

Religion, Philosophy and Values Education . . . . .

# Dialogue

## Australasia

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# Life after Death

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If 'the only things certain in life are death and taxes' as Benjamin Franklin suggested, it was an unknown wit who added; 'But you don't have to die every year!' Unlike the tax return, death is a climactic event, the conclusion of a life and the petering out of all that we know. We disarm it by humour, but it stalks us nonetheless.

It is the greatest paradox of life and for many, the cruellest irony. That those who live, will die. That even those who have lived the fullest, richest and complex of lives reach the end of the story and already know how it will end. Our lives, if not 'nasty, brutish and short,' are over all too quickly and barely scratch the surface of time. We have all lost someone we love, and we will all lose the thing that we most love. And over this inevitable loss, our technology, our science, our music and our masterpieces all put up some kind of a fight. But whether there is any credible, philosophical expectation of more a personal life after death, is of perennial interest and debate.

Of the three great monotheistic religions, it is only Christianity that has looked death in the face; countenanced it, ingested it and spat it out. The dramatic birth-death-resurrection cycle of the Christian year has at its heart a much older story; that of meeting a cold universe with unquenchable Energy, of the triumph of Personality over dissolution and Love over indifference. It is a tale as old as man himself; tied, umbilically, to the cycle of the seasons as winter is overcome by spring, and Persephone emerges from the underworld to rejoin her mother on earth. It is both natural and supernatural; incredible and profound.

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**It took the Axial age... to promote ideas about the possibility of life after death for *everyone*.**



The journey to heaven is intimately related to how you have lived your life. But the link that we take for granted is actually relatively recent. Certainly in the Western hemisphere, early beliefs in an afterlife were unrelated to moral excellence; it was status (and the access it afforded) rather than virtue that won the day. For people such as the Ancient Egyptians, entrance to the Kingdom of the Dead depended as much upon knowing the correct passwords as having a sin-free heart. And if the soul was heavier than the feather of Truth, it would be eaten by the demon Ammit. For the Ancient Israelites and Ancient Greeks, Sheol and Hades were dreary, insubstantial places, reserved for kings and prophets. For the ordinary man in the street, the only hope of survival lay in his children or his tribe.

It took the Axial age – that great stirring of individual consciousness somewhere around the 6th Century BC – to promote ideas about the possibility of life after death for *everyone*. Now the Prophet Ezekiel, in exile in Babylon, could have a vision of a 'valley of dry bones' that God would bring back to life. In the depth of his misery, Job was comforted by the realisation that the God who loved him was a Just God, and would see justice done. "I shall see God whom I shall see on my side, and

my eyes shall behold and not another." Job 19:27.

Although Job believes that his restoration will be fleeting, he was not alone in his hope for *something*. Hannah's vision of the glory of the Messiah includes that of the dead being raised, and when the corpses of soldiers were thrown on top of the dead Elisha's bones, they were resurrected and bought back to life. Hope for personal survival was slowly gaining ground, although it seems to have taken the persecution by the Greek, Antiochus Epiphanes, for a more sustained belief to take shape. As the Jewish faithful were massacred in the Temple and butchered in the streets, the cry went up that the Martyrs would not die unrewarded. 'You are taking us out of this world but the King of the World shall raise us,' is the defiant call of one of seven Maccabaeen brothers, massacred for refusing to denounce his God. His cry was heard by many. By the time of Jesus two centuries later, there was a well-established dialogue between the Pharisees, who believed in personal resurrection in the coming Messianic age, and the Sadducees who did not.

Coming from a very different tradition, place and time, Socrates drank the hemlock in prison with confidence and good heart. His

death, as reported by Plato in the *Phaedo*, reads as a blueprint for the calm acceptance of a man who believes that death is not the end.

The friend who mourns for me imagines I am the other Socrates. The Socrates whom he shall soon see, a dead body; and he asks how shall he bury me? I, Socrates – the man, is leaving you and going to the joys of the blessed... and you must do with his body what you see fit.

