

Religion and the Meaning of Life

Major question: What is the meaning, purpose or value of human life? Widespread traditional theory is that life is meaningful because each person is part of a divine plan which includes not just this life but a life after death.

Death and Human Destiny

Philosophical and Theological views concerning the survival of bodily death and immortality have been of three major types:

1) Reincarnation of the soul in another earthly body.

In Hinduism, reincarnation is connected with the law of Karma, according to which the status of the reincarnated person is determined by his or her behavior in the previous life, whether they fulfilled their caste duties, etc. Nearly all of the rationally plausible evidence for this view consists of anecdotal accounts of impressive “knowledge” of past lives. The fact that very few people seem to have any such “knowledge” and that nearly all of them are from India or other Asian countries in which there are strong traditional beliefs in reincarnation has to be compared with the small number of cases involving such claims. There is little in the way of controlled studies or careful documentation of these claims.

Some Philosophers, such as **Plato**, have offered arguments based on the fact that all human beings seem to have knowledge of universal and necessary truths such as the basic facts of mathematics or logic. He argues that sense-experience is insufficient to rationally justify the universality and necessity of such knowledge. He concludes that this knowledge must have been in us before we were born and, so, our souls must have existed at a time before they were joined to our bodies.

Other philosophers, such as **John Locke**, have argued that this sort of knowledge is acquired by us through the use of our faculty of intellectual intuition. By this faculty we are able to grasp necessary connections between numbers or other concepts that we have obtained from experience. It is not necessary to infer that we existed before we were born in order to explain this sort of knowledge.

2) Immortality of the Disembodied Soul

Contrasted with the merging of the individual into the infinite being of God or Brahman which brings the cycle of reincarnation of that person to a final end. The theory of the immortality of the disembodied soul asserts the post-mortem existence of the individual person and does not involve either reincarnation or the loss of individual identity.

Plato's (and Descartes') argument for the immortality of the soul is that it is immaterial and therefore indestructible, since only things which can be divided into parts can be destroyed and immaterial things cannot be divided into parts. It is in fact nonsensical, according to Descartes, to think of souls as if they had any sorts of physical properties.

Some philosophers have found the doctrine of the **dualism of body and soul** to be full of difficulties. If they are so different, how can they be connected or related in the same human being? What evidence do we have that such things as immaterial souls exist at all? We cannot see, hear or touch a soul, not even our own soul. Do we know of the existence of at least our own soul by a kind of inner sense or introspection? Many have agreed with David Hume, who complained that he could not perceive anything within himself but perceptions, feelings, thoughts, emotions, etc, never a continuing single substance which is the subject to which all those perceptions belong.

There is now widespread support for behaviorist or materialist philosophies of mind which argue that mental states or mental events cannot exist independently of a body; indeed, that mental states are functions of certain bodily systems, such as the vast network of neurons forming the higher centers of our brains.

Even if Plato and Descartes were right and our souls are immaterial substances which cannot be divided, is they also right that they only way for something to be destroyed is by dividing it into parts? Even an immaterial substance would have qualities such as consciousness and such qualities can gradually decrease in their degree of intensity until it reaches zero. Immateriality is not a guarantee of indestructibility.

2) Resurrection of the Body

This is the original teaching of Judaism and Christianity. The Platonic doctrine of immortality of the separated soul was adopted by the Jewish and Christian communities when they came under the influence of Greek Philosophy.

The resurrection of Jesus, raising him from the dead, reflects the continuity of early Christianity with ancient (Greek, Egyptian and middle eastern) traditions which consider existence as a person to be impossible without a body. Christianity adds the notion that, on the day of resurrection, the day of final judgement, those who are among the saved shall be resurrected with new, transformed, perfect incorruptible bodies and the Earth will be transformed into the Paradise it was in its first creation. Since such an event would require the power of God to bring it about, this is a theory that is plausible only on the assumption that God exists. So, the rational plausibility of this view depends on whether there are sufficient plausible reasons to believe in God. But there are other considerations that affect its plausibility as well.

