

JOHN HALDANE

## Sentiments of Reason and Aspirations of the Soul

### *I. Introduction*

IT IS A COMMONPLACE to remark on the intractability of philosophical and theological disputes; yet generations of advocates return again and again to restate their favored positions, each time hoping to have found some new persuasive argument or consideration. This combination of persistence in the face of dialectical intractability suggests that beneath the weft and warp of carefully crafted arguments there lie deeper differences of intellectual outlook and existential commitment. A few years ago, I engaged in a published exchange with philosopher J. J. C. Smart on the question of the existence of God and allied issues in the book *Atheism and Theism*.<sup>1</sup> Smart, the brother of the late Ninian (himself a leading figure in religious studies), is one of the best known philosophers of his generation. Early in the book, Smart describes having once been a Christian and, thereafter, mentions more than once his feeling that there is, perhaps, a real mystery in the fact that there is anything at all. Yet he finds the theist explanation of cosmic existence no less mysterious; although he is open to the idea that there are mysteries to be

explained, he is not disposed to feel these mysteries call for or admit of religious interpretations and resolutions. For Smart, the only real explanations are scientific ones.

In a perceptive review of *Atheism and Theism*, Alexander Pruss and Richard Gale discussed various aspects of the detailed dialectic between Smart and me, but ended with a reflection on the broader character of our opposition. They wrote,

What emerges as the most salient feature of the debate is that the ultimate parting of the ways between Haldane and Smart is due to their having rival “sentiments of rationality” in respect of what constitutes a rationally satisfying explanation . . . this clash between their “sentiments of rationality” appears to be an ultimate one in that we do not know any way to mediate it. . . . The theist experiences the world as a “thou” and thus finds it natural to seek personal explanations . . . whereas the non-theist experiences it as an impersonal “it.”<sup>2</sup>

This comment echoes, I think, Richard Gale’s view, expressed in agreement with William James in Gale’s book *The Divided Self of William James*, that different philosophies appeal to different emotional feelings about things in general.<sup>3</sup> Toward the end of that excellent study, Gale also says something about James himself that, I suspect, he thinks to be true of many of us:

What we really want is to be both a Sartrean In-itself that self-sufficiently abides in its total completeness within the present, and a For-itself that is always racing ahead of itself into the future so as to complete itself. In other words, we want to be God. Not surprisingly, this is forever beyond our grasp.<sup>4</sup>

I shall return to this suggestion and to the more general matter of “sentiments of rationality.” First, however, because I am going to be discussing immortality and the rationality of the desire for eter-

nity, I want to say something about attitudes to considering the very idea of the soul; then I will set out in brief some arguments for its reality—arguments that I think are unjustly neglected, but that, I am happy to acknowledge, are also somewhat obscure and require detailed analyses that cannot be entered into here.

## *II. Knowing That and Knowing What*

Anyone familiar with ancient, medieval, and early modern philosophy will be aware of the extent to which thinkers in these periods assume we are possessed of immaterial rational souls. There are, of course, quite significant differences in their understanding of the nature of the soul; but that the soul exists and that it can be known to exist are rarely, if ever, doubted.

It is, however, one thing to know something exists, another to be able to demonstrate its existence (from commonly agreed if not exactly indubitable premises), and a third to describe its nature or essence. Writing of the possibility of natural knowledge of God, Aquinas distinguishes two kinds of causal arguments: those in which one reasons from the nature of a thing to its effects, showing why they are as they are; and those in which one reasons from effect to cause. In the case of the former, one must already know something of the essence of the agent, but in the case of the latter, one might only know effects, and the only thing that can be demonstrated may be that an adequate cause of them must exist. The question naturally arises of reasoning further from the character of the effects to that of the cause, but this is made problematic in the case of reasoning about God because he is also taken to be transcendent of, and absent from, the categories of ordinary predication.

The thought of divine transcendence led some to the austere view that while we can be sure *that* God exists we may yet know nothing of what God is, and some have said this is Aquinas's position. In fact, however, Aquinas favors the method of analogy by proportion

that allows for positive predications, though they remain extrinsic characterizations determined by reference to effects—as, for example, when it is said God is the ultimate cause of purposeful behavior by ordering things to their proper ends.

