

“In the Vale of Soul-Making”*

A dialogue between Rupert Sheldrake and Matthew Fox

“The soul is not in the body but the body is in the soul.”

A Dialogue.

RUPERT: The soul is the animating principle, that which makes living things alive. In Greek it's called the psyche. We now think of the psyche as the human mind, but for the Greeks the psyche had a far wider meaning: it was the life principle of all living things, including plants. The Latin word for soul is *anima*, and is the source of our word animal. The traditional meaning of the word soul is far wider than the human soul. The soul is that which makes things alive. A starting point for any reflection on the nature of life is death, comparing the dead body of a person or animal or plant with the living state that preceded it. The amount of matter in the dead body is the same as in the living body, the form of the body is the same, and the chemicals in it are the same, at least immediately after death. But something has changed. The most obvious conclusion is that something has left the body and since there's little or no change in weight, that which has left is essentially immaterial.

In the animistic traditions of the world it was taken for granted that many things in nature are alive besides ourselves. All plants and all animals, the entire Universe, the planet Earth, the other planets, the Sun, the stars: all of these were thought to be living beings, all with their own kind of soul. The Platonists spoke in terms of the *anima mundi*, the soul of the world, the whole cosmos as a living being with a body, soul and spirit. Aristotle formulated it in biological terms. He spoke about the soul of a plant as governing the form of the plant as it grows. The soul is the formative principle. According to Aristotle, an acorn grows into an oak tree because it's pulled towards the final form by its soul. In human beings, there are three aspects or levels of the soul: the vegetative soul responsible for the form of the body; the animal soul, giving us our animal nature; and the intellect or the rational soul, which is the conscious part of our mind, our reason. The conscious mind was part of a much larger psychic system which linked us to the animals and plants. A LOT OF THE present confusion began in the philosophy of René Descartes in the seventeenth century. Descartes said the whole of nature is a machine; it is inanimate. In effect, he withdrew the soul from nature, from all animals and plants, and from the human body as well. Before that, the soul was believed to permeate the whole body and the body had different psychic centres within it. We learn about these today in the context of Eastern philosophies, the chakras. But in the West there was a

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very similar understanding. We still have it in Christian liturgies in relation to the heart as the centre of the deepest thoughts. But for Descartes and his followers it was merely a pump, part of the mechanism of the body.

How the rational soul interacted with the machinery of the body was an utter mystery to Descartes and is still a mystery today, because today we still have the same theory. Cartesian dualism has become the standard theory of our culture. The only difference is that the supposed seat of the soul has shifted a couple of inches from the pineal gland into the cerebral cortex. But we're still left with an animating principle inside the brain, somehow controlling the body. This is sometimes called the "ghost in the machine" model of consciousness.

If you go to the Natural History Museum in London, in the section on human biology there is an exhibit called "How You Control Your Actions" with a model of a man with a Perspex window in his forehead through which you can look. Inside the head is a complex array of dials, controls and levers like the cockpit of a jet aeroplane. Then there are two empty seats, presumably for you, the pilot, and your co-pilot in the right hemisphere. This says it all. I've been there when parties of schoolchildren are being led through so that they can understand what contemporary science has to teach us about human nature.

I'm sad to say that in my five-year-old son's kindergarten classroom they have a standard schoolbook called "How Your Body Works." And there are pictures and diagrams of the body full of conveyor belts, escalators, pumps, tubes and so on. Inside the brain there are lots of little men pushing jack plugs into telephone exchanges, looking at dials on computers, pressing buttons and so on. This is the usual modern view. The so-called mind/body problem is so notoriously intractable that most scientists think: why bother with it? The result is that you can be educated as a biologist, as I was, and you can teach in a medical faculty, as I did, without ever mentioning the word consciousness. It doesn't come up.

When Descartes made this division between the realms of matter and spirit, he established a new demarcation between science and religion, defining their boundaries. Science took the whole of nature, including the human body. All nature was secularized. The arts and religion took the soul. In this way a *modus vivendi* was established between science and religion. Science was concerned with the objective realm of facts; religion and the arts with the subjective realm of values, aesthetics, morality and belief. Science got the better part of the bargain, since it got practically everything, as defined in its own terms.

Well, this is the legacy of Cartesian dualism. But we may be able to go beyond it. To understand how this may be possible, we need to recall the older, pre-Cartesian understanding of the soul. The old view of the soul was very general. It didn't just apply to animals and plants, it even applied to magnets. Thales, the first of the Greek philosophers, said the lodestone has a soul, the magnet has a soul.

A magnet can act at a distance, attracting or repelling things. It can do so without anything in between. If you heat a magnet up, it loses its magnetism. It's as if there's an

animating principle in a magnet that can disappear, just as the animating principle in an animal or plant can disappear. So in the ancient world it was generally believed that the magnet had a soul. The basis of magnetism and electricity was a psychic reality, a psychic entity. William Gilbert, the founder of the modern science of magnetism, whose great book on the subject was published in 1600, still thought in terms of magnetic souls; the compass needle pointed north because of the magnetic soul of the Earth. The soul was part of the common discourse of science right up until the time of Descartes when souls were banished from every aspect of nature.

But magnetism remained. Like Newton's gravitation it worked at a distance. But how? It was a profound mystery that no one could explain. They just forgot about the problem. It wasn't until the nineteenth century that Faraday replaced the old idea of the soul with the new idea of the field. In the 1920s Einstein extended the field concept to gravitation: the gravitational field co-ordinates and holds together the whole Universe, fulfilling the role of the *anima mundi*.

