

# Life after death

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There are two main philosophical questions about life after death. The first is: does the idea make sense? The second is: is there any reason to believe that it is real? We'll discuss these in turn.

## 1. DOES LIFE AFTER DEATH MAKE SENSE?

The main question about whether life after death makes sense is this: is it possible that someone could be raised from the dead a certain number of years after my death, and still be *me*? This question is intimately connected with questions about what it takes for one person to continue to exist over time.

There is no obvious philosophical problem with the idea that a God who created the universe could also, at some point, raise up bodies and given them life. The philosophical problems rather concern the claim that some of those living beings would be us.

One way to see the problems is to imagine that I come into class one day and claim to be identical to — the same person as — Knute Rockne.

You might naturally want to ask me some questions: “Do you remember coaching Notre Dame in the 1920’s?” “Did George Gipp really say those things on his deathbed?” “What caused that plane crash over Kansas in 1931?” “Did you emerge from Rockne’s gravesite in Highland Cemetery?”

Now suppose that I respond that I haven’t the faintest idea about any of these things; no recollection of coaching Notre Dame, no memory of knowing George Gipp, etc. And that I was born in the usual way and that Rockne’s body is, as far as I know, still in his grave.

You might reasonably be more than a little bit puzzled. You might wonder how I could know that I am Knute Rockne. But you also might wonder, more fundamentally, about

the intelligibility of my claim to be Rockne. If, as it seems, I have nothing at all in common with Rockne, how could I be him?

Two sources of this puzzlement: lack of psychological continuity, and lack of physical continuity.

Corresponding to these sources of puzzlement are two different views about the nature of personal identity over time.

### *1.1. The psychological theory*

These views might seem like they come to pretty much the same thing. But there are apparently coherent descriptions of cases in which they seem to come apart. One is due to John Locke:

**For should the Soul of a Prince, carrying with it the consciousness of the Prince's past Life, enter and inform the Body of a Cocker as soon as deserted by his own Soul, every one sees, he would be the same Person with the Prince, accountable only for the Prince's Actions**

Does this sort of example make sense? Does it show that the psychological theory is to be preferred to materialism about persons?

Many have thought that it does. And this might seem to be good news for the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. After all, the best case scenario for our bodies would seem to be death followed by burial — but given that bodies decay in the ground, it might seem hard to see how any body to which God gave life at some later time could be the same material object as my body.

By contrast, many have thought that the psychological theory makes the resurrection of the dead relatively easy to understand. An example is John Hick, and his example of 'John Smith':

**Suppose, first, that someone — John Smith — living in the USA were suddenly and inexplicably to disappear from before the eyes of his friends, and that at the same moment an exact replica of him were inexplicably to appear in India. The person who appears in India is exactly similar in both physical and mental characteristics to the person who disappeared in America. There is continuity of memory, complete similarity of bodily features including fingerprints, hair and eye coloration, and stomach contents, and also of beliefs, habits, emotions, and mental dispositions. Further, the “John Smith” replica thinks of himself as being the John Smith who disappeared in the USA. After all possible tests have been made and have proved positive, the factors leading his friends to accept “John Smith” as John Smith would surely prevail and would cause them to overlook even his mysterious transference from one continent to another, rather than treat “John Smith,” with all John Smith’s memories and other characteristics, as someone other than John Smith.**

Hick then extends the example so that the reappearance of Smith occurs after his death; and then that the reappearance occurs in a different universe.

This seems to make the possibility of life after death unproblematic: all God would have to do is bring to life someone with the same personality, memories, etc. as me.

A problem for this: Parfit’s example of teletransportation.

In fact we can see something like Parfit’s problem as lurking behind Hick’s description of the resurrection. For we were supposing there that all that it takes for God to resurrect me is for him to create a being psychologically continuous with me in certain ways. But surely if it is possible for God to do that, it is possible for God to create multiple beings which are psychologically continuous with me. But if one of those beings is me, so are all the others. And from this it follows that there could be multiple distinct beings each of which is identical to me. And this, given the transitivity of identity, is not possible.

## *1.2. Materialism*

Notably, when we look at Aquinas on life after death, we find hardly any discussion of psychological continuity or memory. Here is a statement that tells us a lot about how Aquinas thinks about life after death and personal identity:

The necessity of holding the resurrection arises from this -- that man may obtain the last end for which he was made; for this cannot be accomplished in this life, nor in the life of the separated soul ... otherwise man would have been made in vain, if he were unable to obtain the end for which he was made. And since it behooves the end to be obtained by the selfsame thing that was made for that end, lest it appear to be made without purpose, it is necessary for the selfsame man to rise again; and this is effected by the selfsame soul being united to the selfsame body. For otherwise there would be no resurrection properly speaking, if the same man were not reformed.

