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Humanity in Quest of the Soul

WAGNER. Alas, poor slave! See how poverty jests in his
nakedness! I know the villain's out of service, and so
hungry, that I know he would give his soul to the devil for
a shoulder of mutton, though it were blood-raw.

CLOWN. Not so neither: I had need to have it well roasted,
and good sauce to it, if I pay so dear, I can tell you.

— CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE, *DOCTOR FAUSTUS*

The Risk of Loss

In the legend dramatized by Marlowe and later retold by Goethe, Faust makes a disastrous bargain: he gains a great deal of power and pleasure but loses everything that truly matters. Anyone who thinks that the badness of the bargain hinges entirely on whether there really is an afterlife has failed to grasp much of the deeper significance of the story. It's perhaps unlikely that a dramatist today would write a play about selling one's soul, but even though the word "soul" may be less commonly found than it used to be, the underlying idea is very far from obsolete. Philip Pullman's acclaimed fantasy trilogy *His Dark Materials* describes a world where people have "daemons," which take the form of animals who closely accompany them everywhere. In childhood, people's daemons have the ability to change their shapes frequently, becoming, for example, cats or birds or monkeys, but

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in adolescence the daemons “settle” into a single shape. The daemon is closely linked to the life and distinctive personality of each character, and even a temporary separation of people from their daemons causes intense distress. In the course of the story, some of the characters fall into the hands of evil experimenters who use a hideous process called “intercision”: a silver guillotine is employed to sever permanently the lifelong connection between a person and his or her daemon. The result is a listless, demoralized individual, bereft of energy and will, already well on the way to dying.¹

It does not take any great leap to understand Pullman’s concept of the daemon as a kind of imaginative representation of the soul, or at least as having something in common with what people mean by that difficult term. Losing your daemon is about the worst thing that can happen to you, depriving your life of its distinctive rhythm and its moral centre. No price, one feels, would be sufficient recompense for losing one’s daemon, and (as the “intercision” episode implicitly conveys) no scientific or technological project, no matter what benefits it promised, could justify depriving someone of his or her daemon. Pullman’s attitude towards religion is ambivalent (he certainly targets its powerful institutional manifestations), but it is not hard to detect religious overtones in his portrayal of the preciousness and vital importance of one’s daemon, calling to mind the question posed in the gospels: “What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?”²

But what does it really mean to lose one’s soul? Outside the realm of fantasy fiction, can we today still take seriously the idea

1. This is the fate of Tony Makarios in ch. 13 of Pullman’s *Northern Lights* (published in the United States as *The Golden Compass*), the first volume of the trilogy.

2. Mark 8:36 (Authorized Version).

of the soul as something we are in danger of losing, or perhaps have already lost? Many of the most influential thinkers of modernity seem to have thought so. T. S. Eliot, that great prophet of the modern age, watched the seething crowds flowing over London Bridge and declared: “I had not thought death had undone so many.”³ The line deliberately echoes Dante’s vision of the lost souls in Hell, severed from their earthly bodies, just as Eliot’s unfortunate city dwellers seem to be severed from their souls. Herded together, condemned to a repetitive existence that is messy and pointless, “distracted from distraction by distraction,”⁴ they seem to lack any moral purpose, as listless and demoralized as Pullman’s tragic victims whose daemons have been forcibly sliced off. And yet all this, Eliot implies, is accepted by most people as quite normal: no one seems to have noticed that anything is amiss. A century before Eliot, the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote:

A person can go on living fairly well, seem to be a human being, be occupied with temporal matters, marry, have children, be honoured and esteemed, yet it may not be detected that in a deeper sense this person lacks a self. . . . The greatest hazard of all, losing one’s self, can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all. No other loss can occur so quietly; any other loss—an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc.—is sure to be noticed.⁵

Instead of “soul,” Kierkegaard talks of the “self,” or sometimes of the “spirit,” but he seems to be speaking of much the same momentous threat as the danger of losing one’s soul. Those who

3. Eliot, “The Waste Land,” pt. 1, line 63; cf. Dante, *Inferno*, canto 3, line 57.

4. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” line 101; later incorporated into *Four Quartets*.

5. Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*, 32–33.

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“mortgage themselves to the world,” he says, may achieve all kinds of temporal success, but “spiritually speaking they do not exist—they have no self.”⁶ Even though it can happen imperceptibly, without anyone noticing, the loss of the self is, for Kierkegaard, a catastrophic moral collapse and amounts to nothing less than “sickness unto death.” Putting this in theistic terms, Kierkegaard says that in losing my self I am losing that which makes me conscious of “existing before God.”⁷ The remark comes in Kierkegaard’s *Sickness unto Death*, the title of which recalls the gospel story of Lazarus, whose sickness was indeed fatal and who had to be summoned back from the tomb by Christ.⁸ Kierkegaard’s implicit suggestion seems to be that the plight of one who has lost his or her very self is even graver than this, unless redeemed by renewed consciousness of God.

Though these reflections of Kierkegaard have a strongly theistic, and indeed Christian, stamp, the idea of the self or soul as the precious and fragile moral core of one’s being, something that can be irretrievably lost, does not have to be expressed in explicitly religious, let alone Christian, terms. Several centuries before Christ, Socrates reproached his Athenian accusers for being overly concerned with things like money and reputation, but not having the faintest concern for the virtuous conduct of their lives, or the improvement of the most precious part of themselves—their souls.⁹ And in some of the later Hellenistic philosophers, the terms “care of the soul” and “care of the self”

6. Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*, 35.

7. Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*, 79. See further Carlisle, *Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling*, 143–44.

