

Essay

Is the Afterlife a Non-Question? (Let's Hope Not)

Deepak Chopra*

There are few questions where it can be said that literally every answer is second-hand, but the persistence of consciousness after death is one. As sticky and complicated as the issue seems to be, it can be broken down into three perspectives that in themselves are simple. The perspective of a believer supports life after death; the skeptical perspective denies it; the undecideds stand in the middle. It's rare to find anyone who belongs to one of these camps who is willing to accept evidence from another. In essence, believers don't budge because they trust their religion; skeptics won't budge because they trust rationality; undecideds remain stuck in ambivalence and doubt.

Yet even where militant skeptics trumpet their certainty at one end of the spectrum and at the opposite extreme religious extremists are willing to die in order to attain paradise, everyone bases his position on received wisdom of one kind or another. This renders the afterlife a non-question. It has been a non-question for as long as recorded history, but a tradition doesn't become true through persistence and the passage of time. The fundamental issue is whether the afterlife can be transformed into a viable question.

I believe it can, but it takes a lot of convincing and patient discourse before the needle moves even half an inch. As social psychologists have proved over and over, when you show partisans objective proof that their position is shaky or untenable, the net result is that they harden their position even more. Assuming that you, I, and the reader in the corner are open-minded, turning the afterlife into a valid question must return to basics, including the most boring basic, defining our terms. However, as it turns out, defining our terms actually answers the question.

The most basic term in this case is consciousness, because when arguing over the possibility of an afterlife, much confusion is caused by asking the wrong questions. If you don't specify what consciousness actually is, you wind up worrying about the survival of the soul, or of "me," the individual ego-personality. And if those pitfalls are avoided, Eastern traditions are filled with equally misleading notions of Jiva, Atman, and Brahman, or of Nirvana and Satori.

I will propose that if two people agree upon their definition of consciousness, they will agree on the existence or non-existence of an afterlife. This isn't an arbitrary judgment. It rests on the familiar experience that people make up stories, they believe in their stories, and the reality they inhabit conforms to their stories. For a skeptic whose story contains the *facts* that all

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things can be explained through materialism, experimentation, data, measurement, and a confirmed allegiance to objectivity over subjectivity, there will be no doubt that the afterlife is spurious – not because it actually is, but because a certain story, or worldview if you prefer, forbids it to exist. By the same token, a confirmed believer holds fast to a story where the non-existence of a personal God is impermissible, even unthinkable, and therefore the afterlife acquires its reality by association with the deity.

If these points are acceptable, we can refine our investigation and ask if there is a definition of consciousness completely detached from all stories, which means the absence of bias, predisposition, received wisdom, rumor, myth, group pressure, wishful thinking, fear, apprehension, and mental figments of very sort. I believe so. Every reasonable person, I think, will accept that consciousness, as experienced by humans, is the awareness of two things: that we exist and that we experience. By extension, a reality that cannot be experienced is moot. By this measure, UFOs, angels, the afterlife, and the quantum vacuum exist on the same playing field. They are suppositions and inferences.

If we toss out suppositions and inferences, what can we truthfully say about consciousness? By this I mean what can we say that no reasonable person will disagree with? Here we run into a complicated situation, because certain aspects of consciousness require extended discussion and a back-and-forth between people of good will. Such a setup is rare, unfortunately, but at least I can relate a few things that I've been able to convince people of over the years.

1. There is only one consciousness. To subdivide it makes no sense. This point is lifted almost verbatim from Erwin Schrödinger, the eminent quantum pioneer. Philosophically, the "one consciousness" position is common to monistic schools, because they repudiate any true difference, ontologically, between the one and the many. Yet when dealing with everyday people, it's obvious that we all cling fervently to being individuals, outfitted with *my* family, house, body, mind, and soul. To crack this allegiance requires arguments like the following:

- When you get wet, do you call it "my" wet? Some things happen to us personally but turn out to have a general existence.
- If you sing "The Star-Spangled Banner" as you walk down the street, did the song walk down the street with you?
- If you imagine your mother's face, where is that mental image located? The brain has no pictures in it, and no light. When you imagine your mother's face, you didn't consult a directory of facial characteristics the way computer recognition software does – you simply called up what you wished to see.
- Where is your self located? There is no neurological evidence of a region of the brain that contains the self, and, even if researchers claimed such a region existed, it would have to contain everything attached to you as a self, including your life history.

2. Assuming that the discussion can crack open the presumption of isolated, local consciousness – there are many ways to get at this, not just the few questions listed above – the second point is that this "one consciousness" cannot be located. It is everywhere, all at once. This point

sounds like a hard sell, as it would be if everyone held an advanced degree in philosophy, I imagine. But in everyday life the argument is fairly easily based upon physics.

