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The self, death and the afterlife

Conceptions of the self	190
Reincarnation and karma	196
Arguments for immortality	198
Arguments against immortality	201
Summary	204
Questions for review/discussion	205
Further reading	206
Websites	207

All of the major religious traditions offer hope for satisfying the fundamental longings of humanity – longings for peace, fulfillment, and real, sustained happiness. But of course such longings are not often satisfied in this life, so the religions provide a solution: while our deepest yearnings may not be fulfilled in the here and now, they will ultimately be so. This life is not the end; we will continue to exist (in some sense) beyond death.

This claim raises a number of questions. Do we really continue to survive after we die, or is death the very end of our conscious existence? What kinds of evidence are there for such a belief, if any? If we do survive death, what will this experience be like, and what is it that survives? Will our thoughts and beliefs and memories be as they are now, or will everything change? Will I know my family and friends in the afterlife, or will we all be transformed beyond recognition? If we have thought much about life after death, these are the sorts of questions we have probably pondered. How we answer them is largely determined by our worldview or religious tradition.

While each of the world religions provides a positive answer to the question of whether there is a continued existence after death, the answers provided by them are quite different. Before we explore some of the central questions surrounding life after death, it is important to first delve into the issue of what the self is, and of what personal identity consists, for our answers to these issues will significantly influence our understanding of how we view the afterlife.

CONCEPTIONS OF THE SELF

There are various conceptions of the self which have been held historically in the East and the West, and we can delineate four of the major ones in the following manner:

- 1 dualism
- 2 materialism
- 3 monistic pantheism
- 4 the Buddhist doctrine of no-self.

We will briefly examine each one in turn.

Dualism

There have been a variety of conceptions of the self historically, and in the West dualism has been the most widely held of them all. On one major dualist account, a person consists of two substances, a material substance (the body) and an immaterial or mental substance (the soul or mind). René Descartes (1596–1650) is perhaps the most widely recognized defender of substance, or mind–body, dualism. On his account, the soul is an unextended (non-spatial) substance, and it is contrasted

with the body, an extended (spatial) substance. The soul and the body (somehow) relate to one another, but how an immaterial substance can interact with a physical substance is a mystery – a mystery which has often been castigated as the problem of the “ghost in the machine.”¹

Another form of dualism is the Thomistic view (derived from the work of Thomas Aquinas, 1225–1274) in which the soul is understood to be a complex structure that keeps in check various mental states (such as feelings, thoughts, and sensations), capacities, and structures. On this account the soul, while immaterial, is what animates, unifies, and develops the biological functions of the physical body. It is an individual's source of life as well as its ordering principle.²

In one form or another, many of those in the Western religions have been dualists as the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Qur'an all seem, on a straightforward read at least, to affirm the reality of body and soul.³ Many of the major Western philosophers, such as Plato, Aquinas, and Descartes, also held to some form of dualism. In the East, too, there are Hindu conceptions in which a distinction is held between the individual soul (*atman*) and the physical matter (*prakriti*) which makes up the body. Furthermore, most dualists – both religious and non-religious – have affirmed life after death. For some, immortality involves an embodied state, and the Jewish, Christian and Islamic views of the resurrection of the body are cases in point. For others, life after death involves being reincarnated in another physical existence – perhaps as an animal or another person. Yet for other dualists, life after death is disembodied existence where the soul is forever separated from any future physical existence.

A number of arguments have been put forth in defense of dualism, including the following. First, there is the distinction between physical events on the one hand and mental events on the other. Consider your thought of London. Does this thought have a weight, shape, smell, or taste? It seems to not be the kind of thing which can be described in terms of physics, chemistry and biology. But the *brain event* which is correlated with your thought of London is the kind of thing which is described in terms of physics, chemistry and biology. Therefore, mental events and brain events are not identical; one is physical and the other is not – they are two separate things.⁴ The dualist argues that this distinction between mental and physical things is most plausibly explained within the dualist framework.⁵

Second, and related to the first, is what's called the *knowledge argument*. The following is a well-known story by philosopher Frank Jackson which is intended to demonstrate the heart of the argument:

Mary is a brilliant scientist who is, for whatever reason, forced to investigate the world from a black and white room via a black and white television monitor. She specializes in the neurophysiology of vision and acquires, let us suppose, all the physical information there is to obtain about what goes on

when we see ripe tomatoes, or the sky, and use terms like 'red', 'blue', and so on. She discovers, for example, just which wavelength combinations from the sky stimulate the retina, and exactly how this produces via the central nervous system the contraction of the vocal cords and expulsion of air from the lungs that results in the uttering of the sentence 'The sky is blue'. ...What will happen when Mary is released from her black and white room or is given a color television monitor? Will she learn anything or not? It seems just obvious that she will learn something about the world and our visual experience of it. But then is it inescapable that her previous knowledge was incomplete. But she had *all* the physical information. *Ergo* there is more to have than that, and Physicalism [the doctrine that everything which exists can be completely described in terms of physical information] is false.⁶

