

**1.) Compare and contrast arguments for and against belief in life after death (20 marks).**

**26/01/03**

One initial problem with studying the belief in life after death is that there are a vast number of theories stating what they believe 'life after death' actually is. Therefore in order to effectively ascertain arguments for and against this idea, it is necessary to deal with each individual theory separately.

Plato's theory of dualism<sup>1</sup> argues that it is the mind that determines our personality and that the body is an outer shell for the real self. The body is contingent and therefore destined for decay but the mind is associated with the higher realities such as truth, goodness and justice and is immortal. Plato believed that the soul continues after death. Plato said that there was a perfect idea/form for everything in existence. The idea of the thing is prior to the individual instance of it and so it must be more real. Ideas are not physical things so they must belong to a spiritual realm of reality, which is more real than the material realm. According to Plato the telos<sup>2</sup> of the body is to be in the physical world and receive sense-impressions whereas the telos of the soul is to travel into the realm of heavenly ideas and understand them.

Before our immortal souls became imprisoned in our bodies they were acquainted with these heavenly ideas and so our soul wants to break free of our bodies and spend eternity in contemplation of the true, the beautiful and the good. In this realm the thinking being would survive without the physical body, the body would not survive death, but the soul - the real essence of the person would continue. Plato terms this 'soul' as our personality identity.

According to Davies, although the arguments may seem ingenious, in actual fact they are severely misguided. Things may have opposites, but it does not follow that if something comes to be, there is something which is its opposite from which it comes. Nor does it follow that if something ceases to be, something comes to be which is opposite to something existing earlier.

Davies adds that Plato's second argument does not work because it mistakenly assumes that if all who have lived come to be dead, it follows that everyone has come to be dead. It is true that someone who has gone to sleep has not awoken but it is not true that nobody is awake.<sup>3</sup>

Aristotle developed a similar theory of dualism for life after death, he considered the 'soul' to be the part of the body that gives it life. It is what turns the physical form into a living organism of its particular type. Therefore a human will have a human soul.

Aristotle defines the body and soul as being inseparable. The soul develops the person's skills, character or temper, but it cannot survive death. When the body dies, the soul ceases to exist, as they are one. This would appear to be materialistic at first but Aristotle believed that the body and soul were different. Human beings have a soul or self that is capable of intellectual life. Only humans can reflect on feelings and sensations and grasp 'universals'. In this way we come to understand eternal truths and in doing so we move on to achieve a higher level of existence.

It seems evident here that Aristotle's argument is guilty of confusing spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> "Any view that postulates two kinds of thing in some domain is dualist; contrasting views according to which there is only one kind of thing are monistic" - Simon Blackburn Oxford Dictionary of philosophy pg 248

<sup>2</sup> Greek word meaning 'purpose'

<sup>3</sup> The Puzzle of God - Peter Vardy

fulfilment that occurs on an entirely physical level, involving emotions and cognitions with life after death and so it seems we must reject his argument.

Bernard Williams raised concerns that the separation of body and mind raises questions for discussion. Williams argues that memories are not a good guide to identity. Memories and personality can be fabricated and personal identity cannot be proved through mental activity alone. He believed that identity comes from physical characteristics as well. Personal identity depends on the way in which we recognise each other and without our bodies we cannot be fully identified.

However, one could counter this by saying that the recognition of each other is irrelevant as it is more the manner within which we recognise ourselves that is important. Furthermore, Williams speaks of recognition on an entirely materialistic level as it is merely the physical person they are identifying. Given that one might say that we make judgements through the form of our physical selves and not our souls to recognise something non-physical by this means does not seem rational.

Williams also highlights the causal affects between body and mind. For example the use of alcohol and drugs affects cognitions and changes personality.<sup>4</sup>

We can argue against this by distinguishing between the mind - a non-physical entity, and the brain - a physical entity by which the mind operates.

Modern science has shown links between the mind and the brain. Surgeons are now capable of splitting the brain and effectively creating two minds. It is possible to argue that dualism was only invented as a philosophy as a means of explaining what, at that time science could not understand.

Finally there is the argument that if the mind is a non-physical object how can it cause anything to happen in the purely materialist realm of the world.

Arguments have been put forward to counter this- some philosophers for example have highlighted parts of the brain by which they believe the mind connects to the physical realm. However, modern science has once again defeated this argument and shown how they serve other purposes. It seems that the argument was little more than unfounded opinion and guesswork.

