

Article

## The Tilde Fallacy and Reincarnation Variations on a "Skeptical" Argument

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### Abstract

In this article, I will be discussing these different Tilde Fallacy arguments in increasing order of general acceptability. The first argument is, as far as I know, accepted by no one today who has seriously studied the subject. The next is accepted only by a small but vocal cult following. The third is accepted by a very large group probably including the majority of the academically employed. The last of these Tilde Fallacy arguments is acceptable to probably almost everyone except me (and perhaps you, gentle reader, if you find my arguments convincing). The topic of this argument is survival after biological death. The so-called "materialist" position, which I will call mortalism, relies heavily on the Tilde Fallacy. I will argue that once the Tilde Fallacy has been removed from the debate, the most ontologically parsimonious position is belief in reincarnation. I will also argue, at much greater length, that the mortalist position is self-contradictory, but that the contradiction is phenomenological, not logical.

**Keywords:** Tilde Fallacy, reincarnation, biological death, mortalism, materialist.

### Introduction

What I will be calling the Tilde Fallacy, expressed crudely, is this:

My position uses the logical symbol known as the tilde (the logical symbol used for translating "not", "no", "it is not the case that", etc.). Therefore it is not really a position at all, but only a denial of some other position. Consequently, I can always invoke Occam's razor against the position I am denying, and my opponent cannot. The burden of proof is always on my opponent, not on me, because my position has no actual content (which follows from the fact that it has only negative content).

One way of diagnosing a case of the Tilde Fallacy is to show that a position claiming this privileged status can be restated without the tilde. In some cases, this restatement reveals that this position is self-contradictory, which of course refutes it. In other cases, this transformation merely refutes the Occam's razor argument that allegedly supported it, and thus reveals that it needs to be supported by further arguments and evidence. Although this transformation from negative to positive is often sufficient to demonstrate the presence of the Tilde Fallacy, it is not necessary. In most cases, a single negative claim implies numerous unstated positive claims, and in such cases it is equally invalid to assert that the negative claim requires no further support.

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The negative claim and its implied positive claims are a package deal, and any application of Occam's razor must consider the entire package when making judgments about relative simplicity.

The following four arguments support very different conclusions about very different topics, and yet all of them rely on the Tilde Fallacy. I will have to spend some time considering arguments other than the Tilde Fallacy, which support each of these conclusions, to bring the Tilde fallacy itself into greater clarity through contrast. The fact that these conclusions are often supported by the Tilde Fallacy does not mean that there aren't other stronger arguments available to support them. I don't find any of these arguments convincing myself, but I don't have the space here to make more than a few brief (and admittedly rather snide) comments against them, which I fully acknowledge are far from decisive.

I will be discussing these different Tilde Fallacy arguments in increasing order of general acceptability. The first argument is, as far as I know, accepted by no one today who has seriously studied the subject. The next is accepted only by a small but vocal cult following. The third is accepted by a very large group probably including the majority of the academically employed. The last of these Tilde Fallacy arguments is acceptable to probably almost everyone except me (and perhaps you, gentle reader, if you find my arguments convincing). The topic of this argument is survival after biological death. The so-called "materialist" position, which I will call *mortalism*, relies heavily on the Tilde Fallacy. I will argue that once the Tilde Fallacy has been removed from the debate, the most ontologically parsimonious position is belief in reincarnation. I will also argue, at much greater length, that the mortalist position is self-contradictory, but that the contradiction is phenomenological, not logical.

## **The Tilde Fallacy and Logical Positivism**

The Logical Positivist's version of the Tilde Fallacy was widely accepted for about a decade, and then was rejected by all of the philosophers who originally proposed it. This is perhaps the only time in the history of philosophy where everyone involved agreed about anything. This logical positivist version of the Tilde Fallacy is the prototype on which the other three arguments are based. I expect the majority of my philosophically trained readers to find the other arguments acceptable in direct proportion to how closely they feel they resemble that prototype.

The Logical Positivists tried to resolve the questions of metaphysics by saying "all metaphysics is nonsense." This claim was importantly different from the materialist commonsense feeling that all metaphysics is BS. "BS" is simply a term of abuse, but "nonsense" has a specific meaning. To say that a claim is nonsense is to say that it lacks sense, which must lead to theoretical questions about the relationships between sense, reference and meaning. The consideration of those questions eventually made the Logical Positivists realize that the claim "all metaphysics is nonsense" is itself a metaphysical claim. When pressed to define the term "nonsense", they implied it meant "any proposition which was neither empirically verifiable nor

tautologous", which eventually made them realize that by these criteria their own position was nonsensical, and thus also self-contradictory.

The Logical Positivists thought at first that, because there was a tilde implied in their metaphysical claim, it was not a metaphysical claim at all. This was exposed as a fallacy by in effect removing the Tilde and stating the position in the positive, i.e., by unpacking and defending its metaphysical theory of the relationship between language and reality. Once they realized that it was a metaphysical theory, however, it became clear that this theory contained the only flaw that can decisively falsify a metaphysical theory. It was self-contradictory because by its own definition it was itself nonsensical. Thus the Logical Positivists realized that whatever the answer was to the big metaphysical questions, it couldn't be this. They reluctantly returned to asking the same kinds of questions that had bedeviled Western philosophy since Descartes, becoming Logical Empiricists instead of Logical Positivists.

## **Libertarianism and the Tilde Fallacy**

There are numerous objections to Libertarian political philosophy, some of which I have summarized in Rockwell (2013). Some of these objections are Utilitarian, i.e., based on issues of what would produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. (A Libertarian society would be a bleak and joyless place for almost everyone because of a lack of infrastructure and extreme differences between wealth and poverty.) Other objections are Deontological, i.e., based on issues of justice: the networks of privilege that would inevitably emerge in such a society would falsify the Libertarian claim that each person had justly acquired everything they owned. In this article, however, I will be concerned only with the Libertarian use of the Tilde Fallacy. Here we find a parallel with Logical Positivism. The Tilde Fallacy is not as obvious in the common sense materialist view that metaphysics is BS, or in the rhetorical rants of Ayn Rand. It can, however, be revealed in the more explicitly theoretical writings of the Logical Positivists and also in the writings of Robert Nozick, who attempts to justify the Libertarian revulsion towards government as a positive principle.

