

MUST SOULS BE IMMORTAL?
THE GAIA HYPOTHESIS AND SCIENTIFIC SOULS

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Jacques Maritain's concept of the soul is complex. A soul is ontologically independent; it is spiritual, and not an a priori presupposition. In *The Range of Reason*,¹ Maritain identifies the human soul in several ways: as a power, the principle of life of the human body, or the form of the body; as a spirit able to exist "intrinsically independent of matter" (RR, 58), as the root of all spiritual and intellectual activity as well as living activities. Living forms, other than humans, have souls or the power of life in them, but these souls cannot exist independently of matter or of material bodies. The human soul is a spiritual soul, able to exist independently of bodies, thereby being superior to them, and it is able to have "other powers and activities which are organic and material" (RR, 58) relating to the union between body and soul.

In substantiating his claims about the existence of the soul, Maritain relies on several capacities of the intellect: 1) to have knowledge, 2) to engage in self-reflection, 3) to make free choices (thereby rising above "universal determinism" [RR, 59]), 4) to experience conscious doubt and guilt, 5) to make moral commitments to what we know is good. These facts are rooted in intelligence and in our sense of timeless existence to which we have access through intellectual reflections. Maritain acknowledges that the intellect uses the brain, but claims that intellectual power is not dependent on an organ of the body; it is purely spiritual, deriving its power from another spiritual source, Prime Cause, or "subsisting principle" (RR, 56) from which the power proceeds. This Prime

¹Jacques Maritain, *The Range of Reason*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952. (Hereafter RR).

Cause is the substantial root and is immaterial, as is the intellect. Maritain avoids a dualistic nature for man by referring to man as a single essence with a compound nature – the intellect is the form of our human body. To be a human being is to be aware of one's spiritual form as intellect, its powers and capacities born out in physical acts (that are freely chosen). It is also to be aware of one's intellectual repositories of knowledge.

One may ask why Maritain's human souls require an independent existence, or immaterial substantiality? Why don't they simply exist in their compound human forms and then cease to exist when that human form ceases to exist? Maritain claims that our desire for immortality – our desire to live beyond our finite lives – has produced the theory that our deeds, our actions, our contributions to knowledge live on in memories, records and historical documentaries of succeeding generations. But he isn't satisfied with that position. For there are many human lives that remain unrecorded; there are sad lives remembered by no one. Immortality should not be thought of as the privilege of a select few.

Maritain wants philosophic proof (logically coherent with universal application) to ensure that all finite material human lives will have a future immaterial infinite existence. Although he argues in the tradition of Aristotle and Aquinas, one can use the tradition of Plato to capture Maritain's position. Plato, throughout the *Republic*, created examples to establish his logical points. Things, he argued, cannot sustain logical contradictions. A man cannot be moving and standing still at the same time. Something (mind) must explain the illusions of the senses. One can extrapolate and suggest the following as an interpretation of Maritain's position. Material things cannot continue to exist and cease to exist. If we appear to have both finite (material) lives, and infinite (spiritual) lives, then there must be a way of resolving the contradiction. As beings with compound natures, not dualistic ones, (Maritain's terms) we cannot be finite and infinite simultaneously. Our spiritual nature must appear through finite forms but actually exists in an independent infinite form. But Plato would have gone on to point out that the knowledge of our finite material lives can be established and used in theoretical ways; we can build disciplines of knowledge about our finite lives and institutions to further that understanding. (See Plato's *Republic* Books 4 and 5). If our intellects or souls do survive our bodily death we can only know that by their reincarnation in some way. The theory of reincarnation gives credence to the possibility of infinite souls. Plato attributed infinite, timeless, existential status to perfect ideas, or forms. Perfect ideas mattered, not mere humans as such. These Platonic ideas mattered so much that Aristotle was not content to leave them in a possible world, theoretically

accessible through disciplined study. He tethered them in the material world and in the repositories of knowledge. The immortality of knowledge would help us ward off fear of death.

Maritain's immortal souls have logically coherent properties which only human intellects have the power to appreciate. They are immaterial therefore incorruptible, unified therefore unable to be fragmented in destructive ways, self-subsistent and as such the source of their own energies. They exist in perpetuity. Maritain's souls are logically coherent, but they require a leap of faith and an act of belief. It is clear that Maritain thinks the immortality of souls has been established despite the need for an act of belief.

