



Toward a Unified Science of Spiritual Experience— Visionary Realism and the Ontology of Interiority: Philosophical Commentary on Chatlos's Framework of Spirituality

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This article proposes visionary realism as a philosophical framework to underlabor for the development of a unified science of spiritual experience. By integrating elements of Roy Bhaskar's critical realism, Ken Wilber's integral theory, William James's radical empiricism, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's participatory epistemology, and Rudolf Steiner's subtle empiricism, visionary realism outlines key ontological and epistemological challenges to studying interior realities such as consciousness, culture, and spirituality. Visionary realism critiques the reductionist tendencies of physicalism (scientific materialism) and the neo-Kantian conflation of subjectivity and interiority, reclaiming interiority as an emergent, ontologically real dimension of the natural world that, while epistemically relative and fallible, can, in principle, be understood objectively—namely, in an ontologically realist and transfactual manner. This article advances an expanded or integrative empiricism—radical, deep, and subtle—that integrates subjective, intersubjective, and objective methodologies to legitimize spiritual experience as a domain of rigorous scientific inquiry. It further explores the nested relationship between a science of interiority, a science of spiritual experience, and the emerging academic field of soul studies. This integrative framework seeks to bridge science, philosophy, and theology, offering transformative responses to the meaning crisis and the larger global metacrisis by fostering a secular spirituality capable of re-enchanting the disenchanting world.



Introduction

We live in an age of great scientific prowess and profound spiritual disorientation. In this disenchanted world, where deep meaning wanes and the incessant pull of nihilism and its myriad inflections of spiritual malice seem to be approaching an apogee, how can we reclaim the reality and depth of our interior life in an era that seeks collapse it? The study of spiritual experience presents a unique challenge at the intersection of science, philosophy, and theology. To investigate such phenomena scientifically within a naturalistic, secular, and realist framework, we must first clear away the unjustified metaphysical presuppositions that obstruct the possibility of a rigorous and integrative inquiry into the nature of spiritual experience and spiritual reality—or the “unseen order,” as William James (1912) called it. As John Locke ([1690] 1996) aptly put it, we need “philosophical underlaboring” to clear the “metaphysical rubbish” from the path of knowledge.

In this commentary, I argue for the development of a visionary realist philosophy of science that underlabors for a new *science of interiority* capable of systematically exploring subjective spiritual experience and the objective ontological realities that underpin it (Hedlund 2021). This approach provides philosophical buttressing for John Calvin Chatlos’s proposed Framework of Spirituality (FOS)—a naturalistically compatible model that seeks to integrate science, philosophy, and theology within a unified ontology. This is not to say I agree with all the details or the claims Chatlos makes, but rather that I seek to support the general direction of his FOS in the sense of developing a naturalistic ontology and scientifically grounded approach to the study of spiritual experience and realities. My aim is to contribute to the dialogue in field of science and religion about what a naturalistic common foundation for the scientific study of spiritual experience and spiritual realities might look like.

Chatlos’s (2025, 2) FOS forms the basis for a scientifically grounded study of what he calls the “spiritual core”—a kind of rationally intelligible “soul studies.” Central to this framework is the “unseen order” of subjective experience, which includes not only the spiritual core but also creative forces such as love, truth, and faith (Chatlos 2025, 2). While the FOS emphasizes phenomenology and subjective spiritual experience, it clearly presupposes an intransitive ontology of universal and real spiritual structures, including a tripartite model of thinking, feeling, and doing; a stratified self with depth; and an intrinsically lawful spiritual development.

This ontology implies interiority is structured and follows rationally intelligible principles. Spiritual development unfolds through stages, reflecting a universal process of transformation, even as individual expressions vary due to historical, cultural, and psychological mediations. In this way, the deep structure of interiority is implicitly universal, with the spiritual core both innate and emergent—innate in that it is a fundamental aspect of human being,

emergent in that its realization depends on participatory engagement. Hence, spiritual experience in the FOS is not merely subjective but ontologically real and causally efficacious, unfolding according to lawful, though experientially variable, patterns of transformation.

