

HAVE YOU A SOUL?

Part 2: A Sermon.

By Rev DANIEL A. LORD S.J.

“For what does it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, and suffer the loss of his own soul? Or what exchange shall a man give for his soul?” (Matthew 16:26)

Father Hall had mounted the familiar and venerable pulpit in his small but up-lifting Parish Church. He had just declaimed this stirring passage from the Gospel of Saint Matthew and quoted the Divine Saviour’s words.

He went on: ‘My dearly beloved people, not long ago, I was at a small dinner party with a mixed group of Catholics, when, as it does, the conversation turned to matters that had something to do with religion. It was a devout Catholic who put an interesting dilemma to the group.

Horrible Thought.

‘He said, “I’ve had a horrible thought.” Yes? “I’m darned if I know whether or not I’ve a soul.”

‘He went on, “Now. I don’t doubt that I have a soul; in fact, I’m convinced that I have one. What I meant was this: If anybody stopped me in the street and said, ‘Look here, old man, how do you go about proving that you have a soul?’ I’d be as dumb as a turtle.”

‘What about you, my dear friends? Would you be in the same situation?

‘Oh, but you might say “Doesn’t the Bible prove that we have a soul?” “Didn’t Our Lord tell us to save our souls? Didn’t He die so that we wouldn’t lose them? That’s enough to satisfy me.”

‘That’s all very good, but, sadly it is hardly enough to satisfy the enquiring mind of a genuine truth-seeker amongst the men in the street, now, is it? Because it involves us in a vicious circle. We believe something mentioned in the Bible and we prove that this something is real by quoting the Bible. No we need something more.

‘You might reply, “I just accept the fact. Why should you want to prove it?”

‘As one of the others present pointed out the answer to that question, “Because, so darn many people think they have no soul. At least, they say that they haven’t one. Materialists is what they call them.”

‘At that point in the discussion the group lapsed into a moment’s silence. It really did seem silly to think that while they were, like all good Catholics, busy trying to save their souls, in the face of the thousands of people who claimed that there were no such things as souls, they couldn’t even prove that they had one.

‘Was there any logical proof? Or did they simply have to take God’s word for the soul’s existence?

‘Let me share some of the discussion that followed.

‘I began by saying, “Well, I’m not surprised.”

‘Not surprised that no one in this crowd of educated Catholics could — in a pinch prove that he has a soul. Of course, one of these days the young people here will be studying in their Catholic-college psychology class the proofs for the existence of the soul. But I’m sometimes amazed when I realise how many people there are who get callouses on their knees, saving souls whose existence they accept on faith, and how many there are who have never even stopped to wonder whether they could prove from reason that they have a soul to save. It’s one of the startling phenomena of Catholic thinking or shall we call it Catholic lack of thinking?”

Can It Be Proved?

“Can it be proved from reason that we have a soul?”

“Certainly it can be proved. Why the Bible is built up around the fact of a human soul. Genesis recounts the story of God’s breathing into the newly formed body of man ‘a living soul’, thus making him in the image of his Maker; the Gospels end with the stories of Christ’s sending the Apostles into the whole world to save souls and to bring them into the eternal kingdom of heaven, where, while the bodies lay sleeping in the earth, the souls would be endlessly happy

— 'this day you will be with me in Paradise'. From beginning to end the Bible accepts the soul as the second great reality. The first reality is God. The second is the human soul.

“But that’s only the beginning; or, rather, to put it more accurately, it’s a mere confirmation of something that men would know and understand about themselves even if there were no Bible. You see, human history is certainly clear on at least this one point: that the vast majority of all men of all times have believed that they have something that is beyond and above and independent of — to some extent — the body.

Separated by Death.

“The fact of death was and is inescapable. And even the primitives, the Egyptians and the Assyrians and the prehistoric men and the American Indians, laid their dead in some kind of grave. But though the bodies were dead and though everyone had learned from grim and often unpleasant experience how swiftly bodies decayed and became once more part of the earth, none of these people thought that with burial came the end of their dear relatives and friends. Somewhere in another world these dead continued to exist, somewhere where they could eat the food that was placed on their graves or could hunt and talk or could enjoy some sort of paradise or be punished in some sort of hell.

“The dead bodies were there, rotting; that was obvious. But something that was not the body was judged in the moments that followed death, judged because it was the more important part of a man, the part that had been responsible for his goodness or his badness.

Various Names.

“Perhaps not all of these people called this something a soul. But all of them, from the cave men to the pagans of modern Jamaica, who ‘capture’ the souls of their dead in little boxes as they escape from the dead bodies — all men were convinced that there was something in a man that was not his body, something that was superior to his body and was so independent of his body that after the body was dead that something went on living a life that was even more complete than the life it had lived while it was incased in the body. In fact, that something was so tremendously important that it was punished or rewarded according as the man lived a bad or a good life.

“Evidently this something was the thing that made man.

“So, you see, belief in souls is an historic tradition. The Bible is meaningless unless souls do exist. But so is human history and human self-analysis.”

They Made Other Mistakes, So —.

‘Now to this line of thinking I was immediately confronted with someone objecting, “Oh, we’ve given up believing in so many things in which people always used to believe — fairies and ghosts and the sun’s moving round the earth . . . That argument doesn’t impress me too much.”

‘And I must admit that I nodded in partial agreement.

