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The imprisoned soul?

Who are you? If someone were to ask you this question – as people often do as we travel through life – how would you answer it? The expected response might be to give your name and maybe also your job. Expected though this might be, such a response would not answer the question of who you are. Neither my name nor my job would tell you anything about who I am as a person. The question is, if we were to feel comfortable enough to reveal who we really are, what might we include in our self-description? Some people would describe their personality; others their intellectual ability; others again their values or hopes. All of these might fall under the rough heading ‘soul’. However, many people would also go on to describe their relationships (daughter/son; mother/father; sister/brother; wife/husband etc.) and/or their physical appearance; in other words features that could fall under the rough heading ‘body’.

Bodies and identity

Although some people might say that their bodies are only incidental to who they really are, others might point to aspects of their identity that are inextricably associated with their bodies. Some people find it impossible to imagine being who they truly are in any other body than the one they have now; others that they have been given entirely the wrong body and will not be at home in their body until it can be changed. There is a link between our body and who we feel ourselves to be. This is why a dramatic change to our bodies can be traumatic: the loss of hair through chemotherapy; a change of facial features due to accident or severe illness; the loss of a limb – any of these can

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feel as though they change who a person really is. Bodies may not be the entirety of who we are as people but they certainly contribute to our sense of self.

All of this challenges us to think about the soul and its relationship to the body and how we imagine them to be connected. It may seem odd to begin a book on the body with an exploration of the soul. The tendency to focus on the soul at the expense of the body is one of the reasons why the Christian tradition has had such an ambivalent relationship with the body throughout its history. While this over-emphasis on the soul might have contributed to current less positive attitudes to the body, this is precisely why we do need to begin here in order to understand the assumptions that guide our view of the body.

One of the problems with the word 'soul' is that in some (philosophical) contexts it has a very precise meaning; whereas in other more popular contexts it has a broader, more evocative meaning. Before we proceed, therefore, it is important to work out what the word 'soul' evokes for us. It is a word that we use regularly in popular speech: we talk about things being good for the soul; we swear we won't tell a soul; we try to keep body and 'soul' together; we pour out our souls or bare our souls and some people sell their souls. In more Christian circles we sometimes also talk about 'soul-making'. The word 'soul' is clearly suggestive and helpful for describing something about who we are. The question is what we mean when we use it.

Defining the soul

Souls are often seen as the opposite of the body. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), for example, defines the soul as the 'spiritual or immaterial part of a human being or animal, regarded as immortal'. Short as it is, this definition draws the attention to four key aspects of common definitions of the soul.

The first is that the word 'spiritual' is very quickly brought in when we talk about souls. This happens naturally and easily. In fact people often slip between the words 'soul' and 'spirit' as though they are the same word. A second factor to notice is that the dictionary entertains the possibility that animals have souls. This has been a very important part of discussion over the centuries, best summed up by the child's

question of whether their pet will go to heaven or not. A third aspect is to notice that the soul is often described as 'immaterial', as here, or 'incorporeal'. Particularly when it is described as incorporeal the implication is that the soul is somehow the opposite of our bodies – the immaterial to the body's physical. The fourth and crucial aspect to notice in this definition is that the soul is regarded as immortal: that bit of us that lasts beyond the grave.

The *OED* definition gives us some elements to reflect on when thinking about the soul, but there are some aspects missing that we also need to explore before moving on. When researching for this book I asked various people via social media what the word soul meant to them. The answers were fascinating. There were four strands to the answers but not the same four as in the *OED*. Some answers just had one of the strands; some had two or three of the strands. None had all four.

Two of the strands overlapped with two elements of the *OED* definition. People used the language of God and the divine to talk about the soul. So they said things like the soul was 'God's gift of life', or that it was that within us which has something of God's essence, that bit of us that God holds in his hands, that bit of us that can join in the dance of the Trinity. This clearly overlaps, at least in part, with a description of the soul as 'spiritual'. The other strand that overlapped was a reference to that bit of me that survives beyond the grave. Interestingly very few people referred to this directly though references to being held in the hands of God might be understood to imply it.

