



WHAT IS THE SOUL?

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Does death have meaning?

This may seem an inane or even a pointless question. And yet, an understanding of death determines how humans live. Consider the fact that mankind has come up with only two answers for death.

First, that death has great meaning, because it is the transition to an eternal, extra-corporeal, or spiritual realm. The quality of this everlasting existence is determined by moral choices made by individuals during life on earth. In other words, the life of the soul depends upon morality.

This also means that the role and purpose of civilization becomes twofold: To look after the body and to care for the soul - to ensure that its citizens not only enjoy a happy earthly life but also have the assurance of a happy eternal existence.

humans are innately moral creatures

Civilization has a higher calling than simply managing modes of production, for it also needs to transition into its own eternal form by way of its earthly citizens. Civilization must concern itself with the Kingdom of God.

The second answer, which is more recent, maintains that death is final; there is nothing that comes after. Thus, there is no soul, and death is really meaningless, since it is the final end of life.

This answer dismantles the need for a morality attuned to eternity – and makes civilization into nothing more than civic space where individuals consume and produce, and thus no value is higher than this consumption.

Life is simply the pursuit of individualized pleasure; and the point of civilization is to set up structures that enable the satisfaction of sensual urges and desires.

The contemporary world is struggling with both these answers to the question of the soul.

Those that belong to the second camp justify themselves by asserting that humanity has matured into soullessness - to worry about the soul is to be childish, superstitious, and therefore regressive. Those that worry about the soul are deemed mythologizers whose day has long vanished.

to live the life of the mind, to use reason, by necessity means acknowledging the soul

Those that cultivate the soul, in turn, have history on their side, because mankind has always shown itself at its most refined and the most generous when the soul is not forgotten.

Indeed, [where would the West be](#) if it did not worry about the soul throughout its history?

But what is the soul?

The English word "soul" is an ancient one, descending from the Proto-Germanic, **saiwalo*, which reaches far back into the Bronze Age. Its Indo-European cousins are the Greek *aiolos* and the Russian, *sila*.

During [Indo-European antiquity](#), "soul" likely meant, "speedy," or "energetic" - that is, the quickening energy of the body. There is no connection between the "soul" and the "sea," despite [popular etymologies](#).

It was the Greeks who first clarified and identified the immortal part of the human body.

Earlier ancient civilizations (Mesopotamian and Egyptian) also delved into notions of life after death, but their concepts did not gain currency beyond their own particular cultures, because they could not clarify the nature of the soul.

The Greeks however created explanations and ideas that would persist through space and time and thus become universal.

The two terms that they used for the soul were *psyche* and *pneuma*. The former gained greater currency (via psych-ology), but the latter actually defined the soul itself.

the contemporary world is struggling with... the question of the soul

The *psyche* is emotions, understanding and sensibility. Humans, as well as animals, possess *psyche*, which is also known as the animal-soul. The *psyche* animates the carnal body and, since it is not immortal, it dies and disappears at the time of death.

The *pneuma*, on the other hand, is the mind, which is a complex unity of the conscience, reason, and will. Only humans possess the *pneuma*, or the rational soul, which is immortal, and which therefore continues existence into eternity.

The *pneuma* is also understood as being the resurrected spirit-body in Christianity, which is not fleshly, but is governed by the Holy Spirit (the *Pneuma Hagion*), through which it unites with God into eternity.

[Christianity collapses](#) the two Greek terms (*psyche* and *pneuma*) into one - *psyche*, which now comes to carry the meaning of the [rational-soul](#).

Thus, true to its Indo-European root, the soul carries still a quickening energy, for it determines not only

the quality of an individual's life, but also the very character of civilization itself.

Further, the soul broaches two deeper questions – how shall we live and what must we do? Is an animal existence enough for human beings?

But to live the life of the mind, to use reason, by necessity means acknowledging the soul.

In the words of Thomas Aquinas: "The human being abounds in diverse types of potential: namely because humanity is on the frontier between spiritual and corporeal creatures, and thus the powers of each are joined in it."

Civilization has a higher calling than simply managing modes of production

But what is meant by the soul, whose presence or absence delimits how humans live?

The earliest civilizations, Mesopotamian and Egyptian, recorded the first understandings of the meaning of death – that it is a process whereby mankind transitions into its eternal abode, whether among the stars or in the netherworld.

In these early civilizations, both the body and its inherent life-force (the soul) shared in immortality. This explains the grave-goods that were left with the departed.

Eternity and humanity were forever linked, which then justified the importance of morality (the me-s among the Sumerians; the ma'at for the Egyptians), which in turn was established by the gods for the structuring and maintenance of human civilization.

Thus, to live was to practice and follow divine laws. The breaking of such laws had immediate social as well as eternal consequences.

a complex unity of the conscience, reason, and will

It would be easy to say that the first answer affirming the soul is hopeful, while the second one denying the soul is bleak. But that would be misguided.

Rather, what we have are two answers that express the same reality (a hendiadys). In other words, both the denial and affirmation of the soul are really two sides of the same coin.

What coin is that? The coin of faith, or belief. Both answers are, of course, valid because both are expressions of human faith, either in the material or in the spiritual. Is life even possible without belief? Even the denial of belief is belief.

But the results of both beliefs are the important thing. The denial of the soul leads to a grim immediacy, where appetitive satiation is the only goal of life, encapsulated by the fatuous maxim, "Live each day to the fullest." In other words, self-indulgence is the sole reason for being alive.

To say that each human body houses a soul leads humanity elsewhere - towards morality, for life is not about fulfilment, but about pursuing the truth and, through actions and ideas, adding to the goodness of the world, even if doing so harms or even kills the body.

As stated already, belief in something that survives death has always been part of the human condition until recently, when an unthinking sort of atheism took hold.

Thus it is not surprising that humanity has always cared to construct some version of morality because it lends stability to society and builds civilization, and because it determines how we are to live and what we are to do.

Does the denial of the soul benefit humanity? No, because humans are innately moral creatures, and when they are asked to live without morality, they veer into existential absurdity - in other words, a soulless life of relentless satiation, as embodied by the so-called celebrities of this age.

What, then, is the soul? It is the very essence of what it means to be a human being - in this world and the next. The soul is the summary of that we are and shall be. How shall we want to be summarized? That is the real question of what it means to be a human being.

The photo shows, "The Empty Tomb," painted in 1889, by Mikhail Nesterov.

