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Challenging Religious Issues

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Supporting A-level Religious Studies. The St Mary's and St Giles' Centre

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Supporting Religious Studies at A-level and beyond

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Mind after Death? Substance Dualism, And the Near-Death Experience

Mark Fox

This article seeks to explore the possibility of the mind's survival of death by examining the philosophical position of substance dualism while making specific reference to near-death experiences.

Specification Link: WJEC RS4 HE: Studies in Religion and Human Experience (A2). Life, Death and Life after Death.

Believing in life after death

Despite their variety and differences, almost without exception the world's religions include some sort of belief in life after death. What form that belief takes varies from religion to religion and includes concepts as diverse as resurrection, reincarnation and the continued existence of some sort of disembodied soul.

But what would be required for the 'I' that is writing this article to continue to exist in some form beyond the end of its current physical, this-worldly existence? In what follows I will attempt to answer this question, drawing in particular on insights from within the philosophy of mind and making specific, critical reference to a position popularly known as 'substance dualism'.

It seems clear that if 'I' am to survive my death and continue into some sort of non-physical post-mortem existence this will require some kind of non-bodily continuity of my existing sense of self, with all its attendant thoughts, memories, feelings, personality dispositions and mental processes. Those who would wish to assert that mind is simply the same as brain would, of course, at once object to any such possibility. Any such ontological reduction of mind to brain would simply preclude such a possibility: for if mind and brain are one, then once the brain has ceased to function any kind of mental processes required to produce a sense of self would cease also. It seems clear, then, that for any kind of continued life after death to be possible the 'I' must be in some sense separate from – and capable of functioning independently of – the body.

Near-death experiences

In recent years this possibility has been given potential evidential support from so-called near-death experiences (NDEs). Such experiences are widely reported within all cultures and seem to happen whether the experiment has any kind of existing religious belief-system or not. Occurring during episodes of apparent clinical death when all vital signs indicative of life are apparently absent, such experiences typically start when persons suddenly find themselves 'hovering' over their newly-dead bodies. Following this, other reported events include a sense of moving through darkness towards a light and entering some kind of transcendent realm. The following extract from a testimony provided by a resuscitated person includes a number of features typical of NDEs.

> All of a sudden I knew that I was dead. This realization struck me as odd. I hovered about twenty feet above my body, which was still on the operating table. I was surrounded by doctors who were talking to one another, but I didn't hear their voices. I also saw my husband waiting on a bench in a darkish room somewhere in the hospital. He was nervous. He was rolling a cigarette. From one moment to the next I found myself flying through a tunnel. It was extremely long, and I flew through it head-first. The tunnel was virtually horizontal, but at a slight upward angle. It was about 10 feet in diameter. I heard a whizzing sound, like wind blowing past my ear, and in the distance I saw a bright light, which I was being sucked toward, but which still seemed a long way off. And all this time I felt scared, powerless, and lonely, because nobody knew that I was aware that I was dead. I wanted to either return or not be aware of my death. But clearly I had no choice in the matter. (Van Lommel, 2010, p. 29).

If all mental processes are ultimately reducible to brain processes and this experient was genuinely clinically dead then such an experience should not occur: for clinical death would include brain death and with this all mental processes would stop. Yet a second glance at the above account shows that mental processes are very much in evidence: there is a realisation that death has occurred, together with continuing perceptions and feelings of fear, loneliness and powerlessness. Perhaps most oddly of all, however, the experience starts with the subject apparently 'hovering' over her body viewing the doctors, and then making specific observations of her husband – 'He was rolling a cigarette' – somewhere else in the hospital. That the experience has been remembered at all is also highly odd: for it is now generally accepted that memories are 'laid down' in the brain and this should not be possible in a brain that has ceased to function.

Philosophy and substance dualism

Perhaps, then, accounts such as these are revealing that mind and brain are *not* the same, and that at death the mind simply 'escapes' the body and continues to exist, allowing the continuation of a range of mental contents including thoughts, feelings, perceptions and memories. As is well-known, such a position is widely supported by many of the world's religions but what is perhaps less widely known is that it has a rich philosophical history also. In book ten of

The Republic, for example, Plato talks about a warrior, Er, who was thought to have been killed on the battlefield and was mistakenly thrown on a funeral pyre to be burned. Er was not dead, however, and upon regaining consciousness was able to describe in detail a 'journey' to another world in which he encountered other souls who were either dying or waiting to be reborn.

The most famous philosophical proponent of the view that minds and bodies are not the same, however, is Rene Descartes, who lived between 1596 and 1650. Philosophically, his position is referred to as 'Cartesian dualism' and it is a variant on the more general position known as 'substance dualism': the notion that minds and bodies are ontologically distinct and not the same thing at all. There is no evidence that Descartes was familiar with what we today call near-death experiences. In fact, he was a philosopher for whom experience was not primarily to be trusted, what we would today call a *rationalist* philosopher: that is, one for whom reason – and not experience – is the primary means of gaining knowledge of what is real. In his sixth *Meditation*, Descartes provides a series of 'thought experiments' designed to demonstrate purely through reason that the mind and the body (including the brain) are not the same. These are complex and have attracted detailed philosophical critique, but in essence he invites the reader to reflect on properties and processes that minds have but that bodies do not and cannot have. In this way he seeks to show that they are not, therefore, the same. For example: he argues that it is impossible to doubt that you are a thinking thing, for in the act of doubting this you are actually thinking and so affirming the very thing you are trying to doubt. By contrast, he asserts that you can very easily doubt that you have a body. In a similar way he argues that it is impossible to imagine away your essence as a being that thinks, but it is very possible to imagine your body away. In these and other ways Descartes thinks he has discovered mental properties and operations that are not shared by the body, and therefore that minds and bodies cannot be said to be the same. Further, Descartes defines the body as possessing extension: that is, occupying space. By contrast, he asserts that minds *lack* extension: their essence is thought and whilst you can destroy anything that possesses extension you cannot destroy something that doesn't. So in addition to proving that minds are distinct from bodies, Descartes also thinks that he has proved that while bodies are mortal and can be destroyed, minds are immortal and hence cannot be.

