

INTRODUCTION

THE CONCEPT OF THE SOUL: SOME SCIENTIFIC AND RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES

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Are human beings composed of two parts, a material body and a nonmaterial soul? Or are humans purely physical beings? ... Many Christians, and believers of other faiths as well, hold (or at least assume) a dualist account. ... However, many scientists and philosophers today suppose that the person is but one substance – a physical body (Murphy 1998, p. 1).

This quotation neatly sums up two common assumptions held today regarding the nature of human beings, and of that entity which is known as the soul. For some Christians, a dualist perspective runs deep, heightened in some quarters by interest in so-called ‘Near-Death Experiences’ which have been widely studied in recent decades (for two contrasting accounts of such experiences, see Zaleski 1987 and Marsh 2010). Although theologians have noted for some time that ‘The Bible looks on body, mind and spirit as aspects of a personal unity’ (c.f. Barbour 1998, p. 270), there yet remains a popular assumption that religious outlooks support dualistic understandings of humankind, whilst scientific outlooks prefer monist ones; and this perception can in turn reinforce the still-popular belief that religion and science are ineluctably opposed to one another.

But how did these contrasting perspectives arise? To what extent are dualist and monist perspectives *necessitated* by religious or other beliefs? Are alternatives possible: can traditional views regarding the soul perhaps be re-framed so as to replace dissonance with consonance? Or are we better off leaving aside soul-language, despite its deep embeddedness in much religious thought and writing, as a hangover from pre-modern

thinking with little or no contemporary relevance? These are some of the questions which are explored in the pages which follow.

The papers gathered together in this volume were presented at, or derive from, the conference of the Science and Religion Forum in September 2012, which was held at Regent's Park College, Oxford. (The original title of that conference, 'Can the concept of the soul have any meaning?', has been revised to 'The concept of the soul: Scientific and religious perspectives' in order to reflect more accurately the overall theme of the papers presented here.)

This collection begins with a specially-commissioned historical overview of ideas about the soul from Louise Hickman. Hickman reviews the roots of dualistic and monistic thinking about human beings, surveying sources from the Bible, classical Greek philosophy, and the Fathers of the Early Church; and she examines the development of these ideas in the work of two key subsequent thinkers, Thomas Aquinas and René Descartes. She cautions against too-glib divisions between 'Greek' and 'Hebrew' origins for this dichotomy in ways of thinking about humanity, teases apart the richness which is inherent in both these strands of thought, and urges us to be careful in reading earlier writers through the lenses of later ones. She thus sets the scene admirably for the range of discussions which follow.

There follow three papers which stem from plenary presentations at the Oxford conference. Peter Hunter explores a particular strand of this historical narrative further through his discussion of the ways in which the idea of the Soul in Roman Catholic theology has been developed within that tradition, from the early Church *via* Thomas Aquinas to the present day. He tackles head-on two 'keystone' doctrines which might be seen as problematic in drawing together Catholic and scientific worldviews, namely the immortality of the soul and the direct creation of the human soul by God. Hunter urges strongly that idea of the soul is not an antiquated concept, and that, moreover, Thomist views of the soul can still make sense in the twenty-first century.

Nancey Murphy offers some fascinating reflections on the question of the soul from her perspective as a philosopher of science. She notes the persistence of dualistic thinking amongst religious believers, despite its large-scale rejection amongst biblical scholars; and she seeks to find a path between the Scylla of dualism and the Charybdis of 'neurobiological reductionism'. After exploring the idea of 'downward causation' propounded by Arthur Peacocke and others, she turns to complex systems theory, using an ant colony as an example of such a system in which emergent, holistic properties may arise. She finally argues for a physicalist

understanding of human nature, coining the expression ‘multi-aspect monism’ for such an understanding.

Chris Frith brings the viewpoint of a contemporary neuroscientist to bear on the key question, ‘Is the brain all there is?’. He explores factors such as unconscious processes and the feeling we have of responsibility for our actions; and drawing on the latest research in functional magnetic resonance imaging of the brain, his considered – and resonant – conclusions are that ‘understanding the brain is necessary, but not sufficient, for understanding the human person’, and that ‘the human soul ... emerges from the interaction of the brain with cumulative culture’.

A number of shorter papers then shine spotlights on the concept of the soul from a rich variety of different perspectives. Mark Harris revisits the Apollinarian controversy of the fourth century to explore a question with profound theological ramifications: did Jesus have a soul? Harris draws from his considerations the conclusion that this debate has something to feed into modern thinking about the soul, suggesting as it does that the soul is irreducible to biological considerations, yet emerges from them. Peter Colyer’s essay also sets out by exploring a strand within traditional Christian thinking: that of hymnody. He notes the ways in which hymns, especially those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, make reference to the soul in both dualistic and monistic terms – either as that part of the human person which ascends to the heavenly realm at death, or as standing for the ‘inner personality, the real “I”’. Colyer then contrasts this use of soul language with the materialism which underpinned the growing science of psychology through the latter part of this period.

The next two papers explore our understanding of the soul through the writings of two influential twentieth century authors: Wolfhart Pannenberg and Martin Heidegger. George Medley explores Pannenberg’s theological anthropology in the light of his juxtaposition of the activity of the Spirit with field theory. Medley fascinatingly traces the roots of Pannenberg’s thinking in the philosophers Schelling and Herder, and he concludes that, for Pannenberg, the soul is to be understood not in material or physicalist terms, but rather in psychological and relational terms, as the identity of the individual expressed in loving relationship with God in Christ. Mehdi Nassaji uses Heideggerian philosophical categories to distinguish between the religious world and the scientific world (both being instances of Heidegger’s world²), and maintains that it is possible to defend the soul as a real entity that may be discovered in one world, if not in the other. Nassaji makes the thought-provoking comparison of these two worlds with the worlds of Western and Chinese medicine, as systems of thought which

are coherent for those who practice them, yet which each have their own, incompatible, conceptual schemes.

A paper by Aemen Javairia and Asma Hussain Khan contributes an important set of insights on the soul from an Islamic perspective. Drawing on medieval writers, and on the modern Muslim psychologist A. H. Almaas, they point to the Islamic tradition as offering a rich set of resources with which to tackle both theoretical and practical (psychological) questions regarding the soul.

Finally, SRF Secretary Jeffrey Robinson offers by way of Epilogue a short history of the Science and Religion Forum. As the present collection of essays serves to exemplify, the topics which the Forum exists to explore remain as important to our understanding of ourselves, our environment, and the interactions between the two as they ever did. The formerly popular understanding of science and religion as opposing factions engaged in endless debate may be on the wane (except, perhaps, in certain controversialist quarters); but the positive, mutually-enriching dialogue between the two continues to bear much fruit. It is our hope that the conferences and subsequent publications of this Forum may contribute to that ongoing journey into deeper mutual understanding.

Bibliography

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