



PHILOSOPHICAL DOUBTS ABOUT SURVIVAL AFTER DEATH

by

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Any rational answer to the question 'Is it possible for a person to survive death?' must begin by specifying what is meant by the words 'person' and 'death'. For unless we specify what we mean by these terms, it will be impossible to say whether a person can or cannot survive death.

I shall use the word 'person' in its ordinary sense to refer to living human beings with whom we come into contact daily. Understood in this way persons are beings capable of a wide range of activities, such as working crossword puzzles, playing chess, talking on the telephone, driving automobiles, swimming, laughing at jokes, telling lies, making love to another person's spouse, and murdering other persons. Of course, not every person engages in all these actions. Given the nature of some of the actions, this is without doubt fortunate for the rest of us. Some persons are incapable of performing some of the above actions; and other persons, although capable of performing certain of the actions, have characters which make it unlikely they will ever do so. And there are times such as when we are asleep that we are not immediately capable of engaging in any of these actions. But this does not change the fact that these are the kind of actions that it is meaningful to attribute to persons in the ordinary sense of the word.

The foregoing remarks about persons may seem so obvious that it is not worthwhile to state them. Indeed, this would be the case except for the fact that a number of philosophers have said things inconsistent with them. For example, they have said such

things as the sole or only attribute of persons is the ability to think or engage in mental activity.

If we take such a statement as referring to persons in the ordinary sense of the word, then it is clearly false. For as we normally use the word “person”, both predicates which refer to mental actions or states, such as reasoning and feeling depressed, and those which refer to physical actions, such as swimming and driving automobiles, are attributed to persons. Thus, we may say of John that he is a poor driver, a good swimmer, scored high on his college admission tests, is depressed because his former girlfriend left him, is not sleeping well at night, and is having trouble digesting his food.

All the actions mentioned are related to one another because they are actions of a single living human being whom we are calling John. It is because he is depressed over his girlfriend leaving him that John is having trouble sleeping and digesting his food. And it is because he does such things as making high scores on his college admission tests that we may say John is good at reasoning. If there are any floating or isolated perceptions and thoughts, as some philosophers have maintained, they would not be of the slightest help in understanding persons. However, I fail to understand how we could identify and talk about thoughts and perceptions that were not characteristics of some particular person.

My emphasis on persons as living human beings may seem to some people to be an embarrassment. For philosophers who write on what has come to be called the philosophy of mind rarely talk about persons understood as living human beings. Rather than talking about such things as John being a good driver, doing well on his college

entrance examinations and being depressed because his girlfriend left him, they talk about such abstractions as minds and souls, or mental and physical events.

In everyday ordinary language talk about minds is a way of describing the activities of living human beings. For example, if John routinely does well on examinations and writes well-argued, thoughtful, essays, we are likely to say that he has a good mind. When we use the word 'mind' in this way it is merely a convenient proxy for certain activities of living human beings. But the fact that the word 'mind' can serve as the subject of sentence may lead one to assume that it refers to some independently existing entity. Thus, instead of persons being said to do such things as reasoning, exhibiting consciousness, etc, minds are said to do these things.

Once minds as independently existing agencies have been assumed, it is natural to ask how these are related to people's bodies. The attempt to answer this question has led to a number of theories such as mind-body interaction, parallelism, epiphenomenalism, etc, which will be familiar to most readers of this article and do not need to be discussed here, except to say that none of them is capable of explaining the actions of actual human beings.

But this should not be surprising for, as John Dewey long ago pointed out, once talk of abstractions such as sense data, mental events, and minds, has replaced talk about actual persons and their activities, there is no reason whatever to think that talk about the former could have any relevance for talk about the latter. Just as all the king's men could not put Humpty Dumpty back together again once he had been shattered, so philosophers of mind have been unable to explain the actions of living human beings

on the basis of theories relating such abstractions to one another.

