

THERESE DOUCET

The Economy of Souls

“I have tried hard—but life is difficult, and I am a very useless person.”

—Lily Bart in Edith Wharton’s
House of Mirth

It’s not fashionable, at least not in the circles where I feel comfortable, to talk about the soul. I’m not religious either, so am not at home among those who say the word “soul” and mean a wispy supernatural material that can be raised up out of the body and still maintain a certain shape and integrity, like a poached egg fished out of a simmering water bath with a slotted spoon. So how does it come about that I would talk about such a thing? And what could a soul be, if not that sort of floaty ghostish thingamajigger familiar to us from popular evangelical thought and folklore?

Some years ago, I found myself thinking about the soul by accident. I was in the midst of a protracted, dismal spell of husband-hunting. As tends to happen with people of a contemplative turn of mind like me, I found many aspects of dating and relationships troubling. There seemed something courtesanal about the traditional practice of getting taken out to nice dinners with the quiet expectation that eventually you’d have sex. On the other hand, if you dispensed with the dinners, you had to worry about seeming easy. Then there was the problem of appearance: however clever and funny and accomplished you might be, it was all spoiled if your looks didn’t

please.

I got still more depressed reading the existentialist philosopher and feminist Simone de Beauvoir, who was writing in the 1950s, on dating:

Woman has to learn that exchanges—it is a fundamental law of political economy—are based on the value the merchandise offered has for the buyer, and not for the seller: she has been deceived in being persuaded that her worth is priceless. The truth is that for the man she is an amusement, a pleasure, company, an inessential boon... [T]he time they spend together—which fallaciously seems to be the same time—does not have the same value for both partners. During the evening the lover spends with his mistress he could be doing something of advantage to his career, seeing friends, cultivating business relationships, seeking recreation; for a man normally integrated in society, time is a positive value... For the idle, bored woman, on the contrary, it is a burden she wishes to get rid of... In a liaison what most clearly interests the man, in many cases, is the sexual benefit he gets from it: if need be, he can be content to spend no more time with his mistress than is required for the sexual act; but—with exceptions—what she, on her part, wants is to kill all the excess time she has on her hands; and—like the storekeeper who will not sell potatoes unless the customer will take turnips also—she will not yield her body unless her lover will take hours of conversation and “going out” into the bargain.¹

This passage rankled, because more than fifty years after Beauvoir had written it, these were some of the same concerns I struggled with. Granted, I wasn't the “idle, bored woman” Beauvoir described, for whom much of the value of a relationship lay in killing unwanted spare time. I was busy enough with work, friendships, and hobbies. Instead, the value of a relationship for me lay mainly in the possibility of being

understood.

It seemed to me I was structured like a tree. There was the bark on the outside: The outward aspect that everyone saw, my appearances, expressions, speech, my day-to-day interactions with others. Beneath the tree's bark were concentric rings going further and further inward, representing my psychological history the way a tree's rings represent past years' weather patterns: lean years, droughts, cataclysms, disasters. In my case it seemed to be layer upon layer of ugliness. Every time I had been disappointed or had disappointed others, or felt hurt or betrayed, this had added another layer of ugliness beneath the surface: layers of fear, jealousy, grief, exhaustion, anger...

At the center was the tree's core. In terms of selfhood, the core represented what was truly of value in me, my only real beauty. It was the part of me that survived and went on in spite of disappointments and suffering. It was my courage, the part of me that still dared to love and strive and take risks, my drive to honesty and to becoming transparent to myself, my commitment to intellectual and moral integrity, my drive to be a true individual, a true self, my drive to truth. It was what made me me, what made me unique and uniquely valuable and gave me a sense that, to use Beauvoir's phrase, my worth in fact *was* priceless.

This core of me was what I wanted to have seen and understood. At times I felt the longer I went without its being recognized, the more it would shrink and fade and grow dim; the more layers of ugliness grew up between my surface self and it, the more it would be crushed and hidden by the weight of all those layers, and possibly snuffed out altogether.

The trouble was that in order for someone to see this part of me, he might first have to go through and see layer after layer of ugliness. My surface self was all about concealing the ugliness. It was hard to imagine that anyone could endure seeing much of it, let alone seeing *all* of it, as might have to be done in order to get down to the worthwhile core.

So even though I was in many ways more self-sufficient than a typical woman of Beauvoir's day, the gifts I had to offer were, like the idle, bored woman's unwanted time, also a terrible burden for another human being to take on.

I found the tree analogy useful for understanding my own unhappiness (which was sometimes opaque to me until I hit on some handy metaphor like this) and returned to it often in my thoughts. Later it occurred to me that what I had done, entirely by accident, was to provide myself with a secular, literary account of some of the same psychological phenomena, or phenomena of consciousness, that turn up in many a religious or cultural tradition as "the soul," or something like it.

Rereading Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, I realized I wasn't the only staunch secularist who had arrived at the problem of body and soul in this fashion. Kundera's character Tereza—with whom I nearly share a first name—is also concerned about having her soul seen. She is afraid of being viewed merely as a body, because bodies are replaceable, if not interchangeable. Her husband Tomas's infidelities reduce her to a mere body, another lover among many, as her dreams about marching naked in step with other naked women reveal. The betrayals strip her of her individuality, of her selfhood. They shove her soul back into its hiddenness.

