

# **The Human Soul**

Essays in Honor of Nalin Ranasinghe

Edited by

**Predrag Cicovacki**

College of the Holy Cross

**Series in Philosophy**



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There is no thing that dying, dies forever:  
Nothing is so for forespent  
But it may somehow finally recapture  
That first content.  
Wrought of the frail and protoplasmic splendor  
Of element.

There is no song, once sung, made still forever:  
Never such hush profound  
But somewhere in the fibers of creation  
Under the ground  
And over the lights of stars in the summer heavens  
Makes cosmic sound.

There is no love once told, that dies completely:  
Never such love has grown  
But scatters seeds producing in its likeness  
From zone to zone:  
Shaping the destiny of men and angels  
In worlds unknown.

Poet unknown



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# A Chronology of Nalin Ranasinghe

- 1960 Born on November 8, in Colombo, Sri Lanka, son of Felix Ranasinghe and his wife Angela
- 1984 Comes to the United States, to study philosophy at the University of Dallas
- 1986 M.A. in Philosophy, University of Dallas
- 1989 Ph.D. in Philosophy, Penn State University
- 1993-96 Teaches at the University of Dallas
- 1998-99 Teaches at the College of the Holy Cross
- 2000 Marries Gudrun Krueger.  
*The Soul of Socrates* (Cornell University Press)  
Teaches at Clark University
- 2001-20 Teaches at Assumption College (now Assumption University)
- 2006 *Logos and Eros* (St. Augustine Press)
- 2009 *Socrates in the Underworld: On Plato's Gorgias* (St. Augustine Press)
- 2013 *Socrates and the Gods: How to Read Plato's Euthyphro, Apology, and Crito* (St. Augustine Press)
- 2020 On March 9, gives his last lecture, "Philosophical Psychology," at Annamalai University, Tamil Nadu, India  
On March 13, dies of cardiac arrest, on the way home from India
- 2021 Nalin's last book published, *The Confessions of Odysseus* (St. Augustine Press)



# Foreword: To Nalin, My Dazzling Friend

Gwenda-lin Grewal

*The New School for Social Research*

**Abstract:** A good friend of Nalin for many years, Gwen wrote this moving “ode to their friendship” ten days after Nalin’s death.

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On Friday the 13th of March, 2020, Nalin C. Ranasinghe died unexpectedly on his flight home to Boston from India. I was heading to Edinburgh to catch a plane to the United States in order to escape the impending travel restrictions in the wake of coronavirus. When I landed in America, I got the news. I was not prepared for it.

Nalin was young. Fifty-nine teenagers on a trampoline had nothing on Nalin at age fifty-nine. He had no health problems, unless you count reading too many books or being gleefully corrupted by his own borderline-mad brilliance. He could rattle off puns faster than the speed of light—so fast that even his own lyrics hurried to catch up with his wit. He once told me that “any philosopher without a sense of whimsy should not be in the profession.” I suspect that the unsupervised silliness of our correspondence would’ve caused anyone considering themselves a “philosopher” to faint in horror. Conversations with Nalin, whether written or live, were always vividly sparkling with anagrams, puns, insights, insults, innuendos, and ideas.

Over the decade that we knew each other, Nalin seemed somehow to get younger while I got older, like a Ceylonese Peter Pan without even a hint of escapism. Friday the 13th was his last battle with Captain Hook. Why didn’t he just sprout wings and fly back through the window rather than taking that plane? If anyone could do it, he could. Where were Tinkerbell and Wendy? We hadn’t talked for some months. It hurts to utter it. I wish I would’ve sent even the briefest letter. I wish there could’ve been some bon voyage between us other than anticipatory silence. Everything that kept my attention away seems useless now that my dazzling friend is gone.

That Nalin died during the coronavirus apocalypse makes it seem all the more surreal. If only he could've survived his death, I imagine the irony would've animated our discussions. We might've seen each other in April. It would've been both usual and extraordinary, as it is with old friends—in this case, two pals stalking each other through a private linguistic jungle, easily hopping from play to Plato and back, picking up where we left off, no matter the pause.

