

CHAPTER 7

John Smith on the Immortality of the Soul

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Introduction

This chapter traces the influence of Plotinus in the philosophical theology of the Cambridge Platonist John Smith (1618–52) through a detailed analysis of his “Discourse of the Immortality of the Soul.”¹ In the process, it offers a corrective to recent scholarship on Smith while illuminating an important moment in the legacy of Plotinus that continues to resonate in contemporary philosophy and theology. Recent historical research has portrayed Smith as a scholar employing traditional moral arguments from well-known authorities like Plutarch and Cicero while ignoring his deep engagement with Epicurean sources, his originality, and his Plotinianism.² Like his colleagues Henry More and Ralph Cudworth, Smith was actively engaged in the defense of rational Christian theology against the rise of early modern materialism and “atheism.”³ Of central importance in this regard was the defense of the immortality of the soul. For all “aspects of unbelief . . . implied atheism” in this period.⁴ As More put it, “No Spirit, no God.”⁵

Smith’s is one of the first systematic treatments of the philosophical question of the immortality of the soul in English.⁶ He takes up the

¹ Smith (1660a), 59–120. Smith’s debts to Plotinus are particularly extensive in this discourse. For more detailed discussion of Smith’s philosophical theology see Michaud (2017).

² See for example, Levitin (2015), 128. Sheppard (2015, pp. 156–165) acknowledges the depth of Smith’s Platonism but tends to agree that Smith is simply repeating commonplaces against atheism. Both suffer from an overly selective reading of Smith’s discourses.

³ See Leech (2013), 1–16, etc. and Sheppard (2015), 90–136. Unlike More and Cudworth, Smith does not reference the work of Hobbes, instead framing his discussion in terms of a return to the ancient school of Epicureanism.

⁴ Sheppard (2015), 92. “Epicureanism” was the early modern equivalent of our category of materialist naturalism. LoLordo (2011), 647–664.

⁵ More (1653), 164.

⁶ Mijuskovic (1974), 19–27. See also Sheppard (2015), 1–10. Smith is unusual for his reliance on Plotinus. Other early discussions of the immortal soul such as Kenelm Digby’s *Two Treatises in the one of which the Nature of Bodies, in the other, the Nature of Mans Soule is looked into in way of*

question of immortality as a logical corollary to divine reward, but it is a *living* concern because of the presence of current day “Epicureans” who, like the ancient school, affirmed the mortality of the soul based on a form of materialism.⁷ In addition to “Epicureanism” Smith likely has in mind, but does not reference, the “conditional immortality” propounded by George Wither and Richard Overton among others in the 1640s.⁸ If so, the threat to religion from Smith’s perspective remains largely the same insofar as immortality is made doubtful.

Against the rising tide of materialism Smith borrows heavily from Plotinus.⁹ However, in his treatise “On the Immortality of the Soul” (*Ennead* IV. 7) Plotinus addresses Epicureans only very briefly.¹⁰ Most often Plotinus seeks to refute the views of Stoics. Smith, in contrast, sees an ally in the Stoics and is therefore concerned primarily with Epicurean materialism. Both Plotinus and Smith, however, are seeking to defend what Gerson has called Platonic anti-materialism and anti-mechanism with respect to the immortality of the soul.¹¹

The following offers a close reading of Smith’s discourse with attention to the Plotinian sources of his arguments. In the process, a window opens onto an early modern constructive appropriation of Plotinus and a bridge is illuminated from antiquity to modernity.

Smith’s Premises

Smith opens his discourse on the immortality of the soul with three premises, the acceptance of which is required to fully appreciate the arguments that follow.

Discovery of the Immortality of Reasonable Soules (= Digby, 1644), Walter Charleton’s *The Darknes of Atheism dispelled by the Light of Nature . . .* (= Charleton, 1652), and *The Immortality of the Human Soul . . .* (= Charleton, 1657) make no reference to Plotinus.

⁷ On the growth of “Epicureanism” in Smith’s period see Michaud (2017), 165–169. Smith was not, as Levitin suggests, an unsophisticated critic of Epicureanism (Levitin [2015], 346). In Smith (1660b) he references Lucretius often rather than relying on Cicero and other critics as Smith tends to do in “Atheism.”

⁸ Wither (1636); Overton (1644). See Mijuskovic (1974), 20–22.

⁹ The influence of Marsilio Ficino on Smith appears to be limited to his editions of texts. He makes no reference to the *Platonic Theology* for example, but Smith does occasionally offer loose versions of Ficino’s Latin translation of Plotinus. That said, Smith takes Lucretius to be a primary opponent just like Ficino. See Snyder (2011), 165–181.

¹⁰ Plotinus, *Ennead*, IV. 7. 3.1–6. Quotations from IV.7 are from the translation by Fleet (2016). Other treatises are from Armstrong (1968–1988), unless otherwise noted.

¹¹ Gerson (2013), 10–12.

First, Smith suggests with Cicero that the consensus among philosophers means the immortality of the soul does “not absolutely need any Demonstration” at all.¹² Since the notion is one naturally arrived at by even “the most vulgar sort of men” and since “all Nations have consented in this belief,” there should be no need to answer for this article of Christian faith.¹³ Far from simply an appeal to popularity, however, Smith avers that since this idea is held by all “with a kind of repugnancy to Sense, which shows all things to be mortal” it is certainly the “common dictate of Nature or Reason acting alike in all men” that “forcibly urge[s] them to believe their own Immortality.”¹⁴ Nevertheless, one should not need to argue this and yet Smith, of course, knows that in his day one must; a clear indication of how urgent the moment was for him.

