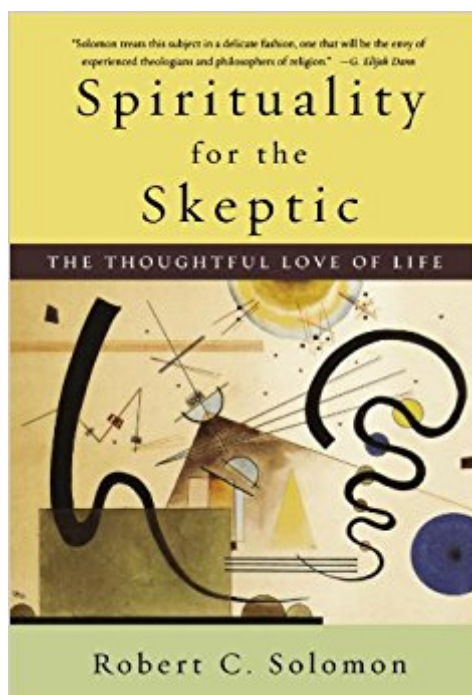


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# Spirituality For The Skeptic: The Thoughtful Love Of Life



## Synopsis

Is it possible to be spiritual and yet not believe in the supernatural? Can a person be spiritual without belonging to a religious group or organization? In *Spirituality for the Skeptic*, philosopher Robert Solomon explores what it means to be spiritual in today's pluralistic world. Based on Solomon's own struggles to reconcile philosophy with religion, this book offers a model of a vibrant, fulfilling spirituality that embraces the complexities of human existence and acknowledges the joys and tragedies of life. Solomon has forged an enlightened new path that synthesizes spirituality with emotions, intellect, science, and common sense. His new paradigm, "naturalized" spirituality, establishes as its cornerstone the "thoughtful love of life"--a passionate concern for the here-and-now, and not the by-and-by. Being spiritual doesn't mean being holed up as a recluse, spending hours in meditation and contemplation, Solomon argues. It demands involvement and emotional engagement with others in the struggle to find meaning in our lives. As such, this modern-day spirituality encompasses a passionate enthusiasm for the world, the transformation of self, cosmic trust and rationality, coming to terms with fate, and viewing life as a gift, all of which are explored in depth throughout this book. *Spirituality for the Skeptic* answers the need for a non-institutional, non-dogmatic spirituality that leads to personal fulfillment and satisfaction. By examining the ideas of great thinkers from Socrates and Nietzsche to Buddha to Kafka, Solomon arrives at a practical vision of spirituality that should appeal to many seekers looking to make sense of the human condition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Solomon (business and philosophy, Univ. of Texas, Austin; *A Passion for Wisdom*) has no

sympathy for New Age spirituality or any family heritage of traditional religious practice. Nevertheless, he has also grown weary of academic philosophy's tendency toward "clever paradox and puzzle-solving" and "often cynical obscurantism." "Philosophy," he reminds us, "is a spiritual practice." He looks to philosophy itself, especially the work of Hegel and Nietzsche, to provide the tools to pursue a naturalized spirituality, spirituality as "the thoughtful love of life." Separate chapters address thoughtful spirituality as characterized by passion, cosmic trust, and rationality; as facing up to tragedy, fate, and death; and as fostering transformation of the self. This is a warm and wise book. While Solomon does not begin to touch the historical riches of philosophy as spiritual practice (as in the pioneering work of Pierre Hadot), he does begin the important task of reconceiving contemporary philosophy as a passionate spirituality a spirituality for those skeptical of supernaturalism and authority-based religious claims. Steve Young, McHenry Cty. Coll., Crystal Lake, IL Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

"Professor Solomon offers an approach to spirituality (and I think religion, and broader still the philosophy of religion) that many will find extremely attractive and timely.... Solomon treats this subject in a delicate fashion, one that will be the envy of experienced theologians and philosophers of religion."--G. Elijah Dann

A few years ago, I left a religion that no longer held meaning for me. I had tried for years to overcome my doubts, but in the end found them insurmountable. When I left this organization, I searched for ways to "fill the void" left by my "conversion" to "none." This book was one of many resources that I found on my journey. Solomon presents suggestions for finding meaning in the "thoughtful love of life." While his book is addressed to those with a skeptical mindset, (atheists, agnostics, humanists, other "nones"), it avoids the angry, judgmental polemics that frequently plague books for the skeptic. I have since found another organization, and am a happy (secular) practitioner. This little book is still on my shelf because I think that it bears re-reading from time to time. Why not 5 stars? I reserve 5 stars for truly extraordinary philosophical books (Plato, Aristotle, Kant, etc.)

