

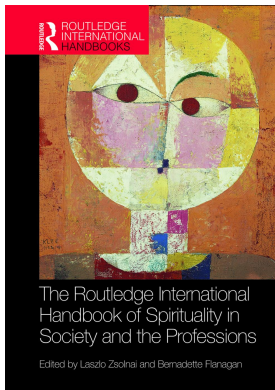
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Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

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## **The Routledge International Handbook of Spirituality in Society and the Professions**

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### **Spirituality and philosophy**

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315445489-3>

David Rousseau

**Published online on: 12 Mar 2019**

**How to cite :-** David Rousseau. 12 Mar 2019, *Spirituality and philosophy from: The Routledge International Handbook of Spirituality in Society and the Professions* Routledge

Accessed on: 16 Oct 2021

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315445489-3>

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## 2

## SPIRITUALITY AND PHILOSOPHY

*David Rousseau***Worldviews**

Although some of philosophy's historical concerns are congruent with those of spirituality, there is also a significant difference between them. Spirituality is practice oriented – a way of living that is informed by a personal worldview. Philosophy, on the other hand, is reflection oriented – it is a discipline of inquiry that (*inter alia*) questions the assumptions behind worldview tenets and tries to work out objective reasons for advocating types of attitudes and kinds of practical action. Worldviews are thus the “common ground” where philosophy and spirituality intersect in a mutually informative way, as shown in Figure 2.1. There is a long history in both the East and the West of philosophy and spirituality engaged with each other in this way (Hadot 1995; Hamilton 2001, 3–5). An understanding of the structure and evolution of worldviews is therefore important for understanding the interplay between philosophy and spirituality.

Worldviews are complex constructs involving a range of assumptions and beliefs about the nature of the world and the place of human beings in the scheme of things. Essentially, a worldview is a “map of reality” that people use to order their lives (Hiebert 2008, 15). A worldview can be characterized as comprising three main elements, namely a perspective on the nature and sources of knowledge (“epistemology”), a perspective on the nature of the world (a “world picture” or *Weltbild*), and a perspective on one's existence in the world (a “life view” or *Lebensanschauung*). The categories have a rich structure that includes ideas about how to gain knowledge, what is possible or not, and how to make value judgments (Rousseau et al. 2016a; Rousseau and Billingham 2018).

Personal worldviews evolve as people try to integrate their knowledge, experience, and intuitions into a coherent framework they can use to make sense of their lives and make decisions about how to live and what to do (Emmons 1999; Hiebert 2008; James 1902). Figure 2.2 illustrates the balancing interaction involved in the formation and evolution of worldviews. Personal knowledge, experiences, and intuitions are not always in agreement, so this balancing reconciliation is not a simple process and tends to be under constant revision.

The rich structure and complex dynamics of worldviews entail that it is not possible to classify people's worldviews in a simple way, because someone's commitments in one area do not determine (although they do condition) what their commitments might be in another area (Wilby et al. 2015). Many combinations of worldview tenets occur in practice. However, *spiritual*

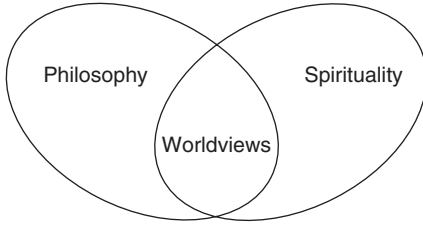


Figure 2.1 Worldviews as the Interface between Philosophy and Spirituality.

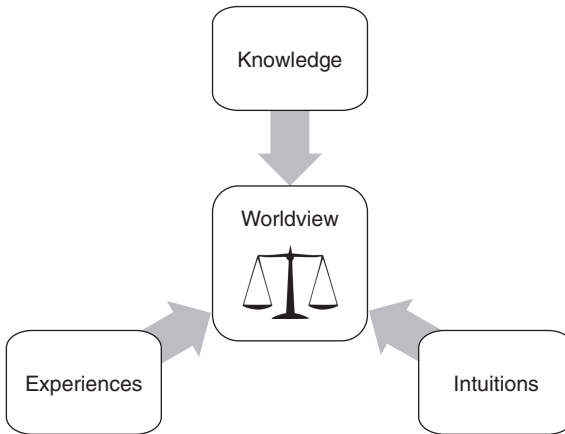


Figure 2.2 Worldview Formation as a Balancing Process.

worldviews show a substantial consistency in certain types of tenets, and typically include such views as that (Rousseau 2014a):

- existence has meaning and value;
- life has an “ultimate” purpose;
- we are genuine contributors to how life’s “drama” unfolds;
- there are some absolute values (e.g., goodness, fairness, sacredness, honor, dignity, duty);
- we are responsible for our choices;
- we are responsible and accountable for our actions;
- there is “more” to us and the world than just the physical aspects; and
- some situations are objectively better than others and should be protected and sought.