For some reason, many of our letters were written in March, and that seems ironic, too. Many of them also contain references to *Alice in Wonderland*, a tale for which we shared an affinity. “*Dear Alice*,” Nalin wrote on March 27, 2012,

*Just thought to write before March is over and I'm still mad. As you know, college professors get dreadfully sane in April when they have to start reading papers that are neither rational nor mad. Also I need to get my hare cut soon and my barber is about as fierce as a Red Queen. She could be off with my head before it has a chance to hide in a flower pot. I may have to go around impersonating a dormouse until it grows back.*

In December of the following year, Nalin scribbled to me about his ascent from the underworld—

*Just emerged from the grading circle in Hades. Here we meet students who forget everything you've taught them and/or serve up, emulating Tantalus, your own words hideously mutilated.*

*How are things in the infernal circles of interview-land—an academic purgatory that's worse than hell because it tempers Sisyphian horrors with hope?*

The same letter is signed, “*May hope spring eternally, like Adre-nalin.*”

Despite his being playful in the extreme, my joy in receiving Nalin's messages likewise came from the serious undertones. On one occasion (again in December), he offered me this warning about an upcoming interview—

*Don't mention Alice but be warned that they're almost certainly aware of your alter-ego. Crabby career caterpillars don't like butterflies ...*

Another note inquires—

*From the fires of fundamentalism into the piss-mires of post-modernism?*

On love, he cautioned—

*Oh my ears and whiskers. O your prophetic soul...take Machiavelli's advice and prefer to be feared/respected before desiring to be loved by people incapable of knowing you ...*

A further missive is signed—

*Arrive—Darcy (as Jane Austen would say),  
Nah!*

The last time Nalin and I saw each other was at the ACTC conference in Santa Fe, New Mexico in April 2019. Nalin had made fun of me for looking, “*my god!* so professional!” I laughed and said, “that’s an insult and you know it!” I was glad to see him, glad to see him see through me, and especially glad for the long afternoon we spent walking around, eating gelato, and sitting in the sun outside of the Georgia O’Keefe museum. I bought a print of the *Bella Donna*. It has been hanging in my living room for nearly a year now. It reminds me of Nalin’s delightful maze of a paper on *Antony and Cleopatra*, and then, his chuckles from the audience during my own talk (a great relief, since I’d left puns like breadcrumbs for those daring enough to laugh). Nalin’s students, his colleagues, his friends—anyone who has known him—will never forget the refrain of his voice: a bubbling combination of warmth, humor, and roguish naughtiness, grounded by the compass of his intellect, even when he might seem to free float. On Saturday, January 19, 2013, he ended a letter with,

*Will be in Europe in months beginning with M but hope to visit Dallas for a conference in early June—before I need Ismene’s sunhat!*

Ismene’s sunhat, I wondered? Nalin clarified—it was “nothing too esoteric,” just that Ismene is, of course, “heat-sensitive” (to Antigone’s “hot heart for cold things?”), and “doesn’t Ismene appear at Colonus wearing a broad-brimmed hat that presumably protects her both from sun blindness and too much insight?” *Obviously.*

The shrewd humor suspended in these notes is a comfort to me reading them now with no possibility of a reply. Nalin and I had a habit of signing our emails in botched anagrams or various acronyms for Ph.D. In a letter from August 11, 2016, we were discussing Thucydides and fashion,

*...Remember, the Greeks were only literally civilized. The Persian ‘barbarians’ were far wealthier even if (or because) they were not politically free. As Thucydides points out, the Greeks at the time of the*

*Trojan War were basically pirates. The Trojans were the effete city dwellers. Helen was the rustic beauty not-entirely-involuntarily abducted by that suave city slicker Paris. Before that she shopped at K-Mart. Hardly Alice should cater to the rich barbarian market niche ...*

*Nalin Ranasinghe  
P(ersian) H(air) D(resser)*

I signed “Pelops Hates Demeter”; he signed “Psychotic Hat Dealer.” Among the other signatures, my favorites are “Alien Saran Wrapper,” “Nearly Wailin,” “Off-white knight,” “Automedon (the hoarse whisperer),” “Nalin Rah-Rah-nasinghe,” and “Never Frump” (from October 2016). Favorite addresses to me include, “Gear Dwen,” “Gluon,” “Gwen Gone Wilde,” “Ailing Dawn,” “Greavely valued Grovelee,” and “G’wen Out West” (from when I lived in Dallas). I once signed with, “Hardly Alice,” to which Nalin in turn signed, “Merely Malice.”

Dear Merely Malice, my favorite Psychotic Hat Dealer, my Dazzling Friend—oh, what I wouldn’t give to escape this Pool of Tears for one last battle of wit and whimsy with you! I assumed that you would always be there to meet me at the Ruby’s in Worcester, to march through the bookstores in Harvard Square (thanks for Jasper Fforde’s *Eyre Affair*), to gorge on cakes and conversation, to belt out Jefferson Airplane’s “White Rabbit” on repeat—ready to have pun whenever the opportunity should arise. On Friday the 13th, 2012, you were planning to come to Yale. I was a fellow there, and we were setting up a lunch date to eat Mock Turtle, since I’m vegan. Let’s set our pocket watches back to that Friday the 13th, and skip every Friday the 13th thereafter. Otherwise, I’m afraid I will miss you for as long as I live. Please don’t go—my intellectual wonderland is a lonelier place without you.