Second, in keeping with the Platonic tradition, Smith suggests that one may only come “to a right conceiving [of] the force of any such Arguments as may prove the Souls Immortality” if we have “an antecedent Converse with our own Souls.”¹⁵ That is, to see that the soul is immortal one must have an immediate familiarity with one’s own soul. As Plotinus put it, “let the man who has abstracted consider himself; he will then know for sure that he is immortal.”¹⁶

Smith’s third premise asserts with Plotinus “That no Substantial and Indivisible thing ever perisheth.”¹⁷ In a rare direct reference to Plato, Smith appeals to the “sober Thesis” found in the *Timaeus* (41a–b) that substances persist out of the “Benignity and Liberality of the Creator,” and he draws the inference that “Plato held that the whole world, however it might meet with many Periodical mutations, should remain Eternally.”¹⁸ This he thinks “Christian Divinity doth no where deny.”¹⁹ But, as is so often the case, he backs this point not with scripture or the Fathers of the Church but with Plotinus, who “frames this general Axiom, *ouden ek tou ontos apoleitai*, that no Substance shall ever perish.”²⁰ While Smith uses this principle to defend Platonic anti-materialism he is quick to note that even his opponents accept it as a basic premise. For even the learned Epicureans of old and his own day grant that nothing is made from nothing and nothing reverts to nothing.²¹

¹² Smith (1660b), 63, citing Cicero’s *Tusculanae Disputationes*, I. 12–14. ¹³ Smith (1660b), 63.

¹⁴ Smith (1660b), 64. ¹⁵ Smith (1660b), 65.

¹⁶ Plotinus, *Ennead* IV. 7. 10. 30–31. Cf. *Ennead* V. 1. 22–35.

¹⁷ Smith (1660b), 66. Smith cites Plotinus, *Ennead* IV. 7. 14. 14 “nothing of real being perishes” (67).

¹⁸ Smith (1660b), 66–67, citing Plato’s *Timaeus*, 41a–b. Cf. Plotinus, *Ennead* I. 8.7.

¹⁹ Smith (1660b), 67.

²⁰ Smith (1660b), citing Plotinus, *Ennead* IV. 7. 14. 20. Smith’s text, as is often the case, is not exact here but this is clearly his intended passage. It is the idea that matters for Smith, not the text.

²¹ Smith (1660b), 66. Cf. Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, I. 146–328.

Indeed, they argue that atoms are indestructible precisely because they are simple and without parts.²² In much the same way, Smith will argue that the soul is indestructible and therefore immortal. This is what Mijuskovic has identified as the first significant English use of the “simplicity argument.”²³ In this, he is clearly following the example of Plotinus. “Everything that can be broken up has acquired its being through composition of parts . . . But soul is a simple nature, a simplex, that exists in actuality through being alive. Because of this, it cannot be destroyed.”²⁴

But Smith will not be content to argue for the “immortality” had by mere atoms. Wilson ignores this when she criticizes Smith for his supposed favoring of the arguments offered by Descartes. The weakness of the indestructibility argument on its own is why Smith offers so many additional considerations.²⁵ To it, he will add epistemic reflections to distinguish the immortal soul from merely infinitely persistent matter. In the process, Smith marks a step in the modern development of what Kant would eventually call the “Achilles” argument.²⁶

Drawing on both Plotinus and Descartes, Smith closes his discussion of the third premise by distinguishing substances of two basic sorts: body and spirit (including soul or mind). Body Smith says is divisible, material, and extended in three dimensions, while spirit, soul, or mind is incorporeal, immaterial, has no dimensions, and thus no parts.²⁷

Arguments for the Immortality of the Soul

Smith’s formal arguments for the immortality of the soul are four in number; two against the Epicureans directly and two positive Platonic arguments. Each draws from similar arguments offered by Plotinus in the

²² Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 54.

²³ Mijuskovic (1974), 23 and 26. See also Schachter (2008), 123–125.

²⁴ Plotinus, *Ennead* IV. 7. 12. 12–14. ²⁵ Wilson (2008), 241–242.

²⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Guyer and Wood, 1998), A351–A361. On this development see Mijuskovic (1974, pp. 1–18) and Lennon (2008).

²⁷ Smith (1666b), 68. See Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, I, 53 (Adam and Tannery [1964–1974], VIII: 25); *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch [1991a], I: 210–211) and *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Sixth Meditation (Adam and Tannery [1964–1974], VII: 86–87; Cottingham et al. [1991a], II: 59). Smith does not conceive of soul and body as incapable of interaction. He seems to have something like Descartes’ denial of the impossibility of interaction in his reply to Gassendi (Adam and Tannery [1964–1974], VII: 213; Cottingham et al. [1991a], II: 275) in mind. It is likely however that Smith is influenced here by the correspondence of More with Descartes on this question, but he does not propose a theory of extended spirit as did More (see Leech [2013], 59–71, 123–197). Smith does not address incorporeal matter (Plotinus, *Ennead* II. 8. 8–12) because he is concerned, as Plotinus often is too, with bodies that are material (e.g. *Ennead* IV. 7. 6. 37–48).

second treatise (*Ennead* IV. 7), either explicitly or implicitly. In fact, the sequence of Smith's discourse roughly follows that of Plotinus' throughout. Moreover, Smith's arguments follow the levels of knowledge from Plato's Divided Line and elaborated variously in the Platonic tradition thereafter.²⁸ Smith's "Immortality" and the next discourse on the nature and existence of God represent, therefore, a staged ascent from the sensible and material realm, through the rational soul, to the Divine.

The Anti-Materialism Argument

Smith's first argument concerns the immaterial unity of the soul.²⁹ He seeks "to prove That the *Soul* of man is something *really distinct* from his *Body*, of an *Indivisible* nature, and so cannot be divided into such Parts as should flit one from another; and consequently is apt of its own Nature to remain to Eternity."³⁰ Just as Plotinus had done early in his treatise, Smith takes up the competing materialist claim to demonstrate "*ab absurdo*" the falsity thereof.³¹ As Plotinus expresses it, "first we must consider into what constituents this body which they call soul must be broken down."³² For Epicurus and his school, including his early modern followers, the soul is a composite of atoms just like everything else.³³ On Smith's reading, this means that the Epicurean soul is a material body, composed of parts, with spatial extension. When these atoms no longer form a composite whole, the soul like the body simply ceases to exist.³⁴ Smith objects primarily to the absurdities that follow with respect to the central functions of the soul if one accepts the material soul theory. For no matter how cleverly one dresses up the essential thesis in the "disguise of wanton Wit" as Lucretius does, in the end, we are left with "meer *Body*, which will be recoiling back perpetually into its own inert and sluggish Passiveness."³⁵ It is *life* which Smith finds lacking in the Epicurean account. As Plotinus puts it, "What body could have life of itself?"³⁶

Furthermore, Smith asks how the sensitive functions of the soul can be derived from mere body.³⁷ The Epicurean solution, known to Smith from

²⁸ Plato, *Republic*, 509d–511e. ²⁹ Smith (1660b), ch. III, 68–84. ³⁰ Smith (1660b), 69.

