

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SOUL

STEWART GOETZ AND
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We dedicate this book to Roderick Chisholm, author, teacher, and mentor, and to John Strassburger, friend, colleague, and president emeritus of Ursinus College

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Introduction

The current intellectual climate is quite hostile to the idea that we are embodied souls. The idea that there might be more to us than our physical bodies is out of step with contemporary secular philosophy. There is a prevailing assumption that we human beings and other animals are thoroughly physical–chemical realities. To be sure, physio-chemical organisms like us have extraordinary powers and capacities (powers to think and choose, and capacities to feel pleasure and pain), but most philosophers today think this does not make us in any way non-physical or entail that there is more to us than physio-chemical processes. Daniel Dennett offers this summary of the current materialist view of the natural world and the mind:

The prevailing wisdom, variously expressed and argued for, is *materialism*: there is only one sort of stuff, namely *matter*—the physical stuff of physics, chemistry, and physiology—and the mind is somehow nothing but a physical phenomenon. In short, the mind is the brain. According to materialists, we can (in principle!) account for every mental phenomenon using the same physical principles, laws and raw materials that suffice to explain radioactivity, continental drift, photosynthesis, reproduction, nutrition, and growth. (Dennett 1991, 33)

From the standpoint of a comprehensive form of materialism, talk about “souls” only makes sense as a metaphor for referring to one’s

values or identity, as for instance in “Jones sold his soul to become a celebrity.” The existence of the soul retains some life in fictional worlds such as J. K. Rowling’s hugely popular Harry Potter books (a soul can be sucked out of a character by the kiss of a dementor) but not in the real world. In *Philosophy of Mind*, Jaegwon Kim says the following about the soul:

The general idea [. . .] is that because each of us has a soul, we are the kind of conscious, intelligent, and rational creature we are. Strictly speaking, we do not really “have” souls, since we are in an important sense *identical with* our souls—that is, each of us *is* a soul. My soul is the thing that I am. Each of us “has a mind,” therefore, because each of us *is* a mind. All that is probably a bit too speculative, if not totally fantastical, for most of us to swallow. (Kim 2006, 29)

The traditional account of the soul is still mentioned in the average philosophy of mind textbook, but rarely taken seriously. For example, in *The Problem of the Soul* Owen Flanagan contends that, if we recognize the soul at all, we need to see that it is the very same thing as the brain:

The mind or the soul is the brain. Or better: Consciousness, cognition, and volition are perfectly natural capacities of fully embodied creatures engaged in complex commerce with the natural and social environments. Humans possess no special capacities, no extra ingredients, that could conceivably do the work of the mind, the soul, or free will as traditionally conceived. (Flanagan 2002, xii)

Is the prevalent materialist outlook beyond challenge? Could there still be a sound case for holding that there is more to being a human (and perhaps an animal, too) than physio-chemical processes?

In this book we explore the history of the idea that we are embodied souls. Many contemporary philosophers who reject the view that we are, or contain, souls yet acknowledge that such a view seems natural, and even a matter of common sense. William Lyons writes that the view “that humans are bodies inhabited and governed in some

intimate if mysterious way by minds (or souls) seemed and still seems to be nothing more than good common sense” (Lyons 2001, 9). One way to bring out the apparent common sense of such a stance is to appreciate how we think about death. We often think that, when a person dies, the person either perishes or (if we subscribe to religious traditions) is with God or in some kind of afterlife, heaven or reincarnation. In any case, we often treat a person’s dead body as a corpse (or remains), and not as the same thing as the man himself or the woman herself. Even to allow for the possibility of one’s surviving the death of the body is to court the possibility that one is more than a body. Moreover, it is puzzling to think how it can be that all our sensations, conscious experiences, and so on are the very same thing as brain states. To be sure, there is an evident, clear sense in which our sensations are affected by the brain, and it appears that our bodily processes are affected by our beliefs and desires. But establishing a correlation between the mental and the physical is not the same thing as establishing their identity. Colin McGinn rightly points out the apparent distinction between the mental and the physical:

The property of consciousness itself (or specific conscious states) is not an observable or perceptible property of the brain. You can stare into a living conscious brain, your own or someone else’s, and see there a wide variety of instantiated properties—its shape, colour, texture, etc—but you will not thereby see what the subject is experiencing, the conscious state itself. (McGinn 1991, 10–11)

So, while many contemporary philosophers (including McGinn) deny the traditional belief that we are embodied souls and deny that consciousness is more than brain states, the belief that there is more to us than physical–chemical processes has some initial, common-sense credibility.

As it happens, we actually accept the truth of this apparent commonsense distinction of soul and body. In the philosophy of mind literature, the position we hold would customarily be called *substance*

dualism, though the term “dualism” is so fraught with misunderstanding and meets with such derision that we will only use it sparingly. “Dualism” as a philosophical term is a late invention (so-called dualists, from Plato to Descartes, did not use any equivalent expression in their languages, or any of its cognates). Indeed, ancient Greek does not even have a word for “dualism.” We will, however, pay close attention to all the classical and contemporary objections to “dualism.”

