RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

A Complete Guide to the Soul

Patrick Harpur

A Complete Guide to the Soul

Patrick Harpur

RIDER

LONDON • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND • JOHANNESBURG

This eBook is copyright material and must not be copied, reproduced, transferred, distributed, leased, licensed or publicly performed or used in any way except as specifically permitted in writing by the publishers, as allowed under the terms and conditions under which it was purchased or as strictly permitted by applicable copyright law. Any unauthorised distribution or use of this text may be a direct infringement of the author's and publisher's rights and those responsible may be liable in law accordingly.

Version 1.0

Epub ISBN 9781407063294

www.randomhouse.co.uk

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

First published in 2010 by Rider, an imprint of Ebury Publishing

Ebury Publishing is a Random House Group company

Copyright © Patrick Harpur, 2010

Patrick Harpur has asserted his right to be identified as the author of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009

Addresses for companies within the Random House Group can be found at www.rbooks.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

The Random House Group Limited supports The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the leading international forest certification organisation. All our titles that are printed on Greenpeace approved FSC certified paper carry the FSC logo. Our paper procurement policy can be found at www.rbooks.co.uk/environment

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

ISBN 9781846041860

Copies are available at special rates for bulk orders.
Contact the sales development team on 020 7840 8487 for more information.

To buy books by your favourite authors and register for offers, visit www.rbooks.co.uk

Contents

Cover Page
Title Page
Copyright Page
Dedication
About the Author
Otherbooks

Introduction

1. Soul and body
2. Soul and psyche
3. Soul and world-soul
4. Soul and mana
5. Soul and the unconscious
6. Soul and myth
7. Soul and daimon
8. Soul and spirit
9. Soul and ego
10. Soul and initiation
11. Soul and afterlife
12. Soul and Otherworld

References
Bibliography
Index

To my aunts, Cicely and Boobela

Patrick Harpur is a long-time student of the Western esoteric tradition. He has published two novels and three works of non-fiction, including a study of alchemy, *Mercurius*: *or, The Marriage of Heaven and Earth*; a study of visions and apparitions, *Daimonic Reality: A Field Guide to the Otherworld*; and a history of the imagination, *The Philosophers' Secret Fire.* He lives in west Dorset, England.

Other books by Patrick Harpur:

The Philosophers’ Secret Fire: A History of the Imagination
Daimonic Reality: A Field Guide to the Otherworld
Mercurius: or, the Marriage of Heaven and Earth

Novels:

The Serpent’s Circle
The Rapture

Introduction

It is notoriously difficult to talk about the soul. If we believe that we have a soul, we tend to picture it vaguely – as some essence of ourselves, some core of our being which constitutes our 'real' selves or our 'higher selves'. Even if we are not specifically religious we can all still resonate with the notion that there is some part of us which should not be sold, betrayed or lost at any cost. We can understand the idea that we can 'lose our souls' and still go on living, just as we can lose our lives but retain our souls. We still use the word 'soul' to mean something real or authentic. Whenever music, dance, architecture, food is said to have soul, we mean that it is the real thing, that it speaks to the deepest part of ourselves. It is not a tangible reality, of course, but it is understood to be more real than ordinary life. So the first attribute of soul is as a symbol of depth and authenticity. Wherever it slips in, it stirs in us a sense that there is more to this world than meets the eye, something behind mundane events that is more than human. It stirs, in other words, a religious feeling, regardless of any religious denomination.

The notion of soul is also oriented towards death. If we believe that some part of ourselves lives on after death, that part is the soul. Despite what modern materialists tell us – that we are only our bodies – we persist in feeling that we do in fact inhabit our bodies. We persist in feeling that the most real moments of our lives occur when we –

perhaps our souls – temporarily leave our bodies, whether in joyful or in agonized passion. For example, we are ‘outside’ of ourselves when we are deeply engaged with a landscape or a lover, when we are ‘lost’ in a piece of music or dance. Conversely, when we are in heightened states of rage or fear, we spontaneously say: ‘I wasn’t myself!’, ‘I was beside myself!’, ‘I was out of my head!’ The Greek root of the word ‘ecstasy’ means to ‘stand outside (oneself)’. Such feelings enable us to experience the reality of what most, if not all, cultures have always asserted: that when we step outside ourselves for the last time, at death, the body rots – but this essential, detachable part of ourselves, our soul, goes on.

