

The Soul as Mediator: Comparison of the Works of Alice Bailey and Plato

John F. Nash

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Abstract

Alice Bailey (1880-1949) wrote 24 books addressing a broad range of esoteric subjects, including the nature, role, and destiny of the human soul. According to Bailey the soul gives rise to consciousness, creates forms to nurture the indwelling spirit, and drives us forward on a path of spiritual development.

While there is no evidence that Bailey intentionally built upon by Greek philosophy, we find striking parallels between her and Plato's views of the soul. Both writers depict the soul—macrocosmic and microcosmic—as the mediator between spirit and matter, establishing divine order, harmony, and meaning. Also, both assign the soul primacy over the body and regard it as threefold in nature and immortal. In other areas, Bailey presents a distinctive viewpoint, particularly concerning the relationship between soul and consciousness. This paper compares and contrasts the views of two significant writers separated by more than 2,300 years.

Background

Between 1929, when she had a spiritual encounter, and her death in 1949, Alice Ann Bailey wrote 24 books.¹ The books' 10,000 pages cover a broad range of esoteric subjects, including the natures of the deity and humankind, the spiritual path, and service responsibilities to humanity and the planet. A subject Bailey treated in considerable depth was the nature of the human soul. While Bailey's work conformed to the conceptual framework of the Theosophical Society² to which she once belonged, she pursued many topics further and some for the first time. The 24 books appeared under her own name, although she insisted that the material in most of them was supplied by the Master Djwhal Khul, usually referred to as the "Tibetan Master," and that she served merely as his scribe or amanuensis. By her account, she received the material telepathically and transcribed it with minimal editing.

There is no evidence that Alice Bailey—or for that matter the Tibetan—intentionally used Greek philosophy as a model; the books occasionally refer to early philosophers but rarely mention their teachings. Prior to 1929 Bailey had been a socialite, mother, missionary, factory worker, and editor of a Theosophical magazine. Nevertheless, we find striking parallels between Bailey's work and Plato's. Examination of their published works yields valuable insights into her beliefs and may also provide insights into the development of religious thought from antiquity to the present. We can in no way ignore what philosophers, mystics, church leaders, and others have contributed to our understanding of the soul during the intervening centuries, nor overlook the many Platonic revivals. However, a focus on the ideas of these two writers, separated by 2,300 years, may be useful and rewarding.

The main areas of similarity are the notion of the soul as mediator between spirit and matter; music as a metaphor for the establishment of harmony between pairs of opposites; correspondences between the individual human and world souls; immortality of the soul, with the expectation of reincarnation; and the soul's threefold functional and/or structural nature. On the other hand, Bailey does not support Plato's view that the body should be "cast off" as soon as possible because of its "foolishness" and impurity. She develops the theory of the soul's nature in greater depth and stresses the soul's role as the seat of consciousness and the growing human impulse toward group consciousness.

Order and Harmony

Plato (c. 428-348 BCE) considered himself to be a student of Pythagoras and much of his work built on the teachings of his forebear. Pythagorean influence is conspicuous in the belief that the cosmos is ordered by harmonious relationships between pairs of opposites. Plato tells us in *Timaeus* that God created the “body of the universe” from fire and earth, but that “two things cannot be rightly put together”— put together harmoniously, that is—“without a third; there must be some bond of union between them.”³ And because the universe is “solid” this bond requires not one but two intervening elements: air and water. The four elements are mutually related by mathematical proportions which turn out to be the ratios: 1, 4/3, 3/2, and 2. .

These are precisely the ratios that define the rudimentary Pythagorean musical scale consisting of the tonic, subdominant (major fourth), dominant (major fifth), and octave or diapason. In his famed experiments on the monochord, Pythagoras showed that dividing the length of a vibrating string in integer fractions, like 2/3 or 3/4, produced pleasing tonal intervals. The experiments contributed to music theory, but the monochord also served as a powerful metaphor for the universe—or perhaps more precisely we should say an analogy (*analogia*). If the “vibrating string” linked spirit and matter or heaven and earth, the vibration was not just ordered, but harmonious and meaningful. In due course, the metaphor would be extended to the human constitution.

