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When Souls Had Wings

Pre-mortal Existence in Western Thought

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Introduction

And this is
Life?—Toil! and wherefore should I toil?—because
My father could not keep his place in Eden?
What had *I* done in this?—I was unborn:
I sought not to be born.

—Lord Byron,
Cain, act 1, scene 1

If there is one assertion that every disgruntled mortal seems safe in making, it is the petulant insistence, “I didn’t ask to be born.” Birth has, in the West at least, usually been seen as the result of forces that operate entirely independently of what those forces produce. Whether engendered by spontaneous passion or parental planning, and viewed as the consequence of strict biological laws or a divine procreative power—it has seemed self-evident to generation after generation of humanity that newborns are the passive objects of another’s will, springing into being at someone else’s behest—or careless instigation—set “naked and miserable upon the shores of this great ocean of the world.”¹

In this version of events, most people have generally assumed that the human individual comes into existence at the time of birth as, in the Judeo-Christian tradition at least, a combined physical body and immaterial soul or spirit.² In such a case, immortality is a ray, not a line, starting at a moment between conception and birth and extending into an infinite future. The process of physical procreation, as miraculous as

it may be, provides a generally sufficient explanation of how our body comes to exist. (Though even here, delightful variations exist that ascribe, for example, the simultaneous physical presence of all future generations in miniscule form in the eggs of Eve or the sperm of Adam.) The origins of the soul, however, have been subject to rather more speculation. This would seem to be inevitable, given the immediate problem that emerges: the logic of physical parents producing physical progeny becomes complicated when those physical parents are considered to produce offspring possessed of an immortal and nonphysical dimension as well. The procreation of physical bodies is relatively straightforward. How and when a spirit is created and joined to that body is more problematic.

In early Christian thought, two theories evolved to resolve this conundrum. The spirit or soul was held to be either generated from the parents in the same way as the body (traducianism), or it was believed to be formed by a special act of creation on God's part for each and every individual (creationism). Traducianism (from the Latin *tradux*, "shoot" or "sprout"; *traducere*, "convey" or "lead across") can be traced at least to the church father Tertullian (b. 160) and was later embraced by the Eastern Orthodox Church and Luther. Since Adam begat a son in his own likeness and image (Gen. 5:3), and since he comprised a body and soul, then begetting a combined body and soul appears to be compatible with, if not clearly indicated by, Holy Writ.

Before the term was co-opted to refer to biblical literalists in the aftermath of Darwin, creationism was an alternative version of the soul's creation. Creationism was perhaps first taught by the African apologist Lactantius (245–325 CE) and by the Middle Ages was being proclaimed by prominent church teachers. The theory relies principally upon the biblical account of Adam's creation, at which time the spirit was infused or breathed into a body prepared for it. Creationism came to be embraced by the majority of early church authorities. This view avoids the metaphysical difficulties of how spirit and body interact in the human individual to jointly sire a combined body and spirit. At the same time, the doctrine reserves to God alone the capacity to produce that which is immortal. Catholics (like most Protestants) subscribe to creationism, based on their belief that the human soul is simple and indivisible, hence it cannot generate spiritual germs or seed; and the body, being physical, cannot generate that which is spiritual.³

Both doctrines are encumbered with profound theological problems. If the soul originates with the body, as the traducianists hold, then why does it not perish with the body? In what manner can a human be thought capable of generating a soul? Creationism presents, if anything, even more intractable problems. If God creates the soul afresh in every human, how can it be imperfect, as a soul of fallen nature necessarily is? If it is created pure and innocent, how and when does it come to acquire the burden of Adam's sin and guilt? And what justice can there be in immediately consigning a purely created spirit to the incubus of guilt, sin, and fallenness?

There is, however, an altogether different conception of the soul's creation which has held sway at various times and places throughout the world. According to its several formulations, every living soul existed in a former realm, either there created or eternally uncreated. Belief in the soul's pre-mortal existence has a long if currently obscured history in Western thought. It has been articulated in virtually every age, from ancient times to the present. It has been adumbrated in many forms in philosophy, theology, poetry, and popular culture. It has been anathematized as Christian heresy and defended as a true doctrine known to the ancients. Some have deployed the idea to buttress arguments for the immortality of the soul. Others have adduced it to account for individual differences evident at birth, still others to explain the existence of innate ideas, and many have used it as the basis of a more compelling solution to the problem of God's apparent injustice.