Tereza's story, together with my own, suggests to me that the discovery of the soul tends to occur erotically. It is in a context of wanting to love and be loved, rather than one of speculating about metaphysics, that the problem of the difference between body and soul becomes visible and difficult even to us in this age where thoughts and emotions can be explained in terms of firing neurons and sparking synapses. As Kundera writes: "The old duality of body and soul has become shrouded in scientific terminology, and we can laugh at it as merely an obsolete prejudice"—as I did myself in my opening gambit, likening the soul to a poached egg. "But just make someone who has fallen in love listen to his stomach rumble,

and the unity of body and soul, that lyrical illusion of the age of science, instantly fades away."²

The Soul's Nature

This "soul," then, the beautiful core I saw in myself: Is it something real? Or is the surface self the only thing that can really be said to exist, while the soul is merely figurative, an imaginary projection, in my case, of what I wish I were, born out of a typically neurotic mixture of grandiosity and self-contempt? Are there others who perceive their inwardness in this way, who have ached to be understood and for their soul to be seen, even if it wouldn't necessarily occur to them to use such words? Does everyone have a soul? And can the set of phenomena that I've named as the soul be explained entirely in terms of the brain's structure and functions, or at least in terms of the scientifically familiar, or do they belong irreducibly to some sort of spiritual realm inaccessible to science? These questions are important, because the answers influence how we value human beings.

In high school physics I was taught that there were two kinds of energy: kinetic and potential. Kinetic energy was the energy of a bouncing ball in motion, while the ball's potential energy lay in its inner springiness, its height above the ground before being dropped. When the ball is dropped, its potential energy becomes actualized as kinetic energy. The actual motion of the ball, its kinetic energy, is clearly real: we can observe and measure it. The potential energy of the ball is both real and not real: it can be inferred, but still lies hidden and untapped within the ball, has yet to blossom into being. By definition, what is potential is not actual and therefore in a sense not real. Yet in another sense it seems real because we can calculate it and write equations describing it.

One way of thinking about the soul—the soul I stumbled on in the tree analogy—is as potentiality, in contrast to the surface self as actuality. The hidden inwardness I saw in myself

included both ugly layers and a beautiful core, and these could be thought of as my potential for ugliness and beauty (or, if you will, evil and good) in daily life: the ugliness coming from my history (as the history of the ball's movement contributes to its potential energy and future movement), while the beautiful core is independent of that history (as the ball's intrinsic springiness is independent of where it is and has been and also contributes to its potential energy). My soul, then, would be my potential for the good and evil, the beauty and ugliness, that are actualized in my surface self.

Another characteristic of the soul is concealment. Its hiddenness is like that of an object's substance. Etymologically, "substance" is *sub-stantia*, that which stand under. An object like a solid wooden cube has a surface we can see, touch, hear the sound it makes if we throw it against a wall. Below the surface is its substance, the material that underlies or "stands under" it, which we don't see, and without which there could be no surface appearance. The surface delimits this material, gives it form. The substance is potentiality: A vast number of potential surfaces lie within it, as there are any number of ways we could carve and shape the wood. The surface is actuality, the way the wood ultimately manifests itself to us.

The soul, like the cube's substance, is a hidden inwardness, wedded indivisibly to the open outwardness of the surface self. If we cut away a layer of the cube's surface, we see only more surface, still concealing the substance underneath. But the soul is doubly hidden. When I meet other people, their consciousness is hidden from me. I hear their words and observe their actions, but can't directly share their thoughts and sensory impressions, can't see the world through their eyes. I experience my own consciousness and can extrapolate and surmise that these other people have a hidden inwardness in the form of a consciousness like mine.

But within the sphere of my consciousness there is also an inwardness of myself inaccessible to me. I experience the

actuality of my consciousness as it streams along through time, but not the source from which it springs. I have a blind spot where my consciousness originates, in the same way that my eyes can't see into their own sockets; my sight can't see what does the seeing, nor my thoughts perceive what does the thinking. It's as though my consciousness itself were a surface that had a hidden substance beneath, its own inwardness: the pool of possible states of consciousness from which the actual states spring, the potentiality from which my consciousness draws its continually unfolding actuality.

If this substance of consciousness, the inwardness of my inwardness, is my soul, then it turns out my soul is hidden even to me. I surmise it's there as the origin or source of my consciousness but don't perceive it directly. My vision of my soul is indirect and shadowy, like the faint flashes of insight I get into other people's inner lives. Perhaps that's why my first significant glimpse of it had to come from a metaphor.

As this inwardness from which the conscious self springs, the soul is also the source of individuality and selfhood. As the single, consistent origin of my states of consciousness, it is what makes me uniquely and constantly and inescapably me, no matter how much external circumstances change. My soul is my potential to be myself.

As for whether everyone has a soul and the soul is really real, its nature as hidden from one's own view and doubly hidden from others implies that we can never know for sure. By analogy with my own experience, I can reasonably suppose it. But the hiddenness means there will always be a gap between supposing and knowing, a gap no amount of logical reasoning or scientific research can bridge. Like the uncertainty principle in quantum physics, where measurement of a given particle's position with a certain degree of accuracy precludes measurement of its momentum with the same degree of accuracy, the inability to gain precise knowledge of the soul seems inexorably embedded in the nature of existence.

Because of this gap, one could just as reasonably suppose others' inwardness is unlike one's own, or emphasize the indeterminacy of all inwardness and the hubris of supposing anything about it. And one could just as reasonably conclude from the soul's proposed nature as a hidden potentiality that it is not really real—depending on how one chooses to understand “real.” Sartre, in his essay “Existentialism and Humanism,” presents the doctrine that “Man...exists only in so far as he realizes himself, he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is.”³ It follows that it is illegitimate for people (in particular those unsuccessful in life) to take comfort from any notion of the potentiality that lies hidden in them, endowing them with intrinsic worth in spite of their lack of visible accomplishments. For this potentiality does not really exist, in the sense in which Sartre chooses to understand existing.

The question of the soul's existence is therefore one for which “deception stretches unconditionally as far as the truth, falsity unconditionally as far as honesty,” to quote Kierkegaard's essay “Love Believes All Things” in *Works of Love*.⁴ That is, the evidence is ambiguous, and so we are faced with a freedom to interpret the evidence as we will, and our choice of how to interpret it says much about us. We are free to choose to believe or not believe that the soul exists, to gamble on its existing or on its not existing. Which is to say, believing or not believing in the soul requires a decision, a leap of faith.

