

TITLE: What Happened to the Soul?

Speakers: **Iain McGilchrist**, psychiatrist and author of "The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World"

Chaired by: **Jonathan Rowson**, Director, Social Brain Centre, RSA

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NB

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Jonathan Rowson: Hello good evening I'm Jonathan Rowson, director of the Social Brain Centre here at the RSA. And I'm very glad to extend this soulful welcome this evening. We have a wonderful guest to speak in a moment, I'll introduce Iain shortly but I just wanted to take a moment to first of all some housekeeping. Are your phones please on silent but you're welcome to tweet, indeed encouraged to do so and the hash tag is #RSASpirituality. So do be active there if you feel like it. We are recording this event so keep that in mind when you ask a question later introduce yourself briefly for posterity and we also have a big live audience I believe. I was particularly intrigued to hear there's people watching from a live streaming event in Guernsey and Iain's a long time resident of the Isle of Skye so we have a big small island community and a theme going on tonight.

Now this event takes place in the context of a broader project as some of you know. It's called Spirituality Tools of the Mind and the Social Brain. It's roughly an 18 month project and it's broadly about how rethinking human nature might help us to reconceive spirituality and think better of its purpose and value. And we've been doing that through a variety of private events at the RSA as part of our research process that will lead to a final report. But we've also been doing it with public events. We had an opening event broadly exploring rethinking spirituality, trying to get away from the kind of hijacking of the term by the New Age and thinking a bit more deeply about how we might use it.

In the second event we had Guy Claxton speaking about embodied cognition and the role of the fundamentally embodied nature of a lot of the spiritual experience and tonight we have a talk exploring the soul.

Now Iain is someone I'm very glad to introduce. If you haven't read his book *The Master and His Emissary* you're just letting the best in life pass you by. It's a really extraordinary work and it's the product of, sometimes you hear that line you know a

luminous mind at the peak of its powers, it's that kind of thing. It's really an amazing work and Iain has the rare ability to traverse neuroscience and the humanities with equal authority in both. He knows his dopamine from his serotonin but he also knows his Sartre from his Heidegger or whatever. So it's that kind of breadth of vision that I was keen for him to bring to bear on this important question tonight.

So without further ado Iain McGilchrist.

Iain McGilchrist: Well, thank you very much, Jonathan, for inviting me here and thank you all for coming. Jonathan asked me to do this, and I foolishly said 'yes' and I feel a complete fraud actually because, well, I don't really know anything about the soul and the only thing that consoles me is that probably very few other people do either – so you'll have to just cut me some slack anyway.

There was a piece in the papers not very long ago by a quite well known team in America who do neuroimaging and they're particularly interested in moral values. And they found that by suppressing activity in the right temporoparietal region they caused a failure to understand the nature of moral judgements. Well, this wasn't a surprise to me, anyone who knows my book would suggest that that was probably going to happen. They set up a scenario of Grace, hoping to put sugar in her friend's coffee but actually by mistake putting poison in, and her friend died. In the other scenario Grace intended to poison her friend but put sugar in and the friend lived. In the normal state we probably think it was worse to intend to poison; but the good old left hemisphere on its own thought, in what is basically an autistic way, that the outcome was the important measure.

Well, that's all very interesting. But then these neuroscientists, and I won't mention their names to spare them their blushes here, finished up by saying, "If something as complex as morality has a mechanical explanation, it'll be hard to argue

that people have, or need, a soul.” Well, I hope you can see that there might be a category mistake in there; everything that goes through human experience has its brain correlates, but of course it doesn’t mean that that’s all there is to it.

So is the concept of the soul a redundant idea now that science has made us see it as a superstition, or are we actually turning our backs on something very important, simply because we can’t satisfy demands for precision and proof; and in fact are we making a category mistake?

So I’m going to ask today two questions. What use is the soul as an idea? And I think I have an answer to that. I think it has a use. And I’m also going to ask if so what might the soul be like? And about that I’m afraid I am less certain, but I’m going to have a go.

I expect a lot of us would sympathise with the soldier of Marlborough’s before the battle of Blenheim who was reportedly heard praying, “Oh God, if there be a God, save my soul, if I have a soul.” And nowadays it’s become a kind of embarrassment to talk about the soul; and yet until now it has been central to most cultures. The word has disappeared. And language is an aspect of reality. If it’s true, as Wittgenstein said, that philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by language, making something disappear by language could bewitch us into thinking it didn’t exist.

So let’s think in simple terms, can this word be substituted? Well, it seems to me to place the person in the widest context, the context outside the confines of immediate time and space, and even to involve an idea of destiny. So, for example, Othello’s great lines, “It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul, let me not name it to you, ye chaste stars, it is the cause.” It will be difficult to replace that with, “It is the cause, it is the cause, my mind, my brain, my emotions, my will, my what?” Equally that famous poem of W.E. Henley’s *Invictus*, “I am the captain of my soul.” I am

the captain of my mind, my brain, my emotions, my what? It seems that the concept has a meaning, which we can’t exactly say what it is, but it, as I say, sets the human being in a broad context, not the narrow context of where we’re encountering the person. And it seems to have this idea of a destiny. And so one gets the idea of Keats’ that the world is a vale of soul-making. What did he mean? He didn’t mean that we grow up intellectually. He didn’t mean that we got better at being moral citizens. He didn’t mean that something happened to our heart exactly, although it could have involved bits of all of those. He meant something bigger and deeper.

