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# THE SOUL WHAT IS IT ?

*LIGHT* FROM MODERN  
SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY

*By*

*John A. O'Brien, Ph.D., LL.D.*



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# The Soul: What Is It?

Light From Modern Science and Philosophy

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The University of Notre Dame

- I. THE SOUL: WHAT IS IT?
- II. IS THE WILL FREE?
- III. SHALL WE LIVE AGAIN?

*What doth it profit a man, if he gain the whole world,  
and suffer the loss of his own soul? Matt. xvi. 26.*

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## CHAPTER I

### GOD'S IMAGE IN MAN

*"Two things," the wise man said, "fill me with awe;  
The starry heavens and the moral law."  
Nay, add another wonder to thy roll—  
The living marvel of the human soul!*

—Henry van Dyke, *Stars and the Soul*.

SUPREME among all the values on this earth stands the human soul. It ranks next to God. Indeed it is God's image in man and His pledge of human immortality. "Of all things which a man has," observes Plato, "next to the gods, his soul is the most divine and most truly his own."<sup>1</sup> Because he possesses a soul, man may be said to be an amphibian, capable of living in two worlds—in the world of time and in that of eternity. Destroy his body and his spirit remains unquenched, destined for an eternal life with God in heaven. It is this spiritual nature which elevates man above all the beasts of the field and renders him a being of unique dignity and of transcendent worth.

"Whether or not," observes John Erskine, "the philosophers care to admit that we have a soul, it seems obvious that we are equipped with something or other which generates dreams and ideals, and which sets up values."<sup>2</sup> S. T. Cole-ridge goes to the very nub of the question when he says: "Either we have an immortal soul or we have not. If we have not, we are beasts, the first and wisest of beasts, it may be; but still true beasts. We shall only differ in degree, and not in kind; just as the elephant differs from the slug. But by the concession of all the schools, or almost all, we are not of the same kind as beasts—and this also we say from our own con-

<sup>1</sup> *Laws*, Bk. IV, sec. 252.

<sup>2</sup> Durant, *On the Meaning of Life*, p. 39.

sciousness. Therefore, it must be the possession of a soul within us that makes all the difference.”<sup>3</sup>

Long before Coleridge, the Roman philosopher, Seneca, pointed to the soul as the source of man’s true nobility. “The soul alone,” he says, “renders us noble. . . . Do you ask where the Supreme Good dwells? In the soul. And unless the soul be pure and holy, there is no room in it for God.”<sup>4</sup> A Teacher greater, however, than Plato, Erskine, Coleridge or Seneca, reveals to us the surpassing value of the human soul. Making this the focal point of His gospel to mankind, Jesus Christ, the divine Founder of the Christian religion, declares: “What doth 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?”<sup>5</sup>

Pile up all the riches and treasures of this earth, and place them on one side of the scales. Add to them all the honor, glory and fame of this world. On the other side of the scales, put the soul of the most ragged and neglected waif that roams our city streets. That soul will outweigh all the earthly treasures on the other side. Why? Because it is spiritual and will live when all the things of earth are but dust and ashes.

### Recognized by Primitive Man

Belief in the existence of a principle distinct from the body stretches back into the remote past till it is lost in the twilight of antiquity. It appears as an almost inevitable inference from the observed facts of life. In the lapse of consciousness during sleep and in swooning, in the mysterious dreams which haunt his sleep, even in the common operations of imagination and memory, which abstract a man from his bodily presence, the lowly savage perceives the existence of something besides his visible body. That something is within the body, he realizes, but to a large extent is independent of it, and leads a life of its own.

In the rude psychology of the savage, the soul is often

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<sup>3</sup> *Table Talk*, Jan. 3, 1823.

<sup>4</sup> *Epistulae ad Luciliūm, Epis.* xlv. 5 and lxxxvii. 21.

<sup>5</sup> *Matt.* xvi. 26.

depicted as traveling to and fro during dreams and trances, and after death haunting the vicinity of its body. Almost invariably it is thought of as something volatile, a perfume or a breath. The Samoans have a name for the soul which means "that which comes and goes." Other savage peoples, such as the Dyaks and Sumatrans, have the custom of binding various parts of the body with cords during illness to prevent the escape of the soul. In short, the scientific study of primitive peoples shows that the belief in a soul, distinct from the body, like the belief in a Supreme Being, was well-nigh universal among them.

### In Ancient Philosophy

In the philosophy of the ancients, the soul has had likewise a long and eventful history. In the *Rig-Veda* and other liturgical books of India are found numerous references to the coming and going of *manas*—mind or soul. In Indian philosophy, whether Brahminic or Buddhistic, with its various systems of metempsychosis, the distinction between soul and body is so accentuated as to make the bodily life a mere transitory episode in the existence of the soul.

In Greek philosophy, Plato focussed attention upon the soul. In his *Phaedo*, he bases his argument for the immortality of the soul on the nature of intellectual knowledge interpreted on the theory of reminiscence. Soul and body are conceived as distinct orders of reality, with bodily existence involving a kind of violence to the life of the soul. Thus the body is viewed as the "prison" or "tomb" of the soul. Aristotle's definition of the soul as "the first entelechy (activating principle) of a physical organized body potentially possessing life" stresses the closeness of the union of soul and body. He recognizes the spiritual element in thought and describes the active intellect νοῦς ποιητικός as separate and impassable.

The Stoics conceived the soul as a breath pervading the body, calling it a particle of God ἀσπασμα τοῦ Θεοῦ. In Epicureanism the atomist theory of Leucippus and Democritus was widely held. This represented the soul as consisting of the finest grained atoms in the universe, finer even

than those of wind and heat. Thus they explained the exquisite fluency of the soul's movements in thought and sensation.

In the Old Testament the distinct reality of the soul is clearly taught. Later Jewish thought was greatly influenced by Philo of Alexandria who infused into it many Platonic concepts. He taught the immediately divine origin of the soul, its pre-existence and transmigration, contrasting the *pneuma*, or spiritual essence, with the soul proper, the source of vital phenomena. He revived in Hebrew philosophy the old Platonic Dualism, attributing the origin of sin and evil to the union of spirit and matter.

