Review Essay

Controversies over the Soul and its Origin

Davide Cellamare

Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

d.cellamare@ftr.ru.nl

Leen Spruit, *The Controversy over the Animal Soul in Roman Censorship* (Lugano: Agorà & Co, 2015), pp. 204, €24,00, ISBN 978 88 97461 66 1; Leen Spruit, *The Origin of the Soul from Antiquity to the Early Modern Era* (Lugano: Agorà & Co, 2014), pp. 178, €24,00, ISBN: 978 88 97461 47 0

Over the last few decades, a conspicuous number of studies has been devoted to the development of psychology (or, ‘the science of the soul’) from Antiquity to the early modern era. Two aspects (often intertwined) of the early modern history of the study of the soul have, in particular, received much scholarly attention: questions related to the immortality of the soul and the discussion concerning the disciplinary status of psychology as a discipline that borders both on natural philosophy and metaphysics.¹ This focus seems justified, given that these topics were hotly debated throughout history and that they

1 On these topics, see, for instance: Eckhard Kessler, “The Intellective Soul,” in Charles B. Schmitt, Quentin Skinner, Eckhard Kessler and Jill Kraye, eds., *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1988), 485-534; Jill Kraye, “The Immortality of the Soul in the Renaissance: Between Natural Philosophy and Theology,” *Signatures*, 1 (2000), 1-24; Lorenzo Casini, “The Renaissance Debate on the Immortality of the Soul. Pietro Pomponazzi and the Plurality of Substantial Forms,” in Paul J. J. M. Bakker and Johannes M. M. H. Thijssen, eds., *Mind, Cognition and Representation. The Tradition of Commentaries on Aristotle’s De anima* (Aldershot, 2007), 127-150; Paul J. J. M. Bakker, “Natural Philosophy, Metaphysics or Something in Between? Agostino Nifo, Pietro Pomponazzi, and Marcantonio Genua on the Nature and Place of the Science of the Soul,” in Bakker and Thijssen, *Mind, Cognition and Representation*, 151-177; Marco Lamanna, “On the Early History of Psychology,” *Revista Filosofica*

continue to be of philosophical interest. In effect, establishing the extent to which the human soul was exclusively the business of natural philosophy, whether it was an immaterial entity, and whether it could survive the death of the body amounted also to defining the place occupied by human beings in the universe, their possible superiority and the difference between them and the rest of the ensouled world.

However, similar concerns were at stake in two other discussions which, whilst keeping most ancient, medieval, and early modern philosophers occupied, have received comparatively less study: one regarded the difference between the soul possessed by human beings and that possessed by the other animals; the other discussion concerned the origin of the soul. Recent scholarship has begun to acknowledge the importance of these two discussions for the history of psychology, and Leen Spruit has recently devoted two studies to each of them.²

As the title indicates, Spruit's *The Controversy over the Animal Soul in Roman Censorship* examines debates concerning the difference between the human and the animal souls from the specific and interesting angle of documents produced by the Church censors. The central part of this book consists of a collection of documents found in the Roman Archive of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. These documents cover the traces that were left by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century debates over the animal soul in the records of Roman Catholic censorship. The Catholic Church documents reproduced in the book are preceded by an extensive introduction, in which Spruit summarises some central ideas, from Antiquity to the early modern period, regarding the animal soul.

The introduction first examines ancient views ("Presocratics to Neoplatonism"), which are characterised by Aristotle's criticism of the Presocratics for failing to recognise the difference between sensation and intellect, ascribing intellect thus to all animals. Aristotle, for his part, granted animals memory and experience, but not the possibility of attaining universal concepts. In this section of the introduction, Spruit also examines Epicurean and Stoic positions, as well as two other relevant sources for later debates: Strato's view that

de Coimbra, 38 (2010), 291-314; Fernando Vidal, *The Sciences of the Soul. The Early Modern origins of Psychology* (Chicago, IL, 2011).

- 2 See, for instance: Richard Sorabji, *Animal Minds and Human Morals. The Origins of the Western Debate* (Worcester 1993); Cecilia Muratori, ed., "The Animal Soul and the Human Mind: Renaissance Debates," *Bruniana & Campanelliana*, Supplementi xxv, Studi 15; Stefanie Buchenau and Roberto Io Presti, eds., *Human and Animal Cognition in Early Modern philosophy and Medicine* (Pittsburgh, PA, 2017); Joseph S. Freedman, "The Soul (*anima*) according to Clemens Timpler (1563/4-1624) and Some of His Central European Contemporaries," in Barbara Mahlmann-Bauer, ed., *Scientia et Artes. Die Vermittlung alten und neuen Wissens in Literatur, Kunst und Musik* (Wolfenbüttel, 2004), 291-830;

sensation involves reasoning and belongs to all animals; and Plutarch's *On the Intelligence of Animals*, in which examples of animal intelligence are presented (pp. 5-10). This is followed by an explanation ("Fathers to Middle Ages") of how the issue concerning the animal soul takes on a theological dimension with the rise of Christianity. Whilst the Church Fathers expressed a wide range of opinions on this matter, it was through Augustine that the Stoic insistence on reason as an exclusively human faculty became a central point in the Christian tradition of the Latin West (pp. 10-12).

