

1

Making sense of death

A naturalistic view of death

From a naturalistic understanding of what makes us human, death means personal extinction. The basic reason for this is that everything that makes us the kind of people we are seems bound up with our physical embodiment. Our thinking, feeling and willing are related to particular brain states which neurophysiologists are increasingly able to identify. Our temperamental type, our character, imagination and intelligence are genetically linked, and the effective working of our endocrine system is essential for our intellectual and emotional well-being. In the light of such considerations, many think that belief in life after death flies in the face of what science has discovered.

Many think that belief in life after death flies in the face of what science has discovered

Modern scientific knowledge is quantifying, confirming and in some cases extending what experience has taught us for generations. More than 200 years ago David Hume argued: ‘the weakness of the body and that of the mind in infancy are exactly proportioned; their vigour in manhood, their sympathetic disorder in sickness; their common gradual decay in old age. The step further seems unavoidable; their common dissolution in death.’¹

Old Testament perspectives

As we shall see in the next chapter, this naturalistic and mortalist view of human beings is very different from the world-view

of historic Christianity. However, it is not solely a post-Enlightenment or modern perspective. The proposition ‘all men are mortal’ was seen in ancient Greek philosophy as the classic example of a logical truism. The use of the phrase ‘to expire’ as a synonym for death reflects the belief that when a person breathes out for the last time then that person ceases to be. It seems that this is also how we should understand biblical phrases about the spirit returning to God who gave it. Although within the Christian tradition such expressions have often been interpreted as a reference to the ‘parting of soul and body at death’, the consensus of Old Testament scholarship is that it refers to God taking back his own life-sustaining spirit. The Hebrew word for spirit, *ruah*, is best understood as ‘breath’, and

The Hebrew Bible, just as much as modern biology, sees human beings as irreducibly part of the natural order

the Hebrew word *nepes*, though often translated as ‘soul’ actually means ‘life’. So when we are told that Rachel’s *nepes* departed, this simply means that she died.² The

Hebrew does not mean that her soul left her, as if it were something that could go off on its own. The Hebrew Bible, just as much as modern biology, sees human beings as irreducibly part of the natural order.

Heart, kidneys, bowels, liver, inward parts, flesh and bones are all explicitly mentioned in the Old Testament as shaping and determining our character and emotions.³ According to the Psalmist, human beings are like the beasts that perish, the grass that withers and the flowers that fade.⁴ In the presence of death, Job thinks that we are less fortunate than the plants, for ‘if a tree is cut down, there is hope that it will sprout again . . . But when a human being dies all his power vanishes.’⁵ In ancient Hebrew thought, God’s enduring covenant was with the whole people of Israel, not with individuals whose deaths were simply part of the ongoing cycle of life.

Making sense of death

Given this perspective, Ecclesiastes argues that human life can have no ultimate meaning and therefore in the language of the King James Bible he speaks of life as ‘vanity of vanities; all is vanity’. Modern translations prefer to talk of ‘emptiness’ or ‘futility’. Ecclesiastes thought that although life could have no ultimate purpose, we should not despair but should find fulfilment in the limited goals open to us within our mortal existence, believing that

there is nothing good for anyone except to be happy and live the best life he can while he is alive . . . It is good and proper for a man to eat and drink and enjoy himself in return for his labours . . . Enjoy life with a woman you love all the days of your allotted span here under the sun . . . Whatever task lies to your hand, do it with might; because [in the grave to which you are heading], there is neither doing nor thinking.⁶

Evolution and our place in the natural order

Over the past 150 years, the naturalistic case for extinction has been strengthened by the way that evolution shows the place of human beings within the natural order. Like other developed animals, we evolved over millions of years, and over many generations *homo sapiens* gradually emerged from earlier forms of life. Modern genetic studies further strengthen this picture by revealing that the vast majority of our genetic inheritance is shared with other species. Like them, our development has been shaped by the struggle for existence. In our case, as in theirs, death has played a crucial role in our progressive adaptation to the challenges of existence. Without death there could have been no progress.

The qualities we value in life reflect an awareness of our finitude and our lives find their meaning as the various stages of life offer opportunities for our personal development. If medical research were ever to discover how to reverse the

An ‘elixir of immortality’ is an age-old fantasy, but its actual realization would be a disaster

ageing process, humanity would be faced with appalling choices. An 'elixir of immortality' is an age-old fantasy. Its actual realization would be a disaster. Human society depends on each generation passing away and handing on the baton to their successors.

