

AVICENNA'S CONCEPT OF SOUL: A CRITICAL EVALUATION

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Abstract: The study of *soul* occupies a justifiably central and voluminous part of religious sciences as it is essentially related to the all-important eschatological doctrine of the religion. However, the study of soul and its nature is not limited to Religion alone. Starting from the Greeks, it occupies a prominent position in the history of Philosophy too. Avicenna's position regarding this problem is of particular interest for the history of thought. This paper is an effort to explore Avicenna's theory of soul. To begin with, Avicenna's theory of soul is compared to the views of Plato and Aristotle on the subject. This is followed by the arguments Avicenna offered to prove the existence of soul and the way he establishes the link between the soul and the body. After this, Avicenna's hierarchy of the souls along with their respective faculties is described. Towards the end, Avicenna's arguments in favor of immortality of the soul and rejection of Metempsychosis are listed which are of prime interest in the religious domain. Moreover, this paper highlights how Avicenna's arguments regarding soul appear to support and establish the religious conception of soul on rational grounds.

Key Words: Avicenna, Greek, Immortality, Philosophy, Religion
Metempsychosis, Philosophy, Soul.

Introduction

Ibn-Sina, known in the West as Avicenna, is a tenth century Persian polymath. He is the most significant of all Muslim Philosophers. Being a system builder, he is still a major influence on almost all intellectual circles in the Islamic world being a defining factor behind most of the developments in mysticism, philosophy, religion, science, and theology. He not only influenced the Muslim intellectual tradition, but was also an important determinant of the Western Medieval intellectual tradition. The Scholastic intellectual Tradition pays great homage to Avicenna (Sharif 1963, 505). Avicenna was an immensely productive thinker in that he wrote extensively on a variety of subjects. In medicine, he wrote an encyclopedic work *The Canon of Medicine* that remained relevant for centuries. Even in Philosophy, Avicenna's contribution is phenomenal. His philosophically most important texts include *Kitab al-shifa*, *Danish nama-i alai*, *Kitab al-nijat*, and *al-Isharat wa-l-Tanbihat*.

Avicenna

Avicenna wrote on Logic, Theoretical Philosophy, Metaphysics, and Practical Philosophy. However, the focus of this study is a critical evaluation of his concept of soul. Schematically, first of all, Avicenna's different definitions of soul have been enlisted and contextualized to highlight their Greek (especially Aristotelian) background. Using Avicenna's definitions of soul, effort has been made to infer the nature of soul and the place of the concept of soul in his metaphysical scheme. His arguments for the existence of soul are enlisted after this, including his *argument from abstraction* as well (which resembles closely with Descartes' *floating man argument*). Subsequently, the relation between matter and soul along with the reliance of soul type (qualitative) on the quality of matter is made clear along with the resulting metaphysical hierarchy of souls. Towards the end, the focus shifts to religiously central concepts such as immortality and metempsychosis. Various arguments that Avicenna offers to favor immortality and reject metempsychosis (in favor of personal identity) have been highlighted. Moreover, it has been established that Avicenna's concept of soul on the whole remains Islamic in spirit and has something of its own to offer despite its Aristotelian background.

What is Soul?

To understand Avicenna's concept of soul, Ancient Greek thought in general and Aristotle's philosophy in particular would be helpful as they provide the background of his concept of Soul. Despite this background, Avicenna's conception of Soul is strictly in resonance with

the Islamic tradition. It will become evident from the following sections of this study that Avicenna apart from assimilating the Greek heritage on the subject, also modifies and enriches it. Greek setting of Avicenna's concept of Soul becomes evident from his definitions of the Soul. Firstly, in resonance with the general Greek meaning of the word 'soul' as life giving (Bostock 1986, 22), Avicenna equates life with the soul. Secondly, like Aristotle, he calls soul the entelechy of the materially organized body (Rahman 1952, 2). Three central concepts of Avicenna's definition of soul, following Aristotle, include: form, entelechy, and the substance.

On the basis of the above definitions, it can be inferred that Avicenna considers soul to be a unitary substance. Moreover, Soul, far from being material, for Avicenna, is of the order of form and is the cause of different activities, which we associate with being alive. The various activities, functions and conduct of various species are only explainable through soul (as soul is the differentiating principle). However, the relevance of Soul is not exhausted by the functions and activities (of the species) as apart from being the differentiating principle amongst species, Soul also is a source of perfection. This implies that Soul, for Avicenna, not only has a phenomenal aspect but also has a transcendent aspect. As far as the study of Soul at the phenomenal level is concerned, Avicenna, like most Ancient and Medieval Philosophers, believes it to be a subject of Philosophical Psychology. On the other hand, the transcendental aspect of soul falls under the area of Metaphysics, according to him.

Arguments for the existence of soul

Avicenna offers two arguments to prove the existence of soul. First of them is his famous *argument from abstraction* (Sharif 1963, 487). This argument is based on the supposition that a person is created in adult state with the following inabilities:

1. Inability to have any perception of the external world
2. The inability to have sense-perception of own body as well

From these suppositions, Avicenna concludes that such a person will only affirm his self as a completely spiritual entity. He will be unconscious of the existence of his body as well as the external world.