So is our sense of the spiritual something like our moral sense? Well, it certainly has something of that in it, but it goes beyond it, doesn’t it? There’s a rather marvellous moment in a play of Iris Murdoch’s called *Above the Gods*, where a character says, “In a way goodness and truth seem to come out of the depths of the soul, and when we really know something we feel that we’ve always known it. Yet also it’s terribly distant, farther than any star. We’re sort of stretched out. It’s like beyond the world, not in the clouds or in heaven, but a light that shows the world, this world, as it really is.” I’ll come back to those words. But they put me in mind – she was a Platonist – of Plato’s speaking of philosophy in the Seventh Letter. He says, “For philosophy doesn’t admit of exposition like other branches of knowledge; but after much converse about the matter, and a life lived together, suddenly a light, as it were, is kindled in one’s soul, by a flame that leaps to it from another, and thereafter sustains itself.” So thinking and moral reasoning are part of it; but what both those passages seem to suggest to me is that there is something deeper, more transcendent, over which we have less power, that comes to us.

So is it to do with emotion? That’s another possible idea because, after all, we say ‘soulful’, often meaning with emotion, and

I think that might be right. But there's a kind of realm in which we can respond to art, I'm thinking particularly of music, for which the word 'emotion' is wrong. (Music plays.) This is the Kyrie Le Roy, by the 16th century John Taverner, and it strikes me, and has always struck me, that we don't have words for the way in which that works. It is intellectually pleasing; it is, I suppose, emotionally something; but it is above all *spiritually* whatever it is. There just seems to me no two ways about it.

Now one thinks of phrases ... the psalmist says, "Why art thou cast down, o my soul? And why art thou so disquieted within me?" You could say 'somebody is unhappy'; you could say this is sadness, and in a way that's right, depending on what we mean. But if you think of this as the words of a soldier encountering the realities of the life of combat, or a refugee fleeing from such a world, or just a bereaved 'soul' (as we say), it seems to me that it's more than that. And perhaps also the case of depression is not really one of sadness. Is it perhaps a soul sickness? Psychiatrists, after all the word means 'soul doctors'; and in German there was the idea that doctors were ministering to *die Seele*, which is a hard thing to define. But that's the point: we need a word that's hard to define, because, if we define it, we'll probably miss the point altogether.

Well, let's get a little bit less defined. It could be sort of 'imagination', something like that. And indeed again it often involves imagination, but it surely is other than that, and goes beyond it; and there's plenty of imagination which is not in the service of the soul at all. In a book called *Logos of the Soul* by a follower of Jung, called Christou, talking about Jung's idea of the soul, he comments, "A person who spent his life in a cell may have enriched and deepened his soul, and this wouldn't mean moreover that he spent his time accumulating fantasies or writing learned treatises". It's not intellectual, or imaginative in the sense of 'fantasy'. But it's probably more imaginative in the way that

Wordsworth used the idea: "...and become a living soul." There are overlaps there.

Well, OK, it's not any of those things precisely – but could it be a something that stands over against our embodied existence? Well, I think there's two things wrong with that. One is that it's not a thing, and the other is that it's not over against our embodied existence. Like matter, according to Whitehead and Bergson the soul seems to me to be process, more process than a thing. We come back to the phrase, 'a vale of soul-making'. Perhaps not all souls are equal. Perhaps we have to grow our souls. Perhaps souls can be so thwarted that they're almost extinguished.

And many people who have talked about the soul have used imagery of fire or water, which are things that are more like energy processes. For example, Eckhart's *funkelein*, the little spark, the *scintilla animae*, the soul spark, which comes from, corresponds to, and reaches out again to, the divine. A potentiality, in other words – something in the process of happening, a latent function that needs to be nourished, to grow and expand. Nowadays it's not popular to say that there is a value to suffering; and I'm certainly not suggesting that suffering is ever anything that anyone should, or would want to, invite into their life. But it is part of the experience of suffering, sometimes, that it does deepen one's sense of what it means to be alive.

A poet that I like very much, Henry Vaughan, had a collection of poems in fact called the *Silex Scintillans* which means 'the sparking flint', the flint from which the spark comes. And, of course, the spark arises when the flint's struck, it comes from the heart, and is the spark that is involved in, and nourished by, suffering. Then I think of that phrase of Wordsworth's, after his brother was drowned in the wreck of the Abergavenny, I think it was, "A deep distress hath humanised my soul." Again, thinking of water, one would think of the *tao*, the flow of

life, which is not far from a kind of 'world soul', really, and the flow that is in Heraclitus, where *everything* is flow, at the heart. Of course in Heraclitus you get imagery both of flow *and* of fire – Heraclitus has everything!

And I remember also a wonderful film (I thought it would be too complicated to show you a clip of that tonight). I'm very fond of a number of films by Andrei Tarkovsky. One of them I'm thinking of is *Solaris*. If you think you've seen *Solaris* because you saw a terrible American film made in the 1990s [actually 2001] you haven't: you need to see the Russian film made in, I think, 1974 [actually 1972]. I think it's one of the most moving and philosophically fascinating films ever made. And it shows somebody, through the imagination of someone that loves them, and through their being imagined by that person, and through their experience of suffering, actually *growing a soul and coming to life*. It's a science fiction film: it's both extremely eerie and extremely beautiful. So there you see a sort of resonance between the two characters, Kris and Khari, in that story, that brings this soul to life. And I think that's a good image of how we grow a soul, if we do grow a soul – in this *resonant* area.

