

Thoughts on Death

1. In the sense of *bodily* extinction, death is a fact of life – although only a *contingent* fact. The indefinite continuation of a living thing (its component material being replaced bit by bit) is not impossible *logically* (i.e. it does not involve a logical contradiction) and perhaps not *practically*, although nothing so far has beaten the rap – the Methuselah Tree, a bristlecone pine in the White Mountains of California, has yet to celebrate its 5,000th birthday!

2. In discussing the scientific quest for immortality (or ‘Gilgamesh Project’, as he calls it) the historian Yuval Harari states: “Nanotechnology experts are developing a bionic immune system composed of millions of nano-robots who would inhabit our bodies, open blocked blood vessels, fight viruses and bacteria, eliminate cancerous cells and even reverse ageing processes. A few serious scholars suggest that by 2050, some humans will become a-mortal (not immortal, because they could still die of some accident, but a-mortal, meaning that in the absence of fatal trauma their lives could be extended indefinitely).”¹

3. Aldous Huxley’s novel *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* (1939)² tells of a Hollywood millionaire who, fearful of death, seeks to extend his life at any cost. He learns about an English nobleman who is reported to have discovered the secret of longevity (enjoyed by animals such as carp). On visiting him, however, he finds that the man, now 200 years old, has degenerated into a gibbering ape-like creature. Despite witnessing the horrendous consequences of managing to prolong life but failing to stop physical and mental decay, the millionaire still wants to pursue his own immortality. The novel provides a cautionary tale for people who pay to have their entire bodies (or, in some cases, just their heads/brains) frozen at death – in the vague hope that future generations will be able (and willing) not only to regenerate and repair them but also to halt/reverse the ageing process³.

4. The link between consciousness and brain activity appears incontrovertible. John Searle, amongst many philosophers, views conscious states as higher level features of brain systems, arguing that “we know for a fact that all of our mental processes are caused by neurobiological processes and we also know that they are going on in the brain and perhaps in the rest of the central nervous system”.⁴ If this is the case, then the death of the brain presumably spells the end of consciousness and thus of the *self*. For medical purposes a widely used definition of death is the *complete* and *irreversible* loss of brain function – including not only that of the *cerebrum* but also of the *brainstem* (without which heartbeat and ventilation cannot continue unaided). Although currently the stuff only of science fiction and philosophical speculation, an alternative to putting a dead brain into cold storage – in the hope that its loss of function will eventually prove to be *reversible* – might be to

¹ Yuval Noah Harari. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. Vintage Books, 2011 (p. 301 of paperback edition)

² The title is taken from a line in Tennyson’s poem *Tithonus* (1860) – see page 19 of this paper.

³ ‘Frozen body: can we return from the dead?’ [BBC Science: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/0/23695785>] provides a brief guide to cryonics. Woody Allen’s 1973 film *Sleeper* depicts what might await the future ‘defrosted’.

⁴ John R. Searle. *Mind: A Brief Introduction*. OUP, 2004 (Chapter 4 – *Consciousness and the Mind-Body Problem*)

copy its entire contents into a suitably constructed artificial brain⁵. Either a resuscitated or a copied brain, however, would need to be connected via a central nervous system to some sort of *body* possessing *sensory apparatus* (giving the brain awareness of the outside world) and *moveable parts* (which the brain could control) – otherwise the conscious experience of the reactivated person would be of complete sensory deprivation (worse than being buried alive, if that is possible) or of locked-in syndrome. Ideally, any new body should be as much like the subject's original body as possible, otherwise the cognitive dissonance experienced could be mentally shattering.⁶ At the very least, substantial psychological support would be required – as can be the case with major reconstructive surgery (which may now include full-face transplants).

5. The BBC Science piece on cryonics (see footnote 3) quotes a Swedish neuroscientist as saying that, if the destructive effects of cryopreservation could be solved, “there is no reason why (in theory) a cryonic procedure couldn't preserve memories. However, it would be like time travel with a lot of confusion for the subject.” The suggestion appears to be that the preservation of *self* is primarily a matter of preserving *memory*. The *cognitive system* realised within a brain, however, comprises vastly more than just a set of stored memories. To reactivate anything like the original conscious being, the *entire system* (including, for example, intellectual capabilities and dispositional traits) would have to survive the preservation and reactivation process. The same applies to ‘brain copying’ i.e. the *entire* cognitive system, not just memory, would have to be replicated in an appropriate artefact.

6. The *logical* possibility of surviving bodily death by having one's brain replicated within an artificial body is problematic. If, at death, *one* such copy could be made then so, presumably, could *several*, all incorporating, at the time of replication, *identical* cognitive systems with *identical* memories. But which would then be the surviving *self* or *person*? All or none of them? How would they react if they met one another, all laying claim to the same life history, parents, partner, children, relatives and friends? And how would *those* people regard them? How would the ‘replicants’ be treated *legally* – for example, how would their *rival* claims to the property of the deceased/replicated person be settled and could they be held accountable, individually or severally, for any crimes committed by that person? And what would be the position if someone were replicated not at the point of death but *whilst he or she remained alive*?⁷

⁵ A digital computer seems unlikely to fit the bill. The research aimed at ‘in silico’ whole-brain simulation carried out since 2013 under the EU's billion-euro Human Brain Project has been criticised as ignoring the essentially *bio-chemical* nature of brain activity [<http://www.nature.com/news/rethinking-the-brain-1.17168>]. In his 1984 Reith Lectures [*Minds, Brains and Science*] John Searle argues that “brains are biological engines; their biology matters... For any artefact that we might build which had mental states equivalent to human mental states, the implementation of a computer program would not by itself be sufficient. Rather, the artefact would have to have powers equivalent to the powers of the human brain.”

⁶ In his short story *The Metamorphosis* (1915), Franz Kafka imagines what it would be like to wake up in the body of a giant insect (it has been suggested, in fact, that a *woodlouse* – a crustacean, not an insect – best fits the few descriptive clues provided by Kafka).

⁷ *Physical* rather than *mental* doppelgängers appear to provide most scope for fictional treatment. For example, in the 1970 psychological thriller *The Man Who Haunted Himself* starring Roger Moore, a stuffy businessman briefly suffers clinical death following a car accident (in his staid Rover P5B). As he revives on the operating table, *two* sets of heartbeats appear on the monitor. From then on his life becomes a nightmare as a dissolute and Lamborghini-driving version of himself appears sometimes to be acting in his place, making rash business decisions and conducting an extra-marital affair. Is there really two of him or is he going mad?

7. The *multi-copying* of a cognitive system raises major issues regarding the concept of *self*. If assured that my entire cognitive system would, at the point of bodily death, be replicated in a suitably constructed artificial brain/body I might be inclined to consider that 'I' would thus survive and, in effect, cheat death. If told, however, that my cognitive system would be replicated in *two or more* such artefacts I would probably regard *neither/none* of them as a continuation of 'me'. The (varying) ways in which we conceptualise a self or person all appear to require *uniqueness* of existence – including the *spatio-temporal* uniqueness of any associated body. This does not mean that the stuff of which a body is composed must itself remain unaltered if that body is to be regarded as still belonging to the same person – although, arguably, some spatio-temporal *continuity* of existence is required. The human body, as it develops from a fertilised 'egg' through to eventual death, undergoes a constant process of adding and discarding material, the constituent cells of different parts of the body being subject, at *varying* rates, to replacement.⁸ The biological control mechanisms of the body generally ensure this done in such a way that the *structural identity* of the organism is maintained – although, very rarely, this can malfunction to such an extent that the individual concerned may come to be seen as a 'different person' and, as such, rejected even by parents⁹. The increasing range of human parts that can be replaced by prosthetics raises the issue of just how far this process can go without affecting personal identity. The transplanting of a brain into an *entirely* artificial body – particularly if that body bears little resemblance to a human body – might seem too radical a change for the 'after' person to be considered the same as the 'before' person.

