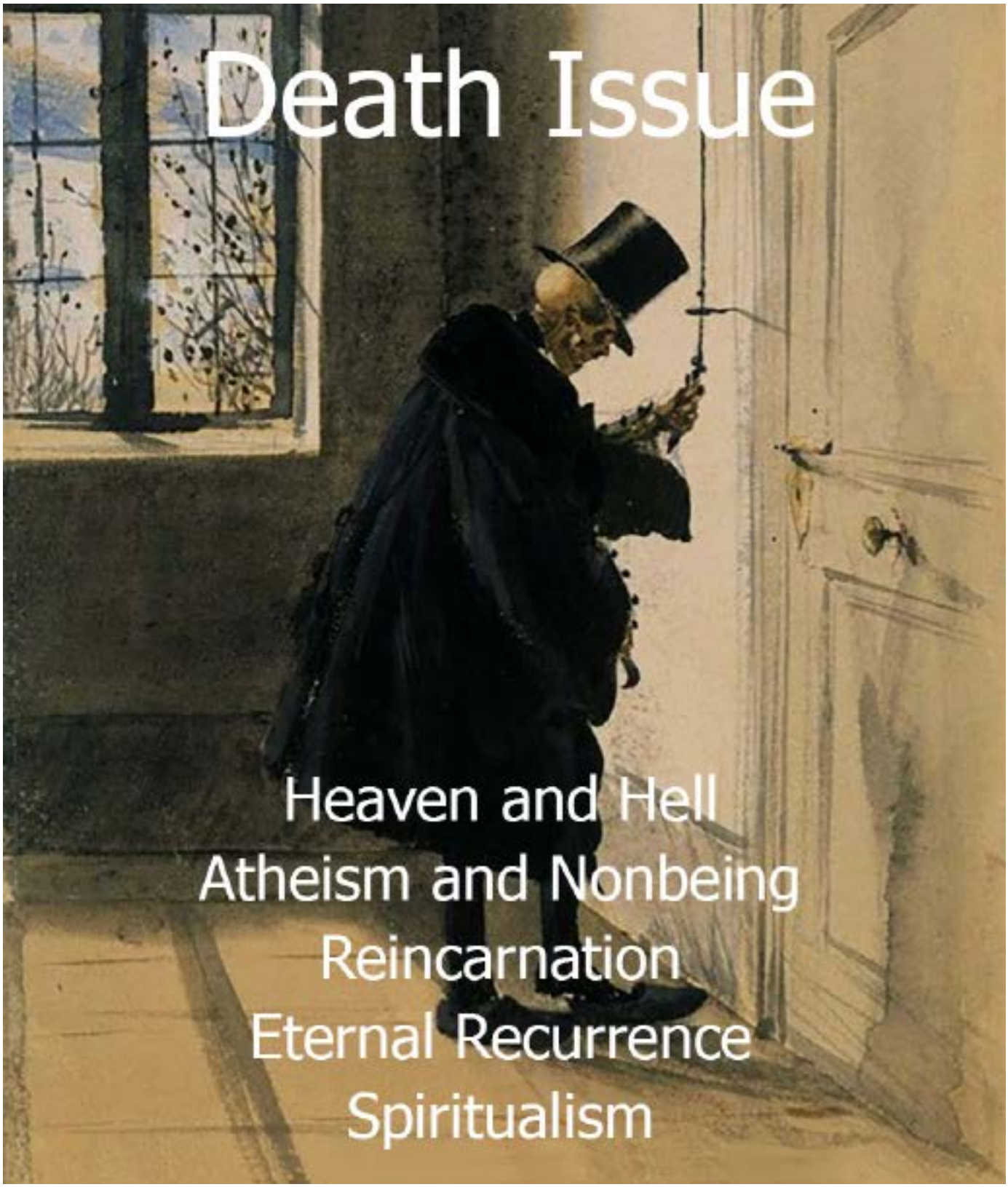
Autumn 2025

In Statu Nascendi

NASCENT STATE

Journal of Intuition

Magazine



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NASCENT STATE Magazine

Death Issue

Cover art: Adolf Menzel, *Death Visitor*, 1844.

From the Editor

This edition of *Nascent State Magazine* looks at the question of the life after death. What we think about the afterlife shapes our lives, quite apart from whether we believe in it, deny it, or leave it unresolved.

Logic deals with the unknown by reducing it down to the level of what is already known. Logic cannot deal with the unknown directly - but intuition can.