Other responses clustered around the idea of the soul being who we really are – the me-ness of me. Here people said that the soul was the real essence of 'me'; that unique core that makes me 'me' and you 'you'; the hallowed wholeness of me and what makes me truly human. The final strand of response, which was less common, and directly opposed by some respondents, was that the soul was the command centre of who we are, combining heart, mind and will. In other words the soul is rational and involves rational thought.¹

These add a fascinating dimension to our reflections on the soul. In particular they raise the question of what each of us means when we use the word and whether we all use it in the same way. At this point in the book, it is worth taking a moment to work out what you

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mean by the word ‘soul’, so that you can gauge where you place yourself in the discussion. A particularly important question to reflect on is how vital you think the soul is to your sense of identity. If it is essential, it is important to work out why it is so important before you continue onwards. For some people it is essential because the idea captures who they feel themselves to be now. For some it intimates who they might become. For others, it points to that of us which continues beyond the grave. For others still it points to that within us which is capable of a deep relationship with God or that which constitutes our mind. Of course it is unlikely that you will have just one of these views but having what you do think clear in your mind will make what follows much easier to relate to.

The influence of Plato

The challenge we face is that, whether we are aware of it or not, many of us have an ‘inner Plato’. In other words when we see the word ‘soul’ we cannot help but think of it in a way that has been influenced even a little by a Greek philosophy that comes from Plato. The majority of people whose thought-world has been shaped by the Western Christian tradition will to some extent also be influenced by Plato’s view of the soul. If your primary influence has not been in a world shaped by Western Christian thought then you may well view the world, the body and the soul in a strikingly different way from those who have.

For those whose world-view has been shaped by Plato, it is worth reminding ourselves not only that this influence is often unconscious but also that few people will hold a fully Platonic view of the soul. As so often happens the popular inheritance of a view is always a little mushy with some points emphasized and others ignored. Nevertheless the general shaping of popular views of the soul often has some level of influence from Plato. In order to help clarify this, it will be helpful to lay out briefly the understanding of the soul in Greek thought with particular focus on Plato and his successors.²

The soul before Plato

People love to attribute the invention of the soul to one person or another; I have seen it attributed, slightly incongruously, both to Plato

and to Descartes. They clearly cannot both be the author of the soul. Indeed there is strong evidence that neither of them came up with the notion of the soul. Belief in the soul stretches back far beyond even Plato and can even be found in the writings of Homer who wrote many years before Plato. Nevertheless, although not the inventor of the soul, Plato was certainly one of the first to write down a systematic understanding of what he understood the soul to be.

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by Homer (thought to have been written down around the sixth century BC) talk about the soul as something that gives life to a body. Interestingly Homer only normally mentions the soul when a human being is about to die. Thus it is associated with life and death: the soul is what brings life to a human body and is what leaves the body when it dies.³ Despite this emphasis, in Homer there is not much that we would recognize as a belief in the ‘afterlife’. Homer’s view of what happens after death was more of a grim, joyless existence in which the dead can remember what it was like to live but do not really ‘live’ themselves.⁴

It is in the writings of Pythagoras that we first see an idea of the soul doing more than just ‘existing’ after death. One of the most commonly cited stories about Pythagoras comes from Xenophanes who reported that Pythagoras on passing a man who was beating a puppy begged him to stop, saying, ‘Stop, don’t beat it, since in truth it is the soul of a friend which I recognized upon hearing it cry out.’⁵ Here the soul doesn’t just bring life but can be separated from its original body and relocated in another. Today this would be called reincarnation, though in discussions of Greek literature it is more commonly called the transmigration of the soul or metempsychosis. Unfortunately little is known of what Pythagoras thought happened to the soul between ‘incarnations’. Nevertheless it is possible to begin to trace the idea of the soul as having an existence both before and after its ‘life’ in a particular body.

The soul in Socrates and Plato

This view became more developed with Socrates and Plato. Socrates, a Greek philosopher widely credited with the foundation of the Greek philosophical tradition, is known only from the writings of others, like Plato and Xenophon. What we know about Socrates’ view

of the soul comes almost exclusively from Plato so it is very difficult to differentiate between their two views, especially in texts like the *Phaedo* which were written some time after Socrates' death and seem to contain more of Plato's views than of Socrates'. The *Phaedo* is set up as Socrates' final conversation in prison just before his execution by drinking hemlock. As you might expect much of the conversation is about what will happen to him after he dies and is one of the major places in Plato's writing that focused on the soul and its importance.

In the *Phaedo* the soul was described as that which imparts life to the body and, because its very nature is life-giving, as something that could never perish. So when someone died their body might perish but their soul continued onwards. Like Pythagoras, Plato believed in the transmigration of the soul so that the soul could exist in many different bodies. This means that for Plato, and his adherents, a particular body did not shape human identity because the soul could exist in a range of bodies. It also means that, as well as continuing to exist after death, the soul pre-existed the body.