For Socrates, the body is a vehicle; a casing for the man, but as little to do with the real, indivisible, single soul as the toga he could take off at night. His eternal soul was unaffected by death, being non-composite and, therefore, irreducible. His soul was of a different realm to that of the body whom his friends could bury as they would. He had no further use for it – either now, or at any time in the future. And with these two different beliefs, one Judaic, the other Hellenistic, one can discern very different ideas about what kind of being the human being actually is. Students need to grasp this fundamental difference.

For the Hebraic mind, man is ineluctably linked to his body. *Really* linked. A monist conception sees 'mind and matter as formed from, or reducible to, the same ultimate substance or principle of being.' There is no possibility without a body. There is nothing without a body. Hence any survival of death means the survival of the body – or a body. And from there, it is a short step to see why, in the monist conception, the *resurrection* of the dead is the only possible mode of survival. Although dominant in Hebraic thought, the Greeks were not without their advocates of monism; the Stoics famously postulating the Logos, or Reason, as the central, unifying state. But Plato in contrast, advocated dualism, with the world being but a shadow of the Eternal Form. In this guise, the body is part of a material realm, whereas the soul partakes of the Forms.

It was the Neo Platonism of Plotinus, via Origen, that introduced dualism to Christianity; finding synthesis and conflation in the genius of St Augustine. Before he became a Christian, Augustine had been a Manichean, and although he rejected the Manichean

doctrines, a latent belief in their dualistic world view is often ascribed to him. In his *Confessions*, Augustine writes

And, because my soul dared not be displeased at my God, it would not suffer ought to be Thine which displeased it. Hence it had gone into the opinion of two substances, and resisted not, but talked foolishly. (*The Confessions of St Augustine*, Book VII, Chapter XIV, Vs 20)



Later, to correct himself with a more monist conception:

I saw....that Thou truly art, who art the same ever, varying neither in part nor motion; and that all other things are from Thee..... Of these things was I indeed assured, yet too weak to enjoy Thee. (Chapter XX, Vs 26)

Augustine wrote the *Confessions* in 398 AD – that's 1,515 years ago. And yet I heard him yesterday! A Catholic friend rang to ask whether I was going to a local funeral.

"It's at the Crem," she bemoaned. "I hate the Crem. Can't bear all the speed and finality! I'm just going to be put in the ground and rot slowly.... and hope that an angel comes to get me!"

However Charlotte, if pressed, would also say she believes in an everlasting and incorporeal soul that is quite independent of what happens to the body; and the peculiar synthesis embraced by Christianity owes most of its origin to Augustine.

It has not been an easy marriage. It is very difficult to imagine a soul without some 'body' or vehicle to house it, so the abstracted Greek thought is already demanding. What would the disembodied soul look like? How would it be recognisable to others? Most importantly, how would it know itself through memories? How would it 'speak, move and have its being?' If we strip away attributes such as memory – and discard them as 'mind events' or 'products of the brain' – we pretty soon come to a surviving soul that bears little resemblance to the person that lived. The soul is free – too free – of the body it once occupied. And the famous 'Replica Theory' of Professor John Hick has some fascinating and controversial answers that always stimulate classroom debate.

For St Paul, and millions of Christians, we believe in physical resurrection because of an event in history. 'If Christ has not been raised then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain,' Paul writes to the Corinthian church, adding 'If we have hope in Christ in this life only, we of all men are the most miserable.' (1 Cor 15:14-19) The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of Christian belief. Without it – whether one believes in a literal resurrection of a physical body, or a life changing vision of the Risen Christ – there would, for Christians, be little point in speculating about animated bodies or incarnated souls. 'I am the resurrection and the life' says Jesus. And, on His Passion Cross, spread out for all to witness, is the interchange

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between God and man, faith and doubt, hope and despair. It is the crossroads of Life meeting Death.

