

“An embodied life in heaven is entirely possible. Discuss.”

Introduction

Death can be defined as “the cessation of all vital phenomena without capability of resuscitation, either in plants or animals, the termination of life.”¹ The majority of philosophers would agree with the first part of this definition; however there is altercation over exactly what “the termination of life” means.

There are many different religious and philosophical life after death belief systems regarding what happens to the body and the soul after we die. Theories concerning the afterlife and the place of deceased humans are many and varied. However we can usually categorize them under four main headings:

Reincarnation – A belief associated with Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism who teach contradistinctive versions of this. This is the conception that the soul of each person is reborn into another body after death. Rebirth is connected with karma by balancing the good and bad conduct a person has completed in their former lives and how spiritually enlightened they are.

Mystical Union – This is the belief that after death the soul becomes one with the Divine (or incorporated into it). In Hinduism this idea finds expression in Vedantic philosophy (non-dualism). In Buddhism it is called nirvana. Mystics of all faiths/beliefs are likely to teach the doctrine of Mystical Union.

Resurrection – The belief that after death the soul goes to a place where it waits for the resurrection day. In the Old Testament souls gathered in Sheol. In the New Testament several passages teach that souls await the final return of Jesus when the dead will be resurrected to challenge judgement.

Embodied Existence – This is the belief that after death the soul is given a new body and lives in the spiritual dimension. In Christianity this is the belief that after death the righteous go to heaven whilst the

¹ Definition of death. www.hyperdictionary.com

unrighteous go to hell.

Islam has no teaching about reincarnation and teaches that after death there will be a Day of Judgement. When a person dies they remain in the grave until the Day of Judgement. Allah judges and decides what happens to all believers, not only Muslims and his decision is ultimate. People who have pursued the teachings of Allah will live eternally in Paradise, a perfect world of rest and pleasure. People who have ignored Allah's teachings will go to hell where they will be punished.

Christians and Hindus accept different realisations about what the afterlife entails. The Christian belief in an afterlife is based on a linear view of time. This means Christians believe each person will live on this earth once and after that will be judged by God. Whilst Hindu's believe time is intermittent (or cyclical), meaning that they believe people do not live and die once but are able to be reborn a number of times before reaching their final concluding state.

Christianity developed from Judaism and postulated originally that when a person dies they went to a sinister place not on earth (Sheol). Later, Jews began to believe that they might share some kind of eternal life with God after death. There are two main Christian beliefs in the afterlife, resurrection of the body and soul.

The resurrection of the body is an essential Christian doctrine and is a substantial conversion whereby the human body resolved into its component parts by death is restored to its former condition. The resurrection is styled a conversion to distinguish it from creation by which an entirely new being comes into existence. In ancient times the resurrection was denied especially by the Sadducees, the Gnostics, the Manicheans, and the medieval Albigenses, and is still violently attacked by atheists, materialists, and rationalists.

The Bible conveys that when Jesus returns to earth, he will physically raise all those who have died, giving them back the bodies they lost at death. These will be the same bodies people had in earthly life, but the resurrected bodies cannot die, and the virtuous will be transformed into a glorified state, freed from suffering and pain.

The belief in the resurrection of the soul is the idea that the immortal soul leaves the body and goes to God, who either accepts or rejects the soul.

In this essay I will examine different theories of an embodied afterlife and attempt to evaluate these with reference to other material.

There are two main theories that have implications for indicative survival after death; dualism and materialism.

Dualism

Mind-Body Dualism assumes the existence of two distinct principles of being in the universe: spirit and matter, or soul and body. Dualism (philosophical understanding of the term) originates from the seventeenth century French philosopher Rene Descartes. Descartes, who quoted utterance "I think, therefore I am"², popularised the idea of reality as a separation of matter (extended or spatial substance) and spirit (thinking substance, including God). This form of mind-body dualism became known as "Cartesian Dualism", after the Latin pronunciation of Descartes (Cartes).

Dualism argues that the mind determines our personality, thoughts, emotions, memory, and decisions, whereas our physical body is simply an outer shell, which is contingent and destined to decay. Our soul is immortal and is associated with higher realities such as truth and justice. Contemplation of the higher realities, allows a person's soul to enter eternity after the death of the physical body.

This was the basic understanding behind the teachings of Plato, according to which the physical world of sense phenomena (our senses) is but a poor reflection or image of the true spiritual world. The goal of the philosopher was therefore the elevation of consciousness, and the contemplation of these pure spiritual forms. Plato, like Descartes, saw the mind as identical with the soul. However, unlike Descartes, Plato argued that the soul both pre-existed and survived the body, going through a continual process of reincarnation or "transmigration". This view derived from his theory of "the Forms", in which Plato suggests that beyond our world is a world of perfect "forms" or ideas. A world where perfect examples of everyday things exist eternally. Things in the everyday world share in the idea of the "form" but are not eternal or perfect. These ideas are not physical things, so they belong to a spiritual realm of reality.

One aspect of Plato's embodied theory concept is the idea that the soul has existed prior the body and therefore had understanding of the world of the forms. When the soul is placed in the human body it

² Descartes in his Third Meditation

loses memory of the forms. The aim of the soul is to break free from the physical body and abscond to the realm of ideas or “forms”. Plato believed that the real identity of a person lies with the soul, as it can grasp the realm of ideas or the “forms”, through philosophy. The thinking being can continue to exist without the body and survives death, as, for Plato the soul is the “essence” and the real identity of the person.

