

The Religious, Scientific, and Metaphysical Quest For The Soul

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Religious teachers, mystics, occultists, philosophers, psychologists, and physicists are in substantial agreement--as they have been throughout most of history—that reality extends beyond the dense physical universe. But what lies beyond it has been fiercely debated for thousands of years. What lies beyond the physical world: pantheons of gods, impersonal energy of one kind or another, abstract mathematics, or something else, is important to our understanding of reality. But what lies beyond humanity's physical nature is of much greater importance. It determines our stature in the world and potential for surviving physical death and may determine the behavior we must adopt during earthly life in order to realize this potential.

Plato introduced the notion that human reality includes body, soul, and spirit. Spirit meant God, or at least the fragment of divine substance invested in humanity. It was the source of life and provided the potential for development. It ennobled humankind, lifting us above the level of the lower kingdoms of nature. And it made man actually or at least potentially divine. The soul was regarded as the mediating link between spirit and matter. Plato was an idealist, believing that the soul was the “real” aspect of man and that the physical body was an offshoot of it and animated by it. He also believed in the *Anima Mundi*, or World Soul, of which the physical world, or perhaps the whole universe, was a similar offshoot.

Aristotle agreed that all living things had souls, but his concept of the soul was smaller than Plato's and his view of spirit less clear. The Aristotelian soul had little life of its own and was strongly related to physical existence. Aristotle described the soul in terms of his fourfold theory of causation. He regarded the soul as the seat of the formal and final causes that provided, respectively, the plan and purpose of life. His other two causes were the material and efficient causes, providing the building blocks and the necessary action underlying causation. The Platonic and the Aristotelian schools of philosophy represented the epitome of Greek thought. Each had its strong proponents and the respective merits of each system were debated for nearly a thousand years, well into the Christian era.

At first, Platonic or Neoplatonic ideas held sway. Many of the early Christian Fathers were Gnostics and accepted a Neoplatonic view of the human spirit and soul. But Gnosticism was ruthlessly persecuted by the developing orthodox factions in the church, and Christian Neoplatonism was gradually stamped out. In 869 A.D., the 8th Ecumenical Council in Constantinople decided (some historians say as the result of a voting irregularity) that mankind consists of body and soul, but not spirit. Thirty nine years later, another general council at Maçon, France, acknowledged by only a single vote that women even have souls. The church's *Magisterium* works in mysterious ways. The Constantinople decision was to play a key role in the split between the Western and Eastern churches. In the latter, the notion of human divinity survived to a significant degree, even to the present.

During the Renaissance, Thomas Aquinas and the Schoolmen, adopted more and more of the Aristotelian world-view and built it solidly into the framework of Western Christian dogma. Although the church acknowledged the individual soul, it assigned to the soul a lower status than it enjoyed under Neoplatonism. Regardless of the possible motives for the Constantinople decision and its subsequent confirmation in Thomist theology, stripping away man's divinity had an important political effect. It reduced his spiritual self-confidence and self-sufficiency and increased his dependence on the church. The church itself replaced

the soul as the most important intermediary between incarnate man and God. At the same time, the church became the new *Anima Mundi*, uniting not all mankind but at least its baptized members in the Mystical Body of Christ.

To its credit, Christianity has always stressed the soul's potential for everlasting life. The church teaches that the soul will live for ever; but, interestingly, it denies that the soul existed before physical life began. Each soul is supposed to be created at the moment of physical conception or soon thereafter; thus the soul is semi-eternal rather than eternal. Today, we would view as highly dubious the notion that a nonphysical soul could be created in time; time is now regarded as being inseparable from the physical universe. But this notion was entirely consistent with the metaphysics that prevailed from the Renaissance to the end of the 19th century and that reached its highest expression in Isaac Newton. To Newton, time was absolute and eternal, and the clock was already running when God created the universe and us.