It is clear that, if accepted, these arguments would lend powerful support to the notion that while death may mark the end of my *body*, it cannot and does not signal the end of my *mind*. If this or any other form of substance dualism could be shown to be the case, then we are offered hope that death is merely an event in the ongoing life of the mind. It would also lend powerful support to the view that near-death experiences should be taken at face value as providing experiential confirmation of what can also be proved philosophically.

Weaknesses of Cartesian dualism

But how strong *are* the arguments for substance dualism? Descartes' own arguments attracted powerful criticism even during his own lifetime. One main problem with his position – and that of substance dualism generally – is known as the 'problem of interaction'. Simply stated: if, as substance dualists assert, the body and mind are completely different things, how do they interact? Surely, if they are as radically different as Descartes supposed, with one possessing extension and the other not, how might the soul 'act on' the body in such a way as to make the body do its bidding? And how might what the body perceives through the senses be 'relayed' to the mind if they are completely different things? Descartes could never satisfactorily answer this question, and offered more than one solution before effectively giving up. At first he proposed that mind and body interacted at the pineal gland in the brain, asserting that its particular 'lightness' and location made it an ideal meeting point of mind and body. When it was pointed out that, light as it as, the pineal gland was still extended and that his proposed 'solution' did not do justice to the sense that bodies do not just interact with minds at one single point but throughout, he proposed a second position in which the mind and body were intermingled not at one point but throughout. Finally – apparently despairing at finding a solution to the problem of interaction – Descartes declared that it was a mystery known only to God. Whilst this may be true, it hardly qualifies as a solution to the problem. It may very well be the case that Descartes failed to find an adequate solution because his whole division of mind and body was flawed.

Equally problematic for substance dualism is an empirical objection. Simply stated: we do not reasonably doubt that we have bodies, but the same cannot be said of non-bodily minds. We can simply and easily detect our bodies via any of our senses. But we cannot do this with 'disembodied minds'. Being effectively invisible – or undetectable through any of our other senses – we might reasonably doubt whether such things exist at all. Of course, it could be countered that even if minds are 'nothing but' brains, their actual mental contents are equally invisible. However, supporters of the view that minds and brains are in some sense one might point to the known correlations that exist between mental states and corresponding brain-based processes. To do full justice to these additional issues would take us beyond the boundaries of this article; but a suspicion remains that the invisible, non-detectable mind or soul of substance dualists stands in need of some sort of empirical support and is based on weak philosophical foundations.

Near death experiences and substance dualism

Might near-death experiences be providing much-needed support for substance dualism? As we have already noted, there is no shortage of accounts of such experiences and they are reported from within all cultures by persons of all religions and none. Many such accounts contain apparently accurate descriptions of their surroundings made by persons allegedly temporarily apart from their bodies which, it is alleged, simply could not have been made unless they really *were* in some sense disembodied. However, all *experiments* that have attempted to locate objects in operating theatres in

vantage points only accessible if persons were apart from their bodies have failed to derive a single correct identification. Time will tell if this situation changes. For now, it would appear that substance dualism is a philosophically problematic position to hold and remains in need of greater experiential support than its adherents have been able to supply. Perhaps the post-mortem survival of 'I' in the absence of a functioning body is reliant on something other than its existence as a thing wholly separate from my brain.

Glossary

Empiricism: the philosophical position that experience alone can provide reliable knowledge.

Ontological: to do with the nature of being. (From the Greek *ontos*, meaning 'being'.)

Rationalism: the philosophical position that reason alone can provide reliable knowledge.

Substance dualism: the philosophical position that asserts that minds (or souls) exist independently of bodies.

Links

http://iands.org/home.html(The International Association for Near-Death Studies).

http://www.amazon.co.uk/Religion-Spirituality-Near-Death-Experience Mark/dp/0415288312/ref=la_B001 HQ4DZ4_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8 &qid=1391469920&sr=1-2(Look inside: Mark Fox, Religion, Spirituality and the Near-Death Experience).

Discussion points

1. How far do the weaknesses of substance dualism damage belief in the immortality of the soul?
2. In what ways might near-death experiences provide support for the view that death is not the end of mental processes?
3. Might it be possible to construct another argument for substance dualism that does not share the weaknesses of Descartes' arguments?

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Jeremiah

Gareth Lloyd Jones

This article places the message of Jeremiah in its historical and theological context of the early sixth century BC. It examines the nature and purpose of the call narrative, comments on an acted parable, considers the reasons for the judgemental nature of his preaching and demonstrates his hope for restoration.

Specification link: WJEC RS3 BS: Studies in Biblical Studies (A2), 4. Later Prophecy.

