

Conceivability and Immortality: A Response to John Hick

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I

I am perplexed as to where to start and indeed as to what issues to pursue in responding to Professor John Hick's rich and reflective thought-model. I am one of those who, rightly or wrongly, believe that the religious experience of humanity is purely a human projection, though, like Ludwig Feuerbach and George Eliot, I think it is often a morally complex and morally significant projection. But a human projection I believe it to be and not, as Hick takes it to be, 'a cognitive response to a divine reality transcending physical nature and human consciousness'.¹ But his 'A possible Conception of Life After Death' is addressed to those who would share with him that religious assumption and would accept some conception of life after the death of the present body. That is a fair enough limitation of his task. All deliberation and argument, including philosophical argument, is not between belief and unbelief but sometimes it is between belief and belief. And it is that task that Professor Hick sets himself in his present essay. Since I am skeptical about a common background assumption of many otherwise very different religious belief-systems, the very possibility (metaphor apart) of there being any life for us in any form after the death of our 'present' bodies seems very problematical to me. Given this skepticism, I find it very difficult to get exercised over the different alternatives of the western strands of the religious life and the eastern strands. Still, initially bracketing all questions about the plausibility and coherence of both conceptions, and, for a moment, looking only at their moral dimensions, I want to consider their comparative moral attractiveness.

They both have their matching virtues and defects, yet if either were a live option for me I would Pascalian wager on the eastern option. Both the eastern and western religious traditions, at least as Professor Hick reads them, hold 'that the ultimate human state . . . is

one of union or communion with the divine reality'.² Where they most centrally part company is that the western doctrine is 'of a single temporal life and the eastern doctrine of many such lives'.³ The Jewish-Christian-Islamic strands have a single temporal existence followed by divine judgement, while the Hindu-Buddhist strand, with its belief in incarnation, makes for a whole series of temporal lives in which through those lives in a developmental sequence there can finally be, through a series of moral and spiritual changes, the attainment of a state of union with divine reality and with that eternal life. The western conception – speaking purely morally now and setting aside all consideration of comparative cosmological plausibility – gives, with its 'one shot hypothesis', an attractive stress on our taking responsibility for our lives and on our actively struggling to be a certain kind of person, while the indeterminately large number of chances the eastern way affords could encourage passivity, resignation and a kind of fatalism. However, this is more than counterbalanced when we consider the extensive infant mortality in the world, the incredibly blighted lives of many people (people – to take a key example – experiencing very severe and very early malnutrition) with nothing like a realistic chance for moral development. But that is in fact the fate of millions of human beings. Here there certainly seems to be something very unfair about the one shot deal. The eastern option, in spite of its propensity for passivity, seems, on balance, if we view the matter purely morally, the more attractive option. Such a world will be fairer, more humane, giving far fewer hostages to the arbitrariness of the wheel of fortune. We have, with the eastern option, a connected series of finite lives in which the series ends only when a final self-transcendence has been attained. Moreover, it is something we, since we all are in such a series, will all attain in the end. No one will be permanently damned. Whatever we might think about its cognitive coherence (and it seems no worse than the western way), taking it pictorially and looking at it from the moral point of view, morally speaking it is more compelling than its western counterpart. It would, that is, square better with our considered judgements in *wide* reflective equilibrium.

II

Let me now turn to something in which both cosmological issues and conceptual issues come to the fore. Hick argues that the empirical

evidence for both reincarnation and the survival of the death of our 'present' bodies in either a disembodied state or with a new resurrected body is ambiguous and uncertain. The phenomenon, taken as evidence for either, that religious believers of either tradition appeal to, can be, and reasonably is, variously interpreted. Sometimes the interpretations are religious and sometimes secular. We, Hick tells us, certainly have no conclusive evidence or even strong evidence that would require a reasonable, fair-minded person, faced with the phenomenon – phenomenon taken by some to be evidence – to believe in either reincarnation or survival.⁴ Hick is surely right when he goes on to claim that the following facts are not in themselves sufficient to dismiss either religious belief (that is, either reincarnation or survival), namely (a) the fact that we do not have conclusive or even nearly conclusive evidence for either survival or reincarnation, and (b) the fact that the alleged evidence can plausibly be read either in a secular fashion or in a religious fashion. These things *by themselves* are not sufficient to dismiss either a belief in reincarnation or survival.⁵