‘But I had to point out, “The fact that a great many people agree on a thing doesn’t necessarily prove that the thing is right, unless — please note this — unless their reasons for agreeing on it are compelling, satisfactory reasons.”

“In the case of the ‘soul’ the reasons are satisfactory!”

Clear Observation.

“Perfectly so! You see, long before there were laboratories, men did quite a bit of observing. Sometimes I’m inclined to think that men did more observing along some lines before the invention of microscopes than men have done since that time. Our God is a God of Science AND of Revelation. So like all good Catholics, I believe in science, but I don’t believe in all scientists.

“Science is wonderful. But often scientists are men who know so much about one thing that they are absolutely blind to everything else.”

Different from Animals.

“Well, it didn’t take a heap of acute observing to make men — even very primitive men — realise that they were more than a little different from the animals around them. The tiger might be far more powerful physically than men

were, but men had something inside themselves, some cleverness, some mastery of skill, that let them outwit the tiger that could knock them cold with a biff of its paw. Men could build traps. They might be afraid to meet a gorilla in the jungles, but they would have hooted at the suggestion that some gorilla was sitting down in a cave and drawing pictures of men on the wall. Men drew pictures of gorillas; by no stretch of fancy could they imagine gorillas drawing pictures of men.

“They found they had within themselves the power to learn to do almost anything that they saw the animals do. But the animals learned nothing from them. Men were not so swift as was the deer, but men could outwit and kill the deer. The elephant could crush a man with his trunk or his forefoot, but a man could dominate an elephant and force him into slavery. The bird’s nest was a masterpiece of adaptation, but men learned to build houses and temples and palaces that were not only highly serviceable but extraordinarily beautiful. And if anyone had suggested to a primitive tribe that it should invite an ape to sit as a fellow counsellor, or train a dog to act as court physician, or have a chimpanzee as troubadour of the tribe or a beaver as the official architect, men of that tribe would have laughed boisterous, savage laughter.

“Animals, they knew, were different from men. Everyone knew that they were different. They lacked something that man had. And that something lifted man so high above the entire kingdom of animals — strong, fleet, beautiful, clever though those animals were — that between a man and an animal there was no possibility of equality.

Not Their Bodies.

“Now these men were shrewd enough to realise that this superiority was not in their bodies. The deer could outrace any man. The elephant could outwork him. Unarmed, he dared not meet the lion or the gorilla. His hair was not so beautiful as was the plumage of the bird of paradise. His skin could not resist heat and cold and the darts of an enemy as could the skin of a hippo. No; it was not man’s body that made him different. Then what was it?

“Well, they argued quite logically — or so it seems to me — that if it wasn’t their bodies that made the difference, it was something beyond their bodies, something that they possessed in addition to their bodies, something the animals didn’t have. They called it their soul, or they gave it some other name. But whatever they called it, it was the thing that made them men and, making them men, made them masters.

“All you and I have to do is watch a man and an animal tackle any problem or meet in any sort of competition in which the man can use his full manhood and his complete abilities, and we are very much inclined to think that these old ancestors of ours were pretty smart.

What a Difference!

“In fact, I never read that some materialistic scientist is working to prove that there is no essential difference between a man and a monkey without thinking, ‘My friend, I’ll really be impressed when I hear that a monkey has set out to prove conclusively that there is no difference between a monkey and a man’. Our interest in monkeys is so different from the monkeys’ lack of interest in us that that in itself is almost enough to prove that we are superior to monkeys.”

‘Now to all this there was very quickly an immediate and obvious objection.

‘It is said. “Of course, animals and men are different. Man’s brain is more complicated than that of an animal. We’re different, we human beings, because our structure is more elaborate. A monkey is more elaborate than a clam. An ape is more elaborate than an ant. And we are more elaborate than any of the animals. Doesn’t that elaborateness explain our superiority? Why drag in a metaphysical thing like a soul?”

A Principle.

‘What is to be said of this? Firstly let me clear some ground. Don’t say metaphysical as if it were a nasty word. If so, you’ve been reading the wisecracking unbelievers too much. They don’t like the word metaphysical. But metaphysical is just a term that we apply to those things that we can’t touch or see. Liberty is something that nobody ever saw. It’s metaphysical; but, believe me, it’s a mighty important thing. Principles are metaphysical. Do you know what we mean here by a principle?

Examples.

‘Well let’s take up some examples to illustrate what I mean as I did in the discussion.

‘Well, let’s say that a crowd of people, strangers to one another, are sitting in a railroad station. All of a sudden a number of things go wrong. A woman faints. A locomotive throttle refuses to budge. A man sitting on a bench grabs his forehead and enthusiastically starts to scribble on a piece of paper. Two men wax hot in argument; one hits the other, while a third man runs up and collars the first two.

You Watch.

‘Now you are sitting in the station; you know no one there. You are simply watching. As the woman faints, a man runs up to her, pulls a stethoscope out of his pocket and expertly uses it, gives her something to drink, deftly manipulates her muscles, and presto! the woman is revived. What do you conclude about the man?’

‘Why, obviously he’s a doctor,’ so you’ll say, and you’ll be right!

‘All right; let’s continue. When word comes that the locomotive throttle is stuck, a man jumps up, climbs into the cab, monkey with a few gadgets, and lo! the throttle works. He is, clearly, an engineer.

‘Let me continue. The man who runs up to the men that are arguing is a detective or off-duty police officer.

