The human soul is a centuries-old concept, yet today we know just as little about a soul as we did then, or whether it even exists or not. Ancient cultures believed in souls, philosophers of several nationalities gave their wisdom on the matter. There is certainly a difference between a living person and a dead one, and it is commonly believed that this difference is the presence of a soul. Or is it the presence of a spirit? These debates are ubiquitous among philosophers, as well as families at the dinner table. Some say the soul and spirit are different, others the same. Some say the spirit gives a person life, others the soul. Of course, there are also some that believe the existence of a soul to be nothing more than a simple prevarication. No matter one’s opinion on the matter, the fact remains: every person has a soul and a spirit.

Let’s first delve into the definition of a soul. Aristotle defined the soul as “the actuality of a body that has life”, life meaning the capacity for growth and reproduction. Plato’s theory of soul considers the psyche to be the essence of a person, which decides how they behave. Plato believed this essence to be an incorporeal, eternal occupant of the human being. However, most people today probably don’t turn to ancient philosophers for vocabulary assistance. The dictionary defines a soul to be “the immaterial essence, animating principle, or actuating cause of an individual life”. That’s pretty similar to the definitions from Aristotle and Plato, perhaps people do ask ancient Greek minds for ideas. It seems that everyone trusted enough to explain a complex phenomenon such as the soul will say something along the lines of “the immaterial essence that makes a person who they are”.

Most cultures have adopted the idea that people have souls, in some shape or form. There is even evidence that ancient peoples recognized an aspect distinct from the body that makes a person whole. Some of these peoples, like the Egyptian and the Chinese, believed in the concept of a dual soul. The Egyptian ka, or breath, was believed to survive death but remain near the body, and the spiritual ba would proceed to the land of the dead. The Chinese recognized a lower, more sensitive soul, which was said to disappear come death, and a more rational soul, the hun, which survived the grave and became the object of ancestor worship. The early Hebrews accepted the concept of souls, but they did not believe it to be separate from the body like most other cultures. Biblical references to the soul often tie it to breath, and demonstrate a certain distinction between the ethereal soul and corporeal body. Christian concepts of a body-soul dichotomy originated with the ancient Greeks, and were introduced to Christian theology at an early date. Ancient Greek concepts of the soul varied wildly. Platonists believed the soul to be akin to the gods, Epicureans believed it to be made up of atoms like everything else, and Aristotle thought it to be totally inseparable from the body.

History, philosophy, and religion all show strong belief in the soul, though the details vary. Such widespread belief in the soul, that driving force behind a human being, must indicate the existence of something akin to a soul. That’s where things get tricky. Do humans have souls, or do they have spirits, or both? Everyone speaks of souls, and they speak of spirits, but
the difference between them is hardly discussed. The answer to this question can be found in the Bible, as the matter is discussed in several verses scattered throughout the Old and New Testament.

There are two key verses that prove the soul and spirit to be two separate entities residing within a person. First Thessalonians 5:23 says, “And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ”. The word “and” sits between the spirit and the soul, thus clarifying that they are different. Hebrews 4:12 says, “For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart”. This verse shows that the soul and spirit are separate, but that they are closely related in the way that the joints and marrow of our physical bodies are related.

Now that the difference between the spirit and the soul has been decided, it’s time to discuss the functions of the two. John 4:24 says, “God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth”. God being a spirit means that his substance is spirit, so the human spirit is the part of us that has the ability to receive God. Luke 1:46-47 says, “And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour”. In these verses, Mary perfectly explains the function of the soul and of the spirit, and God’s purpose in giving each person both. The soul is composed of one’s mind, emotion, and will, and it contains the personality of each individual. God gave man a spirit in order to receive, fellowship with, and worship Him. God gave man a soul in order to express Him. In the aforementioned verses, Mary feels the joy of her Saviour in her spirit, and she manifested and shared that joy in her soul.

It’s easy to argue this, since the Bible is a chiefly Christian doctrine, but it is undeniable that a living person is far different from a dead one. A live body and a corpse have innumerable similarities; they share all the same organs, nerves, and blood. All a corpse lacks is a heartbeat, right? Well, you can restart the heart of a corpse, use machinery to pump air in and out of the lungs, to circulate the blood, to beat the heart, but that body is not alive. This “battery-operated” body should be the same as a living person in every way, but it’s not. That’s because it lacks spirit, and soul. After death, those move on to the afterlife, wherever that may be. Once a person is dead, you simply cannot bring them back.

The soul is an inarguably complex thing, and it has perplexed both great philosophical minds and bored families alike. Discussions of the infinite possibilities of soul and spirit can last hours, and yet never come to a satisfactory conclusion. Present, yet seemingly invisible things like the soul rarely do. But after diving into biblical excerpts and the expansive history of the subject, there seems to be a clear answer to the big question. Every person has a spirit and a soul, they’re different but intimately related, and each has its own important purpose within our small but impactful lives.

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