But we need to have a sort of disposition – and perhaps that disposition *is* the soul. Perhaps the soul is a disposition towards life, a disposition that's both rapt and reflective, and makes a living process possible – that opens a space. And here James Hillman, another disciple, if you like, of Jung, says, I think putting it rather well: "The soul is less an object of knowledge than it is a way of knowing the object, a way of knowing knowledge itself."

So it's not really a thing. It's more a disposition, a manner, an attitude, a way of being and a process, it seems to me. And it isn't *contrary* to the body, although, in the past, it was conceived as the thing that was 'left over', as it were, when dying. The college at Oxford of which I'm lucky enough to be a Quondam Fellow is called All Souls. Actually

its full name is All Souls of the Faithful Departed (in fact I think it's of the Faithful Departed at the Battle of Agincourt), but there you have the idea of the soul as what's left of people once they've died. And, of course, that is a very rich idea, and I'm not dismissing it; but it does rather lead to the idea that it's something separate from the body. (Incidentally those who don't like the college take great pleasure in pointing out that the French for 'All Souls' College' is '*Collège des Morts*'.)

But once again Wittgenstein put his finger on it, when he said, "The human body is the best picture of the human soul." And the soul is intangible, perhaps, but it's still embodied; and in every culture images of breath, force or motion, such as in Greek *pneuma* and *psyche*, ideas of breath; and the same ideas exist in Hebrew (which is not a language I know), where there are the words, I believe, *ruach* and *nephesh*, which are words for soul that are derived from the idea of breath. And of course that is the image of God making man, by breathing his soul into the clay, into the living clay.

And, without that, the soul becomes something rather nebulous. Without that embodied nature, it becomes terribly tenuous. And it reminds me of Hadrian's description of his soul as *animula vagula blandula*, that poor little wavering, vague, smooth, little creature, that slips away – out of your mind. So it's important to remember that the soul is embodied, and it's deep also in instincts and intuitions, which is probably one of the ways whereby we contact it. And one shouldn't try to cut those out of the idea of the soul, in order to make it noble.

There were in the Nazi era, as you know, great festivals of the burnings of books. And Freud's books were among those that were consigned to the flames. And those who threw the books into the fire were enjoined to chant the following words, "In defiance of the soul-corroding glorification of instinctual life, and in the name

of the nobility of the human soul, I commit to the flames the writings of Sigmund Freud.”

C. S. Pierce, a 19th century American philosopher, who was also a logician and a mathematician, and whom I very much admire, wrote in a lecture beautifully entitled ‘Detached ideas on vitally important topics’: ‘It is the instinct, the sentiments that make the substance of the soul; cognition is only its surface, its locus of contact with what is external to it’.

The eyes are, we say, the windows of the soul. We see somebody’s soul in their eyes. In portraiture, too, there is the sense of contact with the soul through the eyes, and we can’t quite get away, can we, from this idea. And I don’t see why we should. Because it’s very deep in us, that something comes *out of* the eyes, not just goes *into* them. It’s present in almost every culture, and in every language.

What I quite like is the Hasidic idea of soul, in which there are two distinct souls. They remind me somewhat of a couple of hemispheres I once described. One is the animal soul, which is all about self-preservation and self-enhancement; and the other is the divine soul, which is driven by the desire to reconnect with its source. And our lives are the story of the interplay of these two souls. They’re not side by side, by the way, but they’re sort of nested, so that the divine soul is *inside* the animal soul, which is *inside* the body. They are ostensibly in conflict, but ultimately complementary. And at the core is the *divine* soul.

So they’re not the same as, the soul is not the same as, the body. But it’s not opposed to it either. And we need to go to people like Goethe and Blake to be able to understand that opposites don’t have to eliminate one another. In particular I like very much Goethe’s idea that we find the infinite, not by turning our backs on the finite, but *through* the finite, we find the general, not by turning our backs on the particular, but *through* the particular; and that

these are false dichotomies. In fact in the Hasidic tradition the nature of *sephiroth*, which is essentially the created world, is the synthesis of everything and its opposite. For if they didn’t possess the power of synthesis, there would be no energy in anything. This is rather like the idea in Heraclitus of *harmonie*, two poles that are held in tension, and out of which the richness of existence arises.

So, somehow, the soul is something there that is in the world, but *not* in the world; that is in contact with something other, but is also immanent here in the world. And I like that, because the idea of creation is to create relationship, and I think the divine creation was essentially about relationship. And so this otherness needs to be accessible. The divine needs to be both transcendent and immanent at the same time.

I come back to that phrase in Iris Murdoch, “A light that shows this world as it *really is*.” The soul is what makes the world authentic. It’s what is really in touch with experience. So, she also says, it’s terribly distant, farther than any star, we are sort of stretched out. So it has that element of otherness – but it’s brought together. And so it’s indefinable, but not remote. And, in Teilhard de Chardin’s way of thinking, we might say we are ‘steeped’ in soul. He has this wonderful expression: ‘by means of all created things, without exception, the divine assails us, penetrates us and moulds us. We imagine it as distant and inaccessible, whereas, in fact, we live steeped in its burning layers.’

So how do we contact this thing that is other? Well, we need to make an effort. We need to put ourselves in the disposition to understand it. We’re not going to understand it at all if we stand there, resistant to the idea, and waiting for it to sort of turn up as something credible to us. And I’m reminded here of a joke which a Jewish friend told me about a rabbi who is very poor, but very spiritual, and his life would be very much more comfortable if he had some money, and

he prays to God: "Please let me win the lottery." And his prayer never seems to be answered. "Please let me win the lottery"; never is it answered. One day he is at prayer, and God says to him, "Look, Samuel, meet me halfway – buy a ticket."

