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Spiritual Intelligence: A New Form of Intelligence for a Sustainable and Humane Future

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Definition

Spiritual intelligence (SI) is defined as a unique form of hermeneutic–relational intelligence that enables individuals to integrate cognitive, emotional, and symbolic dimensions to guide their thoughts and actions with reflection, aiming for existential coherence rooted in a transcendent system of meaning. It functions as a metacognitive framework that unites affective, cognitive, and symbolic levels in dialog with a sense of meaning that is considered sacred or transcendent, where "sacred," in this context, refers inclusively to any symbolic reference or value that a person or culture perceives as inviolable, fundamental, or orienting. It can derive from religious traditions but also from ethical, philosophical, or civil visions. It functions as a horizon of meaning from which to draw coherence and guidance and which orients the understanding of oneself, the world, and action. SI appears as the ability to interpret one's experiences through the lens of values and principles, maintaining a sense of continuity in meaning even during times of ambiguity, conflict, or discontinuity. It therefore functions as a metacognitive ability that brings together various mental functions into a cohesive view of reality, rooted in a dynamic dialog between the self and a value system seen as sacred.

Keywords: spiritual intelligence; value coherence; existential discernment; empathy; interpersonal relationships

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1. The Origin and Definition of the Concept of Spiritual Intelligence

Reflection on the relationship between intelligence and spirituality is not a recent development. Ancient religious and philosophical traditions—ranging from Christian asceticism to Islamic Sufism, Jewish mysticism, and yogic practices—have long cultivated forms of inner discernment, reflective abilities, and transformative practices aimed at aligning worldview with behavior. The extensive collection in the Paulist Press Classics of Western Spirituality series showcases the historical and cross-cultural breadth of spiritual practices dedicated to personal transformation, ethical reflection, and inner discernment—practices that prefigure many functions now linked to spiritual intelligence [1,2]. This indicates that spiritual intelligence has deep roots in a long-standing history of experiential and reflective practices. More recent theoretical developments describe spiritual intelligence as a multidimensional ability that combines emotional awareness, ethical intuition, and existential reflection into a cohesive system of meaning. This skill allows individuals to navigate ambiguity, interpret personal and collective experiences through core values, and maintain a sense of purpose even during times of change or uncertainty [3].

The concept of spiritual intelligence has been suggested as a possible extension of Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences [4]. However, Gardner himself later

expressed caution about including it in his official model. Among those who support the scientific plausibility of this construct is Robert Emmons [5], who identified spiritual intelligence as a distinct type of intelligence based on the ability to use spiritual information to solve problems and achieve existential goals. Emmons outlined five core capacities, including transcending the material, sanctifying everyday experiences, and using spiritual resources as guides for moral action.

Individuals with high spiritual intelligence tend to demonstrate inner integrity, relational insight, and the ability to handle complex situations using shared ethical principles. Furthermore, while spiritual intelligence relates to other types of intelligence—such as emotional or intrapersonal intelligence—it is distinct in its explicit reference to a broader, symbolic, and value-based dimension, which includes transcendent or ultimate aspects [6].

In this contribution, the term "spiritual intelligence" refers to the general concept as defined in existing literature, while the acronym "SI" denotes the specific theoretical model developed here. Although spiritual intelligence has been proposed as a potential new form of intelligence—such as in discussions related to Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences—SI distinguishes itself by offering a conceptual redefinition that reframes spiritual intelligence through a unique symbolic–hermeneutic perspective. Specifically, SI interprets spiritual intelligence not only as a cognitive–existential ability but as a form of intelligence based on engagement with a symbolic and sacred interpretive framework. Unlike purely theoretical or speculative views, SI is demonstrated through the tangible alignment of beliefs, emotions, and actions connected to a transcendent source of meaning. Although it does not directly include internalized humanistic ethics, it acknowledges their importance and affirms their relevance within intercultural dialog. Rather than introducing an entirely new type of intelligence, SI redefines spiritual intelligence by positioning it as a hermeneutic capacity rooted in sacred symbolism and value orientation. While it may resonate with religious traditions, this hermeneutic capacity is not restricted to religious faith; rather, it reflects an interpretive function through which individuals engage with symbolic frameworks—whether spiritual, philosophical, or existential—that provide coherence and meaning. This approach fosters existential discernment and coherence by harmonizing inner beliefs, reflective processes, and daily actions within a sacred horizon of meaning.

