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Are We Born and do We Die?

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Abstract

The stranglehold on our imagination by the mind-body dualisms that permeate the culture is such that most people seem to suppose that "body" and "soul" name distinct and separable entities. Resisting such dualisms in favour of an old-fashioned Aristotelean view of the soul as the form of the body, this essay considers two questions: do human parents produce human beings, and do human beings die? The doctrine of the special creation of the individual soul seems to require us to answer the first question in the negative because, according to this doctrine, parents only produce matter for the God-given soul to form. As to the second, many people seem to suppose that human beings do not die, only their bodies do. Arguing against the view that immortality is a natural property of human minds, the essay suggests (with the help of Joseph Ratzinger) that, whether we speak of "immortality" or of "resurrection", life from death is neither nature, nor achievement, but gift.

Keywords

Body, soul, mind, birth, creation, death, immortality, resurrection

1 Prologue

1.1 Guildford Crematorium

After the funeral service for my mother, some years ago, my wife and I accompanied the coffin the fifteen miles to Guildford Crematorium, leaving my sister to start providing the rest of the company with food and drink. There came with us an elderly first cousin of my mother's, a devout Anglican and rather grand person who had once been Private Secretary to the Queen.

The chapel of Guildford Crematorium is, even by the general standards of such places, unbelievably dreary. As we left it, I turned to the cousin and said: "Philip, this is a *soulless* place", to which he replied: "Oh, I do hope not".

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1.2 Introduction

There is nothing fine-tuned or erudite in this short paper. I simply want to try to open up the conversation – firstly, by making some polemical remarks against "substance-dualist" anthropologies and, secondly, by asking two questions: "Are human beings born?", and "Do human beings die?".[1]

A central issue in this discussion concerns the status of our discourse. For example, if someone says: "human beings consist not only of perishable bodies but also of immortal souls", are they talking the language of the physical sciences, or of philosophy, or theology? Are they issuing an empirical description of some kind, or expressing their trust in God's fidelity? To put it another way: how are such claims best tested or evaluated?

2 Against Dualism

Richard Sorabji's contribution to the 1996 Wolfson College Lectures in Oxford (published as *From Soul to Self*), which was entitled "Soul and Self in Ancient Philosophy", began as follows: "How many of us now believe we have souls? There are at least two reasons why we hesitate. First, we tend to think of the soul as something immortal, and in the English-speaking countries doubt has spread about immortality. Second, Descartes revised the Aristotelian concept of soul and marked the revision by switching to the word 'mind' (*mens*)."[2]

"Revised" seems to me a rather understated description of what Descartes did. In a study published posthumously in 2005, and entitled *The Good Life*, Herbert McCabe said of a chapter devoted to sketching "an agenda ... for thinking about what it means to be alive": "I see this chapter as a skirmish in the war between Aristotle and Descartes. I see this war as a liberation struggle to free us from the shackles of Cartesian dualism, the mind/body dualism that permeates our culture and our society."[3] And, a few pages later: "in consequence of the Cartesian victory over Aristotle the word 'soul' has been taken over to mean the Cartesian consciousness, a 'spirit'

[1] As reported by John Cornwell in *The Tablet* ("Soul Searching", 29 July 2006, pp. 8–9), European bishops called for more debate following an EU decision to fund embryonic stem-cell research. In response to this call, John Cornwell, Eamon Duffy and I convened a twenty-strong interdisciplinary group to discuss the question of the soul (see John Cornwell, "How to conceive of humanity", *The Tablet* (14 April 2007, pp. 4–5). This paper is a revised version of my contribution to that conversation.

[2] Richard Sorabji, "Soul and Self in Ancient Philosophy", *From Soul to Self*, edited M. James C. Crabbe (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 8.

[3] Herbert McCabe, O.P., *The Good Life*, edited and introduced by Brian Davies O.P. (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 58.

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that is supposed to haunt the body, and so it is utterly misleading to use it any more in an Aristotelian context."[4]

I am happy to enlist in McCabe's war but, before doing so, need to issue a caveat and voice a puzzle. The caveat: to describe the "mind/body dualism that permeates our culture" as "Cartesian", as we conventionally do, does not necessarily entail supposing that Descartes was any more a Cartesian than Aquinas was a Thomist or Karl Marx a Marxist!

