



Rejection of the Soul's Immortality

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THE reflections presented to the reader in this work, tend to show what ought to be thought of the human soul, as well as of its operations and faculties: everything proves, in the most convincing manner, that it acts, that it moves according to laws similar to those prescribed to the other beings of Nature; that it cannot be distinguished from the body; that it is born with it; that it grows up with it; that it is modified in the same progression; in short, everything ought to make man conclude that it perishes with it.

This soul, as well as the body, passes through a state of weakness and infancy; it is in this stage of its existence, that it is assailed by a multitude of modifications; that it is stored with an infinity of ideas, which it receives from exterior objects through the medium of the organs; that it amasses facts, that it collects experience, whether true or false, that it forms to itself a system of conduct, according to which it thinks, in conformity with which it acts, from whence results either its happiness or its misery. its reason or its delirium, its virtues or its vices; arrived with the body at its full powers, having in conjunction with it reached maturity, it does not cease for a single instant to partake in common of its sensations, whether these are agreeable or disagreeable; it participates in all its pleasures; it shares in all its pains; in consequence it conjointly approves or disapproves its state; like it, it is either sound or diseased; active or languishing; awake or asleep. In old age man extinguishes entirely, his fibres become rigid, his nerves loose their elasticity, his senses are obtunded, his sight grows dim, his ears lose their quickness, his ideas become unconnected, his memory fails, his imagination cools: what then becomes of his soul? Alas! it sinks down with the body; it gets benumbed as this loses its feeling; becomes sluggish as this decays in activity; like it, when enfeebled by years it fulfills its functions with pain; this substance, which is deemed spiritual, which is considered immaterial, which it is endeavored to distinguish from matter, undergoes the same revolutions, experiences the same vicissitudes, submits to the same modifications, as does the body itself.

In despite of this proof of the materiality of the soul, of its identity with the body, so convincing to the unprejudiced, some thinkers have supposed, that although the latter is perishable, the former does not perish: that this portion of man enjoys the especial privilege of immortality; that it is exempt from dissolution: free from those changes of form all the beings in Nature undergo: in consequence of this, man has persuaded himself, that this privileged soul does not die: its immortality, above all, appears indubitable to those who suppose it spiritual: after having made it a simple being, without extent, devoid of parts, totally different from anything of which he has a knowledge, he pretended that it was not subjected to the laws of decomposition common to all beings, of which experience shows him the continual operation.

Man, feeling within himself a concealed force, that insensibly produced action, that imperceptibly gave direction to the motion of his machine, believed that the entire of Nature, of whose energies he is ignorant, with whose modes of acting he is unacquainted, owed its motion to an agent analogous to his own soul; who acted upon the great macrocosm, in the same manner that this soul acted upon his body. Man, having supposed himself double,

made Nature double also: he distinguished her from her own peculiar energy; he separated her from her mover, which by degrees he made spiritual. Thus Nature, distinguished from herself, was regarded as the soul of the world; and the soul of man was considered as opinions emanating from this universal soul. This notion upon the origin of the soul is of very remote antiquity. It was that of the Egyptians, of the Chaldeans, of the Hebrews, of the greater number of the wise men of the east. It should appear that Moses believed with the Egyptians the divine emanation of souls: according to him, “God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul:” nevertheless, the Catholic, at this day, rejects this system of divine emanation, seeing that it supposes the Divinity divisible: which would have, been inconvenient to the Romish idea of purgatory, or to the system of everlasting punishment. Although Moses, in the above quotation, seems to indicate that the soul was a portion of the Divinity, it does not appear that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul was established in any one of the books attributed to him. It was during the Babylonish captivity, that the Jews learned the doctrine of future rewards and punishments, taught by Zoroaster to the Persians, but which the Hebrew legislator did not understand, or, at least, he left his people ignorant on the subject. It was in those schools, that Pherecydes, Pythagoras, and Plato, drew up a doctrine so flattering to the vanity of human nature—so gratifying to the imagination of mortals. Man thus believed himself a portion of the Divinity; immortal, like the Godhead, in one part of himself: nevertheless, subsequent religions have renounced these advantages, which they judged incompatible with the other parts of their systems; they held forth that the Sovereign of Nature, or her contriver was not the soul of man, but, that, in virtue of his omnipotence, he created human souls, in proportion as he produced the bodies which they must animate; and they taught, that these souls once produced, by an effect of the same omnipotence, enjoyed immortality.

