

INTRODUCTION

LIFE AFTER DEATH

The conviction that there is life after death is both one of the most prevalent and one of the most peculiar of human beliefs: prevalent because it extends through almost all religions – although it is absent in Hinayana Buddhism and relatively unimportant in Judaism – and certainly peculiar because it flies in the face of the universal phenomenon of human mortality. For the believer, however, the prospect of an after-life carries with it undoubted attractions. In its various guises it can satisfy the common human desire to survive and to be reunited with loved ones; it can offer consolation for past unhappinesses and provide further opportunities for growth in knowledge or character; and it can gratify one's sense of moral purpose through an elaborate system of rewards and punishments. We should not assume, however, that the belief in an after-life requires a belief in God. For while it may be the case that these satisfactions are more plausibly administered through the goodness and power of a personal deity, there is no contradiction in claiming either that there is a God but no immortality (as both Voltaire and Mill argue) or that there is immortality but no God (as the philosophers J.E. McTaggart and C.J. Ducasse maintain, both supporters of reincarnation or survival as rebirth).

Belief in an after-life is supported by three general theories of survival. The first is the theory of disembodied mind or soul. This proposes a *dualistic* notion of the self, with the 'real person' being identified with a soul or spirit, which somehow survives the physical destruction of the body. Although the theory was held by the pre-Socratic philosopher Pythagoras (570-500BC), such arguments for the after-life properly begin with Plato,* the first major thinker to provide detailed arguments for the distinction between mind and body. The second is the doctrine of resurrection. Sometimes also known as the reconstruction doctrine, and associated with traditional Christianity, this is a more *monistic* view. It claims that to have a genuinely human and personal existence, we must retain our corporeal form – that, not least, the existence of X's body is necessary for the identification of X as X and not Y – and that such a thing indeed occurs through God's power: the same body that dies on earth will be resurrected into a new and eternal life, albeit in a changed form.¹ But this is not the only version of immortality within Christianity. A third, which attempts to combine both the previous arguments, is the theory of the 'shadow-man' or 'minimal Person', associated with St Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas argues that the resurrected individual is sufficiently corporeal to overcome any problems of identification with the original bodily person, and sufficiently incorporeal to escape unharmed from the earthly form that has degenerated. Perhaps the nearest modern equivalent to this view is to be found in the spiritualist notion of the 'astral body': that in fact human beings possess two bodies – the one physical, the other non-physical – which allows not only for 'bilocations', the appearance of the individual in two places at once, but for the later use of

1. So St Paul in 1 Cor., 15:12-53.

their astral body after death as the vehicle of the consciousness. Two modern exponents of this view are Robert Crookall (1961, 1966) and R.A. Monroe (1972); the position is criticized by Susan Blackmore (1982).

Those who reject belief in life after death concentrate primarily on the first of these theories, the theory of disembodied mind, and more specifically attack the dualistic distinction between mind and body upon which that theory depends. The main philosophical alternative to dualism is the theory of materialism. Materialism is a set of related theories which asserts that all entities and processes are reducible to, and explicable only in terms of, material or physical processes. Typically allied to atheism or agnosticism, it denies the reality of any spiritual being or disembodied existences, and claims that mental states are no more than bodily phenomena: in this respect, therefore, a human being *is* his body and nothing else besides. This idea first appears with the ancient classical atomists – for example, Democritus (4th-5th century B.C.), Epicurus (341-271 B.C.) and Lucretius (c. 94-c. 55 B.C.) – all of whom reject immortality in favour of the physical dispersal of the mind's atoms at death. The most explicit and consistent application of materialist assumptions emerges in the eighteenth century, with such figures as Voltaire (1694-1778), Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789) and David Hume (1711-1776), and in the nineteenth century with Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) and T.H. Huxley (1825-1895), the last-named adopting a version of materialism called 'epiphenomenalism', common among Victorian evolutionists, and according to which mental activities are 'by-products' of brain processes. Admittedly Voltaire was critical of d'Holbach's violently anti-religious views, but they both agreed that belief in survival is absurd on the well-trodden reductive grounds that, if mental processes may be regarded as attributes of the body, 'mind' or 'soul' can have no separate existence after death. Hume, in his famous essay on Immortality (1777)* is less clear-cut on whether 'matter may cause thought', but is similarly forthright on the mortality of the soul 'from the analogy of nature'. Hume's additional comment – that an after-life expresses the human desire for a future justice – is extended dramatically by Feuerbach into a fully-fledged projection theory in his *Essence of Christianity* (1841). Here God is merely the magnification of human qualities and immortality, the understandable but delusional consequence of man's desire to continue his own existence under more favourable circumstances. This conclusion impacted directly on the atheism of Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924), and is an acknowledged influence upon the psychoanalytic assessment of belief in an afterlife as wish-fulfilment by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939).*