My puzzle concerns the *roots* of our dualism. It would be difficult to imagine a more "anti-Cartesian" text than *Rameau's Nephew*, which Diderot first drafted in 1761, a century after Descartes' death.[5] In view of the immense impact which this short text had – on Goethe, Hegel, Marx and Michel Foucault – how did what McCabe called the "Cartesian victory" come about? It is as if alternative descriptions of the human got lost in learned libraries, and only a simplified anthropological dualism shaped the public imagination. I do not know the answer, but when I put the question to Nicholas Boyle, he suggested that if we want, "iconically", to finger one early modern individual, it should be Martin Luther rather than Descartes.

Whatever about that, in what follows I am going to take a good, old-fashioned Thomist approach and suppose the human soul to be, as the Council of Vienne said in 1312, the *"forma corporis"*, the *form* of the human body. The souls of cabbages, being the forms of cabbages, are different. And, of course, when we speak of "bodies", we are speaking of *living* bodies. Strictly speaking, a corpse is not a human body. It can't be, because it is lifeless: it lacks a human soul.

Historically, "soul-talk" has always been "life-talk". Almost all the ancient words – *nefes* and *ruah* in Hebrew, *psyche* and *pneuma* in Greek, *anima* and *spiritus* in Latin – are rooted, etymologically, in breathing. Your soul is your life, or, if you prefer, your "mind". And so Aquinas can refer, quite straightforwardly, to "anima[m] humana[m], quae dicitur intellectus, vel mens": "the human soul, which is called intellect, or mind".[6] (Which makes Sorabji's remark doubly misleading.)

These days, some people say that human beings are made up of body, mind, and "spirit". The soul, they will insist, is a *spiritual*

[4] Ibid, p. 64.

[5] For some reflections on that text, see Nicholas Lash, "Reason, Fools and Rameau's' Nephew", *Theology for Pilgrims* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008), pp. 123–136.

[6] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* Ia, q. 75, art. 2, c. "The Latin word *intellectus* is connected with the verb *intellegere*: this is commonly translated 'understand', but in Aquinas' Latin it is a verb of very general use corresponding roughly to our word 'think'" (Anthony Kenny, "Body, Soul, and Intellect in Aquinas", *From Soul to Self*, pp. 33–48, p. 34). Many years ago, Herbert McCabe told me that, when translating Aquinas, he often found that the most appropriate translation of *"intellectus"* was *"imagination"*.

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reality. Quite apart from the fact that I am never *quite* sure what "spiritual" realities are, it may be worth remembering that Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, published in 1807, was translated into English, in 1931, as *Phenomenology of Mind* and again, in 1977, as *Phenomenology of Spirit*. So perhaps the distinction between "mind" and "spirit" really isn't all that clear.

In an article in *New Blackfriars*, Aidan Nichols "echoed [Joseph Ratzinger's] view that the great crisis of the present day ... is anthropological, to do with the essence of man. Is man simply part of nature, or has he through mind and personhood a spiritual vocation and destiny?"[7] Why could it not be said that humankind is that part of nature which has, through mind and personhood, a spiritual vocation and destiny? Nichols may have had in mind an address by John Paul II to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in 1996, in which the Pope insisted, "on philosophical as well as theological grounds", that the theory of evolution "cannot account for the appearance of the human soul which, being spiritual, cannot originate from the resources of matter alone", but must "be 'immediately created by God'".[8] I am citing the address from a paper of Ernan McMullin's on "Biology and the Theology of Human Nature", in which he distinguishes with great clarity between "dualist" and "emergentist" accounts of the human soul. So far as I can see, Catholic Christianity is by no means committed to a substance-dualist anthropology. As the Hungarian theologian Ladislas Boros put it forty years ago: "Man is not a composition of two things".[9]

3 Are Human Beings Born?

Which brings me to the first of my two questions: are human beings born? I intend the notion of "being born" to refer to the entire process from conception to parturition. In other words, do human parents give birth to human beings?

I don't think that I have ever met a parent who had any doubt about the matter and yet, an affirmative answer seems *prima facie* incompatible with the doctrine of the special creation of the individual human soul.

[7] Aidan Nichols, "Anglican Uniatism: A Personal View", *New Blackfriars* (July 2006), pp. 337–356, p. 348. No reference was given to where Ratzinger expressed this view in these terms.

[8] John Paul II, "Message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences", *Origins,* 26, 1996, pp. 350–3; cited from Ernan McMullin, "Biology and the Theology of Human Nature", *Controlling Our Destinies*, ed. Philip Sloan (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000).

[9] Ladislas Boros, *The Moment of Truth* (London, 1965), p. 74.

