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The 'Soul': Some Reflections

In his provocative Prize Essay Dr. Howard recently argued that it is time for Christians to abandon the traditional idea of the 'soul' as the part of a man that lives on after death. In the following short article Mr. Adcock, who lectures on the philosophy of religion at Manchester College, Oxford, maintains that if they take Dr. Howard's advice Christians will abandon more than they had bargained for.

In his recent article in *Faith and Thought*, Dr. J. K. Howard¹ argues that the traditional idea of the 'soul' owes more to Platonic philosophy than to Biblical teaching, and that it is in fact basically wrong. His view is likely to appear attractive to those Christians who desire to state their beliefs in such a way as to render them invulnerable to scientific criticism of all kinds. There are, however, a number of points which Dr. Howard seems to have overlooked.

Let us say at once that it is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to define, locate, or consistently talk about the 'soul' in relation to the other features of the psycho-physical organism that is a man. It is certainly not easy to refute reductive materialists or behaviourists who seem to identify the mind with the brain. It is even less easy to refute the common-sense opinion that when we are dead we are dead, especially when the scientists argue that there is no valid or indisputable empirical evidence of survival and the philosophers argue that the notion of a disembodied spirit is meaningless. Christians who wish to avoid a direct clash between science and philosophy on the one side and revelation on the other might well be glad to know that the 'soul' and

its survival do not form a part of revealed religion. It will please them to know that if the 'soul' can be analysed without remainder into physical constituents this need not mean that any important theological truths have been falsified.

Dr. Howard follows a line that some Protestants have found attractive, for a number of disparate reasons, ever since the 16th century.² For the Roman Church, on the other hand the doctrine of the survival of the soul is *de fide*.³ Dr. Howard is prepared to accept the idea that *nothing* of a man survives physical death — though he is strangely inconsistent, for he refers also to 'the intermediate state' and its importance.⁴ He believes that the Scriptures are not talking about any survival of any part or aspect of a man: the Gospel hope is one of resurrection on the Last Day. This is a matter about which none of the natural scientists could possibly have anything to say. It is not an event which takes place in this world in the ordinary course of history, and it is compatible with any and every theory about the relations between 'mind' and 'body'. What revelation states, on this assumption, is that God will *re-create* human beings *ex nihilo* on the Last Day. In the meantime, they have been literally *nothing*: when they died they died *completely*. Belief in the resurrection on the Last Day does not depend on any sort of philosophical or scientific evidence, argument or analogy, but *solely* on our belief in God's promise together with our belief in his absolute omnipotence.

It may save the Christian a great deal of trouble if he can show that Christian theology is unaffected by any of the controversies about the relations between 'mind' and 'body' or between 'mental events' and 'material events'. The Christian belief in a future life would then be in principle irrefutable. But it is possible that this sort of 'victory' for the Christian apologist may involve consequences far greater than he realises.

Whatever other functions the notion of the 'soul' may have, the word is used in common parlance and in traditional Christian theology to refer to that 'part' of a human being which survives bodily death. If we believe that a human being does in any sense survive, we cannot entirely dispense with

the term 'soul'; we need rather to think about its possible meaning. As the physical body has died and disintegrated, the 'soul', or 'psychic factor' (as Broad called it⁵) must be either disembodied or immediately reincarnated. The only other possibility is total annihilation. Professor H.H. Price⁶ has sought to analyse carefully what disembodied experience could possibly comprise. The Jesuit theologian, Fr. Karl Rahner has also written a valuable paper on 'The Life of the Dead'.⁷

Both the above writers are trying to give an account of a state of affairs in which they believe. On the other hand, a more detached philosopher, Professor T. Penelhum,⁸ has argued that it is almost impossible to talk meaningfully about the experience of disembodied spirits: if we abstract from experience, as we know it empirically, everything that is bound up with embodiment, there is virtually nothing left. Those who are interested in such matters from either a religious point of view or in connection with psychical research are certainly faced with some very difficult philosophical problems. I am not making any attempt here either to underestimate or to solve such problems: I am merely arguing that these *are* the problems with which Christian philosophers have to deal — they cannot be shelved. It is implausible to argue that those who believe either in Biblical revelation or traditional Christian experience can safely jettison either the notion of human survival or the possibility of disembodied spirits.

There are numerous Biblical references to non-human spirits, presumably disembodied — e.g. angels and demons. There are also instances of the dead being brought back — e.g. Samuel and the Witch of Endor incident, Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration. Those who argue that the dead do not in general survive try to explain these away as special cases: the Transfiguration was a special miracle, it was not really Samuel who appeared, but rather a familiar spirit.⁹ The prohibition of necromancy in the Bible implies that it *ought* not to be practised, not necessarily that it *cannot* be practised. What did Jesus mean in Matthew 22: 32 about the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob being the God of the living

rather than of the dead? Again, for Jesus' hearers, 'Abraham's Bosom' was not *just* a literary manner of speaking: the Jews believed that the just are received at their death by Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Dives' discussion with Abraham in the parable does not suggest that Abraham was completely non-existent at the time of Dives' death.

