WHAT ARE 'SPIRIT', 'SOUL', 'BODY' AND 'MIND'?

LANGUAGE AND THE MANDALA OF ABSOLUTE CONSCIOUSNESS



Peter Wilberg

2009

WHAT ARE 'SPIRIT', 'SOUL', 'BODY' AND 'MIND'?

One can hardly find a better example of the casual and casually unquestioned thoughtlessness that pervades our culture than banal talk of the human being as if it were an assemblage of things called 'body' and 'soul', 'body' and 'mind' or that fatuous phrase - 'body, mind and spirit'. Despite not sparing a thought to what is *meant* by such terms – let alone what distinguishes them and what their inner relation to one another is, such talk nevertheless prides itself on being 'holistic' - simply by virtue of bundling them as 'buzz words' and relating them with the help of the profound word 'and'. That is not to say that the so-called 'body-mind' question is not a respected question in philosophy, as well as finding a new incarnation in the so-called 'science' of 'psycho-neuro-physiology'. Yet unlike in traditional 'philosophy of mind' - where at least some thought is spared to the distinction and relation of the nature of the mind and brain or brain and consciousness – in modern neuroscience 'mind' is effectively reduced to a property or function of the brain, just as everything that might be associated with the 'soul' or 'psyche' (feelings for example) is reduced to some neurological or hormonal mechanism.

Crucially however, neither philosophy of mind, modern brain science nor adherents of traditional religions or New Age 'spirituality' even *attempt* to offer a satisfactory answer to the basic question of what exactly is meant by terms such as 'spirit', 'soul' or 'mind' - not to mention terms such as 'matter', 'physical' or 'body'. Even in the languages of more complex esoteric philosophies such as 'theosophy' and 'anthroposophy', what is meant by 'body' is itself reduced to an un-holistic assemblage of various ill-defined 'bodies', including both the so-called 'physical' or 'material' body, 'and' also other 'subtle' bodies such as an 'etheric' body, 'astral body', 'causal body' etc.

What runs through and sustains this thoughtless use of casually accepted terms is a wholly unquestioned assumption that just because *a word* exists (within whatever happens to be the currently accepted cultural and linguistic currency of the day) there necessarily exists - and always has existed - also some *thing* corresponding to that word. Thus it is that a word such as 'stress', one that only came into common usage in the last

decades of the 20th century – and is a *metaphor* derived from *mechanical engineering* - is now taken, without question, as some literally existing psycho-physiological 'thing' in need of psychological 'management' or 'control'!!!

Then again, the very term 'psychology' is taken as referring to some unclearly defined 'thing' we call 'a science'. In doing so it is forgotten that 'psychology' and 'science' are both terms of relatively recent coinage, and that those who are taken as the founding fathers of 'science' - Newton for example - neither spoke of 'science' nor called themselves 'scientists'. As for the particular 'science' now called 'psychology', one of the principal characteristics of texts on this subject lies in never *once* referring to the historic roots of the very term by which it names itself. For the modern term *psychology* derives from the ancient Greek words *psyche* and *logos* — and yet the language of modern 'psychology' does not begin to question the meaning those words once had, let alone explore how that meaning has changed over the centuries - to the point where it is now buried under countless archaeological layers of language.

That these layers are still unseen is evidenced by the use of other terms such as 'spirit', itself a Latin translation of the Greek word for wind – *pneuma*. The fact that the words 'soul' and 'spirit' can be casually uttered 'in the same breath' shows what complete ignorance there is regarding the root meaning of the words 'spirit' and 'psyche' themselves – both of which are rooted in meanings to do with 'air' and 'breath'. *Psyche* meant 'life breath' – the air within us. *Pneuma* referred to the air 'outside' us – felt in the form of winds or currents of air. Yet today words such as 'psyche', 'psychology', 'spirit' and 'spirituality' are spoken of entirely in the abstract, as if they had nothing to do with breath, air or the process of *breathing* (the exchange of the 'air within' and the 'air without') named by the Latin verb *spirare* – itself the root of the English words 'respiration' and 'transpiration'. As for the word 'soul' on the other hand, this derives not from Greek or Latin but from a Germanic word (*Seele*) whose root meaning has to do not with any form of air, wind or breath but rather with the element of *water* – with the *sea* (German *See*). A 'soul' in this Germanic sense is a being of the sort that dwells in a larger sea. A sea of what sort or nature however? A primeval ocean of water, a 'sea of

