

will see themselves as connected importantly to a Creator God: our life itself is a gift. These beliefs deeply shape a Christian sense of who we are and what meaning our lives have. We will think of philosophy as part of a way of life, but for believers it is also part of a way of worship and discipleship. Christians will therefore find the question "Who am I?" fascinating, as should every thoughtful human being.

IS THERE LIFE AFTER DEATH?

Socrates knew when he was going to die and how it would happen. He also knew that if he just said the word, he could escape his death sentence and live out the remainder of his natural lifespan. The majority of us, if given this choice, would grab the chance for freedom and life, especially if we were convinced, as Socrates was, that our death sentence was an egregious miscarriage of justice. However, Socrates stayed and was executed, so he must have had a pretty good reason to choose death instead of life. We will get to his reasons for accepting his death in short order. However, the end of his story makes more sense if we understand the circumstances that brought him to this life-and-death decision.

Socrates had a distinguished pedigree; he came from a well-respected family lineage. He had also served bravely in the Athenian military. Both of these factors typically would have guaranteed an aging gentleman a place of respect within Athenian society. However, Socrates was not your typical man. Instead of enjoying the perks of social standing, he alienated himself from his peers by asking a lot of questions. These were not the kinds of questions expected of everyday chatter and conversation. Instead, he probed into big issues like truth, reality, holiness, and justice. In other words, he put himself on the social fringes by asking the sorts of questions we talk about in this book.

For a number of reasons, some obviously personal, we hope that asking philosophical questions is not sufficient cause for people to want us dead. Yet that is precisely what happened to Socrates. Part of his predicament requires that we understand both a “how” and a “who” component. *How* Socrates asks questions started off simply enough. He would pose what seemed to be a simple question, and his conversation partner would offer an answer. Socrates would come back with a follow-up, a question or counterexample that revealed a problem with the initial solution. Things would usually go downhill quickly from there, because the more Socrates’ conversation partners would try to extract themselves from the difficulties Socrates raised, the more deeply mired they became. To put it bluntly, those who got sucked into conversation with Socrates usually ended up looking like they didn’t know anything. What made it worse was that Socrates liked this. For some reason he thought that admitting that we don’t know anything was a key step toward wisdom. Unfortunately for Socrates, the people who ended up looking stupid did not consider this a positive outcome.

This brings us to the “who” element of the story. In the early stages of Socrates’ public interrogations, many who were at the receiving end of his queries were Athens’ most prominent and powerful men. This was not a group you wanted to irritate and embarrass. But that is exactly what Socrates did. After a while, the city big-wigs stopped talking to Socrates. Undaunted, Socrates went in search of other conversation partners, and these often included the sons of the city’s elders. The powerful of Athens could usually avoid Socrates on the streets, but they didn’t want their sons bringing these annoying questions home. So they brought Socrates to trial for corrupting the youth and teaching falsehoods about the gods—both serious charges potentially punishable by death.

If you evaluate Socrates’ self-defense at the trial in strategic terms, it was a total disaster. He informed the jury that he was putting *them* on trial to see if they would be truly just and told them indirectly that they were all ignorant and didn’t know it. Even when he did respond to the specific charges, he packaged his arguments in a way designed to get under their skin. In short, he didn’t make nice to the five hundred men on the jury, and the closeness of the vote shows that Socrates

almost certainly would have gone free if he had shown at least some deference to them. However, he gave the jury advance notice that we wasn’t going to play the public relations game. His defense would test whether they would decide the case on the principle of justice or whether their verdict would be based on his likability. Maybe the majority thought the verdict was just, but what happened next was blatantly unjust. In their vote on the punishment—should Socrates be fined (which we know from other trials was an acceptable penalty) or put to death—a larger majority of the jury voted for death than had actually voted for a guilty verdict. In short, some who had earlier declared him innocent now voted to execute him.

Perhaps some jurors chose execution as the punishment because they knew something that everyone in Athens knew: Socrates would have the opportunity to escape and leave town before his execution. It’s probable that most jurors did not want him dead; they just wanted him gone. Again, they failed to recognize that Socrates was not like most people. He called their bluff, stayed, and was executed.

As Socrates conversed with friends on the day of execution, his response to what constitutes a “good life” is wrapped up in his answer to the question, “What is death?” Death, he says, is the separation of the **soul** from the body. The body is mortal, so death brings an end to our biological existence. But Socrates says that we are not simply biological entities. We have a nonphysical soul that is immortal. Moreover, the soul, rather than the body, is the bearer of our identity. Thus, like his star student, Plato, Socrates advocates a **metaphysical criterion of personal existence**. The true “me” is not dependent on a physical body but is a metaphysical entity, a soul.

Most people throughout history have believed in some sort of afterlife, but Socrates’ position also has a rather shocking implication. Because our souls are immortal, our nonexistence is impossible. It is not just the case that Socrates believes that he will not die even when his physical body ceases to function. He is saying that he *cannot* die. On top of that, he also maintains that we (our souls) have never not existed. Immortality runs in both temporal directions.