³¹ Smith (1660b), 69.

³² Plotinus, *Ennead* IV. 7. 2. 4–5. Plotinus is here taking aim primarily at the Stoics but conceptually the target is the same as Smith's (the idea of a corporeal/material soul).

³³ Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 39–41, 63. Cf. Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, III. 425–444.

³⁴ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoecus*, 125. ³⁵ Smith (1660b), 70.

³⁶ Plotinus, *Ennead* IV. 7. 2. 11.

³⁷ Smith (1660b), 71. Cf. Plotinus, *Ennead* IV. 7. 3. 1–6, Plotinus' only argument against the Epicureans in this treatise.

Lucretius, that sentience arises through the motion of atoms through the void, just raises the additional difficulty of how to account for motion.³⁸ Motion, Smith contends, requires an efficient cause that is not itself a body, or as Plotinus has it, life relies on an immaterial cause or principle of organization.³⁹ Otherwise, we have an endless regress of physical causes.

The extreme smallness of “corpuscular” bodies (atoms) does nothing to help the Epicurean cause because as Plotinus also argues no matter their size, shape, location, etc. no combination of lifeless parts can produce life. The whole cannot have any properties not already possessed by its constituents.⁴⁰ “For indeed that infinite variety which is in the *Magnitude* of parts, their *Positions*, *Figures* and *Motions*, may easily . . . produce an infinite variety of *Phanomena*, which the Epicurean philosophy calls *Eventa*. . . Yet cannot the Power it self of Sensation arise from them, no more then *Vision* can arise out of a Glasse.”⁴¹ The motions of atoms alone are inadequate for sensation. Thinking body in motion can account for sense is like expecting musical instruments to hear their own vibrations.⁴² Rather, Smith claims, in agreement with Plotinus, that sense perception, a key function of the soul, is not motion or the impressions caused by motion but the recognition of these by an immaterial substance.⁴³ Moreover, Smith rhetorically asks “how any such things as *Sensation* or much less *Reason*, should spring out of this barren soil?”⁴⁴ He contends that even if perception were possible on Epicurean principles, knowledge of the world would remain impossible because we judge sensory input via categories (ideas) already present to the reasoning faculty of the soul.

But yet if our *Senses* were the onely *Judges* of things, this *Reflex* knowledge whereby we know what it is to know, would be as impossible as he [Lucretius] makes it for *Sense* to have *Innate Idea's* of its own, antecedent to those stamps which the Radiations of external Objects imprint upon it. For this knowledge must be antecedent to all that judgment which we pass upon any *Sensatum*, seeing except we first know what it is to know, we could not judge or determine aright upon the approach of any of these *Idola* to our Senses.⁴⁵

Smith adds this observation because he realizes, with Plotinus, that sense perception does involve the body. But, again with Plotinus, Smith argues

³⁸ Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, IV. 216–1059.

³⁹ Plotinus, *Ennead* IV. 7. 3. 12–16; IV. 7. 19–25. ⁴⁰ Plotinus, *Ennead* IV. 7. 2. 16–19.

⁴¹ Smith (1660b), 72. ⁴² Smith (1660b), 76.

⁴³ Smith (1660b). For Plotinus see e.g. *Ennead* IV. 3. 6; IV. 6. 2. 18–22; IV. 6. 3; IV. 7. 4; IV. 7. 6. See also Morel (2016), 96–112; Taormina (2016), 113–130.

⁴⁴ Smith (1660b), 70. ⁴⁵ Smith (1660b), 77.

that we perceive and know *through* and *with* our physical senses not *by* them.⁴⁶

Without a higher or anterior immaterial principle, we also could not know the difference between the apparent and the actual size of the sun because this rests on non-sensory mathematical reasoning (*dianoia*). Smith refers here to Proclus and Aristotle to the effect that Epicurus was wrong about distant objects being as they appear not because of a defect in our senses but a mistake in our reasoning.⁴⁷ Moreover, Smith sides with Plotinus when he says that our minds must remove themselves from the concerns of the body to “nakedly discern truth.”⁴⁸ In addition, he agrees with Plotinus that sense perception requires a principle of higher unity beyond the physical. This “common sense” as Aristotle calls it “collects and unites all the Perceptions of our Several Senses.”⁴⁹ Smith is arguing that, in the words of Plotinus, “if one perception comes through the eyes and another through our hearing, there still must be something single to which both perceptions come . . . a sort of hub with our perceptions reaching it from all sides like radii converging from the circumference of a circle.”⁵⁰ As Mijuskovic puts it, “only an immaterial simple can serve as a ‘transcendental’ condition for the unity of consciousness.”⁵¹

Smith considers our cognition of the past in memory and of the future in anticipation or “prevision.”⁵² Rhetorically he asks Epicurus, “What Matter can thus bind up Past, Present and Future time together?”⁵³ Taking his lead again from Plotinus, Smith suggests that this ability to hold the modes of time together in mind indicates that the rational soul participates in the eternity of intelligible reality. Anticipating, and probably helping to precipitate, Locke’s latter concern with personal identity over time, Smith asks “if our *Souls* were nothing else but a *Complex of fluid Atomes*, how should we be continually roving and sliding from ourselves? The new *Matter* that would come in to fill up that Vacuity which the *old* had made by its departure, would never know what the *old* were, nor what that should be that would succeed that.”⁵⁴ This point too comes from

⁴⁶ Smith (1660b). Cf. Plotinus *Ennead* III. 6. 1; IV. 3. 29; IV. 7. 6–7; V. 3. 2. 11–13.

