

The Spirit

Having understood the importance of the spirit (Ruh) and the spiritual life, it is natural to pursue our discussion with this topic, the spirit. The issue of spirit is one of the oldest problems confounding the human mind. Even the earliest human beings were aware of a non-material entity within them. They were aware of different states and levels of consciousness in their lives, and by comparing sleep and death with their normal awake state reached some preliminary conclusions. They were also cognisant of the fact that humans are different from animals, with the latter lacking free will and wisdom. Animals just seemed to follow their instincts. They also thought about dreams. Dreams which came true were especially intriguing. Without being able to articulate it, they had an inkling that this might be the result of a part of the Person taking leave, traversing the future.

As human societies developed, such problems were delegated to philosophers who were good at thinking and reflecting. Philosophy confronted the issue by first asking: Is the spirit material or non-material? In other words, is this phenomenon part of our bodies or not? Material things have specific properties, for instance they can be divided into smaller parts which can also be divided into parts once more, ad infinitum, if the means were available. They also knew that if a person lost a limb, he or she was essentially the same person, with a handicap. Their notions of themselves did not seem to suffer in the process. Thus, many philosophers concluded that the soul is independent of the body. This theory was further strengthened when they considered the notions of “I”, “mine” and “me”, as distinct features of the person. Is the person, this unit of a human being, material or non-material?

As noted with the loss of limb example, philosophers knew that humans even after losing parts of themselves were the same. We all seem to have an understanding of ourselves as a whole, as something which is not divisible, and which is simple and not compound. When we get our hair cut, we do not feel any less afterwards. That which remains besides our body and is not on the floor of the barbershop is what we are after.

Let us use another example to help clarify this illusive topic. When a person commits a crime, especially a heinous one such as masterminding mass killings, as the Nazis did in WWII, he is expected to be brought to justice, even if he committed the crimes half a century ago.

Science tells us that the average person's body cells are nearly all renewed every six years. For all practical purposes we are not physically the same person we were, say ten years ago. Why then should the Nazi officer, whose body bears little resemblance to the one which carried out the atrocities, be apprehended, tried, and punished? We intuitively understand that we are not losing some parts of our being which must be replaced. The unity of identity which we feel is not justified only through physical continuity.

So there seems to be universal recognition of the fact that, what animates a person is ultimately constant, and is held responsible for the whole of the person body and spirit. Because the two are so closely interwoven, and because we humans are so deeply anchored in this physical, material world, we tend to identify with the body rather than the spirit. In Islam there is no doubt that the spirit is the essence of the person, and the body a vehicle for the manifestation of the soul in this world, and a means for its works.

There is a set of reasons proving the existence of the spirit through the study of our knowledge. If we prove that our knowledge is not material, it will be clear that we are not merely bodies. For example, it is obvious that a greater thing cannot be placed in a smaller thing. A big box can easily accommodate a smaller one put into it. The reverse does not hold. Then imagine gazing at a beautiful forest for a while, savouring all that stands before you. Later on when you remember the experience with all its grandeur, little thought is given to the size of the forest, which is, in a way, now stored within your memory. Whatever one might call it the idea, picture, or the experience of the forest fits neatly within a person's mind which is rather limited in size. We wonder how a forest, with all its characteristics and size can fit into our consciousness.

The problem is not solved if we imagine small microfilms, for instance, which are pictures of what we see, and are in one way or another, stored in our minds. Even extremely small microfilms have dimensions, which, when added together, would soon leave no more room in our minds for anything else. Also when you have

microfilms you are in need of some means to be able to interpret those microfilms, You also need some ability to understand things in their real sizes. There is a difference between seeing a small picture of a forest and seeing the forest itself.

This is a rather difficult issue which has puzzled many of scientists. As a matter of fact, when a survey of top scientists, including Nobel laureates, was conducted recently, the vast majority, when asked what will be the most important field of research in the next decade, gave psychobiology as the answer.

It is somewhat well understood that neurones in our brains, through sensors, spread out like roots, pulses, electrical signals, if you will, by which they interact with billions of other cells. Brain waves are this measured, charted, and studied. Yet the nature of information storage is not well understood.

The repeated actions of a person, for instance an athlete after intense training which involves repeated

motions of the same kind, do indeed leave physical traces in the physiology of the brain; as a stream of water would after running down the same path for a while. This enables the athlete to perform extremely difficult tasks without “thinking” or great effort at co-ordination. Yet this explains only part of the process. This is the wiring system, so to speak, and not the process of cognition, information storage, and retrieval. In what form the athlete's skills are stored is still not understood.

The question occupying many minds is: Is the physical brain the gateway unto something else, or is it all there is, and the end Of all that has to do with cognition? I hope we have understood how to answer this question without being engaged in technical discussions of philosophy. There are many other ways to prove that knowledge is not material. For example, knowledge is not changeable, but every material thing is. For instance, today is Saturday. You have the knowledge that you are reading a book on self-knowledge this day. This knowledge is true today. When you think of it tomorrow, it will be the same. Your knowledge about this particular book will be the same after a week, a year, or say even twenty years after. When you forget something what this really means is that particular data have been lost which cannot be easily retracted tom the memory storage. By no means does it mean that your knowledge has altered.

