

Death Part IV

Life After Death

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Some years ago Bertrand Russell asked ‘Do we survive death?’¹ Russell argued that a person is simply a set of experiences and that these are bound up with the structure of the brain, which of course dissolves at death. Belief in the afterlife is purely emotional: some people believe we are very good and the world is very good, so we must survive. But, Russell argues, most people are so bad and the world so awful, it is better to think the world is malevolently created and to hope that our lives are transient.

In Russell’s pejorative sense of ‘emotional’, belief in the afterlife is not purely emotional at all. In fact, it is so bound up with important human practices and attitudes that it is difficult to see how it could be abandoned without dismantling whole areas of our way of life. I will ask what effects attempting to abandon the belief might have, what the belief consists in, and whether there are compelling reasons for holding it.

Belief in the afterlife is threaded into common thought and everyday practice. Until comparatively recently the common law would not allow that Australian Aborigines could swear oaths, for example in giving evidence. This was so because white men thought—wrongly—that Aborigines had no concept of the afterlife. Whether rightly or wrongly, the courts believed that only a belief in life after death with divine retribution could give a motive for avoiding perjury and like undetectable offences. Most academics today may deny transcendent meaning and destiny; nevertheless, for the rest of us these questions radically affect our everyday activities and attitudes. The possibility of afterlife haunts contemporary healthcare, medical research, family life and love lives, religion, bioethics, art, and our ordinary responses to loss, need and suffering.

The idea that our acts will also, eventually, have consequences is a deep psychological motivator. No doubt there are sound evolutionary reasons for this; but sometimes it would make evolutionary sense for us to abandon this ‘primitive’ thought habit—yet still we do not.

¹ Bertrand Russell ‘Do We Survive Death?’ in *Why I Am Not A Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1957).

Kant thought our moral universe only made sense on a number of key assumptions, including the assumption of a *post mortem* future in which God's justice will finally be enacted. I think this is one of the least original notions of Kant—and that is perhaps its significance: Kant took it as read that we need the full accomplishment of justice if we are to persevere with life, and that justice is not always fully accomplished in this world.

The life-sustaining qualities of hope and faith—trusting in and believing in a good future—seem to be necessary human experiences. Of course, people often lack them, but where they do lives are ruined, or disregarded. Anything approaching human flourishing requires hope and faith in a good future. Yet for most of the world's people there is apparently nothing to hope for or believe in—unless the object of hope and faith is an encounter or experience *post mortem*. People often comfort bereaved children with tales of mummy in heaven with the angels. The adults may think of their story as a fable, but they also know they cannot achieve the same effect with tales of mummy becoming food for insects, or making a microscopic contribution to our barrier against increased global warming. The point is, only the story postulating immortality *works* because children, and adults who were once children, know that is what we have to believe if we are to survive great pain and clear the way for eventual acceptance.

Many similar points could be made. We could trace many acts and choices that reveal our (conscious and unconscious) commitment to belief in our own, and others', immortality. But the question is: might this be a mere strategy or illusion—the ultimate survival mechanism or a collective lunacy of the human race? Is it a belief in anything *real*?

First, think again of what we lose by abandoning the belief—if we can abandon it; it runs very deep. Stephen Rosenbaum argues we have been exposed to the thesis of life after death for so long we are powerfully affected by it in ways we do not even realise. For example, he thinks it is ignorance of our condition in the afterlife that is root of the universal fear of death.² Richard Sorabji explores the roots of the widespread attitude that people would even prefer being damned to Hell if only they would continue to exist and not be annihilated.³ Giving up immortality would certainly be psychologically and emotionally difficult, perhaps shattering. But let us say we do come to accept that death makes us worm-food and that is that; there is nothing else. Then, for one thing, our attitudes towards community

² Stephen Rosenbaum 'How to be dead and not care: a defence of Epicurus', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 23, 1986, pp. 217–225.

³ Richard Sorabji 'Fear of Death and Endless Recurrence' in *Time, Creation & the continuum: theories in antiquity and the early middle ages* (Ithaca NY: Cornell UP, 1983).

would change dramatically. Love and justice matter to everyone. But if we believe that those we love, and who love us, and those due justice from us or owing it to us will simply cease, our moral attitudes and practices will alter radically. Love expects to be deathless—and that is not foolish romance: it is written into every birthday card and underpins every shared future plan; meanwhile, justice is due to the dead, and expected from future generations in the names of their fathers and mothers. Our most basic community ties would change, and not obviously for the better, without the afterlife.

