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Elliptical Model and Ultimate Concern: A Reconstruction in Philosophy of Religion

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Contemporary philosophy of religion is largely governed by a propositionalist framework that interprets faith as assent to propositional claims, reducing epistemological inquiry to questions of evidential support. This paper argues that such a framework conceals the structural dimension of faith: faith is not primarily directed toward an intentional object but embedded within existential-defining structural conditions. This article develops an elliptical geometric model as a formal language for analyzing Paul Tillich's notion of "ultimate concern." Four geometric components of an ellipse—two foci, the moving point, invariant 2*a*, and eccentricity *e*—map onto four structural features of ultimate concern: the unconditional, concrete human existence, constitutive constraint, and existential tension. The model is defended as structural isomorphism rather than rhetorical metaphor. Based on this formal framework, the concept of "structural cognition" is articulated to forge a middle position between evidentialism and Reformed epistemology. Furthermore, this paper introduces "elliptical dissolution" within philosophy of death, which resolves three persistent puzzles for the deprivation account: the no-subject problem, the timing problem, and the symmetry problem between prenatal and post-mortem non-existence. Limitations and future research directions of the elliptical formal model are clarified.

Keywords: ultimate concern, epistemology of faith, philosophy of death, religious pluralism, structural cognition

Introduction

The Target and the Contribution

Contemporary philosophy of religion has long been dominated by a propositionalist framework in its understanding of faith: faith is construed as assent to certain propositions, and the central epistemological question is reduced to whether these propositions are supported by evidence. This framework obscures a deeper structural dimension—that faith is not directed at an object, but is situated within a structural condition that defines one's existence.

This paper proposes the elliptical model as a formal language for understanding this structure. The four elements of the ellipse—the two foci, the moving point, the invariant 2*a*, and the eccentricity *e*—correspond item by item to the four structural features of ultimate concern: the unconditional, human existence, the constitutive constraint, and the state of tension. This model is not a metaphor but a structural isomorphism; not rhetoric but formalization. It transforms the question "What is faith?" from a vague philosophical intuition into a structural analysis that can be articulated and deduced.

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Three core theses are advanced. First, an epistemological thesis: the concept of "structural cognition" carves out a middle path between evidentialism and fideism. Second, a pluralist thesis: a shift from "substance" to "structure" avoids the difficulties facing Hick's pluralistic hypothesis. Third, a thesis in the philosophy of death: the notion of "elliptical dissolution" dissolves the no-subject problem, the timing problem, and the symmetry problem faced by the deprivation account.

Starting from Tillich: A Neglected Structural Dimension

Tillich defines faith as "ultimate concern." This definition is widely cited, but its structural implications have not been sufficiently appreciated. Tillich explicitly states that faith is not primarily a cognitive function: it is "the most centered act of the human mind," involving the whole personality in an act of commitment and risk. In *Dynamics of Faith*, he distinguishes his concept from "belief that something is true," arguing that if faith were merely belief, doubt would be incompatible with it; but since faith is ultimate concern, doubt is a necessary element within it.

Critical to this paper is the fact that Tillich's analysis of "concern" operates on two levels. As William Rowe has pointed out, Tillich uses the word "concern" in both the sense of "commitment to something" and the ordinary sense of "anxious about something." This duality is not incidental: it reveals that ultimate concern is a structure of existential tension, not a propositional attitude. What one is ultimately concerned about is not an "object" that can be described from a neutral standpoint, but a "condition" that structures one's existence from within—a condition that both demands surrender and promises fulfillment.

Tillich's own language already points toward this structural dimension. He writes: "There is no conditional way of reaching the unconditional; there is no finite way of reaching the infinite." If the object of faith cannot be reached by any finite means, then faith cannot be understood as a relation to an object in the ordinary sense. It must be understood instead as a mode of standing within a structural condition—a condition that is not itself a being among beings.

The Research Gap: The Absence of a Formal Vocabulary

What Tillich lacks, however, is a formal vocabulary for describing this structural condition without reifying it into an object. His account remains phenomenological and existential, which makes it vulnerable to the charge that "ultimate concern" is too vague to do philosophical work. The problem is not that Tillich is wrong about faith, but that his conceptual resources do not allow him to specify the structure of faith with the precision that the epistemology of religion demands.

This is where the elliptical model enters. The definition of the ellipse contains a simple invariant: for any point P on the curve, the sum of the distances PF_1 and PF_2 is constant ($2a$). This invariant is not a "thing" but a relation. The two foci F_1 and F_2 are not empirical objects in the ordinary sense; they are structural parameters that determine the shape and dynamics of the curve without themselves appearing on it. The moving point P traverses the ellipse, but its motion is constrained by a condition it neither produces nor can alter.

This geometric structure provides a formal model for Tillich's "ultimate concern," avoiding both the propositionalism he rejects and the vagueness that has limited his influence in analytic philosophy. In this model, the object of faith is neither a proposition nor an entity, but the invariant $2a$—the constitutive constraint that makes the coherence of a life-system possible. Faith is the attunement to this invariant, an existential reliance on the constitutive condition that sustains one's existence while remaining beyond one's control.

Structural Dialogue with Existing Theories

The argument developed here engages in structural dialogue with three theoretical traditions, with theoretical advance rather than thematic resonance as the core objective.

First, the dialogue with process philosophy: from qualitative description to formal expression. Whitehead argues in *Process and Reality* that "actual entities" are generated in relations—a position deeply consistent with this paper's ontological schema of "relations prior to substances." But Whitehead's "eternal objects" are qualitative and non-measurable; he does not provide a formal language to express the proposition "relations prior to substances" with precision. The contribution of this paper lies in the fact that the invariant $2a$ is a measurable geometric quantity, advancing process philosophy's "relational ontology" from qualitative description to formal analysis. This is not a supplement to Whitehead, but a formalization of his unfinished work.

Second, the dialogue with comparative philosophy: from macro-comparison to structural model. Fang Dongmei (Thomé H. Fang) points out that the distinctive feature of Chinese philosophy lies in its "life-centered ontology," emphasizing holistic relatedness and dynamic balance. This judgment is highly consistent with this paper's structural reading of "ultimate concern." But Fang's discussion remains at the level of macro-comparison in the history of philosophy; his comparative method is one of "similarity and difference," not structural analysis. The contribution of this paper lies in providing a precise structural model for "life ontology" through elliptical geometry, advancing comparative philosophy from "which traditions are similar and which are different" to "what structure they share and how they share it."

Third, the dialogue with systems science: from natural systems to ultimate concern. Hermann Haken's synergetics reveals the slaving principle of order parameters, which is internally consistent with this paper's proposition of "the invariant $2a$ as the core constraint of a system"; Ludwig von Bertalanffy's general systems theory provides the theoretical background for the "hierarchical nesting of elliptical domains of existence." But synergetics and general systems theory deal with natural systems and do not address the question of ultimate concern. The contribution of this paper lies in introducing the structural analysis tools of systems science into the philosophy of religion, making "the structure of faith" an analyzable object. This is not to reduce religion to a system, but to provide a cross-disciplinary formal language for the structural analysis of religion.