Nozick's moral justification for Libertarianism can be seen as an extrapolation from the liberal principle of the separation of church and state. In a theocracy, the state has ideals and values set by the state religion and passes laws to insure that people live up to those ideals (no card playing or dancing on Sunday, women must dress modestly, etc.). In a liberal state, however, each individual has her own values and ideals, and the state's only job is to insure that each individual has the freedom to pursue those ideals. Nozick argues that this principle, when taken to its logical conclusion, requires the state to have no goals or ideals at all. Because "liberty upsets patterns" (Nozick 1974, p. 160), and the Government's sole job is to protect liberty, this means that the government has no right to consider what Nozick calls "end result principles" (Nozick 1970, p. 170). The State's only purpose is to protect the freedom of its citizens, and freedom, like the metaphysics of the Logical Positivists, is defined purely negatively. This means that government must be completely neutral as to the outcome of any actions by any member of society or even by itself. Physical force and the breaking of voluntary contracts are forbidden not

because they interfere with the goals of government, but because they interfere with the freedom of individual citizens to pursue their own goals.

Just as Logical Positivism was the metaphysical position that said all metaphysics was nonsense, Nozick's Libertarianism says that the purpose of government is to have no purpose. Just as Logical Positivism thought it was superior to all other metaphysical positions because it enabled scientists and engineers to do their jobs without having to tangle with messy metaphysical conundrums, so Libertarianism thinks itself superior to other forms of government because it enables citizens to trade in the free market without messy governmental interference. One promises a metaphysics that is not really a metaphysics, and the other promises a government that is not really a government. Both positions assume they are superior to their competitors because they define their position in exclusively negative terms, and thus both are guilty of the Tilde Fallacy.

However, as Colin Bird (1999) has pointed out, Libertarians do not actually treat freedom as something unconditional that can never be compromised to serve some government goal.

Suppose a wealthy self-owner wants to donate ... to the Lutheran Church ... but now suppose that the public agent taxes the wealthy self-owner in order to ... prevent a greater number of more serious violations of self-ownership in the future ... [In] this case, then, the public agent violates this self-owner's right to make the donation. ... Local violations are then justified when they would make it easier for everyone to live by the lights of their own consciences. (pp. 154-155)

In other words, Libertarianism, like all theories of government, posits an ideal society, and it must compromise the freedoms of its citizens to achieve that ideal society. The ideal society for the Libertarian is one in which people are free to exchange property and labor without fear of theft or swindle. In order to maintain that society, it is necessary to tax people to pay for an army, a police force, and a court system, which will inevitably compromise their freedom to spend their money elsewhere. Nozick's Libertarianism thus does presuppose an end result principle, which contradicts itself in much the same way that logical positivism contradicts itself. The Libertarian government must limit the rights of its citizens to defend the principle that rights must never be limited.

Unlike with Logical Positivism, the self-contradictoriness of this argument does not prove that Libertarianism is itself self-contradictory. The Libertarian still retains the option of admitting that she posits an ideal society, and then urges us to accept Libertarian policy as the best way of producing that ideal society. Libertarian literature contains many such panegyrics to the free market Eden that will arrive when the invisible hand is set free to bless us all. However, these panegyrics need additional support not required by Nozick's version of the Tilde Fallacy. These include 1) empirical arguments that prove that Libertarian policies will actually produce this kind of society, 2) ethical and/or aesthetic arguments that show why we should prefer the Libertarian ideal society even if it is produced by these policies, and 3) a recognition of the possibility that some non-Libertarian system might be better at fulfilling that ideal, and a willingness to embrace that other system if this turns out to be the case.

To clarify 3), let us suppose that the Libertarian ideal is a society in which all private property is safe from theft or swindle. Let us further suppose that the best way to protect property is to provide free education and good paying jobs for the unemployed *lumpenproletariat* that does most of the stealing. Anyone who sees the Libertarian ideal society only as a means to producing a society with free trade and safe property, rather than as an end in itself, would have to support these social programs if they come closer to fulfilling the Libertarian ideals. I think Nozick realized this, which is why he tried to justify Libertarianism by claiming it had no social goals at all. This claim, however, was what led him into the contradictions of the Tilde Fallacy.<sup>1</sup>

## The Tilde Fallacy and Atheism

The Tilde Fallacy is probably the most popular defense of atheism, and my claim that it is fallacious will unquestionably be controversial. It is often argued that the atheist should start with some kind of home court advantage when confronting the theist in the Space of Reasons. The theist is claiming that something exists. The atheist is only claiming that something doesn't exist, and therefore her claim has negative content, and therefore no content at all. (It gives a stronger sense of necessity if you leave out that second "therefore".) The most popular atheist expression of this version of the Tilde Fallacy is Russell's teapot argument. We don't need reasons or evidence for disbelieving that there is a teapot rotating the earth that is always blocked by the moon. As Hermione Granger pointed out to Luna Lovegood (in the Harry Potter books), you don't need evidence against the existence of crumpled horn snorkacks to rationally disbelieve in them (Rowling 2007). The same is true for Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster. Why isn't this true of God? Isn't atheism the null hypothesis, and theism the positive hypothesis?

