

On the difference between Soul and Spirit



Soul and Spirit are miles apart.

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Sir,

Permit an humble Theosophist to appear for the first time in your columns, to say a few words in defence of our beliefs. I see in your issue of December 21st ultimo, one of your correspondents, Mr. J. Croucher, makes the following very bold assertions:

Had the Theosophists thoroughly comprehended the nature of the soul and spirit, and its relation to the body, they would have known that if the soul once left the body, it could not return. The spirit can leave, but if the soul once leaves, it leaves for ever.

This is so ambiguous that, unless he uses the term “soul” to designate only the vital principle, I can only suppose that he falls into the common error of calling the astral body, spirit, and the immortal essence, “soul.” We, Theosophists, as Colonel Olcott has told you, do *vice versa*.

Besides the unwarranted imputation to us of ignorance, Mr. Croucher has an idea (peculiar to himself) that the problem which has heretofore taxed the powers of the metaphysicians in all ages has been solved in our own. It is hardly to be supposed that Theosophists or any others “thoroughly” comprehend the nature of the soul and spirit, and their relation to the body. Such an achievement is for Omniscience; and we Theosophists, treading the path worn by the footsteps of the old sages in the moving sands of exoteric philosophy, can only hope to approximate the absolute truth. It is really more than doubtful whether Mr. Croucher can do better, even though an “inspirational medium,” and experienced “through constant sittings with one of the best trance mediums” in your country. I may well leave to time and Spiritual philosophy to entirely vindicate us in the far hereafter. When any Oedipus of this or the next century shall have solved this eternal enigma of the Sphinx-man, every modern dogma, not excepting some pets of the Spiritualists, will be swept away, as the The-

¹ [In her *Scrapbook*, Vol. III, p. 197, H.P.B. wrote the following remarks in blue pencil, in connection with a tribute to W.H. Harrison, the Editor of *The Spiritualist*:

Very true. The best, most scientific and impartial of all Spiritual papers.

— Boris de Zirkoff.]

ban monster, according to the legend, leaped from his promontory into the sea, and was seen no more.

As early as February 18th, 1876, your learned correspondent, “M.A. (Oxon.),”¹ took occasion, in an article entitled “Soul and Spirit,” to point out the frequent confusion of the terms by other writers. As things are no better now, I will take the opportunity to show how sorely Mr. Croucher, and many other Spiritualists of whom he may be taken as the spokesman, misapprehended Colonel Olcott’s meaning, and the views of the New York Theosophists. Colonel Olcott neither affirmed nor dreamed of implying that the immortal spirit leaves the body to produce the medial displays. And yet Mr. Croucher evidently thinks he did, for the word “spirit” to him means the inner astral man or double. Here is what Colonel Olcott did say, double commas and all:

That mediumistic physical phenomena are not produced by pure spirits, but by “souls” embodied or disembodied, and usually with the help of elementals.

Any intelligent reader must perceive that, in placing the word “souls” in quotation marks, the writer indicated that he was using it in a sense not his own. As a Theosophist, he would more properly and philosophically have said for himself “astral spirits,” or “astral men,” or doubles. Hence, the criticism is wholly without even a foundation of plausibility. I wonder that a man could be found who, on so frail a basis, would have attempted so sweeping a denunciation. As it is, our President only propounded the *trine* of man, like the ancient and Oriental philosophers and their worthy imitator Paul, who held that the physical corporeity, the flesh and blood, was permeated and so kept alive by the *psychē*, the soul or astral body. This doctrine, that man is trine — spirit, or *Nous*, soul and body — was taught by the Apostle of the Gentiles more broadly and clearly than it has been by any of his Christian successors.² But having evidently forgotten or neglected to “thoroughly” study the transcendental opinions of the ancient philosophers and the Christian Apostles upon the subject, Mr. Croucher views the soul (*psychē*) as spirit (*Nous*) and *vice versa*.

The Buddhists, who separate the three entities in man (though viewing them as one when on the path to Nirvāna), yet divide the soul into several parts, and have names for each of these and their functions. Thus confusion is unknown among them. The old Greeks did likewise, holding that *psychē* was *bios*, or physical life, and it was *thumos*, or passional nature, the animals being accorded but a lower faculty of the soul-instinct. The soul or *psychē* is itself a combination, *consensus* or unity of the *bios*, or physical vitality, the *epithumia* or concupiscible nature, and the *phrēn*, *mens*, or mind. Perhaps the *animus* ought to be included. It is constituted of ethereal substance, which pervades the whole universe, and is derived wholly from the soul of the world — *Anima Mundi* or the Buddhist Svabhāva — which is *not* spirit; though intangible and impalpable, it is yet, by comparison with spirit or pure abstraction — objective matter. By its complex nature, the soul may descend and ally itself so closely to the corporeal nature as to exclude a higher life from exerting any moral influence upon it. On the other hand, it can so closely attach to the *nous* or spirit, as to share its potency, in which case its vehicle, physical man, will appear as a God even during

¹ [Pseudonym of Rev. Stainton Moses, 1839–1892, English cleric and reputed spiritualist.]