It is, of course, possible to de-mythologise all such stories: but we should then need to de-mythologise very much more, including much that Dr. Howard would almost certainly *not* regard as expendable. We might also ask whether Jesus had ceased to exist between Good Friday and Easter Sunday: If bodily death *entails* soul-death, he must have done so; it is hard to see how in such a case he visited 'spirits in prison', or how they could exist. It is also hard to understand what Jesus meant when he promised the repentant thief 'Today thou shalt be with me in paradise'. According to Dr. Howard's theory, the only way out of this difficulty is to suppose (as many of the radical theologians do suppose) that Jesus expected an *immediate* Parousia, but that Jesus was certainly wrong. Does Dr. Howard agree with Schweitzer on this matter?

It is also clear that much post-Biblical Christian experience would be delusory if *no* human being had *ever* returned to give a message. Thus, I cannot see how Biblical, or indeed any traditional, Christians can deny the existence of disembodied spirits or argue that no human spirit can exist in a disembodied state. In what he calls a 'Heretical Postscript' Professor Penelhum also asks whether the denial of the possibility of disembodied spirits may not entail the denial of the existence of God himself. After all, God is traditionally believed to be non-material,¹⁰ even though John Laird,¹¹ in his Gifford Lectures, (like the Mormons) does entertain the possibility that God may have a material body of some sort or other.

Dr. Basil F.C. Atkinson¹² has recently written an excellent book in which he argues that the Bible does not teach the survival of any soul. His philological study of all the Biblical words used in connection with life and death etc. is persuasive as far as it goes. But the way in which the Biblical writers use words like *psyche* depends on what they are talking about: the meaning of words is governed by their context. The

problems the Biblical writers were discussing were not the same as the problems now being discussed within the Moral Sciences Faculty; they were not investigating scientifically and philosophically the relations between mind and body or the validity of reductive materialism. We simply do not know what they would have written if they had needed to talk about completely different matters in a completely different intellectual climate. We cannot properly strain their metaphors and their poetry so as to extract from them theological or philosophical dogmas or to prejudge later controversies. In any case, the nearest we come to any sort of philosophical argument on such matters is in St. Paul's letters to the Corinthians. 'How do the dead rise, and with what body do they come?' (1 Cor. 15:35). His answer, based on the seed analogy, would suggest continuity rather than discontinuity. A gardener would not expect to get a good crop by planting non-existent seeds years after the natural seeds had really died! Similarly, in the Second Letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 5:1), St. Paul would seem to endorse the popular idea of body-soul dualism when he speaks of living in a tabernacle which is shortly to be dissolved. His other remarks in the same chapter might suggest a slight Hellenistic bias, 'hough when he talks about needing to be absent from the body so as to be present with the Lord, he may be using the word 'body' in a pejorative sense only.

Suppose we do decide, however, to jettison survival of the soul and all types of body-soul dualism, and to pin our hope on the last great resurrection miracle on the Last Day. We now find ourselves, as Professor Penelhum shows, in even greater difficulties.¹³ Suppose that I (i.e. Adcock-I) die completely. Suppose that on the Last Day God creates a new Adcock (Adcock-II) *ex nihilo*. In what sense is it possible to say that these two Adcocks are identical? If God programmes A-II to resemble A-I absolutely, with all the memories and guilts etc. built in so that A-II *believes* he is a continuation of A-I, how can anyone tell whether the two of them are identical *numerically*, or just perfect 'doubles'? *But*, if it has been stated dogmatically that A-I did end and that A-II has been created *ex nihilo*, then they are not numerically identical and there is no continuity between them in fact. It is

logically impossible to distinguish in such circumstances between creation and re-creation. Unless there is a real continuity between A—I and A—II, the Last Judgement would not be in fact a judgement of A—I. It would be blatantly unjust to punish anyone for someone else's sins: Conversely, there is no point in our developing our personalities *to fit them for a future life* if there is *for us* no such life.

