

Life and Immortality: A Comparison of Scientific, Christian, and Hindu Concepts

Jingjing Z. Edmondson

Institute of Communication Studies, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, Zhejiang 310028, China;
jjze@zju.edu.cn

Abstract: In this paper conceptions of immortality provided by two of the world's leading religions, Christianity and Hinduism, are critically compared with each other, as well as with the possibilities of atomic immortality implied by modern physical science, with the aim of ascertaining how these religious and scientific views may or may not be compatible or mutually supportive. [Life Science Journal. 2005;2(1):2-6] (ISSN: 1097-8135).

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Everything in earthly existence, including human life in all of its facets, is involved in a process of ongoing change. Hence, permanence seems unattainable, and thereby especially desirable. The wish for immortality thus becomes one of the most important original reasons for the appearance of religions, and the motives of many scientific research fields can also be traced to this motive. Since very ancient times humans have wondered if after their deaths in this world they might continue to exist forever in some next and unchanging condition. My purpose in this paper is to contrast a modern scientific conception of the possibility of human immortality with some more traditional religious views of the same.

Scientific discoveries made during the last two centuries have determined that the fundamental building blocks of the physical universe as we now find it consist of submicroscopic "atoms", each of which in turn has a complex inner structure of elementary "particles" and "forces" (Brennan, 1992). A further solidly established scientific determination is that since the establishment of atoms during one stage of cosmic evolution they have been involved in a universal process of rearrangement. Thus individual humans in their physical aspect are aggregates of atoms that formerly and variously constituted elements of other creatures or objects, and upon the death and decomposition of humans' bodies, their atoms, rather than simply dissipating into nothingness, become parts of subsequent creatures or objects, and so forth indefinitely. In this sense deceased humans achieve an "atomic immortality".

However, atomic immortality is theoretically problematic in view of alternative scientific antici-

pations of future cosmic evolution. On the one hand, astronomers anticipate that if the average density of matter in the universe should prove to be less than a certain critical value, the expansion of the physical universe that began some fifteen billion years ago with the explosion of a point of infinite heat and density (the Big Bang) will continue to infinity ("open universe") (Barrow, 1991; Gribbin, 2000; Morris, 1993). Science anticipates that within an "open universe" the stars (including the earth's sun), of which receding galaxies are composed, will eventually burn themselves out, the universe will lapse into a cold darkness, and life on the planet earth will cease. In such case, the atoms of former human bodies could presumably continue as components of the dead earth, and human physical immortality might thus in a sense be sustained. However, the expectation that our dead earth will continue to be involved in an infinite cosmic expansion, thereby preserving that immortality, can for living persons never be more than an unverifiable anticipation, for the one reason that no persons would remain alive during the later (dead earth) phases of that expansion in order to verify it, as well as for the more general reason that any infinite expansion *ipso facto* denies the possibility of its own confirmation (that is, since infinity can never exceed itself, by the same token it can never be exceeded by a confirming observer "beyond" itself).

Scientific anticipation holds, as another possibility, that if the density of matter in the universe should prove to be greater than the critical value, gravitational forces will eventually cause the expansion of the universe to reverse itself and come to an end in an awesome implosion (Big Crunch) (Greene, 2003). If the Crunch occurs it would

mean that the universe is finite ("closed universe"). In the case of the Crunch the atoms involved in the expansion of the universe would presumably be transformed and compressed back into a pre-atomic point of infinite density of the sort that led to the Big Bang. The radical transmutation of matter-energy involved in the Crunch would presumably disallow retention of any identifiable remnants of given human bodies; hence it would be extravagant in this case to maintain that the atoms that had provided persons with an extension of their existence beyond their deaths would provide true immortality. What would transpire after the Crunch is unknown, although some astronomers have conceived the possibility of a series of Big Bangs and Big Crunches, and therewith the evolution and devolution of a series of universes, or of one "oscillating universe" (Jastrow, 1992). But in the case of transformations of universes back into points of infinite heat and density, it is difficult to imagine that any atoms that had once been parts of human bodies within a given universe could survive the changes from one universe to the next; thus in the scenario of an oscillating universe human immortality would be denied.

Nonetheless, anticipations of atomic immortality are presumably meaningful to some people. Yet it seems probable that such concepts are insufficiently satisfying to most people, who need to anticipate an immortality involving not only, in one or another fashion, their post-mortem physical survival, but also the survival in some sense of the consciousness of self which they experience while alive. Such survival is absent from atomic immortality, which may involve some of the atoms of a deceased person's body being recycled as components of other living persons' bodies, yet without involving any synchronous transmigration of the first person's consciousness. Understandably, then, humans throughout their history have developed religious beliefs that accommodate the anticipation of a continuing post-mortem consciousness. To exemplify the multitude of religious beliefs, past and present, the present discussion will focus on the doctrines of two of the world's major living religions, Christianity and Hinduism.

