

THE HOW WE KNOW IT'S REAL
AND WHY IT MATTERS

SOUL

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Introduction: **WHAT'S SO IMPORTANT ABOUT THE SOUL AND CONSCIOUSNESS?**

Throughout history, the vast majority of people, educated and uneducated alike, have been dualists (those who believe that the soul is an immaterial thing different from the body and brain), at least in the sense that they have taken a human to be the sort of thing that could enter life after death while his or her corpse was left behind. Some form of *dualism appears to be the natural response to what we seem to know about ourselves through introspection and in other ways (words preceded by an asterisk are defined at the end of the chapter, and in the glossary at the end of the book). Many thinkers who deny dualism still admit that it is the commonsense view. Thus, physicalist Jaegwon Kim (a physicalist is someone who denies the existence of a soul and says that consciousness is merely physical or at least dependent on the physical) acknowledges that “We commonly think that we, as persons, have a mental and bodily dimension. . . . Something like this dualism of personhood,

I believe, is common lore shared across most cultures and religious traditions . . .”¹

Not only has belief in the soul been included in the commonsense beliefs of people all over the world throughout the ages, but also the idea that there is a soul has been the constant teaching of the Christian church since its beginning. Throughout church history, Christianity has given affirmative answers to questions about the reality of the three great topics of Western philosophy—namely, God, the soul, and life everlasting. For centuries, most Christian thinkers have believed in the souls of men and beasts, as it used to be put. Animals and humans are (or have) an immaterial entity—a soul, a life principle, a ground of sentience—and they have a body. More specifically, a human person is a functioning unity of two distinct entities, body and soul. The human soul, while not by nature immortal, is nevertheless capable of entering a disembodied intermediate state upon death, however incomplete and unnatural this state may be, and, eventually, being reunited with a resurrected body.

Today, however, it is widely believed that science has rendered this commonsense and biblical view obsolete and implausible. As Christian physicalist Nancey Murphy says, even though science cannot prove dualism is false, still, “science has provided a massive amount of evidence suggesting that we need not postulate the existence of an entity such as a soul or mind in order to explain life and consciousness.”² Sadly, this opinion is not limited to academic circles. To see this, consider the following two cases.

Case 1: A few years ago, *Time* magazine featured an article defending stem-cell research on human embryos:

“These [embryos] are microscopic groupings of a few differentiated cells. There is nothing human about them, except potential—and, if you choose to believe it, a soul.”³ This expresses a widely held opinion that when it comes to belief in the soul, you’re on your own. There is no evidence one way or another. You must choose arbitrarily or, perhaps, on the basis of private feelings. For many, belief in the soul is like belief in ghosts—an issue best left to the pages of the *National Enquirer*.

Case 2: *The Walking Dead* is a very popular television show today. In the first season’s final episode, a scientist shows a group of ordinary people a video of the inside workings of a live human brain. It looks like a complex web of wires and nodes, with a multitude of flashing lights traveling to and fro. He then declares matter-of-factly that all of the electrical activity that they see is actually the real you. When those “lights” go off, you cease to exist.⁴

Regardless of how often this mantra is recited, nothing could be further from the truth. In reality, a robust case can be offered for the view that consciousness and the soul are *immaterial*—not physical—realities. Thinking through these issues is a fascinating adventure of considerable importance. French philosopher Blaise Pascal rightly remarked that the soul’s nature is so important that one must have lost all feeling not to care about the issue.⁵ The great Presbyterian scholar J. Gresham Machen once observed, “I think we ought to hold not only that man has a soul, but that it is important that he should know that he has a soul.”⁶ But why should we think Machen is correct about this? Why is it worth spending time learning about the immaterial nature

of consciousness and the soul? After all, life is busy and we have many demands on our time. I believe there are at least four reasons why this topic is worthy of our attention.

First, the Bible seems to teach that consciousness and the soul are immaterial and we need to regard this teaching as genuine knowledge and not as faith commitments that we merely hope are true. For twenty centuries, the vast majority of educated and uneducated Christians understood the Bible in this way. The historic Christian position is nicely stated by H. D. Lewis: “Throughout the centuries Christians have believed that each human person consists in a soul and body; that the soul survived the death of the body; and that its future life will be immortal.”⁷ (For a detailed discussion of the biblical evidence, see chapter 2.) Lay people are rightly suspicious of and concerned about what they see as politically correct revisions of what the church has held for centuries, even if the revisions are done in the name of science.