*...March Har(e)vard Sq is two squares (by MBTA) from South Station. Could we meet there? Make sure that Mary Ann has your hat and gloves nicely laid out. I won’t be late!*

*Tweedles,  
Nalin*

# Introduction: To Bet on the Soul

Predrag Cicovacki

*College of the Holy Cross*

**Abstract:** This introductory essay consists of three parts. I first present some of Nalin Ranasinghe's views on the human soul. In the second part, I elaborate some of the central message of his last public lecture, (held on March 9, 2020, at Annamalai University in India, four days before his death). In the third part, I will reflect on the essays included in this collection.

In his last lecture, Ranasinghe expressed his concern over the idea that the human soul has been hijacked due to the way our civilization has developed. He believed that the highest and most noble aspirations of our civilization have been replaced by our obsession with money, pleasure, and power. Our cities have become places of sin, not centers of culture where one can have friends and cultivate their soul. Our universities have become sports centers. Our education practices have been reduced to rote memorization, cleverness, and technical skill, rather than promoting the pursuit of wisdom, through the cultivation of self-knowledge of the soul and in dialogue with others. As a result of our misguided orientation, we now live in a time where we do not know who we are, nor who the people around us are. Despite all of the technical gadgets connecting us virtually, this is the age of disconnect and loneliness, as well as of the degradation of humanity. Ranasinghe insisted that the two keys for recovery are the self-knowledge of the soul and a continuous dialogue with others. We need to relearn how to relate to ourselves and others as unique individuals, not as objects for the satisfaction of our needs. We have to revive the best and most noble in our tradition, Ranasinghe was convinced, so that we can pursue wisdom and become humble, recognize the humanity of others and nurture the best in each other.

\*\*\*

*“Fortunately or unfortunately, man cannot possess the goods of the soul; they must possess him.”*

—Nalin Ranasinghe, *The Soul of Socrates*

### The Soul in Focus

It is sometimes said that every thinker attempts to answer only one question. For each one of us, there is the question that is more urgent than all others. Our entire opus—indeed, our entire life—is, at the bottom, an effort to deal with this one question to the best of our abilities.

If there was such a question for Nalin, it could have well been the following: What would it look like to see the world from the soul's point of view? Or perhaps combined with another, more precisely and more generally: What would it be like to live our lives from the soul's point of view?

By 'soul' Nalin primarily understood a perspective and a way of relating. He never offered a definition of the soul, nor did he think that any such definition is necessary; he believed we intuitively understand the soul as a capacity to see and connect, to love and embrace. Unlike many Western philosophers, he insisted that the soul is neither a substance nor a thing. Nor did he believe that the soul should be identified with the form of the body, as Aristotle thought, or with the mind, as Descartes and Locke later postulated. Furthermore, Nalin strongly opposed the idea that the soul should be understood as the will, as many varieties of voluntarism seem to understand the soul in our age.

Nalin was convinced that we intuitively understand that the soul is something complex and fluid, always in motion and opening the way of connecting and imagining. Imagination involves as much feeling as thinking, as much intuition as perception. The soul is more evocative than referential, exploring the imaginative possibilities inside and outside us, rather than something algorithmic or mechanical. Essential for the soul is our felt experiences and imaginative explorations, which is the reason why the presence of the soul is most revealed through shared feelings and storytelling. The soul's preoccupation is with meaning and subtle truth, rather than with gross facts or infallible deductions. Besides Shakespeare, Nalin considered Homer to be the greatest and, historically speaking, the most important storyteller of all times. He often used the example of Odysseus and Penelope to illustrate his view of the soul. Odysseus prefers to return to his middle-aged humble soulmate Penelope, rather than to pursue Helen, the perfection of human beauty, or stay with the divine-looking Nausicaa. On her side, Penelope has to be sure that the stranger who comes to her after twenty years of wandering is the real Odysseus. Although so many years had passed, and Odysseus reappears in Ithaca (in Nalin's words) "ignobly disguised as an ugly untruthful beggar," the concern of Penelope's soul is not whether this in fact is Odysseus, but whether this is the person for whom she had been awaiting for so long. Penelope knows that Odysseus is there in fact, in body;



what preoccupies her far more is: Does he feel in his heart and soul that he is at home here? This is the question that the soul asks; this is the way of approaching the world from the point of view of the soul. For Nalin, the hero is not Odysseus, just as it most certainly is not Achilles; it is Homer, the blind old bard and the brilliant storyteller who makes us see the world with the eyes of the soul.