This argument appears compelling if you look at atheism and theism as each entirely captured and expressed by a single sentence. In that case you count up the entities posited by theism (world + God = 2), compare them to those posited by atheism (world = 1), and atheism wins the Occam's Razor derby with the lowest score. If we accept Russell's philosophy of logical atomism or the theory of language expressed in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, we could see every

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<sup>1</sup> Another way for Libertarians to escape the Tilde Fallacy is with Anarchist Libertarianism, which is not self-contradictory even though it is empirically delusional. Anarchist Libertarians say that because property rights are unconditionally inviolable, all taxation is theft, and therefore all government is morally indefensible. This position is consistent. Anyone who believes that government should have no purposes can get what they want by abolishing government, and a society with no government at all would not be vulnerable to the contradiction described above. This is one reason that Nozick felt compelled to devote almost half of *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974) to defending his position against Anarchist Libertarianism. There is also no logical contradiction in a possible world in which government is unnecessary, such as a world where there is so much abundance that no one will starve or covet another's property, and/or a world in which property rights are so universally sacred that the poor will voluntarily starve rather than steal. That world, however, bears essentially no resemblance to our own, so there is really no point in bothering to refute Anarchist Libertarianism, despite the fact that there are a small number of people who actually defend it.

sentence as being completely independent of every other sentence in precisely this way. This would mean that Wittgenstein was right in claiming that "the world divides itself into facts. Anyone can be the case or not be the case and everything else remains the same" (Wittgenstein 1922, Para 1.2--1.21). This however, is another one of those logical positivist dogmas that has long since been discredited, even by the people who originally proposed it. The rejection of this view of language is one of the main differences between early and later Wittgenstein, because it leads to undeniable absurdities.

Can anyone coherently assert that mountains exist, but that valleys don't? Or that aunts and uncles exist but that nieces and nephews don't? Or assert that nieces and nephews exist, but deny that people with children ever have siblings? If we are going to understand what any given sentence is actually asserting, we need to understand other sentences it necessarily implies. This total network of sentences is, as I said earlier, an ontological package deal. The network of sentences that gives meaning to the sentence "Bigfoot exists" is relatively small, which is why we can either remove or place Bigfoot in our possible universe and leave the rest of it relatively intact. Removing God from the Universe, however, has implications for almost everything else in it. This is why it is possible for writers like Richard Dawkins to write book after book articulating the numerous and important implications of God's non-existence. The arguments in these books are often original and thought provoking, and their conclusions might even be right. But their detailed thoroughness makes it impossible for Dawkins to claim that his position is ontologically simpler than theism.

*The Blind Watchmaker* (1986) is one of the most important theological tracts of our time, and Dawkins' denial that he is doing theology is based on the Tilde Fallacy. He is saying God doesn't exist, therefore his claim has negative content, and therefore no positive content. Nevertheless, Dawkins manages to evoke a very vivid and precise view of the nature of reality, even when using sentences heavily sprinkled with tildes. When he says, "Natural selection has no purpose in mind. It has no mind and no mind's eye. It does not plan for the future. It has no vision, no foresight, no sight at all" (1986, p. 5), his description creates a precise and memorable image in our mind, which is the positive content of his Atheist theology. To some of us, this may seem obvious, but for those who are still dazzled by Dawkins' tildes we can remove them and state his theology in the positive.

Here's a bit of metaphysics that I doubt my readers will question. There are two different kinds of entities in the world, conscious agents and mechanisms. We don't need a detailed definition of how they are different to recognize that they are different. The moral argument for vegetarianism uses this distinction to support the claim that no one should ever kill and eat a conscious being, as does anyone who understands this argument well enough to disagree with it. Dennett mentions that his brand of Darwinian atheism implies that we conscious agents possess "foresight: the realtime anticipatory power that Mother Nature wholly lacks" (Dennett 1990, p. 61). This is probably not all there is to being a conscious agent, but it is certainly an important part, and clearly implied in the ideas of many Darwinian atheists. With this distinction in mind, we can assert Dawkins' theology in the positive by saying, "The only conscious agents with foresight are medium sized biological creatures with very big brains. All other organized patterns, micro and macro, are mechanisms, not agents." There is no contradiction in this claim. It might even be true, and there are other arguments that support it (the argument from evil, for

example.) But Blind Watchmaker theology cannot claim a right to use Occam's razor because it is allegedly the null hypothesis. The fact that it has as much positive content as theism becomes clear once it is stated in the positive.

## **The Tilde Fallacy and Mortalism**

Before I wrote this paper, I would refer to the following arguments as defending or attacking personal immortality, and did not name the position I was actually talking about and critiquing. The burden of proof is so widely assumed to be on the shoulders of the immortalist that we are forced to coin a new technical term – *mortalist* – for the position that rejects personal immortality. The assumption was that immortalism was a metaphysical and religious claim, but that mortalism was not a position at all. This shows how deeply this question has been obscured by the Tilde Fallacy. In fact, thanks to certain new developments in cognitive science and philosophy of mind, the Tilde Fallacy might be the only serious argument that the mortalist has left.

For many years, the most popular argument for mortalism was something like this: The mind is identical to the brain, the brain is a piece of meat that will eventually decay and pass out of existence; therefore, the mind will eventually decay and pass out of existence. If the first two premises were unambiguously true, the mortalist would have very strong biological evidence supporting her position. For many people, in fact, this argument still seems so unassailable that they assume it cannot be rejected unless we throw out all of modern science. Eugene Brody, after carefully analyzing the data in Stevenson (1966), concluded there was no actual evidence to discredit it, but also concluded that it would be more rational to accept unfounded speculations about alternative explanations, because "paranormal phenomena and the theory of reincarnation are intrinsically unacceptable – there is no way to make them compatible with the total accumulated body of scientific knowledge" ( Brody 1979, p. 770). Stephen Hales (2001) makes a similar argument against Almader (1992), saying, "Reincarnation is not consistent with either our best empirical theories or with our best philosophical theories about the mind" (p. 338). Almader also cites both C.D. Broad and Paul Edwards as indicating this data should be rejected because it contradicts materialist metaphysics. Almader agrees, but grasps the opposite horn of the dilemma and says we should reject materialism.

Today, however, I argue that the orthodox scientific position is fully compatible with the existence of reincarnation. Modern Cognitive Science says that the mind is what the brain does, not the piece of meat that does it. The computer metaphor for mind, although somewhat problematic in certain respects, captures the fact that something like the hardware/software distinction accurately describes the relationship between mind and the matter that embodies it. Dennett (1991) refers to this "software" with the carefully ambiguous phrase, "...the organization of information that runs your body's control system" (p. 430). At that level of ambiguity, the consensus for this position is decisive. Roughly speaking, the mind is the software that runs on the brain/body's hardware, not the brain itself. But how soft is software, exactly? It is obviously softer than tapioca pudding or cotton candy. Is it as soft as a ghost? Not quite,

because there is a significant difference between this kind of materialism and hardcore dualism, and this difference is expressed by the technical term *supervenience*.