Since there are different kinds of experiences (subjective and objective) and different kinds of information (physical and non-physical) which a person can have, there is a difference between the physical and the mental. So, the argument continues, some form of dualism makes more sense than materialism as a general account of the self.⁷

A third argument offered in defense of dualism comes from personal identity. Consider the following scenario. Suppose you took your automobile – whatever it is you might drive – to the repair shop. The mechanic tells you that there are a number of problems with it and that it will take him a week to get it repaired. Now suppose when you return a week later, you discover that he replaced every single part of the automobile with a new part – each fender, tire, bolt ... everything (an expensive endeavor, for sure)! Would this still be the same automobile you brought in a week earlier? It seems evident that it would not be the same one. As a matter of fact, it could be argued that even if just *one* part had been replaced it would not literally be the same automobile; it would be similar, but not identical.

So, when it comes to objects like automobiles, a change of parts (and especially essential parts) changes the identity of the object. But what about persons? Is it the same for us? If our "parts" change, are we still the same person? In one sense, all of our parts *have* changed since childhood (all, or at least most all, of the cells in the human body are regenerated/replaced every seven years), but are we not yet the same person? Is not that person in your childhood photos you? Substance dualists argue that we maintain absolute identity through change because our essence – our immaterial substantial soul – remains the same through bodily change.

Materialists have various responses to this argument. One response is to agree with the dualist that personal identity is not constituted by the physical parts of a person but rather by her memories or psychological states. Same memories or psychological states equal same person. Another response is to disagree with the dualist – to affirm that personal identity is constituted by the material parts which

make up an individual, but to add that those parts are not the body as a whole but certain fundamental parts. For example, personal identity may be constituted by some part of the brain or central nervous system – some part which doesn't change over time but literally remains the same (it is debatable whether there are such parts). Or perhaps personal identity consists in a certain continuity of parts which remain interconnected over time. For example, even though many (perhaps most!) of the parts of my automobile have been replaced by my mechanic over the past five years, it is still the same vehicle. And its identity is the same because of the continuity and interconnectedness of many of its parts.

Materialism

The idea that there is no immaterial aspect of the self – no soul or immaterial mind – has not been a prominent view historically, at least in the West. However, in the last two centuries, it has been held by a considerable number of persons, especially among those in academic settings. A host of arguments are offered to support the materialist view of the self, one being that there seems to be no reason to believe that human persons are anything more than the matter of which they are constituted. Philosopher Paul Churchland expresses the view concisely:

[T]he important point about the standard evolutionary story is that the human species and all of its features are the wholly physical outcome of a purely physical process... If this is the correct account of our origins, then there seems neither need, nor room, to fit any nonphysical substances or properties into our theoretical account of ourselves. We are creatures of matter. And we should learn to live with that fact.⁸

Further arguments have been offered to support the materialist view, and most of them hinge on the claim that a physical brain is necessary for a functioning mind. On one materialist view, called the *identity theory*, all mental properties are identical to physical properties of the brain. The mind just is the activity of the brain, and so there is no need to posit some additional immaterial mind or soul to account for reason, emotion, will, or consciousness. Much of the evidence in support of this view comes from the apparent neural dependence of mental phenomena. For example, narcotics, alcohol, and other drugs affect one's mental abilities, as do various brain diseases. This makes sense if the mind is the activity of the brain, but not so, it is argued, if the mind is a separate immaterial substance. Dualists respond by claiming that there is a *causal connection* between brain states and mental states but from this, they maintain, it does not necessarily follow that mental states are *identical* to brain states. Identity theorists reply that there is no need to add an additional substance when the data can be explained with just the one.⁹



Figure 10.1 The mind as a black box

For a number of reasons which we cannot go into here, the identity theory has been in decline in recent years. Another materialist view has grown in prominence and is probably the dominant view today among philosophers of mind and cognitive scientists. This view is called *functionalism*.¹⁰ Functionalists maintain (as do dualists) that it is impossible to identify particular mental states with particular brain states. However, it is possible to characterize mental states by reference to behavior. On the functionalist account, the mind is like a black box and can be explained in terms of inputs and outputs. Consider this analogy. I do not know how this computer on which I am typing works; I am totally unfamiliar with its internal structures, parts and inner workings. Nevertheless, I don't need to know such information. What counts is that given certain inputs, certain outputs follow. When I hit the letter "j" for example, a j shows up on the screen. To me, the computer is a black box.