other souls', both or neither? Yet the central, most essential question that needs raising is a more fundamental one: namely is there any satisfactory way of understanding the true meaning and relation of such commonly used *words* as 'body', 'soul', 'mind', 'matter' and 'spirit' – more specifically an understanding that does not assume them to be – or reduce them to – a set of separable 'things' or 'entities'? For the mere verbal implication that 'body', 'mind', 'matter', 'spirit' etc. are separable 'things' is inherently paradoxical and circular – leaving us as it does with the question of *which* of these variously named 'things' is more fundamental to understanding the essential nature or basic 'stuff' of which reality as such is composed ie., whether the very 'things' *supposedly* referred to by words such as 'body', 'mind', 'matter' and 'spirit' are themselves *essentially* something 'bodily' or 'mental', 'material' or 'spiritual'?

Is there any way out of the circularity of such questions and the central assumption behind them – namely that for every word - however historically *recent or new* - there is and *always has been* some separable 'thing' or 'entity' that it names, denotes or refers to – thus reducing the universe and reality as such to a conglomerate of such 'things' or 'entities', however sophisticatedly complex and varied? I argue that there *is* such a way out, and that this lies in suspending such 'entitative' thinking altogether. To do so however, means seeking and finding some singular and ultimate reality underlying *all things*, yet one that cannot *itself* be conceived as any sort of 'thing' at all. Were we in a position to name this singular and ultimate reality, the 'proof of the pudding' would be that it would offer us a new *unified* and *unitary* understanding of what we currently refer to as 'spirit', 'body', 'matter' and 'mind' - one which can clearly show them not to be separate things or entities at all but rather distinct but *inseparable* aspects or dimensions of the same *singular and ultimate reality*.

The name I give to this singular and ultimate reality behind all things is *awareness*. For the *awareness* of a thing – any thing, of whatever nature – does not itself have the character or nature of a 'thing'. If we wished to understanding the essential reality behind the elevated terms 'God' or 'Spirit' – but do so in a way that did not reduce either to 'some-thing' - I can think of no better way of doing so than by understanding them as

identical with awareness *as such* – that which alone allows us to be aware of any 'thing' at all – and yet is not itself a thing of any sort. By 'awareness' then, I mean consciousness *as such* - and not any thing, of whatever nature or description, that we are conscious or aware *of*. Yet if consciousness or awareness *as such* and alone is ultimate reality, we are still left with the question of how *apparent* 'things', 'entities' or 'beings' - anything at all - come to *be* or to *be experienced* as things in the first place.

The answer to this question is that what we perceive and conceive as multiple and separable 'things' are in essence nothing but distinct yet inseparable shapes and forms taken by the singular and absolute reality that is consciousness as such – by an 'absolute consciousness' that I call 'awareness'. All seemingly separate things are essentially portions of that singular awareness – and consequently inseparable from it and from each other. At the same time they are also *expressions* of it. For just as a singular, wordlessly sensed meaning or message may find expression in a sentential string of seemingly separate words, so does this singular awareness 'express' itself in many seeming separable things. Things themselves take shape within and arise from awareness in essentially the same way that words do – and in the same way too, as a multiplicity of fish and other life-forms arise within an ocean or sea – both as portions of that ocean as a whole (thus inseparable from it) and also as expressions of it (each distinct). As awareness, 'spirit' can indeed be compared to an unbounded ocean or 'sea' of pure awareness within which distinct and differentiated forms of awareness – 'souls' - emerge. For souls to *emerge* within this sea however (the word 'emergence' incidentally, being the original meaning of the Greek word physis and thus a root meaning of the terms 'physics' and 'physical') they must already have been 'latent' or 'potential' in some way within the primordial 'ocean' of absolute consciousness or 'awareness'.

