

O Death, Where is Thy Sting?

*For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,
The black minute's at end,
And the elements' rage, the fiend-voices that rave,
Shall dwindle, shall blend,
Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,
Then a light, then thy breast,
O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,
And with God be the rest!*

– Robert Browning, *Prospice*

James E. Alcock

What happens when we die? Science informs us that death is simply a fade to black, that our “minds,” our personalities, are only direct manifestations of brain activity and cease to exist with the dying of the flesh. There is substantial converging empirical evidence that supports this view. For example, in comparing the brains of various organisms, the degree of physical complexity correlates strongly with corresponding cognitive abilities. In addition, cognitive abilities emerge in children in an ordered manner as the brain matures, and when brain development does not proceed normally, cognitive development is distorted or arrested. Further evidence: specific drugs elicit predictable changes in consciousness and emotion; the effects of brain damage are predictable based on where an injury occurs; and electrical or chemical stimulation of various regions of the brain elicits similar perceptions and memories and emotions as those produced by the same cellular regions during normal functioning. This is all strong evidence in support of “psychoneural identity theory” – that is, mind and brain are one.

One need not be a neuroscientist to understand this congruence. The withering away of

the mind as the brain deteriorates is witnessed in real time by those unfortunate enough to observe the decline of loved ones whose brains are overwhelmed by the ravages of Alzheimer's. In step with the shrinkage of brain tissue and the diminution of crucial neural activities, intellect wanes, personality slowly disintegrates, and memories of those nearest and dearest, and even of oneself, dwindle away.

While psychoneural identity theory makes logical sense, we are not by nature logical beings. We are born as magical thinkers who form our early understanding of reality through making automatic and sometimes spurious connections among actions and events around us. As we move through childhood, this *intuitive* information-processing system is gradually supplemented by an *intellectual* system that relies on the guided development of logic and reason. These two parallel systems sometimes come to a common interpretation of our circumstances, but at other times they diverge sharply. It is especially in times of emotional upset when logic fails to satisfy our emotional needs that the intuitive system is likely to triumph. A colleague, aware of the power that intuition and magical thinking can wield over logic, neatly summed

this up when asked whether he believed in God. He replied, “Only when I’m scared.”

Natural-born dualists

Young children are naturally predisposed towards mind-body dualism. By five months of age, they already distinguish between what is animate and what is inanimate and by age three they have developed what psychologists call *theory of mind*: they believe that animate beings have internal mental processes, minds, similar to their own, while inanimate objects do not. Mind is seen as something “added on,” and when they begin to understand the meaning of death, they do not assume that the mind disappears with the death of the body.

The cognitive development of infants also predisposes them to belief in a supernatural realm. As they develop, they automatically begin to search for *agency*, that is, for the causes of the events that occur around them. Failure to identify the cause of an important event leads at times to the assumption that the agent is invisible, which contributes to belief in existence of wilful discarnate beings. At the same time, children, still lacking the ability to think critically and logically, begin to acquire beliefs from their elders about ghosts and goblins and gods and devils – and about life after death.

Of course, it is not just childhood experience that promotes belief in mind-body dualism. Consider nineteenth-century anthropologist Edward Tylor’s contemplation about how difficult it must have been for early humans to make sense of death. A friend appears hale and hearty one moment, but in the next is lying inert on the ground, physical appearance unchanged at first but all signs of life gone. It must have seemed, he suggested, that an animating force, a “soul,” has taken flight. And if the friend soon appears in a dream, it would seem that the spirit lives on.

But if it lives on, where does it do so? Early societies developed various answers to this question as they tried to make sense of the world. Ancient Greeks, who believed that Zeus ruled the world, considered his brother Hades

to be in charge of the Underworld. That nether region, separated from the realm of the living by the River Styx, was not a welcoming place – Homer described it as filled with “mouldering horror loathed even by the gods.” It obviously was not a destination that evoked happy anticipation and, in reaction, various cults eventually took root that offered hope of a more pleasant afterlife through purification rites said to wash away the sleaze of human corruption.