And more than our community attitudes would change. Every time we grasp a truth or create an idea or argument we do not simply use but increase reason. Our thought has unlimited power to keep going if we stay well and alert and new data and puzzles continue to stimulate us. Of course, this depends on the health of the brain and the creativity of the mind. But do we not also believe that our thought can, at least sometimes, transcend the conditions of its own occurrence—namely, our brains, minds and mortality? When we, or at least our greatest thinkers and our mystics, think seriously about objects of thought greater than thought itself—goodness or truth or God—can we not have the experience of our thought becoming one with something larger than itself or ourselves, something lacking our limitations and finitude? Francoise Dastur asks: if thought can thus participate in eternity for brief moments, why not for ever?⁴

Indeed, why not? To believe that our capacity to contemplate and so find union and stillness in the highest objects will cease with death would involve renegotiating our attitude towards this highest experience of thought: thought's capacity for enabling human self-transcendence would turn out to be temporary, illusory. This response to our thought as transcendent, eternal, a spiritual act lies not just at the root of prayer, mysticism, and artistic genius, but of much more common human experience too, experience increasingly (if imperfectly) exploited today by the 'new spiritualities'.

If ceasing to believe in immortality would alter other central beliefs and attitudes, then just what *is* this powerful belief? I think that most Western people, if honest, would answer they believe we survive as holy versions of ghosts. I also think we should take people's fears of and credulity about ghosts seriously. Being left alone in a quiet house for several hours is enough to make most people feel 'spooky', uneasy, tempted to check that all rooms are truly empty. This reaction is widespread, and often a starting point for what people believe about the afterlife. Significantly, many people happily believe in disembodied, invisible ghosts such as poltergeists, or ghosts whose visible form is not human but more like a tablecloth with holes for

⁴ Francoise Dastur *Death: an essay on finitude*, trans. John Llewelyn (London: Athlone, 1996), p. 37.

eyes (though they probably only picture angels in human form!), *and* believe these ghosts are human persons, or at least remnants of human persons.

But this caricature cannot be all there is to our beliefs about survival. If people just believed they would survive as a spirit or a centre of consciousness, then (painless and timely) bodily decay and death would not matter quite so much to them as it does. If we thought 'humans *might* survive and if they do, will do so in disembodied form', fears about what happens to our bodies before and after death would not have the same scope or intensity. With proper medication and no disgust or fear caused to loved ones, we ought to be able to regard bodily dissolution with simple regret, or even relief. But in general we do not. This suggests we believe at some level that bodily survival is the only survival possible for me, at least if I am to survive as *me*. That is why watching the body decay and die is so terrifying: if there is survival, the body must return, and as we watch it decay we know any return will not be a natural return which we can easily picture and easily accept.

Indeed, the more we dig into everyday action and everyday psychology, the deeper seems the belief in bodily afterlife. For example, the dying care about what is happening to their bodies, and those who nurse them care too that no damage or neglect is caused to any bodily part or function even when it is clear death is near and the damage will not hasten it; again, families and lovers have to *conquer*, if they can, the deep belief that they will meet their beloved dead again; we feel repugnance at the abandonment of human remains: even ashes should be solemnly scattered since they (just) might be one day reconfigured; and so on.

Of course, there are people and whole religions that teach the body is not necessary to survival, even to individual survival. But these may very well be undermined by their own adherents' continuing attitudes towards their bodily lives. It may well be that all people experience themselves as a simultaneous unity of thought, feeling and action, as, for example, Aquinas thinks?⁵ Also, the belief in disembodied individuals (as opposed to a disembodied soul-mass) may simply be philosophically incoherent: How would we individuate these persons? How could they retain their own personal boundaries of thought and affect intact? Some, faced with these questions, opt for the unhappy notion of a 'spiritual body', a sort of ghostly, shaded-in matter, to retain individuality. In any case, we can say that belief in self-as-ghost and self-as-bodily-presence (whether as alternatives, in harmonious combination, or in uneasy compromise) are the elements that form most Western people's belief in immortality.

⁵ Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* 1, 76, 1.