To claim that every actual thing, entity or being existed first of all as a soul or shape of awareness in a state of latency or *potentiality* is no mere artificial *add-on* to the claim that it is the ocean of pure, content-less or 'thing-less' consciousness that constitutes ultimate reality. On the contrary, it can be argued that consciousness or awareness as such – if it is not reduced to an awareness of any *actual* thing that already *exists and*

precedes it — is in essence and 'to begin with' a primordial awareness of potentiality and of potential 'things'. Potential realities however, by their very nature, do not have any objective reality as actual things. On the contrary, they have reality only subjectively—in awareness—and as potential shapes, patterns and qualities of awareness. It is the realm of these potential shapes, patterns and qualities of awareness—present within awareness—that can be understood as constituting the realm or world of 'soul', with every soul, like every life-form within a sea or ocean being essentially—and in this sense also initially—nothing but potential form taken by that ocean. All potential 'things' then, despite being expressions of awareness as such—or 'spirit', also have a distinct 'soul' nature—being distinct shapes, forms, patterns and qualities of that singular and ultimate awareness ('spirit') from and within which they emerge like life-forms within an ocean or sea.

There is no such 'thing' then as a 'soul-less' or 'insentient' or *unaware* 'thing' – the essence of all things being their 'soul' character - their nature as distinct shapes, forms, patterns and qualities of awareness or 'spirit'. To 'begin with' then, all things are souls – that is to say they are uniquely *individual* and *in-divisible* combinations of 'soul shapes' and 'soul qualities' – shapes and qualities of awareness latent or potential in awareness as such. Paradoxically, it is these very soul shapes or forms that constitute also the essence of 'bodies'. 'Body' or 'bodies', in other words, are nothing (no-thing) that is *separable* in any way from 'soul' or souls. On the contrary, a body is essentially nothing but a *shape of soul*. Put in other terms, a body *is* a soul - shape of awareness – as it is perceived 'objectively' from without. Conversely, a soul is nothing but a bodily shape or form of awareness as it is experienced subjectively and from within – *as* a shape or form *of* awareness or 'subjectivity' itself. Even the so-called 'physical' body is just the outwardly perceived form taken by shapes and patterns of molecular, cellular *awareness*.

That said, we are still left with a further question to answer in our quest for a unified understanding of ultimate reality, not as a set of separable things but as an awareness with distinct but inseparable aspects. The question is: how do the souls that dwell as potential shapes and qualities of awareness in the ocean of pure awareness or 'spirit' come to actualise themselves - and in doing so, to perceive each other too as actually existing

'objects' or 'bodies' in space and time? The question can be answered with a question. Have you not ever felt a *distinct* but nevertheless wholly *unformed* awareness of something you would like to express or give form to - whether in word, deed or through some medium of artistic or intellectual expression? Have you not also noticed how, through simply staying with the *awareness* of that as-yet formless 'thing' that you wish to express, it begins, in and of itself, to gradually take shape or take on a clearer, more differentiated form within that awareness - until a point is reached when you can release it into its own *fully-formed actuality* - whether in the form of speech, action or any form of creative expression? For such also is the process whereby potentialities of awareness not only already *have* shape or form but take on ever-more clearly defined and differentiated shapes or forms – until they reach the point where, being fully-formed, they find themselves released or 'born' as independent *actualities* from the oceanic womb of awareness in which they first arose and took shape as *potentialities*.

No better analogy can be found for this process of actualisation of potentialities than the process of gestation in the womb (cellular differentiation and growth) and birth from it. Indeed that process is no 'mere' analogy but a living biological embodiment of the creative process as it occurs on an ultimate and universal scale. Yet following this biological 'analogy, we might feel justified to ask: what is it that first seeds, fertilises or gives rise to the potentialities latent in awareness? Again we can answer the question with a question. What is it that first seeds an idea or potential within ourselves other than the very awareness of it? What nourishes the growth and development of that idea or potential any more than the awareness we continue to grant it? What 'seeds' the growth of potentialities, in other words, is nothing different from the very 'soil' of those potentialities – namely awareness as such. In one sense however, the question of how potentialities first 'arise' simply makes no sense. For potentialities - simply by virtue of being potential rather than actual realities – require, in principle, no explanation or basis for their reality, let alone for any 'actual' existence or 'being'. Indeed they could be said to constitute the realm of what could otherwise be described philosophically as the realm of non-being.