Modern debates about the after-life divide along lines substantially drawn already in these earlier discussions. The materialism of physiological psychology is represented by Corliss Lamont (1936): his 'monism in psychology' requires the indissoluble union of personality and body and so totally discounts any possibility of immortality; and a similar conclusion is reached in the logical behaviourism of Gilbert Ryle's influential *The Concept of Mind* (1949): since mental concepts – thinking, understanding and so on – are understood to function only in terms of actual or possible behaviour, there can

be no spiritual entity to survive apart from the body. In the Humean tradition stand Bertrand Russell (1936)* and Antony Flew (1984): neither is either a reductive materialist or behaviourist, both admitting that mental processes cannot be so simply reduced to bodily phenomena. For them, however, so overwhelming is the empirical evidence for the dependence of mind upon body, confirmed in modern brain research, that any survival of mental life after death remains highly improbable.² Unsurprisingly Christian philosophers like Geach (1969), Hick (1973),* van Inwagen (1978)* and Swinburne (1986) reject this viewpoint. Given the problems associated with any theory of disembodied mind, they propose instead various forms of resurrection theory. Swinburne and Hick reject the resurrection in any literal sense, the latter attempting to resolve the problems of identity and continuity of persons through his concept of a 'resurrection replica'. Geach and Van Inwagen, on the other hand, adopt a more literal interpretation, with van Inwagen opting for the actual bodies we had in life as the vehicles of survival, a view reminiscent of Aquinas' 'shadow-man' theory. More recent discussions of resurrection are provided by Stephen T. Davis (1993), Baker (2000) and Corcoran (2005).

Paralleling these philosophical disputes is the continuing debate about whether out-of-body and near-death experiences provide evidence for the existence of an afterlife and a soul. Here the classic assessment remains by Broad (1953, 1962), with Flew (1987) providing a useful collection of essays. For a comprehensive survey of the evidence, see Paul and Linda Badham (1982).

2. It should be noted, however, that more recently Flew, in his much-publicized move away from atheism and towards deism (2004), although still denying the possibility of an afterlife, is now much more willing to concede that recent evidence of near-death experiences do constitute impressive support for the possibility of human consciousness operating independently of any occurrences within the human brain.

4. JOHN HICK: IMMORTALITY AND THE RESURRECTION REPLICA

Biographical Summary. See p. 1:191 above.

Philosophical Summary. Hick provides a variant on New Testament teaching: he agrees with St Paul that resurrection has nothing to do with the resuscitation of corpses but distances himself from the Pauline view that the earthly and physical body will be qualitatively distinct. Hick prefers instead the more holistic approach of St Irenaeus – that the resurrection body will have the same shape as the physical body – and which he translates as the re-embodiment after death of the individual as a ‘psycho-physical unity’. This spiritual body (*soma pneumatikon*) inhabits ‘its own space’, occupying its own spiritual world just as the physical body inhabits the physical world. Personal identity can be maintained between the pre-mortem and post-mortem individual through a ‘resurrection replica’ or re-creation of an exact copy of the dead body. This process is explained through the experiment of ‘John Smith’ disappearing in London and reappearing in New York, an extraordinary but not logically impossible event.

Bibliographical Summary. Hick presents his idea of a ‘resurrection replica’ in more detail in *Death and Eternal Life* (1985). For criticisms of Hick, see Paul Edwards (1992), Clark (1971) and Olding (1970). See also Antony Flew (2000). A further analysis is found in Perrett (1987) and Yates (1988). For a comparison between Hick and Barth on this issue, see Schmitt (1985).

John Hick

Immortality and the Resurrection Replica⁸

Some kind of distinction between physical body and immaterial or semimaterial soul seems to be as old as human culture; the existence of such a distinction has been indicated by the manner of burial of the earliest human skeletons yet discovered. Anthropologists offer various conjectures about the origin of the distinction: perhaps it was first suggested by memories of dead persons; by dreams of them; by the sight of reflections of oneself in water and on other bright surfaces; or by meditation upon the significance of religious rites which grew up spontaneously in face of the fact of death.

