

Preliminary Thoughts on the Problem of Mortality

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(Abstract)

By “the problem of mortality,” I mean human concern about the fact of mortality: the fact that every human being dies within a limited time from birth. This concern generates a host of interesting philosophical questions, many of them very difficult. Below, I consider a few of these questions in a preliminary, unsystematic, and to a considerable extent speculative way. It is possible that contradictions lurk among my answers. If so, they represent a task for a later time—if there is one!

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QUESTION 1: With respect to mortality, what is it that I wish I could believe?

It would satisfy me, and I daresay it would satisfy many others, to know that this life of mine is unlimited in the sense that it will last as long as I want it to last, barring a catastrophic accident, and will take me into fascinating new domains and become more and more enjoyable.

QUESTION 2: I feel that my life is short, even if I should live well into my nineties. But why do I feel so?

I am not merely a subject of experience, a receiver of inputs. I am an agent, too, a producer of outputs. Some people, perhaps, want to live longer than they will not primarily in order to continue enjoying experience, but rather in order to complete various projects they consider important.

Setting aside the question of agency, however, I feel that my life is short because I for-

get almost everything that I have experienced since I began to experience, well before I was born. Because I forget, I fail to recognize that my life is very long indeed in subjective terms—long beyond imagination.

QUESTION 3: Is death to be feared? If not, this ought considerably to alleviate concern about mortality.

To begin with, a desire to live eternally is one thing, a desire to live for a very long time, so long that one need not worry about the end, is another, and a desire to live indefinitely long, as long as one chooses, is yet another. Of these three desires, I take the third to be the most rational.

Strictly speaking, the fact that a human being must die, as things stand, within one hundred years or so is not fate. Rather, it reflects the limits of present-day technology. Nevertheless, it is as if it were stern fate imposed from above. The desire to live indefinitely long is a desire to be free of this fate.

Clearly, it is possible to distinguish the desire to live indefinitely long from the fear of death. One might desire to live indefinitely long and yet feel no fear of death. In this case, death is merely regrettable. On the other hand, one might have no desire to live longer and yet fear death. “Tired ’o livin’ an’ scared ’o dyin,’” as the lyrics have it.

It stands to reason that the fear of death—fear of the process of dying and the state of death indiscriminately—is at bottom an outcome of the process of organic evolution. Its survival value is obvious. It is not to be expected, then, that it is entirely rational.

In order to think accurately, however, it is necessary to distinguish the process of dying—that is, rapidly, near the end of one’s life—from the state of death. The process of dying is part of life. As long as one is dying, one is still alive and has not yet arrived at the state of death.

In principle, one might fear the process of dying but not the state of death, or the state of death but not the process of dying. It is possible, then, to distinguish fear of the one from fear of the other. As for fear of the process of dying, perhaps it comes down largely to fear of pain and fear of that which one has not yet experienced. As for fear of pain, unless there is concrete reason to believe that the process of dying will prove excruciating, it is irrational to suppose that it will. If it is pain that you fear, then you ought to fear living, not dying.

As for fear of that which one has not yet experienced, viz., the process of dying, when

one dies it is for the first time—though there are traditions that deny this—and every human death is to a certain extent unique. One cannot know, then, exactly what to expect. But this does not make the process of dying unique. There is a first time for everything, as the saying has it. The preferred attitude, surely, is pleasurable anticipation at the prospect of something new and different, even if it is the very last thing.

I will say nothing further about the process of dying.

As for fear of the state of death, it is augmented by images. There is, above all, the image of eternal darkness. It is natural to imagine that everyday consciousness yields to darkness at the time of death. It ought to be obvious, however, that the state of death is not a matter of darkness, whether temporary or eternal. The experience of darkness is an experience like any other, and hence implies that the brain continues to function. But the brain, of course, does not continue to function. It does not even continue to exist. There is no darkness, and this fact is of fundamental importance, for it means that the state of death is not fearful.

The reasoning of those who imagine that everyday consciousness yields to eternal darkness at the time of death appears to run as follows: After the body ceases to function, and with it the brain, there is no input into the system. Hence there is an information-free state of idling, as it were. This state is one of darkness. It is like the steady hum of a radio that is receiving no signal at the moment. Clearly, however, there is no information-free state of idling in the case of death. If you want to imagine the state of death accurately in terms of the simile of the radio, do not imagine a steady blank hum. Rather, imagine that there is no radio. There is no radio and hence no blank hum, and similarly there is no brain and hence no darkness.