While the soul is obviously connected with our sense of depth, of religion and of death, it is also connected with the question of life, and of life’s purpose. ‘Where am I? Who am I? How did I come to be here … ?’ asked the philosopher and ‘father of existentialism’ Søren Kierkegaard. ‘How did I come into the world? Why was I not consulted? … And if I am compelled to take part in it, where is the manager? I would like to see him.’[1] There are times when we have all echoed Kierkegaard’s indignation with our own questions to the manager – ‘What is my purpose in life? What am I for? Where do I go when I die?’

Whoever is lucky enough to have found their purpose on Earth knows that they have done so because they feel fulfilled. They may have found their purpose in some job or in some person – a ‘soul-mate’ – but they are convinced that it is ‘meant’. Their lives are not necessarily free of suffering, but they are full of *meaning*. Those of us who are not so lucky nevertheless feel that we should search for a purpose, as if for our own souls. It might be that the search itself is our purpose.

The poet John Keats considered such questions too, suggesting that although people have ‘sparks of divinity’ in

them, they are not ‘souls’ till they acquire an identity – ‘till each one is personally itself’. ‘Call the world if you please “The vale of Soul-making,” ’ he wrote in a letter to his siblings. ‘Then you will find out the use of the world.’[2] The question of our paradoxical condition – that we are born with souls yet also, in another sense, have to ‘make’ them – is at the centre of this book about the soul, its nature and destiny.

This book is therefore for people who are wondering what we consist of – what our essential nature is – and what happens to us when we die. It is for people who are sceptical of materialistic claims that we consist only of our bodies; sceptical of rationalist claims that the only reality is one that is subject to narrow empirical definitions. It is also for people who are disenchanted with the major religions – and especially Christianity – for squabbling over liturgy, gender issues and so forth, and neglecting the one thing religion is founded on: knowledge of the individual soul and its relationship with God. It is for people whose supernatural longing leads them to the East – to Buddhism and Taoism, for instance – only to be downcast by the difficulty of entering wholeheartedly into an alien culture and language. It is a book, too, for people who are drawn to New Age-style ‘spirituality’, only to find that this is at best abstract and diffuse, at worst, woolly and embarrassing. In short, our souls long for meaning and belief just as much as they ever have, yet they can find no lasting nourishment in modern offerings of philosophy and science. We are like starving people who are given cookbooks instead of food.

Fortunately, help and sustenance lie to hand – not from some outlandish belief system or foreign land, but from a secret tradition within our own culture. It is a kind of ‘perennial philosophy’ which remains true no matter how radically times appear to change. Why then do we not all embrace it today? Because it is difficult and demanding.

However, it is not difficult because it is, for example, in German or in academic jargon. It is difficult because it is subtle and elusive, more an imaginative vision of how things are than a system of thought. Neither is it demanding because it requires tremendous effort, willpower and work; it is demanding because it wants us to turn our whole world-view upside down, forbidding us to fall back on the ideologies, whether of religious dogma or scientistic literalism, that we use simplistically to try to settle the matter of reality once and for all.

Instead, we are talking about a tradition of thinking or, better, seeing, which asks us to see through our own suppositions about the world, to dissolve our certainties, to read many levels into the world as if it were a great poem, and, in changing our perception, to transform our lives.

Although this tradition is secret, coursing through Western culture like an underground stream for the last eighteen hundred years, it occasionally wells up into the mainstream at times of crisis and transition – times, in fact, like our own. I have documented the extraordinary and fertility-bearing floods which inaugurated those great flowerings of culture amongst the Renaissance magi, the Romantic poets and the depth psychologists in my book *The Philosophers' Secret Fire*. Now I want to describe the personal implications of this secret tradition for us as individuals. More, I want to initiate the reader into this brilliant and creative world-view in a language no longer alchemical and arcane but as straightforward as possible. For we all have to rediscover the ancient truths and retell the old myths in a way that speaks to our own generation.

Although its shape constantly changes to suit the age, the central tenets of the secret tradition remain the same. The idea, for example, that *psyche*, soul, constitutes the very fabric of reality; that humans are individual manifestations of a collective Soul of the World which

interconnects all things; that imagination, not reason, is the chief faculty of the soul – though not the pale imitation of imagination as we now know it; that there is another world whence the soul comes at birth and to which it returns at death; and that the idea of *gnosis*, of a personal and transforming experience of divinity, is of the essence.