The introduction continues with an overview of "Renaissance views: Cusanus to Bacon," which points to an important novelty: Renaissance geographical explorations produced a rich travel literature, which included descriptions of formerly unknown animals. This contributed to bringing the debate beyond the boundaries of bookish knowledge and to the advent of the more observation-based genre of *historia*, as is nicely illustrated by the publication of Konrad Gesner's *Historia animalium* (1551-1587) (pp. 12-17). The concluding part of Spruit's overview considers "The modern debate on the animal soul"; before discussing seventeenth-century England and eighteenth-century developments, it focuses on Descartes and the new philosophy – an issue of central importance for Church censorship (pp. 17-27). In effect, as Spruit anticipates at the end of his introduction, the Roman censorship documents concerning the issue of the animal soul testify to the Church's particular attention to the debate triggered by the Cartesian idea that animals were purely machines, bereft of any soul. On the one hand, Spruit explains, he considers the documents too narrow a basis for the reconstruction of something like a Catholic position on the animal soul. On the other hand, one pattern does emerge from them, which has to do with the above-mentioned Cartesian view. Most of the cases of censorship examined in the book oppose both the Cartesian idea that animals do not possess any soul and the reaction to this view which argued the contrary position, insisting on the spirituality (and in some cases even the immortality) of the animal soul. The pattern emerging from the censorial practice amounts to a middle-ground position, which corresponds to the Aristotelian scheme of a hierarchy of forms, and ascribed only the lower souls to brute animals.³ Before proceeding to the documents of the Roman censorship, Spruit draws the reader's attention to another aspect emerging from them: namely, the censorship's careful approach to the use of Scripture for refuting scientific views, as some censors were mindful of the troubles this had caused during the Galilei affair.⁴

3 Spruit, *Controversy over the Animal Soul*, 29-30.

4 *Ibid.*, 30.

The main part of the book supplies documents produced during seven cases of Roman censorship, concerning the issue of the animal soul. The documents reproduced by Spruit are in Latin and the vernacular, and all are preceded by short introductions. The first case (chapter 1) dates from 1662 and regards Martin Schoock's *De anima belvarum*, which attracted the censor's attention for the idea that animal souls are substantially immaterial and only *per accidens* extended. Chapter 2 provides the documents of the 1685-1686 censorship of the Neapolitan priest Agostino Mazza, who conceived of animals as having speech and rationality. The third case (chapter 3) concerns a *censura* that was issued in the late seventeenth century and concerned an unknown person, forced to abjure for having defended the view that animals were rational, and that the human soul was not immortal. Chapter 4 documents the 1711 censorship of the work of Andrea Pascoli (author of literary works), who allegedly defended the Cartesian idea that animals do not possess any soul. In the late 1750s, Pierre Mausset (chapter 5), a Catholic convert to Protestantism who lived in the Dutch Republic, drew the attention of the Congregation of the Index for allegedly holding that all entities are possessed of sense and reason and that animals have more perfect *cogitationes*. Chapter 6 addresses the *censura* of theologian Giovanni Lami, who held that animals were intelligent and worshipped God. Of particular interest is the fact that the censor discusses Lami's problematic views in the broader context of the conflict between Aristotelian and Cartesian philosophies. Lami's name reoccurs in the last censorship presented by the book (chapter 7); the Carmelite friar Francesco Maria Soldini was accused in 1784 of using Lami's theories (as well as those of Locke and Senert) in his *De anima brutorum*, and of defending the view that animal souls were of a spiritual and immaterial substance.

The Controversy over the Animal Soul in Roman Censorship makes a useful contribution to our knowledge of the long-lasting debate over the difference between human and animal souls. It does so from the privileged perspective of censorship documents, and gives us access to new and relevant information for a wide range of researchers, from historians of ideas to scholars in the field of theology.

The scope of *The Origin of the Soul from Antiquity to the Early Modern Era* is much broader. It treats the rise, evolution, and dissolution of questions about the origin of the soul from ancient philosophy and medicine to the present day.