Supervenience requires mental software to always be embodied in some kind of physical hardware, unlike the disembodied spirits of dualism. Software possesses a kind of immortality because it can be uploaded and downloaded indefinitely, even after the first copy has long been destroyed. This is equally true of literary classics like *The Iliad*. Its first oral and written manifestations have been gone for millennia, and yet the books themselves are still very much with us. Philosophers describe this distinction by saying that the book is not identical with any individual volume, but only *supervenes* on that volume. Nevertheless the book does not endure eternally in Plato's heaven, according to this view. If all the physical volumes containing *The Iliad* were destroyed, the book would pass out of existence, as did most of the writings of Parmenides and Democritus.

Dennett (1991) argues that modern cognitive science grants conscious beings the possibility of the kind of immortality achieved by *The Iliad*. However, he also argues that Occam's razor requires us to assume that each human consciousness suffers the fate of Democritus' writings, rather than being immortalized as was *The Iliad*. Could this be an example of the Tilde Fallacy – the assumption that a negative claim is more parsimonious merely because it contains a tilde?

The question is more complicated in this case than in the three previous examples, but I think the answer is yes in two senses. First of all, the mortalist position is as speculative as the immortalist one, and consequently the mortalist, like the atheist, cannot win this debate using Occam's razor. Secondly, a good case can be made that the Tilde Fallacy as used by the mortalist is self-contradictory, and therefore necessarily false, although the contradiction is phenomenological, not logical. Phenomenological contradictions need to be treated with caution, for they are harder to bring to consensus than are logical contradictions. Dennett famously said that it is easy to confuse a failure of imagination for an insight into necessity. I would go further and claim that there is never any way of proving that phenomenological necessity is not mere failure of imagination. Nevertheless, the appearance of necessity is often all we have, and it seems rational to accept it at face value until someone dissolves it by expanding our imaginations.

## **Mortalism and “Extraordinary Claims”**

Dennett says, "I don't believe that there is any reason to think that anybody yet has achieved the sort of immortality I allow for" (personal communication). This statement is strongly challenged by numerous historical books that offer such evidence (Almeder 1992, Braude 2003, Carter 2012, Stevenson 1966, Fontana 2004). These books look pretty convincing to me, as do the replies to attempted debunkings in Carter (2012). But I am a philosopher, not a historian, so I will limit myself to making a philosophical point. Once we recognize that our current view of the nature of mind is fully compatible with the possibility of immortality, we can no longer dismiss the books cited above with Hume's argument against miracles, often



paraphrased as, "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proofs". Some of us believe that Hume's argument is perniciously fallacious and seriously interferes with scientific and historical objectivity (see Earman 2000). But those who still accept it must use it elsewhere, if they are permitted to use it at all. If the mind is software that supervenes on brains, rather than the brain itself, there is nothing miraculous about a mind supervening on some other physical substance after death, and then eventually downloading into some other body. This is arguably the most plausible explanation for the data in the above listed books (although I will show later that there are other explanations equally problematic for the mortalist.)

There are some other attempts to show that immortality contradicts known facts. Those arguments, when carefully scrutinized, often reveal themselves to be variations on the Tilde Fallacy. Consider the claim that reincarnation is impossible because there are so many more people now than there used to be. This argument is paraphrased and replied to in Carter (2012), but I have encountered it frequently elsewhere. Like Carter, I have several possible replies to this – perhaps more people from other planets are reincarnating on Earth, perhaps more mosquitos are reincarnating as people – which are usually met with derisive demands that I prove these claims. Those demands would be appropriate if I were claiming that these things actually happened, or if my opponents were claiming to have concrete evidence that Earth was the only planet with conscious beings on it. Then we could weigh the evidence for each of our claims and judge them on purely scientific terms. However, neither of us has any evidence for either claim, which is why we are talking only in terms of possibility, impossibility, and necessity.

The claim that reincarnation is factually impossible<sup>2</sup> can be refuted by showing that there are possible scenarios that permit reincarnation and are fully compatible with currently accepted scientific facts. The existence of life on other planets is fully compatible with our current state of knowledge (or ignorance) on this topic. Therefore, this argument's unstated but necessary premise is false. What is really going on in this argument is this: I am saying it is possible that there is life on other planets, and my opponent is implying that there must not be. Even if she doesn't explicitly assert or believe this, she must imply it, or her argument will not go through. A claim that X is possible is clearly weaker than a claim that X is impossible. This is especially obvious when both arguments are stated in the positive. If the evidence cannot resolve the question, it is surely more speculative to dogmatically assert that there cannot be life on other planets than to accept the possibility that there might be. But because my opponent's claim has a tilde in it, she reflexively assumes that my position needs further proof and hers doesn't.

What applies to this argument applies to mortalist arguments in general. Denying that there is life after death has tremendous implications for the rest of reality, and these implications have as much speculative content as the immortalist position. At this point I could add some

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<sup>2</sup> Factual impossibility occupies the middle ground between logical impossibility and possibility. There are many things that are logically possible that are factually impossible. It is logically possible that the entire universe is made out of cream cheese, but no one has ever noticed. There are various facts about the universe in which we live that make this factually impossible. The main point of this section is that the "facts" about the mind/brain relationship, which allegedly made immortality factually impossible, have been revealed to be false.

sentences that followed the parallel structure of the previous three arguments and show why each side of this argument is implying and/or stating positive claims that are equally speculative. That project, however, would be hampered by the fact that those positive claims are rather muddled and confused – so much so that they seem to imply a much stronger argument. The libertarian and logical positivist versions of the Tilde Fallacy reveal that the positions they are defending are self-contradictory. The atheist version of this fallacy is not self-contradictory, only illegitimately employs Occam's razor. If I stop now, I could content myself with a parallel argument against the mortalist's use of Occam's razor. I think however that a case can be made that the mortalist position is as self-contradictory as Logical Positivism or Nozick's argument for libertarianism. When the mortalist does try to state her position in the positive, it is not at all clear that what she says even makes any sense. It might even be self-contradictory, in much the same way that Logical Positivism is self-contradictory. If this is the case, the mortalist position can be rejected for the same kinds of reasons that Logical Positivism was rejected, and some kind of immortalism would win by default. We may not know what does happen to us after death, but we can be essentially certain that we are not going to be reborn as four-sided triangles.