Neither Hindus nor Buddhists would mind “the Crem” that my friend Charlotte has such an aversion to! In the great Vedanta tradition of Hinduism, the soul is liberated from the body at death. And the duty of the eldest male relative is to crack the skull to release it; allowing it to pass on. The new life the soul enters is dependent on karma – the law of cause and effect. It is the karma of a life that influences its rebirth; for every action has its response. And hence responsibility for good and bad fortune is passed back to the powerful soul.

There is a wonderful story in Plato’s *Republic* about Odysseus choosing his rebirth. It is found in the ‘Myth of Er’:

There came also the soul of Odysseus having yet to make a choice, and he happened to be the last of them all. The recollection of former troubles had disenchanted him of ambition, and he went about for a considerable time in search of the life of a private man who had no cares. He had some difficulty in finding this, but eventually saw one such life, lying about, having been neglected by everybody else. When he saw it, he said that he would have still chosen this life if he had been first instead of last, and that he was delighted to have it. (The Republic Book X)

With the rise of technology, death is not what it was. Once it was easy; death happened when the heart stopped beating and the blood stopped flowing. But now the heart can be *forced* to beat, or a machine takes over and does the beating. In that case, death is related to the death of the brain. But which part of the brain? Is a man whose brain stem is dead actually ‘dead,’ and should he be treated as such, as British law presumes? Or does death entail the demise of the whole brain – as is the case in America? Can a

dead man have legal rights – as in a recent British case, where a judge has ordered that a terminally ill person can bring an action in court, even though he will be dead by the time the case is heard? And what of the near death experiences so commonly reported? How are we to treat them? Are they the deluded, endorphin-triggered fantasies of a brain that is shutting down, or are they plausible events? Or the notion of cyber-consciousness, where tiny nano-robots are installed into our brains, to be uploaded on to some super-computer when we have the technology to do so. Would the ensuing ‘avatar’ be us in any sense? Or would we be



dead – and a travesty of all we had once been? All these form part of a bridge between abstract *philosophical* ideas about life after death and urgent, *ethical* questions, and all become the concern of the RaVE student, especially in synoptic units.

Life after death is a topic that divides people profoundly. The language of ‘passing’ is interesting – in all that is implied but not said. And, whether you fill those implications, or leave them empty, is something very quiet and personal. But I am reminded of the story of the Waterbug who spent his life puzzled that his friends all disappeared.

“I don’t know,” he said. “They grow wings and float to the surface and then – pop – they’re suddenly gone! If that ever happens to me I promise I will come down and tell you all how I did it!”

One day, the water bug did indeed grow wings and found himself making the journey he had watched so often, before. “It’s happening,” he told himself.

“Soon I will be able to go back and tell my water bug friends exactly how I did it” But to his great dismay, when his new wings had unfurled and dried, he found he could not go back. Try as he might, he couldn’t penetrate the water, but bounced back up to the sky.

“Well I can’t tell them,” he said sorrowfully. “But one day they will know. It’s a journey each bug does for himself” and with that he flew away.

Just like the isolation of the water bug, death is a journey we all make alone, in a reverse of the journey we first made at birth. The journey may not be very long – or it may be eternal. And neither the atheist nor the theist can *know* anything other than what they believe.

“The real question of life after death isn’t whether or not it exists, but even if it does, what problem this really solves” said Ludwig Wittgenstein, continuing:

Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death. If we take eternity to mean, not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present. Our life has no end, in the way in which our visual field has no limits. (*Tractatus* 6:431)

It is a neat argument; satisfying and robust. Zeno, the Ancient Epicurean, would have agreed with him and told us we have nothing to fear. Death cannot happen to a living man. There is never a state of non-being because death *only* happens when one’s dead! One can certainly see what he is saying. But for the water bug, and for millions of people around the world, death paradoxically *does* happen to a living man. It happens when one is still alive, and embarking on a different road or journey. And that might not be a failure to embrace the reality of death, but an expectation and a hope that one lives by.