Thus far, we have implicitly described three distinct but inseparable realms of an ultimate reality that can be pictured as concentric circles or rings - see diagram entitled 'The Mandala of Absolute Consciousness'. The outermost ring of the Mandala, which embraces, contains and *constitutes* all others, is 'absolute consciousness' or 'awareness' ('A-con') and denotes consciousness as such as opposed to its contents. Having the character of a primordial, content-less or 'pure' consciousness, it is also the realm or ring that can most aptly be designated as 'Spirit' or 'God'. The first inner ring ('P-con') is a realm of latent potentialities, latent within the 'ocean' of this Absolute Consciousness – and consists of those potential shapes, patterns and qualities of awareness that constitute the realm of 'soul' and of distinct 'souls', each of which is an individual and in-divisible combination of potential patterns and qualities of awareness with its own characteristic shape. The second inner ring is that of 'body', being the realm of fully formed and fully born bodily shapes taken by these potential consciousnesses or 'souls' - all that is experienced as having the nature of an outwardly perceived 'body' as well as an inwardly felt 'soul' and an all-pervading 'spirit' (awareness). As such I designate it as the ring and realm of 'experiential consciousness' ('E-con') that embraces all experienced actualities – all actualised 'contents' of consciousness, whether in the form of thoughts or things.

The central ring is the ring or realm of 'mind', understood not simply as the intellect but as 'representational consciousness' or 'Re-con'. By this is meant the way in which we *represent* any actual or potential contents of consciousness to ourselves, both perceptually and conceptually. It includes the way in which any given soul, once actualised or born, both perceives and conceives the different shapes, patterns and qualities of awareness that constitute other souls or other 'species' of consciousness. I use the term 'species' deliberately - in recognition of the fact that every biological species is in essence a 'soul species' or 'species of consciousness'. By this I mean that what *we* perceive as a creature of some species - a shark or jellyfish, dog or spider for example – is essentially nothing but a species-specific consciousness or 'field-pattern of awareness'. This field-pattern of awareness in turn shapes a 'patterned field of awareness'. It is this patterned field of awareness that shapes what any creature perceives as its *environment* as well as determining how it perceives other creatures and species of consciousness - other

'field-patterns of awareness' - within that environment. Thus the particular 'field-pattern' of awareness which determines the way in which we, as human beings, perceive specimens of other species (what we perceive as 'a shark' for example) is no way identical with the way in which any other species (jellyfish or sharks themselves for example) perceive 'sharks' or any other species - including our own.

No species or creature then - indeed no 'thing' whatsoever in our entire experiential *environment* - can be identified with or reduced to the way in which we, as members of the human species, perceive it and conceive of it. For like other species, human beings are essentially nothing but a 'species of consciousness' - one whose whole perception and conception of its environment (and of all other species within it) is determined by a highly specific 'field-pattern' of awareness. The bodily *forms* of other species, together with their anatomy and physiology as *we* perceive and explain them - are just that – our specific human way of outwardly perceiving the *soul* of those species, the specific shape, qualities and 'field-patterns' of awareness that characterise them. Just as a tick has no sense of a visual environment, neither do we have any sense of the *electrical* environment experienced by the electrical sense of a shark. Nor do we even have a sense of how *our* land environment is experienced by 'man's best friend' – with its highly-differentiated sense of smell. Even the way we anatomically perceive the *sense organs* of other species is something specific to our species – and not necessarily shared by that species or others.

The ultimate reality that is Absolute Consciousness embraces not only countless more *species* of consciousness than we perceive but countless more 'planes' or 'spheres' of awareness than we are aware of. Thus what we, as one species, dwelling within one limited plane of awareness, experience as 'warmth' might, on another plane of awareness, be experienced as 'density' by another species of consciousness. Similarly, what we experience as 'thoughts' might be experienced as living and growing *things* by other species of consciousness evolved within other planes of awareness. Indeed what we perceive as a 'planet' – and conceive of as a mere spherical and material *mass* – is but our way of perceiving an entirely different sphere or plane of *awareness* - one whose native 'life-forms' are such different *species of consciousness* as to remain entirely invisible to

