

Grounds for belief in life after death

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Introduction

'Is death the end of each unique individual human personality and the extinction of all consciousness?' Whether or not our minds and personalities survive bodily death is arguably one of the most fundamentally important of all philosophic and religious questions

The subject of this lecture is therefore not just a matter of mere intellectual curiosity to academic philosophers. The stark inevitability of death has profound philosophical and theological implications which may be temporarily ignored but cannot ultimately be evaded.

Philosophical arguments concerning the possibility of an afterlife

'The hope of eternity and the yearning for life is the oldest, as it is the greatest, of human desires', wrote Plutarch. A thought echoed many centuries later by Dostoevsky: 'There is only a single supreme idea on Earth: the concept of the immortality of the human soul...All other profound ideas by which men live are only an extension of it.'¹

It therefore seems odd that, though this question has engaged the minds of our most revered Eastern and Western religious sages and those of philosophers from Plato to modern times, many

¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Diary of a Writer*, cited in Martin Ebon, *The Evidence for Life After Death*, New American Library, New York, 1977, page 1.

contemporary academics treat it as if it were a matter of little ultimate significance.

They evidently think it is not worth the intellectual energy so many of the greatest minds of the past have devoted to it.

With characteristic pith and lucidity Bertrand Russell stated his stark view that human beings could not look to the consolation of an afterlife but instead should expect complete extinction.

I believe that when I die I shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive.... I should scorn to shiver with terror at the thought of annihilation. Happiness is nonetheless true happiness because it must come to an end, nor do thought and love lose their value because they are not everlasting.²

So what grounds do philosophers like Russell have for adopting such a bleak view and denying the likelihood, or even the possibility, of an afterlife?

I shall later treat the moral and religious arguments for immortality as well as the philosophic arguments which support it but before I do so I shall consider several of the objections sometimes advanced to belief in life after death.

The first is the charge that believing in an afterlife is merely a form of wishful thinking. It should therefore be suspect and considered self-delusional and erroneous because, as Hume argues, it is a one of those comforting beliefs 'favoured by our passions'. In

² Ibid, page v.

other words people believe it not on sound evidential grounds but purely because they find the idea comforting .

It comes, it is claimed, from a deep psychological need, particularly on the part of those who have lost loved ones and so are impressionable and vulnerable to such claims. But is this a logically valid ground on which to reject such a belief?

The fact that it may be comforting is surely irrelevant? The question should be 'Is it true and are there sound reasons for holding this belief?' Though some may actually adopt it as a religious dogma and others as a consolatory refuge in their hope of compensation for sufferings in their present lives, those who dismiss the possibility of survival have not succeeded in proving that those who believe in life after death do so primarily out of wish-fulfilment and that such believers deliberately ignore any evidence to the contrary. It may be equally convincingly argued that opponents of this belief also find arguments to rationalise their emotionally hostile state of disbelief.

May the so-called 'argument from desire' not actually constitute evidence that a belief in immortality is innate and may it not be our instinctive realisation of the possible truth of this immemorial belief in immortality?

Then there is what has been called the 'argument from silence'. If for so many centuries human beings have been on Earth and countless billions have gone the way of all flesh, why, it is asked, do we not have firm and reliable evidence of survival? Why have

the dear departed not made known their presence to console grieving family, relatives and friends?

If there is no evidence of such communication, does this not disprove the existence of life after death?

Though this argument seems plausible and even persuasive, is it valid? Why should there be an assumption that the 'dead' have to, or would want, to communicate? There may be all sorts of difficulties, of which we are unaware, in the way of such communications. That said, I would argue that such evidence has been produced: the *Journal and Proceedings* of the SPR for over 130 years have surely furnished such survival evidence? I would also argue that NDE research has served to convince many others, particularly the thousands who experienced them, that belief in an afterlife is a wholly rational one and that NDEs, while not proving survival, give reasonable grounds for supposing that the mind and personality will survive the destruction of the brain. So we may well conclude that the 'argument from silence', though giving us much on which to reflect, certainly does not serve to disprove the *possibility* of survival.

There is also what we might call (after its use in Plato's dialogue *Phaedo*) the 'broken lyre' argument. We think of music being played on a lyre or harp. As long as the lyre is being played or the harp plucked the music will continue to be heard but if the instrument is no longer played or is damaged the musical sound will cease. The question is whether the music can exist without the physical mechanism of the lyre itself.

