

## *Swami Vivekananda: the Global Template for Eclecticism.*

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This dissertation shall not even try attempting to fathom the depth of a gargantuan personality like Swami Vivekananda, who, by the dint of sheer mettle rocked the globe as he spoke and the world listened in speechless wonder—marveling at this ‘Orange-monk who exercised the most wonderful influence over his auditors.’—the “Cyclonic monk from India”. Swamiji’s religious beliefs have so often been reiterated that one almost feel them ensconced in what Heidegger existentially calls one’s quintessential ‘dasein’. What I aim at doing today is to try and point out how a great deal of Swamiji’s philosophical beliefs could have so very much in common with the ontological musings of great minds across space and time. Since time is fast running out I shall zero in only on a certain facet of Swamiji’s ponderings—his ideas about the correlation of the body and the soul and afterlife and reincarnation.

Swamiji, drawing heavily from Vedantic thoughts, talks of Creation in terms of two distinct yet symbiotic notions—that of ‘Aakaasha’ and ‘Prana’. ‘Aakaasha’ and ‘Prana’—create every aspect of life. ‘Aakaasha’ is the substance and ‘Prana’ is the force the ‘elan vitale’—the vital life. Whatever is material, is the product of Akasha. It goes on to become finer or grosser, in inter-relativity with the action of prana.

Prana is omnipresent, and interpenetrating and infusing everything. Yet, 'force' cannot exist without matter. Thus, the gross body – made out of akasha, makes way for the manifestation of prana in gross forms, like the kinetic motions of walking, sitting, talking and so on.

The fine body is also made of akasha, but a very fine form of akasha, where the same prana manifests—but in the finer form of thought. Thus the human existence gets layered into the tripartite essence of the gross body, the fine body beyond that, and deep down is the Jiva, the real man. The gross body disintegrates and dissolves very quickly, but the fine body remains through ages and the Jiva is absolutely eternal just as God is. Jiva is immaterial and therefore will remain forever.

The gross body—a compound of akasha and prana, will be decomposed. The fine body, too, will be decomposed, but after a long time, but the Jiva, which is simple, and not compound like the gross or subtle bodies that are wrought out of 'Aakasha' and 'Prana', will never be destroyed. It was never born, as nothing simple can be born. Only that which is a compound can be born.

After death, once the sins and misdeeds of man have been absolved by his oeuvre of good deeds, the Jiva becomes pure again and goes to what is called Devayana. The Jiva gets out of the body, and goes to the solar regions, aiming for its ultimate destination—the highest heaven, called the Brahmaloaka, where the Jiva lives eternally, no more to be born and therefore, no more to die.

The Jiva of others who are not as exalted and absolved by virtues as their good works had been conditioned by the expectation of rewards and returns, does go to Heaven—slated for a short stint there, and then returns in reincarnation.

And as for the very wicked and retrograde humans, who commit all sorts of vices and demoniacal acts in life, they are born again as animals, and, if they are fit to be absolutely written off as profligates, they are born as lowly animals, or plants, or stones.

The Swami thus enumerates a complex layered universal construct that encompasses the highest heavens—Brahmalok, the solar sphere, lunar sphere and the sphere of lightning, the electric sphere, and the earth Sphere. Brahmalok houses the ultimate ‘Brahman’—the ultimate God. He is only one ruler of the universe and no one can emulate him.

Now, what strikes one as singular is that Swamiji’s theological and spiritual precepts have a lot in common with the theosophical and spiritual ideology of several schools of thought across the globe.

The layered universe that Swamiji talks of with the Brahmalok being the ultimate abode of the ultimate God, comes very close to what Dante Alighieri enumerates in his *Divina Comedia*. Dante talks of a similar, layered universe of nine concentric circles which begin beyond the Earth—and end in the ultimate sphere that reveals God—the sphere that he calls ‘Empyrean Orb’ and our very own Swamiji called the ‘Brahmalok’.

Again, what Swamiji says about the gross body, the fine body and the jiva is very reminiscent of what Thomas Aquinas said about human existence. Aquinas, in his magnum opus, the *Summa theologiae* and the *Summa Contra Gentiles* explains how the human ontology is a compound of two ingredients—the gross body and the finer soul which he calls the "substantial form"; the soul refined out of substance, but it is not the substance by itself. Thomas defined the four cardinal

virtues of prudence, temperance, justice, and fortitude and the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity as essential to refine the soul, preparing it for salvation. Nevertheless, the soul exists separately from the body, and continues, after death, in many of the capacities we think of as human. Aquinas further states that 'substantial form' is quintessentially what makes a thing a member of the species to which it belongs, and substantial form is also the structure or configuration that provides the object with the unique abilities that make the object what it is. This idea of Aquinas then comes close to what Swami Vivekananda said about the gross body, the fine body and the Jiva.

According to Aquinas, the rational souls are abstract forms independent of the body. But a human being is one composite being, compounded out of two permanent entities –the substantial form and the gross matter.