It was Plato (428/7-348/7 B.C.), the philosopher who has most deeply

8. *Philosophy of Religion*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1973, pp. 97-102.

and lastingly influenced Western culture, who systematically developed the body-mind dichotomy and first attempted to prove the immortality of the soul.⁹

Plato argues that although the body belongs to the sensible world,¹⁰ and shares its changing and impermanent nature, the intellect is related to the unchanging realities of which we are aware when we think not of particular good things but of Goodness itself, not of specific just acts but of Justice itself, and of the other 'universals' or eternal Ideas in virtue of which physical things and events have their own specific characteristics. Being related to this higher and abiding realm, rather than to the evanescent world of sense, reason or the soul is immortal. Hence, one who devotes his life to the contemplation of eternal realities rather than to the gratification of the fleeting desires of the body will find at death that whereas his body turns to dust, his soul gravitates to the realm of the unchanging, there to live forever. Plato painted an awe-inspiring picture, of haunting beauty and persuasiveness, which has moved and elevated the minds of men in many different centuries and lands. Nevertheless, it is not today (as it was during the first centuries of the Christian era) the common philosophy of the West; and a demonstration of immortality which presupposes Plato's metaphysical system cannot claim to constitute a proof for the twentieth-century disbeliever.

Plato used the further argument that the only things that can suffer destruction are those that are composite, since to destroy something means to disintegrate it into its constituent parts. All material bodies are composite; the soul, however, is simple and therefore imperishable. This argument was adopted by Aquinas and has become standard in Roman Catholic theology, as in the following passage from the modern Catholic philosopher, Jacques Maritain:

A spiritual soul cannot be corrupted, since it possesses no matter; it cannot be disintegrated, since it has no substantial parts; it cannot lose its individual unity, since it is self-subsisting, nor its internal energy, since it contains within itself all the sources of its energies. The human soul cannot die. Once it exists, it cannot disappear; it will necessarily exist for ever, endure without end. Thus, philosophic reason, put to work by a great metaphysician like Thomas Aquinas, is able to prove the immortality of the human soul in a demonstrative manner.¹¹

This type of reasoning has been criticized on several grounds. Kant pointed out that although it is true that a simple substance cannot

9. See pp. II:15-29 above.

10. The world known to us through our physical senses.

11. *The Range of Reason*, London, Geoffrey Bles Ltd. and New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953, p. 60

disintegrate, consciousness may nevertheless cease to exist through the diminution of its intensity to zero.¹² Modern psychology has also questioned the basic premise that the mind is a simple entity. It seems instead to be a structure of only relative unity, normally fairly stable and tightly integrated but capable under stress of various degrees of division and dissolution. This comment from psychology makes it clear that the assumption that the soul is a simple substance is not an empirical observation but a metaphysical theory. As such, it cannot provide the basis for a general proof of immortality.

The body-soul distinction, first formulated as a philosophical doctrine in ancient Greece, was baptized into Christianity, ran through the medieval period, and entered the modern world with the public status of a self-evident truth when it was redefined in the seventeenth century by Descartes. Since World War II, however, the Cartesian mind-matter dualism, having been taken for granted for many centuries, has been strongly criticized by philosophers of the contemporary analytical school.¹³ It is argued that the words that describe mental characteristics and operations – such as ‘intelligent,’ ‘thoughtful,’ ‘carefree,’ ‘happy,’ ‘calculating’ and the like – apply in practice to types of human behaviour and to behavioural dispositions. They refer to the empirical individual, the observable human being who is born and grows and acts and feels and dies, and not to the shadowy proceedings of a mysterious ‘ghost in the machine’. Man is thus very much what he appears to be – a creature of flesh and blood, who behaves and is capable of behaving in a characteristic range of ways – rather than a nonphysical soul incomprehensibly interacting with a physical body.

As a result of this development much mid-twentieth-century philosophy has come to see man in the way he is seen in the biblical writings, not as an eternal soul temporarily attached to a mortal body, but as a form of finite, mortal, psychophysical life. Thus, the Old Testament scholar, J. Pedersen, says of the Hebrews that for them ‘. . . the body is the soul in its outward form’.¹⁴ This way of thinking has led to quite a different conception of death from that found in Plato and the neo-Platonic strand in European thought.