Aristotle considered the soul to be the part of the body that gave it life, and turned the physical form into an animated structure. For Aristotle, the body and soul are inseparable and work together in the manner that the soul develops the person’s characteristics but cannot survive death. When the body dies, the soul ceases to exist. Given this theory of the soul, including its implications for the nature of the mind, Aristotle's views cannot be incorporated into the seemingly strict category between materialism and dualism that often characterizes debates about philosophy of mind. Aristotle cannot be a dualist because he clearly rejects the idea of the soul as something ontologically distinct from the body. He cannot be a materialist, for such an interpretation would make his basic contrast between soul as the form of the living organism and body as the matter incoherent.

For Aristotle, all living things have souls. There are varying degrees of functionality within the different soul types in the hierarchy, the human soul being considered the highest. In conclusion, for Aristotle the soul is separate from the body, however, it is dependant upon it.

St Thomas Aquinas established Aristotle’s view on the aspect of the function of the soul, and agreed that the soul was the force animating the body, giving it life.

In his book “Summa Theologica” Aquinas referred to the soul as the ‘anima’, which means ‘that which animates the body’, “...the soul is what makes the body live; so the soul is the primary source of all these activities that differentiate levels of life.”³ The soul functions independently from the body. This stems from his belief that the only things that can be divisible can decay. The soul cannot be divided and so on the basis of his argument is eternal and can survive death.

As the soul is connected to the body and its experiences, when the body dies, the soul is able to take the experience, memory and identity to the next life (or afterlife).

Descartes was a dualist who accepted that anything that is not physical becomes part of the mind. Descartes' mind/matter distinction can be found in his “Meditations” and is a particular kind of

³ St Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica

substance dualism most accurately called Cartesian interactionist dualism. Often, the term 'Cartesian dualism' is used to refer to the general class of substance dualist theories. Substance dualists hold that mind and matter are different kinds of substances. Cartesian interactionist dualism is a particular kind of substance dualism supported by Descartes in which these two different kinds of substance can causally interact. Mind substance can cause matter substance (i.e. the body) to act and matter substance (i.e. the body) can cause mind substance to have certain 'sensations' most often by itself being acted on by other material objects.

For Descartes, the essence of matter is extension (i.e. having spatial dimensions and being located) whereas that of mind is active thinking. Because Descartes thought these two sorts of substance are essentially different, he held that they are also independent. He concluded that as our identity comes from our ability to think, then it might be possible that we could survive without our bodies, remaining the same person. "Our soul is of a nature entirely independent of the body, and consequently... it is not bound to die with it."⁴ He believed that the mind could survive death.

Materialism

Materialism is the view that everything that actually exists is material, or physical. Many philosophers and scientists now use the terms 'material' and 'physical' interchangeably. Characterized in this way, as a doctrine about what exists, materialism is an ontological, or a metaphysical view. Within the topic of life after death, materialism is the belief that there is no separate part to the body and the "soul". Materialism acknowledges that an individual is a physical body and nothing else. The majority of materialists believe that once the body dies, the whole person is dead and therefore ceases to exist. Philosophers such as John Hicks, Richard Dawkins, Rene Descartes and Gilbert Ryle had a materialistic approach to the theory of life after death.

John Hicks shares the materialist idea that at death, both the body and the soul die. He also, argued that it might be possible for the dead to exist after death. In John Hick's "Replica Theory" he attempted to develop a theory on life after death that claims to be consistent with Christian materialism. In Hick's "Replica Theory" he maintained that individuals are "psycho-physical unities" and the pattern or code of which can be re-embodied at any time after death. A re-embodied individual based upon code would be identical pre-death counterpart providing there is only one such re-embodiment.

⁴ Rene Descartes, Discourse on the Method, 1637

Hick's argument began with the idea of an individual ceasing to exist at a certain place that comes into existence in another place. He stated that "the person who appears in the new place is exactly similar, as to both bodily and mental characteristics, to the person who disappeared."⁵ Every single element that might count, as a criterion for an individual's identity, such as their memories and characteristics would be evident in the replica and so therefore would be the same person.

In this theory, Hick continues to state that God is omnipotent and so can effortlessly create a replica body of a dead person, and although death destroys us, God re-creates us in another place.

Richard Dawkins rejected the concept of an immortal soul. Within his writing "River out of Eden" he put forward an argument for biological materialism. He argued that scientific beliefs are supported by scientific evidence, which is consistent, whereas religious concepts such as life after death and the soul cannot be proven with empirical evidence. He claimed that the conviction in the soul is a result from human inability to accept that evil and suffering has no purpose. He believed that an individual is nothing more than the sum of his or her DNA, and is a product of evolution and not the soul. Dawkins was a believer in the Evolution theory and therefore believed that human survival is through their DNA.

Gilbert Ryle was a materialist, which in his work "The concept of the mind" argued that the idea of the soul was a "category mistake", in the use of language, which resulted in people speaking of the mind and body as different entities. Ryle argued that the soul was not something separate. To describe someone as smart or happy does not require the existence of a separate entity. In the same way, if there is a soul, this does not indicate that there is the existence of a separate thing called the soul.

It would seem that whilst many religious believers point towards resurrection of the body as an essential part of religious doctrine that it is not easy to justify at a philosophical level. Arguments from philosophers such as Hick and Ryle try to establish a logical argument for embodied existence after death, but both theories are open to criticism. In contrast theories of the soul are also open to similar criticism making it difficult to assert anything, which can be considered categorically true. In conclusion it would seem that embodied life after death cannot be justified logically or coherently using any philosophical dialogue, leaving it simply as a matter of faith.

⁵ <http://itw.sewanee.edu/philosophy>

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