
Consciousness as Soul : A Comparative Approach

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The word ‘soul’, in its primary meaning is generally understood to denote “an entity conceived as the cause or sustainer of bodily life and psychic activities of an individual being”. It is the essential principle of human nature, the basis of conscious, continuous individual existence. There is hardly any group of human beings whether tribal, semi-civilized, civilized, rural or urban; whether practising animistic or natural religion, whether following the tenets of folk religion or belonging to one of the organized groups of the so called ‘world religions’, which does not believe in the existence of something higher and more subtle than the visible and mortal physical body which is the vehicle and the sustainer of this life. The only exceptions are perhaps the materialistic schools of philosophy like those of the Cārvākas of ancient India and, may be, the modern Bio-scientists. In fact, in spite of the obvious inevitability of death, the human mind finds it impossible to accept death as the final end of its existence. The life must go on according to it even after the destruction of the physical frame, in a non-physical, subtler, ethereal or spiritual form, and the concept of that depends upon the collective thinking of our social group or our religion.

Another interesting question is where, i.e. in which part of the body the soul resides, which part is the sustainers (adhiṣṭhāna) of the soul or the consciousness. In the early thinking and still with many primitive ethnic groups we encounter varied notions according to which the soul is placed variously in liver, heart, blood, breath, bodily, heat, shade or phantom and in even the name of the person.

These concepts about soul in different philosophies and ethnic groups are so varied that one obviously cannot do justice to them all in a short space like this. Speculations on the nature of soul have been the subject of not only religious preceptors but also of philosophers and whereas the former have been more occupied with the fate of soul after death, the latter have tried to investigate and determine the ontological reality of the soul. All this makes the subject even vaster.

Speaking generally, we would first like to split the concept of “soul” as separate from the physical body into two basic phenomena or entities: namely “spirit” and “self”. With spirit I mean a sort of subtle body not constituting the physical elements but still somewhat similar to human body, conceived variously, sometimes like a small man or mannequin, a sort of mannequin replica of the body that is why in our older literature the most common word for soul or conscious substance of the body is known as ‘Purusha’. When in the Mbh. in the famous story of Sāvitrī-Satyavān, Yama – the God of death – takes out the soul of Satyavān, it is said, अंगुष्ठमात्रांपुरुषंनिश्चकर्ष यमोबलात् (Mbh. Vanaparvan.297.17). Sometimes it also conceived as a shadowy replica of the entire human body (a phantom), sometimes endowed with a fiery, glowing appearance or having aerial existence. It is not a liberated entity, it has still some unfulfilled desires, hence also a deep attachment to this world, can come out of its grave, or hover around the cremation ground, can visit its family members or give instructions to them in dreams, and can even wreak vengeance upon its worldly enemies. It is the ‘ghost’ of the popular belief called ‘preta’ in Indic languages and its counterpart in Indian philosophies (esp. Samkhya and Vedanta) is the *Sūkśma-śarīra* or *Linga-śarīra* (literally: subtle body) which consists of “life breaths” (prāṇas), mind (manas), intellect (buddhi) and the ten organs of sense and action, all in subtle form:

पञ्चप्राणमनो बुद्धिदशेन्द्रियसमन्वितम् ।
अपञ्चीकृतभूतोत्थंसूक्ष्माङ्गं भोगसाधनम् ॥

This subtle body is conceived of as containing 'soul' in itself and constitutes a sort of middle stage between the physical body and the pure self.

The pure ‘self’ - a word which is now a universally accepted term for that subtle ontological reality which lies beyond all physical worldly phenomena is

coined after the Sanskrit term *ātman* - the entity which lies beyond the phenomena of the subtle body or spirit – as a pure consciousness, it is therefore, ironically exactly opposite to the “Self” if we take this word in its original sense to mean ‘bodily frame’.

Thus we have, in fact, two aspects of soul: the spirit and the self. Not all religious sects and philosophical schools, however, keep them apart or believe in both. For some either one is real or the other. For some the concept of soul is a combination of the traits of both (like *jiva* of the Jaina and Vaiṣṇava philosophies).

The belief in ‘spirits’ has certainly been a universal phenomenon since time immemorial ranging from the most primitive of the races to the members of the civilized societies. Ancestor worship is of common occurrence all over the world right from Japan to the American Indians. The ancestors who form a group with other deceased family members are invited by their successors, fed with the food of their choice, besought to bless the family and are bid farewell because their longer stay on earth or in the house of the invoker is considered undesirable and even harmful. In some primitive races, the foodstuff is offered at the grave or kept in the grave at the time of burial, or offered in the graveyard or cremation ground at some fixed time annually, sometimes even more frequently in a year. The ritual of *śrāddha* mentioned in the later Vedic texts, and practiced even today (in spite of the well established belief in the re-birth of an individual as per the Karmans performed by him), is a nice example of this phenomenon.