8. Notwithstanding the above, it is hard to escape the feeling that, *regardless* of changes to bodily substance or structure, the same person somehow survives as long as continuity of *consciousness* is preserved.¹⁰ According to John Locke¹¹, "*self* is that conscious thinking thing ... which is sensible, or conscious of pleasure or pain, capable of happiness or misery, and so is concerned for *itself*, as far as that consciousness extends" and thus "consists not in the identity of substance" (whether spiritual or material) but "in the identity of *consciousness*". For Locke, therefore, continuity of consciousness appears crucial to personal survival. He argues that "if it be possible for the same man to have distinct incommunicable consciousness at different times, it is past doubt that the same man would at different times make different persons". Locke thus distinguishes between a *man* (i.e. a *human being* considered as a *biological* entity) and a *person* (i.e. a *conscious* entity with an interrelated set of memories). Although not without its problems, Locke's distinction (or something like it) is one that we do sometimes appear to make. For example, we might be

⁸ Dating of radioactive carbon-14 (released by pre-1963 above ground nuclear weapons tests and absorbed by living things including humans), has helped improve estimates of the average life of different types of cell in the human body. This varies widely from days to years and some cells, including those in the cerebral cortex of the brain, appear never to be replaced. There are various theories (e.g. the degradation of DNA information) as to why cell replacement doesn't continue forever and why the body thus ages and dies. The Swedish biologist who carried out the carbon-14 dating speculates that the enfeeblement with age of the stem cells that provide the source of new cells in each tissue constitutes the single impediment to immortality. [See: http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/02/science/your-body-is-younger-than-you-think.html?_r=0]

⁹ An example is provided by Joseph Merrick (1862-90), the so-called 'Elephant Man'.

¹⁰ Someone who has shed pounds of excess weight through diet and exercise might say "I have become a *different* person" – but only (and literally!) *figuratively* speaking. The present and remembered 'I' is clearly considered to be the *same* 'I' (once fat but now slim).

¹¹ John Locke. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) (Book II, Ch. XXVII – *Of Identity and Diversity*)

inclined to describe a parent suffering from severe memory loss (perhaps resulting from Alzheimer's disease) as still the same *human being* but not the same *person* that we used to know. A recurrent issue in law, moreover, is the rationale for putting people on trial for crimes which they committed many years ago but are now incapable of remembering or comprehending due, perhaps, to dementia.

9. *Complete* loss of memory (even for sufferers of Alzheimer's disease) is extremely rare. To varying extents we *all* experience memory loss as well as the inability to retrieve stored memories (which are, in any case, fragmentary and often unreliable). Just how much memory of an earlier time in our lives do we have to lose in order to constitute a 'different person' from then and how much retain in order to constitute the 'same person'?

10. There is, of course, much more to consciousness than memories – including thoughts, feelings, beliefs, desires, intentions and motivations. Over the years, the nature and content of these are subject, for better or worse, to *change* – reflected in changing personality and patterns of behaviour. As with memory loss, a crucial question is just how much change has to take place before someone is viewed as a 'different person'? Most change is *gradual* and, as it occurs, *imperceptible* – although 'Road to Damascus' conversions regarding, for example, beliefs and behaviour are not unknown. We might, albeit loosely and figuratively, say that the person we are now differs from the person we were as an infant, a teenager, a young adult, and so on, but would be at a complete loss to identify any clear points of transition. The *lack* of such points requires us, for some practical purposes, to invent relatively arbitrary ones (e.g. regarding the age at which we are deemed fit to marry, vote or draw a pension).¹²

11. For David Hume¹³ consciousness comprises the 'perceiving of perceptions' (his re-naming of Locke's 'ideas' as 'perceptions' resulting in tautology). "When I turn my reflection on myself, I never can perceive this *self* without some one or more perceptions; nor can I ever perceive anything but the perceptions. It is the composition of these, therefore, which forms the self". On this basis he regards a person as "nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual state of flux and movement". Thus when perception ceases so does the self, either temporarily during sleep or permanently at death. "When my perceptions are removed for any time, as by sound sleep, so long am I insensible of *myself*, and may truly be said not to exist. And were all my perceptions removed by death, and could I neither think, nor feel, nor see, nor love, nor hate, after the dissolution of my body, I should be entirely annihilated, nor do I conceive what is further requisite to make me a total nonentity."

12. It might be argued that Hume's use of the word '*I*' in the above passages represents the self *not* as a 'bundle or collection of different perceptions' but as *whatever it is that*

¹² Problems for *identity* posed by *gradual change* are sometimes referred to as '*sorites paradoxes*'. The Greek philosopher Eubulides (4th century BC) identified as a paradox the fact that if we continue to add one grain of sand to another, we eventually form a heap ('*soros*' in Greek) but there is no *particular* grain of sand that can be said at any stage to have turned a non-heap into a heap.

¹³ David Hume. *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) (Appendix & Book 1, Part IV, Section VI – *Of Personal Identity*)

perceives those perceptions i.e. as something distinct and separate from them. Searle¹⁴ agrees with Hume that we do not *perceive* an entity called the self but argues that we cannot avoid a *formal notion* of the self as “an entity, such that one and the same entity has consciousness, perception, rationality, the capacity to engage in action, and the capacity to organise perceptions and reasons, so as to perform voluntary actions on the presupposition of freedom”.

13. Aside from a *notion* of self, we undoubtedly have a *sense* of self. Such a sense, arguably, is intrinsic to our functioning as sentient beings who interact with our observed environment. Simon Blackburn¹⁵ argues that for any such being, “a minimal self-consciousness is a *structural* requirement on any kind of interpretation of experience”. Crucially, it enables sentient creatures to differentiate themselves from the various parts of their experienced world and to *locate* themselves within that world. Humans inhabit not only a physical world but also, largely by virtue of intercommunication through language, a social and institutional world within which they also ‘locate’ themselves.

14. A sense of self can thus be seen as a key function of a cognitive system realised within a brain. It is *generated* by neurobiological activity and *what* is generated at any time may *vary*. This is the reality of our everyday experience. It squares with the *varying* images we have of ourselves and the *varying* ways in which we behave/react depending upon our current mood and physical/social setting. It is also consistent with the fact that how we see ourselves (in terms of both physical appearance and personality) can be very different from how others see us. The self or person experienced internally by ourselves and externally by others can change not only over a period of *years* but in a matter of *seconds*. If sufficiently provoked, for example, we may flip from a rational, benign and peace-loving person (at least in our own estimation) to an out-of-control, angry and vengeful monster – the phenomenon of road rage providing a case in point.

15. *Consistency* of experienced/observed self can vary widely. “The more integrated the self-image, the more consistent a person’s behaviour will be... This ‘consistency’ may take various forms, depending on whether the self-image is based on the attributes of some person, or on a set of ethical or ideological rules of conduct, or on an occupational or social-class role.”¹⁶ The fact that the self we experience at different times is the product of a *single* cognitive system is bound to provide a *degree* of consistency (memory appearing to play an important role here). *However*, the cognitive system not only changes over time (sometimes drastically due to brain injury or disease) but is also highly complex and only *partially* integrated – hence the generation of different selves at different moments. Aside from pathological cases of ‘dissociative identity disorder’ (previously called ‘multiple person disorder’), the ability of people with no certifiable mental condition to behave out of character (e.g. the loving parents who gassed other people’s children in Nazi extermination camps) is frightening.¹⁷

¹⁴ Op. cit. in footnote 4 (Chapter 11 – *The Self*)

¹⁵ Simon Blackburn. *Think*. Oxford University Press, 1999 (Chapter 4: *The Self*)

¹⁶ Argyle, Michael. *The Psychology of Interpersonal Behaviour*. Penguin, 4th Edition, 1988 (p. 195)

¹⁷ See paragraph 5.2 of my paper *Minds and Brains* on the KPC website.

16. The features of the self identified above, it should be noted, are *wholly inconsistent* with the notion of the self as an indivisible, unchanging, unstructured and essentially characterless 'thing' imprisoned within a body but liberated when that body dies – either to be reincarnated in *another* body or to live on as a disembodied 'spirit', perhaps eternally in some 'heaven' or 'hell'. The incoherence of such a notion might seem obvious but, in some form or another, it is so prevalent as to demand examination.¹⁸ It is generally, but not *necessarily*, associated with the belief systems of various religions (not all of which, we should note, espouse the immortality of an identifiable person or self). The issues associated with it are essentially *ontological* i.e. they relate to the nature of *reality* and, in particular, of *substance*.

17. Most people, it seems, presume the existence of *two* types of substance:

- *Physical/material* substance (*matter*) comprising everything experienced through our senses (of which we have at least five) and including our own brains/bodies;
- *Spiritual/immaterial* substance of which minds, souls or spirits are composed and through which consciousness (in the form of thoughts, feelings, memories, etc.) is realised.