One method employed by intuitive thinking is to consider the unknown from different perspectives. In the East, this is called 'anekantavada'. With this in mind, this edition of *Nascent State Magazine* has articles on Heaven and Hell, Atheism, Reincarnation, Eternal Recurrence, and Spiritualism. Each will lay out the case and let the reader decide.

Many take the view that we can know nothing about life after death and leave it to that. And yet sooner or later we all have to face death, so it is better to know what we think about it now, while we can still affect how we live.

Nascent State Magazine is presented in a PDF, free-to-download format; download it and read it at your leisure. For enquiries, contributions and comments, email:

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Heaven and Hell

A traditional view

Domenico di Michelino, *Dante, Florence and The Divine Comedy*, 1465

'If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is - infinite.'

William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

Present day society is largely secular or non-religious. Nonetheless we are all familiar with the traditional view of life after death, which is that after death we will be judged by our maker who will consign us to spend an eternity in either heaven or hell depending on how we have behaved in life. This idea is so embedded in Western culture that even those who reject it are familiar with it.

The idea that we continue to exist after death is central to all the major religions of Europe, including Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Although there are variations between them, each teaches that the soul is immortal, that after death we meet our maker who decides whether we should be sent to heaven or hell, and then we will wait for an eternity until we are finally resurrected in the final judgement.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states it:

'Each man receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death, in a particular judgment that refers his life to Christ: either entrance into the blessedness of heaven through a purification or immediately, or immediate and everlasting damnation.'

The Koran takes the same view:

'Allah has promised the believing men and believing women gardens beneath which rivers flow, wherein they abide eternally, and pleasant dwellings in gardens of perpetual residence.' (*Surah 9:72*)

'And for those who disbelieved in their Lord is the punishment of Hell, and wretched is the destination.' (*Surah 67:6*)

Judaism is more concerned with the covenant between God and the people of Israel than with personal judgement, and so the Old Testament has little to say about the existence of the individual soul after death. Nonetheless, we find this in *Daniel 12:2*:

'Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.'

In each case the statement of belief is backed by an authority, whether it is a Pope, an Imam or a Rabbi, and the backing of an authority means that the teaching must be accepted on faith alone. For this reason it is not possible to question the given teaching without being accused of being an 'apostate', an 'infidel', or a 'mumar', and therefore forfeiting the right to enter heaven as a pure and unsullied soul.

On the nature of paradise, Chapter 22 of the *Book of Revelation* tells us:

'And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month.'

Hieronymus Bosch, The Garden of Earthly Delights, c.1500.

On the nature of hell, the most popular account comes from Dante Alighieri, the fourteenth century Italian poet, and his *Divine Comedy*. Dante divided the afterlife into three parts; Inferno or hell, Purgatorio or purification, and Paradiso or heaven. He depicted Hell as having nine concentric circles, with each circle corresponding to a specific sin. In addition to the seven deadly sins - pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth - he added the two further sins of heresy and treachery.

Because the major Western religions are based on deference to a divinely appointed authority, it follows that to question the authorised view of the afterlife is to risk eternal damnation.

Jan van Eyck, the Last Judgement (detail), c. 1430–40.

This explains the severity of the treatment of heretics in history. The word 'heretic' means 'one who chooses' and indicates that the individual was not willing to submit to the authority of the Church. Those within the Church who persecuted the heretics did so because they believed they were serving God, and not just fighting evil, but in doing so they were vouchsafing their own place in heaven. Members of the Cathar heresy who lived in Beziers in France were treated worse than animals:

Expulsion of the Cathars from Carcassonne, 13th Century

'In 1209, Arnold Aimery exulted to the Pope that the capture of Beziers had been 'miraculous'; and that the crusaders had killed 15,000, 'showing mercy neither to order, nor age nor sex'. Prisoners were mutilated, blinded, dragged at the hooves of horses and used for target practice.'

The same treatment awaited Giordano Bruno, who not only championed the Copernican heliocentric view of the world, but also openly taught the 'cursed' subject of reincarnation. For this he was stripped naked, hung upside down and burnt at the stake in the Field of Flowers in Rome in 1600.

The trial of Giordano Bruno by Ettore Ferrari, 1889.

We now live in a non-religious, or secular, society and few people are willing to accept any teaching or statement by any authority - religious or otherwise - without questioning it. This includes not just the teaching of an afterlife, but also wider issues such as the nature of reality, truth, ethics and morality, and most of all the freedom of the individual to make their own decisions and judgements about such matters.