Christianity asserts that man *has* a soul, rather than man *is* a soul, as Plato had stated. It also stresses that positive steps must be taken to “save” the soul from eternal damnation that is deserved because of our sins. Catholic doctrine even insists that babies who die in infancy can never reach Heaven because of the collective “original sin,” or what we would call negative racial karma. Salvation is made possible by Christ's death on the cross, but it also requires the combined efforts of the individual, during the few critical years of earthly existence, and the church. People who lived before the time of the historical Christ and people outside the church can be saved only by special dispensation. Significantly, the soul plays no role in its own salvation. Not only is the Christian soul fragile and corruptible—a well-known old hymn tells of the “sin-sick soul”—it is also ineffective. The soul is treated as a kind of balloon that we carry around on a string, hoping that it does not get popped before we die.

According to Christian teaching, even if we die in grace, permanent residence in heaven is linked to the eventual resurrection of the physical body. Reunion with the body is necessary to make us once again “whole.” For a religious movement ostensibly concerned with spirituality and the hereafter, Christianity focuses surprisingly strongly on the physical body. Our physical resurrection as well as Christ's are central elements in its doctrine. On the other hand, the importance of the resurrected physical body contrasts in a curious way with the low status that Christianity, since St. Paul's time, has assigned to the body while in earthly life. Until death, the body—and the larger physical world in which it lives—are corrupt, providing endless temptation to sin. The flesh must be disciplined and even beaten into submission. Medieval Christianity in particular had little respect for physical creation; more than one “work of art” from the period showed the Devil excreting the physical universe. Even the general belief that God created the universe and sent His Son into incarnation has done little to alleviate the physical world's degraded status.

Modern Christian writers take a more generous view of humanity and a more ecumenical view of salvation. Most acknowledge that the world is not all bad and that the church may not be the sole intermediary between man and God. But the soul has improved little in spiritual status, effectiveness, or independence. Indeed, there has been a tendency to despiritualize the soul, presumably to make it more salable in a skeptical market.

Concepts and terminology are borrowed from contemporary physiology or psychology. For example, Teilhard de Chardin—whose philosophy has interesting parallels with that of his contemporary and fellow Taurean, Bertrand Russell—conceives of the soul and his World Soul largely in physiological terms, as organisms. The result has been the further downgrading of the soul and the spread of soul-materialism, even in Christian circles.

This discussion of the religious view of the soul has emphasized the Christian tradition because of its dominant influence on Western thought. Other major world religions embrace a wide variety of positions on human divinity, the individual human soul, and a possible World Soul. Hinduism independently developed

a philosophy not unlike Plato's and has maintained its concept of body, soul, and spirit more or less consistently for thousands of years. As will be seen later, Hinduism provided a firm base from which Platonic ideas were eventually reintroduced to the West. On the other hand, Hinduism stressed much more than did Plato that the physical world is illusory. The Old Religion of Europe, which Christianity displaced, included a strong belief in divinity, primarily in the form of the Goddess, and in the powers of nature; but it gave less emphasis to the individual human soul. In contrast to Hinduism, there was no suggestion that the Pagan world was an illusion. The religions of the North American Indians regarded the natural world as divine, in the form of the Great Spirit of the Earth. But again, the soul received less emphasis; human survival was believed to take place primarily through tribal descendants or, in some cases, through totem animals.

The concept of the soul has received major challenges from science. The scientific revolution that started in the 17th century sought either to discard the soul altogether or at least to remove it to such a distance that it could have no significant influence on the physical body or the world. Soul and body were separated, and the dualistic school of philosophy was born. Descartes, its founder, believed in spirit (which he equated with God), and he continued to acknowledge the existence of a soul. But he considered that contact between the soul and the physical body was minimal, being confined to some part of the brain (others said the heart). Descartes' assertion that body-soul contact is localized in the brain appealed to the 18th century Swedish scientist: Emanuel Swedenborg. Swedenborg conducted an extensive investigation, identifying the pituitary gland as the most likely point of contact. But his growing interest in psychology, psychism, and mysticism began to preoccupy him to the exclusion of his purely scientific research. Late in his life, the soul itself became much more important to him than its relationship to the physical body. Meanwhile, most scientists of the time declared themselves to be atheists or agnostics and had little interest at all in the soul.