It is very important for Christians to understand the central teachings of Scripture to be sources of **knowledge* and not merely truths to be accepted by a blind act of faith. Why? It is on the basis of knowledge (or perceived knowledge)—not faith, commitment, or sincerity—that people are given the right to lead, act in public, and accomplish important tasks. We give certain people the right to fix our cars, pull our teeth, write our contracts, and so on because we take those people to be in possession of the relevant body of knowledge. Moreover, it is the possession of knowledge, and not mere truth alone, that gives people confidence and courage to lead, act, and risk. Accordingly, it is of crucial importance that we promote the central teachings of Christianity

in general, and the spiritual nature of consciousness and the soul in particular, as a body of knowledge and not as a set of faith-practices to be accepted on the basis of mere belief or simply a shared narrative. To fail at this point is to risk being marginalized and disregarded as those promoting a privatized set of feelings or desires that fall short of knowledge.

Unfortunately, the contemporary cultural milieu—inside and outside the church—in which we live and move and have our being is precisely one that takes the central teachings of the Bible to be on the order of astrology or the Flat Earth Society. If we revise the traditionally understood teachings of Scripture in light of the supposed demands of science, then we contribute to the idea that it is really science that gives us confident knowledge of reality and not Scripture. Such an attitude will undermine our efforts to reach the lost and pass on our Christian faith to our children.

Here's a simple definition of knowledge: *To represent reality in thought or experience the way it really is on the basis of adequate grounds.* To know something (the nature of God, forgiveness, cancer) is to think of or experience it as it really is on a solid basis of evidence, experience, intuition, and so forth. Little can be said in general about what counts as “adequate grounds.” The best one can do is to start with specific cases of knowledge and its absence in art, chemistry, memory, Scripture, logic, introspection, etc., and formulate helpful descriptions of “adequate grounds” accordingly.

Please note that *knowledge has nothing to do with certainty or an anxious quest for it.* One can know something without being certain about it, and in the presence of doubt or with the admission that one might be wrong. Recently, I

know that God spoke to me about a specific matter but I admit it is possible I am wrong about this (though, so far, I have no good reason to think I am wrong). When Paul says, “This you know with certainty” (Eph. 5:5), he clearly implies that one can know without certainty; otherwise, the statement would be redundant. How so? If I say, “Give me a burger with pickles on it,” I imply that it is possible to have a burger without pickles. If, contrary to fact, pickles were simply essential ingredients of burgers, it would be redundant to ask for burgers with pickles. The parallel to “knowledge with certainty” should be easy to see. When Christians claim to have knowledge of this or that—for example, that God is real, that Jesus rose from the dead, that the Bible is the Word of God—they are not saying that there is no possibility that they could be wrong, that they have no doubts, or that they have answers to every question raised against them. They are simply saying that these and other claims satisfy the definition given above (that is, to represent reality in thought or experience the way it really is on the basis of adequate grounds).

The deepest issue facing the church today is this: Are its main creeds and central teachings items of knowledge, or mere matters of blind faith, privatized personal beliefs, or issues of feeling to be accepted or set aside according to the individual or cultural pressures that come and go? Do these teachings have cognitive and behavioral authority that set a worldview framework for approaching science, art, or ethics—indeed, all of life? Or is cognitive and behavioral authority set by what scientists or the American Psychiatric Association say, or by what Gallup polls tell us is embraced by cultural and intellectual elites? Do we turn to these sources

and then set aside or revise two thousand years of Christian thinking and doctrinal/creedal expressions in order to make Christian teaching acceptable to the neuroscience department at UCLA? The question of whether or not Christianity provides its followers with a range of knowledge is no small matter. It is a question of authority for life and death, and lay brothers and sisters are keeping a watchful eye on Christian thinkers and leaders to see how they approach this matter. Currently, the nature of consciousness and the soul are at the heart of the struggle for the intellectual authority of extra-scientific fields such as theology and the Bible.