This proposal differs from the typical definitions of spiritual intelligence, which often associate it with empathy, compassion, or a vague sense of inner depth. While acknowledging some overlap with emotional and intrapersonal intelligences, this definition emphasizes that SI operates through a specific interpretive framework: a reference to revealed or sacred content (broadly understood) that guides thoughts and actions. A biblical commentary provides an example—without claiming any definitional authority—of how sacred content can serve as a symbolic framework for interpreting moral and ethical concepts, especially in the sections on "understanding" (p. 1138) and "wisdom" (p. 1189), where sacred texts are shown as guiding tools for ethical understanding [7].

While this proposal agrees with Emmons's view that spiritual intelligence acts as a type of competence involving cognitive, value-based, and transformative processes, it differs in several key aspects.

First, whereas Emmons employs a distinctly functional language in which spiritual intelligence is conceived primarily as a tool for solving problems and achieving adaptive effectiveness, the model proposed here defines SI as a hermeneutic capacity grounded in symbolic and transcendent reference points. While it may lead to functional outcomes, such as fostering inner coherence, the emphasis is not on utility or adaptation, but on the interpretive integration of beliefs, values, and actions. In this sense, SI is not merely a tool

for effective functioning, but a framework oriented toward existential meaning-making, aligning thought and behavior with what is perceived as sacred.

Second, although Emmons views spirituality as broad and flexible enough not to require affiliation with a formal religious system, the model presented here adopts a different stance. SI is rooted within a symbolic and value-based framework that is explicitly considered sacred. This framework, although intercultural and non-confessional, is neither neutral nor solely subjective. It involves deliberate engagement with a transcendent referent that offers both normative guidance and symbolic structure. As a result, SI is not simply liberated from dogma—it is guided by an active interpretive relationship with a horizon considered sacred by the individual, which functions as a central axis.

Third, the epistemological stance varies: Emmons seeks to place spiritual intelligence within Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences by attempting to prove its scientific validity. In contrast, the definition presented here adopts a more conceptual and phenomenological approach, developing new semantics for the construct that differentiates it from existing models while still acknowledging commonalities.

All of this naturally raises complex theoretical questions. A key issue concerns the epistemological status of spiritual intelligence: Is it valid to include it among other types of intelligence if its expressions involve symbolic, spiritual, and transcendent elements that are often hard to measure? Although scholars like Emmons [5] have suggested functional criteria for recognizing it, the difficulty of scientifically operationalizing it remains unresolved.

A second key issue relates to the potential semantic overlap between spiritual intelligence and related constructs like empathy, moral awareness, and emotional regulation. To clarify this, SI is proposed as a form of intelligence that provides individuals with a multidimensional metacognitive ability operating at a deep interpretive level, fostering an ongoing dialog between the self and a transcendent symbolic system. It combines and balances various psychic functions—cognitive, emotional, and relational—bringing coherence and meaning to lived experience. This process involves a high level of reflective awareness through which individuals interpret their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in relation to ultimate values and broader horizons of meaning. SI does not simply respond to stimuli; instead, it reinterprets them through the lens of existential questions and guiding principles, demonstrating a hermeneutic capacity that unites subjective inner experience and symbolic–spiritual dimensions into a coherent view of reality. Lastly, there is a risk that defining SI based on positive behavioral outcomes (such as compassion, coherence, or value-based judgment) could lean toward implicit normativity, where SI is seen more as an ethical ideal than an empirically measurable ability. To prevent this, it is helpful to focus on a descriptive approach that analyzes psychological and reflective processes, avoiding prescriptive or moralizing language.

SI also manifests itself in the intersubjective realm through recognizing another person's spiritual dimension. It includes the ability to perceive and respect others' beliefs, values, and spiritual experiences, thereby fostering dialog and coexistence in diverse settings [8]. Just as emotional intelligence involves understanding others' emotions, SI similarly entails the capacity to recognize and interpret someone's spirituality, integrating various meanings, symbols, and worldviews. In this way, it functions as a relational and intercultural skill, essential for forming genuine connections and promoting social harmony.