‘And if another man appears on the scene and offers to get the two of them released then you could conclude that he is a lawyer if he isn’t a prominent but corrupt politician with a drag at the city hall.

Judged by Results.

‘In other words, we don’t know enough about what this last chap did or how he did it to be able to tell what he is. But in the other cases you knew precisely what each man was from watching — note this — what he did. It really is quite simple, so very simple.

‘This is correct. It really is simple. But note: You did not see the doctor’s medical knowledge; you just saw the man practising medicine. You did not see the engineer’s mechanical ability; you simply saw the man successfully monkeying with a machine. And monkeying is a very poor word there. For all the possible monkeying that a monkey could do wouldn’t get the machine fixed. The policeman made an arrest, but he couldn’t show you or the fighting pair his authority. And nobody could see the lawyer’s legal knowledge or the politician’s ‘pull’. You didn’t have to see those things. You saw what we call an effect, something done. You knew what was the cause of that effect, and that cause was the knowledge, skill, special ability of each man — which is roughly what we mean by a principle. Get it?

How About the Writer?

‘What about the man who had been scribbling on the piece of paper? Suppose he threw it away in frustration and then you walked over and picked up the paper that he had thrown away. And it was a scrap of lovely poetry, clearly original. Then you would say, “I know he is a poet.”

‘So we can see that by examining effects we can begin to see causes. By examining effects we acknowledge the world of Principles. We, and our primitive ancestors, have been examining various bodies and have concluded that a living human body has something extra, another principle or cause which helps to explain the difference effects that being a human involves.’

‘So now we are looking at what?

Bodies.

‘Just a group or cluster of bodies, various kinds of them. In the visible world we have a wide range to pick from, haven’t we? Everything from pebbles to philosophers, from geraniums to germs to gems, from orchids to oysters, from crystals to butterflies and crypts and crustaceans.’

‘Now let’s choose a few from this varied range of bodies and make a picture.

‘A rock lies under a wide-reaching tree on the side of a hill; near it sheep are feeding, while on the rock sits a shepherd watching his sheep, counting the profits he’ll make when the ewes have lambed and out of the joy of his heart singing a song of his own contriving.

Pastoral.

‘So, whether they were assembled by a pastoral painter or by our imagination, we have in one spot a rock, a tree, some sheep, and a shepherd. Each of these things is quite obviously very different from all the others. The rock lies there, slowly corroded by the passing storms and the heat of the sun. It is, as we say, inanimate. The sheep browse about; they feed on the grass, which is turned by the power of their digestion into flesh and bone and the curling wool upon their backs; they will breed lambs that will be reproductions of themselves, complete in all details; and if these sheep have some accident or other, a little care and nursing will make it possible for their health to be restored.

‘Over them hangs the beautiful tree. Its roots reach far down into the soil, and the chemical elements that it pulls out of the earth are incorporated into its growing branches. It drops acorns to the ground, and these acorns are capable of becoming other trees. An axe may damage its bark, but if the damage is not too great, the wound will heal and the tree will continue to thrive.

Sheep and Shepherd.

‘Yet the sheep have things which the tree doesn’t have. The sheep recognise their master when he calls. They have a thousand instincts that they exercise without training or experience of any sort. They move about under the impulse of cold and heat and hunger and the desire for water. They follow their master with the fidelity of Mary’s famous lamb.

‘Finally, we come to the man. He’s a poet at heart, a maker of songs. He sees the sheep as a means for making money, and for that reason he has decided to breed them. He sits in the shade and thinks of profit, of God, of the sheep he’ll have ten years from now (sheep that have no present existence), of love and beauty, the while he creates a new song out of the sounds that he’s heard around him.

The Cat.

‘Or imagine a sleek Persian cat wandering into a living room. The cat moves towards the venerable old lady of the house sitting in her rocking chair, a rose corsage in her blouse, freshly picked from the garden, and, with a spring, the cat is in her lap and curls, purring, on her knee.

‘Here you have a charming proof for the existence of the soul. There is the beautiful chair in which she is sitting; there is the corsage of roses that she is wearing; there is the purring cat on her knee; and there is the lady herself.

‘That comes close to being a fair summary of the visible world:

‘The inanimate world the chair.

‘The vegetable world the roses.

‘The animal world the cat.

‘The world of human beings the lady herself.

Ninety-eight Cents Worth.

‘Now, as far as the chemical elements that go to make up the human parts of our two pictures — the shepherd on the hillside and the lady and her cat — there is not a great deal of difference. You remember the old chemical analysis of a man, don’t you? The fat in his body would make half a dozen bars of soap, the sulphur would furnish heads for a box of matches, the chalk would whitewash a chicken coop, the iron would make a ‘ten-penny nail’. I think the total value of my body, chemically speaking, is about ninety-eight cents in a 1940’s grocery store.

‘Horrible? Yes; if that were all there was to it, it would be horrible. And, according to the men who deny that man has a soul, that is all, and it is horrible.

Not the Same.

‘But all you have to do is study the various kinds of objects, and you’ll see that they are not the same and that chemistry cannot explain the whole of man. The rock is explained by inorganic chemistry. Rocks are acted upon; they do not act. There is no principle in them to make them act. Dirt may pile on a rock and make it larger, but the rock

does not feed on that earth. If a rock is cracked or smashed, it stays broken. And by no stretch of the imagination can you conceive of a little chip of a rock taking root and growing into another large rock. Nor can you conceive of the rock's giving birth to a litter of little stones while it itself remains unchanged.