This analogy has been used by some philosophers, who have argued that it is a sound one for the mind-body relationship: that the mind is wholly depend on the mechanism of the brain and so cannot exist once the brain has been destroyed.

But how convincing is this argument and how apt is this analogy? Many musicians may argue that Beethoven's *Choral Symphony* or Mozart's operas were created in the composers' minds. In Beethoven's case, because he was profoundly deaf when he composed his symphonic masterpiece, it existed in his mind and sounded in his inner rather than his physical ear, just as the poet Wordsworth saw the daffodils in what he called his 'inner eye, which is the bliss of solitude'.

We now come to what many materialist critics consider their decisive knock-down argument: the death of the brain and its effect on consciousness and the mind. The destruction of even parts of the brain can lead to elimination of a number of vital mental functions and so, it is argued, the death of the whole brain must result in the cessation of all mental functions and the annihilation of consciousness itself. These materialist critics therefore conclude that life after death is impossible.

As this is one of the most disputed questions in the whole of philosophy and the subject of numerous metaphysical studies and disputes it would be indeed presumptuous of me to set about providing an elaborate rebuttal of the materialist case here by

advancing detailed arguments against epiphenomenalism or to Behaviourist advocates of Gilbert Ryle's 'ghost in the machine'. All I wish to do is affirm that a belief in non-Cartesian interactionist dualism may arguably provide what many of us consider a convincing response to the materialist case.

Some may agree with the philosopher R.W.K. Paterson that it provides 'the nearest we can get to an accurate model of the mind-body relation' and that dualism need not follow the Cartesian model. He claims that non-Cartesian dualism has been espoused and developed over the last century by Bergson, Price, Broad and Popper among others, including such leading academic philosophers of religion as John Hick, Richard Swinburne and Keith Ward. According to this theory, the function of the brain is to amplify and focus consciousness rather than create it.

This model of interactionist dualism serves to counteract one of the most forcible arguments against belief in life after death: it is a model of mind-body relations which would allow us to conceive of the mind continuing to function after the destruction of the brain and the death of our present bodies'.³

We may here call into evidence the telling arguments of William James in his 1897 Harvard Ingersoll Lecture on Human Immortality, in which he eloquently argues against the then prevailing orthodoxy that the mind is a mere function of the brain. James ironically concedes that almost all contemporary psychologists and materialist scientists 'tell you that only a few

³ Ibid, page 101.

belated scholastics, or possibly some crack-brained theosophist or psychical researcher' seem to deny this quasi-scientific dogma. James argues that there may be valid scientific and philosophic grounds for supposing consciousness may still continue when the brain itself is dead. Even if it is established that consciousness and brain function are interdependent and constantly interact it does not necessarily follow that the mind ceases to exist with the destruction of the brain. It would, in James's words, 'in no wise make immortal life impossible—it might be quite compatible with supernatural life behind the veil hereafter'.⁴

Seeking to draw what he calls the 'fangs of cerebralistic materialism', James argues that there may well be a convincing answer to the materialist case. He argues that the mind and brain do interact and may the brain itself transmit rather than produce consciousness? What he calls the 'production theory' of materialist scientists itself remains unproven.

So James is led to conclude that the hypothesis that mind is a mere product of the brain is 'therefore not a jot more simple or credible in itself than any other conceivable theory'. He therefore challenges the materialist dogmatist to disprove this alternative hypothesis. If this is true the door to immortality, what James calls 'a vital hope of mankind', far from being closed, may be left wide open.

⁴ William James, *Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine*, Archibald Constable and Co., 1898, page 39. Ingersoll Lecture on Human Immortality for 1897 delivered at Harvard.

Philosophic arguments in favour of life after death

All Western philosophy, according to A.N. Whitehead, is a series of footnotes to Plato. So it seems appropriate to note the arguments for immortality which Plato advances in his dialogues. Though he furnishes arguments for immortality in several dialogues, those in his *Phaedo* and *The Republic* are arguably the most sustained and philosophically convincing.

