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Since when have humans had a soul?

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An attempt is made to determine when humans have had a soul. For this purpose, mind and soul are distinguished from each other. This clarification of terms makes it possible to criticise the emergentist view, which assumes that the soul arises naturally from the biological organism. The existence of a soul is inferred from the mental activities of humans, which are directed towards the transcendent. Special significance is given to burials. Burials have been practised for at least 448 000 years. Not only *Homo sapiens*, but also *Homo naledi*, *Homo heidelbergensis steinheimensis* and *Homo neanderthalensis* buried their dead. Therefore, there is good reason to assume that *Homo heidelbergensis* and all its descendants possessed (and still possess) a soul. Moreover, one can suppose that *Homo erectus* and *Homo naledi* also possessed a soul.

Contribution: The clear distinction between the immanent mind and the transcendent soul makes us aware that we humans are beings equally at home in immanence and transcendence. Humans have possessed a soul for a very long time, and not only *Homo sapiens* but also his ancestors and related species.

Keywords: soul; mind; burials; human evolution; palaeoanthropology; theology; tripartite view of humans; emergentism.

Introduction

The last decades of palaeoanthropological research have increasingly revealed the steps of human biological evolution: The genus *Ardipithecus* evolved into *Australopithecus* (White et al. 2009) and an *Australopithecus* species evolved into the genus *Homo* (Kimbel & Villmoare 2016).

It is generally accepted that the first true human was *Homo erectus ergaster*, whose oldest find is from Kenya and is 1.87 million years old (Antón et al. 2016; Buck & Stringer 2016; Lepre & Kent 2015). In Africa, *Homo erectus* evolved into *Homo heidelbergensis heidelbergensis*, which had a slightly smaller brain than present-day *Homo sapiens* but was otherwise quite similar to us (Manzi 2011; Pearson 2013:8; Stringer 2002). *Homo heidelbergensis heidelbergensis* soon expanded into Europe and Asia. In Europe, this human species lived already 700 000 years ago (Moncel et al. 2020). In each of the three continents, *Homo heidelbergensis heidelbergensis* evolved differently (Manzi 2011):

- In Europe, it evolved into *Homo heidelbergensis steinheimensis*, which developed further into *Homo neanderthalensis*.
- In Asia, the subspecies *Homo heidelbergensis daliensis* emerged. Within this subspecies, Manzi (2011) and Buck and Stringer (2016:231) also include the Denisovans, widespread in Asia.
- In Africa, *Homo heidelbergensis heidelbergensis* evolved into *Homo heidelbergensis rhodesiensis*. Moreover, from this arose *Homo sapiens*. This is also confirmed by the analysis of Thackeray, Albessard-Ball and Balzeau (2020).

The oldest unequivocal representative of *Homo sapiens* was found in Ethiopia: it is the skull of Kibish Omo, which is at least 212 000 years old (Vidal et al. 2021). All humans living today belong to the species *Homo sapiens*.

There are other species of the genus *Homo* that are extinct and descended from *Homo erectus* or even more primitive human species. In particular, I would like to mention *Homo naledi*, which lived in South Africa about 236 000–335 000 years ago (Berger et al. 2017; Dirks et al. 2017).

While the evolution of the human body can be traced based on bones, the evolution of the mind is much more difficult to document, and the origin or acquisition of the soul cannot be traced at all with scientific methods. Nevertheless, in this article, I attempt to determine when humans presumably have had a soul. In doing so, I rely on the research results of palaeoanthropology and try to interpret them concerning this question. However, before I come to this actual

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question of my article, I first have to clarify what is meant by body, mind and soul.

Body, mind and soul

The body is the material part of the human being. Until 100 years ago, it was perfectly legitimate to contrast the body with the non-material part of the human being in an undifferentiated way. Since at that time, the natural sciences did not know so much about the non-material part of the human being, it was not a significant problem of knowledge if no sharp distinction was made between mind and soul. Today, the situation is quite different because modern natural sciences show that an essential area of the non-material part of the human being depends on the body. If one wanted to, one could even go to the extent of claiming that essential aspects of the non-material part of the human being – such as feelings and consciousness – are only the result of biological, chemical and physical processes. This view is held, for example, by Aslan (2017:39). This progress in knowledge in the field of natural sciences forces us to clearly define and distinguish between mind and soul.

