

A Debate on the Existence of the Soul

Rev. Mark Hayes and Lois Durran

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The Case Against the Soul (Mark Hayes)

When I was a child I learned in Sunday School and church about heaven and hell and eternal life. And of course what I learned was that it is the soul that continues to exist beyond death and go on to either eternal reward or eternal punishment. But my childish way of understanding the soul was as some kind of shadow body, that at some time after death would leave the physical body and ascend up into the sky – to heaven.

Because of this understanding, I adopted a curious personal custom. Whenever I would pass a cemetery, I'd watch very carefully, trying to spot some recent souls making their way out of the grave into the great beyond. Needless to say, I never spotted any souls, and I eventually gave up trying. As it says in one of Paul's letters in the New Testament: When I was a child, I understood as a child; but when I became a man I put away childish things.

But what childish thing did I put away? Was it the whole idea of a soul, or simply my particularly childish way of understanding it? In fact, I went on for a good while believing in the existence of a soul, which I took to be an immaterial, spiritual entity, animating my physical being and destined to live on after my eventual demise. Somehow my soul was the "real" me, while my physical body was simply a temporary shell providing it a home during my stay here on earth.

Where did I get these ideas? Did they arise somehow from my experience of the world? No, they were passed down to me as part of the philosophical and theological legacy of western culture. They go way back, at least as far as Plato and Socrates. At the root of belief in the soul is the philosophical notion of dualism – the idea that there are both physical and non-physical realms of existence.

A strong form of dualism – substance dualism – holds that the soul is a real, but non-physical substance, an independent entity in its own right, not dependent on any physical entity for its existence. That is, the soul and the body or brain can interact with each other, but they are different substances with different properties. And because of its independent existence, the soul may continue to exist even in the absence of a physical host. This soul is immortal.

In direct opposition to this strong form of dualism is a position called physicalism or materialism. This position rejects the notion of two separate planes of existence – the material and the spiritual – and embraces only that which we actually observe; namely the material or physical.

One of the challenges of the physicalist position is to account for mental experience – our experiences of thinking, emotion, pain, etc., which seem somehow to be separate from properties we observe in matter. Nothing in chemistry or physics leads us to expect that such experiences are properties inherent in the material world. But advances in science have indeed provided some evidence for a physicalist view – particularly advances in physiology.

For every so-called mental event, there appears a corresponding change in brain activity. One conclusion to account for that is that the mental events are phenomena arising from, and in some sense identical with, the chemical and physical properties and events of the brain. Brain activity, and the mental events that accompany it are both properties of the material world – that is, the one and only world. In this view, clearly, survival of a soul, or of consciousness of any kind beyond the death of the body and brain is not an option.

For those who find these two positions – physicalism and substance dualism – too extreme, there is some middle ground. Property dualists agree with other dualists that human beings are both body and soul. However, they see the soul not as a separate kind of independent mental substance, but rather as a set of mental properties and events of our physical brains. Our selves in their totality, then, consist of a bundled set of physical substance and mental properties and events. In this view the existence of our soul is strictly dependent upon our body, and the soul in fact dies along with the physical body. No immortality here.

Myself, I come down somewhere between the physicalist and the property dualist positions. I see the distinctions between them as primarily philosophical nit-picking with respect to the precise nature of the relationship between physical and mental phenomena. I find no compelling reason, however, to embrace the idea of a separate spiritual entity – the soul – that will outlive my material existence.

But why, in fact, does the idea of a separate immortal soul persist? I see a couple of primary reasons. First is the continuing inability to grasp and understand that relationship between matter and consciousness. Science may or may not succeed in reaching that understanding, but in its absence, it seems to be a part of human nature to postulate some unseen, hypothetical structure to explain that which cannot be explained any other way. But our current inability to explain everything in material terms does not mean that there is no such explanation.

Another, and perhaps more important reason for clinging to the concept of the soul is to soften the impact of impending death and the depressing prospect of eternal non-existence. Immortality is a seductive idea, and the notion of an immortal soul brings that idea into the realm of possibility.

In the reading earlier, Thomas Moore wrote that we need a soul to hold together mind and body, ideas and life, spirituality and the world. Many of us may need the soul as a vehicle for immortality. But needing it, or wishing it do not necessarily make it so. While some concept of “soul” may be functionally useful, and even beneficial – an idea I’ll speak about a little later – I must, for the time being, let go of the idea that life and consciousness will continue beyond death by way of an immortal soul. If I’m wrong – which is always a possibility – I guess I’ll find out.