The assertion that our souls always have been and also are immune to death is such an interesting proposition that Socrates’ friends

challenge him to explain why he believes souls are immortal, and he obliges with several reasons. First, he points out that people know things that they could not have learned from bodily senses. We have never seen a perfect circle or two objects that are exactly equal, but we know circularity and equality. Also, circularity, in its perfect form, lacks physical characteristics. If we are asked to explain a perfect circle, we would provide a definition like "a round plane figure whose circumference consists of points equidistant from the center" rather than a picture that could be seen. Thus, Socrates concludes that whatever it is that knows conceptual realities must function in a different manner than our senses, which grasp only that which can be accessible through sensory signals from imperfect physical objects. In short, we have a nonphysical means of knowing (he calls it *reason*) that is a capacity of a nonphysical soul. Moreover, even if you could eliminate every circular object in the physical world, the concept of circularity would still exist; it is immortal. Thus that which allows us to know the eternal concept of circularity, the rational soul, must also be immortal. After all, the principle of *like knows like* indicates that bricks and shrubs, things that come into and pass out of existence, are known by the senses of a body that also comes into and passes out of being. Likewise, that which knows eternal things, like concepts of justice or circularity, must be immortal. Finally, transitory physical objects like human bodies are composites. Their demise occurs when their parts are taken apart or decompose, as will happen to Socrates' body at death. But nonphysical entities, like the concept of equality or a soul, have no parts, so how can something without parts be destroyed?

Socrates' arguments for the soul's immortality may help explain his cavalier attitude at trial and why he doesn't escape when he has the chance. He doesn't believe anyone can kill him, no matter what they do. But there is more to it than this. The day before his death, his friend Crito comes to the prison to tell Socrates that arrangements have been made for his escape. Socrates rejects this offer, stating that "not life, but a good life, is to be chiefly valued." He is not primarily concerned with the length of life but the quality of it, believing that while the soul is immortal, it can also become corrupt. The basic form of the soul's corruption is preoccupation with temporal, imperfect,

and changeable things, which leads to a lack of concern about and ignorance of eternal, perfect, and unchangeable realities. In other words, we get hung up on the stuff that is like our bodies and lose track of that which is more like the soul. This explains why Socrates was so avid about the philosophical life. As he puts it, "The one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death."

A POSTMORTEM METAPHYSICAL "ME"

This definition of philosophy brings us back to Socrates' idea that death is a separation of the soul and the body. Philosophy helps us distance ourselves from the physical world and its transitory interests by fixing our attention on perfect and eternal realities. Because our souls are embodied in this world, and because our bodies have immediate physical needs and urges, we can never give undistracted attention to that which is proper for the soul. However, at death, the philosopher's soul is forever separated from the imperfect physical realm and will continue in a disembodied state in the world of perfect and unchanging realities. Socrates is not completely clear about the fate for the souls of those who are uninterested in the pure and nonmaterial realm. In several places, though, he hints at a **transmigration of the soul** (or **metempsychosis**) in which the corrupt souls of the dead are rejoined to different bodies. All souls have an afterlife, and in it they get what they want. If our soul desires the tangible and partial things of the material world, that is what it gets by transmigration to a new body and a return to the physical realm. If our soul's highest longing is for freedom from the imperfect and mutable, it enters the immaterial and perfect world and remains disembodied for eternity, enjoying the uninterrupted contemplation of all that is eternal, pure, and true.

The vast majority of human beings throughout history have believed that an afterlife follows the cessation of our biological functions. On one level, we have to acknowledge that this is an odd belief. We just don't see people who have died, in the medical sense of the term, who later are reanimated and start showing up at family picnics again. Thus, when someone embraces belief in an afterlife, this often assumes that what survives death is not the body but instead something

metaphysical (i.e., beyond the physical) and that this metaphysical entity must be the true "me." This last part is a reminder that my interest in the afterlife is not just that something survives death, but that *I* survive death. Thus Socrates' metaphysical criterion of personal existence asserts that what constitutes the real me is not grounded in anything physical, but is a metaphysical reality, a soul, that survives my biological demise and decomposition and preserves my identity postmortem.

The idea of the immortality of the soul has been extremely popular in Western thought for a number of reasons that can be found in Socrates' story. Our bodies are quite variable. They grow, change cellular composition multiple times, can be altered by amputation, and differ in terms of abilities and disabilities. These and other factors cause us to question whether the "real me" is determined by my physical being. Moreover, grounding my identity in a body seems to be thrown into turmoil by death, since death ends all biological functions that accompany life. If my body is me and my lifeless corpse succumbs to decay, how does it make sense to believe that I exist after death? However, if our true identity resides in a non-physical soul capable of functions that are difficult to explain in purely physical terms, it seems reasonable to think of an immortal and undying metaphysical reality that provides continuity between this life and the next.

HINDUISM

Hinduism shares Socrates' metaphysical orientation toward understanding the deepest truths of reality and existence. However, it believes neither that we exist at all, at least not in the manner we usually believe we do, nor that the physical universe exists. Thus we might say that Hinduism advocates a metaphysical criterion of personal existence. All that exists is metaphysical in nature, but it is not personal or individual. Because it rejects the notion of individual existence, Hinduism calls for a radically different perspective toward our usual understanding of death and postmortem existence. Before we get too far into Hinduism's view of life and death, a couple of qualifiers are in order. First, Hinduism

is a religion of great diversity formed over millennia; so we will flesh out positions that are held by many Hindus, but they do not represent all strains of this faith family. Second, our exposition will concentrate on the topic as addressed in the Upanishads. This group of writings is not the sole source of Hindu belief and should not be understood as authoritative for Hindus in the same way that the Bible is for Christians. Still, the Upanishads are highly formative for the various schools of Hindu thought.

