

Dualities and Convergences: A Comparative Examination of Soul and Atman in Marvell and Shankara

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the concept of the inner being in Christian and Hindu religio-philosophical discourse. The terms *Atman* in Hinduism and soul in Christianity both pertain to the immaterial aspect or essence that is believed to exist within a living being. While these terms are used interchangeably within the cultural context of India, it is essential to recognize that they carry distinct meanings and connotations. Using mimetic literary criticism based on a comparative analysis of Andrew Marvell's *A Dialogue between the Soul and the Body* and Adi Shankara's *Tattvabodha*, this essay uncovers the similarities and differences between the seide as. The study shows that the concept of soul is different from that of *Atman*, and that using these terms interchangeably can lead to misinterpretations and distortions of both traditions. The essay highlights the importance of employing accurate terminology to correctly convey philosophical and theological concepts, and stresses the importance of cultural sensitivity and mutual respect in inter-faith discussions.

Keywords: Andrew Marvell, Adi Shankara, Atman, Tattvabodha, Hindu Philosophy

INTRODUCTION

The quest for meaning and fulfillment in life has captivated human beings since time immemorial. Whether it is Socrates's inquiries into the ethics and purpose of life, Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, Nietzsche's existentialist philosophy, or Camu's absurdism, philosophers and rationalists alike, have, over the ages continued to offer varied perspectives and insights into this profound and complex philosophical inquiry on the meaning of life. On the one hand, scientists and empiricists insist that the empirical world alone is real and that questions like "What is the meaning of life?" and "What is the nature of an individual's experience of his life as meaningful?" can be approached by social scientific methodology (Battista and Almond, 1973, p. 409). *Charvaka*, an ancient Indian philosophical school that flourished more than two millennia ago, in the same way, rejected concepts like an afterworld and liberation, denied the authority of any scripture and emphasized a worldview grounded in perceivable matter and empirical evidence (Chattopadhyaya and Gangopadhyaya, 1990).

Yet there are those who have continued to ask questions like: Who am I? Is there something that exists beyond the confines of the physical body? Is there a divine entity, beyond the earthly realm, who is the source of ultimate joy, love and salvation? In this way, the concepts of body, soul, and spirit, or its equivalents, have emerged in different traditions. In Christian thought, the soul represents the individual's internal experiences, encompassing thoughts, emotions, desires, and imagination, while the spirit pertains to the same inner life in relation to God, symbolizing elements such as faith, hope, love, character, and perseverance (Smith, 2018). In Hindu thought as well, there is a clear distinction between the body (*sharira*) and one's inner self (*Atman*). The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (II.i.20) employs poetic language to illustrate the nature of Atman. Just as the spider moves along the thread it produces or as form fire tiny sparks fly in all directions, in the same way *Atman* is that "Truth of Truth" from which comes forth all faculties all worlds, all deities and all beings (Nikhilananda, 2008, p. 161).

Ideas like an inner being beyond the body, and concepts like salvation or liberation, are therefore seen in both Western thought as well as in Dharmic faiths such as Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism (Flood, 2013, p. xii). For centuries, philosophers and seekers of knowledge, throughout the world, have contemplated on this interplay between the body and the inner being. The quest for meaning and purpose is a fundamental aspect of the human experience, transcending cultural and temporal boundaries. Throughout history and across diverse cultures, individuals have grappled with existential questions, seeking to find significance and direction in their lives (Flood, 2013, pp. 2-3). This universal pursuit reflects the innate human desire to understand one's place in the world and to find fulfillment and purpose in one's existence.

In translations and discussions involving Hindu concepts, such as those found in Sanskrit or regional Indian languages, there is often an interchangeability between the terms soul and *Atman* (Malhotra and Babaji, 2020, p. 54). Through an exploration of Andrew Marvell's, *A Dialogue between the Soul and the Body* (mid to late 17th century CE) and Adi Shankaracharya's *Tattvabodha* (8th century CE), this essay delves into a comparative analysis of the notions of soul and *Atman*, seeking to uncover similarities and differences between these concepts as presented in the selected works. *A Dialogue between the Soul and the Body* offers insights into the Western understanding of the soul, delving into the internal conflict and connection between the soul and the physical body, exploring themes of liberation, imprisonment, and the essence of the soul's autonomy. Shankara's *Tattvabodha*, on the other hand, explores the nature of self-realization, the means of liberation and discusses in depth the nature of the *Atman*. The essay thoroughly examines similarities and differences between the concepts of soul and *Atman*, delving into an exploration of the underlying reasons behind these similarities and differences. As noted by Abrams (1999, pp. 51-52), there are four models of applied criticism to judge a literary work, depending on whether the work pertains "primarily to the outer world, or to the reader, or to the author, or else treat the work as an entity in itself" known as mimetic, pragmatic, expressive and objective criticism, respectively. For the purpose of this study, a mimetic criticism model has been chosen to examine the selected poems as it allows a deeper understanding and interpretation of the themes, ideas, and cultural contexts.

