

FECHNER'S *SEELENFRAGE*: THE PLACE OF THE SOUL IN PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract

*The usage of the term "soul" was banned from the psychological dictionaries at least from Angell's famous interdict (1911). However, in the last few years a renewed interest for it is risen, from two independent sources: 1. the "naive" concept of soul owned by laymen; 2. the concepts of life after death and (im)mortality in children. Bering (2006) proposes three cognitive mechanisms, producing "illusions of personal immortality, of teleological authorship in the design of individual souls, and of natural events as having symbolic meaning", forming "an organized 'system'" in the human evolution under selective pressures. What is missing is an adequate consideration of what the soul is in the different human cultures. 150 years the *Seelenfrage* posed by Fechner (1861) is still unsolved, One must question whether the "mind", that replaced the soul, is i) better defined than "soul"; ii) is more able to capture the complexity of our psychological system.*

The usage of the term "soul" was banned from the psychological dictionaries at least from Angell's famous interdict (1911). In the same period, Watson (1913) decreed a *fatwah* against the term "consciousness". What is interesting is that, in spite of the great success of the behaviorism in the development of the psychology of the last century, Watson's interdict didn't survive to the fate of this school, when Angell's one was carefully respected practically till today. And this could be considered curious, because the "soul" was a founding concept in the history of the beginning of the psychology. It was so not only for Fechner (1861), that insisted in posing to his colleagues his celebrated *Seelenfrage*, but also in Herbart, Lotze, Wundt, and many other founders of scientific psychology (cfr Arnett, 1904),

However, in the last few years a renewed interest for the concept of soul is risen from two independent sources: 1. the folk psychology, for the "naive" concept of soul owned by laymen; 2. the developmental psychology, for the concepts of afterlife and (im)mortality in children. In particular, most interesting in this respect is a debate initiated by Bering (2006), which proposes three cognitive mechanisms, producing "illusions of personal immortality, of teleological authorship in the design of individual souls, and of natural events as having symbolic meaning". All this forms "an organized 'system'" in the human evolution under selective pressures. At the basis of Bering's ideas are the famous experiments on children about the mouse and the alligator (Bering, 1902; Bering and Bjorklund, 1905). The children (4 to 12 years old) observed a puppet show in which a mouse was eaten by an alligator, and were then asked about the biological and psychological functioning of the dead mouse. All children were more likely to attribute "epistemic, desire, and emotion states to the dead mouse than biological, psychobiological, and perceptual states".

This, and other empirical evidence (see below) has induced many author to believe that the idea of soul (and of religion) is in some sense "natural". In particular, Bloom (2006) states that man is a natural "Cartesian", believing in any instance that the soul does exist and that it is distinct from the body, in a pure Cartesian way. In Astuti's (2001) words, we are "natural dualists". This view has been highly criticised, among others, by Hodge (2008). According to him, three are the main issue that deserve a deep analysis in this debate: i) the problem of the "disembodied minds"; ii) the problem of the "mind *qua* soul"; and iii) the problem of the mind and of the personal identity.

As regards the problem of the disembodied minds, it is often quoted an experimental result by Harris and Gimenez (2005), that demonstrated that religious primes (v. secular ones) facilitates continuity responses on afterlife not only for psychological, but also for biological processes. It is clear that at least for the children that participate to their experiments the conception of the afterlife existence is not linked to a dualist belief.

As regards the problem of the “mind *qua* soul”, one can mention a research by Richert and Harris (2006): the children that participated at this study believed that mind and brain perform equal (cognitive) functions, but the soul perform different (emotional) functions, linked to other biological processes, like the ones performed by the heart. In other words, mind and soul are not only conceptually, but also functionally separate.

As regards the third problem, the relation between mind and personal identity, two are the studies that appear particularly relevant in this respect, due respectively to Cohen and Barrett (2005) and to Mahalingham and Rodriguez (2006).

The Cohen and Barrett’s study refers to a mind transplant, and the authors was demonstrated that their subjects were able to argue as in this case there were also an exchange of aptitudes or other cognitive abilities. This is considered a proof of the “natural dualism” of the participants, but as a matter of fact, as Hodge (2008, p. 404) argues, this results demonstrate only that they “could reason counterfactually about a mind transplant [...] This would be the same as if one were presented a vignette concerning a mythical creature such as a unicorn”. As a counterproof, Mahalingham and Rodriguez demonstrated that in the hypothesis of a brain transplant the participants argued that there would be an analogous exchange of identity, aptitudes and capacities. In this case, of course, is the brain, not the mind, the place of the personal identity.