Clearly, not every spiritual person has all these “spiritual beliefs” or feels them equally strongly, but to count as a spiritual person, one has to hold some of these beliefs to some degree. In general, it is because of their grounding in spiritual beliefs that the goals, attitudes, and actions of spiritual people count as expressions of *spirituality*, rather than being expressions of strategic cunning, religious obligation, or cultural sophistication.

A worldview incorporating some of the beliefs described above can be characterized as one of “spiritual realism,” that is to say, spiritual people believe in the real existence of such things such as choice, freedom, norms, agency, meanings, purposes, and so on. Thinking of these as

“real” means thinking they are not merely contingent products of our culture or cognitive limitations but would be true (or potentially true) of the world even if humans did not exist.

These kinds of commitments represent matters of great interest to philosophers, who have, in a tradition dating back to at least to the time of Socrates (ca. 450 BCE) in the West and the Upanishads (800–500 BCE) in the East, tried to find rational ways of characterizing and assessing such beliefs. For example, the spiritual worldview includes the belief that it “really” matters how things are, and that we can act to make a “real” difference to how things turn out. Philosophical analysis shows that this entails beliefs (amongst others) in the existence of some absolute values, an objective reality, the accessibility of real knowledge, the existence of free will, true agency, and the validity of causal non-determinism (Rousseau 2014a). Many such fundamental assumptions and systemic interdependencies between them can be extrapolated from spiritual beliefs. These assumptions reflect positions taken on matters that have long been considered important open questions in philosophy.

For spiritual people, their spiritual beliefs are grounded in a range of intuitions and personal experiences, but the ultimate nature of these intuitions and experiences is unclear too. Consequently, the coherence and validity of spiritual beliefs are presently undetermined. This is not to cast doubt on the practical utility of spiritual beliefs – there is considerable evidence for positive correlations with personal and social welfare factors (as discussed elsewhere in this volume) – but rather to acknowledge that we do not understand the mechanism whereby these benefits arise, and hence have no principled way of judging the extent to which specific spiritual beliefs are representative of the objective nature of the concrete world.

Philosophy, by seeking ways in which the truth, falsehood, or likelihood of spiritual beliefs can be assessed, may therefore make an important contribution to the evolution of spirituality in contemporary society. This is a break from the historical situation in which spiritual beliefs were grounded in religious teachings that are typically not open to question and hence constrained in terms of their evolution.

The philosophical questions that bear on spiritual beliefs are increasingly the subject of joint investigations between philosophers and scientists under the rubric of “Big Questions,” ranging over such issues as whether humans have free will, whether reality is fundamentally exclusively physical, whether consciousness is emergent on physical complexity or is a fundamental property, whether moral dispositions are a product of or merely conditioned by culture, and so on. Many think that progress in this area cannot be made by philosophy or science on their own but only by leveraging the strengths of each. Many of these questions have been the subject of philosophical inquiry for thousands of years, without resolution. However, for most of that period, there was not any relevant scientific evidence available to inform the philosophical inquiry. The current situation is rather different though, and contemporary philosophy has rich scientific resources and evidence to draw on, as contemporary science is increasingly engaging with issues relevant to spirituality, such as free will, moral intuitions, religious experiences, and the nature of consciousness.

This emerging partnership between philosophy and science in the study of questions that are significant for spirituality is a consequence of the decline of religious authority since the beginning of the late modern period. For the last half-century at least, the majority of philosophers in the Western world have been non-religious (Oppy 2012, 82). However, the decline of religion in the West has not been accompanied by a decline in spirituality. Investigation reveals that spirituality is sustained by two widely encountered phenomena, namely “spiritual intuitions” and “spiritual experiences” (Rousseau 2014a). Both of these stand as kinds of evidence that can be subject to philosophical and scientific inquiry, and hence provide an opportunity for philosophy and science to contribute to the development of spirituality independently from religious arguments.

