

UNITED WISDOM

Walking the Ridgeline: Why We Need Science and Spirituality

World and Consciousness

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Epigraph

> *“It is written in the language of mathematics.”*

Galileo Galilei — on the book of the universe. The Assayer (Il Saggiatore), §6, 1623. Editorial translation from Italian. Primary source.

About This Article

We know how to describe the world in numbers: calculate motion, study matter, find patterns in behavior. Even feelings become subjects of research. Yet human life still contains questions for which an explanation alone is not enough. What sustains meaning after a loss? Why does an experience of silence, prayer, or connection with other people sometimes change our relationship with life? How can we respect such an experience while retaining the ability to question it?

I find myself drawn to the image of a person walking along the crest of a hill. From there, both sides are visible: how the world works and the depth of our experience of it. When one perspective begins to obscure the other, the panorama narrows. This article explores the possibility of maintaining a balance between scientific honesty and spiritual openness. It considers the distinction between fact, personal testimony, and faith, and how to seek inner support while preserving the right to examine our own conclusions, respect another person's choices, and reconsider what once seemed final.

I. The World in the Language of Mathematics

Mathematics allows us to notice an order that is difficult to see with the naked eye. Behind the fall of a stone, the motion of a celestial body, or the vibration of a string, we can look for relationships between quantities. In such a description, an individual event becomes part of a pattern. We gain the ability to compare, calculate, and test our expectations.

In The Assayer, Galileo presents the universe as an immense book that requires a mathematical language to be read. The epigraph refers to this very book. His image expresses confidence in our ability to investigate nature and learn how it works. Galileo, §6.

Centuries later, in a 1960 essay, the physicist Eugene Wigner reflected on the unusual effectiveness of mathematics in the natural sciences. He wondered why mathematical

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concepts prove so productive in physical theories. Even a successful explanation of the world leaves room to marvel at the very possibility of understanding it. Wigner, original publication.

There is a particular pleasure in finding the world more intelligible. Calculation removes the need to guess where we can find out. Someone checking the load on a structure does not become less sensitive to the beauty of a building. On the contrary, understanding its construction may reveal another aspect of that beauty: the relationship between form, material, and intention.

But scientific clarity calls for care. A formula applies under particular conditions; a measurement has limits; an explanation can be refined. Confidence in a particular result does not automatically become confidence that everything important has already been explained. Between “we have found a pattern” and “there is nothing to understand beyond this pattern” lies a further step that itself needs justification.

The scientific side of balance therefore begins with the ability to distinguish knowledge from an interpretation that extends beyond it. It helps to trust what has withstood scrutiny. It also helps to see where scrutiny ends and our desire for a complete picture begins. The unfinished nature of research does not diminish science: it leaves room for the next question.

II. What Can Be Measured in Feelings

Feelings belong to a living person with a body, memories, relationships, and circumstances. Their bodily aspect can be investigated without denying the personal meaning of the experience. The difficulty arises when a measured property is taken to be a complete description of a person.

In a study by Lauri Nummenmaa and colleagues, published online in 2013 and in a 2014 issue of PNAS, 701 participants in five experiments marked body silhouettes to show areas where they felt activity increase or decrease. Different emotions were associated with distinguishable maps of sensations; the Western European and Taiwanese samples studied showed concordance. These were self-reports, rather than direct measurements of hormones. The findings do not provide a chemical code for love or exhaust the experience of emotion. Bodily maps of emotions.

Imagine someone facing an important conversation. They notice tension in their shoulders, faster breathing, and a desire to postpone the meeting. Describing these sensations is useful. Yet it does not tell us why this particular conversation matters to them. Are they afraid of losing a relationship? Of telling the truth? Of hearing a refusal? Similar sensations can accompany different situations in life.

To understand what is happening, we need to bring several levels together: bodily state, the content of thoughts, the history of the relationship, and the actual circumstances of the conversation. One dimension does not cancel out the others. The person's own words remain part of what we need to understand, although their explanation of their feelings may also be incomplete.

