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JINS 375: Weird Science

February 27, 2018

### **Afterlife and Ghosts**

What happens when we die? This is a natural question to ask as there is no obvious answer to it as long as we are alive. Everyone, at least once in a lifetime, wishes they could converse with a loved one who has passed away, but such things do not happen, at least not in the realm of mainstream science. The living is completely separated from the dead. Perhaps this is a scary thought, and perhaps this fear is where the concept of afterlife originates. When people are suddenly killed in car accidents and babies are suffering and dying of diseases as soon as they are born, it is much more comforting to imagine a better place where their souls are transported to, or to believe that their souls are reincarnated into another life. Another motivation for devising such concepts is to justify common religious and moral values within a community. For instance, Hindus believe in a cycle of rebirths where you either go up or down the caste system depending on the good and bad deeds you perform in your current life (Ogilvie, 2018). However, I claim that reality shows no mercy. There is no reason to think that the physical world is formed in such a way that humans feel more comfortable. I believe that afterlife is simply an idea resulting from human imagination and our natural tendency to seek for pleasant explanations in order to deal with the cruel truth such as the inevitable death of all living things.

First, consider the most common beliefs about afterlife which involve the existence of other worlds where the souls of dead people reside, namely places like heaven and hell. This concept of having other worlds made complete sense in the context of philosophy and science in

the old days when the Earth was flat, and we did not have much knowledge about our universe. One could have easily believed that there are places above us and below us to where we are sent to after death, since the explanation fit perfectly with the world view at the time. The fact that the night sky is sometimes referred to as the “heavens” and almost all constellations and planets are named after ancient Greek or Roman gods is a consequence of this idea. However, nowadays we have a much more sophisticated understanding of our world and how we are merely a single point in the vast universe where there is no “above” or “below”. We can now observe roughly 92 billion lightyears deep into space (Redd, n.d.), and it is difficult to believe that heaven and hell exist in the physical world. Even if they existed somewhere in the universe, they would have to be very distant, which makes it fairly challenging to come up with physical explanations for common beliefs if we assume that souls are physical entities. For instance, reincarnation via heaven or hell would inevitably imply that souls can travel faster than the speed of light and claims about mediumship or any psychic abilities pertaining to the “other world” would also imply communication faster than the speed of light. Therefore, it is extremely unlikely that places like heaven and hell exist in our physical world.

As a non-religious skeptic, I have engaged in several debates with my religious friends about heaven and hell, and afterlife in general. Although their response varied widely between people of different religious beliefs, I would say the general trend is that they believe in an abstract place that does not exist in the physical world. This view of afterlife is much more intelligible, since it not only separates the belief from physical laws but prevents it from opposing the scientific progress we have made to this day. I, for one, believe that religion and science should not conflict each other, since most religious claims are metaphysical in the first place. A religious person could easily accept most scientific claims by imagining an abstract place, separated from our physical

world, where their religious beliefs hold true. Evolution is a notable exception where this avoidance of conflict may be challenging. However, a major problem with this interpretation is that if the afterlife is in an abstract world, we should not be able to find any evidence for it in our physical world. If we cannot find any physical evidence, why should we believe in afterlife to begin with? Perhaps the entire concept of afterlife is an abstract idea that only exists in human minds. Terror Management Theory in psychology tells us that we all have a subconscious fear of death from which we feel fundamental anxiety and unease leading to behaviors such as status-seeking and strongly defending our identity (Taylor, 2014). In such state of mind, it is only natural to believe in some form of afterlife where our fear of death is significantly alleviated. Although we cannot provide any physical evidence against the formulation of another world in abstract space, I conclude that afterlife is most likely a concept just as abstract as its formulation, resulting from human imagination and our natural fear of death.

Yet, some people still attempt to provide physical evidence for afterlife by devising some form of connection between the living and the dead. The existence of ghosts is one of the main examples of such connection. Ghosts are generally taken to be souls of deceased people which can appear to the living. Some people believe that ghosts are results of tragic deaths where the souls of dead people are unfulfilled with the world of the living and thus remain as an entity stuck in our world. The fact that ghosts appear to the living implies that souls at least have some physical characteristic. However, we have argued that places like heaven and hell are unlikely to exist in the physical world and that souls must somehow defy the laws of physics if such places physically exist. On the other hand, even if we assume the abstract-world formulation from before, the entire concept of being “stuck” between the two worlds does not make sense, since we have implicitly assumed that souls are abstract entities which cannot be seen in the physical world.

Nonetheless, there have been countless ghost sightings and other cases of paranormal claims reported to date, and some researchers say that claimants of encounters with these spirits are just as common today as they were in the medieval times (The Telegraph, 2010). Some survey studies report as high a number as 45% for the proportion of adults believing in ghosts, and 64% for the proportion believing in afterlife (Speigel, 2013). Although these statistics are certainly alarming, skeptics argue that many reports of paranormal activity can be explained by natural causes. For instance, temperature changes make the materials around the household expand and contract at different rates, which explains a variety of phenomena including spooky noises, small objects moving or falling off of surfaces, and doors and windows opening or closing on its own (Kelly, 2004). Similarly, numerous cases of sightings can be explained by various reflective surfaces, car headlights and other sources of light at night, and hallucinations (Kelly, 2004). Moreover, the human mind, when given visual information, tends to form patterns and the human face (Kelly, 2004). Although these explanations are not conclusive, I argue that the natural, scientific explanation for a seemingly paranormal claim should be favored over belief in ghosts given our current understanding of the physical world. Thus, reports of ghost encounters are most likely derived from some natural cause creating a strange image or sound with the help of the human imagination.

All in all, I conclude that afterlife does not exist and that ghosts are not real. With our current knowledge of the universe, the existence of places like heaven and hell in this physical world seems unreasonable. Hence, the only formulation of afterlife that agrees with our modern scientific knowledge is to imagine an abstract place completely separated from us. For this reason, ghosts do not make sense, since souls, as abstract entities, should not be able to interact with the physical world. Additionally, the numerous cases of ghost sightings and paranormal claims can be

explained by natural causes and tricks of the human mind. Although I disagree with the perspective that afterlife exists in abstract space, I believe that it is completely legitimate within its religious system, and totally harmless. As one human being, I understand the fear of death and feel that it is only natural for us to imagine a pleasant departure from life. However, it becomes a serious issue when we use this faith to go up against scientific claims. What we discover about the physical world is completely independent of faith, and we must always investigate any claims or theories with skepticism. Only then could we say that science and religious claims such as these coexist in peace.

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