What am I?

Life after death

Our discussions for the last few weeks have focused on answers to the question: What am I?

Our answer to this question is closely connected to another: is it possible that I continue to exist after my death? For if I can continue to exist after my death, then it must be the case that, after my death, something will exist which will be identical to me. And whether this is possible will depend on what sort of thing I am.

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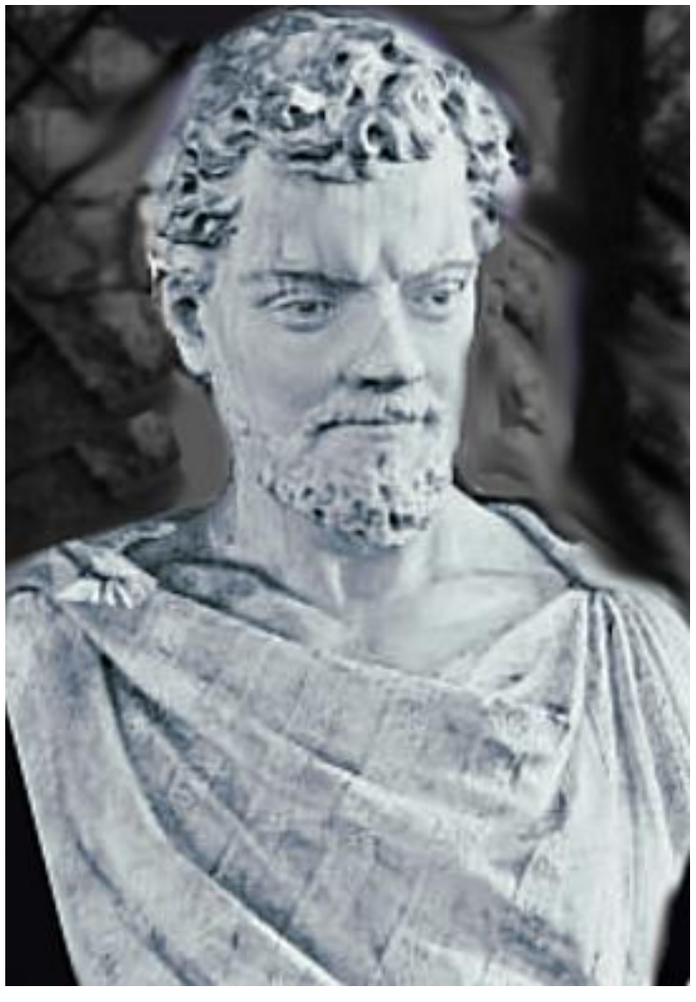
Today we will discuss three different philosophical questions about death, and life after death:

If there is no life after death, is death a bad thing?

Is life after death possible?

If life after death is possible, is it desirable?

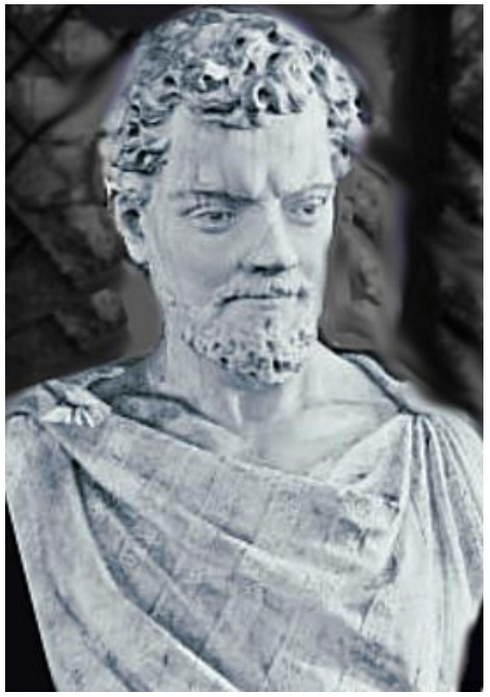
If there is no life after death, is death a bad thing?



One reason for interest in the question of whether life after death is possible is the thought that, if there is no life after death, then death would be a terrible thing.

