

1 The Faces of Immortality

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I

Is there an afterlife or any reasonable possibility of an afterlife, or is belief in an afterlife – of a post-mortem existence – somehow incoherent, or is it instead merely a false belief? Given the new philosophical dispensation in the aftermath of the undermining of foundationalism, it is better for secularists such as myself to ‘split the difference’ and contend that conceptions of the afterlife are so problematical that it is unreasonable for a philosophical and scientifically sophisticated person living in the west in the twentieth century to believe in life eternal, to believe that we shall survive the rotting or the burning or the mummification of our ‘present bodies’. There are questions of fact here, questions of interpretation of fact, and questions of what it makes sense to say which come as part of a package, and it may well be that in some instances it is not so easy to divide these questions so neatly. In a good Quinean manner I will let philosophy range over all these considerations.

If immortality is taken, as I shall take it, in a reasonably robust way and not simply as the sentimentalism that we shall live in the thoughts of others, belief in the afterlife – or so I shall argue – is so problematical that it should not be something to be believed. It is a belief, depending on how exactly the afterlife is construed, that is either fantastically unlikely to be true, or is instead an incoherent belief which could not possibly be true. Bodily resurrection, one of the reigning conceptions of the afterlife, may well, on some of its formulations, be a coherent belief (at least on some readings of ‘coherent’), but it is a belief which is very unlikely indeed to be true. Its unlikelihood rests, as I shall show, on a number of grounds. One of them is, of course, the non-existence of God. If there were a God and He was what, say, Orthodox Christianity takes Him to be, we might take bodily resurrection to be a straight matter of faith.¹ Even so, I will argue, there will still be extraordinary difficulties, difficulties so great that not a few believers in God have turned away from any such conception. They have, that is, opted for belief in God without belief in immortality. In this context we should keep firmly in

mind that if the grounds for believing in God are scant the grounds for believing in bodily resurrection are doubly scant. Belief in it is a considerable scandal to the intellect.

I shall, after some preliminaries, start with a discussion of bodily resurrection, go on to a discussion of disembodied existence, and finally turn to a last cluster of considerations of broadly moral and human rationales for having a concern for immortality and having a hope that it may, after all, be a reality. This last consideration will be linked to the claim made by some that belief in immortality is necessary to make life in an otherwise intolerable world have some sense in the face of what, some argue, would otherwise be human despair, a despair that is inescapable where human beings come to escape double-mindedness and face non-evasively the bleakness of their lives without God and the possibility of eternal life.²

II

In speaking of immortality we are speaking of the endless existence of a person after what we call her 'death' or at least the death of her body. What is agreed on all sides, and what is an inconvertible fact, is that after a time for all of us our bodies cease to be energised and left alone they will simply rot, and no matter how they are manipulated, when they are thoroughly in that state there is no evidence of their ever being re-energised. (In that respect we are not like batteries.) Believers in immortality believe that, all this to the contrary notwithstanding, we, as human beings, persons, selves, somehow do not really die but have instead an endless existence after such a de-energisation and disintegration of our bodies or (if you will) our 'earthly bodies'.

Jewish, Christian and Islamic defenders of immortality take two fundamentally different positions in their characterisation of the afterlife. The first position I shall characterise is probably the more religiously orthodox position and the second position, until rather recently, would more likely appeal to philosophers and perhaps even to common sense since the time of Descartes, and in certain strata of society extending down to our own time. Since I believe both views are fundamentally defective, I shall not be concerned to take sides with respect to them, but to be, after a characterisation of them, concerned to critique them both. The two views are, respectively, bodily resurrection by God to eternal life, and Cartesian dualism with

its belief in an indestructible, immaterial individual self distinct from the body in which this self is said to be housed. This self is also thought to be capable of, without any body in which it must be housed, to exist as a disembodied individual who is also a person.

Belief in bodily resurrection is clearly something deeply embedded in the orthodox Judaeo-Christian-Islamic traditions. Unless we take seriously the idea that there could be, and indeed there actually is, a God and that He, being omnipotent, could do whatever is logically possible, bodily resurrection is a very difficult thing in which to believe on empirical grounds. On those grounds it just seems utterly fantastic and no doubt is something whose reality is very unlikely indeed. However, it appears at least not to be an incoherent notion, at least if we take an incoherent notion to be a notion which is logically impossible, for example, 'a round square', or not understandable (comprehensible), for example, 'Reagan sleeps faster than Thatcher'. People on such an account, when resurrected, do not have to be radically different from those men and women we meet on the street, including ourselves, where as Antony Flew once put it, 'People are what you meet. We do not meet only the sinewy containers in which other people are kept, and they do not encounter only the fleshy houses that we ourselves inhabit'.³ Rather the people we meet are flesh and blood individuals: energised, purposively acting bodies through and through a part of the physical world (if that isn't a pleonasm).

What bodily resurrection teaches us is that we embodied beings will survive the death of our present bodies and that our post-mortem existence, though in certain respects it will be very different, will be, ontologically speaking, in a manner essentially similar to our pre-mortem existence. We will come to have, when resurrected, an energised physical body essentially like that of our present body except that it will be a better one, though better along familiar lines, and differing from our present bodies in that it cannot ever wear out or become de-energised. It must, and will, last forever. (It is like the suit in *The Man in the White Suit*.) We have an energised body, and, as we go along the history of our life trajectory, that body at some time ceases to be energised and then, perhaps after considerable decay or even disintegration, gets, according to the bodily resurrection story, a refurbished or a reconstituted body and, most importantly of all, it gets a re-energised body as a dead battery gets recharged. We are rather like a lake, to switch the analogy, that dries up and then, on the same lakebed, refills again. Peter Geach, a

stalwart defender of bodily resurrection, forcefully puts the matter in this way:

The traditional faith of Christianity, inherited from Judaism, is that at the end of this age the Messiah will come and men will rise from their graves to die no more. That faith is not going to be shaken by inquiries about bodies burned to ashes or eaten by beasts; those who might well suffer just such death in martyrdom were those who were most confident of a glorious reward in the resurrection. One who shares that hope will hardly wish to take out an occultistic or philosophical insurance policy, to guarantee some sort of survival as an annuity, in case God's promise of resurrection should fail.⁴

Leaving God out of it, the notions of inert bodies being re-energised or even particles of dust being brought together and formed again into a single body and then re-energised are logical possibilities (in the philosopher's sense of that phrase) and in that sense (a sense familiar to philosophers) these notions are coherent.

Of course, to say that something is logically possible is not to say much. It is logically possible that Geach might sprint from Leeds to London in three seconds or eat a thousand ears of corn in two seconds, though we better not ask for a story about how he will do these things. Similarly, it is logically possible that I might grow an aluminium exo-skeleton just as the metamorphosis in the Kafka story is, as the logical positivists used to say, consistently describable. However, that is a kind of low-order coherence if coherence at all. It is in reality no more than a necessary condition for coherence. What it does mean is that we know what it would be like to see a metallic substance spreading all over Nielsen's body and for his bones and the like to turn into something like iron rods. And we can follow the Kafka story. But we do not at all understand how such things are causally possible. They make no sense at all in terms of what we know about the world. (All we have are mental pictures here but still it does not appear that any syntactical rules have been violated.) And it is not even clear that we know what it would be like to see Geach run from Leeds to London in three seconds or even in three minutes. Suppose I were in an aeroplane at a very high altitude with very powerful binoculars. I could possibly spy out Geach at Leeds in his running shorts starting with the starter's gun and then track him as he ran – now in three seconds – to London, though, if we get specific,

what it would be like to carry out such a tracking so rapidly is hard to say. However, I do know or think I know, what it would be like three seconds later – though I would have to move my binoculars awfully fast – to spy out Geach or a Geach-like replica at the outskirts of London. Given, as I remarked, the speed of his alleged running, the tracking (the very idea here) gets more obscure. What, for example, would it be like to see him running at such a speed? (But perhaps I could have a movie camera and replay the whole thing in very slow motion. Still he must have moved his arms and legs with incredible speed. And how did he do that? How is that possible? For God, all things are possible but not for Geach.)