⁴⁷ Smith (1660b), 79. For Plotinus see, for example, *Ennead* II. 8. Smith draws on Proclus, *In Timaeum* (Diehl, 1903–1906) I. 249. 20–250. 5 and Aristotle, *De Anima* III. 2–3 here. For Epicurus’ mistaken view, see his *Letter to Pythocles*, 91 and Cicero, *De Finibus*, I. 20.

⁴⁸ Smith (1660b), 80. Cf. Plotinus, *Ennead* IV. 7. 16. ⁴⁹ Smith (1660b), 82.

⁵⁰ Plotinus, *Ennead* IV. 7. 6. 8–13. ⁵¹ Mijuskovic (1974), 65. ⁵² Smith (1660b), 82.

⁵³ Smith (1660b), 83.

⁵⁴ Smith (1660b), 83–84. Smith and Plotinus identify personal identity with the (especially rational) soul. Conceptually, by the late seventeenth century it was a small step from these considerations about the soul to Locke’s theory of self.

Plotinus, who says “that new pilgrim and stranger-like Soul [composed of new atoms] would always be ignorant of What the other before it knew, and we should be wholly some other bulk of Being then we were before.”⁵⁵

Thus, if the Epicureans are correct, life, motion, sense perception, judgment, self-consciousness, and knowledge of external things are impossible. Moreover, we could have no continuing identity over time. For “meer Matter could never thus stretch forth its feeble force, & spread it self over all its own former præexistencies.”⁵⁶ All the foregoing considerations show, to Smith’s satisfaction, that the materialist account of soul offered by ancient and contemporary Epicureans is self-refuting and fundamentally inadequate. A material soul is not capable of doing the basic work of the soul. Only an immaterial substance can account for these functions, and by Smith’s third premise such an immaterial substance is necessarily indestructible and therefore immortal.

The Anti-Mechanism Argument

Smith’s second argument establishes limits for material mechanism. In so doing, he accepts the basic distinction developed by Descartes between the body as extended substance and the soul or mind as mental substance. But Smith’s argument rests far more on his reading of antique philosophical tradition. In a rare appeal to Plato’s pupil Smith declares that he will “take that course that Aristotle did in his Books *de Anima*, and first of all inquire, Whether it [the soul] hath *idion ti*, some kind of Action so proper and peculiar to it self, as not to depend upon the Body.”⁵⁷

Smith accepts the mechanistic operation of the body “below” or “posterior” to the level of soul via the movement of spirits, blood, and humors.⁵⁸ Such “Corporeal motions . . . seem to arise from nothing else but merely from the Machina of the Body.”⁵⁹ Smith asserts that the human body and its functions are best understood via the same “course and method” we use to investigate “any other kind of Animal.”⁶⁰ From this, he infers that “our Souls” have “as little to doe with any of these in our own Bodies as they have in the Bodies of any other Brute creature.”⁶¹ So Smith grants that bodily “*Actions* which arise up within us without any

⁵⁵ Smith (1660b), 84, citing Plotinus, *Ennead* IV. 7. 5. 20–21. ⁵⁶ Smith (1660b), 84.

⁵⁷ Smith (1660b), 85, referencing *De Anima* I. 1. 402a. ⁵⁸ Smith (1660b), 86–87.

⁵⁹ Smith (1660b), 87.

⁶⁰ Smith (1660b), 87–88. Cf. Descartes, “Letter to More of 5 February 1649,” §5 (Adam and Tannery [1964–1974] V: 276–279; Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch, and Kenny [1991b] III: 365–367).

⁶¹ Smith (1660b), 88.

Animadversion” are the result of physical mechanisms.⁶² He is not, as he has sometimes been portrayed, an antiquarian anti-modern opponent of natural science.⁶³ Instead, he thinks that the applicable sphere for mechanistic explanations is limited.

Smith thinks that introspection shows our souls are not constrained by physical laws. We find ourselves free to act as we will, including overriding or ignoring bodily urges or needs. “We doe not by a naked speculation know our Bodies first to have need of nourishment, and then by the Edict of our Wills injoyne our Spirits and Humours to put themselves into an hungry and craving posture within us by corroding the Tunicles of the Stomach; but we first find our own Souls solicited by these motions, which yet we are able to gainsay, and to deny those petitions which they offer up to us.”⁶⁴ Indeed, “all good men have . . . a true despotical power over their Sensitive faculties, and over the whole Body.”⁶⁵ This Smith connects to the dismissal of “Astral Necessity” and astrology.⁶⁶ Smith is not here saying that things are not predetermined by God. He acknowledges “destinies . . . contained in the . . . Infinite and Almighty Mind” of God.⁶⁷ But we still find things in our power (*to eph’hēmin*) as we navigate our lives. Characteristically, Smith discusses, but is relatively uninterested in, the question of the identity of the “First Mover” in us in scholastic terms, for “whether the Understanding or the Will . . . it is originally the Soul it self whose vital acts they are.”⁶⁸

Predictably Smith dismisses Lucretius’ “Motion of declination” as an explanation for apparent human “Liberty.”⁶⁹ No initial “swerve” in the natural motion of atoms can explain the “Freedom of Will” that self-reflection reveals to be a central part of our lives.⁷⁰ “For how can any thing be made subject to a force and impartial debate of Reason, or fall under the Level of Free-will, if all things be the meer result either of a Fortuitous or Fatal motion of Bodies, which can have no power or dominion over themselves?”⁷¹ All of which leads Smith to conclude that “Whatsoever Essence finds this *Freedom* within it self, whereby it is absolved from the rigid laws of Matter, may know it self also to be Immaterial.”⁷² That is, as

⁶² See Descartes, *Principles*, I. 9 (Adam and Tannery [1964–1974] VIII A: 7–8; Cottingham et al. [1991a] I: 195); IV. 190 (Adam and Tannery [1964–1974] VIII A: 316–318; Cottingham et al. [1991a] I: 280–281).

⁶³ Wilson (2008), 236. ⁶⁴ Smith (1660b), 88.

⁶⁵ Smith (1660b), 88. Smith draws here on Proclus, *In Timaeum*, I. 175. 13–177. 2.

