

A Religious and Philosophical Evaluation of the Concept of Immortality

Ölümsüzlük Düşüncesi Üzerine Dini ve Felsefi Bir Değerlendirme

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Öz

Araştırmanın amacı, ölümsüzlük düşüncesi hakkında bir değerlendirme yapmaktır. Bilindiği gibi, ölüm ve ölüm ötesi, hem dini hem de felsefi tartışmaların odak noktalarından biridir. Zira, ölümden sonra bir hayatın olup olmadığı sorusu, din felsefesinin en önemli sorularından biridir. Doğal olarak bu sorunun iki olası cevabı vardır. Bunlardan biri ölümden sonra bir hayat vardır, diğeri ise yoktur.

Çalışmada, ilk olarak ölümden sonra bir hayatın olmayacağına dair görüşler hakkında değerlendirmeler yapacağız ve “ölümün her şeyin sonu olacağı” şeklindeki teorilerin hem psikolojik açıdan hem de felsefi açıdan problemlerini ortaya koyacağız. İkinci olarak ise, “ölümün yeni bir başlangıç olacağı” şeklindeki görüşleri değerlendirip, hangisinin daha tatmin edici olduğunu ortaya koymaya çalışacağız.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Din Felsefesi, Ölüm, Ölümsüzlük, Ölümden Sonrası, Reenkarnasyon

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to assess the idea of immortality. As it is known, death and post-death are one of the focal points of both religious and philosophical discussions. The question of whether there is a life after death is surely one of the most important questions that are asked in the philosophy of religion. Naturally, there are two possible answers to this question. One of them there will be a life after death, and the other will not.

Firstly, in this study, we will evaluate the views that there will be no life after death, and we will present both psychological and philosophical problems of that "death ends all" theories. Secondly, we will evaluate that "death will new beginning" theories and try to reveal which one is more satisfying.

Keywords: Philosophy of Religion, Death, Immortality, Afterlife, Reincarnation



Introduction

Death, a constant fact of life, is an unquestionable reality that every living creature will meet. Death and life are two facts contain each other. No one who comes to the life of the world wants to face death. Since the first humans, this characteristic of death has caused us to ask, "Where did we come from? Why are we here, and where are we going?" All of the ideas raised about this inevitable reality were relevant to what will happen after that. The following epitaph, which is written in a tombstone over hundred years old in an Indian cemetery, is an indication of how much importance the human being places on the question of where we are going.

*"Pause, stranger, when you pass me by,
As you are now, so once was I.
As I am now, so will you be;
So prepare for death and follow me."*

A passerby had read those words and scratched this at the bottom of the inscription,

*"To follow you I am not content
Until I know which way you went."*(Rhodes, 1996, pp. 39-40; Hewett, 1988, p. 145)

Immortality, which means that the existence of man will continue even after death,(Andrade, n.d.; Blackburn, 1994, p. 187) is both one of the oldest and most dangerous impulses of humanity, the strongest motivator he has, and the most important desire of him. This impulse is old and dangerous because Adam, who was the first human, was expelled from heaven because of the forbidden fruit, which he ate because he wanted to be immortal (A'raf 7/20; Ta-ha 20/120; Genesis 3/4-5). This desire for immortality is the strongest motivator because people do everything with its influence. For example, people eat because they want to survive, they have a child because they want to continue their generations, they write because they do not want to be forgotten. In short, the human being does everything to survive or to become immortal.

Briefly, immortality can be basically the promise of divine religions and also has some psychological basis, at the same time has the subject of important philosophical debates, too. The belief in life after death is so central to human beings that one author contends that "in this fundamental identity between God and immortality priority still belongs to immortality. God would be dead if there were no immortality. And it is plain that survival after death was a commonplace notion long before the idea of a monotheistic God had become widespread"(Lamont, 1936, p. 7; Peterson et al., 2003, p. 195). This study uses the term "immortality" in the sense of eternal life because immortality means "not-dying" and this appears to conflict with the fact that all persons die.