Though in Plato's *Apology* Socrates appears to take an agnostic position regarding life after death, in *Phaedo*, Plato's account of the last hours of Socrates as he faces judicial execution in Athens, Socrates is seen to devote those final precious hours with his friends to arguing, with confidence and unshakeable conviction, the case for the immortality of the human soul. For Plato the essential 'person' is the individual human soul, not the physical body. It is the destiny of this non-corporeal human soul which is important, not the fate of the corpse.

In seeking to examine some arguments of later philosophers in favour of human immortality we move on to those of two Anglican bishops, George Berkeley and Joseph Butler.

Berkeley eloquently reaffirmed the Platonic argument for the immortality of the soul as an 'uncompounded' entity not subject to the mortal dangers, fatal disasters and shocks of life we see all around us as we contemplate the death and decay of the physical body.

They indeed who hold the soul of man to be only a thin vital flame, or system of animal spirits, make it perishing and corruptible as the body, since there is nothing more easily dissipated than such a being, which it is naturally impossible should survive the ruin of the tabernacle, wherein it is enclosed....We have shown that the soul is indivisible, incorporeal, unextended, and that it is consequently incorruptible. Nothing can be plainer than that the motions, changes and decays and dissolutions which can hourly befall natural bodies... cannot possibly affect an active, simple, uncompounded substance: such a being therefore is indissoluble by the force of Nature, that is to say, the soul of man is naturally immortal.⁵

'Whether we are to live in a future state ... is the most important question which can possibly asked', wrote Butler in his *Analogy of Religion*. He argues that there is no proof that death of the body involves the destruction of our individual minds and personalities and that there is even a strong presumption that intelligent minds may continue to survive the death of the brain. There may be an analogy between our original transition from the womb, the transformation of caterpillars into butterflies or birds breaking their way out of egg shells and the way our minds and our individual consciousness survive the transition called death and break into a new dimension of consciousness.

⁵ George Berkeley, *The Principles of Human Knowledge*, 1710, Nelson edition, 1949, page 117.

Like Plato, Butler argues that our bodies are not an essential part of ourselves and so this dualist view makes life after death possible.

He follows Plato in the philosophic presumption that consciousness, not being a compound essence, is therefore not subject to decay and decomposition into dissoluble parts.

Butler envisages this future life as being a social one. People will be rewarded according to their virtues and individual merits. Not to be able to see such a world beyond the grave would, he thinks, amount to a failure of the imagination. Those of us hidebound to the natural world and the mundane round of everyday living may lose sight of the fact that we have yet not fully discovered the marvels of Divine Providence.

Immanuel Kant regarded the immortality of the soul as a religious belief of supreme importance along with the existence of God but he did not believe it capable of *scientific* proof. He bases his belief in human immortality on what he considers the inexorable demands of the moral law. A perfect moral agent, he argues, desires moral perfection. Kant himself was a believer in the 'summum bonum', which he perceived as the union of virtue and happiness proportioned to the demands of morality. That highest good is the supreme and complete good for all and the will to strive for this highest good is evidence itself of the immortality of the soul. But its attainment is not possible during a single lifespan and therefore time must be allowed for the soul's attainment of this highest good. For that reason a merciful Providence would ensure that the soul could not become extinct with the death of the body.

So for Kant infinite progress is possible only if we pre-suppose that the existence of a rational being is prolonged beyond the grave and that each person retains his or her individual personality after this transition.

In his *The Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, his book about Swedenborg Kant writes of the dual nature of the person.

Our body only is perishable; the essence of us is not perishable and must have been existent during that time when our body had no existence. The life of man is dual. It consists of two lives: one animal and one spiritual. The first life is the life of man and man needs a body to live this life. The second life is the life of the spirit: his soul lives in that life separately from the body and must live on in it after the separation from the body.⁶

Empirical evidence for an afterlife from psychical research

In *Immortality or Extinction?*⁷ Paul Badham carefully considers how evidential the findings of psychical research are in the search for proof of survival. He considers parapsychology significant in one particularly important respect: the resultant 'substantial body of evidence' established over 130 years since the foundation of the SPR calls into question what the philosopher C.D. Broad calls 'the

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* in E. Wynne-Tyson, *This Is Life Eternal*, Rider, 1951, page 105.