Historical and theological context

By the rivers of Babylon

The Old Testament tells the story of the Israelites against the backdrop of five great empires: Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Greece. Each imperial power in turn dominated the ancient Middle East. Lesser nations became subject to them and paid tribute.

By 605BC the Babylonians, under King Nebuchadnezzar, had conquered the Assyrians and defeated the Pharaoh of Egypt in battle. The kingdom of Judah, which had been allied to Egypt, refused to pay tribute. So in 598BC Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem, took the king, Jehoiachin, to Babylon and appointed a new ruler. But Judah continued to rebel. The Babylonians returned in 587BC. This time they dealt a fateful blow by destroying the Temple, stealing its treasures, executing the king, and taking the cream of the population into exile in Babylon. The story of this devastating attack is told in Jeremiah 52. Nebuchadnezzar came back again in 583BC to ensure complicity, after which the people of Judah (now known as 'Jews' for the first time) caused him no further problems.

Born into a priestly family in about 650BC, Jeremiah ministered to the people of Judah during these fifteen tumultuous years (598-583BC) which mark the beginning of a very significant period in Jewish history known as 'The Exilic Period'. The Exile lasted almost 50 years (587-538BC), during which the leading families of Judah were held captive in Babylon (see Ps.137). Jerusalem was in ruins. The remaining population of Judah, leaderless and hopeless, was kept in line by a Babylonian governor.

When theology fails

The Exile was a time of challenge and change for the Jews not only politically but also theologically. The traditional theology of ancient Israel contained 3 crucial beliefs which are mentioned frequently in the Book of Psalms, the Jewish hymnbook, all of which were undermined during this crucial period.

- *An elect nation.* The exodus from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan were regarded as demonstrations of God's love for his chosen people and his power over the enemy. Their status as this powerful God's special possession convinced the Israelites that no harm would ever come to them. (See Ps. 105:43-44.)
- *An everlasting dynasty.* God chose David to succeed Saul as king of Israel. Because he had made an unconditional promise of protection to him and his descendants, the nation believed that God would ensure that the monarchy would last for ever. (See Ps. 89:35-36.)
- *An impregnable city.* David made Jerusalem his capital. Solomon then built the Temple as a house for God. Because of God's presence, the Israelites regarded the city as being impregnable. No enemy would ever capture her. (See Pss. 46:4-5; 84:7; 99:2.)

In times of crisis Israel clung to such positive teachings. But now the elect nation had been exiled, the royal family eliminated, the city looted and the Temple destroyed. It seemed as if God had rejected his people. Far from being Israel's friend and protector, he had become her enemy. The Jews could not make sense of the anguish they had to endure. They wondered: Is God powerless? Is he fickle? Is he dead? If not, why had he broken his promises? The failure of the old theology led to perplexity and despair. (See Ps. 44.)

The call to prophesy: Jer. 1:1-19

A description of the call to prophesy is a familiar feature of the prophetic books (Dell, 2008, p. 158). It is recorded in order to justify the words and actions of the prophet. Divine initiative gives his message authority, especially when his preaching abandons traditional theology, and consequently finds little favour in the community (Brueggemann, 1997, p. 630).

The call of Jeremiah shares common elements with the call narratives of other prophets:

- *Message: 1:10.* The call narrative encapsulates the two main themes of the book: judgement and salvation. Jeremiah is instructed 'to pull down and to uproot, to destroy and to demolish'. His mission, like that of Amos, Hosea and Micah before him, is to preach judgement. He castigates the people of Judah for breaking God's laws. But demolition is not the last word. There will come a time for building and planting. Destruction will be followed by regeneration. The future is not without hope.
- *Protest: 1:6-8, 17-19.* Jeremiah protests that he cannot possibly be God's spokesman. He has no gift for public speaking; in one sense he is only a child. This lack of confidence recalls the reaction of Moses (Ex. 3-4) and Isaiah (Isa. 6:1-5) who resist the call of God, insisting that they are inadequate and unworthy. But as in the case of his predecessors, God rejects Jeremiah's plea. He promises

to protect him and give him the strength to carry out his mission.

- *Visions:* 1:11-16. As in the case of Amos, Isaiah and Ezekiel, vision plays a crucial part in the call of Jeremiah. An almond tree and a cauldron supply the imagery for his message. The interpretation of the symbols undermines the old theology by expressing God's determination to punish his disobedient people.

Preaching judgement

While the religious leaders complained that God had abandoned his people, Jeremiah came to a very different conclusion. He claimed that the destruction of Jerusalem had been engineered by God himself. It was punishment for breaking the covenant, divine judgement on a sinful nation. For those brought up on the traditional theology, his words were anathema. He inevitably came into conflict with 2 groups of people:

- *Religious officials.* He accused them of idolatry. He criticised them for teaching that the city would never be captured because of the presence of the Temple, or predicting that the Exile would soon end. False prophets lulled the people into a false sense of security by saying 'all is well'. How could they say this, knowing that nothing is well (6:14)? He advised the people not to trust them (7:1-15).
- *State officials.* Though Jeremiah's message was essentially spiritual, it had political consequences. In true prophetic tradition he fought for social justice. He condemned the authorities for ignoring the commandments. He accused the king of avarice and oppression (22:13-19). Because he believed that a Babylonian victory was decreed by God, and therefore inevitable, he called on the Jewish military commanders to open the gates of Jerusalem and save the city from destruction. Only thus would Judah avoid a catastrophe (34:1-4).