### In Christian Philosophy

It remained for Christianity to purge these ancient philosophies of their vagaries and errors and to bring their scattered elements of truth into full focus. The teaching of Christ tended to center all interest in the spiritual side of man's nature, making the salvation of the soul the supreme issue of human existence. The dualism of body and soul is explicitly recognized and their values are frequently contrasted, as in the passage: "Fear ye not them that kill the body, and are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him that can destroy both soul and body in hell."<sup>6</sup>

St. Thomas Aquinas developed the philosophy of the soul into the form substantially held by the Schoolmen today. We summarize the four principal points in his doctrine thus:

1. The rational soul, which is one with the sensitive and vegetative principle, is the form of the body.

2. The soul is a substance, but an incomplete substance. By this is meant that it has a natural aptitude and exigency for existence in the body, in conjunction with which it makes up the substantial unity of human nature.

3. While connaturally related to the body, it is itself absolutely simple. This means it is of an unextended and spiritual nature. It is not completely immersed in matter, as

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<sup>6</sup> Matt. x. 28.



its higher operations are intrinsically independent of the organism.

4. The rational soul is produced by special creation, at the moment when the organism is sufficiently developed to receive it. The vital principle has merely vegetative powers in the first stage of embryonic development. Then a sensitive soul educed from the evolving potencies of the organism, comes into being. Later on this is replaced by the rational soul, which is essentially immaterial and so demands a special creative act. This last point is now generally abandoned by modern Scholastic philosophers who hold that a completely rational soul is infused into the embryo at the first moment of its existence.<sup>7</sup>

### Universal Belief

This brief historical review brings into clear relief the universality of the belief of mankind in a soul distinct from the body. Like the belief in a Supreme Being, this universal conviction of mankind is the result of the simple spontaneous application of the principle of causality to the observed facts of life. While the concept of the soul has differed widely in details among peoples in various stages of development and civilization, the core of all of them is that something, distinct from the body, exists within it, and is independent, at least in some of its actions, of the body.

The fact of the matter is, that it is impossible for any one, ancient or modern alike, to look inward upon himself without being led to think of a thinking, aspiring agent who is not completely identified with flesh and blood and bones or any form of matter under the sun. Call that principle by which one thinks, ψυχή, πνεῦμα, *anima*, *ego*, *I*, *soul*, or any other name, the reality underlying all of them remains. Man can no more divest himself of the conviction of a unitary principle underlying his manifold thoughts than he can divest himself of the consciousness of his own identity amidst all the ebb and flow of his mental life.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Soul*, by Michael Maher and Joseph Boland, in *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

## CHAPTER II

### THE SOUL: SUBSTANTIAL AND SIMPLE

*The human soul is a silent harp in God's quire, whose strings need only to be swept by the divine breath to chime in with the harmonies of creation.*

—H. D. Thoreau, *Journal*, August 10, 1838.

WE come now to a consideration of the nature of the human soul. We shall treat briefly of its substantiality, simplicity, spirituality, freedom, and immortality.

The soul may be defined as the subject of our mental life, the ultimate principle by which we feel, think, and will, and by which our bodies are animated. The term *mind* generally denotes this principle as the subject of our conscious states, while *soul* denotes the source of our bodily activities as well. For all practical purposes they are used as interchangeable terms.

#### The Substantiality of Soul

*The human mind or soul is a substantial principle.* By this we mean that the ultimate basis of our conscious life cannot be a *mode* or an *accident*. A principle is that from which something proceeds. Substance, as its etymology indicates, is that which *stands under*, or supports something else, namely, accidental modifications. We may define it as being which exists *per se*, which subsists in itself, in contrast to accident, which cannot so subsist but must inhere in another being as in a subject of inhesion.

In short, substance, "stands by itself." An accident, however, leans, clings, inheres in the subject which it modifies, and has no ground in itself for its own being. Imagine before you a piece of *rounded* wax. That shape illustrates what is meant by accident, as the roundedness could not exist by itself but needs a substance in which to inhere.

Now the ultimate foundation of our psychical existence, the last ground of our mental life, must be a substantial principle. Thought and volition do not exist by themselves. They do not spring out of a void and go floating about like cobwebs in the autumn air. They cannot declare, like Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, that they "never had no father, nor mother, nor nothing." They proceed from something and inhere in it. Where there is motion there is *something* that is moved. So likewise where there is thought, there is *somebody* that thinks. Where there is a feeling, there is a *being* which feels. In other words thinking, willing, feeling are accidental modifications of a thinking, willing, feeling subject.

This conclusion holds with equal rigor, even if states of consciousness be regarded merely as aspects of cerebral processes and not as involving the operation of a spiritual principle. For in the former case, not less than in the latter, they would still have their root in a substantial principle. Hence even a materialist, who admits the existence of sensations, cannot deny the general principle that a modification necessarily implies a subject. This ultimate substantial principle, the subject of our thinking, feeling, willing, and of all our conscious states, is what is meant by the soul.

### The Simplicity of the Soul

The human soul is a simple or indivisible, substantial principle. By this we mean that the soul, unlike the body, is neither extended nor composed of quantitative parts nor separate principles of any kind. This excludes all forms of composition, that of extended parts as well as of separate, unextended principles, whether homogeneous or heterogeneous. For the *unity of consciousness* is incompatible with a multiplicity of component elements of any kind whatsoever. Thus the soul is something *distinct from the body*. This does not mean that the soul is "a *detached* existent, *sufficient unto itself*." In thus interpreting the Scholastics, William James<sup>8</sup> and many other modern writers failed to understand the posi-

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<sup>8</sup> *Principles of Psych.*, vol. I, p. 6.

tion of the Schoolmen. In representing the latter as believing in the existence of a detached entity, sitting inside the brain and pulling the reins of action this way or that in complete independence of the bodily organism, many modern writers have made a grotesque caricature of Scholastic teaching. In refuting the existence of such an entity, they mistakenly thought they were refuting the Scholastics, whereas they were simply destroying a man of straw which they themselves had erected. Scholastic philosophy teaches that the soul, though *distinct* from the body, is actually *united* to the body to form one complete substance with it. Soul and body are *complementary parts of man*. As long as this union lasts, the soul is far from being "sufficient unto itself," it neither exists apart from the bodily organism nor acts independently of it.

