

The Ghost in the Machine

Please Note: ideally this article should be under the banner “Philosophical Essays.” However, it’s under “New Testament” for one simple reason, simply to fill up this section.

First, an explanation about where the title of this article came from. The source is British philosopher Gilbert Ryle's description of René Descartes' mind-body dualism. Ryle introduced the phrase in his book entitled **The Concept of Mind** to highlight the view of Descartes and others, that mental and physical activity occur simultaneously but separately. I've heard of the phrase before but failed to associate it with Descartes who continues to have a profound impact on the way we perceive ourselves. “He made us what we are” as a friend remarked, tongue-in-cheek. As this terse remark indicates, it's fashionable to say that Descartes has contributed immensely to the fashioning of the Western world or at least a large part of it. More precisely, he contributed to making us more self-aware, something that has plagued us ever since (i.e., his famous *cogito ergo sum*). Be that as it may, I borrow Ryle's use of “ghost” and apply it in another manner, that is, as related to our struggles with trying to follow a spiritual life. Ryle's catchy phrase simply provided something I had been looking for.

Above all else, ghost as presented here isn't a *doppelgänger*, a non-biologically related look-alike or double of a living person. Such an entity sometimes is portrayed as an apparition or paranormal phenomenon usually taken as a harbinger of bad luck. Nor is it some disembodied spirit that may or may not be related to common ideas about reincarnation, of memories present within us which supposedly derive from a former life. Instead of diddling over whether such idle curiosities may or may not be based in reality, the way “ghost” will be developed is of an order quite different from what's commonly held, spooky or otherwise.

As for the word “machine,” it's a less than flattering way to describe ourselves, the place where the supposed ghost resides and animates us. The reason? Not so much suggesting the automatic way our bodies operate but the blind and impersonal way it's carried out. At birth we're wound up, set in motion and let to run until we expire. In the meanwhile we're guided by the presence of that ill-defined ghost which at the end of life simply dissolves into thin air. No ghost, no body. As for the notion of a machine, science has developed brand new ways of understanding it. Despite the sophisticated results, the impersonal element remains even though it may comprise biological entities informed by nanotechnology. This is a far cry from our common perception about a machine, gears, wheels and above all else, a ticking sound which reveals the presence of the ghost. Perhaps

at a future date something positive...indeed, liberating...may be said about this impersonal aspect of being a machine ¹.

The opening paragraph mentions the “spiritual life,” a familiar catch-phrase describing how we fit into our lives the principles of a given religion which in this instance is Christianity. It has a parallel with Ryle’s description of Descartes, that is to say, spiritual = ghost and life = machine. Given the influence of Descartes down to this day, unfortunately this equivalence is not uncommon. Since the phrase is thrown around so much, we’ll let it stand simply for convenience though it’d be nice to come up with an alternative. At the moment none comes to mind, but that’s okay. As long as we’re aware of its commonality and limitations.

So to live a life which is spiritually oriented implies focusing upon something not perceived by our senses yet is very much real...more real than what these senses present to us. Such is the experience of many people though they’re at a loss to express it convincingly. Despite this invisibility, there remains some kind of attraction that can’t be explained away. This is baffling to those with the experience and those who might be interested in knowing more. Therefore instead of throwing out ready-made answers, it may be helpful to look within and see if there is actually something which is attractive. In this instance you don’t pay attention to your thoughts, memories or anything...shall we say...that’s personal. All that is discarded. What causes this discarding isn’t a negative experience but a deep seated desire. Should it have a voice it would say nothing we’ve found thus far is satisfactory. The search will continue unabated against all odds. So if you asked someone to describe this longing you’d get an answer where the attraction falls neither under the category personal nor impersonal. It’s simply there.