But there is an ancient tradition which says that this is a mistake: that death, even if there is no life after death, is nothing to be feared.

Lucretius, a Roman philosopher who lived in the first century B.C., was part of this tradition. In his poem *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*), he gave a short and intriguing argument against the idea that death is at all a bad thing.



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> If it happens that people are to suffer unhappiness and pain in the future, they themselves must exist at that future time for harm to be able to befall them; and since death takes away this possibility by preventing the existence of those who might have been visited by troubles, you may be sure that there is nothing to fear in death, that those who no longer exist cannot become miserable, and that it makes not one speck of difference whether or not they have ever been born once their mortal life has been snatched away by deathless death.

Lucretius asks us whether we were afraid, or suffered, when terrible things happened in the distant past. The answer, of course, is ‘No’ — because we did not exist at those times.

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But, Lucretius says, just the same is true of events at times after our death. We will not exist then, and so nothing can harm us at those times.

In slogan form: 'If death is there, we are not, and if we are there, death is not.' So we have nothing to fear from death.

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Here is one way in which Lucretius' argument can be represented:

1. The only things I should fear are experiences which I undergo.
2. When I am dead, I undergo no experiences.

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Williams thinks that this argument is less than convincing:

> **To want something, we may also say, is to that extent to have reason for resisting what excludes having that thing: and death certainly does that, for a very large range of things that one wants.[5] If that is right, then for any of those things, wanting something itself gives one a reason for avoiding death. Even though if I do not succeed, I will not know that, nor what I am missing, from the perspective of the wanting agent it is rational to aim for states of affairs in which his want is satisfied, and hence to regard death as something to be avoided; that is, to regard it as an evil.**

If Williams is right, why is premise (1) of Lucretius' argument false?

If there is no life after death, is death a bad thing?