William Hogarth, *A Rake's Progress*, Tavern Scene, 1732.

The emergence of science as the governing paradigm - in the West at least - means that religion and its influence is in decline. And yet many of the values that inform present day society, including our concept of justice, redemption, conscience, and the nature of evil are drawn from a religious origin. Even now, admitting to being motivated by pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, or sloth are still regarded as, if not a sin, then at least shameful. Whether we are religious or not, the fear that we might somehow be punished for our deeds still haunts us.

Frans Francken, Death and the Merchant, c. 1635.

Nonetheless, blind faith, once an effective tool of the Church to maintain its authority, is now the very reason why so many people feel disenfranchised from religion. If we are to resolve the issue of life after death, an approach based on knowledge rather than blind faith is needed. This is problematic, because death means the expiry of the senses on which present day science is based. To approach the question of life after death we must defer to another means, namely to our own intuitive judgement.

This requires more than a snap judgement based on our existing thinking, but on the consideration of what we do not know directly. Removing the religious element from any such decision still leaves us with a decision largely based on belief. The question is not so much whether it is belief, but whether we trust our own intuitive judgement.

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Atheism

And Nonbeing

Francisco Goya, *The Third of May 1808.*

'God is dead and we have killed him.'
Nietzsche

While many people identify as atheists, few have the certainty of their convictions to reject the possibility of an afterlife outright. It has been said 'scratch an atheist and you'll find an agnostic', and this is particularly true with respect to the issue with the finality of death.

Western Atheism had its source in ancient Greece, notably from the contribution made by one of the earliest proponents of atheism, Democritus. About Democritus we know little, and of what he taught we have only fragments and second-hand accounts. According to Sextus Empiricus he said:

'The gods are only beings made out of atoms, and are not immortal.'

The historian Diogenes Laertius tells us:

'His principal doctrines were these. That atoms and the vacuum were the beginning of the universe; and that everything else existed only in opinion.'

Democritus by Agostino Carracci, c. 1596.

Democritus held the view that material nature was real, and our inner life was no more than its shadow. The atheism outlined by Democritus survived the persecutions and inquisitions of religion - both Galileo and Bacon mentioned him - until it emerged fully at the time of the Renaissance. Rene Descartes, who was a key figure in the scientific revolution, wrote the *Passions of the Soul*, where he expressed much the same view of the inner life:

'The body is like a machine, which, by the mere disposition of its organs, can execute many different motions without the need of any other guidance from the soul.'

The theme of the human being as a machine was further taken up by the French philosopher and physician, Julien Offray de La Mettrie, who wrote:

'Man is a machine. The soul is only a word for the most subtle of all material substances. It is the most delicate of all springs, the most ingenious of all automata.'

Julien Offray de La Mettrie by Georg Schmidt, c. 1748.

In the following century, Alexander Bain provided the theoretical framework for the study of biological neural networks (on which artificial intelligence is based), and in his seminal work *Mind and Body, the theories of their relation*, he employed the same machine-like approach to that which is regarded as the seat of the soul - the mind:

'Every thought, every feeling, every volition, is accompanied by a physical change in the brain.'

Then in the twentieth century, the psychologist B. F. Skinner, who founded the science of behaviourism, stated in his book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity:*

'It is in the nature of scientific progress that the functions of autonomous man be taken over one by one as the role of the environment is better understood. A scientific conception seems demeaning because nothing is eventually left for which autonomous man can take credit.'

B. F. Skinner, c. 1950

It follows that if human beings are no more than machines, then nothing can survive the death of the physical body. There can be no afterlife from the point of view of Atheism. From this perspective, the last few moments of life would result in a sensory shut down, followed by a last minute surge of electrical activity in the brain, and then a release of chemicals throughout the body until finally all activity would fade, and what is referred to as the 'self' would cease to exist.