Furthermore, computational functions can occur in different mediums. The earliest computers were made out of materials that were very different from what they are made of today, and their internal and external structures were quite different as well. Nevertheless, they could perform many of the same computations as modern computers (such as adding $2 + 2$). On the functionalist account, the mind is a black box – it is like a living computer. In human persons, computational processes are fully realized in material structures, as they are in computers, and so no additional non-material entities (such as an immaterial mind or soul) needs to be posited to explain them.

For some materialists there is no life after death. Once the physical body dies, the person perishes forever. For other materialists, life after death is a real possibility. Recent Christian materialists, for example, maintain that there will be life after death when God raises the body back to life again in the eschaton.¹¹ We will examine the possibility of resurrection later.

Monistic pantheism

Another view of the self, which is held primarily by those in the Advaita Vedānta school of Hinduism, is monistic pantheism – "monism" (reality is a unified whole – there are no distinctions of things); and "pantheism" (all is divine). According to Advaita Vedānta, ultimate reality (which is typically referred to as "Brahman") is undifferentiated and beyond all qualities, including personhood. The universe flows from Brahman, whose very nature includes *maya* – an illusory aspect from which apparent differentiation and individuality emerged. Individual selfhood is an illusion,

A jar made of clay is not other than clay. It is clay essentially. The form of the jar has no independent existence. What, then, is the jar? Merely an invented name!

The form of the jar can never be perceived apart from the clay. What, then, is the jar? An appearance! The reality is the clay itself.

This universe is an effect of Brahman. It can never be anything else but Brahman. Apart from Brahman, it does not exist. There is nothing beside Him. He who says that this universe has an independent existence is still suffering from delusion. He is like a man talking in his sleep.

Shankara ([eighth century]1947)

however, and a product of *maya*. The true self, or *Atman*, is in reality Brahman. This is reflected in the well-known Vedāntin phrase, "That art Thou."¹²

When one finally reaches enlightenment, or *moksha*, one escapes the clutches of this grand illusion and becomes aware of one's true Self as undifferentiated Brahman. A simile which is sometimes used here is that Brahman is like Space and individual selves are like space in jars. When the jars are destroyed the space in the jars merges back into Space. Enlightenment breaks open the jars, and individual identity is ultimately seen as being absorbed into undifferentiated Brahman.¹³ Achieving *moksha* is an arduous task, however, and for the Vedāntin the process by which one attains it involves working off the negative effects of karma, typically through a succession of reincarnations.¹⁴

No-self

For a number of reasons Buddhists are not satisfied with the dualist, materialist, and Hindu views of the self. We saw back in Chapter 3 the Buddhist doctrine of *Anatman* (no-self). This view is based on the Buddhist metaphysics in which there is no "thing" that has independent existence; there are no individual substances. Similar to the Advaitin view noted above, a central truth of one school of Buddhism, the Mahayana school, is that the individual self does not exist and our belief that it does is merely an illusion. But contrary to the Advaitin view, there are various experiences, desires, feelings, and cravings which are real and are in continual flux.

Nevertheless, there is no self of which they are constituents. The following account of the Buddha's teachings on the matter is found in the sermon entitled "The Not-self Characteristic" as found in the *Anatta-lakkhana sutta* of the Pali Canon (Buddhist scriptures):

The body, monks, is not self. If the body were the self, this body would not lend itself to dis-ease. It would be possible (to say) with regard to the body, "Let my body be thus. Let my body not be thus." But precisely because the body is not self, the body lends itself to dis-ease. And it is not possible (to say) with regard to the body, "Let my body be thus. Let my body not be thus."

Feeling is not self... Perception is not self... Mental processes are not self.... Consciousness is not self. If consciousness were the self, this consciousness would not lend itself to dis-ease. It would be possible (to say) with regard to consciousness, "Let my consciousness be thus. Let my consciousness not be thus." But precisely because consciousness is not self, consciousness lends itself to dis-ease. And it is not possible (to say) with regard to consciousness, "Let my consciousness be thus. Let my consciousness not be thus."

Thus, monks, any body [or consciousness, or feeling, or perception, etc.] whatsoever – past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle, common or sublime, far or near; every body [or consciousness, or feeling, or perception, etc.] – is to be seen as it actually is with right discernment as: "This is not mine. This is not myself. This is not what I am."¹⁵

An old Indian chariot analogy is often cited regarding the no-self view. A chariot is not the spokes, or the wheels, or the frame, or the axle; it's none of the individual parts. Neither is it the individual parts taken together. Yet neither is it something other than the parts. It turns out to be merely the sound of the word "chariot." So too with individual selves.¹⁶

Buddhists grant that grasping the no-self teaching may not be easy; here too it may well require working off the negative effects of karma and multiple reincarnations to come to this realization.