Second, as the Time article cited above implies, the reality of the soul is important to various ethical issues that crucially involve an understanding of human persons. There is a deep connection between the reality of the human soul and the sort of high, intrinsic value human persons possess, and this is relevant to ethical reflection—for example, in areas such as abortion, euthanasia, and human rights. Now, one could believe in the soul and reject this sort of value, and one could reject the soul and embrace this sort of value. Whether or not each view can be justified is, of course, another matter. But, in any case, the existence of the soul factors into a good deal of bioethical argumentation. It is in virtue of the type of soul humans have, reflecting as it does the image of God, that humans have such high, intrinsic value. As I see it, physicalists of various stripes have a difficult task in attempting to justify this sort of value for human persons insofar as they are material objects. If it is true that we are merely physical objects, we are of little value, or so it seems to me.⁸

But, you may respond, what of the body? Are you being

Platonistic or gnostic here and devaluing the body's worth? No, not at all. I just don't think the body is of much value simply insofar as it is physical. As I see it, the body has value for these reasons: (1) I take the body to be an ensouled, spatially extended, physical structure; thus, the body includes the soul to be a body, and it is of value accordingly. A body without a soul in it is just a corpse. By contrast with a body, a corpse is of little intrinsic value. (2) It has certain qualities (color, smell, sound, taste, texture) that serve as the *meta-physical grounding of many of its aesthetic properties, and neither these qualities nor aesthetic properties are physical (that is, *properties like colors and beauty and others mentioned below are *abstract). A major reason bodies are beautiful is due to these kinds of qualities. (3) It possesses certain geometrical features, for example, shape and symmetry, but these are not physical, they are abstract. (4) It possesses a certain complexity of arrangement, but since this complexity is an abstract object, it is not physical. (5) It is owned by the person, it is the vehicle in virtue of which the person is known, and it is intimately and causally related to the person. (6) It exists and, insofar as any existing thing has value, it does. (7) It is physical.

(6) and (7) involve little value compared to the other factors. It must be kept in mind that the intrinsic value/beauty of the creation is due to factors like (2)–(4) above, not (7). Further, (1) and (5) are the key reasons why the body has value as is evident when we compare the value of the body as an ensouled structure that is intimately related to the soul to the value of a corpse or the body of a mindless zombie for which these value-making features are absent.

Third, loss of belief in life after death is related to a commitment to the authority of science above theology, along with a conviction that belief in the soul is scientifically discredited. As philosopher John Hick pointed out, “This considerable decline within society as a whole, accompanied by a lesser decline within the churches, of the belief in personal immortality clearly reflects the assumption within our culture that we should only believe in what we experience, plus what the accredited sciences certify to us.”⁹ While there are, indeed, a small group of Christian physicalists who try to make sense of life after death without a soul, most people rightly understand the afterlife as involving the departure of the soul at death (and Christianity, of course, teaches that after this disembodied intermediate state we will all receive resurrection bodies).¹⁰ For most people it just stands to reason that if there is no soul, as modern science would have us believe, there is no life after death.

Finally, in The Divine Conspiracy, Dallas Willard says that understanding the immaterial nature of the human spirit is crucial to grasping the essence of spiritual growth: “To understand spirit as ‘substance’ is of the utmost importance in our current world, which is so largely devoted to the ultimacy of matter.”¹¹ Willard argues that without a careful grasp of the soul’s nature, it becomes virtually impossible to develop a detailed model of spiritual formation. Thus, knowledge of the existence and nature of the soul is crucial for our self-understanding and for developing a view about how to mature in the Way of Jesus.

For these four reasons, it is crucial that parents, pastors, and parishioners recapture the confidence that in

Christianity we are presented with genuine knowledge about the existence and nature of the soul. It is also important for us to regain knowledge of how to make a case for the immaterial nature of consciousness and the soul without using the Bible. While in past decades Scripture was held to be a source of authority in our culture, it no longer is today. If we are to make a persuasive case for Christianity, and aspects of its teaching like the soul, we must learn to use reason and evidence to defend biblical doctrine. In the chapters to follow, we will be concerned with making a reasonable case for an immaterial soul and consciousness. But first we need to get before us a set of distinctions that will help in the discussion to follow, and we will examine these in chapter 1.

CHAPTER IN REVIEW

In this chapter we saw that we should care about the soul and consciousness because:

- The Bible seems to teach that consciousness and the soul are immaterial and we need to regard this teaching as genuine.
- The reality of the soul is important to various ethical issues.
- Loss of belief in life after death is related to a commitment to the authority of science above theology, and the conviction that belief in the soul is scientifically discredited.
- Understanding the immaterial nature of the human spirit is crucial to grasping the essence of spiritual growth.