It is necessary, then, to distinguish the notion that everything turns dark for me at my death, which is clearly false, from the thesis that my consciousness comes to an end, which might be true.

I conclude, then, that the state of death is not to be feared—though it is perhaps to be avoided, given that one's survival poses no great problem for others, as long as one enjoys life or has important projects to complete or important duties to fulfill.

QUESTION 4: What is the most accurate and adequate image of death?

The most popular image of death is, perhaps, that of a skeleton or a skull—in essence, a nonfunctioning human body. This is not, however, an accurate image. To form a more

accurate image, imagine a space, a room in a house, for instance, in which there is no body at all. There might, however, be a more adequate image.

QUESTION 5: What is consciousness?

I maintain that consciousness consists in neural activity, or more generally physical activity, of certain descriptions. This is classical physicalism with respect to consciousness, and it calls, of course, for explanation. Here, then, is my explanation in a nutshell: A human being is in a position to register the neural activity that constitutes his own consciousness in that it occurs in his brain as an ordinary operation of the brain. The crucial point is that he registers that neural activity itself as opposed to information about it or a neural representation of it, but does not perceive it in any way. In consequence, he conceives of it not as neural activity, but rather as experience—as a pain, a tickle, a thought, or whatever else it might be. The neuroscientist at the screen of a brain monitor, in contrast, perceives that same neural activity but does not register it, and in consequence conceives of it quite differently—viz., as neural activity.

QUESTION 6: What is a human being?

I maintain that a human being is a functioning body of a certain type. This, too, is classical physicalism. The notion that there is more to a human being, viz., a soul or a mental life, is, I think, the upshot of confusion. A human being does indeed have a mental life, but that mental life is not something over and above the functioning body, for it consists in neural activity in the brain. That neural activity is indeed something other than neural activity for the subject himself, for, as explained just above, he conceives of it as experience in that he registers but does not perceive it. The subject in the case, then, is a functioning human body, and there is no reason to conclude that a human being is a mysterious mental particular, a soul.

QUESTION 7: Does it make sense to attempt to achieve immortality through biotechnology?

Strictly speaking, that which is in question here is not immortality, but rather an end to the aging process.

The primitive desire to avoid death is very powerful and the biotechnological means to eliminate the aging process may well be in hand before the end of the present century. The consequences of making use of those means, however, are frightening. To mention just a few of the more obvious difficulties: What will become of the environment when no one dies except by accident or deliberate killing? In particular, how will it be possible to feed a grossly overpopulated planet? What forms of political organization will arise in response to environmental collapse? Or is childbearing to be outlawed? In that case, who will show innovation when almost everyone alive is three or four hundred years old? And so on. This prospect lends considerable urgency to the problem of mortality.

It may well be, moreover, that to a full, accurate view, we already have what we desire with respect to mortality. It is far from clear, then, that it makes sense to attempt to achieve immortality through biotechnology.

QUESTION 8: A human being is a physical object, a subject of experience, an agent, and a member of society, among other things. In the context of the problem of mortality, as opposed to a practical context in which the task is to assign responsibility, allot rewards, correct bad behavior, and so on, what makes a human being the particular subject of experience he or she is?

I would say that the configuration of the functioning body, including, of course, the brain, down to the molecular level (or the sub-atomic level, if you wish), is the appropriate criterion. It is this, I think, that makes a particular human being the subject of experience he or she is.

This, however, carries startling consequences. If a human being who lives several centuries after you comes to have precisely the same configuration you had at a certain time, then he or she is you. But the same holds for a contemporary. In principle, you might be where you are now, and simultaneously on the other side of the planet. It appears to follow, moreover, that subject identity is a matter of degree: a human being who has almost the same configuration as you is you to a great extent whereas one who has a configuration very different from yours, as human variation goes, is you to only a slight extent. Any human being who lives at any time is you to one extent or another. The same holds, moreover, for any conscious being that lives—or functions, if it cannot be said to live—at any time.

Tentatively, I accept these consequences. That is to say, I do not take them to consti-

tute a *reductio ad absurdum* of the similarity criterion of subject identity.

