

Constructing and Deconstructing the Terminology of Spirituality: A Journey Back to the Greek Roots

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, literature related to spirituality presents rising interest within researchers. Many tried to encode the term but there is not a widely agreed definition of spirituality. My interest in investigating the terminology led me to some hypothesis. The antiquity of the word must be important in order to understand how the word was originally used. The purpose of this short communication is giving flesh to the notion of spirituality as it goes into the heart of Ancient Greek philosophy in order to encode the term. A large body of literature acknowledges the connectedness between spirituality and the Greek word πνεύμα (pneuma) which means spirit, mind, soul, and breathing. The semantic root of the English term spirituality is the Latin word spirare which meant to breathe, to blow and to live. Spirituality does elicit an experiential sense by force of the words' own signification and etymology. Based on the definitions of spirit outlined in this manuscript; the spirit animates not only human beings but all beings. This analysis shows that since "air" is an extension of breath, spirituality must possibly be as vital as the air we breathe. It must be our 'Breath of Life'. Air has also been ascribed divine attributes, so spirituality could also be the 'Breath of God'. This 'Breath' could help people understand answers to ultimate questions about life, about meaning and about the relationship to the sacred, the transcendent, and the Divine.

Keywords: Spirituality; Terminology; Greek philosophy; Air; Breath

Introduction

Over the past few decades literature related to spirituality presents rising interest within researchers. The role and meaning of spirituality has been discussed in various worldwide publications. Many tried to encode the term but there is not a widely agreed definition of spirituality. When discussing about this debate Dreyer and Bennett (2006) very aptly say "... there is also the issue of definition. There are hundreds from which to choose" [1]. The word of spirituality is on countless lips today [2]. A religious language usually refers to the notion of spirituality as to what is not material; several metaphors are also used in order to define the term; the dualistic view of matter and spirit seems to have influenced several other researchers; philosophical paradigms are still trying to capture the definition; while a universal approach of the term that touches upon us all also attempts to lead a path. No borders exist and so this debate can proceed incessantly.

Due to this large number of definitions and approaches an unresolved question still remains to be answered. What is spirituality? For someone unfamiliar with the term things get even more confusing. People might have heard about spirituality but are not really sure what it is. Many researchers have the desire to attribute a universal essence to the meaning of spirituality. Sometimes this desire ignores the historical and cultural traces and differences in the uses of the term [3]. Spirituality is not an invention of these last few decades [4]. Kielkiewicz and Dalzell (2014) stated that spirituality was known and practiced by generations of people down through the ages [4]. According to Miner-Williams (2006) spirituality has been discussed since the earliest of times, and many hundreds of philosophies have explored this phenomenon [5]. The phenomenon is used and understood very differently in today's context in comparison to its original root. "Currently, there is no 'gold standard' for the definition of spirituality that can be established independent of the historical use of the term in the English language or the Greek or Latin roots from which the word 'spirituality' is derived" [6].

Two recent researches on Greek Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) patients [7] and COPD caregivers [8] showed that the antiquity of the word (Greek: πνεύμα) could be important in order to

understand how it was originally used. My interest in investigating this kind of cognition led me to some hypothesis. I am not aware if there is "some kind of ancient 'authentic' or 'true' spirituality" [3] but I believe that in order to encode the term we must go back to Ancient Greeks ways of thinking. There were we can actually identify the root of the word spirituality.

Aim

The purpose of this short communication is giving flesh and historical grounding to the notion of spirituality [9]. It mainly goes into the heart of Ancient Greek philosophy in order to encode the term. It is based on a detailed search of work published in the database of Pubmed and Google Scholar using terms that included spirituality, spirit, Ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, religiosity, air, and breath. Maybe this analysis could help readers come closer to the original meaning of the word while trying to explain the phenomenon of spirituality.

Constructing and Deconstructing Spirituality

Many researchers try to use shortened or narrower definitions in order to decode spirituality. Spirituality has been described as a variable of holism [10,11] as it involves a sense of connectedness to other people, nature, and life as a whole [12]. Moving away from this holistic perspective one "may cut of spirituality from the half of its body" [13]. Waaijman also wonders "...whether this intense interest is not a Procrustes bed" [13].