Such stories depend for their intelligibility on their being under-described. The more we, remaining stubbornly literal, try to fill them in, the more problematical they become, namely, their intelligibility, and the less coherent they seem. (Philosophers talk of ‘the limits of intelligibility’ but we have no clear idea of what we are talking about here.)⁵ Still, perhaps no contradictions are involved in their characterisations: problematicity and doubtful coherence yes, inconsistency no, or perhaps no. (Still, what is or isn’t consistent is not always easy to ascertain.) Where no disembodiment assumptions sneak in by the back door to carry the self from one body to the next, bodily resurrection seems at least to be some kind of obscure logical possibility. Still that is not saying very much at all.

Many logical possibilities are not genuine possibilities. It is totally irrational for me to believe I can levitate, survive in the winter outside in my swimming trunks at the North Pole, or that this body of mine will go on functioning in good order indefinitely. Is it not just as irrational to believe in bodily resurrection? Well certainly it is *without* a belief in the God of Judaism, Christianity or Islam. But with it, it is not so clear. Recall that for those religions God has promised such a resurrection and for God everything is possible. God, that is, is conceived of as omnipotent which entails that He can do anything that it is logically possible to do. (But He cannot create a round square – a clear logical impossibility.) So if you can come to believe in the God of these three sister religions – and continue to conceive of Him in a fairly orthodox way – you can come, readily enough, to believe in immortality in the sense of bodily resurrection though it also may cut the other way too, for some may feel that if to believe in God one must believe in bodily resurrection then one can hardly believe in God. (Perhaps we need something like reflective equilibrium here.) If our faith commits us to things like that, it is not unnatural to believe, then it is hard to be a person of faith.

However, again an extreme Fideist, remembering his James Joyce, may believe that if it is logically possible, and indeed humanly speaking necessary, to believe in one absurdity, that is, God, it is easy enough to believe in another, that is, bodily resurrection. Still, I think that it is reasonable enough to say that, if there is a God, and if He is as He is portrayed in the orthodox Judaic, Christian and Islamic traditions, then it is not unreasonable (scandal to the intellect that it is) to believe in survival through bodily resurrection. Theologians may debate over exactly what is the least imperspicuous representation of this, but that it will occur is itself reasonable to expect *given such background beliefs*. (But we should not forget how arcane and implausible these background beliefs are, beliefs which include the idea of there being an infinite disembodied individual who is both an *individual* and omnipresent, and is an individual, and a person as well, that is transcendent to the world.)

It is, I believe, for reasons such as this that Godfrey Vesey, after arguing that bodily resurrection is a coherent notion, remarks that 'bodily resurrection is a matter of faith, not of philosophy'.⁶ If one has the faith of a Jew, Christian or Moslem, one can reasonably believe in bodily resurrection, if not, not. However, philosophy, or at least reflective deliberation, need not stop just where Vesey thinks it must, for we can, and should, ask whether this faith is reasonable or indeed, for us (that is we intelligentsia), standing where we are now, knowing what we know, not irrational (viewed from a purely cognitive perspective). We should also ask, irrational or not, whether we should, everything considered, crucify our intellects and believe in God and bodily resurrection even if such beliefs are irrational. (There may be a case – a reasonable case – as we shall see later, for sometimes, if we can bring it off, having, in certain very constrained circumstances, irrational beliefs.)⁷

It is because of such considerations that I, in several books, have laboured hard and long over questions about the necessity of faith and over whether belief in God is reasonable, if we have a good understanding of what our situation is.⁸ I have argued, as has Antony Flew in a rather parallel way, that belief in an anthropomorphic god is little better than a superstition, and that belief in God, when conceptualised in the non-anthropomorphic way, is incoherent.⁹ The non-anthropomorphic conceptualisation is where God has come to be conceptualised, in developed Judaic, Christian and Islamic traditions, as an infinite immaterial individual, omnipresent, but still a person transcendent to the world (to the whole universe). It is this concep-

tualisation that we are maintaining is incoherent. It is a conception, incoherent as it is, that is beyond reasonable belief for a person in the twentieth century with a good philosophical and scientific training. (For those who are not in a good position to be cognisant of its incoherency it is another matter.)

I hasten to add, lest I seem both unreasonable and arrogant in making the above claim, that reasonable people can have, and perhaps are likely to have, *some* unreasonable beliefs. I am not saying, let me repeat, that educated religious believers are unreasonable, while I am plainly reasonable. That would be gross hubris and silliness to boot. But I am saying that their belief in God, and with that, their belief in bodily resurrection, is unreasonable. However, I am also saying that *if* it were reasonable to believe in the God of our orthodox traditions, it would not be unreasonable to believe in bodily resurrection. So I have, in my work, concentrated on belief in God, and not on immortality, taking the former belief to be the central thing on which to concentrate.

It is hardly in place for me to repeat my arguments here or to try to develop new ones. However, if, on the one hand, they, or some more sophisticated rational reconstruction of them, are sound, or, if, on the other hand, arguments against the existence of God like those of Wallace Matson or J. L. Mackie are sound, or by some rational reconstruction could be made so, then belief in bodily resurrection is unjustified. (For the same conceptualisation of God, they cannot, of course, both be sound.) I should add here that both Matson and Mackie profess (strangely it seems to me as it does to Flew as well) to have no difficulties with the intelligibility or coherence of God-talk.¹⁰ (They are the atheist counterparts or *alter egos* of Swinburne and Penelhum.) We say that belief in the God of developed forms of these traditions is incoherent; they say, by contrast, that the belief is merely false or at least on careful scrutiny clearly appears to be false. The Matson-Mackie arguments, that is, are arguments claiming to establish that belief in God, though coherent, is unjustified, and that it is more reasonable to believe that God exists is false than to believe in God or to remain agnostic. But in either eventuality, it is unreasonable to believe in bodily resurrection. If either the Flew-Nielsen coherence arguments, or the Matson-Mackie arguments about justifying belief in God, or an appeal to faith are sound, then, given the radical diversity of putative revelations, belief in God for philosophically informed people is unreasonable. And if belief in God is unreasonable, it is surely not reasonable to believe in bodily

resurrection. But if one or another of these skeptical arguments are not sound or cannot be made so with a little fiddling, and if we are justified in believing in God or perhaps justified in accepting such a belief as an article of faith, then belief in bodily resurrection seems to be reasonable *if* God is what the orthodox say He is. (I say 'seems' for, as it does to Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, such talk might still seem to be such an intellectual affront that it would be more reasonable and, morally more desirable, to somehow construe the whole matter symbolically as do Niebuhr and Tillich.)