8. See John 11:4.

9. Plato, *Apology*, 29d5–e3; cf. 30a6–b1, 31b, 36c.

are closely linked.¹⁰ By the time of the Christian gospels, this linkage is well established, so that the saying quoted earlier from Mark's gospel ("What doth it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his soul?") appears in Luke as "What shall it profit a man if he gains the world and loses *himself*?"¹¹

Lives, we know, can go well or badly. People can be more or less successful, more or less lucky, and advantaged or disadvantaged in many different ways, by birth or geography, or economic circumstances, or physical health. And sometimes such external circumstances can crush someone so completely that no worthwhile human capacities can unfold. But for those able to enjoy at least a basic modicum of health and physical security, there will always be, beyond questions about fortune or misfortune, wealth or poverty, a further more fundamental question about the moral core of their being—the "soul" or self that defines each individual. Have they found themselves, are they at peace with themselves, or have they wasted their lives, pursuing illusory goods at the cost of losing their very souls?

These brief opening remarks have ranged from the fourth century BC through to the time of Christ, and on down to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and beyond, and it may seem to be moving much too swiftly to assume that ideas from such disparate historical periods can be grouped together. But the essentials of the human condition have not significantly altered in what is, on an evolutionary timescale, the tiniest blink of an eye. Indeed, however often we are told that this or that technical

10. For "care of the soul" (*epimeleia tēs psychēs*) and "care of the self" (*epimeleia heautou*) in ancient philosophy, see Long and Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers*, 25C; see also Seneca, *Epistulae morales*, x. For more on these writers, see Hadot, *Philosophy*.

11. Luke 9:24–25.

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or scientific development has “altered human life beyond recognition,” the existential predicament that confronts human beings is fundamentally the same as it has always been:

The troubles of our proud and angry dust
Are from eternity, and shall not fail.¹²

To be sure, these “troubles” may manifest themselves under various guises—as threats to our psychological equilibrium and identity (Pullman), as spiritual and existential anguish (Kierkegaard), as the risk of neglecting the most precious part of ourselves (Socrates). But there is a common thread, insofar as the task of finding or recovering that vital part of ourselves that has been called the “soul” is a task that transcends any given historical circumstance and is inseparable from the human condition. Beyond the imperatives of securing the wherewithal to keep ourselves alive and physically secure, to be human is to be subject to a deeper demand, the requirement to seek, and to find, our true identity. This will not be a merely factual task, like determining our genetic profile; it will involve measuring what we have so far made of our lives against what they are capable of becoming. The demand is inescapable, no matter how much we may try to stop our ears to it. And in the way we finally respond to it we will either find ourselves or lose ourselves.

Dimensions of Soul

It should already be apparent that the notion of a “soul” is an elusive one, and that questions about “finding the soul” may be understood in a number of ways, including the existential, the psychological, the spiritual, the religious, and the moral. In

12. Housman, *Last Poems*, no. 9.

the chapters that follow, we shall hope to explore some of these dimensions, though it may not be feasible or desirable to fully separate them or disentangle them. Such separating—such “analysis” or breaking down—can often be of great value in philosophy if we are to have some kind of conceptual map of the terrain to be crossed, but it is arguable that those distinctive and crucially important characteristics of human beings grouped under the label “soul” are best understood synthetically or holistically, as a network of capacities and dispositions that are intimately interrelated and mutually supporting.

This kind of linkage can be seen if we turn to another context in which the term “soul” is commonly employed—a context that at first sight may seem far removed from the grave questions about moral identity and selfhood so far broached. The context in question relates to the spontaneous outpouring of a certain distinctive kind of joyful emotion. In some verses written by the nineteenth-century Irish poet Samuel Ferguson, and often heard set to a traditional Irish folk tune, we find the opening lines:

Dear thoughts are in my mind,
and my soul soars enchanted
As I hear the sweet lark sing
In the clear air of the day.¹³

As the song develops, it becomes clear that the imagery is an expression of the poet’s joy at being accepted by his beloved. But, as so often in poetry, much more is conveyed here than could be captured by a literal paraphrase (and the lyrical power of the verse to suggest more than what is literally asserted is

13. Samuel Ferguson (1810–86); a sung version of the poem, performed by Cara Dillon, may be heard at Alberto Ablanedo, “Cara Dillon—The Lark in the Clear Air,” YouTube, 29 October 2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uLoBEC5mNYI>.

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immeasurably enhanced when it is set to music). It is not just that the protagonist feels very pleased about what has happened. The idea of the soul soaring upwards like the lark in the “clear air” expresses a peculiar upwelling of joyful exaltation, and it is important for conveying this meaning that the term *soul* is employed. For what is suggested by putting it in terms of soul, as opposed to, say, the mind or the feelings, is that the event has a spiritual significance for the life of the subject: it involves his whole sense of self, of who he is, of the meaning of his existence. Like Othello when he greets Desdemona with the words “O my Soul’s joy!”—the feeling is not merely one of pleasure or delight, but a complete outpouring of spirit:

It gives me wonder great as my content
To see you here before me. Oh my soul’s joy,
If after every tempest comes such calm
Let the winds blow till they have wakened death . . .¹⁴

Once one starts to reflect on the kind of human experience referred to here, one realizes that breaking it down into component parts—belief, desire, cognition, emotion—would involve a kind of distortion. Important though the components are, the use of the term “soul” alerts us to a deeper significance that has to be understood holistically: the cliché that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts is here quite true. We are dealing with something that impinges on the whole person and affects people’s conception of themselves and their lives at many levels of significance, not all of them perhaps accessed by the conscious mind. In Othello’s joy, there is a wonder at having earned the love and devotion of his spouse, an elation and sense of completion at being reunited with her, the sense of calm after the tempest of