Rene Descartes is also greatly associated with dualistic arguments for life after death. He states that if human beings are not to be identified with their bodies, then the view that they can survive death seems a plausible one. We normally think of death as the end of a persons bodily life. But if people are distinct from their bodies, then the fact that their bodies die does not entail that they die.

Another modern advocate of a distinction between persons and their bodies is Richard Swinburne. According to him it is coherent that a person can exist without a body. Swinburne asserts that if X (the body) can be without Y (the mind), then X and Y are distinct. Since I can be without my body, it follows, says Swinburne, that I am not my body.

Through Descartes' and Swinburne's arguments it becomes entirely possible to attack the premise of a dualistic interpretation of life after death by attacking the premise of dualism itself.

On the other hand, although our language seems to involve subscribing to a distinction between body and mind this does not show that they are separate things. Furthermore we often talk about ourselves as being distinct from our minds also, so it seems this argument does not work.

There are a number of arguments, however, which work in favour of this approach. For one thing, there is the fact that we often naturally talk about our real selves as though

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<sup>4</sup> The puzzle of God – Peter Vardy

they were distinct from our bodies. Another factor is that we also have privileged access to many of our thoughts. We can think about something without displaying that fact by our bodily behaviour.

However what does the fact that we have privileged access to many of our thoughts actually tell us. It certainly does not mean that only I can know what I am thinking as it is entirely possible for someone else to know what you are thinking by an observational analysis of your physical responses and even for them to be thinking the same thing at the same time.

Unfortunately this counter-argument does not work either as although it is entirely possible for someone to work out roughly what you are thinking, they will never be 100% accurate, nor will they ever be able to think with the perceptions, cognitions and interpretations which you do.

Another argument put forward by Descartes to uphold dualism is his statement: "I know I exist". He also states that he can say that he is essentially a thinking thing. Therefore this perception of the physical seems to imply that there is something else apart from the body with regard to being a human.<sup>5</sup>

However in this case it is possible to argue that appearance may be deceptive, as sometimes our senses can be mistaken regarding the physical world. Why should we be an exception? For example a drunk man may perceive himself to be sober when actually this is not the case.

However, we may point out that this analogy is at fault because if a man is drunk then his perception and mind have been distorted by alcohol and has little to do with appearance as the appearance which has been perceived is not a truthful one.

Unfortunately this line of argument seems to fail when we ask why should drunkenness be any different to other distortions of perception which may occur naturally without our awareness. In fairness, it is not.

Furthermore, Immanuel Kant would argue with Descartes over this issue stating that- the human mind imposes order on our experiences and in reality we do not know with certainty the source of the sensations that the mind organises.

An alternative to dualism is materialism or behaviourism, which is the view that so called mental events are really physical events occurring to physical objects. Emotion for instance is just the interacting of chemicals in our physical body. Gilbert Ryle (1949) dismissed dualism as a theory about 'a ghost in a machine'. That is the ghost of the mind inside the machine of the body. Ryle called the notion that the body and mind are separate entities calling it a category mistake. He uses the analogy of an overseas visitor who is shown around a collegiate university town and sees the college, libraries, and so forth, only at the end of it to ask "but where is the university". Failing to appreciate that the university is not something separate from its constituent parts; failing to see the 'wood for the trees' as some may say...

Ryle advocated something known as philosophical behaviourism- all mental events are really physical events interpreted in a mental way. Thus our mind is not a separate entity but just a term meaning what we do with our physical bodies. Some critics have suggested that this does not explain all mental behaviour. If we are for example wishing for something, this does not mean we are behaving in a particular way.

You could counter this by saying that the number of subconscious thoughts we have are numerous, and they often can manifest themselves through behaviour without our knowledge, who is to say that conscious thoughts are any different. In fact it seems highly likely that they are not.

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<sup>5</sup> Religious Education notes from R.S. conference

Ryle's behaviourist theory can be assigned to a mode of thought known as materialism.

There are two forms of this - hard materialism and soft materialism.

Hard materialism refers to a mode of thought that does not accept that an individual's characteristics are anything more than physical ones. Any idea of consciousness is nothing more than brain activity. The mind cannot be separated from the body. When the body dies, then so does the brain.

Soft materialists do not accept that all characteristics are physical ones. Consciousness is more than just a brain process. The mind and body are related to and do not act independently of each other, but the body often displays inner emotions. A physical symptom may be caused by something that is troubling the mind. There is nothing that we can do independent of our bodies and therefore our personal identity must involve our bodies. They believe that when the physical body dies, so does the mind.