Before I leave the topic of bodily resurrection I should note that there is a felt difficulty concerning it that some, in a way that baffles me, find naggingly worrisome.¹¹ Suppose Sven dies and rots and eventually turns to dust and indeed further suppose his grave gets upturned and the dust, which is all that he is now, is spread randomly by the wind. God, being omnipotent, at the Last Judgement gathers these specks of dust together and reconstitutes them into an energised body that looks exactly like Sven and has all the memories Sven had, but, the objection goes, what appears is not Sven,

the very same person that died previously but merely a replica or simulacrum of him: for, since there is a time-gap between death and resurrection, during which the original body may very well have been destroyed altogether, the connecting link that would make it unambiguously the same person and not a replica will have disappeared.¹²

There are a number of things that should be said here. First, there is no reason, unless we gratuitously assume some very strange physics, to believe that the connecting link is broken: that there is not a bodily continuity. Those specks of dust scattered about and mixed with a lot of other dust are still the specks of dust of Sven, and God, being omnipotent, can readily gather up all the specks of dust and only those specks of dust that are Sven and reconstitute Sven and re-energise Sven's reconstituted corpse. For a while we have bits of Sven and then we have Sven all together again. That should not be difficult at all for God, given His intelligence and omnipotence. There is nothing there that should be *conceptually* puzzling. First we had Friday's *Globe and Mail* and then we had bits of paper scattered all over and then we had them all gathered up and pasted together into *The Globe and Mail*.

We no more need to speak of a gap-inclusive entity here than we need to speak of a gap-inclusive entity between my old battery which had gone dead and the same battery re-energised. There is no more a gap in identity between the human being first energised and then in turn de-energised and then re-energised again, than there is between the live battery, the dead battery and the battery charged up again. In both cases we maintain bodily continuity. The ashes of my pet canary, in a container on my desk, are still the ashes of my pet canary. The same physical entity transformed. God has a little more work cut out for Him in putting Sven back together again than the garage mechanic who charges my battery. (God, unlike the king's men, would have no trouble with Humpty-Dumpty.) But then again, God would not be God if He could not do it. There surely are no logical impossibilities here that omnipotence could not overcome unless perhaps omnipotence is itself an incoherent notion. (I shall assume here it is not.)

Secondly, certainly it could – and perhaps just as well – be a replica and perhaps there would be no verifiable difference between a situation describing the real Sven and a situation describing his replica. But this by now should not be in the least surprising. It is just the old story of theory being *undetermined* by data. Both descriptions make verifiable claims but perhaps there is no *further* verifiable claim that will enable us to decide between them, but post-Quinean philosophy of science has taught us to be neither surprised nor disturbed by that. There will often be a proliferation of theories all equally, or at least apparently equally, compatible with the same observed and perhaps even the same observable data. We must choose between theories on other grounds, and if Jews, Christians or Moslems have independent reason for accepting the God-centred narrative, then they can safely and reasonably ignore replica possibilities. They are not going to get certainty but then, as fallibilism has taught us, we never do in any interesting cases and, after all, why must they have certainty? They can instead be sturdy knights of faith confident that they have deflected philosophical arguments designed to show that talk of bodily resurrection is incoherent. Defeating such rationalism, they can live as persons of faith in their trust in God's promised resurrection: a promise that human beings will rise from their graves and die no more.

III

Let us now turn to an examination of a defence of immortality rooted in Cartesian dualism. That is, we will turn to claims to disembodied existence. There are Christians (Geach, for example) who vehemently reject such a conception of immortality as a philosophical myth which they take to be intellectually unsupportable and religiously unnecessary. There are other Christian philosophers who fervently wish that it would be true but are not even convinced that the very idea of disembodied personal survival is not nonsense.¹³ Believers often see the claim to disembodied personal existence as a conception of Greek origin, refurbished and streamlined by Descartes. Many of them claim that it is in reality foreign to a genuinely biblical world view. Whatever may be the larger truth here, we should note that in contrast with the biblical world view, which is more communitarian in spirit, the Cartesian view nicely meshes with the intense individualism of the modern period.¹⁴

However, as has been pointed out, Jesus's own sayings about the afterlife are ambiguous as between the resurrection of a material body and a 'spiritual body' (whatever that means).¹⁵ Later Christian thought has also waffled here. It has tended to teach the ultimate resurrection of our earthly bodies, no matter how long dead or in what state of decomposition, while permitting the average believer to expect an immediate transition of her soul at the moment of death.¹⁶ Yet, a not inconsiderable number of believers, particularly *some* Protestant Christians, and, among them some philosophers, have opted (even in the age of Ryle, Wittgenstein and Dennett) for a disembodied self and the form of immortality that goes with it. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that even some atheists have believed in this form of immortality (for example, McTaggart). However, it is only against the background of a biblical world view that such a purely speculative conception, at least *prima facie* implausible, is of much interest. Christians, understandably, long for life eternal in the fellowship of God and it has come to seem to a not inconsiderable number of them that the best face that can be put on this is to see ourselves, if this can be justifiably done, as disembodied selves: spiritual continuants whose very spirituality (thinking, willing, feeling non-materially) is what makes us what we are. It is this that is our essence. This Cartesianism seems too much untutored common sense in many modern Christian environments (more likely so in Orange County than in Scarsdale) to be a clear enough notion, but

many philosophers and theologians have found it very baffling indeed. Can we actually attach sense to the thesis that persons can exist disembodied? Can we be disembodied continuants who are also individuals who are, as well, persons? (Even if somehow we can attach some sense to the notion we have a long way to go to the making of it a belief that can plausibly be thought to be true.)

Hywel Lewis is just such a Christian philosopher. Lewis does not think 'that any case for immortality can begin to get off the ground if we fail to make a case for dualism'.¹⁷ He is fully aware that many able philosophers think a belief in disembodied personal existence or in disembodied persons is an incoherent belief, devoid of any intelligible sense, and he is concerned to make a case for rejecting that (among philosophers) widely-held belief. He attempts, that is, to defend a belief in disembodied personal survival. In its classical Cartesian form it maintains that persons are real selves or souls, namely particular immaterial conscious things (continuants) which have feelings and thoughts, are capable of willing and acting and which are only contingently connected with the bodies ('physical bodies', if you will) in which they are sometimes housed.

It is this self – a self by which each person is what he is – which each of us, in our own direct, immediate experience, realises is distinct from the body and is capable of being what it is even if there is no body at all. We, the story goes, just experience ourselves as distinct from our bodies. Lewis thinks that this is just a *datum of experience*. Our sense of self-identity, which is prior to any conception we have of personal identity, just tells us that this is so. We are each directly aware of ourselves as we are directly aware of being in pain or of having a sudden thought.

A standard problem for any belief in an immaterial self is over how it is possible to individuate this self (distinguish it from other selves) since it does not have a body. Lewis in defending his view that a knowledge of an immaterial self is just a datum of awareness remarks:

There must, then, I agree, be individuation. But how is this possible if the immaterial substances in question cannot, as the thought of them would seem to imply, 'be individuated by spatial relations'? This problem, I must now add, does not worry me a great deal, and it never has. It has always seemed evident to me that everyone knows himself to be the being that he is in just being so. We identify ourselves to ourselves in that way, and not in the

last resort on the basis of what we know about ourselves. The reaction to this is sometimes to retort that we seem to be running out of arguments, and we must surely make our case by argument. This is a trying situation for a philosopher to have to meet; quite clearly he does not want to seem unwilling to argue. But argument is not everything, we have also to reckon with what we just find to be the case, we cannot conjure all existence into being by argument and we cannot, as I hope does not sound pretentious, argue against reality.¹⁸

It may be, as Terence Penelhum has remarked, ‘that such a doctrine has no content, and just amounts to an empty assertion that our problem really does have an answer’.¹⁹ It may be, as Godfrey Vesey and Sydney Shoemaker think, that in so reasoning Lewis in effect construes ‘I’ as a proper name when it is not, and when in reality it functions more like ‘here’ such that ‘I’ no more names a person that ‘here’ names a place.²⁰ On Lewis’s account, even if I suffer amnesia, I do not lose the direct sense of self-identity – my direct awareness of self – of which he speaks. There just is this direct self-awareness. Vesey asserts that such a self-identification is an illusion, and so cannot give meaning to talk of personal immortality.²¹ There are perfectly non-deviant uses of ‘here’ where ‘here’ does not name a place. As Vesey puts it:

Suppose that, *although I am quite lost*, I say to myself ‘I know where I am, I’m here’. This use of ‘here’, although completely uninformative, may nevertheless *seem* to be a significant, non-empty use. It borrows a facade of meaning from the informative uses. Similarly, an empty, soliloquizing, use of ‘I’, may ‘borrow a facade of meaning from the informative, interpersonal, uses’.²²

Suppose I am suffering from amnesia and I remember Lewis’s doctrine that ‘Everyone knows himself to be the being that he is in just being so’, so, fortified by that, I know who I am: ‘I am I’. I just find it to be the case in immediate experience that I am I. This is just something, the Cartesian story goes, we find to be so in a self-disclosure or in self-awareness. But if we recall that ‘I’, in standard contexts, is no more used to name a person than ‘here’ names a place, we should recognise the emptiness of Lewis’s remark that ‘Everyone knows himself to be the being he is in just being so’. It is like saying

'Everyone knows where he is, in that he can say, "I'm here" and not be wrong'.²³

Perhaps, as J. L. Mackie thinks, things are not quite that simple (in philosophy they usually are not).²⁴ However, even if the above arguments about emptiness do not go through there is, I believe, a simpler objection to such an account. Suppose we grant that there is this dumb or brute self-awareness (perhaps 'inarticulate' is the better word) giving one some kind of inchoate self-identity. I am directly aware of myself in a manner similar to the way in which I am directly aware that I am thinking – like the having of a sudden thought – or having a pain. But this brute datum (if that is what it is) is just that: it does not itself carry the heavy *interpretive* weight that Lewis in effect puts on it, namely that the self of which I am aware is *immaterial* (disembodied). That is clearly an *interpretation* of the experience to which there are alternative interpretations and one would (*pace* Lewis) have to argue for that alternative. (Argument cannot stop where Lewis wants it to.) One could not rightly claim that it is just something found to be true in experience. Indeed to the extent that we do not understand 'immaterial thing', 'immaterial individual', 'disembodied person', we might think *that* interpretation is a non-starter in being only a putative interpretation.

Be that latter point as it may, what we have here, in claiming that we are directly aware of ourselves as not just a self, as something I know not what which has thoughts and feelings and initiates actions, but also as a disembodied agent, is in reality an *interpretation* and not just a datum of experience, just as much as when I say that the pain I feel is the stimulation of my C fibres I do not just report my experience but interpret it. Both are interpretations of experience. They are not direct data of experience. And if we say, misleadingly I believe, that all experiences are interpretations, then we must recognise that there are degrees of interpretiveness and grades of theoreticity. There cannot be the direct way to immortality that Lewis seeks, not even as an enabling doctrine. 'I am immortal' cannot be a matter of direct awareness in the way 'I am tired' is.

It is a rather common belief among many analytical philosophers (A. J. Ayer, Peter Strawson and Bernard Williams among them) that the very idea of a disembodied person is incoherent, for reference to a body is a necessary condition for establishing the identity of a person and for ascribing identity through time to a changing person. We indeed characteristically appeal to memory as well in determining

whether a person at a later time was one and the same person as at some earlier time. But when memory and bodily criteria conflict bodily identity takes pride of place. Suppose, to take an example, Hans dies and it is alleged that his spirit lives on. However, because having a body is a necessary condition for making ascriptions of personhood, we can have no way, even in principle, of ascertaining whether there is really a disembodied Hans who is the same person as the ruddy-cheeked Hans we used to know. The very idea of a '*bodiless individual*' seems to be unintelligible.²⁵

If we try to substitute memory as the primary criterion for personal identity we will fail, for we need to be able, for there to be memories at all, to distinguish between real and apparent memories, between Mildred's thinking she remembers cashing the cheque and her actually remembering it. Only genuine memories guarantee identity, not merely apparent ones. Actually remembering that I am a professor of philosophy at the University of Calgary guarantees my identity, only thinking I remember it does not. But for these to be real memories as distinct from apparent memories the events thought to be remembered must actually have occurred *and* they must have happened to the person remembering them. Memory cannot constitute personal identity or, more plausibly, be the fundamental criterion of personal identity for it presupposes that such identities have been established, that we can determine who it is that has the memories. So memory will not do the fundamental work. The only alternative – or at least the only other argument alternative – for in any fundamental way establishing personal identity is having the same body (bodily continuity).

However, are there not at least conceivable happenings that would loosen our attachment to bodily identity as a necessary condition for establishing personal identity and not only show that people, like Locke's Cobbler and the Prince, could 'exchange bodies' but that they could also exist without bodies at all? The following story is designed to show that bodiless existence is a *logical* possibility. Suppose I am a rather credulous fellow and I live in a house with a spouse, two children, my aged mother and two dogs. The house initially is a perfectly normal house, but then one day strange things, sometimes in front of us all, start happening. Lights inexplicably go on and off, doors open and close and chairs move in unaccountable ways. The happenings cannot be traced to any member of the family, to the dogs, to neighbours, to friends, or to agents whom we

ordinarily would regard as people, or to the wind, or to anything like that. Suppose I, the credulous one, hypothesise that the house is haunted by a poltergeist to the considerable amusement of the more skeptical members of the family. But then suppose my son, age 16, begins to receive premonitions of what is going on. He can predict accurately when a door is going to open, a light go on, a chair at the table will move and the like. He says an invisible person, *S*, has talked to him. Pressed he retracts 'talked' – no one else hears it and no tape recorder catches it. He now says rather that 'talked' is a groping way of saying *S* lets him know like thoughts popping into his head. But this, whatever it is, goes on with considerable accuracy for some time. My son (for example) says *S* told him that *S* is going out in the garden and sure enough the backdoor to the garden opens and closes.

Suppose, after a time, *S* comes out of the closet, so to say, and gives my son to understand that *S* is lonely and wants to belong to the family and to be accepted. After dinner, Sarah, as *S* tells my son she wants to be called, communicates to him that she is going to wash up, take care of the fireplace, and turn the thermostat down in the evening and up in the morning. We see, with no body around making it happen, dishes go from the table to the dishwasher, matches striking against the grate and regularly lighting the fire at the desired time and just before I get to it I see the thermostat go up in morning and down in the evening set to the required day-time and night-time temperature with no discernible hand moving the thermostat. Sarah, as we now have started to call *S*, lets my son know that she is beginning to feel like a member of the family. She lets him know she will be on the watch-out for us and guard us. Subsequently Sarah lets my son know that my daughter is in danger in the back yard, and indeed we rush out and discover she has fallen into the well, and at another time she warns us, again through my son, that my German Shepherd is in danger and again we rush to the back yard and find him confronted by a rattlesnake. The whole family becomes convinced, after such episodes, that Sarah is real, that she is an invisible person and a family friend. She might, if people want to talk that way, be said to have a 'subtle invisible body' that neither the family members nor the dogs can see or in any way detect, for example, no one ever bumps into her and she never steps on the dogs' paws. If such conceivable things did actually happen we might be led quite naturally and quite plausibly to use the name 'Sarah' and to think of

Sarah as a person, indeed to take her to be a person albeit a disembodied person. If such things really happened there would, it is natural to say, be at least one disembodied person.²⁶

If things really were so to transpire would we be justified in calling Sarah a person? Well, it would be at least plausible to say Sarah met all of Daniel Dennett's suggested conditions for personhood, namely, rationality, intentionality, propriety as the object of a personal stance, ability to reciprocate such a stance, verbal communication and a special kind of consciousness.²⁷ She knows, to take the elements fitting her most problematically, concern for the well-being of the family, for example, her protection of my daughter and concern for the well-being of my German Shepherd as instanced in the rattlesnake event. This gives rise to gratitude and affection and Sarah reciprocates concern with other acts, for example, at Thanksgiving various mixings mysteriously go on in the kitchen done by none of the regular family members and by no visible hands and a lovely Indian pudding emerges. And we have seen how Sarah communicates, though it is perhaps stretching things a bit to call it *verbal* communication. Sarah also seems plainly to be aware of herself and her surroundings. We identify Sarah in identifying these happenings.