However it may be with these variations upon the origin of souls, those who supposed them emanating from the Divinity, believed that after the death of the body, which served them for an envelope, they returned, by refunding to their first source. Those who, without adopting the opinion of divine emanation, admired the spirituality, believed the immortality of the soul, were under the necessity to suppose a region, to find out an abode for these souls, which their imagination painted to them, each according to his fears, his hopes, his desires, and his prejudices.

Nothing is more popular than the doctrine of the immortality of the soul; nothing is more universally diffused than the expectation of another life. Nature having inspired man with the most ardent love for his existence, the desire of preserving himself for ever was a necessary consequence; this desire was presently converted into certainty: from that desire of existing eternally which Nature has implanted in him, he made an argument, to prove that man would never cease to exist. Abady says, “our soul has no useless desires, it naturally desires an eternal life;” and by a very strange logic, he concludes that this desire could not fail to be fulfilled. Cicero, before Abady, had declared the immortality of the soul to be an innate idea in man; yet, strange to tell, in another part of his works he considers Pherecydes as the inventor of the doctrine. However this may be, man, thus disposed, listened with avidity to those who announced to him systems so conformable to his wishes. Nevertheless, he ought not to regard as supernatural the desire of existing, which always was, and always will be, of the essence man; it ought not to excite surprise, if he received with eagerness an hypothesis that flattered his hopes, by promising that his desire would one day be gratified; but let him beware how he concludes that this desire itself is an indubitable proof of the reality of this future life, with which at present he seems to be so much occupied. The passion for existence is in man only a natural consequence of the tendency of a sensible being, whose essence it is to be willing to conserve himself:

in the human being it follows the energy of his soul--keeps pace with the force of his imagination—always ready to realize that which he strongly desires. He desires the life of the body, nevertheless this desire is frustrated; wherefore should not the desire for the life of the soul be frustrated like the other? The partisans of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul reason thus: “All men desire to live forever, therefore they will live forever.” Suppose the argument retorted on them; would it be believed? If it was asserted, “All men naturally desire to be rich; therefore all men will one day be rich,” how many partisans would this doctrine find?

The most simple reflection upon the nature of his soul, ought to convince man that the idea of its immortality is only an illusion of the brain. Indeed what is his soul, save the principle of sensibility? What is it, to think, to enjoy, to suffer; is it not to feel? What is life, except it be the assemblage of modifications, the congregation of motion, peculiar to an organized being? Thus, as soon as the body ceases to live, its sensibility can no longer exercise itself; when its sensibility is no more, it can no longer have ideas, nor in consequence thoughts. Ideas, as we have proved, can only reach man through his senses; now, how will they have it, that once deprived of his senses, he is yet capable of receiving sensations, of having perceptions, of forming ideas? As they have made the soul of man a being separated from the animated body, wherefore have they not made life a being distinguished from the living body? Life in a body is the totality of this motion; feeling and thought make a part of this motion: thus it is reasonable to suppose, that in the dead man these motions will cease, like all the others.

Indeed, by what reasoning will it be proved, that this soul, which cannot feel, think, will, or act, but by aid of man’s organs, can suffer pain, be susceptible of pleasure, or even have a consciousness of its own existence, when the organs which should warn it of their presence are decomposed or destroyed? Is it not evident, that the soul depends on the arrangement of the various parts of the body; on the order with which these parts conspire to perform their functions; on the combined motion of the whole? Thus the organic structure once destroyed, can it be reasonably doubted the soul will be destroyed also? Is it not seen, that during the whole course of human life this soul is stimulated, changed, deranged, disturbed, by all the changes man’s organs experience? And yet it will be insisted, that this soul acts, thinks, subsists, when these same organs have entirely disappeared!

