

The Concept of Spiritualism and Philosophical Materialism: A Comparative Study

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Abstract: Spiritualism or Spirituality and Materialism or Philosophical Materialism, are two opposite ideologies prevalent among human beings since time immemorial. Though Spirituality has been the dominant belief of Homo sapiens from ancient times in the form of Shamanism, Animism, and various religions, Materialism is gaining its roots nowadays with the advancement of science and atheistic worldview. Spiritualism can be defined as the belief in the transcendent nature of reality where physicality is not the only reality. It's the belief which includes in its fold the belief in a higher power or powers, immortality of the soul, supernatural occurrences and other mystical experiences. Philosophical Materialism, on the other hand, is the belief in the finality of the matter or material phenomena. It's the viewpoint which says that only physical existence is the stuff of the cosmos or universe and there's nothing beyond perceivable objects. The present work tries to find out the major differences between the two opposite worldviews and study the philosophies of the proponents of both sides. Spirituality is a vast umbrella which includes every religion on this planet and perennial wisdom traditions. It can be institutionalized in the form of organized religion or can manifest in a freeform way. Materialism can be found in some pre-Socratic Greek philosophers and Indian materialist school of Charvaks. We shall see the basic differences between the two and give a thorough description without any value judgment or preconceived notions.

Key Words: Spiritualism, Materialism, Perennial Philosophy, Transcendence, Mysticism, Atheism.

I. Introduction

Human Beings have many special features which make them unique in the living world. Our sophisticated brain and complex consciousness have everything to do with this peculiar nature of humans which make them superior to animals in many aspects. Religion, art, music, language, and science are some of those characteristics which add to the uniqueness of humans. Homo sapiens have also been called Homo religiosus as we are the only living beings which find a very potent need to adhere to any religious or spiritual belief. This is because our complex consciousness creates intense emotions in our minds and we yearn for the ultimate purpose of existence and are eager to find the meaning of our lives. The questions which emerge in our minds are very deep and peculiar. Where did we come from? What is the purpose of the world or the universe? What is the meaning of our lives? Why we are here and what are we supposed to do? What is good and evil? Why is there death and suffering? Is our death the end of our existence or is there a continuation of our beings in some form? Is everything a creation of any being or is it just random? These are the basic philosophical issues which have been pondered upon by prophets, saints, and philosophers since we gained the superior senses.

Spiritually inclined scholars and philosophers opine that we have a spark of divinity within us which prompts us to find the path of salvation. This spark of the Divine is our very essence, our higher self or

simple the soul. They believe in a personal Creator or an Impersonal Consciousness which is the Ground of Being and the Absolute Fundamental Stuff of the Existence. They also believe in the immortality of our souls. Materialists on the other hand believe in the finality of the physical laws and the physical reality as the only real stuff which goes on by itself through its inherent potentialities and laws. They also don't believe in any God-like being or force and deny the immortality of the soul. For the materialists our death is the cessation of our being and the end of our existence.

Many people throughout history have experienced altered states of consciousness which many call the higher states of consciousness as well. This has happened spontaneously to some, through intense meditations and prayers, and the use of psychedelic plants. These experiences instigated them to codify the altered states in language and the descriptions of religious and spiritual experiences were passed from generation to generation orally which were finally written in many books of mystical philosophies. In response, some scholars, sociologists, and psychologists have denied any kind of supernatural element in these mystical states or experiences. Instead, they are of the opinion that these experiences are the result of the chemical alteration in our brains. They consider mystical visions as auditory and visual hallucinations due to some defect in our nervous system and neurotransmitters. We shall see in detail the "evidences" provided by both sides and let the readers decide the strength of either one.

II. Defining Spiritualism and its early origins

Our ancestors believed in various myths but the myths were the metaphorical representation of some philosophical or psychological phenomena with which our forefathers were confronted. Plato, the student of Socrates, was one of the most important proponents of Spiritual concepts. He opined that behind everyday material existence, there exists a world of 'forms' and 'ideas' which were the actual realities existing in an Absolute State of the Spiritual Realm.¹ The early traces of the emergence and development of Spiritual ideas can also be found in the phenomenon of Shamanism. Shamans were and still are spiritual leaders of some tribes who act as spiritual healers in the community. They were either selected by the elder Shamans or find a call towards the mystical path on their own. Altered states of consciousness, trance states, ecstatic behavior, and intense mystical tendencies were the chief characteristics of the early Shamans.

