

## Is eternal life possible?

What would it mean to live forever? Would meaning be taken out of human life? Is death, as we know it now, truly the end of our lives? Does heaven really exist? Can we live on through our legacy or through others remembering us? Thus, if we have a lasting enough influence on the people around us, can we control the notion of eternal life and live on for as long as we please? How can we be certain that death is the true end if the only way, we currently know of, to know this is to die, which would be permanent – or would it? Would we still be able to communicate? In what form? What about our souls; do they ‘live’ on? How would we define life in the first place? As you can see, this topic is one of many paradoxes. Through literature, religion, philosophy, and science we can gain some clarity about whether human life can transcend time and death.

Atomism proposes that the physical universe is composed of fundamental indivisible components known as atoms. If everything, including humans, is made of these atoms, then it could be possible to suggest that even when we die, we are still composed of atoms – our bones, ashes – but they have just turned into a different formation. Of course, this is dependent on how we define life in the first place; life in a way is *a posteriori*, our experiences, relationships, thoughts, both solipsistic and universal. Does life mean that we have to be breathing or physically alive? We can be alive, but not actually *living* our lives. It could also be our atomic composition, which could also have a direct impact on our experiences and relationships, the way we are physically and mentally, and so if we are still composed of atoms when we die, are we truly dead? Maybe statues are living – they are composed of atoms which are in constant motion, so maybe they move, or live, or breathe, just in a different way to humans recognise, but not necessarily an inferior way.

Utilising a biological viewpoint, during pregnancy, parts of genetic material and cells pass not only from mother to child, but also from child and mother. Indeed, part of the child’s DNA moves to the mother’s body through the placenta and embeds itself in the mother’s tissues, becoming a permanent part of her. This back and forth of DNA suggests a sort of inter connectivity, that means one can live on through another. It is important to note however, that each individual’s DNA is unique, but all DNA is composed of the same nitrogen-based molecules (only the order differs). In terms of genes, both the father’s and mother’s genes are inherited by their child and from this child to their child, and so on. In this sense, the inheritance of genes, keeps them alive and present within society. The blue eyes you may have gotten from your father, could have come from his father, and his father’s mother, and so on. The blue eyes are still *alive*, and so each of these people also are, just in a different body each time, but their genes still survive. If we define life as composed of our DNA and genes then it is possible we can live on through our children, and their children and so on, as part of what made us has been inherited by another being.

In a similar way, the act of recycling, whether that be plastic bottles or electronics, extends the life cycle of an object, possibly indefinitely, suggesting a kind of cyclicity to life. Is the life of a plastic bottle, still considered *life*? It has a lifecycle, from being designed, made, manufactured, sold, *dying*, being recycled into something else, in much a similar way humans do (gestation, birth, living/breathing doing *things*, dying, and then – unsure). Could this recycling be applied to human life? Ideas can be recycling, human body parts can be recycled via donor transplants – hearts can be transplanted and so is that *dead* person technically still alive, and the person who has had the transplant technically that dead person in some form. We need a heart to literally live so the *dead* person might not actually be *dead* if their heart is still beating. This is we are considering life as inherently linked to the beating of a heart. In theory, this could be done over and over (if we had the scientific ability – at this stage there have only been six published cases of reusing a heart transplant), and as such one could live on for a much greater time, living in a different way and form. It would be nice if our ashes formed but of the dust that forms nebulas, later turning into stars, shining down on the rest of the world, providing energy, light and life for them.