According to its definition, the soul is immortal and non-material. It can neither be put in the categories of matter, energy and space. It is, therefore, transcendent. This makes it completely inaccessible to the natural sciences, and we can only infer its existence from personal experiences and the cultural and religious traditions of humanity. The great number and far-reaching power of cultural and religious traditions that speak of the existence of the soul (see e.g. Ciocan 2020; Ohlig 2006:19–22) is a very good reason to be convinced of its existence.

The 'mind' is not material, like the body, but it is also not transcendent like the soul. The mind has much to do with consciousness, thoughts and feelings but is not limited to them. In the mind is the seat of personality and personal history. I do not want to get into questions here about whether the mind can be reduced to the biological activities of the brain or whether the mind is the result of the interaction of the brain (as a component of the body) with the soul or whether it is something in its own right. In my understanding, the mind interacts with both the body and the soul.

Although the mind is non-material, it is undoubtedly part of our universe, that is, immanent. The following reasons can be given for this:

- Biological, chemical and physical processes very much influence feelings and consciousness – see, for example, Pretorius (2020).
- Biological, chemical and physical processes can explain important aspects of the mind.
- There is a clear connection between the state of the brain and the state of the mind, just as there is a clear connection between the evolution of the brain and the evolution of the mind.

Both the mind and the soul are non-material entities. While the soul is transcendent, the mind is immanent.

The tripartite division of the human being into body, soul and spirit has a very long tradition; Irenaeus of Smyrna, one of the most important Christian theologians of the 2nd century, had advocated this concept in his work '*Adversus haereses*' (Allison 2019:175). And there were and still are Christian theologians who advocated this tripartite division although the prevailing view was and is the dichotomy of body and soul (Allison 2011:322–327). Even today, there are still theologians who advocate the tripartite division of the human being into body, soul and spirit, such as Lee (1984), Sumrall (1995) and Woodward (2007). Proponents of the tripartite view rely on various biblical passages, in particular 1 Thessalonians 5:23.

At this point, it would certainly be interesting to clarify how the biblical passages discussed in this context are to be understood, what the philosophical justifications are for the division of human being into two or three parts or how the various terms in the different languages suggest different interpretations. It would also be very interesting to clarify to what extent the tripartite division into body, soul and spirit advocated by Irenaeus corresponds to the tripartite division into body, mind and soul proposed here. However, each of these questions would hopelessly go beyond the narrow scope of this article.

In this article, I can only try to sketch the outlines of a view of the human being that takes seriously both the Christian teachings of faith and the findings of modern natural sciences. Neither an uncritical acceptance of natural scientific ideas nor the absolutising of philosophical concepts that arose long before the time of modern natural sciences can provide truly satisfactory answers.

By interpreting the human being as a unity of the three entities body, mind and soul, the particular position of the human being becomes comprehensible. Humans are deeply rooted in this universe through their bodies. Zoologically, we are nothing but a species of the class mammals, and our body is as mortal as that of the animals. The first thing that distinguishes us from the animals is our mind, as it goes beyond what is necessary for survival. Our mind becomes aware of our position and limitations, trying to advance further and further. The mind becomes aware that we are limited in space and time by our body and tries in many ways to overcome these limitations. But even the mind cannot overcome the limits of this universe of matter, energy, space and time, because it is 'immanent', just like our body, that is, a component of this universe. Nothing that is immanent can break out of immanence by its own power. Only something that comes from transcendence can overcome the barrier between immanence and transcendence. Only through the transcendent soul do we have access to transcendence. Through the soul, we become a being at home in two worlds simultaneously: in immanence and transcendence.

Comments on modern literature on mind and soul

Reviewing the modern literature on mind and soul, one observes that often everything non-material, – that is, mind and soul – is put into one bag and indiscriminately contrasted with the body. Examples include Loose, Menuge and Moreland (2018:1), Farris (2018:83) and Ehrman (2020:175). Together with the progress of knowledge in the field of natural sciences, this leads to statements such as these:

> To sum up, science has provided a massive amount of evidence suggesting that we need not postulate the existence of an entity such as a soul or mind in order to explain life and consciousness. (Murphy 1998:18)

> And finally, I propose that, rather than consider souls as being created individually by God and infused into their organisms, we should embrace an emergentist view in which the souls are generated naturally as a result of the structure and functioning of the biological organism – in the case of humans and the higher animals, of the brain and nervous system. (Hasker 2018:130)

Murphy's (1998:18) statement is the result of a worldview that reduces all reality to what is measurable through the natural sciences. This reduction ignores important traditions and experiences of humanity that testify to the existence of transcendence and the soul.