Christianity, in its turn, offered the enticing prospect of everlasting happiness for those who embraced Christ as their Saviour. And if such promise was not enough to bring people to the Lord, the threat of eternal damnation for failing to heed the call added an extra push, with paradise or perdition to be decided after death, on Judgement Day. Such belief provided a strong basis for moral behaviour, and wise people attempted to live according to heavenly dictate to avoid a fate *worse* than death itself.

Other religions provided different solutions to the mystery of death. For example, in Hinduism and Buddhism, the departed soul does not wait long without a fleshy home, for it is soon born anew as part of an almost endless cycle of reincarnation. While the fact that each new incarnation carries no memory of its earlier forms may be unsatisfying to non-Hindus, the simple understanding that one’s spirit does not actually “die” is apparently reassuring to those who believe in it. Reincarnation also involves a system of justice. For example, Hindus who faithfully adhere to the cosmic law, *Dharma*, during their lives can expect to enjoy higher rank in the caste system next time around, while others who have strayed will suffer demotion.

The appeal of immortality

Many factors motivate people to nourish belief in an afterlife.

- ...*first a peace out of pain, Then a light...*

For those whose lives are ravaged by pain, suffering and despair, death offers an end to misery. And if the “soul” lives on in eternal

happiness, what more could one wish for? For many, this is reason enough to believe in an afterlife. The prospect is so enticing that it became a source of considerable difficulty in the early days of Christianity, for it disproportionately appealed to the impoverished and underprivileged, and the prospect of a glorious eternity after death was hard to resist. Numerous new recruits to the budding religion were so excited by the prospect of eternal happiness that they took their own lives to hasten their reward, and members of some Christian sects – the Circumcellions and the Donatists for example – were so eager for eternal bliss that they engaged in mass suicides, or in some cases paid other people to kill them. Such behaviour was of course detrimental to building a movement, and over time the Church, which once looked upon suicide with compassion, came of organizational necessity to view it as an unforgivable crime aimed at God himself. One cannot build a movement if recruits keep killing themselves.

• *O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again...*

It is easy to understand Browning's longing to rejoin his beloved wife Elizabeth, who died not long before the writing of *Prospice*. Human happiness relies in large part on our relationships with others, and the need to love and be loved is an essential part of the human condition. The loss of love brings pain, and the greater the love, the greater the suffering. Belief that those one loves live on after they die, that "we shall meet

again on the other side," provides great comfort in times of overwhelming sorrow.

• *And with God be the rest!*

People give little consideration to what

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living in everlasting happiness, alongside God, might actually be like. After all, even living in Mr. Rogers' *beautiful day in the neighbourhood* for all time to come, which might be lovely at first, would eventually lead to difficulty in keeping boredom at bay. However, perhaps one might argue that the "soul," while maintaining the brain's ability to perceive, remember, and enjoy, leaves behind its need for stimulation and change. This raises another difficulty: Those who are willing to assume that the "mind" survives the body show no regard for all the complex neural circuitry required for perception, memory and cognition when one is still in the flesh. Somehow, they

assume, the ability to enjoy the world around us continues unabated, sans need of retinal cells or visual cortex to experience beautiful images, taste buds to savour a fine meal, or olfactory receptors to appreciate the fragrance of a rose.

Alongside such neurological considerations, one might also consider what it is in post-mortem paradise that will keep a person content for all time to come? Mark Twain addressed this question in *Letters from the Earth*: A fallen angel sent to earth as punishment for his missteps writes to his angel friends detailing the many human oddities he observes. He notes that while humans contemplate heaven as a place where

piety reigns, discord is absent and hymn-singing is ubiquitous, they seem unconcerned that the pleasures of the flesh that give them so much pleasure on earth, such as liquor, tobacco and sex, are decidedly absent in heaven:

His heaven is like himself: strange, interesting, astonishing, grotesque. I give you my word, it has not a single feature in it that he actually values. It consists – utterly and entirely – of diversions which he cares next to nothing about, here in the earth, yet is quite sure he will like them in heaven.

Beyond just the monotony of a beautiful day in the neighbourhood that goes on forever, there is also the prospect of being surrounded by thoroughly decent souls who bore you to tears (in the unlikely circumstance that tear glands exist in post-mortem paradise). After all, the “goody two shoes” of the world will probably end up in heaven, but many of the more interesting people might well be denied entry to Paradise. As Mark Twain observed: “Heaven for climate, Hell for company.”