The same applies to love. We can study the processes, behavior, and circumstances associated with it. But a promise made to another person cannot be assessed solely by the state of the body at the moment it was made. Questions of trust, memory, responsibility, and choice arise. They remain significant regardless of how thoroughly their biological background has been investigated.

A person does not become less real when they can be measured. Nor do they become fully understood simply because a measurement has been made. A broad perspective needs both abilities: to notice observable processes and to listen to what they mean in a particular life. The mistake begins when one language forbids the use of another.

III. Explanation and Meaning

An explanation helps us understand how an event became possible. Meaning concerns the place it occupies in a life and what a person wants to hold on to from that point onward. These questions can interact, but answering one does not always resolve the other.

Imagine someone who has lost a loved one. They may know the circumstances of what happened and understand that nothing can now change it. Yet in the morning they still have to enter the kitchen, where a familiar place is empty. Knowing the causes does not automatically tell them how to arrange the day, whom to turn to, or what to preserve from their shared life. This is an imagined scene, rather than the story of a particular participant or a description of the only way to experience loss.

It would be wrong to reduce such a situation to a defeat for science. The study of human life includes questions of relationships, values, and experience; scientific knowledge can be useful here too. Yet knowledge, however precise, does not live the day on someone's behalf. Between understanding a pattern and finding one's own relationship with what happened, there is still work that a single piece of information cannot do.

This is also visible outside difficult circumstances. Suppose someone is choosing between two pursuits. They compare income, time, risk, and available resources. Such calculation is needed for clarity. Then they notice that one opportunity would require them to compromise a promise, while the other would mean giving up the approval they are used to receiving. A table helps make the consequences visible, but the criterion for choosing needs to be considered separately.

It helps here to distinguish three questions. What happened? What am I experiencing? How do I understand the meaning of this event? In the first case, verifiable information is especially important. In the second, a careful description of the experience. In the third, values, the grounds for a judgment, and a willingness to consider alternatives. The answers can clarify one another while retaining their distinct purposes.

The need for meaning does not prove the existence of the supernatural. It shows that a person has to work out their relationship with their own life. They may seek that relationship in religious faith, philosophy, creative work, or care for others. The transition itself matters: from knowing what is happening to asking how to be present within it and what is worth continuing.

IV. Different Languages of Spirituality

Here, spirituality means attention to meaning, conscience, inner life, and a connection with what a person considers larger than their immediate interests. This is a working definition for the article. It does not combine all religions into a single system or require readers to call their own experience spiritual.

In Book X of Augustine's Confessions, the exploration of memory and inner life becomes part of his address to God. Behind the question of his own memories lies the question of whom he seeks and loves. This inward search belongs within a Christian understanding of the relationship between a human being and God. Augustine, Book X, translation by E. B. Pusey.

In Chapter VI of the Bhagavad Gita, in the teaching corresponding to verses 6.16–17, Krishna links the practice of yoga with moderation in eating, sleep, and everyday activity. In this spiritual discipline, we can see a connection important to our discussion between inward practice and ordinary life: attention to ultimate questions sits alongside attention to how the day is lived. The Song Celestial, historical version by Edwin Arnold.

The first chapter of the Dao De Jing draws attention to the limits of naming: the Dao that is expressed and named should not simply be identified with the constant Dao. This is a different language from Augustine's address to a personal God. It can be read as an invitation to be cautious about complete descriptions, while retaining the text's own context. Translation by James Legge.

Bringing these works into conversation opens several paths of inward attention. What matters to me is the possibility of hearing these voices together while preserving their differences. The connections explored below will be the authors' readings: scientific findings, philosophical arguments, and propositions of faith retain their own grounds. This allows us to explore similarities without presenting them as a shared doctrine.

Nor can spirituality be declared in advance to be deeper than a secular life. Depth depends on the seriousness of our attention, honesty, and relationship with other people. Religious words can express a significant experience, or remain familiar formulas. Someone without religious faith can ask ultimate questions and live meaningfully. The right to make that choice belongs within the balance discussed here.