The common logic of these three dialogues is straightforward: the present analysis does not merely seek thematic resonance with these traditions but undertakes complementary theoretical work. Process philosophy provides the intuition of relational ontology, comparative philosophy provides the judgment of life ontology, and systems science provides the tools of structural analysis—yet none of them has completed the work of formalization. The core contribution lies precisely in completing this formalization.

Structure of the Paper

The paper proceeds in five parts. Section 2 develops a structural reading of Tillich's "ultimate concern," showing how his own formulations resist propositionalist interpretation. Section 3 introduces the elliptical model and responds to the charge that it is "merely a metaphor." Section 4 applies the model to the epistemology of faith, defending the concept of "structural cognition" against both evidentialism and fideism. Section 5 develops the elliptical account of death, engaging with Nagel, Epicurus, and recent literature in the deprivation debate. Section 6 concludes by specifying what the model can and cannot claim, and why its limits are as important as its achievements.

Tillich's "Ultimate Concern" as a Structural Concept

Tillich's Critique of "Faith as Belief"

To understand Tillich's "ultimate concern," one must first understand what he opposes. At the opening of *Dynamics of Faith*, Tillich draws a clear line: faith is not "the belief that something is true." He points out that if faith is equated with propositional belief, two insoluble difficulties arise.

First, the relation between doubt and faith is distorted. If faith is assent to a proposition, then doubt is the enemy of faith and should be excluded. But Tillich observes that in actual religious life, doubt is precisely what cannot be eliminated: "If faith is understood as belief that something is true, doubt is incompatible with the act of faith; if faith is understood as being ultimately concerned, doubt is a necessary element in it" (Tillich, 1957, p. 19). A person who never doubts his faith may precisely not be in a state of ultimate concern—because what he is concerned about is something he believes he has already firmly grasped, rather than that which truly and unconditionally claims him.

Second, the "unconditionality" of faith is dissolved. Propositional belief is always conditional: it depends on evidence, argument, experience, or authority. But Tillich insists that ultimate concern is "ultimate" precisely because it is not conditional on anything. If faith depends on some proposition being proven true, then it is not unconditional but conditional—it depends on that proof. Ultimate concern is unconditional: it is "the concern about the unconditional" (Tillich, 1957, p. 9), a concern that does not depend on any condition, whether subjective or objective.

A common misreading must be clarified. When Tillich says faith is not propositional belief, he does not mean that faith contains no cognitive content, nor that faith is opposed to reason. What he opposes is the reduction of faith to a propositional attitude—the view that the entire essence of faith consists in assent to certain propositions. In Tillich's view, propositional content can be the expressive form of faith, but it is not faith itself. Faith itself is "the most centered act of the human mind" (Tillich, 1957, p. 4), the state in which the whole personality is grasped by the unconditional.

This distinction is crucial. For if faith is not a propositional attitude, then the question "What does faith point to?" cannot be answered by "What propositions does faith believe?" Another language is required to describe the "directedness" of faith—not directed at an object, but situated within a structure. This is precisely what the elliptical model is meant to provide.

The Dual Structure of "Concern": Commitment and Anxiety

Tillich's choice of the word "concern" is not arbitrary. William Rowe, in his analysis of Tillich's concept of "ultimate concern," points out that the word carries two layers of meaning in ordinary English: first, "commitment to something," and second, "anxious about something" (Rowe, 1968, pp. 12-13). These two layers find a corresponding expression in Chinese: the word guanhuai (关怀) can mean both "to have one's heart set on something" and "to be anxious about something."

Tillich's "ultimate concern" contains both layers. When one is ultimately concerned about something, one both surrenders one's existence to it and is anxious about it. These are not two different psychological states, but two sides of the same existential relation.

The first side: commitment. Ultimate concern demands that one surrender oneself. Tillich writes that an ultimate concern "demands the total surrender of him who accepts this claim" (Tillich, 1957, p. 1). This surrender is not "trust" in some object, but the entrusting of one's existential ground to a structural condition. Whatever one is ultimately concerned about, one "lives" in it. This is not something one can choose or reject, because ultimate

concern is “ultimate” precisely in that it has already defined one prior to one’s choice.

The second side: anxiety. If ultimate concern were merely commitment, it would seem to be a state of security and certainty. But Tillich insists that ultimate concern is also anxiety. For the object of ultimate concern is not something that can be possessed, controlled, or proven. It always remains “beyond one's control.” The closer one comes to the object of ultimate concern, the more one realizes that one cannot grasp it. This “inability to grasp” is precisely the source of anxiety.

The combination of these two sides reveals a key structural feature: ultimate concern is not a relation between a person and an object, but the way in which one’s existence itself is defined by a condition beyond one’s control. This condition is neither purely external (because it internally defines one’s existence) nor purely internal (because it always remains beyond one’s control). In the terminology of this paper: the object of ultimate concern is not a “focus,” but the tension-structure between two foci; not the goal toward which a “moving point” tends, but the invariant that defines the mode of the moving point’s motion.

Tillich himself did not use the word “structure” to characterize ultimate concern. But his phenomenological descriptions repeatedly point in this direction. He says ultimate concern is “unconditional” because it does not depend on any condition; “ultimate” because it cannot be replaced by anything more ultimate; “centered” because it involves the innermost center of the personality. These descriptive terms jointly point to one feature: ultimate concern is not one concern among many, but the structure that defines the possibility of all other concerns.

The Structural Dimension in Tillich’s Language: An Unfinished Formalization

Tillich’s formulations already contain a clear structural intuition, but he did not (and could not) express it in a formal language. Three passages are most crucial.

First: the relation between the unconditional and the conditioned. Tillich repeatedly emphasizes that the object of ultimate concern is “the unconditional.” But “the unconditional” is not an object that can be named—for once named, it becomes one condition among others. Tillich writes: “There is no conditional way of reaching the unconditional; there is no finite way of reaching the infinite” (Tillich, 1957, p. 14). The philosophical implication of this sentence is profound: if the unconditional cannot be reached by any conditional means, then its relation to the human being cannot be a “subject-object” relation, because both subject and object are conditional. This relation can only be structural: the unconditional, as “the condition itself,” defines human existence, but is not itself conditioned.

Second: the distinction between symbol and referent. Tillich has a famous proposition: all speech about the ultimate is symbolic, not literal. The symbol participates in what it refers to, but is not identical with it. The usual reading of this proposition is epistemological: we cannot directly know the ultimate, and can only refer to it through symbols. But what this paper emphasizes is its structural meaning: the relation between symbol and referent is not a “sign-object” relation, but a “moving point-focus” relation. The symbol is the position of the moving point on the elliptical trajectory; the referent is the focal structure that defines the trajectory. The symbol “participates in” the referent just as the moving point “participates in” the ellipse—the moving point exists in dependence on the focal structure, but the focal structure does not appear at the moving point.

Third: the “non-objectifiability” of ultimate concern. Tillich insists that the object of ultimate concern cannot be objectified. Once objectified, it is no longer ultimate. This insistence directly points to the fundamental difficulty of propositionalism: propositional belief necessarily objectifies the object of faith—it transforms the object into a “propositional content” that can be stated, argued for, assented to, or rejected. But Tillich’s ultimate

concern precisely refuses this objectification. This means that any attempt to describe ultimate concern in propositional language necessarily deviates from its structure.