Nalin got the first inclination of the soul's perspective and a corresponding way of life as a child, by learning about Jesus. Even when he later became a scholar, what mattered least to Nalin was whether Jesus was born of a virgin mother, or resurrected after three days in the grave. Jesus was of interest to him as a bridge between the two worlds, between the two dimensions of existence: the human and the divine. Jesus is the symbol of something greater than humanity, of the unknown and mysterious realm in which humanity is nevertheless invited to partake. For Nalin, the central message of Jesus was that to be human is not to be perfect; to be human is to struggle and strive, to imagine and share, to care and love. No less important for him was the insight that the struggle to become as human as possible must be sustained by what he called a "transcendental order." As Nalin put it in his first book, *The Soul of Socrates*, "Once impregnated by the god, men will recollect their true identity."

Nalin did not understand that transcendental order in a theological way. What it meant for him was that, just as our soul is not limited to the body, neither is the soul in general limited to the human soul. That we are part of something bigger means that there is a dimension of reality which, in the absence of a better name, we can call the world soul. Like the human soul, that world soul, the *anima mundi*, is not a substance of any kind, natural or supernatural. The world soul is more like a primordial spark, a burst of energy that radiates through everything created the presence of something different than mere facts and tangible things. The presence of that radiance is what captures our imagination, stimulates our thinking and storytelling, and supports our striving to become as human as possible. It is that which ultimately leads us lovingly to affirm the world and our lives in it, despite all of its tragedies, despite all of its imperfections.

Against Augustine, Nalin insisted that imperfection is not the mark of any sin. Christianity has been wavering between the language of perfection and the language of love. Since we cannot be made perfect even through divine intervention, the path to follow is that of love. That is how Nalin understood the central message of Jesus and the relationship of the human soul to the world soul, of the human and the divine.

Nalin could not accept any conception of an angry, punishing, and unloving God; nor could he believe that we can never know ourselves, that only God can know who we are. This fascination with self-knowledge may be the chief

reason why, although his admiration for Jesus never ceased, Nalin's enchantment with Socrates became even greater. Nalin came to believe that the central message of Socrates was that, to be human, we have tirelessly to examine who we are and how we should live. Such striving may not lead to wisdom, for wisdom—like perfection—is beyond the reach of humanity. But the love of wisdom and dedication to a life worth living are not. These are the goals toward which our conscious efforts should be directed.

For Nalin, Socrates became the role model of how to approach the world and how to live in it from the soul's point of view. Socrates, as depicted by Plato, also became the central preoccupation of Nalin's teaching and research. He dedicated much of his life trying to understand—and share his findings with others—what made Socrates so unique. There was hardly a generation of his students that did not have to confront Nalin's persistent and oft-repeated question: What can we learn from Socrates and how can we integrate his insights into our lives?

For Nalin, Socrates' greatness boils down to his two central features: moral resilience and erotic self-transcendence. Socrates' moral resilience was revealed throughout Plato's dialogues, but it was most clearly illustrated through Plato's rendering of the events surrounding the trial of Socrates, together with the last days of his life. What inspired Nalin was, briefly stated, Socrates' ability to resist the pressures of the moment—fear of death being one of them—and remain faithful to the principles he could rationally understand and support. Socrates knew who he was and what he stood for. Most of us, the vast majority of us, do not. Our own souls are to us like the unread books. The dangers and threats of a moment sway us and become more important than what we declare as sacred to us, and what should never be compromised. In order not to be overwhelmed by real or imaginary desires and fears, Socrates insisted on interposing *logos* between the perception of the situation in which we find ourselves and the moral decisions on which we want to build our lives. In Nalin's interpretation, Socrates' message was: calm down and think clearly about what you are facing; moral life requires rational discourse and inquiry, as it requires our sense of responsibility. Whatever challenge we face, there should be no excuses and no denying the importance of our rationally based decisions and acts. Genes and DNAs, societal environment and social class may be of use in order to understand the background of our lives, but they are not causally related to doing the right things and living in the proper way. Our rational moral deliberation is. As much as imagining and emotions are relevant for the soul, so is *logos*.

It was very important to Nalin that Socrates never identified *logos* with the soul as a whole. The soul is crippled without its eroticism, without its dark horse and irrational drives and impulses. Nalin believed that Aristotle and the Stoics

underestimated this insight and misdirected our understanding of the soul by treating it as a two-floor structure. In the upper floor of this edifice resides its legitimate tenant, our rational capacity, while the lower floor is occupied by the unruly feelings and other irrational and uncontrollable aspects of our nature. Even Christianity, Nalin was convinced, was unfortunately seduced to believe that the lower floor is the source of our problems and that its tenants should be tamed, perhaps even expelled altogether.