If a clear distinction is made between the immanent mind and the transcendent soul in the non-material part of the human being, the following crucial criticism of Hasker (2018:130) can be formulated: We can imagine the material body producing the immanent mind. However, we cannot imagine the immanent mind evolving into the transcendent soul. How is this step from immanent mind to transcendent soul to be understood? Is it a self-salvation or a self-deification? How can the soul be immortal if it initially emerged from immanent matter? After all, we observe time and again that everything immanent is transient.

These questions are very important because not only Hasker (2018) takes an emergentist view of the origin of the soul but also Farris (2018) and other authors hold similar views. However, such concepts only make sense if transcendence is understood as an extension or superelevation of immanence. Nowadays, there is more and more talk of a gradual transition between immanence and transcendence (Oviedo 2020). But the concept of a gradual transition between immanence and transcendence does not fit Christianity. The interpretation of God's incarnation in Jesus Christ as God's act of salvation – a central truth of faith in Christianity – only makes sense if there is a barrier between immanence and transcendence that can only be overcome by God from transcendence.

Quite contrary to the view put forward by Hasker (2018), all Christian churches teach that the soul is a voluntary gift from God. For example, the teaching of the Catholic Church today is that the human body came into being by way of biological evolution, but that God directly creates the soul (Deane-Drummond 2012; Ehrman 2020:181; Kemp 2020). If one accepts the teaching of the Christian churches, one no longer has a problem explaining the transcendence of the soul: Because the Creator himself is transcendent, he can give something transcendent to humans as his immanent creatures. Thus, humans then receive a transcendent soul without something immanent having to transform itself into something transcendent by its own power. Because the soul is transcendent, it can be immortal.

How to recognise the beginning of the human soul?

My attempt to say something about the beginning of the human soul starts from the human mind; for mind and soul have a particularly close relationship to each other. Of the various mental activities of the human being, those activities are particularly interesting for us who consciously want to break through our inner-worldly horizon of experience and aim at the transcendent beyond. These are the three questions: 'Where do I come from?', 'What is the meaning of my life?' and 'What comes after death?'

Asking oneself these three questions is a central aspect of humans' special position in the animal kingdom and an essential reason for our special dignity. Until the appearance of humans, all efforts were directed towards this world, which can be put in the categories of matter, energy and space, because in the entire evolution, it was always only a matter of maintaining one's existence in this world for as long as possible and/or of multiplying and perpetuating oneself through successful reproduction.

By asking themselves the three transcendent questions, humans break through the prison of the material world and open themselves to the transcendent. The mere asking of the three transcendent questions I would like to take as an indication of the possession of a soul. If, in addition, there are actions that express a hope for life beyond death – such as preserving the dead through mummification or burial – this indication becomes even clearer.

Two necessary prerequisites for being able to ask the three transcendental questions are the capacity for language and the capacity for symbolic thinking. *Homo neanderthalensis* could definitely speak and think symbolically (Breyl 2021; Frayer, Radovčić & Radovčić 2020; Lombard & Högberg 2021). *Homo heidelbergensis* could also speak (Martínez et al. 2013; Sikorska-Piwowska et al. 2015), and there is evidence of symbolic thinking in him (Coolidge & Wynn 2009:170–174). *Homo erectus* is also thought to have been able to speak (Sikorska-Piwowska et al. 2015). Moreover, it is very possible that *Homo erectus* already had beginnings of symbolic thinking, because about 500 000 years ago on the island of Java, *Homo erectus erectus* engraved geometric figures on shells (Joordens et al. 2015). This means that, theoretically, we have to look back to 1.87 million years ago, to the first representative of the biological genus *Homo* in the narrower sense, to *Homo erectus ergaster*, to see whether we can find

indications of a concern with the transcendent or even a hope that extends beyond death. A clear indication would be, for example, burials.

In the following, I focus on burials for the following reasons:

- Burials are much more preservable than other ways of dealing with a dead body – such as burning. Burials can be traced and studied even after many thousands of years.
- Gestures of mourning for deceased conspecifics have been observed not only in humans but also in various mammalian species (Pomeroy et al. 2020:267). However, burial has only been observed in humans.
- Burial protects the body (e.g. from scavengers) and in this way preserves the integrity of the corpse. In many cultures (such as ancient Egypt), the integrity of the corpse was an important part of the ideas about life after death.