The obvious problem with such *dualism* is to explain how two fundamentally different types of substance can possibly interact. What possible connection can there be between a world of 'stuff' and 'things' conceived as possessing structure, dimension and position in time and space and a world of 'spirits' conceived as structureless, dimensionless and positionless instances of 'mind-stuff'? René Descartes grappled (unsuccessfully) with the problem until the end of his life.¹⁹ Locke recognised, but could not resolve, fundamental issues arising from the apparent inability of minds to operate independently of their associated bodies (and thus, for example, sharing with them the attribute of *motion* i.e. *change of relative position*).²⁰ Given the conceptual problems with dualism can we jettison one of the substances and adopt a coherent *monist* position? And could it offer us any hope of personal immortality?

18. For all its conceptual difficulties, the notion of physical/material substance or 'matter' appears intrinsic to the way in which we interpret our sensory experience. Our

¹⁸ Searle identifies as a (false) *pre-reflective default position* the belief that: "Each of us consists of two separate entities, a body on the one hand, and a mind or soul on the other ... joined together during our lifetimes but independent to the extent that our minds or souls can become detached from our bodies and continue to exist as conscious entities even after our bodies are totally annihilated".

John R. Searle. *Mind, Language and Society: Philosophy in the Real World*. Basic Books, 1999

¹⁹ His final attempt was in *The Passions of the Soul* (1649). He posited unhelpfully that, due to its central position in the brain, the pineal gland provides the point of contact between 'body' and 'soul'!

²⁰ "Spirits as well as bodies cannot operate but where they are ... Everyone finds in himself that his soul can think, will and operate on his body in the place where that is; but cannot operate on a body or in a place an hundred miles distant from it. Nobody can imagine that his soul can think or move an object at Oxford whilst he is in London; and cannot but know that, being united to his body, it constantly changes place all the whole journey between Oxford and London, as the coach or horse does that carries him; and I think may be truly said to be all that while in motion, or if that will not be allowed to afford us a clear idea enough of its motion, its being separated from the body in death, I think, will: for to consider it as going out of the body, or leaving it, and yet to have no idea of its motion, seems to me impossible."

Op. cit. in footnote 11 (Book II, Ch. XXIII – *Of Our Complex Ideas of Substances*, Paragraph 20)

everyday awareness is of *stuff*, much of it identifiable as bounded *objects*.²¹ Our *explanatory model* of such *stuff* conceives of elementary particles in fields of force and an interrelationship between ‘mass’ and ‘energy’. It represents *stuff* as essentially *active* and capable, if appropriately structured, of forming *living things* (vegetable and animal), some possessing central nervous systems and *brains* (varying widely in degree of complexity). Although we don’t understand how, *some* bio-chemical processes occurring within brains (at least within the highly complex ones of humans) appear causally related to *consciousness*. Searle²² argues that *consciousness* should be accepted as a *natural feature* of such processes, a view he labels ‘*biological naturalism*’. The phenomena associated with *consciousness* (thoughts, feelings, etc.) are as much *real* features of brain activity as any other and, as Searle argues, “because conscious states are real features of the real world, they function causally”. Recognition of their *causative* role is crucial to understanding the nature of human *agency*.²³ They are not reducible to causally inert *epiphenomena* that just happen to accompany causally effective *physical phenomena*.

19. Searle differentiates his approach from that of *materialism* which he defines as “the view that there is nothing in the universe except material phenomena as traditionally defined. There are no irreducible intrinsic, subjective states of consciousness or awareness or anything else that is intrinsically mental. Every apparent case can be eliminated or reduced to something physical.” Such a view, he argues, “is rather easy to refute, because it denies the existence of things we all know to exist. It asserts that there are no ontologically subjective phenomena, and we know that this is false because we experience them all the time.” Searle recognises that his ‘biological naturalism’ challenges the conventional distinction between ‘the mental’ and ‘the physical’ and argues that “if we are going to keep this terminology at all, we need an expanded notion of the physical to allow for its intrinsic, subjective mental component”. He concludes that “we do not live in several different, or even two different, worlds, a mental world and a physical world, a scientific world and a world of commonsense. Rather, there is just one world; it is the world we all live in, and we need to account for how we exist as a part of it.”

20. Expanding the notion of physical/material substance to accommodate the mental phenomena of which we are all aware might avoid the problems of dualism (with its postulation of two radically different types of substance) but does not appear to offer any hope for the survival of consciousness in the absence of neurobiological activity. Might the prospect of immortality be offered instead by a monist approach that abandons any notion of physical/material substance and recognises the existence only of *spiritual/immaterial* substance – a classic example being the immaterialist doctrine of George Berkeley?²⁴ He claims “it is evident there is not any other Substance than *spirit*, or *that which perceives*”, that this substance exists in the form of *individual* spirits, each comprising “one simple,

²¹ Steven Pinker (in *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature*. Penguin Books, 2007) argues that our distinction between objects and substances is reflected in our use of *count nouns* and *mass nouns* and that “the count-mass distinction ... is best thought of as a cognitive lens or attitude by which the mind can construe almost anything as a bounded, countable item or as a boundariless, continuous medium”.

²² Op. cit. in footnote 4

²³ To give a simple example, if I tried to *explain* a choice/action of mine by describing the associated neuron firings in my brain (assuming this were possible), I would still be asked “Yes, but *why* did you choose/do it?” and would be expected to refer to meaningful *reasons*, not to a succession of biochemical events.

²⁴ See his *Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710) and *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (1713).

undivided, active being” and that “this perceiving, active being is what I call *mind, spirit, soul* or *myself*”. The conscious experience of each spirit involves the perception of *ideas* which are “imprinted on the senses or... perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind or... formed by help of memory and imagination”. Ideas imprinted on the senses – or *sensations*, as Berkeley calls them – are “blended or combined together” to compose “objects” (e.g. apples, trees, houses, mountains, rivers and, indeed, our own *bodies* and their constituent parts including our *brains*) which thus comprise “collections of ideas” existing only whilst perceived. The sensations we experience, Berkeley argues, are clearly not of our own choosing and therefore must be imprinted in us by *something else*. Having ruled out the existence of material substance (also claiming that such substance, if it *did* exist, would necessarily be inert and incapable of generating ideas), he concludes that they must be implanted by an *Infinite Spirit* or *God* (also comprising immaterial substance) who ensures the continuing existence of objects by always perceiving their constituent ideas ‘himself’.

21. Even from the brief outline above, the incoherence of Berkeley’s doctrine should be obvious.²⁵ Amongst its many inadequacies, it fails to provide a coherent account of the nature of self and of *death*. Berkeley’s notion of immaterial substance is obscure. For him, it is not something of which spirits are *composed* and of which they contain a certain *amount*. Instead, it just *comprises*, and thus *itself constitutes* nothing other than, such spirits.²⁶ Each spirit, says Berkeley, is “indivisible, incorporeal, unextended”. So conceived, a spirit appears a quite different being from the complex, multi-faceted, evolving and changeable self that we all experience. Particularly unclear is how so-called ‘ideas’ can be fed into, stored within or generated by something that is indivisible and unextended. Equally obscure is the *nature* of these ideas, which are conceived as passive entities (not themselves comprising substance), perceived by active spirits (comprising immaterial substance, the only substance there is).²⁷ Berkeley regards humans (and perhaps other animals, although he is less than

²⁵ It is examined at length in my paper *Stuff and Nonsense: Berkeley and Immaterialism* and illustrated in my *Fourth Dialogue between Hylas and Philonous* – both of which can be accessed on the KPC website.

²⁶ Descartes’ notion of immaterial (*and* material) substance is equally obscure. He argues that “By *substance* we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence. If we perceive the presence of some attribute, we can infer that there must also be present an existing thing or substance to which it may be attributed... Each substance has one principal property which constitutes its nature and essence and to which all its other properties are referred. Thus extension in length, breadth and depth constitutes the nature of corporeal substance; and thought constitutes the nature of thinking substance”. Thus Descartes identifies two distinct types of substance: *extended substance* (matter/body) and *thinking substance* (spirit/mind). Their existence, according to Descartes, depends upon nothing but God who constitutes an eternal, infinite and uncreated spirit. For Descartes, extension and thought *comprise* substances. Body is not something that is extended. It *comprises* extension. Mind is not something that thinks. It *comprises* thought. “Thought and extension can be regarded as constituting the natures of intelligent substance and corporeal substance; they must then be considered as nothing else but thinking substance itself and extended substance itself - that is, as mind and body”. *Principles of Philosophy*, 1644 (Part I Paragraphs 51-53)

²⁷ Samuel Johnson (an American clergyman and philosopher, *not* the English lexicographer of the same name) was an ardent admirer of Berkeley but, at the same time, raised fundamental objections to his immaterialist doctrine. “These ideas of ours, what are they? Is the substance of the mind the *substratum* to its ideas? Is it proper to call them modifications of our minds? Or impressions on them? Or what? Truly I can’t tell what to make of them any more than of matter itself. What is the *esse* of spirits? You seem to think it impossible to abstract their existence from their thinking. Is then the *esse* of minds nothing else but *percipere*, as the *esse* of

explicit on this) as *finite* spirits into whom God, an *infinite* spirit, feeds sensory ideas, thus determining their sensory experience. They are deemed *finite*, presumably, because they do not exist until God chooses to create them. It is conceivable that he might choose at some stage to *annihilate* them, their immaterial status thus offering no guarantee against death (in the sense of total extinction and the ending of *all* consciousness). Berkeley as a Christian, however, appears to discount this possibility, believing instead in life *after* death (in a heaven or hell). The meaning of death, however, then becomes far from clear.