Evolutionary difficulties in relation to immortality

Although Darwin did not think that his findings affected the validity of belief in a Creator God, he recognized from an early stage that they challenged belief in the immortality of the soul.⁷ He was right to do so. As I have sought to show elsewhere, in my article 'Do animals have immortal souls?', the Christian tradition has held that of all God's creatures, only human beings are heirs of eternal life.⁸ Though animals are distinguished from plant life through their possession of a sentient soul (*anima* is the Latin word for soul), traditional belief holds that this kind of soul is mortal. It was not thought intelligible to suppose that animals have the kind of consciousness that could conceivably exist without a body. Aquinas was clear that even for humans, the existence of self-aware consciousness in a disembodied state could only be

**There are no sudden breaks
in the evolutionary pathway
leading to *homo sapiens***

a temporary stage in the transition to an eternal life.⁹ However, the belief that human beings are fundamentally different from other animals, as tradition has taught, now faces the serious objection that there are no sudden breaks in the evolutionary pathway leading to *homo sapiens*.

Linda Badham argues:

somewhere along that line we might feel reasonably secure in denying that such and such a creature had any self awareness whereas most normal adult humans do possess such an awareness. But between these extremes lies a grey area. To have a non-arbitrary dividing

Making sense of death

line it has to be possible, for us to decide at least in principle, where a sharp division can be drawn between the last generation of anthropoid apes and the first generation of true homo sapiens? Are we to suppose that . . . the changes between one generation and the next were so great that the children counted in God's eyes as the bearers of immortality while their parents were 'mere animals'?¹⁰

Moreover, suppose an older 'ape-like' hominid married one of the new generation 'humans'. How could the one enjoy immortality knowing that the other had perished for ever? Simply to state the predicament is to indicate its unsatisfactoriness. This difficulty is compounded by recent discoveries that there may have been as many as six different species of humanity coexisting for long periods of time and possibly even interbreeding with one another. It is also likely that for the first three million years that human beings lived on earth our lives were virtually indistinguishable from those of other animals. Those features of civilization that most differentiate us go back fewer than 10,000 years.

The problem of when personal life begins

The difficulty of saying when distinctively human life emerged is recapitulated when we consider the comparable impossibility of identifying when personal life begins in any individual today. Clearly there is a sense in which my distinctive identity goes back to the moment of conception, for at that point my unique DNA code came into existence. Yet 70 per cent of zygotes develop no further than this initial stage, and are expelled from the mother's body as foetal wastage in what she experiences as simply a late menstrual period.¹¹ It would be wholly unintelligible to imagine that 70 per cent of the future population of 'heaven' should be unformed zygotes! The moment of implantation will not do either, since we would then face the difficulty of identical twins whose separation may well take place after implantation and we can hardly suppose that

a 'person' splits into two up to four weeks after beginning life. 'Animation' is equally problematic, as the timing of a baby's first

'Somewhere' in the path leading from conception to adulthood, consciousness comes into being in what is a seamlessly continuous process

movement being reported depends more on the mother's subjective interpretation of what is going on in her womb rather than on any clearly identifiable development in the child. The fact simply is that

'somewhere' in the path leading from conception to adulthood, consciousness comes into being, but it is impossible to draw dividing lines in what is a seamlessly continuous process.

The logic of mortality

Consideration of the place of human beings in the natural order has led many contemporary philosophers to the conclusion that the possibility of personal life after bodily death is literally 'non sense'. Wittgenstein alerted his contemporaries to the danger of ignoring the everyday use of the language we speak, and the context in which we learnt to utter the words we use. He believed that if we paid attention to the meaning of the words involved, we would realize that 'death is not lived through' and that 'the world in death does not change but ceases'.¹² Antony Flew developed this argument further, coining the slogan 'people are what you meet' and pointing out that what we do meet are creatures of flesh and blood who can be pointed at, touched, heard, seen and talked to. 'Person words refer to people. And how can such objects as people survive physical dissolution?'¹³

The size and age of the universe

Further difficulties for the Christian valuation of human beings come from the growing realization of our utter insignificance in cosmic

terms. The early Christians believed that this earth had been directly created by God in the relatively recent past for the benefit of human beings. With heaven above and the underworld below, it constituted the whole of reality. The sun, moon and stars existed to provide us with light, while plants and animals existed to provide us with food. In this context it was natural to believe that people mattered to their Creator and that he would not wish death to be their final end.