Burials and other evidence of religious activity

The keyword 'burial' hurls me into a heated discussion among palaeoanthropologists – the contributions by Balter (2012) and Randolph-Quinney (2015) provide illustrative examples of the heatedness. Researchers try to distinguish between 'disposal' (without a transcendent dimension) and 'funeral' (with a transcendent dimension). In my opinion, this discussion misses the reality.

Why would prehistoric humans, who were fully occupied with survival, bury their dead in the earth or hide them in cave systems that are difficult to access? Should they do it only for hygienic reasons, so that no epidemics would spread? In contrast to today, only a few people were living back then, but many scavengers, such as vultures, devoured all animal and human bodies down to the bones within a concise time. If one had been afraid of disease, it would have been quite sufficient to move the dead a little away from the campsite so that the vultures would eat them; and one would thus save oneself from the great effort of burying them (May 2021:238).

What the true background to this discussion is can be seen more clearly if one considers that in the past, archaeologists and palaeoanthropologists were much more likely to acknowledge burials. In contrast, today the possibility that prehistoric humans might have buried their dead is almost always first dismissed, and alternative explanations are desperately sought to avoid only the working hypothesis of 'burial' – see, for example, Gargett (1999), Randolph-Quinney (2015) and Durand (2017). This is because in the natural sciences and many of the humanities, a mindset has taken hold that equates atheistic with objective. Many scientists consider an atheistic worldview that ignores transcendence to be normal. A detailed discussion of this topic is provided by Mutschler (2018:390–396). But looking through human history, it is the other way around: the rule is a religiously based interpretation of the world that is explicitly open to transcendence.

There are important voices in the scientific discussion that emphasises that the capacity to believe, religiosity and openness to transcendence are fundamental human characteristics: Van Huyssteen (2006:23) states that 'our ability to respond religiously to ultimate questions in worship and prayer may be deeply embedded in the history of our species' symbolic and imaginative behavior'. Veldsman (2016:5) writes: 'We are as humans "hardwired for religion".' Wildman (2009:218) puts it this way: '… human beings are religious and spiritual creatures not only historically, culturally, and circumstantially, but also ontologically, essentially, and inescapably'. Fuentes (2017) takes a similar view when he says that the capacity to believe is what makes us human.

Therefore, the question must be raised seriously whether the current rejection of the interpretation 'burial' is not the expression of an unconscious attempt to transfer one's non-religiosity to prehistoric people or to legitimise it as 'natural' from prehistoric people.

Quite contrary to the expectations of some 21st-century humans, the relatively primitive human species *Homo naledi* already buried their dead in caves that were difficult to access some 236 000–335 000 years ago (Berger et al. 2017; Dirks et al. 2015; Elliott et al. 2021; Hawks et al. 2017; Randolph-Quinney 2015; Veldsman 2016:2). Toit (2017) sees the natural beginnings of religious thinking here and assumes that *Homo naledi* already asked themselves the question of the further fate of the deceased. Herce (2017:105) is sceptical of such an interpretation, because no further evidence of intelligent behaviour has been found so far in *Homo naledi*.

However, *Homo naledi* was not the only one to bury its dead in caves, as the same is true of the well-preserved skeletons of *Homo heidelbergensis steinheimensis* from the cave 'Sima de los Huesos' near Atapuerca in the province of Burgos (Spain), which are about 448 000 years old (Arsuaga et al. 2014; Demuro et al. 2019). Interestingly, a striking red hand axe was found among the skeletons, which could have been a burial gift (Pettitt 2011:338; Pigeaud 2017:169).

While one can still question a religious dimension in *Homo naledi*, because we have not yet found any further signs of intelligence, this criticism does not work for *Homo heidelbergensis*. We know that *Homo heidelbergensis* created advanced stone tools (Buck & Stringer 2016:230) and designed geometric shapes consciously (Richter 2013). He was also able to speak and there is evidence of symbolic thinking.

Homo heidelbergensis steinheimensis evolved into *Homo neanderthalensis*. Despite all the debates about whether and to what extent the Neanderthals buried their dead (Balter 2012), it is undeniable that beginning around 80 000 years ago, some Neanderthal groups buried their dead (Buck & Stringer 2016:231; Pettitt 2010, 2011; Zilhão 2015). Balzeau et al. (2020) and Rendu et al. (2014) provide modern studies of

Neanderthal burials in France. Koutamanis (2012) notes that different Neanderthal burial sites had different burial traditions, and thus, burial traditions evolved slowly. Pettitt (2011:338) also points out that the manner of burial was more variable among Neanderthals than among early *Homo sapiens* and concludes that Neanderthals developed burial of the dead independent of *Homo sapiens*.