The expression "preexistence" encompasses a range of meanings, and that very richness and vagueness are both a reflection of, and a reason for, the concept's dogged persistence through time, in spite of religious anathemas, shifting philosophical trends, and the vagaries of poetic fashion. Purists might prefer the term "pre-mortal existence" to the illogical-sounding "preexistence," but it is the latter term that has far and away predominated in the history of the concept and the one that will be largely employed in this book. In general, the term refers to the existence of the soul before it was incarnate in its present human form. "Before" can in some contexts and traditions mean logically, rather than temporally, prior to creation. And preexistence can itself refer to the soul and to a galaxy of related concepts, from emanations and hypostases (essential realities rooted in the divine) like "the church," to the Logos, or the figure of Sophia. Though sometimes found in conjunction with metempsychosis (transmigration of souls, or reincarnation), preexistence is a distinct doctrine and neither entails nor is entailed by a doctrine of cyclical rebirth or multiple lives. On the one hand, the spirit may have an existence prior to its one and only incarnation, and on the other, multiple mortal lives may include no prior or independent existence of the spirit that animates those sequential versions of mortality. Scholar of esoterica G. R. S. Mead registered this point a century ago, noting:

[T]his general hypothesis of pre-existence...by no means necessarily includes the special doctrine of reincarnation or transcorporation proper, that of repeated incarnations in physical bodies on this earth. It is somewhat necessary to insist on this distinction at the outset, for the two theories are not infrequently confused in the popular treatment of the transmigration-doctrine.⁴

And though proponents of one often championed the other, it was at least as common for the defenders of preexistence to explicitly reject transmigration. Geddes

MacGregor suggests one particular reason for this fact: in early Christianity, at least, preoccupied as it was with the imminence of Christ's return, a theory of past spiritual existence was perfectly reasonable and often compelling. A theory involving future reembodiments, on the other hand, was largely obviated by the nearness of the world's end and the rapturous contemplation of a heavenly life in Christ or with him.⁵ There was also the dilemma that transmigration raises for physical resurrection (which of multiple incarnations would be the immortal form?) and the fact of explicit New Testament language declaring that "it is appointed unto men once to die" (Heb. 9:27).

In general, I am taking preexistence as the positing of the existence of humankind's spiritual identity in a state and place that preexist mortal life. In some versions, the soul is a fully self-aware moral agent seemingly possessing most of the attributes and characteristics of the later, embodied self. In other versions, since personhood is considered to be a composite of spiritual core and bodily nature, the preexistent self is only a partial self. And in yet other, early versions, the preexistent self is the raw material out of which the spirit will itself be formed. This volume will encompass the entire range and variety of beliefs that trace the origins of individual identity to some kind of nonphysical state before birth.

The idea appears to have more than one point of origin, and influence and inheritance are in any case notoriously difficult to establish with certainty where the history of ideas is concerned. Most early appearances of the concept in the Western world are traceable to a classical setting where Greek, Egyptian, Persian, and even Indian streams of thought intermingled just the other side of clear historical genealogies. Some would trace the ancestry of the idea further backward, even to Central Asia, but those paths lead well outside the realm of documented transmission.⁶ For this reason, and for simple reasons of practicality, I begin the present study with the first appearances of the idea in Semitic traditions and in Greek antiquity and then trace the tradition as it developed and was manifested in subsequent Western culture.

Belief in the soul is generally a function of religious belief, and Christianity has long consigned the doctrine of a pre-mortal soul to the realm of heresy. That fact itself only adds to the questions surrounding the rich and tempestuous history of this idea. Definitive prohibitions generally dampen ardor for all but the most recalcitrant religious tenets. Belief in preexistence, on the other hand, has persisted across millennia and across cultures. It resurfaces as a religious doctrine in spite of orthodox proscription, affirmed by theologians, prophets, and mystics alike. It recurs as a philosophical idea from Plato into modernity, in mythological formulations and contemporary argumentation. Poets from antiquity to Robert Frost and Polish Nobel laureates have limned the features of a human preexistence, as literary trope and as apparently earnest, polemical description.

