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Christianity

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The **immortality of the soul**

Human beings seem always to have had some notion of a shadowy double that survives the death of the body. But the idea of the soul as a mental entity, with intellectual and moral qualities, interacting with a physical organism but capable of continuing after its dissolution, derives in Western thought from Plato and entered into Judaism during approximately the last century before the Common Era and thence into Christianity. In Jewish and Christian thinking it has existed in tension with the idea of the resurrection of the person conceived as an indissoluble psychophysical unity. Christian thought gradually settled into a pattern that required both of these apparently divergent ideas. At death the soul is separated from the body and exists in a conscious or unconscious disembodied state. But on the future Day of Judgment souls will be re-embodied (with resurrection).

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Within this framework, philosophical discussion has centred mainly on the idea of the immaterial soul and its capacity to survive the death of the body. Plato, in the *Phaedo*, argued that the soul is inherently indestructible. To destroy something, including the body, is to disintegrate it into its constituent elements; but the soul, as a mental entity, is not composed of parts and is thus an indissoluble unity. Although Aquinas’s concept of the soul, as the “form” of the body, was derived from Aristotle rather than Plato, Aquinas too argued for its indestructibility (*Summa theologiae*, I, Q. 76, art. 6). The French philosopher Jacques Maritain (1882–1973), a modern Thomist, summarized the conclusion as follows: “A spiritual soul cannot be corrupted, since it possesses no matter; it cannot be disintegrated, since it has no substantial parts; it cannot lose its individual unity, since it is self-subsisting, nor its internal energy since it contains within itself all the sources of its energies” (*The Range of Reason*, 1952). But though it is possible to define the soul in such a way that it is incorruptible, indissoluble, and self-subsisting, critics have asked whether there is any good reason to think that souls as thus defined exist. If, on the other hand, the soul means the conscious mind or personality—something whose immortality would be of great interest to human beings—this does not seem to be an indissoluble unity. On the contrary, it seems to have a kind of organic unity that can vary in degree but that is also capable of fragmentation and dissolution.

Much modern philosophical analysis of the concept of mind is inhospitable to the idea of immortality, for it equates mental life with the functioning of the physical brain (*see* mind, philosophy of). Impressed by evidence of the dependence of mind on brain, some Christian thinkers have been willing to accept the view—corresponding to the ancient Hebrew understanding—of the human being as an indissoluble psychophysical unity, but these thinkers have still maintained a belief in immortality, not as the mind surviving the body, but as a divine resurrection or re-creation of the living body-mind totality. Such resurrection persons would presumably be located in a space different from that which they now inhabit and would presumably undergo a development from the condition of a dying person to that of a viable inhabitant of the resurrection world. But all theories in this area have their own difficulties, and alternative theories emerged.

Kant offered a different kind of argument for immortality—as a postulate of the moral life. The claim of the moral law demands that human beings become perfect. This is something that can never be finally achieved but only asymptotically approached, and such an unending approach requires the unending existence of the soul. This argument also is open to criticism. Are humans indeed subject to a strict obligation to attain moral perfection? Might not their obligation, as finite creatures, be to do the best they can? But this does not seem to entail immortality.

It should be noted that the debate concerning arguments about the immortality of the soul and the existence of God has been as much among Christian philosophers as between them and non-Christian thinkers. It is by no means the case that Christian thinkers have all regarded the project of natural theology as viable. There have indeed been, and are, many who hold that divine existence can be definitively proved or shown to be objectively probable. But many others not only hold that the attempted proofs all require premises that a disbeliever is under no rational obligation to accept but also question the evidentialist assumption that the only route to rational theistic belief is by inference from previously accepted evidence-stating premises.