Here Aquinas seems to be thinking of human beings as things which are made up of two things: a body, and a soul. Thus, he thinks, for a human being to be resurrected, what is needed is for that human being's soul to be re-joined to that human being's body. It seems as though he would have endorsed the following claim:

*The same body requirement*

If A does not have the same body as B, then A and B are not the same person

As Aquinas recognized, this view leads to immediate problems in making sense of the possibility of resurrection: for after I die, my body will decay, and hence won't be around at the time of the resurrection. Given the same body requirement, doesn't this just imply that I will not be raised from the dead?

Aquinas seems to think of the resurrection as a kind of *reassembly* of the particles that composed me in life. But this leads to two different kinds of worries.

- (1) The worry about cannibalism, which Aquinas discussed at length.
- (2) The fact that reassembly does not seem to be sufficient for me to continue existing, as is brought out by the following example from van Inwagen:

And reassembly is not enough, for I have been composed of different atoms at different times. If someone says, "If, in a thousand years, God reassembles the atoms that are going to compose you at the moment of your death, those reassembled atoms will compose you," there is an obvious objection to his thesis. If God can, a thousand years from now, reassemble the atoms that are going to compose me at the moment of my death—and no doubt He can—, He can also reassemble the atoms that compose me right now. In fact, if there is no overlap between the two sets of atoms, He could do both, and set the two resulting persons side by side. And which would be I? Neither or both, it would seem, and, since not both, neither.

This is a problem analogous to the problem that Parfit's examples of teletransportation led to for the psychological theory.

But if we are material things, what else could be required for our survival other than reassembly of what composes us? A plausible answer: causal continuity. van Inwagen offers a proposal of how resurrection within a materialist scheme could work:

... I proposed a solution to this problem that has, let us say, not won wide assent. ... I suggested that God could accomplish the resurrection of, say, Socrates, in the following way. He could have, in 399 BC, miraculously translated Socrates' fresh corpse to some distant place for safe-keeping (at the same time removing the hemlock and undoing the physiological damage it had done) and have replaced it with a simulacrum, a perfect physical duplicate of Socrates' corpse; later, on the day of resurrection, he could reanimate Socrates' corpse, and the reanimated corpse, no longer a corpse but once more a living organism, would be Socrates. Or, I suggested, he might do this with some part of the corpse, its brain or brain-stem or left cerebral hemisphere or cerebral cortex—something whose presence in a newly whole human organism would insure that that organism be Socrates.

Another possibility: non-local causation involving a temporal gap.

### 1.3. *Dualism*

There is a whole different perspective on our problem, which takes both the psychological theory and materialism to be on the wrong track.

This is the *dualist* view that we are not material things at all, but instead are identical to immaterial souls.

One might motivate this view by showing that cases of fission can be used against the materialist view in much the same way that teletransportation cases can be used against the psychological theory.

This view has some advantages. Assuming that immaterial souls are indivisible, the problems of division illustrated by the examples of fission and teletransportation cannot be used against the dualist. (Of course, dualism doesn't say exactly what does happen in these cases - just that the original person survives if and only if one the post- surgery (or post-teletransportation) bodies is attached to his soul. But, souls being invisible, it might be quite hard to tell.)

This, I think, is the sort of view of life after death that most people have nowadays; it's a view which places much less emphasis on the body than the sort of view we find in Aquinas (and in the painting which is the background for this lecture).

Three objections to this view:

- (i) The 'easy argument'
- (ii) The argument from mind/body causal interactions
- (iii) The argument from Christian doctrine. If we are immaterial souls, then why the resurrection of the *body*?

## 2. HUME ON IMMORTALITY

In this short essay, Hume considers and rejects, in three successive sections, three types of arguments for life after death.

### 2.1. *Dualist arguments*

Section I is concerned with Platonic arguments for life after death, which presuppose dualism about persons. Hume is skeptical about the view that persons are substances at all, let alone that they are immaterial substances. He reiterates this skepticism about arguments which attempt to show that the fact that human beings think or feel implies that they have immaterial and immortal souls:

“Animals undoubtedly feel, think, love, hate, will, and even reason, though in a more imperfect manner than man. Are their souls also immaterial and immortal?”