The line of reasoning by which we establish the simplicity of the soul may be put into the following syllogistic form: Every composite or extended substance consists of an aggregate of distinct atoms or parts. But the subject of our conscious acts cannot consist of such an aggregate. Therefore it is not an extended or composite substance. The major premise is evident. The minor is demonstrated by a multitude of facts in our mental life, of which we shall cite a few.

### **The Simplicity of Intellectual Ideas**

One of the certain facts of our mental life is that we form various abstract ideas or concepts, such as, truth, goodness, beauty, unity, honesty. One of the abstract ideas mentioned in virtually every issue of the press these days is patriotism. That idea as well as the others mentioned are by their nature simple indivisible acts. But acts of this character cannot flow from a composite or extended substance, such as the brain. This becomes evident from a brief analysis. If such an indivisible idea as, say, patriotism, were to be produced by the brain, it would have to be produced in one of three ways. Either different parts of the idea must inhere in different parts of the brain, or each part of the brain must be the subject of an entire idea, or the whole idea must pertain to a single part of the brain.

The first alternative is untenable. Why? Because the act whereby the mind apprehends *patriotism*, *truth* and the like, is an indivisible thought. It is directly contrary to its nature to be distributed or scattered over an aggregate of separate atoms. The second alternative is equally impossible. If different cells or atoms of the brain were each the basis of a complete idea, we would have in our mind at the same time not one, but a multitude of ideas of the object. This is, however, directly contrary to the testimony of our consciousness. The third alternative likewise collapses under inspection. For if the complete idea were contained in one part or element of the brain, then this part is itself either composite or simple. If the former, then the old series of impossible alternatives again stare us in the face. If the latter, then our thesis, that the ultimate subject of thought is simple or indivisible, is established.

### **The Simplicity of the Intellectual Acts of Judgment and Inference**

We can establish the simplicity of the soul likewise from an analysis of an act of judging. Any judgment, no matter how simple, involves the comparison of at least two distinct ideas which must be simultaneously apprehended by one indivisible agent. Let us take the simple statement: "Man is mortal." If the agent which entertains the two concepts, *man* and *mortal*, is not indivisible, then we must assume that one of these concepts is held by one part and the other concept by a second part; or else that separate parts of the divisible agent are each the seat of both ideas.

In the former case, however, we cannot formulate any judgment at all. The part A entertains the idea of *man*, the different part B entertains the idea of *mortal*. But does this yield any comparison or judgment? Not any more than if my right door neighbor, John Smith, thinks of *man* and my left door neighbor, Thomas Murphy, thinks of *mortal*. What is absolutely necessary for the act of judgment is that a *single* agent should apprehend the two ideas of *man* and *mortality*,

and after comparing them should formulate the judgment: *Man is mortal.*

In the second alternative, if part A and part B each simultaneously entertained the idea of *man* and *mortal*, we should have not one but a multiplicity of judgments, which is contrary to the testimony of our consciousness.

Neither can one escape the above conclusion by conceiving our conscious states, as William James does, as "a stream of thought" without an abiding subject. How could even the simple judgment, which we have already formulated, take place? Let us say that one section of that stream, A, apprehends the idea of *man*. Another section, B, apprehends *mortal*. Now how can a judgment be formed, when the idea, *man*, is apprehended by one wave of thought, and the idea, *mortal*, is held by a different wave? There can be no escape from the conclusion that a judgment can be passed only by a *single* agent which apprehends both subject and predicate and affirms their likeness or lack of it.<sup>9</sup> The same line of reasoning establishes the simplicity of the soul from the unity of consciousness presented in acts of volition as in acts of judgment.

### Proof from Memory

The operation of memory furnishes another striking proof of the simplicity and indivisibility of the human soul. Through memory we are aware of our own abiding personal identity in the midst of all our varied experiences. We know with the most absolute certainty that we are the same persons who yesterday, a month ago, many years ago, went through experiences that are still vivid with us. Thus the writer can recall as vividly as though it were but yesterday an event that took place nearly half a century ago. As a youngster of five, he had started off for his first day at school. After going a block, he was seized with fright at the thought of that strange institution looming up before him. Turning on his heels, he fled homeward in something close to tears. Every reader can duplicate the incident with experiences of his own.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Michael Maher, S.J., *Psychology*, Stonyhurst Series. The work is distinguished for its lucidity and penetration, and we commend it highly.

Such recollections would be impossible, however, were the mind composed of successive states, or were the material organism the substantial principle in which these states inhere. It is an established fact of physiology that the constituent elements of the body are completely changed, not merely every seven years, as was formerly thought, but every few months. "None of the flesh of our body," points out Flammarion, "existed three months ago; the shoulders, face, eyes, mouth, the arms, the hair—all our organism is but a current of molecules, a ceaselessly renewed flame, a river which we may look upon all our lives, but never see the same water again."<sup>10</sup> Fleeting mental operations which did not inhere in a permanent subject could no more be remembered than could Peter recall the experiences of Paul whom he has never known or seen. It is only an indivisible principle, abiding unchanged amid the transitory experiences, that is able to afford an adequate basis for the operation of memory.

The helplessness of materialism to explain the operation of memory is well brought out by Dr. Alger: "A photographic image impressed on suitable paper and then obliterated is restored by exposure to the fumes of mercury. But if an indefinite number of impressions were superimposed on the same paper, could the fumes of mercury restore any one called for at random? Yet man's memory is a plate with a hundred millions of impressions all clearly preserved, and he can at will select and evoke the one he wants. No conceivable relationship of materialistic forces can account for the facts of this miraculous daguerreotype-plate of experience, and the power of the mind to call out into solitary conspicuousness a desired picture which has forty-nine million nine hundred and ninety-nine pictures latent lying above it, and fifty millions below it."<sup>11</sup>

How could one possibly remember experiences that took place years ago, and in the interim undergo the loss of every atom of his bodily organism and its replacement by new matter, if there is not some indivisible principle which retains its

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<sup>10</sup> Camille Flammarion in *The Proofs of Life After Death*, edited by R. J. Thompson, p. 97.