Because Jeremiah's mission was to announce the demise of the triumphalist theology of the past by pronouncing God's judgement on the nation and warning the people that they were living in a fool's paradise, the ruling élite were outraged. On account of his negative attitude towards Temple worship, the religious leaders sentenced him to death for blasphemy (26:11). Though he escaped execution, the state officials imprisoned him on the charge of treason (38:1-6). Even the inhabitants of his native village, Anathoth, plotted to kill him (11:21). His entire ministry revolved around this clash with his contemporaries.

Acted parables

In order to drive home their message, the prophets often engaged in acted parables or symbolic acts. Isaiah walked naked through the streets of Jerusalem for 3 years depicting the enslavement of the Egyptians by the Assyrians (Isa. 20:1-4). Ezekiel shaved his head and placed the hair in three piles to depict the fate of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians (Ezek. 5:1-4). The action was more than a visual aid used to explain some point. It contained a truth. It was believed that the act itself could precipitate the event that was being symbolised. If the message was destruction, the devastation would begin with the acted parable. Jeremiah used this method several times. Let us consider one example, that of the linen

girdle in 13:1-11 (Stacey, 1990, pp. 131-138.)

Jeremiah buys a girdle or undergarment and wears it. He then takes it off and hides it among some rocks on the banks of the river Euphrates (Perath). After a while he returns to retrieve it and finds that it was spoilt. Three explanations of the act's symbolism are given in verses 8-11:

- The girdle is a symbol of friendship and intimacy. Just as a girdle is worn next to the skin, so Israel was once close to God. During the early period in her history she followed him faithfully. God bound her, like a girdle, to himself. She was his favoured nation.
- The useless garment symbolised faithlessness and disobedience. Just as the girdle was taken away and left to decay, the Jews would go into exile beyond the Euphrates. Because they had forsaken God, and refused to listen to him, they would languish in captivity.

By means of this symbolic act Jeremiah announces the doom awaiting Judah in no uncertain terms. See also 13:12-14; 27:1-11; 28:10-17 for other acted parables symbolising judgement.

The 'confessions' of Jeremiah

Because every sermon he preached widened the breach between himself and his fellow Jews, Jeremiah often reflects on his own pain and disappointment. He struggles with being faithful to his calling and responding to his own desires. Tormented by doubt, isolated and frustrated, he expresses his despair and takes God to task for calling him. This happens in six chapters: 11:18-23; 12:1-6; 15:10-11, 15-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-18. Though these are called 'confessions', they are presented as prayers. They are similar in content to psalms of lament in which an individual complains to God and seeks deliverance (e.g. Pss. 3, 5, 6, 7).

Most of Jeremiah's 'confessions' share common characteristics:

- *Cause.* The occasion for the lament varies, but it reflects some trauma in the prophet's life. In 12:6 he agonises over the prosperity of the wicked. In 15:10 and 20:14 he laments the day of his birth. In 15:18 he has lost faith in the promises of God. In 18:18 his enemies bring charges against him.
- *Vengeance.* The vehemence with which Jeremiah prays for vengeance is most marked in 18:21-23. But see also 12:3; 17:18; 20:12.
- *Response.* God responds to the lament sometimes by recognising that worse is to come (12:5-6), and sometimes by assuring him of protection and the vindication of his mission (15:19-21).

These sections are unique in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament. The private side of the prophet rather than the public comes to the fore. These are glimpses into his personal diary. But it is difficult to link them to any particular time in his life. They most probably belong to the middle period of his ministry, before the fall of Jerusalem, when the people's refusal to listen to him became obvious.

Hope for the future

We have noted two elements in Jeremiah's ministry: negative and positive. Undoubtedly judgement comes

to the fore most frequently in the book. But chapters 23-24 and 29-33 contain a message of hope. Chapters 30-33 are known as 'The Book of Consolation'. Because they contradict the rest of the book, some commentators regard these sections as later additions, the work of others who developed Jeremiah's preaching in the period of the Exile. While the probable answer is that they are a mixture of both, they pursue a theme which is integral to Jeremiah's message. For although he announced God's judgement, he saw beyond it to a time of renewal and restoration (Gowan, 1998, p.115). The trauma of exile was a door to a new beginning. Israel had forsaken God, but God would not forsake Israel. Two themes in these chapters deserve notice:

- *Individual responsibility: 13:27-30.* Though God promised restoration, many were doubtful. Surely, they argued, the present generation was doomed because of the sins of their ancestors. Had not God said that he would punish the children until the third and fourth generation for the sins of their fathers (Ex. 34:7)? This firm belief in corporate responsibility was expressed in a popular proverb: 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge' (see also Ezek. 18:2; Lam. 5:7). The same idea appears in the New Testament. On the streets of Jerusalem Jesus saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him: 'Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' (Jn. 9:1-2). Jeremiah rejected the idea that children were penalised for the offences of their forefathers. He dismissed the proverb and stated categorically that a new generation could arise from the ashes unburdened by the past.
- *A new covenant: 31:31-34*. This passage has been described as one of the most important in the book of Jeremiah, the theological high point of the prophecy. The historical background is the Sinai covenant which God made with Israel soon after the Exodus. Its continuation was conditional on the nation's obedience. The people had not only failed to keep the Law, they seemed incapable of keeping it. Jeremiah asks pointedly: 'Can the Nubian change his skin, or the leopard its spots? And you? Can you do good, you who are schooled in evil' (13:23)? The problem is solved by having a new covenant in which God will give the nation not only the strength but also the desire to keep the Law. All will come to know God, in the sense of accepting his lordship and doing his will. Perhaps the most important section is the last clause of verse 34. Reconciliation and renewal are possible because God is ready to forgive. He will take the first step to break the endless spiral of sin and punishment by granting forgiveness. The God of Israel is a God of grace.

