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THE IDEA OF SOUL IN HOMER AND HERACLITUS

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to show that inspite of Heraclitus' general criticism of Homer (fr. B 42, B 56), he accepted in his "psychology" some essential features of Homeric picture of the soul.

Two basic conceptions of the soul are distinguished in the Ancient world. According to the ideas of orphism spread on the West, the soul is immaterial being without real relationship with the body; according to the Ionian conceptions it is material. The reflections of these distinctions are obvious in the very beginning of the Greek philosophy.

The substance of the Pythagorean doctrine of the soul on the West, based on and in near connection with orphics ideas, may be stated as follows. The soul of man, regarded entirely as the *double* of the visible body and its powers, is a daimonic immortal being that has been cast down from divine heights and for a punishment is confined within the "custody" of the body. It has no real relationship with the body; it is not what may be called the personality of the individual visible man: any soul may dwell in any body. When death separates it from the body, the soul must first endure a period of purgation in Hades and then return again to the upper world¹.

So, the practical philosophy of the Pythagoras school is founded upon a conception of the soul as absolutely distinct from a nature, and, in fact, opposed to it. It is thrust into the life of nature, but it is in a foreign world where it perserves its self-enclosed individuality intact and from which it escapes into independence to undergo ever-renewed incarnations. Its origin is *supra-mundane*, and so, when liberated from the shackles of natural life it will one day be enabled to return to a supernatural existence as a spirit. This peculiar dualistic doctrine is maintained also by Empedocles; his soul-daimon is not made out of the natural elements, nor is it for ever

¹ Cf. Rohde, E., *Psyche*. London 1925; 375-6.

chained to them. It enters as a stranger into this world from another world of gods and spirits².

On the other side, Ionian philosophy had fixed its attention on nature as a whole, and on the phenomena of life displayed in every corner of the universe. Man, as a natural being is mere ripple on the surface of the ocean of becoming.

But, the soul as an important part of the human being was also presented in the speculations of Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes and Heraclitus.

Thales of Miletos began the philosophy of nature and called the soul of man immortal³, but he said that it is intermingled in the universe and that all things are full of gods⁴. So, he recognised a soul in magnets and plants and thought of the material stuff and the motive force of the soul as inseparable; it seems that Thales have spoken of the immortality of the human soul in the same sense as he might have spoken of the immortality of all “soul-forces” in nature. Just like the primal water which is imperishable and uncreated, the soul is entirely and essentially alive and can never be dead.

Anaximander said of the Unlimited from which all things have been developed by separation that is immortal and imperishable. This can not be intended to apply to the human soul as a separate existence, but it is a part of the natural mixture of elements.

Anaximenes of Miletos did not differ seriously from Thales and Anaximander; for him the soul was of the same nature as the one divine primal element of air that is in movement and produces all things out of itself⁵.

The connection between the human soul and cosmic fire is essential for understanding of Heraclitus’ psychology. The analogy between fr. B 31 and fr. B 36⁶ reveals that the human soul (ψυχή in fr. B 36) could be interpreted as parallel to πρηστήρ (fr. B 31) conceived as terrestrial represent of cosmic fire⁷. It means that ψυχή is not a principle (ἀρχή) on the level of water, air or fire, but only that it participates in the cosmic fire⁸ which in fr. B 30 is interpreted

² Empedocles, fr. B 115 D/K.

³ Thales, fr. B 22a D/K.

⁴ Thales, fr. A 22 D/K.

⁵ Anaximenes, fr. B 2 D/K.

⁶ The enumeration of Heraclitus’ fragments is according to H. Diels.

⁷ Cf. my discussion on this topic in V. Mitevski, *Heraclitus*, Skopje 1997 (into Macedonian); pp. 184-188.

⁸ Cf. G. S. Kirk, (*Heraclitus; The Cosmic Fragments*, Cambridge 1962; p. 341) and G. Vlastos (“On Heraclitus”, *AJPh* 76(1955); p. 365) ;contra Aristoteles (*de anima* A 2 405a 25), Ch. Kahn (*The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, Cambridge 1979; p. 128) and M. Conche (*Héraclite; Fragments*, Paris 1986; 329).

as everliving (πῦρ ἀείζωον). The soul in the human being is a part of cosmic fire as fundamental vital power.