22. For Berkeley *all* sensory experience, including that associated with the *process* of dying, is determined by the sensations that God chooses to feed into minds/spirits. But what happens at the point of *actual death*? Does God *permanently* discontinue the implanting of sensations – as presumably he does *temporarily* when they sleep? Or does he then start to implant sensations consistent with a ‘heavenly’ or ‘infernal’ existence. If *not*, and unless God *annihilates* them, spirits continue to exist but with the ability to perceive only their own *self-generated* ideas (of imagination, emotion and memory). Without implanted sensations to ‘blend’ or ‘combine together’, spirits cannot perceive a world of stuff and objects. Spirits would thus lack any awareness, amongst other things, of their own and other people’s *bodies*. According to Berkeley, God *alone* “maintains that intercourse between spirits whereby they are able to perceive the existence of each other” and does so by feeding sensory ideas into them. In the absence of such ideas the experience of spirits would be of complete sensory deprivation (see paragraph 4). Berkeley claims to “see no difficulty in conceiving a change of state such as is vulgarly called Death, as well without as with extended substance” and that “it seems very easy to conceive the soul to exist in a separate state (i.e. divested from those limits and laws of motion and perception with which she is embarrassed here), and to exercise herself on new ideas, without the intervention of these tangible things we call bodies”.²⁸ Anyone inclined to agree that it is possible, let alone easy, to imagine what it would be like to live in a world where we have no perception of either our own or each other’s bodies (or of any other “tangible things”) should just try! If God deems it appropriate to implant sensations in spirits during their *earthly life*, moreover, it is unclear what purpose is served by discontinuing such implanting in an *afterlife*.

23. An inability to provide a coherent account of the nature of both *death* and *life after death* is displayed at least as much by dualist approaches as by Berkeley’s immaterialist form of monism. Proponents of the dual existence of two quite different types of substance (mind and matter) appear to consider that, during life, the sensory experience of minds/spirits depends upon the brains/bodies to which they are tied and through which they perceive an independently existing world of stuff/objects. Death involves the severance of that tie but what *causes* this to happen is entirely unexplained – unless we hypothesise a ‘god’ who decides when minds and their related bodies should uncouple. It is equally unclear what *then* determines the conscious/sensory experience of the incorporeal minds/spirits following such uncoupling. Without connection to brains/bodies and thus to a world of stuff/objects, they can have no *sensory* experience and thus no means by which they may perceive the existence of, or communicate with, one another.

ideas is *percipi*? ... Can actions be the *esse* of anything? Can they exist or be exerted without some being who is the agent? And may not that being be easily imagined to exist without acting e.g. without thinking?”

Letter to Berkeley (1729) – see paragraph 4.14 of my paper *Stuff and Nonsense: Berkeley and Immaterialism*.

²⁸ *Reply to Johnson* (1729) – see paragraph 4.19 of *Stuff and Nonsense: Berkeley and Immaterialism*.

24. Most, if not all, of those who believe in a *personal* afterlife appear incapable of imagining it other than in *bodily/earthly* terms. Most, if they are honest with themselves, see heaven as little more than a happy and pain-free version of life on earth. Hell and its torments also tend to be imagined in *physical* terms (of a particularly lurid and nasty kind). All this evidences the *restricted* and *febrile* nature of human imagination. The sheer naivety of much of what is believed and failure to question even the most obvious absurdities are depressing.²⁹ Just one problem, out of many, is the fact that people die at different ages (between birth and extreme old age) and in different physical and mental conditions. In what form do their spirits then continue in an afterlife? Do the spirits of deceased babies remain just as they were at the time of death or do they somehow mature as they would on earth, and, if so, how far into adulthood? Do the spirits of people with severe dementia at the time of death regain their mental faculties and, if so, to what point in their previous mental history are they restored?

25. Attempts to imagine an afterlife in entirely non-physical terms seem doomed to failure. At best, we might imagine wraith-like beings haunting some ethereal realm. The more we exclude from them the earthly characteristics (both mental and physical) of individual selves, however, the less can they be seen, in any meaningful sense, as *continuations* of those selves. The ultimate eliminative reduction of the self is to an essentially characterless entity temporarily linked to, but distinct from, *both* mind and body.³⁰ Hinduism postulates a 'deep-self' (Atman), comprising part of a universal 'oneness' (Brahma), which has somehow become trapped in a cycle of death and rebirth (involving successive reincarnations) but which may eventually achieve liberation and reunion with the oneness. Such a deep-self appears devoid of any consciousness or memory. Its existence and fate, therefore, would seem a matter of complete indifference to me if I were concerned only with the continuation of the conscious, thinking, feeling and active being which I call 'myself'. On a similar basis, I would be equally unimpressed by the prospect for personal survival, or rather *lack* of it, held out by Buddhism. "Instead of eternal souls, individuals consist of a 'bundle' of habits, memories, sensations, desires, and so forth, which together delude one into thinking that he or she consists of a stable, lasting self. Despite its transitory nature, this false self hangs together as a unit, and even reincarnates in body after body. In Buddhism, as well as in Hinduism, life in a corporeal body is viewed negatively, as the source of all suffering. Hence, the goal is to obtain release. In Buddhism, this means abandoning the false sense of self so that the bundle of memories and impulses disintegrates, leaving nothing to reincarnate and hence nothing to experience pain."³¹ The idea of death as involving the absorption of earthly spirits into a cosmic oneness is

²⁹ There are undoubtedly people who see heaven as an eternal paradise where their own (selfish) desires are forever satisfied – where, perhaps, they can play golf and always score a hole in one, where their football teams always win and, for the sexually ambitious, where they can have multiple partners (forgetting that these presumably come with multiple sets of relations/in-laws and a potential multiplicity of 'heaven-born' children to support). The problem of how the *conflicting* desires of *different* spirits might be reconciled does not appear even to have occurred to them. The *crass stupidity* and *moral repulsiveness* of all this just beggars belief.

³⁰ For an example of such a reduction of the self (to a mere 'spark of life') and the claim that the self must be independent of the body because it stays the same whilst the molecules of the body change, see: <http://www.scienceofidentityfoundation.net/yoga-philosophy/yoga-view-of-the-self/scientific-evidence-that-you-are-not-the-body>

³¹ <http://www.victorzammit.com/articles/religions3.html> includes handy summaries of the approaches of some religions to an afterlife, whilst also claiming to give 'scientific proof' of 'Life after Death'.

associated with *pantheism* (which translates literally as ‘all is God’) and finds poetic expression in, for example, Shelley’s *Adonais* (see page 21).

26. The monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam all offer the prospect of *personal* survival beyond the grave although Judaism is less explicit on the subject (the Old Testament saying little about an afterlife, the first reference being in Daniel 12.2: “And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt”). Christianity maintains that each soul is judged by God when it separates at death from its body and, depending upon that judgement, consigned to either heaven or hell. Different versions of Christianity differ significantly on matters such as *timing* (Catholics believing that souls may wait in ‘purgatory’ before being judged) and the *basis* for God’s judgement (some Christians insisting that lack of belief in God damns individuals regardless of how good their earthly lives or that the fate of souls are somehow pre-determined from the moment they come into existence). As souls are supposedly judged on a one-by-one basis as they depart their bodies, the purpose of the *second* judgement and creation of a *new* heaven described in Revelations is obscure.³² In contrast to Christianity, Islam holds that, following death, souls remain with their bodies in their graves until “on a day decided by Allah, and known only to Allah, life on earth will come to an end and Allah will destroy everything. On this day all the people who have ever lived will be raised from the dead and will face judgement by Allah... This day is called by several names: the Day of Resurrection; the Day of Judgement; the Final Hour”.³³

27. Attempts have been made to refine religions by replacing simplistic aspects (linked perhaps to naïve physical imagery) with more sophisticated concepts.³⁴ Some who baulk at the appalling physical cruelties associated with traditional visions of hell (see Fra Angelico’s depiction on page 20) prefer to think of hell as nothing more than the unremitting *anguish* of permanent exclusion from the presence of God. They thus appear hostile to *physical*, but strangely relaxed about *psychological*, torture. The *purpose* served by *any* sort of everlasting punishment is, of course, totally unclear. The nature and purpose of the lives of the spirits/souls admitted to heaven is equally obscure. If incorporeal spirits living in heaven are to be, in any meaningful sense, *continuations* of incarnate spirits once living on earth, there has to be *continuity of cognitive systems* (including memories, thought patterns and dispositional traits). Without this they would be indistinguishable from, and might just as well *be*, completely *different* sets of spirits. But how would their lives in heaven compare

³² “And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death... And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away.”