Though some of my criticisms may appear wholly negative and destructive, we are bound to sympathise with Dr. Howard's emphasis in the later pages of his essay. He thinks of Christ as offering 'Wholeness of life here and now' rather than a shadowy future life. Dr. Howard is a Christian physician, well aware of the intimate relations between physical and psychological ailments, with a love for the physical body, as befits a doctor, and with a desire to cure people *now*. He would naturally be attracted by the Lucan picture of Jesus the healer and by the Johannine emphasis on eternal life as a *quality* of contemporary life rather than as a mere extension of this life here and now. But this does not mean that the notion of survival is of no interest in connection with other problems in other contexts. The late Professor C.D. Broad was interested in establishing the priority of mind over matter on the ground that no religious view of life could possibly be validated if mind were simply epiphenomenal or if mental events could be analysed without remainder into material events: Broad studied psychical research in search of some empirical evidence which would refute the sort of naturalistic philosophy which he regarded as muddle-headed, narrow, and destructive of cultural values.¹⁴ A colleague of his, Dr. F.R. Tennant,¹⁵ also sought to show that empirically-based Christian theism cannot be sustained if there is no sort of survival. However tempting it may be to espouse a 'secular Christianity' and to refrain from offering pie-in-the-sky as a substitute for wholeness of life in this world, I wonder what Dr. Howard would think of Dr. Wren-Lewis' version of the Gospel hope,¹⁶ looking forward to the day when the idea of the resurrection 'might well be an expression of the ultimate achievements of technology'? 'We now have definite evidence from physiology that the body's mechanisms for preserving its vitality and

integrity are much stronger than we ordinarily realise so that there is no difficulty in imagining that they might be made to prevent ageing and to resist even major acts of violence (like crucifixion)'. Again, 'the general line of the actual findings of modern science make it quite reasonable to take the New Testament idea of physical resurrection quite seriously, if we look at them in the *spirit* of modern science'. An American writer, Dr. Rosin,¹⁹ has developed this notion of 'do-it-yourself immortality' in much greater detail. The traditional Christian view of the relations between the 'soul' and its body is much more rational and sober than some of the more recent theories which seek to replace it.

REFERENCES

1. *Faith and Thought*. Vol. 98. No. 1. 1970. pp 63–84.
2. Froom, LeRoy, *The Conditional Faith of our Fathers*, Vol. ii. p. 64 f.
3. *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*. By Ludwig Ott. Mercier Press. 1962. p. 98. The Roman Church would also seem to be committed to body-soul dualism. *Vide* the Encyclical *Humani Generis*, Pius XII. 1952 "The teaching of the Church leaves the doctrine of Evolution an open question, as long as it confines its speculation to the development, from other living matter already in existence, of the human body. (That souls are immediately created by God is a view which the Catholic faith imposes on us.)"
4. Ref. 1, p. 83.
5. C.D. Broad, *The Mind and its Place in Nature*. p. 536
6. H.H. Price in *Man's Concern with Death*, edited by Eric Rodhe. 1969.
7. Rahner, K., *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 4, 1966 'The Life of the Dead'. pp. 347–356.
8. Penelhum, T., *Survival and Disembodied Existence*, 1970.
9. *Vide* B.F.C. Atkinson: *Life and Immortality*, p. 33 and p. 52. Cf. J. Stafford Wright: *Christianity and the Occult*. 1971. pp. 115 and 116.
10. cf. Thirty-nine Articles of Religion. Article I. "Without body, parts or passions"

- 11 Laird, J., *Mind and Deity*, 1940, p. 149.
- 12 B.F.C. Atkinson, op. cit. supra.
- 13 Ref. 8, pp. 93–102.
- 14 *The Philosophy of C.D. Broad*. Edited by P.A. Schilpp. 'Autobiography' by C.D. Broad. p. 58. 'A Reply to my Critics', by C.D. Broad. pp. 718–723.
- 15 Tennant, F.R. *Philosophical Theology*, Vol. II. pp. 269–272. Tennant concludes that "The world, in short, cannot safely be regarded as realising a *divine* purpose unless man's life continues after death."
- 16 *Fact, Faith and Fantasy*, By C.F.D. Moule, J. Wren-Lewis, P.R. Baelz, D.A. Pond. (Open Lectures of the Cambridge Divinity Faculty. 1964) Published in Fontana Books. J. Wren-Lewis: 'Does Science Destroy Belief?' pp. 42–44.
- 17 Rosin, J., *In God's Image*, 1969. Philosophical Library, New York. Dr. Rosin argues that 'Man is capable of anything nature and God can do, given time.' He shows how *homo sempervirens* will be evolved by science.

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Dr. Howard writes:

Adcock is approaching my argument from a purely philosophic standpoint and, I feel, with basic preconceptions (not that I am without those!). Research into the nature of man may well pose problems for the philosopher, but if his solutions are to be in any sense valid they must take into account the discoveries of the research biochemist or physiologist. The 'psychic factor' of man; his thought processes, memory, his dreams, his moods; are complex physico-chemical processes which cannot be separate from the wholeness that is man. Philosophers or theologians must always beware of 'doing a Nelson' and ignoring information or data which does not fit in with their preconceptions.