Nalin much preferred the story that Plato puts in the mouth of Socrates in the *Phaedrus*. Both the white horse of reason and the dark horse of passion are needed to pull the chariot of our soul toward the vision of the highest and toward life at its best. In the *Symposium*, Socrates told the story about how the priestess Diotima was instructing him that eros is a mighty force, firmly rooted in the earth but reaching to the heavens. Born of the parents who symbolize impoverishment and resourcefulness, eros drives us not only higher, but out of ourselves, out of the confines of our own egos. As logos stands behind our moral resilience, eros enables our self-transcendence.

The highest accomplishment of the Socratic combination of logos and eros is neither perfection nor romantic love; it is friendship. We win friends through truth and love. We win them not by using the same social media and dating applications, but by relating to others from the point of view of the soul, by approaching them as our soulmates. Nalin could not imagine that there may be greater joy in life than sharing time, experiences, and ideas with our friends and soulmates. Of the many gifts that Nalin possessed in abundance, the gift of friendship was the greatest.

### **The Last Message**

On March 9, 2020, Nalin delivered his last lecture. He was a guest at Annamalai University, in India. The lecture was entitled “Philosophical Psychology,” and it was intended for an audience not overly familiar with the history of Western thought. The central topic of his lecture was the story about the human soul: how it has been hijacked and what we should do to help the soul find its path toward itself. Before embarking on a short history of the understanding—and misunderstanding—of the soul in the Western tradition, Nalin emphasized the tremendous loneliness of the modern soul. We live in a restless and hostile, mechanized and dead world. In addition to our obsessions with money and machines, perhaps the deadliest trend of our modern way of life from the soul’s point of view is our increasing reliance on numbers and abstractions; straying away from directly felt experience, we are putting our faith in spreadsheets and statistical data. Nalin was concerned that we have developed the social sciences but have lost our concern for humanity in the process. Numbers and abstractions cannot help us with what

our souls are yearning for most deeply: life's meaning. In their resolve to imitate natural science, social scientists obscure from our sight the questions that should preoccupy us the most: What is our story here on the earth? What is our myth? In what myth do we live nowadays? Or do we no longer have any myth to live by?

In its obsessive rush to measure, catalog, or dissect anything that can be found on the face of the earth, the soul of modern humanity has lost interest in anything transcendent. We have forgotten that the things that mean the most are those that are beyond all numbers, concepts, and abstractions. The soul of modern humanity is reduced to a mask behind which opens the abyss of emptiness and meaninglessness.

Nalin believed that perhaps the main reason why we have lost faith in God is that we have come to realize that God—as we conceive of the divine being—cannot fix our increasingly disorienting world for us. And we have similarly lost faith in humanity because our attempts to usurp the role of God and turn the world around make it even more dehumanized. But do the central points of life consist of adjusting and problem-solving? Is the “survival of the fittest” the highest accomplishment in life?

In his last lecture, Nalin was reminding his audience of that elementary insight that should always be kept in mind: man may lose his soul and keep his life, or he may lose his life but not his soul. This is the fundamental dilemma not only of our time but of all ages, the fundamental dilemma of humanity. What is to be our ultimate priority, on what are we going to stake our lives? Sheer survival? Wealth? Political influence and power? Computers and smartphones?

Nalin's message to the audience, the last message of his public life, was: Stake it on your soul, bet on the soul!

To bet on the soul is to focus on the love song of the fully experienced moment—the moment shared with those we care about and love. It is to bet on the dance of life, with all its joys and pains, seriousness and silliness, responsibility and playfulness. It is to bet on the soul, with all its imperfections. Perfections may be respected but they cannot be loved; only what is not perfect can. To bet on the soul is to challenge ourselves to love another being—but only insofar as that being is someone out of our comfort zone: not a member of our family, nor our tribesman, nor someone who wears the same uniform, or prays the same way we do. To bet on the soul is to accept the challenge to love someone who is different: with a different accent, different skin color, different flag, or even a different God. Such loving opens our hearts and leads to a wholly different way of seeing the world and relating to it. To bet on the soul is to embrace the differences without denying them. Nalin was convinced that only

such loving out of our comfort zone can make us see the world from the point of view of the soul and live our lives guided by it.

At the end of his last lecture, Nalin posed the question that, surprised by his urge to bet on the soul, his audience was anticipating. Since it is clear to everyone that we live in a materialistically dominated and selfishly oriented world, why exactly should we bet on the soul? More precisely, what could we possibly gain by betting on the soul? This question can be answered in many ways, but Nalin felt that it was most succinctly addressed by Shakespeare in “As You Like It.” To approach the world from the point of view of the soul and to bet on the soul and win is to end up with “rich eyes and empty hands.” That was Nalin’s last word: Live in such a way that will make your heart rejoice and your soul sing—come what may.

