

THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE SOUL AS KNOWN BY HUMAN REASON

‘With his openness to truth and beauty, his sense of moral goodness, his freedom and the voice of his conscience, with his longings for the infinite and for happiness, man questions himself about God’s existence. In all this he discerns signs of his spiritual soul. The soul, the “seed of eternity we bear in ourselves, irreducible to the merely material”, can have its origin only in God.’ (Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 33)

Just as with the existence of God, the existence of the spiritual human soul can also be proved by reason alone, prior to faith. Rational arguments for the spirituality of the soul were already set forth by Plato and Aristotle, and were refined by St Thomas Aquinas (1225-74). Here we give a rudimentary account of a proof related to theirs, though avoiding some of the technical concepts of their philosophies.

We know the sort of being something is and the sort of existence it has, by the types of activity it is capable of, since the capabilities of something derive from the sort of being that it is. If there are human *activities* that go beyond the powers of matter and are independent of matter, this means that there must be an aspect of human *nature and existence* that is independent of matter. The human activities that have been thought to go beyond the powers of the material world include self-awareness, free choice, knowledge of universal truths (such as in logic and mathematics), and possession of abstract ideas.

Taking knowledge of universal truth – the fundamental difficulty in a materialistic account of human knowledge can be grasped from a simple consideration: ‘If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motions of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose that my beliefs are true...and hence I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms.’ (C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*, p. 19, quoting J. Haldane) In other words, if all my thoughts, beliefs and reasonings are what they are, just because certain atoms happened to move one way rather than another (and tomorrow, equally non-rational chemical processes might cause them to move a different way, and give me quite different supposedly ‘rational’ beliefs), then my own thinking processes could not really be trusted.

So C.S. Lewis argues at length from this that someone who believes that ‘thinking is totally dependent on matter’ would logically become unable to trust their own reasonings, including their very belief that ‘thinking is totally dependent on matter’, or even their belief that the brain is made of atoms. (Lewis does not actually intend to question that the brain is composed of atoms, but merely to show that someone who thinks reasoning is purely a material process ends in this impossible position of not really knowing anything.) Therefore a belief that the human mind is totally dependent on matter contradicts itself, and undermines all of logic and science, and indeed any attempts to rationally defend materialism itself. All these attempts at reasoning would become untrustworthy. Science cannot even get started unless we can be confident that human thought and reasoning, at least in their most basic principles, give us a true insight into reality.

We must then take the other alternative from materialism, and say that although many aspects of our mental life are related to our brains, part of our mental activity (such as our insight into truth) goes beyond the power of matter and operates independently of matter. To have the capacity to perform these immaterial activities, we must ourselves transcend matter in some aspect of our existence and nature, since our capabilities are rooted in our natures. If our natures are totally material, they cannot give to our activities an immateriality they don’t themselves possess. Therefore, the part of human nature that gives us insight into truth must have an immaterial, i.e. spiritual, existence. We call this the spirit.

Insight into a truth is related to the abstract ideas that form part of that truth. In theologian Frank Sheed’s example, abstract ideas such as ‘mercy’ and ‘justice’ cannot consist in a group of atoms: they have no material or spatial properties, such as size or shape. Certainly, the *words* ‘mercy’ and ‘justice’

are material, but not the *ideas* the words represent. Immaterial non-spatial ideas cannot ‘reside in’, or be dependent on, a material or spatial entity such as a group of atoms in the brain, but must belong to the spirit. (What depends on the material cannot go beyond the material. The brain would impart to any ideas supposedly inherent in it or dependent on it, its own spatiality and materiality – which would be fatal for rationality.) It is by our spiritual power of intellect that we are directly aware of the very nature of the abstract ideas residing there, and it is because of these that we can know universal truths concerning those ideas.

If we were purely material entities, totally subject to non-rational and ever-changing physical forces, knowledge as we actually experience it (e.g. our awareness of universal and unchanging truths such as the truths of logic and mathematics) would be impossible. To have the knowledge we actually find ourselves to possess – knowledge essential for logic, science and even everyday life – we must in some way be spiritual beings.

St Thomas’ proofs that God is the First Cause of all things besides himself also apply to the human soul: like everything else, the spiritual soul must ultimately derive from God. And unlike material entities that can be brought together from pre-existing parts extended in space, the soul (having no such extended parts or any matter) must be brought into existence ‘all at once’: it is created by God out of nothing *directly and immediately*.

St Thomas Aquinas also goes on from his proof of the spirituality of the soul to prove that our souls are *immortal*. In brief: because it has existence independently of matter, there is no reason the human spiritual soul should cease to exist just because the body disintegrates. Neither can the spirit itself disintegrate into separate physical parts, since an immaterial being is not extended in space at all (just as abstract concepts such as mercy and justice, that reside in the spirit, are not ‘extended in space’). Thus the spirit has no physical parts that it can break into. Of its own internal nature then, it has no tendency to non-existence – which is what we mean when we say it is by nature ‘immortal’.

(There does remain a possibility of its non-existence, not internal to its nature, but external – residing in the power of God, who could entirely withdraw his gift of existence, annihilating the soul and bringing it to nothingness, just as he created it from nothing. The same might be said about the universe as a whole. However, it does not seem reasonable for God to create an intrinsically immortal nature only to destroy it; and we believe that God has further confirmed, through Christian revelation, that he will not do this.)

All these rationally known truths about the soul confirm all the more that it is not unreasonable to think that God would have a special interest in the human race, even to the extent of possibly intervening miraculously in human history. We already know he has ‘intervened’ by creating each human soul. We also know that even granted an evolutionary process in the formation of the human body, at some specific point in the process the spiritual soul must first have been infused by God. Thus there were definite ‘first human beings’ – not *just* a gradual process.

Following the defence of the foundations of human knowledge, and the proofs of God’s existence and attributes; and further supplemented by rational examination of the foundations of ethics, good and evil, right and wrong, the freedom of the will and human responsibility; the proofs for the spirituality and immortality of the soul provide key rational and philosophical underpinning for the rational case for specifically Christian faith.

For more details of these arguments that are here roughly sketched, the reader is referred to St Thomas Aquinas, ‘Summa Contra Gentiles’, Book II, Chapters 46-90, especially 49-51, 55, 64-66, 79-81, 87. Although St Thomas works with some Aristotelian scientific concepts that are now obsolete in various ways, the essential logical validity of his philosophical arguments remains.