

## The Soul According to Rāmānuja

Abolfazl Mahmoodi <sup>1</sup>

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Rāmānuja was the founder of Visistādvaita Vedānta School, which is one of the three main schools of Vedānta. According to Rāmānuja, the soul (cit), Brahman, and matter (acit) constitute the three principal ontological realities. Rāmānuja provides some proofs for the existence of the soul, which are mostly based on self-consciousness. The relationship of the soul with the matter, on one hand, and with that of Brahman, on the other, is similar to that between the body and the soul. Therefore, He is the Soul of souls. Using this idea, Rāmānuja explains God's action, which is the basis of the concept of God's grace and favor within the man. The main traits of the soul according to Rāmānuja are eternity, knowledge, bliss, incomprehensibility, individuation, the distinction from Brahman and other souls, simplicity, and free-will. In its pure state, the soul has these attributes in an unadulterated manner. However, they get contaminated by ignorance and its negative consequences. The emancipation of the soul from samsara depends on the self-recognition and its differentiation from acit or matter.

**Keywords:** cit, soul, Rāmānuja, acit, self, Visistādvaita Vedānta.

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### Introduction

Rāmānuja (1027–1137) was the founder of Visistādvaita Vedānta School, which is one of the two main branches of the Vedānta School.

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1. Associate Professor, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran (amahmoodi5364@gmail.com).

Vedānta is considered to be one of the six Āstika or orthodox schools of Indian spirituality. Vedānta claims to present, explain, and formulate *upanisadic* thought. Both of its main branches, as well as the subsidiary ones, have presented their own interpretations of the sacred Indian texts, especially the *upanisads*. The most significant representative of the Vedānta School believes in absolute unity. For him, Brahman is the only real being and everything else is merely the result of Māyā or universal illusion and ignorance. Contrary to this school of thought is Rāmānuja's. He believes in a kind of moderate or so-called qualified unity. Moreover, he describes Brahman, the soul (*cit*) and matter (*acit*) as the Truth.

This article attempts to describe Rāmānuja's view regarding the essence of the soul and its attributes. It also includes an analysis of the kind of relationship that exists between the soul and two other realities, one of which is Brahman.

### **The Proof for the Existence of the Soul**

Rāmānuja's arguments for the existence of the soul could be summarized as follows:

1. Statements like "I know" necessitate the existence of the soul.
2. Phrases like "This is my body" indicate the existence of the soul.
3. Ecstatic experiences have nothing to do with the body.<sup>1</sup>

In Rāmānuja's works, we find that self-consciousness is the prime method to prove the existence of the soul. This methodology has been used in a more meticulous way in the works of his master, Yamūna (Rāmānujācārya 2001, II, 2.27, p. 512).

The first two proofs in Yamūna's works go like this: self-understanding, which is stated in some propositions like "I know," quite vividly refer to "I" as the knower or subject of recognition, which is completely different from the body and its organs. The latter are usually

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1. See Smart (1967, 163-64).

expressed in propositions like “This is my body” or “this is my hand.” This is similar to objects that are mentioned in statements such as “this is a rock,” or “this is a jug.”

When I turn my attention away from the external subjects and focus on myself, I will achieve an understanding of my true self that has no connection with my hands, legs, or other organs. These two instances of understanding indicate the presence of two distinct objects: the body, which is no different from other external objects, and the “I.” Propositions like “This is my body” demonstrate this distinction as well. Naturally, this is different from expressions like “myself,” which seemingly convey a distinction between “the self” and “I,” but which such are due to the limitations of language.<sup>1</sup>

### **Brahman and the Soul**

According to Rāmānuja, even though the soul and inanimate matter are real beings distinct from Brahman, they depend upon Him. In other words, in his ontology, he speaks of a kind of simultaneous unity and diversity. He attempts to reconcile the unity-oriented and diversity-oriented verses of the sacred texts and most importantly that of *upanisads*, under a unified order. Thus, his views on the relationship between Brahman and the soul differ from that of Śāṅkara. The latter believed in the unity of Brahman and the soul. He was of the opinion that the relation between the two is like the connection between the soul and its body, the relation between quality and qualified or the one between substance and accident. Along with matter, souls constitute Brahman’s body or its states. Thus, Brahman is the Self of selves or the Soul of souls.