### Nicky Hansell

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**With the rise of technology,  
death is not what it was.**

## Classroom Activities

**1 A Resurrection Activity** that is good for kinaesthetic learners. Make the following cards (they can be scraps of paper or something more durable) and hide them around the room – in fairly obvious places if you don't want this game to last too long! Invite students to team up, and record the correct assertion with one, or even several possible criticisms.

### Assertions:

- Jesus had a Hebraic concept of what a man is. He was a monist.
- It is not logically impossible for God to recreate a resurrected body in a different realm at the moment of our death or sometime after it.
- Personality depends on memory – so in order to be the same person, the resurrected person would have to have memories.
- Heaven could get too crowded.
- The idea of resurrection cannot be thought of as 'literally true.'

### Criticisms

- If this were true, why did he say to the thief beside him on the cross 'Today, you will be with me in Paradise'?
- If Jesus was not literally resurrected, there seems to be very little grounds for anyone believing in an afterlife, let alone resurrection.
- A space/time concept is a human construction. It is just limitations in our understanding and imagination to suggest this might be a problem.
- Maybe it doesn't need to be thought of as 'literally true' in order for it to be true in some other way. As Hamlet said to Horatio "there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy."
- Why does God have to follow what's logically possible?
- As Terence Penulham would say ' If such a being was recreated, how would that replica be us and not a fake of us?'
- We are a process rather than a fact. Which 'us' would God resurrect – at what stage of our lives?
- When is this resurrection supposed to happen? If later than immediately after death, where does that person go? For the monist there is nothing without a body, so if there is no simultaneous resurrection, that person ceases to exist.
- We don't know much about Jesus and can't make assertions like this.
- If personality depends on memory, is the person with Alzheimer's, or in a coma, or even someone asleep, still a person?
- If resurrected beings didn't necessarily have memories, how would they recognise each other?

**2** 'Corrupting the youth of Athens' sounds like a serious offence. In our day we would expect it to mean a teacher having a relationship with an underage pupil – or any pupil. Indeed, teachers who do so are imprisoned. *There is a particular responsibility placed on those in authority?* Invite students to come up with a list of 'crimes' that they imagine have changed over time – they don't need any particular knowledge, but it is easy to imagine that 'blaspheming against the gods' or 'treason to the king' was once more serious than it is today. Or was it?

- Did Socrates deserve to be put to death?
- If the soul is immortal, does this make a difference to our views on capital punishment?
- Does the concept of karma have any relevance here?

**3** If, as Plato believed, the Forms exist and there are Perfect versions of Truth, Beauty and Goodness, what difficulties might you encounter with the following statements:

- a) Female circumcision is a good thing to do.
- b) There are many religions in the world but only one is correct
- c) Capital punishment should be 'brought back' for people who abuse children
- d) War is never right

