

In Defence of the Soul

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Some concept of the soul as a spiritual reality capable of surviving bodily death is one of the most widespread of human ideas. It is particularly common in religious traditions, though there is considerable diversity about how the concept of the soul should be understood. In primal religions and in the religions of Greece and ancient Mesopotamia there is the concept of a shadowy, vague and not very attractive kind of survival, whereas in later religion more positive concepts of the soul come into being.

The soul in Hinduism and Buddhism

In Hinduism the concept of the soul or *atman* is the idea of a permanent unchanging essence which passes through a succession of lives and ideally should be unaffected by the traumas which affect bodily existence. This is very different from the Buddhist understanding. Buddha unequivocally repudiated the concept of *atman* in his *an-atta* doctrine, saying "The speculative view that shall be *atman* after death - permanent, abiding, everlasting, unchanging, and that I shall exist as such for eternity; is not that wholly and completely foolish?" ¹ As a result of this, many westerners believe that Buddhism denies any concept of the soul. This is not the case, because the Buddha also taught a doctrine of

rebirth. He insisted that the belief that death meant extinction was a 'wicked heresy' and 'precisely what I do not teach'.² What the Buddha affirmed was a dynamic, developing, ever-changing concept of the person, and his understanding of *karma* as meaning that what we do now affects what we become later is closely linked with such a view. In Pure-land Buddhism, the dominant Buddhist tradition in Japan, they believe we will all be reborn 'in Buddha's Pure-land'. The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* speaks of the consciousness-principle' going on³.

The soul in Greek philosophy

Two rather different understandings of the soul have come down to us from Greek philosophy. For Aristotle the soul is the 'form' of the body, its animating and directing principle. This understanding, taken up and modified by St Thomas Aquinas, who added to it the concept of the soul's immortality, has been the dominant tradition in Catholic Christianity. For Plato, the soul is the self, and consequently 'Platonism' has become associated with the idea of a soul as essentially distinct from the body. This became the dominant understanding of what 'Platonism' implied. A play on the Greek words for 'body' and 'tomb' (*sornalsenza*) in later Platonism suggests a negative attitude to body, and further talk of the body as 'the prison-house of the soul' enhances this. But Plato's own thought is complex, and he may in any case be speaking only of the final condition of embodiment in terminal old age when indeed the body may well become a prison for the human spirit.

Asceticism and the soul

At times the western metaphysical tradition has been strongly dualist in identifying the true self with the soul, and despising the body. Elements in western philosophy, Catholic asceticism and Protestant Puritanism exemplify this, as does the asceticism of Hindu holy men. But there is no necessary connection between belief in the soul and contempt for the body. Traditional Judaism strongly affirms both the immortality of the soul and the importance of the body to us. Islam believes in the immortality of the soul but strongly repudiated the asceticism of western monasticism, affirming that 'there is no monkery in Islam'. Zoroastrianism likewise is

strongly dualist but teaches that celibacy is sinful. The Theravada Buddhist tradition which sometimes emphasises the *an-cotta* doctrine in ways that are hard to reconcile with any real picture of rebirth also teaches the ideal of monastic asceticism, vegetarianism, teetotalism, and celibacy. By contrast Pure-land Buddhism, which teaches rebirth in Buddha's Pure-land, repudiates asceticism, insists on a married priesthood and encourages both meat-eating and alcohol. So there is no necessary connection between asceticism and dualism, even though in some traditions they happen to go together.

Gnostic and Manichaeian influence on Christianity

Although a form of dualism which took a negative attitude to the body has often been found within Christianity, it has never been normative for Biblical Christianity. Contempt for the body entered Christianity from Gnostic, Manichaeian and Neo-Platonist sources. It received strong repudiation from many Christian writers. One New Testament writer gave a strong anti-Gnostic warning:

The Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by giving heed to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons through the pretensions of liars, whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and enjoin abstinence from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving.⁴

However, despite such warnings, under the influence of St Augustine a negative attitude to the body became widespread. The tragedy is that St Augustine was first a Manichee, and then a Neo-Platonist before his conversion to Christianity and as the saying goes, 'though people may change their religion, they rarely change their philosophy'.