<sup>11</sup> *A Critical History of the Doctrine of a Future Life*, 10th ed., p. 628.

identity in the midst of such repeated renewals? The abiding identity of the *ego*, that knits together by the thread of memory the scattered and varied experiences which stretch from the cradle to the grave, is one of the most certain facts of the conscious life of every person. Thus the proof from memory, while simple and within the comprehension of a child, is complete and absolute in its convincing power.

### The Unity of Consciousness

The three proofs, which we have developed, may be said to be illustrations of the fundamental fact of our mental life, namely, the *unity of consciousness*. This fact is fatal to every form of materialism. By the unity of consciousness is meant that our manifold conscious states are either explicitly referred to a single indivisible unity, or are apprehended in reflection to be possible only as acts of such a simple subject. Lotze presents this fact and its implications with penetration and insight in the following brilliant passage:

“We come to understand the connection of our inner life only by referring all its events to the one *Ego* lying unchanged alike beneath its simultaneous variety and in its temporal succession. Every retrospect of the past brings with it this image of the *Ego* as the combining center; our ideas, our feelings, our efforts are comprehensible to us only as its states or energies, not as events floating unattached in a void. And yet we are not incessantly making this reference of the internal manifold to the unity of the *Ego*. It becomes distinct only in the backward look which we cast over our life with a certain concentration of collective attention. . . . It is not necessary and imperative that at every moment and in respect to all its states a Being should exercise the unifying efficiency put within its power by the unity of its nature. . . . If the soul, even if but rarely, but to a limited extent, nay, *but once* be capable of bringing together variety into the unity of consciousness, this slender fact is sufficient to render imperative an inference to the indivisibility of the Being by which it can be performed.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Microcosmus*, Bk. II, c. i. 4.



The evidence which we have presented, demonstrates the simplicity and the indivisibility of the substantial principle lying at the root of our mental life, and shows that it cannot be an extended or composite substance. Indeed, the evidence proves not merely the *simplicity* of the soul but also its *spirituality*. We shall, however, develop this latter truth with further considerations dealing with it explicitly. It is sufficient to point out here that the evidence already presented refutes the cardinal dogma of Materialism—that thought and volition are functions of the brain.

True, most modern materialists shrink from the vulgar frankness of Cabanis and Vogt, and no longer speak of thought as a “secretion of the brain.” Sloughing off many of the crudities of the older school, its modern exponents deck it out with many refinements and present in euphonious phrases a more subtle form of Materialism. We hope to make its overthrow still more complete by demonstrating explicitly that the substantial, simple, indivisible soul of man is spiritual and immaterial. For in the demonstration of the spirituality of the soul is sounded most clearly the death knell of Materialism both as a philosophy of life and as a method of interpreting the phenomena of the mind.

## CHAPTER III

### THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE SOUL

*Mount, mount, my soul! thy seat is up on high,  
Whilst my gross flesh sinks downward, here to die.*

—Shakespeare, *Richard II*, V.

THE essential dignity of man lies in his possession of a spiritual and immortal soul which reflects the nature of God. It is that spiritual nature which elevates him above all the animal kingdom and renders him a creature made in the image and likeness of the Creator. Strip a man of that spiritual soul and he would differ not in kind, but only in degree from the beasts of the field. With that likeness of the divine within him, however, man can never be permanently reduced to the status of a chattel or mere beast of burden. For that spark of the divine within him burns with a luster which no tyrant can extinguish—a luster that points to his divine origin and proclaims his divine destiny. Indeed, it heralds the essential equality of the serf or slave with the tyrant or the king who wears a crown and sits upon a gilded throne. The mark of man's true dignity and essential worth lies not in these external trappings, but in the divinely bestowed endowment of a spiritual and immortal soul.

We now undertake to demonstrate that the human soul is spiritual or immaterial. We distinguish carefully between *simplicity* and *spirituality* which are not infrequently confused. When we say that a substance is simple, we mean that it is not composed of parts. By affirming that it is spiritual, we mean that in its existence, and to some extent in regard to its operations, it is independent of matter. Thus the principle of life in lower animals is generally held by Scholastic philosophers to be a simple principle but not spiritual, because it is absolutely dependent upon the organism, and unable to exist without it.

The general line of reasoning by which we establish the spirituality of the human soul runs as follows: The human soul is the subject of various activities which are essentially immaterial or spiritual. But the subject of such spiritual operations must itself be a spiritual being. Therefore the human soul must be a spiritual being.

The minor premise is evident. Water cannot rise higher than its source. An effect cannot transcend its cause. An action cannot contain a greater perfection or a higher order of reality than is possessed by the being which is the cause of the action. If we can show that some of the operations of the human mind transcend the properties of matter then it is evident that the principle from which those operations flow must likewise transcend matter and in some respects be independent of it. Let us now look at some of the operations of the human intellect which unmistakably reach the heights of an immaterial, spiritual order of reality.

### **Comparison and Judgment**

Man may be compared to a city with five gates through each of which messengers come with reports of happenings in the outer world. The gates are the five senses. Each allows a special kind of imagery or sense impression to enter, to be carried to the intellect. Man is dependent upon the testimony of the senses of sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch for the raw material of his knowledge of the external world. Man shares these senses with many creatures of the animal kingdom.

His knowledge does not end, however, with the mere piling up of the reports of the senses. He works over these reports, classifies, analyzes, and compares them. The distinctive work of the intellect begins where the work of the senses end. Mere sense impressions would never result in judgments, comparisons, and abstract ideas, if a higher power did not enter to transmute them into purely intellectual concepts devoid of all sense attributes. A caveman could draw a picture of a monkey as G. K. Chesterton has observed, but no monkey ever drew a picture of a man.

The supra-sensuous character of the intellectual operations is clearly manifested in the acts of comparison and judgment. In comparing the rounded character of an orange and an apple, we ignore their color, taste, size and weight and, concentrating upon the single attribute of circularity, declare that attribute to exist in greater measure in the orange. While this judgment presupposes the sensations or images of both objects, it is obviously distinct from either one.

In fact, it involves an intellectual act distinct from the related impressions by which the relation subsisting between them is apprehended. In addition to the pair of compared ideas, it demands a superior force which holds them together in consciousness and examines the relationship of comparative roundness existing between them. The mere successive impingement of the sense images of an apple and of an orange could never result in the analysis of their comparative circularity, unless there be a third distinct activity of a higher order in which both are present, and which is capable of discerning, measuring, and judging the common attribute under comparison.