The highest Brahman, having the whole aggregate of non-sentient and sentient beings for its body, ever is the Self of all.  
(Rāmānujācārya 2001, 349)

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1. See Dāsgupta (1997, 140-41).

The entire complex of intelligent and non-intelligent beings (souls and matter) in all their different states is real, and constitutes the form, i.e. the body, of the highest Brahman. (Rāmānujācārya 2001, 88)

The allegory of soul and body is the most common example that Rāmānuja used to explain the above-mentioned relationship. He has also used the allegory of the part and whole and also the allegory of the quality and the qualified.

The individual soul is a part of the highest Self; as the light issuing from a luminous thing such as fire or the sun is a part of that body; or as the generic characteristics of a cow or horse, and the white or black color of things so colored, are attributes and hence parts of the things in which those attributes inhere. (Rāmānujācārya 2001, II, 3, 45, p. 56)

According to Rāmānuja, Śankara's view concerning the innate unity of the human soul with the highest soul or Brahman is as irrational as believing in the identity of the soul and the body (Rāmānujācārya 2001, I, 7, 7, p. 98). He denies this unity even at the time of the separation of the soul from the body in Mokṣa, the final spiritual release: "Nor can the individual self become one with the highest Self by freeing itself from Nescience, with the help of the means of the final release. (Rāmānujācārya 2001, I, 7, 7, p. 98)

In his opinion, just as the luminous mass is essentially different from its light, so is Brahman or the highest soul different from *jiva* or the individual human soul, which is a part of the former. On several occasions, Rāmānuja has attempted to establish his view by introducing particular interpretations of some Mahāvakyas—like "*tat twamasi*," (You are Him). These were the most significant arguments of Śankara that he attempted to use to prove the absolute identity. He also holds the idea that the word "Him" in the phrase, "You are Him," refers to Brahman as the cause and creator of the universe and the word "You"

denotes the same reality as the inner self or the controller of the individual selves of *jīvas*, which in turn are Brahman's "body" (Bartley 2002, 99). However, if Brahman, whom Rāmānuja usually refers to as *Īśvra*, controls the self from the inside, wouldn't this lead to determinism? Rāmānuja has answered this objection in his works (Rāmānujācārya 2001, II, 3, 41; II, 2, 3). He says that *Īśvra*'s inner control over us does not rob us of our freedom of will. What is more, the human can execute his free will. This freedom is bestowed upon us by *Īśvra*. He has not only given us freedom but also helped us to realize our free will. Even his favor to servants is when they ardently wish to be close to him, and his disfavor is due to the sinful inclinations of the humans who have distanced themselves from *Īśvra* due to their intimacy with worldly pleasures (Dāsgupta 1997, 3: 159-60).

These two phrases, which Rāmānuja has mentioned in two successive sutras of the Vedānta Sutra, indicate how he coordinates God's providence and the free will of human in their deeds:

Even though the self always has the instruments of action at its disposal - such as the organ of speech and other faculties - it acts when it wants to and stops acting when it so wishes. (Rāmānujācārya 2001, II, 3, 39)

The activity of the individual soul proceeds from the highest Self as its cause. (Rāmānujācārya 2001, II, 3, 40)

Now, keeping in mind Rāmānuja's emphasis on the identical relation between the *jīva*, i.e. the individual soul, and Brahman, i.e. the highest reality, we may arrive at some conclusions which were coincidentally pointed out by Rāmānuja himself. Contrary to Śankara's, he said that although self-knowledge is a prerequisite to the knowledge of Brahman and the attainment of spiritual release, in its true nature, it is not the same as Brahman. So, it is not sufficient in the attainment of the final [spiritual] release.

The other point that must be mentioned is that although *jiva* and Brahman have common qualities, these are not completely similar. Songupta, one of the proponents of this school of thought has mentioned four qualities that are the attributes that *jiva* and Brahman share: (1) inwardness or *pratyaktra*, (2) Consciousness or *cetanatra*, (3) Spirituality or *atmatva*, and (4) agency or *kartrtva*. He also listed four distinctions for *jiva*: (1) being distinct or *anutva*, (2) being an accessory or *sesatva*, (3) being supported or *adheyatva*, and (4) being dependent or *vidheyatva* (Veliath 1992, 132).