A question arises: Suppose that A and B are precisely similar functioning human bodies. Are they merely qualitatively identical, or are they numerically identical? Perhaps there is no choice but to say that they are merely qualitatively identical, since there are, after all, two of them. On the other hand, there is no reason to treat the one differently than the other, and if B lives after A, it does appear reasonable to say that B is simply A again—that is, that B is numerically identical to A. It will be necessary to resolve this difficulty.

QUESTION 9: Is it possible in principle that an experience might occur that is not the experience of any subject? If so, this might encourage a deflationary account of the subject.

I maintain that any given experience is numerically identical to a certain neural or physical event—viz., the neural or physical correlate, to speak dualistically. This thesis is of course highly controversial, but, for lack of space, I shall not offer any argument for it here beyond the suggestion that the subject registers the neural event itself but does not perceive it in any way and in consequence conceives of it not as a neural event but as an experience. Let us assume, then, that any given experience is indeed numerically identical to its physical correlate and perform a thought experiment.

A) Imagine a neural event that constitutes an everyday human experience—a whiff of rose, for instance. It is a physical event in the subject's brain. Now try to imagine a second physical event just like the first in all essential respects, which, however, occurs not in a brain, but rather in the void—in the middle of a room, for instance. The question is this: Is it possible to imagine such a thing, and if so, does the second event likewise constitute a whiff of rose?

Answer: I think that the answer is yes on both counts. As for the second count, if a physical event of a certain configuration constitutes an experience of a certain type in virtue of that configuration, then it constitutes an experience of that type whether it occurs in a brain, in the void, or elsewhere.

If this is correct, it entails that it is indeed possible, in principle, that an experience might occur that is not the experience of any subject, a subjectless experience. Most philosophers deny this, but on inadequate grounds.

If a subjectless experience is positive, that is, enjoyable, then, presumably, it is of posi-

tive intrinsic value, or intrinsic value for short, for all that no subject is in a position to intuit its value. If it is a whiff of rose, then, for any given subject, it is like a whiff of rose that another subject enjoys.

QUESTION 10: Subjects of equal complexity and sophistication are, perhaps, like identical milk bottles: it does not matter which bottle holds the milk, and it does not matter what subject has the positive experience. Is this correct?

I think that it is correct. The subject is not to the point. That is to say, the significant circumstance is that a positive experience occurs, and it does not matter what subject, if any, has that experience.

QUESTION 11: Which is more basic, the desire that I continue to live, function, or exist indefinitely, or the desire that this consciousness I enjoy continue indefinitely?

Let us perform several thought experiments.

B) My conscious life comes to an end, but I continue to exist in that I continue to live and function, as a zombie. The question is this: Is this what I desire?

Answer: No, and surely it is not what most people desire. But this suggests that the desire that I continue to live indefinitely is not basic.

C) Given that it is possible in principle that an experience might occur that is not the experience of any subject, it is possible in principle that my conscious life—that which I call my conscious life, quite correctly, as things stand—might survive the subject I am now, for my conscious life is one thing, viz., a series of physical events of a certain configuration, and the subject I am now is quite another, viz., a functioning human body. Imagine, then, that my body disappears while the series of physical events that constitutes my conscious life continues in the void indefinitely. There is no longer any subject of experience. There is only a series of conscious events, without a subject. The question is this: Is this what I desire?

Answer: Yes, I think that it is, basically. “All this”—that which I call my conscious life—continues indefinitely. The fact that no body remains, and hence no subject, is perhaps no more than a minor cause for regret, if indeed it is a cause for regret at all.

Note that my agency, my ability to influence the course of events in the world at large, is not necessarily diminished, for that which was my conscious life consists in physical

events which can, of course, cause further physical events, and it continues and might reasonably be identified as me. I have disappeared as a subject, but not necessarily as an agent.

This thought experiment corresponds to the notion that the soul survives the demise of the body: the body disappears but the conscious life continues. Those who subscribe to this notion, however, fail to notice that when the body drops out of the picture, the subject drops out, too.