The introduction provides a quick sketch of the historical trajectory of the question concerning the origin of the soul. It explains that this question is as old as the religious system of 4000 BC Mesopotamia, but became formulated in a more systematic way within the framework of Greek philosophy and science. It was at this time in Mesopotamia that the idea emerged that two

physical parents produced physical progeny with a non-physical and immortal dimension, viz. the soul. Spruit explains that whilst the procreation of the body was relatively unproblematic, the question of how the soul came about remained difficult to answer. In fact, if Aristotle was right in considering the soul as the form of the body, how could a formal principle be drawn from, or descend upon, formless matter? What was the role of celestial bodies in producing the soul of the offspring? Or was the soul produced by an agent beyond the natural realm? These questions were reformulated after the rise of Christianity, from at least two points of view. First, they were now based on theological exegesis, ethics, and dogmatics. Second, they were transformed into a debate concerning two main alternatives: the soul was either generated by the parents in the same way as the body (traducianism), or it was created by God in each individual (creationism). Despite the possibility of a third position (that souls pre-exist in a former realm and then descend into the bodies), the choice between traducianism or creationism was to become the main issue for centuries to come.

Spruit's introduction also points to another important aspect. In the Greek world, two other issues became intertwined with the questions regarding the soul's origin. One pertained to the formation of the embryo and the other to the moment in which the embryo became animated. Questions concerning the origin of the soul and the formation of the embryo were often related to each other, as is nicely illustrated by philosophical and medical reflections concerning the Galenic notion of the 'moulding faculty' or 'formative faculty'. This notion reached the Latin West through the Arabs and Albert the Great, and was used by Renaissance physicians (such as Niccolò Leonicensio and Jacob Schegk) in the study of the relationship between the seed, the vehicle of the soul, the foetal formation, and the coming about of the rational soul. The transformation of these related questions concerning the soul's origin and the embryo is treated as "the issue of the origin of the soul" by the nine numbered chapters of the book.⁵

Chapter 1 treats Greek philosophy and medicine and hence a wide range of theories of the soul's origin. On the one hand, Pythagorism introduced an element of dualism into psychology, which was then inherited by Plato, who considered the soul to have a divine origin. On the other hand, Aristotle's hylomorphism looked at the soul as something emerging from the development of the embryo. With Alexander of Aphrodisias' interpretation of hylomorphism, Spruit turns to the materialist option proposed by Hellenistic philosophy, as well as to later Platonism. Less attention is given to the Aristotelian theory that

5 Spruit, *Origin of the Soul*, 1-7.

at least the intellectual part of the soul, or reason, might come into being from without the body.⁶ However, this idea is mentioned when Spruit turns to Plotinus' psychology and explains the view that the soul originates from the intelligible world as a Platonic twist on the Aristotelian theory just mentioned. The chapter then covers Porphyry and some later Neoplatonists (such as Proclus, Iamblichus, and Simplicius) and concludes with a section on ancient medicine and embryology, and in particular on Hippocrates and Galen. Although neither author formulated a clear theory about the origin of the soul, Spruit outlines their contribution to embryology. Galen's notion of *dunamis diaplastikê* (or the moulding faculty) is of particular relevance. This faculty or force was seen as central to the formation of living beings and would later be very popular with philosophers and physicians, from Avicenna, Averroes, Albert the Great and Pietro d'Abano, through to Jacob Schegk.

Chapter 2 analyses the Jewish and early Christian traditions. It starts off with an account of the ways in which the Old Testament refers to the soul and then continues with a section on the rise of Christian psychology. This chapter makes two interesting points: first, that it was through the Church Fathers that the issue of the origin of the soul first became reduced to the alternatives of pre-existence, creationism, and traducianism; second, that while the idea of pre-existence was not contentious in the Jewish context, it was declared anathema in the Christianity of the mid-fifth century and subsequently condemned by an AD 543 decree by Justinian and by the Second Council of Constantinople in AD 553. As a consequence, the debate from then on revolved only around traducianism and creationism, with the latter being accepted by Lactantius and most of the Fathers, thus becoming the dominant view in the Latin West.

Chapter 3 looks at medieval discussions, which are presented in three phases. The first was characterised both by a limited availability of ancient philosophical and medical texts, and by theology and Platonic views. The second phase was characterised by important changes connected to the first introduction of Galenic works and the *Corpus Hippocraticum*. It was only during the third phase that the Aristotelian and Arab texts became generally available and these transformed the framework into one in which psychology was substantially discussed. In this context, a new form of creationism developed that was consistent with the Aristotelian conception of generation as a gradual development from the embryo. Thanks to Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas,

6 Aristotle, *Generation of Animals* 11.3, 736b27-28, in Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle. The Revised Oxford Translation* (Princeton, NJ, 1984), 1: "It remains, then, for the reason alone so to enter and alone to be divine, for no bodily activity has any connexion with the activity of reason."