The oldest documented *Homo sapiens* burials are 100 000–120 000 years old and occurred in Israel (Grün et al. 2005; Pettitt 2011:339; Pigeaud 2017:169). The oldest burial of a *Homo sapiens* found in Africa to date is 78 000 years old (Martinón-Torres et al. 2021).

Besides burials, there is also other evidence of religious activities: human-like figures and ritual spaces. Approximately 400 000-year-old human-like figures made of somewhat worked stones are known from Morocco and Israel (Pettitt 2011:333–334). As an example of ritual space, Pettitt (2011:336–337) discusses the approximately 370 000-year-old settlement site of Bilzingsleben in Thuringia (Germany).

In summary, not only *Homo sapiens* and *Homo neanderthalensis* independently performed burials and other activities oriented towards the transcendent but also *Homo heidelbergensis*, from which both human species are descended. And then there is *Homo naledi*, a contemporary of these three human species, but which, biologically speaking, was considerably more primitive. We can conclude that the openness to the transcendent is something fundamentally human. I would even go to the extent of assuming that *Homo erectus* also already possessed this openness to the transcendent and that one day we may even find evidence in the form of burials or the like. Humans probably became *Homo religiosus* much earlier than Wildman (2009:218) expected.

The existence of the soul

How can it be concluded from the above observations that the soul already existed? The answer to this question depends very much on the concept one has regarding the soul: One can either:

1. hold, like Hasker (2018), that the transcendent and immortal soul appears naturally and necessarily from a certain level of development (especially of the brain) of the living being, or
2. believe that the transcendent and immortal Creator-God gives it voluntarily at some point to his chosen creatures.

If one adheres to opinion (1) and believes in the natural evolution of the soul, one has it relatively easy: because *Homo sapiens* and *Homo neanderthalensis* and the Denisovans, who presumably belonged to *Homo heidelbergensis daliensis*, were able to reproduce fertilely with each other (Ahlquist et al. 2021; Dolgova & Lao 2018:2), one can reasonably assume the possession of a soul for all of them and for their common parent species *Homo heidelbergensis*. And because of the biological relationship and similarity with *Homo erectus*, one could also go to the extent of assuming the existence of a soul for *Homo erectus*.

But suppose one is convinced, as all Christian churches teach, that the soul is a voluntary gift from the Creator, in that case, one must approach the question somewhat differently: Burials are not only a sign of a general openness to the transcendent but also and especially the expression of a hope (implicit or explicit) that biological death does not mean the definitive end of our existence, but that it continues after death. Burials are a sign of a hope for life after death. The soul is what is needed for a human being to survive the biological death of his body. Therefore, the soul is a necessary component of fulfilling this hope. Now, one could point out that the Creator-God is not obliged to fulfil this hope of his creature as well. But because all Christian churches assume that all our good impulses and our hopes directed towards God are inspired and/or strengthened by the Holy Spirit, we may assume that the hope for life after death in prehistoric humans also comes from the Holy Spirit. If the Holy Spirit awakened hope in prehistoric humans, why should he withhold the soul they need from them to fulfil this hope? As a result, it then appears that not only *Homo sapiens* but also *Homo neanderthalensis*, *Homo heidelbergensis* and *Homo naledi* possessed a soul. And it can be assumed that *Homo erectus* could also have had a soul.

Conclusion

Firstly, I distinguished mind and soul from each other. Both the mind and the soul are non-material entities. While the soul is transcendent, the mind is immanent. This clarification of terms allows us to criticise the emergentist view and to understand the special position of human beings in the universe. Through the soul, we become a being that is simultaneously at home in two worlds: immanence and transcendence.

Analysis of the results of palaeoanthropological research shows that burials and other evidence of religious activity have been found in various human species for at least about 448 000 years. How one interprets these research findings also depends on whether one has an emergentist view of the soul's origin or believes that the soul is a gift from God.

Although the concepts regarding the soul differ, the results are largely in agreement: There is good reason to assume that *Homo heidelbergensis* and all his descendants possessed (and still possess) a soul. And furthermore, we can suppose that *Homo erectus* and *Homo naledi* also possessed a soul. This means that humans have had a soul for a very long time. The mind gives us the longing for transcendence and the soul gives us the possibility to live eternally in fulfilled transcendence with God, the Creator of this universe.

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A.M. is the sole author of this research article.

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