

A Philosophical Discussion on Immateriality of the Soul

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Is the soul immaterial? The word "soul" in this discussion means that thing which every man refers to when he says "I". Its "immateriality" refers to the fact that it is not a material thing, it is
.neither divisible nor governed by time or space

No doubt, I conceive in myself a concept which I refer to as "I"; and it is equally certain that every man has similar conception about himself. It is a conception which we are never oblivious of — as long as we are alive and conscious. It is not a limb of ours; nor is it a part of our body which we perceive by one of our senses or even through reason. In short, it is not like our external limbs which we feel with our senses of sight or touch, etc, nor is it like our internal organs which we know by senses or experiment. Sometimes we become oblivious of one or another of those limbs or organs — or even of the whole body. But we are never oblivious of the "I". It proves that the "I" is other than the body and its parts.

One thing more Body and its limbs and parts as well as the faculties and characteristics found in it, are all material. One of the characteristics of matter is gradual change, dissolution and divisibility. If soul were body or a part thereof, it would have been material and subject to change and division — but it is not so. If a man looks at this vision of his "self" and then compares it with that which he used to look at since the beginning of his gnosis of the "self", he will find that it is the same vision, the same notion, without the least change or plurality. It is unlike his body or its parts and characteristics which all undergo continuous change, in substance and form as well as in their conditions and positions. Also, he will realize that it is a notion, Simple, indivisible and non-compound, unlike the body or its Parts and characteristics. And matter and every material thing is a compound and divisible. Obviously, the soul is not body, nor is it a part of the body; it is neither a development of the body nor one of its characteristics. Coming to matter again, it makes no difference whether we perceived it with a sense of ours or by reasoning, or did not perceive it at all — it is matter and material in any case. And matter is subject to change and divisibility. But we have seen that the vision which we call "soul" is not subject to any of the above characteristics of matter. Therefore, soul is
neither matter nor material.

Also, this vision of "I" is a notion, simple and one; there is no plurality of parts therein, nor is there any extraneous item mixed with it; it is an absolute one. Every man finds it in himself that he is he and not someone else. Therefore, this vision is a concept subsistent by itself, and distinct; it is beyond the definition of matter and is not subject to its characteristics and

properties. It is a al-jawhar (جواهر = lit. “jewel”; technically, a thing that exists in reality and which is the bearer of the accidents), separate from matter; it has a connection with the body which makes it identifiable with the body – and it is the connection of management.

The above discourse proves our claims in this respect.

All the materialists and a group of Muslim theologians as well as the Zahiristic traditionalists do not accept the immateriality of the soul. But what they have written in support of their view stretches the credulity too far.

Let us have a look at the arguments of the materialists.

They say:

1. The science has nowadays advanced to a previously-undreamt-of extent in its in-depth and minute researches of natural phenomena. It has found and pin-pointed a natural and material cause for every characteristic of the body. It has not found any psychological effect which could not be explained according to the material laws. This being the case, why should we believe in the existence of an immaterial soul?

2. The nervous system continuously conveys the perceptions to its centre (i.e., brain) with extreme rapidity. The vision thus perceived is a unified series, having a single position. The pictures formed in mind are substituted with such rapidity that one frame is not distinguishable from another; that is, mind does not realize that the preceding frame has gone and been replaced by another. It is this composite “one”, this illusory “unit”, which we see and call our soul, and which we refer to as “I”. It is true that it is other than all our limbs and organs; but it does not necessarily mean that it is other than body and its characteristics. The fact is that it is a composite series which appears to be one, because of continuous and rapid substitutions – and we are never oblivious of it, because such an oblivion would result in nullity of the nervous system – in other words, death.

Also, it is true that my vision of my “I” is constant. But it is not because there is a thing which is constant and unchanged. In fact, it is only an illusion resulting from a series of constantly and rapidly changing visions. Suppose there is a water-tank with an inlet and an outlet of the same diameter; water comes in from one side and goes out from the other, with exactly the same speed— and the tank seems always full. Our sense perceives the water as one, constant and unchanged unit, but in reality it is neither the same water nor is it constant and unchanged. Even if there is a reflection in the water, of a man, tree or some other object, it will look as unchanged, steady and constant, but actually it is not so – it is not one, it is gradually changing with the gradual change of the water. The same is the case of the apparent oneness, constancy and unchangeability which we see in our soul, self or “I”.