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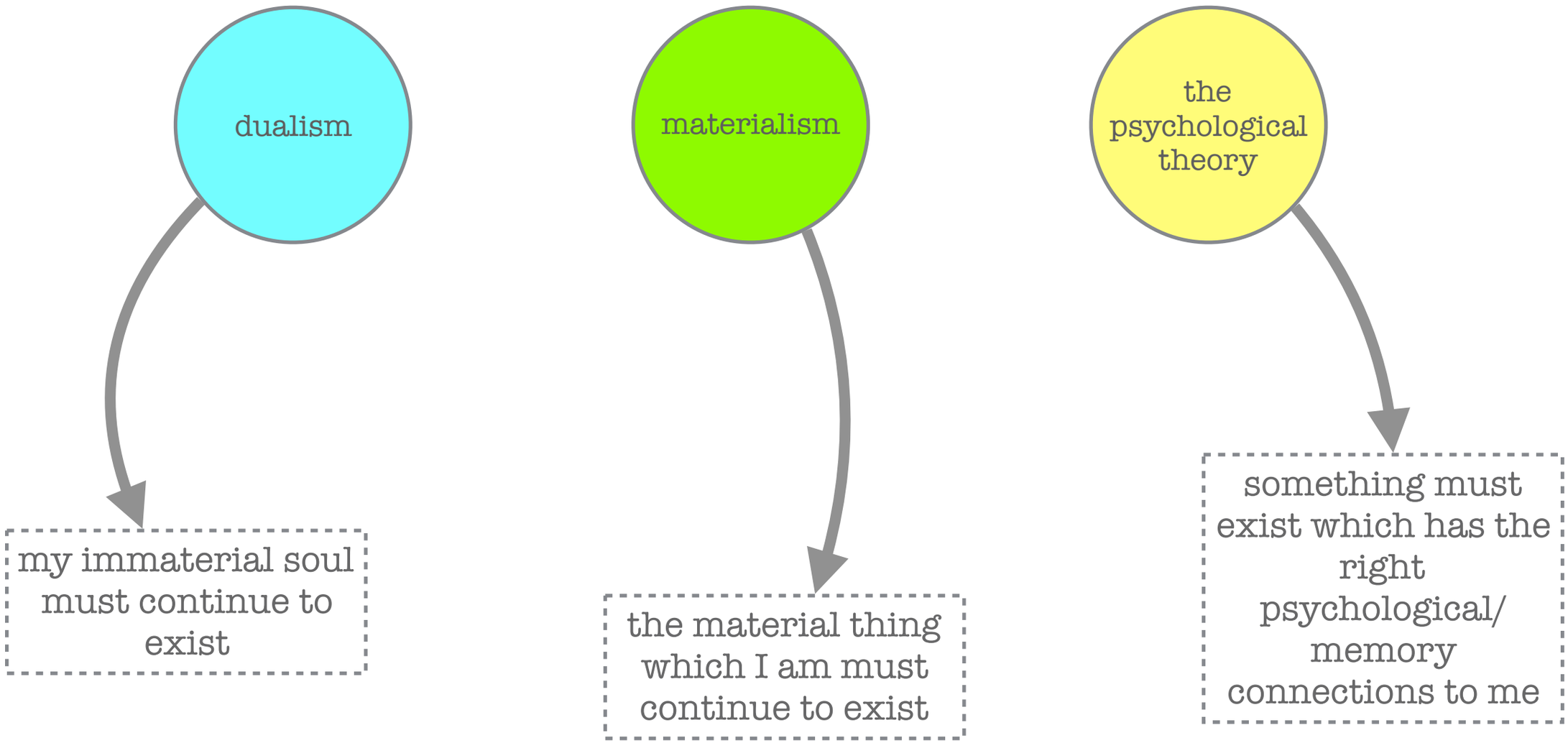