So we have four distinctive conceptions of the self, and they each provide unique views about death and the afterlife. For the materialist, life after death is possible if the body can be raised from the dead or in some way be reconstituted. For the dualist, physical death is not necessarily the end of the self either, for the soul may well continue to exist in the afterlife, either embodied or disembodied. For the Hindu pantheistic and Buddhist no-self conceptions, reincarnation and karma are of fundamental importance for understanding what happens after the body dies. We will look next at reincarnation and karma.

REINCARNATION AND KARMA

There are interesting similarities between the religions of the East and the West regarding death and the afterlife. For example, they both offer an eternal hope beyond the grave – hope for ultimately satisfying (or, as we will see below, extinguishing) the longings experienced in this life. But there are also significant differences between

them. Perhaps the most striking difference is the widespread belief among those in the East in karma and reincarnation.

In its popular formulations, reincarnation is the view that the conscious self transmigrates from one physical body to the next after death. Each human being has lived former lives, perhaps as another human being or perhaps as another kind of organism, such as an animal. Some people claim to have memories of experiences from previous lives. For example, there is the famous case of an Indian boy named Parmod Sharma. As a young boy, Parmod began remembering specific details about his life as a man named Parmanand. He told his mother that she didn't need to cook meals for him any longer because he had a wife in Moradabad (a town about ninety miles away from Parmod's home). He then began speaking about many of the specifics of his life as a businessman who owned several shops – even offering the company names, including a biscuit and soda shop called "Mohan Brothers" – and described details about his wife and family. Not only did he claim to be married, but he had five children, four sons and a daughter!

Word got out about Parmod's story, and eventually reached the ears of a family in Moradabad who fit his descriptions to a tee. Turns out the family did own a biscuit shop called "Mohan Brothers" and one of the brothers, Parmanand, died eighteen months prior to Parmod's birth. Parmanand had left a widow and five children, four sons and a daughter. This story and thousands of others like it have been investigated and many of them published.¹⁷ While a number of them turn out to be explainable by cryptoamnesia, or hidden memories, many of them cannot.

Reincarnation is an essential doctrine for both Hindus and Buddhists. But one might wonder how reincarnation makes sense within a Buddhist view of no-self. Indeed, there is much debate among Buddhist scholars on this subject.¹⁸ One of the more influential answers is that at the death of consciousness (or the dissolution of the *skandhas* – mental events or bundles¹⁹), a new consciousness arises. This is called "rebirth," a term which better captures the meaning of the event than "reincarnation." This new consciousness is not identical to the former, but neither is it completely different from it. There is a causal connection between them as they form a part of the same causal continuum. For many Buddhists, the reason for the widespread belief in an individual self is ignorance (*avidya*). In order to move beyond ignorance and experience enlightenment, or *nirvana*, one must understand this no-self teaching as well the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path described back in Chapter 3.

Reincarnation is usually connected with the doctrine of *karma*, the idea that we reap the good and bad consequences of our actions, either in this life or in another. Those who affirm reincarnation and karma often point to a difficulty they see with the Western view: it seems exceedingly unfair that one child is born healthy into a wealthy, loving family whereas another child is born sickly into a poor, cruel environment. If there is a Creator God who brought these two persons into the world, such a God seems to be unloving and unjust. However, if the two children are

a → b → c → d → e → f → g

The letters a, b, c, etc., represent the life circumstances of a particular individual; the arrows represent the causal flow of circumstances from one's previous life to the next.

Figure 10.2 The karmic law of cause and effect

reaping the consequences of actions they performed in previous lives, this seems to provide a justification for the inequalities. The effect of one's karma determines the circumstances of our present and future lives; we reap what we sow.

Another reason sometimes offered for the belief in reincarnation is that many people claim to have experienced a previous life, and sometimes they can even document events which have occurred hundreds or thousands of years prior to their birth.²⁰ Even the more common *déjà vu* experiences are cited as evidence of reincarnation.

A number of objections have also been raised against reincarnation. For one, does it really offer a plausible explanation for the inequalities found in this life? According to the karmic law of cause and effect, my present life circumstances are explained by my actions in a previous life. And my life circumstances in that life are explained by my life circumstances in a life previous to that one. And so on indefinitely. So the solution we hoped for regarding inequalities seems to never come to an end; it ends up being relegated to the dustbins of the infinite past. Furthermore, does it really seem fair that when a person who has lived a long life dies and is reincarnated, she must start all over again as a baby with her maturity, life experiences, wisdom, and memories completely gone?

