

THE VIEWS OF THE PHILOSOPHERS ON THE NATURE OF THE SOUL

Translation by Kirk Watson

Of all the subjects that Philosophers have discussed, there is none on which they have disagreed more than on the nature of the human soul. They have studied & worked with the same ardour; some to establish its immortality & others to prove that it is perishable with the body, like those of the other animals.

To leave each person his liberty to decide for himself on this matter by his own lights, we will be content here to share, succinctly, but without omitting anything essential, the various proofs on which the philosophers of each party thought themselves well grounded in maintaining their various opinions.

There are many treatises written in favor of the first opinion, both by the ancients as well as the new Philosophers. Pico della Mirandola wrote one in the Fifteenth Century which is found printed in his works. The famous Theses he defended in Rome for fifteen days, wherein he responded in all languages, & defended the opinion contrary to all the propositions that might be advanced, having obliged him at the opening of these Theses to maintain that the human soul was mortal, against a scholar who had set out to maintain its immortality, Pico della Mirandola cited so many & such powerful arguments to prove its mortality that all assembled there were convinced that he had defended his own views, which drove him to compose, during the nights of these fifteen days which he so gloriously employed for himself, his treatise on the immortality of our souls, which he had printed as he went along, & which he distributed on the final day.

FIRST CHAPTER: *The Proof of the Immortality of the Soul.*

The most plausible proofs which the Philosophers, both the ancient & the modern partisans of the opinion of the immortality of our soul, have produced to establish their views are, essentially, these:

1. That the excellence of the human soul over that of the animals is so manifest that it is not possible to believe that it is of the same nature, all the more so, since thought & reasoning are its exclusive prerogative, since these point to faculties which cannot pertain to bodies, & which, consequently, are the operations of a substance at variance with that of the body. A Philosopher of the last century explained this proof more particularly with the following argument.

I think & my thought is not my body: this thought is neither long nor large nor extended, as the matter which composes a body must be; it is not, consequently, subject to destruction like it; for destruction cannot occur without a division of parts; & no division of parts can be conceived in a substance which, like thought, has no extension: therefore, concludes this Philosopher, there are, in me, two substances: an imperishable one which thinks, & the other, perishable, which does not think.

2. That the opinion of the immortality of our souls, found in all nations, is a proof as true as it is natural.

3. That the operations of this soul provide a no less touching testimony, in light of the fact that man is not only the only being endowed with the faculties of thought & reason, but also the only one with those of expressing his thoughts with appropriate sounds & of transmitting them to posterity by letters of his own invention: add to that that the desire, which is so natural to him, of immortalizing his name & his actions, the monuments he raises to perpetuate their memory, the way he saves his goods for the benefit of his descendants, or of those who will bear his name, are so many proofs of the immortal soul which is in him, & which would, if possible, share its immortality with the mortal part to which it is united.

4. That the operations of this soul are so noble that they show that they can only be derived from a divine & immortal source. To prove this proposition, it's said that man is the inventor of the most sublime arts & sciences, that he has formed societies which have built cities, made laws to regulate the body of the state, maintain justice & abundance, punish the wicked & reward the good; that he has made other laws to regulate the rights of fathers over their children & the sharing of goods between them: that he has discovered the art of crossing the vastest seas, & of reuniting, for his convenience, that which nature had separated by so great a distance: that he has, finally, lifted himself up to the heavens, that he knows the paths of the stars, & how long they take to follow them, that he foresees the future & announces it; that he has achieved the knowledge of the author of the universe, & that he renders him all proper rites: all of which cannot, it's said, derive from anything but a divine & immortal soul.

5. That the constitution of the body is so fine & so noble that all it takes is to contemplate it from without & within to be convinced that it's the lodging-place of a sublime soul. Here, lengthy enumerations are made about the beauty of its internal parts, which are called the epitome & representation of the cosmos. As for the exterior, after observing its excellent proportions, they add that man is the only animal who walks with his head raised towards Heaven; a still more evident proof that he originates & must return there.

6. That all animals respect & fear him, even those whose strength is far superior to his, & that they are subject to him. This superiority, it's said, can only derive from that of his soul over theirs, & plainly establishes the natural difference between the human soul & that of the beasts, & the immortality of the first.

