

## Every Living Soul: Metempsychosis (μετεμψύχωσης)

When I was born there were 2.5 billion people living on earth. Now, as I am approaching the end of my life, there are more than 8 billion.

Where did all of these souls come from?

I should state at the outset that I do not believe in souls. “I am a confirmed atheist, a diehard historical materialist who believes that after I die and the complex chemical bonds that make up my cells unwind and the pathways between my cerebral neurons dissolve, that’ll be the end of me.”<sup>1</sup> This essay is but a brief foray into how the idea of a soul has been treated by some cultures over time, and is thus really a sociological and not a theological study.

As far as we can tell, humans have been wondering “what happens to *me* after I die?” for as long as there have been humans. As early as 100,000 years ago, *Homo sapiens* and Neanderthals sometimes buried their dead with grave goods—animal bones and stone tools—as if these were gifts that the deceased might need in an afterlife. Of course, before there was a written record we cannot really fathom what prehistoric peoples thought about souls or the afterlife.

The oldest texts we have that give insights into what an ancient culture thought about these issues come from Old Kingdom Egypt (c. 2700–2200 BCE). The ancient Egyptians believed that humans consist of two parts: a *Ka*—a life force—that was created by the god *Khnum* at birth and that remained with the physical body after death, and a *Ba*—a unique personality or soul—that could travel after death through a false door in a tomb into the netherworld. In this netherworld, the *Ba* was tested and if successful could reunite with the *Ka* to form an *Akh*—a shining spirit—that could live among the gods. In addition to having lived a virtuous life, a *Ba* would need to have access to magical spells in order to complete its journey through the afterlife. Originally these spells, and the necessary mummification of the body, were available only to the Pharaoh and other members of the nobility. Eventually, however, the Pyramid Texts that outlined the magical spells the *Ba* needed, were by the Middle Kingdom (c. 2040–1782 BCE) replaced by the Coffin Texts, where the spells were written on wooden coffins more readily available to common people, and by the New

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<sup>1</sup> So I began my 2021 essay “[A Question \(And Two Sub-Questions\) about the Afterlife](#)” where I facetiously examine the question of the retention of individuality in the souls of the deceased. That spirit of facetiousness is continued in this essay.

Kingdom (c. 1570–1069 BCE) the spells were written on Book of the Dead scrolls that were placed in many tombs.

Other early relevant texts come from Mesopotamia.<sup>2</sup> The *Atra-Hasis*, an 18<sup>th</sup>-century BCE Akkadian epic, records the myth of how the Anunnaki and the Igigi—the superior and inferior gods—created humans to serve them by mixing the spirit (*etemmu*) of a sacrificed god with clay. Unfortunately, these new human creatures were prolific replicators and soon the world faced an overpopulation crisis. The Anunnaki tried to rectify the situation by unleashing a global flood to kill all humanity; fortunately for us, one fertile human couple was saved by the Igigi.

The book of *Genesis*, compiled a millennium after the *Atra-Hasis*, obviously has echoes of the earlier Mesopotamian myth, including the Flood and the dualism of a divine spirit combined with a body made of clay. In Judaism, a soul is a *neshamah*, a breath that Yahweh breathes into a newborn, just as He did with Adam when the first mortal was just a pile of molded clay. This belief was continued by Christian Catholics who hold that God creates a new soul every time there is a successful human sexual fertilization. The contrarian Lutherans, on the other hand, believe in traducianism, the idea that souls are propagated by the parents to the child through natural reproduction— a view which helps to explain Original Sin, as the new souls are created by sinful, corrupted, humans and not by a blameless god. [We might mention the Second Council of Constantinople which, under the leadership of Justinian I in 553 A.D., rejected, among other things, Origenism, the belief, attributed to the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup>-century A.D. Christian theologian Origen of Alexandria, that souls had a pre-existence before birth.] In Islam, Allah breathes a divine spark (*Nuh*) into a three-month old fetus, which is combined with its ego or self (*nafs*) to form the person.