Discussion points

1. To what extent does the office of the prophet invade his personal and spiritual life?
2. How does Jeremiah respond to historical events?
3. Why and how does Jeremiah make the transition from judgement to promise?

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Blasphemy and Free Speech

Richard Bartholomew

This article explores why governments have had laws against attacking religion, using Britain as the primary example. It shows that concern has evolved from protecting religion as the basis for civil order to protecting religious minorities from vilification, but that recent trends have prompted campaigners to assert 'the right to offend'.

Specification link: RS3 CS: Studies in Religion in Contemporary Society (A2), 1. Religion and Contemporary Issues.

Introduction

In the 1760s, the jurist William Blackstone defined blasphemy in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England* as an offence

> against God and religion … by denying [the Almighty's] being or providence, or by contumelious [i.e. insolent] reproaches of our Saviour Christ. Wither also may be referred profane scoffing at the holy scripture, or exposing it to contempt and ridicule. (Blackstone 1979 [1769], p. 59)

Blackstone reasoned that blasphemy – along with other 'gross impieties' such as profane cursing or working on the Sabbath – needed to be punished '*pro salute animae*' ('for the safety of the soul') of the offender, and 'for the sake of example' to wider society. In particular, Blackstone warned that without the belief that God will dispense rewards and punishments in the future, the basis for ensuring truthfulness when giving evidence under oath would be weakened or even 'overthrown' (Blackstone, 1979 [1769], p. 44).

Blackstone thus articulated a rational justification for the law of blasphemy that would make sense within the context of the Age of Enlightenment: his analysis does not invoke the possibility of supernatural causality, whereby a society that tolerates a blasphemer risks angering God. That was the reasoning of the law code compiled under the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Emperor Justinian in the sixth century, and which was influential in the history of Europe. Justinian's Code explained that blasphemy needed to be punished to prevent God from inflicting famine, earthquakes or pestilence on the population (Goodich, 2007, p. 56; Levy, 1995, p. 50). For Blackstone, the law of

blasphemy protected true religion, which in turn protected society from human failings and malice.

Blasphemy and law in Britain

A law against blasphemy protected Christianity in Britain up until 2008, although the nature of that protection became increasingly circumscribed during the twentieth century. In 1797, a bookseller named Thomas Williams was sent to prison for having published and sold a text called *The Age of Reason*, by the political activist Thomas Paine. Paine was a deist, meaning that he believed in a creator God but not in religious revelation, and his pamphlet attacked the historical claims and moral teachings of the Old Testament. Williams's prosecution was brought by the Society for Carrying into Effect His Majesty's Proclamation against Vice and Immorality, which had been founded by the anti-slavery activist William Wilberforce (Levy, 1995, pp. 332–338), and took place less than ten years after the French Revolution. At this time there were fears that attacks on religion would lead to the same kind of violent excesses that had been seen across the English Channel, although another man, Richard Carlisle, was also convicted of publishing the same work in 1818.

The nineteenth century saw the publication of many books that undermined traditional Christian teaching about the Bible or the origins of the world. However, the general attitude was that free enquiry into religion should be allowed, but not gratuitous insult. Another jurist, Thomas Starkie, wrote a treatise on libel and slander in which he argued that:

> society [is] more than compensated for the partial and limited mischiefs which may arise from the mistaken endeavours of honest ignorance, by the splendid advantages which result to religion and to truth from the exertions of free and unfettered minds … The law visits not the honest errors, but the malice of mankind. (Starkie, 1830, pp.146–147)

In 1882 a freethinker named G. W. Foote was sent to prison for having published cartoons that mocked the life of Jesus (Levy, 1995, p. 487), and in 1922 John William Gott was sentenced to hard labour for publishing anti-religious booklets that the judge felt might provoke a breach of the peace. In particular, the judge noted a passage in which Gott compared Jesus to a circus clown; this was in reference to a Bible passage (Matthew 21:7) which describes Jesus as riding both a donkey and its colt (Lester, 2005, p. 223). However, no further prosecutions occurred until 1977, when the conservative 'taste and decency' campaigner Mary Whitehouse brought a private prosecution against *Gay News* for publishing a sexually explicit poem that suggested that Jesus had been a homosexual with multiple partners. The publisher was given a suspended prison sentence, and the House of Lords refused an appeal. Speaking in the Lords in 1979, Lord Scarman argued that blasphemy laws should even be widened to protect other faiths.

> The offence belongs to a group of criminal offences designed to safeguard the natural tranquillity of the kingdom. In an increasingly plural society ... it is necessary not only to respect the differing religious beliefs, feelings and practices of all but also to protect them from scurrility, vilification,

> ridicule and contempt. (Scarman, quoted in Lester, 2005, pp. 222–223)

Ten years later, there were calls by Muslims for Salman Rushdie to be prosecuted for having written a literary novel which some Muslims considered to be blasphemous (Hare, 2010, p. 293).