So we have examined four views of the self. On the materialist view, a person is the physical matter of which he or she is composed. On such a view, life after death would be possible if the matter was somehow brought back to life (on the identity theory) or if the mental processes of the brain were somehow transferred to a different medium after death (on the functionalist account). For the dualist, life after death could involve either an embodied or disembodied existence, and we will examine arguments for and against these possibilities below. Reincarnation and karma typically accompany the pantheist and no-self views. On both accounts there is life after death, but the afterlife involves a series of reincarnations and a radical transformation of what the individual understands herself to be: divine for the pantheist and impermanent non-substantiality for the Buddhist.

ARGUMENTS FOR IMMORTALITY

There are a number of arguments put forth by those who believe in immortality.²¹ We will limit our examination to four.

Near-death experiences

The first argument we shall examine is based on near-death experiences (NDEs) which have allegedly been had by tens of millions of people.²² NDEs are common patterns of events associated with impending death. They include a multitude of sensations such as fear, serenity, the presence of light, traveling through a tunnel, a heightened spiritual awareness, leaving the body and looking down on one's body, and meeting other persons or supernatural beings.

Astonishingly, virtually everyone who has had an NDE has concluded that there is life after death based on what they saw or felt.²³ Of course these experiences could be illusions or delusions or hallucinations, but the following elements of the experiences lend support to their veracity:

- 1 they are widely experienced by persons from diverse backgrounds and belief systems
- 2 there are common characteristics to the experiences
- 3 the experiences are sometimes quite specific with information otherwise unavailable to the person (such as locating objects in the room during surgery which were not present while the patient was alive/awake; describing an event in another location which occurred during surgery, etc.).

Besides NDEs, millions of people have described having other types of out-of-body experiences (OBEs) as well, including reincarnation and astral projection. While the evidence for NDEs and OBEs is not conclusive, such experiences provide some warrant for the belief in a soul which is separate from the body. If the soul exists and can be separated from the body, then life after death is a reasonable inference.

Resurrection

Some religions – most notably Judaism and Christianity – include the belief that our physical bodies will, in the eschaton, be resurrected from the dead. On the historic

My recent [near-death] experiences have slightly weakened my conviction that my genuine death, which is due fairly soon, will be the end of me, though I continue to hope that it will be. They have not weakened my conviction that there is no god. I trust that my remaining an atheist will allay the anxieties of my fellow supporters of the Humanist Association, the Rationalist Press, and the South Place Ethical Society.

A. J. Ayer²⁴

Christian account, one bodily resurrection has already occurred: Jesus of Nazareth. Easter, of course, is the Christian celebration of this unique event. The Apostle Paul actually uses Jesus' resurrection as evidence for our own future bodily resurrection.²⁵

There is much debate in the recent literature in philosophy of religion and biblical studies on the meaning of and evidence for the resurrection of Jesus.²⁶ Many biblical scholars – both those who believe that Jesus was resurrected from the dead and those who do not – agree with the following:

- 1 Jesus died on a cross and was placed in a tomb.
- 2 Jesus' body was gone from the tomb soon after his death (or at least the disciples believed this).
- 3 Jesus' disciples believed he was resurrected from the dead and appeared to and spoke with them.
- 4 Key Jewish leaders, including Saul of Tarsus (who became the Apostle Paul) and Jesus' brother James, were converted to belief in and worship of Jesus shortly after his death.

The question then becomes what best explains this data. Gary Habermas, Stephen Davis, and William Lane Craig are notable scholars who argue that Jesus' literal, bodily resurrection provides the best explanation of the historical facts. Michael Martin, Antony Flew, and Robert Price are notable scholars who argue that a naturalistic account provides the best explanation of the historical facts about Jesus' body after his death. They maintain that there are reasonable, non-miraculous explanations for the emergence of the belief in Jesus' resurrection after his death, and so there is no reason to affirm a supernatural one.

The resurrection debate continues, but one solid conclusion we can reach is this: if there is reason to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead (and this is hotly contested), then this would provide evidence for life after death.

The nature of God

For most theists across the religious spectrum, including such towering historical figures as Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), Avicenna (980–1037), and Madhva (1238–1317), God is understood to be infinitely good, loving, wise, and just. As such, God is not the kind of being who would create human beings with the longings and aspirations we all have, such as life after death, on the one hand, and then let them go eternally unsatisfied on the other. So, the argument goes, we can rest assured that there will be life after this life; God will make it so. Furthermore, if you love someone, you would not want them to cease to exist. Since God loves us with a perfect love, he would not want us to cease existing. So God will ensure our eternal existence.