And I feel there's a deep spiritual truth in that, that we only get there if we are prepared to 'buy a ticket'.

So often we can say what it isn't. Hillman, in a work called *Suicide and the Soul*, says: "The soul is a deliberately ambiguous concept, resisting all definition, in the same manner as do all ultimate symbols which provide the root metaphors for the systems of human thought." And indeed mind, matter, nature, gravity, time, energy and God, all fall into this category. We can't really say what they are at all.

So spirituality is often about *not* knowing, because knowing means you've got it wrong. It can't be defined. It's not a concept, it's a symbol, not wholly of our making. Rabindranath Tagore talks about the ways in which one can understand; and he says, in a rather wonderful image, that again goes back to water: "The small wisdom is like water in a glass: clear, transparent, pure. The great wisdom is like the water in the sea: dark, mysterious, impenetrable." So, as Jung says, there may be a danger of wanting to understand the meaning, and, by doing so, overvaluing the content, which is subjected to a sort of intellectual analysis, and interpretation, so that the essentially symbolic character can no longer do its work – it's lost. And what goes missing is – meaning, and value for the subject.

So there's a danger, in my terms, of the left hemisphere having to collapse things too quickly into something familiar, 'what is it precisely?', leaving, therefore, no place for the intuited and the implicit, through which alone all great ideas in art, in religion, and in our lives are communicated. Making things more explicit doesn't actually make them easier to understand: it means we understand

something *other than what it is we are seeking to know*.

And in ritual we see embodied metaphor. Sometimes things can speak very loud to us through rituals, through a *mythos* (which is not a fiction, but is just another kind of truth from *logos* that one arrives at by sequential reasoning). Metaphor is a way to deal with the apophatic. They say, 'He who knows, doesn't tell, and he who tells, doesn't know'.

So how are we to approach this? I'd like just to make some attempt before I close. One is to take the idea of depth, which I've mentioned once or twice. Again, hard to define, but I don't feel too bad about this, because here is Isaiah Berlin on depth: "The notion of depth is something with which philosophers seldom deal. Nevertheless it is one of the most important categories we use. Although I attempt to describe what profundity consists in, as soon as I speak, it becomes quite clear that no matter how long I speak, new chasms open. No matter what I say, I always have to leave three dots at the end. I am forced to use language which is, in principle, not only today, but forever, inadequate for its purpose. You have no formula that will by deduction lead you to all the vistas opened by profound sayings. In this way it is something like the sublime, except, instead of the sublime without, it is the sublime within. And these two things surely correspond to one another, which is why we feel our soul, as we say, expands in the sublime landscape, the vastness of the view speaks to us internally."

And sometimes we encounter this also in more mundane aspects, if you like, of life, or, at least, more familiar aspects of life, such as our life of love, and through those that we love. In fact, in a secular age one of the ways in which we can really understand that there is something beyond, that we call the soul, may be through *eros* at its finest, at its greatest.

Jung, again interpreted by Hillman, says that this is what makes meaning possible, and deepens events into experience, *deepens* them into experiences; no longer just events, but experiences, which are communicated in love. And there was a very nice piece of neuropsychological research recently – well, it's molecular genetic research, actually – by Frederickson Cole, which suggested that people who are happy, or call themselves happy, but have little to no sense of meaning in their lives, have the same gene expression patterns as people who are enduring chronic adversity. In other words they are *stressed*, although they report happiness. And it's people who have connections, the 'betweennesses' in their life that give it meaning, that report being satisfied.

So, it's something deep, but it's also something very hard to bring into focus. It's that which grounds, but is itself unseen, like the eye. The eye sees, but we don't see the eye – it is the *ground of our seeing*. And the tension, again, which makes the world what it is, is an aspect of consciousness, not a *function* of it. The spiritual is often to be found in the places where we're not looking directly, but in the background, the 'in-between'. Bonhoeffer calls it a kind of *cantus firmus*, using an idea from polyphonic music: the melody, as it were, to which all the other melodies provide the counterpoint. And he makes the point that, if that element in our life, the spiritual, is kept going as the *cantus firmus*, we can depart as far as we like from it into the world, the actual world, the concrete world, the material, the fleshly, the emotional, the everyday – without losing anything.

So, finally, I'm talking very much about the soul in general. But what about each of our individual souls? How do we square the idea of soul as something generic and yet something particular? Well, it seems to me that the whole of creation is about the making of things particular out of things that are whole. And, in the Goethean way, they're not necessarily opposed to one another.

They may be aspects of one another. Individualisation is part of creation, achieving an unfolding inter-complexity, that is not in the *world soul* idea. We need both quanta and qualia. We need particles as well as waves. We need individuals as well as flow. And the soul is that which seems to me not to be in any way opposed to material existence, but transcends it. It's not separate from the material, in the way that a wave is not separate from the water; and yet the form, the force field, the thing that shapes it, the thing in which it's instantiated, is something concrete and not concrete at the same time. And I would see this as an aspect, really, if you asked me my opinion (and that's all I can give, because *none* of us has a privileged experience of this), I would say there's something in the idea of pantheism, the idea that there is multiplicity and unity without denying either, and without delimiting the concept of the divine, in the way that pantheism does.