We can conclude that according to the Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes and Heraclitus the soul is basically *everliving material stuff*. The soul is identified with the cosmic matterial stuff (or not distinguished from it) and it is everliving as a part of everlasting substance.

But, it seems that what the Ionian philosophers in connection with their cosmology said say about the soul of man did not bring them into direct conflict with popular views that we find in Homer.

It is well-known that one of the most significant features of Homer's "psychology" is the lack of concept of the soul. Instead of a distinct idea of soul, in Homeric poetry we find several terms which denotes kinds or seats of mental life: κῆρ (κραδίη), ἦτορ, θυμός, φρήν, νόος and ψυχή.

κῆρ (κραδίη) in Homer is a heart i. e. part of the human body⁹. It is located in the chest (ἐνὶ στήθεσσι)¹⁰ or in θυμός¹¹ or in φρήν¹². Mainly, κῆρ is a seat of emotions: joy¹³, grief¹⁴, anger¹⁵, bravery¹⁶. But it can also be a seat of thought or consciousness¹⁷ or connected with νόος¹⁸.

In some passages in Homer ἦτορ has a physical aspect as "the heart giving life". It is located in the chest region (στήθεα), in the φρένες, or in the κραδίη, and is mentioned in gods, human beings, or in lions, wasps, or fawns¹⁹.

Basically ἦτορ is the "heart" that makes life possible by its physical activity. But it has taken on a wider range of function and acts as a centre where a person feels²⁰. A person relates to ἦτορ as a seat of emotion within. Most often it is involved with emotion of

⁹ Il. 10. 94, Il. 13. 284.

¹⁰ Il. 14. 139-140.

¹¹ Il. 6. 523-4.

¹² Od. 18. 344.

¹³ Il. 10. 16.

¹⁴ Il. 11. 274.

¹⁵ Il. 9. 555.

¹⁶ Il. 12. 45.

¹⁷ Il. 15. 10.

¹⁸ Il. 15. 52, Il. 21. 441.

¹⁹ Harrison, E. L., "Notes on Homeric psychology", *Phoenix* 14/2(1960)23-4.

²⁰ Sullivan, Sh. D., "The psychic term ἦτορ: its nature and relation to person in Homer and the *Homeric Hymns*", *Emerita* 64/1(1996)11-29. Cf. also B. Šijaković, "Homcrovska psihološka terminologija", *Hermesova krila*. Beograd 1994; 37-70.

various kinds: joy²¹, grief²², anger²³, fear²⁴, pain²⁵. Occasionally does ἦτορ, as agent, take part in intellectual activity and when it does, the situation is one charged with emotion. It can be also identified with the life of man²⁶.

θυμός is located in the chest²⁷, in the φρένες²⁸ or in the belly²⁹. There is some connection between θυμός and smoke³⁰ and the idea of “breath” since it invariably belongs to living creatures³¹. But it is also closely associated with the heart and it also can “beat hard” with emotion, and even “sink down to the feet” or be “made of iron”³². As a factor in man’s behaviour θυμός is the source of irrational impulses - of anger, desire, fear, courage, and so on³³. And the poet himself on one occasion seems to set it in the kind of antithesis with νόος which becomes common in later times³⁴. θυμός in the sense of life-energy naturally plays an important role in the scenes of death being regularly described in terms of its total loss. It is identified with the life of human being³⁵ or of animal³⁶.

φρένες is frequently some kind of membrane around the heart or lungs, i. e. *diaphragm* which separates them from the other part of the intestines. In Homer, φρένες have human beings and animals as a seat of vital force which disappears after death³⁷. In spite of blurring of the lines between the emotional and the rational in the use of φρήν/φρένες, there can be no doubt that the rational element is in fact dominant. The impulsiveness of anger and courage is much

²¹ *Il.* 21. 389, *Il.* 23. 647, *Od.* 4. 840, *Od.* 7. 269.

²² *Il.* 16. 450, *Il.* 20. 169, *Od.* 9. 62.

²³ *Il.* 8. 413, *Il.* 10. 107, *Il.* 24. 584, *Od.* 20. 22, *Od.* 17. 46.

²⁴ *Il.* 3. 31, *Il.* 17. 111.

²⁵ *Od.* 1. 48, *Od.* 16. 92.

²⁶ So Diomedes lose dear ἦτορ in *Il.* 5. 250.

²⁷ *Od.* 10. 461.

²⁸ *Il.* 21. 386.

²⁹ *Il.* 4. 531.

