

Leibniz to Rudolf Christian Wagner¹

Translated by Donald Rutherford

Wolfenbüttel, June 4, 1710

To those things you ask concerning the nature of the soul, I respond with pleasure, for I see from the doubt you express that my view is not yet sufficiently clear to you and that the doubt touches on an example drawn from the essay I published in the *Acta Eruditorum* [*De ipsa natura*, 1698], where I argued against Sturm regarding the active force of body. You say that I adequately defended there the active force of matter and that, when I attribute resistance to matter, I also attributed reaction to the same thing, and hence also action. And so, since there is a principle of activity everywhere, this principle seems to suffice for the operations of beasts and there is no need of an enduring soul in them.

I reply, first, that I do not attribute an active principle to bare or primary matter, which is merely passive and consists only in antitypy and extension, but to body, i.e. “clothed” [*vestitae*] or secondary matter, which contains in addition a primitive entelechy or active principle. I reply, second, that the resistance of bare matter is not action but mere passion, namely, as long as it has antitypy or impenetrability, it will indeed resist being penetrated, but it does not rebound unless there is added an elastic force, which must be derived from motion and thus from an active force superadded to matter. I reply, third, that this active principle, this primary entelechy, is in fact a vital principle endowed also with a faculty of perceiving and enduring for reasons I have already given. And it is this very thing that I hold to be in beasts in place of a soul. And so, when I admit that there is everywhere superadded to matter an active principle, I maintain also that through this there is distributed everywhere a vital or perceiving principle, and thus monads, and so to speak, metaphysical atoms, lacking parts, which are never created or destroyed naturally.

You ask, finally, for my definition of the soul. I reply that the soul can be taken broadly or narrowly. Broadly, the soul is the same as what is alive or a vital principle, namely, a principle of internal action existing in a simple thing or monad, to which external action corresponds. And that correspondence of internal and external, or representation of the external in the internal, of the composite in the simple, of a multitude in a unity, in fact constitutes perception. And in this sense a soul is ascribed not only to animals but also to all other perceiving things. Narrowly, the soul is taken for a higher species of life, i.e. sensitive life, when the faculty of perceiving is not bare, but includes in addition sensing, namely, when to perception are joined attention and memory. In the same way, in turn, the mind is a higher species of soul, namely, a rational soul in which to sensation is added reason or inference from the universality of truths. Consequently, just as the mind is a rational soul, so the soul is sensitive life and life is a perceiving principle. But I have shown by examples and reasons that not every perception is a sensation, for there is also insensible perception. For example, I cannot

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sense green unless I perceive blue and yellow, from which green results. At the same time, I do not sense blue and yellow, unless perhaps a microscope is employed.

But you will recall that in my opinion not only are all living things, all souls, all minds, all primitive entelechies eternal, but also that to every primitive entelechy or vital principle there is forever joined some natural machine, which we call an organic body, although this machine stays in flux and is always being repaired, like Theseus' ship, even when on the surface its shape is preserved. And so we may be certain that not even the smallest particle of matter received by us at birth survives in our body, given that the same machine is from time to time completely transformed, augmented, diminished, enveloped or evolved. Thus, not only is the soul eternal, but some animal also always survives, although no specific animal should be said to be eternal since the species of animal does not endure, just as a caterpillar and butterfly are not the same animal although the soul is the same in both. Therefore every machine of nature has this feature: that it never can be destroyed completely, since however many surface layers are broken up, some small, as yet undestroyed machine always survives, like the harlequin comedians of old for whom a new tunic always still remained after many had been cast off. And this should surprise us all the less, since nature is everywhere organic and ordered to determinate ends by the wisest author, and nothing in nature should be thought to be neglected, although at the same time it appears to our senses as no more than an undeveloped mass. In this way, then, we remove all the difficulties that arise from the nature of a soul absolutely separated from all matter, so that in fact a soul or animal before birth or after death and a soul or animal living a present life do not actually differ entirely in the kind of beings they are but only in the appearance of things and in their degrees of perfection. Likewise I believe that angels are minds endowed with a body that penetrates easily and is fitted for their role, which they can perhaps change as they please; and for this reason also they deserve not to be called animals. Thus, all things in nature are analogous, and the subtlest can easily be understood from the coarsest, for both are considered in the same way. Only God is a substance truly separated from matter, since he is pure act, endowed with no power of suffering, which wherever it is constitutes matter. And indeed all created substances have antitypy, through which it naturally happens that one is outside the other, and so penetration is ruled out.

Although my principles are as general as possible, and hold no less in the case of a human being than that of beasts, nevertheless human beings stands remarkably far above beasts and approach angels, since by virtue of the use of reason they are capable of society with God and consequently of reward and punishment in divine governance. Thus, they preserve not only life and the soul, as in beasts, but also self-consciousness and memory of earlier states, and, in a word, the person. They are immortal not only physically but also morally; hence, strictly speaking, immortality is ascribed to the human soul alone. For unless a human being knows that in another life punishments and rewards are conferred on him on the basis of this life, there would in fact be no punishment, no reward, and consequently, as far as morality goes, it would be as if, after his death, he had been succeeded by a different happier or unhappier person. Thus I indeed hold that the souls hidden in little seminal animals since creation are not rational until they become destined for a human life through conception; however, once they are made rational and rendered capable of consciousness and society with God, they never give up the personhood of a citizen of the city of God, which is ruled with the greatest justice and

beauty, as a result of which through the very laws of nature, on account of the parallelism of the kingdoms of nature and grace, souls are rendered more apt for rewards and punishments through the force of their own actions. In this sense it can be said that virtue is its own reward, a wicked deed brings its own punishment, for by a certain natural consequence in accordance with the final state of the soul, in as much as it departs purified or unpurified, there arises a certain natural distinction, preordained in nature by God and in agreement with divine promises and threats, as well as grace and justice, effected through the intervention of good and evil angels (according to whether we have associated with one or the other), whose operations are everywhere natural, although their nature is more sublime than ours. We see indeed that a man awakening from a deep sleep, and even from apoplexy, when returned to himself, usually recovers the memory of his earlier state. Likewise, we should say that although death can render our perceptions disordered and confused, it cannot erase them completely from memory, through whose restored use rewards and punishments take place. And in this way the Savior himself compared death to sleep. However, the preservation of personhood and a moral immortality cannot be ascribed to beasts incapable of divine society and law.

Thus, there is no reason to be afraid of the dangerous consequences of this doctrine, since, on the contrary, from my principles there is demonstrated by the most beautiful reasoning the true natural theology, which is not only not at odds with revealed truth but also supports it most wonderfully. But whoever denies souls to beasts and all perception and organism to other parts of matter, fails to adequately recognize divine majesty, introducing something unworthy and disordered to God, namely a vacuum (which you may call metaphysical) of perfection or forms, which must be rejected no less than a physical vacuum or one of matter. Whoever, on the other hand, gives genuine souls and perception to beasts, and yet claims that their souls can perish naturally, also destroys for us the demonstration through which it is shown that our minds cannot perish naturally, and falls into the dogma of the Socinians, who believe that souls are not preserved except miraculously or through grace, but hold that by nature they should perish, which is to abandon the most important part of natural theology. Besides, the opposite has in any case been demonstrated, since a substance lacking parts cannot be destroyed naturally. Farewell and be well. Written at Wolfenbuttel, 4 July 1710.