From blasphemy to 'religious hatred'

Plans to repeal the law against blasphemy were announced in 2004. However, this did not mark the end of the state's interest in curtailing certain forms of hostility to religion: the Home Office explained to the media that it was considering the change as part of a 'wider context' of a new offence of 'incitement to religious hatred' (quoted in BBC, 2004a). The state was no longer concerned about 'offence against God', or in using God as an 'invisible policeman' to persuade people to tell the truth; rather, as Scarman had identified more than thirty years previously, there was a concern with managing a multicultural society in which minority religions are associated with particular ethnic groups.

The Racial and Religious Hatred Act was introduced in 2006, and the crime of blasphemy was abolished two years later. However, the Act did not simply add 'religion' to existing legislation relating to race; instead, it had its own legislative provision, and the offence was confined to 'threatening' words (Hare, 2010, p. 296). Further, the final form of the Act included the explicit proviso that:

> Nothing … shall be read or given effect in a way which prohibits or restricts discussion, criticism or expressions of antipathy, dislike, ridicule, insult or abuse of particular religions or the beliefs or practices of their adherents, or of any other belief system or the beliefs of its adherents, or proselytising or urging adherents of a different religion or belief system to cease practising their religion or belief system. (quoted in Hare, 2010, p. 296)

This was added in response to a campaign by free speech advocates, including the comedian Rowan Atkinson, whose comedy routines have included satirical comment on religion. Speaking to the House of Lords in 2005, Atkinson argued that the original form of the Act:

> promotes the idea that there should be a right not to be offended, when in my view, the right to offend is far more important than any right not to be offended, simply because one represents openness, the other represents oppression … The Government claims that one would be allowed to say what one likes about beliefs because the measure is not intended to defend beliefs but believers. But I don't see how you can distinguish between them. (Atkinson, 2005, p. 60)

A further criticism of the Act was that it was by no means clear that such a measure was needed, given that the 1986 Public Order Act already prohibited 'threatening, abusive, or insulting words or behaviour within the sight or hearing of a person likely to be caused harassment, alarm, or distress', and that a 2001 amendment introduced a 'religious aggravation' to this offence. Further, legislation against incitement to racial hatred is applicable to religion when an ethnic community is intended: Jews and Sikhs are explicitly protected, and courts have interpreted the term 'Muslim' in specific circumstances as having been used racially in a way that is

interchangeable with 'Pakistani' (Hare, 2010, p. 307).

One such case of 'religiously aggravated harassment' came to court in Carlisle in 2011, and involved a man who had burnt a copy of the Qur'an in the centre of the town as a protest against Islam. In contrast, six people who burnt a Qur'an in a pub garden in Gateshead and posted a video to YouTube in 2010 were arrested, but it was decided not to prosecute because there was insufficient evidence that 'harassment, alarm, or distress' had occurred.

Protecting feelings

The issue of free speech, blasphemy, and religious hatred is broader than simply whether certain statements or acts fall foul of criminal law. Believers (and other sympathisers) may also urge broadcasters or publishers to refrain from disseminating a particular work on the grounds that it is offensive. In 1995, Channel 4 broadcast a controversial Hollywood film entitled *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which had been made seven years previously but never shown on British television. Many Christians interpreted the film as suggesting that Jesus was prey to sin like other humans, and in a letter to the *Times* a member of the House of Lords put forward the case against the film's broadcast.

> Such treatment of Christ is, to a Christian, as shocking and unacceptable as similar treatment of their husband or wife would be to anyone else who was happily married. This is why the often repeated comment, 'if you don't like it you can turn it off' really does nothing to make the broadcasting of such material acceptable. One does not have to stay in a room to hear one's wife slandered; but the fact of the slander is no less deeply offensive, and the injury to her reputation no less real, because it is uttered in one's absence. (Elton, 1995, p.19)

Discussions about 'belief', 'feelings', and 'offence' need to bear this very real emotional context in mind. For some religious traditions, a perceived insult is a challenge that needs answering: in 2004, a play depicting sex abuse and murder inside a Sikh gurdwara (temple) prompted hundreds of Sikhs to demonstrate outside a theatre in Birmingham, with one protestor quoted as asking, 'would any religion take it?' (quoted in BBC, 2004b).

In the case of Islam, this perspective can have international repercussions, with the perceived toleration of blasphemy in a Western country provoking protests and even violence abroad. This was seen in relation to the *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad cartoons controversy, in which a Danish newspaper published satirical depictions of the prophet Muhammad in 2005 as part of a debate over whether commentators were self-censoring opinions about Islam out of fear.

In recent years, Islamic nations have sought international protection for Islam through the United Nations via a resolution on the 'defamation of religions' proposed by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The resolution argued that 'defamation of religions and incitement to religious hatred in general could lead to social disharmony and violations of human rights', and that there was a need to 'effectively combat defamation of all religions and incitement to religious hatred in general and against Islam and Muslims in particular' (United

Nations Human Rights Council Resolution, 10/22).

The Resolution was opposed by many Western countries on free speech grounds (Heneghan, 2012), and because religions are not persons and so cannot be defamed (although, as we have seen, Rowan Atkinson argues that there is no such distinction between beliefs and believers). In 2011 an alternative resolution was proposed, 'Combating Intolerance, Negative Stereotyping and Stigmatization of, and Discrimination, Incitement to Violence and Violence Against, Persons Based on Religion or Belief'. This resolution (of the Human Rights Council, 16/18) 'condemns any advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence', but its advice to states concerned promoting non-discrimination by officials, protecting religious expression, and undertaking 'education and awareness-building'. This approach received the support of the USA and other Western countries.