³⁰ The usage of θυμός can also be explained in physical terms. The root *dhu-* in Sanskrit and *thu-* in Greek has a primary meaning of rapid movement, as in Skt. *dhuno* “to agitate” and Greek *θύειν* “to seethe”. Association with the rapid movement of smoke gives Skt. *dhumas* “smoke” and a second verb *θύειν* “to turn into smoke” i. e., “to burn”.

³¹ This conclusion is corroborated by the development from the same root of Slavonic *dyua* “breath”.

³² *Il.* 23. 370, *Il.* 15. 280, *Il.* 22. 357.

³³ *Il.* 19. 271, *Il.* 13. 775, *Il.* 11. 291, *Il.* 20. 176.

³⁴ *Il.* 4. 303 ff. and *Il.* 14. 61 ff.

³⁵ Cf. θυμόν ἐλέσθαι in *Il.* 5. 852.

³⁶ *Il.* 3. 294.

³⁷ *Il.* 23. 104.

less frequently seated in it³⁸; instead we find most commonly the introspection of grief and of fear³⁹.

The Homeric νόος is the mental organ that “takes in” a situation as it is presented to the senses, and νοεῖν is to use the νόος in this way⁴⁰. Sight is in practice the sense most frequently involved, and νοεῖν therefore most frequently to grasp the significance of what is seen. It is thus frequently combined with ἰδεῖν⁴¹. On this basis, the clear distinction between emotional activity of man and rational activity of his νόος in Homer tends to be lacking. νόος is the one mental organ which animals never possess. Normally they lack ψυχή and φρένες also, but this can be forgotten⁴². The νόος however is what distinguishes man from beast.

ψυχή in Homer can scarcely be called a mental organ. Naturally it figures frequently in death-formulae: man loses it, has it taken away, or it leaves him⁴³. Here the breath-basis is clear from its departure via the mouth. On leaving the body ψυχή descends to Hades. In Hades it has no more power than it had in the living man, and is substantial as a shade or a puff of smoke⁴⁴. Dependent on the basic idea of “breathing out”, it is the breath exhaled in swoon and the breath exhaled at death. As such it is conceived as an entity that is waiting to leave the living, is leaving the dying⁴⁵. While in man, the ψυχή is simply the representative of his mortality. So, it seems that it is not an enlivening force. But, it alone, and not θυμός, φρήν or νόος is left behind when a man dies. Thus, although it is the weakest of strands stretching into the afterlife, it is still the beginning of what can become a lifeline. ψυχή is confined to human beings⁴⁶, but the term ψυχή, alone, implies the presense of none of those faculties which we would regard as characteristic of human life. ψυχή is a necessary condition for human life, for consciousness, thought and emotion; but its function in the living man remains undefined in Homer.

At the end of this brief survey of “psychology” in Homer we see that his picture of soul is built on the same two presuppositions that we can recognise in first Ionian philosophers. His “mental organs” (κῆρ/κραδίη, ἦτορ, θυμός, φρήν/φρένες, νόος and

³⁸ *Il.* 2. 241, *Il.* 24. 171.

³⁹ *Il.* 1. 362, *Il.* 8. 124, *Il.* 13. 394.

⁴⁰ Harrison, 72.

⁴¹ *Il.* 11. 599.

⁴² Cf. *Il.* 17. 111, *Od.* 14. 426.

⁴³ *Il.* 13. 763, *Il.* 24. 754, *Il.* 16. 453.

⁴⁴ *Od.* 11. 207, *Il.* 23. 100.

⁴⁵ Harrison, 75.

⁴⁶ The death of animals is described in terms of θυμός.

ψυχή) are *substantial* or can be identified with something substantial/corporeal and they are principles of *vital energy*.

Now, it is strange that one Ionian philosopher as Heraclitus, criticizes Homer as follows:

“Homer deserves to be expelled from the contests and flogged.”⁴⁷

My opinion is that this severe criticism might not be understood as a general stand point of Heraclitus towards Homer⁴⁸, and especially not towards Homeric picture of the soul because Heraclitus’ concept of the soul is based on the same two Homeric principles mentioned above: it is *substantial* (built from the cosmic fire) and it appears as *vital energy*.

It is also important to explain why Heraclitus used just one Homeric “mental organ” - ψυχή - to denote his concept of soul. Of course, he himself did not choose ψυχή; it was accepted before by Miletian philosophers. We can only suppose why they made that choice, but in the case of Heraclitus there are some nearer indications.

