



**ON THE SOUL AND
THE RESURRECTION**

Gregory of Nyssa

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**Theological Treatise on Immortality and Infinity of
God**

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Contact: info@e-artnow.org

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The mind, in times of bereavement, craves a certainty gained by reasoning as to the existence of the soul after death.

First, then: Virtue will be impossible, if deprived of the life of eternity, her only advantage.

But this is a moral argument. The case calls for speculative and scientific treatment.

How is the objection that the nature of the soul, as of real things, is material, to be met?

Thus; the truth of this doctrine would involve the truth of Atheism; whereas Atheism is refuted by the fact of the wise order that reigns in the world. In other words, the spirituality of God cannot be denied: and this proves the possibility of spiritual or immaterial existence: and therefore, that of the soul.

But is God, then, the same thing as the soul?

No: but man is “a little world in himself;” and we may with the same right conclude from this Microcosm to the actual existence of an immaterial soul, as from the phenomena of the world to the reality of God’s existence.

A Definition of the soul is then given, for the sake of clearness in the succeeding discussion. It is a *created, living, intellectual being*, with the power, as long as it is provided with organs, of sensuous perception. For “the mind sees,” not the eye; take, for instance, the meaning of the phases of the moon. The objection that the “organic

machine” of the body produces all thought is met by the instance of the water-organ. Such machines, if thought were really an attribute of matter, ought to build themselves spontaneously: whereas they are a direct proof of an *invisible* thinking power in man. A work of Art means mind: there is a thing perceived, and a thing not perceived.

But still, what *is* this thing not perceived?

If it has no sensible quality whatever—Where is it?

The answer is, that the same question might be asked about the Deity (Whose existence is not denied).

Then the Mind and the Deity are identical?

Not so: in its substantial existence, as separable from matter, the soul is *like* God; but this likeness does not extend to sameness; it resembles God as a copy the original.

As being “simple and uncompounded” the soul survives the dissolution of the composite body, whose scattered elements it will continue to accompany, as if watching over its property till the Resurrection, when it will clothe itself in them anew.

The soul was defined “an *intellectual* being.” But anger and desire are not of the body either. Are there, then, two or three souls?—Answer. Anger and desire do *not* belong to the essence of the soul, but are only among its varying states; they are not originally part of ourselves, and we can and must rid ourselves of them, and bring them, as long as they continue to mark our community with the brute creation, into the service of the good. They are the “tares” of the heart, while they serve any other purpose.

But where will the soul “accompany its elements”?—Hades is not a particular spot; it means the Invisible; those passages in the Bible in which the regions under the earth are alluded to are explained as allegorical, although the partizans of the opposite interpretation need not be combated.

But how will the soul know the scattered elements of the once familiar form? This is answered by two illustrations (not analogies). The skill of the painter, the force that has united numerous colours to form a single tint, will, if (by some miracle) that actual tint was to fall back into those various colours, be cognizant of each one of these last, *e.g.* the tone and size of the drop of gold, of red, &c.; and could at will recombine them. The owner of a cup of clay would know its fragments (by their shape) amidst a mass of fragments of clay vessels of other shapes, or even if they were plunged again into their native clay. So the soul knows its elements amidst their “kindred dust”; or when each one has flitted back to its own primeval source on the confines of the Universe.

But how does this harmonize with the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus?

The bodies of both were in the grave: and so all that is said of them is in a *spiritual* sense. But the *soul* can suffer still, being cognizant, not only of the elements of the whole body, but of those that formed each member, *e.g.* the tongue. By the relations of the Rich Man are meant the impressions made on his soul by the things of flesh and blood.

But if we must have no emotions in the next world, how shall there be virtue, and how shall there be love of God? For anger, we saw, contributed to the one, desire to the other.