Unfortunately, however, eliminating talk about minds as independently existing entities, and their supposed relationships to human bodies, is not sufficient to avoid absurd theories in the philosophy of mind. For example, eliminative materialists seem to conclude from the fact that there are no independently existing minds, not that it is primarily living human beings or persons in the ordinary sense of that word who may be said to be conscious agents, but that there is no such property as consciousness at all.

I say that it is primarily humans who may be said to be conscious agents, and not that humans are the only such agents, because I have no doubt that some animals are also conscious beings, although not to the extent that most humans are. The reason for this is that both consciousness and the type of actions of which a being is capable, are clearly dependent on the nature and condition of its body. The extent to which a being is conscious, e.g., is obviously dependent on the development of the brain. Animals are therefore incapable of understanding abstract theories because their brains are not sufficiently developed. In particular they lack the cerebral cortex which characterizes human brains.

Because consciousness and the range of actions of which a being is capable, depend on the nature and condition of its body, persons do not suddenly appear in the world fully mature, but develop along with the development of their body. Human fetuses and newborn infants are thus not yet persons but only potential persons.

Just as persons develop along with the body, they also decline with the body. Anything that affects the functioning of living human beings affects persons, because persons in the ordinary sense of the word, just are living human beings who exhibit certain types of consciousness behavior.

Let us now return to our starting point and ask what are the implications of how we ordinarily use the word 'person' for answering the question 'Is it possible for a person to survive death?' The answer is clearly that if we take the word in its ordinary meaning to refer to living human beings capable of the kinds of actions described above, then no generalization is better established than the statement that all persons will die.

By 'death' I mean what physicians ordinarily mean by the term — total lack of receptivity to outside stimuli, even those that would normally be experienced as extremely painful, no spontaneous movements when mechanical respirators are turned off for three minutes or longer, a flat electroencephalogram for a ten minute period, no EEG responses to noise or pinching, no evidence of any other condition which could explain the foregoing phenomena, and similar results when the foregoing tests are performed after a twenty four hour period. Finally, after some time, the breakdown and decay of the organic material that constituted the once living person.

Given the ordinary meaning of the words 'person', 'death', and 'survival' it is therefore false that any persons survive death.

Anthony Flew has argued for the stronger thesis that given the ordinary meaning of these terms, it does not even make sense to speak of people surviving death. This is

because the words 'death' and 'survival' are usually understood as referring to diametrically opposed states of affairs. Thus, Flew maintains that to say that someone survived his or her death,

is self-contradictory because we use the words 'death' and 'survival'...in such a way that the classification of the crew of a torpedoed ship into Dead and Survivors is both exclusive and exhaustive: every member of the crew...must (logical 'must') have either died or survived: and no member of the crew could (logical 'could') have both died and survived.¹

Neither my comments above nor Flew's should be interpreted as equating persons with bodies. For as Flew further pointed out, there is a tremendous difference between remarks such as 'we brought a person down from the mountain' and 'we brought a body down from the mountain'. The former refers to a living individual capable of a range of actions which the latter cannot perform. Of course such an individual might not at a given moment be capable of performing any of these actions. For example, a person might not be conscious at the time he or she is brought down from the mountain, but even if that individual were unconscious, he or she would still be a person, for it is not an attribute of persons that they must be continually aware of themselves or their surroundings. Persons can also do things they are not aware they are doing, when, e.g. they act from habit. And of course all of us have done many things we no longer remember.

Person words are thus words used to refer to living human beings who exhibit certain characteristics which inanimate objects and other living beings lack, including some living beings who are members of the species *Homo sapiens*, but for some reason or other, are permanently and not just momentarily, incapable of such activities. But person words do not refer to the mental or the physical characteristics of such living

beings considered apart from the individuals who manifest them; they refer to the living individuals who manifest the characteristics. This is true whether one is referring to other persons or to oneself. Thus as Flew has commented, the pronoun 'I', is not a synonym for either 'my body' or 'my mind'.²

It follows from what has been said that if anyone maintains that persons do not cease to exist at death, he or she must be using the words 'person' and 'death' in a different sense from their ordinary use, and it is incumbent upon them to explain what they mean by these terms. However, writers on survival rarely do this.