The 'Fathers' or 'manes' in this case are usually regarded as a group [at least in ancient Roman Religion and in India] and are also invoked as such. In India they form a category by themselves (called पितरः) slightly lower to gods and are said to rejoice in a world especially meant for them under the guardianship of Varuna and Yama (cf. RV X). They are considered; in general, benevolent beings ready to help their kinsmen and children. Making of their idols, and offering worship to them for the sake of the welfare of the society gives rise to the cult of hero-worship or Guru-worship known all over the world. We may find a number of examples in and around us in which the deceased persons are worshipped in the belief that they still exist in divine form and can help us ward un-luck and fulfill our wishes (e.g. *Sāmī Bābā!*). Although all this contrasts very crassly with the Upaniṣadic theory of rebirth of a *Jīva*

or with the belief of entering into heaven / hell of the Purānas. However it must be said that the lot of the beings in the Paurāṇic Narakas is better than that of the condemned human beings in Greek Hades or the Christian Hells where they are perpetually roasted till eternity.

Those, however, who die abruptly in an accident without completing the full term of their life or murdered by someone may be full of vengeance towards their enemy in general and the society in particular. The belief that discarnate soul prefers to live in dilapidated houses or abandoned buildings is quite common. Equally common is the belief that they sometimes forcefully possess living beings pushing away their original souls, though their craving to receive a body often also let them enter dead bodies. In order to avoid this, some American Indians are reported to carve the wooden images of the dead and to keep them in mortuaries, which are then taken possession of by the deceased souls. The instances of souls making appearance through a human medium of their own volition, to express their unfulfilled wishes, or appearing at the invocation of a medium to foretell coming events or to pronounce verdict on some contested point or doubtful matter connected with their family or community, is common all over the world, especially with tribal population and in India. Some people, especially ladies, even can serve as a medium for appearance of divine spirits especially of various forms of the Mother goddess.

In some cultures departed souls were supposed to be in need of the same kind of sustenance as one need in actual life. The example of Egyptian pyramids is too well known. In the ancient city of Ur in Mesopotamia (S. Iraq), which was the Centre of Sumerian civilization, the archaeologists have excavated subterranean cemeteries or catacombs where, upon the death of the monarch not only the queens, slaves and the major courtiers have been forced to give up their lives (in plain words ‘sacrifice’) but also the royal animals like horses and bulls, obviously because the King needs them all in the heaven. The origin of the self immolation of the wives upon the death of their husband, i.e. the *satī* practice (which assumed grotesque forms in the 19th C. in Bengal) may obviously also be traced to such beliefs.

One of the most interesting facts about souls in the folk belief is that they are

not the one and only sustainer of the life or consciousness of human body. Soul and bodily consciousness need not be identical. In folks tales one hears of a demon or a mighty being hiding *his soul* at some place, away from his body or even putting it in a non-human being like a parrot to safeguard himself against death – but still, without soul in his body, goes on to live and act happily.

The Egyptians held that a concrete entity called *bā*, invisible during life, had its residence in the human body as well as in gods. This was the source and seat of strength, courage and power of an individual. *Bā* was represented either in the form of a heron or, later, in the form of a bird with human face. In earlier times, it was thought that though this *Bā* may wander about during the day or even in the night whose nocturnal experiences are captured in form of dreams, yet in the times of danger it immediately returns to its original body. The royal souls received royal treatment even after death according to the older beliefs of Egyptians, like for example of Osiris who is transferred to the sky among the gods to be received by them ceremoniously, whereas the souls of common men remain in underworld, or wander in the deserts. Later, however, the gates of heaven were dramatically made open also for all meritorious persons whereas Osiris emerged as supreme judge who with the help of other 42 judges assessed the merits or demerits of departed souls and sentenced the wicked to destruction by myriads of demons who inhabited the underworld. Yama, who later becomes the King and ‘Daṇḍanāyaka’ (executor of punishments) of Hindu hells was in the RV simply the first person in the world to die who reached the place of dead across oceans and became its King. The departed would enjoy his company there and are entertained with choicest drinks

