Nick Berry

know fear, know courage™

Essays

Anima 2

Yesterday evening, I was ambushed by another thought, related to my last letter to you concerning the fate of the soul. This latest thought was similarly inspired by the *Phaedo*, and goes something like this…

To the Physicists, there was no absolute process of coming into being or passing away. Rather, creation and destruction were seen as acts of modification of an eternal underlying structure. For example, the soul in its living and dead iterations; the living coming from the non-living, and vice versa.

Then we have the argument from recollection, expressed in the *Phaedo* and the *Meno*; the idea that the soul exists prior to life. This resonates with an expression I heard used recently by friends in Italy, who spoke of a deceased relative having returned to heaven; not gone to heaven, but gone back to heaven. The argument from recollection implies a universal warehouse of souls that is endlessly replenished, reordered and redistributed. This at least admits that individual souls are neither inviolate nor omnipotent, in that they must, by logic, lose their identities once the respective bodies they inhabit are finished with life. If they did not, they could not be reconfigured and made available to the next body in the queue.

Then we have the Atomists and their sense of the recycled soul, derived from the breaking down and reconstitution of matter to atomic particles. The magnetic charge that holds atoms in relation to each other, which they did not know about – or, if they did, did not commit to paper – is another way of expressing the notion of ‘soul’: invisible but coherent and eternal, in the sense of the Platonic Idea, in that soul binds together and gives substance, and, in doing so, gives life, if we take the sense of the soul as breath.

Then we have the inductive exposition of the Body against the Platonic Idea, in which the body is understood to be capable of sense (sensory/sensual) and subject to decay, where the soul is invisible and creates at least the representation of immortality, constituted by its state of non-mortality. In this case, the soul can resemble both change and permanence, depending on its relationship to the body; change when in and of the body, permanence when not. That being the case, we can assume that the soul in its own right – divorced from the body – must be unchanging: beyond the influence of mortality, or immortal.

In spite of their different approaches, none of these arguments denies or disputes whether there is such a thing as soul; be its nature what it may. Investigation is focused on its form or expression, not on its existence or non-existence. This universal acceptance of the notion of soul is not restricted to Ancient Greece. I have broached the subject with contemporary Danes and, while the responses vary, not one person has questioned the concept of soul, or intimated a willingness to do so. Even a devout atheist; even a committed nihilist. Because nihilism is itself an expression of the same unknowable and undeniable quality that others call ‘soul’: a universal, infinite, unifying framework, or the eternal underlying structure identified by the Physicists. I think that may be what annoys nihilists; because to believe that there is no meaning is a belief, and a belief cannot exist if there is no meaning – otherwise, in what might it be said to believe? Nothing? Non-meaning? The nihilists’ existence disproves their central premise. You cannot not have a nihilist if there is such a thing as nihilism, because if the word ‘nihilism’ signifies anything, then there cannot be no meaning (the definition of nihilism). All of which implies, what? In which direction may this acceptance of the concept of a single, shared soul be pointing?

The *Phaedo* and all reflections of a similar nature that preceded and succeeded it, which mass of reflection includes all religions and all philosophies that busy themselves with considering the nature of existence, are concerned with the individual soul: what happens to your

soul, mine, and everyone else's after our bodies go the way of all flesh. But do those reflections explore the nature of soul itself, or the nature of human perceptions of soul as having some relationship with an individual body? Your soul, my soul, every person's soul (and the soul of every sentient being).

If the concept of soul is universal – something shared by all people, forever, in any temporal direction – is it not the case that the body must exist in relation to the soul, not the other way around? That is, we are defined by the soul; the soul is not defined by us. That is why I found myself questioning why it seemed so important in the *Phaedo* to determine what happened to the human soul after death, and why I found myself contending that it did not matter – not to the soul. It mattered to the body. It matters to us, and this mattering to us is an expression of our solipsism and introspection.

Our concept of the individual soul says nothing about the nature of the soul and everything about the nature of us. We need the soul to be individual because, if it is, it gives us an eternal relevance. Whether that means our eternal soul in heaven or our eternal soul in hell, it is Our Soul; *ergo*, for good or bad, we have eternal significance.

The soul does not need the soul to be individual, because it is not concerned for its own life or afterlife, because it exists beyond the conceptual borders of life and afterlife. The physical objects we encounter on earth exist in three dimensions. As a fallacious corollary to that, we tell ourselves that the world exists in three dimensions, as do we within it. In contrast, the soul exists in the nine (or is it eleven?) dimensions so far identified by physics, out of a possible infinite number. Life moves within the limitless structural possibilities offered by the soul (including imagination and love, and other non-three-dimensional qualities); the soul is not determined or restricted by the structural limits of life, whether actual or perceived.

In other words, the soul does not share our time on earth with us; we share our time on earth with the eternal, universal (being of the universe), infinite soul. We are given definition by it, not it by us.