14. Shakespeare, *Othello* [c. 1604], act 2, scene 1.

separation, but also a fragile sense of foreboding, a fear that the joy cannot last:

If it were now to die,
'Twere now to be most happy; for I fear
My soul hath her content so absolute
That not another comfort like to this
Succeeds in unknown fate.¹⁵

For a modern audience watching the play, the vulnerability is made more poignant by the familiarity most of them will already have with the story, and the knowledge of the tragedy that will unfold by the end. The peculiar resonance of Shakespeare's lines here seems somehow linked to a wider sense of the significance of love in human life—how it can give meaning and purpose to someone's existence, and how the yearning that it engenders is bound up with awareness of love's precariousness, and the ever-present risk of loss.

All this is bound up with love's having a *spiritual* significance, a significance that goes far beyond the biological imperatives of reproduction or the urge for sensual or emotional gratification. The yearning for love, and the "soul's joy" that it brings when requited, are connected with the longing for "ontological rootedness," for that which will ground and validate our existence, and give us a sense of being at home in the world, instead of alienated from it and alone.¹⁶ Whether human love can in fact bear the whole weight of being a repository for this kind of longing is an open question; and in any case one could no doubt point to perfectly straightforward and genuine cases of attraction and affection that occur without any of these existential

15. Shakespeare, *Othello*, act 2, scene 1.

16. See May, *Love: A History*, 7.

undercurrents necessarily rising to the surface. But what is nevertheless conveyed by the idea of love having spiritual significance, or as involving someone's "soul," is that what is at stake has deep importance for the entire life of the individual. To revert to Ferguson's poem, the elation described, which is likened to the lark singing in the clear air, seems to allow the soul to "soar enchanted" precisely because it is no longer just a "feeling," or a psychological "episode," or an "emotional experience" (though it is all these things), but something that has the power to lift us above the world of ordinary mundane existence, something of transcendent importance that seems to make us fully alive to who we are and to the reality we inhabit.

It is worth reflecting for a moment here on the way this upward movement of the soul is described—"my soul soars *enchanted*." One often hears that modern, secularized Western society has become "disenchanted," meaning in part that our scientific and technological progress has come at the cost of our losing a sense of the sacredness and mystery of things. We may have greater control over the circumstances of our lives, but the world we inhabit has become lifeless, mechanical, an instrument to be used rather than a living presence shot through with beauty and meaning. Although this notion of "disenchantment" is associated with the twentieth-century sociologist Max Weber,¹⁷ there is something more universal in the thought that human beings can easily become bogged down by the drab practical and instrumental demands of day-to-day existence so that life becomes flat and meaningless. But in moments of great emotional power, when the soul "soars," life suddenly becomes re-enchanted.

17. The German term is *Entzauberung*: "The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the disenchantment of the world"—Weber, "Science as a Profession," 20.

A great prophet of the transcendent power of certain emotions and their ability to lift us out of the mundane was the poet William Wordsworth. His “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” perhaps have something in common with Ferguson’s description of the soaring of the soul, insofar as strong love and affection for a particular person play a prominent role in the poem; but intermingled with that, and forming the specific focus of the exaltation he describes, is a deep love for the beauties of the natural world.¹⁸ When our senses and our imagination are animated with this love, Wordsworth suggests, we are able to experience intense, epiphanic moments when the exaltation rises to such a pitch that “we are laid asleep in body, and become a living soul.” In such moments of transcendence,

the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world
Is lightened—that serene and blessed mood
In which the affections gently lead us on,
Until . . . made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.¹⁹

The message, a recurring theme in so much of Wordsworth’s writing, is how communion with nature and our harmonious responsiveness to the living world around can lift us up in joy and serenity; and it is this that leads Wordsworth to describe nature as “the anchor of my purest thoughts,” the “guide and guardian of my heart, and *soul* of all my moral being.”²⁰ Here once again we can see the use of the term “soul” signalling that what is

18. Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey.”

19. Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” lines 40–49.

20. Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” lines 110–12, emphasis added.

involved is something of profound significance for the meaning and value of human life. This is one reason why the term “soul” is so valuable, and why the term “self,” although as we have seen it has often been used interchangeably with “soul,” does not always serve as well. For not all conceptions of the self necessarily carry these strong ethical and evaluative connotations; the self might, for instance, simply indicate an individual’s psychological profile or personality, whereas the use of the term “soul” very often points us not just towards the selves that we are, but towards the better selves we ought to be.

This kind of resonance is by no means confined to the world of poetry or the era of Romantic literature. To come closer to our own time, Leon Kass has argued, in a richly evocative study called *The Hungry Soul*, that all our human activities, even seemingly mundane ones like gathering around a table to eat, can play their part in the overall “perfecting of our nature.”²¹ More recently still, a book published by the ecologically minded architect Christopher Day at the turn of the twenty-first century is entitled *Places of the Soul*. The choice of title points to the need for humans to live, and to design and build their dwellings, in ways that harmonize with the shapes and rhythms of the natural world, and thereby provide nourishment for their deepest needs and longings. As with Wordsworth, this is not just a matter of “aesthetics,” but of profound moral and spiritual significance. Day goes on to argue that in place of what is found in so much modern architecture, the “faceless, mineral objects . . . that dominate and sterilize the streetscape at their feet,” thus alienating us from our humanity, we need to create “buildings and places of life-renewing, soul-nurturing, spirit-strengthening qualities”:

21. Kass, *Hungry Soul*, 227.

If this plea is not taken seriously, we will be known as the generation of destroyers—destroyers of places, of ecological stability and the human in human beings. If it is, we can start to build an architecture of healing, to build places of the soul.²²

The underlying message is that human beings need to shake themselves free from exploitative and alienating modes of existence and learn to live in harmony with one another and the natural world; and there is a clear connection here with the task of “finding the soul” that we have set ourselves to undertake, or at any rate to understand better. As with some of our earlier examples, the use of the term “soul” need not necessarily involve any explicitly religious ideas—indeed, Day speaks not of the divine or the transcendent, but of recovering the “*human in human beings.*” But it is important to see that the term “human” here cannot just be a descriptive one—for clearly, and sadly, constructing sterile tower blocks is just as much a human activity, it is just as much something that we humans do, as a matter of fact, do, as building homes that harmonize with the surrounding land. By calling the dwellings he advocates “places of the soul,” Day is referring not just to what human beings *are*, but to what they *should be*. His vision is a not simply a descriptive one, but what philosophers have come to call a *normative* one. So by building for the soul, we are building in a way that transcends what is mean and ugly and utilitarian in our nature, and allows what is best in our human nature to flourish. Like Othello when he greets his “soul’s joy,” like Ferguson’s soul “soaring enchanted” as it yearns for the beloved, like Wordsworth’s exaltation of the spirit as he responds to the quietness and beauty of the natural world, what is conveyed by talk of the

22. Day, *Places of the Soul*, 270–72.

“soul” is the aspiration to live up to what is finest in our nature, so that we can be redeemed from the squalor and waste of our quotidian existence, and begin to find healing and completion.

The Soul and Human Nature

In the many and various contexts introduced so far, we have seen the term “soul” being invoked by a number of different writers not in some technical philosophical sense, but in ways that are likely to resonate with large numbers of people, insofar as they highlight certain widely shared and centrally important features of human experience. These include, for example, our anxieties about finding our true “self” or identity; our search to lead integrated and morally worthwhile lives; our yearning for the love and affection that can give meaning to our existence; and the exaltation that arises from the sense of being in loving union with another human being, or in harmony with the natural world.

At this point, however, one may perhaps begin to wonder if the net has not been cast too widely. Are not the various contexts in which we find the term “soul” cropping up simply too divergent and heterogeneous to allow us to suppose the notion of “finding the soul” refers to one single problem or interlinked set of problems?

Part of what is at issue here, when we group together human activities and emotions that are said to involve the soul, is a philosophical problem about human nature. To speak of the importance of the soul, or of a “spiritual” dimension to our experience, implies, at a minimum, that our human lives cannot be fulfilled through mere material or utilitarian gratification, but that our nature demands more. In seeking nourishment for the human soul, we seem to be implicitly presupposing that human nature,

despite all its flaws, is somehow oriented towards some higher goal or end than satisfying our biological and social needs as a species. We seem, at least on one interpretation of what is going on here, to be reaching towards some kind of objective pattern or template that determines what it is for human beings to realize what is best and finest in their nature.

But is there such a pattern? A dominant strand in our contemporary secular culture is highly sceptical about this, and regards any such notion as having ceased to be tenable in the light of post-Darwinian understandings of the human species. On this view, human beings are simply a “ragbag,” as it were, of genetically determined and culturally inherited propensities and dispositions, with no reason to think there is one right way of living that will suit everyone. Here is Bernard Williams, one of the most eloquent spokespersons for this contemporary view:

[The] most plausible stories now available about [human] evolution, including its very recent date and also certain considerations about the physical characteristics of the species, suggest that human beings are *to some degree a mess*, and that the rapid and immense development of symbolic and cultural capacities has left humans as beings for which no form of life is likely to prove entirely satisfactory, either individually or socially.²³

Those attracted to this pessimistic—or, as its advocates would say, realistic—view of human beings will find plenty to object to in the implications of the phrase “finding the soul,” if this is taken to mean the goal is to recover a way of living that represents our true human identity—how we are meant to be. For the plain fact, according to Williams and those who share his

23. Williams, *Making Sense of Humanity*, 109, emphasis added.

perspective, is that there is no such identity: instead, there are many and various projects and goals that a human being may adopt, with no reason to think they will all “fit together into one harmonious whole.”²⁴ Or as the American philosopher George Harris puts it, in even starker terms: “Our values are pursued in a world that is very unfriendly and hostile to our efforts and . . . our own deepest values war against each other with tragic results.”²⁵

There is clearly some truth in this view. No one could deny that human life is often complicated and sometimes tragic. Humans are conflicted beings. And even leaving aside the deeper psychological conflicts, the ordinary task of mapping out one’s life obviously involves the need to choose between different and incompatible pathways—one cannot be a farmer and also a sailor, or an academic and also an airline pilot. So much may readily be granted. The question that remains, however, is whether despite all the variations, there is an underlying template for human flourishing, a goal or end towards which all the different pathways should ultimately tend if our nature is to find fulfilment.