D) I receive an offer: "You will not age and die in the usual way. Instead the following will happen: The objective / subjective dichotomy will be erased from your brain and hence from your conceptual scheme. Within your revised and somewhat diminished conceptual scheme, then, there will be no such thing as 'I,' no such thing as 'my experience,' and for that matter, no such thing as 'an experience' at all. That is to say, you will not conceive of anything as yourself, your experience, or an experience. In compensation, you will be granted indefinitely long life of a highly enjoyable and increasingly splendid sort. Your experience, then, will be very positive and as long as you choose, but you will not have the conceptual resources requisite to label it 'my experience.'" The question is this: Would I do well to accept this offer? Does it satisfy my desire for unlimited life? Or does the loss of the concept of myself nullify the gift of unlimited life?

Answer: I think that I would accept the offer, for that which is on offer is increasingly splendid experience of a type somewhat different from that to which I am accustomed. My conscious life—that which I call my conscious life within my present conceptual scheme—continues and becomes considerably more enjoyable. It is to be expected that in some ways the loss of the concept of myself will in itself make my experience more enjoyable and hence of more intrinsic value, if less functional. But this suggests that the basic desire is that "all this"—that which I call my conscious life—should continue.

This last thought experiment suggests a line of thought which perhaps merits consideration: "All this" is simply positive experience. But positive experience does, presumably, continue indefinitely, probably throughout the universe. So the fact that I will cease to exist is no occasion for regret.

Here is a further argument:

What is the relation between this particular subject, the one I refer to as "I," and this conscious life, which I call "my conscious life"?

This subject is a functioning human body, the one I refer to as "my body." The question, then, is this: What is the relation between this functioning body and this conscious

life? I can think of two things to say: (1) I perceive this body. I see the hands and feel movement in the joints, for instance. And (2) the content of this conscious life depends on the structure and dynamics of the brain that forms part of this body.

This subject is one thing, viz., this functioning body, and this conscious life is another, viz., neural activity in the brain that forms part of this functioning body—which, however, might in principle continue in another form. I want to know whether it is the former or the latter that concerns me at bottom.

Do I yearn, then, to continue to perceive this body indefinitely? No, I do not. It has congenitally weak abdominal muscles and in consequence a protruding stomach, it is slowly losing its top hair, the movement of its joints is not entirely comfortable, it fails to digest many foods correctly and in consequence generates all the discomfort of major food allergy, and so on. When I wake up tomorrow morning, if by a miracle that portion of my conscious life which consists in perception of my body is altered greatly for the better in that my body is greatly improved, even to the extent that it is a new, different, body, I (the subject I am then) will feel gratified, not thwarted. Many, indeed, failing to think through the consequences, want to do without a body altogether and thus dispense with this aspect of human experience.

Do I yearn, then, for some guarantee that the content of this conscious life will continue to depend on the structure and dynamics of this brain, the one currently in this skull? No, I do not. When I wake up tomorrow morning, if by a miracle my powers of thought and enjoyment have improved greatly in that the brain in this skull has been greatly upgraded, even to the extent that it is a new, different brain, I (the subject I am then) will feel gratified, not thwarted.

Suppose that a new, quite different brain, far better and more powerful than the one I have now, is installed in this skull, but with memories sufficient to preserve my identity. In this case, at any rate, I will be glad to have it.

In sum, it would appear correct to conclude that the basic desire is not that I continue to live, function, or exist indefinitely, but rather that “all this,” the consciousness I enjoy, continue indefinitely.

QUESTION 12: Does a human being survive teleportation?

Teleportation is a thought experiment.

E) An elite team at MIT invents a teleportation system and puts it to use successfully.

A device scans a functioning human body—Dr. Fernmann, a member of the team, has volunteered—encodes full information as to its structure and current dynamics, and vaporizes it instantly and painlessly. The information is sent electromagnetically to a receiver at a remote location, and a device there constructs a body precisely similar to the one just destroyed. The question is this: Has Dr. Fernmann been sent to a new location, or is it rather that he has been destroyed and another human being created?

Answer: The received opinion, I think, is that Dr. Fernmann has been sent to a new location. I agree. The identity of the functioning human body, and hence of the human being, and hence also of the subject, does not depend on the identity of the materials of which it consists. In the actual case, for that matter, a functioning human body consists of ever-new materials. The rule is not “same materials, same body,” but rather “continuous structure and dynamics, same body.”