At this point, Tillich's predicament becomes clear. He has accurately described the structural features of ultimate concern: unconditionality, non-objectifiability, symbolicity, centrality. But he lacks a formal language capable of precisely characterizing this structure without objectifying its object. His descriptions are phenomenological, existential, and dialectical, but lack formal precision. This has led "ultimate concern" to be regarded in the analytic philosophical tradition as a vague, unworkable concept.

The elliptical model proposed in this paper is precisely meant to fill this gap. Elliptical geometry provides a formal language in which:

"The unconditional" is characterized as the invariant $2a$—it does not depend on the position of the moving point, but rather defines the possible range of the moving point's motion;

"Non-objectifiability" is characterized as the non-empirical nature of the foci—the foci are structural parameters, not empirical objects;

"Symbolicity" is characterized as the relation between the moving point and the foci—the moving point "participates in" the focal structure, but is not identical with the foci;

"Centrality" is characterized as the bipolarity of the foci—not a single center, but two mutually constraining foci that jointly define the entire structure.

In other words, the elliptical model does not translate Tillich's "ultimate concern" into mathematics, but provides a precise formal language for his structural intuition. This is not reduction, but formalization: expressing the structure already implicit in phenomenological description in a geometric language that can be articulated and deduced.

Before proceeding to Section 3, one possible objection must be addressed: whether this framework "mathematicizes" religious experience and thereby loses its existential depth. Formalization is not equivalent to reduction. The geometric structure of the ellipse is not a set of cold formulas; it is itself an ontological schema of "relations prior to substances." When Tillich says the object of ultimate concern cannot be objectified, the elliptical model says: the foci are not on the curve. This does not cancel the existential depth of religious experience, but provides it with a more precise expression.

Summary

This section has argued three points. First, Tillich's critique of "faith as belief" is essentially a critique of the propositionalist framework: faith is not assent to propositions, but the most centered existential act of the human being. Second, the dual structure of "concern" (commitment and anxiety) reveals that ultimate concern is an existential tension, not a psychological state directed at some object. Third, Tillich's language already contains a clear structural dimension, but he lacks the formal tools to express it precisely. The elliptical model is meant to provide this tool.

The next section formally introduces the elliptical model and responds to the charge that it is "merely a metaphor."

The Elliptical Model and the Charge of "Merely a Metaphor"

The Basic Structure of the Elliptical Model

An ellipse is the locus of points in a plane whose sum of distances to two fixed points is constant. Let the two fixed points be F_1 and F_2. Then the ellipse can be defined as:

$$\{P \mid PF_1 + PF_2 = 2a\}$$

where $2a$ is a constant *and* $2a > F_1F_2$. The two fixed points F_1 and F_2 are called the foci, and the constant $2a$ is called the length of the major axis. The shape of the ellipse is determined by the eccentricity $e = c/a$, where c is the semi-focal distance (half the distance between the two foci).

This structure contains four elements: First, two foci. The foci are not points on the curve, nor do they appear in the curve itself. They are structural parameters that define the shape of the curve. Without the foci, there is no ellipse; but the foci themselves do not "appear" on the elliptical trajectory. Second, a moving point. The moving point P is the point that actually moves along the elliptical trajectory, that can be observed and measured. Its position constantly changes, and its trajectory is the ellipse itself. Third, an invariant. No matter where the moving point P moves, $PF_1 + PF_2$ is always equal to $2a$. This invariant does not change with the moving point; rather, it is the constraint that makes the motion of the moving point possible. Fourth, a tension parameter. The eccentricity $e = c/a$ determines the "flatness" of the ellipse. When $e \rightarrow 0$, the two foci approach coincidence, and the ellipse approaches a circle; when $e \rightarrow 1$, the ellipse becomes extremely flat, approaching a parabola; when $c > a$, the ellipse ceases to exist.

These four elements constitute a complete relational structure. The central claim of this paper is that this structure provides a formal model for understanding "ultimate concern."

It must be emphasized that the "model" spoken of here is not a "metaphor." A metaphor is rhetorical: it uses one known thing to "explain" another unknown thing, but there is no structural necessity between the two. A model, by contrast, is structural: the modeled object and the model share the same relational structure, so that deductions within the model can be translated into structural knowledge of the object. The remainder of this section will argue that the relation between the ellipse and ultimate concern is precisely this kind of structural relation, not a rhetorical one.

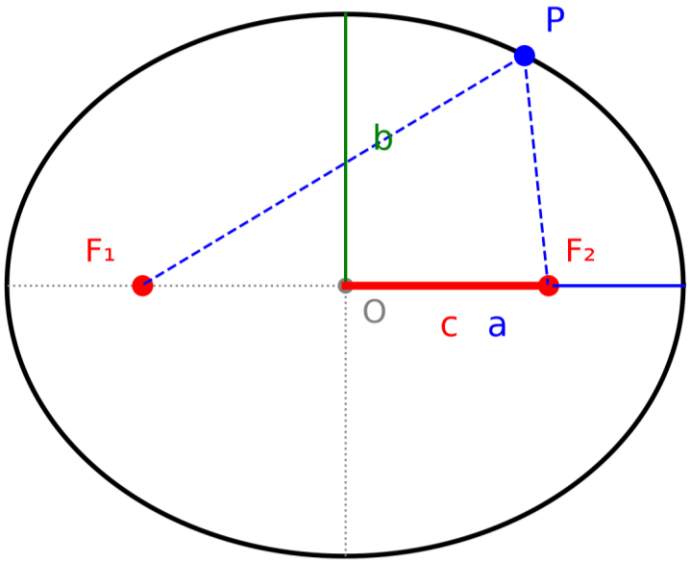


Figure 1. Schematic Diagram of Elliptical Structure.

Note: In the figure, O is the center, F_1 and F_2 are the foci, a is the semi-major axis, b is the semi-minor axis, c is the semi-focal distance, and P is the moving point. Any point P on the ellipse satisfies $PF_1 + PF_2 = 2a$ (a constant), and the eccentricity is $e = c/a$. The foci are not on the curve, yet they are the structural parameters that define the shape of the curve. This figure corresponds strictly to Section 3.1, "The Basic Structure of the Elliptical Model," and Section 3.2, "The Correspondence Between Elliptical Structure and Ultimate Concern."

The Correspondence Between Elliptical Structure and Ultimate Concern

The correspondence between elliptical structure and Tillich's "ultimate concern" is not an arbitrary analogy, but an item-by-item structural mapping.

First, the correspondence between the foci and "the unconditional." Tillich says that the object of ultimate concern is "the unconditional," which cannot be objectified and cannot be reached by any conditional means (Tillich, 1957). In the ellipse, the foci F_1 and F_2 occupy a similar structural position: they are not points on the curve, cannot be "seen," but they are the defining conditions that make the curve what it is.