Firstly, Homeric ψυχή was most suitable to express the idea of soul as substantial and vital power together. It was said that ψυχή in Homeric poetry in the same time is associated with the notion of *substantiality* (last breath, connected with air, in living man and puff of smoke, connected with fire, after death) and with notion of pure *vital energy* (it is necessary condition of human life).

But, there is an other specific meaning of ψυχή that was prepared in Homer and was suitable to express one special feature of soul in Heraclitus. It was the idea of individuality of man and his unifying power. In Heraclitus’ fr. B 67a is presented the central position and unifying role of ψυχή in the human being:

“sicut aranea, ait, stans in medio telae sentit, quam cito musca aliquem filum suum corrumpit itaque illuc celeriter currit quasi de fili persectione dolens, sic hominis anima aliqua parte corporis laesa illuc festine meat quasi impatiens laesionis corporis, cui firme et proportionaliter iuncta est.”

The statement of M. Nussbaum that the general content of this simile can be attributed to Heraclitus in spite of some denials of authenticity of the fragment is acceptable, but not her argumentation

⁴⁷ Fr. B 42 D/K = Mouraviev T 705 11-12.

⁴⁸ Contra M. Marcovich (*Heraclitus*. Merida 1967; p. 151-2): “The reason for excluding the Homeric poems from the ἀγῶνες might consist in that they taught people *lies*, instead of the truth”.

that the idea of individuality of man presented in the simile is absolutely new in Heraclitus and that Homeric man fails to recognize explicitly that in virtue of which he is a single individual⁴⁹.

We have seen that in Homeric poetry are distinguished a number of “organs” with separate functions and locations (κῆρ/κρᾶδίη, ἦτορ, θυμός, φρήν/φρένες, νόος), but beside them Homer introduced ψυχή as a notion of unifying power of living man and picture of individuality of dead man. ψυχή is unifying power of living man as a necessary condition of his life, consciousness and mental activities (thought and emotions). After death, ψυχή is a shade i. e. picture of man as totality in the moment before he died.

The relation between ψυχή and λόγος is discussed with special reference to their occurrence in Heraclitus’ fr. B 45 (which teaches us that our soul has a “deep logos”) and fr. B 115 (“soul has a logos which increases itself”). Heraclitus was original by introducing λόγος as a cosmic and cognitive principle in human soul⁵⁰, but the question here is why he suggested possessive relation between λόγος and ψυχή and not between λόγος and νόος or φρήν which at first sight (as a mental or cognitive organs) are more appropriate to be in connection with λόγος? It seems that there is one reasonable explanation for this choice and it is the *immortality* of ψυχή. In opposition to all other mental organs (including νόος and φρήν), only ψυχή is presented in Homer as immortal (it leaves man at death and continues existence as a shade or smoke in Hades). Heraclitus accepted Homeric idea of immortality of the soul and used it to explain ψυχή as a part of cosmic *everliving* fire (πῦρ ἀείζωον) in the human being which after his death separates from the body and come back to the pure cosmic fire⁵¹. Now it is easily to understand that between Homeric mental organs only immortal ψυχή is capable

⁴⁹ Cf. M. C. Nussbaum, “ΨΥΧΗ in Heraclitus, I”, *Phronesis* 17(1972)5.

⁵⁰ Cf. V. Mitevski, “Heraclitus’ logos as a principle of change”, *Živa Antika* 44 1/2(1994)45-64. I accept argumentation of D. Rankin that a high value (increasing) of λόγος in ψυχή would indicate a high level of developed consciousness of human soul (in D. Rankin, “ψυχή and λόγος in Heraclitus B 45 and B 115 (D/K)”, *Emerita* 62(1994)289-294.

⁵¹ The expression θάνατος ψυχαῖς in fr. B 36 should not be understood literary (it would be death of the fire as a life-faculty that is absurd); it means here a moment of the separation of ψυχή from the body and its comeback (τρόπος) to the everliving cosmic fire (πυρὸς τροπαί = fr. B 31a; πυρὸς ἀνταμοιβή = fr. B 90). Cf. V. Mitevski, *Heraclitus*; especially pp. 81-89 and commentary of referring fragments. Again, I accept the conclusion of M. Nussbaum (*op. cit.* 156) that in fr. B 36 Heraclitus rejects a Homeric picture of shades and *conclusive* identity of the individual after death, but according to his cosmology of everliving fire and the conception of soul as a part of that fire, Heraclitus was not able to deny immortality of ψυχή.

to be a “guardian” of λόγος, the cosmic principle of change which is also immortal (everlasting)⁵².