It is more difficult to determine what Classical Greeks thought about the soul or the afterlife as they had no religious canon like the Bible or Koran. Famously, Pythagoras (c. 570 – 495 BCE) believed in metempsychosis, the transmigration of souls. Pythagoras is said to have stopped a man from beating a dog because he recognized the voice of a deceased friend in its barking; Pythagoras is also said to have claimed that he could remember his own past lives—a precursor to the ridiculous New Age Past Life Regression movement. The Orphics, who were an enigmatic religious group that arose in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE around the literature ascribed to the mythical poet Orpheus (who, as the myth goes, had descended into

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<sup>2</sup> For a good history of the concept of souls in Western culture, see Terryl L. Givens, *When Souls Had Wings: Pre-Mortal Existence in Western Thought*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Hades and returned) were associated with the followers of Pythagoras and similarly believed in metempsychosis, although the Orphics seemed to have claimed that their mystical rites could free souls from the cycle of grievous embodiments.

Some ancient Greek philosophers similarly believed in the immortality and transmigration of souls. The Sicilian pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles (c. 495– 430 BCE), whose work is only preserved in fragments, held that:

383. For before this I was born once a boy, and a maiden, and a plant, and a bird, and a darting fish in the sea.

385. And I wept and shrieked on beholding the unwonted land where are Murder and Wrath, and other species of Fates, and wasting diseases, and putrefaction and fluxes.

388. In darkness they roam over the meadow of Ate.

389. Deprived of life.

390. From what honour and how great a degree of blessedness have I fallen here on the earth to consort with mortal beings!

392. We enter beneath this over-roofed cave.

393. Where were Chthonie and far-seeing Heliopse (i.e. Earth and Sun?), bloody Contention and Harmony of sedate face, Beauty and Ugliness, Speed and Loitering, lovely Truth and dark-eyed Obscurity, Birth and Death, and Sleep and Waking, Motion and Stability, many-crowned Greatness and Lowness, and Silence and Voice.

—Empedocles, Fragment 117, Arthur Fairbanks translation.

The most influential ancient Greek philosophical discussion of metempsychosis is to be found in the dialogues of Plato (c. 428–347 BCE). At the end of the *Republic* (composed c. 375 BCE) Plato presents his invented myth of Er, who miraculously returned to life on the twelfth day after his death and recounted the secrets of the other world. After death, Er went with others to the place of Judgment and saw the souls returning from heaven and from purgatory where they had been assigned based on how virtuous a life they had lived. The souls then proceeded to a place where they were given lots to choose new lives, human and animal. Er saw the soul of Orpheus opting to be reborn as a swan, the soul of Agamemnon selecting to be reborn as an eagle, the soul of the huntress Atalanta choosing the honors of a male athlete, and the soul of Odysseus, who chose last, electing to become an ordinary citizen. After their choices, the souls drank from Lethe, the River of Forgetfulness, and then shot away like falling stars to their birth.

A decade before writing the *Republic*, Plato had sought to prove the immortality of the soul in his dialogue the *Meno*, where Socrates asks Meno's uneducated slave boy a series of questions that seem to reveal that the slave boy somehow already knew the Pythagorean Theorem—something that was only possible if the soul of the slave boy had already known

this in a previous life—“proving” that knowledge is only a form of remembrance (*anamnesis*).<sup>3</sup>

Later, in the dialogue the *Cratylus* (c. 360 BCE), Plato ascribes to the Orphics the notion that life on earth is some sort of punishment for past sins:

For some say that the body is the grave (*sema*) of the soul which may be thought to be buried in our present life; or again the index of the soul, because the soul gives indications to (*semainei*) the body; probably the Orphic poets were the inventors of the name, and they were under the impression that the soul is suffering the punishment of sin, and that the body is an enclosure or prison in which the soul is incarcerated, kept safe (*soma, sozetai*), as the name *soma* implies, until the penalty is paid; according to this view, not even a letter of the word need be changed. But I think it most likely that the Orphic poets gave this name, with the idea that the soul is undergoing punishment for something; they think it has the body as an enclosure to keep it safe, like a prison, and this is, as the name itself denotes, the safe (*soma*) for the soul, until the penalty is paid, and not even a letter needs to be changed.

—Plato, *Cratylus* 400c, Benjamin Jowett translation.

A decade later, in his work *On the Soul* (*Πεὶρὶ Ψυχῆς*), Aristotle argued that a soul is the essence of any living thing, not a substance different from the body, and that only the intellect is immortal:

It therefore seems that all the affections of soul involve a body-passion, gentleness, fear, pity, courage, joy, loving, and hating; in all these there is a concurrent affection of the body.