His second argument is based on the empirical observation, which distinguishes between animate and inanimate objects. This argument proceeds like this:

P 1 – On the basis of empirical evidence, we can certify that certain bodies exhibit the activities of life.

P 2 – These bodies do not exhibit these activities only because they are bodies (material). If this would have been the case then there should be no inanimate bodies.

C 1 – Therefore, living bodies in addition to mere corporeality must have some other life-giving principle.

C 2 – This principle of life is soul (according to Avicenna).

Soul and Matter

Not only for Avicenna, but for Plato (Segal 2006, 99) and Aristotle as well, soul is not matter. Avicenna's argument for the distinction between soul and matter can be sketched as under (Rahman 1952, 10):

P 1 – If we consider soul to be the material principle of the body, then we need another principle to explain the actual capacity of the body to perform certain activities (associated with life).

P 2 – It is the soul that explains the actual performance of those activities as a principle (according to Avicenna).

C 1 – Therefore, the soul cannot be the material principle of the living body.

C 2 – Therefore, the soul is a form/ like a form/ like perfection (different variants in Avicenna's work).

Contrary to Aristotle, however, who identifies soul with the form, Avicenna prefers to call it perfection (McGinnis 2010, 93). In order to explain what sort of perfection the soul has, Avicenna distinguishes between two types of perfection, namely:

1. The 'first perfection'
2. The 'second perfection'

The 'first perfection', according to Avicenna is that "by which the species actually becomes a species" (93). According to this criterion, soul for Avicenna is the 'first perfection' as it completes and perfects the body by actualizing the potentiality of a body. On the other hand, the 'second perfection' is "whatever comes after thing's species". This implies that the 'second perfection' is the actual performance of the activities (associated with life).

Although Avicenna distinguishes soul from matter, yet, matter plays an important role in determining the quality of the soul. Furthermore, it

is on the basis of elemental mixture that a body qualifies for having the soul. The elemental mixture is the combination of the following four elements.

1. Earth
2. Water
3. Air
4. Fire

The proportions in which these elements get mixed play an important role in the process of soul acquisition. After the elements have been combined they attract the soul (which can be considered as a faculty of the World Soul) from the World Soul. It is the elemental mix of the body that defines the potentiality of the corresponding body. It is explanatory of the possible range of activities that belong to a particular body. Avicenna, following Greeks, associates certain properties with these elements, which are listed below (92).

1. Earth (cold/dry)
2. Water (cold/wet)
3. Air (hot/wet)
4. Fire (hot/dry)

These elemental properties also have an influence on the overall functioning of a body. The influence that a particular elemental property has on a particular body is enlisted below.

1. Hot (acting on/active)
2. Cold (acted on/passive)
3. Wet (power to receive)
4. Dry (power to retain)

Apart from these properties, Heath attributes an additional property to each of the elements with reference to the medical *Canon* (Heath 1992, 53). The additional property that he attributes with each of the four elements is mentioned below as:

1. Earth (heavy)
2. Water (heavy)
3. Air (light)
4. Fire (light)

In short, the elemental mix along with its properties determines the faculties of a soul as well as the quality and hierarchy. Apart from having an influence on the physical capacities of the soul, the elemental mix also remains relevant at the psychological level.

Hierarchy of the Souls and their Faculties

All the souls are not of equal ranking. There is a hierarchy that runs through different types of souls, according to Avicenna. Various faculties are associated with the different types of souls, i.e., vegetative, animal, and human. The hierarchy of the souls is in turn based upon the hierarchy of the different faculties of the soul. According to Avicenna, faculties like growth, nutrition and reproduction stand lowest in this hierarchy. Second in line are the faculties related to locomotion and perception. While the faculties that are ranked the highest are the intellectual faculties. On the basis of this hierarchy he ranks different souls as:

1. Vegetative/ Nutritive soul (lowest)
2. Animal/ Sensitive soul (middle position)
3. Rational soul (highest)

The vegetative/ nutritive soul is related to the plants. While the animal/ sensitive soul relates to the animal kingdom. Finally, the rational soul not only characterizes but also distinguishes human being from other created existents. This nested hierarchy of the functions of souls relevant to various soul types can be sketched as under.

There is also a hierarchy between the various faculties of a single type of soul. In the case of vegetative soul Avicenna gives a scale of nobility of various vegetative faculties (96). According to this scale, reproduction sits on the top, followed by growth and nourishment in the order of descent.

In the case of other faculties related to animal and human soul he proposes a relation of 'ruler and ruled' (95). On the basis of this relation theoretical intellect sits at the top and is followed by practical intellect. Downward on this ladder lies the senses (internal followed by the external) and locomotion (motive and moving powers) in order. Higher members of this ladder, according to Avicenna, rule the lower. In other words, we can say that the lower members on this ladder serve the higher ones.

Immortality of soul:

Immortality of soul is an important religious concept. It is a major doctrine of almost all the religions of the world. Avicenna adheres to the view that the soul can exist apart from the body. He gives two arguments to establish that the soul is immortal. First of these arguments is based

upon examining the relationship between the soul and the body (Rahman 1952, 12). The argument is outlined below:

P 1 – The relation between soul and body is not causal (the relation is not of cause and effect).