Be that as it may, trying to get a better handle on the spiritual life can be had by rearranging the phrase slightly. Let’s put focus upon the noun “life,” the primary element, which the adjective “spiritual” modifies, the secondary element. This is important insofar as we tend to emphasize the latter as superior over the former. Also it’s intended to shed some more light upon the outline above (life = machine and spiritual = ghost) where emphasis should be upon our bodies which minus the ghost element, are mechanical and

1 Indeed such positive insights exist. Some of the best relative to the spiritual life may be found in the unfortunately titled **The Supreme Doctrine** by Hubert Benoit. This obscure author has written the best account of what it means to follow a spiritual life, and is no easy read. Essential to this is stressing upon the impersonal nature of a machine which he applies to our lives but in a fashion that’s wholly different from what we expect.

hence impersonal ². This association can range from the older mechanical view to the newer one informed by nanotechnology.

With regard to the “spiritual life” we tend to view the body in and by itself as requiring a vital principle and hence once which is personal. Without it we might as well be like those dry bones Ezekiel saw laying on the plain. Really, it’s amazing to think that something within us insists on inserting a vivifying principle into the machine when we’d be better off without it (Descartes?). Part of the reason may be semantic, a way we’re inclined to describe life and what makes it function...if not, we’d find life cold and brutal even under favorable conditions. However, advocating the body minus the pesky interference of a ghost/vivifying principle might be a better way to go. That would help set the stage for a more harmonious relationship when it comes to pure awareness.

If we’re perceiving the body as a machine in light of pure awareness, the mind is to be treated in similar fashion. As far as I can tell, this goes strongly against Descartes. In other words, the mind is just as much a machine as the body, only it’s not visible. So instead of perceiving the word “machine” negatively, it can have a positive meaning. This may be difficult to accept because as already observed, we’re accustomed to equate machine with what is mechanical and therefore impersonal. Actually it can free us up to regard the body (and mind) as doing their thing in a straight-forward manner which has all the hallmarks of functioning automatically. In other words, no intervention is required from an outside source. Actually that turns out to be the key. It turns out that the body/mind-as-machine is the locus of our true worth which at face value seems preposterous. If Descartes were alive, he’d think putting a high value on the body and its many prosaic functions to be as close to absurdity as you can get.

So why focus upon the apparent absurdity of the physical (i.e., the machine)? Chiefly because it’s something we can rely upon with certainty compared with the operations of our minds and feelings, let alone what we’d attribute as being spiritual. Part of the reason why we reject the body is because we live too much in our minds. This contributes to posit the existence of a ghost which controls bodily activity more attractive than ever. Take, for example, the widespread use of computers and mobile devices in addition to the so-called cloud. We’re simply in love with our gadgets which sets us up for a double-bind, if you will. Despite our fascination with them, we’re turned off by such dependence, the same attitude we show at the sloppiness of life in all its physicality. That eliminates two sides of the fence, leaving nowhere to go, blocked in from two sides. An exist does exist, but we’re too impatient to recognize it due to our attraction...addiction...to our devices. We want the object of our desire here and now, not a second later. As for that “place” to which we can

2 Another way of phrasing it: a life which is spiritual. Sometimes the act of playing around with a familiar word or phrase is to re-arrange it in more than one possible ways.

escape, let's call it awareness or the freedom from any subject-object relationship. No question it's a big leap from here to there. Nevertheless, it must be done.

It seems that this leap comprises a combination of disgust, anger, humiliation and desperation all rolled into one. They conspire with each other, either making or breaking us. We're forced to make the leap into pure awareness to escape them, simple as that. Once we've gotten to such desperation and have no other choice but to refer everything we encounter to such awareness, there remains something akin to that ghost Ryle speaks about. The difference is that the ghost at hand consists of memories which remain but have a kind of hollowed out existence. They are phantoms of a half reality having the power to take us over provided we assent to them. They nag after us...not barking like a dog but always there with a more lightsome though persistent touch. A real life example comes to mind. That consists of St. Paul though his ghosts haunted him far more persistently than usual.

As for St. Paul, before his conversion he had been a vigorous persecutor of Christians. Afterwards he was the most notable of all the apostles, gaining that title reserved for the original twelve on the road to Damascus. Indeed, his epistles contain the foundation into much of what Christianity has evolved, and to him we are indebted. Nevertheless, something strained, overly serious and focused permeates his writings. No matter how much he speaks of his love for those in his charge, Paul remains haunted by his past. Thus he's an example, albeit exaggerated, of someone worthy of admiration but not imitation. You simply can't cozy up to Paul nor find a trace of humor in him. He's too strung-out, theological and overbearing. Those whom he had slain are always watching him, their ghosts (in the more conventional sense, that is) being inescapable.

