

ETERNAL QUESTIONS

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“The Soul After Life”

There awaits men when they die such things as they look not for nor dream of (frag. 122).¹

Heraclitus

In Plato's Apology, Socrates speaks to the jury who sentenced him to death by saying he is not afraid of death. Not only does he have nothing to fear, he adds, they may have just done him a favor. To explain how death may be a blessing Socrates suggests that either death is a cessation of consciousness, a single night of dreamless sleep; or, after death we go to a place that will be ruled over by just judges.

As much as I admire Socrates he makes what I consider two unsubstantiated assumptions about death. His first assumption is that (1) we would agree with him that a loss of consciousness after death, a single night of dreamless sleep, would be considered something good. Then, (2) if we have an afterlife we will have “just judges” examining the life we recently completed. Who are these just judges and why are they judging Socrates, or any of us, at all?

¹ John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1908)

How can anyone, even Socrates, assume that consciousness and unconsciousness after death are in any way equivalent or equally good states? Yes, it's likely true that we won't know that we are unconscious if we are unconscious, but does this blessing of a dreamless sleep really fool anyone? A dreamless sleep is only a blessing after we awaken. Who wants a dreamless sleep that never ends?

I'm going to make my own assumption, more accurately a *presumption*, and say that everything I've seen, read, and heard in my life declares emphatically that humanity does *not* want a dreamless sleep that never ends. Only those in extreme pain, suffering, or with a cold nihilistic emptiness in their soul *want* their life to end. Aren't those who want a dreamless sleep just desiring freedom from the consciousness of their present, unpleasant life?

Socrates, and the Stoics after him, claim that death is not to be feared, and I agree with them. It *is* to be faced stoically. I also agree with Marcus Aurelius who said that if an afterlife for humanity is good for all of Nature, then the divine would have no trouble creating it. Fine, but the consciousness I know best, my own consciousness, is something I want it to continue long after my body lies moldering in the grave. To say otherwise would be pretense, a lie. Life in the corporeal world *can* be hard, and I *could* let go of our familiar world without a lot of fuss, but I do *not* restrict or confine my mind, consciousness, and imagination to the corporeal world alone.

I recently saw a film about an assassin who narrated much of his personal philosophy of life and death while we watched him killing for hire. One comment made while narrating his internal dialogue spoke of the great freedom that comes with the acceptance of annihilation at death. Years ago, my mentor, Dr. Keith Campbell, Chairman of the University of Sydney Philosophy Department and I were discussing life after death, and he made a comment that I've never forgotten—not for its insight but for its Vachel Lindsayan pounding poetic rhythm. Professor Campbell said we must learn “reconciliation to a finite life.”

Reconciliation to a finite life. Yes, I agree with Socrates and the assassin and the Oxford-educated professor who tell us we can appreciate a dreamless sleep and the freedom of death and reconciliation to a finite life, but why should we? Why should we accept their opinions? Instead, why should we not prefer to explore the oceans of evidence that point to the continuation of consciousness after death? Those who believe in a finite life hold onto that belief not because of any evidence of extinction, there can be none, but because they adamantly refuse to believe the claims of the many, millions actually, who have seen a new consciousness appear at the brink of death and beyond.

Okay, enough of that. What about the other assumption of Socrates, the one about just judges examining us when our lives come to an end? Who are these

judges, and for what purpose would they be judging our lives? The simplest explanation is that he was speaking of a common Greek myth in his day about the three just judges of the Underworld—Minos, Rhadamanthus, and Aeacus. But, when these just judges are described as being mythological it would be a mistake to dismiss the reality of their power over the hearts and minds of the Athenians sitting in judgment of Socrates.

Early Greek Afterlife

And it is the same thing in us that is quick and dead, awake and asleep, young and old; the former are shifted and become the latter, and the latter in turn are shifted and become the former.

Heraclitus (frag. 78, Burnet)

In ancient Greece, myths (*muthos*) were not discredited as being factually worthless. A myth was highly valued as a true story told orally with poetry (e.g., *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*) and handed down by the ancients to explain the origins and key events of the world, including the existence of an Underworld.² Hades to the Greek was real as both a god and as a place. As a god, Hades was stern and without pity, but he was not evil, and he was often referred to as Zeus of the Underworld. He was the grandson of Uranus, god of the sky, and Gaia, goddess of Earth. His demeanor was cold and distant unless someone tried to leave or steal souls away from his realm, then his wrath was hotly ferocious.