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Received September 24, 2017; **Accepted** October 15, 2017; **Published** October 25, 2017

Citation: Tzounis E (2017) Constructing and Deconstructing the Terminology of Spirituality: A Journey Back to the Greek Roots. J Tradit Med Clin Natur 6: 248. doi: [10.4172/2573-4555.1000248](https://doi.org/10.4172/2573-4555.1000248)

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Holistic spirituality is a necessity for our postmodern world. Holism comes from the word 'whole' which is perceived in multiple meanings such as the entire, total, undivided, undamaged, or a complete entity. The word 'whole' comes from the Greek word 'όλος'. This totality of the terminology was probably captured from Anaximenes. Anaximenes (Ἀναξίμενης; in Greek) of Miletus (c. 585–528 B.C.E.) was a pre-Socratic Greek philosopher. Anaximenes is best known for his doctrine that air is the source of all things. He proposed air as the First Cause from which all else comes and conceived "air" as an extension of breath.

Joshua Mark states that "to the Greeks of the time, air was comparable to soul and, just as one's breath gave an individual life, so air, Anaximenes claimed, gave life to all observable phenomena" [14]. While describing the same phenomenon it is stated that "by 'air,' Anaximenes meant some original element that can give life (breath or soul) to human beings [15].

Some may wonder about how all these are related to spirituality. Hence, why not start unfolding Ariadne's mite. Carrette and King identify that although the term 'spirituality' developed from earlier Greek and Latin roots, there are significant dimensions to these earlier uses that are lost once one defines the spiritual in narrowly privatized terms [3].

I believe that spirituality leads on to its own ancient path; it is not a trend that changes yearly. Did this 'genuine' or 'ancient' spirituality come from the transfiguration of a previously existed spirituality? Probably not, it proved its existence incessantly and it still is.

A large body of literature acknowledges the connectedness between spirituality and the Greek word πνεύμα (pneuma). The Greek term πνεύμα (pneuma) reveal the linguistic root of the word [4].

The Greek word for spirituality is 'pneumatikotita' (=πνευματικότητα). Πνευματικότητα comes from the Greek word πνεύμα (pneuma) which means spirit, mind, soul and breathing [16]. The root πνευ- talked about the dynamic movement of air describing a person's breath, which meant they were alive (breath equals life) [17]. Pneuma, "air in motion, breath, wind," is equivalent to aer (ἀήρ, "air") as the element from which all else originated [18]. Anaximenes concept of "air," seems to explain both spiritual and physical phenomena. "Οἶον ἢ ψυχὴ ἢ ἡμετέρα ἀήρ οὐσα συγκρατεῖ ἡμᾶς, καὶ ὅλον τὸν κόσμον πνεῦμα καὶ ἀήρ περιέχει" [(Aët. I 3, 4 (D. 278)] [19]. (= Just as our soul (psyche), being air (aer), holds us together, so do breath (pneuma) and air (aer) encompass the whole world [15].

Based on the definitions of spirit outlined above; it seems that for the Greeks, spirit animates not only human beings but all beings.

In the classical societies of Greece and Rome, spirituality also maintained a central place. Breath was also associated with "soul," the source of life, in many ancient cultures, including the Romans. The modern English term 'spirituality' refers to spirit [20] and comes from the Latin spiritualitas. Spiritualitas springs from the noun spiritus which means 'the breath of life'. The semantic root of spiritus is the word spirare which meant to breathe, [20] to blow and to live.

It seems that spirituality does elicit an experiential sense by force of the words' own etymology and signification [2].

If we suppose that spirituality is all around us, as air, is it then, possible to see the affect this "phenomenon"? First and foremost, someone will argue that we cannot see spirituality. Maybe this statement is not quite true because I personally believe that we must conceive spirituality both outside and inside the boundaries of our senses.