Aristotle defined human fulfilment or happiness as an *activity of the soul in accord with virtue*. What exactly he means by “soul” (*psychē*) will be examined later,²⁶ but for the present it is enough to note that the soul’s activity, for Aristotle, is very much bound up with exercising the various capacities that are characteristic of our species, and that virtue or excellence involves our distinctive human capacity for rationality. We cannot blunder through life relying entirely on instinct or habit. Having formed

24. Williams, *Ethics*, ch. 8, 153.

25. Harris, *Reason’s Grief*, 15–16.

26. See ch. 2.

the right habits in childhood may be essential for a good life (indeed Aristotle stresses this point), but we also need, he says, to have our life ordered towards a *telos*—a rationally determined end.²⁷ Once our human capacity for ordered planning and rational evaluation is taken into account, it becomes clear that any worthwhile human life has to be organized so as to provide first the basic prerequisites for a good human existence, such as food and shelter, and then a whole range of personally and socially enriching goods such as family relationships, friendships, and recreational and cultural activities. Furthermore, these will in turn require institutional structures of social cooperation and rational deliberation that enable these goods to develop and flourish. So despite the “messiness” of our human nature, it seems plausible to think rational reflection will enable us to construct a stable list of virtues necessary for the good life that is valid across many different types of situation. The underlying idea here is that our human nature as rational and as social animals requires, if we are to flourish, that our activities, practices, and social systems be rationally ordered towards an end, or *telos*, that represents the good for humankind. In short, as has been argued in our own time by Alasdair MacIntyre, one of the most systematic defenders of this kind of Aristotelian approach, human agents, “as participants in the form of life that is distinctively human . . . can only be understood, they can only understand themselves, *teleologically*.”²⁸

But is it possible, after Darwin, to believe in this kind of objective, teleological framework in terms of which our lives can find harmony, meaning, and value? To be sure, human beings do aim for various goals, and they work and plan towards achieving

27. Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, bk. 1, 1214b6–14.

28. MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts*, 223–37, emphasis added.

those goals—there is nothing in evolutionary science that should make us doubt this basic common-sense truth. But why should there be a harmonious rational pattern that subsumes the disparate aims of different individuals? The goal for Don Giovanni was self-gratification and sensual enjoyment; the goal proposed by Nietzsche was power and creativity; the goal of Gauguin was artistic achievement. All these characters might be said to be seeking to realize their unique individual selfhood, and to find a certain kind of exaltation of “soul.” So why should we go along with the Aristotelian idea of “*the good for humankind*” (*to anthrōpinon agathon*),²⁹ or his associated idea of a blueprint for human fulfilment involving virtuous activity of the soul? What justifies the claim to objectivity?

The Soul and Moral Integration

One kind of religious answer to the question just raised would invoke a highly metaphysical account of the soul. The idea here would be that in addition to our biological nature, our collection of often conflicted and mutually warring impulses derived from our mixed cultural and genetic inheritance, each human being has an immortal soul specially created by God, and that our fulfilment can be assured only when the soul is oriented towards the end ordained by our creator. This is Saint Augustine’s vision of the restless longing of the human soul that can find repose in God alone.³⁰ Many have found this an inspiring vision, but interpreting it is not without problems: it may seem to take our conception of the soul too far away from the

29. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 1, ch. 7, 1098a16.

30. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, bk. 1, ch. 1: “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds rest in you.”

ordinary human context (the context that forms the main focus for Aristotle and his followers) and lead us instead into the metaphysical perplexities of a Platonic-style account, where the soul becomes a kind of ethereal other-worldly part of us that does not obviously connect with our biological nature. We shall return to these issues in the next chapter, and in particular the question of whether a religious idea of the soul does in fact necessarily require us to think of it in “Platonic” or other-worldly terms. But what at any rate seems clear for present purposes is that any conception of the soul that is to make sense as a way of understanding the human condition must be capable of being *integrated into the rest of our world view*: it must fit in with, or at least be compatible with, our scientific picture of ourselves and our origins and our personal experience of the human condition and the moral problems of our existence. With this in mind, let us leave the metaphysical idea of an immaterial and immortal soul on one side for the moment, and pursue the argument about teleology, human nature, and human fulfilment from a more philosophically down-to-earth perspective.

Evaluated even from an ordinary human perspective, the lives referred to at the end of the previous section, the life of sensual gratification (Giovanni), the life built around the will to power (Nietzsche), and the life of single-minded artistic creativity (Gauguin), all turn out to be problematic as coherent blueprints for human fulfilment. For all these lives seem to envisage a good that is defined in fundamentally self-oriented terms. Don Giovanni, in Mozart’s opera, makes this explicit: his motto is “*mi voglio divertir*” (I want to amuse myself),³¹ and sensual diversion

31. From the aria “Gia la mensa è preparata,” in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* (1787), act II, scene 24; lyrics by Lorenzo da Ponte.

unashamedly takes precedence over the happiness of others.³² Or again, Nietzsche's "new philosopher," pursuing the grand designs of the will, is explicitly stated to need a "heart turned to bronze," hardened against the "weakness" of compassion for others that might interfere with his projects.³³ And Gauguin (at least as depicted in what has become in the philosophical literature an icon for a certain kind of single-minded pursuit of artistic success) ruthlessly abandons his family in search of the islands in the South Seas where his painting can flourish.³⁴ Yet there seems to be something unstable about these kinds of compartmentalized vision in which an individual's projects are supposed to bestow meaning in isolation, irrespective of their moral status and how they impinge on others. Given the kinds of creature that we humans are, something vital for our integrity and psychic health is lost if our chosen projects involve walling in our rational awareness and emotional sensibility so that we are no longer open and vulnerable to the needs and demands of others.

If, as these considerations imply, the compartmentalized life is less than fully human, this in turn suggests that in order truly to flourish, our human lives will have to manifest a certain kind of unity. Some have expressed this in terms of *narrativity*: for the fulfilled human being, there is always a *story* to be told about how I became what I now am, how I learn from my past mistakes, and the destination at which I am now aiming.³⁵ The kind of narrative unity involved here is to be understood not just in terms of formal coherence or consistency, but as the goal of being able to see one's life as a morally integrated whole. Securing the health of

32. For more on the moral implications, see Cottingham, "Demandingness."

33. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, secs. 202 and 203.