These are the sorts of notions I hope to unpack in the course of this book. Together they add up to a world-view very different from the one to which we in twenty-first-century Western culture are accustomed. It is a sacred outlook, so to speak, which is rich in meaning but neither dogmatic nor agnostic. Nor is it against other systems of thought, such as science, but simply gives us the perceptual tools to look through science's assumptions and to relate its hypotheses back to their mythic origins. Nor is it against religion. It merely enables us to dissolve the sclerotic ideologies which have hardened the heart of religion, letting it beat again. It particularly does not require new-fangled ideas or jargon, but tries to apply new insight to old ideas in order to present them afresh.

To this end, I begin with a survey of the way the soul is understood in tribal cultures very different from ours. I contrast their ideas with the sophisticated notion of soul developed by the Greek founders of our culture, and especially its apotheosis among the Neoplatonists. They best expounded the traditional view that soul is the flagstone of reality, underlying both us and the world, and forming a bond between the two which modern dualism has mistakenly severed. By re-introducing soul to the world we re-enchant the environment and reconnect with our own experiences of the divine which we have been encouraged to ignore or forget, just as Western culture has suffered a collective loss of memory concerning soul itself.

I also re-introduce the soul's traditional spokesman – that guide, guardian angel, Muse or daimon of which

Socrates spoke so eloquently – and show how it transforms chance to fate, and fate to a Providence in which whatever randomly occurs is seen to have been forever ordained.

I describe the strengths of our historically recent and culturally unique consciousness, centred on an indomitable ego – and also its weaknesses, not least our own fond belief that it is the highest form of consciousness there is. Central to this deconstruction is the role of initiation in dismantling our tendency to be over-conscious, over-rational – and over-literal. And I shall stress the necessity of reviving those rites of initiation which, though lost to us, are still informally and unconsciously enacted, especially by teenagers, in a desperate bid to keep us in touch with soul, our authentic selves and the world at large.

Lastly, I describe what happens to the soul when it leaves the body, both during life and after death. Part of the impetus behind this book was provided by an eminent English novelist who, in reviewing *Everyman* by the renowned US novelist Philip Roth, praised Roth's view of death as an exchange of 'our fullness for that endless nothing.' He further congratulated Roth on 'casting such a cold crystalline eye on the unfairness of death, and concluding that there are no answers: just the terror of nothingness that we all share.'[3] But, on the contrary, we do not all share such an impoverished view, and as exponents of imagination these novelists should know this – and know better.

Anyone with even a modicum of initiatory experience knows that death is a portal into that greater reality which can already be glimpsed in this world as an imaginative experience of the Otherworld. Whatever physical pain members of traditional cultures may suffer, they do not suffer the mental anguish of eminent modern novelists because they know that they will pass seamlessly into an afterlife where, gathered up by rejoicing ancestors, they

will live forever in an ideal version of their beloved homeland, free of sickness and want. Many, perhaps most, people in Western culture – particularly those who are uncontaminated by scientistic and existential nihilism – believe much the same thing. As the Greeks maintained, death is not the opposite of life but of birth – life is a continuous realm out of which we are born; which (as Plato says) we can dimly remember during our existence; and to which we return when we die – return to that totality of life compared to which mortal existence seems but a dream-like fragment.

At the same time, there is no doubt the Afterlife can appear, at worst, as hellish and, at best, as a Hades-like realm of shades which, according to old Irish laments for example, are pale by comparison with the richness and colour of life in this world. The Afterlife is paradoxical, in other words; and I shall explain how it tends to mirror our own souls so that we get the Afterlife we deserve – the Afterlife we already, in a sense, inhabit without being aware of it.

It is a purely modern affectation to claim that we can know nothing of life after death. It means ignoring the accounts of mystics, poets, mediums, medicine-men, shamans, prophets and so-called Near-Death Experiencers, to say nothing of those who have crossed the narrow sword-bridge during moments of love or rapture, during heightened states of illness or drugtaking, in visions or dreams. Such experiences may last only moments, but they can outweigh in importance years of mundane existence. ‘Strange as it may seem,’ wrote the most famous of all humanists, Erasmus, in 1519, ‘there are even men among us who think, like Epicurus, that the soul dies with the body. Mankind are great fools, and will believe anything.’