Further, Chatlos's framework suggests the spiritual core and its development transcendently depend on spiritual realities such as love, truth, and faith, which function as creative forces shaping both individual transformation and collective meaning-making. Thus, while the FOS operates within a naturalistic paradigm, it does not reduce spiritual experience to mere subjectivity or neurological epiphenomena; rather, it affirms the ontological depth of spirituality, advocating for a scientific approach to studying these realities within a unified, interdisciplinary framework.

To shift from the prevailing empiricist–physicalist paradigm—where only what can be seen or measured through the five senses is deemed real—to a transcendental realist, post-physicalist paradigm that recognizes the unseen order of interior causes and structures as real, we must indeed “clear out the rubbish.” Visionary realism contends that a crucial part of the rubbish has to do with the Kantian insistence that we cannot touch noumenal reality or the thing-in-itself (*ding an sich*), leaving us confined in the Kantian straight jacket of subjective phenomena. The visionary realist proposal for a new science of interiority (Hedlund 2021) critiques the neo-Kantian coupling of subjectivity and interiority, arguing that interiority constitutes an ontological domain distinct from subjectivity, which it construes as epistemic. Subjectivity is the primordial foundation of all knowledge, encompassing our epistemic access to both interior and exterior domains, but that does not mean interior phenomena are merely subjective. By decoupling interiority and subjectivity, we can recover the ontological reality of interior phenomena (consciousness, culture, ethics, spirituality) and move toward a framework that supports “objective” knowledge claims in these domains, understood not as a view from nowhere, nor a panoptic view, but as a systematic, rigorous, procedurally rational intersubjective agreement (Habermas 1984) that lays claim to reliable and valid description and expression of alethic truth (Bhaskar [1979] 2015) despite being inexorably situated, fallible, relative, provisional, and subject to revision and falsification.

Grounded in critical realism (Bhaskar 2016; Bhaskar et al. 2016), visionary realism holds that science can, in principle, yield transfactual, objective knowledge about the real but unseen causes of events—interior as well as exterior—even though such knowledge remains fallible and theory-laden. In rejecting the Kantian doctrine of unknowable reality, visionary realism affirms that the interior domains of mind and spirit, no less than the exterior natural world, can be known in theory (albeit always provisionally). This stance seeks to resolve the stalemate between modernity's naïve empiricist realism and postmodernity's social constructivist anti-realism, pointing toward a post-postmodern participatory

realism in which knowledge can be more or less resonant with reality (namely, alethic resonance) and thus asymptotically described and expressed through disciplined inquiry. In this vision, interiority (consciousness and culture) is not an ineffable mystery forever beyond knowledge but an emergent aspect of nature that can be explored through appropriate epistemic participation. We can begin to imagine a transfactual or objective science of interiority that is as methodologically rigorous as the natural sciences yet adequate to the depth of its subject matter. With this philosophical foundation in place, we can now examine how visionary realism reclaims interiority and sets the stage for a unified science of spiritual experience.

The Neo-Kantian Coupling of Subjectivity and Interiority

Modern Western thought has largely inherited Immanuel Kant's strict separation of the knowing subject from the ontological reality of what is known. Kant confined interiority to the realm of mere subjective experience, accessible only via the mind's transcendental structures, thereby banishing phenomena of mind and spirit from the domain of objective reality. This neo-Kantian legacy treats subjectivity as the epistemic domain of the knower and relegates interiority to it, implicitly denying that consciousness, culture, or spiritual insight could correspond to anything real. Visionary realism directly challenges this assumption, decoupling interiority from subjectivity. Drawing on Bhaskar's ([1979] 2015) critical realism, visionary realism maintains that interior phenomena possess ontological intransitivity—they exist relatively independently of our awareness of them. Instead of being absolutely unknowable or strictly subjective and non-generalizable, interiority is both an intransitive ontological domain of reality and a transitive epistemic mode of participatory access to it, as knowledge (e.g., science and philosophy) is constellationally contained by being (e.g., social reality). This recursivity in the social domain does not amount to a kind of self-referential paradox in which ontology is reduced to epistemology (what Bhaskar calls "the epistemic fallacy") but adds a degree of relativity to the notion of ontological intransitivity that necessarily is justified in a process-relational ontology. Once an object or structure has come into being (at t_1), whether in the social or natural world, it is both determined and determinate as well as inalterable (at t_2)—that is, it is existentially intransitive (Bhaskar 2016, 46–47). Such an entity or structure may be partly causally constituted in a causally interdependent, recursive manner (as in social and human science), and therefore only relatively intransitive in a causal sense, but not an existential one. In short, scientific knowledge (in the transitive dimension) of a social reality is partially constitutive of the social reality it describes such that the transitive and intransitive dimensions remain categorically distinct but not discrete.