Among the few who have attempted to meet this challenge are Paul and Linda Badham. In their book *Immortality or Survival* they argue that: "What makes me 'me' is not my external appearance...or even my characteristic behavioural patterns of which others may be more conscious than myself, But rather it is that I am the subject of the thoughts, feelings, memories and intentions of which I am aware."³ They further argue that this subject of thoughts and feelings, which they call the self or soul, is an invisible, intangible, entity capable of surviving the death of the body.

The Badhams concede that "we initially learn the use of words like 'I', 'self' and 'person' by reference to living embodied creatures of flesh and blood, and we discover the meaning of the word 'death' by observing the evidence of corruption and decay in once living plants or animals."⁴ They also concede that: "An invisible, intangible, disembodied soul is a very different sort of entity from an embodied creature of flesh and blood," and therefore ask, "why should we suppose that the same personal pronoun can be applied to both?"⁵

They further concede that “life after death can only be a meaningful concept if it is possible to show that there is a legitimate sense in which ‘person language’ can be extended beyond its normal usage to relate either to an immaterial soul, or to a ‘spiritual body’...”⁶

Finally, they agree that Flew is correct in maintaining that person words are initially learned and used in contexts in which they refer to living human beings. But in response, they ask: “why should this fact be supposed to veto any extension of the meaning of these words?”⁷

Flew’s argument they maintain

depends on the quite groundless assumption that the meaning of words is irrevocably shaped by the environment in which we first learnt how to use them. Yet as even Sir Alfred Ayer...points out, there is “no reason why the meaning of words should be indissolubly tied to the contexts in which they are originally learnt.” And with regard to most words in our vocabulary no one would dream of making such an assumption.⁸

Indeed, modifying concepts to apply to new areas is standard operating procedure in the sciences. Thus, they conclude that: “We ought not therefore to rule out...the possibility that as our knowledge and understanding of what it means to be a person grows and develops, we may wish to extend and modify our initial understanding of person words.”⁹

Focusing on the word ‘I’ they maintain that: “It is true of course that we first learn how to use the word ‘I’ by observing the public behaviour of other people.”¹⁰ This is also true of such words as ‘pain’ and ‘happy’. However, they maintain that “having once

learnt the meaning of words like 'pain' and 'happy' by reference to outward behaviour, there is nothing to prevent us subsequently using the words to refer primarily to the inner feelings which normally give rise to such behaviour."¹¹

It is appropriate to identify the self or person with such "inner" experiences, the Badhams argue, because "for the individual, self-identity is constituted far more fundamentally by his thoughts, feelings and intentions than by his physical embodiment or by his situation in space and time."¹²

In light of the fact that human bodies are clearly mortal, it is essential not only to the Badham's argument, but to any argument for non-bodily survival, that the self be identified with thought and feelings, conceived of as capable of existing apart from the body. Thus all such arguments presuppose either implicitly or explicitly that the "real" self is different from living human beings or persons in the ordinary sense of the word.

But at this point several difficulties arise. The Badhams speak of our extending the use of person words as our knowledge of ourselves and other persons grows and develops. However, using word such as 'I' and 'self' to refer solely to thought and feelings, rather than to living human beings capable of a much broader range of activities, is not an enrichment or extension of their meanings, but an impoverishment or restriction of them. On the other hand, if such words are not used to refer solely to thought and feelings, but continue to be used in conventional ways to refer to living human beings, then a fundamental ambiguity is introduced into their use.

An even greater difficulty for their position is that using such words to refer to a

person's "inner" thoughts and feelings in no way shows that the subject doing the thinking is an invisible, immaterial soul, capable of existing apart from the body.

