

Self, Soul and Ego

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Introduction

This chapter discusses various aspects of the self. By “self” I mean the human being, emphasizing the view from the inside, from the being’s own subjectivity. When I talk about the human being as perceived from the outside, I use the term “person.” The term “self” can refer to the constellation of thoughts, emotions, physical perceptions, memories and anticipations that one commonly thinks of as oneself. It can also refer to the Transcendental Self, that which is conscious of and acts upon the world, both subjective and objective. When I use the term in the first sense it is in lower case; when I use it in the second sense the first letter is capitalized.

People use terms like "Self" and "self" as if everyone knows what they mean, but in fact there is a huge danger of equivocation, whether on purpose or not. In this chapter I try to clarify the many meanings in order to have a useful framework within which to think about it.

The Soul

In mystical terms, the Transcendental Self may be termed the Soul, with a capital S. The Soul is the unobservable center around which experience is organized and from which action emanates. “Experience” here includes not just sensation, but all the structural elements one finds in one’s experience: thoughts, feelings, emotions, perceptual judgments, etc. (This list is similar to what the Buddhists call the *skandhas*, or “aggregates” which categorize or constitute all individual experience, but is not identical to the Buddhist list.)

If the Soul is unobservable then one might suggest that Occam's Razor should lead us to drop it entirely from rational discussion, which is what the Buddhists do. However, despite its being unobservable, one can observe its effects and thereby infer something about it.

Sometimes in general parlance in English the term “soul” refers to the human being generally (as in “twenty souls were lost in the disaster”). Often it refers to some indefinable substance that is alleged to be the essence of the human and that persists after death. In the latter sense people debate whether animals have souls, and atheists deny that even humans have souls.

Interestingly, the Arabic word *nafs* (pronounced “nufs”, a singular term) can mean both “soul” and “ego”. Its root meaning is “breath.” There are various levels and gradations of *nafs*, depending on the degree of one’s spiritual realization. The Sufis speak of the animal soul, the contrite soul, the soul that delights in Allah, etc. There are either three or seven such levels, depending on the school of Sufism. The term is often translated as “ego” when speaking of the lower levels of realization and “soul” when speaking of the higher.¹ The derivation from “breath” emphasizes the aspect of activity, being animated, more than the aspect of experience, being conscious.

Following this convention, we can use the term “soul,” with a lower-case S, to refer to the interiority of a being, recognizing that there are degrees of interior complexity that correspond to degrees of physical, or exterior, complexity. In this sense the term “soul” means what I call the self, with a lower-case S. The soul in this sense is coherence of interiority. The more coherent and the more complex, integrative and harmonious one’s experience, the higher degree of soulness one has. The higher degree of soulness one has, the richer is al-Lah’s experience of the All.²

Such diseases as Alzheimer's and dementia can be viewed as degenerative diseases of the soul in this second sense, and the less coherent the soul gets the less one could say that it survives. People in a persistent vegetative state, such as Terri Schiavo, might be said to lack a soul. Or to have only a vegetable soul, not a human soul.

People with multiple personalities could be said to have more than one soul, in both senses of the word. Not only that, I suspect that one soul might animate more than one physical body. Sometimes a flock of birds or a herd of animals will seem to move as one being. Perhaps the souls of the individuals mingle in some way such that a higher-level coherence comes into being, at least for a time. And, of course, the mystical absorption into the One can be understood as an individual soul (coherence of interiority) participating in a higher-level coherence.

¹ URL: <http://www.abc.se/~m9783/nafs.html>, as of November, 2006.

Nafs (pl. *Anfus* or *Nufus*) lexically means soul, the psyche, the ego, self, life, person, heart or mind. Although some scholars have classified the *Nafs* up to 7 stages, there is agreement among Ulama' that in the Qur'an, Allah (s.w.t.) has described at least 3 main types of the *Nafs*. And these are in rank from the worse to better: *Nafs al-Ammara Bissu'*, the *Nafs* that urges evil, *Nafs al-Lawwama*, the *Nafs* that Blames [oneself for doing evil], and *Nafs al-Mutma`inna*, the *Nafs* at Peace.

² I spell the word “al-Lah” this way in order to emphasize its literal meaning: The God. There’s only one.

Questions Regarding the Soul

Given these definitions of “Soul” and “soul” we can approach some of the ongoing questions about the nature of the soul. Is the soul unchanging? Does it survive after death? Is it eternal?

