

Philosophy: Life After Death Analysis

To what extent does it make sense to talk about life after death? Nobody likes the idea that we are going to die. It's one of those things that pop into your head whenever you get comfortable, possibly as a subconscious motivational tool. Just in case you ever get really, truly at ease with your life it strikes you that it will all come to an end (possibly quite horribly) without your say-so or even prior notification. Many people find this not only rude but also decidedly inconvenient, and refuse to accept that their lovely lives could ever end. Others are content to allow existence is occasional bout of poor manners and go quietly. This essay is about the main ways people accept their demise, or rather (as it is in most cases) do not.

With science fast becoming the adopted mechanism for explaining our existence, you would think more people would be zealous advocates of materialism, but this is not the case. You would think that the belief that you are nothing more than a soulless (although organic) piece of machinery, rambling aimlessly with only the purpose of reproducing and a brain minutely to advanced to accept this would have most people jumping at the chance to support it. Perhaps this is because materialism falls under the umbrella of reductionism, and as Richard Dawkins says, "in some circles, admitting to being a reductionist is comparable to admitting to eating babies". Conveniently for this paper however, there has been a long and steadfast tradition of Materialism, the primus inter pares of which is a Mr Gilbert Ryle. In 1949 when psychology was a young and nubile science, seen (as all new sciences are seen) to hold the Holy Grail to understanding the human mind, Ryle published "The Concept Of The Mind". In this he dismissed the soul as a category mistake, or a misuse of language. He even went so far as to coin a scornful phrase for his nemesis "the ghost in the machine" – a beautifully elegant term as it embodies both his belief of the body/mind (as for Ryle, the mind is physical organ and so part of the body) as a machine and the soul as the long jibed-by-science notion of ghosts. Ryle implored us to consider the poor foreigner who asks why the team spirit is late for the sports match, only to be mocked by those of us who understand that "team spirit" is merely a colloquial term for the collective banter of many men – not a separate entity of its own. Ryle saw talk of a soul in a similar fashion, as a way to describe the way a man behaves in the world and acts around others and that to say a soul is something separate is trying to justify something that isn't there. Unfortunately for Ryle he was speaking shortly after a very bloody war, to a nation who had just lost many loved ones, who were not really all too willing to accept they had simply been thrust into oblivion by the Nazi war machine. However we live in an altogether different time, far from any front line where we can keep the idea of death at a hypothetical arm's reach. So enters Richard Dawkins. Dawkins appears to be the classic godless heathen atheist, holding totally to his beliefs in the science of genetics and conviction that they hold the complete explanation for what we are. Following from Charles Darwin who came up with the idea of natural selection as a mechanism for our existence – the first credible one that didn't use one god, many gods or any other obscure and divine apparatus. This didn't go down too well with theologians of the time, notably William Paley who wrote an entire text against it (including a metaphor which provided Dawkins with the title for a book of his own). Paley's metaphor was one comparing a rock to a watch, one being a purposeless lump of raw ore and the other a well-defined, precise piece of machinery capable of performing a function. He held that the distinction between these two is that one has a designer and one does not, the wider implication of this being that the universe's/human being's complexity was evidence of design. Dawkins attacks this idea in "The Blind Watchmaker". Dawkins gives us the sense of a force of evolution capable of creating human beings in all their complexity and beauty, at once doing away with notions of the divine background that give strength to our claim on a soul. Evolution is the blind watchmaker of the title, the ultra-slow cumulative selection filtering system that weeds out weaker creations through a process of statistical averages across mind-bogglingly huge lengths of time.

