

# Soul, nature and immortality of the

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For the Greeks, the soul is what gives life to the body. Plato thought of it as a thing separate from the body. A human living on earth consists of two parts, soul and body. The soul is the essential part of the human – what makes me me. It is the part to which the mental life of humans pertains – it is the soul which thinks and feels and chooses. Soul and body interact. Bodily states often cause soul states, and soul states often cause bodily states. This view is known as substance dualism. It normally includes the view that the soul is simple, that it does not have parts. If an object has parts, then one of those parts can have properties which another part does not. But for any experience that I have, an auditory or visual sensation or thought, it happens to the whole me. Plato also held that at death, soul and body are separated; the body decays while the soul departs to live another life. Aristotle, by contrast, thought of the soul simply as a ‘form’, that is, as a way of behaving and thinking; a human having a soul just is the human behaving (by moving parts of the body) and thinking in certain characteristic human ways. And just as there cannot be a dance without people dancing, so there cannot be ways of behaving without embodied humans to behave in those ways. Hence, for Aristotle, the soul does not exist without the body.

Christian theology, believing in life after death, found it natural to take over Plato’s conception of the soul. But in the thirteenth century, St Thomas Aquinas sought to develop an Aristotelian conception modified to accommodate Christian doctrine. The soul, Aquinas taught, was indeed a form, but a special kind of form, one which could temporarily exist without the body to which it was naturally fitted. It has always been difficult to articulate this view in a coherent way which makes it distinct from Plato’s. Descartes restated Plato’s view. In more modern times, the view that humans have souls has always been understood as the view that humans have an essential part, separable from the body, as depicted by Plato and Aquinas. The pure Aristotelian view has more normally been expressed as the view that humans do not have souls; humans consist of matter alone, though it may be organized in a very complicated way and have properties that inanimate things do not have. In other words, Aristotelianism is a kind of materialism.

If, however, one thinks of the soul as a thing separable from the body, it could still cease to exist at death, when the body ceases to function. Plato had a number of arguments designed to show that the soul is naturally immortal; in virtue of its own nature, because of what it is, it will continue to exist forever. Later philosophers have developed some of these arguments and produced others. Even if these arguments do not show it (and most philosophers think that they do not), the soul may still be naturally immortal; or it may be immortal because God or some other force keeps it in being forever, either by itself or joined to a new body. If there is an omnipotent God, he could keep it in existence forever; and he might have revealed to us that he is going to do so.

## 1 The existence and nature of the soul

The form of a thing is its shape, appearance, pattern of reaction, and (in the case of a living thing) its way of changing over time and acting, in fact, all the properties that make it the kind of thing it is. The form of a living thing is, for Aristotle, its soul. Plants have ‘vegetative’ souls, animals have ‘sensitive’ souls and humans have rational or intellectual souls; a human soul is not just a way of behaving publicly, but also a way of thinking. Forms for Aristotle are universals, in the sense that the same form can be instantiated in many different things. The form of a table, for example, can be instantiated in many different tables. What individuates, what makes the particular table the one it is, is the matter of which it is made. So too, claims Aristotle, what makes a particular human the one they are is the matter of which they are made. No form, he claims, can exist apart from the thing (a particular substance) in which it is instantiated. So a human soul

cannot be separated from its body. At least, a whole soul cannot be separated, for Aristotle considers that a soul has parts, and he adds (*On the Soul* 413a) that some parts of the soul may be separable. He may have in mind the part or parts responsible for thought.