The Badhams defend their position by arguing that in proposing that person words be taken to refer primarily to thought and feelings, they are not like Humpty Dumpty using language in a purely arbitrary and idiosyncratic manner.

However, they also state that even if their proposal to extend the use of person words is rejected,

this need not be a stumbling block in the way of an immortal hope. As R. H. Thouless argues, "the essential issue about survival is not...what happens to the human personality (the self...met by other people) but...what happens to the stream of consciousness. This is of course directly verifiable only by the individual himself, and by him only after the death of his body." Sir Alfred Ayer makes the same point "if there could conceivably be disembodied spirits, the fact that it would not be correct to call them persons would not perhaps be of very great importance."¹³

In saying this they are clearly abandoning their earlier view that "life after death can only be a meaningful concept if it is possible to show that there is a legitimate sense in which 'person language' can be extended beyond its normal usage to relate either to an immaterial soul, or to a 'spiritual body'"¹⁴ Indeed, they are in effect giving up the argument that persons can survive death, in favor of the argument that even though persons cannot be said to survive death, their consciousness may do so.

If we take the word 'person' in its ordinary sense, this is analogous to saying that the Cheshire cat's smile can remain after he has vanished. But let us waive the objection that so far as we know consciousness is a property of living individuals with certain

types of brains and nervous systems, and explore this suggestion. Let us assume, that is to say, that although persons in the full sense of the word cannot survive death, some part of them, in particular their consciousness, might nevertheless survive.

One problem for such a position is that consciousness as it characterizes persons in the ordinary sense of the word is not a continuous phenomenon. There are periods in which we are clearly unconscious, e.g. during deep sleep and when we are under anesthesia. However, no one would say that persons cease to exist when they are not conscious. This is because consciousness is only one of the properties we usually attribute to persons. But if consciousness is to survive apart from persons, it would seem that it would have to be an uninterrupted phenomenon. Otherwise how could one say that the consciousness of the former person continues to exist? This is why people committed to the survival of consciousness have usually gone on to postulate some substance of which the consciousness is said to be an attribute. The classic example here is of course Descartes. But since the notion of a self or substance, the sole essence of which is to think, adds nothing to the idea of consciousness existing by itself, nothing is gained by this move. Furthermore, if the consciousness of living persons is not an uninterrupted phenomenon, what basis can there be for assuming that after death it would be?

But let us temporarily put aside this objection also, and assume that consciousness detached from persons could somehow be an abiding entity. Two questions immediately present themselves. First, since such a disembodied consciousness would so to speak be only a shadow of the person of whom it was once an attribute, what kind of experiences might it have? Second, is there any empirical evidence whatever that

such a disembodied consciousness exists?

The powers of such a diminished being would necessarily be fewer than those of the person of which it had once been an attribute. For example, since it is disembodied and thus lacks location, it would not make any sense to speak of it as moving or changing its position. Similarly, because it lacks sense organs it could not be said to see, hear or touch anything in the normal sense of these words. It might have experiences which it believed to be cases of seeing, hearing and touching, but since it is incapable of changing locations it could not perform any of the tests people normally use to determine whether their perceptions are correct. Also it could not bring about any changes in the world, and if it could, it would not know that it had, since it would have no way to verify this. It could will something in the sense of strongly wanting it to occur, but could never know that it had in fact occurred as opposed to simply seeming to occur. In short, as H. H. Price has argued, the experience of such a disembodied consciousness would be restricted to its own images.¹⁵

Price asserts that even though the experience of such a disembodied consciousness would be restricted to its own images, it could have experiences analogous to dream experiences. However, this seems doubtful to me, since I see no way a being limited to its own images could distinguish between veridical and dream experiences. Indeed, if *ex hypothesi* its experience is limited to its own images, and it therefore has no way to check them against the experiences of others, the usual way in which we distinguish between veridical and hallucinatory experiences, what meaning can be given to saying that it could make such distinctions?

