



THIRD EDITION

PHILOSOPHY
of RELIGION

SELECTED READINGS

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According to Richard Swinburne (b. 1934) the function but not the existence of a soul depends on a functioning physical brain. Since it is unlikely that brains can be reassembled, the soul may exist but is unlikely to function after death. Arguments from psychical research and philosophers like Plato also fail to show that souls can function without brains. However, since there is no natural law requiring the connection of souls with brains, the way is open for a metaphysical theory like theism to claim that it is possible that God could create the requisite conditions under which the soul could live and function after death. For example, God might create a different body.



A man's having a mental life must be understood as a non-bodily part of the man, his soul, having a mental life. . . .

THE EXISTENCE OF THE SOUL

What I have argued so far is that without a functioning brain, the soul will not function (i.e. have conscious episodes)—not that it will not exist. But what does it mean to suppose that the soul exists at some time without functioning? The distinction between existence and functioning is clear enough in the case of a material substance, which has some sort of life (e.g. a plant) or some sort of working (e.g. a machine). The substance continues to exist so long as the matter of which it is made continues to exist in roughly the same shape (with the possibility perhaps of gradual replacement of parts). But it functions only so long as normal life-processes or machine-use continue. The clock exists, when it no longer tells the time, so long as the parts remain joined in roughly the normal way; and a dead tree is still a tree, although it no longer takes in water through its roots and sunlight through its leaves.

The distinction is not, however, at all clear in the case of the soul, an immaterial substance. The soul functions while it is the subject of conscious episodes—while it has sensations or thoughts or purposes. But is it still there when the man is asleep, having no conscious episodes? This calls for a decision of what (if anything) we are to mean by saying of some soul that it exists but is not functioning.

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We suppose that persons continue to exist while asleep, having no conscious life. In saying that some such person still exists, we mean, I suggest, that the sleeping body will again by normal processes give rise to a conscious life, or can be caused to give rise to a conscious life (e.g. by shaking it), a conscious life which will be the life of the person existing before sleep. Now, we could describe this latter fact by saying that, although persons only exist while they are conscious, the bodies which they previously owned continue to exist during the periods of unconsciousness and become thereafter the bodies of persons again (indeed the same persons who previously owned those bodies). However, that would be a very unnatural way to talk, largely because it has the consequence that certain substances (persons) are continually popping in and out of existence. Although there seems to me nothing contradictory in allowing to a substance many beginnings of existence, it seems a less cumbersome way to describe the cited fact to say that persons exist while not conscious, and mean by this that normal bodily processes or available artificial techniques can make those persons conscious. This will have the consequence that persons normally have only one beginning of existence during their life on Earth.

Our grounds for saying that persons exist while not conscious are similar to the grounds for saying that persons have desires and beliefs when they are not aware of them, i.e. that they can easily be made aware of them and that those desires and beliefs will influence their actions when they are put in appropriate circumstances.

Conscious persons consist of body and soul. We could say that souls exist only while conscious; while a person is asleep, his soul ceases to exist but it is made to exist again when he is woken up. But this would be a cumbersome way of talking. It is better to understand by a soul existing when not functioning that normal bodily processes on their own will, or available artificial techniques can, make that soul function. In saying this I am laying down rules for the use of a technical term, "soul." With this usage, a soul exists while its owner exists; and a soul will normally have only one beginning of existence during a man's life on Earth. . . .

Four thousand million years of evolution produced man, a body and soul in continuing interaction. A human soul is more dependent for its development on its own states than is an animal soul, for it has complex beliefs and desires kept in place and changing in accord with other beliefs and desires. Other animals having only much simpler beliefs and desires are much more dependent for their continuing beliefs and desires directly on their bodily states. Can this complex evolved human soul survive on its own apart from the body which sustains it? I have argued so far that the functioning of the human soul (i.e. its having conscious episodes) is guaranteed by the functioning of the brain currently connected with it (connected, in that the soul's acquisition of beliefs about its surroundings and action upon those surroundings is mediated by that brain). I have considered what it is for a man or his soul to exist unconscious, and I have argued that that was a matter which required to be settled by definition. The definition which I suggested was that a soul exists if normal bodily processes or available artificial techniques can bring the man to be conscious, i.e. his soul to function again.

