

# In search of the immortal soul in a modern world

Immortality has become the great question mark. The answer used to be provided at Easter, but for the secular modern age, belief in any form of life after death is in doubt.

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10 MINUTE READ •  2

Immortality has become the great question mark. The answer used to be provided at Easter, with the Christian climax in death by crucifixion, followed by resurrection. The Jesus story wrestled with death not being merely death. Today, however, the sacred meaning of Easter is little more than a dusty relic.

For the secular modern age, belief in any form of life after death is in doubt. The metaphysical supports that directed earlier generations, keeping them on their feet and moving, have lapsed. Most no longer believe in a supernatural being — whether providential, guiding, punishing, or forgiving.

God has become a figment of the archaic imagination; gods of any type are mere alien superstitions, held once upon a time by naive, even primitive ancestors. Belief has long gone in an eternal destination for the departing soul at death — heaven or hell. The existence of a soul is in question; never mind whether that hypothetical soul survives the death of the individual human. All in all, human consciousness has narrowed down to focus on mortal life, lived here and now, on a this-worldly plane; a finite span bound by birth and death, governed by everyday pleasures and pains.

Individuals today find themselves in the position of Socrates, if they are honest. After being sentenced to death at his trial in Athens in 399BC, the 70-year-old philosopher reflected that he did not fear death. He told his fellow citizens that he did not know what awaited him once he was gone. There were two possibilities. Either death was final, like a form of eternal dreamless sleep. Or his soul was immortal and would migrate off, somewhere beyond, to join other immortal souls. Socrates was the paradigm agnostic.

The death question has not gone away. Its centrality for all humans, and in all times, is illustrated by the fact religions pivot their theology on finding an answer to it. The first great work in the Western tradition, Homer's Iliad, focuses on death: even though it is a war and conquest story, the nature of mortality is of much greater concern than fighting and glory. Christianity instated the cross as its commanding symbol, a death and transcendence symbol.

Today, in a seemingly quite different world, what is it possible to believe? Let me open by considering a room full of people. When a stranger comes through the door, those whom they encounter will recognise that a kind of force has arrived, changing the atmosphere. An extraordinary concentration of presence has infiltrated among those assembled. That individual human being is more than the sum of their known and observed parts: physical form, the complex of their gestures and expressions, voice, and attributes of character, and its biography. The derogatory Yiddish term *nebbish* underlines the point, in negation, referring to an inconsequential person whose presence on entering a room creates a vacuum.

We see this in parenthesis in some fictional examples. When Achilles stands up unarmed on the edge of raging battle, in Book Eighteen of The Iliad, and the

goddess Athena bathes his head and shoulders in metaphoric golden light, the fighting Trojans stop in mid-stride, quaking in fear, although they are armed and winning the battle.

When Audrey Hepburn enters the royal ball in *My Fair Lady* the assembled throng is hushed, awe-struck by her shimmering beauty, a beauty that outshines gorgeous gown, gracious figure, and finely proportioned face. She is a modern goddess, a film “star”, the many associations with divinity indicating that some kind of supernatural glow is seen to have manifested, emanating from her.

The stranger who enters the room is more than personality, although personality may have its own impact, whether brashly domineering, slyly insincere, sparkingly alert or even darkly gloomy. Personality may even predominate. It, in turn, may be amplified by physical bulk, litheness of movement, fidgety restlessness or languor.

Nor does the stranger introduce just a new energy field. Shadowing the physical form, some kind of spiritual aura has been revealed. Those already in the room, were they to calm themselves, put their egos into recess and half-close the eyes, might sense a concentration of spectral force. Sacred impregnation of the ether contrasts with carnal thereness. Here lies the supreme potential power of living humans.

Intimidation may follow, as with Achilles on the edge of battle. Alternatively, a process of psychic contagion may impose myriad other influences. The presence of the other can inspire, excite or charm; calm or unsettle; or distress, deplete and depress. Psychic contagion is arguably the least understood factor in personal and social relations, and the most underestimated.

This is why a corpse is unnerving. The physical form is there, largely unchanged. But the animating presence has gone, the light switched off. The face is a mask, whether chalklike or heavily made-up, ghastly, quite different from the prosaic outer form of the person who recently was.

The eerie horror that leaves the observer grave, shaken and mute — that simply cannot be comprehended — is that this person, lying here as a ghostly physical residue, is gone forever. No breath remains to flutter the veil. The body, cold to the

transgressive touch, commands deathly silence, awakening consciousness of the vacancy of life, its little consequence when seen in the context of the infinite, eternal nothing.

This negative power in turn, however, implies an opposite positive truth — two sides of the same coin — a truth of such engaging potency that to remove or deny it may paralyse the witness.

It is difficult to believe that the concentration of spectral force that, but an hour earlier, animated the human entity that is now a cadaver simply disappears into nothing. It is said that death is final. But those are mere words.

For the preceding 3000 years in our culture, it was assumed that a soul inhabited the living person. According to most beliefs, it arrived at birth and departed at death. With their last breath, the person expired. The spirit that was breathed out for the last time was the “immortal soul”.

To progress further we need to distinguish between two quite different phenomena animating the human psyche. On the one hand, there is vitality, energy, life force and ego. On the other, there is soul. The former constellation is mortal. Energy ebbs as a person gets older or sickens; the ego shrinks, even withers. When the person dies their vitality is snuffed out. If we reflect on the nature of the human ego, it appears unambiguously mortal.