This difficulty is even greater than it may first appear to be. For if such a disembodied consciousness believed that it was the survival of the consciousness of some former person, how could it know that this was the case? The usual answer is that it could know this because it would remember being associated with that person. But 'memory' is a success word, and one cannot be said to remember something unless there is some way of independently verifying that what one claims to remember actually occurred. But it is precisely a way of independently verifying its experiences that a disembodied consciousness restricted to its own images would lack. Hence, such a disembodied consciousness would have no way of knowing that it had not come into being with its present thought. And, of course, this problem would be exacerbated if a disembodied consciousness, like the consciousness of persons, were episodic rather than continuous.

Price has suggested that unconscious desires and wishes would be important factors in determining which images a disembodied consciousness would experience. According to him such beings would in effect create their own heavens and hells. But if, as suggested above, a disembodied consciousness would necessarily be but a shadow of a former person, unable to effect changes in its environment and unable to know even that it had a previous existence as a characteristic of a person, then I find it hard to believe that such a situation could ever be experienced as very satisfactory. There would, therefore, appear to be great truth in the remark of shade of Achilles to Ulysses that it is better to be a slave among the living than to be a ruler in the world of the dead.

One could attempt to avoid the foregoing problems by claiming that even though a being reduced by death to consciousness alone, is indeed a poor substitute for a person, God will remedy this by giving such beings even greater powers than persons currently

enjoy. But, there are at least two problems with such a view. First, if it could be shown that the disembodied consciousness was in some sense identical to the consciousness of a former person, one could say that at least a part or aspect of the former person seems to have survived. But if the disembodied consciousness had powers the former person lacked, there would not seem any basis for saying that the disembodied consciousness was the consciousness of the former person. Second, such a proposal seems little more than appeal to a *deus ex machina*, an ad hoc hypothesis put forward in a desperate attempt to account for difficulties that could not be otherwise resolved.

What, if any, empirical evidence might be advanced to show that a person's consciousness can survive the death of the person?

Some people such as J. B. Rhine have argued that if ESP is possible that proves the existence of disembodied entities. But the inference is invalid. Just as it does not follow from the fact persons in the ordinary sense of the word are conscious, that there must therefore be minds or souls that are also conscious, it similarly does not follow from the fact that some people allegedly have certain extraordinary abilities, that these abilities are somehow attributes of minds or souls, rather than characteristics of the persons with the extraordinary abilities. Thus, as Flew has argued, nothing in the experiments Rhine and others have conducted on ESP in any way demonstrates the existence of disembodied beings.¹⁶

Nor do the various stories invented by philosophers to demonstrate the possibility of bodily transfer show that consciousness could exist independent of a body.

Indeed, they do not show, as their authors seem to think, that memory is a sufficient

criterion of personal identity. For all such stories with which I am familiar, beg the question by assuming that the supposed memories of the individuals involved are accurate, i.e., that they in fact remember having a previous body instead of simply being deceived.

The same is true of claims to have lived in other bodies in the past.¹⁷ Even if such claims were true, they still would not show that consciousness can exist without any body whatever. Thus they in no way provide evidence for the existence of immaterial beings or immortality.

Some people have argued that certain near-death experiences are evidence for the possibility of non-embodied existence. In particular, it is claimed that the experiences of people near death who believe they have observed things while they were out of their bodies shows that consciousness can exist apart from the body.

Now the first thing to keep in mind about near-death experiences is that they are just that — *near*-death experiences, and not after-death experiences. Since the persons involved obviously recovered if they were able to relate their experiences to others, they were not dead in the usual medical sense of ‘dead’ discussed above. Hence, there is no reason to think that the reports of such people tell us anything about an after-life.

There appear to be only three explanations which can be give for alleged out-of-body experiences. The first is that the events that are reported actually took place. The second is that the people who claim to have had such experiences are lying. The third is that they are reporting their experiences as they believe them to have happened, but

the reported events never occurred because they were hallucinating. Since it is highly unlikely that all people who have reported such alleged out-of-body experiences are lying, that leaves the other two explanations.