The Revelation of St. John the Divine (20.11-15 & 21.1)

³³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/rs/death/islambeliefrev2.shtml>

³⁴ For example, in his book *Honest to God* (1963) the Anglican Bishop of Woolwich, John Robinson, argued, in line with existentialist theologian Paul Tillich, that God should be regarded as ‘the ground of our being’, not as a separate entity (with vaguely human characteristics) existing ‘out/up there’. He was much criticised by traditional Christians, even being accused of atheism. Another example is *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977), a set of essays questioning whether Jesus should be viewed as ‘God incarnate, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity’ or as just a ‘man approved by God’.

with those on earth? From a *dualist* perspective, the loss of bodily connection to a material world of stuff/things would appear to deprive heavenly spirits of sensory experience and thus awareness of, or any means to communicate with, each other. From the perspective of Berkeley's *immaterialist monism*, such deprivation would be avoided *only if* God continued to feed sensory ideas into them, as during their earthly existence (see paragraph 22).

28. As suggested in paragraph 24, most believers in an afterlife appear to envisage it in at least vaguely corporeal terms. Unlike Berkeley, they find it impossible "to conceive the soul to exist...divested from those limits and laws of motion and perception with which she is embarrassed here, and to exercise herself on new ideas, without the intervention of these tangible things we call bodies". Probably, most see themselves reunited with previously departed relatives, friends and even pets – ignoring the embarrassing possibility of also encountering former lovers, divorced partners and enemies – and ready to greet, or perhaps in some cases scowl at, new arrivals. The life they imagine in heaven (assuming that's where they think they will end up) is likely to reflect their earthly desires, attitudes and prejudices. Not all will imagine a realm from which all inequality/injustice – based on race, colour, creed, class, gender, sexuality, age, etc. – has been banished. Not all will imagine a world of spirits who understand one another perfectly (perhaps all speaking the same language) and who never argue or come into conflict. If they *are* able to imagine such a world they might wonder in what way such spirits could be the same as any previously existing on earth and whether after a time (and there would be an *eternity* to contend with) it might all become a bit tedious and less than heavenly. They might question the *point* of existence merely for its own sake, however cosy it might be. What makes life tolerable on earth (and death worth avoiding for as long as possible), arguably, are not just its *comforts* but also its *challenges*. A life without challenges, where everything is known and understood, where our horizons remain fixed, would seem itself a form of death.

29. To illustrate the last point, if following my death I 'awoke' to the scene depicted by Titian (see page 20), doubtless I would be at once awestruck (whilst worrying, as an atheist proved wrong, that my admission to heaven was an oversight soon to be corrected). After a time, however, my awe would subside and I would begin to think "So this is heaven. Is this all there is to it?"³⁵ I would question the *purpose* of spending an eternity adoring God (whom I might actually *dislike*, especially if he displayed his Old Testament persona) and

³⁵ My feelings might resemble those of the character in Thomas Mann's short story *Disillusionment* (1896) for whom no reality could ever satisfy the anticipation of something infinitely more wonderful engendered in him since childhood by the exalted language of religion and of "those poets who chalked up their large words on the walls of life". "It is my favourite occupation to gaze at the starry heavens at night – that being the best way to turn my eyes away from earth and from life. And perhaps it may be pardoned in me that I still cling to my distant hopes? That I dream of a life, where the actuality of my fonder anticipations is revealed to be without any torturing residue of disillusionment. Of a life where there are no more horizons? So I dream and wait for death. Ah, how well I know it already, death, the last disappointment! At my last moment I shall be saying to myself: 'So this is the great experience – well, and what of it? What is it after all?'"

Mann's story provided the basis for the Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller song '*Is That All There Is?*' recorded by Peggy Lee in 1969. It ends with the following lines. "I know what you must be saying to yourselves. / 'If that's the way she feels about it why doesn't she just end it all?' / Oh, no, not me. / I'm in no hurry for that final disappointment. / Because I know just as well as I'm standing here talking to you, / That when that final moment comes and I'm breathing my last breath / I'll be saying to myself – / Is that all there is? / Is that all there is? / If that's all there is my friends / Then let's keep dancing / Let's break out the booze and have a ball / If that's all there is."

wonder what there was to *do* in heaven that offered any sort of *interest* or *challenge*. I might begin to fear confinement to an eternity of boredom from which there could be no escape through death. I might, indeed, begin to wonder whether I had not, after all, been assigned to hell – and that this was it.

30. Without some uncertainty of outcome and some disappointment, many of our earthly pleasures would very soon pall. To give a trivial example, watching a sporting event such as a cricket match would be pointless if its outcome were inevitable. For an English cricket fan in heaven, an eternity in which England always wins the Ashes series against Australia would rapidly become tedious and far from blissful.³⁶ Although the example is trivial, the key underlying point is *not*. The whole notion of a heaven, whether in a naïve or more sophisticated form, arguably represents the negation of all that is most important in the human psyche – the need for continuing *challenge* and *discovery*. However far we extend the frontiers of our knowledge, we feel there must always be something *beyond*. Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* (1988) concludes with the assertion that if we find the answer to "why it is that we and the universe exist... it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason – for then we should know the mind of God". However, if we *did* think we had found the answer to "the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe and Everything" – even it were vastly more impressive than the answer '42' which, in Douglas Adams' *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979), the supercomputer Deep Thought takes 7½ million years to come up with – we would still seem bound to ask: "Can that really be *it*? Is there really nothing *more* to know? *Is that all there is?*" Even the mind of a supposed 'all-knowing' God could not avoid such questions. If 'absolute knowledge' were possible, would the *finality* it implies represent an ultimate form of *death*?

31. A similar deathly finality is implied by the scientific concept of entropy – i.e. of a state of total *disorder* where all differentiation and complexity has collapsed into a random and unstructured 'oneness'. Surprisingly, some people take comfort in the thought that the highly structured stuff comprising their bodies came from, and will return to, a relatively unstructured mode of existence (phrases such as 'we are stardust' and 'dust to dust' coming to mind). Illogically, many seem to believe that, even in such an unstructured state, something significant about them will live on. The opening lines of Rupert Brooke's poem *The Soldier* (1914) – "If I should die, think only this of me: / That there's some corner of a foreign field / That is for ever England" – expresses such a feeling. Also illogically, most people seem concerned about the fate of the stuff that happens to comprise their bodies at the time of death but not of the far greater volume of stuff that their bodies have previously discarded. Much of our former skin, for example, has ended up via our vacuum cleaners and dustbins in assorted landfill sites – but no poet has yet felt inspired to write "there are bits of native rubbish dumps that are forever me".