⁷ Chapter 6, The Evidence from Psychical Research (written by Paul Badham) in Paul and Linda Badham, *Immortality or Extinction?*, Macmillan, 1982, page 71 onwards.

basic limiting principles' of what we might call the 'naturalistic world-view'.

Belief in an afterlife involves a bold challenge to the materialist world view which denies the possibility of telepathy, clairvoyance and the survival of consciousness after the destruction of the physical brain. I wish to rise to the challenge and call into evidence a number of incidents, well established in the literature of psychical research, which seem to contradict this materialist 'naturalistic world-view'. I shall therefore examine the mediumship of Leonora Piper, the American sensitive so exhaustively investigated by William James, Richard Hodgson, Sir Oliver Lodge and other leading SPR researchers, and later consider the philosophic and religious significance of near-death experiences, which, in the considered opinion of many, appear to give prima facie evidence of mental processes continuing to function when, as in the case of Pam Reynolds, the patient was known to be clinically dead and the brain was not functioning..

The mediumship of Leonora Piper

'To upset the conclusion that all crows are black, there is no need to seek demonstration that no crows are black; it is sufficient to produce one white crow; a single one is sufficient.' So wrote William James and Leonora Piper he considered to be indisputably such a white crow among mediums.

James wrote that, after exhaustively investigating Mrs. Piper's mediumship for many years, he was 'as absolutely certain as I am of any personal fact in the world that she knows things in her

trances which she could not possibly have heard in her waking state’.

He later wrote: ‘I should be willing now to stake as much money on Mrs. Piper’s honesty as on that of anyone I know, and I am quite satisfied to leave my reputation for wisdom or folly, so far as human nature is concerned, to stand or fall by this declaration.’

Concurring with that rigorous investigator of mediums Dr. Richard Hodgson, who himself was once described as ‘the keenest fraud hunter, the most profound sceptic [who] took every precaution to bar the possibility of deception’, that the ‘hypothesis of fraud’ could be dismissed, James wrote:

I agree with him absolutely. The medium has been under observation, much of the time under close observation, as to most of the conditions of her life, by a large number of persons, eager, many of them, to pounce upon any suspicious circumstance for nearly fifteen years. During that time not only has there not been one single suspicious circumstance remarked, but not one suggestion has ever been made from any quarter which might tend positively to explain how the medium... could possibly obtain information about so many sitters by natural means.⁸

Writing in his second SPR report on Mrs. Piper’s mediumship Hodgson affirmed his strong belief in her integrity and impressive psychic gifts which enabled her to give so many evidential sittings.

⁸ David Fontana, *Is There an Afterlife: A Comprehensive View of the Evidence*, O Books, 2005, page 124.

'I cannot profess to have any doubt but that the chief communicators are veritably the personalities that they claim to be; that they have survived the change we call death, and that they have directly communicated with us... I have no hesitation in affirming with the most absolute assurance that the spirit hypothesis is justified by its fruits, and the other hypothesis [ie, telepathy from the living] is not.'⁹

After Hodgson's sudden death in 1905 James Hyslop took over as chief SPR investigator of Mrs Piper's mediumship. Like Hodgson, Hyslop had been initially sceptical but he in turn quickly became convinced of the extraordinary nature of her mediumistic gifts. Hyslop confirmed that 'for decades Mrs. Piper was subjected to the most stringent tests and was never once found wanting'.

Accepting the accuracy of these veridical communications and many others over two decades, Hodgson came to believe that telepathy could not explain the many evidential details given (often not known to sitters at the time) and that post-mortem spirit communication was the only convincing explanation.

We now proceed to a series of equally evidential sittings given by Mrs Piper to Sir Oliver Lodge and others in England. During Mrs Piper's visit to England in the winter of 1889 for some of her stay she was a guest at the house of Sir Oliver Lodge, who had several what he himself considered highly evidential sittings with her. All were held in strict test conditions.

⁹ Ibid, page 125.