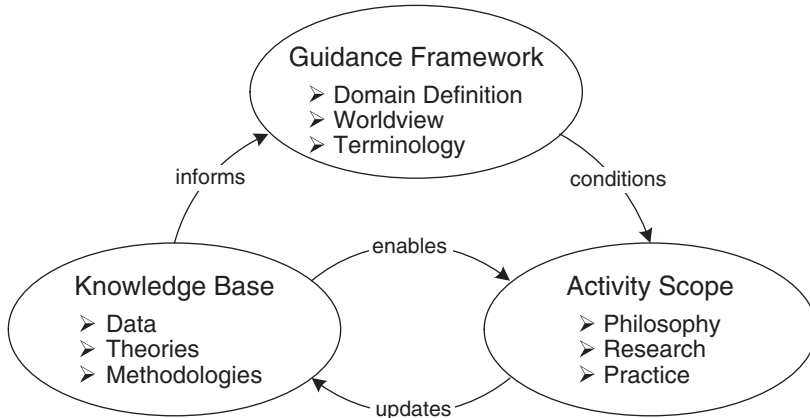


Figure 2.3 Generic Model of an Academic Discipline (adapted from Rousseau et al. 2016b).

It is, however, important to acknowledge that scientific inquiry in this area, as in any other, is always conditioned by researchers' worldviews. Figure 2.3 illustrates this interplay between worldviews and knowledge-producing disciplinary activity.

Researcher worldviews might at their core contain very different philosophical frameworks that condition their research programs in different ways. This variety exists because scientific knowledge is incomplete, and hence philosophers and scientists have to work with multiple assumptions about the nature of what is not known or cannot be seen. These assumptions have to be consistent with each other and with our firmest knowledge so that the resulting worldview forms a coherent and internally consistent "paradigm" (Kuhn 1996). However, there are many ways of covering the gaps in our knowledge in this way, and so inevitably a number of different competing frameworks have become established. The differences between these frameworks typically come down to differences in assumptions about what can be known (epistemology), what the fundamental things to be studied are (ontology), and the nature of what exists in a concrete way (metaphysics). The multiple philosophical frameworks in use amongst contemporary researchers enable a variety of investigative avenues, but also constrain interests and options.

### Philosophical frameworks for spiritual inquiry

To give a flavor of the richness of these investigative opportunities and constraints, some of these philosophical frameworks will be briefly presented here. The summary given here is only to give a sense of this breadth and the opportunities and constraints they bring, rather than attempting to be comprehensive. In each case, some indication will be given of how that perspective may be pertinent to the investigation of spiritual beliefs.

*Scientific Realism* has recently (21st century) become the leading philosophical framework amongst contemporary philosophers of science specializing in metaphysics (Schrenk 2016). It is important to understand the scope and limitations of Scientific Realism because the majority of scientific research into issues relevant to spiritual realism will be conducted from this frame. Scientific Realism holds that the world has a definite and mind-independent structure that can be progressively revealed by science. This framework is very open to how answers to Big Questions might turn out, for example, it can accommodate such contrasting views as Atomism (which holds that only fundamental particles are real in an essential way and every complex

thing is no more than arrangements of particles in motion), Priority Monism (which holds that only one thing really exists, namely the whole universe and every apparent thing is a partial perception of some aspect of the whole), or Compositional Pluralism (which holds that many kinds of things exist with properties that are not wholly contingent on their composition or context). It does not adjudicate between Physicalism (the idea that reality is grounded in wholly physical substances) and Materialism (the idea that reality is grounded in substances that behave lawfully [“matter”] but are not necessarily exclusively physical in nature). Some of the possible positions with Scientific Realism such as Physicalism appear incompatible with spiritual realism, while others such as Compositional Pluralism do not (Rousseau 2014b).

*Phenomenology* became a prominent philosophical framework in the early 20th century. In contrast with Scientific Realism, it takes as its point of investigative departure not “substances” but *experiences*, and hence is focused on the analysis of intensionality (the “aboutness” of experiences), consciousness, the subjectivity of experiences, and first-person perspectives (Smith 2016). These factors are highly significant from the perspective of a spiritual worldview and Phenomenology is important here because it remains a challenge for materialistic science to give an adequate account of the nature of subjectivity, intensionality and meaning. By highlighting the significance of experiences, Phenomenology provides an antidote to a tendency in science to diminish or devalue what it cannot explain.