The Soul and Value

Beliefs about the soul, consciously held or not, influence how we value both the soul and human beings generally.

If one doesn't believe in the soul, it follows that people have only extrinsic value. For if I am only my actuality, if my self as it manifests itself to others and to me is the only reality I can claim, then this surface self is all that can have value—because there is no value in something that doesn't exist. My

value is then entirely dependent on what I am *good for* in the world; it is wholly extrinsic and depends on my usefulness. If my presence is in some way pleasant or profitable to others, then, and only then, do I have value. (I am entitled to my own opinion of my value, but it counts for no more than anyone else's.)

By contrast, the idea that people have intrinsic value presupposes a hidden inwardness in them, a soul. Intrinsic value, by definition, lies invisibly within a person, independent of visible external usefulness, one's looks, charm, and accomplishments. For those who believe in this sort of intrinsic value, even someone who is ugly and weak and can do nothing to help herself or others is nevertheless valuable enough that we don't just toss her in the trash.

The stakes are high in the face of our uncertainty about the soul and our freedom to gamble on its existing or not existing. In Stalinist thought, it could be said, human beings were essentially soulless: “Inwardness and all that comes with it of selfhood, consciousness, and conscience were [considered] nothing but the illusions of a long history of Western metaphysics,” Jonathan Brent writes in *Inside the Stalin Archives*.⁵ In this regime, once human beings had been philosophically stripped of individuality and selfhood—of souls—it became possible to justify atrocities beyond imagining.

If invoking Stalin seems extreme and exaggerated (or hopelessly clichéd), there are examples closer to home of what happens when the soul is regarded as nonexistent. Take seduction, an age-old art that has found modern exponents among the likes of Erik von Markovik (“Mystery,” star of the VH1 reality show *The Pick-Up Artist*), Ross Jeffries (on whom the fictional Frank T.J. Mackey in the film *Magnolia* is said to have been based), and other “gurus” described by Neil Strauss in his entertaining and self-congratulatory book *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists*. An ideology of soullessness is discernibly at work within the so-called “seduction

community”: men and women have “social value”—a concept borrowed from social anthropology and Darwinist theories⁶—but seemingly no intrinsic value. To view an individual woman as special, unique, or valuable in herself is deemed a sickness, called One-itis. One-itis, as described by Strauss, is best cured by having sex with a lot of other women, so the sufferer realizes women are interchangeable and replaceable.⁷ In the seduction community, as in Sartrean existentialism, it appears that “everything is permitted” in order to persuade women to have sex; no bounds of decency or compassion seem to be recognized in the movement’s guiding ideology apart from self-seeking pragmatism.

Acknowledging these stakes, suppose the soul is real enough to be worth talking about. Why would it have value? Why would it be something beautiful? Is every soul equally valuable or beautiful?

If the soul is potential, this quality alone could be said to make it valuable. Often, the more potential something has, the more we value it, as in the case of a car with the potential to move at high speeds, or an investment with potential to yield high returns (potential is also potency, power). We can’t measure a soul’s full potential, and so that potential could be considered of incalculable worth. But “potential” can also mean potential for evil, and “incalculable” can mean not only immense but also simply unknown.

The soul is not just a person’s potential, but the potential for both good and evil, for beauty and ugliness alike. However, recall that in the tree analogy, the ugly layers are not as central as the beautiful core. Instinctively, there seems to be something more primary and central and authentic about one’s potential for good than one’s potential for ugliness. It’s the inner beauty that we tend—rightly or wrongly—to feel represents more of the true self.

Not long ago an experiment was reported where researchers showed subjects a range of photos of themselves that had

been digitally altered, either enhanced to look more attractive or distorted to look less attractive.⁸ The majority of subjects mistakenly took the enhanced images of themselves to be more accurate than the untouched photos. In other words, people thought they were better-looking than they really were. You could say this is just evidence of human vanity. But I wonder if it doesn’t point to a deeper truth: That without always being fully conscious of it, we sense that the truth of ourselves goes beyond what the mirror reflects. We are not just what we are, but also the better selves that we could be. In Pedro Almodovar’s film *All About My Mother*, a transgendered prostitute named Agrado explains that the many expensive surgeries and changes she made to her body allowed her to become more authentically her true self. She concludes: “It cost me a lot to be authentic. But we must not be cheap in regard to the way we look. Because a woman is more authentic the more she looks like what she has dreamed for herself.”⁹

Socrates and other ancients thought that we all have in us a longing for beauty and goodness, whether moral or physical or sensual or logical. This strikes many as naïve in an age where sophisticated brain scanning techniques suggest some people simply lack the capacity for empathy and other traits associated with traditional concepts of moral goodness.¹⁰ It is telling that we call such people “psychopaths”—etymologically, “suffering souls”; they are “sick” souls, or even “soulless.”

Still, the ancients’ sweeping assumption seems on the face of it to be correct where a lot of people are concerned, even if it isn’t true of everyone. And for those who have this longing for beauty and goodness in them, whether conscious of it or not, these aspirations are largely definitive of selfhood. One’s uniqueness is defined not just by what one is but also by what one wants; our aspirations contribute to our identity as individuals.

Socrates, as Plato portrays him, believed that dialogue exploring questions of justice and truth was a means of putting

the *psyche* into harmony with itself. Philosophical discourse helps us discover what we really want. Questioning our suppositions regarding what is desirable allows us to winnow out those suppositions that do not harmonize with our ultimate desires for the beautiful and the true. And the true comprises not just logical but also moral consistency. A soul in harmony with itself is a beautiful soul, and so philosophy, by putting the self in harmony with itself, beautifies the soul, and the beautiful soul is one that grasps both metaphysical and moral truth.