Lodge was convinced that in the séances telepathy could in most cases be ruled out. In no fewer than 38 of these sittings Mrs. Piper in trance gave correct information not within the conscious knowledge of those present. Afterwards Myers and Lodge published an SPR report of these sittings. Lodge wrote:

I have satisfied myself that much of the information [Mrs. Piper] possesses in the trance state is not acquired by ordinary commonplace methods, but that she has some unusual means of acquiring information... and here is more than can be explained by any amount of either conscious or unconscious fraud—that the phenomenon is a genuine one, however it is to be explained—I now regard it as absolutely certain, and I am making the following two statements with the utmost confidence:

1. That Mrs. Piper's attitude is not one of deception.
2. No conceivable deception on the part of Mrs. Piper can explain the facts.¹⁰

In his introduction to the report Myers wrote:

1. Many of the facts given [by Mrs. Piper] could not have been learnt even by a skilled detective.
2. Others of them, although they might have been learnt, would have acquired an expenditure of money as well as of time,

¹⁰ David Fontana, *Is There an Afterlife: A Comprehensive Overview of the Evidence*, O Books, 2005, page 122-23.

which it seemed impossible to suppose that Mrs. Piper could have met.

3. [Mrs. Piper's] conduct has never given any ground whatsoever for supposing her capable of fraud or trickery. Few persons have been so long and so carefully observed, and she has left on all observers the impression of thorough uprightness, candor, and honesty.¹¹

So it can be established that all these leading psychical researchers who examined Mrs. Piper's mediumship so exhaustively for so many years became convinced of her outstanding psychic gifts as a result of their direct and rigorous investigation of her mediumship. Among other SPR studies of Mrs. Piper were those by Newbold and Podmore in 1891, Eleanor Sidgwick and Andrew Lang in 1900, Hyslop in 1901, Carrington in 1901-1903, and by Eleanor Sidgwick in an exhaustive 652-page single contribution in the *SPR Proceedings*.

Such then was the verdict of percipient psychical researchers like William James, Richard Hodgson, James Hyslop and Eleanor Sidgwick on the mediumship of Leonora Piper and does this not appear seem to constitute prima facie proof of breach of what C.D. Broad calls the 'basic limiting principles' of the naturalistic world-view?

¹¹ Ibid, page 123.

We could have chosen other equally evidential examples just as thoroughly investigated by rigorous and seasoned SPR: the mediumship of Winifred Coombe-Tennant, Gladys Osborne Leonard's many thoroughly researched book and newspaper tests, the remarkable psychic abilities of Eileen Garrett (in particular the well documented R101 airship disaster sittings) and, arguably most remarkable and evidential of all, the Cross Correspondences, such a fascinating and well researched field for leading psychical researchers from the original SPR investigators like W.H. Salter and H.F. Saltmarsh to modern academic parapsychologists and philosophers such as David Fontana, Alan Gauld, Archie Roy, Stephen Braude in their exhaustively researched scholarly works, which are the fruit of many years of not only academic study but practical investigation. I am of course indebted to all of them and, it goes without saying, the Journals and Proceedings of the SPR.

However, within the strictly limited space available to me, I am unable to do justice, for example, to the incredibly complex Palm Sunday Case and the other Cross Correspondences and so shall simply commend the rigorous SPR researchers who spent years in dedicated investigation of them.

In his paper 'A Possible Conception of Life After Death' John Hick pays tribute to the rigorous analytical achievements of these SPR researchers. The 'observations, analyses and theorising' were, according to Hick, 'of the highest order and have indeed been seldom equalled since'.

The mediumship of all these sensitives was exhaustively investigated by the SPR and Eileen Garrett herself generously put her time and talents at the disposal of parapsychologists over many years in order to satisfy herself as much as researchers about the true nature of mediumship and especially its bearing on the medium's own state of consciousness and how this relates to the survival hypothesis. Hick writes:

When we read the transcripts of the trance communications, and the texts of the automatic writings of Piper and Leonard, our first impression is one of the presence of still-living personalities who have passed through bodily death. We find the 'spirits' ... talking very much as though they were living people communicating from a distance by telephone or letter....[They] seem essentially like living people who have moved to a distant part of the world.... They seem to be the same conscious individuals, with memories connecting them continuously with the time they were on earth.

NDES

Central to the refutation of philosophical arguments against belief in life after death, as such philosophers and theologians as John Hick, Paul Badham and Keith Ward have cogently argued, is a defence of the soul. Those of us who do agree with the rational religious case for survival and immortality cannot but emphatically agree with H.D. Lewis, who was convinced that no case for immortality could be convincing if we failed to make a case for philosophic dualism, and with Professor Paul Badham, who has argued, in answer to such dogmatic 'sceptics' as Susan

Blackmore, that the most compelling evidence today for dualism is that provided by near-death experiences.