It is to be noted, as T. H. Green has pointed out, that "a feeling qualified by a relation of resemblance to other feelings is a different thing from an *idea* of that relation, different with all the difference between feeling and thought, between consciousness and self-consciousness."<sup>13</sup> The assumption of the materialist which obliges him to dissolve the mind into a series of conscious states devoid of all real unity renders impossible of explanation not only the persistence of personal identity in all the far-flung operations of the mind but also the formulation of the simplest act of comparison between two successive ideas. For this obviously requires the operation of a higher power, an immaterial or spiritual element, which scrutinizes, measures, and compares the specific relationship involved and passes judgment on the same. The element which in its operations thus clearly transcends the properties of matter must itself be spiritual, else the effect would transcend the cause. That spiritual immaterial element which is so

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<sup>13</sup> *Introduction to Hume's Treatise on Human Nature*, p. 213.

plainly manifested in acts of comparison and judgment is what is meant by the rational soul of man.

### **Universal and Abstract Concepts**

The operations of the mind in the formation of universal and abstract concepts likewise demonstrate the spirituality of the human soul. By abstract ideas we mean those from which all individuating notes or attributes have been abstracted, so that they reach the high plane of universal concepts which completely transcend the scope of the senses. We have, for example, ideas of honor, truth, righteousness, beauty, possibility, futurity. Did any man ever see, hear, feel, smell, taste or touch honor? Did any one ever take a walk with truth? If it be material, then it must have the properties common to matter, such as size, shape, color, weight and the like. What size is truth? What is its shape? What color is it? How much does it weigh?

The simple fact is that truth, like all abstract and universal concepts, has none of these properties. It cannot be perceived by the senses. It is arrived at by the speculative intellect which has stripped it of all individual notes or marks so that it will embrace in its universal grasp any and every truth, whether it be in science, mathematics, aesthetics, philosophy or in any conceivable domain. Our senses convey to us the image of a particular man. Images are always particular. It is the intellect which seizes upon the essential features which constitute the common nature of the class. Our consciousness of this community constitutes the universal idea.

Long ago Plato called attention to the importance of universal concepts for both philosophy and science and pointed out that they transcend the scope of the senses. It is in the capacity to form abstract universal concepts that the dignity of man, as a thinker, lies. The concept of relationship, casual or merely concomitant, lies at the basis of all science. The capacity to form such universal concepts completely transcends the power of animals which are dependent upon the senses and instinct for their operations. Abstract concepts such as truth, goodness, righteousness, justice are spiritual realities since they

are devoid of all material attributes. But the intellect which forms such purely spiritual concepts must likewise be spiritual, else the effect would transcend the cause. "If the understanding were a corporeal substance," points out St. Thomas, "intelligible ideas of things would be received into it only as representing individual things. At that rate, the understanding would have no conception of the universal, but only of the particular, which is manifestly false."<sup>14</sup>

A purely physical organ can react only in response to physical impressions, and can only yield representations of a concrete character, portraying contingent, individual facts. Truth, honor, causality, futurity, however, do not constitute such a physical stimulus, and therefore could not be apprehended by a purely organic faculty. Accordingly the formation of abstract and universal ideas transcends the sphere of all actions depending essentially or intrinsically by their nature on a material instrument and must be acknowledged to be of a spiritual character. The acknowledgment of the spiritual character of the intellectual activity resulting in abstract concepts is, however, but another way of saying that the human soul is itself a spiritual and immaterial being.

### **Reflection and Self-Consciousness**

Even more striking is the evidence drawn from the facts of reflection and self-consciousness. It is only man who can turn his mind inward upon himself and study his own sensations, emotions and thoughts. We can analyze them, compare them with previous states, and recognize them as our own. Even while reflecting on these states we can apprehend the identity of the subject of these states. It is only because we possess a supra-sensuous faculty that we can recognize ourselves as something more than our transient states of consciousness.

While that spiritual element is evidenced in the perception of relationships, comparison, judgment, the formation of abstract and universal concepts, and in the intuition of the necessary character of certain judgments, it shines forth most con-

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<sup>14</sup> *Contra Gentiles*, Bk. II, c., XLIX, p. 3.

spicuously in the reflective observation of our own conscious states. Profound and thoughtful scholars have characterized this phenomenon as the most marvelous fact in the universe. In scrutinizing our own consciousness there occurs an instance of the complete or perfect turning of an indivisible agent back on itself. I apprehend an absolute identity between myself thinking about a situation, and myself reflecting on that thinking self. The *Ego* thinking and the *Ego* thought about is one and the same. It is at once *subject* and *object*.

This is without parallel in all the world of matter. Such an action is not merely unlike the known properties of bodies, but it is in direct and violent conflict with all the fundamental characteristics of matter. Here we have an act in absolute and flagrant contradiction with the essential nature of matter. We can understand how a piece of rubber can be bent back so one part of it will act upon another part. We can understand how one atom may repel or attract another, or in various ways influence it. But that one atom can act *upon itself*, that the same identical piece of matter can be simultaneously both agent and patient in its own case, is in plain contradiction to common experience and to all the teachings of physical science. In other words, the action of a material atom must always have for its object something other than itself.

If then this unity of subject and object, of agent and patient, is so directly opposed to the very nature of matter, certainly an organ whose every act is intrinsically dependent upon matter cannot be capable of self-consciousness or self-reflection. Self-knowledge and the unity of consciousness would be clearly impossible for such a bodily organ. Therefore there is a spiritual power within us, and the source from which it issues must be intrinsically independent of the body. This is but another way of saying that the human soul is spiritual and immaterial.

St. Thomas states this argument in the following clear and cogent manner: "Of no bodily substance is the action turned back upon the agent. But the understanding in its action does reflect and turn round upon itself; for as it understands an object, so also it understands that it does understand, and so endlessly. Hence Holy Scripture calls intelligent, subsistent

beings by the name of *spirits*, using of them the style which it is wont to use for the incorporeal Deity.”<sup>15</sup>

The evidence establishing the power of self-determination, the capacity to choose freely between various alternative courses of conduct, demonstrates not only the freedom of the will but also the spirituality of the soul. For if some of man's volitions are free, if they are not the mere resultants of forces operating upon him, there must be within him an inner center of causality, an internal agent enjoying at least a limited independence of the bodily organism. That inner principle of free volition which is able to go directly against the current of sensuous appetite and the urgings of the carnal passions is but another name for the spiritual soul of man. The evidence of that liberty we shall present in detail in the treatment of the freedom of the will. It is sufficient to indicate here the bearing of the freedom of volition in re-enforcing the previous lines of evidence demonstrating the spirituality of the soul.