Aquinas (§10–11) claimed that the soul does not need any bodily organ for thinking, and that is a main reason why he supposes that the whole soul can continue to exist without a body. In accord with the normal articulation of the Christian doctrine of life after death, Aquinas holds that the soul does continue to exist on the destruction of the body until it is reunited with it in the general resurrection. But what survives, claims Aquinas, is not the whole human being, but that essential part of it with limited functions, whose nature it is to be united with the body, and make it live and have its normal human operations of thought, perception and bodily action. Yet what makes such a separated soul my soul as opposed to yours? This question cannot be answered within a pure Aristotelian scheme. For Aristotelian forms are universals. There is just the form of humanity, which can be instantiated in many different individuals, and the separated soul is not united with matter. Aquinas says that each form has an ‘inclination’, is ‘fitted’, to be reunited with a certain body, the one from which it has been separated. Duns Scotus objected to this answer on the ground that there cannot be a bare inclination; an inclination has to be grounded in some actually existing feature of the soul. To take a modern analogy, if some substance has an inclination to liquefy at a certain temperature, that must be grounded in its chemical constitution. Hence Scotus holds that souls are not mere universals, but individual forms or essences, that is, that there is an essence of Socrates as well as of humanity. Anyone who holds that souls can exist separately from bodies must give an account of what makes a soul this particular soul, and the same soul as that of some earlier person. For Plato and for Descartes, this is something ultimate, just as perhaps what makes this chunk of matter different from that chunk of matter is something not analysable further. So too for Scotus, even though he thinks of souls as forms of bodies (*Ordinatio* II, d.3).

If Aquinas’ view is to be spelled out coherently, it must be done in the same way. What did happen to a soul in the past, namely that it was united to a certain body, and will happen to it in future cannot make it the soul it is now. That must be something internal to it now. Religious believers who believe that humans can exist without their bodies, even if only temporarily, must hold that. So too must any believer who holds that there is life after death, even if souls do not exist separately from bodies. For if I come to live again, the question arises as to what makes some subsequent human me, for my body will be largely if not entirely destroyed. If the answer is given that (most of) the atoms of my original body will be reassembled into bodily form, there are two problems. First, many of the atoms may no longer exist; they may have been transmuted into energy. And second, what proportion of the atoms do we need? Sixty per cent, seventy per cent, or what? If it is mere atoms which make some body mine and so some living human me, then no body will be fully mine unless it has all my atoms. Yet some of my atoms, even if not destroyed, will have come to form other human bodies. It will be a matter of degree whether a human survives, unless what makes a human the individual human they are is something other than the body, namely the soul (see Resurrection).

But why suppose that there is a separate soul? Descartes (§§5, 8), in his *Meditations*, gave a famous argument which must be the basis of any justification of substance dualism. He argues that I know infallibly that I exist as a thinking thing, but I do not know infallibly that I have a body; maybe that is all a dream. Hence the body is a separate thing from what is essential to me, namely my soul. A traditional criticism of this argument is that the mere fact that I do not know infallibly that my body exists does not show that it is separable from me; maybe I do not know what is involved in my present existence. After all, the argument has the same form as this clearly invalid argument: I know infallibly that I am Bloggs; I do not know infallibly that I am the son of John and Mary; hence the son of John and Mary is not the same thing as Bloggs. The argument can, however, be rephrased to meet this objection, not as an argument from knowledge and ignorance, but as one from logical possibility and impossibility. Descartes, in writing of what is ‘imaginable’, is often near to phrasing the argument in this way. Here is a rephrased version:

- (1) I exist as a thinking thing now.
- (2) It is logically possible that I go on thinking and so existing, even if my body is suddenly destroyed (and this remains logically possible, whatever else might be the case now inside or outside my body compatible with my existing now as a thinking thing).
- (3) It is not logically possible that any thing continue to exist unless some part of it continue to exist.

Hence I must already have another part beside my body, namely my soul. (For a more detailed presentation of this version of Descartes' argument, see Swinburne [1986] 1997: 145–60, 322–32.)

Most objectors to the argument in this form will deny (2) (see, for example, Shoemaker and Swinburne 1984: 141–8). They would claim that it is not logically possible that I survive without my body. It certainly seems logically possible. Our only grounds for supposing something to be logically possible are that we can make sense of it; we can spell out what it would be like for it to be true. Our only grounds for supposing something to be logically impossible are that we can derive a contradiction from it. It does look as if each of us can tell a coherent story of losing our body and yet continuing to think, and it does not look as if there is an obvious contradiction involved. So to some philosophers it looks as if the conclusion is sound.

Some claim that the causal interaction which substance dualism postulates between the soul and the body is unintelligible unless we can have some grasp of a mechanism through which brain states cause soul states and vice versa. A defender of substance dualism will respond that we often know very well that certain states cause others without having the least idea how this could occur. Before the theory of electromagnetism was developed, people knew that the motion of a magnetic charge caused an electric current, but had no idea how these very diverse states could influence each other.