Sri Madhvacarya, also known as **Madhva** (1238–1317) was the founder of the Dvaita or dualist school of Hindu Vedānta philosophy. He believed and argued that the Vedāntan canonical texts (the sacred Hindu scriptures including the Vedas and the Bhagavadgita) teach that there is a real, fundamental difference between the self (*Atman*) and ultimate reality (Brahman). This is in contrast to the Advaita Vedānta school in which *Atman* is identified with Brahman.

These assurances, of course, are not as certain as we might hope them to be. For as we will see below, even if God exists, there could be good reasons why a loving, just, and omnibenevolent God would not desire that we live on endlessly.

The nature of the soul

Both ancient and modern philosophers have argued for immortality based on the indestructible nature of the soul. Plato (428–347 BCE), for example, in his book *Phaedo* argues that if we practice philosophy in the right way we can be cheerful in the face of death, for the soul of the one who rightly practices philosophy is immortal since it is pure and simple (that is, has no parts) and divine-like. As such, it cannot be scattered or destroyed.²⁷ More recently, J. M. E. McTaggart (1866–1925) has also offered an argument for the immortality of soul based on its simplicity.²⁸ He argues that the soul is probably immortal since 1) it is not constituted by separable parts, and so cannot be destroyed through a separation of its parts (as material objects are destroyed), and 2) it probably cannot be annihilated since there is no evidence that anything is ever annihilated (even material objects don't just cease existing).

However, even if it is the case that we have an immaterial soul which does not consist of parts, one might ask why it could not simply cease existing with the death of the body? Perhaps like a magnetic field which is destroyed with the destruction of the magnet, so too the soul is destroyed with the destruction of the body.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST IMMORTALITY

There are also a number of arguments against immortality, and we will consider three of them.

The dependency of consciousness on the brain

One of the central arguments against immortality can be put this way:

- 1 In order for a human being to be immortal, the individual human self must survive physical death.
- 2 To be an individual human self entails being (able to be) conscious.
- 3 For an individual human self to be conscious, he or she needs a live, physical brain.
- 4 But the physical brain dies when the physical body dies.
- 5 Therefore, the individual human self dies when the body dies.
- 6 Therefore, a human being cannot be immortal.

The main premise in question for our purposes is 3, and several kinds of evidence are cited in support of it. First, and as we saw earlier in this chapter, since drugs and brain diseases affect mental abilities and consciousness, this provides strong empirical evidence that brain activity and consciousness depend on the brain (or are identical to the workings of the brain). Similarly, brain damage also affects consciousness and mental capabilities. Beyond this, various mental abilities are locatable in the brain. For example, the prefrontal cortex is the area of the brain in which the operations of consciousness, thinking, learning, and imagination occur. Taken together, these facts offer strong support that for an individual human self to be conscious, he or she needs a live, physical brain. Since dead persons lack a live, physical brain, there cannot be conscious life after death.

One response to this argument is that while having a live, functional physical brain may be a *sufficient* condition for consciousness, it is not a *necessary* condition. A number of dualists, for example, maintain that the soul continues to exist in a conscious state even after the death of the body.²⁹ Another response is to agree that individual human selves do need a live, physical brain to be conscious, and that will not be conscious following the death of the body (unless, say, God gives them a new body). However, they will be conscious once again when they are bodily resurrected from the dead (as noted above, bodily resurrection is a Jewish and Christian view).

Personal identity

Another argument against life after death directed at the dualist has to do with personal identity. If souls continued to exist in a disembodied state after the death of the physical body, then what would identify them as unique, individual entities? I can identify my friend Jim as the unique individual he is by pointing to him, or describing his physical characteristics, or perhaps by noting the way he behaves when in certain situations. But if Jim had no physical body, how could he possibly be identified as Jim? How could he be distinguished from, say, my other friends Terry, Tim and Kris? What would it be that made him the unique person he was when embodied?

A dualist could respond by claiming that even if it were not possible for one to identify a disembodied soul, or to distinguish one soul from another, it does

not follow that such disembodied souls could not exist. While there might be an epistemic (knowledge) problem, it does not follow that there is an ontological (being) problem. Furthermore, since many monotheists believe that immortality will be embodied, it could be the resurrected body which constitutes the criterion for re-identification after death (from an external, third-person perspective) while the immaterial soul would constitute the survival criterion (from an internal, first-person perspective).