The relationship of the soul to the individual is determined by the degree to which the individual honours the soul during the time that individual is moving and acting on earth. The greater the honour paid, the greater the person. The ultimate expression of that honour is the preparedness shown by Socrates and Jesus, among others, to sacrifice the thing called life to the demands of the thing called soul, or gods, or God. Exemplified in this way, that act of honour is an expression of humility, but that humility does not require the ultimate bodily sacrifice to define it. At its simplest and least costly level, humility in relation to the soul can be achieved through understanding and accepting that we are not the centre of the universe. This is the subject matter of the *Euthyphro* – the nature and value of piety – and the nature and value of Socrates and other lovers of wisdom. Whatever the final human balance arrived at through processes of logic, the soul remains indifferent, since the individual is of no interest to it, except that a bad individual detracts from the integrity of the eternal soul. The greater the evil in the world, the greater the suffering of the eternal soul, and the reverse. In Christian terms, when we violate the soul, we sin, and when we sin, we violate the soul.

The individual does not contain intrinsic relevance; she or he borrows relevance from the soul, which defines relevance. The extent of that relevance is determined by the honour that the individual bestows on the soul by acting in the soul's best interests. That is, doing nothing that harms the soul. If we can understand 'soul' as a synonym for 'consciousness' – because consciousness defines life (in what sense can we be said to be alive if we are not conscious of our existence?) – then honour of the soul means honour of the conscience, because conscience is judge and jury of consciousness. Expressed in that manner, you could use the word 'God' to describe the nature of the soul, and the nature of the soul to describe what is intended by the word 'God': the essence (fire) reflected by that designation. That is how, in the Christian context, God not only *can be* but *is* – has to be, must be, has no option but to be – omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent, because without God (soul) there is no

consciousness (humanity) and in consciousness is God. The two cannot be separated. If they are, neither entity can exist. The presence of one defines the other and the absence of either negates the other. Food only exists in relationship to nourishment, which in turn relies on an object that needs nourishing. If there is no object that needs nourishing, there cannot be that thing called ‘food’, as it would lack the object in whose terms it is defined. That mutual reliance, that equilibrium of opposites, could be seen as the essence of the relationship of soul (God) to human. The one relies on the other for its definition.

This proposal of one universal soul in which we each partake, and which defines our existence, is strengthened if we can accept the notion that soul – consciousness, conscience, God – is not limited to humans, as asserted by Italy’s patron saint, who said of the relationship between God and humanity: ‘Your God is of your flesh; He lives in your nearest neighbour, in every man.’ Saint Francis believed, too, that nature itself, and thus every living thing, reflected the nature of God (the essence expressed in that word), which means by corollary that God (soul) is in every thing that lives. If that were not the case, we could not speak of nature as being a living thing, in the same sense as we understand humans to be living things: coming into being, breathing for a period of time, decaying, and returning to the earth from which they came. That which defines life in one living thing cannot deny life in another living thing without denying its own existence.

If soul can extend its reach beyond humans, where does that leave human uniqueness as being defined by the soul, and where does it leave the human concept of the individual soul? If we can open the concept of the universal soul to admit non-human mammals and even non-animal life, it thrusts the solipsism that informs the conception of an individual soul into an unforgiving light.

If soul could be said to be a synonym for consciousness, and consciousness the prerequisite for conscience, in what sense can other mammals be denied access to the universal soul? It is demonstrable that other

mammals are not only conscious but possess a conscience, informed by an innate morality commensurate with our own. If they were not, they could not punish transgression of their own social rules, and they do. The tyrannical monkey, the thieving lion, the bullying dog, are all either shunned, driven out of their social groups, or killed by their peers. Always. No school or church or parent or existentialist taught them their moral values, or their duty to their fellows to punish transgressors. Their moral values, like our own, are *innatus*: inborn.

The concept of individual soul devised by humans is the comfort blanket of humanity. As we hug it to us, curled in fear in our cave with our backs to the fire, we comfort ourselves in the belief that we have an eternal relevance, in and of ourselves. In truth, our eternal relevance – if we succeed in achieving it – is derived from everything and anything but ourselves. It is derived from, and consists in, who and what we can be for other people and other things, whether of the body or of the mind; how we choose to serve the world we inhabit, not how it serves us.

Our eternal relevance – if we succeed in achieving it – is derived from and consists in the love we share with other humans, other living things, minds, consciousnesses, consciences. Few seek comfort in that understanding; few in Socrates' time, and few in our own. Not only are the many content to live in fear, unwilling to go to the bother of finding the comfort they seek in acceptance of their physical irrelevance through achieving relevance in their spiritual incarnation (soul); they vilify and mock and punish those who are capable of subjugating the animal desires of the body to the spiritual demands of the mind to honour its essence: soul. They kill Socrates and keep on killing him. The history of humanity is a history of murdered philosophers, prophets and seers. Bitter irony, as it is those philosophers, prophets and seers who could, if permitted, 'show the fly the way out of the fly bottle', as Wittgenstein expressed it.

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.

Hamlet, III.i.83 ff.

We gaze at the heavens and see infinite darkness. We look at the images produced by the Hubble telescope and see billions of other galaxies; 100 billion so far, with 200 set to confirm themselves once the James Webb telescope is up and running, with another 200 billion lying in wait for the next telescopic innovation. We stand on the shore of the ocean and see a force of nature that no human ingenuity can subjugate, which immunity from human tyranny it shares with all other forces of nature. We see the mightiest brought low by the tiniest cancer cells. We see the charm of a loved friend reduced to drooling incoherence by dementia. We see a niece drown through her own mother’s arms. We see our smallness and vulnerability, and we are afraid. We invent the notion of the individual soul to comfort us, ignoring the eternal soul whose representative on earth is all we are, and everything we are. One soul. One consciousness. One love.

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