Could Sarah be identified with a normal human being known to have lived a normal life? Suppose in checking the records I discover that a previous owner several years back had had a shy and retiring daughter, also called Sarah, who had died while living in what is now my house. Suppose it is further discovered from accounts about her that she had a personality very like that of 'our Sarah' and that when we ask 'our Sarah' about that young woman Sarah says that she is that very woman and leads us in the attic to a hidden box of letters from that Sarah to her parents. Under such circumstances it would be reasonable to believe that our disembodied Sarah was that very woman. So it appears at least we have described what would have to be the case to become acquainted with a disembodied person and indeed a disembodied person who had formerly had a perfectly normal body. We have given verifiable, empirical sense to the concept showing that it makes sense to speak of 'bodiless persons' and that such a concept, bizarre as it is, is an intelligible one. It has what used to be called empirical meaning.

The first thing that needs to be said about this is that, conceivable or not, things like this do not happen. Some might say this is irrelevant because, after all, what is at issue is that such talk is

intelligible and this only requires that disembodied individuals be consistently describable, not that there actually be the slightest likelihood that there really are such beings. There is not the slightest chance that there are people whose skin is naturally orange and hair naturally purple but the conception, like that of 'golden mountain' or 'wooden jetliner', is perfectly intelligible. Yet we do have some understanding here in the way we do not have for 'Procrastination drinks melancholy', or 'Reagan sleeps slower than Trudeau', but then again we must remember that intelligibility, and even more obviously coherence, admits of degrees and perhaps of kinds. When we think concretely about what causally speaking would have to be in place for there to be a wooden jetliner that actually could fly we see that such a conception doesn't fit in with anything else we know. In terms of what we know about the word, it just doesn't make any sense at all and the same is true of Sarah and of Locke's story of the Cobbler and the Prince. In that perfectly standard way these accounts are incoherent. They are just stories we can tell, like certain children's stories or certain science fiction. Part of their charm (where they have any) is that they couldn't happen, and our reason for our confidence that they couldn't happen is not that we have made careful inductive investigations like looking to see if there are magpies in New York State or if the quail are different in the east of North America than in the west. Rather, our source of confidence is that these things actually obtaining just does not fit with what we know or at least reasonably believe about the world. Just how could a wooden jetliner take off or fly at 500 miles an hour at 40,000 feet? How would it stand the stress, and so on and so on? The wood would have to be remarkably hard, very different indeed from anything we know to be wood. Such things just do not make sense and at least in this way Sarah doesn't make sense either. There are indeed more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than is dreamt of in your philosophy. But in this context that is just empty talk. These things never happen and we would, to put it mildly, be extremely skeptical – and rightly so – of any claim that something like this did happen. People touched by modernity would not accept at face value the claim that my watch just disappeared into thin air as distinct from a claim that I had just lost it and could not find it. There cannot be wooden jetliners, Sarahs or Locke's phenomena, any more than there can be, as Evans-Pritchard was perfectly aware, Zande witchcraft substance.

However, the cobbler and the prince and Sarah aside, there are cases of alleged possession and mediumship and there is Sally

Beauchamp, Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, and *The Three Faces of Eve*. Some cases of this sort have actually been said to have happened by non-credulous people of intellectual and moral integrity and the fictional cases have a certain verisimilitude. But in these cases, if we look at them soberly and non-metaphorically, we need not, and indeed should not, say that we have, as for example in the Eve thing, three persons caged in one body. There are not three Eves but the one Eve has a multiple personality. We should speak in these cases of a plurality of *personalities* not of *persons*. This, as J. L. Mackie points out, is much more guarded and plausible a claim to make than to say there are, mysterious as it may seem, three different persons.²⁸ We need not invoke disembodied existence or even dualism to handle such cases. They are bizarre and puzzling enough anyway, assuming they are not fraudulent, without adding *unnecessarily* ontological puzzlement. Here is a good place to apply the old maxim about not multiplying entities or conceptions of entities beyond need.

More generally, to return to the question about logical possibilities, we should take to heart David Wiggins's point that the concepts we use, and the particulars we identify and describe in using them, are not such that they can range over all at least putative logical possibilities. They are rather constrained by the nomological grounding of the sortal words we use.²⁹ We must not confuse what we can imagine or conceive with what is possible. We can *conceive* of an ice-cream cake at the centre of the sun, but such a state of affairs is *not possible*. For it to be possible the ice-cream cake, as the wooden jet, would have to have so changed that it could no longer coherently be called an ice-cream cake. In identifying any particular, say a candy bar melting in my pocket, this ability to identify and re-identify is closely tied up with our concept of what the thing in question is. We expect the bar to melt in my pocket, but the claim that it survived unmelted on the hot stove, let alone in the centre of the sun, is not a possibility that the concept allows for any more than our concept of what it is to be a wren allows for the possibility that it might fly at 60,000 feet and at the speed of 2000 miles an hour. Where we have a sortal concept it is constrained by the physical laws that apply to the exemplifications of those concepts. Copper cannot do just anything; rather it must obey the laws of nature which enable us to distinguish it as a substance. What in fact happens is the basis of all our concepts. It constrains the conceptual connections inherent in our use of language. Iron cannot melt in snow and the flesh and blood Sarah, who used to live in my house long before I lived there, cannot become a

disembodied person. It *may* be that the idea of a ‘disembodied person’ is not contradictory – we *may* have (beyond mental pictures) understood my narrative of Sarah – but disembodied persons are neither physically nor, as some people like to talk, metaphysically possible.³⁰ We cannot rely on thought experiments – on various underdescribed fantasies – rather, as Wiggins puts it, we have to work back from the extensions to work out what is essential to something being the thing it is. ‘For persons this extension is living, embodied, human beings’.³¹ Person may not be a natural kind, but a human being – a human person – is. For our kind of natural kind, mind and character are dependent for their activities on a body in causal interaction with the world.³² We have no coherent grounds for thinking ourselves to be immaterial substances or disembodied continuants incapable of destruction.

IV

This discussion has been metaphysical, somewhat arcane and, it seems to me, quaint. It is not the sort of thing that contributes either to the growth of knowledge or to salvation. It is, or so it seems to me, strange that people should be arguing about such things in our epoch. Yet argue they do. I think what fuels such talk is a deep human problem and I want now to turn to that. Such talk, to come at it at first indirectly, is at home against a religio-ethical background, as Pascal and Dostoevsky well saw, otherwise what we have are just some not very interesting metaphysical puzzles. After all, there is over personal identity and the like, as Derek Parfit and Thomas Nagel have shown, far more fascinating metaphysical conundrums, than the ones generated by such religious concerns, conundrums that we can, if we like doing that sort of thing, wile away our time with, if we are sufficiently leisured and undriven.³³ It is not the metaphysical puzzles about immortality but the human side of immortality that can be gripping and it is that, and that alone, that gives these arcane metaphysical investigations their point. Given our entangled lives, given the deep frustration of human hopes and aspirations, given the unnecessary hell that is the fate of many (40,000 people simply live on the streets in New York to say nothing of what goes on in Calcutta), it is surely understandable that we humans should ask ‘Shall I live again?’ and, noting the often utterly pointless suffering of the world,

ask of those so suffering ‘Shall they live again? Could there be “another world” in which they could live in some decency?’