V. When an Experience Changes a Life

Personal testimony deserves attention even when it cannot be turned into universal proof. It tells us how a person understands their own change. For the reader, it is important both to hear the account and to preserve the distinction between the event experienced and its explanation.

In A Confession, Leo Tolstoy describes a crisis in which familiar answers no longer provided support. In Chapter VIII, he notices how narrow the circle of people was whose lives he had taken into account. Beyond it were people who worked and believed, and who continued to live. Turning toward them, he began to direct his own reflections differently. In Chapter XII, the return of the strength to live is described as gradual: the author cannot identify one precise moment of change. This is personal testimony to a change he connects with faith and a new attention to life. Tolstoy, A Confession, Complete Works, Volume 23.

What matters for our subject here is this widening of attention: the earlier picture can no longer accommodate life, and a person has to see what had remained at its edges.

Spiritual support may matter at just such a turning point. It gives a person a language for trust, hope, gratitude, and their connection with others. For a believer, it may be the possibility of addressing God when there is no answer yet; for someone else, a sense of belonging to a life larger than their present state. Such support can help a person live with an open question while continuing to live and act. Its depth is felt close at hand: in being able to respond to another's care again, see the value of a day, and be present in relationships. This is the authors' proposed understanding of its role; people choose their own words and forms of support.

A similar change can also be considered on a less dramatic scale. Imagine someone used to assessing a day only by the tasks completed. Then a conversation, a walk, or taking part in an act of care gives them an experience of value that is difficult to express as a measure of productivity. They decide to change their schedule. The change itself can be observed; a final explanation of why that moment mattered may remain open.

We need particular care when speaking about difficult experience. Suffering is not obliged to teach a lesson, ennoble a person, or lead to a spiritual turning point. A person has the right to find no elevated meaning in what happened. If such meaning emerges, it belongs to their continuing work with life; it cannot be imposed from outside and presented as the correct outcome of someone else's pain.

Respect for testimony therefore calls for patience. We can acknowledge that an experience changed someone without requiring them to prove every detail of what they lived through. And we can retain questions about their interpretation without taking away their dignity. These two actions are compatible: attentive listening does not mean giving up independent judgment.

VI. Spiritual Experience as a Subject of Research

Science can investigate spiritual experiences: study accounts of them, their circumstances, associated states, and subsequent changes. The very fact of such research shows that scientific interest and spiritual life can meet without a prior agreement about metaphysics.

A study by Roland Griffiths and colleagues, published in PLOS ONE in 2019, involved 4,285 people. Of these, 809 described a memorable experience, interpreted as an encounter with God, a higher power, or ultimate reality, that occurred without a psychoactive substance. Participants reported lasting positive changes in meaning, life purpose, and satisfaction with life that they associated with the experience. But this was a retrospective internet survey with self-selection: accounts were often collected years later, representativeness is unknown, and memories may have changed. It does not establish causality or prove the metaphysical truth of the experience. Original article and its limitations.

A more modest conclusion is enough for our discussion: some people associate such experiences with lasting changes in their relationship with life. This is a substantial subject for research. It does not follow that spirituality helps everyone, that change necessarily comes after suffering, or that scientific help is inferior to religious experience.

These distinctions also matter in an ordinary conversation. Someone may say: after that event, I became more attentive to my loved ones. This is an account of their life. They may continue: therefore, I received a message from a higher power. This is now an interpretation. Finally, they may decide that such a message determines how others must live. Here, a claim over another person's choices appears. Each transition requires grounds of its own.

Seeing the limits of a finding means giving it an appropriate place. Research should not have to answer a question it was not conducted to address. Personal testimony does not become less important because it is not an experiment. Attention to these limits preserves both possibilities: studying human experience and discussing its meaning, without substituting one for the other.

VII. When Measurability Narrows Our View

The first descent begins where the absence of a convenient indicator is taken to mean the absence of value. The scientific method itself does not require this conclusion. We are speaking here of an everyday way of using measurements: noticing only what can be represented by a number.