However, We have for generations lived in a world where we have an immortal soul. The reason we pursue arts and literature and experience in life is because we believe we have a soul to nourish. We are uncomfortable with being just a machine, and there are many

reasons to say we don't have to be. To see an object's physical elements does not mean you have eliminated what it is. A pencil is dead wood; graphite and wood stain but still no less a pencil. To see a pencil like that could give you no idea that its functions are performed in a world away from physical description, where it is a transport for human thought onto paper. This can be seen as a reflection of how the soul works – with a physical body, but also totally separate from it. This is the principle thinking of the next school of thought on the afterlife: Dualism. In "The Republic" Plato expressed to the world his idea of the soul/body duality that would endure for many centuries after his death. He postulated the world of the forms, where the perfect aesthetic ideas of everything that is and could be on earth exists. He also conjured a demiurge being that would wrench these concepts from their paradise into the land of the material. So every dog/man/table on earth is derived from the dog/man/table ideal in the world of the forms – but only appear different due to the corruption of the form they inhabit. Important to the proof of the soul was Plato's idea of "reminiscence", which is the way we can differentiate between a table and a man. As ideas are from our prior, pure existence they are more real. And as they are not physical things, they belong to the spirit realm – so how do we recognise them if we are material? The answer is obvious: we must possess something in ourselves that is not physical, better known as the soul. This is not gross, unthinking matter; it is pure and capable of "seeing" the forms. This is how we, as human societies, obtain common ideas of justice, duty and honour (all forms to Plato) even when we are geographically isolated from each other. Plato worshipped his soul, claiming it to be the force that guides all of us from the distasteful material world towards the higher realm of the forms. Plato's ideas became standard thinking for most of the world, mainly because it seems so rational to believe that is really how things work.

Aristotle as with all things in his life, took what Plato said and changed it to make it his own. This mainly meant that instead of the demiurge train taking you back and forth from the form world and this one, your soul is what defines you, and when you die it simply perishes with you (as it is really only the shaping force to your physical form). The main reason Aristotle's theories are still mentionable is that they have a factor that was adopted by Catholicism. For Aristotle postulated that humans have reason because they have a different kind of soul from other animals on earth, which ties in nicely with the idea of God making humans superior and giving them the earth to guard in Genesis. The Bible chooses to spend the great part of its time writing an imperative persuasion; trying to convince us that we will survive death at all, not really addressing how it will happen. The closest we get is I Corinthians 15 vs. 35-44 where it first tells us that we should not worry about how we are to be resurrected, but calms and suppresses our fears with the idea of being given a brand new body after death (ideally on the day of Judgement, but then there is an awful lot of souls hanging around somewhere for millennia upon millennia...) constructed of "heavenly flesh". Some people wished to hear an explanation that had either Evidence or Coherence. So John Hick came along with his theory of re-creationism. Hick gave us a postulate in three parts: 1) you disappear mysteriously and reappear in Lowest Moldavia. The man on the other continent is, to all conceivable intents and purposes, you. He has your memories, your physical form and think/behaves exactly like you. Most people would concede that he is you. 2) You have a mishap with a griddle and die. Exactly at that moment a man appears in another less-than-well-known European country, professing your identity. Again, many would concede he is you. 3) Not learning your lesson, you insist on more griddling antics and meet a timely end. This time the replica you appears in another (slightly more divine) planet that is "not situated any distance or direction from our present world". You have died and gone to heaven. With this presumption, Hick attempts to give us a mechanism for accessing the next life – that God will recreate us and we will live in another world forever. The only problem with this idea (other than that it is based entirely apart from fact) is the worrying concept that if no part of you actually continues to the next life (for you are only being recreated) then how can you call it an afterlife. Sure, the rest of the universe can have the benefit of my everlasting existence, but to me the difference between dying full stop and dying to have a copy of me live in paradise is almost totally nonexistent. This for me spells the end for recreationism.