"I would rather choose to have my lyre...out of tune and discordant...than that I should have internal discord and contradiction in my own single self," says Socrates.¹¹ He echoes a goal of some modern psychotherapists, to resolve cognitive dissonance. Therapy often has goals similar to Socratic philosophizing: uncovering the truth of the psyche by asking questions, and in this way making the authentic self more visible and transparent to consciousness. This uncovering of the authentic core of personality is viewed as a good in itself, implying a faith like that of the ancients that if we unearth the *real* truth of ourselves—a truth that perhaps goes even further down than all the dark and scary Oedipal mess of repressed trauma and aggression—we bring to light a drive to beauty, goodness, and honesty that can become the basis of a more sane and beautiful life.

The soul that Socratic philosophy, and perhaps some psychotherapy as well, and I with my rambling tree metaphor, have sought to uncover is valuable because of what it values. To put it more precisely and also more awkwardly, the soul's action of valuing that which it values is what makes it valuable. It is beautiful in its attitude of yearning for beauty, good by virtue of the fact that it longs for goodness, and true by virtue of its will to truth. In this schema, finding one's soul means finding one's true self, which in turn means discovering in oneself the longing for goodness, beauty, and truth. And the effort to become oneself is a striving to gratify that longing by

bringing one's potential for goodness and beauty into actuality, embodying them in the surface self's existence. By the same token, to lose one's soul means to forget that longing.

The Soul and the Work of Art

The ensouled human being can be said to be valuable in much the way a great work of art is valuable. Martin Heidegger, in "The Origin of the Work of Art," talks about the work of art in terms of a strife between "world" and "earth."¹² The nature of the artwork as Heidegger describes it mirrors the structure of the self with its strife between body and soul.

According to Heidegger, the work of art "sets up a world" and "sets forth the earth." World is the "Open" in which human beings move and interact. A peasant woman whose shoes are depicted in a painting by Van Gogh "has a world because she dwells in the overtness of beings, of the things that are." In the work of art—a Greek temple, for example—a world is set up as the temple "fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being." The world set up in the artwork is "the all-governing expanse of this open relational context" in which human beings carry out their lives.

While world is an overtness, earth is an inwardness, like the substance of the wooden cube discussed earlier, or a rock that, when broken in two, "still does not display in its fragments anything inward that has been disclosed." Earth appears to us as that on which and in which the world rests, just as the substance of the cube appears as what makes up and underlies its surface; but earth "appears openly cleared as itself only when it is perceived and preserved as that which is by nature undisclosable, that which shrinks from every disclosure and constantly keeps itself closed up." Thus, for the work of art to set forth the earth means "to bring it into the Open as the

self-secluding.”

Earth and world coexist in the artwork in a kind of perpetual strife, since they have opposite natures: “The world, in resting upon the earth, strives to surmount it. As self-opening it cannot endure anything closed. The earth, however, as sheltering and concealing, tends always to draw the world into itself and keep it there.”

Through this strife, truth emerges in the work of art. Truth, in this context, is “unconcealedness,” which Heidegger envisions as a “clearing” or a “lighting” in the midst of beings, roughly representing both our knowledge of how things are and the limits of that knowledge.¹³ Within the sphere of truth’s unconcealedness, there are nevertheless two types of concealment: the concealment at the limits, when things fall outside the sphere of what is lighted, and the concealment of dissembling, where things appear, but one-sidedly, obscurely, or otherwise deceptively. In this way, Heidegger arrives at the striking conclusions that truth *qua* unconcealedness is in its nature untruth. For what reveals itself is always accompanied by deception, a refusal to reveal itself completely, and forgetfulness of what remains dark.

Truth, for Heidegger, is an “Open” in which unconcealedness and concealment are always in strife. Similarly, the work of art is an “Open” where the overtness of being, as world, coexists in strife with the self-secluding, the earth. Hence, the work of art mirrors the structure of truth as unconcealedness. From this it follows that truth “happens” or “sets itself to work” in the artwork.

In the same way that the work of art makes a space (or an “Open”) for truth as unconcealedness to happen, the self with its strife between soul and surface self is a locus of truth. The soul that we have been talking about is a self-secluding inwardness, as Heidegger conceives of the earth that the artwork sets forth. The surface self, on the other hand, is an overtness, a self-opening, the “world” of consciousness (or self-percep-

tion) and others’ perceptions of oneself. These elements belong together in an integral, intimate strife, as the surface self tries to bring the hidden inwardness of potentiality in which it is grounded into actuality, and yet the hidden inwardness of potentiality, even as it reveals itself in the moment-to-moment flowering of conscious being, yet remains in itself as hidden and potential.

Thus, the ensouled self, like the work of art, mirrors the structure of truth as strife between lighting and concealedness, and like the work of art, becomes a space where truth happens. The self with its soul is valuable in the same way that (if in a different degree than) a great work of art is valuable, and vice versa, because truth happens there, and the truth that happens in the artwork and in the self is bound up with beauty.

The Soul and Gender

In traditional gender ideologies, or at least in an idealistic version of a certain one familiar to me from growing up in a conservative, religious setting, some characteristics and values associated with femininity could be said to correspond to those that I have associated here with the soul. Likewise, some of the ideologically masculine characteristics and values seem to have similarities with those I associate with the body or surface self. Maleness, as constructed by this ideology, is actuality-focused, while femaleness is potentiality-focused. And let me emphasize before I go any further that in what follows, my description of these traditionalist ways of thinking about gender is in no way intended to describe the reality of men’s and women’s situations or their relations to one another. Nor do I intend to convey any judgment at this point, positive or negative, regarding the value or desirability of these traditional ideas. My aim is only to describe them as they relate to our discussion of the soul.