Our aim is to set before you a brief history of the idea that we are embodied souls. We are deeply committed to making this a fair and balanced history, but it will also contain a sustained investigation into what we may gain from this history for our thinking constructively about the soul today. One of our goals in this book is to explain, at least in part, why a history of the soul terminates with an age in which those who are learned deny the very existence of that which is the subject of this book. The arguments of those who deny the soul’s existence are powerful and complex but, we hope to show, unconvincing. Even if we are unsuccessful, we believe that reading a history of the soul written by advocates of the soul will make for a more dramatic and interesting engagement than if the authors were to think that the notion of soul is only of antiquarian interest.

We are convinced that the time is right for a brief history of the soul. While a form of materialism that rejects the soul is the dominant position of the day, not all the materialists are content with the current state of play in their field. A life-long materialist, William Lycan finds himself not persuaded by the philosophical case for dualism; but he is not convinced by the case against it either—nor does he embrace the philosophical case for materialism:

Being a philosopher, of course I would like to think that my stance is rational, held not just instinctively and scientistically and in the mainstream but because the arguments do indeed favor materialism over dualism. But I do not think that, though I used to. My position may be rational, broadly speaking, but not because the arguments favor it:

Though the arguments for dualism do (indeed) fail, so do the arguments for materialism. And the standard objections to dualism are not very convincing; if one really manages to be a dualist in the first place, one should not be much impressed by them. (Lycan 2009, 551)

Although Lycan is not persuaded by arguments for dualism, there has been a renaissance of philosophical work on the soul over the past twenty years, which indicates that the case in favor of its existence is better than Lycan estimates. In light of this development, it is timely to consider the arguments for and against different conceptions of the soul (and thus for and against materialism) not just in contemporary philosophy, but also from a comprehensive, historical perspective.

Two final points before we get started: First, we make liberal use of quotations in our brief history, so that the many figures we cover can speak for themselves. We believe that all the main figures we cover have important things to say to us today, and we hope that this history will prompt you to read these fascinating philosophers directly. In a longer history, more of each philosopher would be represented and more philosophers would be part of the story. But here we are aiming to engage both newcomers and seasoned scholars in thinking or re-thinking the history of the soul and its bearing on our own thinking about human nature today.

Second, all subsequent references to the Platonic dialogues and works in the Aristotelian corpus can be consulted in the editions listed in the bibliography. When we wish to specify one translation rather than another for a quoted passage, we add the translator's name in a bracket.

Chapter 1

The Soul in Greek Thought

In this chapter our focus is on the two best known figures of ancient Greek philosophy: Plato (428/7–348/7 BCE) and Aristotle (384–322 BCE). There are other major philosophers in Greek thought, both before Plato and after Aristotle, and some of them hold a place of honor in the development of great future ideas, such as the hypothesis that the material world is made up of atoms, or the thesis that life evolved; but Plato and Aristotle are the most important ones in shaping the history of the soul.

Plato

Before diving into Plato's view of the soul, three important points need to be observed. First, because the central figure in Plato's dialogues is the philosopher Socrates, the question about which views are Socrates' and which are Plato's is not easy to answer, if it is answerable at all. For the sake of brevity and clarity of presentation, we will not enter the debate about this matter and we will not distinguish between Socrates' and Plato's thought. We will simply assume that Socrates' philosophical views about the soul are Plato's.

Second, we stress that Plato's treatment of the soul is *philosophical* in nature. It is necessary to emphasize this point because it is not uncommon in certain circles (e.g. theological; see Chapter 2) to find

assertions to the effect that Plato invented the idea of the soul and, therefore, that the concept of the soul is a Greek idea. Nothing could be further removed from the truth. Belief in the existence of the soul is, as we pointed out in the Introduction, commonsensical in its nature, in the sense that it is espoused by the ordinary person. What Plato did was to philosophize about the nature of the soul in which ordinary people believe.