The House of Hades was not just one place, but three: Elysium, Asphodel Meadows, and Tartarus. The realm of Elysium was a paradise, but it was only available to those who were chosen by the gods because they lived virtuous, blameless lives, and to the great heroes, such as the Greek war hero, Achilles. Elysium offered an eternity of joy, nice weather, good food, and great friends. Asphodel Meadows was designed for the majority who were neither especially virtuous nor vicious. Those condemned to this region lived in vague shadows, forever consigned to a joyless and gloomy afterlife. Tartarus was for the very bad, and was occupied by terrible beasts and horrible criminals. We don't need to dwell on the unpleasantness of an afterlife among these companions.³

Stoic Souls After Life

Nearly a century after the death of Socrates (c.470 bce to 399 bce), Zeno began teaching his philosophy at the Stoa Poikile (c. 300 bce). According to Diogenes Laertius, Zeno said the soul was a "...warm breath or sentient exhalation.... [permeating] the whole body and death [and] its separation therefrom. However,

² Credit must be given to this website for a useful discussion of the early Greek afterlife: <https://greekreporter.com/2023/08/23/ancient-greece-concepts-heaven-hell/>

³ *ibid*

the soul is not eternal, though it does endure for a time after its departure from the body.”⁴ We saw in the last issue that Chrysippus used propositional logic to prove the soul was corporeal, but there was little agreement among the early Greek Stoics what happened to us after the end of life.

Diogenes Laertius said the Stoics believed there *was* life after death, but they disagreed about who got it and how long it continued. The individual soul was thought to be perishable, but not so the soul of the universe, or God. Here's what we can summarize about the beliefs of Zeno, Cleanthes, and Chrysippus according to DL:

Zeno: "...the soul is not eternal, though it does endure for a time after its departure from the body."

Cleanthes: "...holds that all souls continue to exist until the general conflagration [*ekpyrosis*, the fire that consumes the Passive Principle]"

Chrysippus: "...says that only the souls of the wise men do."⁵

The Stoic description of an afterlife was not based upon fact, inspiration, or even reasoned hypothesis, but merely conjecture. This lack of reasoned certainty is no small matter. As Pierre Hadot said, "The thought of death confers seriousness, infinite value, and splendor to every present instant of life (*The Inner Citadel*, p. 135)." Is it any wonder that Ludwig Edelstein suggested that Stoic philosophy was incomplete for lacking answers to the eternal metaphysical needs of man? We can, and will, but first we must turn to some philosophies that do answer eternal questions, the philosophies also known as religions. We will briefly summarize the religions that are greatest in population, and we do this for the purpose of comparison with our own answer that follows.

Salvation

Of the Abrahamic faiths we will begin with the Christians because their treatment of the afterlife is the most extensive, complex, and subtle. Their beliefs *also* lack agreement and are historically and theologically divisive. However, a full explanation of the various Christian heavens and hells and the reasons for who goes where is a literature far beyond our needs. Only a bare outline is necessary for comparison and contrast to each other and to the Stoics.

Roman Catholics, the original Christian church, give us an afterlife that begins to look suspiciously similar to the three regions of the Greek Hades. Catholics refer to them as heaven (Elysium), purgatory (Asphodel Meadows), and hell (Tartarus). But here the similarity ends. They have new destinations for the soul. I will be

⁴ Josiah B. Gould, *The Philosophy of Chrysippus*, SUNY, 1970, p. 33)

⁵ This paragraph is an excerpt from the author's work, *Death by Gangrene and Other Essays* (see the Eternal Questions website for a pdf copy of this book.)

describing the current Catholic afterlife with the authority of Pope John Paul II.⁶ The Pope begins by describing heaven, purgatory, and hell as *states of being* of the individual's soul, not actual locations. He references St. Thomas Aquinas as his authority for these states of being. This is what Aquinas said,

"Incorporeal things are not in *place* after a manner known and familiar to us, in which way we say that bodies are properly in *place*; but they are in *place* after a manner befitting spiritual substances, a manner that cannot be fully manifest to us." [St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Supplement, Q69, a1, reply 1]

Chrysippus thought that the soul was corporeal and he proved it with logic. But, of course, that's only believable if you accept his premise that the incorporeal cannot attach itself to the corporeal. So, on the matter of the afterlife the Christians' first big disagreement with Stoics is on the state of the soul. Is it corporeal, material stuff, or is it incorporeal, a spirit? Although many Stoics would consider it heresy to suggest that the soul could be incorporeal, one could make that argument. But let's get back to the Catholic afterlife.