From the standpoint of the traditional gender ideology I have in mind, a man is most concerned with measurable,

visible achievements: succeeding in a career, building and repairing things, demonstrating sexual prowess, competing with other men for money, women, and status, running companies and governments, fighting wars, and generally achieving dominance. The ideologically male values come from the competitive worlds of business and industry: efficiency, productivity, power and influence.

By contrast, women (excluding specialized stereotypes that fall away from or pervert the ideal, like the whore or the gold-digger) are relatively more focused on intangibles: relationships between people, emotions, love, romance, beauty. Religion and spirituality, the “things of the soul,” are “best left to women and children.” While the man is concerned with succeeding “out in the world,” the woman’s aspirations revolve around the inwardness of home and family, and her achievements in this sphere are either invisible to the world or do not look like achievements in the world’s terms. (To bear and raise a healthy child, as difficult as this may be, wins no Nobel Prizes.)

The home, the woman’s sphere, is the place from which, ideally, the man draws rest and sustenance and nourishment that allow him to go out into the world and achieve his worldly ambitions. Behind every great man, so the theory goes, is a supporting woman who invisibly creates the potential from which his visible achievements spring.

In the context of such an ideology, a man sees his value as primarily extrinsic, while a woman sees hers as primarily intrinsic. A man must prove himself to other men through what he accomplishes. He can’t expect to rise in his career just by being good-looking or a nice person. In the career world, a man is replaceable: one bricklayer can be replaced with another; one accountant can be replaced by another. If the man’s work is unsatisfactory, he can expect to be let go and see his job taken by someone else. Understanding this, he sees his worth as extrinsic because it depends on how useful he can make himself to his boss, his colleagues, his clients, his countrymen.

The woman, however, aspires first and foremost to love and marriage, and expects to succeed in her aspiration more through who she is than by what she achieves. She dreams of a love-relationship where she is considered special and irreplaceable, and of a proposal of marriage that conveys that she is “the one,” that single individual whom the man chooses, forsaking all others. By definition, a wife cannot simply be replaced. She thus sees her worth, to the extent she has it, as primarily intrinsic.

Beyond ideology, characteristics of the body-soul divide find echoes in the literal differences of sexual anatomy. The female sexual organs, the vagina, the uterus, are defined by inwardness and hiddenness. Ideologically, the woman is taught to see them as a precious jewel to be guarded chastely and kept untouched for the man she will marry. By contrast, the male genitals are defined by exteriority and overtness, and ideologically the man is less subject to the requirements of modesty and chastity. The woman’s sexual value is seen as intrinsic in that it does not depend on how she performs in the bedroom, but on whether she remains a virgin until marriage and, within marriage, is fertile and available. The man’s sexual value, by contrast, is extrinsic, dependent on his visible potency manifested through offspring as well as his stamina and skill as a lover.

In pregnancy, giving birth, and breastfeeding (formerly the only way a child could survive), women represent, in this way of thinking—and perhaps at a level beyond the ideology from which I am trying to distance myself here—the potential for life itself and the survival of the species. As mothers, women not only give birth physically but also psychologically, as they shape a child’s character in their traditional role as the primary caregiver, instilling values, dreams, and personality traits, to the extent that the latter can be shaped through nurture. These intangible achievements, where the work of child raising is done well, are often accomplished by intangible means, through the

example provided by the woman's own values, dreams, and character, which become a hidden source of the child's will and motivation long after childhood is past.

In sum, in the framework of this idealistic traditional gender ideology, the woman is to the man as the soul is to the surface self. First as mother and then as wife, the woman is the hidden source of man's actuality, the life-giving potentiality that underlies and gives substance to his existence. She makes possible his self-actualization through his achievements.

The correspondence of such traditionally conceived male and female characteristics to aspects of the body-soul divide is echoed also in the work of art as Heidegger describes it, with its strife between the elements of world and earth. Ancient and aboriginal mythologies frequently identified the sky (the lighted unconcealedness and openness of the world) with maleness and the earth with femaleness. In the mythical context, the sky is open, active, forging and hurling down thunderbolts, rain, snow, wind, sun, and drought. The earth is passive, receiving what the sky gives, and closed mysteriously over itself, covered; it is to be husbanded, carefully sown with seeds, its fertile potential to be guarded and watched over. Heidegger's own depiction of the strife between world and earth has an erotic sound to it at times, as though he were describing some primordial, archetypal encounter between a sky-father and an earth-mother: The world "in resting upon the earth, strives to surmount it," while the earth tends to "draw the world into itself and keep it there." He describes the strife several times as an "intimacy."

All of this suggests even more strongly to me that the discovery of the soul must involve an element of the erotic, perhaps in a way similar to that in which philosophical eros is the guide to uncovering truth and wisdom in the Socratic-Platonic tradition. More importantly for the present discussion, it also suggests to me that somehow the traditional gender concepts against which and within which some feminist thinkers like Si-

mone de Beauvoir have struggled are bound up with questions of the soul and of its existence, nature, and value.

The Economy of Souls

Beauvoir, in the passage quoted at the beginning of this essay, analyzes the relationship between a man and woman as an economic exchange. She is only half-right in saying exchanges are based on the buyer's valuing of the merchandise, for clearly they are also based on the seller's consent to the sale. In this case there is a marked difference in outlook between "buyer" and "seller," in terms of how each values what is exchanged. The woman thinks she is giving something priceless to the man. The man, on the other hand, sees the woman's gifts as having value only relative to other goods he could be pursuing.