Let us consider another situation. For instance, you have a friend whom you met two years ago. You have formed his image in your mind. When you think of that particular encounter, his mage crosses your mind with precisely the same details. Nothing has affected the image of your friend in your brain. If you were to turn into him on any given street now, you would still identify your friend with the same image that you had previously stored in your brain, If any metamorphosis took place within that particular acquired knowledge, you would not be able to recognise him.

However, you should know this fact that no data is lost at the unconscious level of your mind, even if you cannot recall some of our memories. It is important that you realise that the data have been safely stored in your memory. Whatever forms of experiences you have had in your life, they are in your memory. Now, in order to enable you to recall or extract those data, you need some mental training and practice. We will not elucidate this matter at this stage. What we want to say is that it is possible to lose knowledge at the conscious level of understanding and it is possible to feel that knowledge has become faded. For example, the details of the image of that person may be lost, but you still remember him to be that person. This shows knowledge is not material, because all material things change.

It is true that a huge solid mass of a substance cannot be fitted into or occupy a small vessel, a container or a receptacle, and so is the fact about our knowledge which can neither change nor be segmented in small portions. All these facts prove knowledge is not material. Therefore, we as owners of that knowledge cannot be material. It's not possible to suppose we are material, as we are owners of a non-material thing, the knowledge.

There is yet another way of proving this fact. Let's ask ourselves whether a material thing like a pen has knowledge about itself or about the external world around it. You will definitely say no. We know, for

instance that the outer surface of a pen is not at all aware of its inner surface, or vice versa. The same condition applies when we talk of the relation between two or more pens. Therefore, it is irrelevant to say that these are the Parts of the same pen; or for that matter, these parts are of one book; the book is not one single thing. It is made up of many things, many atoms which are gathered in something which, is apparently one but not really one. Even if it were one it would have no knowledge about itself.

In the excerpt of late Imam Khomeini's historical letter to Gorbachev (31/12/1988), the Imam raised a philosophical point on material and non-material worlds. The late Imam drew Gorbachev's attention to the logical comparison of the soul, a non-material entity, and a statue, a material entity. Imam Khomeini was of the opinion that not everything could be analysed and justified through matter. Therefore, Imam Khomeini asked Gorbachev to consider for instance a statue which possesses no knowledge. Every side of the statue is hidden from the either side.

This should be discussed philosophically, but it can be understood without this. So, a material thing has no knowledge about the entirety of its being and it also has no knowledge about the external world. But this is not the case with human beings. A human being has knowledge about himself, even when thinking about a problem in philosophy, mathematics, history, etc. When you have awareness about yourself, then, you also have awareness about the external world.

There are also experimental reasons to show the existence of the spirit. I am sure you have heard quite a bit about hypnotism. It is related to the invocation of one's soul to do something. Hypnotists make a person go to sleep, and then he gets that person to do something. The hypnotist is able to ask the person under hypnosis to execute his orders. For example, he can ask him to go back ten years and explain what happened when he was at school. He can even get the medium to speak a language he does not know; or sometimes hypnotism is exploited as an instrument to find out what is happening in other places, For instance, a person under the influence of hypnotism is sent to his place of residence and asked to describe what his or her mother is doing. The medium gives a detailed description and then the mother is asked to describe what she has been doing at that particular time, and her description fits with that of the medium. Hypnotism is also used to cure some mental disorders. It can also be used as a means of entertainment.

This is not to say that every person who claims to have such an art is capable of doing so. Their claims may not be genuine. They may pose as impostors who would like to swindle some money out of some simpletons. However, hypnotism as a science and practice cannot be rejected because of the fact that it has some applications in the field of medicine to cure some forms of mental derangement.

There is something else called spiritualism not in the sense of philosophy but a branch of science in parapsychology. People claiming some powers of spiritualism say that they can summon the spirits of the dead through a medium. For example, the spirit of a person's grandfather who died two or three decades ago can be summoned through a medium to speak to him. The spirit can be asked to give the exact location of something like the lost picture of the grandmother. He can even be asked to give the

details of his murderer in some mystery murders. It has been proved that some of these stories disclosed by the medium have been found to be authentic.

It is said that today more than a hundred magazines are published around the world on the subject of spiritualism by the spiritualist societies. All of them believe in the existence of the spirit and they claim that they can have contact with the spirits. I do not want to say that all of them are true, but this fact cannot be ignored.

It is better to give examples from the lives of our own scholars. Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husain Tabatabai the author of *Al-Mizan* a great commentary on the Glorious Qur'an (20 volumes), had a brother, who was called Sayyid Muhammad Hasan Ilihi, and this brother was also one of the great scholars. Ilahi had a student who was able to summon spirits. However, his brother did not disclose that he practised this parapsychological science. It is a custom among great scholars to observe and keep low profile in the areas where they have extraordinary supernatural powers. Ilahi, the brother of Allamah Tabatabai said that at times he had some questions and problems in the comprehension of some ideas in philosophy and he needed to discuss those problems with the original source. His student used to come to his rescue by recalling the spirits of great philosophers and through him, Ilahi used to clarify and solve the riddles in philosophy. But his student was not aware of those solutions since he was not a master of philosophy.