The soul did not just bring life to a body but knowledge too. Plato saw the soul as a repository of knowledge which it had before it entered a body. For him, then, knowledge was simply the recollection of what the soul knew before it was born,⁶ and the body limited the soul's potential. It entombed it within the body's needs and desires so that the soul lost much of its knowledge and needed to shake off the dominance of the body in order to recapture its knowledge. For Plato the soul was unchangeable but was constrained by the body, which constantly changed and was, as a result, regarded as evil.⁷ Plato's emphasis on the pre-existing knowledge of the soul led him to identify reason as the essence of a soul. He saw the goal of life, therefore, as the nourishment of reason by seeking after wisdom and beauty. Those who did not seek such things and displayed traits such as cowardice and unrighteousness would, he believed, return in a lower form – like that of a woman!⁸

Outside of the *Phaedo*, particularly in the *Republic*, Plato argued that the soul had three parts: reason, spirit and appetite. On this understanding the highest part of the soul was reason, which Plato believed to be in the very likeness of the divine. It was particularly associated with knowledge and truth, and was thought to be able to

behold the perfection of the Forms.⁹ Plato located this part of the soul in the head. At the other end of the spectrum, the third, and lowest, part of the soul was the appetite or desires. This part of the soul was non-rational and governed by pleasure and pain. It is sometimes termed ‘the beast within’ because it was driven by desire. Plato situated this part of the soul in the belly.

The second or middle part of the soul sits between the head and the belly and between reason and desire. Plato identified this as the spirited part of the soul, where the higher passions reside, whose job it is to support the reason whenever reason and desire are in conflict. He gave the illustration of a charioteer (the reason) who attempted to control two horses, one good (the spirited element) and one bad (the appetitive element). The good one does what the charioteer demands but the bad one must be whipped into obedience.¹⁰

One point worth drawing attention to is that Greek philosophers, including Plato, did not make a distinction between the body as physical or material and the soul as spiritual or immaterial. This was a distinction clarified by later philosophers, not least Descartes. Philosophers like Plato saw the soul as ‘material’ or ‘stuff’, albeit a different kind of ‘stuff’ from that which made up the body. It appears that we not only read Paul through the lens of Plato, but also Plato through the lens of Descartes.¹¹

Philo and Augustine

Plato’s influence continued long after his death and shaped the thinking of a wide range of subsequent philosophers. One of the key adherents to Plato’s thinking was Philo. Philo was born around 25 BC and died around AD 45–50. He lived and worked in Alexandria in Egypt. A deeply devout Jew, he attempted to make sense of the Jewish faith in the light of Greek philosophy, and in particular the writings of Plato. As we will see below,¹² Hebrew thought saw the ‘soul’ in a very different light from Greek philosophy, and Philo is a rare case of someone who attempted to bring the two fully together. Philo stands in striking contrast to Paul here. Like Philo, Paul was well versed in Greek philosophy but, unlike Philo, Paul was not attempting a systematic reconciliation of Hebrew and Greek thinking. Paul used whatever tools lay available to communicate the good news of Jesus

Christ – sometimes these tools were Hebrew in origin, sometimes Greek – but the goal was always the communication of Jesus Christ not the attempt to reconcile the two different ways of thinking. Anyone who is tempted to see Paul as the midpoint between Hebrew and Greek thinking should look at Philo who illustrates what an attempt to reconcile Hebrew and Greek thinking might really look like.

Philo saw a thorough split between the body and the soul. He saw the body as the source of calamity for the soul, describing it as a corpse, a tomb or a prison.¹³ For him the body was the source of evil and dragged the soul into all sorts of passion, which would end in its destruction.¹⁴ Death, for Philo, was to be seen as a happy release from the tomb of the body, when the soul could fly free from the body that imprisoned it.¹⁵ Though clearly drawing on Plato, Philo took Plato's negative views of the body one step further, arguing that the body entombed the soul and drew it to evil.

Philo's attempt to reconcile Jewish thinking with Platonism was unusual in the extreme, but within Christian thinking it rapidly took hold as a view that fitted easily alongside a Christian view of the world. Indeed one of the reasons why the thought of Plato remains so influential today is because many of the early Church Fathers were so heavily influenced not just by Platonism, but also by Neoplatonism. Neoplatonism was a movement of mystical philosophy that took Plato's thinking further, arguing that God was all-good and the source of light, and matter was darkness and the source of all evil. God alone was free from matter and fully real. Human beings were part soul – and hence like God – and part matter and influenced by evil. The goal of a human being was to aim to eliminate from their soul anything that was material and therefore separated them from God.¹⁶

One of the most important Church Fathers to be influenced by both Platonism and Neoplatonism was Augustine.¹⁷ Like Plato, Augustine thought that everything that was alive had a soul and that the soul was what gave life to all things: plants, animals and humans. Again, for him, the difference between animals and humans was the power of reason, which he saw as ruling the body. A human being was a unity between a soul endowed with reason and a human body, though the soul had superiority because it ruled over the body. Another important strand of Augustine's thought is that he saw the

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faculties of the soul – memory, understanding and will – as a reflection of the Trinity.¹⁸ We mirror God in some dim way but we often chase the wrong things, things which take us away from God rather than towards him.¹⁹ Conversion requires us turning back towards God, yearning for his beauty rather than the pleasures we find elsewhere, and finding our rest in him.