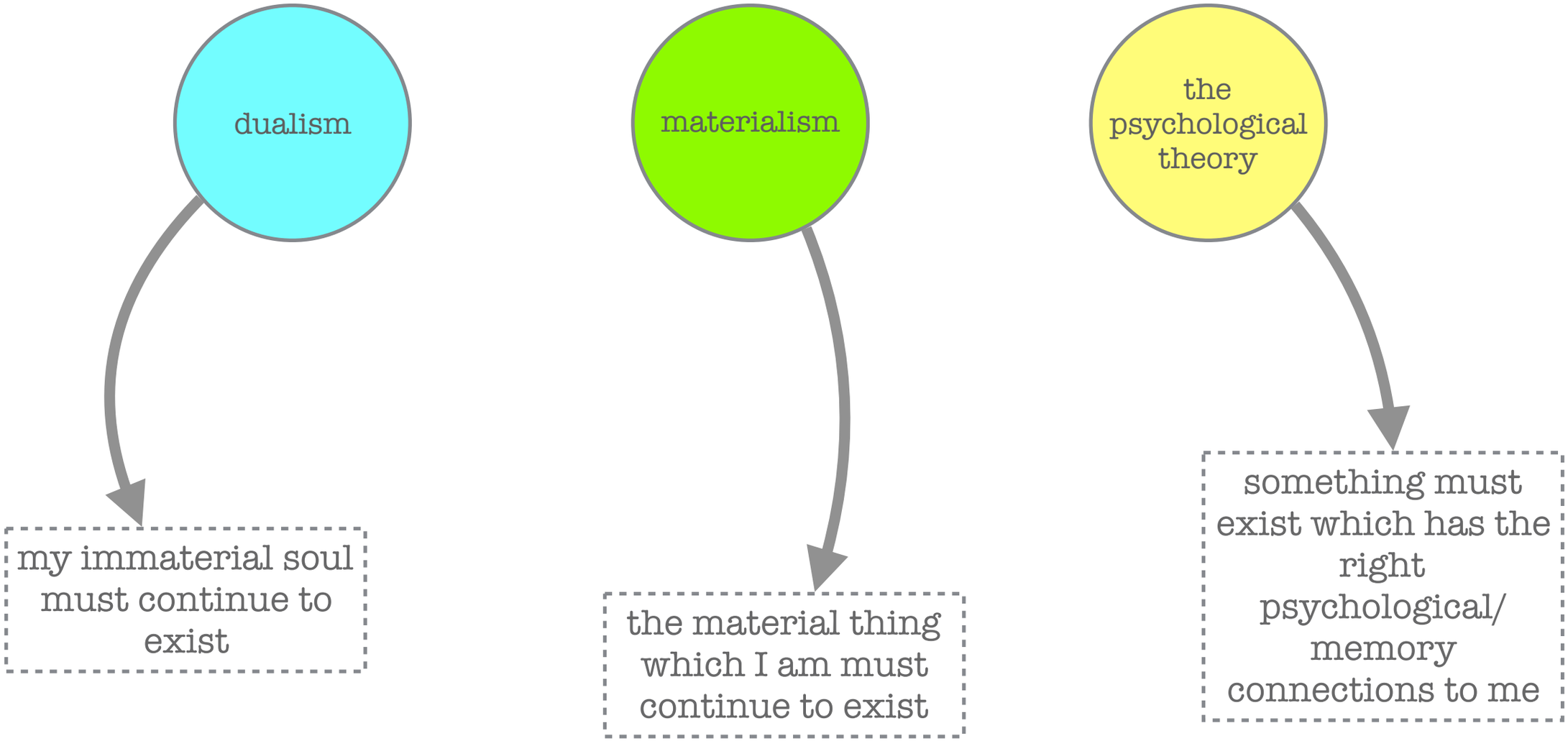
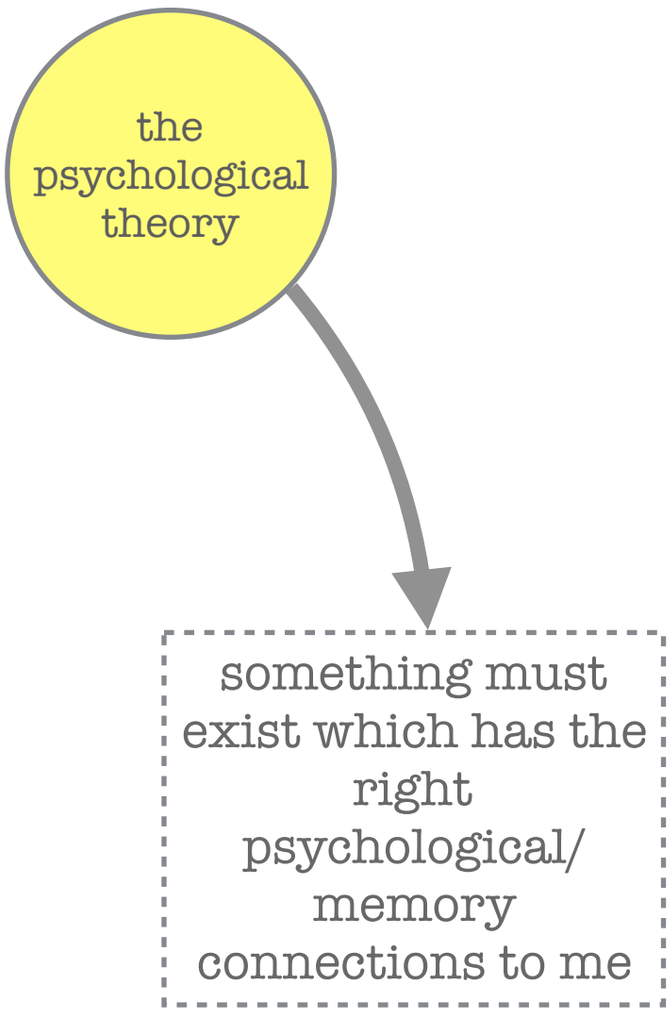