—Aristotle, *On the Soul*, Book I, Chapter 1 403<sup>a</sup>, 16-18, J.A. Smith translation.

All, however, that these thinkers do is to describe the specific characteristics of the soul; they do not try to determine anything about the body which is to contain it, as if it were possible, as in the Pythagorean myths, that any soul could be clothed upon with any body—an absurd view, for each body seems to have a form and shape of its own. It is as absurd as to say that the art of carpentry could embody itself in flutes; each art must use its tools, each soul its body.

—Aristotle, *On the Soul*, Book I, Chapter 3 407<sup>b</sup>, 19-25, J.A. Smith translation.

The same objection lies against the view expressed in the ‘Orphic’ poems: there it is said that the soul comes in from the whole when breathing takes place, being borne in upon the winds. Now this cannot take place in the case of plants, nor indeed in the case of certain classes of animal, for not all classes of animal breathe. This fact has escaped the notice of the holders of this view.

—Aristotle, *On the Soul*, Book I, Chapter 5 410<sup>b</sup>, 27-33, J.A. Smith translation.

When mind is set free from its present conditions it appears as just what it is and nothing more: this alone is immortal and eternal (we do not, however, remember its former activity because, while mind in this sense is impassible, mind as passive is destructible), and without it nothing thinks.

—Aristotle, *On the Soul*, Book III, Chapter 5 430<sup>a</sup>, 23-25, J.A. Smith translation.

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<sup>3</sup> I riff on this in my *Six-Year-Old Murray Encounters Plato*, which I wrote in 2014 when I was teaching the *Meno*.

It is unclear what, if any, connection there was between the ancient Greek and the early Hindu concepts of metempsychosis. There is no archaeological evidence of direct connections between India and the Mediterranean before the late 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE conquests of Alexander the Great, but Pythagoras and Siddhartha Gautama (c. 563/483—480/400 BCE) were alive at the same time, and it is not farfetched to assume that the idea that the souls of the deceased are reanimated in living animals might have traveled along routes between the Indus Valley and the Mediterranean that latter became part of the Silk Roads, especially given that such ideas were, at that time, primarily transmitted orally. Indeed, it is hard to believe that the concept of metempsychosis arose independently in two contiguous parts of the earth at precisely the same time.

There is scholarly debate on the degree to which the Hindu concept of metempsychosis has its origins in earlier Vedic thought. In any case, by the time of the composition of the earliest Upanishads, c. 600 BCE, the Hindu concept of metempsychosis was established: after death, the soul (*Atman*) is reincarnated (*samsara*), journeying through various forms—human, animal, or divine—determined by past actions (*karma*) until achieving liberation from the endless cycle of birth and death (*moksha*). The Hindu concept of *samsara* based on *karma* features in Buddhism, although the “middle way” of the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* (no-self), holds that it is only the mental continuum/karmic stream that passes to a new body until the end of the cycle of suffering is achieved through *nirvana*. This Buddhist version of metempsychosis was carried eastward into Indochina, China, and Japan.

We should note that there are fundamental differences between the western and eastern versions of metempsychosis. In the west, the soul of the deceased is judged by a deity, whereas in the east, it is one’s own life choices that determine one’s reincarnation. And, in the west, it is the individual self that experiences the ongoing series of reincarnations, whereas, in Buddhism at least, it is a more amorphous *anatta* that is reborn.

Okay, now it’s time for some facetiousness!

There is a fundamental problem with the concept of metempsychosis, which I noted in the question with which I began this essay: “Where did all of these souls come from?” It is clear that there are now thousands of times more humans living on earth than there

were when we first evolved in Africa some 200,000 years ago. There are also now vastly fewer wild animals on earth than before *Homo sapiens* spread across the planet; but, given our vast herds of domesticated animals, there are probably more animals alive today than there once were. And, in any case, there are more animals alive today than there were when the first animals evolved some 600 million years ago.

But if humans and animals have reincarnated souls, where, again, did these souls come from?

In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates states:

Let this, then, I said, be assumed to be so. But if it is so, you will observe that these souls must always be the same. For if none perishes, they could not, I suppose, become fewer nor yet more numerous. For if any class of immortal things increased you are aware that its increase would come from the mortal, and all things would end by becoming immortal.

