

IS THERE LIFE AFTER DEATH?

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Abstract: This paper explores the question of whether there is life after death by analyzing the philosophical debate between dualism and materialism and by examining scientific research into reincarnation. The relationship between the mind and body remains contested, which complicates attempts to draw conclusions about consciousness after death. Empirical investigations, such as those by Dr Ian Stevenson, offer intriguing but controversial evidence. Ultimately, the paper concludes that the question remains open, perhaps permanently so, due to both philosophical uncertainty and epistemological limitations.

Keywords: Mind-body problem; Dualism; Reincarnation; Life after death; Philosophy of mind; Consciousness

1 INTRODUCTION

The question of whether there is life after death remains one of the most enduring mysteries of human existence. From a biological standpoint, many scientists argue that death marks the definitive end of a person's existence. However, this explanation may be insufficient, as it presupposes a clear understanding of the relationship between the body and life—or more precisely, between the body and the mind. This essay explores that relationship by first examining the philosophical debate between dualism and materialism, followed by an analysis of scientific evidence concerning reincarnation. The aim is to assess whether either approach can offer a satisfactory answer to the question of life after death.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: DUALISM VS. MATERIALISM

2.1 Defining the Mind–Body Problem

One way of looking at this question is to investigate whether the mind and the body are separate or not. The biologist's position depends on the belief that the biological body is all there is to a human's life. However, this view can be countered by the hypothesis that if the mind and body are separate, then there is the possibility of life after death. Even if the body physically stops functioning, not all of what makes up a person would be gone, and that could be considered 'life'.

When considering whether the mind and the body are separated or not, we should consider two opposing theories: dualism and materialism. To give a brief introduction to these two theories, dualism is the idea that states the mind and the body are separate entities whilst materialism is the idea that everything is ultimately made of material [1].

2.2 Socratic Argument for Dualism

One argument for dualism would be what the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates argues in Plato's dialogue Alcibiades. Firstly, Socrates establishes that the user of a tool or instrument is different from the tool or instrument itself. For example, a shoemaker is separate from the tools that is used. He then goes deeper by stating that there is a user (like the harper and the shoemaker) using tools (their hands and eyes) when carrying out their job. This leads him to draw the conclusion that the mind or the user is clearly distinguished from the physical body (the things used). This line of reasoning supports a dualist perspective by concluding that the mind cannot be equated with the physical and material body, arguing that the mind and body are fundamentally different entities.

2.3 Materialist Counterargument

Meanwhile, a materialist would see this as irrelevant to the mind-body problem with a counterargument. Dualism doesn't allow for a material origin of the mind but when looking at the evolution of the universe, or the fact that only some material things like humans have a mind, materialism begins to seem like common sense. This leads materialists to conclude that matter is fundamental, with the mind emerging as part of the physical body rather than as a separate, immaterial entity. Dualism, by contrast, struggles to account for the material origins of the mind. This materialist view holds that the mind cannot be explained in an isolated, non-physical substance.

3 REVISITING DUALISM: THE QUALITATIVE–QUANTITATIVE DIVIDE

3.1 Descartes and the Nature of Mind

The previous argument for materialism seems logical, but however, there is a further dualism argument that deserves consideration. It famously dates back to Descartes and it is the view that the mind and body are defined by drastically different characteristics[2]. To elaborate on this point, I will use more contemporary concepts. The body is characterized by quantitative properties such as mass, length, volume, which are attributes that can be measured using precise units like kilograms and centimetres. Meanwhile, the mind is defined by qualitative features like intentionality (the "aboutness" of something) and qualia (the quality of feelings and sensations) [3,4]. This makes common sense as it does not make sense to ask, "how many kilograms is your thought?" or "what is the volume of your feeling?".

3.2 Analogy: Mind and Body as Different Modalities

However, it makes sense to ask, "what are you thinking about" or "how did you feel about that". An analogy to this point could be music and paintings. As music is defined by pitch, melody, and dynamics whereas painting is defined by shape, colour and line, it can be said that the mind and the body are just like music and painting where they are defined by completely different things so they must be different and therefore separate. This ultimate divide between the quantitative nature of matter and the qualitative characteristics of the mind provides strong support for a dualist perspective.

3.3 The Interaction Problem

However, a counterargument towards this idea could be what Elizabeth, Princess of Bohemia argued in her correspondence with Descartes that if mind and matter are qualitatively different, they shouldn't be able to interact [5], meaning if the mind and the body were different entities as described in the paragraph above, it would be seen illogical for the two to interact with each other as you cannot change a painting by singing to it nor a melody by painting over it. Yet evidence testified by science experiments or just ordinary human experience on a daily basis disproves the suggestion as the body can influence the mind and vice versa. For example, the body can affect the mind if it takes in alcohol or receives severe harm to the extent of brain damage. Similarly, the mind can influence the body by making the hands balling into a fist if the feeling in the mind is anger or influencing the lower body whenever we want to take a step forwards. This would suggest that the mind and the body are not different and should be considered an integrated entity.

