

Life After Death



I remember, nearly fifty years ago, one of my philosophy teachers stroking his slightly grey hair and admitting he was beginning to worry about growing old. At the time we were studying St. Augustine, so our minds were turned to other things, to God and, perhaps, to the after-life.

A few years after this, I was studying Philosophy of Religion on a course in Canada, and I remember saying to my teacher that I didn't think life after death solved anything. I was envisaging being alive for ever and found the prospect terrifying. What would I do? And what if I got fed up with it? I wouldn't be able to escape. As there any possibility of euthanasia in the after life?

I think that the Oxford philosopher, A.J.Ayer said he would be effronted if he woke up in an after life. He was hoping for oblivion. I think the philosopher, Bernard Williams, wrote an article in which he argued that infinite life would be boring. Socrates, on the other hand, was more relaxed. He imagined drinking with friends and seemed pleased at the prospect. The Vikings imagined being in permanent battle. At least they would have something to do.

As I have grown older, I think I have been pulled to the view that there just isn't an after-life, so all this worry about boredom or terror is misplaced. It seems more and more likely that we are just biological systems that, sooner or later, run out of road. Before we were born, we clearly were not alive. If we were – as

Plato (and Socrates) thought – we don't remember any of it. The likelihood is that after we die we won't be alive either.

There are some who base their belief in an afterlife on bad philosophy of mind. They don't think the mind can be explained in physical terms so they think there is a residual chance that the mind might transcend the physical.

My hopes here are always undermined by what is known as open loop behaviour. This is when you form an intention and half way through trying to fulfil it it gets interrupted. You then find yourself, say, standing at the fridge not sure why you're there. You had meant to get something else and the open loop got you to the fridge, even though you didn't really want to be there. In this I see all the vast pretensions of the self in ruins. The self is a lot of complex brainwork, which sometimes goes awry, without you having any idea what's going on.

The tragic side of this is old age and, if it gets you, dementia. There, the glories of the self are stripped away, leaving the wreckage of its aspirations. Where in the wrecked city of the mind lurks the Cartesian ego, or the Aquinean soul? You would have to believe that somehow it still dances around, invisibly, like a lost child cowering in a bombed building.