

Seven Proofs for the Natural Immortality of the Human Soul

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The two principle powers of the soul are its power to know and to will. Why do we say these powers lie in the soul? In simple terms, it is because it is the entire man that comes to “know” or to “love” (love being the highest purpose of the will) not just “part” of him. This would seem to indicate that the same "unifying and vivifying principle" that explains man's life, would also explain his power to know and to will.

But man is more than just a soul. He also directly experiences the “I” that unifies all that he is and all that he has done down through the decades of his life. This "I" represents the individual “*person*” that constitutes each human being.

Is there a distinction between the *soul* and the *person*? Yes. But it can be a bit tricky to demonstrate. Perhaps it would best to demonstrate the distinctions by laying out some of the differences between the body, soul, and person.

There is no doubt that the body contributes to the soul’s ability to come to know. A damaged brain is a clear indicator here. The soul needs a properly functioning brain to be able to come to know anything, ordinarily speaking.

Yet, it is also interesting to note that according to philosopher and theologian, J.P. Moreland, man is much more than a body as well. Moreland provides: “... neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield electrically stimulated the brains of epilepsy patients and found he could cause them to move their arms or legs, turn their heads or eyes, talk or swallow...”

But yet, Moreland says, the “patient would respond by saying, ‘I didn’t do that. You did.’” Further, no matter how much probing and electrical prodding, Penfield found there is no place in the brain that can “cause a patient to believe or decide” (Lee Strobel, *The Case for a Creator*, p. 258.).

Thus, the “I,” or, the person, seems to use his body, or here, his brain, to be sure, but “he” is not determined by it.

We can also say with confidence that the “I” is not synonymous with the intellect and will, or the soul, either because “I” can struggle to remember, to know, or to exercise my will. There seems to be more to a person than just a body, or even *just* a soul. Man seems to be a body/soul composite. Both his body and soul contribute to the great and mysterious “I.”

The Proofs for the Natural Immortality of the Human Soul

1. The Intellect Possesses the Power of Abstraction

St. Thomas Aquinas explained, “The operation of anything follows the mode of its being” (*Summa Theologica*, Pt. 1, Q. 75, art. 3). To put it in simpler terms: *action follows being*. One can tell something of the nature of a thing through examining its actions. Hence, the spiritual nature of the human soul; and therefore its immortality, can be proven through the exhibition of its spiritual power in human acts. One such "spiritual action" is the power of *abstraction*.

To use thomistic language once again, when a human being comes to know something or someone, let’s say, he sees a man, “Tim,” his senses engage the individual; “Tim,” through the immediate "accidental" qualities that he sees. By "accidentals," we mean the non-essential, or changeable, aspects of "Tim" like his size, color, or colors, weight, etc. From this conglomeration of accidentals, his intellect abstracts the “form” of “man-ness” from that individual (This reminds me of a philosophy professor I had in college who seemed to have an inability to pronounce a noun without adding a “ness” to the end of it.).

This "form" the intellect abstracts is an immaterial likeness of the object thought about or seen. It is ordinarily derived from a particular object, like the man, “Tim,” as I mentioned above, but it transcends the particular individual. The form gets at the essence of "Tim." It is that which is universal concerning "Tim," *the man*. He is risible (he laughs), he reasons, he worships, and more. This is that which is changeless and applies not just to "Tim," but to *all men*. And very importantly for our purpose, we must remember that this essential “form” abstracted by the intellect is a *spiritual* reality. It transcends the individual.

Now, there is a material likeness, or image, that is concrete and singular, impressed in the memory of man, but that is not what we are talking about here. Dogs, cats, birds, and bats have memory. Non-rational animals do not have the power to abstract the form of “man.” Only human beings can comprehend “man-ness” or “dog-ness.”

This is not to say the soul of a dog is not real. It is, as St. Thomas Aquinas says, a "real principle," and it is “adduced from the potency of the matter.” This is analogous to elements formed into a compound or an atomic explosion caused from the potency of the matter used in the formation of a bomb. Certain kinds of matter exist in potency to other kinds of matter that when joined create elements, atomic explosions, or Fido! But only man (among animals on earth) has this power of abstraction that necessarily involves a *spiritual* principle.

Why is this crucial to understand? Well, let’s introduce yet another “form” here... “tree-ness.” “Tree” is defined as, “A woody perennial plant, having a single main stem or trunk arising from the soil and having branches and foliage.” This would represent “the form” that is common to all trees apart from any particular. I could burn the individual tree from which I abstract the form of “tree-ness,” and reduce it to ash so that there is no longer this particular “tree” in existence, but I can never burn “tree-ness” because it is “spiritual,” or “universal.”