Plato’s soul was placed in harmonious relationship between the eternal, undivided spirit and “divisible” matter:

Out of the indivisible and unchangeable, and also out of that which is divisible and has to do with material bodies, [God] compounded a third and intermediate kind of essence [the soul], partaking of the nature of the same and of the other, and this compound he placed accordingly in a mean between the indivisible, and the divisible and material.⁴

Correspondence between the human soul and the world soul, the *anima mundi*, was a popular theme in Greek thought; man was the microcosm, and the universe the macrocosm. Plato stated that human souls were made from the same ingredients as the world soul:

[O]nce more into the cup in which he had previously mingled the soul of the universe, [God] poured the remains of the elements, and mingled them in much the same manner... And having made it he divided the whole mixture into souls equal in number to the stars, and assigned each soul to a star.⁵

The comment that each soul is assigned to a star is worthy of note and will be referred to later. Alice Bailey’s soul also mediates between spirit and matter at both the macro- and micro-levels:

The soul, macrocosmic and microcosmic, universal and human, is that entity which is brought into being when the spirit aspect and the matter aspect are related to each other... The soul is the mediator between this duality; it is the middle principle, the link between God and His form.⁶

Indeed, Bailey’s “soul” is a concept with far-reaching, cosmic relevance:

The term “soul,” with its major attribute of enlightenment, includes the *anima mundi*, the animal soul, the human soul, and that consummating point of light which we regard as the “overshadowing” soul of humanity. It is an aspect of the divine manifestation to which that great Son of God refers when (as Shri Krishna) He remarks, “Having pervaded this entire universe with a fragment of Myself, I remain.” That fragment is the soul of all things. That soul brings light and spreads enlightenment.⁷

Bailey may not require body, soul, and spirit to conform to precise mathematical proportions, as Plato did, but she too invokes the musical metaphor:

God created by the power of sound, and the “music of the spheres” holds all life in being (note that phrase). The soul on its tiny scale can create “the new man” by the power also of sound, and a musical rhythm can usefully be imposed upon the personality life by the disciple... Let love and light and music enter more definitely into your daily life. Spurn not this practical suggestion, but give your mind the opportunity, through the massed sound of music, to break down the personality-imposed barriers between the free flow of soul life and you.⁸

Indeed, man’s spiritual evolution involves the gradual establishment of harmony:

At first, there is dissonance and discord... and a fight between the Higher and the Lower. But as time progresses, and later with the aid of the Master, harmony of colour and tone is produced (a synonymous matter), until eventually you will have the basic note of matter, the major third of the aligned Personality, the dominant fifth of the [soul], followed by the full chord of the Monad or Spirit.⁹

It is interesting that Bailey mentions the major third, which, under Pythagorean and just-intonation tuning, gave early musicians so much trouble because of discord with the tonic-dominant combination. Composers steered clear of the major third until the late Renaissance period when tempered scales began to appear. Tonal temperament was condemned by many preachers as an affront to God, but perhaps it helped fight the prevailing “dissonance and discord.”

Bailey’s human soul occupies a middle ground between the personality—defined as the aggregate of the physical, emotional, and mental natures—and the divine spark, or monad. But it is also a mediator in another sense, linking higher beings with the mineral, vegetable, and animal realms and taking on redemptive responsibilities with respect to the lower kingdoms:

[F]or the soul of mankind is not only an entity linking spirit and matter, and mediating between monad and personality, but the soul of humanity has a unique function to perform in mediating between the higher three kingdoms in nature and the lower three.¹⁰

The notion of the Logos as mediator between heaven and earth, and a correspondence with the human soul, were discernable in Plato’s Greece but developed further under Plotinus and the Hellenic Christians, whereupon the Logos became identified with the Christ. Bailey, too, recognizes the logic correspondence: “Therefore the soul is another name for the Christ principle, whether in nature or in man.”¹¹ The soul is the inner Christ.

The Soul as a Triplicity

The notion of a third element mediating between a pair of opposites grew into the Platonic belief in an essential “threeness” in the soul and creation in general. Not only did Plato’s soul complete the human trinity of body, soul, and spirit, but the soul itself was considered to be threefold, manifesting “existence,” “sameness,” and “difference.”¹² Elsewhere, he suggested that the soul consists of: the “desirous,” the “spirited,” and the “rational.” And, again invoking the musical analogy, Plato urged us to bring these three elements into mutual harmony:

He must have put all three parts in tune within him, highest and lowest and middle, exactly like the three chief notes of a scale, and any other intervals between that there may be; he must have bound all these together and made himself completely one out of many, temperate and concordant.¹³