Conclusion

Blackstone wrote his explanation for having a law against blasphemy at a time when it was taken for granted that true religion should receive the protection of the state for the benefit of society. In Britain that is no longer the case: first, a distinction was made between not believing in a religious truth and insulting religion; and, second, in a society that has largely become secularised anyway, protecting religion no longer serves any purpose as regards maintaining civil order. However, we have laws about speech to protect reputation, against obscenity, and to protect public order: and the development of a concept of 'religious hatred' shows concern with protecting religious minorities from vilification. Countries where religious belief is still protected wonder why, therefore, we would *not* choose also to protect sacred beliefs from gratuitous insult.

Links

http://www.richardwebster.net/abrieflhistoryofblasphemy.html (A brief history of blasphemy).

http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/resources/topics/blasphemy-and-freedom-of-expression (Blasphemy and Freedom of Expression: Resources on Faith, Ethics and Public Life at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs).

http://www.religionlaw.co.uk/ (Religion Law UK).

http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02595a.html (Blasphemy, *Catholic Encyclopedia*).

http://old.shipoffools.com/Cargo/Features99/Features/Brian.html (Comedy or Blasphemy, Ship of Fools).

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/7889974.stm ('Satanic Verses' polarising untruths, BBC).

Discussion points

1. Why do you think laws against blasphemy in Britain broke down?
2. Why might the British Government have felt the need to introduce a 'religious aggravation' amendment to the 1986 Public Order Act in 2001?
3. Are laws regulating speech relating to religion anomalous in the twenty-first century?

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Are We Free Beings?

Adam Willows

What free will is, and whether or not we have it, are two of the most interesting and enduring problems in philosophical and theological thought. This article discusses some of the key questions and ideas regarding free will, including the nature-nurture debate, predestination, and causal determinism.

Specification link: WJEC RS3 PHIL: Studies in Philosophy of Religion (A2), 4. Are We 'Free Beings'?

Free will and free action

'They may take our lives, but they'll never take our freedom!' This is the rallying cry of William Wallace in the 1995 film *Braveheart*. Is he right? In one sense it looks like Wallace is obviously wrong. There are several ways for the English army to deprive him of his freedom. They could conquer his homeland; lock him up; or simply kill him. In another sense, though, he seems to be correct. No matter what they do, his enemies cannot make him want the same things they want or think the way they do. In this way, he will always be free.

These two senses of freedom illustrate the difference between freedom of will and freedom of action. Freedom of the will has to do with the ability to make choices, to have one particular motive rather than another. Freedom of action has to do with the ability to put those choices into effect, actually to do whatever it is that we are motivated to do (Albritton, 2003, pp. 408-423).

Although free action and free will are not exactly the same, they are still closely related and whether we act freely is an important question in determining whether we have free will. This is because our free will is needed to have free action. In order to put our choices into effect (free action) we must be able to make choices in the first place (free will). It seems clear that our freedom of action is partial at best. There are sometimes things beyond our control that prevent us from acting exactly how we choose. However, if we can *never* act freely, then that suggests that we do not have free will. This is why questions about free will are often put in terms of whether or not we can act freely.

Restrictions on free will: Nature and nurture

I have said that our freedom of action is partial: there are certain things that prevent us from acting the way we choose. There are also things which seem to restrict our free will in a similar manner. The nature-nurture debate is focused on the way our genes and our experiences affect our behaviour. Our genes can make us more likely to behave in certain ways or have particular behavioural characteristics. Similarly, our environment – our upbringing, society, country, etc. – can impact on the way we think and behave. *Hereditarians* tend to emphasise the role that our biological make-up has in affecting our behaviour. *Environmentalists* focus on the effects of our surroundings. Each side accepts that both play an important role, but disagree over the extent to which they matter (Paul, 1998, pp. 81-91). Whatever the exact relationship between heredity and environment, it seems clear that together they have a significant effect on the way we think and act. Even if we have free will, these two factors may predispose us towards making particular choices, making it harder to choose to act differently.

Theological restrictions on free will: Sin and predestination

Sometimes we do something we know we ought not to, or even that we would rather not do. We can feel so overwhelmed by weakness of will or temptation that we give in. Often this forms bad habits, and the force of habit makes it easier and easier to keep doing the things we wish we did not. In his *Confessions*, Saint Augustine talks about this self-made restriction on our will: 'I sighed after such freedom, but was bound not by an iron [that is, fetters] imposed by anyone else, but by the iron of my own choice. The enemy had a grip on my will and so made a chain for me to hold me prisoner' (Augustine, 1992, 8.5.10). Augustine sees sin as imprisoning his will, so that by himself he is unable to choose to act in the right way. He is clear that we have free will, but he thinks that it has been warped and restricted by our sinful behaviour until we can no longer make certain choices.

If our will is so bound up by sin that we cannot choose the right thing, Augustine needs to explain what is happening when people come to belief in God. How is it that they are able to make this good choice? Augustine's answer is that humanity is saved from sin by grace. This means that it is God's free gift alone, and not human effort, that releases someone from the bondage of sin. The doctrine of predestination holds that since it is entirely down to God which people are saved, then it seems that those who are saved are *predestined* by God to be so; God decides beforehand who will be saved. Another theologian, Pelagius, disagreed with Augustine. He thought that humans were free to choose the good by themselves, without God's help. Sin is not something that totally restricts us, and those who are saved are not predestined to be so (McGrath, 1994, pp. 21-23). The debate has been characterised in the following way: Pelagius leaves more room for free will, but reduces the role of God in salvation; Augustine gives God a more central role, but restricts free will. This way of looking at their positions is too simplistic. Augustine would insist that we still have free will, and Pelagius thinks that although he sees God's role in salvation as different from Augustine, it is not diminished.