The novel (and film) *Gone with the Wind* makes the point — a 2014 survey found it still the second favourite book of American readers, just behind the Bible. *Gone with the Wind* contrasts Scarlett O’Hara, as lead character, with Melanie Hamilton. Scarlett is a force of nature, extraordinarily vital and resilient; petulantly childish, selfish, insensitive and indomitable; all ego, yet shrewd and realistic in practical matters.

Melanie is soulful, an exemplar of selfless charity and goodness. She is low on ego, naive and sickly, whereas Scarlett is diminutive of soul. Scarlett’s vitality seems to have its source less in a love of life’s potential fulfilments than a tenacious clinging, driven by an assertive, buoyant ego that refuses to be cowed.

The inference may be drawn that once the struggle is over nothing will be left — and indeed for Scarlett the life essence is struggle. Scarlett's one reverent attachment is to her land, Tara, expressed at the end of the novel, if only as a consoling flicker. In general, the animal life force, which Scarlett incarnates to the full, does expire. With Melanie, the grip on actual living is weak; the influence of her spirit strong and resolute. Most who move within her orbit, hold her in awed respect. She is the unassuming centre of gravity, her grace, kindness and incandescent virtue a beacon to others. It is more difficult to imagine the extinguishing of her spirit when she dies.

St Augustine made a distinction between two deaths, the death of the soul and that of the body. The soul may die but the person goes on living — they die twice. As an illustration, those rendered permanently unconscious by severe stroke, with the body still breathing, the heart beating, may give the overwhelming impression to those close to them that the spirit has already absented itself — the animating aura of the person, or the soul, appears to have departed.

Primo Levi, in *If This is a Man* (1958), his account of his experience in Auschwitz, draws an inflexible distinction among humans between those who are saved, and those drowned — a more useful distinction today, it seems to me, than the moralised one between the saved and the damned. The distinction was more obvious in the extreme environment of the Nazi concentration camp. Those who had lost the will to live but were still alive formed an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who marched and laboured in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer.

JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* is the singular book and film phenomenon of recent times. The seven-volume *Harry Potter* series posits a similar understanding of the immortal soul, by casting sinister black, wraithlike creatures called Dementors, which chill the atmosphere whenever they are present, making anyone in their vicinity gloomy — they represent psychic contagion writ large. When Dementors attack, they attempt to kiss the victim, to suck out the soul through the mouth.

In a largely post-Christian world, it is telling that Levi and Rowling should evoke almost identical imagery for the existence of the soul. Auschwitz had swarmed with Dementors.

What would sceptics say? In fact, they can counter with one simple axiom: fear of death gives birth to many a powerful illusion.

The pure atheist, at the extreme, does not believe in God and goes further, to reject all metaphysics. A counter-faith is set up, a new orthodoxy staked to materialist science which, it is held, explains everything. Human beings are but material entities and, when they die, matter rots and decays, returning to dust.

Acute human experience, notably death, may however leave psychic residues that are more substantial than fantasy imaginings. Once, when visiting the German city of Munich, I was shocked to see a station at the end of an ordinary train line named Dachau. How, I thought, could a “normal” suburb be built on the site of one of the most notorious Nazi concentration camps?

Experience points in two opposite directions here. It is common to revisit a place in which fateful personal events had taken place — tragedy, romance, sporting triumph or even the house in which one grew up — to find it resistant to nostalgic memory, cold and empty, indifferent to the past. Maybe the suburb of Dachau is just like any other modern Western community, with a bank, a supermarket and a playground. The minds of the living may be haunted by ghosts from their own past, but those ghosts will vanish with them, or even before.

Yet the opposite is equally true. There are places haunted by ghosts from the past — personally, I find it hard to imagine this is not the case with Dachau. There are spaces that resonate with sacred atmosphere — Delphi comes to my mind, as does the inside of Bourges cathedral, the Alhambra in Granada, and some ancient Australian Aboriginal ceremonial grounds.

Romain Rolland wrote of an “oceanic feeling” he was never without, of something limitless, unbounded, a sensation of eternity. He suggested that this feeling is the universal source of religious energy, whatever the religion and whatever the particular forms of belief and worship. We are in territory in which there are no proofs. Even Rolland remarked that the oceanic feeling does not necessarily imply personal immortality.

There are cases in which the soul is stifled by the housing personality. Shakespeare’s

Richard II, as king, is a case in point, lacking judgment: he is proud, wasteful, lazy, irresponsible and unjust. Once he loses power, however, he switches into a dignified, majestic reflection on life:

*Let's talk of graves, of worms, and epitaphs,  
Make Dust our paper, and with rainy  
eyes*

*Write sorrow on the bosom of the earth ... For within the hollow crown;  
That rounds the mortal temples of a king  
Keeps Death his court; ....*

Once Richard tunes in to things of ultimate gravity, he stills the audience. He has been transported out of the realm of worldly ambition. Liberated, he surrenders to timeless truth, embracing it, and he gains the rare power of being able to speak with its voice. The deep and eternal truths about the human condition are one of the soul's currencies.

What I am suggesting here is that Rolland's abiding sense of eternity beyond the individual is matched by a sense of eternity within. An electric current needs two poles. It is the conjoining of the two, beyond and within, that counters the threat of drowning.

The belief in the immortal soul has its roots somewhere here.

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