



What is life?

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Abstract

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The question of the nature of life, and therefore of the soul and spirit, has troubled people since time immemorial, especially if they are seen as essentially immaterial. It is suggested that the soul may be understood as the process of life, the inter-relationship between the parts of the body, and that the spirit is the driving force that motivates life. This is then related to the role of God in life, and particularly as the originator of new life in salvation.

In the middle of 1998, the author visited Krakow in Poland to give a paper at the international meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. Krakow is not far away from a small Polish town well-known by the German version of its name, Auschwitz, so at the earliest opportunity, a visit was made to the notorious institution, which is preserved as a museum in memory of the atrocities committed within the barbed wire boundaries of the complex of camps. Although the author was expecting to experience something new to him, he was not at all prepared for one aspect of what he did find. He has often visited cathedrals and has sometimes, but not always, been struck by a feeling of the presence of God in them, what could be called a sense of the numinous. Walking through Auschwitz, the feeling was dramatically different. While not seeking, or even expecting, any subjective emotion, there was a sense of deadness, even of walking through a kind of cotton wool. Was this the opposite to the sense of the numinous? Was it just imagination, or was it due to the events that had taken place there a half century before, where so many had lost their lives? Such an experience has prompted much thought, but in particular has served to present the question of the nature of life itself. What is this thing that was so often brought to an end in that small Polish town?

1. The “soul” is life

Traditional theology has often seen a living human being as a body and a soul; once the two become separated, the body dies, while the soul continues. There is an obvious attraction in belief in the existence of a soul; life is so precious that it is hard to accept that it simply comes to an end, even if the physical body would seem to do just that. From a Christian perspective, belief in the soul has rarely been questioned; it must be the case that there exists more that can be directly perceived, such as God, and even in the case of people, such as the mind. Then there are many Biblical references, predominantly in the New Testament, to personal survival after death, which would seem to infer that there is more to a person than just the material of the physical body. More than this, there are several specific references to a “soul”, or “spirit”, distinguished from the body.

Modern opinion has tended to reject such views, for two essential reasons. Firstly, there is no empirical evidence for the existence of a soul, a situation unacceptable to a modern world-view. Secondly, it is often felt that the idea of the soul as distinguishable from the body is probably traceable back to Greek anthropology, following the teachings of Plato and Aristotle (Roger, 1988:277). These tended to see it as an entity with inherent immortality, albeit with different views of its nature. Plato saw it as the essential person, residing in the body, Aristotle as the “form” shaping the body; both have influenced Christianity, the former mainly through Augustine, the latter through Aquinas. It may, however, be questioned if either of these essentially dualistic views is really Christian.

It is then commonly pointed out that Hebrew anthropology presents a view of a unified person. In fact, rather than speaking of a body and soul or spirit, Hebrew physiology talks in terms of the *nephesh*, the living being (sometimes translated as “soul” in older versions, which Eichrodt [1967:134] calls “an unhappy rendering”). Thus such as Pannenberg (1970:48) reject any idea of a soul as an entity distinct from the body. People then do not have souls, but are souls (Laurin, 1961:131).

Therefore, far from being an entity associated with the material body, which tends to make it a thing, implying a quasi-material nature, a Hebrew perspective would be that the “soul” may rather be understood as the process of life itself. In this case, rather than being an entity, it could exist in a way that is definitely non-material. Indeed the Greek word, *psuche*, often translated as “soul”, can usually be translated as “life” (e.g. Lk. 6:9, R.S.V.). But what is this life?

A body of a living being is an entity consisting of a set of organs which inter-relate. It is this relationship that enables life, the interaction of a set of biological systems. Can it then not be suggested that life, and then the soul, *is to be identified with* that interaction, the set of relationships that exist within the organism, and between it and its environment (Schrodinger, in Dillistone, 1946:36)? As such, a living being is more than just the bringing together of its physical components, just as the components only find their full being and function in the context of the whole organism (Dooyeweerd, 1957:639). It is then no accident that the Bible refers to animal life being in the blood (e.g. Gen. 9:4, Deut. 12:23), for it is this that contributes to the relationship between the organs, carrying nutrient to, and waste away from, the various parts of the body. Blood and the soul are closely related, almost to be identified; “man is a soul, but remains soul only so long as there is blood” (Laurin, 1961:132). Haldane (1949:62) therefore explains life as a series of chemical processes, although it is more than just that. It is in this sense that the Holy Spirit has often been referred to as the “soul” of the Church (Augustine, cited in Heron, 1983:95), as it is the Spirit who applies the work of Christ, and so enables the relationships, both of Christians with God and with one another; significantly Augustine also referred to the Spirit as *vinculum amoris*, the “bond of love”.

