

Parapsychology and Life after Death

(Please note: These are rough notes for a lecture, some adapted from previous publications and should not be reproduced or otherwise used verbatim.)

Parapsychology: the scientific study of paranormal phenomena.

Paranormal: (beyond the normal) unusual experiences that cannot be explained on usual scientific principles or by commonsense. These can include:

- Out of body and near death experiences
- Ghosts
- Possession by demonic powers
- Bizarre coincidences
- Miracles
- Unidentified Flying Objects
- Alien Abductions
- Past-life memories

Not easy to analyse the research into these things – much is challenged, and the assumption is made that the parapsychologist wants to find some objective bases for these things, rather than assume that they are all in the mind.

Some would use these phenomena as proof of life after death. Two things to consider:

- how good is the evidence for this?
- if survival is universal, how come these events are relatively rare?

Plus we also need to ask what people mean to life after death – and that not quite as easy to answer as you might imagine.

What is the fascination and impulse to want to believe in life after death....

Marx –

His main criticism of religion was that, in the face of real oppression on earth, it offered spiritual blessings in heaven. People would therefore put up with their present suffering in the hope of a spiritual reward – using it like a drug to ease the pain of their situation:

‘Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, the soul of the soulless environment. It is the opium of the people.

‘The people cannot be really happy until it has been deprived of illusory happiness by the abolition of religion. The demand that the people should shake itself free of illusion as to its own condition is the demand that it should abandon a condition which needs illusion.’

(from the *Introduction to the Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right*)

Hence the danger that the promise of life after death will detract from benefits sought in this life.

Freud –

Freud describes religious ideas as: ‘illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind...’

Those who cling to them do so because of the comfort they bring, God taking the place of a benevolent father, needed later in life, where threats remain but an actual father is not there to help:

But Freud is careful to define what he means by an illusion:

‘An illusion is not the same thing as an error; nor is it necessarily an error...’

What is characteristic of illusions is that they are derived from human wishes...’

Illusions need not necessarily be false – that is to say, unrealisable or in contradiction to reality... Thus we call a belief an illusion when a wish-fulfillment is a prominent factor in its motivation, and in doing so we disregard its relations to reality, just as the illusion itself sets no store by verification.’

[from *The Future of an Illusion*, Penguin translation, quoted in *Faith and Reason*, ed Paul Helm]

He sees one of the benefits of religion as being that religions teachings diminish the threat posed by death.

We need to consider the nature of the soul:

Plato – the soul is immortal, linked to this physical body. It existed before birth and therefore has knowledge of the ‘Forms’.

Aristotle – the soul is what animates us and makes us what we are.

Two very different ideas:

- Immortality – that there is something naturally immortal, possessed by all human beings
- Resurrection – that we die but God raises us up to life at the last day and gives us a new body.

For Augustine and later Christianity, the self or soul was seen as fallen, inhabiting a physical body, but essentially connected with the higher world. At death, body and soul separate, the body to return to corruption, the soul to go to judgement and either heaven or hell. For religious reasons, therefore, it was crucial that body and soul were separable.

Any theory which made the soul a by-product of bodily processes (the 'epiphenomenon' of later debates) would fail to take into account either it's being a divine endowment, or it's being able to have an eternal destiny once its temporal body was no more.

In the quest for personal identity, there are various aspects that can be examined, for example: bodily continuity; continuity of character; memory.

Thus, to the question 'Are you the same person who...?', one could argue first of all that you have to be the same person if there is bodily continuity. Indeed, this is the usual way of recognising someone, although it is difficult if a long time has passed since last we saw him or her.

But just how much change can happen to a body for this identity to remain? The old man and the baby are physically totally different, but yet can claim to be the same person. Mentally, the person in advanced Alzheimer's disease is hardly the bright young student of years before.

Names give continuity, as does genetic code - but names can be changed, and genetic code is not visible; for practical purposes, therefore, we tend to supplement the basic continuity of the body, with other indications of identity. Thus, one generally looks for continuity in terms of that person's character and behaviour patterns. If they have totally changed, one would be tempted to ask what had happened to cause such changes. But, most importantly, a person asserts who they are, and shows that they are the same person encountered earlier, by recalling events in the past. Not only do I have a sense of my own identity because of the memories I have of my own past, but I can convey that sense of identity to others by telling my personal story, or by recalling shared moments. If adults meet for the first time since childhood, they can restore the bond of friendship, by remembering shared childhood experiences - the person encountered in the present may look and sound totally different, but memory immediately established a deep connection.

But can a person's identity always be established, and does it have a fundamental unity? Clearly, when it comes to the body, it is possible to lose a limb without thereby losing one's identity. The body is clearly divisible and some parts are going to be more crucial to personal identity than others - the successful transplant of another head would cause more problems than a transplanted liver, for example.

However, when it comes to the mind, traditional Cartesian dualism has argued that the mind is not a physical and is therefore unextended. The implication of this is that it cannot be divided, since you can only divide that which occupies space. For Descartes, therefore, there is a single self with privileged access to its own mind.

From a materialist point of view, however, it should be possible to divide off aspects of personal identity, simply because they inhere in, or are ways of describing, something physical, and the physical world is always divisible. In other words: **from a dualist point of view, there is always going to be, at the core of personality and consciousness, a single mind - the 'real' me. From a materialist point of view, there is always the possibility that what I conventionally call myself is a bundle of various mental aspects, a bundle whose integrity is not assured, and which might change with time.**

So how does this impact on beliefs about life after death?

we need to clarify also what is meant by 'life after death'

The distinction between resurrection and immortality.