With these provisos in place, perhaps the most consistent theme that runs throughout the Upanishads is **metaphysical monism**. Everything is ultimately one, a singularity that is beyond change, gender, time, personality, and place. This absolute reality is referred to as **Brahman**, and the basic doctrine of Hinduism is summed up in the phrase "all is Brahman." Although Brahman is unchanging and indivisible, it is also the cause of plurality, change, personality, individual existence, and time. What we perceive as distinct objects or persons are ephemeral manifestations of the whole. Thus the physical world is not a created order that is separate from Brahman but is the Absolute seen in an incomplete and hazy way. Stated differently, the One is immanent, or within, each part of the universe.

If all is Brahman, that means that we, too, are in some way Brahman. That which is truly us is referred to as the **atman**. Therefore, as a corollary to the notion that "all is Brahman," it is also true to say that "atman is Brahman." The atman is the true self that is connected to, or identical with, the One. Our essential being is divine and is metaphysically the same as the power that animates all things. Thus while atman is often translated as "soul," its meaning is very different from how Socrates and most Western philosophers think of the soul. When we conceive of our existence, our soul, as distinct from other human souls or as different from Brahman, we fall into error. This notion of ego-self, what Hinduism refers to as **ahankara**, confuses atman with that which is partial and particular. This mistake is deepened when we identify our self as a composite physical body that is distinct from other tangible objects.

Ahankara is, in a sense, the sole problem to be overcome in our search for salvation. It creates **maya**, the illusion of change and

individuality. At its most basic level, maya is confusion that results from reliance on the senses and on rational thought. Perception distinguishes between the person who sees and the object that is seen, or an object's aroma is perceived as different from its texture or the sounds it emits. However, Brahman has no such distinctions or divisions. Thus the observation that objects are particular, composite, and transitory is misleading. Similarly, the process of rational thought perpetuates maya because it distinguishes between the thinker and the object of thought. If I contemplate flying goats, maya fools me into the illusion that I, the thinker, exist apart from the goats I imagine to be soaring overhead.

Since rational categories of thought are a manifestation of our ego-self, they are a hindrance to our quest for salvation. So when Hinduism says that our most profound obstacle is ignorance, it is not the sort of ignorance that can be corrected by thinking more clearly. Atman is universal consciousness itself, not an object about which or with which we think. Thus liberation from maya is brought about by knowledge of our true self, atman, as Brahman. It is a mystical form of realization in which we strive to progress from the lowest levels of understanding, such as "perceiving," to higher levels such as "thinking about" and "thinking itself," ultimately advancing to pure "being." Another way to put it is that salvation is not something we need to attain. All is Brahman. Instead, salvation is a process of increasingly pushing back the various deceptions of maya to realize what we already are.

Another distinctive of Hinduism is that liberation from illusion, what Hinduism calls **moksha**, typically takes place only after a myriad of lifetimes. At this point, Hinduism offers a number of different interpretations. The most common option is **reincarnation**. When the physical body dies, it is burned, and the atman is released and rises to the place of the ancestors. After a time of rest and purification, it returns to the earth as rain and passes through plant and animal forms until it is reborn again in another human body. The conditions of one's future rebirth are dependent on one's **karma**, the idea that persons are punished or rewarded for the accumulated deeds and attitudes of one's previous life. The law of karma is not based on the moral edict of a god

but is an impersonal law that governs our future. Past acts are causes that inevitably lead to future effects, and thousands of lifetimes may be required to achieve the purity required for release from this cycle. However, the atman that has achieved moksha goes to the sun and escapes the cycle of reincarnations. To use a metaphor, the atman is like a drop of water that enters the ocean. That drop was never different from the ocean itself and, in this state of full realization, becomes completely absorbed into and indistinguishable from the ocean itself.

One element of Hinduism that often troubles Western thinkers is that it denies the validity of the basic capacities we rely on to navigate life. By proclaiming that the physical realm is the most blatant manifestation of our entanglement in illusion, it denies what seem most obvious to us: that my shoe exists as a particular sort of object that is separate from a fencepost, that ice has a chemical composition that is different from titanium, or that Pittsburgh is separated from Mumbai by about eight thousand miles. If the physical realm is a mirage that we must overcome to achieve enlightenment, it would seem that science is undermined and our interest in addressing poverty and injustice will be diminished. Why study our physical world or work to improve material conditions if they are but fleeting deceptions? Moreover, as we saw in the previous chapter, there may be good reasons for finding that our bodies are essential to our identities and not simply an undesirable and disposable husk that temporarily entraps our soul (Socrates) or a mirage that obscures our true identity (Hinduism). What if we are our body? The next three individuals we will study adopt the idea that all that is real about us is physical in nature, but it comes with a trade-off. If **physicalism** is true, it is hard to see how immortality can also be true. As we noted above, our observations of bodies seem to be very clear about the fact that once biological functions cease, I also cease to be.