At the end of this comparative consideration it is necessary to say that its aim is not to demonstrate that Heraclitus’ doctrine of soul is not original, but to pay attention to the fact that the first Ionian philosophers (including Heraclitus) did not simply reject Homeric picture of the soul. In fact, they introduced in the philosophy Homeric term ψυχή and built their concept under influence of some essential features of Homeric picture of the soul.

DISCUSSION

Ratko Duev: I think that there are actually two concepts of soul in Homer’s epics, although they both intertwine everywhere throughout his poems, and it is difficult to differentiate them because of their similarity and closeness. It is difficult to specify the influence of the East, since similar concepts can be found everywhere around Mediterranean.

The meanings of ψυχή and θυμός denoting *soul*, are close semantically and etymologically, but still there are slight differences in meaning. The basic meaning of ψυχή ‘breath’, originating from the verb ψυχω ‘to blow’ is analogous to the Hebrew *rûaḥ* ‘spirit’ which basically means ‘wind’. When the spirit of Enkidu appears in front of Gilgamesh, he comes ‘like a wind’, *kī zāqīqi* (*Gilg.* XII 84), a word which is often used in the meaning of ‘spirit’. The connection between the Greek άνεμος ‘wind’ and the Latin *animus*, ‘mind, spirit’, and *anima*, ‘soul’ leads us in this direction. Also in Slavic *duša* (*dus-ja*, *dus/h* ‘spirit’, from the verb meaning ‘to blow’) is the same concept, but maybe here we can speak of some later influence. On the other hand, θυμός comes from the same stem as Latin *fumus*, Slavonic *dim*, meaning ‘smoke’.

Although the breath, even the wind when it is stormy, may resemble to smoke or steam, I still think that this slight nuance in meaning is also transmitted to the concept of ‘soul’. In Homer ψύχη is *going down* to Hades (*Il.* 1. 3; 5. 654; 7. 330...) but never θυμός, although ψυχή can descend to Hades as καπνός ‘smoke’ (*Il.* 23. 101). The meaning of θυμός (as *smoke*) can not be proved only by the ritual of cremation in Achaeans since, as W. Burkert points out (*Greek Religion*, Harvard University Press, 1985, 190–4), many ancient peoples practiced the ritual of cremation parallel with the ritual of burial.

⁵² Cf. Mouraviev T 142 (= Arist. *Rhet.* Γ.5, 1407 B. 11): τοῦ δ’ λόγου τοῦδ’ ἐόντος ἀεί (although this logos exists for ever...) and commentary in V. Mitevski, *Heraclitus*, p. 164-167.

The shades of differences in meaning are evident when Anticleia speaks to Odysseus about what happens to the bodies of people when they die (*Od.* 11. 215–225), when the fierce fire (πῦρ) destroys the flesh and : ...*the soul* (θυμός) leaves the white bones, but the *soul* (ψυχή) flies away... It means that θυμός leaves the body and goes up together with the smoke, while ψύχη flies to Hades.

J. A. Sanford (*Soul Journey*, Crossroad, 1991, 71) considers that, in fact, the concept of soul slowly evolved over time; the words such as θυμός (κήρ, μένος) began to represent the idea of soul, and the connection of spirit with soul began to form slowly with these words. This statement can not be accepted completely because the term ψύχη retained its dominance in philosophy, poetry etc. But it is obvious that the concept of soul as 'breath' is elder than θυμός. The comparison of Homer's epics with those of the East points out undoubtedly to the crucial similarities – tradition and thought which Hellenes have accepted in the contacts with those cultures. The formulas of same metric value ψύχην δ' Ἄϊδι (Il. 5, 654), ψυχὰς δ' Ἄϊδι (Il. 1.3) etc. also point out to the traditionalism and to single epic nucleus which poet used. According to my opinion, duality, met in Hellenes as a result of the crossing of Mediterranean and Indo-European cultures and the endeavours of poets to join these two different worlds, is the reason why θυμός with its clear I.-E. etymology as an idea of soul, found its place in Homer's epics.