REVIEW

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Book Review: In Search of the Soul: A Philosophical Essay

John Cottingham

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John Cottingham has done as much as anyone, and more than many, to champion what he has called ‘humane philosophy’: a method of philosophising that resists the cool, detached style of much contemporary analytic philosophy, and which instead draws on the rich resources of the humanities and arts, including poetry, fiction, and music. Such a method is crucial, Cottingham insists, if philosophy is to help us make proper sense of our human condition: after all, we interpret and live in the world using not just the tools of logical analysis (vital though these are), but also imaginative, aesthetic, and emotional modes of awareness.

*In Search of the Soul* employs the ‘humane’ method and style in order to explore the idea of the soul and its continuing significance. In particular, it focuses on how the notion of soul resonates with the human desire ‘to fulfil what is best in our nature, to realize our true selves, and thereby find meaning and completion’ (p. 157). The book is both wonderfully rich and admirably clear, weaving together several aspects of thought about the soul, including moral, historical, scientific, psychoanalytic, and religious. Ultimately, Cottingham argues that we ought to retain a central place for the soul in making sense of human life, and that a theistic framework of interpretation is especially hospitable to doing so.

Chapter 1 identifies the book’s main focus. We quickly discover that rather than primarily being a metaphysical investigation, this study will explore how the idea of the soul is central to our quest to live meaningful lives. Using well-chosen examples from Socrates, the Gospels, Kierkegaard, T. S. Eliot, and Philip Pullman, Cottingham homes in on the notion of the soul as each person’s moral core or ‘true self’, which we can either find or lose. If our lives are to have meaning then we must foster in ourselves, and encourage in others, the soul’s growth and maturity. An important part of this idea is that ‘soul’ stands for our capacity to recognise what matters most deeply to us, particularly love. Once more, Cottingham uses literary examples to illustrate his point, exploring in the process love for another person (through Shakespeare and the Irish poet Samuel Ferguson) and love of nature (through Wordsworth). It emerges that the concept of the soul has an *evaluative* element: it conveys ‘the aspiration to live up to what is finest in our nature’ (p. 14). Despite the multitude of literary references, the discussion feels remarkably organic and never overcrowded. Elaborating on the evaluative theme, Cottingham proposes that human life has an objective teleology, which centrally includes openness and vulnerability to others. The chapter ends by introducing one of the book’s key claims: persons are unique subjects of experience, and the meaning and value that we can thereby access cannot be understood scientifically.

Chapter 2 engages with some key thinkers on the soul: Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, and Descartes. Cottingham critiques the ‘separatist’ Platonic account: although we can agree with Plato in thinking of the soul as that faculty through which we apprehend universal, abstract truths, it makes no sense to think of it as ontologically distinct from the body. Instead, we should adopt an Aristotelian-style hylomorphism: we can think of the soul in terms of its form or function, according to which the matter of the body is configured. The sections on Descartes are especially instructive; here Cottingham’s expertise comes into its own, revealing Descartes to be much more nuanced than the ‘Cartesian dualism’ caricature suggests. We are shown that Descartes sought scientific explanations for as many human functions as he could; he only posited an immaterial soul/mind because he thought that no physical structure could have an infinite repertoire of potential responses in thought and language. Moreover, Descartes emphasised our embodied nature, including sensory experience and emotion. Although modern neuroscience seems to show conclusively that the brain underpins our capacity for thought, and hence that Descartes was mistaken in ascribing thought to an immaterial substance, Cottingham nevertheless argues that we should preserve a central Cartesian insight: our inner lives have their own reality. Each of us has conscious access to a domain of meaning, which gives us our sense of self, and we cannot understand this ‘lifeworld’ using the methods of science – even though it depends on physical structures and processes. In other words, we should be attributive/property dualists: we have two fundamentally different kinds of property, the mental and the physical, even if we have only one kind of ontological ‘ingredient’, namely, the physical.

