

Existence of Self after Death by Justin Killam

Is there life after death? This at first appears to be a contradiction of terms, death being the point at which life exterminates. To examine this question exactly as it is stated would be to examine the possibility of reincarnation, the continued existence of a person's identity in a new body, or resurrection, the reuniting of the mind and body after death. Even though many philosophers examine the exact terminology in their logical debates this question involves more than just the possibility of reincarnation or resurrection. A truer interpretation of the question would be "Is there an existence of self after the death of the material body?" This is a much bigger question involving problems relating to the correct concepts of the mind, body and soul, and 'identity' as well as taking into account the different religious doctrines involved and their credibility in this philosophical debate.

There are basically three answers to this question, although within each answer there is room for a considerable amount of interpretation. The first answer is a belief that the mind and body will become reunited in either a reincarnation or resurrection, but with this answer there is still a question of what happens to the immaterial self during the time that it is separated from the material body if there is indeed any time of separation at all. The second answer is a belief in the annihilation of the self when the body dies, the identity and mind of a person are both connected to the material and without it simply cease to exist. The third answer is that the self is separate from the body and continues after death of the material shell, although there is a lot of speculation as to what kind of a state the self would exist in without the material body. All three of these answers as well as arguments for or against them shall be examined.

The doctrine of resurrection or reincarnation, in which the soul or mind is reunited with the material body, whether it be an identical or different one seems to be the best answer for the original question of the existence of life after death. This doctrine at first appears to bypass any problems with the existence of self without the body in that it holds that after death the self is reborn into a new or identical body. This would appear to solve the question with the answer of yes, life does indeed exist after death. However unless there is no time involved between death and resurrection there is still the problem of what happens to the self during this time. Terence Penelhum discusses the two views of the resurrection, that of a destruction of the self with the, "hope that God will literally re-create what he has permitted death to destroy" (127) and the view that, "the soul continues in a disembodied state between death and resurrection" (127). Although the doctrine of the resurrection allows the possibility of life after death it "does not avoid the difficulties that beset the doctrine of the disembodied survival, for the simple reason that it falls back upon that very doctrine when its own implications are understood" (Penelhum 142). The doctrine of the resurrection attempts to provide an answer for the question of life after death, but in doing so ignores the many problems that must be addressed in the answering of the question of life after death and regardless of whether or not it is an answer these problems must still be examined.

The foremost problem with any belief that the self can continue to exist after the loss of the material body is identity. What identifies one person from another is a problem that many philosophers have tried to answer with solutions or definitions such as the physical body and its appearance, the memories a person carries with them, an unchangeable spiritual matter, and the intellect or soul. It is this basic trait, that which identifies me from you, that is central to the problem of continued existence in that it is this that must survive for a person to effectively continue after

death. If the identity of a person is lost after death then can it really be said that the person continues to exist after they die?

What is it that identifies us from other people then? Many of the chief arguments against the continuation of existence after death have stemmed from the proposition that the material body is the identifier of the self and that with the death of the material body we as individuals cease to exist. There are many different views that fall under the category of the material identifier, such as the bodies physical appearance or the intellect or memory as direct functions of the body. C.J. Ducasse appears to agree that the identity or consciousness of a person is bound to the physical body of that person when he states that there are,

"a number of facts which definitely suggest that both the existence and the nature of consciousness wholly depend on the presence of a functioning nervous system. [F1.] It is pointed out, for example, that wherever consciousness is observed, it is found associated with a living and functioning body. [F2.] Further, when the body dies, or the head is struck a heavy blow, or some anesthetic is administered, the familiar outward evidences of consciousness terminate, permanently or temporarily." (559)

Another philosopher that shares similar views with Ducasse is J.M.E. McTaggart who also states that the,

"nature of my self make the possession of my present body essential to it. Granted that the body could not exist except for knowledge, it may be that the knowledge of my body, by myself or other selves, is a necessary condition of the existence of my self. In that case it would be an inevitable inference that when my body dissolves, and ceases to be known as a body at all, my self must have ceased also." (544)

It appears that both Ducasse and McTaggart view the body as the source for identity and consciousness and that without it we simply cease to be. This is not true however, their purpose is to point out that the majority of arguments against the proposition of existence after death come from observations of the material world. The arguments rely on the assumption that, "to be real is to be material. And to be material, of course, is to be some process or part of the perceptually public world, that is, of the world we all perceive by means of our so-called five senses" (Ducasse 563). Ducasse believes that, "mental events are doubtless connected in some way with certain bodily events, but they are not those bodily events themselves. The connection is not identity" (560). Both Ducasse and McTaggart see that because of this assumption the arguments against the existence of self beyond death will at first appear to be strong, yet because this is an assumption and not fact these arguments are actually quite weak. To McTaggart it seems, "that the facts only support a very different proposition - namely, that, while a self has a body, that body is essentially connected with the self's mental life" (545). The problem with material objections is that they are based on material observations, which have no bearing on the non-material world in which we have no ability to observe with our limited material senses.