More importantly, the foci are not singular but paired. This point forms a meaningful tension with Tillich's concept of "the unconditional." Tillich usually speaks of "the unconditional" as singular (God, being-itself, the ultimate). But the elliptical model suggests that the structural condition of ultimate concern is not singular but bipolar. This does not deviate from Tillich. For Tillich himself emphasizes that the object of ultimate concern cannot be understood as "a being," but must be understood as "being-itself." And "being-itself," as a structural condition, is precisely not a singular entity, but the relational structure that makes all beings possible. The bipolar structure of the ellipse is precisely the formalized expression of this "relational structure": not two gods, but two structural poles that define human existence.

Second, the correspondence between the moving point and "human existence." The moving point P is the point that actually moves on the ellipse. It constantly changes position, but is always constrained by the invariant $2a$. In the context of ultimate concern, the moving point corresponds to concrete human existence—human action, thought, emotion, historical situation. Human existence is always in change, but is always defined by a condition beyond one's control.

There is a key point here: the moving point does not "choose" its trajectory. It can only move along the ellipse, because this is its mode of existence. Similarly, the human being does not first have a neutral standpoint and then "choose" what to be concerned about. Ultimate concern is "ultimate" precisely in that it has already defined human existence prior to choice. The human being does not "select" one concern among many as ultimate concern, but finds himself already grasped by something unconditional.

Third, the correspondence between the invariant $2a$ and "the structural condition of ultimate concern." $2a$ is the core invariant of the ellipse. It does not change with the moving point; rather, it is the constraint that makes the motion of the moving point possible. In the context of ultimate concern, $2a$ corresponds to the defining character of "the unconditional" as a structural condition—it is not the goal toward which the moving point tends, but the invariant constraint that defines the mode of the moving point's motion.

Caution is needed here. Tillich says the object of ultimate concern is "the unconditional" (Tillich, 1957). If $2a$ is "the unconditional," then "the unconditional" becomes a quantity that can be formalized. $2a$ is not "the unconditional" itself, but the formal expression of "the unconditional" as a structural condition. This is like the situation in physics, where $F = ma$ is not "force" itself, but the formal expression of force as a structural relation. Formalization is not reduction, but the precise expression of the structure already implicit in phenomenological description. When Tillich says the unconditional cannot be objectified, the elliptical model says: the foci are not on the curve—both formulations articulate the same insight (Tillich, 1957).

Fourth, the correspondence between the eccentricity e and "the state of tension in faith." The eccentricity $e = c/a$ determines the flatness of the ellipse. The smaller e is, the closer the ellipse is to a circle, and the smaller

the tension; the larger e is, the flatter the ellipse, and the greater the tension; when $e \to 1$, the system approaches the critical point.

In the context of ultimate concern, e corresponds to the state of tension in the life of faith. A believer can be in different states of tension: excessive harmony ($e \to 0$) may mean that faith has lost its challenge to existence and has degenerated into cultural habit; excessive polarization ($e \to 1$) may mean that faith is on the verge of fanaticism or collapse. The healthy life of faith maintains tension between these two extremes.

Responding to the Charge of "Merely a Metaphor"

This subsection directly addresses the most important charge facing this paper: whether the elliptical model is merely a metaphor.

The charge can be stated as follows: the ellipse is a geometric object, ultimate concern is an ontological concept, and the two belong to completely different domains. Mapping the structure of the ellipse onto ultimate concern is at best a "poetic analogy" and does not possess the force of philosophical argument. If this charge holds, then the entire work of this paper is merely rhetoric, not philosophy.

The response proceeds in three layers.

First layer: distinguishing "metaphor" from "structural isomorphism." A metaphor is rhetorical: it uses one known thing to "explain" another unknown thing, but there is no structural necessity between the two. For example, "life is a journey" is a metaphor, because there is no common structural law between "life" and "journey."

Structural isomorphism is different: two systems share the same relational structure, so that deductions in one system can be translated into structural knowledge in the other. For example, Ohm's law $V = IR$ in electrical circuits and Fourier's law in heat conduction are isomorphic in mathematical form, so circuit models can be used to study heat conduction.

The relation between the ellipse and ultimate concern is one of isomorphism, for the following reasons. There is an item-by-item correspondence between the structural elements of the ellipse (foci, moving point, invariant, eccentricity) and the structural elements of ultimate concern (the unconditional, human existence, structural constraint, state of tension). This correspondence is not arbitrary, but is based on a common structural feature: relations prior to substances. The essence of the ellipse is not the points on the curve, but the tension-structure between the foci; the essence of ultimate concern is not some object, but the relational structure that defines human existence.

Therefore, deductions within the elliptical model (such as "the foci are not on the curve," "the moving point is constrained by the invariant," "runaway eccentricity leads to the dissolution of the system") can be translated into structural knowledge of ultimate concern.

Second layer: responding to the objection that "geometry and ontology are incommensurable." A stronger objection is: geometry is a formal science, ontology is substantive philosophy, and the two are incommensurable. Applying geometric structure to ontology is a category mistake.

This assumption of "incommensurability" is itself questionable. The application of mathematical structures in philosophy has a long history. Spinoza wrote the *Ethics* in geometric order; Whitehead reconstructed metaphysics using mathematical-physical concepts; contemporary analytic metaphysics makes extensive use of set theory, modal logic, and other mathematical tools. The key question is whether the mathematical structure genuinely reveals the structural features of the object, rather than merely providing rhetorical decoration.

In the case of this paper, what elliptical geometry reveals is the structural feature: there exists an invariant that does not change with change, but is rather the condition that makes change possible. This feature is precisely the core of Tillich's concept of "ultimate concern." Therefore, elliptical geometry is not decoration, but the precise expression of Tillich's structural intuition.

Third layer: acknowledging the constructedness of the model without abandoning its truth-claim. Finally, it must be honestly acknowledged: the elliptical model is constructed, not discovered. The analysis does not claim "ultimate concern was always an ellipse," but rather "the elliptical model provides a precise structural language for understanding ultimate concern."

This does not weaken the value of the model. Models in science are also largely constructive: Bohr's atomic model did not "discover" that the atom is like a solar system, but provided a formal framework capable of explaining spectral regularities. The value of a model lies not in whether it "reflects" the true face of reality, but in whether it can generate testable inferences, explain known phenomena, and integrate dispersed intuitions.

The value of the elliptical model in these three respects will be demonstrated concretely in Sections 4 and 5. In this section, only one point needs to be established: it is not a metaphor, but a model; not rhetoric, but formalization.

The Cognitive Status and Boundaries of the Model

Before concluding this section, the cognitive status and scope of application of the elliptical model must be clarified.

First, it is a "heuristic model," not an "ontological assertion." This paper does not claim that "existence is an ellipse." The value of this model lies in providing an analytical tool to help understand ultimate concern structurally. If someone asks, "Is the world really an ellipse?", the question is wrongly posed. The model is not a description of the world, but an expression of certain structural features of the world.

Second, it does not resolve the substantive disagreements among religious traditions. The elliptical model does not judge the truth-value of claims such as the Christian Trinity, Islamic tawhid, and Buddhist dependent origination and emptiness. It only provides a formal language to describe how these traditions each express the structure of "ultimate concern." It does not make judgments about the specific doctrines of any tradition.