7. That it would be vain for man to worship this Creator of Heaven & Earth & pay tribute to Him, or abstain from evil to do good, if he weren't to get any reward for the good actions or any punishment for the bad ones: but these rewards & punishments don't always come in this life; since most innocent people leave this life without compensation for their virtue, & many of the wicked spend it in a continual succession of pleasures & prosperity, it is necessary, they say, for there to be another life where some are punished for their crimes, & others are rewarded for their virtues; otherwise God would not be just, which is not possible, since He is an infinitely perfect being. So, this other life proves & shows the immortality of our souls, the annihilation of which would make this other life useless.

To this point examples are adduced, of the punishments & rewards which are supernatural & numerous in this life: their memory has been preserved for us in histories, by which it is established that God has made efforts to establish the truth of His justice among men, efforts which assure us that his justice must also extend into another life, when it has failed to be exercised in this one: which could occur if our souls perished with the body.

8. That there is another proof that the substance of our souls is imperishable & independent of our bodies, in the existence of demons, genies, familiar spirits, & all the aerial substances, whose existence is established by an infinity of testimonies which have come down to us from past ages, & which aren't lacking in these latter ones, & in extraordinary & supernatural apparitions. Disembodied voices heard on the air, like the one (the great God Pan is dead) which was heard across all of Asia, provide us with further, convincing proof that there truly are substances independent of matter, & an assurance that the human soul, which is of the same nature as these substances, can be separated from the body to which it is joined, without being annihilated.

9. To all these proofs is added the authority of the religions, confirmed by miracles of the first order & proclaimed from afar by prophecies, which are no less invincible testimonies of their truth. Here details are shared of the wonders of Egypt, of those of Mount Sinai, which accompanied the Jewish people in the Promised Land & then continued up to the destruction of their Temple, which was so authentically predicted. Then are adduced the astounding miracles which characterized & attested the mission of Jesus Christ, & the holiness of his Church from its birth until now. This, along with the progress & longevity of these religions which have cultivated in us this mystery of the union of an immortal soul with a body subject to destruction, & which have demonstrated, it's said, by facts, the possibility of its existence independent of the body.

10. Finally, it's observed that those who deny the immortality of our souls are usually libertines, or wicked men who, from fear of punishment in another life, for crimes in this one, are led to imagine that there isn't one, & to maintain that the soul dies with the body.

SECOND CHAPTER: *What the Partisans of the Mortality of the Soul Say, in Refutation of the Preceding Proofs.*

Those who maintain that our souls are annihilated with our bodies, to which they are united, assert that one must first do away with the proofs of the immortality of the soul, the authority of religions, the stories of miracles & wonders, the belief in aerial substances, & all the conclusions which are drawn from these in favor of this immortality.

To prove this, they say, 1. That the histories of all ages & countries contain an infinity of extraordinary & supernatural things, which superstition on one hand, popular ignorance on the other, & interest along with the skill of those who have wished to impose laws, have passed off as true.

To demonstrate their falseness, they point out to the Christians the miracles & wonders of Pagans & Muslims; & point out to the latter the miracles of the others, which cannot all be true at the same time in two different religions which reciprocally accuse each other of falsehood, & one of which, at least, must be false. They point out to Christians & Jews the countless wonders & miracles attested in the books of Pagans & Muslims.

Among others, they share the testimonies of certain historians who have affirmed that there were Kings in Egypt, whose names they cite, which sometimes ascended, in presence of the masses, into the clouds. They say, among other things, that one of these Kings, after giving them laws & commending their observance, thus ascended from them, while saying that he would come back again; & that he indeed did show himself to them after many months; while they were assembled in a Temple, he appeared to them, shining brightly, spoke to them & again commended they observe his laws, proclaiming that he was going to leave them forever: when he finished speaking, he vanished.