Because in the case of the soul there is not the issue of a radical discontinuity between the status of cause and effect, one may hope for a more proximate description of the soul's nature. As methodology, this should secure some approval from those familiar with scientific reasoning to the character of unobservables, but it is now likely to meet with two contrasting responses. First is the reaction that the idea of the soul is otiose and perhaps absurd. The second response is that, to the extent that anything supports a doctrine of the soul, it is first-person self-acquaintance, not a causal hypothesis. In what follows, I want to consider, somewhat briefly, some classical arguments for the existence of the rational soul as an immaterial and possibly surviving principle of human life.

### *III. The Possibilities of Life beyond the Fact of Death*

So far as eschatology is concerned, there are, I think, four basic possibilities for future personal life. First, while human bodies perish there may be a material continuant of some sort whereby the person survives as a body of a different kind. This is one way of understanding the idea of specters—namely, as ethereal figures remaining after the demise of the gross physical body. Another, related, interpretation might suggest that what survives is the person materially transformed into a new kind of body, the corpse being a waste product of this process. It is, of course, highly disputable whether there are ethereal bodies; even if there are, no one has an account of how the processes of bodily separation or metamorphosis might occur. Still, science admits unsolved mysteries, and the circumstances of detachment or transformation may be unique in nature and their upshots only rarely observed. More to the point, however, it is

unclear what these possibilities would achieve so far as concerns overcoming death. There is no reason to suppose a posthuman material body would be immune to injury, degradation, and death. From degradation a subtler body might emerge, but without some special provision this too will go the way of all flesh. The idea of someone's "fading away" takes on new meaning; but whether life ends in a single episode or by successive attrition, the upshot is the same: eternal death.

The second possibility is that while life ends with bodily death there is a future point at which we are somehow re-created. This corresponds to one understanding of the traditional belief in resurrection. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul addresses the Corinthians' concern about the prospect of future life:

But some of you will ask "how are the dead raised? with what kind of body do they come?" You foolish man! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel. . . .

So it is with the resurrection of the body. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown a physical body [*soma psuchikon*], it is raised a spiritual body [*soma pneumatikon*].<sup>5</sup>

This is a memorable passage, but it is problematic because Saint Paul's analogy with the seed and the plant is doubly flawed. First, the seed comes from one living thing, while the shoot that emerges from it is another living thing—not the old plant restored to life but a new offspring. Second, Paul erroneously assumes the kernel that enters the ground is dead. His assumption was common in antiquity and was connected to the belief in natural rebirth. Tertullian, a convert to Christianity, observes how "nature teaches us to expect [our] resurrection, for if all things rise again for man . . . it is absurd to think that the thing on whose account nothing perishes should itself perish entirely."<sup>6</sup> He is appealing to the belief that the setting

and rising of the sun, the waning and waxing of the moon, the dying and rising up of grass and plants, are all cases of things coming back to life. Fortunately, however, the claim that we are restored to life by being re-created does not stand or fall on the success of the analogy of natural rebirth. This, though, focuses attention on the obscurity of Paul's idea of the resurrected person. He speaks of a spiritual body (*soma pneumatikon*), but that seems to be an oxymoron, as if one were to speak of an "intangible solid." If something is spiritual, how can it be a body? If it is a body, how can it be nonmaterial? I shall return to these perplexities.

The third possibility is that persons are not to be identified with bodies at all, but are in truth immaterial souls that are neither transformed nor destroyed at death but either enter new bodies (reincarnation) or persist unembodied in some kind of spirit world. This is a familiar religious view that can be found in most cultures. The idea that souls transmigrate from one incarnation to another is usually linked to a theory of moral cause and effect and thereby to the notion of progress (or decline). When the end state of this process is released into a state of pure spirit, the upshot is a position akin to that more favored in the West—namely, the idea of immediate and permanent postmortem disembodiment. In purely philosophical terms, there is no obvious basis on which to favor one of these two immaterial soul theories over the other. There is said to be evidence of reincarnation in the testimony of those who claim to have witnessed events in previous lives; but apart from the reasonable doubts one may feel about such claims, even if someone seemed to have experiences that occurred before their birth, this could be explained in other ways.