32. In 'normal' circumstances, what happens to our bodies when we die (notably whether they are buried or cremated) will depend upon the wishes of whoever (generally next of kin) has charge of them, any wishes we might have expressed whilst alive and what is permitted in law – which often reflects prevailing *religious* beliefs. Different religions take

³⁶ George Bernard Shaw claimed that "the English are not a very spiritual people, so they invented cricket to give them some idea of eternity."

different stances. For Muslims burial, and for Hindus cremation, is mandatory. Traditionally both Judaism and Christianity have opposed cremation but, apart from a few sects, now deem it acceptable. Until a landmark judgement in 1884, cremation was assumed illegal in the United Kingdom (see page 22). The first official cremation took place at Woking in 1885 and a statutory framework for cremation was subsequently provided by the Cremation Act 1902. The ‘burial v. cremation’ stances of different religions (all essentially *dualist* in nature) relate to their particular beliefs concerning the way in which the post-death fate of spirits is bound up with that of bodies. Muslims believe that spirits remain with their bodies in their graves until a final Day of Judgement (see paragraph 26). Hindus believe that the cremation of bodies is essential in order to release spirits for either reincarnation or re-absorption into a cosmic oneness (see paragraph 25). The position of Christians appears ambivalent. Although spirits/souls are supposed to *depart* their bodies at the time of death to be then judged by God and consigned to heaven or hell, they *also* appear to be regarded by many (perhaps influenced by the notion of a *second* judgement – see paragraph 26) as somehow remaining *asleep* with their bodies in their graves.³⁷

33. To view corpses as resting places for souls is strange given their rapid decay. Whether they are consumed by worms or flames, therefore, might seem irrelevant – although burial does keep bodily stuff more or less in the same place and bones (as opposed to soft tissue) are long-lasting. Attitudes to the treatment of body *parts* are varied. Some people view *any* interference with them as a form of desecration prejudicing, perhaps, subsequent ‘resurrection’. On this basis they are liable to oppose the *post-death* donation of body parts such as kidneys, lungs, hearts and corneas. They might also oppose *pre-death* donations (e.g. of kidneys and blood) and insist that any parts removed or amputated (e.g. appendices, gall bladders, and limbs) should be retained for subsequent burial with the bodies to which they once belonged. Religious beliefs can certainly exacerbate the shortage of donor parts (as is true, for example, in fundamentalist Muslim countries and in China where an interpretation of Confucian teaching and a decision to stop harvesting organs from executed criminals is having a significant impact).³⁸ The attitude of different societies to different parts of the body, particularly to the heart and the brain, has changed over time. Traditionally the heart has been regarded as the ‘seat’ of the soul. The Ancient Egyptians, when mummifying bodies, discarded brains as akin to snot whilst preserving hearts as the centres of intelligence and emotion. The emotional significance attached to the heart has justified, on some occasions, its burial separately from the body.³⁹ Although neurological science has long since established the unique role of the brain in generating all

³⁷ This common conception is exemplified in the following lines from Thomas Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751): “Beneath those rugged elms, that yew tree’s shade, / Where heaves the turf in many a mould’ring heap, / Each in his narrow cell forever laid, / The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.” The words “Rest in Peace” carved on many headstones also suggest an imagined *dormant* existence for departed spirits.

³⁸ “Many Chinese believe that an intact body is needed in the afterlife, and medical workers and volunteers seeking donors usually face a protracted battle with extended families. ‘The body, hair and skin are received from the parents and one dares not harm them,’ says one Confucian teaching.”

<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-01-08/chinese-clinging-to-confucius-fuel-organ-donor-shortage>

For the fascinating results of a research study entitled *Organ donation, transplantation and religion* see: <http://ndt.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2010/10/20/ndt.gfq628.full>

³⁹ Worcester Cathedral and Westminster Abbey house, respectively, the bodies of the ‘English’ kings John and his son Henry III but their *hearts* are buried in the Abbey church of Fontevraud in France, their family home.

that we know of as thought and feeling, the hangover of old beliefs is still reflected in modern parlance (e.g. in phrases such as 'letting the heart rule the head').

34. Faced with the dissolution of the body and doubting that consciousness can exist without it, some may be consoled by the thought that they will live on in the memories of others. Those others, however, will *themselves* die and with them their memories. *Biographical information* about us (including the recorded memories of others), of course, could survive indefinitely and might interest people (such as social historians) far into the future. The more famous or notorious we become in our own lifetimes the greater such interest is likely to be. The most satisfying way of securing a place in the consciousnesses of future generations, it might seem, is through creative achievement in the arts or sciences – viz. the likes of Plato, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Beethoven, Newton, Darwin and Einstein. The problem, however, is that none of this secures our continuation in the sense that really matters to us i.e. the continuation of ourselves as *living conscious beings*. As Woody Allen puts it, "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work; I want to achieve immortality through *not dying*. I don't want to live on in the hearts of my countrymen; I want to live on in my apartment." Just aspiring to feature in the history books of the future, even if achievable, appears not only pointless – we won't be around to appreciate it – but also to offer a hostage to fortune – we might be libelled but won't be around to sue!

35. Although our *first* concern is likely to be with the death of ourselves and of our nearest and dearest, we can imagine and be deeply affected by the death of strangers, particularly those who have died violent, painful or premature deaths.⁴⁰ Unless we believe in some form of afterlife, however, we have to accept that, in one way or another, death and non-existence is the fate of *all* living things. It is certainly the fate of all life on earth. If not destroyed by ourselves in a nuclear holocaust or by a meteorite strike yet more devastating than those responsible for previous mass extinctions, life will be rendered impossible by the sun's eventual expansion from yellow dwarf to red giant. The hope that we will sufficiently master space travel to colonise planets in other solar systems is likely to remain just that – a hope. In any case, a similar fate awaits those planets including any on which life already exists. The fate of the entire universe is a matter of speculation. No scenario, however, offers any clear prospect for the preservation of our conscious selves *or* of the accumulated knowledge that we try to pass on from one generation to the next. The thought that all the products of conscious beings (including our greatest achievements in science and the arts) will be forever lost, is repugnant but unavoidable. We can, of course, postulate a universe which yo-yos endlessly from 'singularity' to expansion via a 'big bang' and then, if there is enough matter in the system, back to singularity – but any conscious beings that evolve in each phase will be totally unaware of the existence of those in other phases or of their creative achievements. *Whatever* the cosmic scenario envisaged by conscious beings, they all seem bound to ask themselves the same question: "What's the *point* of it all?" As suggested earlier, exactly the *same* question has to be asked in respect of any postulated heavenly afterlife.

⁴⁰ Our ability to shed tears even over the deaths of *fictional* characters can be exploited by authors adept at tugging at our heart strings, there being a fine line between sentiment and sentimentality. Oscar Wilde wrote of the death scene in Charles Dickens *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841) that "One must have a heart of stone to read the death of little Nell without laughing."

36. The search for *purpose* in life seems intrinsic to human nature. We may fail to identify any meaningful big purpose but can, at least, invent our own smaller ones. Regardless of any conscious purposes, however, it is simply part of our make-up as animals that we have a primitive *urge to survive* (e.g. to satisfy hunger and thirst). Our *autonomic* functions (e.g. digestive, circulatory and respiratory systems) are geared to the maintenance of our lives and effectively beyond our wilful control – as we are quickly reminded if we try to hold our breath for any length of time. The evolutionary advantage of an instinct to survive, at least until procreation and rearing of offspring has been achieved, is obvious. It is only in extreme circumstances (perhaps of severe physical or mental suffering) that we might, albeit with great reluctance, overcome our urge to survive and seek to end our lives (assuming we are in any condition to make a conscious and rational choice at the time). The availability of death as an *end to suffering* is thus something *positive*. From an evolutionary point of view, it is also a *necessity*. It reduces competition for scarce resources, makes room for offspring to thrive and provides the vehicle for the selective survival of genetically mutating species. Our increasing ability to manipulate our biology and extend our lives well into senility, it might seem, threatens the operation of such ‘natural’ processes. In a world of over 7 billion people and strictly limited resources, attempts to extend our lives indefinitely would appear a luxury we can’t afford and a recipe for inter-generational conflict. The encouragement and facilitation of *voluntary* euthanasia might rise up the political agenda – although the greater propensity of older people to vote would slow the progress of any attempt to make it *compulsory!*⁴¹

37. Given its inevitability, what *attitude* should we take to death? What purpose, for example, does it serve to ‘rage against the dying of the light’ if we can do nothing about it?⁴² Instead, shouldn’t we just stoically accept death as a fact of life and try to make it as distress-free as possible? Much of the fear of death is, in fact, fear of the *experience* involved. As Woody Allen said, “I am not afraid to die; I just don't want to be there when it happens.” Even if assured of dying in our sleep, however, we may still feel repulsed by the thought of our future *non-existence*. This might seem inconsistent with our apparent lack of concern about our non-existence prior to conception and birth.⁴³ However, this is to ignore

⁴¹ In his futuristic story *The Fixed Period* (1882), Anthony Trollope (1815-82) describes the founding in 1980 of the ‘Republic of Britannula’ on a Pacific island. Its founders, all of them young at the time, recognise that the island can support only a limited population and agree that on reaching the age of 67 each will begin a year’s preparation (well provided with the comforts of life) for euthanasia. Problems arise when the first inhabitant to approach the designated age tries to avoid death by contesting his recorded date of birth. Others try similar evasive tactics, the ensuing civil unrest being resolved only when the British government sends a gunboat to take control of the island and ban euthanasia. Trollope, a notable campaigner for cremation, was himself 67 when he wrote the story, dying soon after its publication.