The Desire for Immortality

Undoubtedly, "the desire to live" is the deepest and the most powerful desire of mankind in psychological terms. However, death is an unquestionable reality that every life will end with it, and facing this reality, there are two different forms of movement that emerged in people's life. The first of these is the "avoidance and narcissistic protection" movement, and the second is the "desire for completion." In both cases, human beings want to express their desire to exist forever, and this universal desire is expressed in different forms at the level of belief and thought. The first of these expressions are the "material immortality" which argues that mankind is immortal in terms of the material essence, for, according to this, the eternal and perpetual thing is the only substance, and mankind has a material substance, and this is immortal. The second expression is "biological immortality." Having children is an indication of this kind of desire for immortality because people think that their generation will continue forever through their children. The third expression is the "social immortality" that is thought to be reached by leaving behind works that will be useful to others. All books were written and all kinds of works of art such as painting, music, and sculpture can be given as an example of this kind of immortality. The fourth expression is "personal immortality," which is the view of religions. According to this view, people will be resurrected in a soul-body unity to live an infinite life in a new world in torment or happiness. The fifth expression is "spiritual immortality" which is the view of those who argue that the soul is the true ore that generates people. We can say that the views that reincarnation and the soul will lose its individuality and thus will continue to exist in unity with the universal soul, or that it will live alone forever without the body, are parts of this view. The

approaches that cause religious and philosophical discussion among these five different expressions are understanding of spiritual and personal immortality (Hökelekli, 1991, pp. 163-164).

The Religious Perspective of Immortality.

All the doctrines that claim to be religious, especially divine teachings, can assume the claim of a new life in which there is punishment or reward. All of the divine religions, such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, have taught of new life after death, with minor differences. For example, all these religions say that the human being was created by God, sent to this world to be tested, and eventually will be given eternal life. Eternal life is the promise from these religions to humanity, and this life will be either heaven or hell. This life is one of the most important teachings of these religions, for, if there is no new life, there will be no meaning of religious orders and prohibitions, including things that are to be done or not to be done in the life of the world. In short, death is only a change of dimension not the end of life but merely the change of shape, just like waking up every morning or coming to the world from the mother's womb as a newborn baby.

Philosophy and Immortality

Do people live after death? This is surely one of the most important questions that are asked in the philosophy of religion. Naturally, there are only two possible answers to it. Either humans will live after death, or else they will not. Regarding the theories that deny life after death, "Death Ends All" views and the other theories that accept life after death. "Death New Beginning" views. (Davis, 2000, p. 691)

Among the "Death Ends All" theories, the "Death Ends All" theory dates back to Epicurus and the Flew's claim that life after death is not just false but incoherent need to be revisited. In the views of the "Death New Beginning" concept there are three main sorts of theories that affirm life after death: reincarnation, the immortality of the soul, and the resurrection of the body. All these theories are related to two philosophical problems that bear significantly on this issue, viz., the relationship between the mind and body, and the problem of identity. These two philosophical discussions will be explored.

The first philosophical problem that is importantly related to life after death theories is the problem of mind-body, and this problem, broadly stated, is: How are the physical and mental aspects of human beings related? How are the body and the mind (assuming there are such things as a "mind") related in the human person?

Several major theories of the mind and body have been suggested in the history of philosophy. One of them is a monistic theory that claims to limit human nature to one and only one metaphysical class. We will consider this view kind of materialism. Materialists need not worry about casual interaction between metaphysically different sort of entities, because they claim that there are no mental entities. For example, everything is physical; the only things that exist consist of atoms in motion. Most philosophers who discuss the mind-body problem today defend one or another version of materialism (for example "Identity Theory", "Epiphenomenalism" and "Idealism" etc.)(Davis, 2000, p. 694).

The dualistic theory is another major theory that claims that human beings consist of both physical bodies and nonphysical minds and that the mind (or soul), an ongoing existing thing, is the essence of the person. The dualistic theory known as interactionism is most commonly associated with Descartes's Cogito. According to him, the mind cannot directly cause bodily events, and the body cannot directly cause mental events(Descartes, 1960, p. 69). Believers in "Death Ends All" need not commit themselves to any particular mind-body theory, but believers in reincarnation and immortality, however, must be dualists. That is, if some version of mind-body materialism turns out to be true, those two theories are false. Believers in the resurrection can be either dualists or materialists (Davis, 2000, p. 696).