Shamanism was not confined to a particular organized religion or belief system, but they were of various natures. Despite this they shared some common attributes such as 1) belief in a spirit world and channeling of those spirit beings through various mystical methods. 2) The inducing of altered states of consciousness or trance through music, dancing, chanting and psychedelic plants. 3) The treatment of diseases especially those of the psychosomatic

Origins.² Margaret Stutly writes; "Krader (1956, pp. 282–292) has pointed out that shamanism can be used in various ways since it is an element in *all* religions, such as in the ecstatic, charismatic leaders of Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Islamic and other cults and sects; or as a religion associated with specific cult

practices – the World Tree, the Fire-cult, Soul-loss, Soul-flight and so on. Similarly, Voight (1977) claims that the origins of most religions can be explained completely by shamanistic analogies.

Spirit possession is central to all forms of shamanism, and also has a central position in religious phenomenology and psychology. Lewis (1994, p. 24) has pointed out that it is at the root of mysticism, including the concept of the Holy Ghost, Dervish dancing, fire-walking, transvestism, aggressive messianic cults, and all major religions based on the notion of a supreme spiritual deity.³

Hence we found that the early Shamanist practices are said to be the origin of many spiritual and religious tradition as per some prominent anthropologists and sociologists of Religion. We have other academic subjects with which we can ascertain how ancient the religious practices and beliefs are prevalent in humanity. Archeology is one of those subjects by which we can grasp different remains which tell us about the basic rituals and their spiritual meaning believed by prehistoric humans. Ivor Morrish the role of archaeology in knowing about the origin of spiritual beliefs of ancient people in these words, “In terms of the study of religion, an archeologist’s discoveries in the area of temples, sacred objects and inscriptions are, of course, always interesting: but perhaps what may prove to be even more vital for interpretation are the general methods and orientations of burial, and the sort of artifacts that are buried with or near human bodies, presumably for their continued use after death.”⁴

Durkheim’s view is that the distinction between the sacred and profane things was a fundamental aspect of religious beliefs from the ancient times. Freud’s view is that religion or the belief in the supernatural is a product of human fear, insecurities and the dread of mortality. For Carl Jung, the God and other abstract principles of religion are the archetypes in the minds of men denoting different psychological yearnings and tendencies. Jung states; “When I say, as a psychologist, that God is an archetype, I mean by that type in the psyche. The word ‘type’ is, as we know, derived from ‘tupos’, ‘below’ or ‘imprint’: thus an archetype presupposes a ‘printer’....The religious point of view puts the accent on the imprinter, whereas scientific psychology emphasizes the ‘types’, the imprint, the only thing it can understand”.⁵ This means that spiritually inclined people will say the deep imprints of religious behavior are embedded in us and its source is the Divine. Our source, God or Divinity, is the reason that we yearn for Him and act and belief in a manner which makes us religious. This is a statement which is very much alike a verse of Qur’an where it says that God collected every soul who would take birth on the earth and made a covenant with them asking whether He is their Lord or not and every soul answered ‘Yes’.⁶ This means that the remembrance of our final and ultimate soul is embedded in our souls and psyche and this is the reason for our being religious. It’s a statement which resembles other religions too as in Upanishads the basic theme is that we are the sparks of the Divine and will not find absolute satisfaction or bliss until we know ourselves as one with the Absolute.

III. Definition and the origins of Philosophical Materialism

While the belief in Spirituality is a dualistic metaphysical philosophy, the duality and matter and the spirit, body and the soul, the philosophy of materialism, on the other hand, is of monistic nature. Materialism doesn't believe in any higher or supernatural dimension which is more fundamental than the physical. It propounds the philosophy of monism; the single stuff of the existence is the matter or the products of matter. Hence we don't have any soul which dwells within our bodies and leaves at the time of death. It's our physical material brain which is the cause of our self-consciousness and the destruction of brain implies the end of our existence, the cessation of consciousness forever. There is only physical reality and the phenomena such as thought and consciousness are the byproducts of the matter and not separate from it.