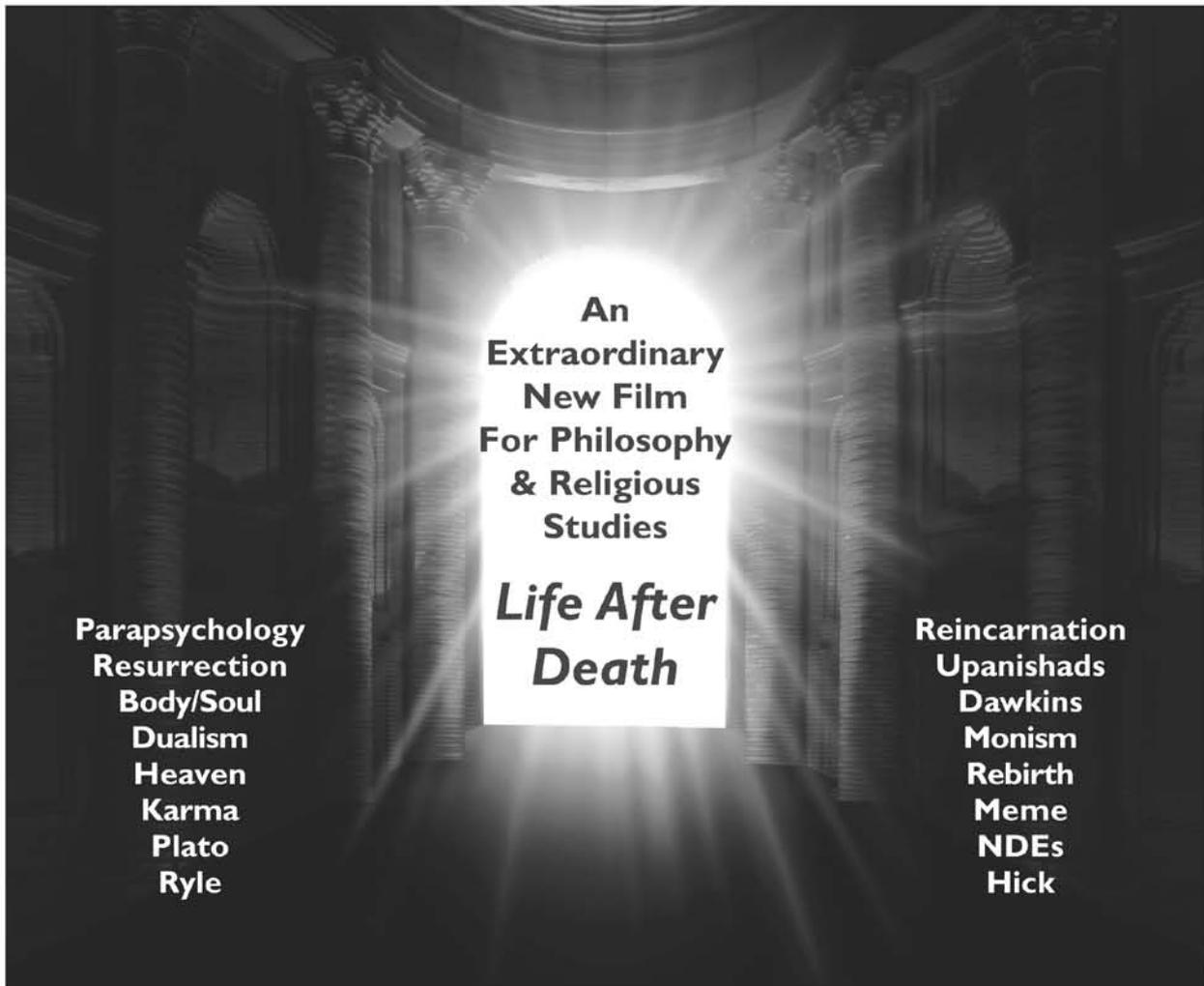
The aim of this exercise to discuss the differences between absolutism and relativism.

**4** Gilbert Ryle talks of the 'team spirit' as a "category mistake." Make a list of institutions/places/clubs/groups known to the students where there is a definite 'spirit' or team feeling. Sometimes these are very different eg. A meeting of Hitler's Nazi Party and a meeting of the League against Cruel Sports.

Answer the following questions of one of their nominations.

- a) Is there a joining or initiation ceremony?
- b) Is there a uniform?
- c) Is there a regular place and time of meeting? If so when?
- d) Are certain rules enforced?
- e) What are the overall aims of the group?
- f) Is there a 'spirit' to the thing that is anything other than all those factors put together? If you took one of those factors away, would there still be a spirit? If you took all of those factors away would there still be a spirit? Is the spirit of the team anything more than how it holds itself together as a group?

**5** In the 'Myth of Er', Plato records how the soul of Odysseus spent time in the afterlife. What kind of soul would the students chose for their next life? Would it be 'the life of a private man' or something else? What would make them chose one soul rather than another?



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