Through its ability to activate processes of reflective awareness and symbolic discernment, spiritual intelligence (SI) cultivates dialogical and inclusive attitudes in educational, organizational, and public settings. In these environments, it functions as a relational skill that supports coexistence among diverse worldviews, promotes authentic leadership, encourages mindful civic engagement, and enhances intercultural cohesion. These outcomes

demonstrate the hermeneutic–relational role of SI, which allows individuals to interpret and transform experience into shared meaning.

In the debate on spiritual intelligence, ethics plays a central role, but this requires a framework that goes beyond simply aligning with confessional moral norms or prescriptive behaviors. A more inclusive idea is the principle of reciprocity, seen as a fundamental element shared across many religious and philosophical traditions. In this context, the Golden Rule—"In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets" (Matthew 7:12) [9]—serves as a clear and concise expression of relational ethics rooted in reflective empathy and moral symmetry.

This principle is not exclusive to Christianity. In the Confucian tradition, the maxim "Do not do to others what you would not want done to yourself" reflects a similar ethical stance rooted in mutual respect [10]. Likewise, in Islam, thinkers like Al-Ghazālī have viewed the principle of ethical reciprocity not just as a behavioral guideline but as a theological basis for moral coexistence. From this viewpoint, reciprocity has a dual purpose: it shapes interpersonal relationships by encouraging empathy and respect, and it also embodies a universal aspect that can go beyond specific religious or cultural boundaries [11].

Reciprocity is the recognition of symmetry between oneself and others—it is the idea that an action is ethically justified only if you would be willing to accept it if roles were reversed. From this view, ethical behavior comes from the ability to think universally about your moral intentions, using a relational imagination that includes others. While this attitude can be shown even without religious faith, the harmony between thought, emotion, and ethical actions might be seen as a form of spiritual intelligence when grounded in a deep engagement with a transcendent symbolic horizon, giving it a sacred and identity-forming importance [12]. In this way, reciprocal actions can express both shared humanity and internalized religious commitment [5].

Just as emotional intelligence is often understood as the ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and utilize one's own and others' emotions to guide thinking and behavior [13,14], SI can similarly be viewed as a metacognitive skill that allows individuals not only to reflect on their own spiritual interiority but also to recognize and comprehend that of others. SI extends beyond personal introspection and functions within the interpersonal realm, enabling dialog among different worldviews, transcendent beliefs, and symbolic systems. This capacity is demonstrated through the ability to interpret and mediate spiritual meanings in complex relational contexts, leading to a deeper understanding of others while maintaining a clear conceptual distinction between emotional and spiritual domains. In the literature, this competence is described as a form of relational and symbolic discernment, capable of initiating processes of recognition, respect, and understanding of spiritual otherness [8,15,16].

Finally, a key issue concerns the very idea of intelligence, whose historical development has been heavily influenced by Western epistemological frameworks, mainly based on abstract–logical and performance-driven standards [17]. Over time, this approach has caused a gradual standardization of the concept, risking the neglect of forms of situated cognition, relational knowledge, and existential wisdom that are common in many cultural traditions [18]. Several cross-cultural perspectives have challenged the universality of the traditional psychometric model, emphasizing the need to recognize more contextual, holistic, and integrated methods [19]. In this context, SI offers theoretically grounded efforts to include symbolic processing, existential interpretation, and ethical-affective mediation—dimensions often ignored by standard evaluation models [20]. Such an approach enhances the intercultural validity of the concept, avoids universalist tendencies, and encourages a dialogic engagement between different frameworks of meaning.

2. Theoretical Reflections and Scientific Framework

Spiritual intelligence is increasingly recognized as a multidimensional concept that draws from psychology, neuroscience, education, and ethics. It is increasingly viewed as a unifying ability that helps people find meaning, resolve inner conflicts, and align their actions with shared values. Located at the intersection of rational intuition, emotional intelligence, and moral reasoning, spiritual intelligence acts as a bridge between cognitive awareness and existential purpose [21,22].

Recent studies define spiritual intelligence as an adaptive and transformative form of intelligence that encourages deep self-reflection, controls egocentric impulses, and guides behavior toward goals beyond self-interest [23,24]. This integrative role is especially crucial in today's world, marked by uncertainty, complexity, and intercultural diversity [25,26].

