The spiritual is a subset of the abstract. The objects and items that we usually think of as “spiritual” are, I would suggest, abstract entities in the philosophical sense of that term. Abstract entities are items like properties and relationships, which are not things but nevertheless are features of the real world. I’ve written a lot about abstract entities elsewhere. Many others have written about them too, beginning with the ancient Greek philosophers. Some of the Greek philosophers had much the same idea I am advocating here: that spiritual items are abstract entities of some kind. [1] I won’t give a lecture about abstract entities right now. For now I’ll just say that abstract entities are features of reality but are not things. The main examples are the properties of things and the relationships that exist among things. Relationships are quite real. Things really do stand in relationships to each other. The north pole really is north of the equator. Europe really is adjacent to Asia. And those relationships of being north of and of being adjacent to are quite real. It really is true that Europe is adjacent to Asia on the globe. To deny that this relationship is real is to deny that Europe really is adjacent to Asia – and that would be a denial of a fact. Relations, like the relation of adjacency, are examples of abstract entities.

Properties of things provide other examples of abstract entities. An electron really has mass. A stone that you hold in your hand really has mass. That’s a property. And to deny that things have properties seems silly. To deny that things have relationships seems silly. Properties and relations are features of the world, even though they aren’t things.
There’s been a big philosophical debate over the reality of abstract entities. I’m going to bypass all that here, and just go ahead and say that properties and relations are in some way features of the world. It’s a mistake to regard them as things, or equate them to things, or to think of them as just another class or type of things. Those are big mistakes. Most philosophical thinking about abstract entities is contaminated by those mistakes in one way or another. But that’s another story that I don’t want to go into right now. Properties and relations are real in some way – otherwise things wouldn’t really have them. At least for all practical purposes, properties and relations of things are real – and what more could we want?

I would suggest that the items that we call “spiritual,” if they exist at all, are abstract features of the world. They are abstract entities. Also, I want to suggest that the failure to understand this fact is the main reason for both superstitious belief and barren skepticism with regard to the spiritual. Think of the human soul, for example. Traditionally there are two camps in the debate over the soul. One camp says that the soul is something that lives in you. Sometimes they say it can survive death, but that’s a separate question. The basic idea is that the soul is something that lives in you that is distinct from your body. And they imagine it as something almost ghostly – some sort of intangible thing that lives within you. So there’s this school of thought that says that the soul is a ghostly thing that lives within you – that tabernacles within you. And there’s another school of thought that there is no soul at all, because when you look at the scientific facts, the so-called “soul” turns out to be a pattern of information in the brain, or the functioning of the brain, or something like that.

There are these two traditional schools of thought – and both of them miss the point. What they both fail to realize is that the soul might be an abstract entity. They both fail to take that possibility into account. If you look at the possibility that the soul is abstract, these two points of view both look partly wrong and partly right! Think about the view of the soul as something separate from the body and existing in the body. If you delete the part about the soul being a separate ghostly substance, which is the usual mental picture that people have of the soul, and instead think of the soul as an abstract entity, then the soul could be a feature of the body or of the brain and still be quite real. And similarly, if you take the materialistic view that the soul is
just a pattern in the brain, you can realize that this pattern, which is a *feature* of the brain, is an abstract entity and therefore is real. Thus, both of these points of view come to the same thing. Once you admit the possibility that the soul is an abstract entity, these two points of view can be reconciled. The soul can be a feature of the brain, and at the same time it can be distinct from the body, not identical to the brain, and more than just matter. The soul is an abstract entity, and a *feature* of material things, instead of being a material thing itself.

You end up with the concept of a soul that’s distinct from the body, and is quite real, and at the same time is a feature or pattern of information. As I’ve shown elsewhere, an abstract soul like that could even be immortal. I’m not saying that it is immortal – that’s a whole separate question. But it could potentially be immortal, because it could continue to exist in another brain after this brain is gone. Even if you don’t believe in another world, there still could be something like reincarnation, where a soul exists in another human brain in the future.

If we admit the possibility that the soul is an abstract entity, suddenly the difference between dualism and materialism evaporates. Some people would label the result as a materialistic viewpoint. Others might label it as “property dualism.” Whatever. Let them label as they may. The important point is that the difference between a brain-based view of the person and a spiritual view is no longer an irreconcilable difference.

Something similar happens with the idea of God. People normally think of God as a supernatural being in addition to the universe. In other words, a *thing* that is different from the universe – a spiritual thing, but still a *thing*. People believe that God causally influences the physical universe by creating it in the first place and then perhaps by intervening in it later. That’s the way people often think of God. I suppose that’s the way most religious believers think of God. Opposed to this view is the so-called skeptical view that there’s really only the physical universe, and that there isn’t this supernatural being called “God.”