Biblical and Thomist theology

Biblical theology teaches the psychosomatic unity of the person: 'man is a physical and psychical whole which consist of a complex of parts, each part

being at the same time physiological and psychical in itself,'⁵ In the Old Testament the heart, kidneys, bowels, inward parts, flesh and bones are all explicitly mentioned as shaping and determining character and emotions, but surprisingly there is no mention of the head. For the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition a person is a union of body and soul. According to Aquinas 'My soul is not "F", and if only souls are saved, "I" am not saved, nor is any man'⁶. The soul after death lives in a 'deprived and unnatural state' prior to the resurrection of the body.

Cartesian dualism

In Gilbert Ryles *The Concept of Mind* he spoke of Cartesianism 'with deliberate abusiveness'⁷. This was most unfortunate because it has resulted in a caricature of Descartes' teaching becoming common. The most important contribution of Descartes was his insistence on mind-body interaction at all times in normal life. I am not only lodged in my body like a pilot on a ship, but besides I am joined to it very closely and indeed so compounded and intermingled with my body that I form as it were a single whole with it.⁸ For a refutation of Ryle and defence of Descartes see H.D. Lewis *The Elusive Mind*⁹

Christian doctrines and the importance of embodiment

The doctrine of *creation* implies the goodness of the material order. The importance of embodiment is also taught through Christian talk of human beings being created in 'the image and likeness of God' and the body being described as 'the temple of the spirit'. The doctrine of the *Incarnation* taken literally implies that God became a human being and thereby invested embodiment with ultimate value. Hence according to Eric Mascall, the fact 'that God has himself become man in the incarnation has sealed human nature with a certificate of value whose validity can never be questioned'¹⁰. Pope John Paul II agrees; 'The incarnation of the Son of God emphasises the great dignity of human nature'¹¹. However, this is not just true of traditional understandings of the doctrine. According to Liberal/Modernist reinterpretations, all holy people reveal something of

God's nature and in Jesus this happened to the nth degree.¹² Even this reinterpretation implies the sanctity of our embodiment. This is further stressed by the Christian stress that as well as the immortality of the soul we need to affirm the *resurrection of the body*.

However this is understood, it implies the permanent importance of some kind of embodiment to our full personhood. Likewise the idea that *marriage* is a *sacrament* implies that sex is holy and a means of spiritual grace.

The physical basis of personality

Evolutionary biology has been taken for granted in mainstream Christian theology at least since the publication of *Lux Muni* in 1890. It is also the case that theologians accept that, while not accepting reductionist interpretations of scientific discoveries, Christians must come to terms with the reality of what modern biology shows us about the importance of biological factors in shaping our personhood. Thus *genetics* shows that 'our temperamental type and character structure, our intelligence, our imaginative range and special aptitudes, all develop in directions and within limits that are genetically prescribed'¹³. Knowledge of the *endocrine system* shows that our intellectual and emotional well-being is dependent on quite specific levels of iodine, calcium, sugar and salt in our bloodstream¹⁴. *N* shows that all our thoughts and feelings are directly related to some quite specific brain processes which it is becoming increasingly possible to identify¹⁵, hence any viable concept of the soul today must be compatible with these discoveries.

The case for the soul

In the light of all the above, what is the case for arguing for the reality of the soul today? The first argument is based on belief in *reason and responsibility*. On a totally materialistic understanding of personhood, all our thoughts and feelings must be the product of antecedent physical causes. As Baron d'Holbach classically put it, 'The brain secretes thoughts as the liver secretes bile'. The difficulty with this is that if

this is so then our sense of purposive rational thought must be an illusion. Jacques Monod who obtained a Nobel prize for his researches in biology argued that this must be so. For him everything is dependent on *chance and necessity* and hence there can be no such thing as purpose. He did acknowledge that there is 'a radically insoluble ... flagrant epistemological contradiction' in accepting that this is the case, and nevertheless thinking that his own writing could be goal-directed. But one cannot make a moral choice to ignore such an internal inconsistency. The simple fact is that one cannot choose as Monod did to write a book to show that there is no such thing as purpose, because the very act of writing such a book demonstrates the importance of purpose in human thought, and hence to the falsehood of physical determinism!¹⁶