Let us now turn our attention to the chief difficulties urged against the spirituality and the simplicity of the soul. As the objections to both merge into one another, we shall not undertake to separate them.

### **Thought: A Secretion of Brain?**

The coarser forms of materialism identify thought with a secretion of the brain. "There subsists," says Vogt, "the same relation between thought and the brain, as between bile and the liver." Cabanis flatly asserts: "Thought is a secretion of the brain."<sup>16</sup> Moleschott described thought as "a motion in matter" and also as a "phosphorescence" of the brain.<sup>17</sup>

The answer to objections of this sort really lies in a better understanding of the essential character of thought. To describe thought as a mere "secretion" of cerebral tissue or as a "movement" of the atoms in the brain is to betray a failure to grasp the nature of consciousness. Thought is essentially un-

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<sup>15</sup> *Contra Gentiles*, XLIX, 7 and 8.

<sup>16</sup> *La pensee est une secretion du cerveau*.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Janet, *Materialism of the Present Day*, c. i.; also Margerie, *Philosophie Contemporaine*, pp. 191-226 for an account of German and French Materialism.



extended. The concept of relationship, causal or concomitant, the judgment that man is mortal, the metaphysical concept of being, the idea of a categorical imperative, the appraisal of moral values, are by their nature devoid of all spatial relations. The organs of secretion produce products which possess weight, size, shape, color and all the attributes of matter. The operations of the organs as well as their products occupy space and can be apprehended by the external senses. Even when unperceived, they continue to exist and to run their course.

Consciousness not only has nothing in common with these, but it is the exact opposite of all these material properties. What does it look like? How much does it weigh? What is its size, its shape, its color? The microscope cannot find it. It has no weight, color, shape, or any of the properties of matter. When not perceived, it is non-existent. Its only *being* is to *be perceived*. Its *esse* is *percipi*. To talk of consciousness as a secretion of matter, or as the movement of one atom against another or in any direction whatsoever, is to miss its essential nature completely. Such descriptions of thought are crude caricatures which have about as much resemblance to the mental reality as they have to the man in the moon. Thought and matter, as John Stuart Mill has pointed out, are "not merely different, but are at the opposite poles of existence."<sup>18</sup>

Movements of atoms, secretions of organs, are in a different category of reality altogether. They have not bridged even the first gap between matter and *sensation*, to say nothing of the gap that yawns between matter and man's higher *thought* processes. Long ago Herbert Spencer pointed out the futility of attempting to reduce mental states to physical processes. "No effort," he declares, "enables us to assimilate them. That a feeling has nothing in common with a unit of motion becomes more than ever manifest when we bring them into juxtaposition."<sup>19</sup>

Dr. Tyndall thus proclaims this same truth: "The passage from the physics of the brain to the corresponding facts of consciousness is *unthinkable*. Granted that a definite thought

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<sup>18</sup> *Essays on Religion*, p. 202.

<sup>19</sup> *Principles of Psychology*, vol. I, p. 62.

and a definite molecular action in the brain occur simultaneously, we do not possess the intellectual organ, nor apparently any rudiments of the organ, which would enable us to pass by a process of reasoning from one to the other. They appear together, but we do not know why. Were our minds and senses so expanded as to enable us to see and feel the very molecules of the brain, were we capable of following all their motions, all their groupings and electric discharges, if such there be, and were we intimately acquainted with the corresponding states of thought and feeling, we should be as far as ever from the solution of the problem—How are these physical processes connected with the facts of consciousness? The chasm between the two classes remains still intellectually impassable.”<sup>20</sup>

### Thought: A Function of Matter?

Shying away from such crude descriptions of thought as “a secretion of the brain,” Huxley, Broussais<sup>21</sup> and others seek to smuggle in an interpretation, equally materialistic, but somewhat more subtle and refined. “Thought,” declares Huxley,<sup>22</sup> “is as much a function of matter as motion is.” Amplifying this a year later, he asserts: “There is every reason to believe that consciousness is a *function of nervous matter*, when that matter has attained a certain degree of organization, just as we know the other actions to which the nervous system ministers, such as reflex action, and the like, to be.”<sup>23</sup>

The use of the term “function” conceals some of the crudity of the “secretion” theory only because it is less explicit. It does not, however, render the materialistic interpretation one whit more plausible with those not contented with payment in obscure words. Function is a delightfully generic “cover-all” term, while secretion is painfully specific. But what is a “function of matter”? The only “functions” of matter which physical science recognizes consist of *movements* or *changes in matter*. Consciousness, as we have already pointed out, cannot be reduced to such movements of atoms of matter. It is some-

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<sup>20</sup> *Address to the British Association at Norwich.*

<sup>21</sup> *Macmillan's Mag.*, May, 1870.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Contemp. Rev.*, Nov., 1871.

thing utterly different and belongs in a different category of reality from physical matter, whether in rest or in movement. If we are going to make words reflect realities and not caricatures, we can speak of thought or consciousness only as a function of a reality utterly opposed in nature to all known subjects of material force.

True, when intellectual processes occur, there are movements within the neurones of the cerebrum. The movements of each of these neurones involve the movements of millions of atoms and of billions of protons and electrons. In this material sense, the brain may be said to "function" and to expend energy. But do the movements of billions and billions of particles of matter within the cerebrum and the expenditure of physical energy bring us any nearer to the reality of consciousness? Would anyone be so rash as to say that the expenditure of physical energy and the whirling together of millions of particles of matter within the cerebrum constitute *consciousness*? The chasm, as Dr. Tyndall points out, between the two classes of fact, the two categories of reality, still remains "intellectually impassable."