ONE

Soul and body

All cultures, apart from sections of our own, agree that humans are made of a body and a soul. For Christians, the uniqueness of the soul and its equivalence in each of us guarantee our individuality and our equal rights, the two basic principles of modern liberalism. Moreover, we are used to thinking of body and soul as being divided, the one mortal and the other immortal. This was a Western development, promoted by the ancient Greeks and adopted by Christianity: Plato had a decisive influence on the theology of St Augustine, while Aristotle's thought pervades that of St Thomas Aquinas – still the pre-eminent theologian of Roman Catholicism. However, the division between soul and body is by no means universal. Nor is the singularity of the soul. Pre-literate tribal cultures – which I shall be calling 'traditional' – usually subscribe to more than one soul; and all agree that, although it is distinct from the body, it retains a certain identity with it.

In Africa, for instance, the Basutos are wary of walking along a river bank because if their shadow falls on the water it might be seized by a crocodile – and the owner of the shadow killed.[1] One of the earliest anthropologists, E. B. Tylor, noticed[2] that many tribal cultures, from Tasmania to North America, from Malaysia to Africa, use the word

‘shadow’ – or a word like it, such as reflection, image, echo, double, dream-body – to signify that part of a human which can detach itself from the body, notably at death. It was natural therefore that anthropologists, who, whether Christian or not, all came from a culture grounded in Christendom, should call this ‘shadow’ the *soul* – and begin to puzzle over it.

Tylor found that as well as surviving bodily death, the shadow was believed to appear to others separately from its body. It could be placed elsewhere, hidden in a secret place; for it is vulnerable to attack and can even be eaten. Moreover, this shadow or soul was located in, or identified with, various parts of the body: for the Caribs of South America and for the Tongans it is the heart; for the Australian Aboriginals of Victoria the ‘kidney fat’; for others, the blood or the liver.[3] The breath is also a common synonym for the shadow or ‘breath-body’, whether in Western Australia or in Greenland. This was also true of the earliest period of Western culture. ‘Breath’ is the original meaning of the Greek word *pneuma*, spirit, and a connotation of *psyche*, soul. The notion that the soul leaves the body with the dying person’s last breath was a Roman belief – both *animus* and *spiritus* in Latin imply ‘breath’ – which persisted into Elizabethan times and beyond. But since soul has long since ceased to be linked to anything concrete in our culture, we are struck by how materialistic traditional cultures seem to be in their spiritual ideas.

To compound the puzzle of soul, traditional cultures also often claim that we have more than one. We might have one that is mortal, for example, and another that is immortal. Or a third which is really the soul of a dead ancestor that becomes attached to us as a guide. In North America the Algonquins believe that one soul can leave the body while the other remains behind, so that at death the first departs for the land of the dead while the second is plied with

offerings of food, and the Dakotas claim four souls: one stays with the corpse, one stays in the village, one goes into the air and one goes to the land of the spirits.[4]

Were-leopards

If this were not enough to confuse Western anthropologists, they found among many African peoples the idea that humans have 'bush souls' in the form of an animal counterpart. This is a ubiquitous theme – the Korichi Malays of Sumatra, for instance, describe killing a tiger which turned out to be in fact a weretiger (from the Old English *wer*, 'man'), for they found it had the same gold-plated teeth as its human counterpart![5] The same idea crops up among the Naga people of North-Eastern India, where, J. H. Hutton tells us, a man called Sakhuto was suddenly afflicted by a wound in his back, appearing out of nowhere. He had been shot, he said, while he was in the form of leopard.[6]

And yet similar beliefs were current in Europe until recent times. There are numerous variants of the tale of the hare hunt in Elizabethan England, when a hare was shot and wounded in the leg and the hunters followed its trail of blood to a remote cottage where, inside, an old woman was found, dressing a wound on her leg … . The old woman is, of course, a witch; and witches have always been credited with the power of shape-shifting, taking on the form of certain animals such as hares or cats. Isobel Gowdie, who was accused of witchcraft in sixteenth-century Scotland, gave the following charm as her means of transmuting herself into a hare: 'I shall go into a hare / With sorrow and sych and meickle care; / And I shall go in the Devil's name,/ Ay while I come home again.'[7]

Among the Naga such transformations were not confined to sorcerers or witches: cases of were-leopards were common among ordinary men, such as Sakhuto, who when in leopard form suffered pains in their joints and moved convulsively in their sleep. If they were being hunted (in leopard form) they threw themselves about in their efforts to escape. However, the Naga do not claim to *turn into* leopards; they say that their soul (*ahonga*, shadow) is projected into the leopard, which can be recognized as 'human' by the fact that it has five claws on each paw.[8] When the animal dies, its human counterpart is not long for this world; and indeed, Sakhuto died nineteen days after his leopard was killed.