EPICURUS

While many of the ancient philosophers argued for the superiority of non-physical soul over a material body, *Epicurus* was a notable exception. As we discovered in the previous chapter, his philosophy embraced **physicalism**, the belief that no metaphysical entities

exist. Everything, humans included, consists exclusively of physical stuff. Thus Epicurus' philosophy is constructed on a **somatic** (bodily) **criterion of personal identity**. All that we are is grounded in the particular material composition of our bodies and the functions our material compositions facilitate. Epicurus' physicalism thus results in a this-worldly perspective that contrasts sharply with Socrates' otherworldly orientation. However, the two do share similar views of the physical world. They both believe that all material entities are mortal, undergo change, and are composite. The big difference is that Socrates believes that another world, a metaphysical realm, exists and is home to all that is eternal. In contrast, Epicurus believes that the physical world is all that there is.

Epicurus' belief that all things are composed of other smaller things reveals a surprising element. More than two thousand years before modern atomic theory, he believed in the existence of *atoms*, small physical particles that were themselves indivisible and eternal. Atoms don't come into being, do not change, and never cease to exist. Thus when a composite object like a tree or cloud comes into existence, it is simply an assemblage of a large number of certain types of atoms. The death or destruction of a compound object results from the scattering of atoms. So Epicurus' definition of death is that it is nothing more than the unbundling and dispersal of a large collection of atoms that temporarily come together to form a human being. The atoms that comprise our body are eternal, but I, as a specific collection of these atoms, am not.

Epicurus does believe that we have a soul that is the center of our thoughts and perceptions. However, this soul, like all other things, is composed of atoms. We perceive an object because that which is seen or heard emits atoms that enter our souls and form patterns. Even thoughts and perception are simply the movements and arrangements of atoms within the soul. This brings us to Epicurus' second important idea about death. Since the soul is a complex collection of atoms as well as the seat of my consciousness, when my soul atoms are scattered at death, I am not aware of it because I no longer exist.

Since this view of the person has no room for the afterlife, how should we then live out our present existence? Epicurus' answer is

grounded in his physicalist philosophy. Since only matter is real, all that we know comes to us via our senses. Our perceptions generate passions or emotions within us, the chief of which are pleasure and pain. Because all things are grounded in atoms, Epicurus argues that what we experience as pain results from the rapid and erratic movement of atoms within the soul. In contrast, pleasure is the slow, relaxed, and harmonious flow of the soul's atoms. When we achieve prolonged periods of serenity and balance, he calls this state **ataraxia**, the condition that all prudent people should seek.

Epicurus' quest to eliminate inner turmoil and fear takes him to the topic of religion, because he believed that fear of the gods was a primary motive behind religious practice. One response to concerns about punishment in the afterlife is already clear from what he has to say about death. Death is the end of consciousness, so we no longer exist to experience pain or pleasure. Thus we have nothing to fear from the gods because we no longer exist to be punished or rewarded. Epicurus also adds a second element to our relationship to the gods. He believes that they exist but care nothing about our actions or problems. In fact, their apathy toward our affairs is actually a model for how we should live. The gods are exemplars of **ataraxia**, a state of serenity that would be impossible if they became ensnared in our matters. **Hedonistic egoism** therefore urges us to follow their lead and avoid entanglements in the affairs of others and live as self-sufficiently as possible.

Epicurus says that we get one shot at life, a physical existence limited to the typical human lifespan. Perhaps we want more, but that is not the way the world works. All physical things, at least in their present compositions, are temporary. Only the atoms that make up our being are eternal. The good news is that death is nothing to be feared. The gods are not keeping score but are modeling the life of serenity. If we are going to follow their example, we do it best by enjoying pleasure prudently and avoiding excess or privation, which allows us to bypass the complications and upheavals possible in this, our only life. But what if **reason** turns against us and we find that, instead of leading to peace and calmness, rational analysis reveals that this life is meaningless and absurd?

CAMUS

Imagine a situation in which a horse pulls a large boulder up a hill. When it nears the hilltop, the big rock is released and rolls to the bottom again. After this, the horse returns to the base of the hill and once again begins the arduous task of dragging the boulder back up the slope. This process is repeated every day of the horse's entire life. Our steed may find this task undesirable because it is physically demanding, but as far as we know, it will not find this situation irrational or absurd. It is an irrational animal just doing its job. If we change one element of our story, though, the meaning shifts dramatically. What if it is no longer a horse but a human dragging the stone to the pinnacle simply to see it rumble back to the foot of the hill? If this is the lifelong fate of this person, it is hard to imagine that a human being will not find this job absurd and tragic. Whether a horse or a human is moving the rock to the hilltop day after day, it is an irrational activity. However, while the horse doesn't recognize that it is farcical, because we are rational in a way the horse is not, humans do know the task is absurd. In fact, if we knew that we were doomed to such an absurd process for our entire life, reason would lead us to contemplate the unthinkable. Is death preferable to a pointless lifetime of meaningless activity? Is suicide an answer?

For *Albert Camus* (1913–1960), suicide is not simply one interesting philosophical question among others. As he puts it, "There is only one really serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Deciding whether or not life is worth living is to answer the fundamental question in philosophy. All other questions follow from that." Before we go any further, it is important to notice that he considers suicide a *philosophical* problem. Therefore, he is not thinking about this question in the context of financial or relational hardships, friendlessness, or failing health—circumstances that are unique to those who find themselves in stressful and difficult straits. For Camus, suicide is a question for everyone, and it arises because he believes that, regardless of our particular situation, life is ultimately meaningless. We are all at sea in leaky boats.