QUESTION 13: Suppose that functioning body A is vaporized in a flash and functioning body B constructed at that instant. If it is to be the case that $B=A$ (that B is numerically identical to A), is it necessary that there be a causal connection between A and B?

Let us perform another thought experiment.

F) A meteorite vaporizes me. At precisely that instant, technicians testing teleporter receiving equipment at far-off MIT construct a functioning human body. Entirely by chance, that body happens to be precisely like mine down to the molecular level, which is to say precisely like me, immediately before I disappeared at the site of the meteorite impact. The question is this: Have I died, or have I made a very lucky escape?

Answer: I think that I have made a very lucky escape—very, very lucky. Surely, it is not the way in which the new body comes to be, but rather the fact that it is just like the old one, that is relevant.

QUESTION 14: Is it possible for a human being to be in two places at once?

Let us think again in terms of teleportation.

G) A teleporter system scans Jones but leaves him unscathed, and reconstructs him at a remote location. The question is this: Are there two human beings now, Jones A and Jones B, or is Jones, one human being, in two places at once?

I am inclined to say that immediately upon reconstruction, Jones is in two places at

once. Even if a question of responsibility arises, there is no reason to distinguish between Jones in the one place and Jones in the other. Since the two environments are different, however, the two functioning bodies will gradually become two different human beings in that the two functioning bodies will gradually become more and more different. If this is so, however, then similarity is the relevant criterion of identity.

It might perhaps be correct to describe the case this way: immediately upon reconstruction, Jones is one human being with a double body.

QUESTION 15: Assuming that my conscious life is positive, is the prospect that it will end necessarily negative?

The following thought experiment is my favorite.

H) Just as I turn sixty, a child is born. The child will grow to be a fine young man (or woman) of twenty-four. At that age, he will be better looking, more highly skilled socially, more intelligent, and more capable of pleasure than I ever was. But he will not be I, for everything about him, including his personality, will be significantly different. As he turns twenty-three, then, I will turn eighty-three. In the course of the following year, however, my functioning body, including my brain, will steadily metamorphose into the exact double of that of the young man. Gradually but steadily, I will lose my own memories and sense of self as my body changes in many ways, all for the better, and acquire the memories and sense of self of the young man. I will not be troubled by problems of memory or identity because those around me will understand what is happening and make allowances. At the end of the year, as I turn eighty-four and he twenty-four, my functioning body—the functioning body of the human being I will be then—and his functioning body will be precisely similar down to the molecular level. At the very instant this happens, however, his functioning body will be vaporized instantly and painlessly. Setting the fate of the young man aside, there are several questions: Does my existence come to an end? Does my conscious life come to an end? Do I face a negative prospect at the outset?

Answers:

My existence does come to an end, gradually, through the course of my eighty-fourth year. It is the configuration of my functioning body that determines what human being and hence what subject I am, and that defining configuration ceases to be.

My conscious life does come to an end, for my existence comes to an end. I cease to be,

and my conscious life with me.

I do not think, however, that I face a negative prospect at the outset. What is there to fear in it? Nothing. And what is there to regret? I might feel a bit sad at the thought that the human being I am will cease to exist in twenty-four years, but that would happen in any case. There is nothing greatly to be regretted, for experience continues and becomes more fulfilling and enjoyable.

This invites a further question: Is there any parallel between this hypothetical case and the actual case?

Answer: In the hypothetical case, the outcome is that I no longer exist and a fine young man exists in my place, as it were. But this is the outcome in the actual case, too. There is indeed a parallel, then.

Some, I suspect, will feel that there is a crucial difference between the hypothetical case and the actual one in that in the former case the transition from the old man's conscious life to the young man's is gradual and continuous whereas in the latter it is not. I doubt, however, that this difference is indeed crucial. For all that the transition takes a different form in the two cases, the outcome is the same.

This in turn invites a further question: Why is it that the hypothetical case appears acceptable whereas the actual case does not?

Answer: In the hypothetical case, it is impossible to imagine that darkness follows the subject's end, and the transition to the young man's experience is continuous and gradual. I cannot think of any further reason.

This is, perhaps, a significant result. In the hypothetical case the prospect is acceptable, even inviting, but in the actual case the outcome is the same.

QUESTION 16: What determines the intrinsic value of an experience?