Plato’s soul was also the source of intelligence, harmony, and beauty; we read that God

put intelligence in soul, and soul in body, that he might be the creator of a work which was by nature fairest and best... [the soul] partakes of reason and harmony, and being made by the best of intellectual and everlasting natures, is the best of things created.¹⁴

Note that Plato's soul-triplicity is functional in nature. Bailey also regards the soul as a functional triplicity, consisting of knowledge, love and sacrifice.¹⁵ But, in addition, she explores its structural complexity; the human soul emerges, as a "middle principle" between the animal soul and an overshadowing divine soul:

The soul is the perceiving entity produced through the union of Father-Spirit and Mother-Matter... This it is which enables him eventually to discover that this soul in him is dual and that part of him responds to the animal soul and part of him recognises his divine soul.¹⁶

The "animal soul" relates to the physical nature that we share with the animal kingdom. And we learn elsewhere that the "divine soul" is the solar angel, referred to in various traditions as the "angel of the presence," "lord of the flame," "holy guardian angel," or "higher genius." Bailey explains that the angel has served as our long-time spiritual mentor,¹⁷ a service involving great sacrifice:

The great solar Angel... is literally [man's] divine ancestor, the "Watcher" Who, through long cycles of incarnation, has poured Himself out in sacrifice in order that man might BE.¹⁸
[Emphasis in original]

Perhaps the solar angels are related to the stars, in *Timaeus*, to which God assigned human souls for protection and guidance. But more specifically, Plato speaks of individual guardians: "We are told that when each person dies, the guardian spirit who was allotted to him in life proceeds to lead him to... the underworld."¹⁹ In the western mystery tradition the solar angel is referred to as the "holy guardian angel" or "genius."

Primacy and Perfectibility of the Soul

Plato regarded man as the pride of creation. God, in *Timaeus*, "made the soul in origin and excellence prior to and older than the body, to be the ruler and mistress, of whom the body was to be the subject."²⁰ However, as Plato matures, dualism becomes more apparent; in *Phaedo* the qualities of body and soul are in marked contrast:

[T]he soul is in the very likeness of the divine, and immortal, and intelligible, and uniform, and indissoluble, and unchangeable; and the body is in the very likeness of the human, and mortal, and unintelligible, and multiform, and dissoluble, and changeable.²¹

Indeed, the body is a burden, even an embarrassment, to a thinking person. Socrates, who faces execution later in the day, is made to lament:

[W]hile we are in the body, and while the soul is mingled with this mass of evil, our desire will not be satisfied, and our desire is of the truth. For the body is a source of endless trouble... [T]he soul when using the body... is then dragged by the body into the region of the changeable, and wanders and is confused; the world spins round her, and she is like a drunkard when under their influence.²²

The best that can be done is to focus on purity and harmony, and abstain from "pleasures and desires and pains and fears" until that blessed moment—soon to come for Socrates—when the physical body is cast off: "And then the foolishness of the body will be cleared away and we shall be pure and hold converse with other pure souls, and know of ourselves the clear light everywhere; and this is surely the light of truth."²³

Alice Bailey avoids such pessimistic dualism but, drawing on creative tension between pairs of opposites—a unifying theme running through much of her work—she still acknowledges a struggle between the higher and lower natures:

Human consciousness... [is] neither purely animal nor entirely divine, but fluctuating between the two stages, thus making the human kingdom the great battleground between the pairs of

opposites, between the urge or pull of spirit and the lure of matter or mother-nature, and between that called the lower self and the spiritual man.²⁴

She does not devalue the lower nature; rather, it is to be redeemed and used as a basis for the expression of soul life through service:

Service is a life demonstration. It is a soul urge, and is as much an evolutionary impetus of the soul as the urge to self-preservation or to the reproduction of the species is a demonstration of the animal soul. This is a statement of importance. It is a soul instinct, if we may use such an inadequate expression and is, therefore, innate and peculiar to soul unfoldment. It is the outstanding characteristic of the soul, just as desire is the outstanding characteristic of the lower nature.²⁵

Bailey emphasizes the soul's function as a form-building agency; the soul creates the forms necessary for spirit to dwell in the world of matter; it:

brings the form into being, which enables it to develop and grow so as to house more adequately the indwelling life, and which drives all God's creatures forward along the path of evolution... towards an eventual goal and a glorious consummation.²⁶