The scientists of the 17th-19th centuries still needed a formal cause, in the Aristotelian sense, but they attributed it to an eternally valid set of mathematical equations. These equations, Newton's laws of motion and the later field theories, provided all that was necessary to explain classical statics and dynamics. In due time they were also to explain electricity, magnetism, and gravitation. According to Newtonian philosophy, God formulated the equations and decreed that the universe would be governed by them—and a suitable set of initial conditions—for all time. God wound up the world, set in motion, and then stepped aside to watch it operate for the rest of eternity. Divine intervention in the world's affairs was over.

Mathematical equations took the place of the World Soul and held that position in intellectual circles for 200 years. Moreover, the final cause, or purpose, of existence—perhaps the last stronghold of spirit—was regarded as a metaphysical issue and of no concern to science. For its part, the individual soul was not needed either. The clockwork universe was populated by clockwork people. On the other hand, science could not be criticized for eroding human dignity much further than the church had already done. On the contrary—and of paramount importance—science gave us back something that the church had for centuries done its best to suppress: the right to think. This was and still is science's crowning glory. If science denied the existence of the soul, it never denied the mind (at least what we would call the concrete mind) or its capacity for development. Mind was paramount, even though its precise relationship to the physical brain was unclear. And once people recognized their right to think without the censure of religious authorities, a gradual re-ennobling of humankind could take place.

After replacing the World Soul and the formal cause, mathematics was even to replace the ether: the matrix that Newton—and a long and distinguished line of scientists before and after him—believed underlies all physical matter. On the cosmic scale, Michaelson and Morley determined that it was impossible to detect motion relative to the ether, setting the stage early in this century for Albert Einstein's theories of relativity. His general theory, published in 1917, replaced the physical world, including mass and gravity, by non-Euclidean geometry. On the microscopic scale the quantum physicists demonstrated that elementary particles “live, and move, and have their being,” not in an ether, but in the Schroedinger wave equation.

Physical matter and its motions and interactions are not only describable by mathematical solutions but in a real sense *are* mathematical solutions. As if to cheer the Hindus and Buddhists, the physical world indeed turned out to be an illusion, leaving nothing but mental constructs. On the other hand, these constructs unify the universe to an even greater degree than did the equations of Newtonian mechanics. Quantum mechanics, and particularly John Bell's theorem of nonlocality, describe a universe in which all events are interconnected; an event at one location has immediate and inescapable effects, even at great distances. In the quantum universe, all is indeed one.

Mathematics provides a relatively complete description of many physical problems of practical importance. But so far it has been less successful in describing life. Classical mechanics produced the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics that predicted that the clockwork universe could only run down. With the relentless and inexorable increase in entropy, the probability that life could evolve was very small. Recently, research on nonlinear dynamics, by Ilya Prigogine and others, has shown that the 2nd Law can be circumvented, in restricted spatial domains and time frames, allowing entropy to decrease enough for complex dynamic systems to evolve. Moreover, related research on mathematical chaos has demonstrated fascinating models of bifurcatory mutation. The work in these fields has been important in overcoming scientific predestination. The Newtonian notion that the future of a mechanical system is completely determined by its initial conditions is no longer tenable. Moreover, chaos theory provides one more example—supporting those already provided by the general theory of relativity and Bell's theorem—of the dependence of local events on their larger environment. On the other hand, this work is still a long way from describing anything resembling the development of a biological system. Even if mathematics could take the place of the *Anima Mundi* of an “inanimate” world, there seems little prospect that it could serve as the soul of a living entity.

In their attempts to explain life, mainstream biologists turned to nucleic acids and genetic codes. Genetic codes are successful in distinguishing a man from a dog or a cabbage, but they do not explain why some cells in the embryo develop into an arm, while other initially indistinguishable cells develop into a leg. Bolder biologists, such as Rupert Sheldrake proposed the existence of morphogenetic fields that may help in this regard. Distinct morphogenetic fields are said to exist for arms, legs, and other human, animal, or plant components and provide the necessary blueprints. The precise nature of the morphogenetic fields is not defined, although analogies have been drawn with electric or magnetic fields and particularly with the Kirlian aura. But the existence of morphogenetic fields is still not accepted in mainstream academic circles. Nor can even their proponents fully explain the origin of the fields and the mechanism by which they are communicated from one generation to the next. The fields may simply be the result of life, and not its cause.