The man here is concerned with extrinsic value, the usefulness things and people have for him. The woman is useful to him and has value in so far as she is pleasant and entertaining, and the same could be said for a stereo system or a workout at the gym. But the woman sees things in terms of intrinsic value and, implicitly, the soul—for if she feels she is giving him something priceless, this priceless thing would seem to be the soul, whose worth is incalculable, or herself as an ensouled human being. The woman perhaps senses that when the man "buys" her bodily companionship at the cost of however many dinners and "hours of conversation" are needed for seduction,* he also gets a soul in the bargain whether he realizes it or not. And both of them run the risk that this soul may go to waste or even be harmed in the transaction (e.g., if the relationship terminates unhappily, adding yet another layer of sadness and ugliness that comes between the wounded person's surface self and the soul and hides and burdens the soul). Far from being

* In *The Mystery Method*, Erik von Markovik calculates that carrying out a seduction properly requires approximately seven hours of contact time.

like the greengrocer who throws in turnips along with potatoes just to be rid of them, the woman is more like a fishmonger trying to sell pearl oysters to a customer who only wants oysters for eating.

For Beauvoir, the woman is mistaken in failing to take the man's view of things. Beauvoir buys into a view I described earlier as part of the traditional gender ideological framework, a masculine view of extrinsic value as primary. Like Sartre, Beauvoir believes that the actual—the surface self—is all that is real enough to matter. Arguably, however, the woman in Beauvoir's example is not so much mistaken as she is operating from within a different framework of values, one that implicitly acknowledges intrinsic value in human beings and the existence of the soul.

Like Beauvoir and the man in her example, traditional market economics is concerned only with extrinsic value. The value of a good is the price at which it sells, which in turn is based on how much perceived utility (usefulness) the good has for the buyer and seller. If a Stradivarius turns up at a garage sale and is sold by an unknowing philistine to another unknowing philistine for \$100, its value is \$100, no more or less. The classical model does not deal with hidden value; it explicitly presupposes perfect information on the part of buyers and sellers.*

If the laws of traditional market economics concern physical exchanges of goods based on extrinsic value, what would we find if we were to look at a market of souls instead, in which transactions acknowledged inwardness and intrinsic

* Only relatively recently, since the 1950s, have information- and institution-focused economists grappled with the problem of imperfect information, as in the case of cars that turn out to be lemons and employees who turn out to be slackers (in the work of George Akerlof, Michael Spence, and Joseph Stiglitz), or public versus private goods where full information about the broader social costs of purchasing decisions is not conveyed in the laissez faire market price (as in the work of Paul Samuelson and Ronald Coase).

value? How would the laws of an economy of souls differ from those of normal market economics? A number of things would surely go topsy-turvy.

The law of diminishing marginal utility, for example, holds that the more you have of something, the less each additional installment is useful to you. The point is illustrated in an old comedy routine where Eddie Murphy compares crackers to long-awaited sex:¹⁴ If you're starving and someone throws you a cracker, it tastes like the best damn cracker you ever had in your life. The next cracker is still delicious. Many, many crackers later, it just tastes like an ordinary old cracker. There seem to be some exceptions to the rule, however, as in the case of what one nineteenth-century economist called the problem of "pictures by old masters, rare coins, and other things."¹⁵ In the case of a painting like Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, arguably one can learn something new every time one studies it. The painting may continue to inspire new ideas and thoughts over the years, the more so as one's understanding grows deeper and fuller. In contrast to the cracker, the utility of such an artwork not only might not decline, it could actually increase with additional installments of time spent in its presence studying it.

Similarly, in our economy of souls, the potential value of a person might not be fully apparent at first, and may be uncovered only through time, study, or expertise. As with the painting, the utility or value of the ensouled human being, or each additional unit of time spent with her or him, may ultimately increase over time. This can happen as one comes to trust and rely on the person, to discover the person's unexpected and wonderful qualities and experiences and abilities, as one forms affection for or falls in love with the other, as one invests in the other one's care and efforts to understand and nurture. In this way, the law of diminishing marginal utility that applies perfectly well to things like saltine crackers and heaps of corn turns into a law of potentially constant or increasing marginal

utility.

The economy of souls would in fact be based on the exact inverse of the fundamental premise of traditional microeconomics, which is that we live in a world of scarce resources and unlimited demand. In the economy of souls, there would be no scarcity of goods, but rather a scarcity of consumers—because not too many people want to take on someone else's soul.

In the case of the “pictures by old masters,” our nineteenth-century economist writes, “the price at which each is sold, will depend much on whether any rich persons with a fancy for it happen to be present at its sale.”¹⁶ In the same way, the offer of an appropriate “price” for a soul could be dependent on whether there happened to be a “buyer” present who managed to gain insight into its potential value through an investment of time and attention. There would be, further, the question of whether the buyer found this soul—as the seat of its owner's individuality and uniqueness—compatible with his or her own unique needs and wants. And finally, there would be the question of whether the buyer had the strength and courage—was “rich” enough—to pay the price, whatever it might be. And very possibly, the price of a soul might be one's own soul in return, and it would be an odd sort of transaction in which ownership did not change hands and nothing was lost, but all the same something of infinite worth was both given and gained.

The “paradox of value” in traditional economics would also work differently. The paradox is that an extremely valuable resource in practical terms, such as water or air, may nevertheless be cheap because it's so plentiful, while a resource that isn't actually useful for much, such as a diamond, commands a high price because of its scarcity. But in our economy of souls, there is an abundance of diamond-like goods—useless but beautiful and precious—that nevertheless lose nothing in value from being in plentiful supply—because we are essentially

working with an economy that has only *one* of every type of good. A better metaphor than the diamond might be that you had an enormous market hall in which nothing was for sale but extraordinary, irreplaceable works of art: Vermeers, Picassos, Chagalls, Monets, de Goyas, all originals, each more astonishing than the next.

Traditional economics deals with markets of goods that are interchangeable, like heaps of corn or boxes of crackers. But the goods in our imaginary market hall are irreproducible, with rich histories. These paintings may have hung in the halls of kings or popes, or been stolen or lost for a time, covered over with a false surface and then restored, or survived wars and natural disasters. Creating each painting was an undertaking into which the painter put a lifetime of skill, training, observation, and aspiration to beauty and genius. Unlike the painting, however, which has no self-consciousness and isn't selling itself, a human being brings himself or herself to market, and the person's soul may be his or her life's one great creation and masterpiece, in which the person has invested all his or her resources, both material and spiritual.