An organized being may be compared to a clock, which once broken, is no longer suitable to the use for which it was designed. To say, that the soul shall feel, shall think, shall enjoy, shall suffer after the death of the body; is to pretend that a clock, shivered into a thousand pieces, will continue to strike the hour; shall yet have the faculty of marking the progress of time. Those who say, that the soul of man is able to subsist, notwithstanding the destruction of the body, evidently support the position, that the modification of a body will be enabled to conserve itself after the subject is destroyed: this on any other occasion would be considered as completely absurd.

It will be said that the conservation of the soul after the death of the body, is an effect of the Divine Omnipotence: but this is supporting an absurdity by a gratuitous hypothesis. It surely is not meant by Divine Omnipotence, of whatever nature it may be supposed, that a thing shall exist and not exist at the same time: unless this be granted, it will be rather difficult to prove, that a soul shall feel and think without the intermediates necessary to thought.

Let them then, at least, forbear asserting, that reason is not wounded by the doctrine of the immortality of the soul; or by the expectation of a future life. These notions, formed to flatter man, to disturb the imagination of the uninformed, who do not reason, cannot appear either convincing or probable to enlightened minds. Reason, exempted from the illusions of prejudice, is, without doubt, wounded by the supposition of a soul, that feels, that thinks,

that is afflicted, that rejoices, that has ideas, without having organs; that is to say, destitute of the only known medium, wanting all the natural means, by which, according to what we can understand, it is possible for it to feel sensations, have perceptions, or form ideas. If it be replied, other means are able to exist, which are supernatural or unknown, it may be answered, that these means of transmitting ideas to the soul, separated from the body, are not better known to, or more within the reach of, those who suppose it, that they are of other men. It is, at least, very certain, it cannot admit even of a controversy, that all those who reject the system of innate ideas, cannot, without contradicting their own principles, admit the doctrine of the immortality of the soul.

In defiance of the consolation that so many persons pretend to find in the notion of an eternal existence; in despite of that firm persuasion which such numbers of men assure us they have, that their souls will survive their bodies, they seem so very much alarmed at the dissolution of this body, that they do not contemplate their end, which they ought to desire as the period of so many miseries, but with the greatest inquietude; so true it is, that the real, the present, even accompanied with pain, has much more influence over mankind, than the most beautiful chimeras of the future; which he never views but through the clouds of uncertainty. Indeed the most religious men, notwithstanding the conviction they express of a blessed eternity, do not find these flattering hopes sufficiently consoling to repress their fears; to prevent their trembling, when they think on the necessary dissolution of their bodies. Death was always, for mortals, the most frightful point of view; they regard it as a strange phenomenon, contrary to the order of things, opposed to Nature; in a word, as an effect of the celestial vengeance, as the wages of sin. Although everything proves to man that death is inevitable, he is never able to familiarize himself with its idea; he never thinks on it without shuddering; the assurance of possessing an immortal soul but feebly indemnifies him for the grief he feels in the deprivation of his perishable body. Two causes contribute to strengthen his fears, to nourish his alarm; the one is, that this death, commonly accompanied with pain, wrests from him an existence that pleases him—with which he is acquainted—to which he is accustomed; the other is the uncertainty of the state that must succeed his actual existence.

The illustrious Bacon has said, that “men fear death for the same reason that children dread being alone in darkness.” Man naturally challenges everything with which he is unacquainted; he is desirous to see clearly to the end, that he may guarantee himself against those objects which may menace his safety; that he may also be enabled to procure for himself those which may be useful to him; the man who exists cannot form to himself any idea of non-existence; as this circumstance disturbs him, for want of experience, his imagination sets to work; this points out to him, either well or ill, this uncertain state: accustomed to think, to feel, to be stimulated into activity, to enjoy society, he contemplates as the greatest misfortune, a dissolution that will strip him of these objects, that will deprive him of those sensations which his present nature has rendered necessary to him; he views with dismay a situation that will prevent his being warned of his own existence—that shall bereave him of his pleasures—to plunge him into nothing. In supposing it even exempt from pain, he always looks upon this nothing as an afflicting solitude—as an heap of profound darkness; he sees himself in a state of general desolation; destitute of all assistance; and he feels keenly all the rigor of this frightful situation. But does not a profound sleep help to give him a true idea of this nothing? Does not that deprive him of everything? Does it not appear to annihilate the universe to him, and him to the universe? Is death anything more than a profound, a permanent sleep? It is for want of being able to form an idea of death that man dreads it; if he could figure to himself a true image of this state of annihilation, he would from thence cease to fear it; but he is not able to conceive a state in which there is no feeling; he therefore believes, that when he shall no longer exist, he will have the same

feelings, the same consciousness of things, which, during his existence, appear so sad to his mind; which his fancy paints in such gloomy colors. Imagination pictures to him his funeral pomp—the grave they are digging for him—the lamentations that will accompany him to his last abode—the epicedium that surviving friendship may dictate; he persuades himself that these melancholy objects will affect him as painfully even after his decease, as they do in his present condition, in which he is in full possession of his senses.

