

A Spirit Philosophy Linking to Buddhism and Theology

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Spiritual ontology, Buddhist epistemology, and theological axiology construct a spirit philosophy, where spiritual ontology sets up an ontological foundation, Buddhist epistemology provides a practical method, and theological axiology contributes a living ethics. While spirit philosophy covers spiritual ontology, Buddhist epistemology, and theological axiology, spirit philosophy links to Buddhism and theology and then introduces a popular philosophy toward the good. This is a mellow philosophical system.

Keywords: spiritual ontology, Buddhist epistemology, theological axiology, spirit, morality, ethics

Introduction

According to Hegel (2018), the essence of spirit is freedom. In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, spirit (Geist) includes (a) true spirit, ethical life; (b) spirit alienated from itself: cultural formation; and (c) spirit certain of itself: morality. According to Croce (1922), philosophy of spirit designates the construction of a philosophical system on the remote pattern of the rationalism (idealism) of classical aesthetics. Its principle is the “circularity” of spirit (mind, or consciousness) within the structure of the system and in historical time. A similar term is spiritual philosophy, which is any philosophy that pertains to spirituality and may incorporate religious or esoteric themes. Although the concepts of spiritual philosophy are not universal and differ depending on one’s religious and cultural backgrounds (Inglehart & Baker, 2000), it can include any belief or thought system that embraces the existence of a reality that cannot be physically perceived (c.f. Britannica). Spiritual philosophy can also be solely based on one’s personal and experiential connections (Miller, 2016). Under above concept system, we can discuss spirit philosophy further.

From the view of Popper’s philosophy (1972) and my triad philosophy (Ye, 2019), objective matter, subjective spirit, and objective knowledge construct a triad ontology. Spirit is a focus on philosophical creation, so that we also focus on spirit philosophy, which is based on spiritual ontology, with linking to Buddhist epistemology and theological axiology.

Spiritual Ontology

Spiritual ontology has both religious and non-religious connotations. The spirituality of religious individuals is greatly influenced by their religion’s beliefs, teachings, including sacred texts (Bible), and the practice of key rituals (Inglehart & Baker, 2000).

Eastern world religions, such as Buddhism, understand the concepts of spiritual ontology through the nature of Eastern philosophy (Rousseau, 2019). Eastern philosophy relies heavily on the teachings and beliefs

of Eastern religions. The main concept of Eastern philosophy, contentment in the endless cycle of the universe, forms the basis of adherent's spiritual ontology (Burt, 1953).

Western world religions, such as Christianity and Judaism, apply the principles of Western philosophy to their interpretation of spiritual ontology (Zacharias, 1951). Unlike Eastern philosophy, where there is a large reliance on religion for spiritual ontology practices, Western philosophy does not solely rely on religion. Rather, Western philosophy explores the reaction to Western religion ideologies along with ideas of politics, science, and mathematics (Burt, 1953).

During 1970s, Christian spiritual ontology was transformed by spiritual philosophy (Sherry, 1981). This was the result of the charismatic movement of the 1960s. Christian spirituality is grounded by the "love of wisdom", which, along with the core concept of Christianity, i.e. there is only one God who is an infinite, self-conscious spirit, is fundamental to adherent's understanding and hence practice of spiritual philosophy (Sherry, 1981). These philosophical outlooks are based on the fundamental principle outlined in the Gospel of John; "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Bible, John 1:1). Ultimately, spiritual ontology of Christian adherents is rooted in "faith", influenced by those of "authority" and must be regarded as "reasonable". Different Christian denominations hold different points of view and hence have differing restraints and acceptations of these fundamental concepts of spiritual philosophy (Wood, 2022). However, adherents universally accept this doctrine in everyday practices in order to develop their understanding of spiritual philosophy in accordance with their faith.

Spiritual ontology in Judaism is largely based on natural theology (Wenley, 1897). According to the Jewish faith, the spiritual living of adherents is not produced by a single thought, but rather a series of formal and informal spiritual experiences. These experiences have greatly influenced adherents' philosophical outlook and subsequently their everyday practice of spirituality. In the Jewish faith, it is philosophy that is primarily responsible for spiritual awakening rather than the history of the religion. Hence, Jewish adherents have greater reliance on the sacred texts and teachings of the religion to inform their decisions in leading a spiritual life (Wenley, 1897). However, the history of the faith is also fundamental to spiritual development.

Spirit is not matter, but out of matter. As subjective spirit is based on objective matter (human brain), matter is certainly important to generate spirit. However, once subjective spirit separates from objective matter, it soars into freedom space-time, to create objective knowledge, till its physical foundation (matter) disappears. Therefore, it is believed that spirit is an independent ontological power for creation.

It is well known that ontology is the branch of philosophy that studies the nature of existence as essence in the universe and ontology explores the reality. This reality can also be something that we are going to prove or our view point toward the reality, whereas epistemology is the branch of philosophy that studies knowledge or knowing. The knowledge examines the reality. Epistemology is the study of how can we prove the view point or carry out the study in order to prove our view point which will contribute toward reality. Therefore, any philosophy needs both ontology and epistemology.