⁴² “Do not go gentle into that good night, / Old age should burn and rave at close of day; / Rage, rage against the dying of the light. / ...Though wise men at their end know dark is right, / Because their words had forked no lightning they / Do not go gentle into that good night / ... And you, my father, there on that sad height, / Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray. / Do not go gentle into that good night. / Rage, rage against the dying of the light.” Dylan Thomas wrote the poem *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night* in 1947, perhaps thinking of his terminally ill father (who survived, in fact, until 1952). Thomas himself died an alcohol-fuelled death in 1953 at the age of 39.

⁴³ Mark Twain remarked: “I do not fear death. I had been dead for billions and billions of years before I was born, and had not suffered the slightest inconvenience from it.” The song *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life* in the film *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (1979) expresses a similar sentiment: “Always look on the bright side of death / Just before you draw your terminal breath... / You know, you come from nothing / – you’re going back to nothing. / What have you lost? Nothing!”

the fact that we can't miss something until we've got it. Once we've got it – assuming we like it – we are loathe to lose it. We are bound to want to cling on to our 'pleasing anxious being' and be reluctant to 'leave the warm precincts of the cheerful day'.⁴⁴

38. Our natural reluctance to pass into nothingness explains the prevalence of belief (generally associated with religious belief) in some sort of an afterlife – however incoherent the concepts involved might be. As indicated earlier, the broad choice is between religions offering the immortality of individual conscious selves and those offering immortality through the loss of selfhood and absorption into a cosmic oneness. As metaphysical propositions, they are beyond evidence, either for or against, and thereby immune to proof or disproof. Even if untrue, might they serve as *convenient untruths* by, for example, helping people face death with something approaching equanimity? Believers, after all, will never know if they are wrong – just as atheists will never know if they are right! The BBC GCSE 'Bitesize' Religious Studies Guide (see footnote 33) suggests that "belief in an afterlife almost always:

- helps people to make sense of life, particularly when life seems unfair or at times of suffering (their own, and others people's);
- gives support and comfort at times of loss and bereavement;
- provides a purpose to life."

If not a majority then a very large minority of people, however, find *all* of the various afterlife scenarios offered by competing religions to be incoherent and, far from helping to make sense of life and give it a purpose, serving only to confuse and obfuscate. They often come, moreover, with much harmful baggage in the form, for example, of morality presented as an exercise in obeying orders (of some imagined 'god') rather than using one's own judgement and of self-appointed shamans who claim privileged knowledge of what those orders are and the right to impose them by force or psychological pressure – the promotion of the concept of *sin*, feelings of *guilt* and the need for *confession* combined with the overarching threat of *eternal damnation* being useful weapons here. Far from helping people approach death with some equanimity they may well exacerbate natural fears of entering the unknown⁴⁵ – except, perhaps, for the smugly self-righteous who feel assured of their own salvation. The GCSE Religious Studies syllabus appears to play down the *negative* aspects of religious beliefs and the *irrelevance* of their 'explanations' to any coherent and meaningful understanding of the world of which we form a part.

39. As hinted above, the only meaningful purposes in life are the ones we invent for ourselves. Most are specific and short-term. Although 'life-coaches' may encourage us to produce 'life-plans', most of us are happy to get by on a fairly ad hoc basis and are unable to identify any over-arching grand purpose to our lives. The fact of death does at least

⁴⁴ "For who to dumb forgetfulness a prey, / This pleasing anxious being e'er resigned, / Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day, / Nor cast one longing lingering look behind?" (Gray's *Elegy* – see footnote 37)

⁴⁵ Francis Bacon wrote: "Men fear death as children fear to go in the dark; and as that natural fear in children is increased by tales, so is the other." The fear that death may not put an end to suffering and that, on the 'other side', dreams and nightmares may await us, is expressed in the famous "To be, or not to be..." speech of Shakespeare's Hamlet. "To die, to sleep; / To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub; / For in that sleep of death what dreams may come / When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, / Must give us pause..."

concentrate our minds on formulating and fulfilling our goals whilst we can⁴⁶ and discourage overweening ambition and pride by demonstrating their ultimate futility – ‘the paths of glory leading but to the grave’.⁴⁷ The more challenging the goals the more satisfying their achievement might be – although if too unrealistic they may result only in frustration.⁴⁸ Often the best way to cope with life is not to think too far ahead and just bash on regardless (summed up in Winston Churchill’s famous motto KBO – ‘Keep Bugging On’) until eventually it becomes too painful, unpleasant or tedious and, one way or another, it ends (Churchill’s reported last words before lapsing into a nine day coma and dying in 1965 at the age of 90 were “I’m bored with it all”). If we are sufficiently stoical or just plain lucky, we might be able to display something like the cheerful equanimity that so disconcerted the friends of David Hume during his last few days.

40. We may hope that at the end of our lives we will experience a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction with what we have achieved. However, many of us will have no warning at all of our deaths or will be incapable, as we approach them, of coherent thought. There seems no obvious reason, in any case, why we should make any more sense of our lives at their end than at some stage earlier when we are probably more ‘with it’. In the unlikely event that, close to my death, I am capable of looking back over and appraising my life, I suspect my main feeling will be one of puzzlement expressed by the question: “So what was *that* all about?” It will not, I trust, be one of smug self-satisfaction (as expressed by the song *My Way*⁴⁹) or of a determination – relevant during life but pointless at its end – to put the past behind me and live my life anew (as expressed by the song *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien*⁵⁰). To have no regrets in life is, in any case, to display a sad lack of imagination. Looking back over my life, I might express (like Woody Allen) just one regret: that I was not somebody else!

Roger Jennings
November 2015

⁴⁶ Dr. Samuel Johnson is reported by Boswell to have said "Depend upon it, sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully." Perhaps Franz Kafka had something similar in mind when he said: "The meaning of life is that it stops."

⁴⁷ "The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power, / And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave, / Awaits alike the inevitable hour. / The paths of glory lead but to the grave." (Gray's *Elegy* – see footnote 37). A similar reminder of the impermanence of even the mightiest of creations can be found in Shelley's poem *Ozymandias* (1818).

⁴⁸ If we aim, in the words of Groucho Marx, "to live forever or die trying" our goal is bound to succeed – if not in one way, at least in the other!

⁴⁹ The lyrics of *My Way* were written in 1967 by Paul Anka to the tune of *Comme D'Abitude* composed by Claude Francois and Jacques Revaux. Much played at funerals, it was famously recorded by Frank Sinatra, who reportedly grew to hate it. The song does admit of a few regrets but "too few to mention".

⁵⁰ The song was written in 1956 by Charles Dumont and Michel Vaucaire and recorded in 1959 by Édith Piaf, who made it her own. She dedicated the song to the French Foreign Legion who sing it on parade!

Opening/Closing Passages from *Tithonus* by Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-92)

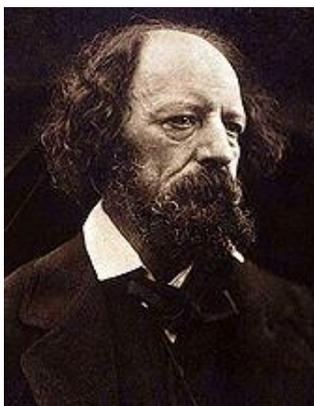
In Greek mythology, Tithonus is a Trojan prince with whom Eos, the goddess of the Dawn, falls in love. She persuades Zeus to give him eternal *life* but forgets to ask that he also be given eternal *youth*. Tithonus is thus doomed to age but never die, becoming progressively more senile and decrepit, until Eos puts him out of his misery by turning him into a cicada!

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,
Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,
And after many a summer dies the swan.
Me only cruel immortality
Consumes: I wither slowly in thine arms,
Here at the quiet limit of the world,
A white-hair'd shadow roaming like a dream
The ever-silent spaces of the East,
Far-folded mists, and gleaming halls of morn...

Yet hold me not forever in thine East:
How can my nature longer mix with thine?
Coldly thy rosy shadows bathe me, cold
Are thy lights, and cold my wrinkled feet
Upon the glimmering thresholds, when the steam
Floats up from those dim fields about the homes
Of happy men that have the power to die,
And grassy barrows of the happier dead.
Release me, and restore me to the ground;
Thou seest all things, thou wilt see my grave:
I earth in earth forget these empty courts,
And thee returning on thy silver wheels.