No matter how complex may be the molecular action within the brain cells, we cannot bridge the gap yawning between such manifold physical activity and the unity of consciousness. "Fifty million molecules," as Ladd observes, "even when they are highly complex and unstable phosphorized compounds, gyrating in the most wonderful fashion with inconceivable rapidity certainly do not constitute *one thing*. They do not, then, by molecular constitution and activities, even constitute a physical basis which is conceivable as a representative or correlate of one thing."<sup>24</sup> The simple truth is that any attempt to explain thought as a function of the brain or the whirling together of millions of complex molecules of matter breaks down utterly when it comes face to face with the *unity of consciousness*. This prodigious fact, as undeniable as it is portentous, may be said to be the mighty Gibraltar against which all the waves of materialistic explanations of consciousness dash themselves to pieces.

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<sup>24</sup> *Physiological Psychology*, p. 595.

## A Sculptor and His Tools

An objection to the spirituality of the soul is advanced from the findings of physiology and pathology. These findings, it is alleged, show the absolute dependence of the mind upon the brain. Thus if a portion of the brain is injured, the mind will be impaired in its activities.

The conclusion is too wide for the premises. The soul is extrinsically dependent in some of its activities upon the brain. This does not mean, however, that it is identical with the brain. A sculptor is dependent upon his tools, his hammer and chisel, to carve a statue. If those tools are seriously damaged, the character of his work will be correspondingly impaired. But does this mean that a sculptor *is* his tools, or that he cannot *exist*, if they are completely destroyed? Similarly the mind uses the brain as an instrumental tool and generally speaking will be affected by the character of that instrument.

Fritz Kreisler, using a poor violin with some of its strings broken, will produce one kind of music. Playing the same composition on a Stradivarius in perfect condition, he will produce a vastly better melody. Yet is not Fritz Kreisler the same identical person in both cases? Yes, it is the difference in the instruments used which is responsible for the difference in the quality of the two performances. That is the analogy which holds in a general way for the soul. There are, however, some of its intellectual operations, as in the formation of abstract ideas, which even though preceded, accompanied, or followed by movements in the brain, nevertheless transcend all the properties of matter. Who, listening to a rendition of Lalo's *Symphonie Espagnole* by Fritz Kreisler, would attempt to explain the rapid bursts of melodic fluency and the deep pathos of the adagio, by saying they are the mere result of the moving of a few strands of horsehair across a piece of cat gut, with no conscious intelligence behind the elaborate process?

## Localization of Brain Functions

The localization of the functions of the brain and the discovery that an injury to one of those parts impairs the mental correlate does not militate, as some materialistic writers have

imagined, in the slightest way against the Scholastic position. Long ago St. Thomas stressed the intimate union of soul and bodily organism and pointed out the close interdependence of their operations. There is no finding of physiology or pathology which sheds any particularly new light upon this long recognized relationship.

Writers who imagine that the scientific data, emphasizing the marked influence of changes in the brain upon mental processes, are hostile to the scholastic teaching, are really confusing it with the theory which Descartes brought into the world in rebellion against Scholasticism. It was Descartes who inaugurated the theory of the soul existing within the brain but in complete independence of it. In contrast to Descartes who placed the soul in the pineal gland of the brain, the Scholastics made no attempt to localize it but conceived it as existing everywhere in the body. "It is enough to say," declares St. Thomas, "that the whole soul is in each part of the body by the totality of perfection and of essence."<sup>25</sup>

It is worthy of note, moreover, that the foremost authorities in cerebral physiology are the first to admit that the nature of consciousness is as much a mystery as it ever was. All the vivid descriptions of currents and discharges of nervous energy, neural tremors and of molecular waves along the afferent and efferent neural paths, so frequent in popular magazines, stop where the process of consciousness begins. Taking to task writers who glibly assert "that *all* mental phenomena whatever their varied characteristic shading, have exact equivalents, as it were, in specific forms of the nerve-commotion of the living brain," Prof. Ladd remarks:

"Our first impression on considering the foregoing way of accounting for mental phenomena is that of a certain surprising audacity. The theory, standing on a slender basis of real fact, makes a leap into the dark which carries it centuries in advance of where the light of modern research is now clearly shining." He then shows that even such inferior and comparatively simple problems as the determination of the physiological conditions of variations in the quality, quantity, time-rate of

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<sup>25</sup> Q. LXXVI, A. 8.

sensation, and "almost everything needed for an exact science of the relations of the molecular changes in the substance of the brain and the changes in the states of consciousness, is lamentably deficient." When we come to the neural conditions of spiritual acts, such as the conception of the principle of causality, or the idea of substance, Ladd observes that science is, and will remain, in absolute ignorance.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Need of a Guiding Principle**

Let us assume for the moment, however, that science will one day discover the intimate relations between neural conditions and intellectual life, and will even photograph the molecular changes taking place in the brain cells. Would that prove more than the extrinsic dependence of the soul upon the body? No, it would merely be a filling in of the details of the process, which we all now admit, that every psychosis involves a neurosis, that all thought involves activity of the cerebral organism.

If we were to take a moving picture of every action of a great artist in painting a masterpiece, so that we knew every detailed movement of his hands, arms, shoulders, eyes and head, every stroke of the brush, be it ever so light, and perceive the blending of all the colors and the play of light and shade, would that demonstrate anything more than the artist's extrinsic dependence upon his instrumental tools? Would it lessen by so much as an iota the need for a directive intelligence behind the thousand and one detailed movements of hands, arms, eyes and brush? Would it show that it was the work of an automaton, a robot? Not at all. All such detailed knowledge of the movements of the physical tools would serve but to emphasize the indispensable necessity of a guiding intelligence behind the whole process.

So likewise whatever advancements we have made thus far, or ever shall make, in the study of the detailed neural and molecular processes concomitant with the operations of the intellect, will serve but to emphasize the indispensable need for a principle, spiritual and immaterial, to account for the spiritual

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<sup>26</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 592-597; cf. also Janet's *Materialism of the Present Day*, pp. 132 f.

and immaterial concepts achieved in the processes of abstract thought. In other words, the fullest knowledge of molecular motion in the brain throws no single ray of light upon the essential nature of consciousness. It is as much a mystery as before the cerebral physiologist began his work. The gap between the movement of atoms of matter and consciousness still remains as wide and deep and impassable as ever.