MARVELL'S DIALOGUE

Andrew Marvell (1621 – 1678), was a renowned English poet, noted for his contributions to metaphysical poetry. The son of a clergyman, Marvell was likely exposed to a strong religious upbringing and this impact can be seen in his writings, many of which contain religious themes and references, exploring moral and spiritual dimensions of human existence (Craze, 1979, p. 3). Ironically, during his lifetime Marvell was more popular as a politician and civil servant, and not as a poet. It was only after his death that most of his poetry was available in print form (Craze, 1979, p. 27). His poems have since then garnered enduring admiration for their captivating imagery, thematic depth, and creative brilliance, all within the bounds of tradition and confined to a specific set of themes. As Colie (1970, p. 3) observes, Marvell's poetry "gives the impression, or the illusion, of great depth—a smooth inviting pool beneath the surface of which are caverns measureless to man." Despite operating within the confines of the tradition he inherited, and not providing either answers or prescriptions to the problems, his literary legacy continues to inspire readers for its "elusiveness and mysteriousness at variance with the apparent precision of the language" (Colie, 1970, p. 3).

A Dialogue between the Soul and the Body is one of the lesser-known poems of Marvell, and was regarded as "a semi-grotesque, near-farcical product of the late 1640s when the aristocratic fashion for emblems and allegory was tottering to ruin with the Court" (Craze, 1979, p. 285). It took the poem three centuries to emerge from obscurity and to be regarded as "a proof of genius" (Craze, 1979, p. 285). The poem presents a conversation between the soul and the body, exploring the tension and conflict between the spiritual and physical aspects of human existence. It begins with the soul lamenting how it is trapped within the body physical body, represented by "bolts of bones," and being fettered in feet and "manacled in Hands" (Craze, 1979, p. 286). The soul yearns for liberation and expresses its desire to escape the limitations and constraints of the physical realm.

In response, the body describes itself as stretched upright, as if impaled or suspended on a precipice, suggesting a precarious and tormenting state. It comments on how the soul animates and moves the body, likening it to a needless frame that could be replaced by a fever, implying that the body's existence serves no purpose beyond the soul's control (Craze, 1979, p. 287). The body emphasizes the transitory nature of life and urges the soul to embrace the joys and pleasures of the material world. Throughout the dialogue, the poem explores contrasting perspectives on the nature of existence. As Thomas (1964, p. III-9) notes, the poem "presents a duality which cannot so easily be reconciled." While the idea of the soul being confined within the body is a commonly depicted image, the depiction of the body as being imprisoned within the soul is novel, and emphasizes the profound contradiction inherent in the human existence. Thomas makes a rather profound observation that this mutual enslavement of soul and body seems to imply that "the spiritual and physical elements are at once separate and intertwined" (Thomas, 1964, p. III-9).

A close examination of the poem reveals several significant aspects regarding the nature of the soul. Firstly, despite not possessing a physical existence itself, the soul is depicted as capable of *experiencing* pain and suffering inflicted upon the body. It demonstrates a capacity to perceive and endure a wide range of emotions, including hope, fear, love, hatred, joy, and sorrow. Secondly, the poem highlights the soul's strong sense of confinement and *enslavement* within the physical body. The soul is portrayed as feeling trapped and restricted by the limitations imposed by the bodily form. Lastly, the soul exhibits a profound yearning for *liberation* and autonomy, expressing a deep desire to transcend the constraints and limitations inherent in bodily existence. Through this longing, the soul demonstrates self-awareness, recognizing its own captivity and questioning its role within the body's existence. In contrast, the body is presented as a fragile and transient entity, described as a "needless Frame" (Craze, 1979, p. 287). It is susceptible to various physical and emotional afflictions such as fevers, cramps, and palsy, underscoring its mortality and impermanence. The body's inherent vulnerabilities and propensity for decay and eventual death are emphasized. Furthermore, the poem implies that the body is designed to accommodate and engage in sinful acts, as it is seemingly built up for sin (Craze, 1979, p. 289), suggesting a connection between the physical form and moral transgressions.

Soul in Christian Thought

Marvell's conceptualization of soul, as an inner entity, closely inter-twined with the physical body, is based on Biblical theology. As Davis (2011, p.31) observes, Marvell's metaphysical reflections were firmly grounded in Christian mysticism and that his "Protestantism dictated an iconoclastic attitude to literary traditions." In the creation myth, the human body is initially formed, but remains lifeless and devoid of vitality, till the time God imparts the breath of life into the body. It is then, that human existence becomes animated, and man becomes a living soul (Sproul, 2022).