When the body dies and the brain ceases to function, the evidence suggests that the soul will cease to function also. For that evidence suggests that the soul functions only when the brain has rhythms of certain kinds, and at death the brain ceases to function altogether. If the soul does not function before there is a functioning brain, or during deep sleep, when the brain is not functioning at a certain level, surely it will not function after there ceases to be a functioning brain. However, there are arguments and evidence of less usual kinds which purport to show that things are different after death from what they are before birth.

Before we face the question of whether the soul can function without the functioning of the brain currently connected with it, we must consider the question of whether, after death, the brain which ceases to function at death can be made to function again and whether thereby the soul can be revived.

CAN THE BRAIN BE REACTIVATED?

A crucial problem is that we do not know how much of the brain that was yours has to be reassembled and within what time interval in order that we may have *your* brain and so your soul function again. We saw this earlier in the split brain cases. If both half-brains are transplanted into empty skulls and the transplants take, both subsequent persons will satisfy to some extent the criterion of apparent memory (as well as the brain criterion) for being the original person. One subsequent person might satisfy the criterion better than the other, and that would be evidence that he was the original person; but the evidence could be misleading. The situation is equally unclear with possible developments at death.

Suppose you die of a brain haemorrhage which today's doctors cannot cure, but your relatives take your corpse and put it straight into a very deep freeze in California. Fifty years later your descendants take it out of the freeze; medical technology has improved and the doctors are able quickly to mend your brain, and your body is then warmed up. The body becomes what is clearly the body of a living person, and one with your apparent memory and character. Is it you? Although we might be mistaken, the satisfaction of the criterion of apparent memory (together with the—at any rate partial—satisfaction of the criterion of brain continuity) would suggest that we ought to say "Yes." So long as the same brain is revived, the same functioning soul would be connected with it—whatever the time interval. But what if the brain is cut up into a million pieces and then frozen? Does the same hold? Why should there be any difference? Suppose that the brain is reduced to its component atoms; and then these are reassembled either by chance or because they have been labelled radioactively. Again, if the subsequent person makes your memory claims, surely we ought to say that it is you. But how many of the original atoms do we need in the original locations? That we do not know. So long as the subsequent person had many similar atoms in similar locations in his brain, he would claim to have been you. So, the criterion of apparent memory will be satisfied. Total

non-satisfaction of the brain criterion would defeat the claims of apparent memory (in the absence of any general failure of coincidence in results between these criteria). But it remains unclear and indeed insoluble exactly how much of the original brain is needed to provide satisfaction of the brain criterion.

This problem of how much of the original body is physically necessary when other matter is added to it so as to make a fully functioning body, in order that the original soul may be present and function, is a problem which concerned the thinkers of the early Christian centuries and of the Middle Ages. They considered the imaginary case of the cannibal who eats nothing but human flesh. Given that both the cannibal and his victims are to be brought to life in the General Resurrection, to whom will the flesh of the cannibal belong? Aquinas¹ begins his answer by saying that "if something was materially present in many men, it will rise in him to whose perfection it belonged," i.e. that that part of the body which is necessary for a man being the person he is will belong to him in the General Resurrection. But what part is that, and what guarantee is there that the matter of that part cannot come to form the essential part of a different man who cannot therefore be reconstituted at the same time as the original man (given the operation of normal processes)? Aquinas goes on to produce an argument that the "radical seed" (i.e. the sperm, which according to Aristotle formed the original matter of the embryo) forms the minimum essential bodily core around which a man could be rebuilt. But we know now, as Aquinas did not, that the sperm does not remain as a unit within the organism, and there seems to me no reason why all the atoms which originally formed it should not be lost from the body, and indeed come to form parts of original cells of many subsequent men. The atoms of the original cell are not therefore the most plausible candidate for being the part of the body physically necessary for human personal identity. Aquinas's problem remains without modern solution.