us, undetected by both our senses and our scientific instruments. Such considerations all relate to the central realm or ring of consciousness – the realm of 'mind' understood as 'representational consciousness' - the way in which we 'represent' what we experience, both perceptually - and in words and language. A chief characteristic of our specifically human form of representational consciousness is that we believe our own words to represent actually existing 'things' as they 'actually' are. That is to say, we believe that what things are and how they are related is identical with the way in which we, as human beings, represent and symbolise their nature and relationship in words. Part of the way we do so is to represent things as *separate entities* such as 'spirit', 'soul', 'body' and 'mind'. The evolution of our consciousness, both as individuals and as a species, demands that we transcend this mode of 'representational consciousness'. To do so requires that we cultivate a new and more aware relationship to language – one in which we no longer assume that simply by virtue of having a word for something, there is and always has been some separately identifiable and objective *thing* that it represents or symbolises. For ultimately, both words and things themselves are but symbols of Absolute Consciousness. What is required is a new type of representational consciousness, one that does not imagine itself to be representing things or being - 'entities' - but instead arises from and reflects a pure awareness of those entities. This awareness is ultimately identical with Absolute Consciousness itself - and not the property of some assumed being, ego or 'I".

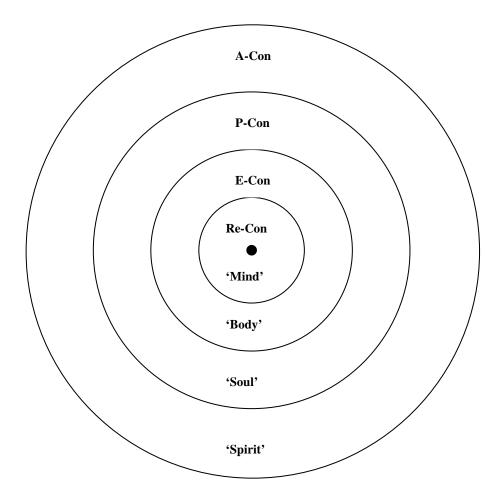
This brings us to a question not yet raised in this essay. What is the nature of that 'entity' we believe *ourselves* to be, and which we represent with the words 'ego', 'self' or 'I'? Do these words too, merely represent a pre-existing being or entity - one that can therefore say 'I AM'? To believe so *begs basic questions*. The questions are: how do we *know* that we ourselves exist or ARE, and how do we know of an 'I' - if not from an *awareness* of being and an *awareness* of self? Yet if we can only say 'I AM' from out of an *awareness* of being, then it follows that it is *awareness as such* ('Spirit') that lies at the heart of our sense of self. The self or 'I' then, is not some individual spiritual being - like a 'captain' who 'steers' the ship of Body, Soul and Mind. Instead every 'self' is but an individualised expression of 'Spirit' *in* 'Soul' and 'Body', just as the very *word* 'I' is but the *reflection* of 'Spirit' – Absolute Consciousness - in 'Mind'.

SUMMARY - 'THE MANDALA OF ABSOLUTE CONSCIOUSNESS'

Far from being separable 'things', what we call 'spirit', 'soul', 'body' and 'mind' can be understood as distinct but *inseparable* aspects of a *singular* reality that is not itself a thing of any sort. That reality is 'Absolute Consciousness' or 'Absolute Spirit' - meaning consciousness or awareness *as such*. For it is consciousness or awareness as such that is the pre-condition for our experience of any thing, being or 'entity' whatsoever – including what we think of as our own being or 'I'. In the illustration that follows Absolute Consciousness or 'Spirit' is pictured as the outermost ring of a 'Mandala of Absolute Consciousness', one that embraces three concentric inner rings or sub-realms *of* that Consciousness, corresponding to what we *call* 'Soul', 'Body' and 'Mind'.

If 'Spirit' is understood as Absolute Consciousness or Awareness itself, then 'Soul' is the first of these sub-realms, consisting of *potential* shapes, forms and qualities of Awareness - themselves latent as potentialities within the realm of 'spirit' or Absolute Consciousness. 'Body' has to do with the second inner ring of the Mandala that I term 'Experiential Consciousness'. This is made up of fully-formed shapes or 'bodies' of awareness – all of which first take shape or gestate in the womb of 'soul' or Potential Consciousness. Finally, 'Mind' refers to those specific patterns of awareness which shape both individual and species consciousness, as well as to any contents of consciousness which serve to represent other contents of consciousness or their mutual relation. Yet 'Mind' can also serve to represent or 'reflect' the pure awareness of any contents of consciousness – an awareness identical with Absolute Consciousness itself. It is as a self-reflection and self-recognition of 'Absolute Consciousness' or 'Absolute Spirit' in Mind that the word 'I' attains its true meaning. This 'reflection' is not like the reflection of a pre-existing object in a mirror. Instead Absolute Consciousness is more like the *light* that enables anything at all to be reflected in a mirror. Like the reflection and sense of recognition obtained by looking in a mirror however, the self-reflection and self-recognition of this Light is an event. So-called 'I-consciousness' too, is a universal event – not the static 'essence' or active agent at the core of separate beings. The event is the 'reflected' awareness of 'being' by which awareness attains its 'I-ness' or self-being.