² See *1 Thessalonians* v, 23.

his terrestrial life. Unless such union of soul and spirit does occur, either during this life or after physical death, the individual man is not immortal as an entity. The *psychē* is sooner or later disintegrated. Though the *man* may have gained “the whole world,” he has lost his “soul.” Paul, when teaching the *anastasis*, or continuation of individual spiritual life after death, set forth that there was a physical body which was raised in incorruptible substance. The spiritual body is most assuredly *not* one of the bodies, or visible or tangible *larvae*,¹ which form in circle-rooms, and are so improperly termed “materialized spirits.” When once the *metanoia*, the full developing of spiritual life, has lifted the spiritual body out of the psychical (the disembodied, corruptible astral man, what Colonel Olcott calls “soul”), it becomes, in strict ratio with its progress, more and more an abstraction for the corporeal senses. It can influence, inspire, and even communicate with men subjectively; it can make itself felt, and even, in those rare instances, when the clairvoyant is perfectly pure and perfectly lucid, seen by the inner eye (which is the eye of the purified *psychē* — soul). But how can it ever manifest objectively?

It will be seen, then, that to apply the term “spirit” to the materialized *eidola* of your “form-manifestations,” is grossly improper, and something ought to be done to change the practice, since scholars have begun to discuss the subject. At best, when not what the Greeks termed *phantasma*, they are but *phasma*, or apparitions.

In scholars, speculators, and especially in our modern *savants*, the psychical principle is more or less pervaded by the corporeal, and “the things of the spirit are foolishness and impossible to be known.”² Plato was then right, in his way, in despising land-measuring, geometry, and arithmetic, for all these overlooked all high ideas. Plutarch taught that at death Proserpine separated the body and the soul entirely, after which the latter became a free and independent *demon* (*daimōn*). Afterward, the good underwent a second dissolution: Demeter divided the *psychē* from the *nous* or *pneuma*. The former was dissolved after a time into ethereal particles hence the inevitable dissolution and subsequent annihilation of the man who at death is purely psychical; the latter, the *nous*, ascended to its higher Divine power and became gradually a pure, Divine spirit. Kapila, in common with all Eastern philosophers, despised the purely psychical nature. It is this agglomeration of the grosser particles of the soul, the mesmeric exhalations of human nature imbued with all its terrestrial desires and propensities, its vices, imperfections, and weakness, forming the astral body — which can become objective under certain circumstances which the Buddhists call *skandhas* (the groups), and Colonel Olcott has for convenience termed the “soul.” The Buddhists and Brāhmanists teach that the man’s individuality is not secured until he has passed through and become disembarassed of the last of these groups, the final vestige of earthly taint. Hence their doctrine of the metempsychosis, so ridiculed and so utterly misunderstood by our greatest Orientalists. Even the physicists teach us that the particles composing physical man are, by evolution, re-worked by nature into every variety of inferior physical form. Why, then, are the Buddhists unphilosophical or even unscientific, in affirming that the semi-material *skandhas* of the astral man (his very *ego*, up to the point of final purification) are ap-

¹ [Or ghosts, plural of the Latin word *larva*, evil spirit, horrific mask.]

² *1 Corinthians* ii, 14

propriated to the evolution of minor astral forms (which, of course, enter into the purely physical bodies of animals) as fast as he throws them off in his progress toward *Nirvāna*? Therefore, we may correctly say, that so long as the disembodied man is throwing off a single particle of these *skandhas*, a portion of him is being reincarnated in the bodies of plants and animals. And if he, the disembodied astral man, be so material that “Demeter” cannot find even one spark of the *pneuma* to carry up to the “divine power,” then the individual, so to speak, is dissolved, piece by piece, into the crucible of evolution, or, as the Hindus allegorically illustrate it, he passes thousands of years in the bodies of impure animals. Here we see how completely the ancient Greek and Hindu philosophers, the modern Oriental schools, and the Theosophists, are ranged on one side, in perfect accord; and the bright array of “inspirational mediums” and “spirit guides” stand in perfect discord on the other. Though no two of the latter, unfortunately, agree as to what is and what is not truth, yet they do agree with unanimity to antagonize whatever of the teachings of the philosophers we may repeat!