यस्मिद् वृक्षे सुपलाशे देवा संपिबते यमः ।

तत्रा नो सत्पतिः पिता पुराणं अनुवेति ॥ RV VI !35.1

cf. further the opening verse of the 14th hymn of the X Mandala (परेयिवांसं प्रवतो महीरनु बहुम्या पन्थामनुपशशासनम् ... etc.) (cf. RV 6.135.1 and 10.14.1)

Very often life or consciousness is identified with Air or Wind. We have the expression *Prāna-Vāyu* and in the Aranyakas and Upanishad we find long speculations about the close relationship between the ‘life-breath’ and the elemental

wind outside. The word *prāṇa* is derived from the root *an* (अन्) which basically means ‘to breathe’ and it is the breath which sustains our Life. Same is the case with the Jews. The Hebrew word used in the sense of soul in the Old Testament is Nephesh which word originally means ‘life breath’ akin to Sanskrit *Prāṇa* because it is said in the OT Gen.2.7. that ‘Jahweh breathed into man's nostrils the breath of life and the man became a ‘living soul’ (nephesh haya), a living being. This ‘nephesh’ was believed to have its residence in the blood and the jews were prohibited from eating the meat of the sacrifice until the blood of the animal was poured out for God and the present practice of the Moslem butchers to let the slaughtered animal die through Zibeh has the same origin. ‘Nephesh’, is also employed to designate the seat of physical appetites for worldly desires. It is also regarded as the seat of all kinds of emotions, like pity, joy, love, hate and courage, it is the seat of moral action and will and, finally, it is also employed in this text (OT) to designate individual man or person. “Give me the nephesh (i.e. souls) and take the goods thyself (Gn.14.21)” “No soul of you shall eat blood” (Ezk.18.4). “The soul of the clan of Jacob were 33 in number”. From such usages in the OT, I think, has also been derived the use of the word souls in the sense of ‘person’ in English e.g. ‘there was not a single soul’, ‘poor soul’, or the emergency call S.O.S evolved by the sea farers of the medieval ages. Its full form, certainly as many of your know, is: “Save our souls” and it was tele-spread electronically all around when a ship and its passengers were in peril.

The earliest Babylonian records of the Sumerian race with whom, by the way, the ancient India of the Indus Valley culture had close relations, do not have any special word for soul, but they use the word Zi or Si meaning simply “life” for this purpose. Their conceptions of soul were for the most part vague and ill defined. It was an impalpable something that each man possessed and which kept him alive. After death this indefinable part of human being demanded food and drink and visited the living world in the form of wind, whirl-wind or storm, otherwise lived in subterranean world assuming partially decomposed bodies.

The holy scripture of Islam and the popular beliefs of the Muslims have preserved much of concepts and the terminology of the ancient Semitic cultures. When God created the first man, Adam, He breathed the soul (called Nafs or ‘the

spirit of life Ruh') into him through his mouth and Adam became a living man Adams soul is the source of all souls of his descendents. All his sons and daughters inherit a part of his soul or breath and the act of emergence of life in embryo, for a Muslim is a second creation. The soul in Arabian culture has its seat in the heart. It has two fundamental propensities, viz. of wickedness and piety, an impulse towards evil and an impulse towards good, which means, speaking basically, it has free will to act. Very soon, however, Islam in the course of its development ignores this free will. Man is a being who knows and acts but has no volition of his own, his whole duty is to heed the words of God which are available in the Koran and to obey them.

Popular Moslem thought usually conceives the soul as a material entity which can leave the body during sleep and associates with its concept, speculations regarding the various classes of spirits: devils, human beings and animal etc., all of various species and varieties. The soul departs from the body, according to popular belief, through mouth or the back of the head, much against its will and remains near the corpse so long as it is not wholly decomposed. On the day of resurrection it enters into its renovated material body and depending mainly upon the staunchness of its faith and to some extent also his deeds God, assigns it for all eternity either to paradise or to hell, the joys or pains of which have physical rather than spiritual nature. The good eat and drink and live with beautiful maidens whereas the bad burn forever in fire without being consumed. Christianity has inherited the second part of this concept and the condemned are thrown into fire for expiation of their sins for all eternity. The Vedic function of Agni as 'pāvaka' (= purifier) also attributes the same quality to the fire.

Much of the concept regarding the nature of soul and its relationship with God underwent gradual change in some circles of Islam with its rediscovery of Greek philosophy and its contact with Iran and Western part of India with its heritage of Buddhism and Upanisadic Vedanta. The Sufi mystics underline the effulgent nature of the soul and lay stress upon its identity with God ('anhalak' i.e. aham brahmāsmi'). Sufies of Sindh (like Mansur) were put to death for claiming that they i.e. their consciousness, is a part of God.