## **Mortalism and Phenomenological Necessity**

If thoughtfully considered, the most common statements of the mortalist position reveal its incoherency. "When you're dead, you're dead." Like all tautologies, this is uninformative. We still haven't answered the question, "What happens when you're dead?" How about: "You lie very still, and eventually your body rots away"? But both the mortalist and the immortalist are in complete agreement about this. How can we express what it is that the two sides disagree about? This can be done only by referring to the first person perspective of the person who dies. That is the only question at issue here, and statements about biological decay are simply changing the subject. So are statements about radical changes in the abstract pattern of behavior we described above as "software". Both the immortalist and mortalist are providing answers to one question only: *What happens to me, from the first person perspective, when I die?*

The first person perspective always provides answers to questions of the form "What is it like to be X?" Consequently, the question that the mortalist and the immortalist are both attempting to answer is, "What is it like to be dead?", or, more precisely, "What is it like for *me* to be dead?" We all know what it is like for other people to be dead, if we have ever seen corpses and/or images of them. This is a different question. Every possible mortalist answer to that question is either an empty metaphor or explicitly self-contradictory. You snuff out like a candle, cash in your chips, hand in your dinner pail. If you're there, then death isn't. (Great! That means I'm never going to die!) You wake up one morning and discover you are not there any more. All of the non-metaphorical formulations are as self-contradictory as "the ultimate metaphysical truth is that all metaphysics is nonsense" or "the purpose of government is to have no purpose". However, unlike the Logical Positivist and the Nozickian Libertarian, the mortalist's position is not *logically* self-contradictory but *phenomenologically* self-contradictory. The inherent contradiction of mortalism does not emerge from the syntax of the proposition that states it, but from fundamental structures in subjective experience.

I am leery of any claims of necessary structures in consciousness, and am open to any thought experiments that might reveal that any so-called impossibilities are possible after all. Nevertheless, there are certain claims about human experience that I believe are presupposed by both sides of this debate, and we must not doubt in our philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts. Phenomenological necessities are few and far between, but there are some that are undeniable. There are no visible shapes without color<sup>2</sup>, and no colors without shapes. Anyone who speaks of such things is talking nonsense. I argue that the mortalist position is revealed to be similarly self-contradictory, once we acknowledge that it must refer to my awareness of "what things are like for me". My knowledge that all Homo sapiens are mortal, and that I am a Homo sapien, gives me good reason to believe that I will eventually die, in the sense that eventually my body will stop moving, then gradually decay. But it tells me nothing about what it will be like for me to die, or what it will be like to be dead.

The mortalist claims that being dead won't be like anything at all, but we have no way of making sense of that claim. We may not know what it is like to visit Paris or to taste haggis. If somebody tells us that the taste of haggis is indescribable, and the only way to know it is actually experience it, we can make sense out of that claim. But if someone tells us that it isn't like anything at all to taste haggis, we would say that they are talking nonsense. And yet that is exactly the sort of nonsense that the mortalist is trying to pass off as down-to-earth scientific fact. The mortalist may reply that death is completely different from anything else that ever happens to us, so these analogies are not valid. But if this is the case, the burden of proof is on the mortalist to explain how it is different, and this is a burden she has not taken up. Within the phenomenological range in which we currently dwell, what the mortalist is saying makes no sense, and thus we must reject it until it is made more coherent. To accept mortalism in its present form would be like believing that we reincarnate as four-sided triangles. The contradiction inherent in mortalism is visible once we acknowledge the following premises:

- 1) The debate between the mortalist and the immortalist must concern death as experienced from the first person perspective. Anything else is changing the subject.
- 2) The first person perspective always provides answers to questions of the form, "What is it like to be X?"
- 3) The mortalist answers to the question "what is it like to be dead?" either change the subject or are self-contradictory. Therefore,
- 4) the mortalist position on death either changes the subject or is self-contradictory.

Those who have problems with this conclusion need to falsify at least one of these premises. They seem undeniable to me.

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<sup>3</sup> I add the qualifier "visible" because a student pointed out to me that we can imagine shapes without color if we imagine them kinesthetically. Thus what once seemed to me to be a necessary truth turned out not to be necessary after all, until I limited it to visible shapes. A vivid example that illustrates the fragile nature of what we must take to be necessity.

## The Reductionist Defense of Mortalism

One possible mortalist strategy I will call *reductionism*. The reductionist in this context claims that the self is nothing but the sum total of its experiences, and thus there is no such thing as a subjectivity that is distinct from the experienced world. David Hume was the first to make this assertion, claiming that introspection reveals the contents of consciousness, but not a subject that experiences those contents. Hume's justification for his claim is thus, like mine, based on phenomenology. When two phenomenologists disagree, they are often reduced to asserting that "my intuitions can beat up your intuitions". Dennett (1991) avoids this cul-de-sac by relying not on phenomenology but on contemporary neuroscience and cognitive psychology. He claims that these new scientific developments support what he calls a *multiple drafts theory of consciousness* that, like Hume's theory, suggests that we should deny the existence of a "central meander". For Dennett, the subjective self is a verbal construct, not a privately experienced reality. This is what Dennett calls *first person operationalism*: my self is what I say it is when I tell the story of myself to myself. If he is right about this, doesn't this mean that there is no such thing as a distinct self, and therefore no first person perspective and no "what-it-is-like-to-be"-ness? This is the strongest argument against my position, but ultimately I do not think it can prevail. When all of its implications are followed to their logical conclusions, the result is a rat's nest of absurdities that could be summed up with the following question: if the central meander doesn't really exist, how can it die?