The second philosophical problem that is importantly related to life after death theories is the problem of personal identity. It is sometimes understood as an epistemological problem, viz., how we could know that, say, a given person before us is the same person as someone we once knew. It is also sometimes should rather be understood as a metaphysical one, viz., establishing the criteria that can be used for identifying and re-identifying persons. On what basis can someone, say, who exists in the afterlife be identified as someone who once lived on earth? (Davis, 2000, p. 696)



The problem of identity revolves around imagined stories that often can be read like science fiction, and John Locke began the trend with his story about the soul of a prince entering the body of a cobbler. (Locke, 1894, pp. 456–457) There are three main approaches to this problem. Those who accept what is called the “memory criterion” (which includes not just memory but other mental characteristics such as personality and dispositions) argue that a given person X is identical to a given person Y if and only if X and Y have the same mind (and thus memories, personality traits, etc.). Those who accept what is called the “bodily criterion” argue that X is identical to Y if and only if X and Y have the same body (at two different times.) The third position has surfaced in recent years. Some who discuss the problem have given up on the task of trying to establish necessary and sufficient conditions of personal identity. There appear to be two main reasons for this. First, some philosophers hold that there is a certain objection to all theories of personal identity that cannot be met, e.g., the so-called “duplication objection.” Second, some philosophers hold that in certain imagined but logically possible test cases personal identity seems either indeterminate or undecidable apart from the arbitrary stipulation. Instead of asking whether some X in the afterlife will be identical to some Y who lives now, they instead ask whether Y will be X’s “closest continuer” or has “psychological continuity” with X. (Davis, 2000, p. 697)

Advocates of “Death Ends All” theories of survival of death need not commit themselves to any particular approach to the problem of identity. Defenders of reincarnation and immortality of the soul must reject the second and third theories in favor of the first. That is, they must argue (1) that the problem of identity can be solved, and (2) that the memory criterion can be sufficient by itself to establish personal identity. Defenders of resurrection must similarly argue that the problem of personal identity can be solved, but can appeal to either the memory or the bodily criterion (or both) is establishing personal identity. (Davis, 2000, p. 697)

In my opinion, if the problem of personal identity is to be accepted as a big problem for the afterlife, it also must be accepted as a problem for earthly life. Let us suppose that there is a man who is in an accident and loses his mind and his face. While he is in a coma, the doctors reconstruct a new face for him. A few months later when the man comes out of the coma and looks in the mirror, will he see himself as the same person or as another person? Will he have forgotten his memories only, or will he also have forgotten himself? I think, even if he has forgotten the memories and has a different face, he will be aware of himself and he will continue to be the same person.

The “Death Ends All” Theories

Many philosophers have taken the approach of “Death Ends All” theory including many of the ancient Stoics, most of the modern Existentialists, and such well-known twentieth-century philosophers as Bertrand Russell, A.J. Ayer, and Kai Nielsen.

According to this view, which Epicurus first argued, “Death, the most dreaded of evils, is therefore of no concern to us; for while we exist death is not present, and when death is present we no longer exist” (Epicurus, 1964, p. 54). His argument can be formulated as follows:

- a) Something can be bad for you only if you exist.
- b) When you are dead you don’t exist. Therefore,
- c) Death can’t be bad for you.

This means Epicurus was committed to the claim that something can be bad for us only as long as we sensation it. Since we do not sense the state of being dead (although we probably will sense to die), the state of being dead is not bad for us (Epicurus, 1964, p. 54; Davis, 2000, p. 699). But this seems false because even things that we do not sense or experience can be bad for us. For example, a person who was born after the death of his parents can never experience his parents' death, but their death is still bad for him. Or, for someone who has lost the sense of suffering as a result of an accident, the painful negative things will still be bad for him, even if he is not in pain anymore. Perhaps this view can be regarded as true for the moment of death, but it does not seem to be consistent to say that it will be valid after death (Feldman, 1991; Rosenbaum, 1986).

Additionally, it seems that Epicurus claims that people fear death because they fear the pain of dying and the threat of a painful afterlife. This claim is not true because these are not the only or even the most important reasons people fear death. Some people fear death because it is unknown; some

fear death because they will have to face it alone; some fear death because it means separating from their friends and loved ones; some fear death. After all, they believe it means their total annihilation. (Davis, 2000, p. 699) For many people, the fear of non-being, of no longer existing, is the chief reason to fear death. In the words of Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno, from his work, *Tragic Sense of Life*:

"For myself, I can say that as a youth, and even as a child, I remained unmoved when shown the most moving pictures of hell, for even then nothing appeared to me quite so horrible as nothingness itself" (Unamuno, 1921, p. 9).