One can raise doubts about Maritain's assuredness for the following reasons: 1) Immaterial 'ideas' can deteriorate in their relevance, value and purpose; some ideas we would well be rid of. They can also be used harmfully. The promises of eternal salvation for the immortal soul have resulted in mass suicides in Jonestown, devastating fires in Waco, suicide bombers in the Middle East. Slavery, women as commodities, white supremacy are ideas that have been or should be coaxed towards deterioration. 2) A unity that cannot be divided is from one perspective a hypothetical idea, from another a mathematical/logical concept. The concept of infinite regress mitigates against such absolute conceptions. The dialectic of affirmation and negation, of one and zero, or one and infinity are conjoined ideas, the conjunction of which makes function and change possible. The idea of an indivisible whole may be appealing, but it is only meaningful in relation to the corresponding idea of a multiplicity of related ideas that evolve as the world we know changes. Unities beyond mathematical ones require human will to sustain them as concepts. If the soul is a unity, how can it sustain knowledge which can change as well? 3) As for the infinite existence of a soul beyond our consciousness awareness, it isn't clear what we can know about such a state. We can develop numerous conceptions, and a conception is an object of knowledge, but does it follow that objects of knowledge exist infinitely? One can conceive of the mortality of a soul in the same way as one can conceive of the mortality of a body. Some knowledge claims undergo constant revision as new conceptions and theories replace old ones. While logical coherence can offer wildly inspiring visions, it is not the measure of ontological claims. We can conceive of many logically coherent ideas, the material existence of which can become contradictory in other ways. Consider the following examples: Dumbo the Elephant, with ears that worked like wings; a cloud with so much soot from pollution that flowers grow and a floating eco-system develops. Neither of these ideas is logically incoherent or oxymoronic, yet both remain as fantasy because gravity, atmospheric

temperatures, air pressure and other material facts render them ontologically incoherent with the world in which we live.

Maritain doesn't deny the need to extend philosophical thought. He fully acknowledges the need for religious thought. The metaphors used to describe souls with grace – the shining abyss, the all pervading revelatory light of the sun, the blessedness – are poetic and appealing, but, for the skeptic, such metaphors are largely uninformative. They are also worrisome, for the 'light' not only reveals the good one's intellect submits for illumination, but the "warped and evil becomes a torment for it under the effect of the very same light" (RR, 63). For souls less fortunate, perhaps death might be a better option. Whether or not these projections for the immortal soul with religious grace are meaningful, Maritain's generosity of spirit to the souls of skeptics, infidels, and other such folk, is worth noting. For he asks the question: "What would be the life and happiness of souls if their state after death were a purely natural state?" (RR, 63) His willingness to include as immortal the souls of those who die naturally (not in a state of grace) is born, one might suggest, not from an established philosophical truth, but from an act of generosity, and that generosity has left the door open for alternate views on the soul and its supposed immortality. We discover that these natural souls can expect a "supreme good" consisting in "wisdom, untrammelled spiritual life, mutual friendship." They will advance constantly "in their natural knowledge and love of God, Whom they would, however, never see face to face. It would be happiness in motion, never absolutely fulfilled".² Frankly this doesn't sound too bad. One's soul could be spared the all pervasive revelatory light, and one would seem able to share the happiness in motion with friends and to continue to seek knowledge of God, even if one is dubious about the point of the pursuit. This has the interesting tones of a spiritual world informed by cooperation, mutual aid, (not just an individual soul baring all in the spotlight) and a continuous quest for understanding. Yet surely all of these conditions identify life and the forces which propel us to continue to live *here* in the finite world. This is how we think of the animate human being, not as just a speculative imaginative consciousness, but as a capable, acting, often magnanimous creature.

If all of these positive ends can be anticipated by the soul of whomever dies in a natural state, might that tempt a soul-body to find less noble pursuits to animate the self, out of sheer laziness, lack of focus, or indifference? If we are

² Peter Bunyard, Edward Goldsmith, eds., *GAIA, The Thesis, the Mechanisms and the Implications*, Wadebridge: Wadebridge Ecological Centre, 1988, pp. 1-34 (Hereafter, GTMI).

spiritual beings, capable of developing and sharing knowledge, cooperative efforts and love, why not promote heartily that vision of spirituality in our finite lives and not worry about our possible infinite ones?