Although the breadth and variety of versions of preexistence are enormous, the focus of this book is not to merely trace a tradition or track sources. One student of preexistence (as it pertains to Christ) has written that "it is not sufficient to ask of a passage that reflects the idea of pre-existence, What is its source? Even if the source were known, the same questions must be asked of the source that are asked of the text: What is the function of the idea of pre-existence within the context where it is found?"⁷ R. G. Hamerton-Kelly refers to general agreement that a conception of preexistence "involves and presupposes a whole view of reality."⁸ Such belief structures, like all enduring myths and paradigms, persist because of their explanatory power. The most successful are those that are more effective than others in the interpretation of human experience.⁹ Such paradigms do important intellectual and cultural work, which is to say, they order reality, satisfy emotional yearning or longing, rationalize the incongruities and traumas of existence, or simply explain why the sky is blue, birds fly, and things are the way they are.

Pre-mortal existence is such a paradigm. In the case of Christ's preexistence, the doctrine is most simply read as the necessary consequence of an incarnate deity also conceived of as eternal, transhistorical, and to be identified with God himself. He must, in some sense, have predated his mortal birth. Alternatively, as in continental dogmatic theology, Christ's preexistence can be taken to emphasize not continuity but his utter transcendence as "an alien intruder into a world with which he has no ontological connection."¹⁰ He exists, in other words, not so much before time as outside time. Applied more generally to entities besides Christ, the theme of preexistence has been attributed to a desire to impute special value, "express divinity or ultimacy," or convey a transhistorical hope in the midst of apocalyptic circumstances.¹¹

I hope to go beyond such sparse conjectures to elaborate an entire series of motivations and purposes behind an idea that has flourished well outside and beyond the early Christian contexts that frame many studies of the topic.¹² Preexistence has been invoked to explain "the better angels of our nature," including the human yearning for transcendence and the sublime; it suggests a reason for the frequent sensation of alienation and the indelible sadness of human existence. Preexistence has been offered to account for why we know what we should not know, whether in the form of a Greek slave's grasp of mathematics, the moral sense common to humanity, or the human ability to recognize universals. The belief has salvaged the wounded sensibility of a host of religious thinkers and people of good conscience, who could not otherwise account for the unevenly distributed pain and suffering that are humanity's common lot, and has been triumphantly invoked to rescue God's justice and honor. Lives lived in pre-mortal realms have explained convincingly the uncannily instantaneous bonds between friends and between lovers, forged so profoundly that they seem to possess their own mysterious prehistory. An origin in the eternal realms has been found philosophically more credible

than human hormones and happenstance to ground the existence of a soul that is held to be immortal and an image of divinity. And many philosophers have found in human pre-mortality the necessary precondition for a will that is genuinely free and independent. Finally, preexistence has been advocated for reasons as unanticipated as its aesthetic and logical symmetry, in comparison to orthodoxy's asymmetrical notions of eternity and the unidirectionality of the soul's immortality. It even provides, as we shall see, a lyrical etiology for the appearance of the gentle groove, the philtrum, that graces the upper lips of the entire human family.

Given the breadth of the cultural and intellectual work that the paradigm of preexistence performs, it is no surprise to find the concept such a durable one, resistant to anathemas, the changing fortunes of poetic fashion, and the vanquishment of Plato, metaphysics, and spiritual anthropologies generally. The surprise, rather, is that the idea met such determined and vociferous opposition in the early Christian world, forcing the doctrine into the peripheries and underground of Western thought. As we shall see, the arguments adduced in opposing the doctrine were almost invariably logically inferior to those invoked in its support. The explanation for its suppression must therefore be found rather in the galaxy of weighty theological concerns and political stakes on which the doctrine impinged. Emerging Christian doctrines of God's sovereignty, the creation of the cosmos, human relation to the divine, the doctrines of grace and original sin, the meaning and significance of incarnation and physicality—these and particular moments of historical crisis, like the Pelagian controversy, the Gnostic menace, the Origenist debates, all combined to render the dangers inherent in preexistence weightier than its virtues. That the ideas with which preexistence was associated and interconnected, rather than the inherent deficiencies of the doctrine, caused its official banishment seems evident in the resilience with which preexistence not only survived but proliferated in succeeding centuries in myriad forms and genres.