In this view, experiences of mind, soul, and spirit are not “nothing but” private constructions; rather, they are real, emergent dimensions of the natural world with their own causal structures that can be studied objectively. This shift opens the possibility of a naturalistic yet non-reductive science of interiority, recognizing that interior phenomena cannot be fully explained away as neural activity or social convention.

Philosophical Underlaboring and Clearing Metaphysical Rubbish

As a philosophical underlaborer, visionary realism works to clear these epistemic obstacles. Locke’s metaphor of the philosopher removing “metaphysical rubbish” from the path of progress is apt here. Visionary realism directly addresses the ontological and epistemological barriers that have marginalized interiority in science. It integrates insights from critical realism and integral theory to develop an expanded, integrative empiricism into a coherent framework capable of bridging the epistemic divides between science, philosophy, and theology. In practice, this underlaboring means proposing new terms of inquiry wherein interior dimensions are taken as real and investigable.

For instance, Ken Wilber’s (1995, 1998, 2000) integral theory provides a valuable corrective to aspects of the neo-Kantian legacy by positing an “all-quadrant” model that situates sentient beings within an ontological matrix encompassing interior and exterior dimensions of the individual and collect (consciousness, culture, behavior, and systems). This model affirms the co-arising of interior and exterior realities, challenging the reductionist “flatland” worldview that confines scientific inquiry to the exterior domain. Similarly, James’s (1912) radical empiricism insists that relations between experiences are as real as the experiences themselves, providing a philosophical basis for the systematic study of spiritual phenomena. By drawing on such perspectives, visionary realism helps clear space for a legitimate science of interiority.

Beyond Physicalism: A Naturalistic but Non-Physicalist Framework

Visionary realism’s critique of physicalism is central to its project of reclaiming interiority. Physicalism, which equates reality with material processes observable through the five senses, systematically excludes interior phenomena from the realm of legitimate scientific inquiry. This exclusion is evident in the dominance of reductionist paradigms such as the “neuroscience meets mindfulness” framework, which seeks to explain spirituality exclusively through neural correlates and adaptive functions (Murphy 1992; Wilber 2000). By contrast, visionary realism affirms a post-physicalist ontology that situates interior phenomena as real emergent features of the natural world. It draws on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s (1988) participatory epistemology, which emphasizes

the active role of the observer in the process of knowing, and Rudolf Steiner's ([1910] 2009, [1923] 2009a, [1923] 2009b) expanded empiricism, which includes subtle faculties of perception capable of apprehending spiritual realities. This expanded framework allows for the study of spirituality not as a reducible by-product of material processes but as a lawful domain of existence in its own right.

Addressing the Meaning Crisis and the Metacrisis

The exclusion of interiority from scientific inquiry has far-reaching consequences for contemporary society, contributing to what John Vervaeke (2019; Vervaeke et al. 2017) terms the “meaning crisis.” This crisis is characterized by existential alienation, nihilism, and the fragmentation of ethical and cultural norms (anomie). The meaning crisis is arguably symptomatically related to the intense contemporary mental health crisis in the West and the mass shootings and opioid crises in the United States. Visionary realism addresses the challenges of the meaning crisis by re-enchanting the world through a new philosophy of science and a new science of interiority. By restoring a sense of deep meaning, purpose, intrinsic value, and interconnectedness to our understanding of reality, it offers a response to nihilism.