These views seem particularly strong as to oppose them would be to suggest that there are bodiless people capable of being defined as human beings, when surely having a body is part of the definition of being human.

Not all materialists accept that death is the end, instead, some believe that there is life after death. As the physical body cannot be separated from the 'soul' (mind), there is only one way this could happen and that is if the whole body continues after death. The survival would have to involve the resurrection of the body. This belief is known as re-creation theory and is held by Christians. One flaw with this theory is that if we survive as both body and mind, then what state is the body in - are we old/young, sick/healthy etc. The question ultimately refers to the identification of the 'self' and who we really are.

If a person was born with a terminal illness it would not seem just for them to be resurrected as a person with such an astounding deficiency, yet would they not so, it would not be truly them. The only plausible way around this would be to resort to a dualist style of argument separating the body from the soul. Unfortunately however this is not cohesive with creation theory.

The theory also does not take into account personal development, if we are resurrected as a younger person of ourselves then it ignores part of what it is to be human - the ability to develop and change in order to achieve self-actualisation. The development of the self is not compatible with the arguments stationary grounding.

Therefore it would seem necessary that we be resurrected in the form that we were just before we died. Yet if the person had contracted a painful illness or indeed was in a coma then this would seem non-sensical. The reason for this being that if (as in this world) suffering and pain is random and universal then the whole point of an afterlife (to reward and punish) is negated. Furthermore if a person were to be 'cured' as it were, then they would have had a very real aspect of their character and development removed from them (as undoubtedly the ailment would have changed them as a person, however small the change) and so it would not be the actual person that was carried on. John Hick would counter-argue and state that it would be entirely plausible that the dead could exist after death as themselves, if an exact replica of them were to appear. This replica could be identified as being the same person who had died, and therefore, according to Hick, would be the same person. If this replica will be complete with all the characteristics and memories of the individual then it would be the same person re-created.

It is possible to counter-argue this point and ask the question: Would this replica not merely be an exact copy of ourselves but not really us. The individual atoms of which we are composed would differ to those of our copy. We are contingent beings and given that there must be some gap in time in between us ceasing to be and our replica coming

to be, then surely it cannot be the same person.

Hindu and Buddhist traditions hold the view that we have lived many lives before and that on death we will be reborn again. The condition of our present lives are believed to be a direct consequence of our previous lives.

According to Verdic tradition, there is an ultimate reality - Brahman. Everything else is maya - a temporary and finite illusion. Within maya there is a limitless number of souls who all seek union with Brahman. The theory of karma and rebirth is concerned with the soul's journey from illusion to reality<sup>6</sup>. The soul continues from life to life, being reincarnated, until it finds the eternal truth; after this the soul is not reborn any more and is united with Brahman. Thus when an individual dies, their mental aspects live on and the next birth is determined by how good or bad their karma was in the last life.

Evidence frequently cited for this is the fact that many people seem able to remember fragments of their previous lives, sometime under hypnotic regression.

However, although evidence for recall can sometimes be damning, why would it seem to suggest evidence for reincarnation, it could be interpreted as a number of things.

Possibly, you could argue that we are all merely cells in one great organism and that these people have just happened to find interconnections between cells. If we removed the cultural-related feasibility of reincarnation then this argument would appear no less likely. In addition, it is possible that there is a rational explanation for this apparent 'recall'. Firstly, the individual might simply be recalling information gained in childhood and attributing it to a past life. Secondly there could be a 'cultural' gene that passes down information from our ancestors. Or thirdly, that some memories may result from psychological problems and be manifested as memories of earlier lives when in fact they are suppressed events from this life. These three explanations seem relatively weak and unable to explain the multitude of 'regressions' which have taken place.

David Hume would call into validity the nature of the people who make and verify these claims, stating that either they are religious and seek to prove their beliefs to be true, or are mentally unbalanced and cannot be relied upon to make accurate claims.

Furthermore, hypnosis is a very unreliable source of evidence. Numerous psychologists have conducted studies showing that not only are only 33% of the population susceptible to in-depth hypnosis, with 33% being not at all susceptible, but also that false memory syndrome can occur quite regularly under hypnosis, where the patient wrongly 'remembers' an event to have occurred even though it actually has not<sup>7</sup>.