In the sense of coherence of interiority, the soul is certainly not unchanging; our inner experience changes constantly, and it takes some effort at meditation to quiet it down even briefly. To say that the Soul, as unobservable center, is unchanging is more plausible. All things change, but the Soul is no observable thing. In our experience it does not change. But our experience may not be all there is to the Soul.

Observations generally change the thing observed, a phenomenon called the “observer effect”. For instance, to detect an electron a photon must first interact with it, and this interaction changes the path of the electron. A standard mercury-in-glass thermometer must absorb some thermal energy to record a temperature, and therefore it changes the temperature of the body which it is measuring.³ It does not follow, however, even if we claim that all observations change what is observed, that the Soul does not change. To assert that would be to fall into the logical error of denying the antecedent:

All observations change what is observed.
No observation can be made of the Soul.

Therefore the Soul does not change.

The argument is fallacious because the Soul might well change even though we cannot observe it. Perhaps we can observe its effects and thereby infer something about it. If it has effects, it must change. The argument is this:

All things that have effects are changeable.
The Soul has effects.

Therefore the Soul is changeable.

But what are the effects of the Soul? To me, this is the great mystery, which I allude to in my chapter on the Quantum Level of Reality. When one is at the cusp of a decision, the alternatives of which have approximately equal weight, one considers the alternatives, and then one of them is chosen. But who chooses? Perhaps it is the Soul. Or perhaps it is The God. Or perhaps these are the same. As Advaita Vedanta says, Atman is Brahman, the Soul is The God. If so, one of the effects of the Soul is choice, or decision, so the Soul changes.

Does the soul in the sense of interiority survive the death of the physical body? I have limited personal experience in this regard, but there are plenty of stories indicating that it does, or at least can. And if coherence of interiority persists, then the unobservable center must persist as well, else there would be no coherence.

³ Wikipedia, “Observer effect (physics)” (On-line publication; URL = [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Observer_effect_\(physics\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Observer_effect_(physics)) as of 31 August 2008).

Whether the soul or the Soul is eternal, however, is completely speculative. “Eternal” means never-ending, perpetual, existing at all times. Our experience has not yet ended, but it might, so we cannot say for sure that it will never end. We have memories of the past in our lifetime, and some of us seem to have memories of past lives prior to this lifetime, but nobody, to my knowledge, has memories of the entire past, so it seems that a soul as coherence of interiority must have had a beginning, and hence has not existed at all times. Or maybe it has, but we lack memory of it. Such speculations are what the Buddha called “questions which tend not toward edification.”

The Self in the World

We speak as if the Soul were an entity, a thing, that endures through time. When one examines one’s experience, of course, one finds no such thing. We could call it a locus of consciousness with continuity over time. What is continuous is the pattern and content of the stuff perceived by that locus of consciousness, not the locus itself, because the locus itself is not there.

If the Soul, the Transcendental Self, the locus of consciousness, is not there, then what leads us to believe that there is one? The answer is that we see things from a perspective, that we have learned that we are “over here” and other people and things are “over there.” We have a visual point of view. We can’t see the seer, but we can see that the visual field extends from a point, which we occupy.

(We call it a “field” of vision or a “field” of consciousness because it is like an actual field of, for instance, grass or corn. An actual field is spread out and so is the field of vision. Many of our metaphors for conscious experience are visual.)

We (each of us, individually) who are “over here” find ourselves thrust into the world of over-there-ness. This is why Heidegger calls the human being *Dasein*, Being-There. Each of us is located. Each of us is in context. One is thrust into the world of the over-there because one has to interact with it. (“Thrust,” of course, is a metaphor. I do not propose at this point to identify who or what has done the thrusting.)

The Self and Others

In this world of the over-there we find other people. It is clear that persons do not live in isolation, that we humans require other humans for our survival and well-being. I do not propose to summarize the vast psychological, historical and sociological literature on the subject, nor the recent and quite cogent speculations of evolutionary psychology. In this section I merely present some observations from the phenomenological point of view.

One’s experience contains the interpretation that this over here is different from that over there. Some of one’s experience can be seen (or heard, or felt, etc.) only from this viewpoint over here. We call this private experience. Some of the objects of one’s experience can be seen by others as well. We call these objects publicly-observable things. Edmund Husserl calls them Objects, with a capital O.