*Personalism* is a very broad philosophical framework that holds that the human *person* should be the starting point of philosophical reflection on existence and the possibility of knowledge. This kind of analysis takes the experience, status, and the dignity of the person as the starting-point for all subsequent philosophical analysis. Factors such as dignity, morality, freedom, and agency are core concerns for both Personalism and spirituality, making this a valuable framework for spirituality studies by ensuring that the richness and value of issues relevant to spirituality are recognized. Despite its focus on traditionally religious concerns such as free will and morality, contemporary Personalism is not religiously committed and embraces atheists, realists, naturalists, and idealists, as well as religious philosophers (Williams and Bengtsson 2016).

*Relativism* is a philosophical framework that maintains that all knowledge and judgments are products of convention and context and hence hold only relative to contingent frameworks of assessment (Baghrarian and Carter 2016). According to this view, all claims and attributions are only relatively so, and hence nothing is inherently true, good, beautiful, or justified. Relativism is set against the ultimate validity of any spiritual belief, so research done from this perspective typically tries to explain away, rather than find concrete grounds for, ideas supporting spiritual realism. Although Relativism is skeptical about spiritual realism it is, in more moderate forms, important for cautioning researchers to be sensitive to the conditioning influence of culture and the limiting constraints of our cognitive apparatus.

*Classical Indian Philosophy* represents an ancient tradition of inquiry into the nature of reality and the sources of knowledge. Classical Indian Philosophy developed in tandem with the Indian religions (e.g., the Vedic-Upanishadic tradition, Buddhism, and Jainism) because its central concerns were the same: investigating the nature of reality and seeking a sound basis for personal action. However, Classical Indian Philosophy remained distinct from religion in that it sought, in all its schools, to find rational means for justifying beliefs (for example, by referring to perception, inference, and testimony) instead of deferring to religious authority (Phillips 2016). Classical Indian Philosophy has many features in common with both contemporary Scientific Realism and Personalism, but it also evaluates routes to knowledge not prominent in contemporary Western philosophical investigations such as yogic perception and meditative experiences. Contemporary forms of Classical Indian Philosophy thus provide a rational framework of investigation into phenomena relevant to spirituality that may be overlooked in many Western philosophical frameworks.

## Emerging approaches to the justification of spiritual beliefs

In the absence of definitive scientific or philosophical knowledge about the validity of spiritual beliefs, such beliefs are predicated on two main kinds of evidence: “spiritual intuitions” and “spiritual experiences.” This section will briefly discuss the nature of these kinds of evidence and the ways in which they are facilitating research that might objectively justify (or falsify) spiritual realism.

There is a long tradition of philosophical reflection on intuitions relevant to spiritual realisms. Intuitions represent propositions whose truth is self-evident to someone who understands the concepts involved in articulating them, demanding no further explanation (Weinberg 2007). Examples of spiritual intuitions abound in the philosophical literature; two examples will suffice here.

The first is from Aristotle (ca. 330 BCE):

There really is, as everyone to some extent divines, a natural justice and injustice that is binding on all men, even on those who have no association or covenant with each other.  
(Aristotle 1946, *Rhetoric* 1.13.1373b5)

The second is from Immanuel Kant:

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence ... the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. I do not need to search for them and merely conjecture them as though they were veiled in obscurity ... I see them before me and connect them immediately with the consciousness of my existence.  
(Kant 1788/1997, 133)

Such intuitions raise questions about what their source is, and hence in what way, and to what extent, they can be relied on as relevant to spiritual realisms. These questions can be investigated in objective ways by the science–philosophy partnership. For example, in psychological experiments with adults, it is possible to bypass cultural priming by asking people to make judgments in unfamiliar moral scenarios. Such studies found people to behave similarly, independently of demographic variations (Pyysiäinen and Hauser 2010), suggesting that that religious, political, and legal institutions condition or guide moral reasoning but are not the originators of moral intuitions. This inference is reinforced by separate experiments demonstrating that pre-verbal children have a sense of right and wrong (Bloom 2010; Hamlin, Wynn, and Bloom 2007).