Recent theoretical models demonstrate how spiritual intelligence develops strong value systems and supports meaning-making, which are essential for both personal growth and social unity. It helps individuals interpret life experiences from ethically grounded perspectives, promoting inner consistency and deeper connections. These skills are vital for personal well-being and for society's capacity to tackle social issues effectively [27,28].

Furthermore, spiritual intelligence has been associated with increased psychological resilience because of its role in promoting identity integration and goal orientation rooted in values. It helps individuals reinterpret adversity as a chance for growth and uphold ethical clarity even in uncertain or morally complex situations. These traits are particularly significant in educational and organizational environments, where leaders and educators are expected to exemplify reflective and value-based behavior [22,29].

Another key theoretical advancement involves recognizing spiritual intelligence as a moderator of emotional and interpersonal dynamics. The capacity to interpret emotions as morally significant signals improves empathy, tolerance, and ethical judgment. In this way, spiritual intelligence acts as a systemic form of intelligence, capable of connecting intrapersonal awareness with socially responsible actions, encouraging active and meaningful engagement within diverse communities [21,28].

Finally, from a developmental perspective, spiritual intelligence develops over the lifespan, often through pivotal experiences. It is nurtured by reflective practices, genuine dialog, and ethical engagement with others. In this view, spiritual intelligence is not a fixed trait but a skill that can be cultivated through education, mentoring, and deliberate practice [25,29].

In light of these clarifications, SI can be seen as a complex ability that links inner beliefs, personal reflection, and everyday actions by referencing symbolic systems broadly regarded as meaningful or sacred across different cultural contexts. It functions as a hermeneutic–relational skill, where the hermeneutic part involves the ability to interpret personal experiences and the world through a symbolic–transcendent framework, while the relational part pertains to how those interpretations influence decision-making and how individuals engage in social relationships. From this perspective, spiritual intelligence is not a fixed trait but an adaptable resource that can develop over time through reflective engagement with ultimate meaning systems, providing guidance for meaning-making and fostering greater harmony between oneself and the world.

The originality of this proposal lies in distinguishing SI from generic definitions that equate it with empathy, compassion, or diffuse morality. While acknowledging shared features with emotional and intrapersonal intelligences, this definition anchors SI in an interpretive process centered on a symbolic framework understood as sacred or revealed. From this perspective, SI functions as a cognitive–relational mechanism that reshapes personal identity in line with a higher symbolic order, guides action in ethically complex situations, and fosters the development of communities based on shared values.

To further clarify the theoretical specificity of this proposal, Table 1 highlights the distinctions between SI and related constructs by examining their cognitive domains, functions, developmental processes, and behavioral outcomes.

Table 1. Comparison between spiritual intelligence and related constructs.

Characteristic	Spiritual Intelligence (SI)	Emotional Intelligence	Moral Intelligence	Intrapersonal Intelligence
Cognitive Domain	Hermeneutic, symbolic, transcendent	Affective, regulatory	Normative, value-based	Self-reflective, identity-oriented
Normative Source	Sacred or revealed corpus (including intercultural sources)	Emotional regulation	Universal ethical principles	Personal authenticity and coherence
Function	Harmonization of life/faith/action; existential coherence	Emotion and relationship management	Making morally sound choices	Self-awareness
Behavioral Output	Actions inspired by transcendent sense of purpose	Empathy, leadership, adaptability	Ethically aligned behavior	Integrity, autonomy
Developmental Process	Dialogical, intentional, ongoing	Affective education, lived experience	Moral education, socialization	Self-analysis, critical experiences
Measurability	Complex, partially psychometric	Established psychometric tests available	Under theoretical refinement	Present in MBTI/Big Five frameworks

3. Applications of Spiritual Intelligence

Although conceptually different from other definitions in the literature, SI shares several applications with the broader idea of spiritual intelligence, including leadership, education, organizational contexts, and personal growth. However, the specific applications of SI specifically reflect the internal coherence of its hermeneutic–relational framework, focused on integrating the symbolic dimension, ethical reflexivity, and intersubjective responsibility.