P 2 – The existence of the body provides only an occasion for the coming of the soul (soul is not attached to the body essentially).

C – Therefore, it is also not necessary that the soul is perishable with the death of the body.

The second argument that Avicenna offers to establish the immortality of the soul is based on the assumption that the soul is a simple substance. The soul is distinguished from matter in the sense that it is not composite like matter. This argument resembles with the argument that Plato has offered in *Phaedo* to establish the immortality of the soul (Segal 2006, 99). Avicenna's argument proceeds like this (Rahman 1952, 107):

P 1 – Only composite things are liable to corruption.

P 2 – The soul is a simple substance.

C – Therefore, soul is immortal.

Metempsychosis (Transmigration of soul):

Metempsychosis signifies the transmigration of soul. It is a view that after death the soul as an immortal essence is capable of migrating from one body (it inhabited previously) to another without any qualification. Apart from Hinduism, this is the view held by Pythagoras amongst the Greek Philosophers. Plato also believed in the metempsychosis as is evident from his dialogues (*Myth of the Er* in *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Timeaus*, *Laws*). Not only Plato but also all the believers of transmigration build their belief on two presumptions. First of which is, that the number of souls is fixed. This assumption leads to the view that the birth far from involving the creation of a soul is only an instance of transmigration of soul amongst bodies. Secondly, those who favor metempsychosis believe that soul pre-exists the body (as it helps in establishing the rotation of souls over bodies). The argument generally advanced to favor the second supposition is as under.

P1 Two things coming into existence simultaneously are of the same nature.

P2 The soul unlike the body is not material.

C Therefore, the existence of soul precedes that of body.

Avicenna discusses the problem in detail in his *Ar Risala al Adhawiya fi Amr al Maad* (Reisman 2003, 163-176). On the basis of the above assumptions, the argument that he believes is used to establish metempsychosis is outlined below.

P1 The number of souls is either finite or infinite.

P2 The existence of infinite souls implies the existence of the actual infinite (because all souls exist simultaneously), which is not practically possible.

C Therefore, the number of souls is finite.

Considering the above conclusion, as premises, the argument can be used as under to prove metempsychosis.

P1 The number of souls is finite.

P2 The number of bodies is infinite (infinite bodies do not imply the existence of the actual infinite as the bodies are successive unlike souls which co-exist).

C Therefore, souls necessarily rotate over bodies (Metempsychosis).

As is evident from the argument, adherents of metempsychosis believe that souls pre-exist the body. It is at this point that Avicenna differs and considers it impossible for souls to pre-exist bodies. He is of the view that souls come into existence with the bodies (while rejecting the premises that two things coming into existence simultaneously are of the same nature). This rejection gives a serious blow to the efforts of affirming the validity of metempsychosis. The argument he advances to reject the pre-existence of soul (and hence metempsychosis) runs as under.

P1 Pre-existence of the soul requires either the presence of one or many souls waiting for the body.

P2 The presence of either one or many souls waiting for body is impossible (Souls cannot be many prior to entering into bodies, as it is the matter that is the individuating principle without which souls are not distinctive. On the other hand, if there would have been one soul waiting for all bodies then the soul of all individuals would have been one and that is absurd).

C Therefore, souls do not pre-exist the body.

Conclusion

Avicenna's theory of soul occupies an important place in the history of thought. Even though he borrows from the Greek sources (primarily

Plato and Aristotle) but gives his own genuine insights on the subject as well. On important points, he differs from the Greeks and supplies his own views quite in line with the religion of Islam. Soul, for Avicenna, is not material, rather it is the order of form as has been taught by Religion and is the differentiating principle between the animate and the inanimate. Not only this, soul is also a source of perfection for entities, implying that perfection is spiritual and not material. Importantly, unlike Greeks the soul is self-conscious, according to Avicenna as far as the existence of soul is concerned, Avicenna proves it using his famous *argument from abstraction* as well as empirical evidence. Even though soul is not material, it is closely related to matter not only for the manifestation of life but also for its association with a particular body as it is dependent upon the elemental mix. This in turn necessarily implies that not all souls are the same but there is a hierarchy amongst them which Avicenna outlines as Vegetative, Animal and Rational based upon the elemental mix and then the capacity to perform various activities after getting associated with the body. This hierarchy of soul helps in explaining various levels of perfection (amongst existents including humans) as well as the stations on earth. In favor of the religious eschatological doctrine, Avicenna believes that soul is not perishable and is immortal (immortality of soul is the basic tenet of the religious doctrine related to the soul). Furthermore, to reject the Greeks as well as the Indian doctrines he disfavors the doctrine of *Metempsychosis* (Transmigration of soul). The concept of transmigration of soul has important theological implications that have been avoided by Avicenna by rejecting it altogether on the basis of rational arguments. Important feature of Avicenna's theory of soul is that it is not only tuned to religious version, it is also rooted in rational arguments at every level to cater those who ask for evidence due to which it is highly useful in this age and time.

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