- Cosmologists and quantum physicists agree that spacetime originated in a domain (referred to as the zero point, quantum vacuum state, or the realm of pure mathematics) that isn't in time and space.
- The entire universe, as well as individual subatomic particles, emerged from this pre-created state, which has no qualities we would recognize such as linear time, dimensionality, solidity, energy, etc.
- At the very least, all creation stories, scientific or not, converge on the creation of something out of nothing. Beyond our experience of reality in spacetime, there is a field of infinite potential, unbounded possibilities.
- As the reality of space, time, matter, and energy appeared and continues to appear, the existence of consciousness must be accounted for. There are only two viable possibilities that are taken seriously. The "matter first" position holds that mind has its origins in matter and energy (to which some theorists add information). The "mind first" position holds that consciousness is the source of everything, including matter and energy.

3. If there are only these two positions, how do we decide between them? The difficulty is that being monistic, the two are incompatible and, more critically, totally self-consistent. It isn't possible to step outside the framework of "mind first" or "matter first" to gather evidence. All the evidence lies within the worldview that produced it. Even if other, as yet unknown, kinds of evidence emerged – such as the current, quite baffling existence of so-called dark matter and dark energy, which don't follow the rules of visible matter and energy – it would be absorbed into pre-existing stories that we live by.

In deciding between "mind first" and "matter first," the crux is a single question. Is it more probable that matter somehow learned to think or that mind can create matter? It seems astonishing to me that more than 90% of scientists are so conditioned to reduce every issue to matter and energy (to use the favored term nowadays, they are *physicalists*), they accept without investigation the assumption that the sugar in a sugar cube, once ingested, can travel past the blood-brain barrier and suddenly think, feel, wish dream, and do science. No one has remotely come close to showing the point in evolutionary history where ordinary molecules acquired consciousness. Therefore, the very notion that the brain is a privileged object, the only "thing" in creation that has consciousness, is untenable. The brain is simply an ordinary object composed of ordinary atoms and molecules. It didn't become consciousness through the random combination of complex organic chemicals.

The contrary position, that consciousness pre-exists the physical world, has some simple evidence on its side. The simplest, of course, is that the impossibility of the "matter first" position leaves only one other viewpoint that can possibly be true. But to most people such an argument feels like sleight of hand. Therefore, we can point to the human brain, where every sensation, image, feeling, and thought pushes brain chemicals around, redirects them to

various parts of the body, causes vital signs to change either slowly or abruptly, and actually produces some chemicals, such as neurotransmitters, out of nothing.

The creation of something out of nothing has been lurking in the background as the ultimate question, yet with reference to everyday experience, the mystery becomes both personal and self-evident. If someone whispers "I love you" in your ear, the mind-body system will display hundreds of changes dissimilar to what occurs if the whispered words are "I have a gun pointed at your heart." The deciding factor isn't material in the slightest; it consists of mental activity, the continual production of thoughts, words, meaning, purpose, direction, intention, and so on.

It is far from impossible to convince reasonable people that these points are true, and they stem from defining consciousness in the most basic, intuitively validated way. As to the specific issue of an afterlife, consider what lies on the side of its existence:

- Consciousness, being nonlocal, is not subject to birth and death.
- Even in physicalist terms, there must be a pre-created state beyond time and space. Birth and death, being aspects of linear time, are not present there.
- An argument can be mounted that certain abstract experiences, such as mathematics and information, have an indestructible aspect, again immune to birth and death.
- Body, mind, and the world "out there" cannot be divorced from conscious experience. The only reasonable location for all of them is in consciousness itself.
- If all of the above are true, then nothing exists except as a modified state of consciousness. Some of these states we identify as matter and energy, but this is simply a habit of mind built up for cultural reasons. There have been societies where "mind first" was just as self-evident as "matter first" is to us.

Having laid out, in truncated form, the argument for consciousness as the basis of reality, not everyone may be willing to follow the clues that lead to an afterlife. But that isn't as important as realizing that we have tended to ask the wrong questions. One can devote a book to untangling the various possibilities for consciousness to persist after the end of the body. (I wrote one, *Life After Death*, 2008) In the end, however, the stubborn way that old stories cling to us, and we to them, muddies the issue and opens the way for vehement partisans who refuse to see that they are flogging second-hand opinions. Until we all are willing to think fresh thoughts about a worn-out question, consciousness will remain constricted. If consciousness begins to expand on an individual basis, there is hope for clarity. More importantly, we can begin to bring centuries of baseless fear and superstition to an end. I'd suggest that ending the superstition of materialism would be a good start.

Reference

Chopra, D. (2008). *Life After Death: The Burden of Proof*. Harmony Reprint.

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