The eternal fate of pushing the boulder up the hill is a reference to the **myth of Sisyphus**. In this myth, Sisyphus is a clever man who

tricked even the gods. As punishment for his disrespect toward the gods, Zeus assigned him the task of rolling a boulder up a hill, only to cause the stone to come crashing back to the bottom just before the task was complete. Sisyphus was thus condemned to a lifetime of fruitless effort, repetitively tugging the stone uphill and trudging down after it in an assignment that had no purpose and no end.

For Camus, Sisyphus is not just a mythical figure. His story is our story. Because reason is the human capacity that craves meaning and purpose, the deepest tragedy imaginable is when the ability that desires meaning also reveals that there is no meaning to our efforts. We are rational, but the world, and our life within it, is irrational and absurd. As Camus sees it, we are condemned to be rational beings in a universe that has no purpose. We act as if there is a point to life but occupy our time with trivial and mundane activities. We do all that we can to preserve our life, but we are keenly aware that we eventually die, decompose, and will be totally forgotten in a few short years. We act as if we are significant, but a cold and unresponsive cosmos seems to disagree. We are free and rational beings who are also pitifully momentary blips in an irrational, mechanical, and unblinking universe. Life is absurd and, as rational beings, we know it. This dualism is what makes suicide the ultimate philosophical question.

In the face of absurdity, two kinds of suicide are available. The most obvious form is **physical suicide**. However, Camus says that this is simply a form of escape. If we end our physical existence, we do not resolve the dualisms. By killing ourselves, we eliminate only our *awareness* of the absurdity of existence, but not the absurdity itself. Physical suicide allows absurdity to have the last word. A second option is **philosophical suicide**. This form of suicide acknowledges that our situation is absurd but then finds reason to hope that life's irrationality and drudgery will be overcome. A common form of philosophical suicide is found in religion. Religion recognizes the dilemma of present existence. It sees the suffering and mundane lives of those who, because they are rational, desire purpose and resolution of the dualism, and then promises that God will resolve all the incongruities in the future. Philosophical suicide also is found in subjectivist attempts to create meaning in a meaningless universe. It recognizes

that there is no overarching logical pattern in the universe that makes sense of life, so it seeks to salvage meaning by adopting some private purpose or mission that makes it logical for me to live. Camus harshly criticizes both religion and self-generated meaning as futile attempts to escape absurdity rather than tackle it head-on. In his view, it is philosophical suicide to postpone our answers to a future that will never arrive or to think that life's absurdity goes away simply because we have arbitrarily decided to declare something meaningful.

Instead of suicide, Camus' answer to the insanity of conscious existence in a meaningless world is **revolt**. Rather than seek an escape hatch, rebels live with eyes wide open to life's absurdity and embrace it. Revolt means that our acknowledgement of the absurd is not a passive surrender but a defiance that gives us power over the forces that govern an impersonal and uncaring cosmos. Sisyphus recognizes the ludicrous nature of his eternal task, sneers at the forces who have condemned him to this fate, and thus refuses to give them the satisfaction of killing his spirit.

In Camus' later writings, he emphasizes rebellion for the sake of others. Although he never fully explains why revolt should take this form, and in many ways it seems to run contrary to everything else he says, our human duty is defiance against tragedy and oppression. Perhaps Camus' clearest expression of rebellion on behalf of others is found in his novel *The Plague*. The setting is a city that has been overtaken by a mysterious disease and is placed under quarantine. In the face of a plague that strikes individuals unpredictably, the question is whether one should respond by finding a way to take advantage of the calamity or join the usually futile effort to fight the disease and give aid to the sick and dying. Camus makes clear that the latter path exemplifies what he means by a revolt against absurdity. Life has no ultimate purpose, yet we take up the fight against the suffering, death, and randomness symbolized by the plague.

Camus' philosophy is perhaps best viewed as a battle he wages on several fronts. As we saw above, he opposes the attempt of religion to respond to the tragedy and irrationality of the universe by offering some future resolution. At the same time, he is equally critical of those who see science as a savior. In a sense, the very existence of

science is an acknowledgment of absurdity because it seeks to unravel the dualisms of our universe. The irony is that science's investigative processes require that we set aside all questions of human purpose. In order to cure disease, extend longevity, and bring efficiency and convenience to life, science avoids bothersome questions about what makes life meaningful. Moreover, the farther it peers into the deep recesses of distant galaxies, the more obvious it becomes that our existence is fleeting, vulnerable, and meaningless. Finally, Camus says that almost all philosophers are wrong in their claim that reason can find some objective purpose in life. Reason is the cruel joke that makes absurdity a reality for us, but philosophy tricks us into believing that we can stall death long enough that reason will finally resolve the contradictory dualisms of life. Camus' answer is that this illusory future has not and will never come. We must instead seize the present and, with eyes wide open, rebel against life's irrationality.

The heart of Camus' critique is that there is no "grand narrative," no overarching story or truth, that gives life meaning. However, even if this is the case, the vast majority of people throughout history have not sought suicide as a way out. What makes this even more interesting is that most people in history have not enjoyed a high standard of living, political freedom, educational opportunities, and other factors that may come to mind in thinking about a good life. So why would impoverished or enslaved people choose life rather than death? It might just be that the desire for life is not grounded in a grand narrative that makes sense of everything in the end. Instead, we might desire eternal life, or perhaps just an extended life, to fulfill our own personal aims and projects. In other words, maybe our private projects and individual endeavors are not philosophical suicide, as Camus claims, but are instead the very things that give life purpose, at least for a while.