St. Peter is another story. His fallibility is out there for all to see and wasn't involved in persecuting nor killing people. We don't feel his guilt running through his two short epistles which are straight-forward yet majestic and without a hint of any Pauline-type haunting. In sum, Paul's guilt had communal repercussions whereas Peter's was personal. Given that the two worked in parallel and had a fall-out, it wouldn't be surprise us if some of the friction between the two derives from Paul being envious of Peter. If it were possible, he wouldn't mind changing places with him any day.

On a practical level, the essence of the ghost as presented here in terms of hollowed out memories makes its appearance felt strongly after we've grown accustomed to the practice of the presence of God. This presence takes on a number of forms. Should one be forced to describe it, it boils down to allowing pure awareness take over our lives. Pretty much nothing else can be said of it. You either do it or don't do it. More accurately, you're aware that you're in it or not aware of being in it. the two being interchangeable. This presence

goes on for a while in a very pleasant fashion once we've gotten the knack of being so disposed. By no means, of course, have we effected such a transcendent presence by own efforts. Then memories from the past start to emerge on their own accord, some going way back. They attempt to exert influence upon our current practice, come close to succeeding but remain just beyond the ability to do so effectively.

We're confronted with a strange but not entirely distressing situation unlike any other in our lives. A true ghost-in-the-machine but different from Ryle's as applied to Descartes. They have a presence which don't impinge directly upon our lives yet remain there silently inviting us to come under their influence. As noted already these memories are phantoms yet have a partial form...disembodied, if you will, partaking of two different realms. We could call them half forms whispering in the background. Our focus upon the practice of God's presence which is equivalent to cultivating pure awareness, despite its incompleteness, suffices to keep the ghosts at bay. Supposedly there will come a time when these ghosts disappear altogether, but that's a matter for someone with real spiritual insight to spell out. All that can be said here is to give an approximate description.

The essence of this rather odd, in between land—in between full identification with thoughts and memories which define us and pure divine transcendence—doesn't seem to be discussed very much. Perhaps it's the very oddness or awkwardness of the situation that has prevented people from either discussing or writing about it. Besides, this in between land is easy to pass over undetected. On one hand we're bound by the past but bound with chains that have provided a degree of freedom enabling us to move around. We value this limited freedom, hanging on to it when we should let it go. At this point we tempted to evoke some great spiritual master who steps in and says that such a state is imperfect (obviously it is) and that we have to snap those chains, however light they may be. But go ahead and find someone who has done this through and through. Should they exist, we don't know about them. Somehow that's how it should be. Regardless, the matter shouldn't be pushed beyond stating it simply.

One way of looking at these ghosts is that they play the role of an accuser, hovering in the background waiting to charge us with something. It's not unlike the role of Satan in the Book of Job whose unwitting ally is Job's wife. After complaining about his recent afflictions she blurted out almost humorously in one of the most direct, telling verses in the entire Bible, "Curse God and die" [2.9]. She, of course, suffered the loss of her children and possessions but strangely doesn't seem affected. Having uttered her curse, this unnamed woman passes off the scene for good.

The presence of such a ghost as defined here requires something to counter it, the need for an advocate. Such is what the Holy Spirit is called, namely a Paraclete as in Jn 14.26: "But

the Counselor (*Parakletos*), the Holy Spirit (*Pneuma*), whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach (*didasko*) you all things and bring to your remembrance (*hupomeno*) all that I have said to you.” Here we’re shown the role of the *Parakletos* who is breath or *Pneuma* and thus quite invisible yet can be perceived, else there’s no reason for talking about him. A *parakletos* is one who acts as a defense lawyer, one who according to scripture use summons (*kaleo*) beside (*para-*) the Father as well as the guilty person. His role has two parts: teaching and bringing-to-remembrance. The former is pretty much straight-forward, but as for the latter, it reads literally as to stand or to remain under (*hupo-*) signifying that it will work invisibly from beneath. Both are relative to what Jesus had said and accomplished, the most important of as relative to the Father.

