

Life After Death

Compare, contrast and discuss two of the following terms: Reincarnation, Rebirth, Resurrection and Immortality of the Soul.

The issue of what happens to us after our death has plagued humanity for millennia, and unfortunately the only way to be completely certain appears to be a one way street. As such, we can only theorise about possible outcomes, and the key issue within these theories is personal identity – *what* has to survive death for that ‘death-surviving thing’ to be the same ‘person’ that once lived?

Two key schools of thought regarding personal identity are dualism and materialism. Dualism holds that there is a distinction between our body and our *actual* self, commonly referred to as our soul. Generally in dualism the soul is viewed as immortal, and thus our existence in the afterlife is defined by our soul. Materialism is quite the opposite, and holds that we are our bodies – nothing more – and whilst it seems natural to think that there cannot therefore be any afterlife (we clearly see our bodies decay beyond repair after death) we must consider full body resurrection as a viable option. For if we are our bodies, and somehow our body was reconstructed after our death, then we would effectively be living again – in an afterlife.

Dualism was first found in the works of Plato, in *The Republic* Plato argues that the soul belongs to a higher state of existence, it is our link to the “world of the forms”. It seems natural to Plato that this soul can survive bodily death. Aquinas shares a similar view, for Aquinas the soul was “*what makes our body live*”, which he called an *anima*. This life force can depart from the body at death, and takes with it our identity.

Another key proponent of dualism was Descartes who is of course infamous for his statement “*I think, therefore I am*”. In that statement he doubts all the empirical data in his mind, and trusts only his rational knowledge. From this, Descartes concludes that “*I can doubt that I have a body, but I cannot doubt that I exist. Therefore, I am not a body*”. On the one hand, this seems quite logical, however ultimately it is a self defeating statement – just because we can doubt it, it doesn’t mean it necessarily doesn’t exist.

Richard Swinburne continued from Descartes work, saying “*since I can be without my body, it follows that I am not my body*”. Whilst this may be true, he offers little explanation or proof for how we can exist in such a disembodied state. In his article *The Possibility Of Life After Death*, Swinburne attempts to demonstrate dualism with his brain transplant thought experiment.

Swinburne invites us to imagine a complex brain operation, the brain of one person is to be split in half and transplanted to donor bodies, but which one would continue the “self”

of the first person? Swinburne is attempting to defeat materialism which should follow that both halves of the body will go on to be the same person they were before and thus we will have created two people with the same consciousness, which would not seem to be the 'correct' outcome of the situation.

Hugh Meller, an avid materialist was quick to criticise, in his article *Reply To Richard Swinburne* he raises many criticisms of dualism and picks holes in Swinburne's transplant theory. He points out that Swinburne's logic does not enable one to know what happened in the transplant operation either, and nor does it especially weaken the materialistic view since when the brain is split; the "self" is being tampered with and neither of the resultant people will be the same as the original person.

There have also been many other more severe criticisms of dualism as a philosophical theory, perhaps the most thought provoking of these is raised by H H Price in his work *Survival & The Idea Of Another World*, which is could we actually have a society of disembodied souls? What would an existence as a soul actually be like? All he could conclude is that we could be trapped in a dream world of memories from our life, with the only possibility of communication being via telepathy. The problem with all this is that it is a very unattractive prospect! Not the fields of milk and honey *The Bible* talks of, but eternal life in a dream world build upon the realm of psychology from which we cannot escape.

Of course we can use a favourite get-out clause and say our current understanding of science doesn't apply to heaven, so we could exist in any form in any way – but is this really very persuasive?

In *The Concept Of The Mind*, Gilbert Ryle puts forward the view that talking about "souls" is a category mistake. By this he means that "*if we have language which describes body and soul as separate, it doesn't mean that they are.*" (Brian Davies), the point he is trying to make is just because our language is geared towards dualism, with sayings like "I feel it in my soul", this doesn't necessitate that the soul is separate from the body. Another example of this is to say "where is the team?", the team is a collection of people, it is not a discrete thing in itself, similarly Ryle suggests, the soul is just a name for the collection of our body, our mind and our memories, it is not a discrete thing in itself.

Vardy raises a final damning criticism for dualism; he asks what exactly the soul is? If our body – our brain – controls our emotions, our senses, our memories and our physicality, what is left? What is left of "us" without the body? If there is nothing left of "us" in the soul, how can the soul possibly be the essence of us?

Davies concludes that dualism has severe weaknesses, which in fact lead us to conclude that we are not essentially immaterial souls. As such the whole theory of dualism is philosophically incoherent, or in his own words “*it would seem there are serious problems with the view that people can survive their death because they are essentially incorporeal.*”

Instead of dualism, Davis takes a materialistic stance and suggests that resurrection is a *more viable* alternative. It is important to note Davies does not suggest it actually happens; this whole argument is just to show it’s philosophically coherent to suggest a person *could* be resurrected. Davies says it makes more sense that in any afterlife we take on our bodily form, since that seems to be what defines our existence in this world.

Hick attempts to demonstrate resurrection with his theory of replicas. We are invited to imagine a person standing at a place A, instantaneously disappears and at the same time an identical person appears at place B. The new person is absolutely identical to the first person, their memory is consistent, they have the same body and mind, and he suggests we would all accept that they are the same person who has essentially been teleported from A to B.

Hick then pushes this analogy further, he says that rather than disappearing at place A, the person dies at place A, but appears at place B completely intact. Whilst this would certainly be extraordinary, Hick assures us it is essentially *theoretically* possible. Would we assume that the person at B is the same as the person who was at A before they died? Hick suggests we would, the fact we have a dead body as well as a living person makes the whole series of events more bewildering but does not change the logic we used in his first experiment.

Davies however is unconvinced by this, he says “*for the continued existence of a person, more is required than replication.*” It’s not very reassuring to be told that when you die an exact replica of you will be produced, since by the very terminology we use “replica”, it doesn’t *feel* like it will be ‘you’. It’s all very well to know that your replica will live on beyond your death, but what will *you* be doing?

In *God of our Fathers*, Vardy tries a different analogy for resurrection. He proposes that just as on a computer we are able to print off copies of what we have done, God can “print off” new copies of us. Of course, God being God wouldn’t allow any identity crisis that might arise from printing two copies of us at the same time, and as such the new copy of us would be same as an old copy of us, and would be – us. The critical mistake in this theory is that the theory not only relies on the existence of God, but also assumes properties of God. For many this will simply annul Vardy’s argument, and risks weakening the whole concept of resurrection.

As a summary of resurrection theory, consider the following: It is conceivable that after our death, some higher power, be it God – or just science, is able to piece our body back together *exactly* as it was before our death. In scientific terms this could be a completely identical atomic structure, perhaps even with the same basic particles that were previously used to construct us in the first place. Whilst science is nowhere near able to do this now, that is not to say it could never be possible. Once we have this exact reconstruction of how we were – what is there apart from that which makes us, us? A materialist is forced to accept that whilst extraordinary, a full body resurrection is not impossible.

With dualism however, it seems that existence as a disembodied soul is not logically coherent. It does not make sense to talk about a soul, it is a “Category Mistake”, and there is nothing of our bodies apart from what exists materially. As such the dualist is not forced to accept the possibility of immortality of the soul – which is very much in contrast to the materialists ‘forced into’ accepting resurrection.

Peter Geach comments “*apart from the possibility of resurrection, it seems to me a mere illusion to have any hope for life after death*”, and this is very much the philosophical conclusion we must reach. Dualism is not consistent; whereas resurrection – whilst highly unlikely – is theoretically possible.