

Question 2—An imaginary dialogue between a scientist, a priest and a philosopher concerning the nature and existence of the soul to illustrate what is characteristic about the approach of philosophy.

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Scientist (S); priest (P); philosopher (Ph) are discussing the nature and existence of the soul, and the dialogue is started by the scientist.

S. There is often talk of the soul, but it is an abstract concept. There may be such a thing as a soul but where would it reside? It cannot be seen, or located within the human body and, therefore it cannot consist of matter, as according to the laws on the conservation on energy and matter, everything must have substance. Perhaps there is no soul as an entity that can of itself be measured, but is a part of the mind, the brain. And perhaps in the brain it is contained within the memory.

P. If that were the case then the soul would then not exist outside of the physical body, and then could not be resurrected. For those that are religious, as indeed many of the early philosophers were, there is the Day of Judgement. If a man has led a good life, his soul goes to the hereafter. Some religions also believe in reincarnation, some believe that the soul is maintained in a state of peace until judgement. Rene Descartes is well known to have been religious and has written extensively on this mind body problem. The soul is regarded as eternal and is not extinguished on death as some people believed at the time Descartes wrote his Meditations on First Philosophy.

S. The problem with the religious angle is that, as you rightly say, many philosophers were religious, and many held clerical positions, e.g. George Berkeley. That being the case, from a scientific perspective then is there not a problem with objectivity? Descartes wrote the meditations that you mention during his retirement and at the time of Pope Leo X, who, by Descartes own hand wrote, in the Letter of Dedication, paragraph three that the Lateran Council, headed by Pope Leo X, condemned the view expressed by some that the soul perished on death, and Descartes wrote the meditations to establish the truth. So, the preferred outcome would be one that supported the Lateran Council view. His writings then must be regarded with this knowledge to hand.

Ph. If you were to read the paper in full he does go on to justify his assertions and arguments. All the same, he was a religious man and to go against an established faith, at that time, could be dangerous. However, he does put forward a good case for the soul to be eternal. I think that generally, for a lot of people it is hard to come to terms with the idea that once our physical self is extinguished, no longer living, all our thoughts and dreams, aspirations and memories come to an end. The word 'soul' is very emotive and difficult to regard objectively. There are so many expressions in everyday use that use the word souls, as in soul searching, soul destroying, and even the maritime SOS save our souls comes to mind. Somehow the term soul means much more than life. Perhaps that is what we should discuss, this abstract notion of a soul which is in us, and contains our feelings, thoughts and memories.

P. It is often the case that the soul is the life, the individuality of that person. We often use terms like 'God rest his soul' in prayer. It cannot be that life is just living, eating, sleeping. What drives us to be good, do the right thing, care for one another? We must have a mind

to do these things. If we had no soul, we would be just a functioning machine.

S. But where does this soul reside? Perhaps all of what we do, and what we are, is a result of 'survival of the fittest', and an evolutionary process, our conatus. And when our time comes our memories, feelings, joys etc. go with our physical being.

Ph. Yes, that outlook does seem a bit grim, and can make our lives meaningless, and cause existential angst, which is something Kierkegaard and Sartre thought about. This is a question that philosophers have pondered since the beginning of time. But the idea of a soul is generally that it is eternal.

P. Just as Descartes postulates in his meditations. We have a free will and that is why we are not perfect, to err is human. There is only one perfect being. The further away we are from him, the more we are prone to having false ideas and beliefs.

Ph. But the existence of a mind and soul must be proven. The word 'soul' is emotive. Like many philosophers I have an interest in science fiction, as we believe many philosophical and ethical issues are at play in them, and the notion of other worlds is always a matter of lively debate. Just the other day I watched a sci-fi programme called Battlestar Galactica, where a fleet of spaceships are trying to evade cylons, machines that were once enslaved by man, but then suddenly these machines became autonomous and attained free will. Anyhow, every time the cylons discovered this fleet they would do an FTL jump (faster than light) and on one occasion a ship of the fleet was lost in the process. The communications officer reported that there were four hundred and fifty-three souls lost, (not lives). And this is repeated throughout the series. Probably done for effect but there is no doubt that losing a soul seems to mean more; it conjures up a person, a living thing with hopes, dreams, feelings, and yearnings as stated before.

The cylons are now trying to move from being a functioning machine-human hybrid to being more human, with minds and souls, so they can experience emotions, torture in a way—like failed aspirations, failed relations, but also hope, satisfaction, love etc. Again, these are all abstract but powerful feelings.

S. If we did not have these feelings we would be just like the many machines I work with, very clever but emotionless. Which is interesting—if a machine were to develop free thought and action, it may not bother to do much, perhaps nothing at all? Often sci-fi depicts these machines as avenging beings fed up with being and doing at our behest. But unless these machines had a mind why would they care? About anything?

P. The surely that is where the mind and soul come in. Without an end goal, a faith, a conscience, some reason for being then they may suffer from existential angst and wonder why they want to become human, it can be very painful at times!

Ph. Interestingly that is one of the story lines of this sci-fi series; the cylons having nearly extinguished the human race now think that they have made an error and, later in the series, now want to become more human and believe that what they are doing is God's will. It is ironic that they now want to become that which they formerly despised. And of course, the whole process could start over again.

S. We still need to know where the soul is residing, in the mind? And what is a 'mind' anyhow and how do we prove it, locate its existence, if it has one? And does it contain this 'soul'?

Ph. That is the very question that Descartes attempts to resolve, though I am not sure it is with much success. He postulated that he must have a mind, and it is his senses that spur his mind to action, and it is the soul, and will, that drive these things, as provided by God. Otherwise he would just be a collection of gears, just like a clock, and what we would call a 'zombie'. He would just be following the actions of a clever programmer so that to all intents and purposes he is a human. Descartes comments that when he looks out of his window and sees people moving along in the streets below, dressed in their coats and hoods, he supposes that they are people just like himself but how does he know that under those coats, hats and hoods they are not just a collection of wheels and pistons? He would regard this as a devious act, and that God does not purposely deceive. But then how do I know that you are not zombies? I cannot know that you see what I see. And how are you going to prove that you are not zombies?

S. Time to be sensible now. There is no mind body problem, we are all here, we exist. We have brains, minds and with it all a soul. We are selfish genes, we procreate and survive, like all other beings on this Earth.

P. But who gives the gift of life?

Ph. To prove that there is a mind and an eternal soul in us we would need to prove that it exists outside the body. And what would it be encased in? It would need a mass of some kind that housed all the properties of our mind. However, like all debate there is no clear cut easily definable answer, there may be no answer but exploring and debating these things at least expands and open our minds. The more we learn the better equipped we are to move on from Plato's Cave which we can discuss at another time.