We live in a world where 10,000 people, most of them quite unnecessarily, die of starvation each day, where people are horribly tortured and degraded and where the rich not infrequently live frivolous and expensive lives, living off the backs of the poor, and where in our part of the world Yuppodom reigns supreme. It is hard, given such a world, to just accept the fact of all those people dying in misery who have hardly had a chance to live. It is hard to accept the fact that they should just die and rot and that that is all there is to it. Of course, cognitively speaking it is easy to accept that, for what could be more obvious, but, morally speaking, it is very hard indeed to accept. The moral sense rebels at such a world.

It is easy enough for someone like myself, surrounded by a caring environment, living in comfort and having interesting work, which I can hope will have some significance, to accept the inevitability of death and my eventual utter destruction. It would be nice if it were not so and I could go on living as I am but that cannot be and others will continue after me. That is not such a hard cluster of facts to come to accept. Moreover, it is evident enough anyway.

The thing is to make something of the life I have. It can be a good and meaningful life and whether it is or not, in the circumstances in which I live, is not independent of what I do. And I can hope that I’ll be lucky enough, without cancer or the like, to have my ‘allotted time’. I would be frustrated if I do not and perhaps irrationally bitter, but, if I happen to be unlucky, it would just be something – and we have here the unforgettable example of Freud – to be, if I am capable of being reasonable under such circumstances, stoically accepted. But with luck nothing like that will happen to me or those close to me and I can live out my life in a meaningful and pleasant way and eventually die. What did Tolstoy get so exercised about?

I think Reinhold Niebuhr was right in turning with contempt from the egoism of healthy individuals, living what would be otherwise normal lives, having obsessive hang-ups about the fact that they will eventually die. For them to be so all important to themselves hardly inspires admiration. For those ageing Yuppies (perhaps former Yuppies is the right phrase), firmly situated in Yuppodom, who have such preoccupations, where there is no suffering or Strindbergian or O’Neillish laceration or self-laceration, their worries are not something to inspire much sympathy or concern. The temptation is to tell

them to get on with it and stop snivelling. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer had a good sense of this.)

However, for the suffering, ignorant and degraded millions, living in hellish conditions, and who have unremittingly, through no fault of their own, lived blighted lives, the inevitability, and at least seemingly evident finality, of death is another thing entirely. This, though plainly there before our eyes, is what is so hard to accept. We do not have something here which is just, or perhaps even at all, a philosopher's puzzle or a neurotic's worry. The matter of blighted lives is a very real one indeed. Five hundred million children and adults suffer from malnutrition and 800 million live, or try to live, in extreme poverty. This remains true while globally one trillion dollars is given to military spending, a spending which is astronomically beyond the needs of anything, for the various great powers principally involved, that could even remotely count as defence. Yet the World Food Council concluded in 1984 that four billion dollars a year committed internationally until the end of the century, would ensure access to food and productive lives for the 500 million people most in need, and set on track a stable world food order where among the poorer nations basket cases would not constantly pop up. However, the brute facts are that a trillion dollars a year goes into doomsday military spending and even a comparatively paltry four billion can't be found to save people from starvation and malnutrition. (Here we are reminded of the world of 1984.)

Thinking of the callousness of it all, the hypocrisy of many great nations, the placid acceptance of this by the masses, even though such a situation is totally unnecessary, is very sickening indeed. It is understandable, given that, that people despair of the world and that there, out of despair with our human lot, arises a hope for and even faith in immortality, an immortality that will give those (along with everyone else) who never have had anything like a decent chance in life another life that is worthwhile. This is not a matter of a kind of grubby individual craving for life eternal but a longing for a morally worthwhile life for humankind as a whole. (Has our individualism and egoism dug so deep that we cannot really believe that people are genuinely capable of such hopes?)

There is a stance within Christianity, though no doubt there are similar stances within Judaism and Islam as well, often associated with Irenaean universalism, which maintains that human suffering would be irredeemably tragic if our present earthly life were not

followed by another in which the suffering of each individual could be made worthwhile for that individual.³⁴ Suppose, in pursuing this, we ask the famous trio of questions of Kant: 'What can I know?', 'What ought I to do?' and 'What may I hope?'. Think particularly of the last one, 'What may I hope?' and then think of (to put it gently) the unhappy world that we know – keeping in mind the facts that I have just described, facts which are but some salient members of a set of deeply disquieting facts. Hopes are hard to maintain against the persistence and pervasiveness of such facts. Max Horkheimer, who certainly was no defender of a theistic world perspective, well put it when he remarked 'moral conscience . . . rebels against the thought that the present state of reality is final'.³⁵ Still, in the struggles of our everyday life, our hopes for a realisation, or even approximation, of a truly human society, a society of human brotherhood and sisterhood, a just society or even a rational society, are constantly being defeated. We do not, in fact, given our economic and scientific potential, have something that even remotely approximates a caring society or a just society. (It is pure propaganda for a cabinet minister to speak – boast might be a more accurate word – as one recently did of there being equality and social justice in Canada. But that is standard issue for politicians in our countries.)

Such states of affairs led Kant, Lessing, and even Voltaire, to postulate immortality in order to make some match between our hopes and what is achievable in 'this world'. It is easy to satirise such Kantian postulations of 'pure practical reason' and it is utter folly, as J. L. Mackie has well argued, to try to argue from such *hopes* to *any likelihood* at all that such a reality will come to be.³⁶ However, as we know from Pascal and Dostoevsky, it may be rational in certain circumstances to have a belief or to cause a belief to come to be formed (if we can) which, viewed from a purely intellectual or cognitive perspective, is an irrational belief. If I am lost in the Canadian North, and if a firm belief that I stand a good chance of getting out is, as a matter of fact, essential if I am going to have any chance at all of getting out, though in fact my objective chances are pretty slim, then it is reasonable for me to come to have that false belief if there is some possibility that I can somehow come to have it in that circumstance. (Recall Pascal on holy water and Schelling's answer to armed robbery.)

Is it similarly reasonable, given the human condition, for me to hope for human immortality in the form of universal salvation for humankind even though the objective likelihood of anything like that

being the case is extremely low? In responding to this question I am going to assume that the cognitive situation *vis-à-vis* immortality is as I have claimed and argued it to be. If the situation is not as bad as I argue it is, then we should perhaps, depending on just what we believe the situation to be, draw different conclusions. But suppose I have managed to tell it like it is, then should we continue to hope, or at least wish, for immortality?

Let me describe a scenario that understandably might push a person in the direction of Pascalian hope. Imagine this person, as a humane and sensitive person, reflective and reasonable, with a good education, coming of age in the west just after the First World War. Suppose she becomes a Marxist or an Anarchist, or some other kind of socialist, and says and feels, given what is then going on in the world, that now there is hope in the world. Now imagine her living through all the times in between up to our time (1987) and now, as a rather old person, though still with sound faculties and a humane attitude, she becomes, given the world she has seen and continues to see before her, utterly disillusioned with secular struggle (including, of course, political struggle), with being able to bring that hope into the world or even to bring into the world (small isolated pockets apart, for example, Iceland or Denmark) a tolerable amount of decency. It isn't that she now comes to think that religious revival will bring it into the world – a kind of moral rearmament with God in the driver's seat. Nothing, she now believes, will bring such an order of kindness into the world. There can be, she believes, Brecht to the contrary notwithstanding, no laying the foundations of kindness. She has simply given up on the world. The caring for humankind and the detestation of human degradation that launched her into political struggle is still there but she has utterly lost the sense that there is hope in the world, that there will be any lasting or large-scale remedy for these ills. She doesn't as a result become a reactionary. She still supports progressive causes, though, unlike a Marxist or an Anarchist – an E. P. Thompson or a Noam Chomsky – she will no longer, given her disillusion, throw her whole life into such activities, but, while continuing to support progressive causes, turns more and more to religious concerns and thinks and feels through the issue of immortality again.