We shall be like God so far that we shall always contemplate the Beautiful in Him. Now, God, in contemplating Himself, has no desire and hope, no regret and memory. The moment of fruition is always present, and so His Love is perfect, without the need of any emotion. So will it be with us. God draws “that which belongs to Him” to this blessed passionlessness; and in this very drawing consists the torment of a passion-laden soul. Severe and long-continued pains in eternity are thus decreed to sinners, not because God hates them, nor for the sake alone of punishing them; but “because what belongs to God must *at any cost* be preserved for Him.” The degree of pain which must be endured by each one is necessarily proportioned to the measure of the wickedness.

God will thus be “all in all”; yet the loved one’s form will then be woven, though into a more ethereal texture, of the same elements as before. (This is not Nirvana.)

Here the doctrine of the Resurrection is touched. The Christian Resurrection and that of the heathen philosophies coincide in that the soul is reclothed from *some* elements of the Universe. But there are fatal objections to the latter under its two forms:

Transmigration pure and simple;

The Platonic Soul-rotation.

The first—

1. Obliterates the distinction between the mineral or vegetable, and the spiritual, world.

2. Makes it a sin to eat and drink.

Both—

3. Confuse the moral choice.

4. Make heaven the cradle of vice, and earth of virtue.

5. Contradict the truth that they assume, that there is no change in heaven.

6. Attribute every birth to a vice, and therefore are either Atheist or Manichæan.

7. Make a life a chapter of accidents.

8. Contradict facts of moral character.

God *is* the cause of our life, both in body and soul.

But *when* and *how* does the soul come into existence?

The *how* we can never know.

There are objections to seeking the material for any created thing either in God, or outside God. But we may regard the whole Creation as the *realized thoughts* of God. (Anticipation of Malebranche.)

The *when* may be determined. Objections to the existence of soul *before* body have been given above. But soul is necessary to life, and the embryo lives.

Therefore soul is not born *after* body. So body and soul are born together.

As to the number of souls, Humanity itself is a thought of God not yet completed, as these continual additions prove. When it is completed, this “progress of Humanity” will cease, by there being no more births: and no births, no deaths.

Before answering objections to the Scriptural doctrine of the Resurrection, the passages that contain it are mentioned: especially Psalm cxviii. 27 (LXX.).

The various objections to it, to the Purgatory *to follow*, and to the Judgment, are then stated; especially that

A man is not the same being (physically) two days together. Which phase of him, then, is to rise again, be tortured (if need be), and judged?

They are all answered by a Definition of the Resurrection, i.e. *the restoration of man to his original state. In that, there is neither age nor infancy; and the “coats of skins” are laid aside.*

When the process of purification has been completed, the better attributes of the soul appear—imperishability, life, honour, grace, glory, power, and, in short, all that belongs to human nature as the image of Deity.

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Basil, great amongst the saints, had departed from this life to God; and the impulse to mourn for him was shared by all the churches. But his sister the Teacher was still living; and so I journeyed to her¹, yearning for an interchange of sympathy over the loss of her brother. My soul was right sorrow-stricken by this grievous blow, and I sought for one who could feel it equally, to mingle my tears with. But when we were in each other's presence the sight of the Teacher awakened all my pain; for she too was lying in a state of prostration even unto death. Well, she gave in to me for a little while, like a skilful driver, in the ungovernable violence of my grief; and then she tried to check me by speaking, and to correct with the curb of her reasonings the disorder of my soul. She quoted the Apostle's words about the duty of not being "grieved for them that sleep"; because only "men without hope" have such feelings. With a heart still fermenting with my pain, I asked—