Personal Identity and Arguments For Survival

The General problem of personal identity is: What does it mean to remain the same person through various sorts of physical or psychological changes? The particular problem of personal identity in the context of surviving death is: if people survive death, what is it that makes them the same people they were before they died? Bodily criteria of personal identity are sufficient for practical purposes while a person is alive. In some cases, a person's body may change so much that psychological characteristics are all that remain as the basis of personal identity. The only way of determining whether the same person exists in spite of physical and psychological changes is whether there is continuity in the changes, so that there are at least some connections between what the person was like before and what they are like now.

Personal identity requires either bodily continuity or psychological continuity or both. Philosophers continue debating which are more important. Reincarnation theories fail both continuity tests. Personal identity ceases if the number and kinds of changes an individual undergoes are sufficiently great and it seems that nearly everyone lacks the kinds of psychological connectedness to past lives that would preserve personal identity because very few people claim to remember past lives.

Resurrection theories might pass a psychological continuity test but this theory requires embodiment of some sort as well as psychological continuity in order to preserve personal identity. But, if I could have more than one body (first the old one and then the resurrection-body) is there enough continuity between these two bodies to preserve personal identity?

What is the difference between this possibility and creation of a new, different person who would be my exact double? If this were to happen, would it still be me who existed?

It even seems probable, on the resurrection theory, for the resurrection-body to exist at the same time that the (dead) earthly body (still) exists. But then that seems to mean that (if God so willed) I could have an exact resurrection-twin. If so, which of them would be me?

Theories of disembodied immortality fail the bodily continuity test but perhaps they could meet the psychological continuity test. Even if such a form of existence is conceivable, is it probable?

One attempt to give it probability involves presenting evidence of communication with the dead by psychic mediums. H. H. Price argued that either the medium really is in touch with departed spirits or the medium is getting information by telepathic communication with living persons. Price believed that the first alternative is more probable than the second, though he did not claim that the evidence provided by mediums was fully convincing.

It may also be doubted whether the cases Price considered to be carefully authenticated really were so. Doubt is legitimate here because many cases of alleged mediumistic communication with the dead have turned out to be fraudulent. Others have been alleged to be conducted under scientifically controlled conditions but the controls have in fact been too loose. After more than a hundred years of attempts to verify such allegations by mediums, investigators from the American Society for Psychic Research have still not been able to agree that any case under investigation has been scientifically convincing.

Another sort of case in which evidence for survival as a disembodied spirit has been reported are so-called near-death experiences.

Some people who have been pronounced clinically dead but were then resuscitated report certain “experiences” which they claim occurred during the time when they were “dead”: meeting dead relatives, encountering and communicating with a “being of light”, feeling peaceful, happy, etc.

It needs to be noted that most of these accounts are from patients in American hospitals and many of the experiences are reported by people who grew up in Jewish or Christian cultural surroundings and their experiences contain strongly Jewish or Christian religious themes. Stories of visitations to “the land of the dead” are nothing new. All cultures have myths in which various persons “die” and then return to their bodies after a sojourn among spirits of the departed. But in these cases, the stories of these visitations contain strong elements from that culture’s religious beliefs.

It also has to be noted that a very impressive body of recent research on the nature of memory has shown that even ordinary remembering involves a large degree of imaginative reconstruction. Even ordinary memory should not be thought of as similar to a process of storing and retrieving pictures, sounds, etc. There have been many cases in which people seem to remember events that occurred long ago but have since been stored away in their minds but it then, on investigation, turns out that those events did not really happen but are sheer confabulations on the part of the subject, sometimes under the influence of a physician, psychologist or counselor.

Also, there is no correlation between the length of time that one seems to remember having elapsed during an allegedly remembered series of past events and the length of time during which “memories” of these events are laid down. It is quite possible to be unconscious for just a few moments and during that time unconsciously fabricate memories of a series of events that allegedly took a long time to happen.

It is sometimes noted that there are an impressive number of similarities in reports of near-death experience even if one discounts the elements that may be due to specific cultural bias. These similarities are important and should not be dismissed without an attempt to account for them.