As I have argued (Hedlund 2021), the global metacrisis—the convergence of eco-social, ethical, existential, and epistemic crises and their interconnected network of root causes (Hedlund et al. 2016; Hedlund and Esbjörn-Hargens 2022; Hedlund and Esbjörn-Hargens forthcoming)—demands an integrative framework capable of addressing its multiple dimensions. The ontological affirmation of spiritual realities helps heal the divides—between subject and object, science and spirituality, being and knowing—that lie at the root of the meaning crisis. By reclaiming interiority and affirming the ontological reality of spiritual phenomena, visionary realism provides the philosophical infrastructure for a eudaimonistic planetary society oriented toward both human and planetary flourishing.

Visionary Realism and the Foundations of a Science of Interiority

Visionary realism offers a transformative philosophical foundation for the systematic study of interior phenomena. By decoupling interiority from subjectivity, critiquing the reductionism of physicalism, and integrating expanded empiricism, it creates the conditions for a science of interiority that is both rigorous and comprehensive. This framework lays the groundwork for subsequent inquiries into the nested fields of spiritual experience and soul studies, providing the intellectual tools necessary for addressing the meaning crisis and fostering planetary flourishing.

This philosophical underlaboring is not merely an academic exercise but an urgent imperative for navigating the perilous complexities of our time. By bridging the epistemic and ontological divides that fragment our understanding, visionary realism holds the potential to re-enchant the world and contribute to the emergence of a transformative, integrative science of interiority.

Rethinking Objectivity

A central innovation of visionary realism is its reconceptualization of objectivity. The dominant positivist and empiricist paradigms define objectivity as the elimination of subjectivity, relying exclusively on quantifiable, empirical data, and the neutral observer ideal to ensure unbiased scientific knowledge. This narrow conception of objectivity dismisses interior phenomena as subjective and non-quantifiable, and thus not truly objective. Visionary realism, by contrast, advocates for a pluralistic, integrative, and participatory notion of objectivity, encompassing three dimensions: (1) epistemic reliability, (2) epistemic validity, and (3) ontological intransitivity (Hedlund 2021). These respectively ensure our methods are consistent and our constructs and theories are accurate, as well as that the phenomena studied have real existence independent of our observation.

Objectivity as Epistemic Reliability

Epistemic reliability pertains to the consistency and reproducibility of methods and results. While natural sciences achieve reliability through quantitative methods, qualitative approaches in the human sciences can also achieve systematic reliability. Techniques such as intercoder agreement and psychometric inter-rater reliability demonstrate that subjective phenomena can be studied with rigor and consistency (Miles and Huberman 1994; Dawson 2004). For example, the neo-Piagetian tradition in developmental psychology has shown that the structures of human interiority can be systematically mapped through reliable, cross-culturally valid methods (Commons et al. 1984).

Objectivity as Epistemic Validity

Epistemic validity concerns the extent to which methods accurately represent the phenomena they aim to study. In the context of interiority, validity involves aligning research methodologies with the complexity and depth of interior phenomena. Construct validity, for instance, ensures that scientific methods genuinely capture the structures and dynamics of consciousness, culture, and spirituality (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011). Visionary realism emphasizes the integration of reliability and validity, recognizing that robust science requires both consistent methods and accurate representations of its objects of inquiry.

Objectivity as Ontological Intransitivity

Critical realism's distinction between epistemic and ontological objectivity is essential for reclaiming interiority as a legitimate domain of scientific inquiry. Ontological intransitivity refers to the independent reality of objects, structures, and mechanisms, irrespective of whether they are known or observed. Visionary realism affirms that interior phenomena like consciousness, values, and spiritual intuitions have intransitive being: they are not merely mental projections but real features of the world with causal powers that can systematically influence behavior and experience.

Embracing these expanded notions of objectivity lays a firm groundwork for a science of spirituality that moves beyond the limitations of physicalist paradigms. It affirms that spiritual experiences, while lived subjectively, are genuine interactions with real dimensions of existence that can be studied with scientific rigor. For instance, practices of meditation and contemplation, often dismissed as subjective exercises, can be understood as methods for systematically engaging with and exploring the structures of interiority. In this way, reframing objectivity legitimizes the subjective and intersubjective realms as parts of nature open to scholarly study.