A natural first thought is that if dualism or the psychological theory is true, then it is easy to see how life after death is possible. On the other hand, given what we know about bodily decay, if materialism is true, it may seem that life after death is impossible.



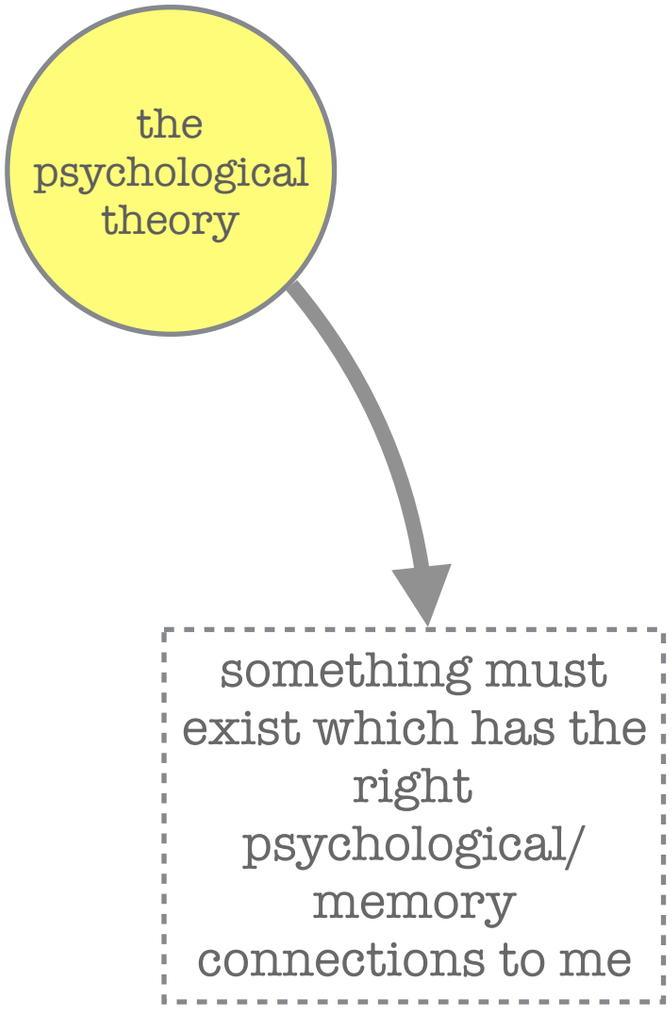
It does seem easy enough to imagine that, after my death, God could create a being who would stand in the right psychological connections to you. It would have your personality, your memories, etc.

But would it be you?

Here is a line of thought which might convince you that it would not be you:

If God could create one being with the right psychological connections to you after your death, he could create two. Call them Fric and Frac. It is clear that Fric ≠ Frac. Since you stand in the same psychological relations to each, you must be identical to both or to neither. But you can't be identical to both; so you are identical to neither.

So what, you might think? God would not create two psychological duplicates of me; God would just create one.



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So suppose that God makes just Fric. In this case, the psychological theorist says, you are Fric. But it is surely possible for God to then make Frac; and then (by the above argument) it would follow that God would have made it the case that you ≠ Fric. But then it looks like God would have taken your out of existence. And surely making Frac did not amount to killing anyone!

This is just a theological version of the problem of fission, which we discussed in the context of teletransportation. You should think about how the psychological theorist should respond to this problem.

Let's return to our other two theories: dualism and materialism.