Buddhist Epistemology

Actually, the teachings and rituals of early Buddhism are some of the earliest forms of spiritual philosophy (Raghuramaraju, 2013). Buddhism provides guidance to adherents on what to do and how to live, in accordance with the teachings and practices of Buddhism. The Buddhist faith has maintained a rich tradition and continues

to remain relevant in a world that is becoming increasingly modernized (Goodman, 2021). The core themes that pertain to Buddhist spirituality cover the Three Seals, the Four Noble Truths with the Noble Eightfold Path, the Five Aggregates, and the Twelve Nidanas, based on the Buddhist Origin Theory.

The Three Seals (also known as Three Universal Truths) include: (1) All phenomena are impermanent; (2) all Dharma are not-self; and (3) the eternity is Nirvana. The Four Noble Truths are suffering (dukkha), arising (samudaya), ending (nirodha), and pathing (magga). The correct path is the Noble Eightfold Path (Siderits, 2021).

Although there are many branch schools of Buddhism, the major Buddhism keeps the Four Noble Truths with the Noble Eightfold Path. The steps of the Eightfold Path consist of eight practices: right view, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right samadhi (equanimous meditative awareness). While the Buddha defines his teaching as “the middle way”, the Buddha teaches Buddhists to recognize the Four Truths via the Eightfold Path, with eliminating the five aggregates (form, sensation, perception, mental formation, consciousness), and breaking away the Twelve Nidanas.

The Buddha’s epistemology has been compared to empiricism, in the sense that it was based on the experience of the world through the senses. The Buddha taught that empirical observation through the six sense fields (ayatana) was the proper way of verifying any knowledge claims. Some suttas go further, stating that “the All”, or everything that exists (sabbam), are these six sense spheres and that anyone who attempts to describe another “All” will be unable to do so because “it lies beyond range”. This sutta seems to indicate that for the Buddha, things in themselves or noumena are beyond our epistemological reach (avisaya).

According to the Diamond Sutra, Buddha claimed (The Diamond Sutra, Section 26):

Someone who looks for me in form or seeks me in sound is on a mistaken path and cannot see the Tathagata.

However, not all followers abide the Buddha’s sutra (the behaviors of most people seem wrong), as they like to have an image of Buddhist mellow, as shown as Figure 1.



Figure 1. An image of Buddhist mellow (open picture).

Although the figure provides a good image for Buddhist mellow, it is a mistaken path to reach the other side via Buddhism. According to the Diamond Sutra, the great realm needs nothing to see, to hear, to smell, to taste, and to feel. One might ignore all images from various ways and then one could reach the Buddhist realm. Nothing is important except keeping the Buddha's teaching in mind. The situation resembles the famous stanza recorded in the Sixth Patriarch's Dharma Jewel Platform Sutra:

Bodhi has no tree,
Clear mirror has no stand.
Originally there is nothing,
Where is dust?

This is just a Buddhist epistemology so called epiphany, leading to Chan (Zen) Buddhism, which conduces to find mind's spirit or soul.

Also, Buddha's command to "steer clear of profitless metaphysical discussions" provides adherents with a clear understanding of the practice of non-attachment, which in turn is relevant to the practice of spirit philosophy throughout Buddhism (Raghuramaraju, 2013). The promise of obtaining enlightenment in Samsara and escaping the constant torture and suffering of the rebirth cycle has resulted in adherents' strict observance of moral disciplines. This discipline has resulted in consistent and widespread practice of faith amongst Buddhist adherents, and subsequently the practices of spirit philosophy relevant to the religion (Goodman, 2021). All the contributions from Buddhism belong to Buddhist epistemology.

Together with ontology and epistemology, an axiology is also necessary for a complete philosophy. As a branch of philosophy that studies values, axiology determines value judgment such as good and bad, moral and immoral. Therefore, we have to introduce an axiology of spirit philosophy.

Theological Axiology

Theological axiology normally guides morality of human life, where religious ethics become a formation of human behaviors. Although there are lots of choice on religious ethics, we pay more attention to Christian ethics (Long, 2010), as Christianity is a key to guide people toward the good.

When Christian ethics is defined as the systematic study of the way of life set forth by Jesus Christ applied to the daily demands and decisions of human existence, Christian ethics derives its metaphysical core from the Bible, seeing God as the ultimate source of all power. The sources of Christian morality or ethics came from Bible. Being God's people, ones follow God's law, which means walking in the way of truth (Bible, Psalm 25:4-5; 86:11) and obeying it (Bible, Romans 2:8; Galatians 5:7; 1 Peter 1:22; 3 John 3-4). The dual commandment holds good, i.e. to love God and to love neighbor (Bible, Matthew 22:37-39). To "dwell in love" is to dwell in God, who is both truth and love (Bible, 1 John). This is a moral theology, also a multi-faceted ethical system.