Another time, it's said, they saw with their own eyes, as is written in the history of the third century of the Muslim Age; viz., that a Caliph, reigning in Babylon, where he had built a College to teach the doctrine of Shafi, a famous interpreter of their laws, dead & buried in great Cairo, wrote to the governor that he was to send him the body of this doctor to be laid to rest into his College & make it more illustrious; this Governor, wishing to execute this

with the greatest solemnity, had himself transported in full majesty & in the company of an innumerable crowd to Shafi's tomb to extract the body; but that those who had been ordered to remove the earth covering it had no sooner reached the coffin than a flame came out from it, which blinded all of them; an official report of this was attested & signed by the governor, by the other officers of the kingdom, & by more than two thousand people. This report was sent to the Caliph, who had many authentic copies made of it, which he circulated wherever the Muslim religion spread from there. They also cite what is reported in the history of a Roman Emperor who, in his journey to Alexandria, restored sight to someone born blind.

On the contrary, against the Muslims & Jews they raise the objection of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which the partisans of these two religions deny, along with so many other miracles attested in history in favor of Christianity.

They observe, on miracles in general, that there is no report of a man who was publicly decapitated & later revived, although this miracle would be no more amazing than the resurrection of a truly withered dead man; from which they claim to have reason to conclude that all the others are false & based on supposition. Among so many miracles of every kind which are said to have been worked, the only exception would be that of a man who was publicly decapitated & still alive, because, they say, such a wonder is the only one of such a nature as to be incapable of either being merely supposed or imitated by any artifice.

4. They deny the existence of all minds separate from bodies, whatever names have been given to them, & regard as fables what is said of them, saying that the same sort of thing was said in ancient times about the oracles, & which, as is now generally agreed, reduced to the greed & skill of the officiants & priestesses favored by the superstition of the peoples of those ages.

5. With respect to the proofs given in favor of the immortality of the human soul which are deduced from the excellence of its operations, they claim that all the difference between human reason & that of animals consists only in that of the organization of their brains, which in men is arranged so as to be more favorable to reasoning than in the other animals.

They observe, in this respect, that dogs know their masters, & feel love for them & hatred against anyone who attacks them: that beavers build houses, join with their fellows to do things that a single one of them could never do, & that they punish & banish from their society those who refuse to work; that bees & ants make provision for Winter, that they

remove their dead from their dwellings to avoid discomfort, form republics & have laws; & they maintain that what produces these operations in animals is the same thing that accomplishes in man those effects by which they claim to establish the difference between his soul and that of animals. They claim that if you understand what produces all these functions in animals & how they occur, you know the instrument & cause of thought & rationality in man, simply by assuming a greater perfection in the organs whose effect they are. The main function of every animal's brain, they say, is to think, to judge the relations made by the other senses, & to combine them, just as that of the eye is to see, & that of the ear is to hear; the degree of perfection in all these operations being only the effect of the different composition or arrangement of the parts in the organs which are its instruments.

If man reasons better than the other animals, they say it is because the constitution of his brain is better suited than theirs to judge the images which are presented to it by the other senses. If dogs have a more refined sense of smell, eagles better vision, cats more subtle hearing, it's because the organs of these sensations are superior in these animals to man's: but this difference does not constitute a diversity of substance between what thinks, sees, worships, & hears better & what does so to an inferior degree; it only denotes a more favorable organic disposition in those with stronger senses than in those with weaker ones.

To more fully establish that reason in man is only a byproduct of the disposition of his brain's organs, they also observe that he is so irrational at birth that he lacks the discernment that all other animals have of recognizing & attaching themselves to the milk-giving breast; that reason grows faster in all other animals than in man, since there are no others whose brain's organs are as weak at birth & need so much time to be able to reason properly: that this property is so strongly dependant, in man, on the condition of his organs, that for some men it's always languid & imperfect, when their natural endowment of the instruments on which it depends are flawed & unable to reach perfection. They also say that if these organs happen to go awry or wear out in those whose faculty of reason is better than anyone else, their reason is proportionally weakened & disturbed, often to such an extent that these men, after having winning admiration by force of their reason, live a further twenty & thirty years, without even a trace of it.