Promoting spirituality as a fact of the compound nature of human beings, indeed all living beings, is surely an agenda that we can all recognize as important. Maritain is skeptical of idealist and panpsychist metaphysics but the belief that life here on earth is infused with a spirituality has a long and distinguished history. Pre-Socratic Heraclitus supported natural order in our lives. Our lives improved as we learned more about the order of the natural world. If proof for the immortality of souls requires a spiritual metaphysics, then anchoring spirituality in the finite material world requires material proof in order to ensure that this compound of ideas, a compound of materiality and spiritual form, is not incongruous.

Maritain used intelligence – a capacity that is not subject to the laws of material nature – as evidence of our spirituality. Material evidence of finite spirituality might require that we conceive of the whole planet as spiritual. If we could do this, if we could make the case that the quality of finite lives is not just a matter of human choice about our activities on earth, but is also subject to all of the active systems and inactive phenomena around us, then we might come to regard ourselves as a part of a whole, not as a separate whole observing various parts. We have the intellectual capacity to actually grasp this possibility. The knowledge that could be derived from acting in accordance with this premise – that the world is a spiritual whole and our place in it is assured through cooperation, love, mutual exchanges and support systems, though our place is not guaranteed – would be meaningful, not logically contradictory, and quite possibly beneficial to our lives. And if the world, this whole spiritual living being, suffers some festering boil as the human race may turn out to be, the world may become poisoned and slowly die (perhaps a premature death), or it may suffer a rupture letting the poison drain away, and continue its finite existence as an extraordinary phenomena in a little understood universe. One can argue that we participate in the spirituality of the world as a part of the whole, but our place is not guaranteed. In as much as other species become extinct, so can human beings. There are those who support this rather humbling view of our world and the search for ‘hard data’ to make the case is at least two hundred years old. A paper by Jacques Grimwald, “Sketch for a History of the Idea of the Biosphere,”³ offers such an overview. James Hutton (1726-1797) a Scottish physician, farmer, philosopher, conceived of the world as a macrocosm, or living

³ In *Gaia, The Thesis, the Mechanisms and the Implications*, pp. 1-32.

organism. Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829) promoted the study of the earth and its geological compositions as basically a biological study. The non-living world needed to be understood as related to living things and visa versa. A symbiosis of survival was basically a synthesis of the dialectical relation between the living and the non-living world. Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), Eduard Suess (1831-1914), Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) promoted the holistic notion of a living biosphere. Many of these early theorists remained anthropocentric in their views, placing man at the centre of the living earth and the key determinant of its nature, not necessarily a product of its nature. Vladimir Vernadsky, a Russian scientist (1863-1945) was advocating the united character of all of nature's activities until the 1930's when political winds began to silence theories that were troublesome to future visions of the Russian state. The other well-known contributor to theories that supported mutual interdependence at least among members of living species and their dependency on the world was Peter Kropotkin, the Russian anarchist, whose books about mutual aid are still in print.⁴ One wonders why Kropotkin's theories are not taught in conjunction with Darwin's.

Recently, the most publicized version of the living earth concept, (substantiated by vast amounts of research, scientific data, conferences and research institutes) has been articulated by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis, as the Gaia Hypothesis – the conception of which was sketched almost a half a century ago by Vernadsky. Gaia refers to “Earth Mother” an ancient Greek goddess. Its basic tenet is that the earth as a whole is a self-regulating living entity. If we accept the hypothesis “that the atmosphere is an extension of the biosphere, and that we (human beings) are a part of this living whole it follows that our conception of the world as we know it is not anthropocentric, but biocentric”.⁵ Lovelock gives little clue as to the existence of any intrinsic moral component of the living earth. He is not proposing Gaia as a spiritual entity that is in the world directing its self-regulating activities. He refers to his conception of Gaia as “a metaphor of science”.⁶ What saves us from determinism that would absolve us from the responsibility for all that we do? What saves us, largely, is the fact that we can choose to interpret the world through a metaphor. Perhaps morality should be thought of as an artifice of the human species, perhaps an

⁴ Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid*, New York: New York University Press, 1972.

⁵ Jacques Grinevald, “A History of the Idea of the Biosphere,” in *Gaia, The Thesis, the Mechanisms and the Implications*, p. 23.

⁶ Jim Lovelock, “The Gaia Hypothesis,” in *Gaia, The Thesis, the Mechanisms and the Implications*, p. 47.

environmental adaptation, in the way that birds and animals developed camouflage strategies to deter predators. The idea of morality as an artificial construct of survival is not in the least fanciful, having been offered by David Hume with his theory of justice as an artificial concept, and Thomas Hobbes with his theory of the social contract.