A thought experiment:

I) Imagine that you have a device which can generate physical events that constitute experiences. It can project them into the void or into a brain of appropriate structure. Generate a physical event that constitutes a whiff of rose. First project it into the void in the middle of a room. Then project it into Orville's brain. Now Orville is in a position to register it—that very physical event as opposed to information about it. He might remark, "Smells good!" Finally, project it into Wilbur's brain. Now Wilbur is in a position to register it. He might remark, "What a wonderful fragrance!" The question is this:

Does the intrinsic value of the event vary through this procedure? Is it more valuable when it occurs in Orville's brain than when it occurs in the void? Is it more valuable when it occurs in Wilbur's brain than when it occurs in Orville's?

Answer: I am inclined to say that the intrinsic value of the event does not vary. When it occurs in Orville's brain, Orville is in a position to register it in introspection, and when in Wilbur's brain, Wilbur is in a position to register it. When it occurs in the void, no one is in a position to register it—except, perhaps, by means of specialized devices not yet invented. But it is the same event and has the same intrinsic value in all three cases.

This suggests, once again, that the subject is not to the point. An experience has whatever intrinsic value it does independently of identity of the subject—if indeed there is a subject.

I conclude, then, that it is the configuration of the physical event that constitutes an experience, and that alone, which determines its intrinsic value.

QUESTION 17: The intrinsic value of a neural event that has intrinsic value is evident only to the subject, who registers it in introspection but does not perceive it, not to the observer, who perceives it on the screen of a brain monitor but does not register it. Why is this so?

The truth, perhaps, is that the observer does not feel the intrinsic value of a neural event that has intrinsic value, but nevertheless perceives that property in virtue of which it is intrinsically valuable.

QUESTION 18: Is it accurate to say that a neural event which constitutes a positive experience is of intrinsic value only for the subject?

This question presupposes that the neural event, which is to say the experience, is of intrinsic value for the subject. I am inclined to say that this presupposition is false, on the grounds that the experience is of intrinsic value simpliciter, not for this or that subject.

I suspect, then, that it makes no sense to say that a particular experience is of intrinsic value for one subject but not for another. It is of intrinsic value whether it occurs in this subject, that subject, or no subject at all.

To say that a particular of any type has intrinsic value is to say that it is valuable in itself, not in this or that respect. Its value is absolute, not relative. It smacks of inconsis-

tency, then, to say that an experience has intrinsic value for one subject but not for another.

QUESTION 19: Does it make sense to conceive of two qualitatively identical experiences, had by two different subjects at two different times, as a single intermittently occurring state? If it does, then two subjects might in principle have one and the same experience at two different times.

Let us pose this question in the form of a thought experiment.

J) Amalfitano experiences a wonderful gust of sea breeze. Years later, Napolitano experiences a wonderful gust of sea breeze. The two experiences are qualitatively identical—that is to say, just alike. The question is this: One might of course conceive of these two experiences as two distinct events, in the everyday, nontechnical sense in which an event is simply something that happens. But does it make sense to conceive of them as a single intermittently occurring state?

Answer: As far as I can see, there is no objection to conceiving of them as a single intermittently occurring state.

QUESTION 20: Is positive experience additive in the sense that a positive experience in one subject and another in another subject add up to an array of greater total intrinsic value than either positive experience alone?

Again, let us perform a thought experiment.

K) Let W_0 be a subjectless momentary sensation—specifically, an exquisite whiff of rose. Let U_1 be a universe as large and old as the one we inhabit, in which, however, W_0 is the only event of intrinsic value. Let $W_1 \dots W_n$ be a great number of sensations precisely similar to W_0 . And let U_2 be a universe as large and old as the one we inhabit, in which, however, $W_1 \dots W_n$ are the only events of intrinsic value. The question is this: Does it make sense to create U_2 in preference to U_1 ?

Answer: I am inclined to say that it does make sense. If I enter U_1 and position W_0 within my brain, so that it becomes my experience, I can register W_0 in introspection and intuit its intrinsic value. I know what it is like to have that experience, and I know that it is good, and how good, at least roughly. If I proceed from U_1 to U_2 and position $W_1 \dots W_3$, for instance, within my brain simultaneously, then, presumably, I can intuit their

joint intrinsic value. But this, presumably, is greater.