Are there any compelling reasons for holding such beliefs? Are there any good reasons at all for believing in survival? One view is that such reasons as there are come only from revealed teaching: 'survival of death remains a case where philosophy would need considerable supplementation [from religious faith] for belief to be credible.'⁶ An older, medieval view has it that there are good *philosophical* arguments for the immortality of the soul, and for the view that if we survive death, then the body must survive death. Meanwhile, in recently issued *Companions* to philosophy of religion (and in recent science-fiction too) some thinkers ponder philosophical arguments for physical recovery or resurrection—the possibility of a living being coming back into existence across a time gap in which there are no physical material-causal connections. Amongst alternatives here is Peter Van Inwagen's suggestion that resurrection is only possible if God snatches men away just prior to death and replaces them with a simulacrum that appears to be their corpse, whereas they are in fact carried off to be stored and eventually revealed by God as alive. Another view holds it is logically possible that God causes fission of the body, each material particle being causally connected to two particles, one of which appears with its fellows in a space-time contiguous location relative to the body at the moment of fission, the other of which is at a different location.⁷

My own response to these 'philosophical' tales is 'if that's what it takes to justify resurrection philosophically, philosophy should shut up.' Does this mean we are left only with Aristotelian and Thomistic arguments (or perhaps weaker, Swinburnian arguments) for an immortal soul, with resurrection left as an extra for the believers amongst us? I think most people—and many Christians—do indeed think of their immortality as ghost-like, with resurrection the hard bit Christians may (if they're liberal) or must (if they're hardliners) believe in. So, do Aristotle-Thomas or Swinburne on the immortal soul provide the only philosophical reason we need to believe in the afterlife? Hardly. The case against Swinburnian dualism is strong.⁸ Meanwhile, Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophical arguments for soul survival, even if successful, leave us without individuality, and, at least on Thomas's account, human personhood. If Aquinas's theory gives us reason to believe in immortality, it is because of the non-philosophical ('resurrection') argument as much as the philosophical ('immortal soul') argument.

⁶ Anthony O'Hear *Philosophy in the New Century* (London: Continuum, 2001), p. 153.

⁷ See, for example, Dean Zimmermann 'Materialism and Survival' in *Philosophy of Religion: the big questions*, E. Stump and M. Murray, eds (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 379–86.

⁸ For interesting critique of both Swinburne's dualism and recent Thomistic work on the soul, see William Hasker *The Emergent Self* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1999), Ch. 6.

Incidentally, I do not think bodily survival becomes easier if we say ‘philosophy has nothing to say on this: it’s a matter of faith’. It is just as difficult for people of faith to comprehend that bodily resurrection can or will occur. ‘Faith’ is not a magical or hallucinatory state that means people can suddenly believe in (philosophical) nonsense; it is genuine knowledge that rational beings can have if they accept as sources of knowledge God’s own speech and the reflection upon it of those God has authorised to reflect publicly and authoritatively on his words. So the compelling reasons religion sometimes suggests are just as difficult to formulate and accept.

But what reason can philosophy, without appealing to revealed truths, give for belief in resurrection? Part of the difficulty here is the images of bodily death that fill our minds. We have deep practical and anthropological reasons for fearing and being disgusted by physical corruption. What was once a complex, healthy unity breaks down into worms feasting on decomposing matter, while the mind, if it survives at all, separates from matter, awaiting its own fate. What was integrated and alive is now a chaos of aliens, parts, and functions. Who could survive this? But part of Christian—and Jewish and Muslim—brilliance is to build all our hopes on this unlikely basis. In *Resurrection of the Body* Caroline Walker Bynum’s concluding words are: ‘For however absurd [resurrection] seems . . . it is a concept of sublime courage and optimism. It locates redemption there where ultimate horror also resides – in pain, mutilation, death, and decay . . . Those who articulated it faced without flinching the most negative of all the consequences of embodiment: the fragmentation, slime, and stench of the grave . . . We may not find their solutions plausible, but it is hard to feel they got the problem wrong.’⁹

Philosophy, then, needs to go down into the grave and find there the reason why we are haunted by the possibility of a supernatural destiny (whether we embrace it or reject it). Of course the thought that *mind* is everlasting is easier to grasp: thought does not corrupt; much fiction and some science depends on this fact. But our fears and hopes for the afterlife depend on the image of ourselves surviving *bodily*.¹⁰ Even the saints whom (with the exception of Mary) we *know* have no bodily survival are (wilfully if piously) pictured by us as existing this moment bodily in heaven.¹¹

⁹ Caroline Walker Bynum, quoted in Daniel Callahan ‘Visions of Eternity’, *First Things*, May 2003, pp. 28–35.

¹⁰ Peter Geach ‘Immortality’ in *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969) thinks that *only* the Judaeo-Christian idea of resurrection makes sense of survival of death.

¹¹ See Simon Tugwell *Human Immortality and the Redemption of Death* (Springfield, Templegate, 1990), p. 122.

But how can this body survive, since it rots and vanishes? The question here is: what is *this* body? Of course, it has to be *my* body, this same body, if I, this individual, am to survive. But in the human case ‘same body’ need not mean ‘same matter’, for what makes a body human is that it is unified and vitalised by a human soul. ‘Any material, either originally or later informed by the soul, that is sufficient for one’s being, is one’s body.’¹² James Ross here notes that though Aquinas does speak of the ‘same material’,¹³ his interest is clearly in showing that it is the *very same person* who died that will rise.