### **The Ultimate Concerns**

While planning this volume and thinking about Nalin’s last message, I asked the contributors to leave their own comfort zone—at least that of the academic scholarship. There are no footnotes and bibliographies in the essays presented in this volume, and the poisonous abstract language and technical jargon so common in academia are reduced to a minimum. Yes, we can ‘dissect’ the soul in our academic laboratories or studies, but the outcome of such ‘anatomy lessons’ almost always turns out to be different from what we hope for: either the soul is reduced to something else, or we lose it altogether in this process. The goal of this volume is not only to preserve the soul, but to awaken it for the trials of our time.

Many of the contributors have answered Nalin’s challenge by writing about someone—or something—out of their comfort zone: out of their field of expertise, or out of their usual way of thinking. The essays by Gwenda-lin Grewal, Jameliah Inga Shorter-Bourhanou, Percy Mark, Rebecca Bratten Weiss, Alicja Pietras, Michael J. Thate, Rick Werner, and John Caputo are the testimonies to that. Other contributors, such as Roger Corriveau, Miran Božovič, Alexandra Cook, Jure Simoniti, Wayne Cristaudo, Roger Crisp, Vitomir Mitevski, Christopher Megone, Ruben Apressyan, and Christian Göbel have stayed within the familiar range of their topics, but have adjusted the style and tone of writing to make it more personal—much closer to the soul’s point of view.

Most of the contributors were friends or acquaintances of Nalin. While thinking about how to order their diverse contributions into one volume, the echo of Nalin’s soul was still vibrating in me. Nalin’s concerns with the human soul were organized around the two sets of questions. One is more directly focused on a dialogue with other beings, and indirectly with the relevance of such encounters for our well-being. The other set of questions is more

concerned with the soul's broader function and role in our civilization, and even in the cosmos as a whole. Although these two sets of questions partially overlap, for the sake of giving the structure to this volume, I have listed all contributions under one of these two headings: "The Soul in Dialogue" and "The Soul in Reflection."

The essays presented under the first heading justify Nalin's urging that we should bet on the soul. The encounters and dialogues described in these essays demonstrate that the soul in dialogue with other—human and non-human—beings still matters, and that such encounters are the source of much joy and meaning. In such dialogues and encounters, we likely find the soul at its best.

With respect to this first set of questions, the direction of our inquiry is inside-out. The soul is the focal point of view, and most aspects of life are observed from its perspective. The soul is treated as the seat of personality and the center of our value orientation. The second set of questions takes us out of that point of view and leads us to look at our lives from much broader historical and deeper cosmic perspectives. It makes an inquiry into our overarching myth—or a guiding story—that can help us understand the world as a whole and our place in it. The focus is now from the outside toward the inside. This is where our main troubles are and where Nalin's message to bet on the soul becomes both more challenging and more problematic: we do not seem to hold on to any such myth, to any such story, that can sustain us in our betting on the soul with regard to our efforts to find our proper place in the larger scheme of things. Let us clarify that a bit by first traveling back to our distant past and our distant home.

We used to believe that there is a continuous thread of development of our civilization. We can find unmistakable traces of that thread already in the *Rig Vedas*, which were compiled together more than three thousand years ago. That was the time when many of our central concepts and ideas received their first formulations; that was the era when the concept of a world soul was first intimated. The Vedic notion *ṛta*, for example, represents an impersonal and powerful force upon which the physical and ethical worlds are based, and through which they are inextricably united. This word, *ṛta*, can be translated as both truth and order, and it stands for the universal truth that gives effective strength to Vedic ritual practices, which in turn serve as the foundation for proper social organization. The term *ṛta* is based on the Sanskrit verbal root *ṛ* (go, move), which itself reflects the Indo-European verbal root *\*ar* (what fits together properly). Thus, *ṛta* signifies the cosmic law that allows the universe to run smoothly; it refers to the dynamic structure in which every object and all actions have their proper place and in which all parts support and strengthen the whole in a flowing symbiosis. The root *\*ar*, in turn, later became the basis for

the Greek *harmos*, from which the English *harmony* derives, and for the Latin *ars* (skill, craft), which became the foundation for the English words art and artist. Accordingly, the Vedic term *rta* already directs us to believe in a ‘finely tuned’ universe whose laws can give creative power to those who understand its structures and attune to its operations.