Then fields were introduced into the heart of matter, in the shape of quantum-matter fields. Fields were introduced into biology in the 1920s in the form of morphogenetic, form-shaping fields. They were invisible formative fields which organized the development of animals and plants, maintaining them and underlying their regeneration. According to the British biologist C. H. Waddington, morphogenetic fields have within them attractors. The oak tree has a morphogenetic field containing an attractor, in this case the mature form of the oak, which draws the developing acorn towards it. It plays the same role as what Aristotle called entelechy, the attractor within the soul. In effect the vegetative soul was reinvented as the morphogenetic field, so that everything that the soul did before, the field did now.

Souls have been brought back into science in the guise of fields. My own work is concerned with morphic fields. The morphic fields of organisms underlie not only their form, but also their behaviour; they play the role of the animal soul. They also underlie the activity of the rational mind.

MATTHEW: I really love your writing about the soul as field. This is a profound contribution. What is a field? It is a space for playing in. A field is a place for running in, frolicking in, dreaming in, soaring in, stumbling in, investing our passions in. I think all of those are images of the soul. To me the soul is our passions. It's what we love. As Jesus said, it's where your treasure is. Our treasures are in the fields. Maybe they're hidden: the field is not all above ground. That's part of the invitation to lie down in the field and play in the field. Our souls are where we play and of course also where we suffer, where we fall down and where we fail. The potential of this image of field is untapped. You rightly put it in a non-anthropocentric context. Not only does every individual, plant and animal have soul but mountains and places have soul. Communities have soul and groups create soul. The biosystem itself and Gaia and our Milky Way and cosmos have soul. Our souls shrivelled up during the Cartesian era. If you're cut off from the souls of all the other animals and plants and stars, you're just hiding away inside your own little self-created space. No wonder we have *acedia* (boredom) which is that sin of the spirit

that comes, as Aquinas says, from a shrinking of the soul. We have shrunk our souls. That's why we can tear down rainforests: we can destroy our nest. We are separated from the responsibility for our own actions and our connection to all the joy and pain of the world. All this is about souls that have shrunk up. This is why we're into addiction: we're covering up the truth of our shrunken souls with everything from alcohol to drugs to television to shopping to sex.

NOW, HOW IS SOUL related to the body? I just want to say this: the soul is not in the body but the body is in the soul. It's a very important shift of consciousness and it contradicts Plato's belief of the soul as a bird stuck in a cage that's not really going to get free until it dies. Believing that our body is in our souls means our souls are as large as the world in which we live, as the fields in which our minds play, and as the field in which our hearts roam. That's how big our souls are.

If our body is in our soul, then our body is an essential instrument that celebrates and praises, expressing the soul's passions: delight, wonder, joy, desire, grief, pain, suffering. The body is an instrument for our soul. Teresa of Avila's finest book, I think, is *Interior Castle*, her book on the rooms in the mansion of the soul. She goes through seven rooms but she ends her book this way: "Now we've explored seven rooms in your soul, but in fact your soul has millions of rooms, most of which never have their doors opened. And in every one of them there are labyrinths and fountains and jewels and gems and gardens."

One point about exploring the soul is that it's an inner journey. This needs visualization. Eckhart says in the innermost depths of your soul God creates a whole Universe. All past, all present and all future come together in the innermost depths of your soul. The soul experience is about going innermost, it's going to the centre. Rumi says: "There is a forest within, which gives you life. Seek that. In your body lies a priceless gem. If you want to find the greatest treasure, don't look outside, look inside and seek that."

RUPERT: In the modern world, when people talk about the inner life, they mean a life somewhere inside their body and especially inside their brain. Then there's the outer life which is the whole of the external realm. We've internalized this shrunken soul, and think that the inner means something inside our brains, and the outer is something out there. Well, if the soul is extended or expanded, as you said, the inner isn't just confined to our bodies: it's the inner experience of things. Science is based on trying to do everything with the outer experience of things. The objective method is supposed to remove all psychic interests of the scientists from what they're doing. In fact, most scientists are heavily engaged in what they're doing if only for reasons of personal ambition. The idea that they're totally objective, like disembodied minds, is a pretence.

This idea of the inner involvement being not just inside but outside us is the key to breaking down the Cartesian division. What you call the shrunken soul I call the contracted mind, the idea that the mind is contracted into the brain, as opposed to the older view which saw our souls as extended all around us. The old view saw the soul as

not confined to the head. It not only permeated the whole body, but was involved in all experience and perception.

If we admit that our souls are extended all around us, what about the souls of dogs, squirrels, deer, birds and other animals? They're also looking around them, and their mental fields must be extended outwards into their environment. We live in a world of overlapping mental fields, of a shared space which is not just a so-called objective material reality, but is encompassed by innumerable minds or psyches, including those of animals. The idea that there is an objective reality, totally free from any kind of psychic influence, is an extraordinary illusion. Yet that's the view on which science has based its beliefs.

MATTHEW: One corollary of what you're saying is this: if our souls are all over the place, if we're projecting them out there all the time, what an incredible invitation to be responsible for taking care of our souls, so that we are projecting the best of ourselves: grace and blessing and not envy, resentment or hostility.

*Extracts from **Natural Grace: Dialogues on Science and Spirituality**. Matthew Fox is an American theologian.*



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