

The soul, the ancient and the new

What is the soul? What is this experience through which and “within” which we have sensations, we feel, we think and intuit, we love, and suffer, and live? What is this we call “I” every day? Even when— deep down – we also realize it is more than what we can apprehend about ourselves, in other words, it is more than the “I”. Daily we relate to and experience our own existence: sometimes this is good, sometimes not so much.

I think of the narratives about the soul – psyche or mind, for whoever feels more comfortable with these words – as a “story telling and writing”. Many stories to tell a greater story, made up of short and long stories, some linked, some broken... I do not feel trapped in the fantasy that we are capable of anything different than describing reality. My hypothesis is that the forms of narrative we use can converse with one another and they may even be integrated: mythological – religious, poetic-literary, philosophical and scientific, because they all are products of the soul.

Our subjective experience varies in quality and intensity and can be (more or less) perceived through an introspective look inside, but it is this subjective experience that we call soul. Some of us call it mind. Others call it psyche. Others (how sad!) brain activity.

Some believe that it is only our consciousness. We, Jungian, believe that there is an unconscious dimension of this experience and that this unconscious component is unfathomably larger and much more profound and ancient than conscious experience. Anyhow, the soul is the experience of being and existing, of being alive and, in our case (as human beings – as people), the experience of consciously realizing our own experience, from a relationship with our inner world, our thoughts, our feelings, our sensations and, no matter how this might manifest in each of us, our intuitions.

Some of us believe that the soul (psyche or mind) is something immaterial; therefore, it is not constituted of particles and atoms like everything we perceive as matter (things and our own body). They believe that body and mind are distinct and separate “entities”. Many of those also consider this immaterial soul immortal, eternal – and divine. Others think that this



separation does not exist, that the soul (psyche or mind) and the biological existence (life) are inseparable and, actually, the same thing.

But what nobody disputes is that our body and the things of the world can only be perceived through the soul, no matter what it is or how it is called. More than that: the soul can only be perceived by the soul, because it is itself what it perceives and, in this purely subjective process, the only possible objectivity is given exclusively by the other and by the other's description.

Each one of us only elaborates and relates with own descriptions of reality, and has only the reality narrated by others (myths, fictions, philosophical and scientific theories) as counterpoint to individual subjectivity. In this way, we merely have the stories told by others to compare to our own at every moment. And we know through experience that our narrative of reality never completely corresponds to the existence that we experience and call soul. Reality is always a description, a story told, a theory. A fact is never an actual fact, but it is always only a description of an experienced fact.

We, human beings, are a part of a long evolutionary chain of transformations of matter that started at the very beginning of the universe (or at least, of this universe we can observe), went through the emergence of life on Earth (and we better make this clear at the outset that – in the same way that in relation to the soul – we do not know what it is this we call life and neither this we call matter) until to our own emergence in Africa about 200 thousand years ago. From then on we regained the control of fire (before us, at least two or three of our evolutionary cousins had already managed to produce fire), we started to bury the dead (some of our evolutionary cousins also did that, independently of us), we started to produce sculptures, paint on the bottom of caves and build megalithic temples, domesticated plants and animals, started to live in cities, invented writing and constructed civilization.

Certainly, we owe this to the evolutionary growth of the brain, but this event alone cannot explain all we are or, at least, what we became. In fact, it seems that when we try to explain the phenomena – including our existence -, merely through its structural constitution, perhaps we are not comprehensive enough: we attribute different levels of complexity to matter, to life and to the psyche, each one of these levels representing the new in the existence in relation to the old.

We seek meaning for what we are. Our stories of being and existing are stories of attribution of meaning: about how we need to find meaning in things and events, about how we are taken by an imperative, uncontainable need of attributing meaning to our own existence and to the existence of the world, tormented by the need to find a signifier (or group of signifiers) that take the place and the value of an image or idea or experience of God. The image, idea or experience of God – in any of its forms – is the signifier par excellence and reveals itself both in religion and in the underlying narrative attitude of mathematical rationalism. It can be found, invariably, in all the descriptions of reality, an external argument, a signifier external to the system

of thought with the value of an image, or idea, or experience of God: this is the basis of all the descriptions of reality.

Our subjective experience (soul, psyche or mind) is marked by a drive to create and experience one or several images or ideas or experiences of God intended to give meaning and sense to life and death. The character of this drive to formulate such ideas or experiences of God is universal and innate, and it is exclusively human psychic “instinct”: what Jung calls **Self** or **one-self**, the central archetype of human existence. No other living being elaborates questions regarding existence or thinks and reveres God or the gods. We create images or ideas or experiences of God in a potentially infinite diversity of expressions, exclusively human, which always result in a world vision and narratives of reality.

The “world vision” is the narrative of reality that we tell ourselves, which justifies us before ourselves. This world vision creates and is created by the stories of being and existing of each one of us, even if each one merely seems to express a collection or set of collective, conscious or unconscious modes of functioning and behaviors. In other words, our world vision is always particular and peculiar, even if invariably constituted by universal and collective elements; thus it can be called soul, because it is constituted by everything that precedes and structures us, and the new in the existence that each one of us represents.

Ricardo Pires de Souza

Scientific Editor