The Recreation of the Psycho-Physical Person

Only toward the end of the Old Testament period did after-life beliefs come to have any real importance in Judaism. Previously, Hebrew religious insight had focused so fully upon God’s covenant with the nation, as an organism

12. *Critique of Pure Reason, Transcendental Dialectic*, ‘Refutation of Mendelssohn’s Proof of the Permanence of the Soul’.

13. Gilbert Ryle’s *The Concept of Mind* (London, Hutchinson & Co., Ltd., 1949) is a classic statement of this critique.

14. *Israel*, London, Oxford University Press, 1926, I, 170.

that continued through the centuries while successive generations lived and died, that the thought of a divine purpose for the individual, a purpose that transcended this present life, developed only when the breakdown of the nation as a political entity threw into prominence the individual and the problem of his personal destiny.

When a positive conviction arose of God's purpose holding the individual in being beyond the crisis of death, this conviction took the non-Platonic form of belief in the resurrection of the body. By the turn of the eras, this had become an article of faith for one Jewish sect, the Pharisees, although it was still rejected as an innovation by the more conservative Sadducees.

The religious difference between the Platonic belief in the immortality of the soul, and the Judaic-Christian belief in the resurrection of the body is that the latter postulates a special divine act of re-creation. This produces a sense of utter dependence upon God in the hour of death, a feeling that is in accordance with the biblical understanding of man as having been formed out of 'the dust of the earth,'¹⁵ a product (as we say today) of the slow evolution of life from its lowly beginnings in the primeval slime. Hence, in the Jewish and Christian conception, death is something real and fearful. It is not thought to be like walking from one room to another, or taking off an old coat and putting on a new one. It means sheer unqualified extinction – passing out from the lighted circle of life into 'death's dateless night'. Only through the sovereign creative love of God can there be a new existence beyond the grave.

What does 'the resurrection of the dead' mean? Saint Paul's discussion provides the basic Christian answer to this question.¹⁶ His conception of the general resurrection (distinguished from the unique resurrection of Jesus) has nothing to do with the resuscitation of corpses in a cemetery. It concerns God's re-creation or reconstitution of the human psychophysical individual, not as the organism that has died but as a *soma pneumatikon*, a 'spiritual body,' inhabiting a spiritual world as the physical body inhabits our present physical world.

A major problem confronting any such doctrine is that of providing criteria of personal identity to link the earthly life and the resurrection life. Paul does not specifically consider this question, but one may, perhaps, develop this thought along lines such as the following.

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

15. Gen., 2:7; Ps. 103:14.

16. I Cor. 15.

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.

Suppose, second, that our John Smith, instead of inexplicably disappearing, dies, but that at the moment of his death a 'John Smith' replica, again complete with memories and all other characteristics, appears in India. Even with the corpse on our hands we would, I think, still have to accept this 'John Smith' as the John Smith who died. We would have to say that he had been miraculously re-created in another place.

Now suppose, third, that on John Smith's death the 'John Smith' replica appears, not in India, but as a resurrection replica in a different world altogether, a resurrection world inhabited only by resurrected persons. This world occupies its own space distinct from that with which we are now familiar. That is to say, an object in the resurrection world is not situated at any distance or in any direction from the objects in our present world, although each object in either world is spatially related to every other object in the same world.

This supposition provides a model by which one may conceive of the divine re-creation of the embodied human personality. In this model, the element of the strange and the mysterious has been reduced to a minimum by following the view of some of the early Church Fathers that the resurrection body has the same shape as the physical body,¹⁷ and ignoring Paul's own hint it may be as unlike the physical body as a full grain of wheat differs from the wheat seed.¹⁸

What is the basis for this Judaic-Christian belief in the divine re-creation or reconstitution of the human personality after death? There is, of course, an argument from authority, in that life after death is taught throughout the New Testament (although very rarely in the Old Testament). But, more basically, belief in the resurrection arises as a corollary of faith in the sovereign purpose of God, which is not restricted by death and which holds man in being beyond his natural mortality. In the words of Martin Luther, 'Anyone with whom God speaks, whether in wrath or in mercy, the same is certainly immortal. The Person of God who speaks, and the Word, show that we are creatures with whom God wills to speak, right into

17. For example, Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book II, Chap.34, para. 1.

18. I Cor., 15:37.

eternity, and in an immortal manner'.¹⁹ In a similar vein it is argued that if it be God's plan to create finite persons to exist in fellowship with himself, then it contradicts both his own intention and his love for the creatures made in his image if he allows men to pass out of existence when his purpose for them remains largely unfulfilled.