The development of modern psychology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries—although foreshadowed by earlier work of Swedenborg and others—took an essentially different path from the then-popular scientific materialism. Psychological man clearly was not a machine. But academic psychologists, struggling to achieve scientific legitimacy and distance themselves from Victorian spiritualism, were reluctant to go too far toward accepting the notion of the soul. It was safer to talk about the subconscious or unconscious mind or the *psyche* (even though “psyche” means “soul”). Even Carl Jung, the boldest of the early 20th century psychologists only conceived of a kind of materialistic soul. Jung's soul is comparable with Teilhard de Chardin's. However, Jung did acknowledge a link between the individual unconscious and an archetypal collective unconscious that can be interpreted as an aspect of the *Anima Mundi*. Both Sheldrake's morphogenetic fields and the psychologists' psyche are models of the soul. But they are strongly related to—or even emerge from—physiological existence, with little potential for independent existence. They too reflect soul-materialism. There is a world of difference between these views of the soul and the idealist views of Plato, or even Aquinas. They resemble the Egyptian *Ka* or the etheric body of our own esoteric teaching, and we carefully distinguish the etheric body from the soul. The etheric body resides on the higher physical subplanes, while the soul occupies the higher mental subplanes.

In the West, the soul, as an independent, functional entity, succumbed to the dual pressures of Christianity and science—at least as far as open inquiry was concerned. Although Platonic or quasi-Platonic notions were preserved in the teachings of Gnosticism, the medieval mystery schools, the alchemists, the Rosicrucians, and the Masons, access to these teachings was severely limited until the present century. However, general interest in the soul arose once more in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and various factors contributed to its rebirth.

The spiritualist movement in Britain and the United States sought, among other things, to prove the survival of the soul after physical death. While mainstream spiritualism had limited objectives, it led to a reexamination of the soul and its relationship to physical existence. Contemporary with the spiritualist movement was the revival of European Hermetism, producing the Society of the Golden Dawn and similar organizations that were built upon Rosicrucian traditions. MacGregor Mathers, Israel Regardie, and others wrote a number of books on ritual magic, although their subject matter extended to the nature of man and the soul. These books adopted their terminology from the Hebrew *Qabala*. Books by writers such as Emma Curtis Hopkins and Manly Hall built primarily upon Christian mysticism, while other authors, such as Dion Fortune, drew on pagan sources. All of these writings laid a basis for the increasing interest in esoteric subjects in the latter part of the 20th century. With this interest came a greater awareness of the soul and the desire to know more about it.

However, the most useful teachings on the soul came from the Hindu and Buddhist philosophies of the East. Following the 18th- and 19th-century colonial excursions into Asia, a number of individuals and groups delved into thousands of years of Eastern wisdom and sought to interpret and present it in concise form to the Western mind. Naturally, Hindu and Buddhist terminology was retained wherever Western theology, philosophy, and psychology offered an inadequate linguistic framework. One of the first groups influenced by Eastern philosophy were the Transcendentalists of New England. Their chief spokesman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, was strongly influenced by the *Vedas* and, in particular, by the *Bhagavad Gita*. His concept of the oversoul provided yet another picture of the *Anima Mundi*. Although the Transcendentalist movement itself was short-lived, the larger New-Thought movement, which it helped to launch, survives today in several metaphysical institutions, such as Unity, whose view of the soul is more Platonic than Christian.