“Object” with a capital O is a translation of Husserl’s use of the German word *Objekt* as opposed to *Gegenstand*, translated as “object” with a lower-case O.⁴ An Object (*Objekt*) is public, “there for everyone,” but an object (*Gegenstand*) is simply something present in experience, something of which one is aware in some way. Thus there are both subjective and Objective objects. Sometimes Husserl uses “object” (“*Gegenstand*”) to mean something self-identical, to which one can return again, but I use the term to mean anything of which one is aware, whether or not it has the sense, “one-and-the-same,” “perceivable again.”)

My only point here is that from a phenomenological viewpoint one finds present in one’s experience the sense that some objects are private, available only to oneself, and others are public, available to everyone. Concomitantly, one finds present in one’s experience the sense that some Objects are in fact subjects as well, conscious of the world as one oneself is. Part of spiritual training is to expand the set of Objects that one recognizes as subjects, gaining increasing intuition and insight into how other people, animals, plants and inanimate objects experience and act upon their world, that is, the world as presented to them, the world as they experience it.

Ego

“Ego”, from the Latin word meaning “I”, is another word loosely referring to the self as coherence of interiority. In mystical teachings it is often a disparaging term, referring to something that one needs to overcome if one is to achieve spiritual realization. In common usage it can also be disparaging as well; we call someone egotistical who is preoccupied with him or herself to the exclusion others. But we also say there is value in having a strong ego. Thus, some meanings of the term denote aspects of the human being that are not useful for leading a fulfilling life; others denote aspects that are.

Here are some meanings that are not useful. “Ego” can mean the sense of a separate self, separate from and opposed to others. The egotistical person in this sense needs to feel better than or superior to others. In its extreme form it can mean blind egotism, a separate self to the maximum. An egotistical person in this sense needs to dominate others, to have power over them. Egotism can mean narcissism, fascination with oneself as opposed to others. Egotism can also mean having a sense that one is more important than others. This is often accompanied by a need for recognition by others (“Look how important I am!”) with varying degrees of subtlety, which may belie the overt assumption of importance; secretly such a person feels inferior and needs to overcompensate or get constant reassurance.

Here are some meanings that are useful. The Freudian sense of ego – as opposed to id (unconscious impulses) and superego (sense of morals or obligations from societal influences) – is one of a set of meanings of the term that are useful for leading a fulfilling life. The ego in this sense denotes that aspect of a person that enables them to live successfully in the world. In Transactional Analysis terminology, a popularization of Freudian thought, this is the rational, adult part of the self, the part that makes plans, is conscious of the world, thinks about the world and takes action in it. The ego reacts intelligently to events, responding freshly and accurately to each new situation.

⁴ Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, tr. Dorion Cairns, p. 3, translator’s note 2

It has intentions and carries them out. It has power in the sense of being able to get things done, to accomplish things that it has decided to do.

Obviously we need a strong ego in the second, useful, sense for our ability to survive and thrive in the world. Perhaps less obviously this sense of ego entails having an accurate perception of our worth in the eyes of others, which moves us in the direction of the first sense of the term. Since humans evolved in small bands, it is not surprising that one of the survival characteristics that we all inherit is the ability to guess rather accurately what others think of us. In addition, we need a sense of ourselves as distinct from others in order to have good psychological boundaries so as not to be overpowered by them. So there is usefulness in the sense of a separate self.

The sense of a separate self gets in trouble from a purely social psychological viewpoint when it becomes overblown, seeking advantage for oneself to the detriment of others. It gets in trouble from a spiritual point of view when it leads us to overlook the fact of our essential connectedness to each other, to all of life and to al-Lah. Spiritual practices such as meditation and chanting lead us in the direction of direct experience of al-Lah, expanding our sense of ourselves beyond the limitations of the separate ego. Other practices, such as non-stealing, non-lying and compassionate action, lead us in the direction of recognizing the value of others, expanding ourselves imaginatively and intuitively to recognize them as expressions of the One just as we are.

Revision History

| Version | Date | Author | Change |
|---------|------------------|--------------|---|
| 1.0 | 27 July 2008 | Bill Meacham | First publication |
| 2.0 | 2 September 2008 | Bill Meacham | Change title. Clarify purpose of chapter. Emphasize the difference between Soul and soul. Add discussion of changeability, survival after death and eternity of the soul. |