

# *Pathways to Philosophy*

## PROGRAM B: PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

### *Searching for the Soul: Unit One*

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#### **(a) philosophy and the soul**

1. A journalist once described an evening class the author was running as 'soul-searching for ordinary people'. That snappy title inspired a train of thought of which these pages are the result. What has philosophy got to do with the soul? What does one mean by 'the soul'? What, indeed, is philosophy? And, assuming that the philosophy has an idea of what it is searching for (if we allow the pun on the ordinary meaning of the term 'soul-searching'), how does it go about looking? To paraphrase a worry once expressed by Plato, how can you look for something if you don't already know what you are looking for? How will you know when you've found it? On the other hand - given that your search is a search for knowledge - if you do know what you are looking for then what's the point of conducting the inquiry in the first place?

2. What is philosophy? Consulting etymology, we find, rather disappointingly, that the word itself has little significant meaning. The term has the appearance of a label invented for political purposes, like 'social democrat'. The philosophers' party wished to be known as the lovers of knowledge or wisdom: if you were against them then you had to be an ignoramus or a philistine. But what did philosophers do? It was clearly a risky occupation, as Socrates discovered - at the cost of receiving a death sentence for alleged impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens. Socrates was not content to keep his philosophising within a small, select band of initiates. He went out into the market place and talked to anyone who was prepared to engage him in dialogue, or, rather, who was unlucky enough to

be caught off-guard. Worse still, his teaching appeared especially attractive to the younger members of Athenian society, a society where fear of criticism and change masqueraded as respect for tradition. The Athenian youth were only too happy to follow the argument wherever it led, and no doubt especially pleased when that meant questioning the teachings of their elders.

3. For Socrates, philosophy was primarily concerned with the nature of the self and the principles of right conduct. Even at such a very early stage in the history of philosophy, that had not always been the case. In Plato's dialogue *Phaedo*, Socrates, in prison awaiting the hemlock, discusses arguments for the immortality of the soul with his friends, and at one point describes how in his youth he was captivated by the speculations of his predecessors (now known as the 'pre-socratic' philosophers) about the ultimate nature of the universe and how it began. Then he came to realize that man himself, far from being just another of the multitude of things to be found in the world, was in fact the central problem, and the only reason for doing philosophy in the first place. The most important thing to know is to 'know thyself', and through that knowledge know how you should act.

4. I would agree with Socrates that the self is of central importance, but not entirely for his reasons. Questions of right conduct (or 'ethics') are central because the self is central, not the other way round. It is a happy outcome if one is able to derive rules of conduct from a philosophical theory of the self, but the theory is in no way invalidated if one cannot. What I do accept is that investigating the ultimate nature of the world inevitably leads us back to the self. I am now stating a result of philosophical inquiry, not an assumption (a claim we shall be testing in due course). Things might, for all one knew beforehand, have turned out completely differently. Indeed, according to the theory held by Socrates' great predecessor Parmenides, the self, far from not holding central place in an account of the nature of reality, is not even in the picture. Right up to the present day the question of the place of the self in a philosophical account of the nature of the universe remains controversial.

5. To say that philosophy is in some sense concerned with the nature of the world and the self, is to say very little. One does not need to be a philosopher to do geography or geophysics, nor to be a competent psychologist or medical practitioner. Adding the word 'ultimate' merely adds mystification.

If you dug a hole in the ground and kept going, ultimately you would reach a hot core of molten rock. For the physicist, the world is ultimately atoms, electrons, quarks. For Freud, if you explore the inner recesses of the self, what you reach ultimately are archaic instincts brutally repressed by the necessary process of civilization, a complex which we know as 'the personality'. All no doubt interesting stuff, but not as such philosophy. (The theories of an Einstein or a Freud are of course of great interest to philosophers. But then so are mathematics, literature, law, art, history, war, ecology and so on. Each of these, and many more, can have 'philosophy of...' tacked onto them, and get studied in university departments of philosophy. By contrast, and contrary to the impression one might get from watching TV chat shows, there is no such thing as a 'philosophy' of football or gardening: though there are undoubtedly persons who have strong views about how one should conduct these activities.)

6. We get a little closer to the object of our concern in talking of the *relation* between the self and the world, or between mind and reality. What is of central importance, most contemporary thinkers would agree, is the question of the *place* of the human subject. Disagreement arises as to how central that place is. To take two extreme cases, we shall come across a theory which says that the self in some sense *is* the world: all so-called inanimate objects, all living things, all individual conscious subjects are mere aspects of the 'universal mind'. The name given by Western philosophers to this theory, originally formulated in the Hindu *Upanishads* long before it appeared in the Western tradition, is 'absolute idealism'. The other view, which enjoys far greater popularity in the West – to the extent that many are not even aware that it is a philosophical theory – is materialism. Like absolute idealism, materialism says that everything is ultimately just one thing: in this case, the one thing is matter, or the objects of physics. The self is merely a brain in a body, and brains with bodies are just one example of the many different kinds of complex clumps of molecules to be found in the world.