So, to wrap up – a phrase of the American philosopher Eugene Gendlin, which I love: "We think more than we can say. We feel more than we can think. We live more than we can feel. And there's much else besides." And perhaps the soul is what we mean when we reflect on that 'much else besides'.

Jonathan Rowson: Thank you, Iain. I'm going to ask Iain a couple of questions and then open it up to everyone else. I wanted to speak to you about your deliberate ambiguity, because my experience of running this project is that clearly there's the soul, there's God, there's spirituality, there's all sorts of terms that are contested, but people have varying degrees of comfort with that idea that you can have something that's essentially contested or inherently ambiguous. And I wanted to ask you what would you say to some sort of Paxman-like question that says, "That's all very well, Iain, it's been a wonderful half hour, but what is the soul?"

Iain McGilchrist: Well, in a way I've attempted to address that as appropriately as I can. One should always, it seems to me, be as precise as the subject matter permits one to be, but no more precise than that. Because otherwise there is a bogus precision: we're always being asked to be precise about many things that are inherently not precise, and plenty of people would rather have us quantify it in some way and give a precise answer. Which is actually more of a lie than saying it can't be made precise.

Jonathan Rowson: So your answer is basically to the questioner, "You're asking the wrong question. You're asking more than I can give. You misunderstood the subject matter."

Iain McGilchrist: Yes, in any question it's a matter of two minds meeting, and you have to have the right disposition for the subject matter you're approaching.

Jonathan Rowson: Which is part of what the soul is, you're saying? It's almost as if, if the soul is to some extent dispositional one's view of knowledge, one's view of what knowledge is for, what experience is, what it means, then that may be a sort of prerequisite for really understanding what the soul is?

Iain McGilchrist: Well, I'm only speaking of course inevitably from experience but it seems to me that if the soul accords with anything it accords with an attitude, a disposition, a certain kind of attention to the world and it can be very much evoked by certain experiences – with music, for example, for me with the natural world, with love and friendship, and with things that I feel resonate with what that is, and what I tried to say was that none of the terms that we might be liable to substitute for it really does the job.

Jonathan Rowson: Okay, interesting. And I think, I know from prior experiences of these events afterwards, try to think of what were the questions that weren't asked and I

think some people understand that with hugely complex issues covering the whole of the world and the meaning and the purpose that's inherent in those really large questions some ambiguity is entirely appropriate. But nonetheless there will be people thinking, well where is Iain exactly coming from? What exactly is his position? Is there a theistic perspective here? Is it panentheistic? Is that where you end up? If so people will want to locate you as a messenger to make sense of the message. Can you help with that at all?

Iain McGilchrist: Well, I might say I can't help with that, really. In a way it's - in terms of the hemisphere hypothesis, it's the need that the left hemisphere has to make things certain and make sure we know what category we're talking about. But, as you know, what I believe is at least as important is the *way in which* things are done, and the manner, and that things are essentially unique. So I fall back, in a way, on the wisdom that "he who knows, doesn't say". Unfortunately I've already said far too much.

Jonathan Rowson: Great, thank you for that. Okay, I'm going to open up for questions and do err on the side of asking earlier rather than later, because we tend to have a flurry at the last minute that we can't deal with. So if I can see your hands early that's good to know. We have two at the front here. So okay we'll take the Twittersphere just so that they know we're with them. Matthew first of all please.

Matthew: We've got Nicole Shadbolt who asks is spirituality a feeling or a belief, e.g. is it like religion where you either believe it or not, or do you just feel it?

We have a question from Middleway who asks, "Did the New Age hijack spirituality or was it left luggage waiting to be picked up?"

Danny asks, "Does the soul provide a symbolic framework to ensnare us as well as hope for freedom?"

And someone else asks, "What is the soul," but you've answered that.

Jonathan Rowson: All right, great. Let me take not all of them, because that will waylay us, but the question about the New Age sort of hijacking spirituality, because that's quite important. When we say we're working on spirituality, a lot of people assume that's what we mean, and clearly we don't, so how do you feel about avoiding that hijacking? What's the alternative?

Iain McGilchrist: Well, when something that can't actually be airbrushed out of existence, however much our dogma says it should be, disappears, it will re-emerge somewhere. And it re-emerged in a sort of arena where people were simply less dogmatic, and I think that's what happened. I'm not really saying there's anything wrong with any particular kind of way of approaching the realm of the spiritual. I think that those who don't know are probably in a better place than those who think they do. and I think that, yeah, although we want to avoid the suggestions of, I don't know, something self-indulgent that goes along with the idea of hippiedom. I'm not averse to the idea that in certain cultures when it disappears, it will emerge in sub-cultures.

Jonathan Rowson: Okay, and you're not averse to hippiedom either, I imagine?

Iain McGilchrist: No. I quite like the question about is it a belief. I mean I really want to stress how little help cognition is in these areas. And Christianity is a religion that's overwhelmed by propositions of a cognitive nature, and in having to sign up to certain beliefs is one of the ways in which Christianity is often – misconceived, I think, actually, but nonetheless is unfortunately conceived. And I would say the mystical tradition, in which experience is more important than cognition, is valuable here.

Mark: Thank you very much. I was wondering as you were talking whether the soul gives offence, and that's partly what's

happened to it, and perhaps it's easy to say it might give offence if you were an out and out materialist and can't understand it but maybe it gives offence to us, you touched on suffering for example, maybe it rightly gives offence to us. It does challenge some of our most profoundly, deeply held notions in the modern world. I was thinking of other tensions like the individual against the collective perhaps. Or control, giving up...when you were talking I was wondering about giving up some kind of control that's required to put yourself in this disposition to see the soul.

