

The appeal of a post-mortem existence

- It seems reasonable to believe that there should be something beyond this life, which 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.

Eschatological perspectives

Christian eschatology offers two eschatological perspectives: *Individual* and *Universal*.

- **Individual:** each individual will suffer death and judgement relative to their beliefs and their actions. The way in which an individual lives their earthly life brings about the conditions for the next stage of their existence, after which those judged to have been saved at the time of their death would enter heaven and enjoy the company of God, Christ and the angels. Those who die in a state of unrepented personal sin go to hell to suffer punishment, although Catholic eschatology allows for some to enter purgatory, where they undergo purification to qualify for heaven.
- **Universal:** the world will come to an end, all the dead will be raised to face a general, last judgement, and all things will come to their final consummation. The return of Jesus will be the signal for the resurrection of the dead, the good and the bad. The present heaven and earth will be destroyed and new ones take their place. Jesus will reign in glory for ever, and those who have been saved will share his reign with him.

Immortality of the soul

Those who take the dualistic view of the body and mind argue that:

- the physical body is an outer shell for the real self
- this real self is within the mind or soul
- the body will die, but the soul is immortal

Plato

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, such as justice, love and goodness, will endure for ever. The aim of the soul was to break free from the physical world and fly to the realm of the forms where it had pre-existed its incarnation, and where it would spend eternity in contemplation of the truth. At birth, the soul forgets its previous life, but through philosophy, we can be reminded of the nature of true reality and recall this lost knowledge. This process is known as *anamnesis* — literally, 'non-forgetting'. Hence, Plato claimed, 'Ordinary people seem not to realise that those who really apply themselves in the proper way to philosophy are directly and of their own accord preparing themselves for death and dying.'

Kant and Hick

Kant believed that the purpose of existence was to achieve the *summum bonum* or the perfect good. This could not be achieved by humans and so the obligation to realise it would be fulfilled by God in an afterlife. Kant argued that, 'The summum bonum is only possible on the presupposition of the immortality of the soul.' In the twentieth century, John Hick observed, '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.'

Descartes

In *Discourse on the Method* (1637), Descartes wrote, 'Our soul is of a nature entirely independent of the body, and consequently...it is not bound to die with it. And since we cannot see any other causes that destroy the soul, we are naturally led to conclude that it is immortal.' Furthermore, Descartes saw the non-physical aspect of personal identity as more reliable than the physical, which was always open to doubt and uncertainty.

RSReviewExtras



Get a revision PowerPoint summarising perspectives on post-mortem existence and print off this poster at www.hoddereducation.co.uk/rsreviewextras

Life after death

Perspectives on post-mortem existence.
See p. 33 for problems with these theories

All boards:
philosophy options

The ghost in the machine

An alternative to dualism is *materialism* or *behaviourism*, which is the view that so-called mental events are really physical events occurring to physical objects — that when we feel emotion, for instance, this is just the interacting of chemicals in our physical body. Gilbert Ryle in *The Concept of the Mind* (1949) 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 rejected the notion that body and mind are separate entities — he called it a *category mistake*. Ryle famously supported this view with the example of the university. He proposed the case of the overseas visitor who is shown around a collegiate university town, and sees the college, libraries, playing fields and such like, only to ask 'But where's the university?', failing to appreciate that the university is not something separate from its constituent parts.

Bryan McGee wrote in *Confessions of a Philosopher* (1997), 'The human body is a single entity, one subject of behaviour and experience with a single history. We are not two entities mysteriously laced together. We have made what Ryle calls a category mistake.'

Resurrection of the body

As an alternative to post-mortem existence being in the form of an immortal soul, the Judaeo-Christian tradition has asserted that it will involve a body, a recreation by God of the human individual, not as the physical being which has died, but as a spiritual being. After his resurrection, Jesus appeared before his disciples with a body, he talked and ate with them, and they touched him and saw his scars. Yet he was different. He appeared and disappeared — he was beyond death and was not to be confused with a ghost: '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 15:52–53). Clearly then, the resurrection body is strikingly different from the earthly body, and yet is recognisably bodily. Thus, we know from Paul's writings that a true believer in the first century had to hold that there was to be a resurrection and that the resurrection was to be a physical one. But Paul also makes it clear that the body with which we shall rise will not be the same as the body with which we now live and with which we may die.

John Hick's replica theory

A possible answer to these problems was offered by John Hick's replica theory, where he suggested that if someone dies and appears in a new world with the same memories and physical features then it is meaningful to call this replica the same person. For instance, Hick says that if a person in London disappeared and in the next instant appeared in New York with the same memories and bodily features, then they would be conscious of being the same person as the one who disappeared in London even though they would not understand how they had arrived in New York.

Hick argued further that since God is all powerful, it would be possible for him to create a replica body of a dead person, complete with all the individual's memories and characteristics, and to do so in a place inhabited by resurrected persons:

Mr X then dies. A Mr X replica complete with the set of memory traces which Mr X had at the last moment before his death, comes into existence. It is composed of other material than physical matter, and is located in a resurrection world which does not stand in a spatial relationship with the physical world.

Hick, J. (1966) *Faith and Knowledge*, Fount