



life, death & beyond

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION BOOKLET

TOPIC 4—Beliefs about Death & Beyond

THIS BOOKLET CONTAINS WHAT YOU **MUST** KNOW FOR THIS PART OF THE UNIT – YOU NEED TO MAKE SURE YOU ARE FAMILIAR ENOUGH WITH THIS MATERIAL SO THAT YOU CAN USE IT AND BE FLEXIBLE WITH YOUR UNDERSTANDING IN ANSWERING QUESTIONS.



What is death? Is it possible to survive my bodily death? What can an afterlife be like and in what sense can I experience that afterlife? Belief in some kind of post mortem existence is fundamental to many of the world's major religions. However, could such belief be some kind of psychological defence mechanism, developed by our "big brains" as a way of helping us to come to terms with our own mortality?

This final topic in Unit 4 Life, Death & Beyond asks us to examine closely the range of beliefs about what happens to us when we die. In this booklet, you will find a summary of Christian, Muslim, and Hindu beliefs as well as the philosophical issues that ought to be addressed.

One thing that everyone is agreed upon is that physical death is certain. We will, at some point, reach the end of our present life. For most atheists this is it – there is no afterlife. This is because there is no spiritual element that is separate to, or able to exist apart from, the physical body.

However, the main world religions all teach about afterlife in one form or another. For Muslims and most Christians, the afterlife is physical – at some point after death, our physical bodies will be restored and we will have a sensory experience of an afterlife (we will be able to see, hear, touch etc). Other Christians believe in some form of spiritual existence beyond death – our physical body dies but our soul will live on. This presents more difficulties in imagining what the nature of that existence might be like as will have no physical body through which to experience it. By contrast, Hindus believe in Reincarnation. Our soul passes from one body to the next in a continuous cycle until it is liberated and can be reabsorbed back into God. This is very different to the Abrahamic beliefs as there is no expectation that 'you' will experience any of the multiple lives that the Atman travels through, nor is it possible to have a personal experience of Moksha.

MONSIM

What am I? This is a key question when considering the nature of the afterlife. After all, if I am simply a physical body then either it is not possible for me to continue to exist once this body has died, or I will need a new body through which I can experience the afterlife. For Muslims and most Christians, the latter is true:

"Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt." (Daniel 12:2)

"Verily We shall give life to the dead, and We record that which they send before and that which they leave behind, and of all things have We taken account in a clear Book (of evidence)." (Quran 36:12)

"But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised." (1 Corinthians 15:12-13)

These references suggest a clearly monist view of the body. Monists do not believe that humans have a separate soul – the soft materialist, Gilbert Ryle famously said that to imagine a separate soul is to make



a “category mistake” - to think of there being a “ghost in the machine”. According to Ryle, there is no separate soul. If all we are, are our physical bodies then we need our physical body in an afterlife.

*There is a clear link here to the material about judgment in the topic on **eschatology & apocalypse** but try not to get too bogged down in it unless the question specifically asks for it.*

The belief in bodily resurrection leads to a view of Heaven/al-Jannah that is a paradise where bodily suffering and discomfort is alleviated. In the Qur’an, Heaven is most often described as a cool garden with running streams of unlimited food and drink. A paradise of perfect peace and contentment.

In Christianity, Heaven is commonly depicted as a temple, a city, or a “new earth” which will replace the current mode of existence.

Revelation 7 has this description: *"they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."*

A physical afterlife requires a physical body. This means that at some point after my death, my physical body will be restored, thereby enabling me to experience the afterlife. At the heart of Christianity is the resurrection of Christ. According to the Gospel writers, Christ’s resurrection was physical – it was his own, original body, complete with marks from the crucifixion. This provides believers with a certain hope that they too will be resurrected from the dead to eternal life with God after death. This does present a few initial problems:

- Dead bodies rot away or are cremated
- They are also excavated many thousands of years after they have been buried
- Would a new body still be me?
- Would I need to have a perfect body in Heaven? (what would a perfect body be like?)
- Would a perfect body still be me?
- How old are people in Heaven?

John Hick’s solution to this problem is known as Replica Theory. Hick argues that it is perfectly possible for God to create an identical replica of me in Heaven. I shall have a replica body in Heaven, created by an all powerful, all loving God. Although death might destroy my original body, as long as my brain and my body are identical, the new body will be me. Hick presents 3 essential criteria for preserving personal identity: Memories, Character, and Appearance. As long as these elements are identical, the replica is the same as the original. This view is entirely compatible with the teachings of St Paul who taught that although our earthly bodies will rot & decay, we will be raised to have a heavenly body.

Hick’s views on personal identity are very close to Aristotle’s. According to Aristotle, my form (pattern) moulds the matter I am made from into me. This implies that as long as the same pattern is followed, any recreated person could be regarded as the same – having the same identity. Hick agrees – an omnipotent



God is perfectly able to create an exact and precise replica. God will recreate me in Heaven despite my physical body rotting in the ground.