Spirituality was strongly associated with air. "Air can be thought of as a kind of neutral stuff that is found everywhere, and is available to participate in physical processes" [15].

In Hermes Trismegistus [21] we can read the following dialogue between Hermes and Asclepius talking about air.

-Hermes. Is not the air a body?

-Asclepius. A body it is.... The air is body, and this is the body which permeates through all the entities, and permeating fills all tilings.

Spirituality was strongly associated with breath and breathing. Our daily reality is both spiritual and material. Breathing for example is the most basic of the voluntary behaviors of living beings and it requires no volition at all. Fontana progresses to discuss breathe as a force that unifies the unseen and the seen dimensions [22]. Kourie and Ruthenberg stated that "the earth, the body and materiality breathes with an organic life and mystery" [2].

Some may wonder; are we able come to an awareness of the mystery of God, or the Divine or find answers to ultimate questions about life based on air and breathing? Is this approach to simplistic to be taken under consideration?

Anaximenes ascribed to air divine attributes. He wrote the Gods and the Divine derived from air. With the spread of Christianity and its concept of the Holy Spirit, spirit and spirituality became associated with a religion [23]. It seems that most religions endeavour to inculcate a sense of the spirituality in their believers. Christians for instance have thought of the Holy Spirit as 'the breath of God'. The Book of Genesis depicts the Spirit of God at the beginning of creation as a wind. The words wind and breath are linked together as God breathes life into Adam [24]. '... And the Lord God formed a man's body from the dust of the ground and breathed into it the breath of life. And the man became a living person.' (Genesis 2, 2) [25].

Nowadays, there are many ways that people describe spirituality. Assembling my thoughts on this topic I asked myself, "Is it may be time to tighten the definition?"

I may take a risk but I would like to give a brief reference of some characteristics which I believe could be possibly accounted to spirituality. I will also try to convey some ideas on the effect of spirituality on people's lives.

1. Spirituality takes its place in the world of every-day experience.
2. Spirituality is not static; it changes forms and shapes, it "flaws" around us, affecting and changing our daily lives.
3. Spirituality is an inexhaustible source.
4. Spirituality has no center, edges, boundaries, or limits.
5. Spirituality is continuous. It has infinite moments and signs since the dawn of time.
6. Spirituality requires no volition but gives us back everything.
7. Spirituality is our 'inner guardian' because is as vital as breath and breathing.

This 'Breath' probably helps people understand answers to ultimate questions about life, about meaning and about the relationship to the sacred, the transcendent, and the Divine.

Since "air" is an extension of breath; spirituality must possibly be as vital as the air we breathe.

It must be our Breath of Life.

Since air has been ascribed divine attributes; spirituality could also be the Breath of God. So is this 'Breath of God' equal (=) with the 'Breath of Life'?

Although there are numerous modern scholars that are addressing this relationship between spirituality and breath many may argue with this approach. Some may also wonder if this is the only definitive meaning of spirituality and if it has to be so strict?

Questions and answers about spirituality are not absent in other cultures, and philosophies. Spirituality is not separated from the spheres of human [3] and other forms of life. Unfortunately, some key issues in Greek philosophy tend to be forgotten. I believe that this ancient knowledge on the specific terminology could be our leading path. There is no need to change a deeply rooted ancient belief about spirit and spirituality by simply treating it as being too simplistic. Going back to Ancient Greeks' ways of thinking about spiritual ideas [3] in order to decode the definition of spirituality is to everyone's great benefit.

Conclusion

Maybe the terminology of spirituality is confusing for many people. Different people from different backgrounds describe spirituality differently. Diving into Greek philosophy and exploring the antiquity of the word helps us to understand how the word was originally used. Some of these things may not speak to you at all but there are many reasons for exploring spirituality. Fuller understanding of the phenomenon requires further exploration. The Greek path of spirituality could take people on an interior journey in order to meet and connect with the Breath of their Lives.

Acknowledgments

The author acknowledges Maria Tzouni (Ph.D. Candidate of the School of English of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki) for her valuable comments while writing the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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