Spiritual intelligence plays a significant role in fostering ethical climates, resilience to technological stress, and managing complexity [6,30]. In high-pressure environments, individuals with high spiritual intelligence help develop inclusive and resilient workforces dedicated to sustainability and collective well-being [26,31]. Such skills are especially important in caregiving professions and leadership roles, where alignment between thought, emotion, and action is vital. A recent study on the principle of Etuaptmumk ("Two-Eyed Seeing") shows how the ability to integrate different systems of meaning is a key competence in Indigenous healthcare and intercultural settings [32]. The reflective and dialogical approach promoted by this concept closely aligns with the idea of SI as a cognitive–relational tool that embodies internalized and transcendent values, transforming them into cohesive, inclusive, and sustainable professional practices.

In educational settings, spiritual intelligence encourages value-based teaching methods, fostering moral responsibility and reflective relationships between teachers and students [33,34]. The spiritual leadership of school administrators helps cultivate ethical school cultures [35], while in higher education, instructors' spirituality enhances student satisfaction and relational depth [36,37].

At the personal level, spiritual intelligence has been linked to the development of self-awareness, discernment, and psychological flexibility, supporting the reinterpretation of adversity as an opportunity for growth [28]. By integrating personal experience with a transcendent symbolic horizon, SI allows individuals to make sense of their experiences and to align their choices with deeply held inner convictions.

4. Assessment Tools and Methods for Measuring Spiritual Intelligence

The assessment of spiritual intelligence (SI) presents both conceptual and methodological challenges. Its multidimensional nature, rooted in symbolic and transcendent content,

and its hermeneutic–relational character raise significant questions about the feasibility of its rigorous operationalization.

One of the most well-established quantitative tools is the SISRI-24 (Spiritual Intelligence Self-Report Inventory) [12]. It measures four dimensions: Critical Existential Thinking, Personal Meaning Production, Transcendent Awareness, and Consciousness Expansion. This instrument has shown strong psychometric qualities and reliable cross-cultural relevance [27].

However, several studies have shown that such measures risk blending with emotional or intrapersonal intelligence, raising concerns about their construct validity [38,39]. Specifically, the evaluated dimensions often reflect traits of inner depth or moral maturity, which, according to the definition provided here, are not enough to establish SI as a separate construct.

Alongside quantitative tools, qualitative methods are increasingly popular, highlighting the process and context of spiritual intelligence. Techniques like reflective writing, narrative analysis, and participant observation have proven effective in capturing SI's interpretive and relational roles in real-world settings. These approaches focus on the individual's ability to engage with symbolic content and turn it into meaningful actions and value-driven relationships [21].

For example, an author created a qualitative tool to assess spiritual sensitivity in pastoral care, focusing on behavioral signs of recognizing unseen spiritual needs, offering targeted support, and understanding individual experiences through transcendent principles [8]. Although it does not have the standardization of a psychometric scale, this tool represents a holistic approach to evaluating SI in particular settings.

Recent studies in the literature also advocate integrating multimodal approaches that combine self-report instruments, third-party observations, and 360-degree feedback [21]. Such a long-term, design-focused strategy aims to overcome the limitations of single-method assessments and to capture the dynamic complexity of SI, consistent with its intentional, interpretative, and relational nature.

Unlike traditional measures of religiosity or subjective spirituality, tools for assessing spiritual intelligence (SI) should aim to identify an individual's ability to align inner life and behavior with a symbolic body of sacred concepts. This involves a metacognitive skill set expressed not only through value coherence but also through the generation of meaning and the ability to respond empathetically and critically to complex situations.

Measuring SI requires both epistemological and methodological reflection that combines scientific rigor with phenomenological sensitivity. The focus is not only on the object of measurement but also on the modalities and contexts in which this form of intelligence manifests as deep discernment and relational transformation.

Therefore, assessment should go beyond measuring static traits or assumed accomplishments. It is better to examine how this ability is demonstrated—especially the quality of interpretive processes that connect lived experience with internalized symbolic frameworks, and the capacity to turn such integration into ethically based actions and meaningful relationships.

In this regard, tools that incorporate qualitative and context-sensitive aspects—aligned with the dynamic and situational nature of the construct—are more appropriate than purely quantitative measures. This view considers it an intentional, evolving process rather than a universally standardizable skill.