This observation made such an impression on van Helmont, the great Philosopher of the last century who had written long meditations on this matter, in which, although he didn't dare to openly deny the existence of the rational & immortal soul in man, he was nevertheless driven to recognize in his works that it was buried so deeply in him while alive that he

showed no sign of it: which is an unequivocal declaration that what appears in man and is called reason, is nothing more than the harmony produced by the convergence of the images which all the other senses bring to the brain, & which the simpleton regards as the effect of a spiritual & rational being, by its essence entirely distinct from the body, indestructible, & outliving the body to which it is connected during this life, & independently of which it will see, hear, & reason all by itself: which is, he continues, as false as it is inconceivable, since thought & reason are only modifications of the organs, without which they can no more exist than color without body & extension without matter. They add that what produces reasoning & thought in man is no less perishable in him than in other animals; which is inevitable when the light which is kept there by the blood-borne spirits is extinguished; a light by whose favor this part forms judgments about external relations; a light which is interrupted by the vapors of sleep, since the blood no longer furnishes the spirits, or at least does so less abundantly; a light which is obscured by the vapors of a hot fever; distracted when this part focuses intensely on certain objects, such that the animal neither sees nor hears anything else, even though its eyes & ears are open; and when its senses are weakened by the desiccation of the canals which once nourished them, or by the diminution of this nourishment. This diminution is caused by a stroke or another violent ailment, just as the canals are completely dried up by death: a light, finally, which is no different from what's produced by a burning lamp: which can be lost, confounded & mixed with the air, without this light's matter being truly destroyed, & also without it subsisting in any other way than it did before it was united with this lamp.

A modern Philosopher has explained all of this in a particular & clear way, we'll briefly share his words & his thought.

THIRD CHAPTER: *Spinoza's Opinion.*

This Philosopher, who seems to have most studied the matter at hand, claims that there is a universal soul spread throughout all matter & especially in the air, from which all particular souls are derived: that this universal soul is composed of a kind of matter which is fine & well-suited to motion, like that of fire, that this matter is always ready to join to objects which are suited to receive life; just as the matter of flames is always ready to attach itself to combustible things which are disposed to burn.

That this matter, joined to the animal's body, from the moment it gets in until it abandons it & reunites with its totality, maintains the joint movements of the lungs, in which life consists & which is the measure of its duration.

That this soul or this spirit of life is the same constantly & without variation in substance, whatever body it's in, whether separated or united: that there is, ultimately, no diversity of nature in the animating matter which makes the particular souls, whether rational, sensitive, vegetative, call them what you will; but that the noticeable difference between them consists only in the kind of matter which happens to be animated, & in differences in the organs which it uses to move in the animals, or in differences in the arrangements of the parts of the tree or the plant it animates: like the matter of fire, which, while uniform in its essence, varies in its brightness or intensity, depending on the substance to which it's united sufficiently to look beautiful & clear to us when attached to a candle of purified wax, obscure & diminished when joined to fat or to a candle of coarse tallow. He adds that, even among waxes, some are clearer & purer than others; that there is yellow wax & white wax.

There are also men of different qualities, which alone creates many degrees of perfection in their reasoning, there being an infinite difference between them, not only between the white & black kinds of men, & between those of the various nations by which the Earth is populated, but even between the subjects of a single species & nation, & those of a single given family. One might even, he adds, perfect in man the powers of the soul or the understanding by strengthening the organs through the sciences, education, abstinence, nutrition & beverages, & by consuming particular foods: these powers are weakened, on the other hand, by a disordered life, by violent passions, calamities, illnesses, & old age. Which is

an invincible proof that these powers are only the effects of the bodily organs, constituted in a certain way.

This is very much in keeping with the opinion, once so generally accepted in the world, & adopted by nearly all the Philosophers of these times, i.e., of the passage of souls from one body into another, & is quite naturally explained in this system; it being obvious by these observations that the portion of the universal soul, or the parts of this portion which would have animated a human body, might animate that of another species: & likewise, those by which the bodies of other animals would have been animated, & which would have made a tree or a plant grow, might conversely animate human bodies; in the same way as the parts of the flame which had burned wood can burn any other combustible material.

This modern Philosopher pushes this thought further, & claims that there is no moment when particular souls are not renewed in animated bodies by a continual succession from the parts of the universal soul to the particular ones; just as the particles of a candle's light, or that of another flame, are constantly replaced by others which follow them, & which are followed in turn by others.