Iain McGilchrist: Well, thank you, Mark. I think there is a problem in our world with not being in control and with making oneself vulnerable. I mean, in essence, to talk about the soul at all is to make oneself vulnerable; and there'll be people who will no doubt think the less of me for agreeing to talk about it. So I think we all do that, but I don't think anything useful in this world came about by trying to be invulnerable, and probably most prizes are won by putting oneself in the way of something that may or may not deliver. It's again the desire to have certainty and control, which actually gets in the way of understanding, I would say.

((Female questioner)): Thank you very much Mr McGilchrist I've read your book, it's profound, and I really do appreciate how much it has added to my thinking. I come as an international educator, but my question comes particularly as an American public school teacher, you talk about the soul and you even reiterated that it can be, I forgot the word you used, but it can be developed or helped by music, by nature, by love, which I agree. It's also apparent to me that it can also be harmed and specific when you talked about autism the increase in autism I see in our school system and I'm speaking again from my American school system is to me almost a damage process of the soul and I wonder what you thought that?

Iain McGilchrist: Golly. A very good question. First of all, I do think it follows that if it can be grown, it can be stunted. And so in that way I think all souls are not equal, which is not an idea that many people would feel comfortable putting about. But we do talk about people as being magnanimous or pusillanimous, which basically means being large-minded or small-minded, or small-souled, really, because it's *anima*. But, of course, I would be extraordinarily averse to the idea that somebody who is autistic somehow sacrificed the possibility of a soul. I think that would be entirely wrong. However I do think that autism is in our culture, and it is getting commoner; and it's terrifying that children now have to be taught how to read the human face, as a matter of course, apparently, in schools – which was never the case until very recently, only for children with autism. And if the face, the human face is one of the things that communicates the soul, it's cutting off one of the ways in which we can understand the soul, and live it. So I think there are dangers, yes. I think the more we liken ourselves to machines, and believe ourselves to be machines, and make ourselves more like machines, the more we drive it out; but I wouldn't want here to try and conflate autism as a human condition with that problem.

Roger Kennedy, psychoanalyst: In some ways I think the soul, what happened to it, it is certainly within the analytic encounter, I think, I certainly feel that one has the care of one's patient's soul, I certainly think in the psychological encounter one has enormous responsibility for the uniqueness of the person and the great danger certainly is to define too much the human being even if you're trying to interpret, you're trying to make sense but to allow something to take place and to listen to whatever it is that's happening that's a different kind of...the soul territory is different from the need to constantly find meaning. Incidentally I mean in terms of...

Jonathan Rowson: We need a question quite soon please.

Roger Kenney: What do you think about that?

Iain McGilchrist: Well, I know, and I've not read all, but part, of a book you've written about this, which is a very interesting topic. I would agree with you that keeping things open is part of the process of successful interaction with a patient, either as an analyst or a psychiatrist, but it's also part of all creative interaction – keeping the field of potential open. And the trouble with this need for definition and clarity is that it causes us to collapse things into things that we think we already know, rather than opening us up to something new. That's going to lead to spiritual death.

Elizabeth Oldfield, Theos: Thank you. You've given some very high culture quotes and examples, and I'm going to bring us right down to low culture with a Harry Potter reference which is that one of the most interesting places I've seen the concept of the soul used recently is in those last few books of *Harry Potter* where you see the bad guy tearing his soul into seven pieces through murder and it's not a particularly theistic universe this kind of echoes but otherwise it's quite an unexpected thing to see there. So I wondered if you think that one of the ways we think about the soul is that kind of moral component of human beings the goodness that needs guarding and can be corroded and whether that actually has more legs in a secular world than perhaps the concept of God?

Iain McGilchrist: In short I think – yes. I mean, yet another area on which I'm not an expert is *Harry Potter*, so I can't say about that, but I do think that the idea that there is something at stake is really quite important. And actually that is essentially what is missing in part from the concept of the meaning of life. And I think that, in a gentle way, the idea that a soul is a process, that can be thwarted or nourished, is a useful

one; and I think that sometimes, yes, forces can act to inhibit that. Now whether one gives them a spiritual life as forces or not is a question that we could debate for a long time.

Jonathan Rowson: Okay, great, I'm going to take lots of questions at once. I'm going to write down the gist of them and then I'm going to leave them to Iain to answer together. We'll begin with Esther over here, please.

Esther: Thank you so much it's a great talk. A quick question, which is: if we have a physical and material body that dies, what then happens to the soul? Because if we're saying this is something beyond the physical and beyond the material then what happens at death?

Jonathan Rowson: Great, huge question and we'll come to that.

((Female Questioner)): Hi, thanks – you mentioned that depression could be seen as an illness of the soul, so I was just wondering as a psychiatrist what your thoughts were about using psychiatric medication as a treatment for that?

Brian Pearce: Thank you very much for a wonderful talk. I wondered if you might say a little bit about how you came to see value in the panentheist approach, which seems to offer a framework within which people who are “religious” and people who are not might be able to share their common human experience and reflect on the kind of issues that you were talking about today? But I'd just be interested to know what led you to that concept?

Jonathan Rowson: I think we're going to make a judgement that we're going to take those three questions, they are so rich that we're going to take those three, and we'll come back to the others in a moment. First of all life after death, if you can?