Further difficulties for the Christian valuation of human beings come from the growing realization of our utter insignificance in cosmic terms

For a contemporary person, the world-view is very different. To clarify how great the difference is, I give the numbers involved in full because I am aware that the similarity in sound between ‘million’ and ‘billion’ can often obscure the difference between them. The fact is that the universe as we know it is at least 12 hundred thousand million years old. Our galaxy alone contains at least one hundred thousand million other stars and there are at least one hundred thousand million other galaxies. Although the conditions under which life can develop are relatively rare, astronomers are daily finding planets in other solar systems. At least some of these planets are orbiting around their stars in the ‘Goldilocks’ position of being neither too cold, nor too hot, but ‘just right’ for life to evolve. There may well be eight hundred million such planets in our own galaxy, even though the distances involved rule out our ever meeting their inhabitants. Logically speaking, such considerations need not affect Christian confidence that each of us matters eternally to our Creator; but psychologically they do tend to erode such confidence.

The human life span

Human beings, like other evolved creatures, have a natural lifespan. The classic description of this appears in Psalm 90 in the Book of Common Prayer:

Making sense of death

The days of our age are threescore years and ten;
and though men be so strong that they come to fourscore
years:
yet is their strength then but labour and sorrow;
so soon passeth it away, and we are gone.

What this tells us is that for the past 3,000 years or so it has been the human experience that, if we do not succumb earlier to accident or disease, we can usually expect to live to our seventies, and the stronger among us can live on into our eighties. But after we get into our eighties life is very much a struggle, and for most elderly people their eighties prove to be a fatal decade. There have always been a few who have lived on into their nineties and hundreds. In the Bible, after the obviously mythological lifespans attributed to patriarchs like Methuselah, we are told that God made 'a hundred and twenty years' the upper limit for any human existence.¹⁴ This is the foundation for the traditional Jewish blessing, 'May you live to be a hundred and twenty.' However, Jeanne Calment is the only documented case of a person who actually reached 120. She died in 1997 at the age of 122. The oldest person alive in 2012 was 116. Talk of ever-increasing absolute longevity is not supported by reality.¹⁵

The coming of a 'third age'

What has changed in human experience is not the existence of old age, but that the majority of us in the developed world can reasonably expect to live to see it. No longer do half of children die before the age of five. No longer is giving birth profoundly life-threatening to women, and no longer will most of us succumb to infectious disease in mid-life. Whereas in sixteenth-century London only 5 per cent lived on into their seventies, by 1998 75 per cent did so. Global life expectancy jumped from 30 to 67 years during the nineteenth and

twentieth centuries.¹⁶ According to HSBC airport posters, two-thirds of all human beings who have reached the age of 65 are alive today.

The majority of us can now look forward to a 'third age' of life after we have finished with work. If we are reasonably fortunate, we may enjoy a life of leisure, albeit followed in due course by a period of terminal illness. This is

**Two-thirds of all human beings
who have reached the age of
65 are alive today**

a very new phenomenon. In 1948 a man was lucky if he lived to collect his pension, for the average age of death for a man was 65.¹⁷ By contrast, according to the Office of National Statistics website in 2010, a man who reached 65 in 2010 could on average expect to have a further 9.9 years of healthy life followed in due course by 6.5 years of ill health, of which the final 3.9 years would be increasingly restricted by illness. Between 1991 and 2001 average life expectancy rose by 2.2 years, but unfortunately only 0.6 were years of health. The other 1.6 extra years were years of persistent illness.¹⁸

Holding death at bay

An important feature of modern medicine is our ability to hold death at bay even when hope of cure is long gone. For example, people with respiratory disease can be provided with oxygen. Linked by a kind of umbilical cord to their oxygen generator, sufferers with breathing difficulties can enjoy a year or two of additional life in their own homes, while motorized scooters can provide independence and mobility long after walking has become impossible. Likewise, pills to prevent water retention, lower blood cholesterol, and to reduce blood pressure can all help in the fight against heart disease. New cancer treatments can sometimes cure and will frequently enable people to live with the disease for several years beyond when it would have killed them in the past. Pneumonia, formerly known as 'the old man's friend', need no

longer release him from this life for it can be treated by antibiotics, as can many other formerly fatal infections.