Let it not be inferred, though, from all this, that I, or any other real Theosophist, undervalue true Spiritual phenomena or philosophy, or that we do not believe in the communication between pure mortals and pure spirits, any less than we do in communication between bad men and bad spirits, or even of good men with bad spirits under bad conditions. Occultism is the essence of Spiritualism, while modern or popular Spiritualism I cannot better characterize than as adulterated, unconscious magic. We go so far as to say that all the great and noble characters, all the grand geniuses — the poets, painters, sculptors, musicians — all who have worked at any time for the realization of their highest ideal, irrespective of selfish ends — have been Spiritually inspired; not mediums, as many Spiritualists call them — passive tools in the hands of controlling guides — but incarnate, illuminated souls, working consciously in collaboration with the pure disembodied human and newly-embodied high Planetary Spirits, for the elevation and spiritualization of mankind. We believe that everything in material life is most intimately associated with Spiritual agencies. As regards psychical phenomena and mediumship, we believe that it is only when the passive medium has given place, or rather grown into, the conscious mediator, that he can discern between spirits good and bad. And we do believe, and know also, that while the incarnate man (though the highest adept) cannot vie in potency with the pure disembodied spirits, who, freed of all their *skandhas*, have become subjective to the physical senses, yet he can perfectly equal, and can far surpass in the way of phenomena, mental or physical, the average “spirit” of modern mediumship. Believing this, you will perceive that we are better Spiritualists, in the true acceptance of the word, than so-called Spiritualists, who, instead of showing the reverence we do to true spirits — gods — debase the name of spirit, by applying it to the impure, or, at best, imperfect beings who produce the majority of the phenomena.

The two objections urged by Mr. Croucher against the claim of the Theosophists, that a child is but a duality at birth, “and perhaps until the sixth or seventh year,” and that some depraved persons are annihilated at some time after death, are

- That mediums have described to him his three children, “who passed away at the respective ages of two, four, and six years”; and

- That he has known persons who were “very depraved” on earth come back.

He says:

These statements have been afterwards confirmed by glorious beings who come after, and who have proved by their mastery of the laws which are governing the universe, that they are worthy of being believed.

I am really happy to learn that Mr. Croucher is competent to sit in judgment upon these “glorious beings,” and give them the palm over Kapila, Manu, Plato, and even Paul. It is worth something, after all, to be an “inspirational medium.” We have no such “glorious beings” in the Theosophical Society to learn from; but it is evident that while Mr. Croucher sees and judges things through his emotional nature, the philosophers whom we study took nothing from any glorious being that did not perfectly accord with the universal harmony, justice, and equilibrium of the manifest plan of the universe. The Hermetic axiom, “as below, so above,” is the only rule of evidence accepted by the Theosophists. Believing in a spiritual and invisible universe, we cannot conceive of it in any other way than as completely dovetailing and corresponding with the material, objective universe; for logic and observation alike teach us that the latter is the outcome and visible manifestation of the former, and that the laws governing both are immutable.

In his letter of December 7th, Colonel Olcott very appropriately illustrates his subject of potential immortality by citing the admitted physical law of the survival of the fittest. The rule applies to the greatest as to the smallest things — to the planet equally with the plant. It applies to man. And the imperfectly developed man-child can no more exist under the conditions prepared for the perfected types of its species, than can an imperfect plant or animal. In infantile life, the higher faculties are not developed, but, as everyone knows, are only in the germ, or rudimentary. The babe is an animal, however “angelic” he may, and naturally enough, ought to appear to his parents. Be it ever so beautifully molded, the infant body is but the jewel-casket preparing for the jewel. It is bestial, selfish, and, as a babe, nothing more. Little of even the soul, Psychē, can be perceived except as vitality is concerned; hunger, terror, pain, and pleasure appear to be the principal of its conceptions. A kitten is its superior in everything but possibilities. The grey neurine of the brain is equally unformed. After a time mental qualities begin to appear, but they relate chiefly to external matters. The cultivation of the mind of the child by teachers can only affect this part of the nature — what Paul calls natural or psychical, and James and Jude sensual or psychical. Hence the words of *Jude*,

. . . psychical, having not the spirit,¹

and of Paul:

The psychical man receiveth not the things of the spirit, for to him they are foolishness; the spiritual man discerneth.²

¹ [vs. 19]

² [1 *Corinthians* ii, 14]

It is only the man of full age, with his faculties disciplined to discern good and evil, whom we can denominate spiritual, noetic, intuitive. Children developed in such respects would be precocious, abnormal — abortives.