So the *Parakletos/Pneuma* by its very nature is ghost-like though more than that. *Hupomeno* or standing-under represents a making firm or permanent Christ’s teachings. That is to say, *hupomeno* fixes them in one’s memory or *anamnesis*, this faculty being more than the recollection of past events. We could say that *anamnesis* is the closest thing to awareness minus subject or object, our true selves or anything of the sort ¹. This emphasis upon recollection as central to our identity is helpful especially nowadays when we have so many problems of identity such as PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), whether or not one is male or female and other issues related to the confusion of one’s personal identity.

One factor contributing to the clouding over of *anamnesis* is technology as through computers and the ubiquitous smart phone. If we ‘re at a loss as to know something, no problem. Just put out our device and the answer is before us. Such immediate access to information as problem solver is fine when used in moderation. However, it has gone way, way beyond that and consumes our personal identity. In other words, the device has replaced *anamnesis* and has become a genuine ghost. It’s presence in one’s life usurps the other ghosts that accompanies our spiritual journey. While the latter eventually may be suppressed, the former is far more difficult to eradicate. Actually it helps keep that first ghost ever present.

Let’s say we’ve come to accommodate ourselves to these ghosts. At first glance they're not entirely unpleasant, more like an annoyance which over time must be dealt with. In the long run, we’d rather not die with them on our minds. They are traces in minor force of what had bothered us throughout life yet haven’t morphed into something more troubling. Later in life a deeper sense of gratitude for having seen through these deceptions takes over which nullifies the sense of guilt that we haven’t escaped fully from the presence of these ghosts even if we know theoretically that the possibility exists.

1 Plato’s **Dialogues** contain the best references to *anamnesis* or memory. Because of that, a select list is included in the Appendix.

So what's a model on which to fall back upon for support? Consider Jesus Christ after his resurrection which Thomas famously had doubted. He's quite physically minded in his request: see his hands, place his finger in his nail marks, place his hand in his side. While with his fellow apostles Thomas proclaims his doubt loudly, even proudly with the desire for someone to challenge him. Then eight days later Jesus makes his appearance and almost immediately tells Thomas to do as he had requested. His response of "My Lord and my God" signifies the precise moment when he no longer requires physical evidence of Christ's resurrection.

Memory of this encounter must have stayed with Thomas his entire life and informed his ministry in a way not unlike his fellow apostles. It can be employed as a way to deal with the ghosts discussed here, for Jesus was in his resurrected body. You take the ghosts and insert them into his side leaving them there. They remain, of course, but now they're not your problem but his. Let's face it. Any image that enables us to get on top of the situation is helpful. After all, we're confronted with a reality that can't be done away with, only partially. As for partially, that doesn't mean imperfectly. Getting in the habit of let's say splatting the ghosts against the wall of God's presence (i.e., pure awareness) is sufficient enough to carry us through even if the final victory isn't at hand but seen from a distance.

Appendix

Select references to memory/recollection or *anamnesis* from the Dialogues of Plato

Theaetetus

-We may look upon it (a block of wax in our souls), then, as a gift of Memory, the mother of the Muses. We make impressions upon this of everything, we wish to remember among the things we have seen or heard or thought of ourselves; we hold the wax under our perceptions and thoughts and take a stamp from them, in the way in which we take the imprints of signet rings. Whatever is impressed upon the wax we remember and know as long as the image remains in the wax; whatever is obliterated or cannot be impressed we forget and do not know. 191d

-In some men the wax in the soul is deep and abundant, smooth and worked to the proper consistency; and when the things that come through the senses are imprinted upon this 'heart' of the soul—as Homer calls it, hinting at the likeness to the wax¹—the signs that are made in it are lasting, because they are clear and have sufficient depth. Men with such souls learn easily and remember what they learn; they do not get the signs out of line with the perceptions, but judge truly. 194c-d