For Rāmānuja, the human being consists of three realities. The first is *acit* or matter, which is the bodily dimension of the human being. The second is *cit* or the human's self that is the spiritual and non-material dimension of the human. This is indeed its real nature. Finally, there is the Self of selves or Soul of souls. This is nothing but Brahman, who is the Soul of the universe. These three are all real. Of course, the first two depend on the third one.

## **The Traits of the Soul**

### **Eternity**

Rāmānuja believes the soul is something eternal and immortal. He has proved this based upon his own interpretations of the *Gita* and the *Vedānta\_Sutra*: “The Self is not produced, since certain texts directly deny its origination; cp. ‘the intelligent one is not born nor does he die’ (Ka. Up. I, 2, 18)” (Rāmānujācārya 2001, II, 3, 18, p. 541). The Soul is eternal, so it is free from evolutionary changes:

As the self is eternal—for the reason mentioned—and hence free from evolutionary changes, all the attributes of the insentient (body) - like birth, death, etc.—do not exist (for it), ... birth at the beginning of a kalpa ... and death (therein) at the end of the kalpa ... do not concern the self. (Rāmānujācārya 1969, II, 20, p. 34)

In his commentary on the *Gīta*, Rāmānuja has presented some reasons for the persistence of the soul against the body, and Sampat Kumar in his translation of Rāmānuja's work has listed the reasons as follows:

1. The soul does not consist of material elements.
2. The soul has no parts.
3. The soul knows and enjoys the fruits of Karma.
4. The soul is pervasive.

However, the body is mortal because of reasons contrary to these (Rāmānujācārya 1969, 32, note 48).

Though *jiva* is eternal, it depends upon Brahman. Thus, Rāmānuja describes it—like matter—as the effect of Brahman. However, in his opinion, there is a principal difference between the two, and they cannot be equal. He believes that the material object is created at the beginning of creation. However, he does not say the same about *jivas* or souls. It should be pointed out that before creation—i.e. when Brahman is in the station of the cause—material objects are in a subtle nameless and formless state in Brahman. In the process of creation, when Brahman moves from the station of the Cause to that of the effect, they emerge from the state of subtlety and intangibility and acquire volume and thickness. This results in their receiving names and forms. Through this process, their innate nature thoroughly evolves. This is why they are considered to be created beings. As for the *jivas*, it is completely different. *Jivas* are always present in Brahman and possess natural traits such as *Jnāna* (wisdom) and *ānanda* (bliss). Whenever creation is renewed, they combine with the bodies and the sensory organs they contain so that they may function and benefit from the fruits of Karma.

The only change that happens in jiva during the creation process is the contraction and expansion of its knowledge. When they are in the state of deterioration or chaos—i.e. Pralaya—they remain stable and their innate essence does not change.<sup>1</sup>

### **Knowledge**

Unlike Śankara, Rāmānuja does not think that the soul is pure intelligence and knowledge. Rather, he interprets some of the sutras of the *Brahma Sutra* (e.g., II, 3, 19) in a unique manner and citing these sacred scriptures, he says that it knows and is aware but is not absolute awareness nor the absence thereof.

This Self is essentially a knower, a knowing subject; not either mere knowledge or of non-sentient nature ... .. on account of Scripture ... .. For the Khândogya Upanishad...says 'He who knows...he is the Self' (Kh. Up. VIII, 12, 4-5) ... and 'for he is the knower, the hearer, the smeller, the taster ...' (Pra. Up. IV, 9; VI, 5). (Rāmānujācārya 2001, II, 3, 19, p. 545-6)

Therefore, we can conclude that being a knowing subject is the essential characteristic of the Self (Rāmānujācārya 2001, II, 3, 31, p. 551).