Imagine two people discussing their relationship. One asks how often they have argued, who spent how much, and how often they met. This information may be important. The other tries to explain when they felt heard, why they lost trust, and what they now fear. If the conversation allows only counting, much of the situation will remain outside it.

We can try to measure trust and satisfaction with a relationship too. Yet the resulting scale will still need interpretation: what exactly was asked, how the person understood the question, and which circumstances were left unnamed. A number can help a conversation, but it does not remove the need to understand its content. Precision in the record does not yet guarantee a complete picture.

This is especially apparent in the word “only.” Love is only chemistry. Conscience is only upbringing. Compassion is only an advantageous strategy. Even if a particular account of an origin is correct, an assessment of its meaning does not arise automatically from it. A promise has circumstances in which it came into being, but the question of keeping it remains. An action has causes, but its consequences for another person require attention.

At the same time, a physical understanding of human beings can readily coexist with responsibility, meaning, and respect for experience. It would be unfair to assume that a committed materialist has an impoverished inner life. The problem is not the name of a worldview. It arises when an accepted explanation makes further attention seem unnecessary, as though everything important were already known before encountering a particular situation.

In such a case, returning to the ridgeline begins with a simple widening of the question. After “what mechanism explains this?” we can ask “what does this change for the people it affects?” The first answer retains its force. The second adds a dimension of responsibility and personal meaning. Together, they allow us to see more than either does alone.

VIII. When a Spiritual Explanation Closes Off Scrutiny

The other descent begins where the strength of a conviction becomes grounds for not examining it. Someone has experienced something significant and accepts the explanation offered as final. Further doubt may seem to threaten the support they have finally found.

But the experience and the conclusion drawn from it remain different. A feeling of connection with the world may matter personally. The assertion that a particular event was caused by a specific invisible force adds a causal explanation to the experience. If that explanation is used in decisions about other people, money, or commitments, the information and consequences need to be examined. The significance of the moment does not do that work by itself.

Imagine someone who sees a chance encounter as a sign and wants to change their life. We can respect their experience and, at the same time, find out exactly what they intend to do.

Begin a conversation? Finish a project? Give their savings to an unfamiliar teacher? Different actions have different conditions and consequences. The general word “sign” alone is not enough to assess each one.

There is also a quieter form of imbalance: any objection is explained by the other person's insufficient spiritual maturity. The position is then protected from discussion in advance. Someone hears confirmation that they are right even in disagreement. But their ability to understand others diminishes because those people's words are no longer considered on their merits.

Historical spiritual texts also offer an emphasis different from a search for the greatest intensity. The Bhagavad Gita's teaching on moderation in Chapter VI relates the discipline of practice to everyday life. For the reader, this is an opportunity to notice how an inward aspiration is present in an ordinary day. Chapter VI, version by Edwin Arnold.

What matters to our argument is the possibility of keeping spiritual support together with the right to refine its interpretation. Revising an explanation does not necessarily destroy the experience. We can stop seeing an encounter as a message and still remember that it helped us recognize a desire of our own. We can change our view of the world while retaining gratitude for a moment after which life began to feel different.

IX. Balance Does Not Mean Equal Shares

A balance between science and spirituality does not require giving each half of every decision. It means distinguishing the question being asked and the grounds appropriate to an answer. A verifiable claim, personal meaning, and a proposition of faith do not acquire the same evidential standing simply because we want to reconcile them.

In his lectures on mysticism, William James considered the force of mystical experience for the person who has it, while separately limiting its authority over others. The significance of an experience for one person does not oblige others to accept its revelations uncritically. His philosophical reasoning helps us preserve personal support and the other person's independence at the same time. The Varieties of Religious Experience, 1902, Lectures XVI–XVII.

This distinction allows a conversation without a winner chosen in advance. One person has the right to say: this became a source of strength for me. Another has the right to reply: I understand what it means to you, but I do not share your explanation. Their shared task, if they have one, is to find a way to act together while their convictions remain different.

