

Death and the Afterlife

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Lesson 1: Being towards Death

When dealing with a gargantuan subject, it is generally best to start with obvious things.

We can begin by looking at death in this manner: Take a given individual. You know him in one way and one way only: by certain actions and movements of his physical body. Even if he tells you about his deepest dreams and most forbidden thoughts, he is doing so by using the movements of his mouth and throat.

On the surface, you have every reason to believe that this individual *is* his physical body. You can see nothing else and have evidence of nothing else. But one day this man's body stops moving and does not start again. Left long enough, its sight and smell will become offensive.

So who or what was this man? What seemed to be the totality of his self was nothing of the kind. What really was most central to his being—his feelings, his personality, his mind—turns out to be something that could not be seen or felt or weighed.

Such is the dilemma that death presents us. Anyone who does *not* find this situation paradoxical and bewildering has probably not thought very seriously about the matter.

To go further, we have to ask this: if what was most genuine and important about this man has turned out to be something invisible, what happens to this unseen part when the body stops moving? Does it survive and go on to another realm or come back to be reborn in this one? Or does it simply cease to exist?

Human thought in various forms has said yes to all of these possibilities. Beliefs about the afterlife fall into three basic categories:

1. Death is the end. There is no unseen part—let us for the time being call this the *soul*—aside from the body. When you die, you are gone, and that is that.
2. The soul goes to another realm when it dies. If the soul has behaved well in life on earth, it will go to a more pleasant world. If it has behaved badly, it will go to one that is less pleasant.
3. The soul comes back to be reborn on earth in another body. This may happen over and over again.

While there are some variants within these three views, they basically sum up the totality of beliefs about the afterlife. Which one, then, should we believe?

We will explore these possibilities in future lessons, but at the outset it is useful to see that most people do not trouble themselves terribly much about this question. They simply accept the beliefs that they were taught when they were little. If someone has been brought up as a Christian, she is likely to accept the second of the possibilities above: life after death in heaven, hell, or purgatory. If she has been brought up as a Hindu, she probably believes the third option, which is usually known as *reincarnation*.

But it is also likely to be true that she does not think very much about any of these possibilities from day to day. For most people, death is an unpleasant subject, and they think about it as little as possible until they are absolutely forced to do so, say, by the loss of a loved one. One psychologist said that most people are death postponers: they accept that there is such a thing as death (as everyone must) but they avoid thinking about it until there is no other choice.

Modern American society acts the same way. We rarely see death from day to day, perhaps in the form of a squashed squirrel on the road or a bird that has dropped dead on a sidewalk. This is even truer today than it was fifty years ago, when it was more common to have a wake for the body of the deceased, which would lie in state so that friends and relatives could come and pay their respects.

One hundred years ago, death was still more present, and most people died at home rather than in a hospital or hospice. In the brownstone houses of Brooklyn that were built in the nineteenth century, the staircases are narrow and the landings often have niches called *coffin rests*. They were put there to make sure that a dead body being carried out in a coffin could make it through the narrow turn at the stairs.

Of course death becomes more omnipresent as we go further back in time, when there were few if any hospitals and lifespans were much shorter. You might imagine that, being confronted with death on an almost daily basis, people would have tried not to think about it if at all possible. But the opposite is the case. Old gravestones do not display sugary greeting-card-like sentiments on them, but grim motifs such as skulls and skeletons.