Heaven. The Pope described it as "neither an abstraction nor a physical place in the clouds, but a living, personal relationship with the Holy Trinity. It is our meeting with the Father which takes place in the risen Jesus Christ through the communion of the Holy Spirit... When the form of this world has passed away, those who have welcomed God into their lives and have sincerely opened themselves to his love, at least at the moment of death, will enjoy that fullness of communion with God which is the goal of human life."⁷ In brief, heaven is a state of happiness when united with a blessed community of believers in Jesus as the Christ. Nothing here describes heaven with the hyperbole of pearly gates or streets paved with gold.

Hell, on the other hand, comes to those who reject god. It is "*the ultimate consequence of sin itself... Rather than a place, hell indicates the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God, the source of all life and joy...It is the state of those who definitively reject the Father's mercy, even at the last moment of their life.*" The Pope refers to biblical texts of hell as a place of eternal torment and everlasting fire, but then he returns to his earlier statement about the future of the soul not as a place but as a state of being. "Rather than a place, hell indicates the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God, the source of all life and joy."⁸

Then the Pope describes purgatory not as a place but as a "condition of existence

⁶ This information was given by the Pope at three Wednesday audiences in 1999. To see his exact words go to <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/heaven-hell-and-purgatory-8222>

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ *ibid*

where Christ removes all traces of sin and imperfection before we can enter into communion with God. This is the salvation that Jesus brings to the world with his ultimate sacrifice on the cross. "According to Old Testament religious law, what is destined for God must be perfect. As a result, physical integrity is also specifically required...The need for integrity obviously becomes necessary after death, for entering into perfect and complete communion with God. Those who do not possess this integrity must undergo purification."⁹ Specifically, purification is accomplished by the sinner confessing the error of his ways and asking for forgiveness. Jesus does the rest.



"Purgatory" (as a place), by Hieronymus Bosch, 15th century

The Protestant Reformation

When a penny in the coffer rings, a soul from Purgatory springs.

Johann Tetzel, Dominican friar

It was *not* the 20th century version of Roman Catholic Purgatory that the Augustinian friar, Martin Luther objected to when he heard a neighboring Dominican friar selling indulgences. The Church at that time raised money by selling early releases from Purgatory for cash, property, or personal fortunes. One could pay in advance to have themselves or a dead loved one brought to the head of the line to get an early release from Purgatory. The Church could hurry things up, but it would cost you.

⁹ *ibid*

Martin Luther protested. The New Testament that he read claimed that salvation was free (see Romans 6:23, and many others), and the greed and corruption he saw in the church of his day offended his idealism and devotion to biblical truth. Sadly, Luther's inflammatory and revolutionary break from Rome in 1517 announced centuries of butchery by almost constant warfare between Protestants and Catholics. The Protestants' revulsion of everything Catholic has only recently abated. On a personal note, the author was raised in a fundamentalist Protestant home where it was taught and believed that the Pope was the anti-Christ, the physical incarnation of Satan, Prince of Hell, 666.

But over the centuries, the Protestants themselves divided into many new ways to believe in the salvation of Jesus Christ. Today there are at least 12 major Protestant denominations and more than 30,000 independent churches who are not members of the 12. I only mention this to show how impossible it would be to describe the different Protestant heavens and hells. But there are certain themes that can be found.

Life to a Protestant can be seen as a personal journey to an afterlife of heaven or hell. Salvation mainly falls into two types: salvation by the grace, or salvation emphasizing free will and personal responsibility.¹⁰ The concept of Purgatory, which is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible, is virtually nonexistent among Protestants. Instead, most believe in a Judgment Day when the dead are separated according to those who believe in Jesus Christ as the son of God. Those who believe go to heaven; the rest go to eternal damnation in a fiery hell.

Some Protestants believe Judgment Day comes immediately upon death, and others believe it comes at the end of the world, the End Times, when Jesus returns, and both the living and dead are judged. At this time the believers in Christ will receive either salvation and transport to Heaven or everlasting punishment for their ignorance and evil. Recently, there has been a new division between Protestants where heaven and hell are not real places of blessedness or agony. The more liberal views resemble Pope John Paul II's description of a joyful state of being with God or despondency without Him.

