

11.4 The Identity of Animals and People (c) (p. 293)

We Can Too Think about Heaven

JOHN HICK ARGUES THAT, on the contrary, it's not nonsense to think about life after death. In support of his idea, he gives us three "pictures":

Picture 1: Somebody around here suddenly disappears, and at that very instant, a person appears in Australia who is in every bodily and mental respect (including memories) exactly like the one who disappeared. You'd be willing to grant that the person who disappeared here reappeared at that same instant in Australia, wouldn't you?

Picture 2: Now suppose that what happened to the person here was not disappearance but sudden death, followed by the appearance in Australia of a replica. You'd be willing to grant that the person who died here was resurrected in Australia, wouldn't you?

Picture 3: Now suppose that the replica appeared not in Australia, but in a different world altogether inhabited by resurrection-persons. This is thinkable, isn't it?¹

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT: Has Hick convinced you that there aren't, after all, the conceptual difficulties alleged earlier of identifying "the same person" resurrected? What if resurrection wasn't of a "replica" like this?

Ayer's Death and Resurrection

A.J. AYER, THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY English philosopher, was famous (and infamous) as an outspoken atheist. Talk about the afterlife, he argued, had no empirical testability, and contradicted the criteria for what counted as the continuance of the same person. At age 78, during a bout of pneumonia, his heart stopped for four minutes before he was revived. Later on, recalling this, he wrote:

I was confronted by a red light, exceedingly bright, and also very painful even when I turned away from it. I was aware that this light was responsible for the government of the universe. Among its ministers were two creatures who had been put in charge of space. These ministers

1 John Hick, "Theology and Verification," *Theology Today* 17.1 (1960): 12–31.

periodically inspected space and had recently carried out such an inspection. They had, however, failed to do their work properly, with the result that space, like a badly fitting jigsaw puzzle, was slightly out of joint. A further consequence was that the laws of nature had ceased to function as they should. I felt that it was up to me to put things right.¹

This sounds a lot like the sort of dream-hallucination a philosopher with an oxygen-starved brain might have, and Ayer admitted that it might all have been a delusion. However, he said that he had changed his mind about his earlier view that survival of death was complete metaphysical nonsense, or self-contradictory, and now thought it merited philosophical consideration, though he wasn't convinced of its existence (and remained a complete atheist). Ayer's friends reported that, after his death and resurrection, Ayer began to enjoy life more, and his ex-wife said, "Freddie has got so much nicer since he died."²

Why You Shouldn't Fear Death

"I'm not afraid of dying. I just don't want to be there when it happens."—Woody Allen

THE ROMAN PHILOSOPHER LUCRETIUS, whose proof of the infinity of space we looked at in Chapter IX (p. 232), was a thoroughgoing materialist, arguing that a person is nothing but a working physical body. It's obvious that the physical body stops working at death, so post-mortem survival is out of the question.

The religious doctrine of the afterlife is often thought to be an attempt to help us cope with our fears of death; but Lucretius, interestingly, argued that this religious doctrine actually encourages those fears, and that his anti-religious materialistic views, which had the consequence that the person is extinguished at death, actually had the consequence that death is not to be feared:

Therefore death to us
Is nothing, nor concerns us in the least,
Since nature of mind is mortal evermore.
And just as in the ages gone before
We felt no touch of ill ...
... thus when we are no more,

¹ "What I Saw When I Was Dead ...," *Sunday Telegraph* [London] August 28, 1988, reprinted in Lewis E. Hahn, ed., *The Philosophy of A.J. Ayer* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1992).

² Quoted by Ben Rogers in *A.J. Ayer; A Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1999), p. 349.

When comes that sundering of our body and soul
Through which we're fashioned to a single state,
Verily naught to us, us then no more,
Can come to pass, naught move our senses then—
No, not if earth confounded were with sea,
And sea with heaven.¹

SOME QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT: Lucretius gives two reasons that we shouldn't fear death: that when we're dead, we can't be harmed; and that being dead (= not existing) is the state we were in before we were born, which doesn't seem to us to be a state inspiring fear. Do these ideas help you with your fear of death? Maybe Lucretius misdiagnosed the causes of that fear.

Jeremy Bentham was among the most important British philosophers of his era. When he died in 1832, in accord with his will his body was preserved and put on display. The body (called Bentham's "Auto-Icon") is now in a glass case stored in the University College of London. Photos are on various websites.²

There's a story that Bentham carried around in his pocket, for years before he died, two glass eyes for the Auto-Icon's head. But the preservation process for his head went badly wrong, leaving it noseless and giving it a very peculiar expression, so a wax head was put on top of Bentham's clothed and seated body, and his head, complete with glass eyes, was put in a closed box between his feet. Frequently stolen by students for various purposes (including football practice), the real head was at last removed from the glass case and kept safely in the college vaults.

According to another story, the Auto-Icon regularly attends meeting of the College Council, whose minutes record "Jeremy Bentham—present but not voting."

Various explanations have been proposed for why Bentham chose this fate for his body. One plausible one has it that he wanted to provide a visible sceptical response to the religious story about death.

¹ *On the Nature of Things* is a common translation of Lucretius' poem called *De Rerum Natura* in Latin. This selection is in Book iii, translated by William Ellery Leonard.

² Try <<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Bentham-Project/who/autoicon>>.