Iain McGilchrist: Okay, well, of course, this is the big question that I didn't

exactly answer. My own intuition is that there is much more besides, as Gendlin says, and that we only know a part of things. I think it's actually only rational to suppose that our brains are not equipped to know everything. So, again, I'm not frightened to say I don't know the answer to this. But you're asking really my view, I think; and my view is this, that we have to use analogies, we have to use metaphors and images, because (and that was the theme of my talk) this is the only way we can do it. One was that we are rather like waves in the water: if this particular wave hadn't existed, another one would, and the water would all have been there, but while that wave is there the water and the wave are one in a way, and then the wave passes on. That gets us so far, but I think that suggests that, as it were, once we're gone, we might as well not have been – except that waves have an impact on the world, they erode stones, they carve landscapes, and they also create things in human minds, so they're not entirely without their consequences. But it seems to me that whatever it is that is the force of creation, it's got a thing about multiplicity. Whatever it is it loves multiplicity, abundance, superabundance and diversity. And that therefore the whole point is that there are individuals like you and me and that that can't be suddenly eroded to the point where it has no meaning. So we can't, with the kind of cognition that we have now, answer this with a proper model because we perhaps haven't got enough dimensions. I'd love to talk about a book published in 1844 called *Flat Land*, which tried to imagine what it would be like for somebody who could use only two-dimensional representations of the world to represent the three-dimensional world that they knew, and it would always be distorted, as maps always are, in places, and you have to do a trade-off. Well, I think it's like that, you can't actually express it, but the things are this, each soul is connected I think to something bigger, and to everything in fact, it's like an out-pouching, that exists for a

while, that enriches the whole. And there is that meaning also in my idea of the hemispheres: that everything is first implicit, it then is unpacked and made immensely rich and explicit by a process, and it's then taken up again as a whole. Perhaps that is actually like creation, perhaps that is an image of the, not just mind-universe, but of the universe. So that was my answer to that question.

Jonathan Rowson: That's a good moment to remind you that we do record these events so you can hear that one again later.

Iain McGilchrist: Now the next one, because, remember, another brilliant question is: "if depression is a soul sickness, unpack that, what do I think of depression or what do I think about medications for depression?" Well, I think it involves not just the mind or the heart, but the whole person including the spiritual dimension; and indeed, when people are depressed, often they experience an extinguishing of the sense of meaning and an extinguishing of their religious sense. So this happens to monks and contemplatives when they get what is called *acedia*, or 'accidie', as it was called in the Middle Ages. And there is a wonderful book by M.O'C. Drury, an Irish doctor who was a disciple of Wittgenstein's, and who actually became a doctor on the recommendation of Wittgenstein; and he wrote a book which is now – and I fortunately have a copy of it, but – it's very difficult to obtain now, called *The Danger of Words*. And in it he has a chapter on this topic, and he says, "What would have happened to all the great artists in the past if they'd been given antidepressants?" You know, we might not have *War and Peace*, for example. So there is that worry. But also, I know depression at second-hand, and I know it at first-hand; and it is so terrifying – true depression – so disruptive, so corrosive, that one could not wish anyone to languish in it a moment longer than they have to, however productive it would make them – and generally major depression *doesn't* make you productive. Having had it, if you recover,

does, because I think you learn from it. As I said, I think suffering can help the soul to grow. So medications are good, and the fact that a medication can affect the soul really takes me back to my point that whatever it is it's not out of touch with embodiment. And the third question?

Jonathan Rowson: Panentheism. And before you say it, can you just define it for us, because it's not...

Iain McGilchrist: There is pantheism, which is roughly speaking that God is the sum of everything. And then there is panentheism, which means that God is not the sum of everything, but God is *in* everything and there is a divine element *in* everything. And I like that. It corresponds with experience. And what do I mean by that? I have read a lot of theological things and mystical works and so forth, I've meditated, I've contemplated, I've lived, I've been a bad boy, I've been a good boy, you know – and here we are. You're asking me how did I get this idea? It came from experience, and I think I like the idea that it's a coming together, a place for those who don't have a creed, with those who do; because in fact the place that I found it best expressed was in the works of a man called Philip Sherrard, who was a Greek Orthodox. And in his spirituality, and the spirituality that one finds in Greece, one sees the notion of the sanctity of every single living thing, every blade of grass, everything – and, indeed, everything that we think of as possibly evil, which takes us into the realm of, well, again, oriental religions are able to cope with this, but modern Christianity can't cope with this.

Jonathan Rowson: Okay, great, we have some more questions, and we'll try and take them together. Begin at the back and move forwards if we can. And it's the last chance to put your hand up, after this there won't be another chance. Okay, so keep your questions as...

((Male questioner)); How would you meet the charge of somebody as sadly bereft

of spirituality as myself that all you've done is reinstated Descartes' ghost in the machine, but instead of being a product, it's a process?

Jonathan Rowson: Okay, hold that question if you can, I know it's tempting to answer it, but we'll take the next question, please.

Andy Hopper: Hi, thanks for the talk. If we take the soul as something that could be stunted and grown, how do we account for evil souls or people developing the opposite – they must still have a soul?

John Field, Fellow: When we remember someone who has died, whether it's a loved one or someone with whom we've been acquainted, what is it we are remembering? Is it not simply their soul rather than anything physical about them?

((Female Questioner)): Thanks very much. Do you think belief in the soul presupposes or necessitates belief in a higher power or a deity, and, if not, in this secular age whether the secularists who believe in the soul?