Galen's moulding faculty could explain the coming into being of the bodily organs and of the lower and bodily parts of the soul. At the end of this process, the body was deemed suitable for receiving the rational soul from God.

Chapter 4 illustrates the ways in which the fifteenth century witnessed the return of Neoplatonism. Here particular attention is devoted to authors such as Ficino, Bruno and Lipsius, as protagonists of a type psychology that looked at the soul and its origin as linked to cosmic principles such as the 'world soul' and the 'universal intellect'. This chapter provides some observations on eclectic figures such as Paracelsus and Fernel, before turning to the Cambridge Platonists and a treatment of Henry More's defence of pre-existence.

Chapter 5 addresses modern Aristotelianism, which, according to Spruit, paid less attention to the question of the origin of the soul, for at least two reasons: first, because early modern Aristotelians based their psychological works mainly on Aristotle's *De anima*, where the issue is not treated; second, in the wake of controversies over Averroism and the immortality of the individual soul, as well as the 1513 condemnation of Alexander's naturalist views in psychology, a large part of the early modern debate focused on the theme of the immortality of the soul.⁷ This chapter does, however, document the fact that questions concerning the soul's origin did receive some attention, especially on the part of Alexandrist authors. Spruit pays particular attention to Pomponazzi and Zabarella and points to the singular example of Antonio Rocco's traducianism. He ends the chapter with a consideration of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century schoolmen such as Toledo, Suarez, and Eustachius of Saint Paul, who generally followed the Thomistic doctrine, with few exceptions (amongst which was Micraelius' *Lexicon* with its defence of traducianism).

By contrast, Protestant authors devoted a great deal of attention to the issue of the origin of the soul, as Chapter 6 shows. This chapter specifically focuses on the confessional divide between Calvinist and Lutheran authors, with the former defending creationism and the latter traducianism. Spruit is careful in stressing that this difference reflects a general trend and not confessional requirements, but he attributes the Lutheran adherence to traducianism to the following theological tenets: God does not intervene in the order of nature after the sixth day of creation; the Lutheran preference for a unified view of nature; and the idea that traducianism is the only theory capable of explaining the transmission of original sin that does not directly involve God. The chapter starts off with a discussion of Philip Melanchthon, who is described as defending creationism with regard to the rational soul. As I have shown elsewhere, however, Melanchthon leaned towards this view only in his *Commentarius de*

7 Spruit, *Origin of the Soul*, 69.

anima (1540), whilst in his 1552 *Liber de anima* he was less reluctant to accept traducianism.⁸ Moreover, Melanchthon relied on the idea that the human intellect is incapable of attaining proper knowledge of the origin of the soul (whether *ex nihilo* or *per traducem*). This is an important point, because this agnosticism became the dominant view amongst Lutherans who followed Melanchthon's teaching. The chapter then turns to Rudolph Goclenius' 1590 *Psychologia*, a collection of texts on the origin of the soul which contains excerpts from (mainly) Protestant authors such as Zanchi, Scaliger, Grynaeus, Bright, Hawenreuter, and Taurellus. Noteworthy is Spruit's remark that Hawenreuter's traducianism attracted the attention of the Roman Congregation of the Index.⁹ Spruit then turns his attention to the attack on traducianism in the 1594 *Psychologia* of the Calvinist Otto Casmann. A defence of traducianism is instead ascribed to Taurellus and to the Calvinist Goclenius himself. Interestingly enough, it is the opposite opinion (namely creationism) that is dealt with in the chapter's fourth section, which is devoted to "Calvinist orthodoxy". The cases of Polanus and Voet are especially considered as "illustrative examples of the standard view of seventeenth-century orthodox Reformed theology," that is, the view that the human rational soul is created *ex nihilo* by God in each individual.¹⁰ The chapter ends with a brief section on "mortalism," the theory that the whole individual human soul 'sleeps' until resurrected for the Last Judgment. Spruit writes that this theory was embraced by Luther and some radical Anabaptists, as well as later English philosophers such as Hobbes and Milton. Spruit sees the theory as having an impact on the way in which these authors conceived (mostly in a traducianist way) of the soul's origin.¹¹

The remaining three chapters devote much attention to embryology and to the development and animation of the foetus. They document the end phase of this debate over the origin of the soul, and in fact its demise.