34. See Williams, "Moral Luck."

35. See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, pt. 1, ch. 2, sec. 3.

the precious *soul* or *self*, which no amount of fame or wealth or personal success is worth the risk of losing, will on this account involve the various elements of my life being integrated both diachronically, where past, present, and future are systematically linked as a progressive pursuit of the good, and synchronically, where what I do at any given time is done not in egoistic isolation, but in awareness of how its effects necessarily spread outwards to the lives of others, and in responsiveness to the possibility of discussion and dialogue with them about how my life impinges on theirs and vice versa.³⁶

Some contemporary philosophers have challenged the idea that a human life should aspire to narrative unity, and have advocated instead the “episodic” or “happy-go-lucky” life.³⁷ Such advocacy seems open to a swift and devastating rebuttal: lives of this episodic kind are possible only because others who are not leading happy-go-lucky lives are sustaining the stable relationships and institutions that make their easy-come-easy-go attitude possible.³⁸ The point can be put in Kantian terms: Can I, as Kant put it, rationally conceive of myself as worthy of respect, without recognizing as a matter of reason that “every other rational being conceives his existence on the same rational ground”?³⁹ Legislating a privilege for oneself which one will not extend to others shows a defective rationality; for to make use of others as a mere means to one’s selfish ends, or even just blithely to ignore one’s dependence on and interconnection with them, is to cut oneself off from the operation of the rational

36. Cf. MacIntyre: “The good that is our final end constitutes our lives as wholes, as unities”—*Ethics in the Conflicts*, 229.

37. See Strawson, “Against Narrativity.”

38. See MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts*, 242.

39. Kant, *Groundwork*, ch. 2, transl. Hill and Zweig, 229. See Cottingham, *Meaning of Life*, ch. 1, 25–30.

dialogue that defines our humanity. It is striking, in this connection, that we find the advocates of the “episodic” life tend to be drawn in the end to abandon the very idea of a self persisting over time. Existence becomes a loosely connected series of events, with no enduring subject or agent to whom authorship of action can be attributed. Yet the more we think about this, the more it starts to look like a fantasy of evasion. We cannot, however much we may wish to, escape responsibility for our actions; there is no way, ultimately, of sidestepping the requirement to give an account of the choices we made yesterday in the light of how they have turned out for ourselves and for others today.

This connects with a basic intuition found in Aristotle—that a good human life must be understood and evaluated as a whole, and that the virtues necessary for a good life cannot be fully present in isolation, but must be somehow integrated or interconnected.⁴⁰ Aristotle insists that *eudaimonia*, human fulfilment or flourishing, has to be measured *over a whole lifetime*.⁴¹ Here Aristotle’s account of flourishing draws analogies between the good for humankind and the good for any other biological species. For a plant to flourish is for it to grow, slowly and steadily, towards an end-state. And similarly, in the words of an earlier and very different text, which nevertheless captures something of the spirit of Aristotle, a good man is “like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever he does prospers.”⁴² There is a rhythm, a growth towards perfection, and this unfolds over time, over the complete lifespan of the organism. So it is not just a matter of adding up the various satisfying activities undertaken during our

40. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 6, ch. 13.

41. *En biō teleiō*; Aristotle, bk. 1, ch. 7, 1098a18.

42. Psalm 1:3.

lifetime: there is more to the flourishing life than a mere aggregate of separate valuable activities. There needs to be an overall teleological pattern,⁴³ and the various virtues or excellences needed to realize this pattern all need to fit harmoniously together; for Aristotle insists on a holistic conception of virtue where the possession of one virtue implies the possession of them all.⁴⁴ In short, the good life for Aristotle has an *organic unity*. There is something that the human being is meant to be—a unified, flourishing organism, developing its characteristic and inter-related excellences over a complete lifetime.⁴⁵

This also connects with an idea found in many religious traditions, that we are not self-creating beings, and hence that in order to be meaningful, our lives must be directed towards what is already laid down as objectively good for humankind, rather than being a function of isolated individual or collectively determined choice or desire. To the champions of creativity or the advocates of the happy-go-lucky life, such ideas can appear stifling and constricting. But the idea of the meaningful life as “integrated” does not mean everyone has to lead the same kind of existence: there is clearly room for many varieties of human flourishing, including very creative ones, such as the life of the intellectual, the artist, the musician, and so on. To constitute a truly meaningful life, however, these varied activities cannot be driven merely by a desire for personal or even collective satisfaction. Whether or not it is explicitly articulated, there has to be a sense of the worthwhile part they play in the story of the growth

43. Not to have your life planned towards some end, says Aristotle, is a “sign of great folly”; *Eudemian Ethics*, 1214b10–11.

44. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 6, ch. 13, 1145a1–2.

45. For a development of this idea that goes beyond Aristotle’s framework, see Cottingham, “Happiness, Temporality, Meaning.”

and flowering of the individual agent, and of the other human agents with which that story is necessarily intertwined. In short, the reflective human agent cannot be content with a compartmentalized or haphazard life, but must seek to shape her life around an intelligible pattern, one which recognizes that her individuality can only operate within relationships of mutuality, which learns from past mistakes, and, above all, which strives to integrate her various pursuits into the pursuit of the good, and so make that life complete.