3. The soul, for whose immateriality arguments have been offered, based on the inner vision, is in fact a composite of natural faculties and characteristics. It is the sum-total of nervous perceptions, which in their turn emanate from mutual action and reaction between external matter and nervous system. It is a composite unity, not the real one.

COMMENT: 1. It is true that the science, based on senses and experiments with all its minute, delicate and in-depth researches, has not come across a “soul”. Also, it is correct that it has not found any phenomenon which irresistibly led one to the Soul as its cause. But these two premises do not prove that there is not an immaterial soul – after all, we have written earlier the proofs of its existence. The natural sciences, which discuss the laws of nature and the properties of matter, are by definition limited to the researches concerning matter only, which is its subject. The apparatus and chemicals, etc. which sciences use to conduct and complete their tests and experiments, may throw light on matter and material affairs only. But by the same token these, sciences and their apparatus, etc. cannot pass any judgment – for or against – on metaphysical and immaterial concept and beings. Utmost that a natural science can say is that it did not find a soul. But “not finding” is not “non-existence”. The natural sciences, by their definition, are not expected to find within their subject (i.e., within matter and its properties and characteristics) something beyond the limit of matter and physical nature. In fact, their above-mentioned assertion emanates from a gross misunderstanding. They think that those who believed in the existence of soul, did so because they look at some biological functions of their limbs which they could not explain within the framework of their incomplete knowledge, and so they said that there was something immaterial, that is, the soul, that was the source of those functions. But now the science has developed by leaps and bounds and has pin-pointed the natural causes of all such functions. Therefore, there is no need now to believe in the putative soul. (It is the same trend of thought which they have followed while denying the existence of the Creator.)

Obviously, it is a wrong assumption. Those who believe in the existence of soul, do not do so because of that supposed difficulty; they do not ascribe some bodily function (of known causes) to the body, and some others (of unknown causes) to the soul. Rather, they ascribe all bodily functions to the body – directly – and to the soul – indirectly, through the body. They ascribe to the soul only one function which cannot be ascribed to the body in any way – man’s gnosis of self and his vision of his person or “I”.

2. They have said that the reality seen by man as one is, in fact, a series of nervous perceptions coming to the central nervous system one after another with extreme rapidity but their oneness

is only composite. But this assertion is quite irrelevant, and it has nothing to do with the vision of the self. We have argued on the strength of the vision of the self; they are talking about arrival of the sensual visions from the peripheral sense – organs to the central nervous system, and its results. Well, let us suppose, as they say, that actually there are many things, that is, perceptions which have no real oneness; and those perceptions are all material, there is nothing behind them except their own reality; and that the vision which is 'one soul' is in fact the sum-total of these numerous perceptions. If so, then where did this "one" come from – the one which is our only vision, whose "other" has never been perceived by us? Where did this perceived oneness come from?

The talk about "composite oneness" is more like a jest than a serious proposition. A "composite one" is in reality a collection of numerous things without any oneness at all. Its oneness is imaginary, as we may say one house or one line, which is not one in fact. What they say amounts to this: The perceptions and sensations which are pluralistic and manifold in themselves are one perceptions in itself.

It means that these perceptions are numerous in reality, having no oneness at all, and at the same time they are actually only one perception; there is nothing beyond these sensual perceptions to perceive them as one perception – unlike a sense or imagination which consecutively and collectively receives manifold sensory or imaginary perceptions, and perceives them as one. They claim that those manifold perceptions are in themselves one perception – there is no other faculty beyond them which treats this collective vision as a composite one. Also, it is not possible to say that that perceiving is done by a part of brain which perceives the pluralistic picture as "one" – because it will not remove our objection: The perception of that part of brain is itself a part of those consecutively and rapidly-perceived picture, and our objection covers that perception too. That part of brain does not possess a separate perception-power which Would deal with these perceptions – as an external sense deals With the external matters and acquires through them sensory Pictures. (Ponder on this point.)

Exactly the same arguments (as we have offered above against "oneness" of the sensual perceptions) apply with equal force against firmness and indivisibility of this vision which is always changing and divisible by its very nature.