Third, the Greek term used in ancient philosophical texts and commonly translated as *soul* is *psyche*, a noun derived from the verb *psychein*, which meant *to breathe*. For philosophers, *psyche* came to stand, not for breath, but for the life of a being or for that which generates and constitutes the essential life of a being. The great philosopher and classicist A. E. Taylor offers this overview, in which he points out that *psyche* can involve (though this meaning is secondary) consciousness—a term that was probably coined in the seventeenth century by Ralph Cudworth, to stand for “awareness”:

Consciousness is a relatively late and highly developed manifestation of the principle which the Greeks call “soul.” That principle shows itself not merely in consciousness but in the whole process of nutrition and growth and the adaptation of motor response to an external stimulation. Thus consciousness is a more secondary feature of the “soul” in Greek philosophy than in most modern thought, which has never ceased to be affected by Descartes’ selection of “thought” as the special characteristic of psychical life. In common language the word *psyche* is constantly used where we should say “life” rather than “soul,” and in Greek philosophy a work “on the *Psyche*” means what we should call one on “the principle of life.” (Taylor 1955, 75)

As we shall see in different chapters, the definition of the soul is dynamic, though Plato’s view on the soul or *psyche* has great historical significance, coming as it does as from the first major contributor to the philosophy of the soul. As an aside, we note that the term “soul” in English today is derived from *sawel/sawol* in Old English, as found in the Vespasian Psalter and in *Beowulf*. What, then, did Plato have to say about the soul? His thoughts are many and wide-ranging in

scope, and they seem to develop over time in ways that sometimes present problems of consistency. We will focus on those thoughts that comprise the core of his view and, when appropriate, we will point out the tensions among them.

We begin with the end of Socrates' life. While Socrates is in prison and not long before he drinks the hemlock that will bring about his death, his friend Crito asks him about how he would like to be buried. "Any way you like, replied Socrates, that is, if you can catch me and I don't slip through your fingers. [. . .] I shall remain with you [Crito and other friends] no longer, but depart to a state of heavenly happiness [. . .] You [the other friends] must give an assurance to Crito for me [. . .] that when I am dead I shall not stay, but depart and be gone" (Plato 1961: *Phaedo*, 115C–D). From this response of Socrates to Crito's question it seems reasonable to infer that Plato believes the "person" Socrates is his soul (as opposed to his soul plus his body, or just his body).

Like most philosophers after him up until Descartes in the seventeenth century, Plato claims that the soul is that which imparts life to its body (*Phaedo*, 105C–D). Moreover, because the soul is that which gives life to its body and cannot acquire a property that is contrary to its essentially life-giving nature, the soul itself can never perish (*Phaedo*, 105D–E). Plato's rationale behind this view of properties is tenuous; but, for a start, we simply note that he thought of the soul as essentially and fundamentally alive, whereas he did not think this was the case with the body. The soul is indestructible or imperishable, and thereby the soul is unlike its body and other material things, which by nature are always changing and never keep to the self-same condition (*Phaedo*, 79C). When a person dies, the body may perish but the soul endures. Plato argues that, because change is always from contraries (e.g., that which becomes bigger does so from that which is smaller, and that which is darker comes from that which is lighter), the soul must have come from the realm of the dead and return there after completing its life in this world, only to return once again to the realm of the living (*Phaedo*, 70C–72E). While belief in reincarnation

may strike western secular readers as preposterous, it is interesting to take note not only of the presence of a belief in reincarnation in the ancient west (one of the best known Presocratic philosophers, Pythagoras, taught reincarnation, and reincarnation is in evidence in one of the greatest Roman epic poems, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Book VI), but also of its widespread adherents today, among Hindus and Buddhists. In any case, given the way Plato describes reincarnation, the soul has to be thought of as something that is distinct from the body.

The soul's recurring journey from death to life and back again entails that it is embodied more than once. This view also seems to involve a concept of the soul as a substantial individual being, as opposed to a mode of the body. In the *Phaedo* the idea that the soul may be just a mode of the body is considered as an objection to the Socratic–Platonic position. An interlocutor in the dialogue raises this point. Could it be that what Socrates and Plato refer to as the soul is not a substantial individual entity, but more like a harmony? One may play a stringed instrument (a lyre, for example) and produce what appears to be more than the instrument (melodious sound); yet this is not a separate substance, but a mode of the lyre. Melodious sound is *the way a lyre sounds when played*, and if (so the interlocutor argues) the lyre is broken, the melodious sound will end:

The body is held together at a certain tension between the extremes of hot and cold, and wet and dry, and so on, and our soul is a temperament or adjustment of these same extremes, when they are combined in just the right proportion. Well, if the soul is really an adjustment, obviously as soon as the tension of our body is lowered or increased beyond the proper point, the soul must be destroyed, divine though it is—just like any other adjustment, either in music or in any product of the arts and crafts, although in each case the physical remains last considerably longer until they are burned up or rot away. (*Phaedo*, 86C; Tredennick's translation)

In the dialogue, Socrates argues that the soul cannot be like the lyre and the music it makes, because the soul actually pre-exists the

body; and, if the soul pre-exists the body, it is not identical with it. Socrates thereby seeks to break the analogy proposed, because *the way a lyre sounds* cannot exist before the lyre exists. The case for a pre-natal existence of the soul, developed in detail by Plato elsewhere in the same dialogue (and in others, too), deserves a brief comment here. For example, in the *Meno* he argues that knowledge is recollection of what the soul was aware of before birth:

[A man] would not seek what he knows, for since he knows it there is no need of the inquiry, nor what he does not know, for in that case he does not even know what he is looking for. [. . .] Thus the soul, since it is immortal and has been born many times, and has seen all things both here and in the other world, has learned everything that is. So we need not be surprised if it can recall the knowledge of virtue or anything else which [. . .] it once possessed [. . .] for seeking and learning are in fact nothing but recollection. (*Meno*, 80E, 81D)

The most famous illustration of the “anything else” that is recalled by the soul involves the interrogation of a slave boy who, when prodded with the right questions, “rediscovers” a proof of the Pythagorean theorem (*Meno*, 85E–86A).