The underlying idea is finely expressed in George Eliot's novel *Silas Marner*. Though not a "religious" work in any conventional sense (at the time of writing Eliot had long abandoned any doctrinal allegiance to the Christian faith in which she had been brought up), the book nevertheless carries unmistakable signs of a deeply felt moral and spiritual outlook, which is, inevitably, shaped by the faith of her childhood. At the start of the second half of the novel, where the story resumes after an interval of sixteen years, we revisit the small rural community of Raveloe that is the main setting for the narrative, and encounter once more one of the protagonists, Nancy Lammeter, who during the intervening period has left her girlhood behind and got married:

Perhaps the pretty woman . . . is more changed than her husband: the lovely bloom that used to be always on her cheek now comes but fitfully, with fresh morning air or with some strong surprise; yet to all who love human faces best for what they tell of human experience, Nancy's beauty has a heightened interest. Often *the soul is ripened into fuller goodness* while age has spread an ugly film, so that mere glances can never divine the preciousness of the fruit.⁴⁶

46. Eliot, *Silas Marner*, ch. 16, 137, emphasis added.

Nancy has not merely changed physically or entered a later phase of her life. Time has matured her, but it is not simply that her appearance has altered, or that her pursuits and interests have moved on. All this may be true, but what Eliot chooses to underline is that there has been a *ripening of the soul*. Nancy's qualities, as the novel will subsequently make clear, have been tested; and in that testing there has been a moral growth, a flowering of all that is best in her nature, a "ripening into fuller goodness," so that this one frail individual human life has been able to yield, over time, the "precious fruit" that it had the potential to bring forth.

We are here brought back full circle to one of the themes broached at the start of this chapter: the notion of the human soul as the true self that represents the best that each of us can become; the moral core of our being, whose loss is the greatest risk we can incur, and whose preservation and fostering are the key to our moral and psychological health and well-being.

But Why the Soul?

Even if one accepts the notion of a unified life, integrated around an objective conception of the good, as something to which human beings ought to aspire, many may still feel qualms about expressing this goal as one of finding or looking after the *soul*. For however natural it may have been in the past to talk of the human soul, and even though the term may still have some currency in certain utopian or poetic contexts, the idea of "soul" seems far less at home in our contemporary culture than it once was. To many people, the most authoritative and reliable way of understanding ourselves and our relation to the world is via the methods of science; and science, it seems, no longer has any use for entities like "souls." As already mentioned in the previous section, the concept of the soul to many people has "Platonic"

overtones, suggesting that we human beings can somehow gain access to such a supra-sensible world, perhaps in virtue of having, in addition to our biological nature, some sort of immaterial or spiritual nature. All these ideas run counter to the prevailing philosophical doctrine known as *naturalism*, according to which there is no ultimate reality apart from the empirical world studied by science.

Many complex questions are raised here, but what can be said straight off is that science, for all its magnificent achievements, could never be shown to have provided a complete and final account of all reality: those who suppose otherwise have stepped outside science and fallen for the seductive dogma of *scientism*, whose incoherencies are well established. Scientism, the claim that science is the measure of *all* of reality, or *all* truth, is a claim that could not possibly be established by scientific means, and therefore, if truly asserted, would be self-refuting. The point was vividly put many decades ago by the British philosopher Paul Grice:

We must be ever watchful against the devil of scientism, who would lead us into myopic overconcentration on the nature and importance of knowledge, and of scientific knowledge in particular; . . . who is even so audacious as to tempt us to call in question the very system of ideas required to make intelligible the idea of calling in question anything at all; and who would even prompt us, in effect, to suggest that since we do not really think but only think that we think, we had better change our minds without undue delay.⁴⁷

A blanket philosophical prejudice against entities not ultimately reducible to the categories accepted by science is hard to justify.

47. Grice, "Method in Philosophical Psychology," 53.

But in any case, and leaving aside for a moment the tenability or otherwise of scientific naturalism, employing the concept of the soul *does not necessarily commit one to a belief in immaterial or supra-sensible entities*. There are philosophical theories of the soul, as we shall explore in the next chapter, which do not treat the soul as a separate immaterial entity, but on the contrary hold that the capacities associated with the soul are rooted in, and dependent on, suitably organized biological systems.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, the tendency for the march of science to marginalize or erode the acceptability of the term “soul” cannot be denied. The Greek term for soul, *psyche*, became, in effect, appropriated during the nineteenth century by the newly burgeoning science of the mind. And the gradually emerging disciplines of psychology and psychiatry (etymologically, the “study of the soul” and the “cure of the soul”) had little apparent connection with the “soul” in the sense in which the term had often been used in religious contexts (in reference, for example, to personal immortality), let alone with the idea of the soul as an immaterial mental substance.⁴⁹ Instead, in the case of psychology, the subject matter had to do with the empirical scientific study of the workings of the human and animal mind, manifested in desire, aversion, appetition, memory, sensation, cognition, and so on, together with the relevant behavioural dispositions, while psychiatry became part of medical science, dealing with diagnosis and treatment of various disorders of those same faculties.