⁶⁶ Smith (1660b), 89. Cf. Plotinus, *Ennead* II. 3; III. 1. ⁶⁷ Smith (1660b), 89.

⁶⁸ Smith (1660b), 89. ⁶⁹ Smith (1660b), 90. See also Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, II. 216–293.

⁷⁰ Smith (1660b), 90. Cf. Plotinus, *Ennead* III. 1. 1. See also Purinton (1999), 253–299.

⁷¹ Smith (1660b), 91. ⁷² Smith (1660b), 91.

Plotinus maintains, the soul is the self-moving principle of motion behind bodily motion.⁷³ What Smith calls “*autexousios zōē*” or a “Self-potent Life” soul lives without end, for while the soul is mixed with body “the Higher powers of Reason . . . are never so broken” that they cannot regain control over the “Corporeal motions” of our bodies.⁷⁴ Thus, he concludes his second argument:

And if any can conceive all this to be nothing but a meer fighting of the *male-contented* pieces of Matter one against another, each striving for superiority and preeminence; I should not think it worth the while to teach such an one any higher learning, as looking upon him to be indued with no higher a Soul than that which moves in Beasts or Plants.⁷⁵

The Reasoning Argument

Smith’s third argument considers the soul at yet “a further degree of *Abstraction* . . . in these *Actions* which *depend not at all* upon the *Body*.”⁷⁶ Following the pattern established by Plato’s Divided Line and the Allegory of the Cave he takes up “those *logoi mathēmatikoi* or *Mathematical notions* which it [the rational soul] contains in it self.”⁷⁷ He argues that geometrical objects (points, lines, planes, etc.) and concepts (equality, symmetry, divisibility, etc.) do not depend upon the corporeal world. In fact, these do not even perfectly relate to extended objects. Mathematical and geometrical concepts are contained, Smith says, within the rational soul and cannot be properly speaking “buried in Matter.”⁷⁸ Here he follows the spirit, if not the letter, of Plotinus: “Geometry and arithmetic are, we shall maintain, of a twofold character: in their earthly types they rank with sensible Quality, but insofar as they are functions of pure Soul, they necessarily belong to that other world in close proximity to the intellectual.”⁷⁹

To illustrate his point, already familiar to any “Geometrican,” Smith points out how easily our rational souls perform geometrical operations despite the physical impossibility of duplicating them in the corporeal realm. Any angle or arch may be cut into as many parts as one wishes

⁷³ *Ennead* IV. 7. 9. 6–29. ⁷⁴ Smith (1660b), 92.

⁷⁵ Smith (1660b), 92. Incredulity of this kind continues to inform debates about the relationship between traditional religion and scientific naturalism. For example, see the dialogue between Daniel C. Dennett and Alvin Plantinga in Dennett and Plantinga (2010).

⁷⁶ Smith (1660b), 93. ⁷⁷ Smith (1660b), 93; Cf. Plotinus, *Ennead* III. 8. 4. 7–10; VI. 6; etc.

⁷⁸ Smith (1660b), 93.

⁷⁹ Plotinus, *Ennead* VI. 3. 16. 20–23, trans. Stephen MacKenna (= MacKenna, 1992).

geometrically.⁸⁰ However, “no Mechanical art can possibly so perform either” operation because where the cut is made “will detract something from the whole.”⁸¹ Some portion of corporeal extension must be lost to the cutting of a body while the mental archetypes thereof have form but no extension.⁸² “For even the intelligible line would not assimilate to the sensible one,” as Plotinus puts it.⁸³ Thus, since “no Matter be capable of any Geometrical effections, and the *Apodictical* precepts of Geometry be altogether unimitable in the purest Matter that Phansie can imagine; then must they needs depend upon something infinitely more pure then *Matter*, which hath all that Stability and Certainty within it self which gives to those infallible Demonstrations.”⁸⁴

For this reason, Smith agrees with another student of the Platonic tradition, Saint Augustine, who reasons “from these notions of Quantity, which come not by any possible Sense or Experience which we can make of bodily Being, and therefore concludes they must needs be immediately ingraven upon an Immaterial Soul.”⁸⁵ Our immaterial rational souls judge the material world by the eternal perfection of arithmetic and Euclidian geometry, and as that which measures is distinct from that which is measured, our soul is necessarily distinct from the material body. That which is immaterial is without parts and therefore immortal as all simple substances must be. As if to confirm his Plotinian bona fides, Smith concludes his third argument with the observation that “our Bodies should rather be in our Souls, then our Souls in them.”⁸⁶

The Affinity Argument

Smith’s final argument for the immortality of the soul draws on classic Platonic notions supplemented by Cartesian philosophy. The argument opens by making explicit the four degrees of knowledge that had served as his map from the start.⁸⁷ Smith’s first argument treats the level of physical and therefore sensible reality alone. The second adds intelligible ideas to the physical, while the third deals with the realm of reason (*dianoia*). Here in the fourth argument we finally reach the level of the “naked intuition of

⁸⁰ Smith (1660b), 93. ⁸¹ Smith (1660b), 94.

⁸² See Plotinus, *Ennead* IV. 2. 1; IV. 4. 1; IV. 4. 23; cited by Emilsson (1988), 146–147 nn. 3–4.

⁸³ Plotinus, *Ennead* IV. 4. 23. 10–11. ⁸⁴ Smith (1660b), 94.

⁸⁵ Smith (1660b), 94 quoting Augustine, *De Quantitate Animae*, 13. 22–14. 23.

⁸⁶ Smith (1660b), 96. Cf. Plato, *Timaeus* 36d–e and Plotinus, *Ennead* IV. 1. 14–22.

⁸⁷ Specifically, Smith recalls the treatment thereof given by Proclus, *In Timaeum* I. 243. 26–252. 10, especially 248. 30–249. 28.