Chapter 7 addresses the issue of the origin of the soul in early modern medicine and natural philosophy, with particular attention on the notion of a 'formative principle' and 'plastic force,' and to the problem of establishing the moment of animation. Fortunio Liceti, Thomas Feyens, and Paolo Zacchia are considered as illustrative examples of the debate concerning animation. A section on 'esoteric views' treats the case of Jan Baptista van Helmont, who drew on Paracelsus' idea of '*archeus*' as the architect of the bodily organs. The

8 Davide Cellamare, *Psychology in the Age of Confessionalisation. A Case Study on the Interaction between Psychology and Theology c.1517-c.1640* (PhD thesis, Radboud University, Nijmegen 2015), 197–220.

9 Spruit, *Origin of the Soul*, 86.

10 Ibid., 91.

11 Ibid., 93.

archeus was understood as an instrument of the sensitive soul (inferior to the rational soul which was instead created by God). Spruit then turns to the Neapolitan physician Sebastiano Bartoli, who followed in van Helmont's footsteps. Two other important authors, the Lutherans Jacob Schegk and Daniel Sennert, are then shown to have endorsed opposing theories. Schegk relied on the notion of a 'plastic faculty' to explain the development of the male seed into the future corporeal parts of the human being, whilst leaving to God the task of infusing the intellective soul into it. By contrast, Sennert argued that there was no separate plastic faculty orchestrating the development of the seed, but that the soul itself was present in the seed and naturally multiplied with it.

The development of the embryo appears to have become a central issue in the seventeenth century, when, as Spruit describes in Chapter 8, animation and the issue of the origin of the soul became mainly the business of physicians and was increasingly ignored by philosophers. There were some notable exceptions to this rule, such as Gassendi. The latter is described by Spruit as developing Telesio's ideas with a view to harmonising atomism, creationism, and preformationism. Preformationism is the central theme of this chapter. Spruit explains how, in the wake of the development of the microscope, preformationism replaced epigenesis as the main way to understand animal generation. Both in its ovist and in its animalculist versions (defended by Jan Swammerdam and Antonie van Leeuwenhoek, respectively), preformationism gained the upper hand, even amongst philosophers such as Malebranche and Leibniz.

Chapter 9 concludes the book by documenting "the demise of an issue". By 1720, preformationism was well established and yet, starting from the beginning of the century, mechanistic embryology had come under attack. Eighteenth-century materialism (in the forms endorsed by La Mettrie or Helvetius) devoted little or no attention to the issue of the origin of the soul. As for Kant, he denied that we could attain knowledge of the generation of living beings. By means of an overview of German idealism and English and French philosophy, Spruit illustrates a shift in the psychological debate as a result of which the soul came to be considered in terms of consciousness and personhood. As a matter of fact, all these elements merged to render the soul's origin less interesting – a process that was brought to a conclusion by modern genetics, which looked at fertilisation (instead of animation) as the most significant biological transition involved in human reproduction. The issue of the origin of the soul has since been limited primarily to theological discourse. Still, as Spruit observes in his conclusion, the issue is still alive in discussions concerning abortion and *in vitro* fertilisation.

Probably because the book is conceived as a compact historical overview, it does not use too many quotations from the sources. However, it does include a short “Appendix of relevant texts,” in which the English translations of some selected passages are given.

The reader might want to consider the way in which authors are grouped in the different chapters of the book. For instance, the Lutheran and creationist Jacob Schegk is treated in a chapter on early modern medicine and natural philosophy. Schegk’s work could have easily been treated in the chapter on Protestant disputes, for he was a highly influential Lutheran professor. This case and others lead to a questionable picture portraying Lutherans as committed traducianists. But, as Spruit warns us in his introduction, the inclusion of a given author in a given chapter “is not due to precise theoretical choices, but is essentially inspired by the need for greater clarity with respect to the evolution of debates and issues”.¹²

One possibly unappealing aspect of the book may be owed to the fact that, while it is devoted to “the origin of the soul,” it handles a variety of connected issues such as embryology or animation. As all of these themes are covered within the limited space of a compact overview, the resulting density (especially in chapters 7 and 8) at times hampers the reader’s understanding of the themes involved. On the other hand, Spruit’s approach does justice to the fact that questions concerning the origin of the soul did develop hand in hand with others, e.g., embryology and animation of the foetus. In fact, *The Origin of the Soul* is one of the few existing attempts to reconstruct a number of questions that have been of central importance for philosophers, theologians and physicians, from the Presocratics through to contemporary debates in bioethics. I would surely recommend this book to both beginners and advanced scholars who wish to study this important issue in psychology, as a very useful compass with which to navigate in the intricate constellation of questions concerning the origin of the soul.

¹² Spruit, *Origin of the Soul*, 6.