The human body comprises of matter and energy. The conservation of energy law states that energy cannot be created or destroyed. If energy cannot be destroyed, then can human life be. Additionally, how is human life created if energy also cannot be created? Humans *are* and also *are not*; we cannot die but we also cannot live (in regards to energy). We are not just energy however, and so if our energy just *exists* then it does not die when we die, but survives, and provides energy for existing life, much like the stars referenced above. This uncertainty, of both not being creating and not being destroyed, mirrors the uncertainty that is wave particle duality, whereby at one moment matter appears like a wave, and at another movement it behaves like a particle. Maybe life is also like this; indeed, we are composed of matter. However, just because we live in this dual state, does not mean that our life cannot be preserved. If we are made of energy, which cannot be destroyed, then in some form, we can live forever. Similarly, the Earth, if needed, can heal itself because it is a self-correcting system. Whilst, at this point, humans cannot do this, the Earth shows how it's life, can in a sense be eternal through its regeneration. If we sustain the Earth can it last forever? Could we do the same for human life? Is there the possibility that technology can extend human life? For example, cryogenics is being used to freeze people who die of disease in the hope that they will be curable in the future, and then reviving those people. Where does consciousness come in to play? What even is it? Is it the soul? This uncertainty is reflective of the complexity of human life – and death.

Philosophy is also a useful tool: Plato's philosophy asserts that there are two worlds – our world (Material World) and the Real World. Our world is in a constant state of change where we rely on our senses to understand what is going on. The real world, in contrast, is eternal and unchanging and based on ideas and not senses. Maybe in one

of these worlds we remain 'alive'; if we are unchanging in the real world, maybe the idea of us can live on forever. Our ideas, memories, and thoughts could live on, and if this is how we define our lives, we can live eternally. Does life count if it is *just* an idea? If yes, then according to Plato, our life is eternal and unchanging in the real world. Indeed, the name *real* implies this is how it should be, and possibly is. Similarly, schools of ancient philosophy such as Epicurean, Skepticism, and Stoicism considered the fear of death as irrational and they used philosophy to fight such a fear. Overcoming the fear of death has been a common practice by philosophers for hundreds of years, as philosophers view death as a reality enough to cause an inevitable fear, but not impossible to overcome. Epicurus said "it is only about our thoughts". According to him, the purpose of human life is to achieve happiness, called ataraxia; as such the fear of death needs to be overcome and should be understood first, because "fear comes from not understanding". The fear of death is useless in the pursuit of happiness in life. Epicurus states "death is nothing to fear; because, when we exist, it doesn't exist. And when it exists, we are gone". This implies that once we die, we cannot experience fear, and therefore emotion in general, which is his reasoning for why we should not fear death, as it will get in the way of our happiness whilst alive. So, nothing can be imagined from death, because nothingness itself is also inconceivable. There is no perspective and no view of nothingness. In the same way, is there no perspective of eternal life? Can we not imagine what is after death because it actually doesn't exist, and not because it is too complex? Does that fact that we do not understand or cannot comprehend it mean it doesn't exist?

It is also important to consider what it would mean if life was eternal. How long is eternity? What is forever? It can mean "for all future; for always". But it can also mean frequently, as in "she was forever late for appointments" – but at some point these appointments will eventually end, not lasting forever in this sense. Is forever relative? Individual for each person, whereby maybe it lasts for however long you want it to. Would life lose its meaning if it was eternal? Is there any meaning to begin with? If yes, then it is fair to say that life could lose its novelty and curiosity. Eventually, children would have to stop being born because the world would not be able to support an infinite number of lives that never died, and so there would be the same number of people *forever*, and the same exact people *forever*. Would human life cease to *progress* or *develop*? Would we even *want* to live forever? Indeed, eternity does not guarantee happiness. So, there are many logistical issues that arise from eternal life, let alone ethical or philosophical. How do we know we exist in the first place? Can we know for certain that we exist? Descartes would say yes - *I think therefore I am* – because the literal action of thinking and questioning so, proves this. What if we can think when we die? Then *are we*?

When think of eternal life, it can be helpful think think of zero. It's paradoxical nature mirrors the paradox that is human life and death. If zero exists (as an integer) but it is is

nothing, then how can it be a *thing*, how can it exist. If zero represents a state of nothingness, the absence of a thing, then how can it be a thing. It is that its actual *being/state/existence* is nothing, or that it *contains* nothing? Is it a something or a nothing? Although how can *nothing* exist, because if you are thinking or speaking about something, it means it does exist, much like Descartes' view on human existence. If we can speak about eternal life, then surely it is not a *nothing*, but a something. But we also do not *know* eternal life exists unless we experience it. But do we need to actually experience something to know it exists? Is that not what religion and faith is? If before The Big Bang there was nothing - let's name it zero – maybe when we die, we return to this state of zero. But the uncertain nature of zero reflects the uncertain nature of existence during death. If we return to zero, but zero is a state of nothingness, it is still a state, that could mean life in some form is possible or exists.