But this question is difficult and I am not entirely confident that this conclusion is correct. I am not even confident that I have posed the question correctly.

QUESTION 21: Is it necessary to reflect on an experience in order to enjoy it?

Let us perform a simple thought experiment.

L) An alligator suns itself. Presumably, it lacks sufficient intellectual capacity to reflect on the experience, as a human being might. The question is this: Does the alligator enjoy the experience even though it has no capacity to reflect on it?

Answer: Presumably, the alligator remains in the sun because it feels good to do so. It does not recognize itself as an entity, does not know that it exists, much less that it is an exothermic animal, and does not reason that it must take advantage of an external heat source in order to warm its blood. Of course it enjoys the experience, assuming that it is a conscious subject—which, to me, appears a safe assumption. In a human being, the pleasure of reflection constitutes additional pleasure.

QUESTION 22: From the point of view of a third-person observer, does the transition from one subject, the predecessor, to another, the successor, entail any loss in terms of intrinsic value?

Again, a thought experiment:

M) Neural activity of the type that constitutes consciousness ceases in the brain of an old man. At that very instant, however, it commences in the developing brain of a fetus. The question is this: From the point of view of a third-person observer, has there been any loss in terms of intrinsic value?

Answer: The neural activity which commences in the fetus's brain is just as worthy of being valued as that which ceases in the old man's brain. That is to say, the fetus's consciousness has as much intrinsic value as the old man's. It would appear, then, that from the third-person point of view nothing has been lost. Consciousness was there, in that brain, and now it is here, in this brain, and there is no reason to bemoan this change of venue. If this is correct, then, once again, the subject is not to the point.

There is, however, a wrinkle, in that the intrinsic value of an experience is not evident to a third-person observer. It is necessary to assume that she already knows, before she

proceeds to observe, that a physical event of such-and-such a description is of so much intrinsic value. Perhaps, then, this thought experiment ought to posit not a third-person observer with a point of view, but rather a third-person judge who registers the consciousness of the old man and the fetus respectively, essentially in the way a subject registers his own experience in introspection. In principle, it should be possible to construct the necessary devices, or at least to duplicate the relevant neural activity in the brain of the third-person judge.

QUESTION 23: Does the subject enjoy the benefit of a positive experience?

The subject might well enjoy a benefit in a practical sense, in that he is better able to survive and reproduce because he has the experience. But this is beside the point. The answer, I think, is no. The subject has the experience and it is good, but he does not enjoy any benefit. It is not that the experience yields him something good. Rather, the experience is good, whether it is his, another's, or no one's.

If this is so, it is, perhaps, significant. For it appears to entail that the subject cannot legitimately complain of losing benefits at the time of death. He does not lose the benefit of positive consciousness because he never had any benefit from it. Rather, positive consciousness itself is good, and that continues—provided, of course, that there is a successor.

QUESTION 24: I know that someone else will enjoy life when I am gone. But this fails to satisfy me. My attitude is: "Very nice, but I want to enjoy life myself!" Am I justified in feeling this way?

I doubt it. If it does not matter who enjoys, then it does not matter whether it is I who enjoys.

Perhaps this in itself is an adequate response to the problem of mortality. It does not matter who will enjoy life in the future. Hence, if you think that it matters whether it is you or someone else, you are simply mistaken.

To answer in more detail, I can think of three relevant dimensions: true / false, significant / trivial, and meaningful / nonsensical. The complaint that I will not enjoy, then, might be true and significant, true but trivial, false, or nonsensical. Which is it, then? This, of course, determines the correct response.

Those who say that one must accept inevitable death bravely take the complaint that I will not enjoy to be true and significant, as do those who advocate the development of bioengineering techniques to put an end to aging. Those who say that the body will be resurrected or that the soul survives the demise of the body deny that it is true. Those who say that the “I,” the self, does not exist, are perhaps committed to the conclusion that it is nonsense. And so on.

Obviously, if we premiss everyday criteria of personal identity, it is true that I who write this will not enjoy the splendid twenty-third century (the century of *Star Trek*). There might, however, be a more appropriate criterion, and it might yield a different outcome. It might indeed be false, then, that I will not enjoy.