Hick, after he has characterised and contrasted east and west, proffers, in an admittedly speculative way, a thought-model that might, as he views it, have something of the advantages of both while escaping their disadvantages. We should, he argues, consider seriously, and indeed from a religious point of view, the possibility 'that we do indeed go through a series of lives, each having its own beginning and end and being a sphere for the exercise of freedom and responsibility, but that these are not all in the same world, but on the contrary in different worlds'⁶ Following some speculations of a theoretical physicist, Paul Davies, Hick seeks to give a non-metaphorical sense to 'different worlds'. It is possible, he tells us, that there are plural spaces within a single superspace. It might well be the case that 'what is usually regarded as "the universe" might in fact be only a disconnected fragment of space-time. There could be many, even an infinite number of other universes, but all physically inaccessible to the others'.⁷ Something like this would have to obtain for it to be possible for each of us to go through a series of lives in different worlds. But this, taken just like that, will not yield anything like reincarnation, for these different universes, these different space-time fragments in one super-space, are less tendentiously described as disconnected (*contingently* disconnected) fragments of space-time in one big universe: 'little universe', if you will, in a super-universe. In saying these space-time fragments are physically

inaccessible to each other we can only be saying that they are contingently inaccessible. Indeed how could it be otherwise if they are in single super-space (that is, the 'big universe')? All we need mean in saying that we are at different times in different worlds is that we are in those different space-time fragments in the big universe at different times. Indeed we could keep bodily continuity and all of that. Dying in this world might be like a battery going dead in this world only for it, after it was transported there, to be re-activated in another part of space-time. This does not take one to reincarnation and, unless we wish to multiply conceptions beyond need, we can be thoroughly materialistic here.⁸

Hick says that besides our particular cultural-historical selves there is a dispositional structure which he calls the soul which is not so cultural-historical. But dispositions and dispositional structures are not things (beings) that can have an independent existence. There must be some being which has the dispositions and the dispositional structures. Rather than speaking of a soul it is less complicated and conceptually problematic to speak, as Marx did, of human beings as beings who have needs, some of which are historically and culturally particular, and some of which, as the need for security, for meaningful work and a sense of self-identity, are pan-human. There is no need, and indeed no justification, for making what is distinctively historical and particular into the 'empirical self' and what is pan-human into a 'non-empirical self'. Rather they are just different, equally empirical, facets of an empirical self. There is no need to multiply selves or worlds beyond necessity.

The picture that Hick is trying to give us is of human life constituting the growth of a multitude of souls, that is, individual moral and spiritual natures, moving toward communion or union with divine life. But, on his reading, the soul is not an entity or person but, as a dispositional structure, a property a person has, just as being energisable is a property a battery has. For us to be able justifiably to say that the same battery was first energised, then went dead, then was energised again, we need to establish a physical continuity that this is indeed the same battery. Similarly, since a dispositional structure is not an entity, we need to establish or to have established some bodily continuity between *A* and *B* in different space-time fragments to know whether it was the same disposition reincarnated in *A* and *B* rather than its being the case that *A* and *B* have dispositional structures of the same type. The 'deeper self' or 'soul', as a *dispositional structure*, is not a being who could be an indepen-

dent continuant between lives but is an attribute of a person: an embodied being. As such it could not be some mysterious independent continuant in some utterly problematic way existing between embodied lives. We have no more understanding of what it could even mean for dispositional structures to exist independently, when there was nothing for them to be dispositions of, then we understand what it would be for the energising capacity of batteries to exist independently when there were no batteries about to be energised. All we can coherently say is that as batteries are the sorts of things that, when they actually exist, can be so energised, so similarly human beings are the sorts of beings such that when they are alive – there in the flesh and blood – they have certain dispositional properties. No sense has been given to how the soul, as a purely dispositional structure, could exist unembodied so that it could persist between different empirical selves or when there was no longer an empirical self.

III

I have – to go back to the beginning of Hick’s essay – a fundamental difficulty with Hick’s whole project. The very idea that after death consciousness continues in a new, an utterly disembodied state, a state Buddhists call *Bardo Thödol*, seems to me incoherent. This suspicion of mine, a suspicion reasonably widely shared, leads me to agree with Hick that the question of human survival after bodily death is not a straightforward empirical question to be answered yes or no. Hick points to the existence of a wealth of exotic psychological phenomena such as trance mediumship, trance communications and automatic writings and the like. They seem to suggest, at least to many religious people, ‘the presence of still-living personalities who have passed through bodily death’.⁹ We have the impression of spirits talking, albeit by proxy, very much as if they were living people talking from afar. It is rather as if someone in Yellowknife were called up by their relatives from the Falkland Islands.