## 2 The immortality of the soul

Even if the soul is simple and separable from the body, it does not follow that it will continue to exist after death, let alone exist forever with a mental life, with thoughts, feelings and sensations. It might instead exist in the way that our souls exist while we have a dreamless sleep. There have been a large number of arguments for the natural immortality of the soul, purporting to show that it is the nature of the soul to be immortal; it will naturally go on forever, without God or any external agency needing to intervene to give it special powers to continue in existence. Most of these are arguments which try to show that the soul has such a peculiar nature that the normal forces which cause things to cease to exist would not affect it.

One well-known argument is that given by Plato (§§10–11, 13) (*Phaedo* 78b) and repeated by, among others, Berkeley (§8) (1710, section 141) and Joseph Butler (§6) (1736 I, ch. 1), from the simplicity of the soul. It runs as follows. We only know of things ceasing to exist when they have parts; and they cease to exist only when the parts are separated from each other. A house ceases to exist when the bricks are taken away from each other. But the soul has no parts, and so we know of nothing which in the normal course of things would cause it to cease to exist, barring divine intervention. So it is reasonable to suppose that it is naturally immortal. But this argument is weak. We do know of things ceasing to exist without any parts being separated from each other. An atom ceases to exist when it is turned into energy. Further, it does look as if the functioning of the soul, its having a mental life, depends on the functioning of the brain. (Does not damage to the brain render a person un-conscious?) We need more positive argument to show that the soul could function without the brain sustaining it. And if it turns out that the soul is incapable of functioning without the brain, why suppose that it even exists?

Plato gives several other arguments for the natural immortality of the soul. They include the argument (*Phaedo* 73a–78a; *Meno* 81b–86b) that humans know many things and have many concepts which they have not learned or acquired on earth. In the *Meno*, Plato describes a slave-boy being led by Socrates to assert various truths of mathematics which no one has taught him. Hence, Plato argues, he must have learned them in a previous existence. But if souls exist before birth and through a life of embodiment on earth, it is natural to suppose that they will continue to exist after death. An objector, however, may reasonably argue that the slave-boy did not know the truths in question until Socrates helped him to become aware of them. The argument from pre-existence did not appeal to Christian philosophers, for Christians have normally held that souls come into existence at conception or birth, though they continue to exist after death. Aquinas appealed to the fact that humans naturally desire to exist forever and that 'it is impossible that natural appetite should be in vain' (*Summa contra gentiles* II, 79.6). Yet it is far from obvious why that is impossible. He also appealed to the ability of the soul to 'apprehend incompatible things', that is, to understand the eternal truths of mathematics and to have contact with God, as showing that the soul's own nature is 'incorruptible', or naturally immortal (*Summa contra gentiles* II, 79.5). But it is in no way obvious

that the finite cannot understand the infinite or that the mortal cannot understand the immortal.

Arguments to the *natural* immortality of the soul are very unappealing today. Some philosophers find arguments to show that the world is such that something external to the soul will guarantee its immortality more persuasive. An argument of Kant captures much more ordinary thinking. It is not strictly speaking, Kant claims, a theoretical argument which proves that the soul is immortal, but a 'practical argument' to this effect: we are obliged to act morally, and it only makes sense to do so if we suppose that we, and so our souls, will continue to live forever. Kant regards the various moral obligations under which we stand as different aspects of the obligation to realize the supremely good state of affairs, the *summum bonum*. The *summum bonum* involves our own moral perfection, something towards which we make only slow progress in this life and need endless duration finally to achieve. For moral actions to make sense, we must regard the *summum bonum* as attainable and so regard ourselves as having an endless life. Kant backs up his argument with the further consideration that the *summum bonum* requires that happiness be in proportion to good moral behaviour, both for ourselves and others. But in this world the good are not always happy. So again for the *summum bonum* to be attainable we need another world in which 'the greatest happiness is... combined... with the highest degree of moral perfection' (Kant 1788, bk 2, ch. 2, section 5). This, Kant claims, requires the operation of God, who alone can bring about such coincidence. Now Kant has a very high conception of the status of moral obligation. Others may not regard its claims so highly. Yet even if we conceive of it as Kant did, it is in no way obvious that to make sense of our doing some moral action, we need to think of it as a step towards our own moral perfection which will eventually be achieved. When conscious of an obligation to help the starving, I give money to a charity; the point of my action is achieved by my giving the money, independently of whether it improves my character. Likewise its purpose is achieved whether or not I am the happier for achieving it. Holiness of will combined with supreme happiness may be good, but acting morally seems to have its own point quite apart from whether all that results from it. Moral actions are in general fully worth doing for totally mundane reasons, even if there are also reasons connected with an after-life for doing them.