If the subject is not to the point—that is, if an experience has whatever intrinsic value it does regardless of the identity of the subject—then, even if it is true that I will not enjoy the splendid twenty-third century, that is a matter of no consequence. In this case, the complaint that I will not enjoy is true but trivial.

QUESTION 25: What explains the subject’s remarkable concern with himself?

I can register my own experience but not that of others, for the neural events that constitute the former occur in my brain whereas those that constitute the latter do not. In consequence, I can intuit the intrinsic value of my own experience but cannot intuit that of the experience of others, though I can reason to the conclusion that the experience of others is of intrinsic value. Possibly, the feeling that I am justified in my desire to enjoy the splendid twenty-third century for myself stems from this circumstance. It is one thing to experience a thrill of pleasure and think, “This is splendid!” and quite another to conceive that someone else does so.

QUESTION 26: Is it sounder to argue, “I miss out after I die because I am not there to enjoy,” or rather, “I do not miss out after I die, because I am not there to miss out”?

I suspect that the latter argument is sounder.

QUESTION 27: I might well think, “People in the future will feel pleasure, but that pleasure means nothing to me, however fine it might be, because I will not feel it myself.” At first sight, this sentiment appears contemptibly selfish. Is it truly so?

If the pleasure that people will feel in the future means nothing to me because I will not feel it myself, then the pleasure that other people feel now means nothing to me. But that is clearly pathological.

QUESTION 28: I want to see what will happen in the next few centuries. But why is it so important to me that I be the one who sees?

Compare this case with another. I want to be the one who gets the girl (and she wants to be the one who gets the best man). Perhaps a primeval selfishness operates here.

QUESTION 29: I will not be an agent in the twenty-third century. I do not much regret this, because I do not think much of myself as an agent. Whatever I can do, others can do equally well or better—especially the ultracapable others of the distant future. I will not be a subject in the twenty-third century, either. Why, then, do I not think in the same way about this?

Indeed, it appears to make good sense to think in the same way about my agency and my subjectivity. With any luck, the subjects of the distant future will be far more competent, both in terms of intellectual capacity and in terms of pleasure, than those of today.

QUESTION 30: Is it truly a tragedy that a mouse alive today will not survive long as a subject?

I am inclined to say no—with most people, I suspect. But it might well prove to be the case that I compare to a subject of the distant future as a mouse compares to me.

QUESTION 31: Does a human being survive in another who lives later?

Let us perform a thought experiment.

N) Again, neural activity of the type that constitutes consciousness ceases in the brain of an old man and at that very instant commences in the brain of a fetus. But there is an additional factor in that the fetus is precisely similar to—molecule-for-molecule just like—the old man as he was at the same interval of time from his own conception. The ques-

tion is this: Does it make sense to say that the old man has reappeared, though in different circumstances?

It might be more conventional to put this question in terms of the moment of birth. Is the newborn baby the old man reborn? In the present context, however, it is not the moment of birth but rather the moment of the onset of consciousness that is significant.

Answer: I think that it does make sense to say that the fetus is the old man as he was. Consider the teleportation of Dr. Fernmann once more. The functioning body constructed at the remote location is Dr. Fernmann in that it is just like the functioning body that constituted Dr. Fernmann at the moment he was scanned. By parity of reasoning, the fetus is the old man as he was in that the functioning body that constitutes the fetus is just like the one that constituted the old man as a fetus.

If the fetus is the old man starting life again, though a different life, this is perhaps of considerable significance. For it is safe to say that in the actual case, at the moment a person dies, or fairly soon before or afterwards, a fetus remarkably like the fetus that person was experiences the first flickerings of consciousness.

In sum, then, let me outline my position, most tentatively:

— The popular notion that everyday consciousness gives way to darkness on the demise of the body is false.

— Hence it is irrational to fear the state of death.

— A given experience has whatever intrinsic value it does independently of the identity of the subject.

— That which is desirable, then—whether desired or not—is not that I should continue to enjoy positive consciousness indefinitely, but rather that positive consciousness should continue indefinitely.

— Perhaps this is what people do in fact desire at bottom, though they express their desire by saying, “I want to live eternally.”

— There is an additional, if subsidiary, consideration, in that it is not clear that a successor similar to a predecessor is a numerically diverse subject by the appropriate criterion of subject identity.

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