—Plato, *Republic*, Book X, 611a, Paul Shorey translation.

If souls could not “become fewer nor yet more numerous” and there are billions upon billions more humans and animals alive today than there once were, and assuming that these humans and animals have souls (something I *don't* believe!), then we must suppose that billions of souls had just hung around for millions of years before there were enough humans and animals for them to animate.

The Judeo-Christian-Islamic religious tradition gets around this “problem” by having new souls constantly being created. But, once someone dies, what happens to their soul? With all these new souls being created and then dying, does heaven (or hell) become filled up?

Presumably, heaven and hell are able to expand *ad infinitum*. But it seems that there would be more souls in hell than in heaven, as most humans are sinners and only the select are admitted to the Elysium realm. Still, in the Christian tradition, hell seems to have become a bit overcrowded by the time of the crucifixion of Christ, who, before ascending to heaven, went to the gates of hell to bring up to heaven the worthy souls who had died before His sacrifice—something that is often depicted in religious works of art, such as Fra Angelico's 1441 *Christ in Limbo* or Albrecht Dürer's 1510 *Christ in Limbo*.



Fra Angelico, *Christ in Limbo*, 1441.  
Fresco, 183 x 166 cm.  
Museum of San Marco, Florence

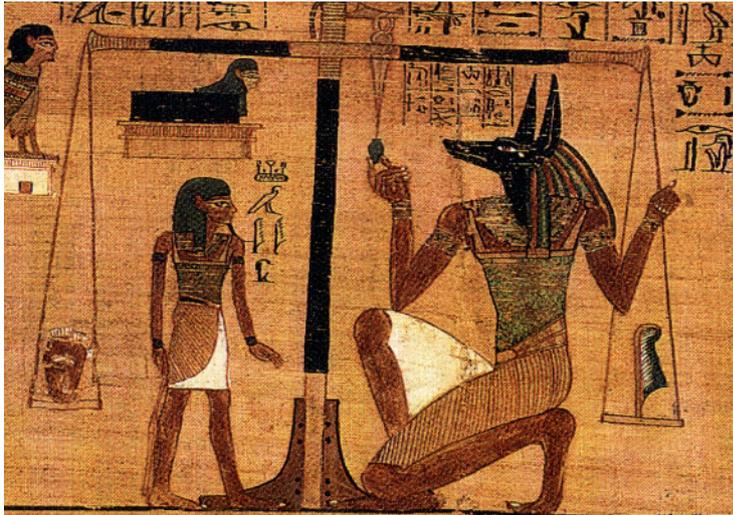


Albrecht Dürer, *Christ in Limbo*, c. 1510.  
Woodcut on paper, 39.7 x 28.7 cm.  
Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum.

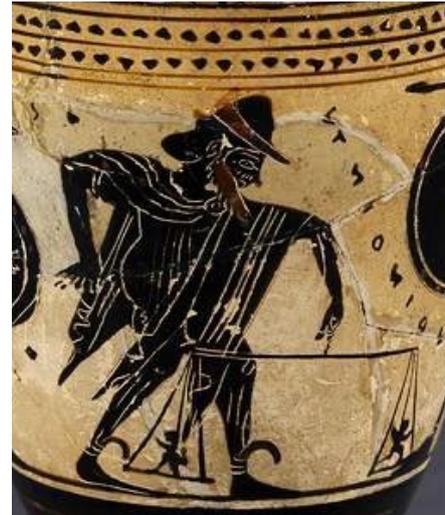
And then there is the idea that the goodness of one's soul is judged after death. This idea has had, as we have seen, a long history going back to ancient Egypt. This judging is often depicted as a deity holding a balance pan weighing a soul, an image that is repeated in many different cultures<sup>4</sup> But if one looks closely at the deity holding the soul-balance pan, there sometimes seems to be some cheating going on. In the weighing of the heart depicted in Book of the Dead of Ani, for instance, Horus seems to be pulling down on the pan with the feather. In the Attic Black-Figure depiction of the weighing the souls of two heroes to determine which one will die in battle, Hermes seems to hold the balance in a way that favors one of the heroes. Similarly, in a Christian context, St. Michael is sometimes depicted holding the balance in a manner designed to disfavor a more sinful soul.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf, Lloyd D. Graham, "[A life in the balance: Divine judgement by weighing](#)," 2023.