The nature of transactions also changes in our imagined economy of souls. The transaction itself becomes something of value. The woman in Beauvoir's example values the exchange for its own sake and not merely for the sake of what is exchanged. In traditional market economics, the transaction is costless, virtually invisible, and largely ignored. It functions like the equals sign of an equation or the grammatical copula, which has no significance in itself but serves only to link combinations of elements like supply and demand with their results—price, profit or loss, consumer and producer surplus. But in the economy of souls, the transaction takes on central and permanent importance, because the value of what is exchanged (sex, expensive dinners, hours of conversation) is secondary to the value of the action of exchanging, which unfolds through the medium of time and attention. In this way, transactions

become costly, but unlike in institutional economics, where the costliness of transactions is treated as a problem and an obstacle to prosperity, here the costliness of transactions is the very thing that makes them precious and becomes the source of what might be called a spiritual prosperity—that is, a prospering of the soul.

And so this economy of souls is diametrically opposed in many ways in its laws to the economy of physical exchanges governed by traditional market principles. Yet—if it exists—our economy of souls will always at the same time run parallel to a busy trade in surface selves that operates according to principles that differ little from those of traditional market economies—what we might call the modern relationship market, as well as the labor market in its conventional sense. Beauvoir, along with present-day purveyors of seduction theory and our gurus of employability and self-promotion, are not wrong to regard human interactions through the lenses of traditional microeconomic analysis and via concepts like “social value” or marketability. They are wrong, if anything, in viewing them *only* through those lenses. For each economy, that of surface selves and that of souls, operates validly in its own sphere according to its own laws. Essentially, whenever we deal with human beings (rather than heaps of corn or gold ingots, say), the two economies operate simultaneously and often in diametrical opposition to one another.

Two Ethical Principles

This is what makes erotic ethics and labor ethics so complicated. The two simultaneously operating and diametrically opposed economies that one encounters here entail two simultaneously operating and diametrically opposed ethical principles—each, again, valid and proper in its own sphere. The guiding ethical principle of the economy of surface selves is usefulness or profitability—one must only engage in profitable encounters. Human beings are to be considered valuable ac-

ording to how useful they are to each other, and calculations of usefulness or profitability should guide how people treat each other. In other words, the guiding ethical principle is to treat people as means to ends.

In the economy of souls, the ethical principle entailed is to treat people as ends in themselves. For in this view of things, people have souls, and the soul is a repository of intrinsic value, which cannot be weighed, measured, and calculated like that of the surface self. Undefined, inaccessible, and irremovable, it has no immediate usefulness. It is not the key to anything else or a means to anything else. It is a source of beauty and truth, but not a beauty that is always readily apparent, and not a truth that tells us about anything besides itself. In Edith Wharton’s novel *The House of Mirth*, which chronicles the exploits of another intrepid husband-hunter, Lily Bart, Selden and Lily’s love for each other is useless, as is Lily’s propensity to behave in accordance with her moral scruples or conscience. These things do not help her prosper in the world; the only usefulness they could be said to have is in existing just as themselves, and this is not a usefulness in the world’s terms. The soul is useless in just this sense, as a thing of beauty that is good for nothing beyond the purpose of existing as itself.

Thus the analogy of the economy of souls being like a market hall filled with precious works of art is again apt, for the painting, too, is not intended as a useful object, but rather an ornamental one. Its main “use,” if it can be said to have one, is to be contemplated, studied, and enjoyed in its capacity of being itself. Similarly, the soul provides nothing but the opportunity of contemplating it as the source of its owner’s being himself or herself. So it makes little sense to talk about a soul as a means to an end, because it can only be itself an end.

Ethical problems and complications arise from a person’s being both a soul and a surface self, just as the painting is not only a work of art but also a physical object. The painting can be contemplated and studied as something valuable just for the

sake of its being itself, but it can also be used to cover a hole in the plaster, or as a tablemat, or to wrap fish in. Human beings likewise have this dual sort of usefulness. They can be thought about, paid attention to, loved; one can try to know and understand them; and this is the ethical principle enjoined on us by the soul. On the other hand, human beings can be used as means to ends like sex, money, or entertainment, or as sentient machines to mine coal in dangerous conditions, as slaves in the running of a plantation, and so on. And human beings can also be discarded and disposed of once their usefulness has run out;* the ethical principle of the marketplace allows this.

If one chooses to gamble on the soul's existing, as I do, it means one is caught up in a perpetual strife between two imperatives: the imperative to be useful to and to make use of others, and the imperative to treat others as ends in themselves and to demand to be treated likewise. Unlike in Sartre's existentialism, where everything is permitted and no ethical principle has us authoritatively in its grasp, here we are inescapably in the grip of not one but two principles of equal force, an intimate strife of elements that belong together in their opposition to one another, like the strife between world and earth in the work of art, or between concealedness and unconcealedness in truth as *aletheia*, or between body and soul in the self.

Epilogue: Marriage and Strife

Heidegger writes that his reflections in "The Origin of the Work of Art" are concerned with "*the riddle of art*, the riddle that art itself is. They are far from claiming to solve the riddle. The task is to see the riddle."¹⁷ Perhaps the same could be said of this ethical strife we have been discussing. It is a riddle concerning which our task has been not to solve it but to see it. In any case, I tend to think the conflicts outlined here are

* Compare the concept of the "useful Jew" in anti-Semitic settings, or, again, Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, who is discarded by society for being useless in society's terms.

irresolvable, or very difficult to resolve, in a way analogous to the opposition of the wave and particle theories of light in quantum physics. Even while acknowledging that each way of characterizing light is valid and proper in its own sphere, the experimental physicist still cannot observe light as both a particle and a wave at the same time. And so it is with the two ethical conceptions that arise when the idea of people having souls is followed a little ways down the paths of its implications.