7. I call these theories 'extreme'. That would be so even if it meant that the majority of persons in our society by this definition count as extremists. Of course, that in no way settles the question whether or not they are right. (It is a cheap debaters trick to represent one's own view as mediating between two so-called extremes.) A more telling point is that the two theories are in some

ways much closer than might at first appear. On reflection, there is not so much to choose between being told that all you are is a tiny fragment of the universal mind-stuff, and being told that all you are is an equally insignificant clump of matter. The consequence of either view is that the individual is absorbed into the whole: the sense of my separateness from the world is a mere illusion. – Considering the animosity that has traditionally characterized the debate between the two views, that is a surprising twist to the story. But then the history of philosophy has many surprising twists.

8. Soul searching implies the idea of looking deeply into oneself in order to discover one's true self. It can also mean the rigorous cross-examination of one's deeply held convictions. It would almost seem as if common usage implies the existence of two selves, the relatively exterior self that appears in everyday social interactions, and an interior self that is less accessible, but also less corrupted by the adjustments and compromises that are part and parcel of our everyday lives. The interior self or soul somehow represents more truly what we are 'in ourselves' than the merely constructed, exterior self. Again, in everyday usage, the notion of the soul seems to apply more to feeling than to thinking. Some jobs or environments are 'soul-less' or 'soul-destroying'. Certain individuals too appear to 'lack' a soul. According to a view popularised in science fiction, machines might one day be capable of conscious thought, but would never be able to feel or experience desires because one cannot manufacture a soul. – Hardly surprisingly, superficial views such as these quickly disintegrate when subjected to logical examination. (Just think what it would mean for a conscious machine such as popular thought imagines an intelligent computer might be to lack desires: if you ask the machine a question, why should it respond? Why, indeed, should it trouble itself to *do* anything at all?)

9. Another source of raw material for our inquiry is religious belief. The soul, not the brain, is said to be the seat of all the attributes of the self. The soul is given to the material individual, or brought into being, at the very moment of conception (according to some of those who object to abortion on religious grounds), and leaves the body at the moment of death, whereupon it then leads a disembodied existence until, according to Christian belief, the Day of Judgement and the 'resurrection of the body'. There is no question here of certain individuals lacking souls, or of some having 'more soul' than

others: there are only good and bad souls. The soul, quite simply, is the self. The body is merely its outer, visible, disposable garment. Again, if one begins to probe, logical difficulties appear. Whereabouts 'in' the body is the soul? What kind of motive power does it possess that enables it to 'leave' the body? How - and to what - does the soul first attach itself? How is the soul able to control the material body without exerting any physical force? Or, if it does exert force, how can such force emanate from something that is essentially non-physical? (We shall see that Descartes, who, more than any other thinker is responsible for laying out the logical framework for a philosophical theory of the soul, was able to meet some of these objections, not others, by denying that the soul has any spatial attributes, thereby rendering redundant the question of its location in space.)

10. If searching for the soul meant finding a theory which justified or underpinned the wide variety of beliefs commonly held about 'the soul', then clearly such an enterprise is doomed to failure from the start. What we are engaged in - as Descartes was engaged in - could at best be a project of reconstruction. (At worst, it might lead to the purging of all talk of the soul from a revised system of beliefs about our essential nature as conscious selves.) Is there then anything in reality that corresponds in any way to our notion of a soul? Where is the soul to be found? Or, if the answer is, 'Nowhere', then what, if anything, should philosophical thought put in its place?

11. The first thing we need to be clear about is the precise motive for our inquiry. Why should we care about 'reconstructing' the notion of the soul? The aim of reconstruction - whether it be of a building, a work of art, a social institution, or a concept - is primarily to conserve what is worth conserving, or what can viably be conserved of something, while clearing away corroded debris or unwanted accretions. Expressed in that general form, the project of reconstruction can involve a variety of motives. For example, different procedures would be applied to the conservation of an object whose primary value is seen to be its intrinsic quality as a work of art, and to an object whose primary value is seen to be that of an archaeological relic. (It might be the very same object.) The question of the motivation for our project therefore comes down to this. Given that many of our unreflective beliefs about the soul cannot be defended, or else cannot be rendered consistent with one

another, what is the abiding interest of the notion of the soul? Why should anyone think that there is anything worth reconstructing or conserving?