Another important "Death Ends All" theory comes from an essay entitled, "Can a Man Witness His Funeral?" which was written by the famous philosopher Antony Flew. Flew argues that the notion of life after death is incoherent. He offers three related arguments for this conclusion. First, one statement typically made by those who affirm life after death, "We all of us survive death," is self-contradictory. In an airplane crash, there are two mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories, the dead and the survivors. So the question, "Did John (one of the passengers) survive the crash?" makes perfect sense, but the question "Did John survive John's death?" does not. Accordingly, the sentence, "We all of us survive death" has no clear meaning. Second, another statement typically made by those who accept life after death, "We all of us live forever," is simply empirically false because it cannot empirically be verified. Notice, Flew says, that the paradigm true statement throughout the history of logic is the statement, "All men are mortal" is as massively confirmed as any generalization can be, and it is, Flew says, the "flat contrary" of "We all of us live forever." Third, Flew introduces his dictum, "People are what you meet." Person words (by which Flew means words like "I," "me," "you," "father," etc.) refer not to too mysterious elusive things like souls, but real human persons, i.e., bodies plus behavior. We know this because children who have no idea what a soul or immaterial essence might be can use person words perfectly well. Persons are publicly locatable and observable things. You don't ever take a walk or have a conversation with an immaterial essence. You engage in such activities with other human beings-not just with their bodies, of course, but with their bodies plus behaviors. Since the bodies and behaviors of human beings do not survive death, Flew's overall conclusion is that human beings do not and cannot live after death. (Flew, 1955)

We can criticize Flew's claims in those ways. First, all these claims are true if we consider man only as a material entity. Equally, if we accept immortality as the immortality of the material body, this claim will be both logically contradictory and impossible in terms of the laws of nature. However, if we accept death as the suspension of bodily functions (such as sleep or coma) for a certain period, accepting of the survival of death will be logically possible. Second, although life after death is not empirically verifiable, it is also not falsifiable. In this regard, the statements, "All men are mortal" and "There is a life after death" can both be true at the same time. Third, people do not compose of only body and behavior. They must have something different from their body and behavior because sometimes people cannot behave (e.g., in a coma or asleep) but they still a real person.

"Death New Beginning" Theories

There are three main sorts of "Death New Beginning" theories that affirm life after death: the immortality of the soul, reincarnation, and the resurrection of the body. All of these theories, although they have many different aspects, accept that human beings are immortal.

First, the "Death New Beginning" theory that the view of the immortality of the soul is the doctrine that after death a body permanently disintegrates, but the immaterial essence or soul lives on forever in a non-material world. Plato was a great defender of the immortality of the soul, and in several of his dialogues, especially in his *Phaedo*, he suggested various ingenious arguments in favor of the doctrine. According to this view, we are essentially composite beings. Besides the more familiar corporeal element, the body, there is also something else, different in kind -the incorporeal soul. For the duration of a life, the soul is somehow attached to, incorporated into, or imprisoned in its body. Although the soul is incorporeal, it is nevertheless a substance, something that could significantly be said to exist independently of anything else. (Plato, 1875, pp. 54-55; Moore, 1931, pp. 25-26) Descartes also believed that the soul existed before and separate from the body and so was immortal. (Descartes, 1960, pp. 13-15) Furthermore, Immanuel Kant offered a famous "moral argument" in favor of God and Immortality. (Kant, 2002, pp. 155-157; Davis, 2000, p. 703)



The Second, "Death New Beginning" theory, reincarnation, claims that the same human mind (or soul or essence or jiva) successively animates two or more different bodies. That is, after death, a body permanently disintegrates, but the immaterial essence will be reborn in another body. After that incarnation, it will be reborn again many times or perhaps even an infinitive number of times. Now reincarnation comes in many packages, but (as already noted) reincarnationist must hold to some variety of mind-body dualism and must hold that satisfaction of the bodily criterion is not essential to personal identity. Perhaps the most philosophically sophisticated reincarnation theory (along with certain Buddhist views) comes from the Vedantic school of Hinduism. (Davis, 2000, p. 700) However, this theory has some problems. In the most general sense, according to this view, a person who does good things in his life will be reborn in a better body in his next life, while a person who does bad things will be reborn in a worse body, e.g., in an insect body. That is, a soul has come from another living thing and will be reborn in another living thing after this life. Let us suppose, I was a bug in my previous life. In such a situation, what did I do to be reborn in a human body? If I do not remember anything about my previous life, can all this be a punishment or reward for me?