The Platonic case for pre-natal existence would be hard to defend today, but if it is even conceivable that the soul can pre-exist its body, then there is at least an appearance that the soul is not the body, and thus not a mere mode of the body. Another way to make Plato’s case against the soul being a mere mode is to appeal to our understanding of ourselves as substantial beings existing over time. Arguably, when you love a person, you love a concrete individual. But if the person, or soul, is a mode of something else (say, a living animal body), then it appears that your beloved is a phase or a shape of his/her body. Is it plausible to believe that the object of your love is a certain aspect of that body? Isn’t it more reasonable to believe that you love a substantial being and that, when your beloved dies, she is no more (at least not in this life), while her body remains? Socrates took

something akin to this position and, in the *Crito*, he comforted his disciples, who were weeping over his immanent death, by claiming that they might bury his body, but he, Socrates, would be elsewhere. (We will return to this question when considering the work of Aristotle.)

Reincarnation means re-embodiment; and in Plato's account of the soul the material body is not only something that is ever changing, but also it is that which effectively serves as a prison for the soul, and as such is evil (*Phaedrus*, 250C). As we examine further Plato's view of the soul-body relationship, it is important to recognize that early philosophers were interested in the soul for more than purely theoretical reasons. They also sought to evaluate the moral and spiritual condition of the soul. According to Plato, the embodied soul is attracted by the pleasures of the body, such as those of food and drink and love-making (*Phaedo*, 64D). These pleasures distract the soul from its true purpose of being (what we might think of as the soul's meaning of life), which is to reason about and know (or recollect) what is true. However, Socrates says:

I suppose the soul reasons most beautifully [without the need for recollection] when none of these things gives her pain—neither hearing nor sight, nor grief nor any pleasure—when instead, bidding farewell to the body, she comes to be herself all by herself as much as possible and when, doing everything she can to avoid communing with or even being in touch with the body, she strives for what *is*. (*Phaedo*, 65C; Brann's translation)

What *is* are the immaterial Platonic Forms or Ideas, which are abstract objects like the concepts of justice, circularity, rationality, humanness, and so on. The soul possesses knowledge when it is focusing on these Forms and philosophizing about them and their relationships with each other. The soul is happy when it beholds the Forms directly, because what it ultimately desires more than anything else is the truth (*Phaedo*, 66b).

Plato seems to regard reason/intellect as that which alone constitutes the essence of soul, and tells his readers that the soul is nourished by reason and knowledge (*Phaedrus*, 247D). The less a soul is nourished by these, the greater its forgetfulness and resulting wrongdoing and the lower its level of re-embodiment. Thus Plato claims that

the soul that hath seen the most of being shall enter into the human babe that shall grow into a seeker after wisdom or beauty, a follower of the Muses and a lover; the next, having seen less, shall dwell in a king [. . .] or a warrior and ruler; the third in a statesman, a man of business, or a trader; the fourth in an athlete, or physical trainer, or physician. (*Phaedrus* 1961, 248D–E)

Elsewhere Plato states: “Of the men who came into the world, those who were cowards or led unrighteous lives may with reason be supposed to have changed into the nature of women in the second generation” (*Timaeus*, 90E–91A). (While such a view would be labeled sexist today, we should note that Plato held a higher view of women than his contemporaries when he affirmed in the *Republic* that women can make ideal rulers). Furthermore, “those who’ve made gorging and abusing and boozings their care [. . .] slip into the classes of donkeys and other such beasts” (*Phaedo*, 81E). In the *Timaeus* again, Plato expresses the view that the “race of wild pedestrian animals [. . .] came from those who had no philosophy in any of their thoughts [. . .] In consequence of these habits of theirs they had their front legs and their heads resting upon the earth to which they were drawn by natural affinity” (*Timaeus* 1961, 91E).

Plato’s position on pleasure and the body may seem to us today as too derisive, and we will not defend it; but it is worth appreciating that Plato’s teacher Socrates, and probably Plato himself, were veterans of a massive war, the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE) in which their side (Athens and her allies) was decisively defeated. Perhaps Plato’s warnings about bodily pleasure and being prey to other sensory desires stemmed from his (and other Athenians) belief that Athens’