

Evidence For Life After Death

Introduction

It is sometimes suggested that certain paranormal phenomena have a crucial bearing on our understanding of what a person is, and that these phenomena do, or could, provide support for the idea that people live on after what we call 'death'. In this section of the module we will look at some suggestions of this form. My own view, which I will make no attempt to hide, is that such suggestions, at any rate in their most familiar form, involve serious confusions. We will be looking in some detail at the use sometimes made of the phenomenon known as the 'near-death experience' (NDE), and, in particular, of the 'out-of-body experience' (OBE) often associated with this. I will, as I have before, ask you at a number of points to write down your own thoughts on this matter. While strongly urging you to do this, I would also urge you not to be discouraged if you sometimes find it very difficult. Some of the issues that arise here just are difficult. But I think there is a real value in trying to think a question through before looking at my answer: it should help you to assimilate the material, and to bring into focus points at which you disagree with the position that I am defending.

As background to the arguments that I will present, I would like you first to read the paper by Paul Badham, 'The Evidence from Near-death Experiences', which is included as **Document 26**. [This is a chapter from Paul and Linda Badham, *Immortality or Extinction?*] This paper is a strong defence of the kind of view that I will be criticising in this section of the module.

The philosophical significance of NDEs

To have a near-death experience is to have thoughts, feelings, visual sensations, or some other experience while in a state in which one shows (more or less) no external behavioural or physiological signs of life. The grounds for thinking that these occur are the reports of individuals who have recovered after being in such a condition. While it is sometimes suggested that NDEs do in themselves indicate that a person is something quite distinct from the extended, tangible human being that we encounter in normal life, the reports of these patients often have a further striking feature. Those concerned insist that they did, for a period, observe the room, or indeed some other place, from a position external to their body. Furthermore, they are sometimes able to give accurate reports of events that were taking place while they were apparently unconscious and that, in some cases, could not have been observed from the point where their body was at the time. It is concluded that the individual 'left her body' for a period, and so that a person must be something other than the familiar bodily being. This opens up the possibility that I should survive the destruction of this bodily being. Indeed, it might be thought to suggest that it is likely that I will in fact survive what we call 'death'. The grounds for this claim would be that it is clear that in these cases the individual lives on, in a fully conscious state, through a period in which the body is in a state that is very similar to that of death.

Now I believe that all of this involves serious confusions. I do not, in fact, believe that any empirical discoveries could throw doubt on the idea that a person 'the self' is the extended, tangible human being - any more than they could throw doubt on the idea that a table is an extended, tangible entity. A proper treatment of these issues is the business of philosophy, not science, and developments within philosophy during the last fifty years do, I believe, show such 'dualist' - two component - views of

persons to be quite untenable. It is not scientific discoveries that have created the important difficulties for dualist views, and no empirical evidence could do anything to rescue such views. I will not, however, attempt to defend these claims directly. I will argue only for the more modest claim that, at the very least, a considerable amount of work needs to be done at a number of points if it is to be shown that phenomena of the kind I have mentioned bear on our picture of ourselves in anything like the ways suggested. I will not, I should stress, be questioning any of the empirical data that is appealed to here. My suggestion will, rather, be that enormous care is needed in taking even a first step beyond that data.

The evidence for NDEs

The claim that NDEs occur does, in one sense, appear to go beyond the best evidence for them that we could conceivably have. Do you see what I mean in making this claim? Please make a note of what you think I might mean. (You need to focus here on just *what* the evidence is, and on the relation between *when* we have the evidence and the time of the event for which it is supposed to be evidence.)

What I had in mind was this. We can, by definition, have no contemporary evidence that somebody is undergoing an NDE; we are, of necessity, dependent on the memory reports of the subject, since the supposed significance of NDEs lies in the fact that the individual shows no external signs of life at the time.

Should this concern us? Well, consider an imaginary example. Suppose that when rhododendron wine was first produced and drunk it was found to have rather unusual effects. Instead of making people drunk in the normal sense it led them, after one sip, to make a lot of remarkable claims about what they had been experiencing for the last half hour. While they have in fact been sitting in Lampeter talking with us they claim to have had a totally different set of experiences: perhaps of things that have been happening thousands of miles away. Furthermore, it turns out that their reports correspond in a striking fashion to things that were, during that period, happening somewhere else. This would, of course, be an extraordinary phenomenon. Would we, however, be justified in concluding that these people had been having the experiences of which they have memory impressions? Please make a note of your own answer to this question.