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This doctrine has a long and very varied history, going back, in one form or another, at least as far as Lactantius, in the third century. To talk of an ongoing debate between (as they were known at one time) "creationists" and "generationists" would, however, be misleading, because precisely what was at issue seems to have varied considerably in different cultural and philosophical contexts.[10]

In 1950, in the encyclical *Humani Generis*, Pope Pius XII, expressing thunderous disapproval of a group of French Dominicans and Jesuits, who were doing the best work in Catholic theology at the time and three of whom, when the wheel in due time turned, later popes made cardinals (Congar, Daniélou and de Lubac) said that "the Catholic faith obliges us to hold that human souls are immediately created by God". The curious thing about his remark is that it is purely parenthetical – furnished with no argument, no warrants. Pius XII seems simply to take for *granted* that "Catholic faith" thus obliges us. And yet, so far as I know, the question has never – shall I say "ripened" – to the point where the Church has thought it appropriate or necessary to give it doctrinal definition.[11]

To confess the world to be "created" is (on a classical Christian understanding of these things) to acknowledge all things' radical contingency, their "absolute dependence" (as Schleiermacher put it) on the love of God. "Creation", for mainstream Christianity, does not refer (as it does for deism and in much contemporary cosmological discussion) to the establishment of the initial conditions of the system of the world, but to the absolute dependence of all things, at all times, on the utterance of God's eternal Word and the breathing of his Spirit.

It took a long time to reach this understanding in the form in which we find it in, for example, the theology of Aquinas. Earlier theologies would give less austerely formal, more colourfully narrative or metaphorical expression to the same belief. And, of course, this understanding eventually faded into the aridities of modern deism.

What I am suggesting is that the notion that a handful of familiar, day-to-day contingent occurrences (namely: the birth of human beings) should require a series of special creative acts of God, while it might have found coherent expression in patristic thought, and, for very different reasons, in the thought-world of early modernity (being seen, by analogy with that world's understanding of miracles, as exceptions to the deist's general rule that God does nothing in particular), it really has *no* place in a philosophically mature theology of creation (which may be why Aquinas seems to struggle to

[10] According to Cross's *Dictionary of the Christian Church*, "no precise teaching about the soul received general acceptance in the Christian Church until the Middle Ages".

[11] McMullin says of the papal address to which I referred earlier that it "simply restates traditional doctrine in regard to the human soul, with a fuller philosophical commentary than any other recent Roman pronouncement on the issue".

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give it plausibility[12]). To put it polemically: from the standpoint of a philosophically mature doctrine of creation, the notion of the special creation of the individual human soul seems either primitive or deistic.

God is, eternally, at work creating all things – every sound and every movement, every mountain, every poem, every effect and every cause. God creates all things *ex nihilo* through the things that God creates.

In June 2001, a committee of Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox and Reformed theologians, chaired by Cardinal Cahal Daly (who is a philosopher) presented a brief to the House of Lords Select Committee on Stem Cell Research. Their document insists that "the Christian doctrine of the soul is not dualistic", and that "The soul is the natural life of the body, given by the life-giving God". Splendid. Two paragraphs later, however, the document tells us that the soul "is neither generated by the parents nor does it pre-exist the body, but is directly created by God with the coming to be of each human being". In other words, parents do not give their children "natural life".[13]

So far, I have argued against this view on the basis of the doctrine of creation. But there is another side to the coin. If parents do not give their children natural human life, what *is* it that parents procreate, what is it that the process of generation generates? The answer cannot be a human body, because a human body is matter formed by a human soul.

In the world of Cartesian dualism, there are only machines and ghosts, thick stuff (called "matter") and thin stuff (called "mind"). But, in the world of Aristotelian metaphysics, "matter", strictly speaking, is pure possibility.[14] And possibilities either are or are not

[12] The argument that, since the soul is "an immaterial substance it cannot be caused through generation, but only through creation by God" (*Summa Theologiae, Ia*, q. 118, art. 2, c) seems vulnerable to his own insistence – rejected, after his death, by the universities of Paris and Oxford – that, in each human being, there is "only a single substantial form, namely the rational or intellectual soul" (Kenny, "Body, Soul, and Intellect in Aquinas", p. 34), because the vegetable and animal functions of the human are clearly parentally generated. It is, I think, significant, that his attempt, in the reply to the second objection, to square these two convictions, is of exceptional length and complexity.

[13] The text of this brief, "On the place of the human embryo in the Christian tradition and the theological principles for evaluating its moral status", can be found on the website of the Linacre Centre.