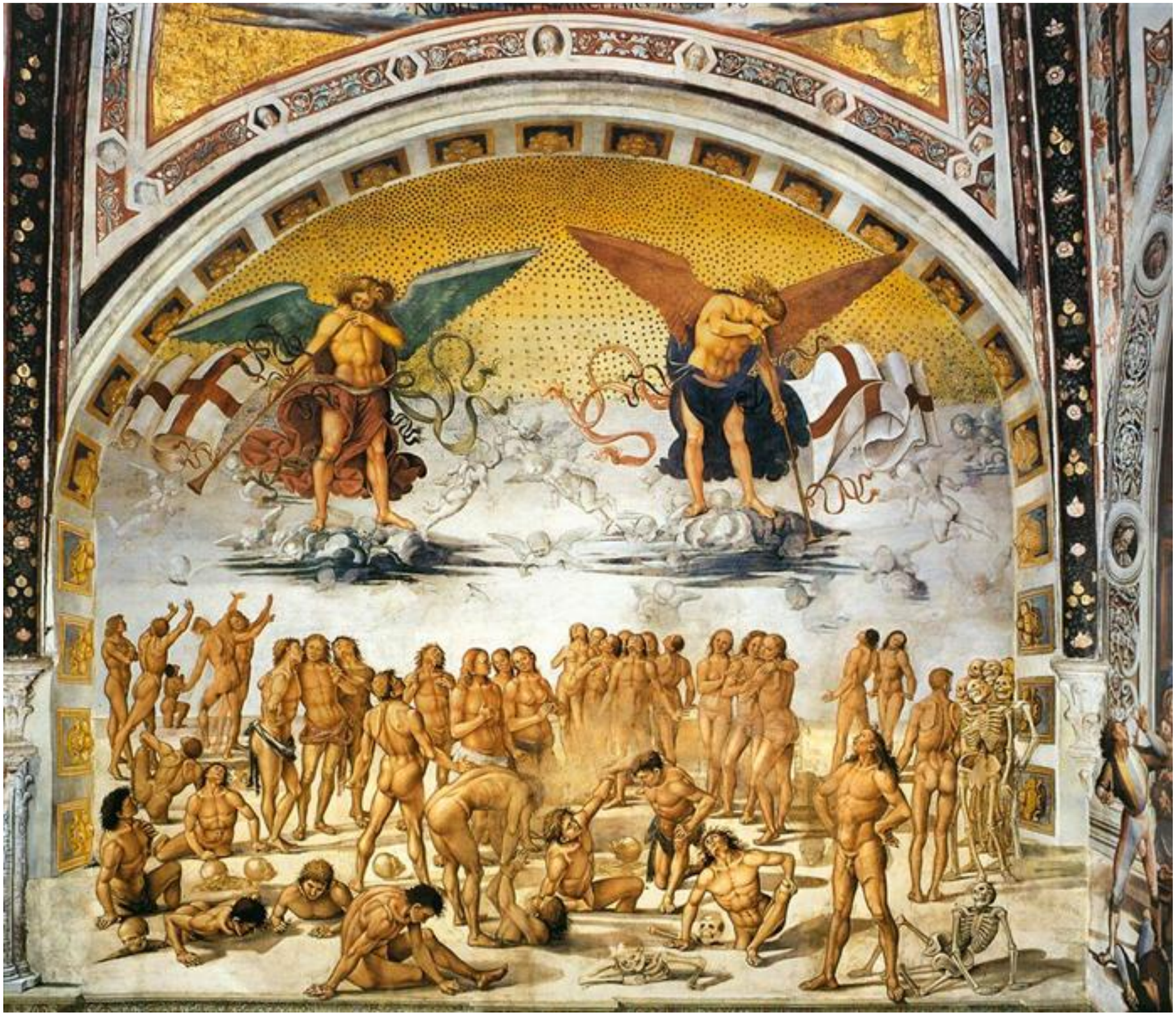
As I mentioned, a natural first thought is that dualism is perfectly consistent with life after death, whereas materialism is not. Here is one sort of reason why a dualist might believe in life after death:

The Platonic theory

You are an immaterial soul, and immaterial souls cannot be destroyed. Your body, like all material things, can (and will) be destroyed, and that is what death is. But since you are an immaterial soul and cannot be destroyed, this will have no effect on you.

This is a coherent theory. One of the points van Inwagen makes in the reading for today, though, is that it is quite distant from the Christian (and Jewish and Muslim) theory of life after death.

This can also be observed by looking again at the painting which was up before class, by the 15th century Italian painter Luca Signorelli.



Luca Signorelli, The Resurrection of the Dead (1501)

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The Platonic theory differs from the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theories in two central respects: (1) the Platonic theory takes life after death to be a natural consequence of the immortality of the soul rather than a miraculous divine intervention, and (2) the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theories (or at least most versions of them) require some sort of bodily continuity for life after death.

Let's look at what Aquinas has to say about this.

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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.

While Aquinas believed in immaterial souls, he appears to have thought that for us to continue to exist after our death, our material bodies must also continue to exist.

As Aquinas was well aware, this, given the decay of the body, leads to an immediate problem. Aquinas took this problem seriously, and was even quite concerned about the problem posed for resurrection by cannibalism:

> It happens, occasionally, that some men feed on human flesh ...Therefore, the same flesh is found in many men. But it is not possible that it should rise in many. And the resurrection does not seem otherwise to be universal and entire if there is not restored to every man what he has had here.