The Other Abrahamic Faiths

Jews who masturbate, cause others to sin, or break the holy Sabbath Day commit the worst sins of the Jewish faith.¹¹ These three sins will get the sinner into the seventh level of Gehinom, which is eternal damnation. There are six levels before Gehinom, and they all have a different sentences. It could be a few years or

¹⁰ These key points are based upon personal recollection aided by this website: <https://www.patheos.com/library/protestantism/beliefs/afterlife-and-salvation>

¹¹ This description of Gehinom is from this website: <https://www.beezrathashem.org/post/3-sins-which-cause-eternal-gehinom-hell>

5,000 in Gehinom, but eventually you get out. But not if you're sent to the seventh level. The world could come to an end, but you will be in hell forever. BTW, the masturbation sin only applies to men and boys. They call it "wasting seed," a truly heinous sin. The following are my favorite old and new quotes about the afterlife:

In the world to come, there is no eating, or drinking, or sex ... rather, the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads, and bask in the glow of God's presence."¹²

Maimonides, Babylon Talmud

The afterlife is the place where the person you chose to be encounters the person you had the potential to be.¹³

Tzvi Glukin, Aish

In the Islamic faith, Heaven (Jannah) and Hell (Jahannam) are real places that coexist with this world, and they are one of six articles of faith required of believers. Muslims also believe in Judgment Day and eternal life in heaven or hell. The judge is Allah Almighty who decides whether a person has lived a life of "good deeds" or of "wrong doing." Jannah, is the reward "for those who believe in Allah and work hard for the pleasure of Allah (SWT)." In Jannah there will be bliss with unlimited food and rivers of wine without intoxication.¹⁴

Nonbelievers and wrongdoers will go to Jahannam, hell, and the conditions there are as you might expect, horrendous. There is fire, of course, and it rises up and over the wicked in great columns where they remain for eternity. In addition to not believing in the Muslim faith, there is quite a long list of offenses that will bring the eternal fires of Jahannam. These include people who are arrogant, who make fun of Muhammad, steal from orphans, idol worshipers, and slanderers of chaste women. Every time a Muslim prays (5 times a day) they pray for forgiveness of their sins and protection from going to Jahannam.¹⁵

Muslims are clearly sensitive about the incredulity of nonbelievers who protest Allah's gift of 72 virgins earned by Muslim martyrs. The only martyrs nonbelievers know about are what they commonly call terrorists or murderers, and there is widespread indignation among them that their god Allah gives them 72 virgins if they die while killing. This gift of virgins is only available to men, apparently, and they downplay it by denying it is actually in the Koran. In fact, this promise comes from a hadith, a collection of traditions containing sayings of the prophet Muhammad, which was narrated in the Sunan of Imam Tirmidhi:

¹² ibid

¹³ From the website: <https://aish.com/heaven-and-hell-explained/>

¹⁴ Information gleaned from <https://www.quranreading.com/blog/concept-of-heaven-and-hell-according-to-islam/>

¹⁵ ibid

"The martyr has six unique traits: he is forgiven immediately; he sees his seat in Paradise and he is saved from the punishment of the grave; he is granted safety from the great terror [the Day of Judgment]; a crown of honor is placed upon his head, a ruby of which is better than this life and all it contains; he is married to 72 maidens of Paradise; and he is allowed to intercede for 70 relatives."¹⁶

Liberation

What do Hinduism and Stoicism have in common? They are both a philosophy of life *and* a way of life.¹⁷ But unlike the Stoa, Hinduism has no fixed or even approximate date of origin and is known as eternal, the "ancient faith" without beginning or end.¹⁸ For the Hindu there is a single goal for every life, *mokṣa*, liberation from bondage to this world.¹⁹ Hindus don't go to *either* heaven or hell; they achieve liberation from this world of pleasure and pain to ultimately *merge* with the divine. To achieve this end one must live a moral life, but unlike the Muslim faith the moral life is not followed to compete for God's favor and protection from the the flames of Jahannam (hell), but for two other reasons:

1. liberation from the bondage of life,
2. and to support a just society.