In *Spirituality for the Skeptic*, as in several of his other books, Robert Solomon laments what he sees as philosophy's relinquishment of wisdom and the consequent hijacking of spirituality by religion. In chapters that focus on spirituality as it relates to reason, the passions, freedom of the will, facticity, suffering, society, and the self, Solomon seeks to show that questions concerning

spirit--human aspirations, human creativity, human tragedy--are independent of religion. One's spirituality may, of course, be informed by religious convictions, but there's no necessary connection between the two. Ultimately, Solomon wants to argue that spirituality is about the "enlargement of the self" (p. 123), an expansion of our horizons that recognizes that it's life itself, not something transcendent to life, that bestows meaning. As we recognize, with gratitude but also a sense of the tragic, that a "thoughtful love of life" is worth committing to, our empathic connectedness with the world expands. Our selves enlarge. Solomon's case for a spirituality for the skeptical has little patience with dogmatic religiosity, but equally little patience with reductive materialists who pooh-pooh the possibility or value of self-enlarging experiences. In making his case, he invokes arguments and examples from an extraordinarily rich range of sources, western as well as Asian. To my mind, the best chapters in the book are the ones dealing with tragedy (chapter 5) and death (chapter 7). Readers familiar with Solomon's work will find little new in *Spirituality for the Skeptic*. But the grace with which the book is written, the humility with which Solomon approaches his topic, and the insights which punctuate his arguments, make it well worth reading.

I have read Robert Solomon's *Spirituality for the Skeptic* for a book club meeting, and I don't buy it (the argument, not the book). Solomon is a thoughtful philosopher, his intentions are good, and his arguments are sound. But I still don't buy it. The goal of the book is to sketch a broader view of "spirituality," one that is not intrinsically religious or mystical, and to include secular skeptics (or, as we more often call ourselves, secular humanists) in it. There are several problems with this project, not the least of which is that the term "spiritual" is so intertwined with religion and mysticism that it is simply hopeless to try to rescue it. Solomon acknowledges in the preface to the book that he finds "most of what passe[s] as spirituality something of a sham, fueled by pretension and dominated by hypocrisy." Here here, brother. Nonetheless he enlists some of the big guns of philosophy, particularly Hegel and Nietzsche, to make the point that there are more genuine and productive ways to conceive of spirituality. Solomon wishes to "naturalize" spirituality starting from the standpoint that, in his words, "if spirituality means anything it means thoughtfulness" (p. 5). By this he seems to suggest that to be spiritual is to think about and appreciate the world as it is (as opposed to as how one wishes it to be). Spirituality in this sense is not just scientific or even philosophical inquiry -- though the two are necessary components of it -- but includes an aesthetic sense as well. So far so good, but why use the word "spiritual," which immediately conjures up thoughts of, well, spirits? This is where I begin to lose Solomon (and it happens pretty early in the book). For instance, the author says that forgiveness plays a role in spirituality. But he doesn't apply

forgiveness, as one might expect, just to what others do to you or to the world, i.e., to the agents of intentional actions. Solomon actually extends the concept of forgiveness to life itself, as in: "This is also true when the betrayer [of your trust] is not a person but life itself, when our hopes and expectations have been thwarted. ... It means, through our actions and feelings as well as through our thoughts, forgiving the world" (p. 56). Come again? Even Solomon immediately realizes that this, as he himself puts it, smells of "implicit animism," but that possibility doesn't bother him because "even the most hard-headed materialists tend, in their personal dealings with the world, to be animists" (p. 56). Oh no they don't! First of all, I resent the "hard-headed" modifier to the term materialist, not so subtly suggesting that there is something wrong with materialism (in the sense of a naturalistic philosophy, not in that of Madonna's "Material Girl"). Second, this is precisely what is questionable about attempting to co-opt a word like "spiritual" for purposes that most clearly are not reflected in its historical and cultural use. One ends up on a linguistic slippery slope that brings him perilously close to the sham, pretension and hypocrisy that Solomon decries at the beginning of the book. Spiritual is in antithesis with material/natural, and it ought to be left that way; to talk about spirituality for the skeptic is simply not helpful. It plays straight into the hands of mystics and religionists who insist that there is something missing from a naturalistic worldview. There is nothing missing because there is nothing else to add. What we need instead is a new way to talk about how one can have an aesthetic and compassionate view of life, how one can be emotional in the positive sense of the word, and still understand the world through reason and empirical evidence. Indeed, an argument can be made that looking at the world the way it really is engenders true compassion and appreciation, freed of the distorting filters of mysticism and religion. Still, we seem to need a new vocabulary to talk about the secular equivalent of spirituality, soul and the like. I think that there is a perfectly good sense in which, for instance, I am a "spiritual" person, or that listening to good music or reading a good book is good for my "soul," and so on. But to use those terms is a cop out that I'd rather not engage in. Therefore, dear readers, what would you suggest we use as alternative words for terms like "spiritual" and "soul"? This is more than an academic exercise, you know. When my wife and I found ourselves through e-dating, we had both put "spiritual but not religious" on our profiles, and as a result had to wade through a pile of emails from new age fruitcakes before finding each other...

Excellent defense of Spirituality for those who are Religious Skeptics

good author

Excellent!

I read it for a class i took, but it is really interesting. It is difficult reading and very intellectual. Some of the concepts are veyr interesting and i they really made me question my ideas on spirituallity. It is good book to add to your library.

Just didn't like it

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