Nevertheless, although neurophysiology cannot tell us which part of his brain is physically necessary for the embodiment of a given man, it does tell us, as I argued earlier, that some of the brain is thus necessary. For the functioning of a given human soul, there has to be a man whose brain contains certain of the matter of his original brain (but which matter we do not know), similarly arranged. A certain amount of the original brain matter has to be reassembled in a similar arrangement and reactivated by being joined to other brain matter and a body if the soul is to function again. And how likely is it that physical processes will bring about such a reassembly? As the time since death increases, and brain cells and then brain molecules are broken up, burnt by fire, or eaten by worms—it becomes very, very unlikely indeed that chance will reassemble them; or even that human agents can do so for they will not be able to re-identify the atoms involved. . . . I conclude that it is very, very unlikely (and with increasing time virtually impossible) that after death souls will again have reassembled the brain basis which we know makes them function.

Is there any good reason to suppose that the soul continues to function without the brain functioning? Arguments to show that the soul continues to function without the brain functioning may be divided into three groups, involving different amounts of theoretical structure, to reach their conclusions. First, we may consider arguments which purport to show that certain men have survived death, in the sense that their souls have functioned without their

brains functioning, directly—i.e. without needing first to establish anything about the nature of the soul or any more systematic metaphysical structure. Arguments of this kind may be called parapsychological arguments.

ARGUMENTS FROM PARAPSYCHOLOGY

First, there is the alleged evidence of reincarnation, that souls function in new bodies with new brains on Earth. There are Indian children who claim to remember having lived a certain past life, and whose memory claims coincide with the events of some real past life about which—allegedly—they could not have learnt by what they were told or had read.² Now, it is of course open to serious question whether perhaps those Indian children had read or were told or learnt in some other perfectly normal way the details of those past lives. But even if for a few Indian children there was this coincidence between their memory claims and the events of a certain past person's life, without there being any normal cause of the accuracy of their memory claims that would not be enough evidence to show their identity with those persons. For, given the general coincidence of sameness of memory with continuity of brain, we must take continuity of brain as a criterion of identity; and the nonsatisfaction of that in the case of the few Indian children (who do not have the same brain matter as the cited past persons), must remain substantial evidence against the supposition that they are those persons.

Next, there is the alleged evidence of spiritualism, that souls function without bodies or with new bodies and brains in another world. Mediums purport to have telepathic communication with dead persons. The evidence that they do is allegedly provided by the knowledge of the details of the dead person's life on Earth (not obtainable by the medium by normal means) which the medium's reports of the telepathic communications reveal. In the reincarnation case there is no doubt that there exists in the present a living conscious person; the debatable question concerns his identity with the past person. In the spiritualism case the crucial issue concerns whether there is a conscious person with whom the medium is in communication.

A serious issue in medium cases, like the similar issue in the supposed reincarnation cases, concerns the source of the mysterious knowledge. Perhaps the medium gets her knowledge from some spy who has done research on the dead person's life. But even if investigation showed clearly that the mediums had gained their knowledge of the past lives of dead persons by no normal route, the evidence would still, I suggest, not support the hypothesis of telepathic communication with the dead. For also compatible with the evidence would be the hypothesis that the mediums have clairvoyance—they see directly into the past and acquire their knowledge thus. (Adopting the latter hypothesis would involve supposing either that the mediums were deceiving us about the kind of experiences they were having (apparent two-way traffic with a living person), or that they were deceiving themselves, or that their experiences were illusory.) On the choice between the two hypotheses there seem to me to be two important

reasons for preferring the clairvoyance hypothesis. First, there are no cross-checks between mediums about the alleged present experiences of the dead in the afterlife. Mediums never give independently verifiable reports on this. Secondly, their reports about the present alleged experiences of the dead are themselves very banal. Yet one would expect because of the total lack of dependence of the dead on their past bodies, that they would live in a very different world, and that this would emerge in their reports on that world.³

Finally, there is the interesting and recently published alleged evidence that souls function while their bodies are out of action. There has been careful analysis of the experiences of those who clinically were as good as dead and then recovered. Such experiences are often called "near-death experiences."⁴ Fifteen per cent of subjects resuscitated after being in such a condition report strange experiences of one of two kinds. Many of them report the following "transcendental experiences":

an initial period of distress followed by profound calm and joy; out-of-the-body experiences with the sense of watching resuscitation events from a distance; the sensation of moving rapidly down a tunnel or along a road, accompanied by a loud buzzing or ringing noise or hearing beautiful music; recognising friends and relatives who have died previously; a rapid review of pleasant incidents from throughout the life as a panoramic playback (in perhaps twelve per cent of cases); a sense of approaching a border or frontier and being sent back; and being annoyed or disappointed at having to return from such a pleasant experience—"I tried not to come back," in one patient's words. Some describe frank transcendent experiences and many state that they will never fear death again. Similar stories have been reported from the victims of accidents, falls, drowning, anaphylaxis, and cardiac or respiratory arrest.⁵