5. Spiritual Intelligence and Personal Growth

Although the role of spiritual intelligence in personal development is well supported in existing research, SI—as defined in this framework—expands this view by providing a

more holistic perspective on individual growth. It helps in creating meaning and coherence in daily experience while also promoting the deliberate development of identity through reflective engagement with a symbolic–sacred horizon. Unlike immediate emotional or cognitive responses, SI enables the integration of internal experiences, value systems, and behavioral expressions. This is demonstrated by the ability to align internalized symbolic content with practical choices, thereby fostering existential growth.

Recent scholarship describes spiritual intelligence as an independent, intentional, and transformative skill focused on personal growth, observable through self-regulation, symbolic clarity, and relational sensitivity [40]. However, such views often mix spiritual intelligence with a broad sense of inner experience or types of subjective spirituality that lack a clear symbolic base. In contrast, the definition presented here highlights an explicit connection to a symbolic–sacred body of meaning and a hermeneutic–relational framework, which go beyond simplistic psychological perspectives by promoting harmony among inner reflection, practical behavior, and personal accountability.

From this perspective, spiritual growth is seen as a dynamic process where individuals refine their discernment, interpret complex experiences through symbolic structures, and stay aligned between intention and action [3]. These skills are especially useful in facing critical existential challenges, where personal integrity and spiritual sensitivity become vital for fostering dialogical and generative relationships that reflect inner coherence and symbolic openness [8,41].

A key conceptual difference is between intrinsic and extrinsic spirituality. The former represents a genuine pursuit of meaning and personal transformation, while the latter focuses on meeting social, conventional, or practical needs. People with high intrinsic spirituality show increased self-awareness, gratitude, and openness to others—factors that support deep existential growth [42].

Furthermore, SI encourages mindful regulation of emotional states, supports relationships based on reciprocity and respect, and promotes anchoring in worldviews that emphasize connection and responsibility. Its development is especially crucial in areas like caregiving, education, and leadership, where symbolic–relational maturity is a key resource for effective and creative action [8,36].

Finally, SI encourages a shift in motivational focus—from seeking self-validation to emphasizing relationships and symbolic meaning that highlight connection, mutuality, and shared understanding. By turning everyday experiences into chances for deep insight, SI supports self-integration and the development of meaningful relationships, making it an essential resource for both individual and community well-being [43].

6. Implications for Society

SI goes beyond individual development by contributing to major social challenges of our time. At its core, SI promotes integrating self-awareness, symbolic understanding, and relational responsibility into everyday life. Although these elements are deeply personal, they have important public implications when practiced in civic, educational, organizational, and ecological settings [8,42].

One area where SI can have a direct impact is in civic education and social relationships. In diverse and multicultural societies, the ability to listen actively, manage internal reactions, and interpret situations through symbolic frameworks is crucial for maintaining democratic coexistence. These skills are developed through hermeneutic–relational processes that help individuals understand the meaning of events and turn them into chances for community growth. People with high levels of spiritual intelligence often prefer reflective dialog over reactive conflict, showing the ability to understand different perspectives without losing their internal sense of direction [33,35].

SI also supports the emergence of transformational leadership within professional and organizational settings. Leaders equipped with spiritual intelligence act with symbolic coherence, transparency, and attentiveness to relational well-being, thereby fostering trust and a sense of belonging. In practical terms, this results in leadership models capable of resisting dehumanizing dynamics while promoting respect, long-term vision, and systemic resilience. These outcomes are not solely the result of managerial strategies but arise from the practical application of internalized principles inspired by a symbolic–sacred vision of responsibility [6,8,44].

An additional expression of such leadership can be seen in public governance, where practices inspired by SI may help build social trust. As noted by Sinchana & Joy [45], this trust is strengthened when institutions act consistently between their intentions and actions and promote transparent dialog. However, it is important to distinguish these positive outcomes from the nature of SI itself. In this discussion, SI is not understood as a functional skill or secular soft skill, but rather as a hermeneutic–relational structure based on active engagement with a symbolic and sacred order. SI is not a relational skill that aims to "transcend the transcendent" for civic purposes. Instead, from the perspective presented here, its public effects are secondary outcomes, not core components. It is the symbolic and sacred nature of SI, rather than its practical applications, that defines its identity. When expressed in institutional settings, SI functions as a coherent reflection of inner orientation, not as a technical tool for civic regulation.