[14] "I have already stressed that it is permissible to say – and indeed that we must say – that man is made up of body and soul. This is of course frequently stated in the catechism. All the same I believe that every Thomist theologian and philosopher will be bound to agree with me when I say that this mode of expression is really an empirically inexact one. It only conveys man's essential being in a highly primitive way, because man is not really built up out of body and soul, but out of spirit and *materia prima*, or 'first matter' – what one might translate as empty otherness" (Karl Rahner, "The Body in the Order of Salvation", *Theological Investigations, XVII* [London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981], pp. 71–89; p. 83).

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actualised and, in so far as they are actualised, formed. And to have a "mind" (or "soul") is to be the kind of thing which has possibilities of a certain kind. I have often quoted Tony Kenny's admirably Aristotelian definition of mind as: "the capacity for behaviour of the complicated and symbolic kinds which constitute the linguistic, social, moral, economic, scientific, cultural and other characteristic activities of human beings in society",[15] a definition which a Christian will wish to amplify by making mention of our capacity (unique, so far as we know, amongst God's creatures) for responding to God's creative and redemptive love.

I believe that human beings are born, and that each individual human being is, like every creature, created by God's love.

4 Do Human Beings Die?

And so to my second question: do human beings die? My impression is that a great many people don't think so. They acknowledge, of course, that our *bodies* die, but that really does not matter, because the *important* part of us, the soul, being immortal, cannot die. (Notice two things about this view, on both of which I shall comment in due course: [1] it takes "immortality" to be a natural property of human being; [2] it seems to have little or nothing to do with Christianity.)

Ten years ago, John Cornwell convened a conference, in Cambridge, the published proceedings of which were entitled *Consciousness and Human Identity*.[16] Most of the participants were scientists: biologists, psychologists, computer scientists, and so on. John Searle kept an eye on the philosophy and I tried to do the same for theology. Searle, whose work I much admire, is one of those people who refuse to describe themselves as atheists on the grounds that to do so would imply that theism had enough going for it to be worth refuting. At one point, he and I were sharing the platform. (I had by then ascertained that the conference divided almost fifty-fifty between atheists and evangelicals!) Searle said: "As far as I am concerned, when you die, you're dead". And I said: "I agree". Uproar! Atheists and evangelicals were of one mind: I had absolutely no right, as a Christian theologian, to utter such a preposterous opinion!

"Anima mea non est ego"; "My *soul* isn't *me*". That is Aquinas, commenting on *1 Corinthians*, Chapter 15, verses 19 and 20: "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died". The point that Aquinas is making might come across more clearly if we rendered it as "My life isn't

[15] Anthony Kenny, *The Metaphysics of Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 7.
[16] Edited John Cornwell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

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me", or "My mind isn't me". And he goes on: "even if my soul were to find salvation in some other world, neither I nor any man would do so".

Let me take up his argument a couple of clauses earlier. It goes like this: human beings naturally desire wholeness, healing, salvation (*"salus"*), and the soul, being part of the body, isn't the whole human being, and my soul isn't me. "The soul, being *part of the body*": *"anima autem cum sit pars corporis hominis, non est totus homo, et anima mea non est ego*".[17] We are now light years away from Cartesian dualism. No wonder poor Thomas had such a hard job trying to make sense of the idea of the "immortality" of the soul. "In the end", says Fergus Kerr, "he finds himself defending the thesis that bodiless souls, brainless minds as we might say, manage to think in ways that, when alive, they never thought possible".[18]

I suggest that, if we are to make sense of the notion of the immortality of the soul, we must abandon the twofold standpoint which I sketched at the beginning of this section. That is to say, we should, first, give up the idea that "immortality" is a natural property of human being: there are no "brainless minds". Having done so, we can acknowledge, quite simply, that we die! Secondly, we might try to see how the scene looks from the standpoint of theology: from the standpoint of the relations between human beings and the mystery of God.

As Paul O'Callaghan says, in his rather good article on "Soul" in the on-line *Interdisciplinary Encyclopedia of Religion and Science*: "All Christian anthropology ... is at heart an implicit Christology".

Confronted with the dark and certain fact of death, Christian hope is not grounded in any attempt to lift what Newman called "the curtain hung over [our] futurity",[19] but in Christ's resurrection. And it is, of course, as difficult now as it has ever been to talk sense, in time, of God's eternity which we are called to share. Temporality and eschatology make difficult companions. Easter, from the memory of which, and in the light of which, we live, still lies *ahead* of us, beyond our sight. A first step, perhaps, consists in acknowledging the metaphoricity of all the things we say, and a second would consist in choosing our metaphors with care.