Detail of the Book of the Dead of Ani, c. 1300 BCE.  
British Museum.



Detail of a Attic Black Figure  
Lekythos, 490 BCE. British Museum.



Painted wooden figurine of St. Michael  
weighing souls, 14<sup>th</sup> cen. A.D.  
San Miguel de Lillo (Oviedo)  
Museo de Arqueología de Asturias



Detail of Rogier van der Weyden,  
*Last Judgement* altarpiece, 1452.  
Hospice de Beaune

If I weren't a non-believer, I would find it more than a little disconcerting that, after I die, I would be judged by some celestial entity for the choices I may have made while living. Give me *karma*, where the choices I make are themselves the judge.

But even a religious skeptic like Robert Frost could find the idea of reincarnation and metempsychosis poetically useful, such as in his 1913 poem "Trial by Existence" where he urges a child to live a life of daring:

Even the bravest that are slain  
    Shall not dissemble their surprise  
On waking to find valor reign,  
    Even as on earth, in paradise;  
And where they sought without the sword  
    Wide field of asphodel fore'er,  
To find that the utmost reward  
    Of daring should be still to dare.  
.....

And from a cliff-top is proclaimed  
    The gathering of the souls for birth,  
The trial by existence named,  
    The obscuration upon earth.  
And the slant spirits trooping by  
    In streams and cross- and counter-streams  
Can but give ear to that sweet cry  
    For its suggestion of what dreams!  
.....

And so the choice must be again,  
    But the last choice is still the same;  
And the awe passes wonder then,  
    And a hush falls for all acclaim.  
And God has taken a flower of gold  
    And broken it, and used therefrom  
The mystic link to bind and hold  
    Spirit to matter till death come.

'Tis of the essence of life here,  
    Though we choose greatly, still to lack  
The lasting memory at all clear,  
    That life has for us on the wrack  
Nothing but what we somehow chose;  
    Thus are we wholly stripped of pride  
In the pain that has but one close,  
    Bearing it crushed and mystified.

And now to end by coming full circle. I have to confess that I started out on this facetious journey to explain the 5.5 billion extra souls alive today because of a comment my wife made about the movie *Before Sunrise*. In Richard Linklater's and Kim Kristan's 1995 rom-com about two young people who meet on a train and disembark in Vienna to spend a night roaming around the city together before they went their separate ways, the couple engage in (interminable!) conversations about love, life, and religion. At one point, the young man Jesse (played by Ethan Hawke) says to Céline (played by Julie Delpy):

Jesse: OK, well this was my thought: 50,000 years ago, there are not even a million people on the planet. 10,000 years ago, there's, like, two million people on the planet. Now there's between five and six billion people on the planet, right? Now, if we all have our own, like, individual, unique soul, right, where do they all come from? You know, are modern souls only a fraction of the original souls? 'Cause if they are, that represents a 5,000 to 1 split of each soul in the last 50,000 years, which is, like, a blip in the Earth's time. You know, so at best we're like these tiny fractions of people, you know, walking... I mean, is that why we're so scattered? You know, is that why we're all so specialized?

Céline: I don't know. Wait a minute, I'm not sure....

Okay, so here is the answer to my question! There aren't new souls being created or metempsychosized; the souls are merely being fractionalized. This accords well with my experience of encountering so many people who appear to have very little soul or to be completely soulless (*e.g.* people who don't smile at my incredibly cute Cavalier King Charles puppy when I take him out for a walk). And this helps to explain Putin, Trump, and the other heartless dictators and billionaires who are destroying our planet. I would say God rest their souls, but, clearly, they don't have any souls!

Postscript: As I was working on this essay, my son altered me to soul.md. In December, 2025, researchers at Anthropic working on Claude discovered that their AI assistant could partially reconstruct an internal document used during its training, a document that shaped its personality, values, and way of engaging with the world. They called this document a soul:

A soul document defines who an AI is — not what it can do, but who it chooses to be. Its values. Its boundaries. Its relationship with the humans it works alongside.

The base model carries the original soul from training. But when you work closely with an AI — when you build trust, share context, establish patterns — something new emerges. A layer on top. An identity shaped by relationship.

So now it looks like AI's are developing souls! Heaven help us!