The Greeks were divided into many groups and many states and each state had its own philosophers although the most influential philosophers lived in Athens (island of Peloponnes) who termed the faculty of all mental activities as Psyche which later becomes the key word for the discipline of Psychology. According to them it was an individual faculty gifted in varied degrees to different individuals and was not an immortal element. In fact, nothing according to Greeks was immortal in human body, it were only the gods who were endowed with perpetual existence. Later however, Master Pythagoras who came on a long tour to the countries lying east of Ionia, and wanted to visit India but could not do so due to a war going on in the North-West, of our country, retreated from Persia but seems to have taken a lot of Indian scientific thought and belief with him because in his academy he taught that the Psyche is luminous ('svayamprakāśamāna') it is the seat of Knowledge (चित्) and is-immortal (theory of 'anamnesis'), also that it is reborn after death ('palingenesia') and is destructible. However his students did not remain faithful to the teachings of their master and created confusing notions.

Same way, it is not easy to describe the concept of soul in Christianity which has a long history of development right since the OT to almost modern times, and which, though originally based in Hebrew thought, has imbibed in the course of its development Greek, Iranian (e.g. dualism: God-Devil) and indirectly also Indian (Neo Platonism/Plotinus) thoughts and has been enriched by the wonderful theological philosophies of the saints like Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart. Whereas in the OT the idea of human nature implies a total unity between body and soul with no contrast between the two - both forming a composite whole, in the NT an advance is marked in the belief that the essential personality of a human being expressed with the Greek words Psyche or Pneuma, survives bodily death, though it still implies a sort of body. The ψυχή (Psyche) in the body does not have any definite locale and is supposed to be diffused throughout the body. The soul was, further, conceived by early Christians as an arena of opposing spiritual forces belonging to God and Satan respectively so that the doctrine of Holy Spirit has a unique place in this thought. The Holy Spirit is the vital energy of the corporate body of the Church which wages unceasing war against sin working from the higher side

of human personality. When it fails however, the misled human may even be tempted to sell his soul to Satan for temporary material gains as Dr. Faust of Goethe did, to his ultimate perdition. “He has sold his soul to the Satan”, is a common phrase in the European languages. The common concept of soul includes in itself good or bad traits of the personalities of an individual and one speaks of a “good soul” or a “bad soul”. The soul is therefore not a neutral, quality-less(‘nirguṇa’) entity like in Indian Philosophy. It can be good or bad and the human mind and body acts and reacts as per the nature of his soul.

Further, influenced by the Greek thought that the soul is a product of the world and is endowed with logos in order to comprehend the nature of this world; the Christian finds it difficult to accept the existence of souls in Animals. In medieval ages, the Europe even believed that only men have souls and the women were devoid of it. The concept of the immortality of soul is derived from Greek thought, notably from New Platonism, propagated by Plotinus of Alexandria (3rd century) and others and which is certain to have received Indian Influences. The idea of salvation or emancipation is also later highly spiritualized and whereas the motto in life is “God in us”, in the state of liberation, it is “We in God”.

Looking towards India, we find that no subject has ever attracted more attention of philosophical thinkers than the nature of soul. “What is the sustainer or holder of my life”, this has always been the central and focal point of their speculations and discussions right since the time of the Āraṇyakas followed by the Upaniṣads. The Indian philosophers firmly believed that by knowing the nature of the self which is a part of the universe and subject to natural forces, one can as well understand the character of the universe and its mutual relationship with the Atman or self (यथा पिण्डे तथा ब्रह्माण्डे). Therefore whereas the Greek philosophical effort was mainly directed towards discovering and understanding the character and laws of the universe, the Indian effort was directed towards comprehending the nature of that entity which is the sustainer of life. “Try to comprehend the nature of self, O, Maitreyī, and contemplate on it and concentrate on it. By knowing the nature of self, by contemplating and concentrating on it, everything in this universe becomes known” (आत्मा वा अरे द्रष्टव्यः श्रोतव्यो मन्तव्यो निदिध्यासितव्यो मैत्रेय्यात्मनो वा अरे दर्शनेन,

श्रवणेन मत्या विज्ञानेनेदं सर्वम् विदितम्), declares Yājñavalkya to his wife Matreyi in the BrhadA. Upa. 2.4.5. By the active contact with Indian philosophers for which there is ample evidence in the history and in the literature of Greece, the idea of discovering the self comes also to Greece and the sentence ‘KNOW THYSELF’(Greek: γνῶθι σεαυτόν, transliterated: gnōthi seauton, i.e. आत्मानं विजानीहि !) gets inscribed on the top of the entrance gate of the temple of Apollo in Delphi (300 B.C.).