Karl Rahner, in a lecture which he gave in 1966, insisted that "man's personal history as spiritual being is identical with his material and biological life (it does not pre-exist this, nor is the soul

[17] Thomas Aquinas, *Super Epistolas Sancti Pauli Lectura*, ed. Raphael Cai, O. P., 8th edition (Rome: Marietti, 1953), p. 411 (n. 924).

[18] Fergus Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 179.

[19] John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (London: Longmans, Green, 1885), p. 242. Newman's breathtaking sketch of the bleakness of the world occurs early in Chapter 5 of the revised (1865) version of the *Apologia.*

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'sojourning' in an alien setting, nor does it have any further and separate history of its own after death)".[20] And here, two years later, is his colleague Joseph Ratzinger (whom I refer to thus because he was, in those days, a long way from being pope): "Man is a being who himself does not live forever but is necessarily delivered up to death". Having, as he puts it, no "continuance" in ourselves, if there is more to be said it can only be said because we have learned that love is stronger than death. "Immortality", says Ratzinger, "*always* proceeds from love, never out of the autarchy of that which is sufficient to itself".[21] (Hence his insistence that, once the fundamentally *relational* character of human existence is given due weight and, as he puts it, "where the 'communion of saints' is an article of faith", then "the idea of the *anima separata* [the 'separated soul' of Scholastic theology] has in the last analysis become obsolete".[22])

Ratzinger's *Introduction to Christianity* is a series of lectures on the Apostles' Creed. Running through the sections on "Rose again [from the Dead]" and "The Resurrection of the Body" is the insistence that it really does not matter all that much which set of images one uses – whether the biblical imagery of "resurrection" or the Hellenic image of "immortality" – *provided* that one keeps in mind that what the doctrine is doing is not issuing empirical descriptions of future states of affairs, but expressing the fundamental Christian conviction that the creative fidelity of God's love overcomes even our mortality. Notice, for example, the way in which, in this passage, both sets of imagery are invoked: "Love is the foundation of immortality, and immortality proceeds from love alone … he who has love for all has established immortality for all. That is precisely the meaning of the biblical statement that *his* Resurrection is *our* life".[23] Ratzinger's position, then, as I understand it, is that life from death is neither nature, nor achievement, but gift.[24]

[20] Karl Rahner, "Immanent and Transcendent Consummation of the World", *Theological Investigations, X* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1973), pp. 273–289; p. 285.

[21] Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), p. 305, his stress. Arising out of lectures given in Tübingen in 1967, this book was first published in German in 1968.

[22] Ratzinger, *Introduction*, p. 351.

[23] Ratzinger, *Introduction*, p. 306.

[24] In the discussion in Cambridge after this paper, I was asked whether my position was not "fideistic". It would, I think, only be fideistic if [a] by "soul" I meant the curious entity that is Cartesian consciousness, the ghost in the machine, and [b] if, in saying something like "I believe in the immortality of the soul", I meant something like: human minds possess some characteristic or natural property that is inaccessible to scientific scrutiny. Since I mean neither of these things, and since most people who hear talk of the "immortality of the soul" take it for granted that the speaker means both of them, it seems to me that Christians in our time and place would do well to try to avoid using the language of immortality and concentrate on trying to get across what it is that we are talking about when we speak of "resurrection".

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I sometimes used to ask students whether they supposed that they had information concerning their future in God which Jesus, in Gethsemane, lacked. I still think that, when people get too chatty about "life after death", this question is worth asking. Death, said Karl Rahner, is "the immediate confrontation of man, together with the whole of his history now consummated and complete, with the absolute mystery, with God", whether we speak of this confrontation in terms of "the continuing life of the immortal soul" or "the resurrection of the flesh".[25]

I believe that human beings die. Moreover, mainstream Christianity has always insisted on the paradox that, although human beings are created and called by a love stronger even than death, they are capable of resisting and refusing, *definitively* refusing, that call, that love. There are, it seems, really only two possibilities for the future – for the future of each one of us and of the world: we die, either into annihilation, or into life, in God.[26]

A note, by way of postscript (because its elaboration would require another paper). The question of the soul is of profound political importance because the dualisms which suppose that souls are what *really* count, and that bodies do not ultimately matter, only too easily lead to a failure to take bodies with due seriousness: a failure to cherish, reverence, and sustain them. In this direction lie all manner of violence and the oppression of the weak.

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[25] Rahner, "Theological Considerations concerning the Moment of Death", *Theological Investigations, XI* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974), pp. 309–321; p. 319. For more detail, see his essay, "Ideas for a Theology of Death", *Theological Investigations, XIII.*

[26] See Nicholas Lash, "The Impossibility of Atheism", *Theology for Pilgrims*, pp. 19–35.

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