While amongst some societies ordinary people may have 'bush souls', shape-changing is typically – and universally – attributed to the shamans of the tribe, the sorcerers and medicine-men. However, there is a range of subtle distinctions in the way they do it. They can, as we have seen, project their souls into an animal, such as a crocodile or tiger[9] – or they can simply change their *body* into the shape of such an animal. Among the Dowayos of the Cameroons, however, a sorcerer becomes a leopard at night by turning inside out – that is, he has the skin of a man during the day and that of a leopard by night.[10]

There is also a sense in which a shaman takes on the identity of a sacred animal by dressing up in its skin or feathers – an image we find in Norse myth where Sigmund finds a wolfskin and, putting it on, becomes a wolf for nine days. We remember too the widespread legend of the Scottish and Irish seaboards about the seal-woman – a seal which, conversely, casts off its skin and becomes a beautiful maiden.

In other words, traditional cultures are either vague about the means by which a man changes into an animal,

or else they have different theories. They assert a duality of soul and body, but they deny the dual*ism* which marks our theology. They insist that soul and body are separable – at death, for example – but deny that they are separate. The anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl goes even further when he says that even the term duality is misleading, because in the case of were-leopards, were-crocodiles, etc. duality is actually 'bi-presence':[11] the sorcerer is both man and leopard at the same time but in two different places.[12]

The Inuit of the Bering Strait give us a striking image of dual existence: they believe that in the beginning all animate beings could take on each other's form at will. If an animal wished to become a man, it simply pushed up its muzzle or beak like a mask and it became *inua*, man-like, the thinking part of the creature and, at death, its spirit. Shamans had the ability to see through these masks to the *inua* behind.[13] Analogously, for a man to wear an animal mask is to become the creature it represents.

Humans, it seems, are convinced of their dual nature, their two-foldness, whether it is expressed as soul/body, mind/brain, energy/matter – or human/animal. The many ways we depict our two-foldness shows how intensely we are engaged in the attempt to imagine our paradoxical nature. The way in which traditional cultures are untroubled by contradictions may suggest that our attempts always to *resolve* them one way or another is simply the result of our modern outlook, and may not be desirable or even possible.

Captured souls

It is almost universally agreed, then, that the soul can detach itself from the body. It can wander off on its own, during sleep for example. Sometimes it becomes lost, cannot find its way back to its owner and has to be

retrieved by a shaman, who flies into the Otherworld of dreams to fetch it back. Sometimes the soul is held in the Otherworld by spirits of disease whom the shaman has to persuade or overcome to release the soul. Sometimes it is not so much lost as stolen – by witches, supernatural animals or the dead. In such cases the body that is left behind is but a husk which wastes away, and sometimes dies if its soul is not returned to it.

In Irish folklore, for instance, it is said that when a young man or woman is taken by the fairies they leave behind a 'log', or else 'the likeness of their body or a body in their likeness'.[14] What remains, in other words, is not human but a kind of 'living dead', like the Haitians whose souls, they say, can be locked up in jars by sorcerers while their bodily remains are abducted – as zombies – to work as slaves.[15] There is always this unwillingness to allow the body to become too material and the soul too spiritual. Each remains tied to the other and bears the other's attributes. Such ideas invite us to picture the body as fluid, insubstantial and liable to shape-shift as the soul is concrete, substantial and liable to remain fixed in the body. What happens to one happens to the other, no matter how far apart they have drifted. There is the merest membrane, what the legend of the seal-woman describes as a skin 'softer than mist to the touch',[16] between body and soul.