The earliest materialists were the Indian 'Lokayats' or the 'Charvakas'. They believed only in the observable perceivable reality and that which cannot be perceived does not exist. This empirical methodology of theirs prompted them to deny the eternal soul and the Absolute Being propounded by Indian Brahmins and sages. We have only one life and the concept of the rebirth or afterlife is a fictitious belief, they said. Unfortunately, their works are extinct but we can study their philosophy to some extent from the books of their opponents. Among the ancient Greek philosophers, Democritus, Epicurus and Lucretius were the main propagators and believers of materialism. Almost a contemporary of the Socrates, Democritus, believed that everything is made up of tiny indivisible particles known as atoms which exist and move in a void, and they are the building blocks of all that is. This is the categorical denial of the idealism of Plato and other spiritual traditions.⁷

Modern proponents of the philosophical material are strong atheists who also deny or lack the belief in any supernatural realm. Let's consider a major difference between the two ideologies. Spiritual or religious people mostly believe that miracles are very much possible. The God or a Creator sometimes breaks the continuity of the natural laws and acts in such a way which baffles the rational minds of people. While as materialists absolutely deny the possibility of any supernatural event occurring in nature and say that there is no conclusive evidence for such miracles, only magical tricks or fake anecdotes. Tim Covell, an atheist author gives the example of epilepsy. He says that epilepsy, for scientists is a common neurological disorder which is treatable through medication. It's not a result of demon possession as ancient people thought because they had no other explanation for this, so their gullible minds made it a supernatural occurrence.⁸

One of the statements of David Hume would suffice for the materialist views about the miracles. The quote is as follows; "When anyone tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should have really happened. I weigh the one miracle against the other; and according to the superiority, which I discover, I pronounce my decision, and always reject the greater miracle. If the falsehood of the testimony would be more miraculous, than the event which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion".⁹

We found that the materialists deny or lack belief in any kind of non- physical supernatural realm and they believe in only one life and the optimistic philosophers among them advocate making the most of it.

IV. Evidences provided for Spiritualism

There is a lot going on in the field of parapsychology regarding the research done on paranormal phenomena. Though parapsychology has not been accepted by the majority of the scientists as science, but still the scholars in this world study numerous anecdotes which, if taken together, makes it near to impossible to consider all spiritual or paranormal aspects in many people's lives. The major phenomena studied in this regard are Near Death Experiences, Children remembering past lives, haunted sites and events, telepathy, clairvoyance, out of body experiences etc. If a curious mind checks all this huge anecdotal evidence, in contemporary times mostly, it becomes very difficult to discard them all by merely saying that these are frauds and lies. Consider the example of Near Death Experience or NDE. Millions of patients have reported extraordinary and vivid out of body travels, even when their brains are kept artificially dead or with no activity to produce any kind of dreams. Raymond Moody has devoted much of his life investigating NDE phenomenon and included many testimonies by doctors and patients in his bestselling book, 'Life after Life'. Similarly Dr. Ian Stevenson and his student, Jim Tucker has studied many events in which children remember their past lives with veridical details.

In the 1970's, a fellow by the name of Raymond Moody interviewed hundreds of men and women who had gone through "clinical death" and been revived. Dr. Moody published a report on his findings which later became a best-selling book. You see, Dr. Moody found striking similarity among the accounts. In fact, there were fifteen recurring points of likeness. So, if we were to construct a composite experience based on the common elements of one-hundred individual death experiences, it might sound like this:

In the 1970's, Raymond Moody studied and interviewed numerous men and women directly who were clinically dead once when they were in an operation theatre under anesthesia. These people were later revived and stated profound experiences about their out of body experiences and going through different spiritual dimensions. The doctors have a duty to listen to their patients and many doctors helped Mr. Moody in this investigation. Many patients who experienced NDE reported that they experienced utmost bliss in that state and did not want to come back. But after their revival through modern medical technologies, their lives changed and most of them became spiritually inclined, their fear of death and other anxieties subsided and many recovered from long-lasting meaninglessness and clinical depression. Furthermore, their memories of these visions were so vivid that they got the impression of their objectivity. Another astonishing thing is that most of these patients were clinically dead for some time where brain function was almost zero; still, the visions were very strong that their memory clearly got imprinted in their minds. One of the patients who experienced this phenomenon was Pam Reynolds. She had a brain surgery where doctors kept her brain dead during surgery but she experienced the peculiar event of her life which changed here forever. After coming back to consciousness she stated how she went outside her body upwards and

was watching herself being operated and doctors taking. She stated the events of her surgery to her relatives who did not take her seriously but when doctors and nurses heard her story, they were dumbfounded to hear her exact description of the surgery, their conversations and the surgical tools used on her.¹⁰

Similarly, Ian Stevenson collected many cases of children remembering past lives many of which were true as per the descriptions of those children. As an example, one of the cases is worth mentioning. A two-year-old James Leininger, a Louisiana loved toy planes very much. He then started continuous nightmares of a plane crash. He would act strangely, screaming "Airplane crash on fire, little man can't get out." Sometimes he would slam his toy plans into the coffee table while yelling "airplane crash on fire," which creates many dents on the table. James related the incident about the crash, saying that he was a pilot and that he, in his past life had flown off a boat. His father asked about the name of the boat and he said "Natoma." His father said, "That sounds Japanese to me," James replied, "No, it's American." James went on to say that 'he' had flown a type of plane called a Corsair, that 'his' nickname was Little Man, and that 'he' had a friend on the boat named Jack Larson. In many cases when the paranormal researches listened to these stories, they confirmed the details and many came to the forefront as factual. Children having these vivid memories is a serious thing to ponder upon.¹¹ Besides, there are millions of anecdotes reported by people who seemingly are honest as per the witnesses, these are the anecdotes stating paranormal events.