BERNARD WILLIAMS

The odds are good that you will live longer than your parents. Better diets, medicine, and technology have extended both the quality and length of biological life. Occasionally we are teased with headlines that tell us that technology may someday make us immortal. For

example, we might find a genetic means of stopping or reversing the aging process, revive cryogenically preserved corpses, download brain contents to a cloned body or digital avatar, use bionic or robotic replacement of body parts to keep us alive, or discover some other as-yet-unimagined means of extending human life, perhaps indefinitely. Most assume such breakthroughs would be good news, as long as biological immortality was accompanied by certain levels of physical health and mental acuity. But is endless existence desirable? While *Bernard Williams* (1929–2003) does not directly address the question of whether humans could be immortal, he makes it clear that while we might benefit from an extended lifespan, mortality is ultimately a good thing because immortality would be boring.

To illustrate his view that immortality would be a curse rather than a blessing, Williams draws on an opera titled *The Makropulos Case*. The story follows the life of Elina Makropulos, who is given a magic elixir by her father that will sustain her at her current biological age for the next three hundred years. During this time, Elina's personality, aspirations, appearance, and tastes remain the same. She marries several times and has children. However, despite the fact that she loves deeply and is an accomplished opera singer, she often has to change her identity and relocate to conceal her secret. Moreover, during this long life, she witnesses the death of many who were close to her, including several husbands and children. All this eventually leads her to become emotionally distant, apathetic, and bored. Life loses its appeal, so after three hundred years, Elina elects not to drink the elixir again, not to extend her life for an additional three centuries.

Williams believes that two questions are wrapped up in the desirability of immortality. The first is, What makes a life *my* life? Williams opts for something like Locke's psychological criterion of identity (see chapter 11), stating that it is not Elina's soul or physical composition that makes her who she is. Instead, there is a persistence of her identity in that she retains enduring goals, memories, values, and personal qualities across time. Without the continuity of interests and aims, this life would not be Elina's over the three-hundred-year span, but a series of lives of different people. By Williams' standard, the Elina

who decides not to drink the elixir the second time is the same person who chose to drink it three hundred years earlier.

The second question raised by the potential for immortality is whether a continued life would also be meaningful. If life lacks purpose and significance, it makes no sense to extend it in perpetuity. Williams argues that the meaning of life is found in the pursuit and fulfillment of desire. However, while all desires motivate us to engage in certain activities, not all desires are equal. **Conditional desires** refer to aims and interests that are incidental to our identity. I might prefer to wear blue shirts rather than orange ones so I'm not mistaken for a Home Depot employee or a highway construction worker, but this desire is not central to my being. On the other hand, we have **categorical desires**, aspirations that are central to our deepest goals and yearnings. These are the longings that make sense of our interest in postponing death. Elina's categorical desires include things like falling in love with a special person, bearing and raising children, and becoming an accomplished opera performer. As Williams puts it, the categorical desires "propel us on into the future," and we would consider it an evil if death came before these life projects have been realized. Stated otherwise, both our identity and our reason for staying alive cannot be divorced from our categorical desires.

So what about Elina? Williams believes that the end of the opera gets it right. Elina has had a meaningful life by the definition outlined by Williams. Her categorical desires have been satisfied, not just once but several times. But Williams also believes that categorical desires have their limits. Once Elina has fulfilled these desires, her life has exhausted any additional meaning it can have. Remarrying, raising more children, and singing yet another opera would become repetitive and boring. She has been there and done that. In fact, the boredom would become so profound that refusing the elixir and allowing the normal aging process to resume and eventually bring death would be preferable to extending her longevity, even for another limited amount of time.

Williams' thesis that immortality would be boring brings up a number of interesting questions. Are there not enough variations within our categorical desires that boredom does not necessarily

follow? For example, if raising children is a categorical desire, would begetting and raising additional children necessarily become boring? The desire remains constant, but children have different personalities. New challenges and possibilities would arise in nurturing a child in a new century or social context, bringing a novelty that might prevent monotony. Boredom with opera may be avoided by the emergence of new material, evolution of operatic styles, immersion in other forms of singing, or passing on three hundred years of operatic experience through teaching new divas. Moreover, Williams tends to assume that our categorical desires remain static over a lifetime. However, it is often the case that we find new interests that open new worlds and reinvigorate desire. Elina might develop a voracious appetite for reading history, playing the zither, raising llamas, or developing more efficient materials for constructing homes in subarctic regions. The potential for discovering new categorical desires is almost endless and may well make the prospect of immortality attractive.

In addition to the questions above, there are other factors that Williams does not seriously entertain in his investigation of immortality. His considerations focus only on a this-worldly continuation of life. However, most philosophers who advocate some form of immortality argue that this existence occurs in a different world, which may provide the sort of environment in which boredom would be unlikely. For example, it seems that a major contributor to Elina's world-weariness is that she had to conceal the secret of her longevity and mourn the deaths of those dear to her. However, if the environment of the afterlife was such that those she loved also shared immortality and she was able to be completely transparent to others, would her zest for life continue? In addition, those who foresee an afterlife in another world envision a situation in which we undergo some sort of transformation and continue to live with others and God. Thus we might consider our susceptibility to boredom as a moral problem that is eliminated in our transition from this life to the next without negating the continuity of **personal identity**. In short, even if Williams is correct that a this-worldly immortality would eventually become burdensome and boring, it is still possible that we might find

eternal life in a perfected environment and a transformed moral and spiritual state to be deeply desirable.