If we are talking about natural immortality (not a Christian concept but one that has played a significant part in the post-Cartesian way of looking at things). There is the prospect of continuous life

This does not require religion of any sort, and is not related to morality - i.e. you are not 'rewarded' with life after death - it is just a feature of being a human being.

On the other hand, if we are thinking in terms of resurrection, in which everything is dependent upon the gift of God. This is the original Christian belief - that you die; all of

you dies; there is no naturally immortal bit to survive. But, at the last day, God raises people up, gives them new bodies, and judges them good or bad – which then determines their ultimate fate, heaven or hell.

In Western thought there is also a tradition of seeing the soul as separate from, and therefore separable from, the physical body. This led some philosophers to argue for the natural immortality of the soul.

Plato argued for the immortality of the soul on two grounds:

1. That all composite things can perish, but absolutely simple things cannot, because there are no constituent parts into which they can be divided. The body is composite and therefore perishable; the mind is simple, and therefore immortal.
2. Some of the things we know – like truths of mathematics, or the ‘Forms’ that we use to understand what individual things have in common – cannot come from seeing individual things, because they are concepts that come from the eternal realm. Therefore we must have had some knowledge of these things before our present birth, and have therefore ‘remembered’ them. Hence we must be immortal.

The argument for immortality need not be religious – indeed, Plato’s arguments given above make no reference to beliefs, or the agency of God, or any idea of reward or punishment after this life. Indeed, immortality is inevitable if the soul is indeed simple and imperishable.

Similarly, the radical dualism of Descartes would be compatible with this idea of natural immortality, since the ‘self’ cannot be found in the interlocking series of things that make up the physical world.

Disembodied existence

A problem with the idea of disembodied existence is that all that we know of another person – their habits, their likes and dislikes, what they think and what they say, is mediated to us via their bodies. Without a body, it is difficult to see how a person could be known, or could have a personality of any sort. A disembodied existence would need to communicate – but how?

A key problem with disembodied existence is that what we know of a person during his or her life is bound up with the interaction between their physical body and the various circumstances in which they find themselves. Everything about them, from their physical body to their patterns of thought, goes through a process of constant change.

The baby will grow to be an adolescent, middle aged and eventually an elderly person – there is continuity, since that same person relates to the world at all stages of life, but it is set within a world in which everything changes. However, at whatever stage of life we meet a person, all that we know about them is given in terms of our relationship with them, which is mediated through the physical. This is not just their physical appearance, but how they speak and act; we know them because of the way they respond to us.

A disembodied existence, as a state that might continue beyond death, is therefore a most curious one. What would it mean to exist without a body? How would a disembodied existence be that of a person in any sense – for a person acts and changes, speaks and thinks, all things that are bound up with the ordinary world of space and time and physical objects?

Bertrand Russell expressed the problem in this way:

‘Our memories and habits are bound up with the brain, in much the same way in which a river is connected with the riverbed. The water in the river is always changing, but it

keeps to the same course because previous rains have worked a channel. In like manner, previous events have worn a channel in the brain, and our thoughts flow along this channel. This is the cause of memory and mental habits. But the brain, as a structure, is dissolved at death, and memory therefore may be expected to be also dissolved. There is no more reason to think otherwise than to expect a river to persist in its old course after an earthquake has raised a mountain where a valley used to be.'

from *Why I am not a Christian...*, Allen & Unwin, 1957

In his book *Death and Eternal Life*, John Hick presents a story in order to explore the relationship between our physical body and our identity as a person. In this, a man dies suddenly in London but then, at that same moment, appears in New York. The person in New York has an identical body, and also seems to have all the memories that belonged to the London man. Does that make him the same person?

The point that Hick seems to be making is not that it is **actually** possible to create some kind of replica person, but that – if it makes sense to think of that replica person as the same as the original – it also makes sense to at least consider the possibility of life after death in the form of a new physical body as a vehicle for expressing personal identity. A replica might therefore have a body with which to express personality, and also a set of memories to inform the present choices and so on. If the replica 'is' the original person, it implies that life beyond death is at least conceivable. However, it might be argued that to be the same person requires **numerical identity as well as physical continuity**; and a replica does not have continuity with the original – for if it did, you would never be able to know that it was a replica or the original!

There is a basic question here: Would someone with a body and memory identical to mine actually be me?

For a materialist, there can be no prospect of a person surviving the death of their body, simply because **they are their body**. Their body may have changed radically during life – but it was still the same physical body.

For a dualist, the separation of soul and body makes survival at least a possibility. Although disembodied existence is difficult to conceive in another person (since I know others by perceiving them), I can imagine myself existing without a body, simply because I cannot imagine myself other than as existing. (Try it!)

Both materialist and dualist positions might be compatible with the idea of resurrection, but only if some sense of identity and continuity can be shown.

Do you believe in ghosts?

A survey in 2003 showed that 42% of people in Britain did. But how can you show that a ghost is real, has a personality, and is not just a feature of an excited imagination. How can you prove a disembodied existence? Could a ghost appear if it did not take on a body of some sort? Surely, if ghosts exist, you can only know who they are if they have some sort of physical appearance?

In the end, whether you believe that parapsychology contributes to the debate about life after death, will depend on:

- How much credibility you give to paraphenomena
- What your view is of life after death
- What your view is of personal identity and what it needs

Personally, I think both Marx and Freud were right in that there are a good number of people who are fascinated by and want to believe in survival. And that means that, however much it is challenged scientifically, parapsychology will continue to flourish.

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