And there is another potential downside to everlasting life. As philosopher Bertrand Russell noted:

We may regret the thought that we shall not survive, but it is a comfort to think that all the persecutors and Jew-baiters and humbugs will not continue to exist for all eternity. We may be told that they would improve in time, but I doubt it.

• *Is that all there is?*

For some, life without an afterlife can have no meaning. This was expressed well in a song made famous by Peggy Lee (the words of which

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were based on Nobel Laureate Thomas Mann’s essay, *Disillusionment*):

And 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?

And if that is all there is, if life is, as Macbeth put it, only “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing,” then what is the point of living at all? Why bother studying for that examination? Why struggle to advance oneself at work? If

oblivion awaits you when you die, what’s the point of doing anything?

However, if there is life after death, this changes everything for many people – and especially so if there are consequences for what one has done while alive. Life is now very meaningful, for no matter how tedious or difficult it might be, it is worth the struggle in the hope that the next life will be so much better.

• *Afterlife as a basis for morality*

Our lives are governed by consequences. Study hard and obtain high marks; fall asleep at your post and lose your job; cheat your neighbour and be wracked by guilt; treat people with respect and receive respect in return. And break the law and suffer punishment. That is, if you are caught. But if God watches us all and metes out reward or punishment when we die, then we cannot escape our just deserts. God’s law and God’s enforcement of that law provides an unyielding basis for ethics, morality and justice.

And so, most 19th-century intellectuals were satisfied that morality and ethics ultimately would be reinforced by consequences, if not in this world then in the next. Thus, the concept of an afterlife was important, and yet it was be-

coming increasingly difficult for some intellectuals to maintain their belief in the supernatural basis of conventional religion. Religious teaching smacked of mythology and was hard to reconcile with the emerging scientific perspective of the world. Imagine, then, the additional discomfiture produced by Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection which challenged the core Judeo-Christian belief that humans are a special creation of an omnipotent deity. Add to that a contemporaneous challenge posed by biblical historian Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus*, which described Jesus as a man and not a God, rejected biblical miracles as fiction, and argued that the Bible should be subjected to the same critical analysis as any other historical document.

The Rise of Spiritualism

At around the same time that Darwin and Renan were posing a challenge to the religious beliefs of many intellectuals, the Spiritualist movement was gaining popularity. Spiritualists, through apparent communication with the souls of the dead during séances, were providing what appeared to be good empirical evidence that the soul survives death. Spiritualists for the most part consider themselves to be on the side of science, carefully examining evidence of an unseen world. For those enamored of science but disillusioned by conventional religion, this offered the prospect of an afterlife without the mythological trappings of religious orthodoxy.

Consider, for example, Henry Sidgwick of Cambridge University, one of the most important and influential ethical philosophers of late 19th century. His intellectual development, bolstered by formal education, had made it difficult for him to maintain the Christian beliefs with which he had been infused in childhood. The challenges posed by Darwin and Renan exacerbated his theological distress. Moreover, this left him much disturbed as an ethical philosopher, for without the authority of the Bible and in the absence of consequences for one's earthly deeds in an afterlife, he could not conceive of a reasonable basis for an immutable moral code.

And without a moral code, he feared that the world would descend into social chaos. On the other hand, if the reports of spirit communication were correct, that would imply that we have a soul that survives physical death, and this would leave open the possibility that altruistic acts would somehow eventually be rewarded, and selfishness and immorality punished. With this in mind, and honouring his respect for science, Sidgwick became obsessed with the effort to demonstrate scientifically that the soul survives death. He believed a necessary first step must be the scientific establishment of the duality of mind and body. Proving the existence of psychic phenomena such as mental telepathy would be enough to demonstrate that the "mind" (or "soul") is not constrained by the physical laws that govern the material world.