Unlike members of the Abrahamic faiths who go to heaven or hell on the basis of their moral worth in ONE life, a foundational doctrine of Hinduism gives everyone more than one life to live. "...the doctrine of Karma and its corollary, rebirth... involves not only the metaphysical belief about the eternal existence of a soul, but also that such a soul is involved in a causal chain which is responsible for its birth again and again in this world." The Hindu sees karma as a causal factor in both the physical and moral realm.²⁰

The Stoics do not have an equivalent metaphysical belief in reincarnation (*metempsychosis* in Greek), and they would not likely separate the physical and moral realm as the Hindus do. We believe virtue is corporeal. The fundamental ontological position of Stoic physics is that only bodies exist, and that the virtues actually do physically exist as a body because they are aspects of soul, a tension of Pneuma, that can expand or contract and can act or be acted upon. But before we continue our contrasts and comparisons, we need to take a brief look at the other liberation philosophy, Buddhism.

¹⁶ <https://seekersguidance.org/answers/general-counsel/72-virgins-for-martyrs-making-sense-of-one-of-the-rewards-of-paradise/>

¹⁷ Chennakesavan, Sarasvati, *A Critical Study of Hinduism* (Motilal Barnarsidass publishers, 1980, pp. 4-5)

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.110-11

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.130

The Buddhist path to liberation is called "awakening," and it varies according to the Buddhist sect or methods used to achieve this enlightenment. Not unlike the spiritual practices of the Hindus, from which the Buddhist religion sprang, there are various forms of meditation, koans, and other methods that all point to the same goal, liberation. Buddhists believe in reincarnation and Karma, but there is a significant difference in goals. Hindus seek *mokṣa*, the end to the cycles of birth and death, to ultimately be one with God. Buddhist also seek an end to reincarnation through enlightenment, which they call nirvana.

Nirvana is neither heaven nor hell but is a state of liberation from the karmic cycles of incarnation, and is exemplified by bliss, compassion, freedom, and deep insight *before* death. Once a Buddhist has achieved this state of enlightenment there is no more bondage. But, there are two primary interpretations of Nirvana, the Sanskrit and the Pali Sutras or collection of texts. Much scholarship has gone into the differences between the sutras, and we are not going any further here except to correct one long-held misunderstanding.

When Westerners first heard of Nirvana as a void following *samsara*, the Buddhist's endless cycles of reincarnation, it was believed that the final death after enlightenment was extinction. Apparently not. "In the *Yamaka Sutta* (SN 22.58), the monk Sariputta clarifies the experience of *Nirvana-after-death*. As the sutra begins, a monk named Yamaka has the mistaken impression that a person who attains nirvana "does not exist" after death. Sariputta explains that this is not the correct view; the correct view is that *nirvana-after-death* is outside of all conceivable experience. Through a series of questions, Sariputta leads the monk Yamaka to admit that he cannot pin down the experience of an arahant after death. Yamaka comes to realize that the only accurate statement that can be made about *nirvana-after-death* is "That which is stressful (*dukkha*; suffering) has ceased and gone to its end."²¹

Evolution

Salvation, Liberation, and, now, Evolution. This what we have come to, but we will have to wait until the next issue. We have ended of our overview of what the majority of people believe about the future of the soul after life. In the next issue we will consider the standard physics model of the soul after death. Then, we consider the realm of experience, an exploration of support for another and newer perspective of the afterlife. After we examine the current scientific answer; we will examine a few drops from the ocean of experience that point to an afterlife that is not confined to scientific method, religious myths, or philosophical traditions. For those who are inclined to dismiss the validity of personal experience I will finish this issue with a quotation from the last issue, #11:

²¹ https://encyclopediaofbuddhism.org/wiki/Nirvana#Nirvana_after_death

"It would be a mistake to confine our knowledge of God [or the soul] to the myths of religions or the theories of scientists or the speculations of philosophers. We can know more by other means, and even the logical positivists of the 20th century made exceptions for the experiences of the individual. "... some of the most rigid materialists in the last century, such as Willard Van Orman Quine and Paul Churchland, allowed for the possibility of there being compelling empirical evidence of parapsychological powers and even ghosts."²²

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QUOTE OF THE DAY

As long as there is life there will be a Stoa. Why? Because the dynamic continuum is the foundation of life, and the War of Polarities can never end.

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For the Readers

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²² Excerpt from Stanford University's entry on the afterlife:
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/afterlife/>