

THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL

Of the infinity of questions that find their way into the minds of men there is probably none that has ever excited a more widespread interest than the question of a future life. Certainly no other problem is of such vital importance to the individual as this. For the doctrine that proclaims man to be animated by an immortal soul carries with it consequences so far-reaching that by its acceptance or rejection must be shaped the whole course of a lifetime.

Though the subject has always held a place of first importance in the speculations of philosophers, and has been the inspiration of some of the finest achievements in art and literature, belief in the soul's eternal existence has at no time been confined to the consideration of the learned only. The history of the human family shows how intimately it has been associated with the life and thought of the unlettered as well as of the cultured. As far back as human records go there has never been a people, not excepting even the brute-like, naked savages—who did not cling steadfastly to the belief that man is enlivened by something within him immeasurably superior to the body, and entirely immune from the corruption to which the fragile tenement of clay must sooner or later succumb. Cicero was right when he said that as the belief in the existence of the gods is natural to us, so do all nations agree that the soul survives the death of the body. (*Tusc. Disp.* I, 16.) Mankind, in thus universally and consistently adhering to a doctrine imposing obligations of the strictest kind, furnishes, to say the least, a very weighty argument in support of that doctrine's soundness, for this unanimous consent of humanity can be but the voice of nature giving utterance to a truth inscribed so deeply in the human heart by nature's God that the efforts made from time to time to effect it have accomplished next to nothing.

The intellect, however, which naturally seeks the reasons of things, looks for the strongest possible grounds on which to base its assent even in matters of less moment than the immortality of the soul. Hence the great thinkers were not content to accept humanity's verdict blindly, without attempting to establish it on a sound, unshakable footing. They delved deep into the very nature of the soul itself for the intrinsic reason of its im-

mortality and have left us a scientific demonstration justifying the age-old belief in man's immortal destiny.

In order to appreciate the full force of their argument it is well to start out with some notion of life, and the peculiar features by which its various forms are differentiated from one another. Living beings, first of all, are distinguished from lifeless things by reason of their self-activity. Lifeless matter is always inert. It has at most a latent power arising from its chemical and physical constituents, but it can not of itself develop this power; whatever movement takes place in a lifeless thing, therefore, is only in response to force applied to it from some external source. Thus it does not move but is rather moved. Living things, on the contrary, are essentially self-active. They do not depend entirely on external forces for the exercise of the activity they manifest; they are not merely moved, they move themselves by some internal principle not identical with the material organism.

The principle of this self-activity, whether it be in an animal, plant, or a man, is called the soul. The difference in the character and scope of activity in these souls are noteworthy. The vegetative soul, the vital principle of the indefinite varieties of plant life, from the meanest blade of grass to the mightiest forest tree, stands lowest in the scale of perfection. All its activity is circumscribed by the matter it vivifies; its sole function is to direct elements in the formation of the plant, and this it does unconsciously and largely under the influence of the forces of nature. The plant is, in consequence, as incapable of sensation as the lifeless elements from which it draws its sustenance.

The brute soul is in an incomparably higher realm. It not only possesses the functions of the vegetative soul by which the highly complex processes of digestion, assimilation, and growth are carried on, but is endowed, as well, with sense-perception and locomotion which enable the animal to provide for its own welfare. Thus, while the activity of the vegetative soul extends no further than the narrow limits of the plant it animates, the circle of the brute-soul's activity is widened to include objects existing apart from itself.

The distance dividing the animal from the vegetative soul is indeed immense, but between the human and the brute soul there lies a veritable chasm separating them into two distinct worlds. Although the human soul has the functions of the lower principles of life, both of these are subservient to the peerless gifts of

reason and free-will, with which man alone is blessed and by which he is elevated far above the rest of the earthly creation. The brute's whole activity is bounded by the sensible; it can know nothing else, desire nothing else. But such is not the case with man. He, too, has sense-perception, and this in a manner more excellent than the brute; but over and above what affects his sense-organs (i. e., material objects) he enjoys a vital activity all his own and, as we shall see, in a sphere that transcends matter, one, therefore, in which the senses can have no intrinsic part.

We may now leave aside the vegetative and sensitive souls, since all admit that they must perish with the matter they vivify, and turn our attention to the human soul, which directly interests us at present.

Though the soul is the mainspring of the energy by which our slightest act is performed, in itself it is mysteriously difficult of access. Like all substances, it is hidden by an impenetrable veil which the keenest search of the senses is unable to pierce. The only means by which an accurate conception of its nature can be arrived at is through the operations of its faculties. This is a roundabout but none the less legitimate procedure, being a particular application of the well-known axiom that "The proper operations of a thing indicate its nature." This, at bottom, is nothing more than asserting the conformity and proportion that necessarily exist between a cause and its effect, a principle which is the basis of all scientific investigation and whose certainty is borne out by the facts of experience. Applied to the human soul, this axiom means that if among its operations we find one or several that are performed independently of matter and material conditions, we can justly conclude that its nature must be immaterial, from which will follow as a necessary consequence its immortality.