Alive.

'Now let's glance at the tree under which the sheep are pasturing. That tree does things that the rock cannot possibly do. We say that it falls within the field of organic chemistry. The tree grows by taking into itself chemicals that it makes part of itself. It has the power of healing its own wounds, if those wounds are not fatal — as when some lover carves a heart and initials in its side or an automobile crashes into it and destroys branches and bark. And, finally, the tree drops seeds that are capable of becoming like the tree from which they fell.

'What is true of the rock is true of the chair in which the little lady is sitting. And what is true of the tree was true of her roses until they were picked from their bush.

'Now let's take a look at the sheep. The grass that they eat, they make part of themselves. A cut they receive from a barbed-wire fence is healed by the quick action of their own blood. And in time they will be nuzzling the little lambs that they have developed inside their bodies.

'And, again, what is true of the sheep is true of the cat.

Instinct.

'Did you notice with your mind's eye that the cat entered the room, moved towards the fire, singled out his mistress — though she is wearing a new dress that he perhaps never saw before — and go where he knew he'd be petted and played with? Did you ever see a cat stalk a mouse? or hunt a bird? or protect its newborn kittens? or do any of the thousand other things that we call instinctive? Did you ever see an ant build its city? an oriole build its nest? a duck find its way from the north to the far south? a dog sniff his master and fawn upon him? a bear go into his hole for the winter?

'Now we maintain that these things that a tree does, but that a stone cannot do, show that the tree is alive and the stone dead. There is a life principle in the tree which makes the tree capable of actions that a stone could never perform. We see that cats and sheep have instincts that no tree or plant possesses. Hence there is some principle in animals which makes them different from vegetation. We watch effects, and we see that those in the animal are so different from those in vegetation that we conclude that the cause must be different. We recognise the doctor's medical knowledge by watching him act. We recognise the life principle in a tree by observing the effects in that tree. When we watch a dog in action, we know that a dog differs from a tree. And in each case we come to know the cause from the effects we see. Remember that a principle really means a source, a cause, a beginning. Clear?

Easy to See, But —,

'The thing is fundamentally simple, the sort of thing one recognised just by looking at it. It is not easy to make easy things seem easier. Anybody looking at a lizard knows it is different from a rosebush, just as a cow surely is different from the moon over which it jumped, and Jack's dog different from the beanstalk that Jack climbed.

'Surely I have made it clear that chemically these apparently different things were not vastly different. Yet what they did was so different that some essential principle in each of them must make them different — the rosebush different from the rock, the lizard very different from the rosebush it used for its sunny promenades.

We Come to Man.

'Now, looking at the shepherd on the rock more pleasantly, at the lady with her cat, we find that both of them are capable of things that we never even vaguely associate with an animal, much less with a rock, a rose, or an oak tree.

'Do you know of a rock or a rose that ever threw a dish at its husband's head if he had said something inappropriate?

'Now can you tell me what humans, you humans, us humans, do that makes them so different?

'And not merely so different, but so different from rocks, roses, and the kittens which might purr in your lap. The

things you do are really very much the same as the things other human beings do.

All and More.

‘You have, first of all, the essential chemicals of the mineral kingdom.

‘You have the power of growth and healing and producing offspring like yourself, all of which is characteristic of the animal kingdom and the vegetable kingdom.

‘You have instincts that are like the instincts of the dog and the cat.

‘But everything that you have beyond that is different.

‘For you are capable of thinking.

‘You have free will. You find inside yourself, or in your soul, a divine discontent. And you are by nature a creator. You want to create things, to fashion things, to be an artist, a builder — of anything from a knitted sweater to a great novel, from a glass of jelly to an aeroplane, from a suit to a symphony, from a miniature to a house of which you will be mistress or master.

‘And these things make you very, very different from any mere animal that pastures in the fields or walks the roads or haunts the jungles of the earth.

The Something More.

‘And because even the simplest and most primitive men have realised their ability to do these things and have recognised in themselves divine discontent and the desire to improve on earth, they have always known they were different. That is why they were so sure their body, which is akin to that of the animal, was not all. That is why they knew they had some principle which produced the effects we call thinking, willing, improving, creating. That is why men were so sure they had a soul.

‘We could speak here of the Egyptian hieroglyphics we can see in the Smithsonian, particularly the little soul of a man being weighed in a balance-scale by the god of the dead. We can recall that we have heard that the Greeks thought the soul was located in the brain, “living there in a kind of advanced penthouse.” Our Latin studies show us that soul and spirit were the same word, and that spirit originally meant wind. “Anima,” also a Latin word for soul, originally meant breeze.

Soul and Breath.

‘This is not too difficult to explain. The Greeks and the Romans both knew that at the moment of death the principle by which the body thought, willed, was discontent, and capable of creation departed. Its departure was precisely what made the body dead, and hence different from a living body. They noticed that at the very end there was a final sigh, a sort of last breath, like the passing of a wind from the mouth of the dying man. That, they thought, might be the soul departing. So they used to signify soul by both ‘spiritus’ and ‘anima’, a natural enough mistake, but a rather beautiful one. At least, it indicates very clearly that these early people were sure that something in them was beyond and different from the body.

‘But, of course, they were wrong about that, since the soul is not equivalent to our mere breath.