In hospitals death can, of course, be kept further at bay by saline drips and respirators, not to mention kidney dialysis, organ transplantation, and heart bypass operations. If a person's heart stops beating in an intensive therapy unit, every possible effort may be made at resuscitation, and it is not unknown for this process to be repeated many times before death becomes impossible to resist any longer. In general a host of new technologies and a cornucopia of new drugs can nowadays keep life in being long beyond anything possible in the past. It is even possible to use life-support systems to keep a person's body functioning for years after they have lost all consciousness. The former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon entered a persistent vegetative state on 4 January 2006, and at the time of writing, more than six and half years later, he was still in that condition. According to *Le Monde*, his round-the-clock clinical care costs €300,000 (£238,000) a year. In Sharon's case this is largely paid for by a grateful state, but clearly no health service could survive if it allowed such support to be widely available.¹⁹

Changing attitudes to death

Growing awareness and experience of the implications of the 'third age' have profoundly affected people's attitude to death

Growing awareness and experience of the implications of the 'third age' have profoundly affected people's attitude to death and immortality

and immortality. The extension of most people's lives into the seventies and eighties means that more and more of us feel that we have lived out our natural span. As a consequence, belief in a future life has tended to evaporate. Historically, a powerful psychological factor in wanting to believe in a life after death was

the unsatisfactoriness of lives cut short before people had had the opportunity to discharge their family responsibilities, fully develop their character or to achieve the goals they had set themselves. This remains the way that death is seen concerning those struck down prematurely, whether in infancy or in the prime of life. For them, death is still responsible for 'cutting short' the natural span of life, and is considered the worst thing that could happen to anyone because it deprives a person of all the potential life still had to offer. However, for those who die after many years of retirement, the situation is different. They know what they have been able to accomplish during their lives and may have no further major goals ahead. Consequently, some people in their eighties seem content to accept that their existence will come to a natural end.

Changing attitudes to dying

Historically, death usually came relatively swiftly, in days or weeks rather than years. This can still happen and when it does it is experienced as particularly tragic. However, for those who survive into old age, the fear of death has been for some replaced by the fear of being kept alive beyond sense and reason. Douglas Davies, in his *Brief History of Death*, talks movingly of the 'national nursing home scenario' in which post-80-year-olds live lonely lives 'deprived of those active commitments and obligations to others that make life worthwhile'.²⁰

The stock nightmare of modern times is of doctors in possession of the power to keep us alive when our bodies are at least partly dead

In their *A Good Death: Conversations with East Londoners*, Michael Young and Lesley Cullen found that 'the stock nightmare of modern times is of doctors in possession of the power to keep us alive when our bodies are at least partly dead'.

This prospect is ‘more frightening than the prospect of being killed.’²¹ Many people have witnessed the lengthy and distressing dying process of a close relative. It is factors like these that lie behind the existence of societies like Dignity in Dying, which supports moves to legalize assisted dying.

The challenge of the naturalistic understanding

The dominance of a naturalistic understanding of life is the primary reason why the idea of life after death is simply a non-starter for many secular thinkers. It also explains why some, while nominally affirming a future hope, have no lively expectation of its realization. Many committed Christians suffer ‘cognitive dissonance’ through awareness of how much their faith differs from the secular assumptions that dominate contemporary discussion. It is hard to continue to believe in something that contradicts the ‘common sense’ of the contemporary world-view. I sometimes feel haunted by the challenge of Francis Crick to those who continue to believe in the soul: ‘What everyone believed yesterday, and you believe today, only cranks will believe tomorrow.’²² It worries me because during my academic lifetime there has been an increasing tendency for neuroscientists and philosophers to take for granted a materialist view of the mind. Back in 1966, 22 of the world’s leading neurophysiologists contributed to Sir John Eccles’ edited book, *The Brain and Conscious Experience*. They were

Materialism has moved from being an antipodean heresy to being the contemporary orthodoxy

united in *insisting* that no materialist theory could account for the workings of the human brain. This would not be true of the leading neuroscientists of today. Similarly in philosophy: when D. M. Armstrong’s book *A Materialist Theory of Mind* was published in 1968 it was dismissed by many philosophers

Making sense of death

as ‘the Australian heresy’, because both D. M. Armstrong and J. J. C. Smart came from that continent. But since then, materialism has moved from being an Antipodean heresy to being the contemporary orthodoxy.

To succeed in ‘making sense of immortality’, one must not only show why the Christian hope matters, but also how the challenge of this naturalistic world-view can be met.