RESURRECTION OF THE BODY

Belief that the cessation of our earthly life is not the end of our personal story is a central doctrine for Christianity. Christians affirm that our mortality is transformed into imperishability (1 Cor 15:42) and we will enjoy eternity in God's presence. This bare-bones affirmation includes the two features mentioned in the paragraph above—a transformed postmortem existence in a nonearthly environment—but these adjustments raise interesting questions. How can personal identity be retained if there is a time gap between premortem and postmortem existence? If our afterlife occurs in a different world, what similarities must continue to preserve personal identity? Is continuity of personal existence dependent on retaining my memories or beliefs, my exact physical composition, my soul, or something else?

In response to these questions, many Christians tend to default to the model we find in Socrates. The transformation involves shedding our bodies so our soul can go to a new world—heaven—where we live in the presence of an eternal and perfect God. If the soul is really me, I retain my identity since my body is expendable. Moreover, there are no concerns with a temporal gap since my soul (i.e., me) never stops existing. However, Socrates' model of the afterlife seems to conflict with Christian doctrine at several points. First, Socrates argues that existence is an inherent quality of the soul. A soul always has and always will exist. This position stands in tension with Christianity's claim that God is the creator and sustainer of all things. In other words, nothing begins to or continues to exist apart from God's will. If this is true, existence is not an inherent quality of souls; they are created entities and cannot continue to exist apart from God. Second, Socrates believes that it is impossible that the real me, my soul, could die. However, without death, it makes no sense to speak of resurrection, a fundamental doctrine of Christianity. "Resurrection" means "to stand or rise again." Therefore, that which is not truly dead has no need to be raised. Finally, the basic Christian definition of individual afterlife is not the immortality of the soul, as in Socrates, but the **resurrection**

of the body. For Socrates, the idea that the body would have a place in postmortem existence would seem absurd, but 1 Corinthians 15:35-44 emphasizes in several ways that our resurrection involves our body, although one that is transformed in some way (v. 44).

If immortality of the soul differs from bodily resurrection, it would be helpful to identify places where Christians find broad consensus on the afterlife. One such area of agreement is that we should not assume that Scripture invests the same meaning in words like "body," "soul," or "spirit" that Greek philosophy does. The Bible seems not to use these terms to refer to separate parts or components of a person but as ways of expressing the different dimensions or capacities within humans. Thus "body" denotes the whole person, but particularly as manifested through our corporeal existence. Terms like "soul" or "spirit" might refer to our capacities for intellect or spirituality rather than distinguishing one part of a human from other components, but this does not necessarily mean that we do not have two or more such components. It just means that the Bible doesn't seem to be very interested in answering questions about this particular topic. This observation is connected to a second area of agreement: "resurrection of the body" does not simply mean the reanimation of a corpse. Instead, "the body" refers to the whole person. Moreover, a third area of agreement is that resurrection should not be confused with resuscitation. There are several scriptural accounts of people raised from the dead (e.g., 2 Kgs 4:35, 13:21; Matt 27:52-53; Luke 7:13-15, 8:55), but as far as we know, they died again at some future time. When Christians talk about resurrection in the most robust sense, it refers to an eternal postmortem existence. A fourth area of agreement is that resurrection is not a natural event but one that requires the supernatural intervention of God. Unless God raises us, we stay dead. Fifth, resurrection life is a continuation of *my* life. It would be hard to get too excited about resurrection if it did not include me. Finally, as noted above, Christians agree that resurrection results in some sort of qualitative change within us that equips us for existence in a different environment.

While we find these broad areas of agreement, Christian scholars have embraced a variety of models of resurrection life that mirror

the different views of personal identity we surveyed in the previous chapter. One model is what we will call the **metaphysical criterion of resurrection identity**. This view maintains a dualism of body and soul that argues, like Socrates, that when the biological functions of the body cease, the soul ascends to another world. Unlike Socrates, though, this position says that our soul is later reunited with a body in the general resurrection, a time when God raises all his people from the dead. Some who advocate this position point to Luke 16:19-31, the story of a beggar named Lazarus whose pleas for help were ignored by a wealthy man. When Lazarus dies, he is carried by the angels "to Abraham's side." To some, this seems to imply a conscious disembodied state, often referred to as the **intermediate state**, in which the soul of Lazarus survives his physical demise and awaits a resurrection reembodiment.

This modified metaphysical criterion of resurrection existence avoids some potential problems of retaining our identity in postmortem life. Since the soul is the bearer of our identity and it survives death, there is no temporal gap in an individual's existence. Moreover, since the body is secondary to our true identity, receiving a different body in the resurrection has no negative impact on the continuity of personal identity. However, other problems arise with this paradigm. In the biblical story we noted above, the wealthy man who ignored Lazarus' pleas is consigned to Hades at death. In his agony he asks Abraham to "send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue" (Luke 16:24). Because disembodied souls lack fingers, or any other body part, most biblical scholars argue that instead of mining this story for information about the afterlife, it should be read as a parable about our duty to the poor and the urgency of heeding God's messengers during our earthly life. Another difficulty in the metaphysical model is that a robust definition of resurrection is lost. Since my soul goes immediately into God's presence, resurrection is not a reversal of my death but the replacement of a body that is nonessential to my identity. ♪

A second position is what we will call the **somatic criterion of resurrection identity**. Because of the philosophical problems that accompany dualist/metaphysical positions on identity, some Christian

scholars argue that human life should be viewed as material unity. Moreover, they would agree with other physicalists in this chapter (Epicurus, Camus, and Williams) that death means that we cease to exist. However, unlike these advocates of physicalism, they would argue that our nonexistence is temporary because God brings about a resurrection of the body (i.e., the person) that was once dead.