He has explicitly stipulated this fact in his commentary on the *Gita* and especially in the argument for jiva's eternity and the absence of cognition. Hence, knowledge or awareness is not the innate nature of the soul; rather, its intrinsic attribute is that it is a being that knows the objects of knowledge. And this trait is evident to everybody according to one's own testimony. This is something that we can realize from everyday statements like: "I am aware of this tree." The basic trait of this consciousness is that, as soon as it comes into existence, it makes things capable of being an object of knowledge its own substrate of thinking and speech. (Veliath 1992, 129)

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1. See Rāmānujācārya (2001, II, 3, 18, p. 542), Veliath (1992, 129), and Chari (1998, 89-91).



### **Unrecognizability**

Although Rāmānuja defines the soul as self-illuminated and eminent (Rāmānujācārya 2001, II, 3, 30, p. 550) and a being that individuals feel within themselves, he also explicitly says, “It is incapable of being the object of knowledge” (Rāmānujācārya 1969, II, 18, p. 31-32). In his commentary on the *Gita*, he also asserts that the soul is incapable of being known. He also explains in other chapters of this work that because the soul is naturally different from all material objects and has none of their qualities—such as divisibility and penetrability—it cannot be recognized using the tools by means of which material objects are understood. This means that the soul is unrecognizable. (Rāmānujācārya 1969, II, 25, p. 37)

Even so, Rāmānuja considers self-knowledge as one of the necessary requirements of the ultimate spiritual release, which is attained through Jnāna Yoga. For sure, the self-knowledge that he refers to does not take place through a logical definition that uses genus and differentia of the self; rather, it is a direct intuitive experience (*atmanubhava*), by means of which the soul comes to be recognized as the eternal knower and the experiencing subject.

### **The Oneness or Multiplicity of Souls**

According to Rāmānuja, individual souls are different from one another, since they abide in different bodies and experience different things. The evidence for their diversity is the distribution of joy and sorrow. Nevertheless, they are equal to each other in terms of their true essence, which is knowledge and bliss. The differences in their appearances have nothing to do with their essential sameness. The differences are the result of their connection with *acita* or matter, which causes darkness in the bright and luminous essence of soul or

jiva. This real essence reveals itself only in the final [spiritual] release.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Soul is Atomic**

Rāmānuja, unlike Śankara, does not believe in the omnipresence of soul or self; rather, he believes that it is an atom and a spot that abides solely in the heart.

The Self is not omnipresent; on the contrary, it is atomic (anu)...Since, scripture says that it passes out, goes away and returns... All this going, etc. cannot be reconciled with the soul being present everywhere. (Rāmānujācārya 2001, II, 3, 20)

Scripture informs us that the Self abides in a definite part of the body, i.e. the heart. 'For that Self is in the heart, there are a hundred and one veins.' (Rāmānujācārya 2001, II, 3, 25)

It is possible that someone may make the following objection here: if the soul is an atom located in a specific part of the body, how is it connected to the body as a whole and is aware of everything that takes place in it as well as all of the states that it undergoes?

He has tried to answer this question using various allegories. The most common one is the allegory of the torch and the light it emits. The source of light is fixed somewhere, but its light is emitted in the environment around it. So is the atomic soul, which abides in the heart but can experience the whole body by means of its quality of awareness (Rāmānujācārya 2001, II, 13, p. 26). In other words, Jñāna or wisdom contracts and expands. It is limited and contracted in the state of Samsara, but nevertheless is never absent. In the final spiritual release—i.e., the state of Mokṣa—awareness attains its peak. Here, nothing is beyond its reach. Therefore, although jiva is essentially atomic, its awareness is limitless (Hiriyanna 1993, 405).

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1. See Rāmānujācārya (2001, II, 1, 15), Rādhākṛishnan (1958, 691-92), and Veliath (1992, 127-31).

Another allegory that he presents is that of sandals. Even though they are only worn by the feet, the comfort of wearing comfortable sandals is experienced by the whole body. Of course, what he says is based on the presupposition that the essence of jiva and its qualities are not the same.

### **The Simplicity of the Soul**

Another quality of the soul is its simplicity; that is, it is not composed of parts. Rāmānuja has discussed this in his commentary on the *Gīta* and some other works. In his opinion, jiva is eternal because of its simplicity: “The self is not discerned as [being made up of] many [parts] ... therefore the self is eternal” (Rāmānujācārya 1969, II, 18, p. 32).