Whereas Plato's soul is the agent of proportion and order, Bailey's soul is the seat of consciousness. The closest Plato comes to a recognition of consciousness is a reference to "intelligence." Bailey's concept of consciousness goes further; "Throughout the universe," she writes, "it is the soul which is the conscious, sensitive theme of the divine plan."²⁷ Consciousness, in fact, results from the very penetration of matter by spirit:

Therefore the soul, through these qualities and characteristics, manifests as conscious response to matter, for the qualities are brought into being through the interplay of the pairs of opposites, spirit and matter, and their effect upon each other. This is the basis of consciousness.²⁸

Consciousness, and particularly self-conscious, are psychological concepts of broad significance for humankind. Self-consciousness extends not only to one's sense of selfhood and identity, relative to the environment, but also to an awareness of different levels of one's own being. Implicit in this last is the possibility of a relationship with one's own soul. Bailey comments thus:

[M]any people... have experienced at sometime or another an illumination, an unfoldment, an uplifting, and a beatitude which has convinced them that there is a state of consciousness so far removed from that normally experienced as to bring them into a new state of being and a new level of awareness.²⁹

Contact with the soul can bring about a new sense of ethics, in which individual goals—even spiritual ones—are subordinated to the common good. Bailey asserts that this is the way to true freedom: "To stand really free is to stand in the clear unimpeded light of the soul, which is basically and intrinsically group consciousness."³⁰ Thus we return to the impulse to serve and the possibility of using the lower nature as an effective tool for spiritual purpose.

Plato's and Bailey's assertions about the primacy of the soul were consistent with their belief in the soul's preexistence and survival. They both taught that the soul is immortal and that reincarnation provides new opportunities for life and experience; bodily "resurrection" only occurs in a reincarnational context. Both rejected any doctrine of body-soul indivisibility, on the lines proposed by Aristotle, Aquinas, or Spinoza. The important aspects of life are invested in the soul alone; as Bailey wrote, commenting on the carnage in World War II:

The death of the physical form is a negligible factor in relation to these [higher spiritual values] and is easily righted again through the processes of rebirth and of fresh opportunity... The destruction of the form in battle is of small importance to those who know that reincarnation is a basic law of nature and that there is no death.³¹

Both writers asserted that rebirth provides a means for the soul to accrue knowledge beyond what could possibly be acquired in a single lifetime. Plato even used such accrual to support a belief in reincarnation; for example, in *Phaedo*, Cebes is made to say:

Your favorite doctrine, Socrates, that knowledge is simply recollection, if true, also necessarily implies a previous time in which we learned that which we now recollect. But this would be impossible unless our soul was in some place before existing in the human form; here, then, is another argument of the soul's immortality.³²

Phaedo also records an interesting discussion on whether harmony can survive destruction of the musical instrument; the consensus was that it could, implying that spiritual harmony remains with the soul after physical death. The soul mediates between spirit and matter, not just in one lifetime but in many, advancing toward ultimate harmony and perfection. Again to quote Bailey:

It is at this point that the doctrine of reincarnation becomes of supreme value; the disciple begins to institute those conditions, to create those forms and build those vehicles which, in another life, will prove more suitable for soul control and more adequate instruments with which to carry forward the perfecting process which the soul demands.³³

Concluding Remarks

Plato and Alice Bailey were fond of the concept of resolution of pairs of opposites, and they both viewed the soul as the mediator between the ultimate pairs of opposites: heaven and earth, spirit and matter. The two writers agreed that a close correspondence exists between the human soul and the world soul. They both recognized that musical tones provide an apt metaphor for the soul's relationship with spirit and matter and the outcome of its existence; however, their views diverged on what that outcome might be. Plato's soul primarily brought order, whereas Bailey's produced consciousness—indeed the expansion of consciousness. Bailey stressed the soul's ethical qualities, viewing it as the driving force behind spiritual growth, group consciousness, and service.

Plato and Bailey adopted similar eschatological positions involving the soul's preexistence, survival, and reincarnation. Both viewed the soul as a triplicity, but they disagreed as to the precise nature of the three elements; Plato's soul-triplicity was purely functional, whereas Bailey's has both functional and structural dimensions. Bailey's soul embraces the animal soul, which we share with the lower kingdoms; the human soul, *per se*; and an overshadowing divine soul. This divine soul is the solar angel—interestingly, a kind of reincarnation of Plato's "guardian spirit."