Phaedo

-Such also is the case if that theory is true that you are accustomed to mention frequently, that for us learning is no other than recollection. According to this, we must at some previous time have learned what we now recollect. This is possible only if our soul existed somewhere before it took

on this human shape. So according to this theory too, the soul is likely to be something immortal.
72.e

-Do we also agree that when knowledge comes to mind in this way, it is recollection? What way do I mean? Like this: when a man sees or hears or in some other way perceives one thing and not only knows that thing but also thinks of another thing of which the knowledge is not the same but different, are we not right to say that he recollects the second thing that comes into his mind? 73.c

-In all these cases the recollection can be occasioned by things that are similar, but it can also be occasioned by things that are dissimilar? It can. When the recollection is caused by similar things, must one not of necessity also experience this: to consider whether the similarity to that which one recollects is deficient in any respect or complete? One must. 74a

-It was seen to be possible for someone to see or hear or other wise perceive something, and by this to be put in mind of something else which he had forgotten and which is related to it by similarity or difference. One of two things follows as I say: either we were born with the knowledge of it, and all of us know it throughout life, or those who later, we say, are learning, are only recollecting, and learning would be recollection. 76a

-The theory of recollection and learning, however, was based on an assumption worthy of acceptance, for our soul was said to exist also before it came into the body, just as the reality does that is of the kind that we qualify by the words 'which truly is,' and I convinced myself that I was quite correct to accept it. 92d

Philebus

-S: And do we not hold that recollection differs from memory?

P: Perhaps.

S: Does not their difference lie in this?

P: In what?

S: Do we not call it 'recollection' when the soul recalls as much as possible by itself, without the aid of the body, what she had once experienced together with the body? Or how would you put it?

P: I quite agree.

S: But on the other hand, when, after the loss of memory of either a perception or again a piece of knowledge, the soul calls up this memory for itself, we also call all these events recollection. 34b

-If memory and perceptions concur with other impressions at a particular occasion, then they seem to me to inscribe words in our soul, as it were. And if what is written is true, then we form a true judgment and a true account of the matter. But if what our scribe writes is false, then the result will be the opposite of truth. 39a

Phaedrus

-But not every soul is easily reminded of the reality there by what it finds here—not souls that got only a brief glance at the reality there, not souls who had such bad luck when they fell down here that they were twisted by bad company into lives of injustice so that they forgot the sacred objects they had seen before. Only a few remain whose memory is good enough; and they are startled when they see an image of what they saw up there. Then they are beside themselves, and their

experience is beyond their comprehension because they cannot fully grasp what it is that they are seeing. 250a-b

-It (writing) will introduce forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it: they will not practice using their memory because they will put their trust in writing, which is external and depends on signs that belong to others, instead of trying to remember from the inside, completely on their own. You have not discovered a potion for remembering, but for reminding; you provide your students with the appearance of wisdom, not with its reality. 275a

Meno

-As the soul is immortal, has been born often and has seen all things here and in the underworld, there is nothing which it has not learned; so it is in no way surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before, both about virtue and other things. As the whole of nature is akin, and the soul has learned everything, nothing prevents a man, after recalling one thing only—a process men call learning—discovering everything else for himself, if he is brave and does not tire of the search, for searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection. 81c

-So let us speak about virtue also, since we do not know either what it is or what qualities it possesses, and let us investigate whether it is teachable or not by means of a hypothesis, and say this: Among the things existing in the soul, of what sort is virtue, that it should be teachable or not? First, if it is another sort than knowledge, is it teachable or not, or, as we were just saying, recollectable? 87b

-For true opinions, as long as they remain, are a fine thing and all they do is good, but they are not willing to remain long, and they escape from a man's mind, so that they are not worth much until one ties them down by (giving) an account of the reason why. And that, Meno, my friend, is recollection, as we previously agreed. After they are tied down, in the first place they become knowledge, and then they remain in place. That is why knowledge is prized higher than correct opinion, and knowledge differs from correct opinion in being tied down. 98a

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Iliad ii.851, xvi.554.