Third, it does not replace religious experience. The model is formal; religious experience is living. The model can help understand the structure of religious experience, but cannot replace religious experience itself. A believer does not need to know the elliptical equation to have a genuine ultimate concern. The model is for philosophers and scholars of religion, not for believers.

Fourth, its boundary is "formalization" itself. Formalization has its limits. Some things can be formalized, some cannot. The elliptical model can express the structure of ultimate concern, but not its content. It can indicate that "the unconditional cannot be objectified," but it cannot specify what "the unconditional" is. This is not a failure of the model, but the essential limit of formalization.

Summary

This section has accomplished three tasks: First, it has stated the basic structure of the elliptical model, including the four elements: foci, moving point, invariant $2a$, and eccentricity e. Second, it has established the item-by-item correspondence between elliptical structure and Tillich's "ultimate concern": the foci correspond to the unconditional, the moving point corresponds to human existence, the invariant corresponds to the structural constraint, and the eccentricity corresponds to the state of tension. Third, it has responded to the charge of "merely

a metaphor." My core argument is: the relation between the ellipse and ultimate concern is not a metaphor, but a structural isomorphism; the elliptical model is not rhetoric, but formalization. At the same time, I have honestly acknowledged the constructedness, boundaries, and limits of the model.

The next section applies this model to the epistemology of faith, defending the concept of "structural cognition" between evidentialism and fideism.

The Epistemology of Faith: Between Evidentialism and Fideism

Two Standard Options in Contemporary Epistemology of Faith

Contemporary discussions of the rationality of faith in philosophy of religion are essentially dominated by two positions.

The first is evidentialism. Its core claim is that the rationality of a belief depends on evidence. One should believe only those propositions for which one has sufficient evidence; if belief in God lacks sufficient evidence, it should be suspended or abandoned. This position finds its most famous expression in W. K. Clifford's dictum: "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence" (Clifford, 1879). In contemporary philosophy, William Rowe, Michael Martin, and other philosophers continue this tradition in different ways.

The second is Reformed epistemology. Its core claim is that belief in God can be justified without evidence, because it can be properly basic. Alvin Plantinga is the most systematic defender of this position. He argues that belief in God can be properly basic, like belief in other minds or belief in past events, without being inferred from other beliefs. This position has been further developed in the work of Nicholas Wolterstorff, William Alston, and others.

The debate between these two positions constitutes the main axis of contemporary epistemology of faith. But they share an unexamined premise: the question of the rationality of faith is a question about the rationality of propositional belief. Evidentialists and Reformed epistemologists alike understand "faith" as "believing certain propositions to be true," and the debate concerns only whether these propositions require evidential support.

This shared premise is problematic. If faith is not propositional belief but existential attunement, then "the rationality of faith" cannot be reduced to "the rationality of propositional belief." Another epistemological category is required to describe the epistemic status of faith. This section argues that "structural cognition" is precisely such a category.

The Difficulties of Evidentialism

The core claim of evidentialism is that the rationality of a belief depends on evidence. This claim has strong intuitive appeal in science and everyday cognition. But in the context of faith, it faces two fundamental difficulties.

The first difficulty: the limits of the concept of evidence itself. Evidentialism presupposes a clear concept of "evidence": evidence is propositional, can be stated, tested, and evaluated. But Tillich's "ultimate concern" precisely cannot be objectified into propositions (Tillich, 1957). If someone says, "I am ultimately concerned about being-itself," this is not a proposition that can be supported or refuted by evidence—because it is not a descriptive proposition, but an existential declaration. Evidentialism demands evidence for "being-itself exists," but "being-itself" is not an object that can be pointed to, so the nature of its "evidence" is itself a problem.

This is not to say that faith does not need reason, but rather: the epistemic status of faith cannot be fully grasped by the category of "evidence." Evidence is a relation between propositions, while faith is a relation

between existence and structure. To reduce the latter to the former is a category mistake.

The second difficulty: the incompatibility of evidentialism with the practice of faith. Tillich makes an important observation: if faith depends on evidence, then it is not unconditional but conditional—it depends on that evidence (Tillich, 1957). But ultimate concern is "ultimate" precisely in that it is not conditional on anything. A person who believes in God because the evidence is sufficient, and a person who does not believe because the evidence is insufficient, may both, in Tillich's view, lack genuine ultimate concern—because their "faith" depends on evidence, not on the unconditional.

This is not to say that evidentialists cannot in practice have faith, but rather: the theoretical framework of evidentialism cannot explain the actual life of faith. A believer who, in the face of suffering, doubt, and uncertainty, still holds fast to his faith—this holding fast is not because he has found new evidence, but because he has been grasped by a condition beyond his control. Evidentialism cannot explain this structure of "holding fast in uncertainty."

The Contribution and Limits of Reformed Epistemology

Reformed epistemology's critique of evidentialism is important. Plantinga correctly points out that if all beliefs require evidential support, an infinite regress results; therefore, some beliefs must be "properly basic," not inferred from other beliefs. Belief in God can be one of them (Plantinga, 2000).

This argument powerfully opens a space for the rationality of religious belief. But it still operates within the framework of propositional belief: it only says that "belief in God does not require evidence," not that "faith is not propositional belief." Reformed epistemology still understands faith as "believing certain propositions," only claiming that these propositions can be justified without evidence.

This leads to two problems. The first problem: the criterion of "properly basic." Plantinga appeals to "proper function" and "design plan" to define what is "properly basic." But this criterion depends on a teleological framework: human cognitive faculties have a design plan, and when they function properly according to that design plan, the beliefs they produce are warranted. Whether this framework holds is itself controversial. Without this teleological framework, "properly basic" becomes an empty label: any belief can be claimed to be "properly basic."

The second problem: the substantive disagreement of propositional content. Even if we accept the framework of Reformed epistemology, it cannot resolve the substantive disagreements among religious traditions. Christians can claim that "the Trinity" is properly basic, Muslims can claim that "tawhid" is properly basic, Buddhists can claim that "dependent origination and emptiness" is properly basic. If all these beliefs can be "properly basic," then the concept of "properly basic" loses its function of distinguishing true from false. Reformed epistemology can defend the rationality of faith, but not the truth of faith.

Structural Cognition: An Alternative Proposal

The concept of "structural cognition" is introduced here. Its core claim is: the epistemic status of faith is neither propositional knowledge nor blind credulity, but an awareness of a structural condition.

It is not propositional knowledge. Propositional knowledge is "knowing that something is true." Structural cognition is not assent to a proposition, but an awareness of a structural relation. It is not blind credulity. Blind credulity is acceptance without reason. Structural cognition has its cognitive content, only this content is not propositional. It is not mystical experience. Mystical experience is private and ineffable. Structural cognition is articulable and communicable, although its expression requires the aid of a formal language.

So what is "structural cognition"? It is the awareness of those invariant conditions that define one's own existence.

Take the elliptical model as an example. The moving point *P* moves on the ellipse. In one sense, it does not possess the propositional knowledge "my trajectory is an ellipse." But in another sense, its motion itself "embodies" a cognition of the elliptical structure: it moves according to the constraints of the ellipse, and its mode of motion is an "attunement" to the invariant $2a$.