It is this promised fulfillment of God's purpose for man, in which the full possibilities of human nature will be realized, that constitutes the 'heaven' symbolized in the New Testament as a joyous banquet in which all and sundry rejoice together. As we saw when discussing the problem of evil, no theodicy can succeed without drawing into itself this eschatological²⁰ faith in an eternal, and therefore infinite, good which thus outweighs all the pains and sorrows that have been endured on the way to it.

Balancing the idea of heaven in Christian tradition is the idea of hell. This, too, is relevant to the problem of theodicy. For just as the reconciling of God's goodness and power with the fact of evil requires that out of the travail of history there shall come in the end an eternal good for man, so likewise it would seem to preclude man's eternal misery. The only kind of evil that is finally incompatible with God's unlimited power and love would be utterly pointless and wasted suffering, pain which is never redeemed and worked into the fulfilling of God's good purpose. Unending torment would constitute precisely such suffering; for being eternal, it could never lead to a good end beyond itself. Thus, hell as conceived by its enthusiasts, such as Augustine or Calvin, is a major part of the problem of evil! If hell is construed as eternal torment, the theological motive behind the idea is directly at variance with the urge to seek a theodicy. However, it is by no means clear that the doctrine of eternal punishment can claim a secure New Testament basis.²¹ If, on the other hand, 'hell' means a continuation of the purgatorial suffering often experienced in this life, and leading eventually to the high good of heaven, it no longer stands in conflict with the needs of theodicy. Again, the idea of hell may be deliteralized and valued as a *mythos*, as a powerful and pregnant symbol of the grave responsibility inherent in man's freedom in relation to his Maker. . . .

Postscript (1988)

Terence Penelhum has discussed this concept of resurrection and suggests that although the identification of resurrection-world Mr X with the former earthly Mr X is possible it is not mandatory. He argues that in my cases number two and three (and probably number one also) it would be a

19. Quoted by Emil Brunner, *Dogmatics*, II, 69.

20. From the Greek *eschaton*, end.

21. The Greek word *aiionios*, which is used in the New Testament and which is usually translated as 'eternal' or 'everlasting' can bear either this meaning or the more limited meaning of 'for the aeon, or age'.

matter for decision whether or not to make the identification. The general principle on which he is working is that there can only be an automatic and unquestionable identification when there is bodily continuity. As soon as this is lost, identity becomes a matter for decision, with arguments arising both for and against. He concludes that although 'the identification of the former and the later persons in each of the three pictures is not absurd,' yet 'in situations like these it is a matter of decision whether to say that physical tests of identity reveal personal identity or very close similarity. We can, reasonably, decide for identity, but we do not have to. And this seems to leave the description of the future life in a state of chronic ambiguity' (*Survival and Disembodied Existence*, New York Humanities Press, 1970, pp. 100-1).

I agree with Penelhum that these are indeed cases for decision. It is possible to rule that the John Smith in the resurrection world is the same person as the earthly John Smith, or that he is a different person. But that such a question is a matter for decision is not peculiar to this case. Ordinary straightforward everyday identity provides the paradigm that is, by definition, unproblematic; but all cases that diverge from it call for decision. This has recently been made very clear by Derek Parfit in his *Reasons and Persons*, Part III. Suppose, for example, that the cells of my brain are surgically replaced one by one, under local anaesthetic, with physically identical cells. My consciousness and other characteristics continue essentially unchanged throughout the operation. When only 1% of the cells have been replaced we shall probably all agree that I am the same person. But what do we say when 50% have been replaced? And what when 99% have been replaced? And what when they have all been replaced? Is this still me, or do I no longer exist and this is now a replica of me? Or again, consider the teletransporter (somewhat as in *Star Trek*) which scans my body, including the brain, records its state in complete detail, and then destroys it, the next moment forming an exact replica on Mars. The Mars replica's consciousness is continuous with that of the earthly me; but nevertheless is it *me* on Mars? Have I been teletransported, or has someone different been created in place of me? This is a question for decision. My contention is that the best decision, the one that best satisfies our intuitions and that gives rise to the fewest practical problems, is that the replica on Mars is me; and also that the John Smith 'replica' in the resurrection world is John Smith.