Kant's argument has very considerable similarity to the argument of Eastern religions from the law of karma, which they affirm to be a basic principle governing the universe, that all actions get their proper reward (see Karma and rebirth, Indian conceptions of; Reincarnation). Good actions lead to happiness, and bad actions to unhappiness. Since so often this does not happen to a soul during a given earthly life, it must have another life in which morality and reward can be evened out. Although karma does not require another life on this earth, Eastern religions believe that we are normally reincarnated on earth. The good are reincarnated in more desirable states; the good poor man has a more wealthy next life, and the bad poor man may be reincarnated as a mere animal. But Eastern religions do not all hold that this necessarily goes on forever. Buddhism claims that our supreme goal should be to break the cycle of death and rebirth, by living such holy lives that after death we are not reincarnated at all, but depart to *nirv\_\_a* (nothingness). It is disputable whether this means 'annihilation' or, on the contrary, a totally blissful state (see *Nirv\_\_a*). However, before we could accept this argument, we would need good grounds for believing that the law of karma operates.

If the soul is not naturally immortal, then the action of some supernatural law (karma) or agent (God) is required to make it immortal. Much Christian tradition affirms that the free action of God is required for this purpose and that he is under no obligation so to act. In that case, in order to have grounds to believe in immortality, we will need his assurance that he will so act. At this point Christian tradition normally produces, not a Kantian argument, but the claim that it is an item of revelation. God has told us that he will so act, that he will bring the dead to life again – the good dead to an everlasting good life, and the bad dead to an everlasting bad life. (There are, however, differences within Christian tradition about what will happen to the bad, and to those who die before they become clearly good or bad (see Heaven; Hell; Limbo; Purgatory; Revelation §§2–3).)

As well as such very general arguments for life after death, there are some empirical arguments. Eastern religions occasionally produce children who claim to be able to recall events of a previous life, events which they could not have known to have happened by any normal means, but which subsequent investigation reveals to have happened. Some child describes the house at some place where 'he' lived in his previous life, and then such a house is found. But there are doubts about the worth of such evidence.

Relatively few children make such claims; the story which they tell about the previous life can be vague; and there are doubts about whether ordinary means of their having obtained the information about that life have really been excluded. Then there are arguments from what mediums declare is told to them, while they are in a trance, by persons already dead. The evidence that those persons give is supposed to be the knowledge that mediums acquire of details of those persons' past lives, which, it is claimed, they could not have acquired by any normal means. But there are similar doubts about the worth of evidence of this kind. The knowledge acquired may be vague and might have been obtained by some normal route. Even if these doubts could be satisfactorily resolved, a hypothesis of some abnormal way of acquiring information about the past might seem less radical than a hypothesis of the present existence of persons who have died. Finally, and most interestingly, there has been the discovery of 'after-death experiences'. Some ten to fifteen per cent of subjects resuscitated after being clinically as good as dead report having had 'transcendental experiences' during the period in which they were virtually dead. These experiences consist of a very vivid awareness of approaching a border or frontier and seeing into a strange, normally immensely pleasing world and then being called back. This coincidence of kinds of experience among people of various backgrounds is interesting; but the experiences have relatively little common detail, so as hardly to provide by themselves very strong evidence that what was observed was really there. These observations would require support from other considerations. In any case, none of the empirical evidence by itself gives any reason at all for supposing the subsequent existence to be everlasting.