This makes it sound as though Aquinas is thinking of the resurrection as involving a kind of reassembly. One way to think about it would be to think of the resurrection as involving God taking all of the particles which composed me at the time of my death, and then reassembling them into a body.

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But, as van Inwagen points out, it does not seem that reassembly is enough. Indeed, it seems to lead to problems of fission quite similar to those which plague psychological theories:

> 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.

If reassembly is not enough, then what would be enough for identity? One materialist response is this: we are one over time not because we have all of the same parts over time, but because there is a continuous causal process involving the gaining and losing of parts over time. For us to exist is for this causal process to continue.

But how could it continue, if our bodies decay in the ground?

> "… 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."

Does this solve the problems with resurrection as reassembly? Does it, as van Inwagen thinks, show that resurrection is possible?

van Inwagen does not propose his theory as an account of how the resurrection actually will happen; he suggests it as an account of how it could happen, which is shows, he thinks, that there is no impossibility in our being raised from the dead.

One might think that, once we see this, there are other less outlandish ways in which this might be accomplished. One possibility is that my body just before death is connected to my resurrected body by a kind of non-local causation — a kind of causation that involves a temporal gap with no series of continuous causal processes during the gap. Some results from quantum mechanics suggest that either such gaps are possible, or that there is 'signaling' which involves movement faster than the speed of light. This may provide some reason to believe in non-local causation of this sort.

Something like this might explain how my resurrected body might stand in the right sorts of causal relations to my body just before my death.

However, one might worry that cases of fission can be used against a materialist theory just as much as against a psychological theory/ Suppose that instead of stepping into a teletransporter, we undergo an ambitious new form of surgery.

In this surgery, one's body is sawn in half. The left half is then joined with a perfect replica of the right half, and the right half is then joined with a perfect replica of the left half.

Let's call the resultant persons Lefty and Righty. It is obvious that Lefty ≠ Righty. But it seems that if materialism is true, Lefty = me and Righty = me. After all, each of Lefty and Righty are physically and causally connected to me.

If you are attracted to a materialist theory, you should think about how you would respond to these sorts of ‘fission’ arguments against materialism.

But let’s now turn to the third of our three questions.

If there is no life after death, is death a bad thing?

Is life after death possible?

If life after death is possible, is it desirable?

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I think that it is fair to say that most people would respond to this question with a resounding ‘Yes.’ And many would say something stronger: it is desirable that we live forever, and that we never go out of existence.

This is the view that Williams aims to call into question with his discussion of EM, the subject of a play (and opera) called *The Makropulos Case*.

EM takes elixir which, if taken consistently, enables her to live forever and, at the age of 342, decides to end her life by not taking the elixir any more. Williams wants to argue two things. First, that EM’s decision makes sense; and, second, that no sort of eternal life would be worth wanting.

Why does EM want to kill herself? Williams thinks that, if one lives long enough, things must go one of two ways. His central argument is a kind of dilemma.

On the one hand, one might live with a relatively fixed character and personality:

> Her problem lay in having been at it for too long. Her trouble was it seems, boredom: a boredom connected with the fact that everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being of 42 had already happened to her. Or, rather, all the sorts of things that could make sense to one woman of a certain character; for EM has a certain character, and indeed, except for her accumulating memories of earlier times, and no doubt some changes of style to suit the passing centuries, seems always to have been much the same sort of person.

What would life be like if one had, literally, seen everything?

Why does EM want to kill herself? Williams thinks that, if one lives long enough, things must go one of two ways. His central argument is a kind of dilemma.

On the other hand, one's character might be constantly changing, so that one has widely different desires at different times. But then why should I wish for that kind of life? Why should I wish to continue to exist if, eventually, I will not be motivated by any of the desires which currently motivate me?

One might also think that if one's personality were variable in this way, one's life and decisions would begin to feel unacceptably random.

Can you imagine a kind of eternal life which would be worth wanting? Can reflection what sort of eternal life would be worth wanting tell us anything about what we ought to value?