

Is there life after death?

Earthly life is in contingent, physical form and inevitably it will eventually end. But does life, in the sense of personal identity, ever really end or is there life after death?

1 Post-mortem existence

Many people find the prospect of a post-mortem existence highly desirable for many reasons:

- There should be something beyond this life that gives meaning to our limited earthly existence.
- The moral law needs to be balanced, with good rewarded and evil punished, if not now then in an afterlife.
- The afterlife would be the place where human potential could be fulfilled.
- The Bible promises an afterlife as a gift from God.
- Many non-religious thinkers find the Eastern religious tradition of reincarnation attractive — the belief that the soul migrates after death to another body, until it is finally released into a higher form.

2 Philosophical problems

Human beings require three things to make up their individuality: body, memory and psychological pattern (personal identity).

If post-mortem existence does not include a body, bodily continuity is lost. If we cannot remember our previous life or lives, memory is lost. With only psychological pattern remaining, it would be impossible to determine if the same person has survived the death process without bodily continuity. Any number of post-mortem beings could look like or have the memories of any one individual. Arguably, both are needed to ensure that it is the same person. Without continuity the benefits of an afterlife would be questionable. Anthony Flew asked whether or not it was meaningful to talk about life after death — if there is life after death, is there really any death at all, since life and death must be mutually exclusive terms?

3 NDEs

In *The Light Beyond*, Dr Raymond Moody studied many cases of people who had died and been resuscitated. Many claimed similar near-death experiences (NDEs), including: floating out of their bodies, travelling down a tunnel and emerging in a world of light, being met by Jesus or by another religious figure or a dead relative, or a review of their life.

The evidence such experiences provide for an afterlife is far from conclusive. Are these people dreaming, or remembering some lost subconscious memory (cryptomnesia), or is it a hallucination caused by a lack of oxygen to the brain? How do we decide if they are hallucinatory or genuinely spiritual? Susan Blackmore makes three suggestions:

- The explanation must be coherent and specific — not just generalities.
- A theory should not suggest supernatural means without good reason.
- The theory should provide testable predictions.

The principle of credulity might suggest that we ought to take such apparent memories seriously, especially in view of the considerable coincidences between them, as evidence that what subjects thought they had experienced they really did.

Richard Swinburne

4 Parapsychology

The spiritualist movement claims that there is a spirit world where people go after death and that the dead can be communicated with by mediums. The philosophical problems are:

- The spiritualist movement has suffered at the hands of hoaxers.
- If the spirit world is real than what is the point of it? Do we just continue living as on earth?

In the Bible there is an account of how King Saul raised up the spirit of the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 28). In the Law of Moses, contacting the spirit world is expressly forbidden (Leviticus 19:31).

5 Immortality

Those who take the *dualistic* view of the body and mind, say that:

- The body is an outer shell for the self.
- This real self is within the mind or soul.
- The body dies, but the soul is immortal.

Plato suggested that the body belonged to the physical world and would one day turn to dust. However, the soul belonged to a higher realm where eternal truths will endure forever. The aim of the soul was to break free from the physical world and fly to the spiritual realm, where it would spend eternity in contemplation of the truth.

A spiritual soul cannot be corrupted, since it possesses no physical matter...the human soul cannot die.

Maritain in *Range of Reason*

6 Summum bonum

Kant believed that the purpose of existence was to achieve the *summum bonum* (perfect good). This could not be achieved by humans in one lifetime. He suggested that there was an obligation on God to help humanity to achieve the complete good by granting eternal life:

The summum bonum is only possible on the presupposition of the immortality of the soul.

John Hick suggested:

If the human potential is to be fulfilled in the lives of individuals, these lives must be prolonged far beyond the limits of our present bodily existence.

7 Soul problems

Is a soul really the same person?

- Dualists say that a person's personal identity is distinct from their body — people often talk about their real selves as if they were distinct from their bodies.
- Christian theologians disagree and suggest that identity is strongly linked to the body. For instance, Aquinas believed that the soul animated the body and gave it life:

The soul is what makes our body live.

9 Resurrection

Bodily resurrection is nothing to do with resuscitating corpses. It is the re-creation by God of the human individual, not as a physical being that has died but as a spiritual being. At the resurrection, Jesus appeared before his disciples with a body, he talked and ate with them, they touched him and they saw his scars. Yet he was different — he appeared and disappeared, he was beyond death:

Look at my hands and my feet...touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.

Luke 24:39

Paul explained that the resurrected body is spiritual and eternal:

For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.

1 Corinthians 52b-53

11 Replica theory

John Hick postulated that if someone died and appeared in a new world with the same memories and bodily features, then it would be meaningful to call this replica the same person. He argued that, since God is all powerful, it would be perfectly possible for him to create a replica body of a dead person, complete with all the individual's memories and characteristics. In *Death and Eternal Life* he wrote:

This supposition provides a model by which one may conceive of the divine re-creation of the embodied human personality.

Hick concluded that only at the end of all things would we possibly know the truth. He called this the principle of *eschatological verification*.

12 The mind-body issue

- Dualism is the notion that humans have two natures — part of them is material (physical body) and part is non-material (mind/soul). Descartes believed that the body and mind were separate but that they interact in the brain and that thinking was the necessary activity of the soul. He believed that, when a person dies, his or her soul is able to live on, with God.
- Materialism is the notion that mental occurrences are really physical events — e.g. when we feel emotion it is just the interacting of chemicals in our physical body. Gilbert Ryle described dualism as a theory about a *ghost in a machine* — that is, the ghost of the mind in the machine of the body. He believed that all mental events are really physical events interpreted in a mental way.

8 Aquinas

Aquinas accepted that the soul operates independently of the body, but said that the two had a unique link — for the soul to become individual it needs the body. He suggested three places where the soul would go after death:

- hell — a place of eternal punishment, where the worst sinners go
- purgatory — where lapsed Christians go to undergo purification and punishment to purge their souls from sin
- beatific vision — the highest joy; the unchanging vision of God — for faithful Christians and those who have completed purgatory

10 Body problems

Is the resurrected person the same person who died? If death is extinction, then the resurrected person must only be a copy of the original person.

- What about the appearance of the resurrected body? Does the body look as it did on the point of death? If not, what age is it? What of physical defects and mental or emotional problems?
- Is everyone cured? If they are made perfect, then is that really them?
- 'For the continued existence of a person, more is required than replication' (Davies).

13 Personal identity

What constitutes personal identity, and so makes a person?

- The body is the means by which we can know the identity of a person — even if the body fails and goes into a coma, we still regard that individual as a person.
- On the other hand, is a person to be limited in their identity to the body? When we think, for example, of great scholars such as Plato, it is not their bodies that define them, but their minds.