But they knew from what Man did that he must have something that distinguishes him from other creatures that have bodies not much unlike his own. Some principle in fact. Something we Christians call the Soul.

What Makes It Work?

‘That principle we talk about may not yet be clear to you. So let us examine it further.

‘A number of years ago the magician, Hermann the Great, had a marvellous clock. It was made of transparent glass with a brass pivot in the centre. Around the edges of the face were figures that ran like the figures of any clock, from one to twelve. Hermann would take a minute hand and stick it on the pivot. Then the audience was asked to mention any date in history; let’s say someone mentioned October 17, 1833. Hermann spun the minute hand, and when it stopped, it pointed to the number that corresponded to the day of the week on which that date had fallen.

‘Now anyone watching that clock knew very clearly that the glass and brass couldn’t make a calculation like that.

I saw the clock at close range and could see nothing that might point to an explanation of how it worked. Yet it demanded that someone do a fairly complicated bit of calendar research. Then it was someone with a mind that had to stop that hand at the right number. Who? What?

Too Simple.

‘Well, the trick didn’t hold its place on Hermann’s programme very long, because it really was too simple. Off stage there was an assistant who had the necessary information and charts before him. He also had a series of electrical connections, one attached to each of the numbers. A person in the audience shouted out a date. As Hermann placed the minute hand on the pivot, the assistant consulted the proper chart and found the correct day of the week. Hermann spun the hand. The assistant touched the connection that shot electricity into the correct number, and by the power of electro-magnetism the hand was stopped dead on the correct number.’

‘Well might you say, “How ridiculously simple!”

‘Yes; isn’t it? But the audience saw only the glass-and-brass clock. They had to argue to a principle that they could not see, a principle which did two things: From a given date it calculated the day on which that date fell, and it exercised some force that stopped the clock.’

It Needed a Principle.

‘The audience knew that glass and brass can’t reason, calculate, or will. So there had to be some principle — even though they didn’t know what it was — that thought and willed. Simple, but no more simple than the reasoning process that taught men that chemical elements, however complicated, don’t think or will, and that there must be some principle capable of performing these extremely difficult processes.

‘Then, all men, looking at their own bodies and comparing them with the non-thinking stone, the non-feeling tree, the non-rational animal, argued that they themselves must surely have a principle that thought and willed, was not part of their body, and lived even after their body had died. Correct?

‘But now you might be tempted to say, “Interesting, but that still doesn’t prove anything, does it? There may be other explanations.’

The Process Called Thinking.

‘But just a minute. Let’s look at this process called thinking.

A Writer at Work.

‘Let’s say that a writer is sitting at his desk, deep in the process of creating a book. Now, creating is hardly the correct word, for creating means making something out of nothing — whereas too many writers make nothing out of something. I’m having a little joke here.

‘A writer doesn’t make something out of nothing, but he does make something out of a good many other somethings. You see, writing a book is a most elaborate process. The author draws on his memory; he uses some of his own experiences; he refers to books he has read and observes the actions of people in various localities; he puts together words the meanings of which he has learned in a thousand different ways. And when he is finished, this one man has built out of a thousand different sources a unit which is his book.

‘That’s a pretty elaborate process. We can reduce it to something that looks simpler, but really isn’t.

Wanted: a Sentence.

‘Let’s take a ‘simple’ sentence, from an editorial:

‘Man’s liberty is so much the white light of his life, the greatest gift of God, that we feel like crying aloud, ‘let’s fight for it!’ and so we should.’

‘Now, the human brain is not unlike an intricate filing case. Into the various sections a man slips the experiences of his life, sounds, colours, nouns, verbs, pains, pleasures, motor reflexes that he has developed through practice. Part of his brain is working while he is talking, another part when he walks. The brain is so compartmented that injury to it

often results in queer twists. One small sector of the brain is hurt, and suddenly the man can't distinguish colours, or he loses the power to recall nouns. Like Alice in the mysterious woods. She couldn't even remember the noun tree.

Pigeonholes.

'Really, the brain is like a desk full of pigeonholes, and the more the specialists come to know about the brain, the better are they able to localise in definite sections definite types of memories, experiences, factual data, and the like.

'Now, let's go back to our author for a minute. Let's say that he is sitting before a desk that has pigeonholes. His filing cabinets are along the wall. He keeps notebooks in which he jots down names, descriptions, bits of unusual conversations that he means to use in his book. He goes to work on that book. Let's watch him: He pulls some notes out of a cubbyhole; he roots around until he gets precisely what he wants out of a file; he thumbs through his notebooks in search of data; he goes to his library and jerks a quotation out of a book.

'Then he, the one person, puts all this together and makes the one, unified, coherent, logical book, a book so uniquely his own that, by observing its style, we know precisely who wrote it.

Quite a Process.

'Now, let's take that sentence again. It's really an excellent one. To put that sentence together, the man who wrote it and we who understood it had to pull a deal of things out of our minds.

'First, we pulled some nouns: man, liberty, light, life, gift, God, and so on.

'Then from another part of our brain we jerked the colour white and our experience with light.

'From our auditory memory, our memory of sounds, we pulled the idea of crying aloud.

'We have never seen God, but we pulled out a concept of Him.

'And, finally, we issued a call to battle, to do something about it, to get the good old will in operation: 'Let's fight for it!' Remember?

Packed.