And Sidgwick was not alone. Philologist Frederick Myers was another of the many intellectuals who yearned for a secular, scientific basis for belief in an afterlife. Myers had come to the realization that he no longer could maintain belief in Christianity when he almost succumbed to pneumonia in 1869; after that, Christianity could no longer provide adequate answers to his existential questions. Like Sidgwick, he was aghast at the thought that physical death brings the disappearance of the personality. He, too, was desperate to build a new belief system, one that accommodates an afterlife but is free of the fantasy and mythology of traditional faiths. And he too believed that demonstrating the reality of telepathy (a term that he coined) would facilitate proof of post-mortem survival. And then there was psychologist Edward Gurney, whose religious convictions had dwindled away when he experienced immense grief at the death of his three sisters in a boating accident on the Nile River. He could not accept that their lives had simply ended, and that there is no more to a human being than what is dictated by the flesh.

These three men, Sidgwick, Myers and Gurney, played crucial roles in the founding of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in London in 1882. It was the world's first scientific organization dedicated to finding evidence of psychic phenomena. Sidgwick became its

first president while Myers and Gurney were appointed its principal researchers, and Gurney was also made its first Honorary Secretary. Their reputations provided a patina of scientific respectability to the organization, but the SPR's formation was actually spearheaded by members of the British National Association of Spiritualists, and its first Council involved 13 spiritualists and only six non-spiritualists, Sidgwick, Myers and Gurney among them. Yet, it was those non-spiritualists who conducted almost all of the research, and over time, the Spiritualist members retired one by one so that the organization became essentially non-Spiritualist in nature. While the SPR focused attention on psychical phenomena such as mental telepathy, its ultimate goal was to find a scientific basis for the existence of a nonmaterial aspect of the human personality, a "secular soul."

Although many modern psychical researchers, parapsychologists as they are now known, rankle at being described as mind-body dualists, there really is no escaping that label given their belief that the mind is not constrained either by the limitations of the physical brain or the laws of physics. And over the years, several prominent parapsychologists have, like Sidgwick and his colleagues, described how parapsychology has provided for them a bridge between science and religion. There is no more important example of this than Joseph Banks Rhine, who grew up steeped in traditional religion and originally intended to study to become a minister. However, he changed his mind, chose science over theology, and obtained a PhD in botany. While his religious faith dimmed, his abiding belief in an afterlife focused his attention on claims emerging from the nascent field of parapsychology. He was ultimately provided the opportunity to organize a laboratory dedicated to parapsychological research at a university in the United States. Imbued with high respect for the methods of science, he was determined, like Sidgwick and others before them, to find scientific evidence that the mind, or "soul," survives physical death, and he too believed that the pathway to such proof depended on first demonstrating that mind can operate indepen-

dently of the body. Establishing the reality of extrasensory perception would accomplish this step but he knew that more than anecdotal evidence would be required. He was impressed by the scientific methodology being developed and applied by psychologists in their research, and so he adapted their methods to his needs. While he believed that he had ultimately succeeded in presenting compelling evidence of psychic phenomena, scientific critics found fault with his research, and he was never able to persuade them of its validity.

It is interesting that modern-day parapsychologists recognize the flaws in Rhine's research and do not rely upon it when arguing for the reality of paranormal phenomena. Yet, like Rhine, they too insist that they have demonstrated the reality of the paranormal, thereby validating their assertion that the mind is not simply a manifestation of brain activity. However, they have never been able to provide evidence that can be replicated by neutral scientists and, in consequence, they too have failed to persuade the larger scientific community that their putative phenomena actually exist. Their search continues, a quest that reflects belief in search of evidence rather than data in search of explanation.

And so, for the majority of people, faith-based conceptions of an afterlife in paradise provide meaning, hope and comfort. For others, those for whom belief in deities and heavens constitute a bridge too far, the claims of post-mortem survival adduced by parapsychologists offer some appeal. But for those of us who view these perspectives as fantastical triumphs of hope over reason, we must rely on rational thinking to provide the basis both for morality and for meaning in our lives. •

James Alcock is Professor of Psychology at Glendon College, York University. He is a Member of the College of Psychologists of Ontario, a Fellow of the Canadian Psychological Association, and is a long-serving member of the Executive Committee of the international Committee for Skeptical Inquiry. He is the author of many papers and books, including the 2019 book "Belief – what it means to believe and why our convictions are so compelling," Prometheus Press.