V. Science and Religion

The scientifically inclined minds are mostly the materialist school of thought as they only rely on empiricism and objective experience for gaining knowledge. While as the epistemology of religious or idealist people have intuition and revelation too in grasping and gathering the reality of the self and the cosmos. Philosophical materialists tend to believe that any non experiential or non empirical idea is just a figment of the imagination of mistaken or deluded people. On the other hand, Spiritualists claim the ephemeral nature of the physical reality and believe in the Absolute nature of the Divine.

As Professor S. Radhakrishnan says that naturalists or materialists believe that the human soul is just a 'puff of vapour'. It is the product of the random combination of matter and an accident of nature. Mind or Consciousness is nothing but an epiphenomenon of a particular combination of atoms. Biologists opine that humans are a mere product of their biology and environment which leaves very less room for free will. Quoting the father of Quantum Mechanics, Max Planck, S. Radhakrishnan writes, "Science cannot resolve the ultimate mystery of nature. And that is because in the last analysis, we ourselves are part of nature and therefore part of the mystery we are trying to solve. The most penetrating eye cannot see itself any more than a working instrument can work upon itself".¹²

The materialist scientists believe that the nature is self-subsisting and they study the nature through induction, experience, experimentation and empirical methodology. Religion and spirituality also accepts the epistemic ground of natural science but they deny that the nature is random and accidental. They believe in a Ground of Existence which holds the whole cosmos together sustaining and nurturing it. The logical

positivists, the materialists of the modern era believe in an independent external world denying any kind of transcendence or idealism but their worldview becomes itself another kind of idealism which is the doctrine of physicalism – Only physical things exist. Obviously neither are they all knowing nor all pervading making their scientism a kind of faith based religion, say the spiritual critiques of materialism. The belief of the empirical realism itself becomes a blind faith because everything we observe is perceived in the inner darkness of our brain or senses. Hence we don't have any conclusive evidence of the external reality as it is presented to us through the filter of our senses. Saying that sense perception is the only source of knowledge is itself a metaphysical claim which doesn't have any external objective basis.¹³

The basic critique of Spirituality or Supernatural by the Scientific Materialism or Scientism is that the theological and spiritual beliefs are just speculations of fallible and gullible men which cannot be tested empirically, hence they can't be observed and are based on blind faith. The mystical experiences of the so called saints and sages are just psychological disturbances, altered brain chemistry, temporal lobe epilepsy and other mental ailments induced by intense meditations and psychedelic plants.

This common underlying worldview is known as "scientific materialism" or "scientism." As defined by twentieth century philosophers William James and Alfred North Whitehead, for instance, scientific materialism is the belief that physical reality, as made available to the natural sciences, is all that truly exists [Haught2010, pg. 48]. It is clear that there is little room for religion in this philosophical system, since religion involves faith in unseen and presumably empirically untestable entities.¹⁴

VI. Consciousness: A Spiritual element or a product of brain.

Starting from the modern era, the human consciousness has been a subject of much research and controversy. The New Age mystics and other spiritualists believe that the brain is just like a radio which receives the signals of consciousness from the Whole Divine Existence and works as a reducing valve to make its flow tolerable and smooth for us. If the radio is destroyed, the signals will still remain; likewise if the brain is damaged or destroyed it will intercept the flow of consciousness within the individual bodies. But the atheists and materialists strongly assert that it's the sophisticated brain of ours with complex neural network which is collectively responsible for generation of the conscious experience. Hundred billion neurons, smart workings of the neurotransmitters and other functions of the physical brain produce the stream of consciousness in which self awareness, emotions, memory, sight etc emerge without any supernatural creation. Though most of the neuroscientists say that they don't know the exact mechanism of how the brain generates consciousness, but they are sure that it *is* the brain which is fully responsible for the workings of the mind. And obviously, they also assert that at the moment of brain death, the consciousness goes extinct and it is the end of our existence.