((Male Questioner)): We've heard very little in this talk about the power of science to unlock and to help us understand what is happening in the brain, the reasons you gave us for taking talk of the soul seriously are that there are various experiences which are hard to explain in other ways, such as the profound reaction we all had hearing that beautiful 16th century music, or people's reactions through terrible suffering, which can make them a more compassionate person, but isn't it quite likely that in the next decade or so that the neurotechnology, scanning of the brain, building better multi-level models of the brain is going to give us more precise and useful ways of talking about it, and that the talk of the soul is going to disappear, much like the 'God of the gaps' disappeared, because there are useful ways to talk about it which give us more precise and useful meanings, than the older, imprecise.

Jonathan Rowson: Okay, we'll try and answer some of those together now, and if we have time we'll take further questions. First of all, Iain, Descartes' ghost in the machine, about process not product, just on that – and, if you can, tie in the other questions as well. If you can't, it's all right.

So if it's not ghost in the machine as product, are you just saying it's ghost in the machine as process? Or are you going beyond that somehow?

Iain McGilchrist: Well, it's not ghost in the machine. First of all, the body's not a machine; and I'm not making a hard and fast distinction between the body and soul, in a way, so I'm saying the body and soul are aspects of perhaps the same thing, and it's important to see that you can have *duality* without having *dualism*. The old image of the Taijitu (which we think of as the 'yin-yang symbol') shows two things that are distinct, but that go together to make a whole, and complement one another perfectly, and are really aspects of the life-force – and they even contain a little bit of one another (I can't illustrate this, but those of you who know the symbol will know what I'm talking about). So I think what you're really saying is, if you talk about a soul at all are you guilty of a Cartesian dualism? And I think those are not the only options at all; and I hoped to steer clear of that tonight – perhaps I didn't succeed.

Jonathan Rowson: Well, in Iain's defence, his book does touch on those things at some length as well, so it's another reference point. The question about whether you need to believe in a higher power for the soul to have provenance – you've kind of touched on that already, but is there anything you want to add?

Iain McGilchrist: Well, I think anything that puts one off the notion that one has a spiritual element is going to be disadvantageous and counterproductive, but I do think that not to be able to believe in something that is beyond us is, yes, to close

the door on the idea of the soul. In a way I've suggested that the soul is something that communes with something that is beyond what we actually can express in language, and if you like to call that a higher power I think it's a useful idea. I've known it be very helpful to non-believing patients who have to deal with addictions, and so forth, and maybe it is a way of talking about deep intuitions that come from well below the conscious level, a kind of wisdom which is not just *our* wisdom. But, at any rate, I mean as Jung suggested, it might be a wisdom of ages that we're able to tap into. So one way or another you come back to the idea of something beyond the immediate that we can define. And really that's why it's got to be indefinite, because it's beyond the defined area of knowledge. Now that's probably what that gentleman picked up, when he was saying 'we'll know more, and then we'll get it precise'; but I think that's just a category mistake – if you've got it precise, you've got it wrong. This is the kind of error that is egregiously made by neuroscientists – like, you know, you remember the terrible fervour and excitement there was in the papers, a great splash, "We've discovered what happens when you fall in love," – you know, there's this circuit that lights up in your brain. Well, you know, I mean, for me that was a huge relief, because until that point I had no idea what falling in love was, but then at last I knew it was some twittering of ganglia. Well, I mean this is just 'nonsense on stilts', and to suggest that somehow we'll be able to find something in the brain that corresponds to the soul is just crass.

Jonathan Rowson: I think to be fair, though, to give the questioner his due, the question is, it may be the case that science cannot tell us what the soul is, or that science cannot tell us anything that would rule out the existence of the soul, but is it in any way the case that science can help us understand better what the soul is?

Iain McGilchrist: [pause] No.

Jonathan Rowson: Okay, fine.

Iain McGilchrist: I mean, it's about appropriate modes of thought for appropriate objects of thought. And it comes back to – this was all covered by Aristotle – there are different things, different forms of wisdom, different forms of knowledge. Don't confuse the two or three.

Jonathan Rowson: Okay we'll come back to that. Jules, we'll take a question here.

Jules: Thank you, great talk. There's been a millennia-old idea that there is a connection between souls and dreams, so the idea of shamanic trances or you think of Cicero's dream of Scipio, where someone falls asleep and their soul leaves, all the way up into Freud and Jung, but it seems like psychology and psychiatry has lost that idea that dreams have anything useful to tell us. Do you think we've closed the door on a useful source of knowledge about ourselves and about the soul?

Iain McGilchrist: I like the question. I think my answer will be that sometimes dreams can be telling us powerful things, and sometimes they can be complete rubbish. And the same is true of psychosis. One mustn't glorify psychosis, but sometimes people with mental illnesses have insights into things which otherwise they wouldn't have had. But sometimes they just think there is an aeroplane glued in their left ear and there isn't. Equally, with taking drugs: sometimes one can have an experience which seems very meaningful, and changes your life, and other times you just see a lot of nonsense. So it's a bit like – you know, one mustn't get dogmatic – I always felt that Freud's idea of the *lapsus linguae*, the slip of the tongue, that it always carries meaning ... well, the boring answer is, sometimes it does, and sometimes it's just a slip of the tongue.

Jonathan Rowson: Gosh, okay, I think we'll end there, because we've had a lot of great questions and it's plenty to think about. Just to let you know that there will be

more talks in the series, there's another two before the final one so there's three in total to come. But the main thing I want to do now is just to thank Iain for a wonderful talk.