Eternal misery

One final argument against life after death does not entail a materialist view of the self as do those above. This argument can be utilized by materialists or dualists, by theists, pantheists or atheists. The argument runs this way. Even given the existence of a loving, kind, and gracious God, post-mortem existence may not be desirable; in fact, it may be boring or tedious or even downright horrifying. In this regard Grace Jantzen makes the following point:

A paradise of sensuous delights would become boring, it would in the long run be pointless and utterly unfulfilling. We can perhaps imagine ways of making a very long feast meaningful; we do, after all, cope with lengthy terrestrial social occasions by choosing interesting conversational partners, and making the dinner occasions not merely for food and drink but also for stimulating discussion and for giving and receiving friendship the value of which extends beyond the termination of the dinner. But if the feasting literally never came to an end, if there were no progress possible from the sensuous enjoyment of paradise to anything more meaningful, then we might well wish, like Elina Macropolis, to terminate the whole business and destroy the elixir of youth.³⁰

So eternal life might well be boring, pointless and unfulfilling. Heaven could be hell.

While Jantzen doesn't argue that there is no life after death, she does argue that it cannot be inferred from the claim that God is loving. She continues:

Christian theologians increasingly recognize that it is not the case that the whole earth, every primrose, every songbird, all the galaxies of all the heavens, exist for the benefit of humanity alone. Yet it is true that God brought about the existence of all these things and delights in them; then it is also true that some of the things he delights in perish forever... Just as that which is morally valuable is valuable for its own sake and not for the reward it can bring, so also trust in God, if it is worthwhile at all, is worthwhile even if it cannot go on forever. A relationship with another human being does not become pointless just because at some point

it will end with the death of one of the partners; why should it be thought that a relationship with God would be pointless if one day it too should end?³¹

So eternal sensuous delights won't do it for us. What could a never-ending life be like such that it would be truly and eternally enjoyable – something we would desire forever? Perhaps there is no answer. Maybe Emily Dickinson got it right: "That it will never come again is what makes life so sweet." Perhaps even if God gave us a soul, there is no never-ending afterlife, for it would be just too miserable.

Charles Taliaferro responds to Jantzen's argument by making a distinction between a *time-enclosed good*, which he defines as "any good project, thing, event, state or process which is good but its good value is not preserved if it is temporally unlimited in extent" (e.g. eating a tasty meal), and a *non-time-enclosed good*, which he defines as "any good project, event, state or process which is good and its good value is not lost if it is temporally unlimited in extent."³² He claims that for an afterlife to be truly good, it cannot consist of a singular time-enclosed good. But there is no reason to believe that an afterlife cannot include an indefinite variety of time-enclosed and non-time-enclosed goods. If God is omniscient and omnipotent, it seems God could certainly create an indefinite number of such goods. Taliaferro further argues that if we have reason to believe God deeply loves us, then we have reason to believe that God will preserve our lives, especially since as persons we possess a value which is not exhausted over time.

SUMMARY

In this chapter we have examined different conceptions of the self and the afterlife. We first focused on four unique conceptions of the self: dualism, materialism, monistic pantheism, and the Buddhist doctrine of no-self. For the materialist, life after death, if there is such life, would entail the continued existence (or the reconstituted existence) of the individual physical body. For the dualist, life after death could involve either an embodied or disembodied existence and the individual would exist in the afterlife as the very same person because he or she has the very same soul. For the monistic pantheist and no-self views, reincarnation and karma play a fundamental role both in this life and the next. For the pantheist the self is ultimate, undifferentiated reality. However, it may take many lifetimes to come to this realization. For the adherent of the no-self view, there is no substantial self, and (as with the pantheist) it may take many reincarnations to finally and fully recognize this fundamental truth.

We next examined arguments for and against personal immortality. We first looked at several arguments for immortality: near death experiences, resurrection, the nature of God, and the nature of the soul. While there are evidences for immortality, none of them offer conclusive proof. We then looked at several arguments against

immortality: the dependency of consciousness on the brain, personal identity, and eternal misery. The evidences against immortality are impressive, but here too they are inconclusive.

Who we are and what happens to us after death are perennial questions that human beings have pondered for millennia. Reflecting on such questions will, no doubt, continue to be a part of the human intellectual experience in this life and, perhaps, even beyond.

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW/DISCUSSION

- 1 Which view of the self do you find most persuasive? What are your reasons?
- 2 Do you agree with the materialist argument that since there is neural dependence on mental activity (being drunk affects one's ability to reason, for example) there is no need to posit some additional immaterial mind or soul to account for reason, emotion, will, or consciousness? Why? How might a dualist respond?
- 3 Explain the knowledge argument. Do you find it persuasive? Why or why not?
- 4 Do you believe in life after death? State your reasons for believing what you do about this matter.
- 5 What are some reasons for believing in reincarnation and karma? Evaluate one or two of those reasons.
- 6 Which argument against immortality do you believe is the strongest? Why? Evaluate the premises of this argument.
- 7 Of the four arguments for immortality presented in this chapter, the first two include empirical evidence and the latter two include religious/philosophical evidence. With respect to immortality, which type of evidence do you find most persuasive? Why?
- 8 Do some research on the evidence for near-death experiences (see Further reading and Websites below). Does this evidence make it more plausible to believe in life after death? Why or why not?
- 9 Do you agree with the claim that eternal life would end up being boring and pointless? What kinds of activities might keep it forever interesting and meaningful?
- 10 If there is no life after death, does this lead to a nihilistic view of life? Explain.