7. Future Perspectives and Research Directions

The nature, classification, and operationalization of spiritual intelligence are still debated and studied. Future research needs to first clarify its conceptual category: it is still controversial whether spiritual intelligence should be seen as an independent form of intelligence, a complex psychological ability, or a multidimensional metacognitive capacity [12,38]. This confusion is worsened by its overlap with other types of intelligence—especially emotional, moral, and intrapersonal intelligence—that share similar experienced expressions. Therefore, establishing clear and accurate criteria for distinguishing spiritual intelligence is a scientific priority [5,46].

A key direction for future research involves refining the operational definition of SI and creating measurement tools that can accurately capture its specific features. Although some validated questionnaires are available [12], their reliability across diverse cultural contexts is still limited. Therefore, it is crucial to develop culturally sensitive metrics that can effectively distinguish spiritual intelligence from related psychological traits [47,48].

Another promising area of development involves exploring how SI influences individual behavior and interpersonal interactions. In educational and organizational settings, spiritual intelligence has been linked to prosocial conduct, ethical management of power, and transformational leadership [44,49,50]. However, models that explain these processes in detail are lacking. Experimental and longitudinal studies are needed to examine the hermeneutic–relational dynamics triggered by SI, especially in situations involving value conflicts or complex decision-making.

On a personal level, spiritual intelligence seems to promote the development of emotional self-regulation, moral reflexivity, and existential coherence, especially during life transitions or times of psychological vulnerability [3]. However, it remains uncertain whether these benefits come from a specific form of intelligence or a broader spiritual orientation. This theoretical point calls for deeper epistemological reflection on the connection between spiritual dispositions and underlying cognitive structures.

At the societal level, the implications of SI for collective well-being and responsible citizenship deserve thorough investigation. Recent studies indicate promising links be-

tween spiritual intelligence and ecological awareness, ethical engagement, and relational inclusivity [36,42]. However, moving beyond correlation to establish causation requires solid theoretical frameworks and comprehensive multivariate analyses.

Finally, future research must address the epistemological questions about the scientific legitimacy of SI. A common challenge is distinguishing between empirical descriptions of cognitive and value-based processes and implicit normativity, which risks mixing scientific inquiry with the promotion of moral ideals. A diverse, critical, and interdisciplinary approach—covering psychological, neuroscientific, philosophical, and religious perspectives—will be essential for establishing SI as a scientifically credible and culturally meaningful concept [5,12].

8. Conclusions and Prospects

SI enables individuals to interpret complexity, maintain internal consistency, and orient their experience with a framework of meaning that is personally or culturally perceived as sacred or transcendent. Instead of being a subset of personality traits or emotional responses, SI functions as a metacognitive ability that can integrate inner reflection, symbolic systems, and contextual adaptiveness. It offers individuals tools to understand ambiguity, realign internal beliefs with lived experience, and create continuity in meaning.

The uniqueness of SI lies in its ability to link symbolic interpretation with personal growth and relational sensitivity. Its strength is not in prescribing correct behavior but in fostering a dialogic engagement with diverse viewpoints, encouraging individuals to explore shared horizons of meaning without enforcing uniform answers. It supports a participatory process of meaning-making that values diversity, deepens self-reflection, and promotes sustainable relationships in increasingly complex settings.

As a conceptual framework, SI creates a space to reconsider how intelligence functions within contexts of diversity, change, and uncertainty. It broadens the understanding of cognitive processes by acknowledging the importance of symbolic references and narrative identity. From education and leadership to personal growth and intercultural dialog, SI provides a creative capacity that helps navigate differences, build coherence, and foster inner guidance.

Future research should focus on improving tools that capture the dynamic and interpretive nature of SI without reducing it to static indicators. Methodologies should aim to reflect the lived and evolving quality of this form of intelligence. Cross-cultural validation and longitudinal studies will be essential to exploring how SI manifests in diverse human experiences and how it can contribute to resilient, connected, and meaning-centered actions.

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