



On the Supposed Uselessness of the Soul

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The following considerations must not be taken as quite expressing my own beliefs, nor again are they offered as original. But they will perhaps bring some thoughts together in a way which may be useful.

There is a view as to the connection between body and soul which seems to grow every day more in fashion. On this view the bodily sequence is wholly independent of mind. It goes on as it would go on if nothing psychical were there. The soul is somehow an adjective which makes no difference to its substantive. It is the whistle of a steam-engine which has no effect on the engine's movement; for the soul is somehow that kind of whistle which expends no steam.

Now, though this view is respectable, it seems none the less ridiculous, but my first object is rather to show its connection with another prevailing doctrine. I refer to what we may perhaps call Darwinian teleology. Everything which on a certain scale persists must be taken as useful. It was not made to be useful, but, if not useful, it would by now have been unmade. So that whatever on a certain scale has arisen and has persisted must certainly be useful. Now, if this doctrine is good, I do not see why we should not apply it to the soul, unless we are prepared everywhere to make the soul an exception to everything except disadvantage; and no one, I believe, has as yet openly contended for that principle. But, when the Darwinian view is applied to the soul, the soul apparently must be of service. Pleasure and pain, volition and thought must after all be there for something, and must after all do something. For otherwise by this time they would surely be no longer there at all, since, if so, they would be varieties useless and yet persisting.

The above reflection is obvious and, I presume, must be answered as follows. The soul is useless, but on the other side the soul costs nothing. To be pleased or pained brings no good but brings also no harm. And thus the soul, being something which with regard to advantage or hindrance is nothing, falls wholly outside the Darwinian doctrine. But this answer can hardly stand unless we are ready to accept the old wives' story of the whistle blown and blown by nothing. And if we hold to the belief that something comes from something, and that from nothing nothing comes, we shall have to seek for a less irrational proof that the soul may be useless.

If we consider that, on any view, the soul covers a large area of fact, if we decline to believe that this mass of existence is produced from and costs nothing, if we reflect further that fruitless expenditure is disadvantage which (it seems) must eventually destroy itself—we shall find it impossible to take the soul as being of no service at all. The soul must be useful, but it may be useful perhaps in a qualified sense. It may afford an advantage perhaps which is but conditional, provisional and temporary. The soul in other words, though of service now, in the end may become useless. And in the end (we must add) having become useless the soul will cease. We can find also some further reason to expect such a supersession of the soul.

Every organism, we may anticipate, will become perfect. They will all in the end be

adapted to their environments, and will be internally free from defect and jolting. But, if the soul is consciousness, the soul in its essence seems to involve imperfection. For consciousness consists in a process of distinction and relation and it implies some collision. That which later we know as choice between incompatibles is at first certainly not present, but at the very dawn of consciousness we have some struggle between suggestion and fact. And if it were not so, and if we felt nothing of a balked attempt, we never, it would appear, should become conscious at all. But consciousness, so living through friction, through delay and wavering, tends, as defects are removed, itself to pass away. Thus habits of action and of perception, acquired haltingly and with painful prominence of each struggling detail, become automatic more and more and with that unconscious. From which we conclude that, when on the whole adaptation has grown perfect, consciousness will have become superseded wholly.

This conclusion, if correct, seems the solution of our difficulty. Consciousness, though useless (we may say) both in principle and in prospect, will none the less be at present of service. Or at the least it will be the necessary accompaniment of what is useful. It will be that crying of an imperfect machine which arises from friction. This friction is expensive to the machine, and in principle it is not useless merely but positively injurious. But because inseparable from the machine at a certain stage of its development, the friction must be taken as an advantage to what owns it. But when by Evolution machines grow perfect and friction gradually is reduced to nothing, consciousness then will meet the destiny assigned to it by principle. It will have become useless wholly, and, with that, will cease to exist. And, with that, the world will have become perfect and purely physical.

There are however some objections which this view perhaps too much ignores. (i) For it has assumed first that the soul is the same as consciousness. But consciousness, with its distinction of subject from object and of objects from each other, is perhaps after all not so wide as sentience. But if the unconscious may be psychical, perfection after all need not be physical merely, but may be a sentient whole in which the oppositions of consciousness are transcended. And this psychical fact cannot be proven as above to be useless even in the end. (ii) Further, even if the principle were not unsound, the detail seems refractory. Without a process in time it is hard to see how any machine is to work and go. But with a process the door seems opened to accidents and jars, and so to outbreaks of consciousness. And since new machines have, I presume, to grow, and since old machines will, I suppose, wear out, perhaps after all perpetually there must be infantile and senile relapses into soul. And in short the Evanescence of Imperfection seems little better than the craze of a theory-monger. The facts rebel, and the principle seems mainly prejudice. The sentient machine of the Universe, though perfect, may by its essence involve collisions and friction between its parts, together with an outcry of consciousness. And what is above consciousness may still contain it as a necessary factor, while consciousness thus always, and yet never, is superseded.

The view of the soul as the result of friction seems in every way untenable, and to be oneself the self-awareness of jolts in a half-finished machine would be too stupid altogether. The distinction we draw between friction and work depends after all, I suppose, on a selected point of view. And if we wish to insist that the harmonious movement of a physical machine is by itself the one work, and that all beyond this is injurious or at least superfluous—perhaps we might begin by asking whether our point of view is rational or arbitrary.

Living once near a quarry on a hill I was persecuted by a strange noise. It came from a wooden brake screwed against the wheels of descending and loaded carts. And listening to this noise I fancied it the cry of some soul forced at intervals out of matter by too rude motion. And I tried to imagine the thoughts of such a soul and the views which it might take of its own meaning and destiny. It would perhaps first feel sure that its own feeling was an

end in itself, and that except for the sake of that or something like it nothing existed. But after many vagaries this soul might come to very different results. It might reflect perhaps how it's self was engendered by accident and defect, and how a perfect cart would admit no friction nor be liable to any soul. A perfect cart would be motion unhindered, harmonious and silent. Or this soul might think itself in any case but parallel to the physical motion. It might consider itself to be certainly in a sense dependent on the cart's movement, yet not so as to be produced at its expense, or as in any way to make any difference to it. But it struck me then that this last view was perhaps the most foolish of all. For that something could come from nothing and lead to nothing, remains always irrational. And I should dare to repeat this though I had thrown at my head some word longer even than "psycho-physical."

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