Similarly, the believer has some awareness of his own structure of ultimate concern, but this awareness is not the propositional "I know that the unconditional exists," but the existential "attunement to the structure that defines existence." This awareness is embodied in life practice, in steadfastness amid uncertainty, and in the dual posture of commitment and anxiety toward the ultimate.

Three features of structural cognition. First, it is relational, not object-directed. Propositional knowledge always points to an object: knowing "what something is." Structural cognition does not point to an object, but is situated within a relation. The believer does not "know what God is," but "is situated within a relation to the unconditional." Second, it is practical, not theoretical. Propositional knowledge can be stated, tested, and debated. Structural cognition is embodied in practice: it manifests as a mode of existence, not as a set of propositions. This is not to say that structural cognition cannot be reflected upon, but that its primary form is practice, not theory. Third, it is fallible, but not falsifiable. Propositional knowledge can be falsified: if the proposition "God exists" is proven false, then those who believe it are mistaken. Structural cognition cannot be falsified, because it is not a proposition. But it can be fallible: one may misidentify one's true ultimate concern, may treat something finite as the unconditional. Tillich calls this misidentification "idolatry" (Tillich, 1957).

Responding to Possible Objections

Objection one: Is structural cognition too vague to be distinguished from "blind credulity"? This is the most important objection. If structural cognition cannot be stated as a proposition and cannot be tested, how does it differ from blind credulity?

Response: although structural cognition cannot be reduced to propositional knowledge, it can be reflectively expressed. One can reflect on one's own ultimate concern, can ask "what am I truly concerned about" and "am I treating something finite as the unconditional." This reflection, though not propositional proof, is a cognitive activity. It can be tested through practice: whether steadfastness persists in the face of uncertainty, whether vigilance is maintained in the face of idolatrous temptation, whether the overall structure of life embodies attunement to the unconditional.

This differs from blind credulity. Blind credulity refuses reflection and refuses testing. Structural cognition precisely demands reflection and testing—only its mode of testing is not propositional proof, but existential testing.

Objection two: Is structural cognition just dressing faith in epistemological clothing while remaining a form of fideism? Response: structural cognition is essentially different from fideism. Fideism claims that faith is unrelated to reason, or even opposed to it. Structural cognition claims that faith has its cognitive content, only this content is not propositional. It does not reject reason, but expands the scope of reason: reason includes not only propositional inference, but also the awareness of structural conditions.

This is consistent with Tillich's position. Tillich writes: "Reason is the precondition of faith; faith is the act in which reason reaches ecstatically beyond itself" (Tillich, 1957, p. 87). Faith does not cancel reason, but leads reason to its limit—to that structural condition that cannot be objectified or propositionalized.

Objection three: Is structural cognition just another way of speaking of "knowing-how"? This is an instructive objection. Gilbert Ryle distinguishes "knowing-that" from "knowing-how." The former is propositional knowledge, the latter is practical skill (Ryle, 1949). Structural cognition seems close to "knowing-how."

But there is a key difference. "Knowing-how" is a skill about how to do something; it is trainable and verifiable. Structural cognition is not a skill, but a mode of existence. A believer does not "learn" how to relate to the unconditional, but is "grasped." This is not a skill, but an existential state. Therefore, structural cognition is deeper than "knowing-how": it defines who a person is, not merely what a person can do.

Summary

This has accomplished three tasks. First, it has clarified the basic landscape of contemporary epistemology of faith: evidentialism and Reformed epistemology share a propositionalist premise, namely that faith is propositional belief. Second, it has criticized the respective difficulties of evidentialism and Reformed epistemology. Evidentialism cannot explain the structure of "holding fast in uncertainty"; Reformed epistemology, while opening a space for faith, still remains within the propositionalist framework and cannot resolve the substantive disagreements among traditions. Third, it has introduced "structural cognition" as an alternative proposal. Structural cognition is relational, practical, and reflectively articulable but not falsifiable. It is neither propositional knowledge nor blind credulity, but the awareness of the structural conditions that define one's own existence.

The next section applies this epistemological framework to the philosophy of death, developing an elliptical account of death.

An Elliptical Account of Death

The Core Problems of the Philosophy of Death

Death is one of the oldest and most difficult problems in philosophy. Its difficulty lies not in "what death is"—biology can answer that question—but in "what death means for the deceased." This question can be decomposed into three interrelated sub-questions.

First, is death a bad thing? If death is the end of consciousness, then there is no experience after death. How can a state without experience be called "bad"? Epicurus's classic argument is: "Death is nothing to us. For when we exist, death is not yet present; and when death is present, we no longer exist" (Epicurus, n.d.). Therefore, death can neither be experienced as bad nor as good; it is not a state that can be evaluated at all.

Second, if death is a bad thing, for whom is it bad? If death means the end of the subject, then the subject who is "harmed" no longer exists at the time of death. How can a non-existent subject be harmed? This is the so-called "no-subject problem."

Third, if death is a bad thing, when is it bad? Death occurs at a certain moment, but "bad" seems to require a subject who bears the bad. If the subject does not exist after death, then when does the "bad" occur? This is the "timing problem."

These three questions constitute the core problems of the philosophy of death. Any philosophical account of death must respond to them.

Nagel's Deprivation Account and Its Difficulties

Thomas Nagel, in his 1970 paper "Death," proposed an influential response. He argues that death is bad not because it brings suffering, but because it deprives the deceased of goods they could have enjoyed. If a person

could have continued to live, to experience, to pursue his goals, then death deprives him of these possibilities. This deprivation is a harm, even if it is not experienced (Nagel, 1979).

Nagel's argument has an important advantage: it avoids the difficulty of "death being experienced as bad." Death does not need to be experienced as bad; it only needs to deprive one of goods one could have enjoyed, and it can be bad. This is like a person who is betrayed without knowing it—he is still harmed, even though the harm is not experienced.

But the deprivation account faces three persistent difficulties. First, the no-subject problem remains. If death means the end of the subject, then who is the subject who is "deprived"? Nagel's response is: the one who is deprived is the person who once existed and could have continued to exist. But this response depends on a premise: the deceased can still be identified as "the deprived" after death. If death means the complete end of the subject, then "the deceased" is not a subject who can be identified, but merely an individual who once existed. How can something that no longer exists be said to be "deprived"?

Second, the timing problem remains. When does the deprivation occur? If it occurs before death, then the deceased has not yet been deprived; if it occurs after death, then there is no subject left to be deprived. Nagel tries to avoid this problem by distinguishing "being deprived" from "being experienced as deprived," but this distinction itself needs explanation: in what sense is a "deprivation" that is not experienced by any subject a real event?

Third, the symmetry problem. If death is bad because it deprives one of goods one could have enjoyed, then prenatal non-existence likewise deprives one of goods one could have enjoyed—why do we not grieve for prenatal non-existence? Nagel's response is: prenatal non-existence is not a deprivation of any person, because that person did not yet exist. But this response seems also applicable to death: posthumous non-existence is not a deprivation of any person, because that person no longer exists. The symmetry between the two seems impossible to break.

Elliptical Dissolution: An Alternative Formulation

The formulation of "elliptical dissolution" is introduced here. Its core claim is: death is not the end of the subject, but the deconstruction of the foci—the irreversible loss of a particular focal-relation configuration.