It seems to me clear that, at the very least, we would not be *compelled* to draw this conclusion. We could think, instead, of the wine as inducing false memory impressions that are, in a way that we do not yet understand, influenced by things that have been happening in another part of the world during the last half hour. Further, despite the embarrassing incompleteness of such an account there would, on the face of it, be serious difficulties with the suggested alternative. For we would have strong evidence, in the form of his behaviour over the last half hour, that the subject was experiencing nothing resembling what it now seems to him that he was.

But might there not be crucial differences between the above case and that of NDEs? Make a note of your own answer to this question, stressing how the differences you point to are relevant.

One obvious difference between my imaginary example and NDEs lies in the fact that in the latter case the subjects do not, during the relevant period, show unambiguous signs that they are experiencing something *else*. Rather, they show what we would normally take to be fairly unambiguous signs that they are experiencing *nothing at all*. That is a real difference between the cases. It is not, however, clear why this difference should be thought to be of any importance. If a possible - and perhaps the best - thing to say in the case of the rhododendron wine is that it induced false memory impressions, is that not also a possible - and perhaps the best - thing to say of the memory impressions of those who report NDEs?

NDEs and what we are

I have been suggesting that, even if we accept the existence of the evidence that is often appealed to, there is a crucial step from that evidence to the conclusion that NDEs occur: that sometimes people have thoughts, feelings, visual sensations, or some other experience while in a state in which they show (more or less) no external behavioural or physiological signs of life. In the remainder of this discussion I will set those doubts to one side. I will, that is, assume that we have strong grounds for the claim that sometimes people do have these rich experiences when in such a condition. What bearing would this have on our picture of ourselves?

One thing they might show (depending on the details of the physiological data) is that what we experience at a particular time is not totally dependent on the state of our brain at that time. While that will, no doubt, come as a surprise to many we need sharply to distinguish *this* question - the question of what my consciousness is *dependent on* - from the question of what it is that is conscious. Consider an analogy. We normally assume that how well a car goes is crucially dependent on the state of the engine. Suppose, however, that we were presented with startling evidence strongly suggesting that the performance of a car could be affected by influences of a kind that are totally alien to contemporary science. Would such a discovery do anything at all to suggest that my car is not that familiar thing with four wheels, a roof, and so on? Would it support the idea that it is possible for my car to live on after the disintegration of the extended, tangible thing parked outside? This, I take it, is obvious nonsense.

Please now make a note of how the lesson of this example might be applied to the case of people and NDEs. If you have doubts about whether the analogy is a fair one, make a note of those too.

It seems to me that - despite the obvious differences between people and cars - there is an important analogy between the two examples. Thus, it is one thing to ask what a person's states are *dependent on*. That is a question for science. It is quite another to ask what those states are *states of*; to ask, that is, what it is that thinks, sees, is happy or sad and so on. Whether the answer to the first question is 'the brain' or something quite different is totally irrelevant to the second question: neither way will it affect the suggestion that it is the human being that thinks, sees and so on. NDEs cannot in this way give any support to the idea that the person, 'the real me', is something distinct from this extended tangible being, and so might survive the destruction of that being.

Out-of-body experiences

Perhaps, however, these remarks do not give sufficient weight to the way in which patients are able to give accurate reports of what was happening at the time in places not observable from the bed where the human being was lying. Does not this at least suggest that the individual 'left her body' for a period; and so that the real person is something quite distinct from this bodily being? Well, this would be moving a bit too rapidly. The facts so far described are quite consistent with the suggestion that the patient was able to give these reports as a result of signals picked up while she was located where she appeared to be: namely, in bed.

In response to this suggestion, it might be argued that this talk of 'signals', in addition to its unfortunate vagueness, does not do justice to the way in which the individual's perspective on the world was for a period from a point external to the body. It is not merely that she knows what was happening, say, next door. For a period she *saw* things from a point in the next-door room; or, at least, it now seems to her that she did. Does not this suggest that part of the patient was 'outside her body' for that period?

Well even if we agree that it does suggest this (and I will have more to say about this later) there would be no pressure at all on us to identify what left the body with the 'real person'. Can you think of a way in which this point might be illustrated? (What you need to look for here is a good analogy that brings the point out.)