Toward a New Science of Spiritual Experience

Contemporary discussions of spirituality within the sciences are often constrained by a reductive physicalism. Spiritual experiences tend to be treated as epiphenomena—by-products of neural activity to be mapped or evolutionary behaviors to be catalogued—rather than phenomena with ontological depth. While valuable insights have been generated within such approaches (e.g., the neuroscience of religion), prevailing frameworks tend to truncate spirituality, effectively explaining it away in terms of neurological processes and adaptive behaviors that fail to address its ontological and existential depth. Visionary realism offers a way forward, advocating for a science of spiritual experience grounded in a naturalistic yet non-physicalist ontology.

In visionary realism, spiritual experiences are emergent properties of interiority that intersect with broader cultural, ethical, and ecological realities. As James (1912) argued, spirituality must be studied within the full spectrum of human experience, integrating subjective, intersubjective, and objective dimensions. Visionary realism extends this approach, framing spiritual experience as a legitimate object of scientific inquiry grounded in an expanded empiricism and an ontologically rich framework. Rather than dismissing mystical or contemplative phenomenological insights as merely subjective, it treats them as data—phenomena that can be investigated systematically, interpreted, and even intersubjectively corroborated (just like physical phenomena). The task then is to develop scientific approaches that honor the subtle depth of spiritual life without sacrificing rigor.

Expanded Empiricism: Radical, Deep, and Subtle

To build such an approach, visionary realism advocates for a reimagined empiricism that transcends the narrow confines of the five physical senses. James's (1912) notion of radical empiricism is a starting point: all aspects of experience, including relations and qualitative nuances, are admissible as data for science. James maintains that the continuity and connections between experiences are as real as the sensations themselves, which pushes us to include the felt sense of meaning—the context and relations of spiritual experiences—in our investigations rather than stripping it away.

Building on James, Wilber (1998) proposes a broad or “deep empiricism” that asserts empiricism must encompass not only the exterior dimensions of reality—accessible through the physical senses—but also interior dimensions, accessible through introspection and systematic contemplative practices. Wilber's framework is grounded in his epistemological model of the multiple “eyes of knowing” beyond the physical senses, including the sensory-physical (eye of flesh), the conceptual-logical (eye of mind), and the contemplative-mystical (eye of spirit). These epistemic modalities, Wilber argues, must be integrated to fully understand phenomena, particularly those involving spiritual experience. Visionary realism integrates Wilber's insight by insisting that empirical science need not be limited to what can be seen or touched; it can extend to what can be experienced inwardly under disciplined conditions.

Other thinkers affirm this widened empiricism. Michael Murphy's (1992) “synoptic empiricism” complements this perspective by integrating insights from diverse disciplines—including psychology, anthropology, medicine, and mystical literature—to uncover deep patterns in extraordinary human capacities. Similarly, Stephen Phillips's (2008) characterizes certain Vedantic approaches as “mystic empiricism,” treating mystical experience itself as a valid source of knowledge (provided it is approached with rigor and critical discernment). Both perspectives reinforce the notion that empirical inquiry can embrace data from prayer, meditation, or peak experiences in a methodical way.

Goethe's participatory epistemology and Rudolf Steiner's development of subtle empiricism further enrich visionary realism's expanded empiricism. Goethe's scientific method (Bortoft 1996) emphasizes an intuitive and imaginative engagement with phenomena, allowing the observer to resonate with archetypal realities beyond the physical senses. This participatory empiricism broadens the scope of inquiry, recognizing that well-cultivated faculties of intuition and imagination can access dimensions of experience typically excluded from conventional empiricism (Goethe 1988). Steiner, as a key interpreter and developer of Goethe's scientific work, advanced a resonant vision by identifying additional “organs of perception” or subtle senses that extend beyond the five physical senses. These include imaginative cognition, inspirational cognition, and intuitive cognition, which, once cultivated, enable

the perception of spiritual realities through vivid imagery, direct insight, and unmediated understanding (Steiner [1910] 2009, [1923] 2009a, [1923] 2009b). In Steiner's view, humans have up to fifteen senses, including these finer capacities. Such claims challenge conventional science, but visionary realism takes up the spirit of Steiner's proposal pragmatically and hypothetically: it suggests that human consciousness may access layers of reality (through symbols, meditative insight, etc.) that standard empiricism overlooks, which is to be more definitively verified or falsified in further philosophical and scientific research. By incorporating disciplined inner observation and intersubjective comparison of those observations, the ambit of empiricism is potentially stretched to include the subtle, the transpersonal, and the sacred.