Although this argument does successfully call into doubt the reliability of hypnosis, the majority of other physical explanations seem relatively weak and fail to affectively account for something - which in all fairness we cannot explain. Yet the fact that we cannot remember why we know something should not provide proof that we have had previous lives, moreover that there are things which we know that transcend our sensory experiences.

Philosophically, however, there are problems with this style of argument. Human beings seem to require three things to make up their individuality - body, memory and psychological patterns (personal identity). If we apply these to reincarnation, when we are reborn, continuity is lost. If we cannot remember our previous lives then our memory is lost. With only psychological pattern remaining it would be impossible to determine if one person is the rebirth of another since, unless they displayed identical characteristics, all we could say is that reincarnated people are 'similar' to those who went before.

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<sup>6</sup> Also known as a state of 'Nirvana'.

<sup>7</sup> The puzzle of God - Peter Vardy

Therefore given that reincarnation argues not for life after death, just for life *per se*, it seems irrelevant to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of its arguments.

Another argument for life after death arises through 'spiritualism' and communications between the spirit world and the living is regarded as evidence of life after death. Many 'mediums' have passed on messages from departed spirits that contain accurate information which was previously unknown to the medium.

However, investigations of a number of mediums have proved that they are frauds. Others appear to be genuine and are able to demonstrate that something extraordinary is happening when they pass on messages. This could be communication with departed spirits or some form of telepathic access to the minds of the living.

Once again however, the question is introduced as to whether we can trust the testimony of another human being without actually witnessing the occurrence for ourselves. Given the frequency of unexplainable occurrences such as these they do seem to be a reasonable argument for life after death.

There have been a number of 'sightings' of dead people, which also constitute as arguments for life after death. Dr Deepak Chopra stated that bodies are comprised of energy. They may appear to be solid, but the truth is that they are in reality just an impulse of energy. When an individual dies, the energy field may retain his/her image and may be perceived as a 'ghost'. He considered the ghost to be an individual's consciousness manifesting itself through the remaining energy.

However there are a number of explanations for the phenomenon including hoaxes or elaborate tricks, which could convince people they had seen a ghost whereas in actuality they had not. Secondly there is the 'stone tape' theory which suggests that just as a magnetic tape is able to record events and play them back, in certain conditions, stones will record events and 'play them back' when the same conditions are present. Finally there is the fact that ghosts could be the result of a case of mistaken identity, or the power of suggestion could lead to the mistaken belief that a ghost had been sighted.

The 'stone tape theory' is quite ludicrous as it takes upon a scientific argument to prove a theory when the main differentiation between science and philosophy is empirical verification. In this case there is no evidence to support the theory.

Aside from this theory, the other two seem quite believable in that they are quite feasible and explain the frequency and variety of times such an occurrence has taken place.

Furthermore, the fact that a bundle of energy continues to exist, showing something that once did exist does not mean that life after death exists. Indeed if the energy is little more than a reflection of what once was, it fails as an argument intended to prove what we know is.

In addition can a bundle of energy really be constituted as 'living', if not then once again the argument is invalid.

The argument of near-death experiences also puts forward an argument for life after death. Dr. Raymond Moody has studied many cases of people who had, to all intents and purposes died (during a surgical operation) and subsequently been resuscitated. Many claimed similar experiences - floating out of their bodies, travelling down a tunnel where they emerged into a world of light.

However, these accounts have problems. Firstly, these accounts may be merely the result of people dreaming or experiencing some subconscious phenomena. Given the clarity of these dreams the first account seems unlikely, the second more plausible yet still is devoid of scientific evidence to support. Some have suggested that a lack of oxygen to the brain resulted in this hallucination.

The main problem once again is verification in that it is impossible for us to experience

the phenomena ourselves and judge its reliability accordingly.

In addition, the types of experiences are often largely dependent on culture and society and so whether or not they are genuine or merely a manifestation of what the person may expect to see, or in the case of non-believers, expects not to see.

One can counter-argue this however by saying that God may not actually be a fixed being but more of an interpersonal one varying from person to person and so the culture argument may not be relevant.

The arguments discussed here are numerous, but generally do not hold a great deal of weight. The philosophical arguments are flawed and in places not logical, and the empirical arguments are generally unverifiable.

However, given the sheer number of empirical arguments and the fact that some of them (near death experiences and regression to previous lives for example) are apparently otherwise unexplainable – we must realise that it is highly plausible if not possible that life after death does occur in some form or another.

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