The origins of these intuitions can be further investigated from several theoretical perspectives such as evolutionary game theory and evolutionary epistemology. The latter is the idea that evolution shapes our cognitive capabilities, including sensory apparatus and mental categories, so that we perceive and intuitively interpret the concrete world in an approximately realistic way so that our actions will be appropriate to our situation, thus making our survival likely (Bradie and Harms 2017). The near-universality of moral intuitions can be considered on such grounds to potentially reflect something present in the nature of the concrete world, suggesting that spiritual intuitions about matters of value may be realistically grounded. However, if we take such an evolutionary interpretation seriously, then it should apply not only to humans but to other species too, at least to some degree. Studies suggest that such evidence can be found, for example, we have many observations of wild animals behaving altruistically or empathetically (e.g., Barber 1993; Masson and McCarthy 1994; Wilson 1975/2000). Recently, empathetic behavior by rats has been demonstrated under laboratory-controlled conditions (Bartal et al. 2011), the first

time such a result has been reported in a species other than dolphins or the higher apes. These studies lend some scientific support for long-established philosophical models such as “Natural Moral Law Theory,” which holds that nature has an inherent ethical dimension (Murphy 2011; Oderberg 2010; Rousseau 2014b). Such studies, potentially also involving other kinds of spiritual intuitions, present a promising avenue for exploring the validity of spiritual realisms.

A second research avenue is presented by spiritual experiences. These are varied in character, including such phenomena as sensing a divine presence, apparent contact with someone who has died, having a prayer answered, sensing a sacred presence in nature, near-death experiences, and mystical unitive experiences (Beardsworth 1977; Davis 1989; Fenwick et al. 2009; Fenwick and Brayne 2011; Fox 2008; Hay 2002; Holden et al. 2009; Marshall 2005; Maxwell and Tschudin 1990). Studies show that the prevalence of spiritual experiences is stable across demographic divisions and uncorrelated with levels of religiosity (Hay and Hunt 2000; Yao and Badham 2008).

Several databases each holding many thousands of case reports of “spiritual experiences” have been established in academic institutions, for example, in the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre in the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UK) and in the Division of Perceptual Studies in the Department of Psychiatry and Neurobehavioral Sciences at the University of Virginia (USA).

These reports can support various kinds of scientific and philosophical investigations relevant to spiritual realisms. Although these experiences typically cannot be investigated in a direct way, it is possible to analyze them and make conjectures about what would have to be true about the nature of the world or the nature of individuals for these experiences to occur or the beliefs they engender to be true, and to make conjectures about the kinds of evidence that would be telling toward testing those conjectures, thus opening up new research opportunities. An example of such study is the analysis of veridical reports of experiences occurring under conditions of cardiac arrest. Medically, such experiences, which have a rich narrative structure, cannot occur because during cardiac arrest the brain is deprived of oxygen and electrical activity falls below currently measurable limits, even in the deep structures (Fenwick and Fenwick 2008; Van Lommel et al. 2001). Experiences under such conditions suggest that mental processes are not entirely contingent on brain processes, and hence open up the possibility that the concrete world is not entirely physical, and consciousness may be a fundamental rather than a derivative phenomenon, in line with certain spiritual beliefs (Greyson 2010; Greyson et al. 2009; Holden 2009; Rousseau 2011, 2012, 2015). If mental processes do not depend on brain process in an essential way, there should be other kinds of evidence for such independent functioning. Studies suggest that such evidence can be found, for example, there are cases of individuals with normal intelligence despite grossly subnormal brain development (e.g., Lorber 1965, 1983), and cases of persons with normal brain development but displaying radically superior cognitive capacities (e.g., Treffert 1989). Studies building on such work could potentially validate spiritual beliefs concerning the existence of non-physical aspects to concrete reality.

### **Conclusions and future directions**

There is a significant interplay between philosophy and spirituality, centered on the matter of worldviews. Philosophy, in collaboration with science, can and is likely to make a significant contribution to the insights arising from spirituality studies, and hence to the future development of spirituality and its impact in society. There is great potential for progress in this area due to the emergence of modern investigative methods and the development of large academic databases of relevant data. There is scope for expansion of current research activities, for example,



by further developing research frameworks that integrate scientific and philosophic approaches and facilitate interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary working (Rousseau et al. 2016c), and by identifying new sources of relevant data (e.g., exceptional observations recorded in medical or psychology databases). This is a promising area of work, because early indications suggest that spiritual beliefs have at least some validity, and that the spiritual beliefs and the actions they motivate lie at the heart of personal and social well-being. We cannot be indifferent to philosophy's quest to clarify the authenticity of spirituality, nor the prospect of scientific research that reinforces, rather than demeans, spiritual worldviews.

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