One of the main problems with dualism is where the soul actually is in the body (unless you go for the pencil argument above, where you cannot see the soul with the perception you use to see the body). Descartes understood that this first hurdle to the afterlife had to be overcome, and came up with this: In your life you experience thoughts, feelings and sensations. These cannot be located in the physical body and to Descartes all that is not physical is the mind. He concluded (with the famous "I Think, Therefore I Am") that although the mind and body are distinct, they must interact. Being of a pre-quantum time, this led Descartes to divide the universe into two basic substances – that which is matter and that which is mind. He arrived at the idea that both these substances existed due to a fundamental purpose - mind-material's purpose is to think, actual matter's is to take up space. This belief is what makes the distinction between Plato's dualism (which is more popular). If there is a divide between the physical/mental worlds, the mind is not a locating device for ideas that are present in the outside world– it is the realm where they exist, non-empirical and as corruptible as the flesh. On the face of it, it would appear Descartes has a very logical justification of an immortal soul for the afterlife – "Our soul is of a nature entirely independent of the body, and consequentially...is not bound to it. And since we cannot see any other causes which destroy the soul, we are naturally led to conclude that it is immortal." Referring to the original question of the soul's location, Descartes may have hoisted himself by his own petard. Where Plato could simply say the form and body were blended by the demiurge, Descartes spoke of an absolute divide – so he had to find a location for it inside the body to allow interaction. For this he drew on the pineal gland or epiphysis cerebri, now known to be the control mechanism for Melatonin (which is released during sleep, helping regulate the body clock). Without this bridge the soul breaks the laws of physics. This means we are back to square one with dualism. So we find dualistic notions of a soul fail in the face of science. Studies on the brain have revealed new problems, one of which is the effect the brain has on our behaviour. If you administer drugs to or perform surgery on the brain, definite changes occur with regard to our behaviour – this would seem to strongly imply a physical link between what we know as our souls and the brain. The problem rests with the already established fact that the soul is nowhere to be found in the body. There is one final main option for us however: Reincarnation. Pythagoras, well known for his work with triangles, believed in a transmigration of the soul, meaning a jump from one body to the other at the moment of death. Unfortunately we have none of Pythagoras's actual writings, so cannot know the details of what he believed. It is said that he studied in Babylon, a highly cosmopolitan city where he could easily have been exposed to Hindu ideas. One people we know about, as their ideas were still strong in Plato's time, are the Orphists. They used one of the myths about Dionysus in their teachings: When he was killed in a battle with the Titans, noble Athene saved Dionysus's heart. Zeus (who was Dionysus's father) swallowed the heart and spat a reincarnated Dionysus. Zeus then ordered Prometheus to create man from the leftovers of both Dionysus and the Titans. The good in Dionysus became our souls and the evil Titan's flesh formed our bodies. This is what gave Plato his ideas on the dualist separation of the body and soul. He may have missed the message of the Orphists however, as they were trying to communicate an ethical approach to reincarnation. As with many Indian beliefs, actions in this world lead to positive or negative forms being granted to you in the next world. Also very much like India, they believed that this cycle of reincarnation was torment for the souls, being constantly torn from loved ones and experiencing the pain of death over and over. This could only be escaped by cumulative good deeds, which would free you from the cycle. Though this would appear to have as many problems as a dualist soul that transmigrates to heaven (namely that we cannot find the soul and there is no proof of the afterlife as we haven't gone there) reincarnation has one saving grace. Why are people born with horrible afflictions? Why are some born to fabulous wealth and easy success, while others slave for years in abject poverty? A Hindu would say these are all the physical evidence for reincarnation, karmic justice in the world around us. When you have the people of the last life coming back to earth instead of off to heaven it gives you a useful insight into the afterlife. Hypnosis will have us believe we can even access our past lives, and many people use this as evidence for reincarnation. A young boy, born with one hand severely disfigured, claims to have been an Egyptian slave master in a past life – responsible for the disciplining of runaway slaves with corporeal punishment. A woman claims her knowledge of

a building she has never been to stems from living there in a previous existence. Sadly however, science steps in again to say these are merely symptoms of psychological longings. It really comes down to how you view the world: 1. The world is a closed system, where nothing exists outside of the realm of current scientific understanding. 2. The scientific view is one of many ways to perceive the universe, and has huge limits to what it allows us to see. So To what extent does it make sense to talk about life after death? Materialism will say the only way we can live on is via the spreading of our genetic material down the lines of time in our children. As for individual survival after death, it is a fallacy of mental creation. Dualists/Christians will say you are to be recreated/your soul will migrate for a life with the almighty in a better dimension. Most of the eastern world would argue that this might happen, but that we have a lot more traversing of the terrestrial plane of existence to do first.