Remember our philosophical principle? "Action follows being?" If the soul has this spiritual power to "abstract" the form of "tree," or "man," it must be spiritual. And if the soul is spiritual, it has to be immortal. It cannot be "reduced to its component parts."

2. The Soul Forms Ideas of Realities That Are Immaterial

The human soul not only abstracts the forms of material entities encountered, but it also has the power to know the ideas or "forms" of immaterial realities like logical sequence, moral goodness, property rights, philosophical categories like "substance," cause and effect, and more. Where are these realities? What color are they? How big are they? How much do they weigh?

They have no color, size, or weight because they are spiritual—and by definition—immaterial. Sense image alone (like the Empiricists John Locke and David Hume say is the only source of knowledge) cannot account for these. We are not talking about the material world here.

To form an idea of something spiritual, again, *requires a spiritual principle*, i.e., the soul. If it's spiritual, it can't die.

3. The Will Strives for Immaterial Goods

Closely related to my first two proofs, just as the intellect has the power to abstract the "spiritual" forms of the things and beings it encounters, and to form ideas of immaterial realities, the will also has the power to strive for immaterial things, like prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude, etc. One cannot produce what one does not possess. There must be a spiritual; and therefore, immortal principle (the soul), to will these spiritual realities.

4. The Intellect Can Reflect Upon Its Own Act of Knowledge

It could not do so if it were material. A material faculty, such as the power of vision, only reacts in response to external stimuli. It could only be said to "perceive" inasmuch as one "part" was acted upon by another "part" of something else. When our intellect reflects on its own act of knowing, and we could add its own act of being as well, it is both subject and object of knowledge. The soul can only do this if it has no parts. A dog cannot reflect on its own act of knowing, or being. It just scratches! That is sense knowledge.

5. Man Has a Natural Desire to Live Forever

Aristotle gave us an extremely important philosophical principle when he said, "A potency without the possibility of actuality destroys nature." The existence of acorns necessitate the existence of oak trees. It is not that each individual acorn will be actualized and become an oak tree. That is clearly not the case. But if *no acorns could* be actualized, there would be no oak trees.

We could multiply examples here. A digestive system in animals necessarily means we can know there is food... somewhere out there. A female dog necessitates the existence of a male dog. If there's not, then "dog" will be eliminated in fairly short order.

Thus, the non-rational animal seeks self-preservation, food and sex. Each of these is conditioned by time. Man has intellectual knowledge which is absolute. The "forms" are not conditioned to time as material knowledge is. Remember? The individual "tree" will die, but not the "form" or "idea" of tree that man alone possesses among creatures of earth. From this knowledge of the eternal springs a spontaneous desire to live forever. And this potency cannot exist in vain. That would be contrary to everything we see in nature.

6. The Testimony of Mankind Over the Centuries and Millenia

From ancient Egypt's *Book of the Dead*, to Western Civilization's *Bible*, every civilization, every culture, in all of human history has attested to the existence of an after-life. Some will point out the very few exceptions—one being Hinayana (or Theravedic) Buddhism—that deny the existence of "spirit," or the soul, to discount this our sixth proof. But to no avail.

Actually, the exception tends to *prove* the rule. And this, I would argue, is certainly the case with Hinayana Buddhism. Not only is this ancient form of Buddhism an anomaly in the world of religion, but the appearance of Mahayana Buddhism (that restored belief in "God" and "the soul"), very early in the history of Buddhism, and the fact that [it is today by far the largest of the three main traditions of Buddhism](#), tends to demonstrate that man is so ordered to believe in the afterlife that errant thinking here or there over millenia can never keep its truth suppressed for very long.

7. The Existence of the Moral Law

My final proof for the natural immortality of the human soul is derived from the existence of the Moral Law that we can know apart from divine revelation. This is a true law knowable to all, and a law that man did not give to himself. And yet, it is often unpunished and the sanctions of law not carried out. Hence, there must be an eternity where all is rectified.

Necessarily rooted in the reality of the justice and wisdom of God who created us and created this that we call "Natural Law," Plato said without the immortality of the soul there is no justice, which would be absurd. If there is a God who is just, then there must be final justice. Since final justice so often does not occur in this life, there must be a next life in which justice will be served.