Resuscitated patients other than those who had transcendental experiences have undergone "a wide variety of vivid dreams, hallucinations, nightmares and delusions," but some of those who had transcendental experiences also experienced these and sharply distinguished between the two kinds of experience. The "dreams" were regarded as dreams, and were quickly forgotten; the "supposed glimpses of a future life" were regarded as real and permanently remembered. These glimpses were reported as having occurred at moments when "breathing had ceased, the heart had stopped beating, and the patients showed no visible signs of life." The principle of credulity might suggest that we ought to take such apparent memories seriously, especially in view of the considerable coincidences between them, as evidence that what subjects thought they experienced, they really did. But although the subjects referred these experiences to moments at which the heart had stopped beating, etc., I do not know of any evidence that at these moments their brains had ceased to function. And if the brain was still functioning then, what the evidence would show is not that the soul may function when the brain does not, but only that its perceptual experiences (i.e. sensations and acquisitions of belief about far away places) are not dependent on normal sensory input.

The same conclusion will follow with respect to the considerable but not overwhelming evidence of those resuscitated patients who had experiences of

the other strange kind, "out-of-body-experiences," i.e. being able to view their own bodies and events in the operating theatre from a distance, obtaining thereby information which they would not have been able to obtain by normal means (e.g. having visual experiences of events which they would not have got from use of their eyes, such as views of parts of the theatre hidden from their eyes).⁶ This again suggests that the subject's acquisition of information is dependent on some factor quite other than normal sensory input to the brain. But again I know of no evidence that these experiences occurred while the brain was not functioning; and so the available evidence does not support the suggestion that the soul can function without the brain functioning.

My conclusion on parapsychology is that it provides no good evidence that the soul continues to function without the brain to which it is currently connected, functioning.

ARGUMENTS FOR NATURAL SURVIVAL

The second class of arguments purporting to show that the soul survives death purport to show from a consideration of what the soul is like when it functions normally that its nature is such that the failure of the brain to function would make no difference to the operation of the soul. Such arguments verge from very general arguments of what the soul must be like to be conscious at all to arguments which appeal to particular empirical data.

Dualist philosophers of the past have usually affirmed the natural immortality of the soul—that the soul has such a nature, or the laws of nature are such, that (barring suspension of natural laws) it will continue to function forever. There have been a variety of general arguments for the natural immortality of the soul. Each argument has, in my view, its own fallacies; and the fallacies being fairly evident today, there is no need for any extensive discussion of such arguments. (Expositions of the arguments do, incidentally, usually suffer from confusing the existence of the soul with its functioning; wrongly supposing that when it exists, necessarily it will function.)

To illustrate the fallacies of such arguments, I take just one famous argument, put forward by Plato.⁷ Plato argues that the soul being an immaterial thing is unextended, and so does not have parts; but the destruction of a thing consists in separating from each other its parts; whence it follows that souls cannot be destroyed and must continue to exist forever.

Now certainly the normal way by which most material objects cease to exist is that they are broken up into parts. The normal end of a table is to be broken up; likewise for chairs, houses, and pens. But this need not be the way in which a material object ceases to exist. Things cease to exist when they lose their essential properties. The essential properties of a table include being solid. If a table was suddenly liquified, then, even if its constituent molecules remained arranged in the shape of a table by being contained in a table-shaped mould, the table would have ceased to exist. So if even material objects can cease to exist

without being broken up into parts, souls surely can cease to exist by some other route than by being broken up into parts. . . .

IS THE SOUL NATURALLY EMBODIED?

If it cannot be shown that the soul has a nature so as to survive death without its connected brain functioning, can it be shown that the soul has a nature such that its functioning is dependent on that of the brain with which it is connected? Can we show that there is a natural law which (i) connects consciousness of a soul with the functioning of some material system, and (ii) connects the consciousness of each soul with the functioning of a particular material system; so that of natural necessity a soul can only function if the brain or other complex system with which it is at some time connected continues to function?