'Our author was the only one who compiled all the data in his book. All right. Who compiled all the data we've just checked over in that one sentence?

'Why, the writer of the editorial of course. And you and I, the listeners.

'But which part of the author? Which part of you? From various parts of your brain; from various emotional experiences something pulled together into a single sentence the most varied ideas, concepts, brain phantasms. Who? What?

'Are you still a little foggy? Here is a clue. The unifying principle is called the soul.

Words Into Messages.

'Let's take another comparison. You've seen teletype machines in telegraph offices. Over the wire comes a message. It is printed out word by word. It rolls out of the machine and into a basket. But it becomes a message only when someone picks it up and reads it, putting the words together to make a completed piece of news.

'All right. The words are lying around up there in your brain; phantasms, we call them. What power in you puts these phantasms together into a message? What power takes out of the different compartments of your brain experiences, colours, sounds, words, and so on, and unites them into one logical, intelligible message?

'We call that power the soul. And unless you grant the existence of the soul, it is simply impossible to explain how the author of that sentence managed to convey sense, and it is impossible to explain the fact that we can listen to or read separate words and unite them into a single, clear sentence.

'But if we have a soul that acts like the author who pulls out of the filing cabinet of his brain memories, experiences, impressions, words, pictures, then everything is simple. The soul is the power by which we think. It is the principle of unity that pulls all our scattered experiences together into intelligible thoughts. It is the real author of our books and our sentences. It is the source of our intelligent thinking.

Chemical Brain.

‘But hey! you will soon find yourself asking, why couldn’t it be the brain that does the thinking?’

‘I will answer: “Why couldn’t the filing cabinet put the novel together without any help from the novelist?”’

‘You’ll then reply: “No. that’s not the same. The brain is alive. The filing cabinet is dead, inanimate.”’

‘Ah, but our brain is still essentially a composite of chemicals, ‘dead,’ inanimate chemicals. More than that; the various parts of the brain are very much parts — that is, they are separated one from another. There has to be some power, some faculty that pulls together into one spot, one sentence, one idea, one judgment or message that lies in these various parts. The author is the power that pulls the parts from his filing cabinets and makes his unified book. The soul is the power that unifies what lies in our brain, which is our most elaborate but widely-extended filing case.

‘I suppose that’s why while we say, ‘my heart beats’ and ‘my feet dance’, we say simply, ‘I think’.

‘But while we can say, ‘I dance’, thinking is particularly applied to the soul, to the essential someone that is I. We don’t say, ‘my brain thinks’. But because the soul in man is not only the principle of his thought processes, but the principle of all his vital activities, the source of his natural life, we simply say, ‘I dance’ or ‘I walk’ and even ‘I sleep’, though we know it is primarily our feet that dance and walk and our body that sleeps.

‘In other words, ‘I’ am my soul. ‘I’ tell my feet to dance . . . And I dance! ‘I’ tell my feet to walk . . . And I walk! ‘I’ decide to go to bed to sleep . . . And I sleep!’

A New Proof.

‘Notice that I mentioned deciding to go to bed. This raises the whole subject of our Wills. The fact that we have a will is another proof that we have a soul. ‘Thinking’ is one proof for the existence of the soul, the unifying principle another, and ‘choosing’ is yet another.

‘I have given you all a lot to think about and you might need a little time to digest it all.

The Soul Not a ‘Function of Matter’.

‘So, what ground is there, in reason, for believing that the soul is anything but a “function of matter”, or that it survives death?’

‘Scientists tell us that our mental processes are all conditioned by the motions of atoms in our brains: we all know that the action of what we call our “immaterial” part is strictly dependent upon the state of our bodies. All our thinking is based on sense-perceptions which we gain through the body: and our state of mind depends largely on the state of our health, our physical habits, age, and so on. Accidental changes in physical structure, may transform a sane man into a melancholic, a victim of sex-mania or a criminal lunatic. Our mind grows with our body, works through our body, and ceases to work when it sleeps; it is affected by its ills and old age. Why shouldn’t we believe, then, that it is a “function of matter” which perishes when the material body dies?’

‘This is the case of the pure materialist — that what we call “mental phenomena” are simply due to a lot of chemical changes. Of course, nobody in their senses is going to deny the observed facts which prove that the mind gains its impressions and expresses itself through the body, so that physical defects often involve defects of impression and expression. If a piano is out of tune, or has dumb notes, I can’t play a Beethoven Sonata decently on it, however great a musician I am: but that doesn’t prove that the music is “a function of the piano” and that there isn’t any musician. And if the piano was closed, or smashed, or burnt, the player would still be alive, wouldn’t he? And he might find other means of uttering his melodies, even if he had no piano?’

‘So, the body is the instrument, the soul the player, so to speak. Do I really need to drag in the notion of a governing, immaterial soul?’

Pure Materialism Refutes Itself.

‘Yes indeed. Let’s suppose that we are just matter, as some suggest, and our thoughts are just chemical processes in the brain. I believe that the world is round: a planet moving round the sun. You, on the contrary, are an unenlightened person, like the late President Kruger, of the Transvaal. You believe it’s flat, with the sky set over it like a soup-tureen. One of those beliefs is true and the other false — you agree?’

‘But let’s look a bit closer. What do those mental phenomena, those “beliefs” amount to? I have a chemical process in my brain which has produced one — you have a process which has produced the other. In what way, then, is one “truer” than the other? All you can say, as a materialist is that both exist as thought-processes.

