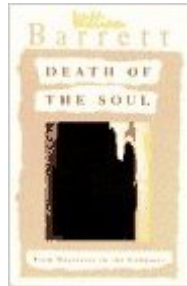


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# Death Of The Soul



## Synopsis

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## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Ever since Descartes saw nature as a vast, interlocking machine and science banished the soul, philosophers have been uncomfortable with this materialistic outlook. Barrett (*Irrational Man* here looks at the way in which various thinkers have attempted to put the human soul or self in the forefront of their visions of reality. He discusses Leibniz's energized universe of monads, or individual souls, Hegel's blueprint for self-realization as part of the unfolding of the "world spirit" and the existentialists' belief that anxiety and death are personal problems each of us must wrestle with. Unconvinced by modern descriptions of the mind as a computer, Barrett debunks Alan Turing's claim that a future computer could write first-rate poetry; he also refutes behaviorism and Wittgenstein. This short book engages the reader in an open-ended dialogue with major Western thinkers on the central questions of the soul, death and consciousness. Copyright 1986 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Barrett's previous popular work, *Irrational Man*, remains one of the clearest expositions of existentialist philosophy available. In this new book, he focuses on the philosophical puzzles of metaphysics and epistemology. Taking the reader on a historical journey, he discusses the attempts of philosophers to answer one of humanity's central questions: Does the human soul exist? Chapters on Kant are excellent; the concluding chapter, "Analytic Philosophy and the Computer," is

a brilliant summary of Barrett's argument for the existence of "mind" in a world dominated by the doctrines of reductionism and scientific materialism. Highly recommended for beginning students of philosophy and for interested laypeople. Raymond Frey, Philosophy & Religion Dept., Montclair State Coll., Upper Montclair, N.J. Copyright 1986 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This review won't be as informed as the other ones here...so here it is from a guy who is not a student of philosophy and who just came across this book randomly. For me it was a hard read. It's heavy on philosophic terms and names. It would greatly help to be at least somewhat familiar with the philosophers referred to. If I got the gist right, it's about how leading thinkers have perceived and defined the human condition over the years. If I'm right, the author says that consciousness, 'who are we?', has been, bit by bit, left at the door. Philosophic thought has tended to overlook or under-value the place of the human mind in understanding who we are and what 'this' is. I think he says there is an over-valuing of the minutiae scientific discovery claims to reveal in defining existence. In other words, the soul is dead and we are left with test tubes, rulers and set squares. I could be wrong in my summary. Anyway, for me it was a tough read from page 1 to page 166. I was constantly hoping for him to 'dim it down a shade'...which he did do from time to time. But I needed more of that. I guess this is a serious book for people familiar with philosophy.

I read Barrett's book in late 80's in grad school without much impact but, 25 years later, I think it is profound. Main thesis is denial of 'substance' which Aquinas defines as "that which exists in itself" (a tree). Descartes divided human substance (or a person) into two, mind and body where there is no connection between immaterial mind and material body. Thus, man cannot know the external world with any certainty. The alternative is that human knowledge turns in on itself and ideas are manufactured by the individual human mind and, since each mind has its own ideas without any common substantial object to be known, knowledge is reduced to individual opinions which are totally relative as we witness today. But Barrett says that not only the substance as object of knowledge is denied, but the existence of the human substance or knowing person is effectively denied which means the "Death of the Soul", the denial of the substantial 'self'. He uses Hume, Kant, Heidegger and Sartre to illustrate his point that there is, in modern philosophy, the denial of an ACTUALLY existing person to know or will. He says, using Sartre's own words, that detaching conscious freedom from any existing and limiting human existence would also limit one's freedom, so, freedom 'floats in a void' in Barrett's words. This is the 'desubstantialization' (in Barrett's word) of

modern philosophy where, as a consequence, there are no certitudes, only an unbounded and effectively blind freedom because there is no true human knowledge and no natural limits to man's moral behavior because there is no existing human nature. I have taught philosophy for about 20 years and I would argue Barrett's thesis is correct and the ultimate reason is the denial of the God, the Creator of substances, human and non human, although Barrett does not go that far and might not agree. However, without existing substances and a real reason for their existence, NOTHING is 'real'. I see the results of this in daily moral and political and academic life and the irony is that for the atheistic existentialists, their alleged rebellion against God is a contradiction because they effectively deny substantial existence as a human person with a free will to accept God or reject Him. One of St. Thomas Aquinas' great 20th century commentators, Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange O.P., said the ultimate choice is either "God or radical absurdity

"Death of the Soul" is a nice essay on modern philosophy and how it went off track. The book highlights one of the central paradoxes of modern culture: namely, that modern science is one of the glories of the creative human mind and has decisively shaped our civilization, yet modern scientific philosophers deny the power or even the reality of mind, preferring to see humans as agglomerations of sense data or behaviors, and not as free, rational agents. The book was written near the end of the William Barrett's life, and isn't in the same league as "Irrational Man" or "The Illusion of Technique." However, it's very good: the writing is clear, the issues are important, and here and there the observations are profound. For example, I was intrigued by the proposal that Kant's aesthetic appreciation of nature could be used to "fill out" Leibniz' otherwise contentless view of God as necessary being (whatever that means). Read the book and salute Barrett's life.

Truly inspiring

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