² How can that ever be practised by mankind? There is such an instinctive and deep-seated abhorrence of death in all! Those who look on a death-bed can hardly bear the sight; and those whom death approaches recoil from him all they can. Why, even the law that controls us puts death highest on the list of crimes, and highest on the list of punishments. By what device, then, can we bring ourselves to regard as nothing a departure from life even in the case of a stranger, not to mention that of relations, when so be

they cease to live? We see before us the whole course of human life aiming at this one thing, viz. how we may continue in this life; indeed it is for this that houses have been invented by us to live in; in order that our bodies may not be prostrated in their environment³ by cold or heat. Agriculture, again, what is it but the providing of our sustenance? In fact all thought about how we are to go on living is occasioned by the fear of dying. Why is medicine so honoured amongst men? Because it is thought to carry on the combat with death to a certain extent by its methods. Why do we have corslets, and long shields, and greaves, and helmets, and all the defensive armour, and inclosures of fortifications, and iron-barred gates, except that we fear to die? Death then being naturally so terrible to us, how can it be easy for a survivor to obey this command to remain unmoved over friends departed?

Why, what is the especial pain you feel, asked the Teacher, in the mere necessity itself of dying? This common talk of unthinking persons is no sufficient accusation.

What! is there no occasion for grieving, I replied to her, when we see one who so lately lived and spoke becoming all of a sudden lifeless and motionless, with the sense of every bodily organ extinct, with no sight or hearing in operation, or any other faculty of apprehension that sense possesses; and if you apply fire or steel to him, even if you were to plunge a sword into the body, or cast it to the beasts of prey, or if you bury it beneath a mound, that dead man is alike unmoved at any treatment? Seeing, then, that this change is observed in all these ways, and that principle of life, whatever it might be, disappears all at once out of

sight, as the flame of an extinguished lamp which burnt on it the moment before neither remains upon the wick nor passes to some other place, but completely disappears, how can such a change be borne without emotion by one who has no clear ground to rest upon? We *hear* the departure of the spirit, we *see* the shell that is left; but of the part that has been separated we are ignorant, both as to its nature, and as to the place whither it has fled; for neither earth, nor air, nor water, nor any other element can show as residing within itself this force that has left the body, at whose withdrawal a corpse only remains, ready for dissolution.

Whilst I was thus enlarging on the subject, the Teacher signed to me with her hand⁴, and said: Surely what alarms and disturbs your mind is not the thought that the soul, instead of lasting for ever, ceases with the body's dissolution!

I answered rather audaciously, and without due consideration of what I said, for my passionate grief had not yet given me back my judgment. In fact, I said that the Divine utterances seemed to me like mere commands compelling us to believe that the soul lasts for ever; not, however, that we were led by them to this belief by any reasoning. Our mind within us appears slavishly to accept the opinion enforced, but not to acquiesce with a spontaneous impulse. Hence our sorrow over the departed is all the more grievous; we do not exactly know whether this vivifying principle is anything by itself; where it is, or how it is; whether, in fact, it exists in any way at all anywhere. This uncertainty⁵ about the real state of the case balances the opinions on either side; many adopt the one

view, many the other; and indeed there are certain persons, of no small philosophical reputation amongst the Greeks, who have held and maintained this which I have just said.

Away, she cried, with that pagan nonsense! For therein the inventor of lies fabricates false theories only to harm the Truth. Observe this, and nothing else; that such a view about the soul amounts to nothing less than the abandoning of virtue, and seeking the pleasure of the moment only; the life of eternity, by which alone virtue claims the advantage, must be despaired of.

And pray how, I asked, are we to get a firm and unmovable belief in the soul's continuance? I, too, am sensible of the fact that human life will be bereft of the most beautiful ornament that life has to give, I mean virtue, unless an undoubting confidence with regard to this be established within us. What, indeed, has virtue to stand upon in the case of those persons who conceive of this present life as the limit of their existence, and hope for nothing beyond?

Well, replied the Teacher, we must seek where we may get a beginning for our discussion upon this point; and if you please, let the defence of the opposing views be undertaken by yourself; for I see that your mind is a little inclined to accept such a brief. Then, after the conflicting belief has been stated, we shall be able to look for the truth.

When she made this request, and I had deprecated the suspicion that I was making the objections in real earnest, instead of only wishing to get a firm ground for the belief about the soul by calling into court⁶ first what is aimed against this view, I began—