Determinism

So far, I have looked at ways in which our free will might be affected or restricted to a greater or lesser degree. Now we turn to a position that some people think rules out any possibility of free will at all. This is *determinism*: the view that, given certain preconditions, all events are inevitable. The way that things happened is the only way they could have happened, and future events – including human thoughts and actions – are similarly determined.

Causal determinism holds that the course of events is wholly determined by natural laws. Everything that happens is preceded by a cause. That cause itself must have a cause, which also has a cause, and so on. Physical laws determine that the same cause will always produce the same effect. This means that the chain of causation is set in stone. Everything that has happened and will happen is an inevitable consequence of the events which came before causing the events that follow.

It often seems that determinism rules out the possibility of free will. If everything is decided in advance, then we are doing none of the deciding. Some thinkers, though, have argued that it is possible to have free will even if determinism is true.

Incompatibilism and libertarianism

Incompatibilism is the view that if determinism is true, free will cannot exist. This is because, according to incompatibilists, to have free will we have to be able to do something different from what we actually do; we have to have choices. Imagine I am faced with a dilemma at a restaurant: do I eat the cake or the ice cream? If I have free will, it seems that I must be able to choose one or the other. It is possible that the future involves my eating cake; it is just as possible that it involves my eating ice cream. What will decide the matter is my free choice.

If determinism is true, then this scenario is not possible. I may deliberate between the two options, but the outcome of my deliberation is already settled. Because of the way the universe began billions of years ago, it was always the case that I would sit here, deliberate and finally choose the cake. There was never any possibility of my choosing the ice cream. What decided the matter was a causal chain stretching back to long before I existed.

According to determinism, the future – including our choices – is already set. Incompatibilists think that the possibility of a different future is needed for free will. They can therefore take one of two different positions. The first is that determinism is true and we have no free will. The second is that determinism is false, and so we do have free will. The first view is sometimes called *'hard' determinism,* and is quite an unusual position to take. The second is called *libertarianism*, and is much more common.

Different libertarian positions focus on explaining how our will and action work, if they are not part of a deterministic system. Some libertarians try to explain how the will could be uncaused without being random; these are called non-causal theories. Other libertarians argue that we do cause our willing and action, but that this is a special kind of cause which is not itself caused or part of a deterministic system. These are called agent-causal theories (O'Connor, 2013).

Compatibilism

Compatibilism is the view that free will and determinism do not rule each other out. Because compatibilists are determinist while still believing in free will, they are sometimes called *'soft' determinists.*

How is it possible that I can have free will if all my future motives and actions are already decided? Compatibilists have a different idea about what exactly free will is. They think that as long as my choices are causing my actions, then I am free – even if my choices are already set. Return to the restaurant. The compatibilist accepts that I was always going to choose the cake, but points out that the eating of the cake is still down to me. I still consider the two options and choose to eat the cake. It is my choice, and nothing else, which affects the future. It is because of me that the cake is eaten.

On this understanding of free will, it does not matter that I can never do anything other than what I actually do. What matters is that what I do is down to me. My actions are still part of the causal chain, but that chain runs through my will. Even if determinism is true, it is my will that causes me to act, and therefore I am free.

Free will and moral responsibility

Part of the reason that questions about free will are so important is that they have a big impact on moral responsibility. This relationship between freedom and moral responsibility was of great importance in the disagreement between Pelagius and Augustine. Pelagius did not see how humanity could be held responsible for sin if we are unable to do good without God's help. Augustine thought that we are still responsible for our deeds even though without grace we cannot avoid sinning.

It is usually thought that if we are going to be held morally responsible for something, we must have had free will and free action in doing it (Clarke, 1992, pp. 53-72). This is because if something is our free choice, it seems to indicate that we had control over it. If I have control over an event it marks it out as 'mine' and it can be attributed to me: this is sufficient to make us responsible for it (Duff, 1998, para. 4). For good or ill, the event in question is down to me.

If an action is not down to my free will, then I cannot be responsible for it. This point forms the basis for a general criticism of the compatibilist position. A lot of thinkers argue that the compatibilist account of free will is not sufficient for moral responsibility: that is, it does not allow us control over our actions. If I could never have done anything other than what I actually did, then I do not have control over it and hence am not morally responsible.

One response to the claim that compatibilist free will does not allow moral responsibility is to say that what matters for responsibility is voluntariness, not the ability to do otherwise (Pink, 2004, 74-79). If my act is voluntary, it means that it was caused by my choice – even if I could not have chosen anything else. This seems enough to be able to call the action mine, and make me responsible for it.

Link

http://www.iep.utm.edu/freewill/ ('Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy': article on free will, including arguments for and against incompatibilism and compatibilism [you will want to pass over the formal logic passages!]).

Discussion points

1. Is it fair to hold someone responsible for doing something their genes and environment make them more likely to do?
2. Does Augustine's idea of grace affect free will?
3. If the way I act is down to my decision, does it matter whether or not I could have done something else?

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