The "middle way" Buddhist philosophy of Nagarjuna has a theory of self very similar to Dennett's and Hume's (Varela Thompson, & Rosch 1992), but this school of Buddhism saw this fact about the self as support for the existence of reincarnation, not mortalism. Buddhism recognizes that the empirical self – the self to which we are so attached and in which we take such pride – is nothing but an aggregate of contingently clustered traits and qualities. The deep recognition of this fact is what enables the Buddhist practitioner to maintain the state of equanimity that liberates the practitioner from suffering. However, if our consciousness is nothing more than an aggregate of experiences, wouldn't this imply that when that aggregate disintegrates into its parts, consciousness would disappear as that aggregate disappears? Buddhism does not accept that conclusion. Instead, it asserts that there is a consciousness which is distinct from the aggregate of experiences we call the self. Consciousness is a kind of emptiness, but it is also accompanied by the qualities of clarity and unimpededness, which can be most clearly seen when we are not distracted by the numerous qualities and character traits we ordinarily call the self. The mortalist will dismiss this as speculative mystical nonsense, but her alternative has serious problems of its own.

If we are nothing above and beyond our various experiences and character traits, then each of us died sometime during our first decade. This is equally true whether we consider the outdated idea that we are nothing more than the meat we are made of, or the more sophisticated claim that we are the pattern that supervenes on that meat. As we pointed out earlier, software can endure *in principle* forever by being replicated in a variety of hardwares. We, however, have the ability to endure even when our software becomes completely unlike our earlier software. It is not just that all of the molecules of the four-year-old boy I once was have now been completely replaced. The formal structures that determined the size, shape and temperament of

that boy have now vanished as decisively as have his molecules. And yet here I am, in some strange sense the same person now that I was then. How am I able to pull this off if I am nothing but a pattern supervening on some material stuff, and both the original pattern and the original stuff have passed out of existence?

The immortalist claims that when our current body is destroyed our consciousness continues on somewhere else. The mortalist claims that the self is nothing but the form and matter of our current physical body – and yet somehow our consciousness endures even when the matter and form have been transformed into something completely different. The mortalist position as it stands is thus self-contradictory, unless we deny the universally accepted proposition that I am the same person that I was when I was five years old. If the mortalist bites the bullet on this, and concedes that I am not same person as that five year old, the immortalist wins even more decisively. The mortalist is in effect conceding that I have already died, and still managed to carry on. That may not be immortality by some definition or other, but it's good enough for me.

## **Mortalism and Reincarnation**

These problems come into sharpest focus when we consider the type of immortalism known as reincarnation. In the western Abrahamic traditions, immortalism usually is bundled with the claim that there is a separate place or places where the conscious self continues to have experiences after the destruction of the body (Heaven, Hell, Purgatory, etc.). That is a much harder position to defend because of Occam's razor issues. Belief in Heaven, etc. requires both a belief in the endurance of the soul and an unseen place where the soul endures. Reincarnation only claims that the soul returns "here" in some sense, and we already know that "here" exists because here we are. This argument for the reincarnation alternative is decisive as far as I am concerned, although it is wise to be tolerant of other conclusions when our ignorance on this subject is so vast. Accepting reincarnation, however, brings with it a variety of implications that cannot be ignored. The Abrahamic immortalist does not have to deal with hard questions about the nature of the self that survives. At least in the popular versions, I remain essentially the same person in life and death, with a few moral purifications to bring out my best qualities more vividly. On the other hand, it's an empirical fact that most of us have no memory of previous reincarnations. Consequently, if immortality is produced by reincarnation, it does not require any formal or material components from our previous lives. In the yogic traditions that accept reincarnation, we do not reunite with our long dead friends and relatives in a celestial home. There are some tales in those traditions about people who reincarnate repeatedly in interlocking relationships, sometimes reversing roles such as master and servant, or pet and owner, or parent and child. But the sentient beings in these relationships have no awareness of their identities in previous lifetimes, and the various personalities of each reincarnation are radically different from each other.

This creates problems for the possibility of verifying any possible case of reincarnation. It is obviously impossible to prove that currently living X is a reincarnation of deceased Y, if X has no memories whatsoever of having been Y. Indeed from the third person point of view, the

idea makes no sense at all. How can something be the same as something else if the two items share no characteristics? It's rather like the Catholic Idea of the Eucharist, in which bread and wine is the body of Christ, without having any of the characteristics of the body of Christ – an idea which most Catholic theologians recognize as a self-contradictory paradox that can only be believed on faith. Actually, this rhetorical question underestimates the problem. Reincarnation doesn't just imply that two individuals are in the same category. It implies that these two individuals are the same individual, even though they have nothing in common. Although this idea makes no sense from a third person point of view, it is easily imaginable from the first person point of view. Imagine you are given a choice of either 1) having your memories and personality completely removed and replaced or 2) being completely annihilated. Both alternatives would be disastrous, but we have no trouble realizing that they are different. This is partly illustrated by the fact that most people would choose 1) over 2), but more strongly illustrated by the fact that even if someone chooses 2) or is indifferent to either, it is still phenomenologically obvious that these are two different choices. Perhaps you want to argue that this is a pseudo-problem, and neither of these alternatives are acceptable? This may be true, but this won't help the mortalist. She is irreparably committed to alternative 2) in this debate, just as the reincarnationist is committed to alternative 1). Throw out this debate, and mortalism goes with it.