Even in death, when the soul might be thought to have finally separated from its body, they remain close. As many Africans say: 'The dead are still living.'[17] Thus, if you want to strike out at a dead man whose 'shadow' is remote and invisible, you have only to act on his bodily remains. The Aboriginals of the Brisbane district were known to mutilate a dead man's genitals to prevent his having sex with the living, while those of the district of Victoria might tie his toes together to stop him 'walking'. In West Africa the

Ogowe used for the same reason to break all the bones in a corpse and hang it in a bag from a tree. In *The People of the North*, Knut Rasmussen noted a similar custom among the Inuit regarding those who had committed murder: they cut up the victim's body, ate the heart and covered the remains with stones or threw them in the sea – all to render the dead person incapable of post-mortem revenge.[18]

Often if misfortunes do occur after a death, the body of the dead person will be exhumed. Sometimes it is found to be intact, with a blush still in its cheeks, and an appearance more of being asleep than dead – a clear sign that the dead person was during life a witch or sorcerer who had gone undetected.[19] Such a belief is not only found in places as far apart as Nigeria and Burma, it is also found in Europe. There, however, it is usually reversed: the intact corpse is held to be that of a saint rather than a sorcerer. When the coffin of St Cuthbert, for instance, was opened some four hundred years after his death in 687, his body was found to be unchanged and undecayed. These signs of sanctity can also be read in an opposite way: unnaturally healthy-looking corpses in Eastern Europe used to be re-buried with a precautionary stake through the heart.

The human race, it seems, has always been anxious about the powers of the dead, whether for good or ill. In so far as a dead person is one with its corpse we can attempt to neutralize it by burying, dismembering or mutilating it. Yet in so far as the deceased can apparently be in two places at once, like the weretiger, they can also return as troublesome spirits or 'hungry ghosts', as the Chinese say, in order to plague us.

Fact and fiction

In Western culture we are particularly confused by traditional views of the relationship of body to soul for, I

think, two reasons:

Firstly, traditional beliefs about body and soul are analogous to the difficulty we have with the literal and the metaphorical. Because we live in a highly literal-minded society, where something is either a fact or a fiction, true or false, we think that traditional societies are the same, and that therefore they take their (to us) absurd beliefs about the soul and the body literally. In fact their beliefs are more like what we call metaphors. They do not believe that men and leopards are interchangeable. Such a view is a metaphor for our double nature. But the moment I say this, I have to contradict myself: there is a sense in which all traditional beliefs are very much held in a literal fashion. The truth of the matter is that traditional peoples just do not make the distinctions that we do. Their thinking precedes any division between the literal and the metaphorical. They are not bothered by apparent contradictions. The shadow is both an optical phenomenon and a soul. The sorcerer in his hut and the leopard in the forest are the same being in different shapes. Their reality is exactly that combination of fact and fiction which is called *myth* – a word which, unfortunately, is identified by us with something untrue. It is a reality in which soul and body exist as different manifestations of each other. We, too, can enter this reality by thinking in a traditional way. Except that for us it is not thinking so much as *imagining*.

Secondly, we have tended to polarize body and soul to such an extent that, as a tribesperson might say, we have allowed our souls to stray so far from our bodies that we are in danger of losing our souls altogether. Our bodies are therefore left to wander the Earth like zombies, who tell themselves that there never was such a thing as a soul; that we must simply face up to our inanimate condition, and grin and bear it.

TWO

Soul and psyche

The roots of our Western thinking about the soul are buried in ancient Greek culture. It is difficult for us to imagine how the Greeks saw themselves at the time of Homer (about 800 BC). Like the tribal cultures we have been looking at, they did not have our modern sense of not being identical with our bodies. Whereas we feel that we have a personality, an essence – a soul – somehow located inside, or carried by, our bodies, they felt that their soul was dispersed throughout their bodies; or, that each part of their bodies expressed a different function of their soul. Indeed, they did not have a word for a living body. They usually referred to it as 'limbs'.[1] The word *soma* (body) referred to a corpse. Only gradually did the idea of the soul withdraw itself from the parts of the body to one central point. And only gradually was that point deemed capable of separating itself permanently from the body.

Homeric Greeks thought we had two souls, *psyche* and *thymos*. Modern scholars at first associated psyche with the breath and thymos with the blood. But in his book *The Origins of European Thought* … R. B. Onians shows that the 'breathsoul' is actually more appropriate to thymos, which is spoken of as feeling and thinking, as being active in the chest and lungs (*phrenes*) as well as the heart.[2] Psyche, on

the other hand, was associated with the head and acted as a sort of life-principle, the force that keeps us alive.[3] When we die, psyche leaves the body and lives on in Hades, the Underworld of death. Thymos also leaves the body at death but it does not live on.