Where we need to establish external circumstances, inner certainty is not enough. We need to read documents, compare accounts, and clarify conditions. Where we need to understand our

own relationship with life, information alone may leave the question open. Reflection, conversation, art, silence, or religious practice may then be appropriate, depending on the person's choices. A single approach does not have to serve every purpose.

Caution about definitive words can be brought into conversation with the beginning of the Dao De Jing. This is the authors' connection with a text about the limits of naming the Dao: we can learn attentiveness from another tradition while remaining precise about what it says. Dao De Jing, Chapter 1.

Balance does not rule out definite convictions either. We can believe, doubt, or accept a materialist explanation of the world. The question is whether we retain the ability to recognize the limits of our knowledge and another person's freedom. The more seriously a decision affects shared life, the more important it is to make its grounds available for discussion. Personal depth confers no special right to direct someone else's fate.

X. What We Can See from the Ridgeline

The crest of a hill is an image of a place from which several sides of the landscape are visible at once. It helps me speak about breadth of attention. Here, the ability to investigate how the world works sits alongside the ability to experience our presence within it. Neither should declare the other meaningless in advance.

In Chapter XV of The Problems of Philosophy, Bertrand Russell connects the value of philosophical reflection with widening the possibilities of thought and weakening habitual dogmatic certainty. Familiar things can reveal an unfamiliar aspect. His secular argument adds another path to a broader perspective: a question can enrich our attention before a final answer appears. Russell, The Problems of Philosophy.

An important feature of the ridgeline is that we walk along it. Balance is required anew whenever the path changes. Sometimes a person is drawn by the desire to explain everything and feel uncertainty no longer. Sometimes, by the desire to accept everything that promises inner certainty. Simply noticing the shift already lets us pause and consider which side is disappearing from view.

This metaphor does not mean that truth always lies halfway between two opinions. In a dispute about a fact, one side may be right and the other mistaken. Compromise does not correct false information. The ridgeline represents the ability to see more questions and relationships, rather than a habit of averaging answers regardless of their grounds.

Nor does it place us above people who have chosen another language for life. A person with religious faith, a skeptic, and a secular philosopher can all have a broad perspective; each can

close themselves off from uncomfortable questions. No identity guarantees a panorama. To keep it, we have to remain attentive to what does not fit our preferred explanation.

If we return to the imagined kitchen after a loss, the empty place at the table will remain. But other things may come into view: someone to call, the memory of a shared life, a small task for today. Knowledge helps us distinguish circumstances and available actions; inner support helps us see what makes returning to them worthwhile. For some, it is connected with faith; for others, with care, beauty, or a sense of belonging. The panorama widens when there is room in it both for the reality of what happened and for the possibility of continuing. From the ridgeline, a path is visible, although we still have to walk it ourselves.

What This Means in Practice

Putting this idea into practice does not require choosing a new worldview. You can begin with one situation in which you find it difficult to consider both information and your own experience. It is better to choose something manageable: a conversation, a decision about a pursuit, or an encounter that left a strong impression. A difficult experience does not have to become material for an exercise.

First, try briefly writing down what you know. For example: someone has not replied to a message for two days; a conversation ended with particular words; an offered job has certain conditions. It helps here to separate an observation from an explanation. “I have not received a reply” and “I am being deliberately rejected” are different entries. The second needs further grounds, while other explanations may still be possible.

Then name the experience as precisely as you can. It may be anxiety, hurt, relief, a sense of connection, gratitude, or a mixed state. You do not have to explain immediately why it arose. You can notice what mattered in the situation: the expectation of attention, fear of loss, a wish for independence, an opportunity to be useful. This description helps you listen to yourself while keeping the question of external circumstances open.

The third entry is your interpretation and its limit. If an encounter seems like a sign, what exactly do you mean by that word? If a state seems to be only a bodily reaction, are you overlooking an important relationship or promise? You can ask yourself what information could change the explanation. If none could, it is worth noticing that it currently expresses a conviction rather than a testable hypothesis.