Again, after the similarities with Dante and Aquinas, Swamiji's ideas about human existence are quite akin to what Plato said about the soul-body equation.

Neither a materialist nor an epiphenomenalist, but an uncompromising spiritualist regarding the soul, Plato upheld the doctrine of psychological dualism when it came to the relationship between the soul and the body. In the *Laws* (896a 1-2) Plato defines the soul or the *Anima mundi* as "self initiating motion" or the "source of motion." The soul is superior to the body, and hence must rule the body. The soul is actually who a person is and is basically just trapped in the body, waiting to be released from its material grasp.

In the *Republic* and in the *Phaedrus*, Plato talks of the tripartite nature of the soul in a doctrine that is very close to the theory of the Pythagoreans. According to Plato, there are three kinds of soul. First, there is the rational soul, which he represented as

located in the head. Next, there is the spirited soul, which is located in the breast. And, finally, there is the appetitive soul which is located in the abdomen. The first type is immortal and only exists in humans. The second kind is present in brute animals. And, the third kind is present in plants. Furthermore, according to Plato, the rational soul (mind or intellect) is the thinking portion within each of us. The spirited soul (will or volition), on the other hand, is the active portion. And, the appetitive soul (emotion or desire) is the portion of each of us that wants and feels many things, which most of the time has to be deferred in the interest of a more valuable intellectual soul.

This again reminds one of the three degrees that can be achieved by the soul as Swamiji recounted.

But, Aristotle (384-322 B. C.), a student of Plato at the beginning of *De Anima* (II.1) says that there are three sorts of substance that exist, e.g., matter (potentiality), form (actuality), and the compound of matter and form.

According to the Aristotelian entelachy, the composite substance is a natural body endowed with life, the principle of this body being called the soul. Aristotle in what is known as Hylomorphism differs a bit from the idea of the transmigration of the soul held by Plato. Since, in Aristotle, there is no pre-existent soul, and, the soul only exists in its unity with the body, then, the soul is "over with" when the body dies, thereby negating the possibility of a reincarnatory transmigrational journey.

Again in traditional Chinese culture, *qi* (also *chi* or *ch'i*) is an active principle forming part of any living thing. *Qi* is frequently translated as "life energy", "life force", or "energy flow". The literal translation of "*qi*" would be "breath", "air", or "gas".

According to ancient Chinese texts like *Ma Wang Dui* and *Huang Di Nei Jing*, the universe is a galaxy of the basic forces in nature: the complementary agents of yin which stand for the dark, cold, female, negative aspects of nature and yang—the light, hot, male, and positive)aspects of nature and the Five Elements –water, fire, wood, metal, and earth. Pervading and permeating all of these elements is the Qi or energy. The human existence is then a compound of ‘li’ or matter and ‘Qi’ or energy. Confucius, used the term *qi* to mean "breath". He said "Human beings are born [because of] the accumulation of *qi*. When it accumulates there is life. When it dissipates there is death... There is one qi that connects and pervades everything in the world." Again this reverts back to what Swamiji had to say about the Jiva. Just as the purified Jiva attains BrahmaloK eternally, the purified ‘Qi’ transcends the layers of ‘yin’ and ‘yang’ and reaches the ‘Dao’ or the highest Heaven or the Supreme Luminary after clearing the spheres of ‘yu-zhou’ or the material universe.

Apart from this, the followers of Christ, including Catholics, Protestants, Anglicans, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, believe, like the Swamiji did, that the soul lives on after death and exists in a spiritual realm. Christian religions believe in the resurrection, or raising of the dead, when the dead are given new, immortal bodies.

Muslims, too, believe that each man is given a physical body and a spirit, the body dies while the spirit, which is molded by his deeds during his earthly life, lives on. Muslims believe that death is a starting point for further progress for each man and that in Heaven he progresses to ever-increasing stages in knowledge and faith.

Lord Buddha, too, accepted the basic Hindu doctrines of reincarnation and karma, as well as the notion that the ultimate goal of the religious life is to escape the cycle of death and rebirth through ‘Nirvana’.

Where Buddha departed most radically from Hinduism was in his doctrine of "anatta", the notion that individuals do not possess eternal souls, but a "bundle" of habits, memories, and sensations, desires, which together delude one into thinking that he or she consists of a stable, lasting self. Nirvana engages in the intricate process of finding out means to abandon the false sense of self so that the bundle of memories and impulses disintegrates, leaving nothing to reincarnate and hence nothing to experience pain.

Thus to wind up my dissertation, I would just wish to bask lingeringly in the vicarious glory of being one of the Indian clan that mothered a genius like the Swamiji. New Historicists or Hermeneutics would probably blow their brains up, wondering whether the Swamiji had ever been influenced by the other schools of thought that are so similar to his conceptualization of the human existence, but we would share a secret pride in the thought that our very own Swamiji was the great mind that was intrinsically iridescent with the 'tejas' of his intellectual flair.

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