This is convincing. After all, human corpses and human flesh may be assimilated by other human (or non-human) animals that live and grow by transforming what was George’s matter into Harry’s. God cannot raise Harry and George with the same matter. So talk of simple numerical identity is naive.¹⁴ Rather, God will raise George in George’s own body because the resurrected matter (providentially and appropriately selected by God for George) has life communicated to it by George’s soul. The soul only requires the availability of appropriate matter for us to resume our (less cerebral) activities of feeling, seeing, imagining, moving around etc. If we want to know more about the nature of this appropriate matter, Thomas’s view is that it is the matter that is, or would have been, my body when I was, or would have been, fully grown (33 years old) but not yet suffering the ravages of age;¹⁵ a nice point, but one that does not help us with the case of someone cannibalized at their peak!

But does this not just show that bodily survival is possible on one—albeit strong—metaphysical account of the soul and of the God who causes the soul to reanimate the body? I think this theory of soul and resurrection is tapping into something broader even than monotheist tradition and Aristotelian metaphysics. Reflection on human experience suggests our sense of meaning and our profoundest values are linked to our view of our destiny. And this is a complex view. Identifying life’s meaning and those (‘objective’) values that draw us rather than simply echo our own voices depends upon recognising our *mortality*, and also our *immortality*—whether we spell this out in Christian or less settled terms. Ignorance of mortality would make incoherent many of the questions of meaning and value we all ask and respond to; but we would not notice questions of meaning or value at all if we regarded ourselves just as dying animals. We see ourselves as mortals who are immortals. Furthermore,

¹² James Ross ‘Together With the Body I Love’ in *Person, Soul and Immortality*, Proceedings of American Catholic Philosophical Association, vol. 75, 2001, p. 4.

¹³ Aquinas *Supplement to Summa* 79, 1, ad 3.

¹⁴ See Thomas Aquinas *Summa Contra Gentiles* IV, 81, 1.

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas *Commentary on the Sentences* IV, 44, 1, 3.

transcendent experience and supernatural destiny seem neither psychologically nor logically conceivable apart from our bodily lives.¹⁶ Thus our mortality, our immortality, *and* the physical completion of our immortality appear necessary to explain the great metaphysical, theological and ethical questions we confront in our individual lives and over total human history. These are the questions that cannot be 'just academic' questions for us: they are matters of passionate concern because they are questions posed by our knowledge of deaths, our survival, and our hopes of resumed personal existence.

I have been suggesting in these essays that death, the loss of life, has great significance in understanding what human life is, what significance it has, and what values humans possess. If all or many of our important values are explained by our mortality, then our bodies and their deaths must have a special, independent value: our mortality has a value all its own. It is not just valuable because it gives us our *other* values; rather, it gives us them because it matters for independent reasons. But what independent value can loss of life have? Loss can only matter because it reveals that the loss is not in fact the end of the story: that, as Jesus once said,¹⁷ losing here is finding. Death matters in itself because we all realise that only with death is it clear—can it be clear—once and for all that we are immortal. Death's own significance is to reveal our indestructibility, to confirm our deathlessness. Death is not only dreaded but venerated because it is only by dying that we can show that the transcendence we are drawn to throughout life is not just wishful thinking; that we do survive, and that, if we survive, either now or later, we must survive as the physical individuals that we are. No other survival for us is possible.

Our most bodily acts—eating, drinking, sex, socialising, medical care—are intelligible as care of a mortal; but they are fully intelligible too as striving to transcend mortality, keeping ourselves or our race going, trying to ensure immortality. Just as form and matter are not two separates but substance looked at, alternately, from both of its (and our) points of view, so the dying body and the deathless soul are not two separates but the human person looked at physiologically, or as possessor of a full and rich human life. After death that life is immediately attenuated and depersonalised. Whether we should believe we flourish once again—far less reach blessedness—depends on whether we can believe two things: that 'we' cannot survive disembodied, and that we *do* survive. The resources of philosophy offer some reason to accept this, but not I think compelling reason for or against. I am not

¹⁶ See Peter Geach 'Immortality' in *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).

¹⁷ *Matt.* 16: 25; *Mark* 8: 35; *Luke* 9: 24.

convinced that philosophy cannot make a compelling case here. But for now, the philosophical view seems to be: thank God for what faith offers, because if the resurrection is false, our lives, and certainly our deaths, are incoherent.

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