Christianity holds that one eternal God (Jehovah) created the universe, including all of its forms of life. Although regarded as a spiritual being, this God is nonetheless conceived of as anthropomorphic, typically as Caucasian, and as having male gender (as the Christian scripture, the *Bible*, puts it: "God created man in his own image.") (The New English Bible, 1971). Christian doctrine is strikingly different in a number of ways from scien-

tific conceptions of being. Scientific knowledge, however imposing it may be, remains teleologically neutral, affording no insight into any ultimate purpose, or lack thereof, of the universe. But Christian doctrine holds that God had a purpose in creating the universe, whereby it is concluded that the universe itself, including the lives of humans, also serve an ultimate purpose. With respect to God's own purpose, Christians maintain that he freely created the universe, not from any necessity of self-completion, but out of love for the humans who are parts of that creation, while the fundamental purpose of human lives is to love God in return, out of gratitude for their existence.

Christianity maintains that God, as part of his continuing creative activity, adds to each new human body an immaterial "soul", inclusive of "mind", which latter is the seat of a person's consciousness. After the first two humans were created, the subsequent chain of human sexual reproduction has been less a matter of direct causation by God than simply a result of humans acting in accordance with the biological "natural law" established by God; however, the addition of souls to new persons (at their moments of conception in their mothers' wombs) remains a direct and purely divine action. Whereas a strictly materialist conception of existence does not deny individual human consciousness as an attribute of a living person's "mind", it holds that mind is no more than an exceptionally complex manifestation of a person's physiology; "mind" reduces, as it were, to physiology, and physiology reduces to atoms, and so there is no mind or consciousness as a reality in addition to body. One might suppose that if consciousness is thus merely an effect of a person's bodily atoms, then the particular atoms of a given person's body that subsequently become components of other persons' bodies would transfer at least some part of the first person's consciousness to those other persons. However, the consciousness-qualities of such transferred atoms become newly and differently operative when incorporated into a new and different whole person, else the collective effect of any given person's accumulated atoms could only be that of an incoherent melange. That is, on strictly materialist terms any given person's consciousness is the result only of a particular, coherent, and unique assemblage of atoms that are melded into a nontransferable consciousness of "self". This situation is reminiscent of the fact that atoms of themselves, in separation from living organisms, have no "life". Whether or not life constitutes (in accordance with the biological philosophy of "vitalism") a stratum of being in excess of the

sums of physical atoms comprising bodies, it remains that atoms manifest life only as constituents of such bodies. As for Christian doctrine, even if it may grant that persons' bodies of themselves are composed of temporary combinations of universally similar atoms, it maintains that each person's soul is an extra-atomic and unique element, which provides each person with a self-consciousness-retentive immortality (Attwater, 1961).

Christians anticipate that humans will experience that immortality either in a paradisiacal realm—a place or state of being—for those persons having led lives acceptable to God, or in a realm of suffering for those who have not. Leading lives acceptable to God requires beliefs and moral behavior in line with certain injunctions, which, it is maintained, God has revealed to humans and which are recorded in the *Bible*. However, it is further asserted that God endows humans with free will, whereby they can choose to obey or disobey those injunctions. According to the Christian historical scenario, in the past many humans indeed disobeyed the injunctions, whereupon God sent his incarnated son Jesus to earth to undergo a sacrificial death by torture in atonement for humans' sins of disobedience. It is genuine belief in the reality and purpose of this sacrifice, plus true repentance for one's sins, that qualifies a person to receive God's saving "grace" (mercy) and thereby gain access to the preferable kind of immortality (Chamberlin & Feldman, 1961).

According to Christian doctrine it will be at the time of a "Last Judgment" that God, in the aspect of his resurrected son Jesus, will effect the consignment of individuals either to heaven or hell. In conjunction with the Judgment God will reanimate the material bodies of deceased persons as those bodies were at their point of physical prime while on earth, to be joined with their souls before entry into one of the supernatural realms. At the close of the Judgment God will bring to an end the physical universe of human earthly experience. And just as God existed eternally before his creation of the realm of human earthly experience, so he will continue to exist eternally after its annihilation, while the conjoined and individually identifiable bodies and souls of humans will also endure forever in one or the other of the supernatural realms (Smart & Hecht, 1982).