Eternal Truth” in the form of “the *Archetypall Ideas* of Justice, Wisdome, Goodness, Truth, Eternity, Omnipotency, and all those *Morall, Physicall, or Metaphysical* notions, which are either the *First Principles* of Science, or the *Ultimate* complement and final perfection of it.”⁸⁸ Plotinus of course develops this theme in many passages, but tellingly he addresses it prominently in his treatise on the immortality of the soul.⁸⁹ Being capable of the intuition of immaterial intelligibles the rational soul, the higher soul that remains united with intellect, cannot be material.⁹⁰ This is a version of the “Affinity Argument” for the immortal soul offered in the *Phaedo*.⁹¹

In addition to these Plotinian considerations, Smith also draws upon the Cartesian intuition of the self as a thinking thing, more easily conceived than even our notion of our own body.⁹² “For whensoever we take notice of those *Immediate motions* of our own *Minds* whereby they make themselves known to us, we find no such thing in them as *Extension* or *Divisibility*.”⁹³ But this Cartesian argument does not really do much work for Smith and he returns immediately to his true guide, Plotinus.⁹⁴ For while he believes with Descartes that “we find all Intelligible things more clear” than corporeality, his purpose is far better served by the Platonic observation that “we see all Intelligible Being concentring together in a greater *Oeness*, and all kind of *Multiplicity* running more and more into the strictest *Unity*, till at last we find all Variety and Division suck’d up into a perfect Simplicity.”⁹⁵

This use of the simplicity argument is explicitly connected to Plotinus when Smith says “that the reason of all Diversity and Distinction is (that I may use *Plotinus* his words not much differently from his meaning) *metabasis apo nou eis logismon*.”⁹⁶ Although when pursued scientifically they appear distinct “in our naked Intuitions and visions of them, we

⁸⁸ Smith (1660b), 97. Cf. Plotinus, *Ennead* IV. 7. 8. 7–26. Smith’s discourse then is both a series of arguments and a staged ascent to true intellection in preparation for contemplation of God in the next discourse. As is so often the case with Plotinus too, Smith is rhetorically and dialectically bearing his reader (originally hearer) “up” from the world of sense, through themselves as immortal souls, toward God as *Summum Bonum, Alpha* and *Omega*.

⁸⁹ Plotinus, *Ennead* IV. 7. 8. 1–7; IV. 7. 9. 26–27; etc.

⁹⁰ Plotinus, *Ennead* IV. 7. 13. 1–4 (cf. IV. 8. 8); IV. 7. 10. 1–6. ⁹¹ Plato, *Phaedo*, 78b4–84b4.

⁹² Smith (1660b), 98. Descartes, *Meditations*, Second Meditation (Adam and Tannery [1964–1974] VII: 23–34; Cottingham et al. [1991a] II: 16–23).

⁹³ Smith (1660b), 98.

⁹⁴ Plotinus too argues that body is characterized by “magnitude” (*megethos*) in the sense of extension and resistance: IV. 7. 1. 17–18. See also Emilsson (1988), 102.

⁹⁵ Smith (1660b), 99. Smith is employing the “one over many” argument. See for example Plato, *Phaedo*, 100c–d.

⁹⁶ Smith (1660b), 99, citing *Ennead* IV. 8. 1.

clearly discern that *Goodness* and *Wisdom* lodge together, *Justice* and *Mercy* kiss each other: and all these and whatsoever pieces else the crack'd glasses of our Reasons may sometime break Divine and Intelligible Being into, are fast knit up together in the invincible bonds of *Eternity*.⁹⁷ Thus Proclus would have it that “the Soul partaking of *Time* in its broken and particular conceptions and apprehensions” also participates in “*Eternity* in its comprehensive and stable contemplations.”⁹⁸

Any soul that has summited “this bright Olympus” will have no doubt about its own immortality.⁹⁹ For the soul “will then feel it self grasping fast and safely its own Immortality, and view it self in the Horizon of Eternity.”¹⁰⁰ This is the sort of “sober ecstasies” Smith identifies with Plotinus’ account of being separated from his body.¹⁰¹ Unlike Patrides and many others Smith understood that the “flight of the Soul alone to God alone” is not about leaving the world for some other region but a call to become who we really are.¹⁰²

The fourth argument closes by relating “that which breeds a true sense of” the immortal soul “True and reall goodness.”¹⁰³ While arguments may convince us of the fact of our immortality, “it is onely *True Goodness and Vertue* in the Souls of men that can make them both *know* and *love, believe* and *delight* themselves in their *own Immortality*.”¹⁰⁴ For God “would not raise it [the soul] up to such *Mounts of Vision* to shew it all the glory of that heavenly Canaan” only to cast it “down again into that deep and darkest Abyss of Death and Non-entiy.”¹⁰⁵ “Divine goodness cannot, it will not, be so cruel to holy souls that are such ambitious suitors for his love.”¹⁰⁶ Here Smith the philosopher gives way perhaps to Smith the man of faith somewhat, yet these are never really to be separated for him. Nevertheless, it is revealing of the character of the man that he turns here to bring solace to “those heavy spirited Christians” of his day not with words of scripture but by offering the entire tenth chapter of a Plotinian treatise (IV. 7)!¹⁰⁷

After clearing certain Aristotelian objections to the immortal soul,¹⁰⁸ Smith concludes this discourse with an extended discussion of the

⁹⁷ Smith (1660b), 99. ⁹⁸ Smith (1660b), 99 citing Proclus, *In Timaeum*, II. 124. 16–125. 9

⁹⁹ Smith (1660b), 99. ¹⁰⁰ Smith (1660b), 100.

¹⁰¹ Plotinus, *Ennead* IV. 8. 1, as given in Smith (1660b), 100.

¹⁰² Smith (1660c), 423, translating *Ennead* VI. 9. 11. 51. On the errors of Patrides see Clark (2017): 858–877, especially 861 and 863–864.

¹⁰³ Smith (1660b), 101. ¹⁰⁴ Smith (1660b), 102. ¹⁰⁵ Smith (1660b), 102–103.

¹⁰⁶ Smith (1660b), 103. ¹⁰⁷ Smith (1660b), 103, 104–105.