FURTHER READING

- Baker, Lynne Rudder (2000) *Persons and Bodies: A Constitution View*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Defends a constitution view of human persons and offers a detailed account of the relation between persons and their bodies.)
- Churchland, Paul M. (1992) *Matter and Consciousness: A Contemporary Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind*, rev. edition. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. (Presents pros and cons of various positions in the mind/body debate, including dualism, behaviorism, reductive materialism, functionalism and eliminative materialism; defends a materialist view of the mind.)
- Cooper, John (2000) *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. (Utilizing the fields of theology, philosophy and science, Cooper defends what he calls "holistic dualism.")
- Davis, Stephen T. (1993) *Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. (Argues that the Christian belief in the bodily resurrection of persons is rational on historical, philosophical, and theological grounds.)
- Edwards, Paul, ed. (1992) *Immortality*. New York: Macmillan. (An important collection of articles on the subject.)
- Flew, Antony (1987) *The Logic of Immortality*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. (A philosophical critique of the doctrine of immortality.)
- Habermas, Gary and J. P. Moreland (2004) *Beyond Death: Exploring the Evidence for Immortality*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock. (Explores the nature, evidence, and implications of immortality.)
- Hasker, William (1999) *The Emergent Self*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. (Challenges materialist views of the mind and argues for an emergent individual.)
- Hick, John (1987) *Death and Eternal Life*. New York: Harper and Row. Reissued by Macmillan. (An excellent, broad treatment of topics connected with death and survival; argues that philosophical and scientific objections to survival after death can be challenged.)
- Le Poidevin, Robin (1996) *Arguing for Atheism: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*. New York: Routledge. (An erudite but readable presentation by a leading philosopher; Chapter 10 focuses on death.)
- Moody, Raymond (2001) *Life After Life: The Investigation of a Phenomenon – Survival of Bodily Death*. San Francisco, CA: HarperOne. (Originally published by Mockingbird Books in 1975, this is the first modern account of near-death experiences by the man who coined the term.)
- Perry, John (1979) *Personal Identity and Immortality*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett. (An insightful and entertaining dialogue on personal identity.)
- Plato ([c. 386–380 BCE] 1997) *Phaedo*, trans. G. M. A. Grube. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett. (One of Plato's masterpieces in which he offers an argument for the immortality of the soul.)
- Searle, John (1998) *Mind, Language and Society*. New York: Basic Books. (An accessible work on the mind and language by a leading philosopher; Chapter 2 argues for the mind as a biological phenomenon.)
- Swinburne, Richard (1997) *The Evolution of the Soul*, rev. edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (An erudite and forceful defense of mind/body dualism.)
- Taliaferro, Charles (1994) *Consciousness and the Mind of God*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Defends a non-materialistic view of persons and the reasonableness of viewing God as a non-physical, spiritual reality.)

Ward, Keith (1998) *Religion and Human Nature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. (Examines the views of the world religions on the soul and its destiny; also offers a philosophical analysis of reincarnation and resurrection.)

Zaleski, Carol (1987) *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experiences in Medieval and Modern Times*. New York: Oxford University Press. (Compares recent near-death narratives with those of earlier historical periods.)

WEBSITES

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/afterlife>

A helpful and concise entry from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* on the afterlife by philosopher of religion William Hasker.

<http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/lifeafterdeath/immortality/>

An infidels.org site which includes a good number of articles on life after death, immortality, and related topics.

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/p/person-i.htm>

An informative entry on personal identity from *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* by philosopher Carsten Korfmacher.

<http://www.mircea-eliade.com/from-primitives-to-zen/eschat.html>

A compilation of sources from a variety of religious traditions on death and the afterlife.

<http://www.iands.org/pubs/jnds/index.php>

The online *Journal of Near-Death Studies* published by the International Association of Near-Death Studies.

http://www.healthsystem.virginia.edu/internet/personalitystudies/case_types.cfm

This site contains ongoing research into out-of-body experiences, near-death experiences, and reincarnation at the University of Virginia Health Science Center, Division of Personality Studies.