Bailey treated her subject in greater depth than did Plato, and her picture of the soul and its destiny are correspondingly richer. But, as has been shown, many of Bailey's concepts have their roots in Plato's teachings. Perhaps we could say that Bailey's teachings on the soul provide a modern exposition of Platonic thought, benefiting from the revelation and philosophical speculation of the intervening 23 centuries. Also, we must not forget that Bailey wrote in an age when the rigid, but durable social order, which had existed in one way or another from the time of ancient Greece to Edwardian England, was giving way to unsettling social change, political turmoil, and war. Plato's cultural environment was the self-absorption of the Greek elite, while Bailey's included the new social consciousness and global awareness of the 20th century. Interestingly, the early 20th century, was also marked by growing belief in Theosophical circles in existence of the masters and their interest in human affairs. In serving as Djwhal Khul's amanuensis, Bailey saw herself as an intermediary between them and humanity.³⁴

It must be emphasized once more that many others have discussed the soul and its relationships with the physical nature, God, and humanity. However, the author hopes that this brief snapshot of two important writers will contribute to the ongoing discussion of a topic of obvious importance to all of us.

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- ¹ All 24 books are published by the Lucis Trust, 120 Wall Street, New York, NY 10005.
- ² The Theosophical Society was founded in 1875 by Helena Blavatsky and Henry Olcott.
- ³ Plato. *Timeus* 31C. (Transl: Benjamin Jowett). See also: Peter Kalkavage. *Plato's Timaeus*. Focus Books, 2001.
- ⁴ *Ibid* 35A. In this and following quotations, square brackets, [], indicate interpolations or substitutions made by the present author. Any parentheses, (), are in the originals.
- ⁵ *Ibid*, 41E.
- ⁶ Alice A. Bailey. *Treatise on White Magic*. Lucis Trust, 1934, pp. 34-35.
- ⁷ Alice A. Bailey. *Discipleship in the New Age II*. Lucis Trust, 1955, p. 158
- ⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 699-700
- ⁹ Alice A. Bailey. *Letters on Occult Meditation*. Lucis Trust, 1922, p. 62.
- ¹⁰ *Treatise on White Magic, op. cit.*, p. 47.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- ¹² Plato. *Commentary II*, 298. There is no conflict between this essential threeness and the four-note scale, because the fourth note is simply the repeated tonic. By convention the diapason is not counted in the diatonic (7-note) and chromatic (12-note) musical scales, and it would not be counted in a triadic (3-note) scale.
- ¹³ Plato. *Republic*, Book IV, 443d-f. (Transl: W. H. D. Rouse.) In Benjamin Jowett's translation we find "temperate and perfectly adjusted nature."
- ¹⁴ *Timeus, op. cit.*, 37A.
- ¹⁵ *Treatise on White Magic, op. cit.*, p. 396.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- ¹⁷ For a detailed exploration of Bailey's teachings on the solar angel, see: John Nash. "The Solar Angel." *The Beacon*, March/April 2001, pp. 7-14.
- ¹⁸ Alice A. Bailey. *Initiation, Human and Solar*. Lucis Trust, 1922, p. 115.
- ¹⁹ Plato. *Phaedo*, 107d. (Transl: G. M. A. Grube.) *Plato: Five Dialogues*. Hackett, 1981.
- ²⁰ *Timeus, op. cit.*, 34C. As was common in ancient languages, the Greek word for "soul," *psyche*, was feminine.
- ²¹ Plato. *Phaedo*. 80B. (Transl: Benjamin Jowett).
- ²² *Ibid*, 66B.
- ²³ *Ibid*, 67A.
- ²⁴ *Treatise on White Magic, op. cit.*, p. 38.
- ²⁵ Alice A. Bailey. *Esoteric Psychology II*. Lucis Trust, 1942, p. 125.
- ²⁶ *Treatise on White Magic, op. cit.*, p. 35.
- ²⁷ Alice A. Bailey. *Esoteric Astrology*. Lucis Trust, 1951, p. 295.
- ²⁸ *Treatise on White Magic, op. cit.*, p. 36.
- ²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 34.
- ³⁰ Alice A. Bailey. *Glamour, a World Problem*. Lucis Trust, 1950, p. 48.
- ³¹ Alice A. Bailey. *Esoteric Healing*. Lucis Trust, 1953, p. 440.
- ³² *Phaedo, op. cit.*, 72E-73A.
- ³³ *Esoteric Healing, op. cit.*, p. 193.
- ³⁴ Alice A. Bailey. *The Unfinished Autobiography*. Lucis Trust, 1951, p. 14.