Through Augustine – and indeed the writings of a range of other early Church Fathers – the philosophy of Plato became thoroughly intertwined with a Christian understanding of the world, the body and the soul. There is no space in this book to explore in detail how the notion of the soul developed in Western thought and, in any case, that has been done well elsewhere,²⁰ but before moving our attention back to the Bible, we need to pause briefly at the thinking of René Descartes and the views of modern neuroscientists, in order to give ourselves a sense of the backdrop against which we can understand modern views of the soul.

Before we do, however, it is worth noting that there is another major strand of thought about the soul which looks slightly different from that of Plato. This strand came from Aristotle (Plato's famous pupil) and was most eminently developed by Thomas Aquinas in the medieval period. This view is, on one level, much less dualist. For Aristotle the body and the soul together made up one substance. Aquinas also argued that human persons needed the body as well as the mind, since without it they could not experience anything.²¹ This view presupposes much less of a split between the body and the soul than Platonism did but the Platonic, overtly dualist view remains the one that has the greatest impact on many modern people's thought.

The soul in the modern period

Descartes

Descartes's famous adage 'I think therefore I am' lies at the heart of his understanding of the soul. Descartes takes Plato's view of reason as the highest part of the soul a step further, and argues that the mind and the soul are interchangeable. Thus for him the 'I' is the soul by which I am what I am.²² In his thinking, the pineal gland, a tiny organ

in the centre of the brain, was the seat of the soul where all thought took place and which in its turn governed the brain.

Unlike Plato and Aristotle, however, Descartes did not think that the soul gave life to the body. He saw the body as a separate mechanism. For him the body did not die because the life-giving soul left it, as in Platonic thought; for him the soul left the body because the body had broken down irrevocably and could no longer sustain the soul. In other words the two were even less connected in Descartes than they were in Plato's thought. It is also worth noting that for Plato the soul was some kind of 'stuff', whereas for Descartes it was entirely immaterial and had no shape in any given space. In fact for Descartes the soul was not located in space at all.

If this all too brief exploration of attitudes to the soul in key philosophical thinkers reveals anything, it reveals that there are really quite different views of the soul functioning alongside each other. Many popular views of the soul have sprinklings of Plato, Aristotle and Descartes in them (maybe even a bit of Philo too), but what we mean by 'soul' is far from fixed. We cannot assume that what I mean by the word is the same as what you mean. One of the key distinctions to observe is the difference between popular views of the soul and philosophical views of the soul. Modern philosophy, although discarding much of Descartes's view of the soul, continues to define the soul in terms of the mind or human consciousness. While consciousness may be an element of popular views of the soul it is only a small part of the whole, and some people resist entirely the inclusion of rationality in an understanding of the soul. This difference between modern philosophical definitions of the soul and popular usage may be helpful to bear in mind as we turn to the proposed death of the soul in modern neuroscience.

The death of the soul?

The contributions of modern neuroscience have given discussions about the soul a new lease of life. The enormous advances of neuroscience appear to challenge the dualism (i.e., body as separate from the soul/mind) of philosophers like Plato and Descartes. It is now increasingly accepted that physical changes to the brain (like lesions or tumours) can fundamentally affect who people are – what we

might call their mind. So brain tumours can increase aggression or reduce inhibition; they can induce confusion or mood swings. Brain lesions can affect cognitive ability and memory. A particularly troubling example of this was the case of a 40-year-old man who suddenly displayed extreme and uncontrollable paedophilia which just as suddenly stopped once a tumour the size of an egg was removed from his brain.²³

If our souls are connected in their entirety with our thinking processes or our personalities, then neuroscience may well now be able to demonstrate that there is no such thing as a 'soul'. There appears, certainly, to be no such thing as a gland in which the soul resides. Many modern neuroscientists would want to argue against there being such a thing as a soul. For example the great biologist and neuroscientist Francis Crick famously maintained: "'You', your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules."²⁴

