

Soul and Immortality in Ancient Greek Literature

Atul Rasika Moudgil

Associate Professor

Department of English

University College

Kurukshetra

India

atulrasika.uck@gmail.com

The emergence of the concept of soul and its significance has been a matter of interest since olden times. There have been different views and terminologies in different eras to understand this mysterious, unknown and unseen concept yet recognized as endless powerful source of understanding life and energy. 5th and 6th century BC Greek thinkers, who were commonly known as Presocratics, termed it as "psyche" and introduced a new way of inquiring into the world and the place of human beings. They were recognized in antiquity as the first philosophers and scientists of Western tradition. They developed their own thoughts based on psyche and connected them to cosmogony and cosmology, hence initiating a new method of explanation known as philosophy.

In the writings by Homer, human soul is featured at the end of the life of an individual. Heroic action was finished when the warrior lay slain on the battlefield while his psyche had an endless shadow of existence in shades. Homer described soul of the dead as a mere shadow without conscious life or mental activity (Wright 108). It is also called shadowy phantom, a kind of ghost, resembling former shape and face for the description of the people of afterlife. Later, Presocratics understood soul to be active throughout one's lifetime and not just at the point of the death. Psyche was also taken to be responsible for the inner-life of thought and decision making. Early philosophers linked human psyche with cosmic forces in structure, substance and life of simpler animals. This way of linking creatures and locating them in cosmos characterized much of Presocratic thought.

Aristotle tells us that Thales attributed a soul to magnet because it moves iron (Long 252). These views by Aristotle provide us with a basic framework for Pre-socratic conception of the soul to be a part of the mixture of Universe and is present in things like magnets. Anaximander, Thales' successor viewed various entities of Universe as quarrelsome neighbours, acting and reacting on each other but gains and losses balance out overall in a cosmic equilibrium known as isonomia (Wright 5). In Anaximander's cosmology, according to the ancient sources, the whole system of balanced opposition began when something capable of producing hot and cold was

separated off from the 'limitless' (apeiron), the vast and characterless origin of all things (Becker 3-8). His views were challenged by his fellow townsman Anaximenes who made comment on soul not just being mixed in with the Universe but being a part of the "arche" of the cosmos. For Anaximenes, human beings are ensouled and maintained by air. He further suggested that air does the same for whole universe, it surrounds and interpenetrates the whole universe, making it mobile and alive. Anaximander's indeterminate 'limitless' now has a character, that of the air, essential for life and an obvious candidate for the boundless source of that life. He didn't view psyche in the Homeric sense which leaves the living at the moment of death and continues as a flitting shade in the realm of dead but as the enduring principle of life, which holds together, strengthens, and controls the individual.

"Pythagoras cultivated an ethos of transmigrating soul, one thought to be capable of communion with the divine, which led to the concept called metempsychosis" (Barnes 80). The Pythagorean view of soul was opposite to any of the theories of soul being part of the physical structure of the body or linked to it or conditioned to it. He agreed that "the soul was vital principle of the body, which contained it during the body's lifetime, but claimed that it had separate existence from it, both before the birth and after the death of that particular body" (Frede 21). Psyche was assumed to transmigrate not only between human beings but from human to animal form. Pythagoras basically took the personalised view of the soul from Anaximenes and expanded it to everything that bears life.

Heraclitus took the view of preceding philosophers, altered their ideas and created a practical application for them. So far, all the other philosophers offered intriguing theories but nothing that appeared to be relevant in terms of daily practical life. He was the first thinker to articulate a connection between soul and physical activity. "Wisdom is attributed to a dry soul and an example of a drunken man is given whose perceptual abilities are attributed to a moist soul" (Waterfield 32). Heraclitus remarks that the drunken person stumbles because his perceptual abilities have been impaired, and this impairment is due to moistness of soul. Like many (or indeed all) sixth and fifth century thinkers who expressed views on the nature or constitution of the soul, Heraclitus thought that the soul was bodily, but composed of an unusually fine or rare kind of matter, e.g. fire. Heraclitus's views were that instead of air, fire was the arche of the cosmos, with the soul being a form of fire. According to him, it is death for psyche to become water, for water it is death to become earth from earth arises water, and from water psyche. Psyche as logos in the individual is the principle of life and controls the material structure as it

does in the cosmos, but it is also, for the first time in this context, a principle of reason and choice.