In sum, visionary realism argues for an integrative empiricism that is radical (accepting all experience as data), deep (probing inner as well as outer realities with mental and spiritual perspectives), synoptic (synthesizing multiple sources of evidence), mystical (open to insights from altered states of consciousness), participatory (engaging the observer's creative intuition), and subtle (utilizing refined faculties of perception). This transfigured empiricism lays the methodological foundation for a visionary realist science of spiritual experience, affirming the ontological reality of spiritual phenomena and their accessibility through diverse modes of human perception.

This integrative empiricism includes:

- First-person (phenomenological) methods: Phenomenological approaches explore the lived experience of spirituality, capturing the subjective depth and richness of spiritual phenomena. Methods such as mediation, introspection, and autoethnography serve as tools for systematically observing one's own consciousness. Such methods yield rich qualitative data on spiritual growth, inner conflict, and transformative insight. Rather than being dismissed, disciplined subjective reports become crucial data for understanding spiritual phenomena from the inside.
- Second-person (relational) methods: These dialogical approaches investigate spirituality as it emerges between people. Examples include qualitative interviews and group dialogues and hermeneutic practices about spiritual experiences, studies of communal rituals and collective prayer, and examinations of mentor–mentee relationships on the spiritual path. In these cases, intersubjective verification—finding commonalities and shared meanings across individuals' experiences—adds rigor. The focus is on how spiritual realities are co-created and validated in relationship.
- Third-person (systematic) methods: These apply often quantitative or formally qualitative techniques to spiritual phenomena. They include neuroscientific studies of meditation (e.g., EEG or fMRI), psychological surveys of mystical experience, cross-cultural comparisons of

developmental stages, and other objective analyses. Such methods situate individual spiritual experiences within larger patterns and mechanisms—linking subjective reports to measurable correlates or societal factors. Third-person approaches provide an external, observable anchor to claims about spirituality.

By triangulating and integrating first-, second-, and third-person methodologies, visionary realism provides a pluralistic framework for studying spirituality that honors the complexity and depth of its subject. It resists reductionism, affirming that spiritual experiences are not merely private whims, or psychosocial constructions, but mediated interactions with real (albeit subtle) dimensions of existence. Only through such an integrative methodological pluralism can the study of spirituality remain both scientifically rigorous and true to the phenomena's depth and nuance.

The Ontological Reality of Spiritual Phenomena

By embracing this expanded empiricism and methodological pluralism, visionary realism allows for a deeper ontology of spiritual reality. No longer reduced to epiphenomena or illusions, spiritual events are seen as emergent properties of nature. In contrast to physicalist paradigms that dismiss spirituality as purely subjective or illusory, visionary realism affirms that spiritual phenomena have ontological reality—they exert real causal influence in individual and collective life. Rooted in the understanding of a methodological circle wherein philosophy and science are syncategorematic and inter-informed, visionary realism contributes an a priori philosophical ontology, laying the intellectual foundations for a new science of interiority, which, when put into an expanded empirical practice, can inform an a posteriori scientific ontology. Together, these produce a consilience in which an integrative ontology of spiritual realities can be progressively developed. This consilience includes both transcendental philosophical methods and empirical scientific ones. Bhaskar's (2002, [2002] 2012a, [2002] 2012b) meta-reality, for example, develops a secular spiritual ontology rooted in transcendental arguments that conclude to demonstrate a deeper ontological unity or nonduality underlying both natural and social worlds. Meta-reality emphasizes the interconnectedness and co-presence of all dimensions of reality, offering a philosophical foundation for a secular spirituality that avoids the pitfalls of dogmatism while preserving transformative potential. Bhaskar's ([2002] 2012b) "esoteric sociology of everyday life" illustrates how mutual understanding and ethical action presuppose a non-dual spiritual substrate—a meta-real ontology that undergirds all human interaction. This framework demonstrates that transcendental methods grounded in procedural rationality and methodological transparency can systematically explore the deeper structures of interiority and spirituality. Such methods, when combined

with visionary realism's expanded empiricism, can help bridge the gap between empirical science and philosophical inquiry.