The thesis of disembodiment also claims to be supported by empirical evidence such as the testimony of mediums and the purported evidence of near-death, out-of-body experiences. As with the evidence of séances, it is easy to dismiss reports as a combination of uncritical inference and wishful thinking and to offer a rival account of the experiences as fantasies induced by oxygen starvation (a con-

sequence of which is a progressive narrowing of the visual field toward its center). This response, though, may be too quick. For one thing, the reported range of experiences is actually much greater than the tunnel type, and, in many cases, patients do not report visual or auditory experiences at all but testify instead to the dawning of a sense of purpose and general value. This latter effect bears directly on further commonly reported features, such as a subsequent decline in anxiety, often including a loss of the specific fear of death, and a change of priorities and values away from what seem to be worthless attachments.

The fourth possibility for future personal life is that while persons are to be identified with living human bodies, there is an immaterial part of the person that survives death and then either persists in its incompleteness, is reincarnated, or is reunited with the original body or with some continuant of it. The reunification option provides another interpretation of the idea of resurrection. Belief in the combination of the survival of a spiritual part with its subsequent reunion with a body is common within the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions. This is the position advanced by Aquinas, and it explains his observation that “I am not my soul [*anima mea non est ego*] and if only souls are saved then neither I nor any human is saved.”<sup>7</sup> What he means is that human persons are psychosomatic unities, and if this unity is sundered, then (even if some part of it survives) it cannot be the person. Aquinas does think there is a surviving intellect, but it is incapable of experiencing or acting on the natural world and probably incapable of remembering having done so when existing as the intellect of a living human being. Such a condition could not possibly constitute the completion of human life as we understand it. Hence, assuming there is a God to provide for this, there will be a restoration of fully personal life through bodily resurrection.

Let me term the four basic possibilities previously outlined as material continuation, material re-creation, full immaterial continuation, and partial immaterial continuation (it being noted that

reincarnation could be a version of full immaterial continuation or partial immaterial continuation). Evidently, most who believe in life after death do so as part of more general religious beliefs or retain it as a residue of these. This is significant because perhaps the best hope of future existence depends on a deity to provide that future existence. In addition, without a religious meaning it is hard to see why surviving death or living again could have any great point or value. Prior to exploring this, though, I want to indicate how a belief in at least the possibility of life after bodily death may be warranted independently of religious assumptions.

A century ago, when William James delivered his Gifford lectures, most academic philosophers in the English-speaking world subscribed to some form of mind-body dualism, believing the thinking subject is distinct from his or her body. By the middle of the twentieth century, the trend had swung away from this, and by the 1970s, the majority of philosophers seemed to believe in materialism. Since the 1970s, things have become more complex as efforts to work out the details of a materialist account of mind have run into difficulties, and current opinion is somewhat confused with virtually all possibilities of life after death.

The idea that human beings are animals and composed of material particles is beyond serious dispute; but in itself, this does not imply we are nothing but material objects. Certainly, if substance dualism were correct, we should disambiguate the idea of ourselves so as to distinguish between our bodies (what you see) and our souls (what thinks). The fact that the composition and operation of the body is describable in material terms leaves untouched the question of whether a person is identical with or reducible to his or her body. There are reasons for thinking, that in some respects, at least, we do transcend matter. The principal considerations involve states or activities that do not seem to be identifiable with bodily processes.

First, there is the fact of phenomenal consciousness conceived of as doubly subjective, in being felt by subjects and in being possibly

experienced in the absence of any corresponding objective reality. Consciousness always has a subject, but it need not have a real object. Added to this oddity is the consideration that phenomenal consciousness appears to resist materialist identification. At the same time, though, there are obvious correlations between physical facts and subjective awareness. The radical dualist may point out that these do not even establish that experiences are dependent on physical facts, let alone that they are physical facts. A more plausible position would suggest consciousness emerges in animals of certain levels of material organization in direct consequence of that organization. This satisfies the intuition that awareness is something non-physical, while granting it cannot exist without a material basis. Once the latter is allowed, however, the possibility of its surviving bodily death is excluded. So far as the issue is concerned, therefore, we may as well be as the scientific naturalist supposes—exclusively and exhaustively material.