If God in his omnipotence intentionally created humans with the capacity freely to obey or disobey his injunctions, one can only assume he realized that some humans would disobey them, and thus have their reconstituted bodies consigned to punitive torture in hell. Relevant to this consideration,

and to paraphrase a famous statement made (in another context) by Albert Einstein, "God (by which Einstein meant simply a supreme order in nature) does not play dice with the universe". However, it seems the anthropomorphic Christian God does indeed play dice in the case of humans with their free will, as he has endowed them with even odds for morally ruining themselves with devastating effect. In a related consideration, human earthly experience often involves suffering, and if asked why God, who is regarded by Christians as both all-powerful and loving, allows this to happen, Christians contend that without the challenge of retaining, through tests of suffering, their reciprocal love for God, that love would be merely trivial and vacuous.

Referring again to atomic immortality, science may someday achieve the great success of satisfying human curiosity concerning the components and mechanisms of the physical universe, and therewith better clarify the possibilities of atomic immortality. But, again, there is no reason to expect that science would thereby afford any clue as to a final purpose of the universe – or that it would yield any rationalizations wherewith to justify the sufferings of living humans – or that it would provide people with the dramatic stimulus of being engaged in a moral struggle to achieve a full-body and consciousness-retentive immortality – whereas Christian belief provides all of these benefits.

It is instructive to consider a contrasting religious perspective provided by Hinduism. The latter includes an exceptionally rich abundance of diverse and often conflicting beliefs, and its discussion here must be restricted principally to the doctrines of one of its many schools, that of *Advaita Vedanta* (Isayeva, 1993). The fundamental concept of this school is that of *brahman* as the uncreated and eternal ground of all being. *Brahman*, like the Christian God, is the spiritual and generative source of the universe, including all of its forms of life. But unlike the anthropomorphic, Caucasian, and male Christian God, *brahman* is regarded as amorphous, racially indistinct, and gender neutral. While undetectable as such to human sensory perception, *brahman* nonetheless thoroughly pervades all things; the individual objects and creatures of the world as humans empirically perceive these are actually only transient manifestations of the intangible and unifying *brahman* itself. Moreover, *brahman* encompasses not only the things and creatures of this world, but also an extensive roster of gods. Yet the *Advaita* viewpoint ("*Advaita*" means "non-duality") is conceived of as monistic, as the gods are regarded merely as personalized re-

flections of various aspects and activities of the one supreme and unifying reality of *Brahman* (Menon & Allen, 1960).

The concept of *brahman* as all pervasive involves the corollary that *brahman* is the fundamental reality of each individual person's "soul", or "self", person, the *atman*, like the Christian soul, never dies. However, unlike the Christian soul, the *atman* becomes joined with a succession of temporary bodies in the course of an indefinitely long series of bodily births and deaths. Thus, another feature of *Advaita* (which it shares with other branches of Hinduism) is the belief in reincarnation, the cycles of which are known as *samsara*. It might appear that the Hindu concept of reincarnation is congruent with scientifically conceived atomism, insofar as the latter envisages the cosmic recycling of atoms, some of which pass from living body to living body. However, not only is the reincarnation of the Hindu *atman* a metaphysical process, but unlike the fortuitous destinations of recycled material atoms, any one transmigration of a given *atman* proceeds only from one specific person to another.

Moreover, totally unlike mere physical atomic recycling, Hindu reincarnation is intimately bound up with morality. As the *atman* is joined time and time again with a new body, the qualitative experience of any one of its incarnations is determined by *karma*, which is the cumulative record of the thoughts and actions, morally considered, of the individual *atman*'s series of lives. Hinduism embraces a conception of the right way of living (*dharma*), and the ways in which a person's behavior in his or her past incarnations adhered to or deviated from the precepts of *dharma* generated good or bad *karma*. The moral quality of a living individual's own actions supplement his or her received *karma*, and the new total is embodied in the person's next incarnation and determines the initial quality of that next life. At the end of any one of an *atman*'s incarnations, the body of that incarnation reverts to a nonspecific, unmanifested aspect of *brahma* (Deutsch, 1968).