In integrating expanded empiricism with Bhaskar's meta-reality, visionary realism provides the philosophical infrastructure for a transformative science of spiritual experience. This science holds the potential to re-enchant the disenchanted world, addressing the existential and epistemic crises of modernity by restoring meaning, purpose, and interconnectedness to human existence. By situating spiritual experience within an ontologically robust and epistemologically pluralistic framework, visionary realism opens new horizons for understanding and engaging with the profound dimensions of human interiority.

Visionary Realism and Chatlos's Framework of Spirituality

Chatlos's FOS provides a practical model toward which these abstract principles can be applied. The FOS is an integrative schema that spans personal, interpersonal, and transcendent dimensions of spirituality. It is essentially a proposal for a unified field theory of spiritual development, aiming to ground soul-related concepts in a naturalistic yet meaning-rich context (Chatlos 2025). Visionary realism both complements and strengthens this framework by supplying it with deeper ontological and epistemological underpinnings. It ensures that Chatlos's empirically grounded approach to spirituality rests on a robust philosophy of reality, where interior constructs like the "spiritual core" could potentially, through research, be validated as real aspects of nature (not merely useful fictions).

Soul Studies

The emergence of "soul studies" as a formal academic field, as proposed by Chatlos (2025), represents a bold and transformative initiative to explore the depths of human interiority. Chatlos's FOS articulates a secular view of the soul as the spiritual core of the human being, situated at the intersection of personal (self-worth), interpersonal (dignity), and transcendent (creative forces) dimensions. This multidimensional approach integrates empirical science, philosophical inquiry, and theological reflection. As Chatlos (2025, 18) states:

the FOS identifies the experience of the creative forces/creative openings with experiences that are similar to what would normally be included with the word soul: a moral truth-force core; agape love of self, others, life, and the "divine"; and faith as an action related to courage rather than as a belief. Science, including psychology, has avoided, if not denied, the reality of the soul and currently has no place for its study or understanding . . . If soul is recognized as a functional reality associated with a specific set of experiences, then there must be a location in scientific discipline for soul studies.

While physicalism and proponents of New Atheism (e.g., Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Dan Dennett) argue that the notion of the soul represents pre-modern, pre-rational dogma incompatible with secular rationality (Harris 2014), visionary realism challenges this claim. Visionary realism provides the philosophical foundation necessary to legitimize this emerging field, addressing its ontological, epistemological, and methodological bases. Once the limitations of neo-Kantian empirical realism and the flat ontology of Humean actualism are exposed, the necessity of a depth-stratified ontology becomes clear (Bhaskar [1975] 2008). From this expanded epistemological perspective, an inquiry into the soul as a transfactual, causally efficacious structure becomes fully coherent with modern scientific rationality and procedural rationality criteria (Habermas 1984).

Through Chatlos's FOS and clinical research, rich first-person empirical data has been gathered, demonstrating significant phenomenological consistency in experiences linked to the soul. Positive psychospiritual transformations observed in patients undergoing Chatlos's cognitive behavioral therapy-based spiritual interventions—often sparked by mystical “oceanic feelings” of oneness—illustrate the soul's functional reality and crucial role in human wellbeing.

Soul studies, as envisioned within visionary realism, occupies a nested position within a broader science of spiritual experience, itself nested within the overarching science of interiority. While the science of interiority broadly investigates phenomena like consciousness, ethics, and culture, soul studies specifically explores deeper transcendent dimensions of human existence. It focuses on the ontology of the soul, dynamics of spiritual growth, and the ethical, relational, and contemplative practices that nurture it. Consistent with Popperian science, soul studies remains open to falsification, viewing any scientific conceptualization of the soul as provisional and fallible.