‘On the premises of materialism, I don’t see how you can even say that the “thought-processes” exist and mean anything; because that judgment itself is just a chemical product of your brain, and there’s no meaning in calling it “true” or “false”. And, in the final analysis, you can’t use any process of reasoning, or establish any fact whatever.

‘Even the words “I have reason to suppose” has no meaning. In fact, the proposition that the mind is simply a material product refutes itself.

‘It reminds me of a story I once read in a book about an artist-lunatic who wanted to paint the universe. When he finished his picture, he saw it wasn’t complete — you see, he was still outside the picture himself. So then, he painted himself in. But then, there was the “self” outside still distinct from the image in the picture and so the problem of finishing the picture could never be solved. In the same way, if we describe ourselves as “material beings” we give no account of our own belief or knowledge that this is true. We can’t be the matter and also the knowing that we are the matter.

‘Now, if I can’t know my mind as matter, how can I know it as mind? When I think of myself, aren’t I making another “self” like our lunatic artist?

‘No we are not. When the thinking subject is once admitted as something different from a mere chemical process, truth and reason have a real meaning: you can think thoughts and form judgments about either the material world or yourself. The mind is conscious and self-conscious, which means that it can double back and think of itself; and all the while it is aware that it is both the thinking subject and the object thought of — it isn’t just “painting a picture”. Incidentally, the fact that the mind can do this is another reason for believing that it is non-material. ‘That is to say, no material action that we know has any resemblance to this action of the mind. A knife doesn’t cut itself, an eye doesn’t look at itself, a mouth doesn’t eat itself.

“Energy Patterned Into Worlds.”

‘Thus, we seem to have got to the point of knowing definitely that mind isn’t just a by-product of matter. But couldn’t, some say, they be just different aspects of the same phenomenon — some stuff which isn’t either mental or material?

‘A lot of scientists have got the notion that the distinction between mind and matter is what they call “departmental thinking”. They run together, it is said. Nature is “energy patterned into worlds,” and it includes purpose, working itself up into organic life and then into conscious, thinking life.

‘But in that case, the lowest matter must be spiritual as well as material; because the original “stuff” of the universe must contain the mind which becomes manifest later. Such a position is untenable.

‘You can’t have that, you know. The word “energy” that is here used is pinched from the material world — and applied to a quite different kind of activity — and the difference is quietly ignored. The idea of unconscious “power” and “energy” having purpose and aim is a lot of nonsense; and it’s only made plausible by slipping in words which suggest an Agent — a real mind — behind the scene. To call “mind” and “matter” the same thing is to use words which haven’t any real meaning. A real egg you can eat, and my thoughts about an egg remain as different as ever. And don’t chuck the word “evolution” at me, either — because it’s just another magic word which explains nothing at all. If you say matter and material energy engender life and mind in the course of a long and complicated process, it is like saying that if you leave a top hat standing around long enough its “purposive activity” will produce a rabbit — without the aid of a magician! Only one thing is apparent to me: that some people are desperately anxious to dispense with the magician somehow, even if they have to invent the weirdest fancies to do it! All this is an attempt to escape from the necessity of admitting the existence of God.

‘Yes — the habit of “Theophobia” is pretty deeply-rooted in the thought of a number of our scientific thinkers but it’s not the sort of “Fear of God” which is the beginning of wisdom!

‘Can you now see that mind and matter must be distinct?

Looking At A Picture.

‘I just want to emphasise again that every attempt to translate the processes of thought into terms of mere matter makes nonsense. Consider the painter of a modernist picture, and a number of spectators looking at it. There’s the picture — an arrangement of colour on canvas. There’s the subject (say, a village street). Both these are undoubtedly material. Then there’s the thought of the artist as he originally conceived it — and as it grew in the course of the painting. Then there are the thoughts of the spectators — of whom three don’t understand it, one thinks it’s something else, one has a vague idea, and one has an understanding somewhere near the artist’s. How can all this be conveyed in terms either of a materialistic philosophy or one which regards mind and matter as one? All these thoughts are real, yet none of them affect the artist, or the picture by way of material modification. Are we to make one material object of the picture and all the thoughts about it — with their various accuracies and inaccuracies? Of course not.

‘Consider how the human mind works. It can think of itself and it can also think of anything else in nature; it draws “universal ideas” from the world of matter, and thereby attains to knowledge of the world of reality and the laws that govern it. It can devise signs to preserve the records of the past: it can throw itself ahead to contemplate future possibilities. It can deal in forms which could never materialize — mental abstractions, mathematical symbols, and so forth.

The Candle Flame.

‘But, even if the mind is immaterial, as we have now established, need we suppose it to be undying? After all, it is born with the body and lives with it, gathering sense impressions as the raw material for it to work upon. Isn’t it, in effect, “extinguished like a candle flame, when the candle is worn down”?

‘But once again, we’re comparing the action of the mind with something material to which it has no real resemblance. A candle flame is exactly what we showed that the mind wasn’t — the effect of a chemical process, which can continue only as long as there are suitable materials to be consumed — or transformed.”

A Question Of Identity.