KEY VOCABULARY

Abstract: In the discipline of philosophy, this term refers to properties (e.g., redness, hardness; see also the entry for “property” below) and relations (e.g., taller than, heavier than) that do not exist by themselves in space or time, but can exist potentially *in* many different places and times (e.g., *redness* can exist *in* both an apple and a ball; a dog can be *heavier than* a rock, while a rock can be *heavier than* a leaf). This term is often contrasted with spatial/temporal objects that are *concrete* or *physical* (e.g., a house, a cow, a bracelet).

Dualism: The view that the soul is an immaterial thing different from the body and brain.

Knowledge: To represent reality in thought or experience the way it really is on the basis of adequate grounds.

Metaphysics: In philosophy, this refers to the study of the most fundamental aspects of reality that underlie what we experience through our senses. Common topics of study in metaphysics include existence, substance, properties, causation, events, and mind/body questions.

Physicalism: The view that the only things that exist are physical substances, properties, and events. In relation to humans, the physical substance is the material body, especially the brain and central nervous system.

Property: an existent reality that is universal, immutable, and can (or perhaps must) be *in* or *had* by other things more basic, such as a substance. Thus, a cow (substance) can have the property of being brown. The brownness (property) is had by the cow (the substance).

NOTES

1. Jaegwon Kim, "Lonely Souls: Causality and Substance Dualism," in *Soul, Body and Survival*, ed. Kevin Corcoran (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 30.
2. Nancey Murphy, "Human Nature: Historical, Scientific, and Religious Issues," in *Whatever Happened to the Soul?* eds. Warren S. Brown, Nancey Murphy, and H. Newton Malony (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 18.
3. Michael Kinsley, "If You Believe Embryos Are Humans . . ." *Time*, June 25, 2001, 80.
4. Adam Fierro and Frank Darabont, "TS-19," *The Walking Dead*, season 1, episode 6, directed by Guy Ferland, aired December 5, 2010 (New York: AMC, 2010), Netflix. I want to thank Michael Sanborn for pointing this out to me.
5. Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, section III, 194.
6. J. Gresham Machen, *The Christian View of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1937), 159.
7. H. D. Lewis, *Christian Theism* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1984), 125.
8. For a Christian physicalist defense of human value and dignity, see Kevin Corcoran, *Rethinking Human Nature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), chapter 4.
9. John H. Hick, *Death & Eternal Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 92.
10. For an exposition and critique of physicalist attempts to make sense of an afterlife, see William Hasker, "Materialism and the Resurrection," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 3 (2011): 83–103; Jonathan Loose, "Constitution and the Falling Elevator: The Continuing Incompatibility of Materialism and Resurrection Belief," *Philosophia Christi* 14 No. 2 (2012): 439–49.
11. Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), 82.

Praise for *The Soul*

One of the most important yet least understood aspects of Christian teaching is the existence and nature of the human soul. J. P. Moreland provides a robust philosophical and theological defense of the soul, but just as importantly, demonstrates why understanding the nature of soul is *critical* to many of the cultural discussions of today. Moreland offers us a rare combination: philosophical acuity, philosophical fidelity, and technical accessibility. I would highly recommend this to anyone!

—MIKE ERRE

Lead Pastor of EvFree Fullerton

Author of *Jesus of Suburbia* and *Astonished*

Many think science has displaced the soul. Nothing could be further from the truth! In this quintessentially Moreland book, *The Soul* provides compelling evidence for the existence of the soul and shows why it matters so deeply for our daily lives. Moreland's teaching on the soul has transformed my personal and academic life. I happily recommend that it be read and studied by pastors, educators, as well as apologists and theologians alike.

—SEAN MCDOWELL

Assistant Professor, Biola University

Coauthor of *Is God Just a Human Invention?*

Increasingly, secular thought denies the human soul. In this splendid book, J. P. Moreland restores the soul to the center of our identity as creatures made in the image of God. Moreland is a first-rate philosopher of mind and top-tier Christian apologist, known for his rigorous argumentation,

but here the style is straightforward and accessible to non-specialists. All of the key terms are clearly defined, and then the biblical, theological, and philosophical case for the soul is laid out. Anyone who suspects the soul has been dismissed without fair trial will be encouraged by Moreland's bold and timely defense.

—**ANGUS MENGINE**

President of the Evangelical Philosophical
Society (www.epsociety.org)