In his essay 'God, the Soul and the Future Life'¹² Professor Badham tells us why this evidence from NDEs is so important in establishing the truth of dualism and the philosophic rationality of post-mortem survival:

These findings are of absolutely crucial significance for the concept of the soul, for if a single out-of-the body experience is correctly described as such, then the soul is a reality. If consciousness can, even for a moment on the brink of death, think-observe-and-remember from a different perspective from the physical brain, then brain and mind are not identical and consciousness can exist apart from the body. And if consciousness can exist apart from the body, then the soul is a reality and the most fundamental barrier across the road to immortality has been removed.¹³

As we know, the phenomenon first became the subject of serious and prolonged academic and scientific investigation with the publication in 1975 of Dr. Raymond Moody's *Life After Life*. Since then this important research has been continued by several able scientific, medical and academic researchers, notably Dr. Kenneth Ring, Dr. Bruce Greyson, Dr. Michael Sabom, Dr. Melvin Morse and Dr. Charles Tart in the US and Dr. Margot Grey, Dr. Peter Fenwick and Dr. Sam Parnia in this country.

¹² *Death and Afterlife*, edited by Stephen T. Davis, Macmillan, 1989, page 36 onwards.

¹³ Paul Badham, 'God, the Soul and the Future Life' in Stephen T. Davis, *Death and Afterlife*, Macmillan, 1989, page 49.

All have undertaken very extensive research and published their findings in learned articles and important books following on from the pioneering studies of Moody and Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson in the 1970s.

Dr. Peter Fenwick, himself a former sceptic but later convinced of the reality and significance of NDEs, now accepts the central importance of NDEs: if the mind and brain can act independently that raises questions about the continuation of consciousness after death, whether there is indeed a spiritual component to human beings and whether this is a meaningful Universe with a purpose rather than a merely random one.

In his book *Light and Death* Michael Sabom gives a detailed account of one remarkable case, that of Pam Reynolds. Pam underwent a rare and risky operation to remove an aneurism in her brain and during the course of it she had an NDE which is considered one of the strongest cases in terms of the veridical evidence produced. Pam later gave an account of incidents in the operating theatre and a detailed description of the unusual surgical knife, which she claimed resembled a toothbrush, and of a classic NDE with all the Greyson scale features, including passing through a tunnel, seeing a bright light, encountering departed loved ones and then returning to her body after she was made to understand that her time had not yet come.

Who here is not now aware of the characteristic features of a classic NDE studied by these researchers?

Patients often hear a strange sound and experiences a sense of peace and calm as they have a sensation of rising up and floating above their physical bodies, which can be observed from above. They then appear to go through a tunnel and at the end of it see a radiant white or golden light. They sense a 'being of light' and feel joy in being greeted by departed family and friends. They are presented with a panoramic review of their lives, sometimes see everything they have done over the course of their lives, like Scrooge in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, and feel the effects of all their acts on others. They feel a sense of overwhelming and unconditional love and this stays with them long after the experience. Finally, they are told (they usually sense this telepathically) that they must return and then find themselves back in their bodies of flesh and blood.

The various ingenious 'scientific' explanations (both physiological and psychological) which have been advanced have not explained away these truly amazing and life changing experiences, which those who have them are utterly convinced are real and certainly not the product of dreams or the effects of hallucinations. The 'dying brain' theory popularised by Susan Blackmore and others and the temporal lobe, lack of oxygen and memory of birth theories are among those that seem to satisfy materialist and other determined sceptics but they certainly fail to convince those who have actually had these experiences.

NDE researchers have established that the temporal lobes, limbic system, Sylvian Fissure and other parts of the brain are highly charged during near-death states but there has been no research which has implicated them as causal factors. As Peter Fenwick and others have stressed, it is always important to realise the difference between ‘correlation’ and ‘cause’ when we discuss the effects of malfunctioning brains and other mind-body abnormalities.

