



Critique of the Idea of a 'Soul'

Abstract: The concept of an immortal soul that can exist independently of a body is critically analyzed in this essay. The conclusion is that the notion of a soul is philosophically untenable and inconsistent, whereas from a religious point of view, the soul-concept - although an invention of the human mind - is still a valuable and necessary idea.

The idea that an immortal soul inheres the mortal body is a common idea amongst religiously and spiritually minded people. Even many a philosopher defended this view and tried to marshal arguments for the necessary existence and the imperishability of a soul.

This essay tries to advocate a position that is opposed to the common view of the immortality of the soul. Not only do I deny the soul its immortality, but in addition, deny the existence of a soul as distinguished from what is commonly understood as the psychological part of a human being (psyche). I do not deny the psychological dimension besides a corporeal one, but only the concept of a soul that is supposed to represent the Divine in us.

My view clearly postulates the Individual Mind (Exonoesis) as comprising both mental and psychical aspects. Although I claim that the Individual Mind is a manifestation of the Universal Mind (Hyponoesis) I do not, however, claim that the Universal Mind is equivalent to God or a Divine Intelligence and that therefore the Individual Mind is of a divine provenance. Since I'm not using the term 'God' or 'Divine' in my philosophy, the following discussion is therefore not about the religious significance of the soul, but purely about the philosophical implications of claiming that a soul exists and that this soul does not perish with the decease of its physical carrier, the body.

1. If we allow for a spiritual or inner development of the human personality and thus indirectly of a potential soul, we also must confer the fact that development is always contingent and therefore requires beginning and end. Development of an entity is only possible if that entity is created in an inferior state that needs further development. If something is created, it has a beginning in time, and as all objects with a beginning in time, it is transient, subjugated to the transitoriness of time and therefore finally mortal. So, if the existence of a soul is claimed and if this soul is not perfect but is in need of spiritual development, then we have to admit the fact, that it was created some point in time, though not necessarily with the creation of its current body.

It is conceivable that the soul may have existed before the existence of the body with which it is connected. If the soul has a beginning, it will have an end. Therefore the soul is mortal. The question remains, whether it is mortal together with the body or whether it can live beyond the death of the body. For the sake of this argument, it does not matter at all.

What this means is that the soul can be logically treated as of the same nature as a physical object in relation to its existence in time. Both are processes that underlie a host of changes and mutations, both start and end in time, and therefore both are perishable. The point of dissolution in time however is a moot question, which is discussed further below.

2. This argument is also sustained by another thesis: if the ultimate reality is one, then the multitude of objects and entities that exist must have been created out of this fundamental unity. Even if we claim that this multitude is just an illusion, we still have to account for the illusory existence of the world. Even if the world has just an illusory existence, the phenomenal reality is still a reality for our experience and the Individual Mind (Exonoesis), and therefore, still needs some kind of creation or manifestation out of this fundamental unity.

3. One of the strongest argument against the immortality of a soul is, I think, the unity of the human being. Most people admit of the fact that the human being is a totality of mind and body. Now the question is, if the human being is a unity of body and soul, is this unity simple or compound? If it is a simple unity, the unity cannot be broken up into its parts. Therefore with the death of the individual human being, not only does the form of the body, but also the form of the soul dissolves. If however, the unity of body and soul is a compound unity, that means, body and soul are separate entities constituting a whole that is more than its parts, a theoretical separation of body and soul would be possible. Still, it doesn't make too much sense.

4. If we argue with Aristotle, that the soul is the form of the body, then we inevitably have to admit the supervenience of the soul on the body. A soul seems to be created for the only purpose of development. This development is supposed to be only possible by the soul's connection with a body or the physical world. This means that the soul is logically supervenient on the body for the sake of its own inner development. Now if that's true, it does not make sense for the soul to exist without a body. Therefore if the soul is presumed to exist as the form of a body, this fact would make the essence of the soul dependent on the body, meaning that the soul cannot exist without a body. That what constitutes the essence of the soul is its inseparable unity with the body, its necessary supervenience on the existence of a physical entity, such as the body. It is even possible to think of an entity other than the body as the necessary pole of manifestation.

5. It is conceivable that the soul is a persistent entity that takes on different material forms, through a process that is called metempsychosis or reincarnation. Still the soul would be perishable in the long run. If we admit the thesis that the soul is individual (how else can we explain the need for development or process), we cannot claim that the soul is one with a Divine Being in the sense that oneness means no differences, no manifestation. The soul has definitely a connection to the one Reality, but so does every physical object.