Disembodied existence is one way to account for them but it is not the only plausible way to account for them. It is also important to remember that the processes that occur in the brain just before death are likely to be quite similar across all cultures. The similarities of those brain processes may be sufficient to explain the similarities in the reported experiences.

There are also other kinds of considerations that affect the plausibility of the hypothesis of disembodied existence. One is the point that if a disembodied spirit has no characteristics in common with physical things then it could not even have shape or size. Hence, it could not have any location either, and would thus not be able (as is often claimed) to see, hear, etc. events going on in the room where their near-death occurs. All observation is from some vantage-point but a thing that had no location could not have a vantage-point.

So, it is interesting to note that most accounts of near-death experience report that the one who temporarily leaves his/her flesh-and-blood body, still has a sort of “body” but one with a very different nature and powers. The implication of this claim, however, is that since the person in question has this “non-physical (astral) body” during the near-death experience and, supposedly, those who permanently leave their flesh-and-blood bodies permanently have non-physical bodies, it follows that even during earthly existence, the person who has a physical body also has this non-physical body.

But what does this mean? That, during earthly existence, the person’s non-physical body is somehow bottled up inside the flesh-and-blood body? If so, why can’t one just leave the fleshy body whenever one takes a fancy to?

If the spirit-body has powers of seeing, hearing, etc. during near-death times, then it is really the person who owns the spirit-body even while it is bottled up inside the fleshy body.

It does all of our seeing, hearing, etc. If so, then why can't we still see, hear, etc. after our eyes or eardrums or perceptual regions of our brain have been damaged?

There is massive evidence for the strict dependence of all psychological capacities on neurological functioning. Very few people who doubt this dependence of psychological capacities on neurological functioning in the case of human beings doubt it in the case of all other animals.

But why should not the same dependence hold for human beings, given the great similarities between human neurological structures and those of other animals? Do all other animals also have spirit-bodies as well as physical bodies? Mice? Frogs? Worms?

One may say that the evidence against disembodied existence or existence in a spirit-body is strong but not strong enough to rule it out even as a possibility. Quite so, but it is also never valid to argue from the mere possibility of something's being true to its being actually or even probably true. The only way to supply enough probability for this hypothesis so that it is more probable than a purely materialistic view of persons is to find independent significant support for belief in the existence of God or some other sort of supernatural entity.

Death, Immortality and the Question of Meaning

Would life be deprived of all meaning; would all chance for happiness and satisfaction be destroyed if it were known that we do not survive the death of our physical bodies? Would all human hardships, suffering and injustice be rendered pointless if that were known for a fact? Many people believe that this is so and that the only thing that makes life as it is actually lived worth living is the belief that death is not the end and that our lives serve a higher purpose that will be fulfilled after death.

If theism is true, then it is reasonable to believe that death is not the end and that our lives on earth do serve this higher purpose. Many people's belief in God is based primarily on this thinking.

This point of view assumes that no matter how much the conditions of earthly life might be improved, it would not be meaningful or worthwhile if it were known that we do not survive physical death.

But is it true that none of the things that are potential sources of satisfaction, happiness, fulfillment and joy are worth pursuing or having without the assurance of survival of death?

Is it even probable that a post-mortem existence would provide us with what we hope for in that state? Would immortality as such be sufficient for fulfilling our hopes? Might not eternal, unending existence become monotonous and eventually devoid of meaning even if did not involve physical suffering? Some people have argued that it is our knowledge of the shortness of earthly existence that makes it so precious and that fills our lives with importance and meaning.

Humanists do not find that life is pointless or without meaning even though they take a naturalistic view of persons. They find the prospect of working to create a world in which our highest values and ideals are realized to be exciting and fully adequate to provide satisfaction, happiness and a sense of purpose.

There have been many persons who, like David Hume near the end of his life, thought it very unlikely that they would exist after death but who faced their death calmly and serenely, without regret and with a sense that this life has been sufficiently meaningful that it is enough.