In vain, he adds, the Egyptians were persuaded that, after a certain limited time, during which the portion of the universal soul which animated their body would pass successively into other bodies, this part would acquire the gift of a particular, spiritual, & immortal being. In vain, on this hope & the opinion that, if their bodies were kept intact, their souls would not pass into other habitations, they embalmed & preserved them carefully. In vain the Banyans, for fear of eating the souls of their brothers, abstain even today from all that has life. And, in vain did the ancient Jews give themselves a law of not eating the blood of animals (a law which is still observed among the miserable remnants of this nation). In vain, I say, they gave themselves such a law for this sole reason that they thought that their soul consisted in the blood; for the union of particular souls to the general one, upon the death of the animal, is as rapid & complete as the return of the flame to its principle, as soon as it is separated from the matter to which it was joined. The spirit of life, in which souls consist, whose nature is even more subtle than that of fire, if it isn't the same thing, is neither susceptible to permanent separation from the matter from which it is taken, nor capable of being eaten, & is immediately & essentially united, in the living animal, with the air by which its breathing is maintained.

This spirit is brought, our Philosopher adds, without interruption into the lungs of the animal, along with the air which keeps them moving: it is pushed along with it into the veins by the breath of the lungs; it is spread thereby into all the other parts of the body. It is what produces, in some beings, walking & the sense of touch, sight, hearing, reasoning in others. It creates the diverse passions of animals. Its functions are perfected & weakened according to the growth or diminution of forces in the organs. If they cease completely, this spirit of life flies & is reunited to the general one, when the dispositions which existed in the particular creature eventually cease.

FOURTH CHAPTER: *A Continuation of the Refutation of the Proofs of the Immortality of the Soul.*

With respect to the proof which supposedly comes from the composition of the human body, in favor of the immortality of its soul, those who deny it show that it is a pure imagination; that there is nothing inside of man to distinguish him from other animals: that the organs of a gnat & of the tiniest insects are all the more amazing as in a minute one, beyond the powers of the best microscopes, since they're the same as those of man; that they have a heart, lungs & innards just like us. That, with respect to the exterior, many animals surpass man in beauty; the amazing plumage of hundreds of different birds, the skins of so many animals, so diversely & pleasantly marked & colored, excel the naked human body, with its hair, bristles, & beard, which rather disfigure than ornament it. That the eagle's eye is a thousand times more keen & piercing than man's, that it can see the smallest creeping animal from above the clouds, that it stares at the Sun without discomfort; that man is weak by comparison to certain animals; a slower runner, less brave; that he can't live by comparison with a deer, that he has no natural defenses, & that he is forced to use weapons to compensate for what nature has refused him, & to surround himself with walls for protection against other animals.

While some see a point in favor of the immortality of the soul in the fact that this opinion is so widespread among so many diverse nations, the partisans of the opposite view say that this proves immortality less than it does human self-love; that men, unable to conceive the certainty of their annihilation without suffering, have imagined this fine way of surviving the dissolution of the body, through an indestructible part of themselves.

That Lawgivers & Magistrates have always favored this opinion as a means of restraining the wicked through fear of inevitable punishment in another life for crimes committed in this one, & which went unpunished; & to excite men to virtue by the hope of a reward after their death for the good works done in this life.

That the religious Ministers, who have a stake in promoting these views due to the offerings which others bring to the divinity, some in expiation for their crimes & others to gain its favor after their death, spared no effort to inspire them in the masses: hence the descriptions of the happy life prepared for the souls of the good in the Elysian Fields, & those of the

torments to which those of the wicked will be delivered after their death, such as Ixion's wheel & the other tortures which can be read of in the books of the Greeks & Romans.

That the lawgivers of the latter ages, to repress the contempt which the human mind had begun to assume towards this opinion, found they could use, to this effect, nothing better than to increase, as far as they can be seen to do in their books, the images of happiness in another life for the good, & torments for the wicked: without there being anything more real therein than in the happiness & tortures sung of in ancient times by the Poets, for each of them.

That it's no surprise when these depictions of good & evil, handed down to children in the cradle, govern their actions in maturity, & are believed by men who are naturally weak, fearful, hopeful, & submissive to the dogmas of a Religion which they sucked with their mother's milk, & who are reminded more and more of them as death closes in.

That, however, the opinion of the immortality of the soul has never been universal, & may never be; that most of the ancient Philosophers thought it mortal or that it passed from one body to another, as their books testify; that many of the Jews, as can be read in their historian Josephus, rigid observers of a strict law, didn't believe in the immortality of the soul & only expected the divinity to hand down temporal punishments or rewards in return for their loyalty or unfaithfulness to His ordinances; & that it was only under the reign of Augustus that the Essene sect, to which Jesus Christ belonged, distinguished itself with this new opinion.