To conclude this debate, there are arguments for both sides but not one than can effectively explain why one side is correct. For example, the point that the mind and the body do interact doesn't address the point of different definitions. It only explains why it shouldn't stand as the perfect argument. Likewise, the point that only some material things have a mind doesn't address the point of what Socrates proposed. Additionally, the idea that matter is fundamental is hardly supported by anything more than theory. To this date, the mind-body problem is an ongoing complex investigation into psychology and philosophy [4]. This problem has a variation of possible solutions but no definite answer and it is thus unable to give a final verdict on the possibility of there being a life after death.

4 SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE: THE CASE FOR REINCARNATION

4.1 Dr Ian Stevenson's Research

Consequently, we would have to look at other sources of evidence. Such evidence could come from scientific research on reincarnation. Scientists have looked at the credibility of reincarnation with the most well-known being Dr Ian Stevenson, who spent nearly half a century investigating this topic. His type of evidence was mainly by studying cases of children, often just beginning to speak, who spontaneously talked about having the memory of a previous life. A typical instance illustrating this phenomenon involves a young boy residing in Beirut. He claimed to have been a 25-year-old mechanic who passed away in a car accident near the shoreline long before the boy was born. Multiple witnesses confirmed that the boy correctly provided the name, exact location of the car crash, and details about his family, despite having no evident association with the dead mechanic's relative [6].

4.2 Supporting Evidence and Criticism

Dr Stevenson believed that reincarnation was the best explanation due to the following reasons: (1) For most of Stevenson's cases, there were a large number of witnesses that could testify for the evidence that what the children were saying about their past lives were correct. These witnesses also didn't have any exterior motives as they had no known benefits or opportunities for them to thrive. This makes the possibility that what the children were saying about their past lives was invalid unlikely. (2) On some occasions had more evidence than just the child able to truthfully provide the details of the deceased, where both the child and the previous person possessed identical congenital deformities or birthmarks. Because both of these characteristics were so unique, the idea that the child was able to accurately give out details of the previous life a coincidence on the occasions described above, seem unlikely [7].

4.3 Dualist vs. Materialist Interpretation

Stevenson's findings caused a lot of controversy. On the one hand, Carl Sagan, a well-known U.S. astronomer and science writer, who is famously sceptic about many unscientific theories, agreed with Dr Stevenson that this was a topic worth studying (though he has not accepted reincarnation this said) [6]. On the other hand, a lot of his colleagues thought otherwise. Paul Edwards, editors-in-chief of philosophical texts of the twentieth century, gave the common response that "the stories were down to selective thinking, suggestions and false memories that are based on the family's or researcher's belief systems" [8], hence not examples of empirical evidence. Additionally, Keith Augustine, a philosopher, wrote that "the vast majority of Stevenson's cases come from countries where a religious belief in reincarnation is strong, and rarely elsewhere, seems to indicate that cultural conditioning (rather than reincarnation) generates claims of spontaneous past-life memories". However, Dr Stevenson has responded with the book *European Cases of the Reincarnation Type* which suggests that it also occurs to people from European cultures, where fewer people believe in reincarnation. Also, for responses such as what Edwards said, Stevenson said they couldn't explain the remarkable claims of the children being able to remember the facts about a life that happened before them.

One flaw of Stevenson's work, something even he admitted, is that he failed to find any physical evidence of reincarnation. However, this piece of information may not play too much importance towards the validity of Stevenson's work as it depends on whether it is assessed by a materialist or dualist. This is because a dualist would say that reincarnation is an immaterial process and therefore shouldn't have any physical evidence to be supported. On the other hand, a materialist would say that matter is fundamental so it must have the physical evidence to prove its credibility.

In short, the debate over whether reincarnation can provide proof of life after death remains unresolved. While cases documented by Dr Ian Stevenson offer intriguing evidence, sceptics raise valid concerns about cultural bias and lack of physical proof. Also, this debate largely relies on the answer on the previous debate on materialism versus dualism, which remains unsettled. Hence, the arguments on both sides have reached a stalemate. There isn't proof to completely answer whether the phenomenon of past life memories can be definitively explained by reincarnation. Therefore, the question of "is there life after death" still open.

5 CONCLUSION

To conclude this essay, the question "is there life after death" is still unknown. Materialists and dualists using their respective arguments cannot make their view stand as the best answer. Further research into reincarnation like Dr Ian Stevenson's work, offers intriguing but controversial evidence, making it not the clear solution. Perhaps the problem of why we cannot give an answer for this question can be best explained by this quote from the essay called "What is it like to be a bat" by Thomas Nagel:

"In order to understand the hypothesis that a mental event is a physical event, we require more than an understanding of the word 'is.' The idea of how a mental and a physical term might refer to the same thing is lacking, and the usual analogies with theoretical identification in other fields fail to supply it".

This quote perfectly but simply summarises why we only have insufficient answers for the question "is there life after death" as it explains how the limitations of the human mind lead us to lack the skillset to have a definite answer. Ultimately the true answer may remain well beyond our grasp.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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