The ultimate factors in the higher thought processes, particularly those affecting the quality of the reasoning, are still a mystery to the physiologist. It is obvious that the *absolute weight* of the brain cannot be a measure of intelligence. For on that basis the elephant and the whale would exceed Shakespeare, Pasteur and Einstein. Neither can it be greater *relative weight*. For in this respect man is surpassed by many of the smaller birds, such as the titmouse, and the adult by the child. Neither do the multiplicity, complexity, and thickness of the convolutions on the surface of the brain afford the answer. For on this basis the ox would be of distinguished mental capacity. Equally ineffective are the appeals to the chemical constitution of the cerebral substance and the richness of the brain in phosphorus. For here again the superiority of the human cerebrum is challenged by two proverbially stupid animals, the sheep and the goose.

### **Body Without Soul Is . . . ?**

The objection is sometimes urged that we never find mind apart from body. The implication is that it is nothing distinct from the body. Mere concomitance does not, however, prove identity. A child may never have seen his mother without her wedding ring. Would that prove the identity of the ring with the finger? Furthermore we do find bodies without minds. A corpse may weigh exactly the same as the body when vivified by a soul. Yet it is now a radically different entity. Why? Because the soul which was the source of its vital and intellectual activities is gone. In the difference between a cadaver and a living personality one secures a good picture of the role played by that immaterial principle of mental life which we call the human soul.

The difficulty has been proposed that the different functions which man performs would seem to imply three distinct souls, a vegetative soul for growth, an animal soul for sentiency, and a spiritual soul for thinking. But principles or beings are not to be multiplied without necessity. Moreover, the different parts or powers co-operate closely with one another for the welfare of the whole, thus indicating that they are under the direction of a single vital principle. Then, too, man's consciousness of feeling and of thinking testifies that he is the same identity who both feels and thinks, thus pointing to a common principle behind both operations. But if it be thus admitted that his soul can combine spiritual with animal powers, no difficulty arises from ascribing vegetative powers to it also.

Furthermore, if man had three separate souls, would he not need a fourth to co-ordinate the workings of the other three for his common welfare? But how would such a fourth soul act on the others, and guide each one in its operations, unless it possessed the three powers which we ascribe to the one human soul? These three considerations all converge upon the conclusion that man possesses a single soul capable of directing all the manifold activities of a human being.

One last difficulty. The soul, it has been argued, cannot be simple and indivisible, because it is present throughout an extended body. The answer lies in a distinction. A simple, indivisible force or substance cannot be *quantitatively* present throughout an extended subject. This means it cannot have parts alongside of parts throughout a spatial object. But it can be *essentially* present by the exercise of its power or influence ubiquitously in such a subject. Thus God is essentially present, throughout the universe, exercising His power everywhere, from the whirling electrons in a grain of sand beneath our feet to the movements of the farthest star in the trackless sky.

We have presented at considerable length the evidence of the spirituality of the human soul and have considered with care all the important objections and difficulties. We have done this with such thoroughness because of the importance of the subject and of its far-reaching consequences. For once we have established the great truth that man possesses an immaterial



and spiritual principle, called a soul, the freedom of the will and the immortality the soul follow with irresistible logic. It is this great possession, a spiritual soul, which marks man off from all the material universe as a being of unique dignity and of transcendent worth. It is by virtue of that incalculable spiritual treasure that man establishes his freedom from all the compulsions of matter and authenticates his claim to everlasting life. The freedom of the will and the immortality of the soul are the towering pillars of man's spiritual edifice, which rest upon the enduring foundation of an immaterial human soul.

## QUESTIONS

### Chapter I (Pages 3-7)

1. Why may man be said to be an amphibian?
2. What does Erskine say about the soul?
3. What makes man different from the beasts? Why?
4. What does Seneca say about the soul? Christ says what?
5. Why does the soul outweigh all earthly treasures?
6. What did primitive man think of the soul?
7. How was the soul depicted in Indian philosophy? By the Greeks? Stoics?
8. Philo taught what about the soul?
9. What is explicitly recognized in Christian philosophy?
10. Summarize the four principal teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas.
11. This historical review brings out what?

### Chapter II (Pages 8-15)

1. How would you define the soul? The mind?
2. What is meant by the substantiality of the soul?
3. What is the difference between substance and accident? Illustrate.
4. What is meant by the simplicity of the soul? By unity of consciousness?
5. How was the Scholastic teaching misrepresented?
6. How do abstract concepts prove the simplicity of the soul? Illustrate.
7. Prove the simplicity of the soul from acts of judgment and inference. Illustrate.
8. How does memory demonstrate the soul's simplicity? Illustrate.

9. What does Alger say about the helplessness of materialism to explain memory?
10. What fact is fatal to every form of materialism? Why?
11. What does Lotze say about the unity of consciousness?

### Chapter III (Pages 16-22)

1. The essential dignity of man lies in what? Why?
2. What is the difference between simplicity and spirituality?
3. The spirituality of the soul is proven by what general line of reasoning?
4. Man may be compared to what? Explain.
5. How do acts of comparison and judgment prove the spirituality of the soul? Illustrate.
6. The assumption of the materialist obliges him to do what?
7. Prove the spirituality of the soul from universal concepts. Illustrate.
8. What does St. Thomas Aquinas say on this point?
9. How do reflection and self-consciousness demonstrate the soul's spirituality? Illustrate.
10. What is without parallel in the world of matter? Why?
11. State the line of reasoning of St. Thomas Aquinas on this point.

### Chapter IV (Pages 22-31)

1. Is thought a secretion of the brain? Why?
2. Can the microscope find consciousness? Why?
3. Can materialism bridge the gap between matter and thought? Why?
4. Is thought a function of matter? Why?
5. Do movements of neurones constitute consciousness? Why? Quote Ladd.
6. What mighty fact sounds the death knell of materialistic explanations?
7. What does the mind use as a tool? Illustrate.
8. What theory did Descartes inaugurate? How refute it?
9. What theory does Ladd refute? How?
10. What is the need for a directive principle?
11. Is the weight of the brain a measure of intelligence? Why?
12. Does concomitance prove identity? Why?
13. Does man possess three souls? Why?
14. What is the difference between being *quantitatively* present and *essentially* present? Illustrate with a comparison.