Aurora and Tithonus
Attributed to Gregorio Lazzarini (1657-1730)
(Aurora is the Roman equivalent of Eos)



Tennyson 1869
(photo by Julia Margaret Cameron)

Tennyson was deeply affected by the death from a cerebral haemorrhage at the age of 22 of his close friend and fellow poet Arthur Henry Hallam (1811-33). In his poem *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1849) Tennyson struggles to reconcile the cruelties of Nature "red in tooth and claw" with belief in a compassionate God.

*"Are God and Nature then at strife,
That Nature lends such evil dreams?
So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life;*

*... I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope,
And gather dust and chaff, and call
To what I feel is Lord of all,
And faintly trust the larger hope."*



Tennyson's gravestone
(Poets' Corner,
Westminster Abbey)
Nearby is the grave of
Thomas Parr, a Shropshire
agricultural labourer who
died in 1635, allegedly at
the age of 152!

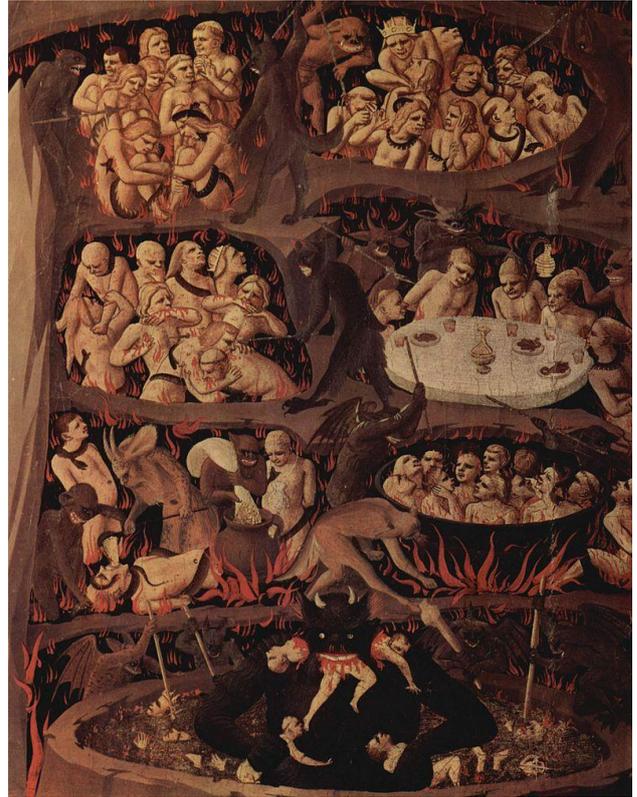
Visions of

Heaven

and Hell



The Trinity in Glory (c. 1553)
by Titian (c. 1489-1576)



The Last Judgement, Hell (c. 1431)
by Fra Angelico (1395-1455)



The graves of John Keats and Joseph Severn (see page 21) in Rome's Protestant Cemetery. Keats' tombstone (on the left) is ornamented with a lyre and Severn's (on the right) with an artist's palette.

**Lines from *Adonais: An elegy on the death of John Keats* (1821)
by Percy Bysshe Shelley**

Peace, peace! he is not dead, he doth not sleep,
He hath awaken'd from the dream of life;
'Tis we, who lost in stormy visions, keep
With phantoms an unprofitable strife,
And in mad trance, strike with our spirit's knife
Invulnerable nothings. We decay
Like corpses in a charnel; fear and grief
Convulse us and consume us day by day
And cold hopes swarm like worms within our living clay...

He has outsoar'd the shadow of our night;
Envy and calumny and hate and pain
And that unrest which men miscall delight,
Can touch him not and torture not again...

He lives, he wakes – 'tis Death is dead, not he;
Mourn not for Adonais...

He is made one with nature: there is heard
His voice in all her music, from the moan
Of thunder, to the song of night's sweet bird...

He is a portion of the loveliness
Which once he made more lovely...

The One remains, the many change and pass,
Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;
Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity,
Until Death tramples it to fragments. — Die,
If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek!
Follow where all is fled!



John Keats
by Joseph Severn† (1819)



Percy Bysshe Shelley
by Alfred Clint (1819)

Keats died from tuberculosis in 1821 aged 25. Shelley drowned at sea in 1822 aged 29. Mick Jagger read some lines from *Adonais* at the funeral of the Rolling Stones' founder member Brian Jones, who drowned in his swimming pool in 1969 aged 27.

Shelley was a declared atheist, denying the existence of any god. However, as evidenced in *Adonais*, he maintained a pantheistic belief in some sort of 'universal spirit'. His 1811 tract *The Necessity of Atheism* states: "There is no God. This negation must be understood solely to affect a creative Deity. The hypothesis of a pervading Spirit co-eternal with the universe remains unshaken." His view of earthly beings as fleeting 'stains' upon an eternal and radiant 'oneness' parallels that of both Hinduism and Buddhism (see paragraph 25).

† Severn accompanied Keats to Italy in 1820, nursing him until his death in 1821. Severn died in 1879 aged 85 and lies buried next to Keats in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome (see page 20).

Cremation in the United Kingdom



Photo of William Price in 1884 in his Druid's garb.



Woking Crematorium in the early 20th century.

William Price (1800-93) was born near Caerphilly in South Wales, qualified and practised as a doctor and became a leading figure in the Chartist, Welsh nationalist and neo-Druidic movements of the 19th century. He was a vegetarian, a proponent of cremation and renowned for his eccentric appearance, wearing a fox fur hat and emerald green clothing and neglecting to cut his hair. Although opposed to the institution of marriage, he had a Druidic wedding in 1881 with his 21 year old housekeeper Gwellian (Ann, his first partner by whom he had a daughter, had previously died). Gwellian bore a son whom Price named Iesu Grist (Welsh for Jesus Christ) but he died in 1884 when only 5 months old. Believing that burials pollute the earth, Price took the corpse to the top of a hill near Llantrisant (where he then resided) and tried to cremate it (using paraffin) but was restrained by local residents who retrieved the body. It was confirmed that the baby had died from natural causes but Price was prosecuted for the attempted cremation which was assumed to be illegal. Price argued that although the law did not state that cremation was legal it equally did not declare it to be illegal. The Judge agreed and Price was acquitted. He then carried out the hilltop cremation with the accompaniment of Druidical prayers and without local opposition. He went on to father another son (whom he also named Iesu Grist) and a daughter. When Price died in 1893 he was cremated, in accordance with his will, on the same hilltop site above Llantrisant. Two tons of coal were used for his funeral pyre and his cremation was witnessed by 20,000 people. The Price judgement enabled cremations (pressure for which had led to the founding in 1874 of the Cremation Society of Great Britain, with members that included the novelist Anthony Trollope and the artist John Everett Millais) to be carried out without fear of prosecution. The first official cremation took place in Woking in 1885. The Cremation Act 1902 and its subsequent amendments provides the statutory framework for cremation in the UK. Although *open air* cremations were made illegal in 1930, the law has been challenged recently and in 2010 the Court of Appeal ruled that they would be legal if carried out within some sort of structure and subject to relevant planning and environmental regulations. Almost three-quarters of funerals in the UK are now cremations.



The Chattri Memorial marks the site, 500 feet above sea level on the South Downs near Brighton, used for the open-air cremation of 53 Hindu and Sikh soldiers who died during the 1st World War in one of Brighton's three temporary military hospitals (which included the Brighton Pavilion). Their ashes were scattered in the nearby English Channel. The inscription (in English and Hindi) on the base of the monument reads:

TO THE MEMORY OF ALL THE INDIAN SOLDIERS WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES IN THE SERVICE OF THEIR KING EMPEROR IN THE GREAT WAR THIS MONUMENT ERECTED ON THE SITE OF THE FUNERAL PYRE WHERE THE HINDUS AND SIKHS WHO DIED IN HOSPITAL AT BRIGHTON PASSED THROUGH THE FIRE IS IN GRATEFUL ADMIRATION AND BROTHERLY AFFECTION DEDICATED.

When the memorial was unveiled in 1921 the Brighton Herald wrote: *To those who do not know the history, this chattri, so essentially Indian in general design and in every detail, may seem a thing alien to the open down land scenery in which it is set. It is artistically appropriate that this should be so. For East came to West in a strange romantic way when, on these Sussex Downs, the ashes were burned of Hindu warriors born in remote villages in far away Hindustan, for whom the wildest imagination could never have suggested at their birth that their funeral fires would be fanned by the winds that swept these Sussex hills.*