Man, as we have seen, is the subject of a variety of operations, all of which proceed from faculties rooted in the soul. But inasmuch as the sentient faculty is common to both man and beast, and the vegetative function is shared in even by the plant, we may pass these over and limit our inquiry to those faculties proper to man alone, that is, intellect and will.

Now, if the intellect were a mere material faculty and could act only through a corporeal organ, it is evident that its whole activity would be restricted to those objects with which such an organ could come in contact; our knowledge would, accordingly,

extend no further than the material and concrete. We have, on the contrary, knowledge of a host of things ranging far beyond the realm of sense. It is an every day occurrence to think and speak of virtue, truth, the infinite, God and his attributes,—all of which belong to an order differing in every respect from that to which our senses are confined, and which have nothing in common with the tangible material world about us.

But not only can the intellect grasp purely immaterial realities which must ever remain a closed book for the senses; it can also apprehend in the objects of sense-perception which always appear as singular, contingent, garbed in the individuating features inseparable from matter, the unchangeable, necessary nature apart from all its concrete manifestations in the reality. My conscience tells me plainly that I can perceive not only this or that particular man, Peter, Paul or John, but also that I can leave aside the differences between them and retain only what they have in common—their human nature. I thus obtain the notion of man in general, which I can attribute to all human beings, existing or possible. In a word, the intellect has the power of abstraction and generalization. It can strip a nature of all individual notes, without which it could not exist in the outside world, and consider it in an immaterial way as an universal capable of reception and multiplication in an unlimited number of material subjects.

Could any corporeal organ do this? Could a material faculty rise so high above its nature as to grasp immaterial realities—or even material realities—in an immaterial way? Surely not; such an assertion would be self-contradictory. Every effect must have a proportionate cause. No object can be superior to the action that attains it. No action superior to the faculty that elicits it; and no faculty superior to the substance in which it is rooted. Object, action, faculty and substance must all be of the selfsame order. And, consequently, to come to the culminating point of our present inquiry, we have a perfect right to conclude, in all rigor of logic, that the human soul must, like its intellect, be immaterial.

The same conclusion could be drawn for the nature of the will, but it is unnecessary to insist on this proof after what has just been said, for it is evident that the desires of the will must be of the same high order as the knowledge of the intellect which directs them. It is a fact of experience that we reach out after

goods that are not the objects of sense. Man, unlike the brute, is not inclined only towards what produces sensible pleasures. He is drawn towards knowledge, virtue, morality,—none of which as such are to be found in the material creation. Such actions, therefore, proceed only from a principle superior to matter—immaterial.

We have now to inquire into the manner in which the soul must cease to exist if it can not survive the death of the body. The destruction of a thing may be brought about in two ways: either by the separation of the parts that compose it, or through some other being on which its existence depends. The physical universe is constantly undergoing a destruction, or rather transformation, of the first kind. To take a familiar example: barren, flinty rocks in the course of centuries become so split up and disintegrated under the corrosive action of the elements that eventually not a trace of them remains; in their place is a fertile soil supporting a flourishing vegetable growth. This, in turn, is converted into the bone and sinew of the animal that chances to feed on it, and the animal's body, no exception to the endless cycle of change, sooner or later returns to the dust. Through all these changes nothing has been destroyed, in the sense of annihilation; the original elements of which the rock was formed have been separated and scattered, and although the rock no longer exists as a rock, not one of its countless atoms has been done away with; some of the elements have been absorbed by the plants and turned into their own tissues and fibres, and these, acted upon again by the animal's digestive organs, appear as parts of its body. In each successive stage the same elements persevere, though their form and condition have altered past recognition.

Why is it that matter is subject to this form of destruction? It is because all material things are physical or chemical combinations of minute particles which become separated and unite again indefinitely to form things totally unlike. From this it is clear that if a being had no parts, no modification of its nature would be possible; it must perish whole and entire or not at all.

It is precisely because the soul lacks parts that it could not be destroyed in this way. Unlike material things, we can not speak of the soul's size, weight or color—in short, we can apply to the soul none of those properties that are part and parcel of

matter. It cannot be divided and turned into something new, because it has no parts to be divided and rearranged.

So far we have shown that the immaterial nature of the human soul precludes the possibility of any intrinsic corruption. Its destruction, therefore, can not come from within, since of itself the soul is immune from deterioration and decay, which are to be found only in materially composite bodies. There remain, then, but two ways in which the soul could be destroyed; either because its union with the body is so intimate that one could not exist without the other, or because God would at some time withdraw his conservation, in which case the soul would immediately lapse into the nothingness whence it came, for it is entirely dependent on the Creator not only for the reception of its existence but also for its continuance.