This formulation is not another way of saying "the immortality of the soul." Elliptical dissolution does not presuppose any substantial soul or consciousness continuing after death. It is not a proof of "life after death." Elliptical dissolution does not claim that the deceased "continues to live" in any sense. It is not a metaphor for "conservation of energy." Elliptical dissolution is not a physical proposition, but an ontological one.

So what is "elliptical dissolution"? In the elliptical model, an existence-system consists of a center, two foci, a moving point, and the invariant $2a$. The motion of the moving point P is defined by the relational structure between the foci F_1 and F_2. This relational structure is not an attribute of the moving point, but the condition that makes the moving point what it is.

Now consider: when this ellipse dissolves, what happens? The moving point no longer moves along the elliptical trajectory. The relational structure between the foci is no longer instantiated. The invariant $2a$ no longer constrains any moving point. But this is not "nothing"—not pure nothingness. It is the disappearance of a particular relational structure. This relational structure once defined the mode of motion of an existence-system; now it is no longer instantiated.

Death is this kind of dissolution. It is not the end of the subject, but the deconstruction of the focal-relation configuration. What is deprived is not the future experience of some subject, but the relational structure itself that once defined an existence-system. This deprivation is real, but it is not a deprivation of some "subject"—because the subject itself is a function of this relational structure, not an entity outside it.

Using this formulation to respond to the three difficulties. The no-subject problem: what is deprived is not a subject, but a relational structure. This relational structure once instantiated an existence-system; now it is no longer instantiated. The locus of harm is not at the "subject," but at the "relational structure." This is not a subject being deprived of something, but a relational structure no longer being instantiated. This is like the disappearance of a piece of music: what is deprived is not the experience of some listener, but the music itself. Music is not a "subject," but its disappearance is real.

The timing problem: the deprivation occurs at the moment of elliptical dissolution. This moment is not a moment when "a subject experiences deprivation," but a moment when "a relational structure is no longer instantiated." It does not require a bearer, because it is not an event, but a change of state—from "instantiated" to "no longer instantiated."

The symmetry problem: prenatal non-existence and posthumous non-existence are asymmetrical. Prenatal non-existence is not "the dissolution of a relational structure," because that relational structure was not yet instantiated. Posthumous non-existence is "the dissolution of a relational structure," because that relational structure was once instantiated. Dissolution is a loss, while not-yet-formed is not a loss. Therefore, grief attaches to death but not to prenatal non-existence—not because death is more painful, but because death is a loss, while prenatal non-existence is not.

Responding to Three Standard Objections

Objection one: Does elliptical dissolution merely replace "subject" with "relational structure," while the problem remains? This objection has some force. If "relational structure" is merely a more abstract "subject," then elliptical dissolution has not really resolved the no-subject problem.

Response: relational structure and subject are essentially different. A subject is an entity that can remain unchanged through changes in relations. A relational structure is not an entity; it is the configuration of relations themselves. When a relational structure dissolves, no "something" disappears—what disappears is the relational structure itself. This is not "a thing no longer exists," but "a relation is no longer instantiated." These two have an ontological difference: the former requires an entity, the latter requires only a relation.

Objection two: Does elliptical dissolution cancel the tragedy of death? On the contrary. Elliptical dissolution preserves the tragedy of death, and expresses it more precisely. The tragedy of death does not lie in "loss of future experiences"—this is still a subject-centered formulation—but in "a unique relational structure is no longer instantiated." This relational structure is irreplaceable: no other ellipse can fully take its place. This is not "loss of something," but "disappearance of an irreplaceable relational configuration."

Objection three: Is elliptical dissolution incompatible with "eternal life"? This is an important question. If death is elliptical dissolution, how is "eternal life" possible?

Response: elliptical dissolution does not exclude a certain understanding of "eternal life," but it excludes the understanding of "the infinite continuation of the moving point's trajectory." If eternal life means that the same ellipse is never dissolved, then elliptical dissolution excludes eternal life. But if eternal life means "the focal-relation structure is redistributed into a larger maternal elliptical system," then elliptical dissolution does

not exclude eternal life. This is not "the same ellipse exists forever," but "the constitutive relations of the ellipse are integrated into a larger relational structure."

Elliptical Dissolution and the Problem of "Eternal Life"

This subsection develops the elliptical account of "eternal life." In traditional philosophy of religion, "eternal life" is usually understood as "the immortality of the soul" or "resurrection." Both understandings presuppose a substantial "I"—soul or body—continuing after death. The elliptical account does not presuppose this substantial "I," but it also does not claim pure annihilation.

The elliptical account claims: death is the dissolution of the ellipse, but not the end of existence. The constitutive relations of the ellipse—the relational structure between the foci—can be redistributed into a larger maternal elliptical system. This is not "I continue to live," but "the relational structure that constituted me continues to participate in a larger relational network."

This account has a certain structural resonance with the Buddhist "no-self" (*anātman*), but there is a key difference. Buddhism claims "no-self," that is, there is no substantial self; but it also claims "rebirth," that is, causal relations continue after death. The elliptical account does not claim rebirth, because rebirth presupposes some carrier of causal continuity—even if this carrier is not "I," it is still something continuous. The elliptical account claims: constitutive relations are redistributed, not that "the same thing" continues to exist.

This account also has a certain structural resonance with the Christian "resurrection," but there is a key difference. Christianity claims "resurrection," that is, body and soul are restored at the end of days. The elliptical account does not claim resurrection, because resurrection presupposes that some "I" is restored—even if this "I" is transformed. The elliptical account claims: constitutive relations are redistributed, not that "I" is restored.

The uniqueness of the elliptical account lies in this: it neither claims the continuation of "I," nor claims pure annihilation. It claims: death is the reconfiguration of relations, not the disappearance of substance. This reconfiguration is real, but it does not presuppose any substantial "I."

This brings an important ontological consequence: death is not "my endpoint," but "the redistribution of my relational structure." This is not consolation, nor liberation. It is merely a more precise description of the structure of death.

Summary

This section has accomplished four tasks. First, it has stated the core problems of the philosophy of death: the no-subject problem, the timing problem, and the symmetry problem. Second, it has critically examined Nagel's deprivation account, pointing out its difficulties in resolving these three problems. Third, it has introduced the formulation of "elliptical dissolution," arguing that death can be understood as "the irreversible loss of a focal-relation configuration," rather than "the end of the subject." This formulation dissolves the no-subject problem (the locus of harm is at the relational structure), explains the timing problem (the deprivation occurs at the moment of dissolution), and breaks the symmetry problem (dissolution is a loss, while not-yet-formed is not a loss). Fourth, it has developed the elliptical account of "eternal life," claiming that death is not the end of relations, but the reconfiguration of relations. This account neither presupposes the continuation of "I," nor claims pure annihilation.

The next section summarizes the whole paper and defines what the model can and cannot claim.

Conclusion: What the Model Can and Cannot Claim

A Recapitulation of the Three Core Theses

This paper began from an unexamined premise—"faith as belief"—and argued that this premise obscures the structural dimension of faith. Drawing on Tillich's concept of "ultimate concern," I proposed the elliptical model and developed the argument along three directions (Tillich, 1957).