It would surely be wise to heed the words of one of the most respected pioneer NDE researchers, Dr. Kenneth Ring, who is convinced that drugs, anaesthesia and medication are not major factors in triggering NDEs. He stresses how different they are from the confused and rambling mental states characteristic of hallucinations.

Any adequate neurological explanation would have to be capable of showing how the entire complex of phenomena associated with the core experience (that is, the out-body-state, paranormal knowledge, the tunnel, the golden light, the voice or presence, the appearance of deceased relatives, beautiful vistas and so forth) would be expected to occur in subjectively authentic fashion as a consequence of specific neurological events triggered by the approach of death...I am tempted to argue that the burden of proof has now shifted to those who wish to explain NDEs in this way.¹⁴

¹⁴ Cited in an Internet article, *Scientific Theories of the NDE*, www.near-death.com/experiences/experts.

Dr. Ring concludes that people who have experienced an NDE report a loss of fear of death, stronger feelings of self-acceptance and a greater concern for and a sense of caring for others. They usually show less interest in material possessions and become more spiritual in their outlook. They speak of the beauty, peace and comfort felt and the total love and acceptance of the being of light they encounter. It is, Dr. Ring observes, an experience which changes attitudes and transforms lives and he is convinced of its authenticity.

Professor Bruce Greyson once described near-death experiences as 'the most profound experience I know of ... nothing affects people as strongly as this'. For if it can be proven beyond all reasonable doubt that the 'seat of consciousness' can continue functioning outside the physical body then surely life after death seems not only eminently reasonable but also surely highly probable?

Moral and religious arguments for immortality

As a Unitarian minister I find myself, not surprisingly, in agreement with the assertion of the Unitarian scholar of afterlife beliefs W.R. Alger that 'the very nerves and sinews of religion is the hope of immortality'. Is it not significant that William James found that for nearly all theists God was invoked as the ultimate guarantor of personal immortality? And surely only the existence of an afterlife can make any theodicy really convincing and even coherent?

For some of us what we might call the argument from Cosmic justice is the most convincing, both intellectually and morally, of all theological and philosophical arguments for the necessity of an afterlife. I would certainly argue that belief in a just God philosophically necessitates belief in life beyond the grave. For otherwise are not our other religious beliefs incoherent and utterly unconvincing, both morally and emotionally?

G.K. Chesterton, brought up under Unitarian influences, once likened a benign and theologically liberal Unitarian to a person climbing a gradual slope. As he mounts it he discards one creedal garment after another: the infallible Book, the infallible Church, the Incarnation, the Atonement ... and so on as he proceeds 'ever onwards and upwards'.

At last he stands on the topmost peak and only God and immortality remain. Most Unitarians, he quipped, have the wit to stop there. They still have what he considers 'the essentials'. Others, mistaking mere movement for progress, still feel impelled to move, plunging right over the precipice... Such a religion clearly necessitates belief in a Creative Mind behind the visible Cosmos. If a just and benevolent God does indeed exist must not that 'immortal hope' be assured?

Many of us may be convinced by the what S.H. Mellone¹⁵ calls a 'teleological' argument for belief in the afterlife: that as spiritual beings we cannot completely realise our true potential in this one short life and so need an afterlife in order to unfold such potential.

¹⁵ S. H. Mellone, article on 'Immortality' in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*.

Life flows in a continuous stream: childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle age and old age pass into each other but this one life is still too short to achieve in full all that we are capable of. This is a view which J. Estlin Carpenter, a pioneer of comparative religion, expressed with feeling and eloquence. He stated that his own hope was

‘largely founded on what seems to me the obvious significance of the whole historic process, the training of character. For this the ordinary threescore years and ten do not appear to give anything like full scope. All sorts of powers and capacities lodged in us never get themselves expressed; life is too short.....’

To him and others, the denial of the doctrine of immortality involves the assertion that that the great moral teachers and thinkers of the world must cease to exist and simply pass into nothingness. As James Martineau argued, the denial of our hope for immortality is the very negation of core teachings of so many of our greatest spiritual teachers.

If the celestial hope be a delusion, we see plainly *who* are mistaken. Not the mean and grovelling souls, who never reached to so great a thought; not the drowsy and easy natures, who are content with the sleep of sense through life, and the sleep of darkness ever after; not the selfish and pinched of conscience, of small thought and smaller love; no, these in such case are right, and the universe is on their miserable scale.

