

Three views of life after death

For me to have life after death is for me to die at some time and then, at some later time, for some person to exist, and for that person to be me. So questions about life after death are closely connected to questions about *personal identity*: questions about what it takes for person x at t1 to be the same person as — ‘numerically identical to’ — person y at t2.

There are three main views about what sorts of things persons are, and so about what personal identity involves:

- (1) dualism
- (2) materialism
- (3) the psychological theory

Each of these gives us a different picture of what life after death would involve. Before looking at these views one by one, it is worth emphasizing the the Christian view of life after death is one which involves the resurrection of the body.

Given obvious facts about decay of bodies in graves, cremation, etc., this view has always given rise to questions. Even St. Paul reports that people skeptical of Christianity asked, “How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come?” So the problems that we are talking about are not new ones.

It is natural to think that a materialist view would make life after death impossible, so let’s begin by discussion dualism and the psychological view.

1. DUALISM

Consider first dualism. This would, at first glance, seem to be the view that makes it easiest to understand how life after death could work. At death your body dies; but your soul continues to exist. Since you are your soul, you also continue to exist. This is the way that Plato thought of life after death, and also the way that many people now think of life after death.

But the view is not without problems:

- simple arguments against dualism

- the problem of mind-body causation
- it makes a mystery of the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body. Why, if we are identical to our souls, would our bodies need to be raised up?
- this view of persons also seems not to fit especially well with other aspects of Christian teaching about persons, e.g. “you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”
- it has trouble making sense of the fact that, according to Christianity, life after death is a miracle, and not something which (as on Plato’s view) simply occurs in the natural course of things

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2. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY

The psychological theory might seem to be better off. It seems to get around the basic arguments against dualism. And it also seems to make room for the possibility of life after death. God would just have to create a being which stood in the right psychological relations to you.

Problems for the psychological theory:

- the example of torture, preceded by amnesia
- the problem of fission, and multiple candidates

3. MATERIALISM

Materialism might seem to be a non-starter for the believer in life after death. And yet much traditional Christian discussion of persons can sound very materialist. Aquinas, for example, says that

“it is necessary for the selfsame man to rise again; and this is effected by the selfsame soul being united to the selfsame body.”

But how could this work, if my body has decayed?

Aquinas seems to have in mind a model of resurrection as a kind of *reassembly*. Some problems:

- the problem of cannibalism
- the ship of Theseus

Alternatives: van Inwagen, the falling elevator model.