At the same time, the soul is not ever-existent, as God has the ability to destroy souls. In Matthew (10.28), Jesus warns his apostles not to fear those who may threaten their physical lives, as they have no power to harm their souls. Instead, he urges them to direct their fear towards God, who possesses the authority to destroy both the soul and body in the realm of hell. Thus, the soul is not eternal in the sense of being beginning-less or like the Hindu conception of *Atman*. Nor is it any different, in essence, from the empirical world of atoms and molecules. Sproul (2022) says:

"The soul is as much a creation as is the body. That the soul survives the grave is not a testimony to its indestructibility or of its intrinsic immortality. The soul as a created entity is mortal. It survives the grave only because it is sustained and preserved by the power of God."

The concept of the soul, as understood in biblical literature, is described with various attributes and abilities. Proverbs (19:15) suggests that the soul can experience hunger, while Lamentations (1:11-19) illustrates the soul being satisfied with food. Leviticus (5:2) implies that the soul is capable of touching material objects.

Job (33:22-28) suggests that the soul can enter the grave, while Psalm (30:3) indicates that it can also emerge from it. These biblical references highlight the diverse qualities attributed to the soul in the religious context, offering insights into its capacity for physical sensations, emotional fulfillment, interaction with the material world, and its perceived connection to life and death. There are many such examples where soul clearly refers to something that is mortal and closely related to human body. The question of immortality and the realm of existence of the soul are two of the key differences between soul and the Indian idea of *Atman* which we will discuss next.

Adi Shankaracharya's *Tattvabodha*

Adi Shankaracharya, also known as Adi Shankara, was an Indian Vedic scholar and teacher, renowned for his contribution to Advaita Vedanta philosophy, one of the major schools of Hinduism (Dasgupta, 2008, p. 83). He is generally believed to have lived in the 8th century CE, although as per some traditions, like that of the *Kanchi Matha*, he is supposed to have lived much earlier (Dalal, 2010, p. 376). Shankara's writings offer a comprehensive interpretation of Hindu texts, emphasizing the liberating knowledge of the Self or *Atman* as its central theme. His commentaries on the *Brahma-sutra*, principal *Upanishads*, and the *Bhagavad Gita* articulate the concept of one eternal and unchanging reality vis-a-vis the incomplete and hence misinformed human understanding of the nature of plurality and differentiation (Dasgupta, 2008, p. 84).

Tattvabodha, an introductory text to Advaita Vedanta elucidating fundamental concepts like *Atman*, *Brahman* and *Ishvara*, is attributed to Adi Shankaracharya. Written in poetic style, the text explains the nature of reality (*tattva*) and the means of self-realization (*bodha*) (Tejomayananda, 2014, pp. 6-7). Adi Shankaracharya very succinctly and authoritatively defines *Atman* as “*sthūlasūkṣmakāraṇa-śarīrād-vyatirikt aḥp añcakośātītaḥsanavasthātraya-sākṣīsaccidānanda-svarūpaḥsanyas tiṣṭhati saātmā*” (Tejomayananda, 2014, p. 34).

Individuals are believed to possess three bodies: the gross physical body (*sthulasharira*), which is perceivable by the senses; the subtle body (*sukshmatharira*), which is not perceivable by the senses and serves as the seat of the mind and intellect; and the causal body (*karanasharira*), which extends beyond the other bodies and encompasses inherent tendencies. *Atman*, on the other hand, refers to that which transcends these three bodies (Tejomayananda, 2014, p. 35). Similarly, individuals are said to have five sheaths (*panchakosha*), which are essentially the same three bodies categorized differently. These include the *annamaya kosha* or food sheath, representing the gross physical body; the *pranamayakosha*, which governs physiological activities such as breathing, digestion and so on; the *manomayakosha*, serving as the mental sheath and the seat of emotions; the *vijnanamaya kosha*, associated with the seat of intellect; and the *anandamaya kosha*, representing the bliss-sheath or the unmanifest condition of personality. *Atman* exists beyond these five sheaths (Tejomayananda, 2014, pp. 35-36). Furthermore, *Atman* exists beyond the three states of humans – waking, dreaming and deep sleep – and functions as the witness for all three. It embodies the nature of *Sat-Chit-Ananda*, representing existence, knowledge, and bliss (Tejomayananda, 2014, p. 37).