It might be argued that the resurrectionist possibility would still be available in the form of material recreation; of late there has been something of a fashion among religious philosophers such as Peter Van Inwagen and Lynne Ruder Baker to favor this option. It has the appeal of providing a prospect of future life even if materialism wins the debate about the nature of persons; it also enjoys apparent scriptural support in Saint Paul's teaching on bodily resurrection. That said, it is hardly open to theists to grant that materialism is the general truth about reality, given that they believe in an immaterial deity, and, therefore, there is no general philosophical gain in conceding the materiality of persons.

Second, some Christian and other religious teachings also favor the idea that the souls of the deceased exist unembodied awaiting resurrection. Saint Paul's observations in his first letter to the Corinthians concern the nature of the latter event and are silent on the issue of what may precede it. Third, there is a major philosophical difficulty in the idea that life after death is provided entirely by material

re-creation. This was touched on in discussion of Saint Paul's analogy with the seed. If a material object is destroyed, and, later, its matter is fashioned into an object of the same sort, we would conclude the latter was a replica of the former and not the same object reconstituted. Likewise, the possibility of human material reconstitution is insufficient to allow us to say those who died live again. It appears, therefore, that the hope of future life resting on the idea of resurrection can only be part of the story; there also needs to be a carrier of identity across the gap between dissolution and reconstitution.

Phenomenal consciousness is of little help, first, because we have overwhelming empirical evidence that it depends on a material substratum; and second, because its contents reflect engagement with the material world. Hallucinations and phantom limb pains are exceptions to the rule. The very idea of such experiences borrows from veridical cases in which what one sees, hears, or smells is the result of the impact of the external world on the senses. Remove the organs of sight, hearing, and so on, and their internal correlates supporting memory and imagination, and the very idea of experience falls apart. For these reasons we should consider the suggestion of the ancients and medievals: what is immaterial is not consciousness but abstract thought.

In advancing this claim they were not unaware of the dependence of thought on experience; indeed, the medievals coined the slogan "there is nothing in the intellect that was not first in the sense." But they made the important distinction between sensory patterns and concepts. It is one thing to be able to distinguish shapes on the basis of their visible differences; it is quite another to be able to define geometrical figures. Intellect is the power of purely abstract thought by which minds can conceive unrealized possibilities, engage in mathematics, and practice metaphysical speculation. It is plausible to suppose that in these spheres we are in contact with essences and meanings existing apart from the imperfections and irregularities of empirical objects. But these abstract domains are not any less

real. On the contrary, they are more real to the extent that the “objects” that populate them are immune to the contingencies that disrupt and ultimately destroy material things. Recalling the medieval principle “acting manifests being” and the Aristotelian principle that acts are specified by their objects, powers by their acts, and substances by their powers, we may reason that whatever is capable of engaging immaterial objects must itself be an immaterial power, and whatever possesses an immaterial power must itself be an immaterial agent.

#### *IV. Arguing for Immortality*

At this point, let me present a series of arguments that I find (or find inspiration for) in Aquinas and other medievals (but have earlier sources in Greek thought) and that, I think, are deserving of further attention.

##### FROM THOUGHT’S OWN SELF-AWARENESS

The mind is capable of self-awareness in the sense of consciousness of its own acts. For example, I am conscious I am perceiving shapes, and I am aware I am thinking about the character of mind. This capacity is not reducible to the transmission of information from one object to another or from one part of an object to another part of that object. For, in these cases, the relations involved are other-directed and not reflexive. While material objects are capable of movement between parts, including the transmission of information from one part to another, no material object is, per se, capable of reflexivity. Thus, the mind, insofar as it is self-aware, is not a material object or a material power.<sup>8</sup>