Indeed, if we can think and imagine, at least the concept of eternal life, then is it fair to say that it exists? Does it only exist for people who can think of it then? Or it is entirely beyond our human comprehension and therefore non-existent? Going back to Descartes, he states that the only thing we can know for certain is that *I* exist, because *I* think it and question it. In the same way, if *I* think of *my* eternal life, then maybe it does exist. In this sense maybe it only exists on an individual level, but its existence is there, nonetheless. The phrase “nothing lasts” is therefore a confusing one. Because if we think of *nothing* then it is a thing, and if nothing is a thing, then it means that everything lasts, including human life.

What can religion teach us about eternal life? Of course, we learn about heaven, hell, and purgatory, implying the existence of eternal life. We can acknowledge the uncertainty of the existence of these *places*, but religion and faith do not mean we know things for certain, but that we choose to, despite, and possibly because, of the uncertainty. But this type of faith does not mean it is blind, or without reason or logic; religion is beyond that and transcends typical bounds of human understanding or reason. If one chooses to believe in God, then God exists, because they are thinking of God; they could not think about something that does not exist, because to think of something means it exists, going back to the argument of zero. Even if we were to think of something *not* existing, implies that it does exist, because you are still thinking of it, even in negative terms. This suggests a kind of certainty about the existence of heaven (and hell etc.) and therefore eternal life. However, we must ‘do good’ to enter heaven. In the same way, is eternal life (a good one at least, because hell is still eternal) only for those who are good people in the same way eternal life is only possible for those who *think* or *conceive* it, on an individual basis? But this implies that even bad people receive eternal life, an eternal life of pain in hell, with purgatory being a state in between, on the way to heaven (not eternal). In this sense, we all achieve eternal life, with the only difference being the kind of eternal life, and as such this is what motivates people to do good, bringing into question morality. But where is heaven? In the clouds

like the movies may suggest? Is it even in the same universe? The universe is everything because there is nothing external to it for it to expand into. It is not expanding into anything as such – everything is expanding. Maybe in the same way, everything is still living, if it is still apart of the universe. The Pericles in purgatory receive prayers by those still ‘living’ and in heaven to help them reach heaven, suggesting a kind of inter connectivity that links each being, no matter the literal or figurative distance. Quantum entanglement is when two particles link together in a certain way no matter how far apart they are in space, kind of like how another’s prayers can help someone in purgatory.

Religion states that when one *dies*, the body ceases, but the soul remains. If life is constituted of our soul, then we can live eternally, not bound in by the limited constraints of the body. If we are our soul, which lives forever, then we always *are*. This might bring some people some comfort, knowing that life does not have to end once the human body ‘gives up’. Indeed, a reason to follow religion is the comfort and clarity it brings, in the face of uncertainty and confusion. If one finds it comforting to believe in eternal life, then why should it not exist, if one follows religion for similar reasons? An in the case of Christianity, we do not need to experience death to know that eternal life exists. Jesus’ death and following resurrection is written in scripture to prove that eternal life exists. This, in a sense, is the evidence one may need to believe in eternal life.