It is important to note that *Atman*, in contrast to the soul, is qualitatively distinct from the physical realm encompassing the bodies, sheaths, and states of awareness. *Atman* transcends the limitations of the physical realm, including the concepts of pain, sorrow, and suffering. It extends even beyond *Ishvara*, the divine cosmic force, and the Lord of the universe as per Hindu thought (Chinmayananda, 2004, pp. 52-53). Ultimately, *Atman* cannot be comprehended through the senses or confined within the boundaries of the physical realm, as it surpasses the realms of space, time, and causation itself. Hindu scriptures are very clear on the fact that *Atman* is eternal. In *Bhagavad Gita* (2.20), Krishna declares: “*najāyatemriyatevāka dāchinnāyam bhū tvābhavitānabh ūyah ajo nityaḥśhāśhvato 'yampurāṇonahanyatehanyamāneśharīre*” (Prabhupada, 1983, p. 123). This statement conveys that the Self, or *Atman*, does not undergo the processes of birth or death. It is neither created nor destroyed and remains eternal, immortal, and unaffected by the passage of time (Gambhirananda, 1998, p. 123). Even when the physical body perishes, the Self remains unharmed and continues to exist. Its essence is beyond the transience of the body and persists beyond the limitations of mortality (Gambhirananda, 1998, pp. 124-125).

DISCUSSION

Although used interchangeably by Hindus, soul and *Atman* are two very different ideas, representing distinct worldviews and religious experiences. Both traditions address the realm of the inner world and the pursuit of liberation, although their approaches to these matters differ significantly. Technically, even the idea of Christian salvation is quite different from the Dharmic idea of liberation or *moksha* in general. The former refers to the process of being rescued by God from the consequences of one's wrongdoing, and soul has very little part to play in it. *Moksha* refers to the realization that the *Atman* alone true, and everything else is but an appearance. Knowing the true nature of *Atman* is central to Advaita Vedanta.

It is essential, therefore, that technical philosophical terms be translated with caution across languages. Malhotra (2013, p. 221) posits that the significance of a philosophical word often resides in its cultural context. Culture encompasses the accumulated collective experiences specific to a particular geography and history, and a genuine comprehension of a culture necessitates an immersive engagement with it. The unique experiences of diverse cultures are not always interchangeable, and the preservation of precise linguistic categories is crucial to preserve the diversity of cultural experience. When the term *Atman* is translated into English as soul, it loses many of its dimensions like eternity, transcendence beyond space and time, and the all-pervasive nature.

The reverse also holds true. Referring to soul as *Atman*, imbues the term soul with characteristics which are often against the basic tenets of Christianity. For instance, the Christian understanding does not perceive the soul as eternal or transcendent beyond the realms of space, time, and causation. Therefore, attributing the term *Atman*, which encompasses notions of eternity and transcendence, to the soul introduces ideas that contradict Christian beliefs and doctrines. As Craze (1979, p. 286) points out, Marvell's *Dialogue* draws inspiration from St. Paul's words in Galatians (5:16-17), which highlight the conflict between the desires of the flesh and the guidance of the Spirit. The soul, depicted as pure, undergoes torment due to the vanity of the mind, the deceitfulness of the heart, and the various vices associated with different parts of the body. The soul and body throughout are shown as being contrary to one another and "to that extent are scriptural." Craze (1979, p. 292) writes:

"This Soul is nothing romantic or exotic; no drop of dew or silver bird or armed warrior. It stands up, but is a simulacrum, a thin-shouldered ghost, immaterial and boneless. It has emotions, and reason, and is immortal. It came from Heaven to be incarnate. It wants to go back there."

CONCLUSION

Across different cultures, philosophers and seekers of knowledge like Confucius, Buddha, Plato, Marcus Aurelius and others, have in their own unique ways, grappled with the complexities and mysteries of the body-mind-spirit connection. In the same vein, Marvell and Shankara, representing distinct traditions, have each explored the deepest questions of human existence from the standpoint of their inherited traditions, Christianity and Hinduism. As Malhotra and Babaji (2020, p. 40) note, literal translations of Sanskrit verses into non-Sanskrit languages often result in incoherent interpretations. At the same time, the Hindu assumption that Christian practices are similar and strive for the same goal, is equally misguided (Malhotra and Babaji, 2020, p. 11). Just because both the traditions have a few common elements, do not mean that they are the same or even have similar goals. The present analysis, therefore, attempts to shed light on the differences between *Atman* and soul and how the interchangeable use of these terms can cause confusion and lead to the loss of contextual understanding.

In fact, the very conception of God in monotheism is quite distinct from the Hindu idea of *Ishvara* (supreme reality). The former is based on the premise that God is separate from His creation, while the latter is based on the idea of an all-pervading reality (Malhotra and Babaji, 2020, p. 65). In the same way, the idea of soul

and *Atman* is also quite different in these two traditions, although they both deal with the same question about an inner self. Attempting to apply frameworks built on western experiences and concepts to Hindu paradigms, and vice-versa, results in incorrect interpretation of religious ideas. This awareness is crucial during inter-faith discussions to foster mutual understanding and avoid misconceptions, and therefore this study emphasizes the need to approach these concepts with sensitivity and acknowledge their nuanced distinctions.

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