##### FROM THE INTELLECTUAL GRASP OF THE NATURES OF MATERIAL THINGS

In thinking about the natures of things, as, for example, in studying chemistry, zoology, or botany, the mind (as intellect) conforms itself

to the natures of other substances without itself ceasing to exist. A material substance can only come to possess or be conformed to the nature of another substance by losing its original substantial nature. Change of this sort is the same as ceasing to exist. Accordingly, the mind (as intellect) is not a material substance or a material power.<sup>9</sup>

#### FROM RATIONAL ORDER

Thought exhibits rational order, whether in the strict form of logically deductive reasoning in which premises entail conclusions or in the various forms of inductive and practical reasoning in which hypothesis are formed, possibilities explored, and conclusions and policies shown to be reasonable. No movement of matter, however, exhibits rational order unless it is under the direction of thought and reason. But rationality cannot be induced or expressed in something that lacks it, save by something that already possesses it. Accordingly, thought cannot be the result of movements of matter, alone, if at all.<sup>10</sup>

These arguments may be further developed as follows. Self-awareness, intellectual knowledge of nature, and deductive, inductive, and practical reasoning are all essential powers of rational minds. That is to say, they are part of what it is to be or to have a rational mind. As a matter of general principle, however, essential powers express the necessary nature of an agent. Thus, the rationally minded agent is not (or not merely) a material entity. Beyond this conclusion one might argue further (in the style of the premodern philosophers and theologians) from the immateriality of the agent of an immaterial power to the subsistence of that agent as a substance independent of the body to the immortality of that subsistent, immaterial, and mental agent. What has no matter cannot perish by nature—though it may yet be annihilated by its Creator.<sup>11</sup>

I need hardly repeat the point conceded in my introduction that these arguments require detailed analyses. If the matter of their

soundness is uncertain, it is more in favor of their receiving further attention than of their being dismissed without careful examination. Certainly their neglect is not due to their lacking in significance but instead to a change of culture.

#### *IV. Aspirations of the Soul*

If upon due reflection it should prove that some or all of these various arguments may be made good, then we have philosophical reason to postulate an intellectual soul as an immaterial aspect of human persons. As such, its essential operations do not involve a bodily organ (though the expressions of that power may, as when we convey abstract thoughts through speech or writing). Accordingly, unlike phenomenal consciousness, we have no reason to think intellect cannot survive the destruction of the body. Yet for all its power to explore abstract domains, the life of a disembodied intellect is liable to lack much that we associate with human meaning and value. This is what Aquinas recognized and why he reasoned that living again as a person depends on being reunited with a body. However, the argument for an intellectual soul provides an important part of a broader case against scientific materialism. It also explains how the coming to be of a human person following one's death may yet constitute one's own resurrection, due to the identification with each body of the same intellect. Beyond that, it suggests a further argument for the existence of God. If mind transcends matter then matter is incapable of producing mind. Consequently, this aspect of human beings is not the result of biological reproduction or of any other material process. Being neither the effect of generation nor of modification of any previously existing stuff it can only be the product of creation *ex nihilo*—and there is only one cause capable of that: God.

This point has a great deal to tell us about the purpose of human life. If the distinguishing feature of human beings is that they are rational animals possessed of intellect, and if this feature calls for

special direct creation and is the basis of survival and the carrier of identity through disembodiment and into a possible resurrection, then it also must be a key to understanding the point of life and the likely character of the resurrected state. So far as this is concerned, there is reason to look again at Saint Paul's phrase "spiritual body." Paul thought the life of the world to come should involve a recognizably personal form of existence. Thus, he would rightly think in terms of animation: of sights and sounds, of action and communication. On the other hand, if triumph over death is to be permanent, not just life *after* death but life *without* death, then the natural causes of decline and decay must be absent. Any dynamic material creation must involve perishing as well as coming to be, for the natural generation of goods is necessarily at the cost of what they replace. Death is a limiting case of natural evil, but any perfection of human life also must involve the elimination of lesser evils. Accordingly, in whatever sense the future life is "bodily," it cannot involve the sort of material processes that sustain life in this world. It may be spatial, it may involve movement, it may be characterized by features such as sights and sounds, but it also must be nonmaterial to the extent of not involving privation or entropy. On this account, one might think of its occupants as having, in some sense, "spiritual bodies."