The third theory of "Death New Beginning" is the doctrine that after death, a body disintegrates, but in the future, God will raise it from the ground and reconstitute it as a person. Bodily resurrection is an aspect of the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as many other religions. The idea is that when we die, our bodies disintegrate, but we continue to exist; for an interim time, we exist in the presence of God as disembodied souls only; then one future day God will raise our bodies, reunite them with our souls, and constitute us as a whole and complete persons again. (Davis, 2000, p. 705)

At this point, some thinkers claim that resurrection is a very different theory from immortality. For one thing, it does not have to be based on mind-body dualism (although, as we have seen, it usually is). Resurrection based on an entire materialist notion of human beings is quite possible. For another, the immortality of the soul posits survival of death as a natural property of souls, while resurrection insists that death would mean permanent annihilation for the human person were it not for a miraculous intervention of God that allows for life after bodily death. (Davis, 2000, p. 706)

We cannot prove that it is a new life after death because nobody came back after his death. However, we also cannot prove that there is no new life after death. So, I want to tell an interesting story about twin babies in their mother's womb.

Let suppose that these twin babies that fall into their mother's womb as unaware of everything can think and speak just like us. As they developed, they began to notice what was happening around them. This comfortable and safe place makes them happy and they always say the same thing to each other.

How wonderful is it that we are in the womb of our mother? Life, what a beautiful thing my brother?

As they grew, they have begun to investigate the source of life and they have noticed the navel cord.

How big is the compassion of our mother? She provides us with this cord everything that we need and she feeds us. When they approached the ninth month, they begin to feel some strong changes. One of the twins who has alarmed by the situation asks the other: "What's going on? What does all mean?"

His brother, who knows that this world is no longer sufficient for them and for this reason he wants a wider world, answers him: We are nearing the end of our lives here.

"I don't want to go" his brother screams. "I always want to stay here."

"We can do nothing," says the other. "Maybe there is a new life after birth."

"How could this be possible after the cord that gives us life is cut off? Look at the other people who had come here before. They went and no one came back to tell us about life after birth. No, this must be the end of everything". Even he says "maybe there is also no such thing as a mother."

"She must exist" his brother objects to him. "How else could we have come here, how can we survive"

"Have you ever seen your mother?" asks the other. "Maybe she is just in our mind, maybe we made up her, and having a mother's idea relieves us."

Thus, the last days in the mother's womb pass through with deep interrogations and discussions. Finally, when the moment of birth came, they leave their world and go to another world.

Discussion and Conclusions

Immortality is an irresistible desire that exists in all people and that it must be satisfied. In this respect, if there is nothing after death, it will be uncomfortable in these two respects. First, as Unamuno said, nothingness is the most frightening situation for human beings and it is not at all satisfactory. Second, if death is the end of everything, there is no meaning for the troubles experienced throughout life, and there is no situation that requires moral behavior. For these two reasons, I believe that death should not be the end of everything. If it is not the end of everything, then something must exist after death and this thing that exists after death must be a kind of life. Let us suppose that this life is in another body in this world, as reincarnation suggests. Is it enough to satisfy the desire for immortality? In my view, the answer is "no" because no one wants immortality to mean coming back to the earth as an insect.

The desire for immortality is a truth that exists as a priori in the human being's self, just as the "perfect being" of ontological arguments and the "highest good" of moral arguments. This desire cannot be satisfied in this limited life, therefore, we need another life and this life must be still our life. However, neither the immortality of the soul nor the reincarnation can satisfy this desire. So, in my opinion, this desire will be satisfied only if we can have a new life after death. It is also clear that we cannot have a new life after death, without God, and for this reason, we cannot satisfy this desire that we have as a priori. So, if we are immortal, God must exist, and If God exists, we must be immortal.

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