The answer given [previously] is that this cannot be shown. It has not been shown and probably never can be shown that there is any naturally necessary connection of these kinds between soul and body. All we are ever likely to get is correlations—between this kind of brain-event and that kind of mental event. And in the absence of a theory which explains why a material system of this kind is needed to produce a soul, how this sort of physical change will produce this kind of mental state, how just so much of the brain and no more is needed for the continuity of a certain soul (as opposed to the mere functioning of a soul with similar apparent memories), we have no grounds for saying that souls *cannot* survive the death of their brains. We do not know and are not likely to find out what if any natural necessity governs the functioning of souls.

The situation is simply that the fairly direct kinds of evidence considered so far give no grounds for supposing that anyone has survived death, but we know of no reason to suppose that it is not possible for anyone to survive death. The situation is thus similar to that in many areas of enquiry when no one has yet found a so-and-so but no one has shown that so-and-sos do not exist. Maybe there are living persons on other planets, naturally occurring elements with atomic numbers of over 1,000, or magnetic monopoles; but as yet no one has found them. Someone may argue that failure to find something when you have looked for it is evidence that it does not exist. But that is so only if you would recognize the object when you found it, and if there is a limited region within which the object can exist and you have explored quite a lot of the region. Failure to find oil in the English Channel after you have drilled in most parts of it, or to find the Abominable Snowman if you have explored most of the Himalayas, is indeed evidence that the thing does not exist. But that is hardly the case with souls whose brains have ceased to function. Maybe they are reincarnate in new bodies and brains on Earth but, as they have lost their memories, the evidence of their identity has gone. Or maybe they are where we cannot at present look. They may still function without being embodied . . . and so there be no place which they occupy. Or if they are re-embodied in another body with another brain, they may be anywhere in this universe or some other. Failure to find souls who have

survived death shows no more than that if they do exist, they are not in the very few places where we have looked for them or that if they are, the marks of their identity (e.g. apparent memories of past lives) have been removed. In the absence of any further evidence as to whether souls do survive death we can only remain agnostic and wait until further evidence does turn up.

EVIDENCE OF SURVIVAL VIA METAPHYSICAL THEORY

There is however a third kind of evidence about whether men survive death which we have not yet considered. This is evidence of a wide ranging character which is most simply explained by a very general metaphysical theory of the world, which has as its consequence that human souls survive death as a result of their nature or as a result of the predictable action of some agent who has the power to bring them to life.

One such theory is the Hindu-Buddhist metaphysic of karma, a deep law of retribution in nature whereby an agent who lives a life thereafter lives another in which he gets the deserts (reward or punishment) for the previous life. (The establishment of such a system would have the consequence that, despite the lack of evidence for this on which I commented [previously], souls exist before birth; in order to be reborn they must then normally lose much of the character which, I have argued, comes to characterize the soul by the time of death.)

Another such theory is of course Christian theism. The theist has first to argue for the existence of God, a person (in a wide sense) of infinite power, wisdom, goodness, and freedom. He may argue that the existence of God provides the simplest explanation of the existence of the universe, the virtual total regularity of its behaviour in its conformity to natural laws, and various more particular phenomena within the universe. It would then follow that God, being omnipotent, would have the power to give to souls life after death (and if there is no natural law which ties the functioning of a soul to the operation of a brain, God would not need to suspend natural laws in order to do this). The Christian theist will need further to show that God intends to bring souls to function after death. He could show this either by showing that it was an obligation on an omnipotent being to do such a thing, and so that, being good, God would do it; or by showing that God had announced his intention of doing this (e.g. by doing something which God alone could do such as suspending a law of nature, in connection with the work of a prophet as a sign that the prophet who had said that God so intended was to be trusted).

It will be evident that any argument via metaphysical theory to the survival of death by human souls will have a lengthy and complicated structure. But of course those who produce such arguments are equally concerned about most of the other things which need to be proved on the way. Few people are interested in the existence of God solely for its value in proving life after death. And if I am right in my claim that we cannot show that the soul has a nature such that it survives "under its own steam," and that we cannot show that it has

a nature such that it cannot survive without its sustaining brain, the only kind of argument that can be given is an argument which goes beyond nature, i.e. that shows there is something beyond the natural order embodied in laws of nature, and that the operation of that something is to some extent predictable.