As an interrelating collection of systems, a human being is very similar to a machine. Descartes indeed understood the nature of both people and other animals in this way, although he believed that the former are guided by souls (Haldane, 1949:3). As a machine, a person is then similar to the engine of a motor car travelling along a road. This is a mechanism, components working together. Its operation depends on the interplay of mechanical, electrical, cooling and fuel systems. It takes in fuel, and excretes exhaust. Its operation is controlled, but is largely independent of the actions of the driver. It “lives” until the driver stops desiring to move, when the machine is brought to a halt, and the disruption of one of the systems, usually the electrical, stops the interplay of the various components, and the engine “dies”. Its body ceases functioning. Such is very little different from a plant, animal, or even a human being, which also depends on the interplay of various respiratory, circulatory and other systems. In this sense even the world itself can be treated as living, as the New Age idea of “Gaia” suggests, insofar as it includes a lot of interacting systems, although there is no need to perceive any form of spiritual power in it, which is what is usually suggested.

As the pattern for the body is something inherited from the parents, which includes the relationships between the various elements, then the actual interaction, the soul, or life, is also something inherited from

parents, not a special creation of God, or even, with Origen, pre-existent. The uniqueness of the individual is from the specific contribution of each parent, in a material sense from the combination of material from the DNA of each. With that combination comes the specific set of relationships that is the life of the individual.

Just as with the car, at the breakdown of any one vital system, a living being starts to die. When the interplay stops, death occurs; this is then a “dissolution” (Jacob, 1958:300). The other systems may well have no fault at all, but because life is dependent upon the cooperation of all the various parts, death occurs, and then of course the other components also rapidly deteriorate.

This understanding of life implies that it essentially continues by itself. The perpetual action of God would not seem to be necessary for the continuation of life, as life is then just the interplay of essentially material systems. Psalm 104:29 needs not imply the continued gift of breath, but its removal causing death. Barrett (1947:19) believes that the writer of Genesis 2:7 sees the divine breath passed on from one generation to the next, not a distinct gift of God to each living being. This view needs not be Deism, the idea that God was only involved with the world as its creator and setter of its laws, which has quite rightly been rejected by Christians. God has continued to act in the world, in particular by the incarnation. But a rejection of Deism does not mean that God is directly involved in everything that occurs in the world. It is going too far to say that “Nothing in Nature works by itself. God ‘works’ it” (White, 1989:59). Does the continued existence of the world, and specifically of life, really rest on God’s continual activity? Helm (1993:82) attempts to defend the idea that God positively upholds the creation, but has to concede that “the exact sense in which objects that are distinct from God are yet upheld by him is difficult to get clear”. He cites Acts 17:28 and Colossians 1:17, but these do not prove the point. Again, he states that upholding “is physically undetectable” (Helm, 1993:89). Just as the existence of an ontological “soul”, it should then perhaps be doubted, which is quite possible without in any way questioning the total sovereignty of God over the creation, or that he does involve himself in it from time to time.

This is also not to deny the idea of “common grace”, although this is not universally accepted either. Calvin taught that all ability in arts or science, so talent, is from the Spirit, so any truth manifesting in the human mind, is from the Spirit as the sole fountain of truth (cited in Hoekema, 1986:189). Bavinck accepts the idea of common grace, so God gives reason and other natural gifts; “music is also a gift of God” (cited in Hoekema, 1986:190). Kuyper, like Calvin, is impressed by human

achievements outside the Church; he then feels that unless humanity is not completely fallen, there must be common grace (Hoekema, 1986:191). On the other hand, some, even of the Reformed persuasion, reject the idea of common grace, believing that grace only acts in the elect, that apparently good acts of others are really sin, and that God does not restrain evil in the world (Hoekema, 1986:192).

There are very few Biblical instances where such an understanding of the nature of the soul is not possible; nevertheless, it must be pointed out that the existence of even a few, such as in Revelation 6:9 (which Laurin, 1961:133 dismisses as an analogy or symbol) and 20:4 demand that a Biblical theology cannot simply see life merely in mechanistic terms, but must accommodate the continued existence of a soul, or life, after the death of the physical body.

This understanding of a soul as the process of life also sees the natures of animal and human life as essentially the same, as indeed Ecclesiastes 3:19 indicates. In fact, it is obvious that human beings are animals, so they can naturally be compared with them (Roger, 1988:277). The question then arises as to what is distinctive about human life, separating people from animals. Putting this another way: in what does the “image of God” (Gen. 1:26) consist? Various suggestions have been made, such as reason or morality, although it is hard to exclude these from all animals.