However, the most important group involved in the importation of Eastern philosophical ideas into the West was the Theosophical Society, founded in 1875. Its leaders, including Helena Blavatsky, Charles Leadbeater, and Annie Besant, contributed large volumes of material, much of it from channeled sources, that has had a great impact on Western notions of the soul and other esoteric topics. Their influence is still felt today. Rudolf Steiner, who also made a sizable contribution to the esoteric literature, and Alice Bailey were also members of the Society, although they severed their relationships with it before beginning their most important work. Alice Bailey channeled the Tibetan's books that developed and extended the Theosophical teachings to provide the basis for our own esoteric system. The Tibetan explicitly stated that his books built upon what Blavatsky had previously communicated. Alice Bailey, of course, also founded the Arcane School.

The teachings of the Theosophists and the Tibetan cover much ground. But in particular, they present a picture of the soul and spirit that provides a balance between pure idealism, on the one hand, and soul-materialism, on the other. Like Plato, they assert that the soul is the true man or woman, preexisting and surviving physical incarnation, and that the soul is intermediate between the lower self, or personality, and the spirit or Monad. These three human aspects correspond to the three Aspects of the Logos. The soul corresponds to the 2nd Aspect, the Cosmic Christ, and indeed is the Christ within us. With this recognition, our spiritual self-sufficiency is amply restored. The soul is the seat of consciousness and love and, while being fully individuated, it is instinctively in communication with all other souls, as well as with the World Soul that expresses the consciousness of the Planet. General awareness of this intercommunication is rapidly increasing in the world today.

The teachings assert that the soul takes an active role in its own development. It creates the physical body and the other aspects of the incarnate personality: the emotions and concrete mind. The soul overshadows and guides the personality, serving as its “god.” The personality is a temporary vehicle, one of many through which the soul expresses itself and experiences existence in the “three worlds:” the physical, emotional, and lower mental planes. Through the experiences of its succession of vehicles, the soul unfolds and eventually reaches the point where physical incarnation is no longer necessary. The soul is robust and indestructible; only the personality can be “lost.” However, in the positive direction, the personality itself can be exalted and the soul’s development accelerated through personality-soul contact. Many of our spiritual exercises are directed to this goal. As the degree of contact increases toward complete personality-soul fusion, the objectives of the incarnational cycle are at last fulfilled.

In their different ways and from their different perspectives, Platonic metaphysics, Christian doctrine, science, and our esoteric teachings have explored the notions of the individual soul and World Soul. They have wrestled, not only with the concept of the soul, but also with the terminology necessary to describe it. Key terms have had to be borrowed from Middle-Eastern and Asian languages to compensate for Western linguistic inadequacies.

Many efforts have been made to get rid of the soul or to downgrade its importance, for political or scientific ends; but these efforts have proved unsuccessful. Attempts to subjugate man to a church-soul have led to rebellion and the decline of organized religion. Similarly, attempts to express the soul in physical, physiological, or psychological terms have left people dissatisfied, feeling that there must be “something more” to human reality. Meanwhile, New Age esotericism—in which the Tibetan’s teachings have played and continue to play a major role—has emerged as the heir to Platonic philosophy, Piscean religion, and perhaps academic psychology. Attempts to show that man is mechanical and the world inert have surprisingly resulted in a greater emphasis on the human mind and the recognition of nonphysical unifying forces and sources of universal influence. Modern physics accepts something strongly resembling a World Soul, although it is described in mathematical rather than esoteric terms.

So far there is no sign of a scientific proof of the existence of the individual soul beyond the concrete mind, although such a breakthrough would probably be received more favorably now than at any time during the last 300 years. Organizations such as the Institute of Noetic Sciences, which explore the mind-brain relationship, provide a valuable bridge between traditionally materialistic academia and New Age esotericism. But their influence remains small. At this time, it seems as though universal recognition of the soul’s existence will come, not from any kind of scientific proof, but from a realization of man’s interconnectedness with and mutual dependence on the whole of humanity and the Universe. The recently discovered interconnectedness of the physical world provides an important backdrop to this process. Recognition of the soul will come from the growing concern for the wellbeing of humanity and the Planet and the desire to reach out to others of all classes, races, and nationalities. The true nature of the soul will become clearer through self-awareness of human behavior, interpreted in the light of intuition. When a substantial fraction of the world’s people *know* the soul, establishing a “laboratory” proof of its existence will become less urgent.