In the 1930s, Albert Einstein attempted to bequeath the religious and theological papers of his only serious intellectual rival, Sir Isaac Newton, to some of the greatest universities in the Western world. Incredibly, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, like Cambridge, the British Museum, and the Royal Society before them, were not interested.¹³ For Newton's personal papers revealed the embarrassing fact that the father of classical mechanics was also a devout student of alchemy, esoteric wisdom, Solomonic mysteries, and biblical prophecy. The same sense of modern intellectual reasonableness, a jealous concern for the reputation of the deceased, and a cultural deference to canons of Christian orthodoxy that are only now succumbing to more militantly secular critical standards can also be seen at work in the long history of preexistence. Since Newton's era especially, the divide between religious and scientific investigations has become more and more pronounced. Newton's contemporary and teacher Henry More, who positioned himself as a foremost defender of

the new scientific spirit of the age, who proselytized for Descartes and embraced Copernicus even while Newton hedged, was already becoming an anachronism as he simultaneously and comfortably acknowledged that he was a believer in witchcraft and demons.

The moral here is that wishing away Newton's religious papers does not simply inhibit our understanding of the man by denying a more complex portrait of him as a product of earlier historical conditions. Those papers also illuminate a powerful point about the ways that paradigms serve to make experience intelligible, mirror the still ongoing struggle to find a synthesis of the material and suprasensible realms, and prompt questions as to exactly which religious and philosophical yearnings those models were thought to successfully address. In a similar way, historical tendencies to suppress, downplay, or deliteralize the centuries-long belief in preexistence miss the point. Whether the human soul precedes birth is a religious question, and whether Plato really believed it is a trivial one. What the paradigm portends for the larger intellectual, religious, and literary worlds it engages is immensely illuminating. This point is clear in the case of a historically pervasive paradigm like the great chain of being. That vision of the cosmos as a scale of existence with infinite gradations arranged in hierarchical fashion both informed and reflected profoundly held beliefs that ranged from humans' relationship to deity, to legitimate ways of ordering society, to the assumed purpose and standards of artistic representation. Questions about the chain of being's metaphysical status in the minds of its adherents or the literalness with which they embraced it would obscure the larger fact of its ideological and practical significance, its enormous historical impact as a model that helped to order personal, religious, and political life. The same principle may be urged in regard to preexistence. Nietzsche championed this insight when he chose, in his own investigations into the history of morals, to reconfigure the problem of good and evil's ontological status and revolutionized the study of ethics in the process. Hitherto, he wrote, the independent reality of evil had been a given, and philosophers and theologians had only plumbed the question of its origin in the world. Nietzsche's project was to approach the subject with a different set of questions:

What was at stake was the *value* of morality... Under what conditions did man devise these value judgments good and evil? *and what value do they themselves possess?* Have they hindered or furthered human prosperity? Are they a sign of distress, of impoverishment, of the degeneration of life? Or is there revealed in them, on the contrary, the plenitude, force, and will of life, its courage, certainty, future? (emphasis in original)¹⁴

Similarly, we might ask, what are the conditions, agendas, and purposes under which philosophers, theologians, and poets have turned time and again to explore and develop the theory of preexistence?

The history of preexistence is far from linear or straightforward. The idea assumes the form, at various times and even in the same proponent, of any combination of theological conviction and poetic trope, literal belief and allegory, crude myth and philosophical abstraction. Motives range from earnest to speculative to playful, and the idea's appeal can extend far beyond the simple set of themes I have chosen to emphasize. These themes in any case blur into each other and fail to fully capture the scope and richness of the formal defenses, poetic celebrations, and implicit apologies for preexistence. But they recur often enough to suggest that serious thinkers over a span of more than two millennia have believed that significant intellectual, religious, and emotional ends were well served by the notion of a human soul that arrived in mortality, "trailing clouds of glory," having originated in a time and place the other side of birth.¹⁵