Many patients have reported vivid memories, unusual visions and sensations when they wake from a coma or brain death, adding more information to the phenomena of Near Death Experiences. It's not possible that a patient is kept artificially brain dead, or in a coma and still experience the blissful audio and

visual phenomena some of which are allegedly veridical and life changing with the most vivid unforgettable vivid memory.¹⁵ An example of a veridical Near Death Experience with Out of Body Experience can be seen in the study of (Van Lommel et al., 2001): There we see a man brought to hospital in a comatose state and the nurse took out his dentures and some other things happened during his coma, when he regained full consciousness almost after a week in the cardiac ward, he recognized the nurse, the dentures put aside by her and other things in an Out of Body state which were later confirmed by some hospital staff. Does this imply that consciousness detaches itself during the physical unconsciousness and works independent of the brain?¹⁶

On the other side, atheists and skeptics highly doubt the so called veridical experiences of NDE and either don't give any importance to them because of their anecdotal nature or explain these incidents by biological processes of the brain and the nervous system. The Out of Body experiences could be induced artificially by providing electricity to some parts of the brain, through the ingestion of the drug, Ketamine, and through depriving brain from oxygen. These are some points by which skeptics try to explain away this particular phenomenon. Besides it is very difficult for the skeptics and neuroscientists to detach consciousness from the workings of the brain.

The human brain is apparently the most complex object in the cosmos. Relative to body weight, human brains are larger in humans than in other species, and by a long way. Our brains are about three times larger than our close relatives with a common ancestor, the other great apes. A human brain weighs nearly one and a half kilograms and consists of over a 90 billion neurons along with many billions of interconnections. Out of all these connections emerge our extraordinary abilities: Perception, learning, memory, reasoning, language, and – most probably, the Consciousness.¹⁷

VII. Conclusion

James Randi is a great magician; mentalist and a professional skeptic who was responsible for breaking the spell of the so called paranormal miracles of Uri Geller live on TV. He has challenged thousands of the claimants of the paranormal miracle performers throughout his life and till now nobody has provided satisfactory and conclusive evidences for the supernatural. There was a one million dollar price for anyone who would demonstrate any miracle in a controlled environment but nobody got the price as the results usually were random and of no important significance. Susan Blackmore, a very bright lady, researched paranormal phenomena for thirty years and her conclusion was that she did not find any case of supernatural origin, only delusions and frauds.

On the other hand Dr. Ian Stevenson collected some cases where children remembered their past lives with matching details and his conclusion was that something mysterious is indeed going on. And Dr. Raymond Moody compiled the cases of Near Death Experiences where he allegedly proved that something non physical is going on in this world related to human consciousness and soul.

There are thousands of anecdotal evidence regarding the supernatural reported from all over the world even in the present era but empirical scientists does not consider the anecdotal evidence as a reliable source of scientific truth. An inquisitive, curious and unbiased person must go through all the data and books to decide for him/herself and the result can certainly be ‘the confusion’ of mind. But the potential of confusion should not keep us away from the pursuit of facts and the truth. Different mental tendencies can lead different people to two extremes while some may remain agnostic regarding the issue. But in my humble opinion, the absolute denial of the either side is an extremist step.

¹ Ivor Morrish, *The Thoughtful Guide to Religion*, Pentagon Press, New Delhi, 2007, p-35

² Margaret Stutly, *Shamanism: An Introduction*, Routledge, London and New York, 2003, p-1

³ Ibid, p-2-3

⁴ Ivor Morrish, *The Thoughtful Guide to Religion*, Pentagon Press, New Delhi, 2007, p-9

⁵ C.G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953, p-12

⁶ Qur'an 7:172

⁷ Edward Craig, *Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, 2002, p-63-64

⁸ Tim Covell, *Born Atheist*, bornatheist.com, PDF, p-86

⁹ https://infidels.org/library/modern/victor_reppert/miracles.html

¹⁰ <https://www.near-death.com/science/evidence/people-have-ndes-while-brain-dead.html#a01>

¹¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/feeling-too-much/201412/children-who-seemingly-remember-past-lives>

¹² S. Radhakrishnan, *Religion, Science and Culture*, Orient paperbacks, New Delhi, 2016, p-112

¹³ Ibid, p-87-86

¹⁴ <http://www.sciencemeetsreligion.org/philosophy/scientific-materialism.php>

¹⁵ Pim Van Lommel, *Near Death Experience, Consciousness and the Brain*, Routledge, ISSN-0260-4027. P-136-139

¹⁶ Ibid, p-139

¹⁷ Susan Blackmore, *Consciousness, A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, UK, 2005, p-17