The concept of the world soul was developed from the concept of *rta* several centuries after the compilation of the *Rig Vedas*. On the vast territory, stretching from India and China all the way to Greece and Judea, and in the period roughly between the eighth and third century before Christ, emerged a vision that we call the perennial philosophy. This overarching vision emphasizes the interconnectedness of everything that exists, the continuity of events, and the oneness of the force that governs the entire universe. The perennial philosophy clarifies furthermore the place and role of human beings in the universe and assigns a definitive purpose to human life. Although it designates human beings as finite, contingent, and immersed in historical time, it also urges us to participate in and imitate the infinite, absolute, and timeless. It teaches us to liberate ourselves from the perishable, concrete, and idiosyncratic, and elevate ourselves to the ‘Olympian’ world soul’s point of view where we can experience life from the perspective of the divine.

The core of the perennial philosophy was most aptly summed up through the Sanskrit formula from the “Chandogya Upanishad”: “*Tat tvam asi*”—You are that! The message is that we are not limited to ourselves, that we are larger than just ourselves, and that we are integrally related to the whole universe. By virtue of our soul, we are structurally of the same nature as the world-soul, which governs the universe. This is so in a dual sense: we discover the divine in ourselves, but also ourselves in the divine. Expressed formally, the primary cornerstones of the perennial philosophy are: 1. There is an infinite, changeless Reality—or the world soul—beneath the world of change, and that Reality is responsible for the presence of the cosmic order and universal justice (*rta*). 2. This same Reality lies at the core of every human personality, and the human soul is guided by the same principles as that Reality. 3. The purpose of human life is to discover this Reality experientially and attune oneself to it.

With the lives and teachings of Socrates and Jesus, the perennial philosophy took a decisively ethical turn. For many in Western civilization—Nalin being one of them—this line of development reached its highest points in these two pivotal figures. Then the thread started its descent, by either transforming and disintegrating (in the Greek tradition), or by hardening and distorting (in the Judeo-Christian tradition). But this line of development was by no means straight, either in the form of a simple ascent or descent. It had its numerous ups and downs, its bumps and turnarounds.

Nalin believed, for instance, that it went significantly up again during the Renaissance, to peak in Erasmus and Shakespeare, and then it started descending again. The papers by Roger Crisp, Vitomir Mitevski, Christopher Megone, Roger Corriveau, Miran Božovič, Alexandra Cook, Alicja Pietras, Wayne Cristaudo, Jure Simoniti, Rick Werner, and Michael Thate address various points and episodes of this complex line of thinking.

With the development of science and the modern turn toward the mind and ego, the line of thinking formulated by the perennial philosophy started sinking and shrinking further and further down away from the world soul and the human soul. It redirected itself toward subjectivism and individualism, the internal and the small, the invisible particles and computer chips. The Vedic notion *ṛta* means almost nothing to us now, and most educated people have never even heard of it. We have come to the point where we are so lost in the smallness and multiplicity of things, that in our time, we can see only the individual trees but not the forest. This lack of a bigger picture and of a coherent story that would explain to us the human position and role in the larger world is what leads to that terrible loneliness that Nalin referred to in his last lecture. The great narrative thread that began with the *Rig Vedas*, and which sustained us for several millennia, has been severely frayed—if not entirely severed. We have lost the reference point from which we can understand and measure the role and relevance of the human soul.

This is the paradoxical situation in which we find ourselves. On the one hand, the souls in dialogue fill our lives with joy and meaning. On the other, because of the lack of any myth to guide our lives, we are not sure whether we should even speak about souls in general, and the human soul in particular. Since we cannot measure our souls against the world's soul, we can only measure them against each other. Yet, even that is not as simple as it sounds. In the spirit of our age, we proudly postulate that all human beings are equal, and thus that all human souls are equally important. As the recent history of humanity teaches us, there is but one short step from being equally important to being equally unimportant. And equally replaceable. And equally disposable. And if everyone is equally important and equally unimportant, how can we have any all-encompassing myth and functioning society, since any meaningful story and any social organization presuppose a hierarchy?

We do not speak much about souls and myths any longer; we speak of individuals and individual human beings. In the era of exploding technological development, if we can still talk about the soul in any but a metaphorical way, it has to be about a technologically informed and 'wired' soul. Yet, wired to whom or what? And who is it that is being wired? Is it still a soul? Is it a human soul? Is the human soul even needed anymore?



It could be, if that soul still has any important role to play in a larger scheme of things. But does it? Would we bet that it does?

This is the central intercrossing of this entire collection. Let us therefore mention several possible answers to these questions which are considered in the essays included. First, many who still look optimistically at our situation believe that we are simply and inevitably moving forward; if we have not already entered a new stage of development of human consciousness, at least we stand at its threshold. As John Caputo and Michael Thate explore this topic in their essays, we realize we may be entering a post-human era, which certainly seems to imply a post-soul era. Second, those who are less ambitious urge us to stop thinking in terms of the stages of human—or any other—development whatsoever. As the essays by Rick Werner and Jure Simoniti suggest, an alternative way of thinking about the big picture is to proclaim that there is no big picture, nor has there ever been any. Our millennia-long insistence on the big picture has been nothing but our own projection, our invention. Our choices are either to work within the perspective in which we find ourselves, or to try to escape into an available alternative perspective.