DUALISM

Christianity is, strictly speaking, a *monist* religion – the physical resurrection of Christ is one of the central truth claims. However, many Christians may tend towards dualism in their view of the relationship between body & soul. This view stems from the philosophy of Renee Descartes who argued,

“my essence consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing. It is true that I may have a body that is certainly very closely joined to me. But nevertheless... I have a clear and distinct idea of myself...accordingly, I am really distinct from my body and can exist without it.” (Meditations)

For Descartes, the Soul is the rational, thinking mind. The mind experiences all the feelings, thoughts & emotions that cannot be located in the physical world. The mind is not physical substance – it is distinct from the body but Descartes postulated the two interact through the *pineal gland* at the back of the head. As I can think of myself without a body, he argued the mind & body must be different things. Descartes' view of soul is therefore a development of Plato's earlier dualistic view – both believe that the essential “you” can survive bodily death.

This leads to a disembodied view of life after death. If I am more than just my physical body, it is possible for me to exist without my physical body. Therefore while my physical shell may decay, my soul can continue forever.

Some Christians may favour the dualist view. Accordingly, they may interpret references to Heaven found in the Bible as being metaphors for the spiritual reality of Heaven. We cannot comprehend what Heaven is like, as all our current knowledge is sensory.

The experience of freewill in moral decision making often leads people to think of their mind as being separate to their bodies. I choose to reach out my hand to lift my tea mug. Indeed to be free (and therefore morally accountable) requires us to be able to act apart from causation. If I am purely physical, I must be subject to the laws of causation and therefore I cannot be free. Since I experience freedom, there must be something separate to my physical body. Indeed reports of near death / out of body experiences like those of Pam Reynolds also lend support to the idea that it is your soul which survives beyond death.

MODIFIED DUALISM

For Thomas Aquinas, neither approach –monist or dualist – presents an accurate picture of the human condition. He identified both physical and spiritual references in the Bible and set about applying reason to make sense of it. He considered a person to be made up of 2 equally necessary component parts – body & soul. Without either, I cannot be fully me. Aquinas claimed *“anima meo non est ego”* – *“my soul is not I”*. This means that we need a physical body in our afterlife – a disembodied soul is not a person. He taught that at death there is a partial separation between body & soul. The physical body stays in the ground, while the soul goes to purgatory to be cleansed of sin until it is reunited with a new & glorified body at Judgement day. This view is called **Modified Dualism** as Aquinas recognises that there are 2



distinct parts that make me who I am. It is not dualism as my soul is not me, yet it is not monism as I do have a soul and which can survive my physical death.

According to the Bible, God "*dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has even seen or can see*" (1 Timothy 6:16), but when God reveals Himself to us in heaven we will then see Him "*face to face*" (1 Corinthians 13:12;etc). This concept has been termed "the beatific vision of God" by theologians, including Thomas Aquinas. It is human beings' final end – where we can experience total happiness as all our desires are satisfied by being in the direct presence of God.

While humans' understanding of God while alive is indirect, the beatific vision is direct (immediate, visual), or literally, a way of seeing God without any sort of censorship like that depicted by the prophet Isaiah. Aquinas defined the beatific vision as the ultimate end of human existence after physical death - the intellectual Beatific Vision of God's essence. Rational knowledge does not fully satisfy humankind's innate desire to know God – at death we shall have full and perfect understanding of God and we shall desire nothing more than that. Quoting St Paul, Aquinas notes "*For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully*" (1 Cor. 13:12).

REINCARNATION

The Immortality of the Soul lies at the centre of Hindu beliefs about Reincarnation. According to Hinduism, each person is made up of body & soul (atman). The soul is the essential "you" housed within a particular life form (from the lowest bacteria all the way to the highest human being). Karma dictates what kind of life form you are. Karma is the principle of causality where actions and intentions determine the future lives the atman passes into. Good actions & intentions lead to good karma which will lead to a more favourable future rebirth. The soul pre-existed for many (thousands?) of lifetimes before it entered your current body . This is known as the cycle of Samsara.



The objective of the soul is to achieve Moksha (liberation from the cycle). This is achieved through the accumulation of good karma. Upon achieving Moksha, the soul will then return to Brahman – it will be incorporated back into God like a drop of water in an ocean.

This means that for Hindus, life after death is not necessarily a good thing as the objective is to be released from the cycle of life-death-rebirth.

SECULAR VIEWS:

The vast majority of atheists do not believe in any form of afterlife. They believe that when the physical body dies, the person ceases to exist. Death is the end with no hope or expectation of any existence to follow. Many however will find comfort in the idea that they have some kind of *legacy* to pass on –they can live on in the memories of their loved ones, or perhaps in the way they have impacted on the world during their lifetime. Our genes and memes will continue long past our physical



death and the elements which comprise our physical bodies will be dispersed back into the natural world.