Suppose, in thinking immortality through on the cognitive side, she comes to a conclusion very similar to mine. But, unlike me, she, keeping in mind Irenaean universalism, comes passionately to hope for immortality in the form of a hope for universal salvation for

humankind. Suppose further, facing non-evasively the odds, it becomes, not so much a *hope* (the odds are too dismal for that) but a *wish*, but still a wish that persistently remains with her and guides her life. Is this an attitude that it is desirable that we should come to share with her? It is certainly undesirable if it comes to block our struggling in the world, if it leads to a quietism in the face of evil: to being like Martin Luther rather than like Thomas Münzer. If that is the upshot, it is better to develop the set of attitudes that accepts that the human situation is irredeemably tragic and that we, in such a situation, in Camus's metaphor, should relentlessly fight the plague, knowing full well that the plague is always with us, sometimes striking virulently and at other times for a time remaining only latent, but always being something that will return, after an uneasy lull, to strike again in full fury. The thing to do is, acknowledging this, to unyieldingly and relentlessly fight the plague. What we should do is to tackle the most glaring ills or at least the ills we can get a purchase on, taking to heart and accepting the fact that there will be no extensive or permanent successes. We will have neither Christian nor Marxist eschatological hopes, but, like Camus, we will accept stoically an irredeemably tragic vision of the world. Doesn't this tragic sense of life square better with a non-evasive human integrity than the religious turn?

Not necessarily and perhaps not at all if the religious person takes, in a non-evasive way, a kind of Irenaean turn. Suppose she does not stop relentlessly fighting the plague and doesn't fight it *because* of the hopes/wishes she entertains for the afterlife, but fights the plague to fight evil *and* does so while still wishing for a salvation for humankind, wishing for a fate which is not irredeemably tragic and where human salvation is a reality. Isn't this way of reacting to life and to the world more desirable than sticking with a bleak Camus-like tragic vision, *if* so wishing does not lead to any self-deception about how astronomically slight the chances for salvation are, and if it doesn't weaken one's resolve to fight the plague or make one, in some other way, less effective in fighting the plague? With some people it might dull the native edge of resolution, but surely it need not. One can doggedly fight the plague *and* have such eschatological wishes as well. She can, that is, continue to fight and, utterly unblinkered, have the wish that salvation could be our lot as human beings. So held, this attitude seems at least to have everything the Camusian attitude has and something more as well and thus, everything considered, it is a more desirable attitude.

However, these are not the only alternatives. A Marxist, an Anarchist, or a revisionist socialist social democratic vision of things are not visions which are the tragic visions of an existentialist humanism or of a Freudian or Weberian view of life. If any of these forms of socialism can become and remain a reality – or can even firmly get on the agenda – and be the forms (different as they are among themselves) that Marx, Bakunin or Bernstein envisaged, or some rational reconstruction of them, without becoming like the later Stalinist *and* social democratic deformations of socialism (for example, on the social democratic side, the Wilson or Schmidt governments), then there could be hope in the world. There would be, in such an eventuality, the reasonable prospect of a decent world, or, more than a decent world order, a truly human world order where human flourishing would be extensive.

The person in our scenario turned away from such hopes because of the terrible historical events since the souring of the Russian Revolution, events such as forced collectivisation, the purge trials, the Second World War, the hegemony of Pax Americana, the Vietnam War, the rise of Islamic Fundamentalism (for example, Iran), the rise, both politically and religiously, of reactionary forms of Christianity and Judaism in American and Israel, persistent mass starvation, and the pervasiveness of doomsday war machines. She has seared into her consciousness the realisation that though we have modes of production capable of delivering plenty to the world, 10,000 starve each day, and even in the so-called First World many live, though often quite unnecessarily, very blighted lives indeed. The Russian Revolution did not spread to the west and we got instead, as Rosa Luxembourgh anticipated, with the failure of its spread, on the one hand bureaucratic and authoritarian forms of statism which, if socialisms at all, are state socialisms of the worst sort and, on the other hand, matched with that we have forms of state capitalism bent on an imperialistic domination and a heartless exploitation of the world. We have, in *most* of the nations of the world, neither capitalism with a human face nor socialism with a human face. We are, that is, caught between two very unsavoury social systems indeed. The result is that we have, and quite unnecessarily, a pervasiveness of terror, a denial of autonomy and equality and massive exploitation and poverty. This picture, which *at most* is only slightly overdrawn, turns the person in our scenario, despairingly, to Irenaean universalism, to the hope, which for her, given her estima-

tion of the probabilities, is little more than a wish, that there will, in an afterlife, be a universal salvation in which the sufferings of each individual could somehow be made worthwhile for that individual.³⁷

What needs to be said here in response is that – given the turn of things historically, and given certain assumptions about human nature – however unlikely it may be that socialism on the necessary world-wide scale can be anything like the socialism of which Marx and Bakunin dreamt, it is still far more likely to become the case (to put it mildly) than is the religious eschatological dream. That is to say that something like this secular vision of the world could obtain is still vastly more likely than bodily resurrection or disembodied existence and the sustaining of Irenaean universalism. (Remember we might still have one or another of the first two things without having Irenaean universalism.) Neither the kingdom of heaven on earth nor the kingdom of heaven in a ‘resurrection world’ are very likely, but a kingdom of heaven on earth, of the two alternatives, is by far the least unlikely of two unlikely prospects. Moreover, there is, with the former, though *perhaps* even here the chances are rather slight, some prospect of some *approximation* of it. The other’s prospects are close to being nil. This being so, the desirable thing is struggle to make that hope in the world a social reality in all the ramified ways that need to be done. What may be unlikely there is at least much less unlikely than the Irenaean thing. It may be apple pie by and by for everyone but it is at least not in the sky.

However, again there is a response from the religious wisher for immortality somewhat similar to her response to the Camusian. Could one not have the socialist thing through and through without any evasion at all and still have this wish for a universal salvation that need in no way be a replacement for a deflect from the struggle for a classless society united in sisterhood and brotherhood where the conditions for both autonomy and equal liberty are maximised? There are reactionary atheists (for example, A. Rand and A. Flew) and there are religious Marxists or at least quasi-Marxists (for example, Gregory Baum and Dorothee Sölle). The latter have on their agenda the struggle for a classless society as much as those ‘standard Marxists’ who are atheists.

Marx and Bakunin were passionate atheists but there is nothing that is canonical to Marxism or Anarchism (libertarian socialism) that requires atheism, however plausible atheism may be on other grounds. Both atheism and socialism can be plausibly said to be part of the Enlightenment project. Still, that project is not such a seamless

web that it is evident that one could not have socialism without atheism or atheism without socialism. There is a kind of conservative liberalism that goes well with atheism and some atheists are just plain reactionaries and there can be, and is, a socialism that is also religious. Perhaps the most coherent worldview would have socialism and atheism running tandem, but that that is so is not overwhelmingly evident. There is a lot of *lebensraum* for bracketing such considerations and in practical class struggles they can perhaps be ignored. Why divide comrades over a speculative matter that may not at all effect the struggle for socialism? Religion, of course, has indeed been an opiate of the people and a bastion of reaction, but, again, that is not intrinsic to its nature, though its pervasiveness is understandable ideologically.