Third, and perhaps most in the spirit of our present age, the world and our lives should be approached in the sense of a stream of consciousness—or of snapshots and selfies. Even to postulate that there is a perspective of some kind is to get involved in an unjustified metaphysical speculation. All there are, and that we can know about, are only and simply impressions and expressions; they may be of local or individual significance, but they have no objective value of any kind.

There is one further option, the fourth one, that would be the closest to Nalin's way of thinking. He was convinced that the solutions for our problems could hardly ever be expected to arrive from the outside. Following Socrates, Nalin believed that virtue cannot be imparted by any teaching, however skillful or persistent the teachers may be. Nor did he have faith in sweeping social revolutions and radical social transformations. But he did believe in gradual individual transformation and growth, due to what we call a change of heart and what Nalin referred to as the impact of one soul on another. As obvious through our dialogues with others and through our friendships, the resources that the soul possesses are not negligible. To bet on the soul at this deeper level would mean to bet that within the soul—the human soul based on *logos* and *eros*—there are enough resources to help us understand again our place and role within reality. The soul supported by the transcendental order would find enough resources to help us overcome the terrible loneliness and disorientation that has overcome our lives. Friendship is not just a fleeting experience between two human beings, but a deeply intimate and

meaningful relationship. And if that be so, the value of friendship must be greater than just an individually and temporally enjoyable thing.

Opposed to the contemporary focus on the will, Nalin believed that friendship is not a matter of voluntary choice. We do not simply choose friends, as we choose what to buy in the supermarket. It seems more adequate to say that we are being seized by something, which we call *eros*. To Nalin, it suggested that those gripped in friendship carry within themselves the gravity of a distant source, and that the soul is just its transmitter—its instrument, not its master. That intimately felt but incomprehensible source we can name God, or gods—or the world soul. This is why Nalin argued that, “Fortunately or unfortunately, man cannot possess the goods of the soul; they must possess him.” Then he added: “Once impregnated by the god, men will recollect their true identity.”

Instead of trying to decide among the four options here, let us clarify them further by pointing out their connections and contrasts in terms of the following two pairs of words: novelty and originality, flowing and floating. The first and the fourth options mentioned above can be contrasted in terms of the antithetical pair of novelty and originality. While discussing creativity, we sometimes use these two words as synonymous, but they are not. Etymologically, novelty indicates something new, not present or existing before, something that has not yet been. Originality, by contrast, shifts our attention toward the origins, toward the sources, toward the past, perhaps toward what has always been and what will always be—or perhaps toward the place that is our true home.

Flowing and floating—which roughly correspond to the second and third options mentioned above—may also look similar, but there is a significant difference between them as well. When Rick Werner suggests “perspectivism” as the proper way of thinking about the human soul and our lives, he is thinking of us flowing within a larger scheme of things—which we will never cognitively comprehend, but which we also need not comprehend in order to fit in, in order to live joyful and meaningful lives. There is something bigger than us, but what it is does not matter as long as we find a way to flow with its current. Such a view may remind us of Taoism, but Werner’s pragmatism suggests that we can also reach that flow by trial and error.

Floating is more radical than flowing, because it does not presuppose anything beyond what is here and now, tangible and perceivable. Understood in that sense, floating is essentially drifting, not flowing. That drifting is what we feel in our age, and this is what we are afraid of—to be bereft of the individual human soul, with no world-soul by which to be oriented. This helpless sense of floating and drifting is the symptom of the steady decline of humanity.

One of the central premises of this volume is that the growing irrelevance of the soul and the decline of humanity have closely followed each other. Even more strongly, these two problems are intimately related and should be addressed together, and this is why we need to reconsider the proper nature and role of the human soul. Even if we are willing to bet on the soul at the micro-level of interpersonal relations, are we also willing to wager on it at the macro-level of cosmic scale? Does human existence—with the human soul as its focal point—matter in the larger scheme of things? Does it make any meaningful difference whether we are or not?

These are the big questions that are raised or intimated here, but they are not going to be resolved by this collection. Its contributors shared Nalin's oft-expressed concern that our human world, the world in which we now live and struggle, hangs from a narrow thread. In various ways and for various reasons, like Nalin, they also believe that this thread has much to do with the human soul. The challenge for you, our reader, is to hear these voices and join them in this all-important dialogue about the nature of the human soul and its relevance for the preservation and future of humanity.

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She is deeply grateful for the friendship of Nalin Ranasinghe, who supported her and her scholarship unreservedly through thick and thin.

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