Once we accept the inevitability of these problems, it seems that the only possible proof for reincarnation would come from those anomalous souls who allegedly remember their past lives. Unfortunately, serious philosophical problems arise from the fact that there are always alternative explanations for any empirical data based on these alleged memories. Robert Almeder (1992) proposes a criterion for proof of reincarnation paraphrased from A. J. Ayer: "It would be sufficient for the truth of the belief that the man beside you is Julius Caesar reincarnated if that man had all the memories that one would ordinarily expect of Julius Caesar, and if he had some verified memories that appealed to facts that were not in any way items of public information" (p. 60). Nevertheless, Almeder also quotes Stephen Braude (2003) and others, who propose a variety of counter-explanations to cases of this sort. Even if we can prove that our subject's knowledge of Julius Caesar's life could not have been acquired by the usual means, how can we be sure that the subject didn't acquire that knowledge through ESP? Just because she knows a lot about Julius Caesar's life doesn't mean she actually lived it, and this is true no matter how much she knows. Braude acknowledges that ESP, as we currently know it, could not deliver the detailed acquisition of skills and personality traits so often described in the literature. He says, however, that there is no reason to deny the existence of what he calls super ESP, a power that goes far beyond what has been documented in the PSI laboratory. The evidence that allegedly supports reincarnation could also be used to support claims of something like exorcist-style *possession*. In other words, a person who claims a new identity and is manifesting new skills and personality traits and knowledge could just as easily have been taken over by a completely different person, rather than revealed to have been a different person in the past.

I must ask my readers who are equally repulsed by all of these explanations to bracket their repugnance and just consider this as a thought experiment. My point is that even if all of these alternatives deserved to be taken seriously, it would still be impossible to distinguish between them in any individual case. The problem is this: *The fact that someone has extensive knowledge of a person's life can never prove that she has actually lived that life. Knowing*

*something (or even everything) about a person does not make you that person.* This is not just the problem of Mary the Color Blind Neuroscientist. Even if we accept Dennett's (1991) conclusion that knowing all the neuroscientific facts about a color is the same as experiencing that color, we cannot apply this conclusion to the reincarnation problem. In most of the cases discussed by Almeder (1992) and Carter (2012), the subjects remember both propositional facts and experience. The problem is that it is impossible to tell the difference between experiences that are actual memories of having been there and experiences that are imaginative fabrications, even if those fabrications are crammed with true facts. That's because, once we strip away the memories and personalities of the person having the experience, it becomes clear that "being there" is nothing more and nothing less than the first person perspective.

Almeder and Carter both try to draw the line clearly amongst the alternatives of reincarnation, memory and possession – and indeed there are clusters of behaviors that make certain cases somewhat more amenable to one description rather than another. But it seems necessarily true that any possible set of facts that could be explained by reincarnation could also be explained by either super ESP or possession, if one were more inclined towards either of those alternatives. This has two very important implications. 1) It is not just difficult, but impossible, to use scientific methods to decisively decide between these explanations. 2) Therefore, science can neither prove nor disprove the existence of reincarnation. Here, of course, is where the Tilde Fallacy usually rears its head. If we cannot scientifically prove that something exists, doesn't Occam's razor require us to assume that it doesn't? No, because negative claims still need some kind of evidence to back them up. Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster have partial evidence against them, based on the fact that many people have diligently looked for them and not found them. There is no such evidence against life in other galaxies, because we don't have resources that could search for them. However, It is still possible that life from other galaxies might show up in good Hollywood fashion, and that hope, slim though it may be, is not an option for reincarnation research. Evidence for or against reincarnation is not just non-existent. It is impossible, as far as we can tell, to find evidence one way or the other because of the presuppositions of our research methods. Science cannot be said to have answered a question that it has never asked.

## Who am I?

What are the presuppositions that hamstring the study of reincarnation so inexorably? I think it has to do with the fact that subjective experience is necessarily linked to our experience of ourselves as particulars, and there can be no such thing as a science of particulars. Subjective experience is what gives us our awareness of this-here-now, and there can be no such thing as a science of this-here-now. It was Kant's awareness of this fact that made him write an entire critique on the problem of judgment – applying a rule to a case – and the depth of this problem is why so much of *The Critique of Judgment* is evocative handwaving. It is not possible to scientifically prove or disprove that I will survive after death, any more than there can be a science of this table. Those aspects of me that are abstract are the only aspects that are scientifically comprehensible, and they are not me, because my being, as Heidegger rightly pointed out, is in each case mine.

Although the mind-as-software theory is a great improvement over the mind-as-two-pounds-of-meat-between-the-ears theory, it still has some serious problems. The mind is paradoxically both abstract and concrete, universal and particular. It's true that the self has no necessary connection to the particular stuff on which it supervenes. However, the mind-as-software theory cannot account for the fact that the mind also has no necessary connection to its abstract qualities. It's not just that the self can remain the same even when all its abstract qualities change, as when a child becomes an adult. These problems with the reincarnation data show that it's also possible to have all the abstract qualities of a particular self and not have that self present. Furthermore, we don't have to consider the data on reincarnation to see this problem. Although Hofstadter and Dennett have created a renowned version of the mind-as-software theory, their classic anthology *The Minds I* (1981) contains two compelling counterexamples to that theory.

1) Stanislaw Lem tells a story of a man who wishes to live happily-ever-after with a tiny princess who lives inside a box. A helpful wizard starts with the assumption that the man's mind is nothing but the abstract patterns of his mind and then duplicates those abstract patterns in a tiny copy of the man. The tiny copy of the man embraces the princess and strolls off with her towards the tiny sunset. When the man protests that he is not in the box, because he is here observing, not there, the wizard offers to solve that problem by killing him with a large hammer. (In Hofstadter & Dennett 1981, pp. 96-98).

2) Dennett offers an alternative explanation for the teleporter beams that appear in science fiction stories. The usual assumption is that "the teleporter will swiftly and painlessly dismantle your body, producing a molecule-by-molecule blueprint to be beamed to earth, where the receiver, its reservoirs well-stocked with the requisite atoms, will almost instantaneously produce from the beamed instructions – you!" (Ibid., p. 3). But is there any reason to doubt the possibility that the machine is not actually a teleporter, but rather what Dennett calls a "murdering twin maker"? From a purely physical point of view, what the machine is doing is destroying your body and then making an exact copy of it somewhere else. Because this copy has all of your memories and emotions, this distinction makes no difference to the organism that emerges from this device. But it makes a tremendous difference to the organism that enters the device. If you think this difference is trivial semantics, consider the following variation. Suppose that the teleporter only travels from one side of a room to the other, and instead of vaporizing the body immediately, you get to stare at your new clone for a few seconds? Would you be willing to be killed with the hammer in the previous example, secure in the knowledge that you will survive because your abstract form has been preserved? According to the terms of the thought experiment, no one else but you can ever know whether you survived or were merely murdered and duplicated. And yet anyone who refuses to be killed by that hammer is acknowledging that this difference is real, even though it is completely subjective.

