

You Are Your Soul

A Reflection on the Nature of the Soul

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John 11:25-26 (quoted)

Ephesians 4:21-28

Religion, in general terms, is a social and cultural system of designated behaviours and practices, morals, beliefs, world-views, texts, sanctified places, prophecies, ethics and organisations, that relates humanity to the supernatural, the transcendent and the spiritual — though scholars themselves have never quite settled on a single definition of what religion actually is. That is a mouthful, but it is true, in its developed, modern form. Its evolution must have begun in humanity's attempts to explain the impermanence of life. One question that almost every religion therefore seeks to address is: what happens after death?

Science and spirituality have often been at odds, and both, in general, have failed to provide substantiated and proven material to answer this question — with, I would argue, the distinct exception of Christianity. Jesus Christ, by His resurrection in a glorified bodily form, gave us proof enough that our souls transcend physical death. Jesus could not have been more explicit when He told Martha: *"I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?"* (John 11:25-26). Do you believe this statement of Jesus? I do, because I believe He meant my indestructible "soul," which is "me."

If you happen to have a group photograph from your final year at school, look at yourself as a sixteen-year-old. That was "you," then; but it is still the same "you," decades later. Here I am, at seventy-eight, limping along, with a stent in my artery and unstable blood pressure, to mention only a few of my present body's deficiencies. But I am still the same person I was, as I see myself in that old school photograph. What makes me the same person as that little boy with thick black hair, all those years ago? It is not atomic material continuity: the atoms in my body now are not the atoms that made up the schoolboy I once was. It is my "soul" that makes me the same person then, now, and beyond, when I cross over, for eternity.

Let me quote the distinguished Oxford philosopher of religion Richard Swinburne, author of *Mind, Brain, and Free Will* (Oxford University Press, 2013). He argues that if physical properties and mental properties were merely properties of bodies — subject, as I would add, to change and decay — there would be no difference between such cases; but because there are plainly differences between "you" and "me," there must be another, essential part of me (an unchangeable

part, I would add) that goes where I go, and this we may call my "soul."

That raises an intriguing, and as yet unanswered, question: where does my soul live within my body? The "housing" most often suggested for the soul is either the heart or the mind. I would argue that the indwelling Holy Spirit must be in or around the soul, since He is holy and pure, and cannot dwell in any place that is corrupt, unholy or decaying. Medical science can now look into almost every part of the body, including the heart, with the exception of the brain. We speak of the "Sacred Heart," of the heart as the seat of the Holy Spirit, of the "cleansing of the heart," and so on; and when we die, our physical death is invariably attributed to cardiac arrest (a cause one hears about rather often these days, as many have found it a convenient way to understate deaths from Covid-19).

Medical understanding also tells us that the mind and consciousness are closely bound up with the physiological functioning of the brain, and that the cessation of that functioning is what defines brain death. While science has yet to fully decipher the workings of the brain, it accepts that a person is considered dead only once all brain activity has ceased. So our attention moves from the heart, as the seat of the soul, to the brain: it has been shown that brain activity can continue for a time even after the heart has come to a standstill. Theologians, in general, are reluctant to use the term "brain" for what needs to be cleansed (see Ephesians 4:21-28), and speak instead, more generally, of "thoughts" or "the mind."

Some scientific research has, in fact, moved close to the very point I am trying to make. It has been suggested that the human brain contains a "God spot," a single area responsible for spiritual experience; more recent research suggests instead that spirituality is a complex phenomenon, involving multiple areas of the brain working together to produce its many aspects. I am quite content with the conditions that appear to stimulate this "God spot." Certain areas of the brain learn — from the Bible, from Sunday school teachers, from the scholarly teaching and preaching we receive; other parts assimilate all of this, and connect it with our experience through life; still other parts govern our emotions — love, compassion, forgiveness, penitence, remorse — as well as anger, sin, ego, and so on.

I see Paul instructing us to allow God the Holy Spirit to direct all these areas, so that He may work upon the holy and pure "God spot," or the place that houses our inner self — in other words, our soul. Only He can access it, for the soul is not only immortal, but incorruptible and pure. Would you think me indulging in fantasy if I suggested that, once every organ in the body, including the heart, ceases to function at physical death, the Holy Spirit performs a kind of housekeeping of the various parts of the brain, and allows my soul — the inner person, me — to flee into the glorious presence of Jesus Christ in His kingdom, to be with

Him for eternity? That would, at the least, offer a credible reason why brain death is sometimes delayed for a time after physical death.

I close by quoting the philosopher John Leslie, professor emeritus at the University of Guelph, in Canada, who drew an analogy with a historical understanding of the soul. "When the parts of a soul were viewed as existentially unified at each particular instant," he said, "it wasn't thought that God, when manufacturing unified souls, had to do some kind of special mixing involving many separate steps. It was believed simply that souls had, from the moment of their creation by God, the property of being complex yet existentially unified. Many distinguishable elements of such complexity were present when a soul had a thought or an experience, but still, a soul remained existentially unified at each instant and remained the very same soul at successive instants."

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