The individual has some control over the physical process in that the indulgence of desire and anger results in an increase of moisture, which is a weakening of psyche's powers. Conversely, it is in the individual's power to dry out his soul by resisting impulse (*thymos*) to choose glory, gained by those who die in battle, honoured by gods and men (Wright 109-110).

Anaxagoras gave a more explicit explanation for the role of *Nous* (Mind) in the cosmos and in the individual. This all-pervading mind of Anaxagoras has the characteristics of psyche developed earlier i.e. knowledge, power and control. But, in attempting to define the nature of mind itself, Anaxagoras stretches the limits from material to the immaterial. Anaxagoras was in agreement with Heraclitus in maintaining that cosmic life and mind are related to the universe as individual life and mind are to each human being. The *Nous* he describes, "however is not air (as Anaximenes proposed) or Heraclitean fire, but the most rarefied of all things and the purest: unlimited, independent and, above all, not mixed or tainted with anything else" (Wright 111). Anaxagoras connects the mind in us with cosmic *Nous* in its independence, its control of the physical and its capacity for understanding, but in neither appearance does *Nous* seem to be in any way a moral agent. The amount of *Nous* in an individual appears arbitrary, and the role it plays in moral decisions is nowhere explained.

Democritus and other atomists then proposed a mechanist theory of the psyche. The physical human body was thought to be a coherent structure composed of various atom-groups moving in the body's empty spaces, and soul and mind had a similar material basis. "They claimed that world is composed of just atoms and void and so is the individual" (McKirahan 335). According to them, groups of fine, spherical atoms interspersed throughout the molecules of body atoms and intervening void, is what keeps the individuals alive. These spherical atoms react to other atomic movements internally and to the impact of external forces, which implies psychic and mental events would be non-moral and out of the individual control. Our ability to be aware of our surroundings is dependent on our physical condition, which continually changes as atoms from the external world push on the outside of the body, some penetrating inside. They concluded that psychic activities such as decision-making have no firm foundation but are linked to random atomic motion and reflection.

At the end of fifth century, Diogenes of Apollonia restored and updated the Milesian system of cosmology, asserting that "all the things are modifications of the same substance" (Tasch 11). He identified this single basic substance with air, similar to the theory given by

Anaximenes of Miletus. Yet, Diogenes took care to give arguments for the existence and properties of his basic principle. Like Anaxagoras, Diogenes claims that “the cosmic system is ordered by intelligence, and he argues that 'intelligence is what human beings call air” (Vander Waerdt 72). Humans and animals live by breathing air, and are governed by it - in them, air is both soul and intelligence, or mind. Moreover, Diogenes argues, “air governs and rules all the things, and therefore, is God” (Kirk 433).

The range of Presocratic thought about soul and cosmos shows that the first philosophers were not merely physicists. Their interests extended to religious and ethical thought, the nature of understanding mathematics, meteorology and the roles of mechanism, matter, form, and structure in the world. None of the views of the Presocratic thinkers can be justified as being rational explanations in the modern sense but it is apparent that the Presocratics increasingly attempted to rationalize views of the soul with the limited observations and knowledge they could obtain at that time. Evident from these limitations is that they attempted to develop theories such as the soul or arches that would explain the world around them, which seems very rational as this is exactly what we do with the modern science. The only difference is that we have highly progressed in technology, but maybe in another couple of years from now, our current conceptions of the Universe and human existence will become equally antiquated and alien.

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