2. The “spirit” of life

However, even if the Ecclesiastes text seems to equate the nature of animal and human life, it then continues by inferring a difference in the “spirits” of people and animals. There are then suggestions that there are in fact three components to a human person, adding a third, the “spirit”, to body and soul. Although some believe that “soul” and “spirit” may just be treated as alternative terms, this distinguishes them, a view supported by such texts as Hebrews 4:12 and 1 Thessalonians 5:23. Spirit is then distinct from the soul or life, clearly existing after the death of the body. Jesus, quoting Psalm 31:5, gave up his spirit at the point of dying. Ecclesiastes 3:21 and 12:7 refers to the return of the spirit to God who gave it. The question is then what such a spirit is.

Biblical references to spirits are generally understood in terms of beings with an independent personal identity, as in 1 Kings 22:31. They are, however, immaterial, able to exist independently of a body. Does this mean that there is an ontological entity as part of a human being? In what sense do people *have spirit*, as affirmed by such as Brunner and Barth (Heron, 1983:141), contrasting them with God who *is* spirit (Jn.

4:24)? (Similarly, while people *have* life, God *has life in himself* (Jn. 5:26).) Again, if the spirit is seen in quasi-material terms, the idea is subject to the same objections as pertain to the nature of the “soul”.

However, the Hebrew term *ruach*, often translated by “spirit”, just like the English, may naturally be understood as the desire or drive motivating human activity. It is a feature of human life, but it is also possible to speak in corporate terms, such as of the “spirit of a nation”, its goals and ethos. Examples of the nature of the human spirit are 1 Kings 10:5, where the woman was alive, even though there was no more spirit within her, also Joshua 5:1 and 1 Samuel 30:12. The spirit of Cyrus was “stirred up” (2 Chron. 36:22 = Ezra 1:1). Such a drive is a feature of a living being, but can easily be understood as existing without a body, and indeed usually does survive its death, even for a long time. Much of what motivates a person does not cease with death, but can continue, and even drive others to achieve. The spirit of a person survives, not in any material sense, but still in a real way. The motives that drive a person also motivate the action of others, and can continue in them. These survive in the memory of others, and, significantly, in the mind of God; this gives at least potential immortality. It is no accident that most of the Biblical references to survival after death are to the spirit.

To continue the mechanical illustration; there is a desire for transport, which becomes an actuality in the building of a car. It would be specific to a particular machine, as the desire can well be to travel in that exact way, such as in a red, rather than a green, car. This clearly survives the “death” of the life in the car, when the engine is turned off. Such a “spirit” can even exist if the material of the car is completely dismantled and scattered, even if without a body the desire cannot be fulfilled; in a sense, therefore, non-incarnated spirits are indeed “in prison” (2 Pet. 3:19).

The physical person is then the way by which the spirit of the person can operate. The body itself is the materialisation of a specific pattern, in effect its *logos*. The actual material atoms are not relevant to either of these, just as the car retains its identity when components are replaced. Because the person incarnates a pattern which death cannot touch, resurrection becomes a possibility even if every material trace of a specific body has dissipated. In any case, every atom in a body changes over a seven-year cycle.

3. The start of life

Even if the process of life is something that can be initiated from the parents, the Bible indicates that the action of God was necessary for life

to occur in the first place. The case of Genesis 2:7, where there were no parents, must be unique, as are resurrections, such as in Ezekiel 37. In these instances it is clear that life was started by the Spirit. The process of life, which would include the human spirit, its desires and motivation, which is expressed in the process of life, was ultimately initiated by the Spirit of God. The latter is the ultimate initiator of life, even if not the sustainer of it.

Just as the “soul”, the process of life, is something inherited from the parents, so it is likely that the motivation of life, the “spirit” is also inherited from them, at least initially. People are profoundly influenced in the way in which they act by parents. However, just as the process of life is able to be affected from outside, such as by drugs, so the spirit can change. Thus although the original human spirit, as given by God, reflected the divine goals, this could alter, because this human spirit in a person is then not the Holy Spirit (McFarlane, 1998:134). It is then possible for the human spirit, so the goals and intentions of the individual, to differ from those of the Holy Spirit; the individual has “fallen”. The opposite is also possible; conversion then results when the human spirit is realigned with God, which again needs the action of the Holy Spirit (Jn. 3:6).