Chapter 3 acts as a pivot, linking the soul to theism. Cottingham spells out an apparent tension regarding the relationship between the physical world and our conscious states. It seems that the right physical configuration is sufficient for conscious thought. However, there also seems to be a gap between the two: we cannot ‘derive…the unique point of view of the individual thinker’ from anything physics tells us (p. 74), since there could in principle be several individuals with exactly the same physical attributes, but only one such person at most would be me. The subjective lifeworld of each person, then, seems to lack a full physical explanation. But rather than treat it as an illusion (as Daniel Dennett among others has done), or as a mysterious intrinsic property of matter (as we find in panpsychism), Cottingham suggests that theism can make sense of consciousness by positing ‘a source…of all being that is somehow *mind-like*’ (p. 83, original emphasis). He draws an analogy with ‘strong normativity’ – the objective reality of the ‘values and beauties and duties’ to which we have access as conscious beings (p. 92). Like individual consciousness, it is hard to account for these in scientific terms. Eliminative or deflationary accounts deny their reality, but cannot explain our deep-seated moral intuitions.So we should favour strong value objectivism. But without a transcendent source of goodness beyond the physical world, it is hard to see *how* objective values exist. God, for the theist, is the ‘transcendent primordial and personal subject’ (p. 99), the source of being and goodness. Theism, then, can explain the existence of objective value, and can make sense of the lifeworld of consciousness through which we access that value.

We return, in chapter 4, to the search for the ‘true self’ introduced in chapter 1; in light of the argument of chapter 3, this is now inextricably linked with the search for God. Specifically, chapter 4 presents the ‘psychoanalytic challenge’. Following Freud, the contents of our minds are often ambiguous and opaque, even to ourselves. And, following Jung, these hidden and obscure contents include a shadowy side to our nature, with which we must come to terms in order to grow psychologically. Cottingham argues for a harmony between psychoanalysis (especially in its Jungian form) and theistic spirituality, in both aim and method. He points out that the struggle for integration is also a central aim of the Judaeo-Christian tradition; and he embraces Jung’s view that a key aspect of psychological healing is in letting the imagination be energised by archetypal religious symbols. (Indeed, the book’s title may be a deliberate reference to Jung’s *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*.) If we engage with these archetypes, Cottingham suggests, we can uncover a longing for God that is rooted in the unconscious. Moreover, much of our experience of God more generally may occur at an intuitive level, without being clearly, propositionally analysable; rather, it might be expressible only in poetic or other artistic forms.

In the final chapter, Cottingham reflects on the soul as an ‘instrument of transcendence’ (p. 132): as that aspect of ourselves that allows us access to realities that transcend the physical world. As we have seen, for Cottingham these include objective value and ultimately its transcendent source, namely, God. However, the chapter suggests that we should understand God’s transcendence and immanence as ‘two faces of the same coin’ (p. 137), and contains an illuminating discussion of theism’s ‘immanentist’ strand. Cottingham argues that ‘supernatural’ is an unhelpful term for understanding theism: it leads us to ‘locate’ God *outside* the natural world, whereas in mainstream theism, although God transcends the world of our experience, this world is our principle means of access to the divine. Cottingham traces a long line of writers, including Aristotle, Descartes, Butler, Wordsworth, and Hopkins, who saw value and purpose in nature, including human nature. In theistic form, the view is that nature’s value and purpose lie in manifesting God’s presence. Perhaps the one thing that could have been made clearer here is the converse strand of theistic tradition, and of much human experience, in which Nature’s riches make us restless for something more. George Herbert’s poem ‘The Pulley’, for instance, sees God pouring on man all his blessings, except for Rest:

For if I should (said he)

Bestow this jewel also on my creature,

He would adore my gifts instead of me,

And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature:

So both should losers be.

How, then, do we care for the soul, bringing ourselves into alignment with the transcendent goodness and beauty that we glimpse in this world? Cottingham’s answer echoes a recurring theme in his work: we need ‘a structured system of [religious] practices’ that symbolically express ‘the hidden longings of the soul…for transcendence’ (pp. 147–8), even in the midst of cruelty and destruction. Our ‘unquenchable yearnings’ make it a ‘spiritual imperative…to believe in the transcendent’, which for the theist is a personal reality, ‘and to reach out to it in faith, hope, and love’ (p. 157).

There is a huge amount to enjoy about this book. Like much of Cottingham’s work, it is to be highly praised for the way it invites the reader to engage with its topic. Rather than aiming to provide a watertight argument, it prompts us to reflect on how soul-talk does justice to our own lived experience, including the deep joy evoked by the natural world and by the love of another human being, and the objective value we thereby seem to apprehend. In doing this, the study engages the emotions as well as the intellect. By drawing on a wealth of literary examples, especially from poetry, it displays a characteristic sensitivity to how our experience, especially religious experience, often resists literal, propositional articulation, and can only be expressed at the imaginative or emotional level. In tying such themes in the philosophy of religion to the notion of the soul, the book highlights the intensely personal and moral nature of the quest: in our search for a transcendent source of goodness, what is at stake is no less than finding, and bringing to fruition, our ‘true self’.