Some may turn to cryonics, the freezing of people who have been identified as “brain dead” with the hope of resuscitation in the future. Around 200 people in the USA have agreed to undergo cryonics –a process which is not currently reversible. The idea is that the memory & personality are stored in durable cell structures which will survive the freezing and resuscitation process. In theory, “you” could die in 2010, be cryonically preserved and then resuscitated at some point in the future. (**Does being brought back to life qualify as *life after death*??**)

Briefly summarize each belief in these boxes:

MONIST

DUALIST

MODIFIED DUALIST

SECULAR



PHILOSOPHICAL ASSESSMENT

At the centre of this topic lies the issue of personal identity. To what extent is it possible for *me* to survive my bodily death? The various different approaches to afterlife, as detailed above, stem from different views about the relationship between body & soul, and the nature of personal identity.

MONISM:

Monists would argue that it is perfectly coherent to survive bodily death. As there is no separate soul, any existence would have to be physical. This is in line with Christianity, Islam and Judaism where the resurrection of the dead is a fundamental belief. The concept of resurrection is however, significantly flawed. The atoms which make up various living things are not destroyed as the body decays – instead, they are incorporated back into the natural world. This would make the prospect of God piecing me back together bit by bit in order to face judgement a logistical nightmare.

Hick's replica theory goes some way to overcoming these problems. However the criteria he presents for personal identity are unsound because appearance and character are changeable and my memory is incomplete and unreliable. There are other problems with Hick's theory too – a replica would have to have all of the memories and experiences of me, including my death. This causes problems if my death was particularly traumatic or messy as memory and appearance must continue into my afterlife if my replica is to be truly me.

Aquinas's Modified Dualism goes some way to overcome these issues. In line with St Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, Aquinas argues that we will receive a new and "glorified" body in anticipation of the Beatific Vision. However would perfect version of me is really be me? In addition, the prospect of a physical existence after death is flawed. If heaven is physical and if I am to have any experiences, it must also be temporal. I cannot be me without freewill and therefore there must be the opportunity to sin in heaven too – surely this is impossible if heaven is perfect?

DUALISM:

My experience of freewill and moral responsibility suggests that there is a "me" controlling my body and making decisions. Pam Reynold's near death experience again suggests a distinction between body & soul. If dualism is correct, then it would be possible for my soul to continue after my physical body has died. Is it possible to imagine myself without a body? just because I feel free, it does not mean that I am free, or that there is a separate substance enabling me to make decisions. Indeed, there are numerous philosophical problems with the idea of the immortality of the soul. Without a body I would not be able to experience my afterlife and therefore there could be no kind of reward or punishment. Indeed, many would say such an "existence" seems to be no different from no existence at all!



Beliefs in death and beyond clearly are important to a great number of people in today's society. Anticipation of an afterlife can shape and influence the way in which individuals choose to live their life (see section on Judgement in Eschatology & Apocalypse topic booklet). For non-religious people, the idea of legacy will often weigh heavily on their minds – the memories of them which continue after their death and the impact they have had may well last long after the end of their life. Therefore, for many people it is important to them that they are remembered in the right way.

Are beliefs in life after death reasonable? Deciding whether a belief is reasonable or not requires us to consider whether there is sufficient evidence to support it. The evidence for continued existence after death (NDEs, ghosts etc) is widely discredited as none have ever been replicated under laboratory conditions. However, it is important to remember that these beliefs are central to many of the world's major religions and therefore to the majority of the global population they are considered reasonable. Either way – if you believe in an afterlife, or if you do not – it is all a matter of faith.

It is crucial to be able to comment on the different beliefs with reference to various different philosophers – think Wittgenstein, the Logical Positivists, Swinburne etc. Have a go at these questions to practice drawing these kind of links:

1. Is it only religious people who believe it is possible to continue after death?
2. Is it meaningful to talk about “soul”?
3. How might Hick's notion of *eschatological verification* be useful in drawing conclusions about the nature of an afterlife?
4. What would Wittgenstein say in response to Ryle's argument that talk about the soul is a “category mistake”?
5. Judas Maccabeus said “*if there is no resurrection, it is superfluous and vain to pray for the dead*” what do you think he means?
6. Dualists like Descartes and Swinburne argued it is possible to imagine yourself without a body. Do you agree?

Arguing your case:

Look at the following statements & decide how you would justify each one

1. The notion of “soul” is incoherent
2. In terms of justice, a cyclical view of life after death is fairer than a linear view.
3. Belief in life after death is just wishful thinking
4. There is no evidence to suggest that it is possible for individuals to continue after death