Now if such events actually took place, then we must believe that the consciousness of a critically ill person can somehow leave that person's body, and in this disembodied condition observe objects and events, including in some cases the person's own body. But such an account is subject to the difficulties discussed above, such as how a disembodied consciousness with no eyes and no location could observe things from what is alleged to be a particular perspective. And if it be replied that such a consciousness could be said to have a location and thus a perspective from which it saw these things, instead of just thinking that it had such a location and perspective, then the question arises how either it or we could possibly know this. Since, so far as I know, no one has ever claimed that other people have observed, or indeed could observe, such a disembodied, immaterial consciousness, there can be no appeal to the testimony of others to show that the experience was veridical. Such an experience therefore seems in principle incapable of corroboration or verification.

The most plausible explanation of alleged out-of-body experiences is therefore that the people who report such experiences were hallucinating. Critically ill people are subject to great psychological and physical stress. They are also frequently in a highly medicated condition. Consequently, they often experience hallucinations, most of which are immediately recognized by others as hallucinatory in nature. Why then should claims to have observed things while out of their body be treated any differently, especially since the things observed such as an operating tables, the top of light

fixtures, etc., are things with which patients may be expected to be familiar? In my opinion they would not be treated differently except for the strong desire of both the persons having the experience and others to seize upon anything that might be taken as evidence for survival. Thus, nightmares and other experiences, that appear to trained observers to have been as equally vivid as the supposed out-of-body experiences, are not remembered and dwelt on with the same intensity as the latter experiences. It is to be expected that persons facing imminent death might not examine experiences which seem to provide hope for continued existence as critically as they might otherwise. This alone is sufficient to explain why the people having such experiences treat them as more significant and important than other near-death experiences. Nor do researchers take the same interest in the latter as the former. This no doubt in turn adds to the importance patients attach to the supposed out-of-body experiences. Thus the fact that persons who have had such experiences attach great importance to them, and are convinced that the only explanation for them is that their consciousness somehow left their bodies, is not evidence that this is in fact what occurred. There is therefore no reason we should adopt an explanation for such experiences, which on other grounds appears implausible if not incoherent. The most plausible explanation of alleged out-of-body experiences is thus that they are hallucinatory and provide no evidence for the survival of consciousness after death.

END NOTES

1. Anthony Flew, *The Logic of Mortality* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 5.
2. Ibid. p. 28.
3. Paul and Linda Badham, *Immortality or Extinction?* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 10.
4. Ibid. p. 4.
5. Ibid. p. 6.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., pp. 6-7.
9. Ibid. p. 7.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid. p. 8.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid. p.15.
14. Ibid. p. 6.

15. See H. H. Price "*Survival and the Idea of 'Another World'*" originally published in the Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research, January 1953, and reprinted in a number of places.
16. Flew, *The Logic of Mortality*, p. 175 ff.

17. People who make claims to previous lives would be well advised to choose obscure historical persons with whom to identify themselves. Otherwise they may find themselves in the embarrassing situation of the rock performer Tina Turner who claims to have been Queen Hatshepsut Maatka-ra of ancient Egypt, apparently unaware that Ann Miller had earlier claimed that she had been Queen Hatshepsut. Even more embarrassing, is that if the alleged memories of a current person to have lived in another body in the past is taken as evidence for identifying the current person with the earlier person, it follows that Tina Turner and Ann Miller are the same person. Such a state of affairs must surely make a shambles of their/her personal and legal affairs! A devastating criticism of the work of Ian Stevenson and other people who claim that such alleged memories are evidence of former lives, can be found in Paul Edward, *Reincarnation A Critical Examination*, (Prometheus Books, 1996) from which the foregoing information has been taken. Edward's book also contains an equally destructive criticism of the work of people such as Elisabeth Kubler-Ross who think near-death experiences are evidence of non-bodily survival.