However, Hick points out that, while the survival hypothesis is compatible with all those strange psychological facts, it is ‘by no means the only possible way of accounting for them’.¹⁰ He makes similar remarks about the evidence for reincarnation. In both cases, Hick maintains, the evidence can be reasonably interpreted in either a religious or a naturalistic manner.

Plainly Hick is right in claiming that from the fact that we cannot now establish that there is life after death by empirical evidence, it does not follow that there is no life after death. My difficulty is a logically prior one about coherence. If some putative proposition *p* is literally incoherent then no question of evidence for or against its truth can possibly arise. But where talk of life after death involves some claim (putative claim) to a self existing in a disembodied manner, even if only for a short time, then it seems to me we have a notion which is incoherent. (I have argued this in my 'The Faces of Immortality'.)¹¹ If that is so, then there can no more be empirical evidence for such disembodied existence than there can be empirical evidence for the truth of 'Procrastination drinks melancholy'.

Two analogies may help. Suppose someone tells me his basil plant suffers from anxiety. (Someone actually did that in the village once.) I remain incredulous. He replies, 'Look, if I talk to it soothingly it grows rapidly. If, on the other hand, everything else remaining constant, I do not talk to it or I shout at it, it ceases to grow and begins to wilt'. Suppose the chap is not a liar and suppose, further, that in many people's houses the identical phenomena occurs. Even so, I would still argue that evidence could not show that plants suffer anxiety because the very idea is incoherent. (If that is fundamentalism, so be it.)

The second analogy is this. Suppose every time Carnap, Ayer, Flew, Nielsen and Company produced an argument for the incoherence of God-talk, the following night the stars re-arranged themselves so that everyone in the Northern Hemisphere could see patterned in the heavens what could quite unambiguously be read as 'God exists'. I would, of course, be stunned – indeed shattered – and I would certainly give up drinking aquavit. Still, if the very idea of God as a disembodied infinite individual transcendent to the universe (Hick's super-universe) is incoherent, such strange happenings would not constitute evidence for the truth of the incoherent proposition. What transpired would shake us up all right, but it still would not count as evidence for the truth of that theistic proposition or to help us understand any better what we did not understand before. If, that is, we do *not* understand what it means to speak of such an infinite individual such happenings, we will be no better off after such happenings. Indeed such occurrences will not in the slightest help us to understand such God-talk where we did not understand such talk before.

In both cases it is just the case that we have some weird causal connections that we cannot now explain. Somehow, soothing talk, we know not how, helps basil plants grow or at least so it seems.

My claim is that talk of persons having a disembodied existence is similarly incoherent. If the arguments for that claim are sound there can be no evidence for such a belief even *if* we at present have no plausible alternative explanations for the supposedly evidencing phenomena. Moreover, contrary to what some have thought, this is not a *priorism* and a denial of fallibilism, the alter-ego of Christian or Islamic fundamentalism, for I do not take it as an *a priori* truth that such talk is incoherent. Argument is always relevant here and there is no certainty here any more than there is anywhere else. But since Peirce's devastating assault on Cartesianism this should not be the least bit surprising or disturbing. It is just irrational to go on a quest for certainty.

Notes

1. John Hick, 'A Possible Conception of Life After Death', p. 183 in this volume.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 191.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 191.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 192.
8. It has been said that I am going back to Newton and ignoring Einstein here. But I see nothing at all incompatible in what I say with Einstein's account of relativity. I was, as I think is proper in such metaphysical contexts, sticking close to our common-sense way of describing things. That, I believe, is a matter of reasonable caution faced with such problematical metaphysical claims. The burden of proof here should be on those who would challenge such common-sense characterisations to show that they are incompatible with modern physics or that they distort the phenomena or ignore certain phenomena. It is my claim that they do not. I think we should take a leaf from Susan Stebbing here.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 187.
11. Kai Nielsen, 'The Faces of Immortality', p. 1 in this volume.