Although our senses are seemingly limited to the material world it is possible that some of us have an extra sensory perception, what is commonly called ESP. While this is commonly thought of only as fantasy or the trickery of charlatans there are societies that have performed in depth observation and analyzation into the validity of these mediums. While the majority of these people are indeed deceivers there is enough evidence gathered by these psychical researchers to support the theory of extra sensory perception. In a paper, *The Problem of Life After Death*, written by H.H. Price the existence of ESP is used to support the theory of continued existence for the self after the death of the material body. There are two hypothesis that explain the accuracy that mental mediums

possess when demonstrating their abilities. The first is that through a strength of telepathic, cognitive, clairvoyance and other paranormal cognitive powers the medium is able to unconsciously find the needed information from the minds of people as well as physical objects such as documents from around the world and piece it together in the form of a perceived persona of the dead person. In order to understand it and present it better. The second hypothesis is that the dead person still exists in some sort of immaterial sense and is directly communicating through the medium. The problem that Price sees with the two hypotheses is that, "the more you deflate the survival hypothesis, the more you have to inflate the powers of the human unconsciousness" (537). With the immensity of unconscious power that would be required to scour the entire world of all physical documentation, mental thought and memories relating to the subject it would appear more liable to believe that the persona of the dead person still exists and is in fact communicating through the medium. If taken that the survival hypothesis is possible evidence of continued existence after death, the many documented cases of mediums also help to understand the kind of existence that the dead have. Many cases provide evidence that not only are the dead more than a continuation of memories from when they were alive, but also that they have continued abilities of thought and emotion.

The theories for an existence after death are not without their problems. Many of these problems deal with the kind of existence that could be possible for a bodyless being and in what sense is the identity preserved. However many of these problems, those dealing with the loss of physical attributes such as the senses, are again based on material observations and may or may not have any bearing on the afterlife. "Even if the brain is essential to thought while we have bodies, it would not follow that when we ceased to have brains we could not think without them. The same argument applies here as with the organs of sense" (McTaggart 545). McTaggart, who has already presented arguments for the possibility of afterlife existence demonstrates that, again, these problems come from assumptions based in material observations.

A problem that Penelhum addresses in relation to the doctrine of resurrection, but relative to the problem of any afterlife existence, is a problem of identity, what identifies a person as that person. Penelhum points out that although many of the proposed identifiers, such as the physical body or the memories, may seem to be appropriate identifiers of the self in a future reference, it is not inconceivable that this may be wrong.

If we assume some one-to-one correspondence between the inhabitants of the next world and of this (that is, assume at least that the inhabitants of the next world each resemble, claim to be, and claim to remember the doings of inhabitants of this one), it might seem foolish to deny that they will be identical with ourselves. But foolishness is not logical absurdity. It is conceivable that there might be a future existence in which there were large numbers of persons each resembling one of us and having uncanny knowledge of our pasts. And if that world does come to be in the future, we shall not be in it. What would make it a world with us in it, rather than a world with duplicates of us in it and not ourselves? (Penelhum 139)

Although this problem of identity is proposed by Penelhum in reference to the doctrine of the resurrection it is a basic problem that must be dealt with to propose that any self can exist after the death of the body. As it is conceivable that any identity of a resurrected person may actually be just a copy of the original persona, it is just as conceivable that any evidence of the existence of a dead person is a copy of a living persons persona that continued to exist after the original person died. This would still be evidence of an existence without a physical body, but would also be evidence against a continued existence from life into death.

So far the arguments that have been examined have hypothesized that the resurrection theory

proposes that life after death can exist in the form of a reunification of body and mind, but that it fails to solve any of the problems with existing without the body, that most arguments against the possibility of existence after the loss of the material body assume that the material world is the real world and thus are not as strong as once thought, that there is evidence that, at the very least, there is the possibility that a person can exist as his self after the loss of his body in an immaterial state, although just what this state would be is unknown, and finally that it is unknown what the radical changes involved with the destruction of the material body would have on the identity of a person if it could actually continue to exist. What exactly can be concluded from these findings? Nothing if not that the possibility exists for life after death. Price's following piece of advice, although not meant for this discussion, is still well appropriate, "Do not be too sure that you will not continue to exist as a person after your physical organism has died" (538). Of course the time upon which the answer will come to us all is when we ourselves will die, until then it seems unlikely that any conclusive evidence will be found. With this in mind the question of life after death becomes a personal question that can only be answered with your personal convictions in mind.

Works Cited

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