There is no logical contradiction in claiming that you are the person "over there", and consequently you are willing to have the self "over here" killed with the hammer. If there is anyone out there who answers affirmatively to that question, I have nothing to say to them. For the rest of us, however, I think these examples show phenomenologically that my personal identity is not constituted by my abstract form. I think the most effective way to resolve this



phenomenological paradox is to say that there is an aspect of my being which is completely concrete that cannot be identified with any abstraction, and therefore always escapes the universal laws that are the tools of science and other forms of knowledge. That is why there can be no first person science that completely closes the explanatory gap separating it from its subject matter. We can of course talk and write about concepts that deal with what I call the third-person-first-person. That's part of what I am doing in this essay. But the first person perspective cannot be reduced without remainder to those concepts.

These diversions into philosophy of mind and ontology are not really diversions, because without them it is impossible to uncover the phenomenological structures that reveal the mortalist position to be self-contradictory. If the first person perspective is reducible to an abstract pattern, there is no need to ask the question, "What is it like to be dead?" However, if it is not so reducible, then we must ask that question. We can then see that the mortalist answer to it makes no sense. If we don't ask that question, we can only talk about death in general, which changes the subject away from metaphysics to biology and/or psychology. That is the heart of the argument in this section: that when we ask "what happens to me when I die?" that question is not answered by saying some abstract pattern identified with you either lives on or is destroyed. People are often not aware of this. That is why they sometimes say things like, "Beethoven lives on in his music." This is a charming metaphor, but we should not permit it to muddy up the discussion of this very different topic. Many of us would love to have our creations remembered long after we have died, even if the mortalists are right about what happens when we die. But that is not the same thing as actually remaining alive and/or conscious. As the Monty Pythons pointed out in their song, "Decomposing Composers," the fact that you can still hear Beethoven does not imply that Beethoven can hear you. The fact that the mind-as-software theory implies something like this could be seen as making this idea into a *reductio ad absurdum*.

### **Hofstadter Bites the Bullet on Immortality**

Hofstadter recognizes that he must take this metaphor of "Beethoven lives on in his music" as a literal truth because it is necessarily implied by his mind-as-software theory. In *I am a Strange Loop* (2007) he bites the bullet on this issue with heroic consistency and embraces a variety of counterintuitive conclusions. These conclusions, however, are as critical of mortalism as are my arguments, despite the fact that they deny one of my essential premises. My argument is that the irreducibility of the first person perspective requires us to conclude that mortalism is self-contradictory. Hofstadter says that there is no first-person perspective that is distinct from the content and character of my personality. However, he also points out that this content and character endures after the person dies, often taking root in the minds and behaviors of other people that live on. Consequently, if I am nothing but my thoughts and behavior patterns, and my thoughts and behavior patterns survive my biological death, then I survive my biological death. Hofstadter seems to almost say, contra the Pythons, that Beethoven literally lives on in his music! Usually, however, he limits this claim to a kind of abstract pattern with a distinctive self-referential structure that he calls a strange loop (hence the title of the book). This structure has a peculiar kind of complexity that Hofstadter spends most of the book describing, and Hofstadter thinks that this kind of structure is all that there is to the first-person perspective. In other words,

he does not accept my claim that there is something irreducibly *particular* about the first-person perspective that cannot be reduced to any abstract principle.

Hofstadter admits that when strange loops are transferred from brain to brain, the resulting copy is usually very "grainy" and inaccurate. A strange loop is a very complicated structure that doesn't transfer from one brain to another as easily as a Beethoven symphony. Sometimes, however, two or more people can be in such close synchrony that they see the world from essentially the same perspective. In that case, they become a "we" instead of a cluster of "I"s. When one of the persons in this kind of group dies, Hofstadter claims it is literally true that the deceased continues to think and live, using the brains of the survivors who continue to see the world from her point of view, and thus continue to participate in her strange loop.

It would probably be more accurate to describe the result of this process as survival rather than immortality. It offers us no guarantee that survival will go on forever. If the mind is nothing but software, there is no contradiction in the possibility of software having nothing to supervene on, and thus passing out of existence. It is only when you accept my claim of the irreducibility of the first-person perspective that the mortalist position becomes self-contradictory. I think Hofstadter needs to pay more attention to the implications of the examples of the tiny princess and the murdering twin maker, and to the factors that make it impossible in principle to either prove or disprove the existence of reincarnation. I think that these factors require us to accept an immortalist position, not just a survivalist position. Nevertheless, Hofstadter and I are in agreement that the mortalist position is not the only one acceptable to a rational person in touch with the latest scientific facts. The fact that mortalism has managed to maintain this reputation, while doing essentially nothing to earn it, is one more example of the seductive strength of the Tilde Fallacy.

Furthermore, as far as I can see, our two positions provide a dilemma from which the mortalist cannot escape. If the mortalist is unpersuaded by my phenomenological arguments, she will have to agree with Hofstadter that the self is nothing more than the abstract behavior that I have metaphorically called mental software. Because these abstract patterns survive our bodily death, this would imply that our selves survive bodily death. This survival would perhaps not be technically the same thing as eternal life, because these patterns do pass out of existence eventually (at least this appears to be true of the ones of which we are aware). But because we have gone through this particular extinction process several times since childhood, it doesn't appear that death has the sting we originally attributed to it (in so far as what we thought about it made any sense at all). In other words: Either 1) the first person perspective is genuinely irreducible, in which case it makes no sense to say we could wake up one morning and discover we are not here any more, or 2) The first person perspective has no separate existence of its own, in which case each of us has already died many times.

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