In my opinion, what is missing is an adequate consideration of what the soul is in the different human cultures. All the discussion appears to rotate around a soul which, at least implicitly, is conceived as

1. entering in the existence at moment of the entering in the existence of the body that will guest it;
2. endowed of capacity of thinking and free will;
3. representing myself in its entirety – my I is the I of my soul;
4. distinguished from the souls of the other human beings and conserving its individuality after the death;
5. surviving to my body, possibly for the eternity;
6. ontologically distinguished from the body;
7. able to master its guesting body.

However, as a matter of fact, in many cultures doesn't exist nothing of similar to our concept of soul; many cultures deny any idea of afterlife existence; in other (Indian, ancient Egyptian, Sumeric, Greek before V century b.C., etc.) there is a dual conception of the soul, like the one described first by Wundt (1916). However, let's see analytically these seven points, in a very schematic account.

1. In many cultures, there are highly different opinions about the time of the birth (or creation) of the soul. However, also in our own culture the solution given at this problem are quite sparse. In Pythagoras, as in Platon, the soul preexist to the body. However, this certainly is not the opinion of many Greek philosophers, from Democritus to Leucippus to Aristotle. We find the same idea in many aspects of the Qabalah (the *gilgul*, the transmigration of the souls, the tree of the souls, existing from the beginning, or from the time of the *Adam qadmon*; cfr Scholem, 1974). However, in the Talmud the soul exists from the birth of the baby. The Catholic church has renounced to establish the moment of the creation of the individual soul (Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede, 1990).

2. The faculties of the soul are seen in different ways in different cultures and in the same culture in different philosophers. In many greek philosophers, the body is endowed with three entities, *psyché*, *pneuma*, and *nous*, and for many only *psyché* is the soul in proper sense. However, thinking is a property of the *nous*. The same tripartition we can find in Hebrew thinkers (*nefesh*, *ruach*, and *neshama*). For others thinkers, like Aristotle, the tripartition concerns “faculties” or “dispositions” of one soul. The same differences can be found in Christian thinkers.

3. In many cultures, like the Indian (in both traditions, Buddhist like Hinduist) the very concept of “I” is an illusion (cfr Zimmer, 1951), and nothing is similar to our idea of soul. However, also in the Polynesian culture there is nothing of similar to our soul. One can say that this is the area of the *mana*. Nevertheless, today we know that the *mana* is not the soul of objects, animals or man (as Tylor, 1871, the creator of the term “animism” believed), but as Blust (2007) points out, it refers to powerful forces of nature such as thunder and storm winds that were conceived as the expression of an unseen supernatural agency. As Lévy-Bruhl (1927) noted, some times when the informers speak about soul with the anthropologists, they use the term only for compliance, and not because in their culture there is something of similar.

4. It was often theorised that the individual soul is an illusion. In particular, a peculiar interpretation of the concept of Active Intellect of Aristotle, mediated by Alexander of Aphrodisia, led Averroë (Ibn Rushd) at the end of the XII century to believe that after death the individual souls fuse together, losing their individuality (see Campanini, 2007). This idea fascinated many Christian thinkers. Particularly important for the development of our culture is the controversy that arose in XIII Century among between the Averroist Siger of Brabant and St. Thomas Aquinas, that, as is master Albert the Great, bitterly criticised the idea of the unity of the intellect (see Mahoney, 1974).

5. Not in all the cultures the soul survives to the body, not always for the eternity, and not for all the persons, but often the survival is only for very important peoples. The poem of Gilgamesh demonstrated this in the clearest way for the Sumeric and Babylonian culture: the lone man that had the immortality was Ut-Napishtin, the Sumerian Noah (cfr Sanders, 1984). However, possibly also in the Hebrew culture before the II Century b. C. the soul after death was sent in the Sheol (similar to the Ades of the Homeric Greeks), where had a very poor existence till the dissolution. In Ancient Egypt, there was not survival without the preservation of the body (see Hankoff, 1980; the Egyptian conception of soul and of its survival was very complex).

6. The ontological distinction between soul and body in our culture is due to Descartes. To us it could appear “natural” in the sense of Bloom, but is a recent one, and for example was always rejected by the Catholic church – see Mercier, 1910.

7. The problem of the control of the soul over the body is the problem of the interaction of soul and body, and we well know that this is the very weak point of any dualist stance. However, also here we have a plurality of solutions proposed by different thinkers in different cultures.

We can add that, contrary to what Bloom and Bering imagine, the concept of soul is quite independent of the concept of deity, or of immortality, or of the afterlife. With this enormous plurality of beliefs, how one can then speak about an evolutionary mechanism at the basis of the credence in the soul? It is true that after 150 years the *Seelenfrage* posed by Fechner (1861) is still unsolved, but I don’t believe that this is the right way to solve it.

The problem is, in my opinion, to question whether the “mind”, that replaced the soul, is i) better defined than “soul”; ii) is more able to capture the complexity of our psychological system. My answer to both questions is decidedly negative. However, this is another story.

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