Perhaps inevitably for a book aimed not just at academics but also at general readers, there are a few issues that invite further clarification and exploration. Three in particular stand out to me. First, I am not entirely clear on how theism ‘makes sense of’ consciousness (p. 83). Chapter 3, remember, argues that we cannot derive the individual’s unique viewpoint from anything physics tells us, since physical attributes alone cannot determine which of several individuals, who are physically exactly alike, would be me. But this seems to overlook the fact that only one conscious subject can inhabit each body. So the physical facts, including spatial location, look sufficient for determining which person is me. Of course, the point still stands that the unique subjective viewpoint is indescribable by science; but the physical facts nonetheless tell us which person is me, or you. However, this makes it less clear how the existence of consciousness provides a motivation for theism. Although we may not know yet exactly *how* the physical facts about the brain (and body) produce each person’s consciousness, there can be no doubt that they *do* produce it. There does not seem to be any further explanatory role here for God to fulfil. (I will shortly return to whether theism should be seen as any kind of explanatory hypothesis.)

The second issue that might benefit from further exploration is that of objective value. In fairness, this is a common theme in Cottingham’s work (see, for instance, chapter 4 of *Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach*, and chapter 3 of *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy, and Human Value*); so interested readers can pursue the topic elsewhere. But it is also a central theme of this book. In short, I am not sure that the argument from objective value to belief in God is wholly successful. We saw that Cottingham maintains that without a transcendent source of goodness, it is hard to see *how* objective values exist. Can theism provide an answer? Take a moral claim, such as ‘we ought to act lovingly’. Suppose we say that the claim is true because God is loving. Can we not simply raise the same puzzle as Cottingham does about a naturalistic world view? Just as we might ask how the (broadly) natural fact that a human act is loving makes it good, we can also ask how the transcendent fact that *God* is loving makes that same human act good. If we say that God is by his very nature normative, or to-be-pursued, why can we not say the same about love that exists, or has the potential to exist, wholly within the natural world? Or, again, suppose we say that acting lovingly is good because God created humans to be truly fulfilled only when exercising our capacity for love. In order for this to be plausible, it would have to be plausible that we are indeed truly fulfilled only in this way. But this is an empirical claim about human nature, and would thus remain true regardless of whether we are theists or atheists: an atheist, no less than the theist, could use the empirical claim as grounds for saying that acting lovingly is good. In other words, it seems to me that either it is the case that neither atheism nor theism can account for objective value, or it is the case that both can. Either way, it is not clear to me that theism adds any explanatory power regarding objective value.

This brings me on to a third, more general point raised by the book’s arguments: in what way can theism ‘make sense of’ human experience? *In Search of the Soul* is a little ambiguous on this matter. On the one hand, the arguments discussed above seem to be for the conclusion that theism, more successfully than atheism, *explains* the existence of consciousness and objective value. On the other hand, Cottingham explicitly distances himself from attempts to provide ‘demonstrative or…probabilistic proofs of God’s existence’ (p. 116) – including (one assumes) inferences to the best explanation. Given the doubts raised above over whether theism really does have an explanatory advantage over atheism, I suggest that we should look elsewhere in making a case for theism. And, indeed, an especially fruitful route is one that Cottingham has mapped out in much of his work. This is to unfold the *significance* that theism sees in human life and experience. A theistic outlook understands phenomena such as consciousness and value as offering us glimpses of an infinite, personal reality whose essential nature is love, and it maintains that our final end is to be in union with that reality. If, as Cottingham suggests, ‘we cannot in integrity deny’ that this vision evokes in us a deep longing (p. 157), then *not* to follow a theistic path would be to deny an essential aspect of our human nature. ‘Care for the soul’, then, can lead us to embrace a theistic outlook, if not in belief then at least in hope. Despite the queries raised above, *In Search of the Soul* makes a compelling case for this view, and is truly a delight to read. It deserves to be read widely – by scholars and students in philosophy, theology, and the history of ideas, as well as by general readers who are concerned with the vital, perennial issue of finding the soul.

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