Telepathy, i.e., the transfer of thoughts from one person to another without using physical means, would only be possible if we are more than material beings. This is because as a physical organism 'the brain is receptive only to information that arrives by neural pathways and so is confined to perception by way of the senses ... if some people are receptive to the contents of the minds of another by some more direct means such as telepathy then those minds are not just brains.'¹⁷ However, both scientific experimentation and personal experiencing show that telepathy happens. 58% of Americans and 59% of British claim personal experience of telepathy, and one form of telepathy is almost universal in that 92% of us have had the experience of thinking of someone just before receiving a phone call from them¹⁸. Telepathy is also the least mind-boggling way of accounting for a wide variety of parapsychological data, e.g. mediumship, children who 'remember' other lives, children selected for office as Lamas because of correctly identifying objects, etc.

Religious experience is another phenomenon which challenges materialism. Over the past thirty years, repeated surveys have found that between 31% and 49% of people questioned have had 'an awareness of a presence or power different from everyday life.' No one believes that such awareness comes through the senses. Heavenly visions are not the kind of things that cameras can record, and though people may believe that God has 'called them' to particular vocations, no one imagines that a

tape recorder could transcribe such a message. if religious experience is treated as evidential because of the impact it has on people's lives it remains the case that 'spiritual things are spiritually discerned.'¹⁹

Near-death experiences are yet another phenomenon which challenges a purely physical interpretation of what it means to be human. In recent decades more than 25,000 people resuscitated from apparent death have reported that at the moment their hearts stopped beating 'they' left their bodies and looked down from above at the resuscitation attempts. They show correct observation, but from a different vantage point than the unconscious body. Yet if consciousness can come apart from the body even for only a few seconds near the point of death, the principle has been established. The fact that 82% of such people claim that they no longer fear death is a powerful testimony to the importance of *such* experiences.²⁰

The soul as an emergent property

One possible way of reconciling an acknowledgement of the physical basis of our personality with the case for the soul is to suggest that the soul is an emergent property we develop during life. John Hick has developed the 'soul-making theodicy' sketched out originally by John Keats to make sense of the suffering inherent in life in an autonomous world. He believes that through 'many lives in many worlds' it may be possible for us to advance towards the kingdom of God. No religion teaches permanent disembodiment though they do have the idea of a temporary mind-dependent state.²¹ Hick suggests that 'Distinctive human mentality and spirituality emerges, *in* accordance with the divine purpose, in complex bodily organism. But once it has emerged it is the vehicle, according to Christian faith, of a continuing creative activity, only the beginnings of which have so far taken place.'²²

Richard Swinburne also believes that dualism is 'inescapable' if we are really to explain human existence and experience. First he points out that though 'the mental life of thought, sensation and purpose may be caused by physico-chemical events in the brain, it is quite different

from them'.²³ Secondly, 'conscious experiences are causally efficacious. Our thoughts and feelings are not just phenomena caused by goings-on in the brain; they cause other thoughts and feelings and make a difference to the agent's behaviour'. Thirdly, 'though a human soul has a structure and character formed in part through the brain to which it is connected [it] acquires some independence of that brain.'²⁴

Keith Ward take a similar line: 'Of course the soul depends on the brain ... but the soul need not always depend on the brain any more than a man need always depend on the womb which supported his life before birth.'²⁵

Twentieth-century church teaching

Throughout the twentieth century the concept of the soul has been one of the most contested notions within Christian theology. However, the mainstream Churches have insisted that belief in the soul remains an essential ingredient of the Christian hope for life after death. In 1938 the Church of England Doctrine Commission declared:

We ought to reject quite frankly the literalistic belief in a future resuscitation of the actual physical frame which is laid in the tomb. It is to be affirmed none the less, that in the life of the world to come the soul or spirit will still have its appropriate organ of expression and activity, which is one with the body of earthly life in the sense that it bears the same relation to the same spiritual entity.²⁶

A similar view was taken by the Roman Catholic Congregation for the Faith in 1979. This declared:

The Church affirms that a spiritual element survives and subsists after death, an element endowed with consciousness and will, so that the `human self subsists though deprived for the present of its complement of the body. To designate this element the Church uses the word 'soul', the accepted term in the usage of scripture and tradition.²⁷

In 1996 the Church of England Doctrine Commission responded to philosophical criticism of the concept of the soul by adopting a somewhat more nuanced approach:

it would not be possible to speak of salvation in terms of the destiny of souls after death, if the soul were thought of as the detachable spiritual part of ourselves. If the essential human being is an embodied whole, our ultimate destiny must be the resurrection and transformation of our entire being. ... To speak thus is not to abandon talk of the soul, but to seek its redefinition. What the word is needed for is to represent the essential nature which constitutes us in our individual particularities. The essence of humanity is certainly not the matter of the body, for that is continuously changing through wear and tear, eating and drinking. What provides continuity and unity through the flux of change is not material but the vastly complex information-bearing pattern in which that material is composed. That pattern can surely be considered the carrier of memories and of the personality. [What happens at death is that death) dissolves the embodiment of that pattern, but the person, whose that pattern is, is 'remembered' by God who in love holds that unique being in his care. [However at some point there must be] a fuller realisation of God's purpose for us all [which will come with the] resurrection of the body [though] it is not to be supposed that the material of the resurrection body is the same as that of the old. ... St Paul warns us 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable'.²⁸

What is striking about this view is that it recognises that no realistic belief in a future life today can speak of continuity of material identity, and yet at the same time the Commission acknowledges that no religion believes that the immortality of the soul alone can suffice to ensure the future life of persons such as we are. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have always classically affirmed both the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body, just as Hinduism and Buddhism have seen a purely spiritual existence as a temporary state before rebirth into a new life. However, any belief in a future resurrection, recreation or new birth, however understood, depends on the continuity through death of something we can call the soul which acts as the bearer of our personhood. This 'soul' can either be understood as an emergent property of our developing personhood through life, or as something that we develop which is held in existence in the mind of God in the way the 1996 Doctrine Commission describes.

The on-going problem

The ultimate crux of the matter is that it seems to me that the concept of the soul is a necessary ingredient of any faith which wishes to affirm that we are more than physically-determined creatures, and that we have the potential for moral and rational growth and for developing a spirituality which can ultimately transcend our bodily death. I have tried in this article to argue that this remains a belief that can be rationally defended. But I am conscious that difficulties remain. I cannot be unaware of such difficulties because my wife Linda Badham wrote her doctoral thesis on *Emergence* questioning whether one can make sense of emergence as anything other than a useful linguistic tool to talk of the different language-games we need to distinguish physical and mental qualities of the same material substratum. I recognise also that according to the Open University textbook on the *Philosophy of Religion* her essay *Problems of Resurrection* provides the definitive case against any belief in a future life.²⁹ Since for more than twenty years I have also collaborated with Professor David Cockburn on an MA programme on *Death and Immortality* I realise that the consensus of twentieth century philosophy of mind is strongly anti-dualist.³⁰ I thus face a serious problem of 'cognitive dissonance' in continuing to affirm the necessity of the concept of the soul in an intellectual environment where this concept is widely rejected. But I can see no alternative if I am genuinely to affirm the evidential reality of religious experience, human freedom and responsibility, and the hope for a future life.

References

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²*Samyutta-Nikaya XXII 85*: cf. S. Radhakrishnan and C. Moore. *A Sourcebook of Indian Philosophy* Princeton 1957 p. 286.

³For fuller documentation see Paul Badham *Near-death experiences, Beliefs about life after death and The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and its postscript *The testimony of the Pure-land tradition* Tokyo Honganji 1990.

⁴1 Timothy 4:1-3.

⁵Eric Rust *Nature and an in Biblical Thought* 1953. p.104.

⁶Aquinas *Commentary on Corinthians (1:15)*.

⁷Gilbert Ryle *The Concept of Mind* 1949 Penguin 1966 p.17.

⁸R. Descartes *Discourse on Method* 1637 Penguin 1968 p.159.

⁹Allen & Unwin 1969

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- ¹⁹1 Corinthians 2:14.
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