The variety of ethical perspectives in the Bible has led to repeated disagreement over defining the basic Christian ethical principles, with at least seven major principles undergoing perennial debate and reinterpretation. Christian ethicists use reason, philosophy, natural law, the social sciences, and the Bible to formulate modern interpretations of those principles; Christian ethics applies to all areas of personal and societal ethics (Calvin, 2010).

Evangelical Christians should not find it controversial to say that the Scriptures—God's Word—is our authority and standard for ethics, just as it is for theology. This is because God is our ultimate authority and

standard. There cannot be a higher standard for ethics than God, not because he is all-powerful, but because he is the source of goodness itself. Moral goodness is defined by the nature of God, and everything he commands is in accordance with his perfect and righteous goodness. We must obey every word of God because every word he gives us flows from his character and his character is infinite and absolute moral perfection. God does not measure himself against an abstract standard of goodness; he does not consult anything other than his own nature when he issues commands and moral rules. His moral commands are not arbitrary and they could not be other than what they are since they are based on God's unchanging moral goodness. Since God's commands are found in Scripture, the Bible is our authority for ethics. It is a virtue ethic which focuses on building moral character, and a deontological ethic which emphasizes duty. It also incorporates natural law ethics, which is built on the belief that it is the very nature of humans (created in the image of God and capable of morality, cooperation, rationality, discernment, and so on) that informs how life should be lived, and that awareness of sin does not require special revelation. Other aspects of Christian ethics (Wilkins, 2017), represented by movements such as the social Gospel and liberation theology, may be combined into a fourth area sometimes called prophetic ethics.

Christian ethics contributes a practical philosophy from theological axiology, which is an important element in spirit philosophy. Furthermore, Christian ethics starts from the position that God created the world toward the good, and calls people to enjoy equal and peaceful life with redeeming love, so that the human love guides us to peace, avoiding war.

Certainly, theology also contributes some standard epistemological concepts that are usually thought of as questions about norms and sources of philosophy (reason, result, experience, tradition, scripture, revelation, etc.) and on some general epistemic concepts that can be related to philosophy (wisdom, understanding, virtue, evidence, testimony, skepticism, etc.). Here we ignored temporarily theological epistemology, for emphasizing theological axiology.

Now spiritual ontology, Buddhist epistemology, and theological axiology construct a complete spirit philosophy, which provides an overall framework for philosophical thinking, where active and dynamic spirit generates and stimulates all human activities toward the good.

Discussion

It is obvious that spirit philosophy is not a science, since a science is an objective logic, quantitative and verifiable system, where ones have conclusive results via verification or falsification from observable or experimental phenomena. Whereas, a philosophy is only a subjective logic and qualitative system, where everyone has unique thought or method to process anything. When a branch of philosophy becomes a branch of science, it breaks away from philosophy and grows an independent discipline. It is correct that philosophy is the mother of science, but science could grow bigger and stronger than philosophy.

Spirit philosophy, with covering spiritual ontology, Buddhist epistemology, and theological axiology, may construct a mellow philosophical system, where spiritual ontology sets up an ontological foundation, Buddhist epistemology supplies a practical methodology, and theological axiology contributes a living ethics. As Buddhism is also a part of theology, Buddhist epistemology may also contain its value judgment, while theological axiology may cover some epistemological methods. Although evidential epistemology, reformed epistemology, and volitional epistemology are the three most common forms of Christian epistemology, it has more ethic value to practice.

Subjective value belongs to person, so that personal mind is the power to support human society. We can have a concept of spirit philosophy, while we cannot provide a spirit philosophy to fit everyone. However, combining with spiritual ontology, Buddhist epistemology, and theological axiology, there is a suitable spirit philosophy for people toward the good.

Meanwhile, both Buddhism and theology are self-mellow philosophy and religion. Both Buddhism and theology also contain ontology, epistemology, and axiology, constructing huge philosophical systems. In this article, we only apply small parts of Buddhism and theology into spirit philosophy. When we separate Buddhist epistemology and theological axiology and merge into spirit philosophy, spiritual ontology, Buddhist epistemology, and theological axiology may construct a mellow philosophical system.

Conclusion

In concluding remarks on above statements, spiritual ontology, Buddhist epistemology, and theological axiology construct a mellow system of spirit philosophy. While spirit philosophy covers spiritual ontology, Buddhist epistemology, and theological axiology, spirit philosophy links to Buddhism and theology and then introduces a popular philosophy toward the good. This is a self-consistent or mellow philosophical system.

This article contributes a concise framework for thinking spirit philosophy, guiding people toward the good, where spiritual ontology establishes spirit existence as essence, Buddhist epistemology introduces for knowing mind or soul, and theological axiology guides to act in the human society. Hopefully this is a beneficial exploration, for leading to peaceful world.

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