An example that seems to me to make the point well is this. If my eyes were on the ends of long stalks I could observe what was going on next door. I would, no doubt, when particularly absorbed in what I was seeing, half think of myself as being in that room; or perhaps even, momentarily, come to believe that that was where I was. None of this would put any pressure on us to say that I really was next door.

I should stress that I am not offering this talk of 'eyes on stalks' as an alternative account of what is going on when someone has an experience as of 'leaving her body'. I am simply suggesting that we do need to be given some reason for thinking that the occurrence of these experiences should move us in the direction of a dualist view of people: a view that holds that the real person is a non-material mind that is quite distinct from the bodily being.

The explanation of OBE reports

It might be said in reply to this that the relevance of NDEs to the question of what a person is is more straightforward than I have been supposing. The relevance, it might be said, lies in the fact that such experiences simply cannot be fitted into the current materialistic, scientific world view: that the terms employed by modern physics are quite incapable of providing any explanation of the observed facts.

Assuming that this is correct, what conclusions should we draw? We certainly cannot move immediately from here to the conclusion that a person is something distinct from the solid, extended entity that others can see. I can hold that a person is a material being in that sense and yet deny that modern physics has the resources to explain everything that we might want explained. Few, I take it, would be tempted to conclude from spoon-bending of the kind attributed by some to Uri Geller that the things affected, namely spoons, are not in fact material entities. (It may be worth noting here that it is no use responding to such analogies with the observation that

'People are not spoons or cars'. Certainly the differences could hardly be more fundamental. The question is: which difference is relevant to the particular argument that the analogy is used to illustrate?)

Nevertheless, it might be said, a dualist view of persons *can* provide an explanation of the observed phenomena in a way in which no alternative view can. Thus, at least until we have an adequate explanation consistent with the view that the bodily being is the real person, these phenomena should be regarded as grounds for accepting the dualist view.

In response to this I should concede first that I have no idea whatsoever how these phenomena might be explained. I spoke of 'signals' that the patient, in her bed, might be picking up. Let us suppose, however, that we have good reason for ruling out any such explanation: *nothing*, at least of the kind now recognised by physics, is passing from the relevant point in space to the patient in bed. I am left thinking in terms of action at a distance; what happens at one place (the event on which he is able to report) is affecting the patient even though there is *no mechanism whatsoever* that connects the events with the patient.

With this in mind, let us turn to how the dualist theory would explain such veridical OBE reports. If the dualist can do better here than I have been able to then that, surely, would be a reason for accepting the dualist view. But can it?

We are perhaps inclined to see the matter like this: 'On the dualist theory I am something quite distinct from this body. This opens the possibility of explaining veridical OBE reports in terms of the fact that the individual left his body and observed the world from a position external to it'. Traditional philosophical dualism, of the kind associated with the philosopher Rene Descartes, does not, I think, leave room for such an explanation since it does not leave room for the idea that the "real me" has any spatial location. Descartes writes, for example: 'I thence concluded that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature consists only in thinking, and which, that it may exist, has need of no place' (Descartes, *A Discourse on Method*, Part IV). On this view, then, I cannot leave my body since I was never in it. I will not pursue the question of whether some other form of dualism could leave room for the idea that the 'real me' has spatial location since I believe there are further problems.

Perhaps the most notorious objection to dualism concerns the question of the interaction between mind and body. To the extent that one holds that the 'real me' is something quite different in kind from this extended, solid entity, one appears to rule out the possibility of there being any intelligible mechanism that links what happens in the one substance with what happens in the other. Descartes, in my view rightly, was apparently quite unimpressed by this supposed objection to dualism. But the point does, I think, raise a problem for the *argument* for dualism that we are now considering. Try to say in your own words why it does.

The point that I had in mind is this. The dualist explanation of veridical OBE reports indeed -of everything that people do - is going to contain a gap of exactly the same kind as that which is present in my non-dualist account of the situation. I was left speaking lamely of 'action at a distance': of one thing affecting another even though there is no physical mechanism linking the one with the other. Now the dualist can hardly complain that this is a significant gap in my 'explanation' - one that gives us reason to move to a dualist view -if his own 'explanation' of *everything that we do* involves a gap of just the same kind.