After that, choose a small next step, if one is needed. Clarify the terms of an offer. Ask the other person how they understood the conversation. Return to a text you love. Set aside time for quiet reflection. For a believer, this may be prayer; for someone else, a walk, art, or conversation. What matters is understanding which question the action serves and which of its consequences can be observed.

Finally, return to the entry after some time. What has become clearer? What do you feel now? How has the original interpretation changed? The steadiness of inner support can be considered through its place in life: does it help you be more attentive to circumstances and people, allow for refinement, and preserve your freedom of choice? These are questions for reflection, rather than a scale of spiritual maturity.

You can stop at any stage. Not every experience needs to become a project for change, and not every question needs an immediate answer. Sometimes it is enough to acknowledge two things at once: I do not yet know how to explain this, and it matters to me. Such an answer leaves open the possibility of further inquiry. From there, too, we can continue along the ridgeline.

Key Quotation

> *“Reason was at work, but something else was also at work, which I can only call a consciousness of life.”*

Leo Tolstoy, A Confession, Chapter VIII, Complete Works, Volume 23. In context, Tolstoy describes a force that directed his attention toward the previously overlooked lives of other people and changed the course of his reflections. Editorial translation from Russian. Primary source.

Connections Between Traditions

This map presents the comparisons used in the article. A similarity indicates a closeness in a particular question or way of attending. It does not establish a shared origin, a single metaphysics, or scientific confirmation of a religious teaching.

Question	Comparison	Connection and Its Limit
How to describe the world	Galileo and Wigner ↔ the opening of the Dao De Jing	The former discuss mathematical knowledge of nature; the latter, the limits of naming the Dao. The authors' connection concerns caution about the completeness of a description; the subjects and their grounds differ.
How to attend to inner experience	Nummenmaa and colleagues' study ↔ Augustine, Confessions, Book X	In both cases, an inner state deserves attention. Scientific self-reporting about bodily sensations and the Christian search for God have different purposes and ways of establishing their grounds.

Question	Comparison	Connection and Its Limit
What makes an experience convincing	Griffiths and colleagues' survey ↔ James on mysticism	We can investigate the reported consequences of an experience and discuss its personal force. Neither a self-report nor personal conviction obliges others to accept a metaphysical explanation.
How change enters a life	Tolstoy, A Confession ↔ moderation in the Bhagavad Gita, Chapter VI	The authors' connection is attention to ordinary life after an inward turning point. Autobiographical testimony and a teaching on yoga do not describe a single mechanism or promise the same result.
How to remain open	Russell on the value of philosophy ↔ Dao De Jing, Chapter 1	A connection is possible through attention to the limits of habitual certainty. Secular philosophical doubt and reflection on the Dao retain different grounds.
How to live with differences	James on the limits of an experience's authority ↔ the authors' image of the ridgeline	Respect for an experience is compatible with independent judgment. The ridgeline is our metaphor for breadth of attention, rather than a teaching of James or a proven model of consciousness.

Primary Sources and Research

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7. Augustine. Confessions, Book X, translation by E. B. Pusey. Discussion of memory and inward searching in a Christian context.

8. Bhagavad Gita. The Song Celestial, version by Edwin Arnold. Historical English verse rendering, the edition shown dated 1900; Chapter VI, the passage corresponding to verses 6.16–17. Paraphrased rather than quoted directly.

9. Laozi. The Tao Teh King, translation by James Legge. Chapter 1. The limits of naming the Dao; the historical translation is paraphrased.

10. Bertrand Russell. The Problems of Philosophy, 1912. Chapter XV, “The Value of Philosophy.” The openness of philosophical reflection and the limits of habitual certainty.

Tags

science, spirituality, mathematics, scientific method, empirical evidence, personal experience, meaning of life, inner balance, worldview, philosophy, religious experience, mysticism, emotions, bodily sensations, self-report, causality, testimony, faith, doubt, freedom of choice, spiritual discipline, moderation, limits of language, self-knowledge, Galileo, Wigner, William James, Leo Tolstoy, Augustine, Bhagavad Gita, Dao De Jing, Bertrand Russell

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