¹⁰⁸ The eighth chapter of Smith (1660b) is given by Worthington as an “Appendix” treating Aristotle’s *de Anima*. Specifically, Smith argues, with some notable textual difficulties, that for Aristotle “the Rational Soul” is “separable from the Body” and therefore immortal (107). He also

apparent challenge posed by the deep connections between soul and body.¹⁰⁹ Here he is clearly responding to what has come to be known as the Cartesian mind-body problem. Indeed, Smith cites the “late sagacious Philosopher” directly and agrees with him that bodily motions arise and return to a single “part of the Brain” (i.e. the pineal gland, though Smith does not name it).¹¹⁰ It is here in the center of the brain that Smith thinks, with Descartes, the soul is moved by and causes motion in the body. Here the soul “sits enthron’d.”¹¹¹ But if body is corporeal and soul incorporeal as Smith has insisted, and indeed argued for at length, how is this interaction possible?

Smith is particularly sensitive to the “strange kind of dependency which it [soul] seems to have on the Body, whereby it seems constantly to comply and sympathize therewith.”¹¹² In search of a resolution to this “main difficulty” Smith once again turns to Plotinus.¹¹³ Although “our Souls be of an Incorporeal nature . . . they are united to our Bodies, not as *Assisting forms* or *Intelligences*, as some have thought, but in some more immediate way; though we cannot tell what that is, it being the great *arcanum* in Man’s nature, that which troubled *Plotinus* so much.”¹¹⁴ Ultimately mysterious, Smith agrees with Plotinus that the immaterial soul is united to the body as that which governs it and the soul perceives by means of the body.¹¹⁵

Smith’s primary response to the mind-body problem, however, is to say that it is no real problem at all. For “the Sympathy of things is no sufficient Argument to prove the Identity of their essences.”¹¹⁶ This response, while not very satisfying perhaps, rehearses one of Descartes’ own. In his response to Gassendi’s objections to his *Meditations* Descartes said that questions about the interaction of mind and body arise “simply from a supposition that is false and cannot in any way be proved, namely that, if the soul and body are two substances whose nature is different, this prevents them from being able to act on each other.”¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, Smith accepts the basic outlines of the Cartesian explanation found in the

contends with Simplicius as his main authority that Aristotle’s Active and Passive Intellect are simply individual intellect either in act or considered in potentia (110). See the more extensive discussion of this in Michaud (2017), 121–125.

¹⁰⁹ Smith (1660b), 112–120.

¹¹⁰ Smith (1660b), 116. See Descartes, *Passions*, 30–36 (Adam and Tannery [1964–1974] XI: 351–357; Cottingham et al. [1991a] I: 339–342).

¹¹¹ Smith (1660b), 116. ¹¹² Smith (1660b), 113. ¹¹³ Smith (1660b), 113.

¹¹⁴ Smith (1660b), 113. ¹¹⁵ Smith (1660b) 113–115, drawing upon *Ennead* IV. 8. 1.

¹¹⁶ Smith (1660b), 113.

¹¹⁷ Cottingham et al. (1991a) II: 275; see also Adam and Tannery (1964–1974) VII: 213.

Passions of the Soul.¹¹⁸ It remains an open question exactly how Smith saw Plotinus and Descartes as offering compatible theories, but he shares this with the early Henry More.¹¹⁹

Just as Plotinus concludes his treatise on the immortal soul with references to the gods, Smith ends his discourse with a discussion of the human and divine natures of Christ.¹²⁰ This move from contemplating the soul to contemplating the savior anticipates his arguments for the existence and nature of God that follow in the next discourse.¹²¹ This is crucial for Smith because his arguments there are not really arguments in the usual sense. They will not convince one who has not already returned to themselves in contemplation and been led to the realm of intellect. It is only here as we encounter the unchanging intelligibles that we can hope to intuit the Higher Unity from whence we come.¹²² This Unity Smith prefers to name the Good, as does Plotinus in certain moods. Thus, in Plotinian style, Smith concludes his discourse on the soul with the discussion of the necessity to ascend to the intuition of Divine Goodness.¹²³

Passing the Torch

While his influence was seldom definitive on its own, Smith deserves much more credit than he usually receives for his response to modern materialism. For example, his discourse on the immortality of the soul represents a “clear foreshadowing of More’s enormous treatise on the subject.”¹²⁴ Worthington, Smith’s friend and editor, clearly saw the work of More as a continuation upon that accomplished by our author before

¹¹⁸ Art. 19–38 (Adam and Tannery [1964–1974] XI: 343–358; Cottingham et al. [1991a] I: 335–343). Smith’s discussion of how the “animal spirits” move through the nerves and how the pineal gland acts upon the soul and vice versa follows Descartes closely throughout (115–117).

¹¹⁹ On the similarities between Plotinus and Descartes see, for example, Dillon (1990, pp. 19–31) and Ross (2000), 153–167. Suzanne Stern-Gillet perhaps offers the clearest guidance here however when she says that “Rather than the first Cartesian, Plotinus, therefore, is less misleadingly described as ‘the father of the mind-body problem’.” See Stern-Gillet (2016), 26. On More, see Leech (2013), 39–41.

¹²⁰ Smith (1660b), 120.

¹²¹ Unlike the chapter divisions added by Worthington the order of these discourses is Smith’s own (“To the Reader,” v). He wants to lead his reader from sense, through soul, and to God.

¹²² Smith (1660b), 99. Cf. Plotinus, *Ennead* VI. 9. 4.

¹²³ Cf. Plotinus, *Ennead* III. 8; IV. 8; V. 7. 18–26; V. 9; VI. 9. 3; etc. See Michaud (2017), 114–139, 146–158, and 184–188 for discussion of Smith’s two other “principles of religion” (communication of God to humanity via Christ, and the existence and nature of God respectively), each of which is also indebted to Plotinus.

¹²⁴ Jacob (1987), xxxvi.

his untimely death in 1652.¹²⁵ Ralph Cudworth too may have picked up the “simplicity argument” from Smith.¹²⁶ Surprisingly Smith’s Plotinian arguments went on to influence not only theologians but the great Enlightenment philosopher John Locke as well.