It is human nature, however, to search for solutions to difficult problems and to try to resolve conflicts and strife—or, in the absence of solutions, to try to find ways of dealing with or working around problems. To me it seems that marriage is one way of dealing with the problem of this ethical strife arising from the body-soul divide. And on this subject I can speak from experience, since after all the dismal years of husband-hunting and fretting over the ethics of dinner-dates and getting depressed from reading Simone de Beauvoir and wondering if I had a soul or not, I did, in the end, have a marriage that lasted several years.

It could be said that marriage reproduces the relation of intimate strife at work in the artwork and in the self with its body-soul divide, if only in the sense that two independent wills joining their existences to one another are bound to disagree eventually on some vital points—yet the fact of a marriage means that the opposition between the two does not sever the bond between them. In striving against one another, "the more the struggle overdoes itself on its own part, the more inflexibly do the opponents let themselves go into the intimacy of simple belonging to one another" (to use Heidegger's words yet again).¹⁸

Marriage doesn't satisfy the two opposed ethical demands on it, but it does acknowledge them. In theory, the partners give themselves over to each other "body and soul." Marriage seems meant to be, on the one hand, a highly practical arrangement in which each partner has duties and responsibilities to fill

so as to be useful to the other—one person might bring home the bacon, for example, and the other fry it up in a pan, or in a more modern, strictly egalitarian arrangement, each might take turns doing the bringing home and the frying up. On the other hand, the enacting of a life-long commitment conveys that the relationship is built on more than mere usefulness, and the partner and the relationship are both ends in themselves.

Marriage both is and is not a lifelong commitment. It is (particularly in the modern West) at once an at-will arrangement that can be broken if one or both partners find they have stopped being useful to each other and, at the same time, a promise to stay together for life regardless of usefulness. It both is and is not defined by its legality, its public, bodily, actualized existence as a (mere) sheet of paper. Any couple can make this commitment privately, inwardly, between the two of them, and effectively be married, as happens among same-sex couples whose marriages the law does not recognize, or in common law marriages. Conversely, the actual sheet of paper grants recognition to relations that bear little resemblance to marriage, like the “temporary marriages” that legitimize and facilitate prostitution in some cultures. Yet the defining importance of the sheet of paper is evident in the political struggles of same-sex couples and transgendered people to have their marriages recognized, and in the bitter divorce proceedings of legally married people. Marriage thus shares with the ensouled human being the character of having both a visible surface actuality and a hidden inwardness where the substance and potential of its being resides, and there is a continual striving to bring that potential into actuality.

Mozart once said of his salary at the court of Emperor Joseph II that it was “too much for what I do, too little for what I could do,”¹⁹ and marriage seems to be sort of like that: more than what the surface self deserves, too little for what the soul demands. My usefulness as a means to other ends is limited, and so does not merit a limitless commitment until death. But

my soul’s intrinsic value, unlimited and undefined, demands an absolute commitment, of which any real commitment will always fall short. And so marriage is a compromise, one that leaves in place the essential strife without resolving it.

In trying to sketch out and gain a vision of an economy of souls, with all the riddles this effort has brought into view for me, I have said little, if anything, that is new or original. I have asked more questions than I have tried to answer and have provided no solution to any problem, whether ethical, epistemological, or ontological, whether practical or theoretical. My analysis is also hampered by all the limitations inherent in my not being a professional philosopher or psychologist or economist or gender theorist or physicist, and by my limited understanding of all these fields even as I find my amateur inquiries spilling over into them. In this sense, my writing all this has perhaps been a thoroughly useless endeavor. But my hope is that if it has been useless, that it has been so at least a little in the way the soul is useless, or the decorative arts or love are useless—that is, in a way that is nevertheless valuable on its own terms, just by virtue of being.

Notes

1. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (New York: Vintage, 1989), 722.
2. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 40.
3. Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism and Humanism,” in *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, ed. Richard Kearney and Mara Rainwater (New York: Routledge, 1996), 75.
4. Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 215.
5. Jonathan Brent, *Inside the Stalin Archives: Discovering the New Russia* (New York: Atlas, 2008), 166.

6. See, e.g., Mystery, *The Mystery Method: How to Get Beautiful Women into Bed* (New York: St. Martins, 2007), 10–23.

7. Neil Strauss, *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 78.

8. Nicholas Epley and Erin Whitchurch, “Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall: Enhancement in Self-Recognition,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 34(9) (2008): 1159-1170, <http://faculty.chicagobooth.edu/nicholas.epley/EpleyWhitchurch.pdf>.

9. *All About My Mother*, DVD, directed by Pedro Almodóvar (1999; Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures, 2000).

10. John Seabrook, “Suffering Souls,” *New Yorker*, November 10, 2008, 64–73.

11. Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias*, trans. W.R.M. Lamb (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1925), 482B-C.

12. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: HarperCollins, 1971), 15–86. Quotations that follow in this section are taken from pp. 41–47, except where otherwise noted.

13. For the discussion of truth and its relation to the work of art see *ibid*, 48ff.

14. *Eddie Murphy Raw*, DVD, directed by Robert Townsend (1987; Hollywood: Paramount, 2004).

15. Alfred Marshall, *Principles of Economics* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1890, 8th ed. 1920), <http://www.econlib.org/library/Marshall/marP29.html>.

16. *Ibid*.

17. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: HarperCollins, 1971), 77.

18. *Ibid*, 48.

19. Harold C. Schonberg, *The Lives of the Great Composers* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 102.

*jabberwock***review**

A Journal of the Creative Arts
Summer 2010
Volume 31.1

Published twice yearly by the Department of English, Mississippi State University