More than the Spirit affecting the human spirit, it is not an accident that both Genesis and Ezekiel identify the Spirit as the initiator of life, for the Spirit is always seen as the one who provides relationship. In classical Trinitarian theology, he is the bond, the relationship between Father and Son. Such does not have to be impersonal, as the relationship in a car or in a human being, but in the relationship between persons, the bond can well be personal, such as that generated between parents by the birth of a child. Nevertheless, after the initiation of relationship, the system operates without external action, save the necessary intake of food. God’s continued action is not necessary, so in this regard God acts effectively in a deistic manner. What then continues is interplay and relationship, the incarnation of *logos*.

4. The resurrection of life

Of course, the “death” of a car is not the end of the car, as the various components still exist, and if reactivated, the car can live again. However, such “life” is not possible if one of the essential components is damaged, or is removed. But even then, something else does still remain, the concept of the car; while this exists, the car can, at least theoretically, be repaired. The concept of a person can similarly survive death; emphatically, the continued existence of this means that it is the whole person that survives, not just a part (Eichrodt, 1967:214). Although

not material, this even reflects the physical makeup of the dead person; so although, for example, the physical tongue will be one of the first parts of the body to decay, the tongue survives as part of the concept of the person.

The pattern, or *logos*, of a person even includes a physical way in which he or she survives after death, because for a while the body retains the features of a living being (Jacob, 1958:301). The *gewiyyah*, corpse, is still a body even if the life processes are absent (Jud. 14:8, 9; 1 Sam. 31:10 etc.). This aspect of the individual then continues to exist until totally reduced to dust. Although Laurin (1961:132) believes that the dead continue to exist, he asserts that it is as *rephaim*, not as *nephesh*; however, the latter is used in several cases where the reference is clearly to the dead. The implication of using the word *rephaim*, interestingly only found in the plural, is that existence remains, but in an attenuated form; of course the active functioning of relationships slows rapidly in the process of death, although arguably does not really cease until the organism has totally decayed. Biblically, the individual still survives as long as a trace of it remains (as in the case of Jezebel 2 Ki. 9:37). This can be for a very long time indeed, as bone lasts almost indefinitely. The bones are then the basic element of human nature (Eichrodt, 1967:146, following Köberle). The importance attached to tombs, and even the effect that they had (e.g. 2 Ki. 13:21), would indicate something of the survival of the individual even in this way.

Physically, the characteristics of the individual still exist while any of the cells which made up the living person still endure. From a modern perspective, every trace of the original organism contains the entire genetic makeup by means of the DNA, which is complete in every cell; *nephesh* then still exists, because the relationships are still there, even if not functioning. It is therefore possible to use the information from even a single cell, and build from it a new individual identical to the one that the cell belonged to. Such is demonstrated by the possibility of cloning, by which a complete individual is effectively derived from one single cell nucleus (cf. Scorgie & Evans-Jones, 1997). It is theoretically possible to do this even from a cell of a body long since dead. The nucleus, containing the information, is inserted into an egg which has had its original nucleus removed, then, very significantly, they are fused, and life starts, at the shock of an electrical discharge. Even more than this, as long as the information survives, that individual can, at least theoretically, live again. In this way, even the soul, or life, can potentially survive death, as the Bible indicates (Matt. 10:28, Rev. 6:9). Here recent identification of the internal structure of DNA is a move towards this, and has given hope for an eventual resurrection. However, this would not include the impressions and memories of the individual, which are a vital

part of the being of the individual person. Both can, however, be retained in the mind of God, who knows totally (Ps. 139). This means that even this could theoretically be restored, or resurrected. Such a resurrection, in the full sense, can only be an act of God.

In all cases, that of the car, plants and animals, whether human or not, it would be possible to assemble all the components without fault, but there would be no life. Interaction does not occur naturally, but has to be started. In the case of a car, the systems have to be activated, usually through the ignition and starter motor, and the machine “lives”. The same is done in cardiac resuscitation, where an electrical “kick” is used to revive what is otherwise a corpse. It is the initiation of the relationship between the systems that must occur, or there is no life. The same is true for animals, which includes human beings; life can only come from outside. Life can only exist when there is spirit, a desire to live. For a car, it will only occur when the desire to run the engine exists, usually because of wanting to go somewhere. For animals and plants, it starts with a desire to procreate, and at the other end of life, it is not an uncommon experience to see a person lose motivation, and indeed, death then usually follows rapidly. Genesis 2:7 essentially says the same thing; the systems of the body can all be present, but require something to be done before life starts. Ezekiel 37 describes the re-clothing of the bones of the slain with flesh and, as a distinct act, their reanimation. In both cases, this is identified as “breath”, better, “spirit”. Even if Genesis 2:7 does not contain the specific word *ruach*, it is implied by the breathing of God (Barrett, 1947:19). *Nephesh* results when the *basar*, the flesh, is animated by *ruach*, spirit (Jacob, 1958:161). Interestingly, Laurin (1961:131) sees the origin of the word *nephesh* from the Akkadian “throat” – that which contains breath. In fact, *basar* without the animation of the *ruach* is not distinct from the dust.