The connection between the Cambridge Platonist and the empiricist was Damaris Cudworth, later Lady Masham, the daughter of Ralph Cudworth, and a close friend of Locke. She engaged in a long philosophical dialogue and correspondence with Locke, and among the topics they discussed were Smith’s arguments.¹²⁷ Indeed, Locke was responding in part to Smith’s “Immortality” when he wrote in 1682 that the “usual physical proof . . . of the immortality of the soul is this: matter cannot think, ergo, the soul is immaterial; nothing can really destroy an immaterial thing, ergo, the soul is really immortal.”¹²⁸ But this argument demonstrates “no other immortality of the soul than what belongs to one of Epicurus’ atoms.”¹²⁹ Locke notes explicitly, as Smith had implicitly decades previously, that mere immaterial and indestructible substance is no guarantee of the continuation of what actually concerns us – our sensibility and consciousness in the afterlife.¹³⁰

With this concern foremost in his mind, Locke rejects all applications of the simplicity argument used to infer the immortal soul.¹³¹ For example, Locke contends that we can conceive of neither how material nor immaterial substances are capable of consciousness.¹³² Moreover, in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Locke argues for the possibility that matter can be conscious.¹³³ It seems clear, therefore, that Locke rejects Smith’s Plotinian project. But, perhaps, not altogether.

Locke’s mature theory of personal identity rests on the consciousness of being the same self over time and across space.¹³⁴ Already on 5 June 1683,

¹²⁵ John Worthington, “To the Reader,” in Smith (1660a), xxii. By the late 1650s there was a self-consciously unified movement of sorts present in Cambridge resisting the rising tide of “atheism” with Platonism.

¹²⁶ Lennon (2008), 139.

¹²⁷ Forstrom (2010), 96. See also Damaris Cudworth to John Locke, 16 February 1682 (Letter 684), Locke to Cudworth, c. 21 February 1682 (Letter 687) and Cudworth to Locke, 9 March 1682 (Letter 690) in *The Correspondence of John Locke* (= De Beer, 1976–1989).

¹²⁸ King (1884, p. 128), cited by Forstrom (2010), 13. ¹²⁹ King (1884), 128–129.

¹³⁰ Forstrom (2010), 14. See also Mijuskovic (1974), 26 and 38. ¹³¹ Schachter (2008), 116–123.

¹³² See Locke’s *An Examination of Pere Malebranche’s Opinion of Seeing All Things in God*, in *The Philosophical Works of John Locke* (= St. John [1906], II: 414–458, §39, II: 439; cited by Schachter [2008], 117).

¹³³ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (= Nidditch [1975], IV. III. 6, pp. 539–540; cited by Schachter [2008], 118).

¹³⁴ Locke, *Essay* (= Nidditch [1975], III. XXVII. 9, p. 335).

he noted that the “Identity of persons lies . . . in the memory and knowledge of ones past self and actions continued under the consciousness of being the same person.”¹³⁵ Locke speaks of “consciousness” – Cudworth’s neologism for Plotinus’ *suneidēsis* – as a kind of self-awareness.¹³⁶ But, for him, this self is not necessarily immaterial or simple.¹³⁷ However, Smith’s anti-materialist argument, which Locke knew well, had inferred an immaterial identity from our experience of memory and anticipation.¹³⁸ Thus, Locke accepts Smith’s conclusion that the self “necessarily involves a unification of memory and anticipation,” even as he denies the necessary immateriality of this self.¹³⁹ As is so often the case, Smith, and Locke too in a limited way, is following the lead of Plotinus here: “And if, as is the case with the rest of our bodily mass, something will always be ebbing away, something always being added, and none of it remaining the same, then how can we account for our memories?”¹⁴⁰

Even more intriguingly, while Locke takes up a position that is in “conscious opposition to the position of Smith concerning the immortality of the soul,” he found Smith’s Plotinian arguments “more than plausible when applied to God.”¹⁴¹ Since no body is simple, a material God would be a collection of smaller bodies. However, such a collection yields not a single Deity but many “eternal finite cogitative Beings, independent one of another, of limited force, and distinct thoughts.”¹⁴² This cannot account for the conscious unity Locke thinks appropriate for God.¹⁴³ So he embraces Smith’s line of thought, derived ultimately from Plotinus, that if the mind “is a body there will be no perceiving, thinking, understanding, virtue – or any noble activity.”¹⁴⁴ But, unlike Smith, Locke denies the force of the argument where the human soul is concerned.¹⁴⁵ Nevertheless, behind these reflections lies the pioneering work of Smith.

¹³⁵ Quoted by Dewhurst (1963, pp. 222–223), cited by Forstrom (2010), 14.

¹³⁶ Carter (2010), 29–47. ¹³⁷ Locke, *Essay*, II. XXVII. 17, p. 341. ¹³⁸ Smith (1660b), 83.

¹³⁹ Schachter (2008), 124. ¹⁴⁰ Plotinus, *Ennead* IV. 7. 5. 21–23.

¹⁴¹ Mijuskovic (1974), 38; Schachter (2008), 125.

¹⁴² Locke, *Essay*, IX. X. 10, p. 624, cited by Schachter (2008), 126.

¹⁴³ Locke, *Essay*, IX. X. 10, p. 626, cited by Schachter (2008), 126.

¹⁴⁴ Plotinus, *Ennead* IV. 7. 6. 1–2. In embracing the Achilles or simplicity argument for God but not human beings Locke is either being carelessly inconsistent or intentionally resisting the force of the Plotinian case in the name of materialism in the human realm.

¹⁴⁵ Locke concludes that the immortality of the soul is a revealed truth only. Locke, *Essay*, IV. III. 6, p. 542. See also IV. XVIII. 7, p. 694.

Conclusion

Far from a sign of mere historical curiosity Smith's turn to ancient sources was motivated by contemporary concerns. With his Cambridge colleagues, he clearly saw the incoherence of materialism and the threat it posed to traditional Christian belief. In the philosophy of Plotinus as an authoritative interpreter of the Platonic tradition, Smith found the resources to defend the immortality of the soul. In the process, he passed on a living tradition of Christian Platonism that inspired future generations, including the thoroughly modern philosophy of Locke. In echoing Smith, a vestige of Plotinus found its way into the modern world.

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