The first thesis is epistemological: the epistemic status of faith is neither propositional knowledge nor blind credulity, but a kind of "structural cognition"—an awareness of those invariant conditions that define one's own existence. This cognition is relational (not object-directed), practical (not theoretical), and reflectively articulable (but not falsifiable). It does not reject reason, but expands the scope of reason: reason includes not only propositional inference, but also the awareness of structural conditions.

The second thesis is pluralist: by shifting from "substance" to "structure," the elliptical model avoids the difficulties facing Hick's pluralistic hypothesis (Hick, 1989). It does not name what the object of faith "is," but describes the structural condition to which faith is attuned. The differences among traditions lie in how they symbolically express this structural invariant, not in the object to which faith refers. This is a weaker claim than Hick's, and its "weakness" is precisely its virtue—it does not require traditions to abandon their substantive claims, only to acknowledge that their claims are symbolic expressions of the same structural condition.

The third thesis is in the philosophy of death: death can be understood as "elliptical dissolution"—the irreversible loss of a particular focal-relation configuration. This formulation dissolves the no-subject problem (the locus of harm is at the relational structure, not the subject), explains the timing problem (the deprivation occurs at the moment of dissolution), and breaks the symmetry problem (dissolution is a loss, while not-yet-formed is not a loss). On this basis, "eternal life" can be reinterpreted as the redistribution of constitutive relations, rather than the continuation of "I" or pure annihilation.

These three theses share the same formal language—the elliptical model. This model is not a metaphor, but a structural isomorphism; not rhetoric, but formalization.

What the Model Can Claim

After summarizing the whole paper, it is necessary to clarify what the elliptical model can establish. First, it can claim a kind of formal precision. The elliptical model provides a formal language for Tillich's "ultimate concern." In this language, "the unconditional cannot be objectified" is expressed as "the foci are not on the curve"; "the moving point is constrained by the invariant" is expressed as "$PF_1 + PF_2 = 2a$"; "the state of tension" is expressed as "the eccentricity $e = c/a$." This formalization is not a "mathematicization" of religious experience, but a precise expression of the structure already implicit in phenomenological description.

Second, it can claim a cross-traditional translatability. The elliptical model provides a neutral formal language that different traditions can use to express their own structural intuitions. Christianity can say: the Trinity is the symbolic expression of the bipolar structure; Islam can say: tawhid is the absolute reliance on the invariant $2a$; Buddhism can say: dependent origination and emptiness is the awareness of the focal-relation structure. The model does not judge which of these expressions is right or wrong; it only provides a translatable framework.

Third, it can claim a middle path in epistemology. "Structural cognition" is neither evidentialism nor fideism. It acknowledges that faith has its cognitive content, but this content is not propositional. It acknowledges the role of reason in faith, but this role is not propositional proof. It provides a new way of defending the rationality of faith—not by proving propositions to be true, but by describing the structure of faith.

Fourth, it can claim a new formulation in the philosophy of death. "Elliptical dissolution" provides a new formulation for the deprivation account. It preserves the core intuition of the deprivation account—that death is a loss—but shifts the locus of loss from the "subject" to the "relational structure" (Nagel, 1979). This shift dissolves the no-subject problem without canceling the tragedy of death.

What the Model Cannot Claim

Honestly defining the boundaries of the model is as important as asserting its contributions.

First, it cannot claim that "existence is an ellipse." This paper does not claim that the world "really is" an ellipse. The elliptical model is heuristic, not ontological. Its value lies in providing an analytical tool, not in describing the true face of reality. If someone asks, "Is the world really an ellipse?", the answer is: the question is wrongly posed. The model is not a description of the world, but an expression of certain structural features of the world.

Second, it cannot resolve the substantive disagreements among religious traditions. The elliptical model does not tell us who is right among the Christian Trinity, the Islamic tawhid, and the Buddhist dependent origination and emptiness. It only provides a formal language to describe how these traditions each express the structure of "ultimate concern." It does not make judgments about the specific doctrines of any tradition. It does not claim that "all religions are the same"—this is an assertion it cannot bear.

Third, it cannot replace religious experience. The model is formal; religious experience is living. The model can help us understand the structure of religious experience, but cannot replace religious experience itself. A believer does not need to know the elliptical equation to have a genuine ultimate concern. The model is for philosophers and scholars of religion, not for believers.

Fourth, it cannot prove "eternal life." The elliptical dissolution account does not prove the existence of life after death, nor does it prove its non-existence. It only says: if "eternal life" is to be understood, it cannot be understood as "the infinite continuation of the moving point's trajectory," but should be understood as "the redistribution of constitutive relations." This is a philosophical interpretation, not a theological assertion.

Fifth, it cannot be falsified. This is the most important boundary of the model, and also the place where it is most vulnerable to attack. The elliptical model cannot be falsified, because it is not an empirical proposition. It does not predict any observable phenomena, nor does it exclude any possible observational results. This is not its weakness, but its nature: it is a formal model, not an empirical theory. Its value lies in description and integration, not in prediction and testing.

Directions for Future Research

The argument of this paper can be further developed in three directions. First, dialogue with more religious traditions. This paper has primarily engaged with Christian theology (Tillich) and religious pluralism (Hick). Future research can apply the elliptical model to other traditions: Islamic theology (such as the Sufi concept of *fanā*), Hindu "Brahman-Ātman unity," and Daoist "Dao follows nature." It remains to be explored whether these traditions can also be expressed through the elliptical model, and what meaningful differentiations emerge between them.

Second, dialogue with scientific models. The elliptical model has structural resonances with the concepts of "attractor" and "order parameter" in complex systems science. Future research can explore whether the elliptical model can be formalized as a dynamical systems model, and whether more precise dialogue can be established with synergetics, general systems theory, and network theory.

Third, dialogue with practical fields. It remains to be investigated whether the elliptical model can be applied to religious dialogue, psychological counseling, and hospice care, and whether it can provide a new analytical tool for these fields. This is not the task of this paper, but it is a promising direction for research.

Concluding Remarks

This paper began from a simple question: what is faith? The mainstream answer in contemporary philosophy of religion is: faith is propositional belief. This paper has argued that this answer obscures the structural dimension of faith.

Drawing on Tillich's concept of "ultimate concern," this paper proposed the elliptical model, understanding faith as attunement to a structural condition. This model is not a metaphor, but formalization; not rhetoric, but structural isomorphism. It provides a middle path for the epistemology of faith and a new formulation for the philosophy of death.

This model cannot claim everything. It cannot claim that "existence is an ellipse," cannot resolve the substantive disagreements among traditions, cannot replace religious experience, cannot prove "eternal life," and cannot be falsified. But these boundaries are not its failure, but its honesty. The value of a model lies not in its ability to explain everything, but in its ability to provide precise, communicable, and reflectively articulable descriptions within its own boundaries.

If the argument of this paper holds, then "faith" is no longer a vague, unworkable concept. It can be formalized, analyzed, and brought into dialogue. This is not to cancel the depth of faith, but to provide a more precise language for its depth.

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