Why, then, should a child who has never lived other than an animal life; who never discerned right from wrong; who never cared whether he lived or died — since he could not understand either of life or death — become individually immortal? Man's cycle is not complete until he has passed through the earth life. No one stage of probation and experience can be skipped over. He must be a man before he can become a spirit. A dead child is a failure of nature — he must live again; and the same *psychē* re-enters the physical plane through another birth. Such cases, together with those of congenital idiots, are, as stated in *Isis Unveiled*,¹ the only instances of human reincarnation. If every child-duality were to be immortal, why deny a like individual immortality to the duality of the animal? Those who believe in the trinity of man know the babe to be but a duality — body and soul; and the individuality which resides only in the psychical is, as we have seen proved by the philosophers, perishable. The completed trinity only survives. Trinity, I say, for at death the astral form becomes the outward body, and inside a still finer one evolves, which takes the place of the *psychē* on earth, and the whole is more or less overshadowed by the *nous*. Space prevented Colonel Olcott from developing the doctrine more fully, or he would have added that not even all of the Elementaries (human) are annihilated. There is still a chance for some. By a supreme struggle these may retain their third and higher principle, and so, though slowly and painfully, yet ascend sphere after sphere, casting off at each transition the previous heavier garment, and clothing themselves in more radiant spiritual envelopes, until, rid of every finite particle, the trinity merges into the final Nirvāna, and becomes a unity — a God.

A volume would scarce suffice to enumerate all the varieties of Elementaries and Elementals; the former being so called by some Kabbalists (Henry Khunrath, for instance)² to indicate their entanglement in the terrestrial elements which hold them captive, and the latter designated by that name to avoid confusion, and equally applying to those which go to form the astral body of the infant, and to the stationary nature-spirits proper. Éliphas Lévi, however, indifferently calls them all “Elementary,” and “souls.” I repeat again, it is but the wholly psychical, disembodied astral man, which ultimately disappears as an individual entity. As to the component parts of his *psychē*, they are as indestructible as the atoms of any other body composed of matter.

That man must indeed be a true animal who has not after death, a spark of the divine *ruach* or *nous* left in him to allow him a chance of self-salvation. Yet there are such lamentable exceptions; not alone among the depraved, but also among those who, during life, by stifling every idea of an after-existence, have killed in themselves the last desire to achieve immortality. It is the will of man, his all-potent will, that weaves his destiny, and if a man is determined in the notion that death means annihilation, he will find it so. It is among our commonest experiences that the determi-

¹ [Vol. I, p. 351]

² [Heinrich Khunrath, 1560–1605, also known as Dr. Henricus Khunrath, physician, hermetic philosopher, and alchemist. Frances Yates considered him to be a link between Rosicrucianism and the philosophy of John Dee.]

nation of physical life or death depends upon the will. Some people snatch themselves by force of determination from the very jaws of death; while others succumb to insignificant maladies. What man does with his body he can do with his disembodied *psychē*.

Nothing in this militates against the images of Mr. Croucher's children being seen in the Astral Light by the medium, either as actually left by the children themselves, or as imagined by the father to look when grown. The impression in the latter case would be but a *phasma*, while in the former it is a *phantasma*, or the apparition of the indestructible impress of what once really was.

In days of old the "mediators" of humanity were men like Krishna, Gautama Buddha, Jesus, Paul, Apollonius of Tyana, Plotinus, Porphyry, and the like of them. They were adepts, philosophers — men who, by struggling their whole lives in purity, study, and self-sacrifice, through trials, privations, and self-discipline, attained divine illumination and seemingly superhuman powers. They could not only produce all the phenomena seen in our times, but regarded it as a sacred duty to cast out "evil spirits" or demons, from the unfortunate who were obsessed. In other words, to rid the medium of their days of the "Elementaries." But in our time of improved psychology every hysterical sensitive blooms into a seer, and behold! there are mediums by the thousand! Without any previous study, self-denial, or the least limitation of their physical nature, they assume, in the capacity of mouthpieces of unidentified and unidentifiable intelligences, to outrival Socrates in wisdom, Paul in eloquence, and Tertullian himself in fiery and authoritative dogmatism. The Theosophists are the last to assume infallibility for themselves, or recognize it in others; as they judge others, so they are willing to be judged.

In the name, then, of logic and common sense, before bandying epithets, let us submit our differences to the arbitrament of reason. Let us compare all things, and, putting aside emotionalism and prejudice as unworthy of the logician and the experimentalist, hold fast only to that which passes the ordeal of ultimate analysis.

H.P. BLAVATSKY

New York
January 14th, 1878



Note by Boris de Zirkoff

In connection with the above article, a sentence from a letter of Master K.H. written to A.P. Sinnett in the Fall of 1882, may be of interest:

It was H.P.B. who, acting under the orders of Atrya (one whom you do not know) was the first to explain in *The Spiritualist* the difference there was between *psychē* and *nous*, *nefesh* and *ruach* — Soul and Spirit. She had to bring the whole arsenal of proofs with her, quotations from Paul and Plato, from Plutarch and James, etc. before the Spiritualists admitted that the theosophists were right . . . ¹

¹ *The Mahatma Letters, etc.*, p. 289