Turning to literature now: literature is somewhat eternal in its ability to transcend time, distance, people and life in itself. Communication, in some way, will always be necessary for humanity to function, as we are not a society acting individually, but mutually. As such, words will always be necessary, and literature, formed out of letters, words, sentences etc., is able to teach us about life and humanity. We still learn from the works of Shakespeare despite his work being some 400 years old. We read the same letters, words, and sentences as those during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, and since then, yet the way we interpret these texts has most likely changed, even within the same period, due to the somewhat solipsistic nature of literature. But the fact that we still read and study his texts reveals how literature is eternal, and still has power and influence no matter the person or time. In this sense is Shakespeare still alive? Of course, there’s then the discussion about whether an author's work is a reflection of them – psychoanalysts would say yes. Taking the approach of psychoanalysis, Shakespeare to some degree is still alive, because his thoughts, ideas, and words are still alive and read by others, who interact with his work, and then to some degree, interact with him, still speaking in some way to him. In this way, can one remain alive through others ‘keeping them alive’? Through legacy, words, ideas maybe we can achieve eternal life. For example, we memorialise soldiers, remembering them and their actions *forever*, with their actions still having a lasting impact.

Christina Rossetti's poem *Remember*, explores the themes of grief, death, rememberance and eternal life. Rossetti interrogates the conventional views of remembrance, mourning, and grief, questioning what it means to die if one can still live on in another's mind. The speaker's tone changes through the poem, faltering between contemplative as they comprehend their coming death, anxious at the notion of being forgotten by their beloved, and ultimately assured in their love and its power to outlast even death. The palindromic nature of the ABBAABBA rhyme scheme, as part of the Petrarchan sonnet form, is somewhat cyclical, reflecting the cyclical nature of life, in particular the hopes of the speaker that they may live on through their partner, through remembrance or otherwise. This creates a sense of life, then death, and then, perhaps, as the speaker hopes, life again. One can be remembered through having a lasting influence on others, pictures, memories and our words. Pictures literally capture us, they keep our 'physical form' alive, as well as our emotions that can be seen in the picture. They can help others remember us and so in a sense we are not dead.

In Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, the lock that is stolen from Belinda by the Baron ascends into the sky. The narrative voice muses that the lock was perhaps too "blest" for any mortal to possess and then informs the reader that many present assumed it had passed into the realm of the moon, where things lost on earth can supposedly be found. It is then revealed that the "Muse" alone watched the lock ascend into the sky, in the same way that Romulus' ascent to the heavens was only seen by Proculus. Then it shot along like a shooting star, more brightly than Berenice's lock, and the sulphur watched on contentedly. The narrative voice continues, affirming that the "beau monde," or the fashionable world, will gaze on the lock in the skies from "the Mall," and that lovers will often mistake it for the planet Venus and will send up prayers of love from "Rosamonda's lake." It also states that "Partridge" will be able to spot this through "Galileo's eyes" and with it predict the fates of "Louis" and "the fall of Rome." Finally, the narrative voice addresses Belinda herself, telling her not to be sad over the loss of her lock, since its position in the sky means that it will be all the more admired and will outlive her, never turning gray. It concludes by stating that it will inspire the "Muse," who will then write her name among the stars. Here Pope finally seems to make a judgement on what the value of beauty truly is. He agrees with Clarissa's point that beauty is indeed transient, but his reference to the "Muse," a goddess of art and poetry, seems to suggest that beauty can be valuable and achieve a degree of immortality by inspiring poets like himself to write works which do indeed live on. Literature can gain this sense of immortality and so can Belinda's name through her name being written in the stars. Similarly, other characters, people and ideas can achieve immortality by literature documenting and describing it.

To conclude, eternal life is a confusing and paradoxical concept, but nevertheless possible if one so decides. Through religion and faith, we can choose to live a life of virtue and enter heaven to live an eternally happy life. On a more literal level, photos,

words, and the actions of others, can help one to live on. We still study Shakespeare and so in a sense he lives on via his legacy. In that sense, does anyone really die if others still remember and think about them? Descartes says that if we think we exist, we do; that could extend to other people, whereby if we think they exist, to some extent they do. Science also helps us to understand the notion of eternal life, whether that be through quantum entanglement linking us to others, or the fact that we, as beings composed of energy and matter, cannot be destroyed, as energy cannot be. In the same way, atoms cannot be destroyed, and so if we are made of atoms, in some sense we cannot be destroyed either. Regardless, eternal life is complex; life is complex, even though we are literally living it. Maybe there are not such clear-cut boundaries as living and dead, maybe we just *are*.

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