



Perspectives and Controversies: The Concepts of Soul and Body in Eastern and Western Cultures

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ABSTRACT: This essay is a brief exposition on the history of soul and body from the perspective of Eastern and Western cultures. In this regard, I will address the topic of the connection between body and soul (described in the various religions) in order to propose an integrative model in social and human sciences that might contribute to the study of human behavior in a more holistic way.

KEYWORDS: a brief history of the soul, a brief history of the body, Western and Eastern perspectives on the soul and body.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The study of the history of the soul and of the body and the connection between the two, referred to in the various religions, has the purpose of comparing the behavior of ordinary man (where the “ego” predominates) and the virtuous man. In the first case, religions speak of sin (Western culture) or karma (Eastern culture) and the need for renewal and transformation of the ego/personality in order to be in harmony with the others human beings, as well as with the Divine. This work of “self-awareness” of one’s own personality performed (for example) through the fasting of Lent (by Christians), fasting of Ramadan (by Muslims) or Ekadashi (fasting made by the Hindus) and metaphorically described in the twelve Labors of Hercules [1] has the purpose of obtaining a human being with more character, that is, with more quality and less fault.

In fact, the study of the connection of the body with soul in the Western and the Eastern cultures assumes different perspectives. An example is the case of the American actress Angelina Jolie, whose elegant and slim body has allowed her to play numerous roles in Hollywood cinema, such as “malefic”, among others. In her free time she is dedicated to helping the unprotected children in the underdeveloped countries, through the aid program of the United Nations. On the other hand, we have the example of the Indian saint, known as Ammachi who presents a non-sculptural body that gives a strong hug to the people who come to Her Darshan (in Sanskrit “seeing the Divine”) in order to search for guidance to his/her own soul’s plan on Earth. It is said that Ammachi is one of the manifestations of the Divine Mother on Earth [2]. In her free time this saint is dedicated to programs of humanitarian assistance to combat natural disasters (earthquakes, tsunami, hurricanes).

These two cases are an example of the contrast between the value assigned to the body in Western culture (Angelina Jolie) and Eastern culture (Ammachi).

II. THE CONCEPTS OF SOUL AND BODY IN EASTERN AND WESTERN CULTURES: AN OVERVIEW

First of all, I’m going to refer the importance of concepts of soul and body in Eastern and Western cultures. In relation to the concept of soul [3], this word has several etymological roots, such as *nefesh* from Hebrew (which means “breath”), *animus* from Latin (which means “what animates or life”), *anemos* from Greek (which means “blow or air”), *atman* from Sanskrit (which means “inner self or true self”). At the same time, the concept of body has also several etymological roots, such as *corpus* from Latin (which means “perceptible by the senses”), *kwrep* from Indo-European languages (which mean “shape, appearance”).

In philosophical terms, there are several concepts for soul, according to Western and Eastern cultures [4]. In this regard, the Greeks (Western culture), such as Plato in his dialogue with Socrates, in *Phaedo*, defends the immortality of the soul and its reincarnations, while Aristotle argues, in his work *De Anima*, that

the soul is the vital principle of every living thing (plant, animal, human). Saint Augustine, author of *De Civitate Dei*, also proposes that soul is the principle motivator of the body, while in the 17th century Descartes argues the separation of mind/soul (domain of philosophy and religion) and body (domain of science and medicine). Meanwhile, Spinoza believes that the soul and the body are complementary aspects of the same reality, while Kant claims, in his work *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, that the soul could not be proved by reason. Later, the concept of soul was related to the research of consciousness. First, Wundt studied the “structure” of consciousness, while Watson proposed the term “behaviorism” to express the link between consciousness and behavior. In the 20th century, with Freud and Jung, the term “psique” is related with the study of consciousness and soul. In this regard, Western philosophy and culture has dealt with the topic of self-consciousness (or perception) [5] to describe the connection of body with the soul. For example, Kant defends that perception is the empirical consciousness, while Husserl claims that in the process of perception, the subject only sees the appearance of the object/body (identical to the Panchakoshas theory of the Eastern culture, discussed further).