One further point can be made here. The suggestion is that veridical OBE reports support some kind of dualism because dualism would allow us to explain the reports in terms of the fact that the individual was for a period located at the relevant place. Now, in normal circumstances we do, of course, take the fact that I was at a certain place at a certain time as explaining the knowledge that I have of what happened there. In a particular case, however, this would be no explanation at all if it were discovered that I had lost my eyes, ears and so on before going there. Would it, then, be an explanation if I had, temporarily, 'lost my body'? I leave this question as an exercise for you to answer for yourselves. (You will, no doubt, be able to guess my answer!)

My perspective on the world

From the point of view that I have been defending, it is a striking fact that we are all, myself included, tempted to interpret the reported phenomena in terms of the individual 'leaving her body'. Many will no doubt feel that it *must* be quite easy to meet the points I have made since, it will be said, this interpretation of the phenomena is so obviously the most natural one. I suspect that this feeling reflects a curious ease with which we slide between two quite different pictures of what a person is. At the same time as trying to bring this out I can, I hope, further undermine our wayward temptations here.

Assume that we have strong evidence for the claim that for a period the individual's visual perspective on the world was from a point outside the physical body. Assume too that for a period the person felt herself to be located at that point. My question is: Should this lead us to say that for that period the person was (or it is likely that she was) situated at a point outside this body? To draw this conclusion we would need to have independent grounds for the following claim: people are (generally) situated at that point from which their visual perspective on the world is - at that point from which they see the world. Without this claim, the inference is quite unjustified. Do we have any grounds for it? On the face of it we do. We might say that we have overwhelming grounds for the claim that, with the exception of cases involving mirrors and the like (which we will assume can be dealt with somehow), people are always situated at that point from which their visual perspective on the world is. Now I think that is right. Leaving aside for the moment the phenomena we are dealing with, namely OBEs, this seems to be a very well-supported universal truth. I do *not*, however, think that this can provide any support for the argument for dualism that we are now considering. Can you see why not?

I suggested that we have good grounds for the claim that people are always (or at least generally) situated at that point from which their visual perspective on the world is. But we only have good grounds for that claim in so far as we can assume that people are *human beings*. For the evidence that we have is this: human beings - these visible, tangible entities that we encounter in our day-to-day dealings with others - are always (or generally) situated at that point from which their visual perspective on the world is. *But this is no use at all for the person who wants to use OBEs to establish some form of dualism.* He cannot use that generalisation in support of his conclusion that the real person is something distinct from the visible, tangible human being. For his argument is only valid if this conclusion is false! (I think the illusion here is one that has a firm grip on most of us. Before reading on, please

make sure that you are quite clear about the suggestion I have been making – whether or not you accept it.)

That leaves us with the question: if one thinks that the person is something distinct from the human being - as one must if one is going to claim that in these cases 'people do leave their bodies' - what grounds can one have for the claim that people are (generally) situated at that point from which their visual perspective on the world is? What one needs is the following: people are generally situated inside human beings. Assuming that we are dealing with a form of dualism within which this *makes sense*, it is not at all clear what could count as evidence for it. At any rate, until we are shown how this claim might be supported we appear to have no grounds at all for moving from the suggestion that the individual's perspective on the world was, for a period, from a point of view external to her body to the conclusion that the individual was, for that period, situated at that point. The idea that the 'real person' is the crying, talking, sleeping, walking human being is quite untouched by these phenomena.

I must make one further point here. To say that there is a confusion in the way in which NDEs are sometimes appealed to as 'evidence of the spiritual' is *not* to say that there need be a confusion in the thought of those whose lives are turned around by their own experience when they come close to death. For the effect which this has on their view of life need not run through any theory about what a person is. Indeed, quite independently of the kind of experience that I have been discussing, I would be rather surprised if an individual's life was not significantly affected by his recognition that he had been close to death. We might even think that a failure to be moved in this way would be evidence of a certain shallowness in the person. But of course the change in him would not normally have anything to do with a new piece of 'evidence' that he has acquired.

Further reading

Antony Flew, *The Logic of Mortality*, ch 10

Paul and Linda Badham (eds), *Death and Immortality in the Religions of the World*, papers by Flew and Berger

Christopher Cherry, 'Are Near-death Experiences Really Suggestive of Life after Death', in D. Cohn-Sherbok and C. Lewis (eds), *Beyond Death*

Christopher Cherry, 'Near-death Experiences and the Problem of Evidence for Survival after Death', *Religious Studies*, vol 22, 1987.

John Haldane, 'A Glimpse of Eternity: Near-death Experiences and the Hope of Future Life', *Modern Churchman*, vol 30, 1988.