A central task of soul studies is to clearly articulate the ontology of the soul by synthesizing diverse intellectual and spiritual traditions within a naturalistic yet non-physicalist framework. Visionary realism affirms that the soul is neither merely subjective nor a mythic metaphorical, but rather an emergent and causally efficacious reality. Drawing on critical realism's depth ontology, the soul can be understood as a structural mediator between the empirical, actual, and real (and meta-real) dimensions of existence—the supervenient causal force of order that governs the morphological trajectory of an embodied human personality. In this way, we could say, resonant with Chatlos, that the soul is the mediator of the transpersonal unseen order (the real) and the personal order of (actual) seen (empirical) events. Steiner's ([1923] 2009a) spiritual science enriches this ontology by emphasizing subtle faculties—imagination, intuition, and inspiration—that enable the soul to mediate between sensory and spiritual worlds. Wilber's (1995, 2000) integral theory further positions the

soul within a developmental cosmology, identifying its evolution through pre-personal, personal, and transpersonal stages. Bhaskar's meta-reality deepens this understanding by characterizing the soul as the authentic core of individual being, inherently linked to the ground state and facilitating transformative unity with transpersonal reality.

Together, these perspectives allow visionary realism to articulate the soul as a multidimensional entity that actively shapes human thought, emotion, behavior, and community through its alignment with transcendent realities like love, truth, and faith (Chatlos 2025). This multidimensional ontology provides soul studies with a robust foundation for scientific inquiry into the deeper structures of human experience.

Methodologically, soul studies would mirror the multi-modal empiricism outlined earlier, but with special attention to soul-specific data. First-person approaches might involve intensive journaling of inner experiences or training in contemplative techniques to observe soul dynamics (e.g., "dark night of the soul" experiences or moments of epiphany). Second-person approaches could compare insights across spiritual direction sessions or group dialogues about purpose and calling, highlighting how the soul's expression is mediated through relationships and culture. Third-person approaches could include longitudinal studies on how profound spiritual experiences alter a person's values, health, or community engagement. In all cases, visionary realism's influence ensures soul studies remains scientifically legitimate without stripping away the profundity of its subject. The field would maintain academic rigor (clear concepts, evidence standards) while still engaging with phenomena of love, virtue, and transcendence that are often left to theology alone.

Re-Enchanting the World through Spiritual Science

At the heart of the metacrisis lies a profound crisis of meaning—a deep fragmentation and disconnection from a coherent and adequate worldview that confers a sense of deep existential meaning. The metacrisis is fundamentally linked to an interior crisis of sensemaking, where the external turmoil of society mirrors the internal void of shared purpose and existential orientation. To address this core challenge, visionary realism proposes the development of a new science of interiority and spiritual experience as an essential pathway forward.

Visionary realism counters the disenchantment identified by Max Weber ([1917] 1946), characterized by the reduction of existence to physicalist, mechanistic processes that have stripped life of intrinsic meaning and value. It reaffirms the ontological reality of interior phenomena—such as consciousness, values, and spiritual experiences—and promotes rigorous scientific investigation into these profound human dimensions. By bridging science, philosophy, and spirituality, visionary realism seeks to re-infuse the cosmos with meaning, purpose, and interconnectedness.

This integrative framework asserts that interior experiences, traditionally seen as subjective or anomalous, are central to human wellbeing and societal transformation. For example, empirical studies on transformative events like near-death experiences have demonstrated their power to profoundly reshape individual lives, realigning personal values towards compassion, interconnectedness, and meaning. By validating and systematically investigating such interior experiences, visionary realism cultivates wisdom and meaning, addressing existential alienation and nihilism at their roots.

Ultimately, visionary realism offers an ambitious yet necessary vision—a reunion of empirical rigor and spiritual imagination. By renewing objectivity, expanding empiricism, and affirming the “great unseen order” of interior life (Chatlos 2025), it creates a unified field of knowledge honoring all dimensions of human experience. Such integration carries significant implications for education, health care, technology, and culture, guiding humanity toward deeper ethical clarity and integral flourishing. In doing so, visionary realism provides a decisive step toward resolving the meaning crisis at the core of the metacrisis, nurturing a more integrated, resilient, and re-enchanted civilization.

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