We have in the brute soul an example of the first kind of destruction. This soul, although immaterial in the narrow and restricted sense of simplicity, inasmuch as it excludes component parts, is nevertheless, so bound up with the corporeal organism that it has not even a single action in which the matter does not play an intrinsic role; no act either of the vegetative or the sensitive life can be exercised except through a corporeal organ. Separated from this the brute soul, deprived of its only means of activity and having no further reason to exist, disappears.

But the human soul is immaterial in a broader sense. Not only is it proof against direct destruction by reason of its simplicity, it has a far higher and nobler prerogative, that of spirituality, by which it carries within itself the image of its Creator and lives a life from which matter and things material are forever excluded.

It is true that all our knowledge comes through the senses. As long as we are in this vale of tears we have no other natural means of acquiring it. But it is one thing to obtain knowledge through the senses and quite another to have only sense knowledge. This is undoubtedly true of the brute, but not of man; for him, sense knowledge is, as we have seen, but a stepping-stone to something higher. The human soul can know and love what material faculties can never attain; it can perform actions entirely independent of the body, and in consequence its existence must be independent of the body, for as a thing is, so it must act, and as it acts, so must it be. Whether it is in the body or out of the body makes no difference to the human soul as far as its

existence is concerned. It is capable of independent existence; it can live and act forever. This reasoning may seem a little abstruse to the untrained mind, but we are confident that a little thinking will bring home forcibly the truth of our contention.

Of course we do not wish to maintain that the soul is a pure spirit, like the angel, for there are different degrees of perfection in created spirits, just as in the material universe. As a matter of fact, the angel receives all his knowledge directly from God, is a complete nature in himself and consequently incapable of being the principle of life in any body. The soul, on the contrary, receives its knowledge in the present life through the senses, remains a part of the human nature even after its separation from the body, and, as long as this separation lasts, is in an unnatural state, since it is deprived of the principal function for which it was created—the animation of a human body.

The human soul is naturally immortal; it cannot perish either directly, through the separation of its parts, or indirectly, through the corruption of the body. God alone could destroy it by ceasing to preserve it in existence—a mere possibility which will never be realized.

We know that the soul of man will never die because God Himself has told us so; it is the teaching of our faith. Besides, is it reasonable to suppose that a beneficent and loving Creator would have given to our souls a nature that calls for endless duration, and would have implanted in that nature a strong desire for immortality, if He were to intervene directly to frustrate the work of His own hands? No, the soul is capable of knowing, loving and praising God for all eternity; such a noble privilege could not have been given in vain.

Moreover, God's sanctity and justice require a sufficient sanction for the moral law, and as this cannot be found in the present life it must be in the next. Here, the just suffer and the wicked prosper; here, vice is rewarded and virtue punished; here, those who are faithful to God's law are looked down upon and despised; deprived of all this world holds dear, they often eke out a miserable existence in poverty and want. On the other hand those who seem to hold nothing as sacred, who ruthlessly trample on the most sacred rights of God and their fellow-man, who live only for themselves and the gratification of their insatiable greed, for worldly gain and carnal satisfaction, seem to be richly rewarded for their iniquity; they lead lives of lux-

ury, surrounded by all the blessings of life. Surely this crying mockery of divine justice cannot go on forever. God owes it to Himself to avenge His outraged law and to vindicate His rights as Supreme Ruler of the universe. The time must come when He will render to every one according to his works. Death will tear the mask from the faces of the hypocrites; man's soul must bear the responsibility in another life for his actions in this one. Nor will the soul be alone in the final accounting, for our faith teaches us that the body will sooner or later be freed from the humiliation of the dust to share with its natural principle of life either an eternity of happiness or an eternity of woe.

The soul of man is immortal. Man, whole and entire, will one day be immortal also.

—Bro. Peter O'Brien, O. P.

FORESHADOWING

The consecrating words have all been said:
 The Angels' Food, the God of boundless might,
 Is waiting there, on linen white.
 The loving Master's feast is spread
 Where He Himself will feed our souls with Bread
 From highest Heaven brought.—And yet in spite
 Of festive glow and sacramental rite,
 The Cup of sorrow shadows all with dream.

E'en thus, when long ago the Child was born
 Upon this earth, while winter's silvern snow
 Like altar-cloth lay cov'ring o'er the ground,
 E'en on that joyous, blessed Christmas morn
 The saving Cross, the Cup of pain and woe,
 Behind the Crib its fitting station found.

—Bro. Nicholas Ehrenfried, O. P.