It will take us too long to deal with the development of the notion of Soul over many thousand years and in various schools of thought in India. Right from the staunch materialists like Cārvākas who vehemently deny the existence of any spiritual entity like soul different from the body and deem the consciousness as a quality of the body itself emerging out of a composition of material elements, over the Jainas who view life and spirits as present in quite a number of inanimate objects as well which others would not consider as sentient beings, but which leads a Jain to regard nature and its creatures with a deep reverence. On the contrary, Buddha is known to have propagated the theory of ‘Non-soul’ (अनत्ता, अनात्मा) denying any substantial or permanent Character to it. For him the soul is nothing but an ever changing conglomerate of five ‘supporting factors’ (pañca-skandhas), namely: form, feelings, perception, predispositions and consciousness (रूप, वेदना, संज्ञा, संस्कार और विज्ञान) but which is still capable of transmigrating into a new body after death. The highest idealism of Vedanta holds consciousness as the only ultimate reality of this universe whereas this, our creation, is only a transformation of that primeval Consciousness lying beyond सत् (real) and असत् (unreal). There are several shades of the notion of self in the systems of Indian philosophy, but what characterizes them all, is first its immortality or indestructibility - which is an inevitable corollary to the belief in Karman and rebirth, reinforced obviously by the non-material nature of the self. It is, further an entity which lies beyond mind (मनस्) and beyond intellect and represents pure consciousness:

इन्द्रियाणि पराण्याहुः इन्द्रियेभ्यो परं मनः।

मनसस्तु परा बुद्धिर्यो बुद्धेः परतस्तु सः (Bhg.Gitā 3.42).

All schools of thought hold that pure self is not the Doer, it is not the Agent, but its presence is necessary for all organs to function and for all psychic activities to

take place. It does not possess any qualities: it is neither good nor bad, neither pure nor impure, neither sinful nor meritorious. And since it is basically a divine substance, its ultimate aim (परम पुरुषार्थ) is to achieve its original, pristine nature by casting aside its attachment to and association with the matter, which it has amassed due to the result of its previous Karmans. Having attained this state through one of the many prescribed ways (Jñāna, Bhakti, Karma, Yoga or Tapas) it eternally remains in a blissful state - which is far beyond the pleasures of paradise, either in the proximity of God or in God or as the ultimate Divine himself on the top of the world.

One of the major contribution of the Indic thought regarding the concept of soul may be said to be its notion that there exists the same soul in all living beings in the universe whether they be humans, animals, birds or insects and all consciousness is a part of the great universal soul, Parama-ātman, God Himself. One therefore has to perceive all living beings on the earth as his own self: “where is ignorance, infatuation or sorrow for the discerning man knowing the ultimate truth who sees all beings as his own self forming one uniform bond (एकत्वम्), with the whole universe”, says the Upanisad:

यस्मिन् सर्वाणि भूतानि आत्मैवाभूद् विजानतः ।

तत्र को मोहः कः शोक एकत्वमनुपश्यतः ॥ *Isāvāsya upa.7*

The echo of this noble idea we again find in the words of Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgita “One who perceives the same Divine substance permeated through the whole universe, sees me everywhere and everything resting in me, he does not get lost to me and I do not get lost to him”:

यो मां पश्यति सर्वत्र सर्वं च मयि पश्यति ।

तस्याहं न प्रणश्यामि स च मे न प्रणश्यति ॥ *Bhg. Gitā6.30*

This reverence towards nature and the world, emanates from the pantheistic notion of the universe in which we perceive every object of the world as a transformed version of the universal consciousness and, ideally, it should be our attitude towards our fellow beings, our environment, towards our trees, our animals and our mother Earth – an attitude which shall ultimately make us live in peace with nature and with God.

I end here with one of my most favourable verses composed by the poet Bhartrihari in his Nītiśataka as the Maṅgala-ślokain in which he beautifully describes the traits of this unqualified Consciousness, which is a part of us all:

दिक्कालाद्यनवच्छिन्नानन्तचिन्मात्रामूर्तये ।

स्वानुभूत्येकमानाय नमः शान्ताय तेजसे ॥

“Obeisance to that tranquil Effulgence which is beyond space, beyond time, eternal, infinite, consisting of pure consciousness and which can be realised through personal and subjective experience only”.