The Case For the Soul (Lois Durrant)

Like a lot of us, I was raised in the Judeo-Christian tradition. I was taught to believe in a soul that resided in each of us somehow, and would exist eternally, either in heaven, as a reward for a good life, or in hell, as punishment for wickedness. I don’t really know whether I ever bought into that idea, but I do know that at some point in my early adulthood I began to develop my own concept of the soul.

I started playing the violin at the age of nine, and discovered very early on that music was something sacred to me. I don’t just mean music itself here. What I mean is that music was an instrument to touch the Divine Spark within me. That is what I think of as my soul. That little bit of infinity that resides in each one of us.

In his book, *Care of the Soul*, Thomas Moore says that art, music, and poetry are all ways to touch the soul. I believe, from experience, that this is true. I think you can also touch the soul in nature, and that if you are really aware of your soul, you can bring it into play while doing the most mundane tasks – doing the laundry or cooking dinner.

I also think that, like most things in life, whether we believe in the soul or not is a choice that we make. People who don’t believe that the soul exists cite the lack of proof, and people

who do believe in a soul need no concrete proof, because they already know. They have felt it themselves. And in the end, what more proof do we need than our own experience?

I think that one of the best arguments in favor of the existence of a soul is the fact that we are all here today, in this place. We hunger for connection. We thirst for meaning in our lives. These are all, to me, just other manifestations of the search for the Divine within.

If you need scientific proof that a soul exists, you are probably never going to get it. But if you can open your heart and mind, and live the questions, then it doesn't really matter. Our lives are a mystery. And part of what makes them so wonderful is just that.

Closing Reflections (Mark Hayes)

Despite my earlier remarks, I do find the idea of a soul useful. Not as a scientific or literal description of reality, but as a useful fiction or metaphor for thinking about and responding to reality. The language of the soul is not the language of science. It is the language of poetry and imagination and possibility. At our present level of understanding, there are aspects of human experience that literal, scientific language simply cannot do justice to.

Take, for instance, the phenomenon of love. In the physicalist view, the experience of love is equivalent to particular patterns of brain activity. And yet, how many of us would find it emotionally satisfying to express our love to another in terms of synapses, neurotransmitters, and electrical activity in our brains? No, we seek rather another level of discourse and expression – that of poetry and metaphor, of heart and soul.

And so soul, taken as a conceptual construct to understand at some poetic, metaphorical level who we are at our core, in our essence, may serve a useful purpose. The important question is not whether we embrace the concept of soul as a literally accurate description of reality, but rather how we use the concept of soul in framing and living our lives as whole human beings.

Jeffrey Hammond, in a recent article in *Notre Dame Magazine*, makes a good case for this approach. I'd like to share some excerpts:

The real question is not whether there is more to us than biology. It's whether we can continue to live as if there is *not*. Although I have no idea whether the "soul" actually exists, I *do* know that for centuries people like my grandmother believed that it did – and that such belief had decisive ethical and experiential consequences for their lives. . . .

When people live *as if* they possess a spiritual dimension that cannot be reduced to mere biology, their actions reflect this belief regardless of its truth or falsity. . .

Embracing the soul as a useful fiction would surely temper our obsession with gratifying physical desires at the expense of other needs, less tangible but equally pressing. The alternative, with its continued focus on materialism as the source of our values, will likely produce only more of what we already see: stress, cynicism, directionless lives – and unhappy people. . .

I believe the answer lies in restoring a better balance of the material and the immaterial in our lives. . . A body cannot feel guilt or assume responsibility for its actions. Such a response requires a human being – a body with a soul. . .

Even if we grant that what I've been calling the "soul" might be important for our happiness, however, our 21st century minds will inevitably ask the question: Is it *real*? If by "real" we mean empirically verifiable, then the answer is no. But if by "real" we mean having an impact on our ethics and the quality of our lives, then the answer is a definite yes. . .

At the very least, the soul is a powerful and enabling construct that allows us to play the game of being human as deeply and completely as possible.

The reading that Lois just shared with us began with the assertion that "Not only can we witness Mystery; in some profound way we are Mystery." In *All the Days of My Life*, Amelia E. Barr made a very similar statement that fits today's topic very well. She wrote "It is not that we *have* a soul; we *are* a soul."

And as one final example of the link between soul and experience, I leave you with the words of Centre Daily Times columnist, Walt Mills, who writes:

The search for the soul may seem as outdated as alchemy in this postmodern age. But . . . [w]hen I look into someone's eyes, a light shines out. Until I have a better name for it, I'll call it the soul.

So may it be.