Or take Nancey Murphy, a philosopher and theologian who says that 'science has provided a massive amount of evidence suggesting that we need not postulate the existence of an entity such as a soul or mind in order to explain life and consciousness'.²⁵ The New Testament scholar Joel Green agrees and argues 'that, at death, the person *really dies*; from the perspective of our humanity and sans divine intervention, there is no part of us, no aspect of our personhood, that survives death'.²⁶

Many Christians instinctively want to resist the neuroscientist's declaration of the 'death of the soul'. The question we need to wrestle with is on what grounds we do so. It challenges us to ask questions about the 'soul' – what it is and whether we really need it to explain human consciousness, personality and identity – and, if the soul does exist, how it relates to our body. In the course of the next few chapters, it will become clear that the biblical tradition does not support much of either philosophical or popular views of the soul. This pushes us to think again about the soul and why we find it to be such a meaningful concept.

The answers given to the question of how we describe the soul and its relationship to the body are sometimes categorized as monism, dualism or trichotomism.

Monism is the idea that we are a single identity or substance. There are a wide variety of positions that you can take within this view. Francis Crick, whose view was cited above, falls into the category of reductive materialism in arguing that we are no more than our bodies. Others, like Nancey Murphy again cited above, identify us as ‘spirited bodies’. In other words we have a spiritual quality but it cannot be separated from our body.²⁷

Dualism believes that bodies and souls are different and can be separated to some degree from each other. Dualist views do not automatically view the body as ‘bad’ but have sometimes done so during the course of Christian history. Dualist views can stretch from seeing the human person as a body–soul unity²⁸ to seeing the two as separate entities.²⁹

Trichotomism argues that human beings have three distinct parts not two. Following two particular biblical passages (1 Thess. 5.23; Heb. 4.13) this view identifies three parts for the body: body, soul and spirit.³⁰

In the course of the book we will be circling these issues on more than one occasion as we ask what Paul meant when he talked about souls, spirits, minds and so on and how these terms and ideas help us to understand his attitude to the body more. Let me stress again a point made in the Introduction. This is not a book about philosophy nor one about neuroscience, it is a book about Paul and what he might have to say about our bodies and their importance. If you are waiting for a technical definition of the relationship between the body and the soul then you have come to the wrong place, not least because I believe that Paul himself does not offer us a technical, systematic definition of body, mind, spirit and soul. There are many philosophical books on the soul (a good number referenced in the endnotes to this book) which you can explore for more technical discussions.

My own view is that any attempt to put Paul into a modern category (monist, dualist or trichotomist) is to force his thinking into a shape he simply would not recognize. Paul’s thinking almost defies definition in these terms and just as you begin to think that he really

is, for example, a monist he refers in 1 Thessalonians 5.23 to something that looks quite like trichotomism. As a result we should resist attempting to pigeonhole his views and instead recognize that he is exploring what makes us ‘us’ in his own unique way, a way that still has much to teach us today.³¹

Concluding reflections

As we reach the end of this brief exploration of how the soul has been understood in philosophy, it may be that you are now less clear, rather than more clear, about what the word ‘soul’ means. In reality, although it is helpful to observe some of the philosophical debates about what a soul is, popular usage of the word ‘soul’ overlaps only partially with philosophical usage.

We do talk about the soul as encapsulating who we are – defining the ‘me-ness’ of me – but most would not boil that down to the rational process or to human consciousness. Many would want to say that there is more to who I am than just reason. Another feature of the soul that Christians, in particular, might want to stress is the importance of the relationship between God and our souls. The ‘me-ness’ of me can only be fully realized in relationship with God. Many would want to join Augustine in arguing that our souls mirror God in some way, however dimly. Indeed his often-quoted saying, ‘You have formed us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you,’ seems to encapsulate something of the essence of who we really are. It is only when our souls have found rest in God that we are truly who we were created to be. This is, of course, where the word ‘spiritual’ becomes important in connection with our souls.

In addition to this many people would identify the soul as that which survives beyond death. The question that is hard to answer is what is it that survives? What is it about ‘me’ that survives? This is a question that has not really been touched on in depth in this chapter but that will become much more important from Chapter 3 below when we turn to look at the resurrection of the body (though only tackled head-on in Chapter 6).

So what of the body? There are few people today who would want to agree with thinkers like Philo in identifying the body as the soul’s

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tomb, bringing nothing but calamity to our souls. It is nevertheless interesting and important to ask ourselves how important we think our body is to our sense of self. How much does our body affect our understanding of who we really are? Could you have a body that looked completely different and still be you? Do you think of your soul as connected in any way to your body? These, and other questions, stand at the centre of what we are thinking about in this book and we will return to them on more than one occasion.