The subsequent practitioners of these disciplines have often tended to embrace a materialistic world view that has little time for “souls”; and this is even more true of the more recent and

48. See ch. 2, “What Is the Soul?” below.

49. See below on Descartes, ch. 2, “Descartes and the Shrinking Soul.”

rapidly expanding fields of cognitive science and neuroscience, which are seen as having the goal of explaining all aspects of human mental activity by reference to the functioning of the brain. The philosopher Daniel Dennett, perhaps the best known champion of this burgeoning science of the mind, puts the matter uncompromisingly:

The total set of details of heterophenomenology [data gathered from people's reports about their conscious experiences], plus all the data we can gather about concurrent events in the brains of subjects and in the surrounding environment, comprise the total data set for a theory of human consciousness. It leaves out no objective phenomena and no subjective phenomena of consciousness.⁵⁰

There are two issues here that need to be carefully distinguished. One is the question of whether our human mental functions and faculties are grounded or realized in physical processes and structures (such as brain circuitry) as opposed to some immaterial entity or force. And on this question, there is a massive accumulation of data (for example, from brain scans) that seems clearly to confirm that human thought and cognition are intimately dependent on neuroelectrical and chemical processes in the brain. But Dennett's declaration, quoted above, that *nothing is left out*, once we have gathered data about these brain processes, and correlated them with facts about the surrounding environment and people's reports of what they are experiencing, is much more problematic. Elsewhere Dennett has compared the modern scientific study of consciousness with other physical sciences such as meteorology: once you have achieved a theory that explains all the phenomena, "you

50. Dennett, "Who's On First?"

get to declare victory: you've finished the task because that is all there is to explain."⁵¹

But there *is* more to explain; or if not to "explain" in scientific terms, there is at least more to understand and to take account of. Dennett's enumeration of the "total data set" that defines what needs to be explained in constructing a "theory of consciousness" airily declares itself to be complete and comprehensive: it cannot on his view be charged with "leaving out" anything, presumably because there is no question of it needing to include scientifically dubious items like the "subjective phenomena of consciousness." But this appears to ignore the entire rich web of mental activity manifest to each conscious subject as a complex flow of beliefs and desires, feelings and sensations, aspirations and longings—everything that gives our existence *meaning*. Each of us can truly say that we have a sense of ourselves as unique subjects of experience, looking out onto the world from a horizon that no one else can cross, yet at the same time able to interact with other subjects, to offer them reasons for our actions, and reciprocally, to respond to the reasons they offer for theirs; and from this is derived the whole precious network of intersubjectivity that structures our human lives.

It is fundamentally misguided to suppose that the web of meaning arising from this human mental activity—our thoughts and feelings and hopes and fears—can be reduced to the working of brain processes. Meaning and interpretation require a whole context of social organization and interpersonal communication, a rich culture and "form of life," the understanding of which takes us far outside the scope of psychological and neurological science, however sophisticated. So while welcoming the scientific advances in neurobiology, one can still find

51. See Papineau, "Papineau vs Dennett."

scope for retaining a “domain of the soul.” This need not imply any necessary commitment to the existence of strange immaterial entities, but will simply denote our human ability to access a realm of meaning and value, manifest, for example, in our artistic and literary and moral and religious experience (not to mention the theorizings and models and metaphors developed by the scientists themselves!). In all of these domains there is rich and irreducible content that is simply of a different kind from the phenomena falling within the scope of scientific inquiry.

Part of that domain of meaning and value is alluded to in ordinary non-philosophical uses of the term “soul,” as in the poetic and other examples we have been discussing earlier, when the soul is said to be nourished, or exalted, by experiences that have deep significance for our lives.⁵² No doubt brain events are going on when such experiences occur—how could they not be? But anyone who supposes that in pointing to a presentation slide of parts of the brain “lighting up” they are on the way to a complete explanation of such experiences is allowing their commendable zeal for science to occlude the palpable evidence of their own introspective awareness—even driving them to insist (as one increasingly finds in much recent cognitive science literature) that this awareness is an “illusion.”⁵³

To be human is to have an inner life. This need not mean that we have immaterial powers, or that our consciousness is not dependent on brain activity. But it does mean that there is more to the task of understanding ourselves than the language and methods of science could ever encompass. Such understanding cannot be gained wholly “from the outside,” from the objective methods of empirical observation and scientific measurement,

52. “Dimensions of Soul,” above.

53. I shall return to the “illusionist” approach to consciousness in ch. 3.

but must involve reference to the “interior” or subjective dimension. This does not mean we can dispense with the help of others: we were not made for solipsistic isolation, and indeed we could not function properly as human beings in the first place except as part of a community of others whom we immediately recognize and respond to as “ensouled,” just as we are. When I encounter another human being, as Ludwig Wittgenstein remarked, I am not *of the opinion* that he has a soul; instead, immediately and without inference, “my attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul.”⁵⁴ What is more, our ability to respond to other human beings in this way is of profound ethical importance for the task that confronts us all of growing towards the selves we were meant to be. Nevertheless, this is a task that can be undertaken only by the *experiencing subject*, by what Descartes called “this *me* [*ce moi*], that is to say the soul, by which I am what I am.”⁵⁵ Descartes may have been mistaken in identifying this “soul” with a ghostly incorporeal substance (we shall look at that question in the next chapter); but one does not have to accept an immaterialist view of the soul in order to accept the irreducible reality of the experiencing subject—“this *me* . . . by which I am what I am.”

We are all engaged in the task of trying to understand the “soul” in this sense: the experiencing subject, the core self that makes us what we are. What is more, the soul or self that is both the individual subject undertaking this task and the object that each of us seeks to understand, and whose growth and maturity we seek to foster in ourselves and encourage in others, is not a static or closed phenomenon. Each of us, like it or not, is on a

54. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, pt. 2, sec. 4, 178.

55. Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, pt. 4, AT, vol. 6, 33; CSM, vol. 1, 127. See below, ch. 2, “Descartes and the Shrinking Soul.”

journey, to grow and to learn, and to reach towards the best that we can become. We have to understand ourselves teleologically, as striving towards whatever can lift us above the waste and futility of our failures and inadequacies and draw us towards something we recognize as having transcendent value and importance. In addressing this task we aim to realize our true selves. This is what the task of “finding the soul” amounts to; and it is here, if there is a meaning to human life, that such meaning must be sought.