At the same time, in Eastern cultures [6], namely the Egyptians claim that each human being has a guardian spirit, named by *ka*, linked with the physical body, called by *ha*, while the Hebrews have an idea of soul that is closely linked to the body. At the same time, Tibetan Buddhism proposes several “psychological states” for the progress of the soul on Earth. In this regard, Hinduism argues that the soul is the “true Being” that drives the body during the earthly life and it survives after death. The Chinese culture also holds that the soul (named by *ling-hun*) has a sensitive side (designed by *po*) and a rational side (called by *hun*), while the Japanese culture argues that the soul (named by *damashii*), like the air, cannot be seen but is essential to experience the true life.

On the other hand, in relation to the concept of body in Western culture [7], I want to refer that the Greeks, like Plato, in his work *Timaeus*, defends that the body has to be integrated with the mind/soul in order to perceive the true reality of things, whereas Aristotle argues that our actions depend both of body and the soul. These concepts prevailed unchanged until the end of the Middle Ages, and during this time the Catholic Church devalued the function of the body (in particular sexual relations that they did not have the purpose of fertilization) to the detriment of the soul. With the Renaissance, in particular with Andreas Vesalius and his work *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*, the study of the body gains a more rational dimension. Subsequently, Cartesian dualism argues that the study of the body is the exclusive domain of science and medicine. With the Industrial Revolution, the care of the body gains a new dimension according to the new standards of beauty of that time, liberating it from the theological principles of “sin”. In contemporary society, the aesthetic aspect of the body has gained particular relevance, and for this reason plastic surgery is one of the ways to “disguise” the natural process of aging. At the same time, Eastern culture, in particular Indian society, assumes, beyond the physical body, the existence of several nonphysical bodies, such as pranic body, concrete mental body, archetypal mental body, intuitive body and spiritual body. This topic is mentioned in Eastern culture as a theory of Panchakoshas. The *koshas* (or “bodies”) are sheaths that are removed during lifetime (called by “self-perception”) in order to human being might witness his/her own real Self – the soul [8].

III. THE CONNECTION OF THE SOUL TO THE BODY: SOME PERSPECTIVES AND CONTROVERSIES

The link between the body and the soul is a reflection of our relationship with others, whether it be a love/marriage with children, a friendship, and family. It is through connection with others and particularly with ourselves that our life makes sense. In this regard, there are many unanswered questions by science, particularly why we feel immediate attraction for some people and repulse for others. In this regard, the most powerful link and relationship that a human being might have is with his/her own the soul – the Real being – or soul mate (as described in myths of all cultures). This link is hard to cope because the object of our search (the soul) is inside of the human being (the subject), and is not outside, as it is experienced in a trivial relationship, previously mentioned. As with any serious relationship (be it with another being or with our soul), love and respect between the parties should be cultivated in order to strengthen the bond and make it permanent/unbreakable [9]. In this case, regardless of the space and time that separates them, the connection will become “eternal”, as described metaphorically in the Sacred books of the several religions, such as the Gospels [10], where it is referred that Jesus teaches their disciples, saying “what interests has a man to gain everything in this earthly world, if the she/he loses her/his own soul?”, or the Bhagavad Gita [11], where Arjuna (disciple) and Krishna (Master) wage the same battle together and where Krishna teaches his disciple, saying “change your paradigm to win the battle (soul)”.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The theme of the concept of the soul and its connection to the body is a topic that has aroused much interest in the various religions, particularly because it interrelates something visible (the body) with something

non-visible (the soul). In fact, this a controversial subject, especially in the scientific community, because it is not possible to prove it experimentally (or deny it) the existence of the soul, as well as the connection between the soul and the body, and consequently the existence of something that survives after death. In other words, there is nothing in our physical body that says that we are consciously linked to our soul. Perhaps, the only visible external mark is the person's own action towards others, denoting a different behavior from ordinary man, such as selfless love (these humans being are popularly called *saints*).

In summary, I think that we should redefine new ways of thinking about the concepts of the body and soul, as proposed by Merleau-Ponty[12], not only to overcome the Cartesian dualism between mind/soul and body, but also to create an integrative model in social and human sciences that might incorporate the connection of body and soul in the study of the human behavior.

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