THE MANDALA OF ABSOLUTE CONSCIOUSNESS



A-Con: 'Absolute Consciousness', 'Awareness' or 'Spirit'. Consciousness *as such*, understood as the absolute pre-condition or 'absolute horizon' for the emergence of all possible *contents* of consciousness.

P-Con: 'Potential Consciousness' or 'Soul'. The realm of *potential* contents of consciousness, understood as unmanifest, unformed or still-unborn shapes, patterns and qualities *of* consciousness.

E-Con: **Experiential Consciousness or 'Body'.** The realm of *actually experienced* contents of consciousness in the form of *full-formed* 'bodily' shapes and perceptions.

Re-Con: **Representational Consciousness or 'Mind'.** 'Mental' contents of consciousness such as thoughts which serve to represent (a) other contents of consciousness, actual or potential (b) reflect relationships between such contents, or (c) recognise the *pure awareness* of any contents of consciousness, this Awareness being identical with Absolute Consciousness itself ('A-con'), just as its recognition is the Self-recognition of that Consciousness – the 'absolute event' at the core of its 'absolute horizon' – the Mandala of Absolute Consciousness as a whole.

1. A-Consciousness

Absolute Consciousness or 'Awareness' is the realm of consciousness that is absolute reality as such. It both embraces and constitutes all sub-orders of consciousness, and is both transcendent of and immanent within them all. The 'ring' of A-consciousness is the ultimate 'ring-boundary' or 'event horizon' of reality as such – an 'Absolute Horizon' of awareness, and thus of all reality. For just as there can be nothing 'outside' space or 'before' or 'after' time, so also can there be nothing 'outside' or 'beyond' this Absolute Horizon. All things exist only *within* this Horizon, as 'contents' of consciousness which in turn are nothing but potential or actual shapes and qualities and expressions *of* it.

2. P-Consciousness

The realm of P-Consciousness is a realm of unmanifest potentialities. As a sub-realm of Absolute Consciousness or Awareness however, these potentialities can be nothing other than potentialities of awareness as such – its latent or potential qualities, patterns, shapes and textures etc. P-consciousness is necessarily a *sub-realm* of A-consciousness for another reason also, namely that all potential contents of consciousness, not being actual in any 'objective' sense, have reality only *subjectively* - within consciousness *as such*.

3. E-consciousness

The actualisation of the potential qualities of awareness latent in P-consciousness is what first gives rise to E-consciousness – the realm of actually experienced contents of consciousness, whether 'inner' contents such as desires, impulses, sensations, emotions and thoughts, or 'outer' contents in the form of perceived objects or 'bodies' in space and time. It is because the realm of the *actual* experiences and contents of consciousness can never fully express the boundless *potentialities* of awareness that find expression in these contents, E-consciousness, as a realm of actual contents of consciousness, always constitutes a sub-realm of P-consciousness or potential contents of consciousness.

4. Re-consciousness

Certain contents of consciousness such as 'thoughts' serve to represent other such contents - such as what we conceive and perceive as 'things'. It is these 'representational' contents of consciousness that constitute the realm of 'Re-consciousness' or 'Re-con'. It is because *all* representations of specific contents of consciousness are *themselves* contents of consciousness (actual or potential) that the realm of Re-con is a sub-realm of E-consciousness, P-consciousness and, ultimately, of A-consciousness itself. The *highest* forms of Re-consciousness however, do *not* represent or reflect other contents of consciousness, actual or potential, but are instead a recognition or reflection of the pure *awareness* of these contents. Re-consciousness at its highest level is the *self-reflection* and *self-recognition* of 'Absolute Consciousness' within all its sub-realms - as represented, reflected and recognised in the realm of Re-consciousness itself. The Absolute Self-recognition of the Absolute Consciousness - recognising itself in all these realms is the 'Absolute Event' of *be-ing* at the centre of its Absolute Horizon.