I think the answer to my above question is that one could be consistently committed to a socialist transformation of the world and have, as well, Irenaean hopes for the salvation of humankind. One could, as some liberation theologians are, be through and through committed to the class struggle *and* have these wishes for an afterlife of a very distinctive kind. Where this is open-eyed, with an awareness of the fantastic and perhaps even incoherent nature of the belief, and is taken as a wish and not allowed to stand in the way of class struggles and other progressive struggles (struggles around racism and sexism), there is nothing wrong with such a wish.

I *suspect* that as a matter of psycho-sociological fact such an attitude will, though perhaps only in some rather subtle ways, stand in the way of liberation – solid liberation in the world – but to the extent that it does not and to the extent it neither wittingly nor unwittingly cooks the books as to the evidence, there is no reason for atheists like myself to criticise it as unreasonable or as in anyway morally untoward, though it is not an attitude we will share even though we recognise that even in a classless, non-racist and non-sexist world order there will be human ills: children born horribly deformed, terrible accidents, a loss of partner or child and the like. It is reasonable to expect that even ills of this sort will be less frequent in such a society with its developed productive forces (including its more developed science) and greater security and greater wealth more evenly distributed. Still, such ills will always be our lot. We can lessen their incidence and surround them with a new environment, but we can never eliminate them. They will always be with us. This being so, in some ways a certain kind of belief in immortality could ‘answer’ to that as no secular *weltbild* could. Atheists should not blink at that fact

or try to obscure its force. They should only point out that, given everything we know, it is an idle wish humanly understandable though it be.

So why not add such a hope or at least such a wish to our repertoire? For me, to speak for a moment personally, the astronomical unlikeliness of such a conception answering to anything real, coupled with the equal unlikelihood of there being a God who could ordain a certain kind of immortality, for (as the Greeks and Romans show us) not just any immortality will do, makes such hopes merely idle wishes and as such nothing to make a matter of the fabric of my life. We have better things to do than to dwell on such idle wishes. Hume, I believe, had a remarkably sane and humane mindset here as did Freud. And Hume and Freud, conservatives though they were, as well as Marx and Bakunin, can remain, without any tension at all, heroes of a contemporary intellectual wedded to the emancipatory potential of the Enlightenment project, while being fully cognisant of the dark underside of it that, on the one hand, Adorno and Horkheimer and, on the other, Foucault, have in their different ways so well exposed. There are plenty of things in both Hume and Marx that no intellectually sophisticated and informed person could accept anymore, along with central things which, with a little rational reconstruction, can be seen to be both sound – or at least arguably sound – and important, and which have forged our contemporary understanding of ourselves and our world such that for a person who has taken things to heart none of the faces of immortality provide live options.³⁸

Notes

1. Godfrey Vesey, 'Remarks', in Stuart Brown (ed.), *Reason and Religion* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977) p. 306.
2. Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954).
3. Antony Flew, 'Immortality', in Paul Edwards (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, IV (New York: The Free Press, 1967) p. 142.
4. Peter Geach, *God and the Soul* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969) p. 29.
5. Thomas Nagel talks this way in his *The View From Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) p. 23.

6. Vesey, op. cit., p. 306.
7. Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984) pp. 12–13.
8. Kai Nielsen, *Contemporary Critiques of Religions* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1971); Kai Nielsen, *Scepticism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973); Kai Nielsen, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1982); and Kai Nielsen, *Philosophy and Atheism* (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1985).
9. Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy* (London: Hutchinson, 1966) and Antony Flew, *The Presumption of Atheism* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1976).
10. Antony Flew, 'The Burden of Proof', in Leroy S. Rouser (ed.) *Knowing Religiously* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985) pp. 110–14.
11. Terence Penelhum, *Survival and Disembodied Existence* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976); Terence Penelhum, 'Survival and Identity', in Mostafa Faghfoury (ed.) *Analytical Philosophy of Religion in Canada* (Ottawa, Ontario: University of Ottawa Press, 1982) pp. 35–53.
12. Penelhum, 'Survival and Identity', p. 47.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
14. Martin Hollis, *Invitation to Philosophy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985) pp. 119–120.
15. John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (London: Collins, 1976) p. 193. See also Terence Penelhum's critical notice, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, IX (March 1979) pp. 141–62.
16. Hick, op. cit., p. 198.
17. Hywel Lewis, 'Immortality and Dualism', in *Reason and Religion*, p. 282. Sydney Shoemaker argues in the same volume that there is a non-Cartesian dualism which is not conceptually incoherent as he believes Cartesian dualism to be. Cartesian dualism, if sound, could support disembodied existence, but, as Shoemaker sees it, it is conceptually incoherent. Non-Cartesian dualism, he argues, is conceptually coherent but it does not support disembodied existence. However, even this battened down dualism with its talk of immaterial substances being related to material substances by a quasi-spatial relationship seems of doubtful coherence, as Shoemaker half admits in a footnote on p. 268.
18. Lewis, op. cit., p. 289. Thomas Nagel, without embracing dualism, in effect reveals the rational kernel behind such an impulse. Thomas Nagel, op. cit., pp. 13–37.
19. Terence Penelhum, 'Survival and Identity', op. cit., p. 51.
20. Vesey, op. cit., pp. 301–6 and Shoemaker, op. cit., pp. 307–11.
21. Vesey, op. cit., p. 306.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 305.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 305 and Shoemaker, op. cit., p. 311.
24. J. L. Mackie, *Persons and Values* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985) pp. 15–27.
25. Penelhum, 'Survival and Identity', op. cit., p. 41.
26. This little tale is adopted from a tale by G. R. Gillett, 'Disembodied Persons', *Philosophy*, 61 (237) (1986), pp. 377–86.

27. Daniel Dennett, *Brainstorms* (Montgomery, Vermont: Bradford Books, 1978) pp. 267–85.
28. J. L. Mackie, op. cit., p. 6.
29. David Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance* (Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, 1986).
30. Gillett, op. cit., p. 384.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid, p. 385. See, as well, Mackie, op. cit., pp. 1–27.
33. Parfit, op. cit., and Nagel, op. cit.
34. John Hick, op. cit., pp. 152–66.
35. Max Horkheimer, *Critique of Instrumental Reason* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974) p. 2.
36. J. L. Mackie argues this convincingly in his ‘Sidgwick’s Pessimism’, *Philosophical Quarterly* (1976) pp. 326–7. For a more detailed argument for this see his *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).
37. There is a point I pass by here made forcefully years ago by Alasdair MacIntyre. The point is this: no matter what comes after in an afterlife the sufferings of people here and now are not thereby made worthwhile. Suppose an infant at birth is born with some horrible physical defect that causes him to be wracked constantly with terrible pain. After two years of such hell he dies and goes to heaven. How does the bliss of his afterlife at all make those terrible sufferings worthwhile? They are hardly a necessary condition for this bliss. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Difficulties in Christian Belief* (London: SCM Press, 1956) and Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘The Logical Status of Religious Belief’, in Ronald Hepburn (ed.) *Metaphysical Beliefs* (London: SCM Press, 1957) pp. 168–205.
38. Kai Nielsen, ‘Death and the Meaning of Life’ in *The Search for Values in a Changing World* (New York: The International Culture Foundation, 1978) pp. 483–90 and Kai Nielsen, ‘God and Coherence’, in *Knowing Religiously*, pp. 89–102.