Later Greek thinkers differed about the location of the soul in the body as much as did our tribal cultures. Epicurus placed it in the chest; Aristotle, in the heart; Plato, in the head.[4] But, more and more, psyche began to take precedence over thymos, so that by the fifth century BC it had come to include thymos, which was still vaguely located in the chest but no longer identified with the 'breath-soul'. At the same time, psyche was thought of as more diffuse, mainly – but no longer exclusively – associated with the head.[5] Already we begin to suspect that the soul is so difficult to pin down precisely because its own nature is to present us with differing pictures of itself.

There was disagreement, too, about psyche's fate after death. Some said that it was a breath that dispersed in the air on the death of the body, while others thought that Empedocles was right: that the soul is a daimon which is reborn in other people.[6] Most, however, believed that the soul went to Hades where it flitted about in the form of an *eidolon*, a 'shade' or image, 'the visible but impalpable semblance of the once living'.[7]

Even in Homeric times there was no sense in which psyche is responsible, as thymos is, for thinking and feeling. It is not concerned, that is, with consciousness either in life or death. At least, it is not concerned with what we think of as ordinary daylight consciousness. Psyche has its own consciousness, not thymos' 'life-consciousness', infused with warmth and feeling, but a colder, more impersonal 'death-consciousness'. Psyche's

home is Hades, whose ruler (also called Hades, god of the dead) possessed a famous helmet. Enclosing the head – that is, the psyche[8] – it made the wearer invisible. This is a metaphor for the way the invisible soul hides a death-consciousness within life. Psyche is the perspective of death concealed within all living things, where death is not extinction but another, more profound kind of life.

According to Heraclitus (535–475 BC), we can take this insight a step farther. Whatever thymos wishes for, he said, it purchases at the cost of psyche.[9] There is a reciprocal, even antagonistic, relationship between our warm, waking, desiring conscious life and the life of psyche – which comes into its own in the dark, while we sleep, during dreams, after life. And just as our conscious wishes and desires sap the vitality of the unconscious psyche and cost the soul dear, so conversely psyche wants to draw our conscious life downwards, towards the deeper perspective of Hades. In fact it was Heraclitus who first drew attention to that defining feature of soul which most concerns us here: depth.

'You could not find the ends of the soul,' he wrote, 'though you travelled every way, so deep is its measure [*logos*]'.[10]

The revolutionary idea that the soul is somehow at odds with the body, even opposed to it, was attributed to the followers of the legendary figure of Orpheus. No tribal member – no Homeric Greek – would have entirely separated soul from body. Even after death they remain tenuously linked. But the Orphics held that the soul was able to detach itself from the body and exist entirely independently. But where on earth did they get such an idea?

Shamans and Egyptians

In *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Professor E. R. Dodds thought it most likely that they got the idea from the Scythians, who lived to the west of the Black Sea, and the Thracians, who lived on the East Balkan peninsula. These tribes had in turn been influenced by the horse-cultures of Central Asia and, even farther north, by the reindeer-cultures of Siberia. They were influenced, in other words, by shamanistic cultures whose most striking feature is that the shaman enters a trance state and 'flies' into the Otherworld, often carried Pegasus-like by a spirit horse or reindeer.[11] He is no mere eidolon, or shadowy image, but his real self.

Orpheus, who was traditionally connected with Thrace, travelled into the underworld of Hades, armed only with a lyre and his songs. Like the shaman's sacred chants, they could charm the dangerous denizens of the underworld and persuade them to release souls they had abducted. Orpheus sought the release of Eurydice, his wife, who had died of a snakebite. She symbolizes his own soul – which he retrieved from Hades, only to lose her at the last minute when he fatally looked back to make sure she was following him. (However, the earliest versions of this myth relate that he was successful in retrieving her from death.)[12]

Orpheus was the first Western shaman; and Orphism had a profound influence on Pythagoras, whom Dodds also calls the Greek equivalent of a shaman. His teachings and practices were in turn given philosophical expression by Plato, who thus combined the tradition of reason and logic with magical and religious ideas from, ultimately, central Asia and Siberia. So real was the experience of the soul when out of the body that for the Orphics and the Pythagoreans the impermanent and corruptible body came to be seen as the 'prison-house' or even the 'tomb' of the immortal soul.[13] This became one of Plato's key doctrines.