‘At this point we’ve seen that the mind enables us, so to speak, to stand outside ourselves as spectators. Now I want you to look at this faculty a bit more closely. I think of myself, and I throw myself back into the past. I remember how I used to play alone in the spare-room at home, the first lessons I had from my mother: country holidays and school life as a boy: the friendships and troubles of adolescence: my life at University — sunny afternoons on the sports-fields; my army days and difficulties; my return after overseas service — life in the big city and then in the country, past happy days. I go into my room and turn over some old photographs — a family group: a boy in a sailor suit — that’s me. Again, a dishevelled looking youth with glasses and untidy hair — me again.

‘Well — you may verily ask what is this, “Me”? I’ve changed my body — every cell of it — many times since the first “me” I remember, peeping over the table to look at a silver sphinx ornament on a fruit dish. My character has changed, too, and a lot of my opinions and tastes. But there’s something that hasn’t changed — a unity that has persisted through all this flow of physical changes and mental developments, linking them together. So, you see, I’m not just a “coagula” — a bundle of changing sensations and experiences. They dissolve, I remain the same.

Growth And Decay.

‘But, so it seems, your mind DOES grow — and is liable to decay, if you live to be old, before the end.

‘Yet think more carefully. What do we mean by “growth” and “decay” when we talk of the mind? Again, we’re using terms derived from the material world. The child’s mind “grows” not because it becomes bigger like its body, but because it gathers understanding and knowledge of itself and the world, and learns how to express itself through the body, and the instrument it uses is improving all the time. On the contrary, the old person’s mind “decays” because the instruments it uses are no longer working so well. The brain’s fatigue weakens attention — the sense perceptions grow weaker, the association between events is confused, and sometimes strange phantasmagoria of the brain stampede the processes of thought. That’s what we mean by “thinking badly” . . . The thinking subject is either there, or not there; we can’t think of it growing or decaying in the sense that the body does. And — this is the point — it can’t die after the fashion of the body, either.

How Could The Soul Die?

‘The death of the body takes place when the material law of dissolution operates upon it. First, the physical organism no longer functions as a single entity; then it begins to fall apart and undergo transformation. Now this “breaking up” can’t happen to the mind, because there’s no material to be broken. We can’t suppose that it depends for its existence on the body, without making it a quality of the body or a “function of matter” — which, I think we agreed, leads us into absurdity. How, then, could it perish?

‘Could it be annihilated?

‘The first answer to that is that Nature does not know such a thing as “annihilation”. If you extinguish a candle flame, the elements composing it change their form, but they are still somewhere in the atmosphere. A burnt paper has become ash — a dead body enters, by degrees, into the substance of the earth, of plants, of other animal bodies as the time passes. The universe moves and changes — but nothing is utterly lost. What reason is there for making an exception of the human spirit? What could cause this ‘annihilation’? God could do it — couldn’t He?

‘Theoretically, of course, He has the power to do so, but it is difficult to see what reason could lead Him to reverse the creative act in this particular case — and destroy mind after making it naturally immortal. If you have formed any clear idea of God — “the strength and stay of all creation,” and the ground of its ordered movement, irrational caprice of this kind will seem inconceivable in Him. And in any case, if anyone is a Theist, there are plenty of other reasons for believing in the immortality of the soul. I know, my good people, that you are more than Theists. You are devout Catholics. But it is useful to examine these subjects from the perspectives of those of your work-mates who do not have the faith.

Can Minds Merge?

‘So let’s admit that human reason can establish that the immaterial spirit survives the body. If I recall rightly, even J. B. S. Haldane, infidel as he is, is inclined to think that that is not improbable. Only he seems to think that the mind will lose its limitations and be merged in an “infinite mind” or something of the sort, which he suspects to exist behind Nature.

‘This reminds me of Sir Edwin Arnold’s rhapsody about the Buddhist Nirvana — “The dewdrop slips into the shining sea.” As a poetical image, of course, Arnold’s line is very charming — but it doesn’t add much to our knowledge of the soul’s destiny. We know that material drops can slip into a great ocean — but the merging of immaterial minds into a great mind is another question entirely.

‘First of all — what do we mean by “mind”? We have used it, up till now, pretty freely to describe thinking persons — ourselves and others. We speak of our mind or our reason instead of the thinking self, just as we speak of our will when we mean the self which wills and chooses or the imagination when we mean the self that imagines. But we have no right to solidify these abstractions as though they could exist unattached of their own accord. There is no such thing as a mind which is not the mind of a person — the “thinking” can’t just rush off on its own like a genie out of a bottle. Still less can it combine with a multitude of other thinkings to form a composite “infinite mind”. All that’s just false imagery, which we derive from material things like the sea or clouds, which have parts. If the spiritual being that thinks is wiped out as a person, then his mind is wiped out. If the mind is undying by nature, then the thinking person is also undying.

‘But Christians, and all theists, believe in an Infinite Mind — “In whom we live and move and have our being”.

‘We believe in Infinite Wisdom, Will, Power, Truth, Goodness and Love — but all these attributes reside in the Infinite Being of a Personal God. All things live “within” in the sense of being held in existence by His creative power — but not in the sense that their being or not being adds or subtracts anything from His reality. My thinking self, my mind, is God-created: it is not part of God. God does not grow, or change, with the growth and changing of the universe.

‘Finally, my dearly beloved brethren, now that we can see with what solid evidence human reason can bring forward as to the existence of the soul, let us now conclude by soberly answering the question posed by Our Lord: *“For what does it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, and suffer the loss of his own soul? Or what exchange shall a man give for his soul?”* (Matthew 16:26)
