenally diverse. Yet, they share in common the task of giving rise to distinctive experiences that have evolved among mammals, and that are most refined and differentiated in human beings.

Traditionally, research has focused on negative emotions, such as [fear](#), [anger](#), and sadness. These emotions are basic and can be found in many non-human animals. Other negative emotions, such as guilt, [shame](#), or disgust are more social and more sophisticated. These emotions are highly specialized and discrete. For a long time, it seemed that there was no equivalent degree of differentiation among the positive emotions. This is where recent research and Vaillant's project come in. There is a range of positive emotions that goes far beyond 'feeling good' or 'being happy.' Vaillant distinguishes between [happiness](#), joy, [gratitude](#), [forgiveness](#), and compassion, among others. For each, he reviews relevant neuroscientific research and makes a case for a distinct evolutionary pathway.

The core of Vaillant's argument is that it is the experience of positive emotions that deserves to be called spiritual. A spiritual person is someone who is capable of experiencing joy in play, forgiveness after having

been wronged, compassion with others who have been derailed, awe when in communion with others or the splendor of nature.

You may ask 'Why do we need the notion of spirituality when the experience and the study of these positive emotional states is quite enough?' And 'Would one not have to include negative emotions, which are as-if not more-differentiated than positive emotions under the umbrella of spirituality?'

Here, Vaillant does not give us much guidance, so I will attempt an answer. It seems to me **that negative emotions don't require a spiritual portfolio because they are so closely bound to the ego or self-consciousness.** Often, we know why we feel fearful, angry, disgusted, or, perhaps to a lesser extent, sad. **These states are about us; they are aversive, and we seek to end them. In contrast, positive emotions-excepting perhaps pride-tend to transcend the ego. In joy, forgiveness, compassion, and awe, the ego's boundaries temporarily crumble. Spirituality happens when we get over ourselves, if only for a moment. This may be why many people consider belief in a 'higher power' essential to spirituality.** On strict [cognitive](#) terms, a literal belief in a higher power may be 'hokey,' to use a term Vaillant relishes. With a more liberal definition, though, it does make sense. The 'higher power' may just be a placeholder for anything beyond the confines of conscious egocentric self-awareness. On the inside, these out-of-ego forces include all the massive work being done by our brains that we, by necessity, will never be able to articulate. On the outside, these forces include our social embeddedness among other humans.

So I think Vaillant has found a way to make the idea of spirituality scientifically respectable-just when I had given up hope that it could be done.