It is common to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to think the afterlife provides some sort of completion of what was begun earlier but was interrupted by death. How are we to understand this notion of completion, and how is it related to the meaning of human history and of human life in general? If theism is true, then given the total dependence of all creation on God, there is no suspense as to whether good will triumph: God is perfect and undiminished. There is, though, a real question about where individuals direct themselves and where they end up. Religion, as Richard Gale observes, offers both a personal explanation and a solution to the human quest for meaning and transcendence. In his opening to the *Confessions*, Augustine writes, "Man being part of your creation desires to praise

you . . . for you have formed us for yourself; and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.” This leads me to a style of argument once popular but now rarely, if ever, encountered.

- 1) Human beings have a natural desire for eternal life in the company of God.
- 2) Wherever there is a natural desire for something, that thing must exist.
- 3) Therefore: God exists.

Assuming the expression “the company of God” is read as referring to a possible state of affairs and not just to a conception of this, and assuming what is implicit in the second premise, that is, that it is impossible that a natural desire should in general be frustrated, then the conclusion follows. It is largely an empirical question whether there is a natural religious desire, though I suspect Gale would agree there is, even if it fails to be universal. The problematic premise is the second one. Why suppose that every natural desire has a real object, let alone that it will be attained? If one were already convinced God exists, then one might see it as providential that we have implanted in us a desire for God and see that this desire is not destined to be frustrated for want of an object. But if one cannot simply assume theism, how else might the desire for God be invoked in a case for the reality of the soul and of the future life?

Herein lies the relevance of Augustine’s words and the possibility of a reinterpretation of the thought attributed by Gale to William James and, perhaps, to us all. Augustine speaks of how “our hearts are restless until they come to rest in you”; and Gale writes, “What we really want is to be both [something] that self-sufficingly abides in its total completeness within the present, and [something] that is always racing ahead of itself into the future so as to complete itself.” Our striving seeks completion in something that is itself complete, something that is the proper object of our actions and gives them ultimate value—not an “it” but a “thou,” and not being God but being united

with God. This aspiration is more evidently religious in character than is the sense of general wonder at the existence of things remarked on by Smart, but both have their place in the construction of the case for theism, which is as much about transforming sentiments of rationality as it is about engaging sentiments and providing reasons. It may even be that the existence of God is, for humankind, per se, more fundamentally a matter of feeling than of rational deduction—which is not to say that the feeling is not itself a rational one.<sup>12</sup>

### Notes

A version of the present text was presented at the Science, Religion, and Pragmatism conference held at the University of Pittsburgh in spring 2003 to honor and mark the retirement from the department of philosophy of Richard M. Gale, author of *The Language of Time*, *On the Nature and Existence of God*, *The Divided Self of William James*, and other fine writings. An atheist, Gale is no enemy of religious sentiment and is respectful of religious argumentation. Part of the third section of my essay also appears in “Religion, Death, and the Meaning of Life,” in John Haldane, *An Intelligent Person’s Guide to Religion* (London: Duckworth, 2003), chap. 7.

1. J. J. C. Smart and J. J. Haldane, *Atheism and Theism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996; 2nd ed., 2003).
2. Alexander Pruss and Richard Gale, “Review of *Atheism and Theism*,” *Faith and Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (1999): 113.
3. Richard Gale, *The Divided Self of William James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
4. *Ibid.*, 331.
5. I Cor. 15:35-44.
6. Tertullian, *Of the Resurrection of the Dead*.
7. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on I Corinthians*.
8. For relevant sources for this style of argument, see Plotinus, *Enneads* vol. IV: 7.1-3; and Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* vol. II: chap. 49, 8.
9. See Aristotle, *De Anima*, 429a13-29; and Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* vol. II: chap. 49, 3.
10. See Anaxagoras, fragments 12 and 14; and Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 2, a3, responsio.
11. See Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestio Disputata de Anima*, a1, responsio.