As for the conclusion drawn concerning the necessity of another life where the good who were not rewarded in this one for their virtues & the wicked who were not punished for their crimes will find this reward or this punishment, they deny this necessity & say that the good are rewarded here for their virtues, whether in their enjoyment of the esteem of other men, or in the light of their own conscience. That, besides, since good or evil, aside from pain, are nothing but opinion, the deprivation of honours, wealth and comforts, and even of life itself, is only an evil for those who let themselves be afflicted by such things: & the possession of the same things is only a blessing for those who regard them as such; that to do good, to help one's neighbor is a satisfaction which is its own earthly reward for those who do these things; that to oppress one's neighbor, to take his goods or life, is a conduct which produces remorse or fear in the heart, which, for the wicked, takes the place of all

punishments pronounced by the laws against those who commit such acts of violence, when they go unpunished.

They add that to suffer pain, illness, infirmity with constancy is a diminution of & a comfort for these evils, & a means of resisting or healing them: that to endure persecutions or trials with patience or submission is a way of rendering oneself insensitive to them. That peace of mind through adversity is preferable to the remorse & fear felt by the unjust & the wicked while they enjoy the goods & honors they've gained in blameworthy ways.

That, finally, there is no obligation on God's part to reward good deeds or punish bad ones; nor, consequently, is there any necessity for another life where men receive punishments or rewards which they seem not to have received in this one: that one might draw the same conclusion from earthly impunity in spite of endless murders which tigers, lions, & other animals wreak every day against their fellows. That it's an illusion of our self-love to imagine that our nature is so different from theirs, & so excellent that another life is necessary where God is obliged to administer to men a justice which they think they were denied in this one.

As for the objection that it's only libertines or the ungodly who seek to be persuaded of the annihilation of their souls for fear of an unpleasant future in another life, they respond with the promises of forgiveness for the worst faults through a single act of repentance, accompanied by the recognition of the expiator & his merits as proclaimed by the Christian religion; & by a single act of the profession of the one God, & of His choice of Muhammad for the fulfillment of the faith as sufficient in the Muslim religion to avoid the torments prepared in another life for those who refuse these dispositions; & to merit ineffable blessings instead.

This idea, far from bringing the libertines & ungodly to combat, at such great personal risk, the opinion of the immortality of the soul, should rather lead them to make a choice which would cost them so little, to make them eternally happy, & spare them endless torments.

Finally, after having thus combatted the arguments which supposedly prove the immortality of the human soul, they add that none of them is conclusive, & that they are, at most, only grounds to lead our self-love to hope & feel flattered by the possibility of something inconceivable & totally opposed to the relations of our senses. That, on this matter in which we are so invested, no new discoveries have been made from the time that a great

Philosopher, the teacher of a Roman Emperor, wrote to one of his friends, some seventeen hundred years ago: “When your letter was returned to me”, he said, in reply to it, “I was busy reading what the Philosophers have written on the nature of the human soul; in favor of whose immortality they give us far more hope than proof”: *legebam libros Philosophorum, unimarum immortalitatem promittentium magis quam probantium*; & they conclude by assuring us that this same judgment still applies to every argument in favor of its immortality.

They share, against the authority of the Gospels, in favor of this opinion, the following passage.

*Messala consule, Anastasio Imperatore jubente, Sancta Evangelia, tanquam ab idiotis Evangelistis composita, reprehenduntur & emendatur.*¹

This passage comes from the *Chronicon* of Victor Muis, Bishop of Africa, who flourished in the sixth century. Abbé Houtteville, in his book on the Christian Religion², filled two pages to destroy the natural conclusion drawn from this passage, against the authenticity of the Gospels; but it remains true that the alteration, as notable as it is, did occur.

¹ Translator: “The Emperor Anastasius, in the consulship of Messala, ordered the holy Gospels to be revised and corrected, as having been composed by idiot evangelists.”

² 70. Translator: *La Religion chrétienne prouvée par les faits* (editions were printed in 1722 and 1740); in these editions, the reference should be to page 112.