A somatic view of resurrection identity takes death seriously. All that we are ceases to be, at least temporarily, when our biological functions terminate. Moreover, it takes seriously the idea that bodies are essential to our identity, a notion that seems to be implicit in Scripture's concept of bodily resurrection. Finally, it fits nicely with the fact that Jesus' resurrection was accompanied by the absence of his corpse from the tomb (e.g., Matt 28:1-6) and his later appearances to various followers with a body that still bore the nail holes and wounds of his crucifixion (e.g., John 20:24-29, although in some of these appearances he was not immediately recognized (e.g., John 21:1-7)). Most of the potential problems for this model revolve around the issue of qualitative change. Does my resurrection, or Jesus' resurrection for that matter, require a precise reconstruction of the premortem body from the observable physical characteristics, right down to the last cell? If so, this appears to be more of a resuscitation without transformation. Moreover, a central affirmation within Christianity is that our afterlife occurs not in this world (or at least not in this world in its current state) but in an environment that facilitates eternal existence. Does such a world require bodies that have saliva, white blood cells, bones, and other physical components that eventually degrade and, even during this lifetime, undergo constant cellular change?

These sorts of issues lead to a third model: the **psychological criterion of resurrection identity**. In this view, death ends our existence as biological and conscious beings. However, all that makes us truly who we are—memories, values, beliefs, tastes, and physical characteristics—is retained in God's memory. Thus, in the eschaton, God resurrects us by restoring all that makes us who we are in this life and provides a body suitable to a resurrection environment. By analogy, we might think of resurrection as God storing our software (memories, values, beliefs, and tastes) until it is downloaded onto

new hardware, a body that may have very different rules of operation than in our present universe.

The advantages of the psychological criterion of identity is that it takes death as a reality and offers a way to accommodate transformation in resurrection life. Moreover, it avoids some of the difficulties of reducing our true identity to either a nonphysical soul or a material body, recognizes the importance of bodies as a means of processing and expressing our identity, and argues that we cannot reduce our identity to physical processes alone. However, critics might ask what we are to think if Jennifer's premortem software is downloaded into one hundred identical resurrection bodies. Would there then be one hundred Jennifers? Or none? In addition, some critics argue that this option simply punts on the question of identity. Instead of attempting to give a coherent picture of what it means to sustain identity between earthly life and resurrection life, it reverts back to an answer that sounds like, "Don't worry, God will work it out." Of course, we noted above that any Christian view of resurrection assumes the intervention of God, but for many, the psychological approach appears to cut off discussion of resurrection identity rather than advancing it.

Some readers might find it distressing that Christian scholars seem to be all over the map on how we should understand resurrection. This is, after all, one of the most basic doctrines of our faith, so we would hope that we could say something about *the* Christian view of the resurrection of the body. However, several things may put this in context. First, we did note above some pretty basic areas of consensus among Christian thinkers on the question. Those things alone present an agreement that provides a stark contrast between resurrection of the body and the other views of life after death presented in the chapter. Second, it shouldn't surprise us to run into disagreement about the details and processes of maintaining identity in postmortem existence. After all, we can't even find a philosophical consensus on what constitutes the principle of identity in this life, and we certainly know a lot more about this life than we do about what life after death looks like. Finally, one difficulty in trying to frame a philosophical view of resurrection is that the Bible is not primarily concerned about

satisfying our philosophical curiosity about the details of life after death. It just doesn't provide a clear picture of the details.

FINAL WORDS ON LIFE, DEATH, AND PHILOSOPHY

Most people do not like to think about death. Ironically, perhaps tragically if you are Camus, it is our capacity to think that makes us aware that we are mortal. Critters will also die, but they don't know it. However, if we flip the question, we also recognize a more positive side to this. The rational capacities that allow us to contemplate our mortality are the same powers that allow us to think about the goals, values, and meaning of life itself. In other words, reason makes us all philosophers, even when we don't ask questions about goodness, truth, and purpose in the systematic way professional philosophers go about this task. Even though this philosophical task raises complex and some seemingly unanswerable questions, many of which concern our mortality, we will likely prefer this to the alternative of irrational existence. Here, we instinctively agree with J. S. Mill's statement, "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their side of the question."

This brings us back to where this book began. Asking "big questions" is fundamental to our humanity. As Christians, we should see the ability to probe these questions as a gift. God invests us with a mind that, from an early age, fills our head with a bunch of question marks. These are questions about both the inner world of our being and the outer world that includes the entire created cosmos and God, inquiries that elevate us above all other things. However, like all good gifts, this one comes with responsibilities. Christians have a spiritual duty to pursue life's deepest questions with virtue, fairness, and above all, a sense of worship and gratitude. Blessings as you continue in this journey.