12. To illustrate that point, consider the following thought experiment. Friendly Martians arrive on Earth, and in the process of trying to translate the different languages of the globe are puzzled by a term that crops up again and again, represented in English by the word 'soul', in German by 'seele', in French by 'âme', and so on. One should note that our visiting Martians, although very advanced scientifically, have never developed nor felt the need to develop anything resembling religion or philosophy. Their language contains a term for the self or person, conceived as a living, flesh and blood individual, but no term whose usage corresponds in any way to the term 'soul', or its equivalents in other Earth languages. Rather than conclude that the human notion of a soul is merely mythical or imaginary, the Martians set out to explore the wide variety of human beliefs about the soul with the aim of giving the most charitable interpretation of those beliefs; one that makes us, in Martian eyes, appear the least irrational.

13. It is difficult to say how far the Martians would get in their investigation. For the one thing that would be lacking is any sense of the problems – philosophical or otherwise – to which the notion of a soul is a response. (Of course it is always possible, perhaps even likely, that in the process of their investigations, Martians would discover an interest in religion and philosophy. The assumption of our thought experiment, however, is that they do not.) Perhaps the more diligent Martians would eventually succeed in producing a primitive theory of 'the soul' as an object of interest and concern to human beings; a theory with some degree of internal coherence. But the ultimate source and motivation of human views of the soul would remain a mystery to them.

14. What is the point of these speculations? Simply to underline the fact that we are not in a position to investigate the soul if we ourselves, as philosophical investigators, do not feel gripped by the problems to which the notion of a soul is a response. Finding other individuals who are gripped by those problems does not, by itself, make the soul problematic enough. That is perhaps putting things rather too crudely. The philosopher who thinks of herself as having got rid, through long practice, of the temptation to succumb

to illusions concerning the soul would reject the suggestion that as a result of such efforts she has merely succeeded in increasing her ignorance! Yet in a way that is just what one has done. Our philosophical goal is surely not to emulate the Martians by simply desensitising ourselves to certain philosophical problems (perhaps there is a certain drug that does the trick). What matters is surely the route one has taken to enlightenment. If one no longer feels the temptation to believe certain things about 'the soul', that state of mind has value for the philosopher precisely because one is still capable of remembering what it was like to be tempted.

### **(b) sources of belief in the soul**

15. Let us now investigate some of these temptations. Many persons, when pressed, will assert that they know, with absolute certainty, that there is more to their existence than a clump of matter, even so highly organised a clump of matter as the human body, with its brain and nervous system. Mere physical stuff, they feel, however complex its form, would simply have nothing *inside*. It is surely a plain fact open to any person's introspection that one does indeed have something inside. Cut open a brain, and all you find is grey stuff. However deeply you probe, all you come across is more of the same. The deepest recesses of a person's brain still lie on the *outside*. Yet laid out before me now is the colourful, noisy, soft, prickly, odorous world of my conscious experience. Treasures such as these remain locked away from the probings of the tiniest scalpel or the most powerful microscope. If they belonged to the brain then surely there would be a way to bring them open to common view. But if they do not belong to the brain, then there must be something else to which they do belong. And that something we call the soul.

16. We are still a long way from assembling the materials that will enable us to directly challenge this commonly held view of the nature of subjectivity. It is perhaps hard for the reader to imagine how it could be challenged. But let us content ourselves for now with considering some relatively trivial but still awkward questions. One speaks of consciousness being 'inside'. Where inside is it? Does the world of my conscious experience have a certain size and shape that enables it to fit inside a certain part of my body? My head perhaps? It is hard to see how that could be so, for the head seems pretty small in relation to the world of my experience. Must I conclude, then, that my conscious world is smaller than it appears? How much smaller? But why must consciousness be located in the head, anyway? The head is where the brain is, and we have been told by researchers in neurology that the brain plays a major role in the production of consciousness. But not everyone knows that. Aristotle, one of the keenest minds who ever lived, believed, for reasons that made good sense at the then current state of knowledge, that the brain was merely a cooling system for the blood. ('You lose most heat from your hands and feet,' my mother used to say.) Following Greek tradition, Aristotle thought that the heart was the organ that we think and feel with. Another reason why we think of consciousness being in the head is simply that that's where our eyes are. It follows that if our eyes were in our elbows, then that is where we would conceive our conscious selves to be. – What one finds when one begins to probe is a tangle of metaphors and pictures, that are not nearly as self-evident as appeared at first sight.

17. Another place where the temptation to appeal to the metaphor of a soul appears is in relation to the question of the identities of persons over time. The drunk lying under the bridge at the Embankment Underground Station in London was once a captain of industry. If you looked closely you might just spot the hint of a resemblance between his ruddy, grizzled features and the photograph of a certain Richard Bull in the July 1967 issue of *Management Today*. What makes these two individuals, the one existing in 1967 and the one existing in 1995, one and the same? 'Dirty Dickey' swears that he has been a drunk all his life. Every recollection of his former existence has been blacked out, the slate of conscious memory wiped clean. A recording angel, however, following the movements of Richard Bull over the intervening years, and his long decline through a failed marriage, alcoholism, and finally destitution, would be able to testify that the living body wrapped in rags is



undoubtedly the same living body that once lounged behind a large, leather-topped desk. Yet we feel there must be more to the identity of Richard Bull than that tenuous fact. Some spark of an indestructible self hidden deep inside this rotting hulk of a body is the spark that once faced the camera lens back in 1967, and this spark we name 'the soul'.