Apart from that, the premises – that these manifold, consequently (and with extreme rapidity) perceived pictures are perceived by mental vision as one – is wrong in itself. What is brain or its faculties? What is perception and the perceived picture? All these things are material – and matter and material are in their quiddity manifold, changeable and divisible. But the gnosis of

“self” is not subject to these material defects. Is it not strange that even then they claim that
there is nothing beyond matter and material?

3. They have said that the senses or the perceiving faculties become confused and consequently perceive manifold, divisible and changing things as one indivisible and unchanging thing. But this assertion is manifestly wrong. Error or confusion is a relative – and not an absolute – effect which occurs when one thing is compared with another. For example, we perceive the celestial bodies as small bright dots. Of course, this perception is wrong as we know from academic proofs and our other perceptions. But this error is found out when we compare our sensory perception with the reality of these perceived luminous bodies. As far as that sensory perception itself is concerned, it is a reality – we are actually perceiving small
bright dots. And to that extent there is no question of any error or confusion.

The subject under discussion is not different from the above-given example. When our senses and faculties look at numerous divisible and changing things and perceive them as one indivisible and unchanging thing, their confusion and error is found out only when that picture is compared with the real thing existing outside. But so far as the perceived picture found in that faculty or sense is concerned, it is undoubtedly one, unchanging and indivisible – and such
a thing cannot be material because it lacks the properties of matter and material.

In short, the above discourse shows that the argument offered by materialists on the basis of senses and experiment, only proves that they could not find the soul. The fallacy is that they have proved ‘not finding’ and think that it proves ‘non-existence’. Also, the picture painted by them to illustrate the vision of self or soul – the vision that is a single, simple and unchangeable reality – is irrelevant and wrong; that picture is in accord neither with
established principles of materialism nor with the actual fact.

Now, we should have a look at the definition of soul or psyche as given by the psychologists. According to them, it is the unified condition resulting from the actions and reactions of various psychological activities – like perception, will, pleasure, love, etc. – which give rise to that unified condition. We have nothing to say about this definition, because scholars of every branch of knowledge have right to postulate a subject for their scholarly pursuit and
deliberation. And so have the psychologists.

Our concern is about the existence (or inexistence) of the soul in reality, quite independent of the assumptions of the thinkers. And it is a question within the domain of philosophy, not
psychology.

There are some scholars of theology who believe that the soul is not immortal. They say: It has been established by the disciplines related to human life, like anatomy and physiology, that

man's spiritual and biological characteristics emanate from live cells; those cells are the foundations of human and animal lives. Spirit or soul, therefore, is a characteristics and especial effect of those countless cells – each of which contains a life of its own. What the man calls his soul – and to which he refers as “I” – is a composite entity made up of countless souls. We know that these life conditions and spiritual characteristics cease to exist when the life-giving germs and cells die. In this back-ground, there is no question of a single immaterial soul or spirit which is supposed to continue even after the body dies. True that the principles of materialism, established after scientific researches, are yet unable to unravel the mysteries of life. Therefore, we may say that the physical causes are unable to create the soul, and accordingly, it may have been brought into being by a metaphysical being. The attempt to prove the immateriality of the soul by purely rationalistic argument is unacceptable in the world of modern knowledge, which does not rely on anything other than the senses and experiments. The author says: On meditation you will see that all the objections written against the materialists' arguments apply with equal force to this argument too. The following two objections are over and above that:

First: If the scientific research is up till now unable to unravel the mysteries of soul and realities of life, it does not necessarily mean that it cannot do so even in future; nor that these spiritual characteristics are in fact not based on material causes – although we may not know it. Therefore, the theologians' argument is nothing but a fallacy by which they have equalized inexistence of knowledge with knowledge of inexistence.

Second: They seem to ascribe some worldly affairs – that is, the physical phenomena – to matter, and some others – that is, spiritual affairs – to a metaphysical cause, that is, the Creator. But it implies that there are two creators in the world. It is a proposition which is neither acceptable to the materialists nor the theists. And all the arguments of monotheism rebut such assumption.

There are some other objections against immateriality of soul, described in books of philosophy and theology; all of them show that the writers concerned have not pondered on the proof given by us, nor have they understood its main theme. That is why we have refrained from quoting and commenting on them here. Anyone desirous to know them should look into .the books concerned. And Allah is the Guide