If, over a (usually extensive) number of reincarnations a person's accumulation of good *karma* is sufficient, the cycles of *samsara* can be brought to an end. Desires motivate human actions, which in turn produce *karma*, but *karma*-producing desires result at bottom from a person's sense that he or she is ultimately a separate entity left alone to pursue egocentric cravings. But if a person gradually and profoundly comes to grasp the identity of *atman* with *brahman*, then the person's *karma*-producing desires are stilled, whereupon the person's *atman* is released from *samsara*, an achieve-

ment that constitutes liberation, or *moksha*. Following the attainment of *moksha*, and the subsequent death of a person's last physical body, the person's *atman* continues to exist forever as a supramundane component of *brahman*. By contrast with human experience within *samsara*, *moksha* provides a new state of continuous serenity, within which individuals enjoy immortality. In Hinduism there is no state or condition of hell as a counterpart to *moksha*. In the Hindu view enlightened people achieve *moksha*, while unenlightened people, whose bad actions produce bad *karma*, simply continue to undergo repeated, and sometimes qualitatively worse reincarnations, until such time as they may reverse the process and eventually become themselves enlightened (Klostermaier, 1989).

The Hindu concept of immortality is different in a number of other ways from the Christian concept. *Moksha* is a purely spiritual liberation that entails no equivalent of Christian reconstituted bodies. In addition, while Hindu immortality involves, as in the Christian case, the retention of consciousness, in the Hindu conception that consciousness expands from a personal to a universalized consciousness. The self-consciousness of the *atman* at the level of bodily involvement is elevated to identity with the universal consciousness of *brahman*. The Christian belief is that persons who achieve immortality retain their personal identities while coming directly to see and know God. Yet such persons even in their new supernaturally enlightened apprehension of God do not become *identical with* God, nor do they ever comprehend *exhaustively* the ultimate mystery of God. In a sense, then, the achievement of *moksha* may be the more profound and comprehensive immortality, since persons who attain *moksha* are thoroughly at one with *brahman*, with ultimate reality beyond any distinction or disjunction between divine and human.

Within the compass of the foregoing discussion, what can be said, in sum, about anticipations of human immortality? All persons can expect as inevitable the attainment of "atomic immortality," which, however, cannot be expected to provide people with an immortality that is consciousness-retentive. The promise of the latter is characteristically an aspect of religious belief. But this recognition immediately poses the major problem of there being no objective basis for asserting the validity of any one religious anticipation of immortality rather than any other. Devotees of given religions—Christianity, Hinduism, and many others—typically regard their mutual confirmation of the beliefs they hold in common as evidence that those beliefs are true. But this is not the universal interpersonal validity of many objectively established scientific findings, and the world's religious groups remain splintered among them-

selves and parochial in their doctrines. From which circumstance it follows that the only objective fact revealed by the long human historical record of conflicting religious beliefs is that of the psychological occurrence of those beliefs.

To focus these issues from a somewhat different angle, today there are scientifically educated Christians, Hindus, and devotees of other religions, who recognize the validity of atoms as fundamental constituents of the physical world (who can deny, in the face, for example, of atomic power plants and atomic bombs, the validity of atomic science?). But while the reality of atoms—and therewith atomic immortality, such as it may be—appears to be a necessary part of any explanation of existence, the question remains whether it is a sufficient explanation of reality. For persons who believe in the validity of *samsara* and *karma*, or in the reality of Christian indestructible souls, or in any of a further extensive assortment of religious concepts, atomism of itself is obviously not a sufficient explanation of the full fabric of being (actually many prominent physicists have believed, on a personal mystical basis, that existence in its broadest terms is determined by forces that are transcendental or spiritual in nature) (Wilber, 1985). Of course, comprehensive but mutually contradictory versions of the fundamental attributes of universal existence—including the eschatological scenarios of various religions, as well as the stance of a rigorous materialism that excludes such scenarios—cannot alike be true, although if any one comprehensive version if indeed true, it is *ipso facto* true for all persons, as we all share one and the same universe.

I realize that numerous persons endure the frequent and sometimes tragic frustrations of their life experience with courage and poise as a consequence of their religious faith of whatever variety. Surely such faith typically—and understandably—receives its greatest impetus from anticipations of immortality, since these provide a sense of reassurance that the adversities which people experience in their earthly lives amount to more than a random absurdity, as these adversities will be justified and compensated for in a future and better existence. Having these realizations in mind, I submit merely that **on the basis alone of objective, nonsectarian comprehension**, perhaps the best any person can do is to hope that humans are destined to experience a (preferably benign) immortality, although the exact cosmic status and specific characteristics of that immortality remain, for persons still in this life, totally unsearchable. Simple hope may emotionally

be a poor substitute for some firm and elaborately conceived religious-doctrinal conviction, but such hope does not necessarily imply its own futility.

Correspondence to:

Jingjing Z. Edmondson
Institute of Communication Studies
Zhejiang University
Hangzhou, Zhejiang 310028, China
Telephone: 011-86-571-8796-9884
Email: jjze@zju.edu.cn

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