18. Here we should note that there is already a glaring contradiction between the two pictures of the soul, as the seat of conscious experience and as the seat of the indestructible self. First we posited a soul to explain the presence of conscious experience 'inside' the self; now we are positing the soul in order to account for its absence! (In fact, the two notions correspond the very different conceptions of the soul as it appears in Western religious thought, and the Hindu notion of the *atman*, which can undergo indefinitely many incarnations.) If we look more closely at the idea of a 'spark of the self', however, we find that far from being a self-evident fact as the existence of consciousness inside the head was meant to be, it is merely a theory, a hypothesis – albeit one which we feel somehow to be necessary. No-one has ever seen, touched, tasted or smelled the spark of consciousness: it is to all intents and purposes completely invisible in every way. So why believe in it then? The indubitable fact of the matter is that we feel the standing temptation to believe in it, and it is that temptation which is the concern of the philosopher.

19. The third source of temptation arises for each person when they first become aware that they are going to die. In popular consciousness, death is acknowledged as something to be feared. Yet death itself, as opposed to the manner of one's dying, is a completely different kind of event from events that happen to one in one's life. It is the absolute closing off of possibilities of experience or action. It is harder than it might first seem to explain exactly why that is something that ought to inspire fear. Blindness, for example, would be the closing off of certain possibilities of experience. Imprisonment would be the closing off of certain possibilities of action. Extending those cases by analogy, one thinks of death as a the ultimate form of confinement, where the self, cut off from all experience, all action, (including thought) shrinks to nothing. That is, of course, just a picture. As soon as it is spelled out, one realizes that, while death deprives us of continued life and all the possibilities that might bring, it is not a deprivation that we *suffer* or that

happens to us when we die. Yet stubbornly, the feeling persists in some persons that somehow one cannot cease to exist. There can never be a time, one feels, when there will no longer be *this*, or *my* world.

20. If I cannot die, and if my body will undoubtedly at some point cease to be alive, then it follows logically that I am not identical with my living body. The something that I am essentially is a soul. Let us not question the first premiss, but concentrate on the conclusion. What is a soul apart from a living body? Why can't souls die? We have already encountered the materials for constructing two possible answers to the first question. In the Western tradition, the soul is conceived as an invisible or ghostly container of all one's experiences and memories. It is an 'inside' without any 'outside': nothing would count as perceiving or encountering a soul apart from a body. (Let us leave aside for now the question how God perceives souls or their contents.) The reason why the soul is incapable of dying would therefore appear to be this. Only material or stuff can be destroyed, because destruction involves the doing of something to an object, which, in turn, implies that the object exists to be perceived or encountered. Equally, one might argue that in the process of destruction, parts of an object are separated, or their disposition altered in a way that prevents that object from continuing to function as an object of that kind. But the only 'separation' or 'alteration' that can happen to the contents of a soul implies the continued integrity of the container. Either way, then, the soul cannot be destroyed, and if it cannot be destroyed then it cannot cease to be.

21. Yet in spite of that argument, we have already described a way for the *this* of my conscious experience to cease to be: simply take away permanently all perception, all action, all thought. One need not enquire by what process those things might be taken away. Let it not be by any 'process', let it just happen. It can happen all at once, or a bit at a time. Now, as is well known, a body to which those deprivations occur can, sadly, continue to live. In the absence of a living body, however, the state of total and permanent deprivation of all feeling and thought *is* death. The only alternative, then, is to conceive of the soul as a contentless *atman*. When deprived of all thought and feeling, the soul does not disappear but rather reduces to an extensionless kernel of the self, what we called the inextinguishable 'spark' of subjectivity. The difficulty now is recognizing that state as anything one would

acknowledge as survival. In what sense will my reincarnation be *mine*, if all that survives of me after the death of my present body is something without experience, thought, or, crucially, memory?

22. We have by no means exhausted the sources of belief in the soul. What we have done is reviewed those which seem to have, directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, the most significant impact on everyday, beliefs. One may call these beliefs pre-philosophical, for there need be no awareness on the part of persons who hold those beliefs of the impact of the inchoate, partially inconsistent reasonings that we have described as the ultimate grounds for those beliefs. Now comes the gradual process of philosophical refinement. Whether the notion of a soul will survive that process, or whether we would wish to describe whatever does survive that process as a 'soul' it is too early to say.