However, his main argument in section I is of a different sort. He argues, first, that even if persons are immaterial substances, this should give us no reason to believe in immortality; and, second, that the kind of immortality which would be guaranteed us, if this argument succeeded, would not be worth wanting.

Against the view that dualism leads naturally to immortality, Hume writes that if we do accept the existence of immaterial substance,

“we have reason to conclude from analogy, that nature uses it after the manner she does the other substance, matter. She employs it as a kind of paste or clay; modifies it into a variety of forms and existences; dissolves after a time each modification, and from its substance erects a new form.”

What is Hume’s argument here? How would a dualist respond?

Hume presents a further argument against the view that immortality of persons is guaranteed by the incorruptibility of the soul:

“...what is incorruptible must also be ingenerable. The soul, therefore, if immortal, existed before our birth: And if the former existence nowise concerned us, neither will the latter.”

The connection between this argument and Locke’s argument against immaterial souls. One way to view Hume’s argument here is that, even if we think that the soul is incorruptible, there’s no reason to assume that we are.

## *2.2. Religious arguments*

Hume next considers arguments derived from ‘the justice of God’ — arguments which take as given God’s existence, and argue on that basis that God would provide us with life after death. Against this, Hume argues that we don’t know very much about what the justice of God is like:

“It is very safe for us to affirm, that, whatever we know the deity to have actually done, is best; but it is very dangerous to affirm, that he must always do what to us seems best. In how many instances would this reasoning fail us with regard to the present world.”

Hume further argues that we can hardly argue from the justice of God to immortality when our ideas of justice are seemingly in conflict with Christian ideas of what the afterlife is like:

“Punishment, without any proper end or purpose, is inconsistent with our ideas of goodness and justice; and no end can be served by it after the whole scene is closed.

Punishment, according to our conception, should bear some proportion to the offence. Why then eternal punishment for the temporary offenses of so frail a creature as man?”

A natural reply to this is that our idea of justice is not God's. But then Hume's natural reply is that, if this is so, we can hardly argue for life after death on the basis of the belief that a just God would make it so. For how would we know what God's justice would demand in this case?

Indeed, Hume thinks, there is good reason to believe that, given what we know of people, a just God would not have designed us like this if there was the possibility of life after death. He gives four arguments of this form, which argue that some feature or other of human life does not fit well with the view that we were designed by a just God for life after death:

1. People are for the most part concerned only with this life:

“With how weak a concern ...does he ever look further? ...

...

What cruelty, what iniquity, what injustice in nature, to confine thus all our concern, as well as all our knowledge, to the present life, if there be another scene still waiting us, of infinitely greater consequence? Ought this barbarous deceit to be ascribed to a beneficent and wise being?”

2. Too many people die young for this life to be a preparation for another:

“Nature has rendered human infancy particularly frail and mortal; as it were on purpose to refute the notion of a probationary state. The half of mankind die before they are rational creatures.”

3. This makes our fear of death inexplicable:

“as nature does nothing in vain, she would not give us a horror against an impossible event. She may give us a horror against an unavoidable event, provided our endeavors, as in the present case, may often remove it to some distance.”

4. Hume's last argument of this sort is perhaps the worst argument that he ever gave:

“On the theory of the soul's mortality, the inferiority of women's capacity is easily accounted for: Their domestic life requires no higher faculties either of mind or body. This circumstance vanishes, and becomes absolutely insignificant on the religious theory: The one sex has an equal task to perform with the other: Their powers of reason and resolution ought to have been equal ...”

### 2.3. *Empirical evidence against immortality*

In the final section of his essay, Hume gives two related arguments, based on our experience of the world, against the view that there is life after death.



The first is based on a kind of argument from analogy:

“Where any two objects are so closely connected, that all alterations, which we have ever seen in the one, are attended with proportionate alterations in the other: we ought to conclude, by all rules of analogy, that, when there are still greater alterations produced in the former, and it is totally dissolved, there follows a total dissolution of the latter.

...The weakness of the body and that of the mind in infancy are exactly proportioned; their vigour in manhood, their sympathetic disorder in sickness, their common gradual decay in old age. The step further seems unavoidable; their common dissolution in death.”

The second argument is as follows:

“Judging by the usual analogy of nature, no form can continue, when transferred to a condition of life very different from the original one, in which it was placed. Trees perish in the water, fishes in the air, animals in the earth. ...What reason then to imagine, that an immense alteration, such as is made on the soul by the dissolution of its body, and all its organs of thought and sensation, can be effected without the dissolution of the whole?”

How would a believer in immortality who thinks of the afterlife in the way that van Inwagen does respond to these arguments?