Metaphor is not new to science. Mechanism, as a kind of explanation, is also a metaphor, one which implies a maker. A self-regulating living entity is, of course, a threat to the more established view that the world had a maker.⁷ Gaia, as a living entity, thus far, has managed to stay alive, exhibiting durable homeostatic properties.⁸ Yet Lovelock acknowledges the system also maintains “internal chaotic instabilities. These pockets of chaos in the larger stable Gaian system serve to probe the boundaries set by the physical constraints to life”.⁹ Self regulation is a dialectical affair; opportunism in life is not determined by natural law. Neither is the metaphor of Gaia a cloak for teleology. “True knowledge can never be gained by attributing ‘purpose’ to phenomena”.¹⁰ And yet if we accept the earth as a living system, does it follow that life as such can generate the souls supported by another ontological perspective? The description of a system encompassing both chaos and order, self-regulating or self-determined and thereby autonomous, serving no purpose other than to exist is one that is meaningful in both a spiritual and material context. For what is a spirit without a body to give it a narrative, a narrative the believer carries into immortality? And what is life other than the material manifestation of a system that creates its own stories for consciousness? This does not mean that only language bearers generate narratives for souls. The lives of chipmunks and all their failures and successes are surely examples of the spiritual vitality of the living world, a vitality informed by chipmunk joy and sorrow, however short those lives may be. The more we learn about living species the more we discover that species’ lives are structured by choices and preferences, not just natural laws.¹¹ For the more evidently conscious species, and indeed the rare self-

⁷ David Abram, “The Mechanic and the Organic: Epistemological Consequences of the Gaia Hypothesis,” in *Gaia, The Thesis, the Mechanisms and the Implications*, pp. 119-132.

⁸ James Lovelock, *The Ages of Gaia*, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1988, p. 19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 214-15.

¹¹ I once raised an injured baby blue jay and discovered that when the bird was given three dishes of baby food (beef, chicken, turkey) simultaneously, the beef was the preferred choice. The little bird never became friendly and, with health, (plus hearing the other birds around) sought release vigorously, which was quickly given.

conscious species, the phenomenon of life is the phenomenon of a free disembodied spirit in another ontological cloak.

Yet one question remains, the question of the immortality of the soul of the world, infused as that soul may be in all its interrelated parts. The odds are not good. The weight of scientific evidence indicates that the living planet in the solar system has a finite lifespan. The bodies that Maritain's spirits inhabit, especially those with intelligence, will probably die out first. If Lovelock is right, Gaia, sick as she is becoming, will survive her worst disease – people – but not infinitely. We are losing thousands of life forms daily in terms of plants and animals.¹² In time, the much more barren earth will not support people. If Maritain is right, souls either blessed or natural will live on as immortal. If Lovelock is right no new life forms will be generated to house souls. We can adopt a belief and ignore the knowledge of science, or we can contemplate the fact that if God created souls, He created a finite number of them. What purpose their supposed immortality could serve is not clear.

Life is a spiritual but finite system replete with what one might call scientific souls, born out of the complex systems of animate and inanimate systems, and without purpose beyond their continued existence for as long as conditions support life. To be without purpose does not mean that purposes, beyond survival, cannot be developed, chosen and pursued. Indeed the capacity to do so differentiates the human species most definitively from all other species. Developing self-serving survivalist tactics gives us no special status in the life span stakes and might very well shorten the time we have. For we cannot rise above our participatory status in the living whole. According to Lovelock and others, if we think we can, we may attempt to do so at our peril, and the peril of symbiotic systems of which we have only partial and imperfect knowledge. To be part of this living spiritual whole and to be aware of its beauty, its fragility, and its ultimate finitude, can inspire a reverence and a fierce desire to protect and care for it as long as possible, in as much as the human race, a meagre but potentially lethal part, can discover how to do so. If the time and energies we devote to the contemplation of the immortality of souls could be redirected to the needs of the mortal Gaia, the living whole, we might prolong the mesmerizing magic for a little while longer.

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¹² See Kent Peacock, *Living with the Earth*, Toronto: Harcourt Canada, 1996. See in particular, ch. 2, and 18. See also John Leslie, *The End of the World*, New York: Routledge, 1996, ch. 1 and 4.