Mortal, led astray by fear! after thy death thine eyes will see no more; thine ears will hear no longer; in the depth of thy grave thou wilt no more be witness to this scene, which thine imagination, at present, represents to thee under such dismal colors; thou wilt no longer take part in what shall be done in the world; thou wilt no more be occupied with what may befall thine inanimate remains, than thou wast able to be the day previous to that which ranked thee among the beings of thy species. To die is to cease to think; to lack feeling; no longer to enjoy; to find a period to suffering; thine ideas will perish with thee; thy sorrows will not follow thee to the silent tomb. Think of death, not to feed thy fears—not to nourish thy melancholy—but to accustom thyself to look upon it with a peaceable eye; to cheer thee up against those false terrors with which the enemies to thy repose labor to inspire thee!

The fears of death are vain illusions, that must disappear as soon as we learn to contemplate this necessary event under its true point of view. A great man has defined philosophy to be a meditation on death; he is not desirous by that to have it understood that man ought to occupy himself sorrowfully with his end, with a view to nourish his fears; on the contrary, he wishes to invite him to familiarize himself with an object that Nature has rendered necessary to him; to accustom himself to expect it with a serene countenance. If life is a benefit, if it be necessary to love it, it is no less necessary to quit it; reason ought to teach him a calm resignation to the decrees of fate: his welfare exacts that he should contract the habit of contemplating with placidity, of viewing without alarm, an event that his essence has rendered inevitable: his interest demands that he should not brood gloomily over his misfortune; that he should not, by continual dread, embitter his life; the charms of which he must inevitably destroy, if he can never view its termination but with trepidation. Reason and his interest then, concur to assure him against those vague terrors with which his imagination inspires him, in this respect. If he was to call them to his assistance, they would reconcile him to an object that only startles him, because he has no knowledge of it; because it is only shown to him with those hideous accompaniments with which it is clothed by superstition. Let him then, endeavour to despoil death of these vain illusions, and he will perceive that it is only the sleep of life; that this sleep will not be disturbed with disagreeable dreams; that an unpleasant awakening is never likely to follow it. To die is to sleep; it is to enter into that state of insensibility in which he was previous to his birth; before he had senses; before he was conscious of his actual existence. Laws, as necessary as those which gave him birth, will make him return into the bosom of Nature, from whence he was drawn, in order to reproduce him afterwards under some new form, which it would be useless for him to know: without consulting him, Nature places him for a season in the order of organized beings; without his consent, she will oblige him to quit it, to occupy some other order.

Let him not complain then, that Nature is callous; she only makes him undergo a law from which she does not exempt any one being she contains. Man complains of the short duration of life—of the rapidity with which time flies away; yet the greater number of men do not know how to employ either time or life. If all are born and perish—if everything is changed and destroyed—if the birth of a being is never more than the first step towards its end; how is it possible to expect that man, whose machine is so frail, of which the parts are so complicated, the whole of which possesses such extreme mobility, should be

exempted from the common law; which decrees, that even the solid earth he inhabits shall experience change—shall undergo alteration—perhaps be destroyed! Feeble, frail mortal! Thou pretendest to exist for ever; what thou, then, that for thee alone eternal Nature shall change her undeviating course? Dost thou not behold in those eccentric comets with which thine eyes are sometimes astonished, that the planets themselves are subject to death? Live then in peace for the season that Nature permits thee; if thy mind be enlightened by reason thou wilt die without terror!

Paul Henry d'Holbach. *The System of Nature*. Chapter 13. Trans. Samuel Wilkinson. London: Thomas Davidson, 1820.

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