It is interesting to observe that a real arif (gnostic) can easily control supernatural phenomena and can even attain a rank where he can control everything in the universe. However, he considers these things of no importance. These practices are within the reach of students of ifran (mysticism). The gnostic masters consider these attainments as very elementary and rudimentary. Those who possess high mystical ranks can easily read your mind. They can predict the events taking shape in totally different surroundings precisely. Therefore, it is not strange that the student of Ilahi was able to summon the spirits.

Siyyed Jalal al-Din In Ashtiyani gave a special interview, published in *Kayhun Farhangii*. In the interview, Allamah Ashtiyani said that once he had contact with the spirit of Hakim Sabzevari who recited a couplet of Mawlavi from the *Mathnawr* which could not be found in the copies at Allamah Ashtiyani's disposal. Finally, through studies, Allamah Ashtiyani learned that a man from the West had found a copy of the *Mathnawi* which contained the couplet.

So this phenomenon of being able to make contact with the spirit of the dead is a very common practice. It bears no special weight and is insignificant to our scholars and our ulama. They do not, at the same time, want to speak about these matters because they say that if they did so, it would cause some unnecessary complications. They do not want to resort to such practices to avoid publicity as well as people's harassment. Consequently, they try to cover these facts. Only the closest friends may become aware of these practices. This issue may be raised in public for very specific purposes on very rare occasions.

The late Imam Khomeini was skilled in 'irfan in theory and practice. However, he never gave himself the airs of possessing such an insight. Only some of his students who were in his service related some things about him. They even confessed that they had difficulty in perceiving those aspects of his mystical practices. The Late Imam was an 'arif of a very special rank. He possessed such high traits that he never bragged about himself nor did he attribute any special quality to himself. The great Imam Khomeini was an arif in the real sense. The Imam has left a treasure of works in the field of irfan.

Irfan is divided into two major branches. There is practical irfan and theoretical irfan. Theoretical irfan is treated as a science whose subject matter is Allah. Practical irfan studies how to get close to Allah and what the stages on the mystical journey are. Those skilled in these branches have studied many things in irfan. They can teach it, but there exists a possibility that they may not be practising arifs. It may be due to the fact that they have not reached certain station on the mystical journey. Perhaps they are ordinary beings merely in possession of some knowledge which they can transmit on mysticism.

Having both the practical and theoretical knowledge simultaneously, if put into practice, leads us towards understanding Almighty Allah's Infinite Wisdom and His Endless Attributes to be able to be honoured with His everlasting blessings to His most amiable lover, His most obedient servant and His complacent slave if our soul totally submits to His Will, and His Injunction.

We have earlier discussed the subject of spirits. We proved the existence of the spirit as a non-material reality. We also said that it is our spirit or soul which makes our personalities, and the body is not as important as the soul. The body is just a receptacle or carcass that carries our spirit. Sometimes the scholars and philosophers compare the body and the spirit to a mount: a mule or a horse. Our soul intimately co-ordinates with our body and effectively uses it as a means in the performance of different tasks.

It is possible for the soul to reach a position and a stage where it becomes totally independent of the body. This stage can be materialised as a reality once a person begins to strengthen his soul through worshipping Allah, his obedience to Him, and the performance of religious duties. If one persists in these practices, his dependence on the material world will decrease as his soul progresses towards the Divine kingdom through his spirit's sanctification. Thus, his soul gradually alienates itself from the physical body.

Many of the mystics and great scholars were able to experience ethereal travel. They would sometimes look at their own bodies. For example, some reported that when they saw their bodies for the first time they thought that they were looking at another person, but after a while they understood that they were looking at their own corporeal bodies.

A very famous and respected scholar from Mashhad, Mirza Jawad Aqa Tehrani (c. 1919–1989) in one of his books says: “The best reason to prove the existence of the spirit is to see the spirit out of the body. This is for those who had this opportunity and I once have personally seen my spirit, i.e., myself before my body just as I now see myself before my clothes which I have taken off and are before my eyes. “

This scholar was very religious and committed, and his son relates that his father was once sitting in the yard and after a while he stood up and went to his room. After a while he came back. His son asked him why he returned. He said that he had seen some ants on his clothes and realised that they were from the yard and he was afraid that had he returned to the room, those ants would have lost their way. Consequently he came back to the yard to put them back in the same place. Then he returned to his room. It can be concluded that these pious people took care of every detail of their minute actions to attain the lofty positions and special spiritual ranks.

We can deduce that it is not at all difficult to prove the existence of the spirit as we did in our previous discussion. We can now draw this conclusion that since our spirits are “non-material, and since our personalities and our real entities are principally shaped by our non-material spirit, our comprehension of the knowledge of the self clearly demonstrates that we should emphasise our spiritual needs more than our material needs. Evidently, we should focus more on the spiritual side of the self than on our corporeal body.

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