Investigation is still ongoing as to whether it is possible to produce life artificially, to assemble all the basic components and then to “kickstart” the process, such as by an electrical impulse. It would mean that the specific act of God was not in fact needed, contrary, of course, to the Genesis account. So far such has not been possible, but even the thought naturally fuels speculation that life on earth, and possibly elsewhere, started as a result of purely natural events, such as lightning into a chemical “soup”. Woltereck asserts that such a step is fundamentally impossible in principle; the complexity of the initial event is just too much (Dooyeweerd, 1957:728, 750). However, even if the initiation of life proves to be possible as a natural phenomenon, this does not necessarily mean that life on this planet did occur naturally, and specifically it does not mean that human life is either natural or to be simply equated with other forms of life.

Even if natural production or resurrection of life is unlikely, if not impossible, an understanding of life in terms of relationship does mean that the traditional Christian teaching of a final resurrection becomes a lot more plausible. It is not a matter of reassembling all the pieces of a dead body, with all the complications attached to this, such as the state of those who were eaten by other people, their material having become fully integrated with that of the cannibal. Rather it is the giving of new material according to a pattern which had not been lost. This also helps the understanding of Paul's analogies of 1 Corinthians 15; a plant and its seed are genetically identical, but the "resurrection body", as well as incorporating more actual material, is a much fuller kind of existence.

In fact, of course, life as understood from a Christian context is even richer than this. Whereas the motor car or a chemical reaction is not really considered to be alive when compared with a human being, the difference is one of degree; both have relationships both internal and external. Then just as the chemical reaction fades away after a period of time, so the life process does likewise; both reach a state of eventual equilibrium (cf. Schrodinger, quoted in Dillistone, 1946:37). On the contrary, however, the new birth results in life which involves a relationship with Christ, and therefore it is eternal. This is real life, life in fullness. Such a relationship is enacted by the Holy Spirit, and is only possible through him. Perhaps the closest parallel to this in the world is that of parasitism, which does have a negative connotation (Dillistone, 1946:47); nevertheless it does reflect the fact that there is no way of salvation apart from a relationship with life itself (Jn. 1:4). Incidentally, the corollary of this is indeed that ordinary biological life does carry on without the direct involvement of the Holy Spirit. Paul's affirmation is that "anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him" (Rom. 8:9), even if they do have physical life.

5. Conclusion

For a living being to continue, there is no necessity for God to be involved in it, but its life or "soul" can continue independently of him, even if its spirit is not conformed to that of God. Such short-sightedness reaps its own reward when the parts of the body wear out, and its inter-relationships cannot be sustained, so that death occurs. While any part of the body remains, its pattern survives in its DNA, but the full renewal of life can only occur by the hand of God, who is able to revive the inter-relating of the material elements of a body, and even more importantly, restore the memories and personality that existed before. Such a hope can only rest in God's action; the bonds that make life are only restorable by the "bond of love", the Spirit of God.

This concept of life can also help a little towards understanding the horrors of Auschwitz. God has often been blamed for his inaction in the face of such tragedy, and many even have lost faith in him, or his very existence has been denied. But if life is a process that is essentially independent of him, he cannot be blamed for when the spirit of evil manifests itself in the horrors that people do to others. At the same time, however, the nature of life is such that even a situation such as that of Auschwitz is not totally bleak. Death there should not be seen as an ultimate end. On the contrary, the spirit that drove the Jews and gave them distinct identity survived, and may even be said to have been strengthened by the events of the Holocaust. The memory of particular individuals is especially revered because of their involvement in it. Even physically, traces of the individuals retain the patterns of those exterminated, which was rarely complete. Ironically, these even survived in hair, bone and other parts, often indeed deliberately preserved by the Germans.

Perhaps the feeling of “anti-numinous” at Auschwitz was due to the loss of so much life that had occurred there, a manifestation of a spirit so much in contrast with that of Spirit of life, the one who ultimately gave life, God himself. What God has, however, done is to show us that he has never in fact let the situation get totally beyond recall. A life driven by God’s Spirit must survive. Even in Auschwitz, hope could live, and give meaning to life.

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Key concepts:

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