### **The Free-Will of the Soul**

Like Śankara, Rāmānuja believes in the idea that the soul is a free agent. He argues that if the self or soul did not have free will, then the commandments of the sacred texts will be meaningless. However, he does not believe that this is essential to it; otherwise, it would be an agent of unwillingly acts all the time. Rather, it acts and stops acting when it wants to: “The Self, although always provided with the instruments of action, such as the organ of speech, and so on, acts when it wishes to, and does not act when it does not wish to” (Rāmānujācārya, 2001, II, 3, 39, p. 556).

As was mentioned in the description of the relationship between the soul and Brahman, Rāmānuja thinks of Brahman as the primary agent of human acts, who works as an inward controller. This means that all human actions depend upon the divine will. Without it, they will not be performed. Nonetheless, these actions take place in accordance with the will of the human being as well (Rāmānujācārya, 2001, II, 3, 40).

According to Rāmānuja, even though the soul is a free agent, it does not change. It is fixed, motionless and eternal. Thus, it is essentially

different from all material things and is absolutely unchangeable (Rāmānujācārya, 1969, II, 25, p. 36-37).

### **The Categories of the Souls**

According to Rāmānuja, even though all of the souls are essentially the same, they can be divided into three categories based upon their secondary traits: The first category includes the eternal souls that are never imprisoned in the confines of the material world. They are always in God's presence and are privileged by bliss or ānanda. The second category is for the souls that have been liberated by means of Mukta. They are liberated from the material world by means of wisdom, purity, and virtue. The third includes the wandering soul. This belongs to those individuals who are wandering around in Samsara, due to their ignorance and pride. This last group can be further divided into four sub-groups: superhuman souls, human souls, animal souls, and stagnant souls.

These souls are different from one another because of the bodies they are connected to. They are not essentially different categories. Even the difference in caste and social class is specified due to the same reason; in themselves, they are neither heavenly nor human, neither Brahman nor Śudra (Rādhākṛishnan 1958, 2: 695).

### **The Soul and the Body**

According to Rāmānuja, the traits of the soul, which were mentioned, are possessed by jiva in its pure or natural state. However, this pure and unlimited reality gets contaminated with ignorance and material inclinations, due to its connection to the body or acita. This ignorance, which manifests itself in the form of evil deeds, means misunderstanding of the real traits of things. More importantly, when the body is mistaken for the true self and its material qualities, self-recognition is impaired.

One will wander around in the circle of Samsara unless he attains such an understanding by means of the elimination of Karma, which

veils the true nature of the soul. So, although one's true nature is bliss and pure joy, it will experience the suffering and pleasure of the material life. Souls can elevate themselves to the highest spiritual levels. They can also drown in the body, animal life, and sexual pleasures due to ignorance.<sup>1</sup>

Rāmānuja thinks of the relationship between the soul and its body like the relationship between God and His servant or a master and his servant. This is because the soul rules over the body and controls it. This obedience includes the mind and the senses as well.

Rāmānuja defines "body" as any being that is managed by a conscious entity. It also employs and supports the body for its own purpose. Therefore, the relationship between the soul and the body is the relationship of a follower and the being it follows. It resembles the relationship between Brahman and jiva. Also, these two are considered to be the followers and bodies of Brahman (Veliath 1992, 132). In fact, according to Rāmānuja, the soul is the meeting point of matter and the divine. On one hand, Jive is inside the body and connected to it. On the other hand, it is abode of the true Self.

## **Conclusion**

The principal traits of Rāmānuja's view regarding the soul become clear when we compare it with Śankara's ideas. The following are some of the ways in which these two theories are different from one another.

The soul is an indisputable reality. However, it is distinct from Brahman. It is also one of the three ontological realities and is realized through self-consciousness.

The soul and Brahman are not identical. Rather, their relationship is like that of the body and the soul or the whole and its part. Brahman is the Soul of souls and guides them from inside. This is the perspective

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1. See Dāsgupta (1997, 3: 160) and Veliath (1992, 127-31).

from which Rāmānuja advances the notion of *grace*, which is one of the distinctions of the Behakti School.

Although the knowledge of the soul is a necessary prerequisite to the knowledge of Brahman, it is not synonymous to it. Hence, it is not sufficient for the attainment of ultimate spiritual release.

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