What if we admitted the possibility that God is an abstract entity? Then God could be a *feature* of the physical universe. There would be no need to assume a supernatural being. God could
be a feature of the physical universe, and God might be present in the physical universe in that way only – in sort of the same way, perhaps, that the mind is present in the brain, although I don’t want to stretch that analogy too far. Once you admit the possibility that God could be an abstract entity, then God could belong to the physical universe (or the physical universe could “belong” to God, if you prefer that wording) in much the same way that a property belongs to things. The things in the universe – all of them, or at least some of them – could be “in” God in this way. Or God could be “in” them, if you prefer that wording. It’s just a matter of God being an abstract entity – a property or a relation or some item similar to that – instead of being a thing, like a spiritual or ghostly thing or substance.

If this is the case, then God still could be the creator in a way, and could play a role in the physical universe in a special way. The things that are “within” the abstract entity we call God, could include whatever started the physical universe, plus the causes of all good things. Therefore, the universe and all good things could, in a way, originate from God, even if God is not literally a supernatural creator or cause.

If we assume that God is an abstract entity, we can reconcile the existence of God with a naturalistic view of the universe. There’s no need for anything supernatural. It works the same way with the soul. There’s nothing supernatural in the view of the soul as a feature of the brain, but if the soul is an abstract entity then there can be a real soul according to this view.

If we assume that the spiritual is abstract, we can reconcile the existence of spiritual realities with the so-called scientific view of the world.

Now here’s another point. The spiritual aspects of the world, the soul and God and such, probably must be abstract if we can know them through personal knowledge. Abstract entities often can be recognized through “direct,” personal, intuitive knowledge. For example, you can see that something has a color – and if you see a color you really have experienced the color. Even if the color was only in a dream, you’ve still experienced that color. If you dream about a red breadbox that isn’t really there but is only in the dream, then you haven’t really experienced
a breadbox at all, but you really have experienced the color red in your dream. Abstract entities are items that we can experience through imagination and insight. We can experience them “within ourselves.” Mathematical objects are perfect examples of this. All mathematical entities, the structures postulated by mathematics, like numbers sets and geometric forms and so forth – all of those are abstract entities. You can learn about them through “pure” reason, through thought and mathematical intuition. You don’t have to experience them with your senses. I’m not denying that sensation has some role in our understanding of mathematics. I’m just saying that once you get started thinking about mathematical entities, you can “see” them (not literally, but with your mind) through pure reason and mathematical intuition.

Abstract entities are like that. One rough-and-ready characterization of abstract entities is that they are items that can be apprehended through thought. Mathematical entities are perfect examples of that.

If the spiritual entities in the world – God or souls or whatever – are abstract entities, then there is no obvious reason why we can’t become aware of those entities and know that they are there through intuition and thinking. We don’t necessarily have to have sensory evidence.

I would like to make this radical suggestion: that spiritual items – whether they be God, or souls, or whatever – cannot be anything other than abstract entities of some kind. Otherwise, they wouldn’t be knowable through the means by which people know about spiritual things. Believers often speak of knowing God “in their hearts” – that is, in the depths of their minds. Well, if you define God as a supernatural creator of the universe (as the atheists do in their efforts to debunk God), then you can’t possibly know in the depths of your mind that there’s a God of that sort. That’s something that would have to be determined through observation of the physical world. If you can know God “in your heart,” then you can’t know that the God you find there is a supernatural creator. You couldn’t determine that from what you experience in your heart, because by using your “heart” – that is, your innermost mind (using the word “heart” poetically) – you cannot tell where the universe came from! The origin of the universe is a fact that’s far away in time. It’s part of the external physical world; it’s not in your mind.
You can no more tell the origin of the universe by looking into your mind than you can determine the mass of the Andromeda galaxy by looking into your mind. You need your senses for those tasks; you need to do physical measurements and analyze them. However, if God is the kind of entity that you can find in the depths of your mind, then God could be an abstract entity. I don’t know of any other type of item that you can find in the depths of your mind this way – a real item that you can find in the depths of your mind through mental intuition of some kind alone. I don’t know of any item like that except for abstract entities.

If we assume that the spiritual is the abstract, a lot of the conflicts between science and religion just vanish. Also, we may have to assume that the spiritual is the abstract to overcome the problem of how we know about the spiritual. If people think they can know God within their minds in some way, and know spiritual realities in the depths of their own being, then what could spiritual realities be besides abstract entities?

It’s something to think about.

--- End of Talk ---

Notes

[1] Specifically, Plato and his school, though Plato’s concept of abstract entities was a bit different from the usual modern concept of them.