6. This strict dualism between soul and body is illusory and ultimately merely of a phenomenal nature. We need to start to speak of aspects rather than different substances. The human being, or any being for that matter, is defined by different aspects, physical, psychical, mental, etc. Each aspect is an individual manifestation of Hyponoesis (Universal Mind). The specific combination of different aspects of a unity is what we call an entity, such as a physical object, a human being, an animal, a plant, etc. Such an entity exists in its particular structure and essence only as long as the specific combination of those aspects exists. Once one or several of those aspects change considerably, the entity also changes its structure and essence, which means, it is no longer the entity it was before. This transformation could be as simple as a chemical process, a biological process of growth, or the death of a human being. Since the individuality of the soul is dependent on the individuality of the body and other aspects, a change in any of these aspects means also a change in the other aspects. There is a mutual interdependence of aspects here.

7. My main point is, that the idea of a soul is the invention of the human being for the sake of religious and spiritual purposes. The soul is a mental construct that is based on religious issues and not metaphysical or philosophical issues. From the point of view of metaphysics, the soul is a superfluous and even contradictory concept. From the point of view of religion or spirituality, the concept of the soul makes sense. But we should always keep in mind that this concept is a mental construct that should not claim any ontological status. The idea of a soul and of God is fundamental to the religious and spiritual culture of mankind. As long as we do not make any ontological claims regarding the reality or existence of those ideas, we can believe in anything we want. The problem arises however with the fact, that most religions do actually advocate a position that regards the soul as a reality per se which is immortal. My main counter argument to this thesis is that every existing entity in this world is a fundamental unity of different aspects,

especially of mind/soul and body. To separate this unity means to undo the primary form of manifestation. This primary form is an individual entity, whose individuality consists in this unique unity of a specific ratio of aspects. To change this ratio is to change the individual entity. To remove one aspect is to destroy the entity as a whole. The whole cannot be separated for the very reason that it is a whole and not an aggregation of differing parts. This oneness of the individual entity reflects the oneness of Hyponoesis (Universal Mind).

8. F.W.J. Schelling in "Bruno or On the Natural and the Divine Principle Things", 1984 State University of New York:

Hence the soul is nothing intrinsically real, nor is the body either; each of them exists in time only in and through the other. The only element of an individual thing that is intrinsically real is the identity of soul and body...

Furthermore, the soul is not anything that is intrinsically real, since it exists only through its relative opposition to the body.

(283, p. 180)

9. William Kingdon Clifford in "Lectures and Essays", Vol. I, MacMillan and Co., 1879:

Inexorable facts connect our consciousness with this body that we know; and that not merely as a whole, but the parts of it are connected severally with parts of our brain-action. If there is any similar connexion with a spiritual body, it only follows that the spiritual body must die at the same time with the natural one. Consider a mountain rill. It runs down in the sunshine, and its water evaporates; yet it is fed by thousands of tiny tributaries, and the stream flows on. The water may be changed again and again, yet still there is the same stream. It widens over plains, or is prisoned and fouled by towns; always the same stream, but at last 'even the weariest river Winds somewhere safe to sea.' When than happens, no drop of water is lost, but the stream is dead.

10. John M. Koller in "Oriental Philosophies", 1985, Prentice-Hall:

The anatta theory denies the existence of a self only when the word "self" is taken to refer to some thing in addition to the groups of factors making up a person. The conviction that there is a substantial self is the root-cause of suffering, for this results in the attitude that underlies and makes possible the attachment of the various processes to a self. It is ignorance that allows the attachment and thereby makes possible suffering. (p. 162 f.)

The basic Abhidharmist teaching on the nature of the self holds that at the core of individual existence, instead of a permanent and unchanging substance, or soul, there is a stream of continuously flowing discrete elements of sensation, consciousness, feeling, activity impulses, and bodily processes. (p. 166)

12. Addendum: Time-related argument: The individual soul (in union with the body) exists in time. Time is one of the characteristics of each existing individual entity in this world.

The fundamental and absolute reality, however, is timeless, does not exist in time or in the same way an individual entity exists. It is out of time and space. Therefore nothing exists as an individual form within reality.

Since an individual soul is part of the world of appearance, it stops existing as a separate, autonomous entity as soon as the union of body and soul stops working as a union or as soon as this unique individual entity is modified in a way as to be no longer that individual. Its essence changed basically and this means it is either a completely different individual form or just no individual form any more. So if an individual form is deindividuated by reunification with the absolute and one reality, its individuality regarding body and soul - is no longer extant.

Soul is that part of the body-soul union that actualizes time for an individual through consciousness. Consciousness is possible only through the connection of the soul with the body.

Without a soul (mind), the body cannot exist, without a body, the soul cannot exist. If the body is dead, consciousness is gone too and with it the individual form of the soul.

The soul's alleged purpose is to evolve through time. Time is stipulated as a prerequisite condition for the soul's being and the soul's progress. Take away time and it amounts to the same as taking away space for the body. Both are determined through their very essence: the body through space, the soul through time. Space and time always occur together (as Einstein found out: space-time continuum). Therefore body and soul always occur together, as an inseparable unity. Since time exists only when the soul is connected to the body, and since nothing actualized or individuated can exist outside of time, the soul cannot exist outside of time or even outside of the body to which it is inseparably linked.

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