

THEORIA

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Soul-Switching and the Immateriality of Human Nature: On an Argument Reported by Razi

by

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Abstract: This article deals with an argument reported by Razi (d. 1210) that attempted to undermine the immaterialist position about human nature. After some introductory remarks and explanation of the conceptual background, the article analyses the structure of the argument, with special attention to the idea of *soul-switching*.¹ Some comparisons are made between the argument reported by Razi and a number of arguments from modern and contemporary eras of philosophy. One section is devoted to the critique of the argument and its conceptual basis. This article shows that the argument reported by Razi is a methodological antecedent of a family of contemporary epistemological arguments against substance dualism. It is also shown that discussion of the argument could be useful to highlight a weakness in some, but not all, versions of immaterialism about human nature.

Keywords: soul-switching, Razi, human nature, other minds, immaterialism, materialism

The progress of philosophy, at least, is dialectical: we return to old insights in new and, we hope, improved forms. — P. F. Strawson¹

1. Introduction

OUR EPISTEMIC POSITION with respect to other persons has almost surely not been used to reject the immateriality of human nature until around the middle of the twentieth century.² Ryle was one of the first recent philosophers to turn the difficulty of accounting for our knowledge of other people's minds (normally called the *problem of other minds*) into an explicit argument against their immateriality. In his book *The Concept of Mind*, Ryle asserts that an adherent of the official theory (i.e., Cartesian substance dualism) "has no good reason to believe that there do exist minds other than his own" (Ryle, 1949, p. 15). Since then, the problem

Hereafter, I shall use the abbreviation *ARR* when referring to the Argument Reported by Razi.

1 Strawson (2008, p. 195).

2 I have searched in vain for such cases before the 20th century, though it is hard to prove negative existentials in the history of philosophy. I should add, however, that this is not the case for the "problem of other minds" per se (i.e., not as a challenge to substance dualism or to the immateriality of the soul). It has historical roots in ancient philosophy (e.g., the Cyrenaics and the neo-Pyrrhonist Theodosius) and there are various discussions about the issue in the modern era of philosophy (e.g., Thomas Reid and John Stuart Mill). See Tsouna (1998) and Avramides (2011).