If God did give to souls life after death in a new body or without a body, he would not in any way be violating natural laws—for, if I am right, there are no natural laws which dictate what will happen to the soul after death. The soul doesn't have a nature which has consequences for what will happen to it subsequent to the dissolution of its links to the body.

In the last chapter I argued that the human soul at death had a structure, a system of beliefs and desires which might be expected to be there to some degree in the soul if that soul were to be revived. If a man does survive death, he will take his most central desires and beliefs with him, which is the kind of survival for which, I suspect, most men hope. In hoping to survive death, a man hopes not only that subsequent to his death, he will have experiences and perform actions. He hopes also to take with him a certain attitude to the world. That attitude certainly does not always include all aspects of a man's present character. Much, no doubt, many a man would be happy to dispense with. But it does include some of his character, and that part just because it is the part which he desires should continue, is the most central part.

Note that if there does occur a general resurrection of souls with new bodies in some other world, yet with apparent memories of their past lives (or a general reincarnation on Earth with such memories), they would have grounds for reidentifying each other correctly. For then the general failure of the results of the criterion of bodily continuity to coincide with those of apparent memory would by arguments [I have offered elsewhere] justifiably lead us to abandon the former criterion and rely entirely on the latter. Not merely is a general resurrection logically possible but it would be known by the subjects to have occurred.

CONCLUSION

The view of the evolved human soul which I have been advocating may be elucidated by the following analogy. The soul is like a light bulb and the brain is like an electric light socket. If you plug the bulb into the socket and turn the current on, the light will shine. If the socket is damaged or the current turned off, the light will not shine. So, too, the soul will function (have a mental life) if it is plugged into a functioning brain. Destroy the brain or cut off the nutriment supplied by the blood, and the soul will cease to function, remaining inert. But it can be revived and made to function again by repairing or reassembling the brain—just as the light can be made to shine again by repairing the socket or turning on the current. But now, my analogy breaks down slightly (as all analogies do—else they would not be analogies). Humans can repair light sockets. But there is a practical limit to the ability of humans to repair brains; the bits get lost. Humans can move light bulbs and put them into entirely different sockets.

But no human knows how to move a soul from one body and plug it into another; nor does any known natural force do this. Yet the task is one involving no contradiction and an omnipotent God could achieve it; or maybe there are other processes which will do so. And just as light bulbs do not have to be plugged into sockets in order to shine (loose wires can be attached to them), maybe there are other ways of getting souls to function than by plugging them into brains. But investigation into the nature of the soul does not reveal those ways. And humans cannot discover what else is needed to get souls to function again, unless they can discover the ultimate force behind nature itself.

NOTES

1. *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4. 81. 12 and 13. (Book IV, translated under the title *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, Book IV, by C. J. O'Neill, Image Books, New York, 1957.)
2. For references to the literature, see John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (London: Collins, 1976), pp. 373-78.
3. On the alleged evidence of spiritualism, see John Hick, *op. cit.*, ch. 7.
4. There is a brief and well-balanced survey of this evidence in Paul and Linda Badham, *Immortality or Extinction?* (London: Macmillan, 1982), ch. 5. My summary of the evidence is based on this chapter, but I also make use of a very careful and balanced account of a new programme of investigations by Michael B. Sabom, *Recollections of Death* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982).
5. *Lancet*, 24 June 1978, quoted in Badham, *op. cit.*
6. On this, see Sabom, *op. cit.*, chs. 3, 6, 7, and 8.
7. *Phaedo* 78b-80c.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is Swinburne's distinction between the existence of the soul and its function? Why is this distinction important to Swinburne's argument?
 2. Why does Swinburne conclude that it is unlikely that after death souls would be able to use their previously connected brain to function? What follows from Swinburne's view?
 3. Why is Swinburne unpersuaded by parapsychology to believe that souls function after death?
 4. What account does Swinburne give of the possibility of life after death by appealing to the existence and acts of God? Why does he think that this account does not violate any natural laws?
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