The deceived are the great and holy, whom [people] revere: [those] who have lived for something better than their happiness, and spent themselves in the race, or fallen at the altar of human good.¹⁶

This is surely then the most precious of all our hopes, one that must transcend all narrow creeds and, in a spirit of universal benevolence, must we not held it out to all? Should it not be the birth right for all and how can we presume to deny immortality to any sentient beings? I am at one with William James in my hope of an afterlife in which that gift of immortality may be an inalienable possession of all: one which we shall joyfully share with all our fellow creatures, in all worlds and all planes of existence.

In his 1897 Ingersoll Lecture on *Human Immortality* William James rejects what he calls the 'aristocratic' view of the afterlife.

'The theory of evolution now requires us to suppose a far vaster scale of times, spaces, and numbers than our forefathers ever dreamed the cosmic process to involve. Human history grows continuously out of animal history... From this there has emerged insensibly a democratic view, instead of the old aristocratic view, of immortality...

Girdled about with the immense darkness of this mysterious universe even as we are, they were born and died, suffered and struggled.... And how inessential in the eyes of God must be the small surplus of the individual's merit, swamped as it is in the vast ocean of the common merit of mankind... We grow humble and reverent as we contemplate the prodigious spectacle.

Not our differences and distinctions, we feel.. but our common animal essence of patience under suffering and enduring effort must be what redeems us.... An immense compassion and kinship fill the heart.

¹⁶ James Martineau, cited in Alfred Hall, *Personal Immortality*, The Lindsey Press, 1949, pages 17-18.

An immortality from which these inconceivable billions of fellow-strivers should be excluded becomes an irrational idea for us. And a modern mind, expanded as some minds are by cosmic emotion, by the great evolutionist vision of universal continuity, hesitates to draw the line even at man.

If any creature lives forever, why not all? Why not the patient [animals]? So that a faith in immortality, if we are to indulge it, demands of us nowadays a scale of representation so stupendous that our imagination faints before it...'¹⁷

James goes on to speak of the Divine inexhaustible capacity for love and a wish for an 'endless accumulation of created lives' for great Originator an never grow weary in such Cosmic creativity. The Divine bounty seems infinite in its generosity and universal its all-embracing sympathy.

May such a truly generous hearted and all-embracing vision animate and inspire each one of us. May we hold fast to that 'immortal hope' of which the greatest prophets and sages of humanity have given us a blessed assurance. It is a hope that the world religions and some of the greatest philosophers have proclaimed. It has inspired not only poets like Milton, Goethe, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning, Whittier, Longfellow and Tagore, novelists like Tolstoy and Victor Hugo and philosophers like Plato, Kant and William James but billions of adherents of the world's great religions throughout the ages with the assurance that such a future life will give meaning and a true perspective to our present lives here and now.

When mere philosophic arguments fail to move us may this affirmation of Victor Hugo, one of the greatest of all poets and novelists, inspire us with a faith that each and every one of us has an eternal destiny that death cannot destroy.

I feel in myself the future life. I am like a forest cut down; the new shoots are stronger and livelier than ever.... You say the soul is nothing but the result of the bodily powers. Why, then, is my soul more luminous when my body begins to fail? The nearer I approach the end the plainer I hear around me the immortal symphonies of the worlds which invite me. It is marvelous, yet simple....

¹⁷ William James, Human Immortality, Ingersoll Lecture of 1897, Archibald Constable, page 64.

For half a century I have been writing my thoughts in prose and in verse, history, philosophy, drama, romance, tradition, ode and song; I have tried all. But I feel that I have not said the thousandth part of what is in me. When I go down to the grave I can say like many others 'I have finished my day's work', but I cannot say, 'I have finished my life'. My day's work will begin again in the morning. The tomb is not a blind alley; it is a thoroughfare. It closes on the twilight; it opens on the dawn.¹⁸

Such is our vision of what we hope and pray shall be. Our yearning for immortality is indeed the most generous of all impulses of the human heart. It is an ardent wish that we and all those we love have not been lived in vain.

Ends

¹⁸ Victor Hugo, cited in J. Head and S. Cranston, *Reincarnation in World Thought*, Julian Press, 1967, page 292.