Some hold the view that Near Death Experiences provide empirical evidence for an afterlife. In this regard, the philosopher and prominent atheist A. J. Ayer had a near death experience of his own. After choking on food, his heart stopped, and for a few minutes he was 'dead'. In an article

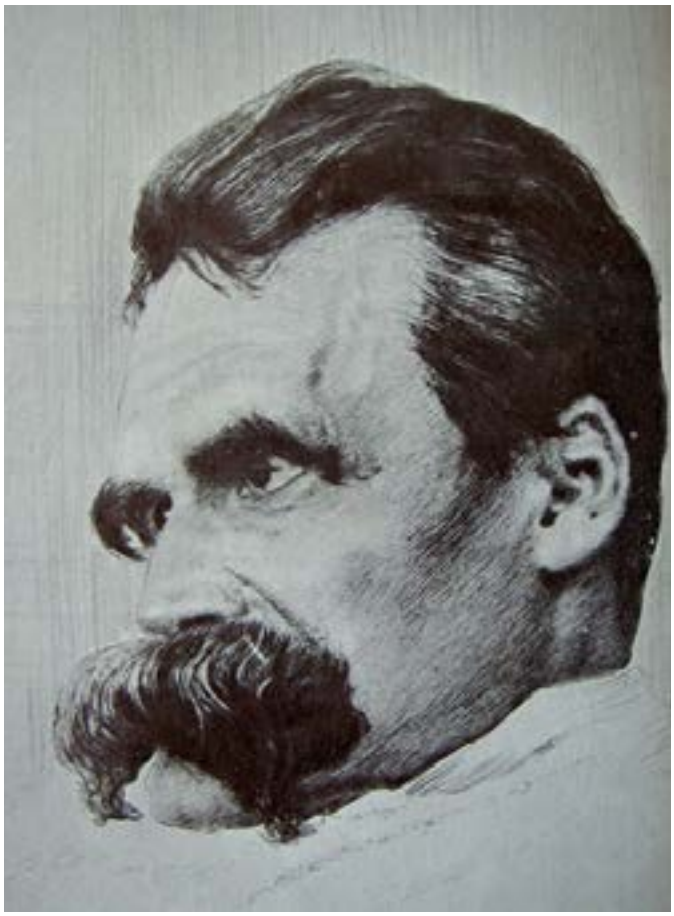
subsequently written for *The Sunday Telegraph, What I Saw When I Was Dead*, he attempted to recount the experience objectively. He wrote that he experienced a bright red light and the feeling that there was a 'master of the universe', or a 'personal being' who was somehow responsible for space and time. He also recalled attempting to cross a river and being frustrated at the first attempt but then succeeding the second time. In spite of this, Ayer remained an atheist. He speculated that his brain, under extreme stress, might have generated such vivid images.

A J Ayer by Geoff A Howard, c. 1980s.

It is interesting to note that, although there can be no afterlife, no judgement, and no heaven or hell from the point of view of atheism, many atheists still retain the ethical and moral values of religion, including the idea of conscience, freedom, and the choice between good and evil. Perhaps this is because, if life has no meaning, then it is better to act out of 'heroic despair', as though life does have meaning.

The one who made the death of all religious values explicit was the nineteenth century philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, who wrote *The Antichrist* to lay out the basis for an atheist morality. In a Godless world, the meek 'turning the other cheek' of Christianity was to be replaced by the 'will to power' of the Superman:

'What is good? - All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man. What is bad? - All that proceeds from weakness.'



Friedrich Nietzsche by Hans Olde, c. before 1900.

Seen from this perspective, the only reason for not committing the most heinous of crimes is the possibility of being caught, followed by social condemnation, prison, or execution. In this light it is perhaps to our benefit that most people remain agnostic on the issue of life after death.

If, on some introspection, we decide we are not atheists but agnostic, it is possible that - unconsciously at least - a part of us knows we do not see the world in its entirety. Life itself can teach us that, however confident we might be our judgement is right, a little further evidence can correct that view. It was Soren Kierkegaard who wrote 'Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.'

The problem with death is its finality; we cannot correct any decision of judgement we have made once we pass away. The part of us that knows this - or perhaps reminds us of this - is the intuitive mind.

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Reincarnation

They will come back, come back again
As long as the red Earth rolls
He never wasted a leaf or a tree
Do you think he would squander souls?
Rudyard Kipling

The Fates by Gottfried Schadow, c. 1790.

Many people assume that reincarnation is an Eastern idea, but this is not so. Plato, regarded as the founder of Western philosophy, included the *Myth of Er* in his important work *The Republic*. The *Myth of Er* recounts the tale of a warrior slain in battle, whose body was put on the funeral pyre but didn't decompose, and when he awoke he recounted his journey to the afterworld. He recalled that, after a period of time in the afterworld, returning souls had to stand before the fates - Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos - and choose a future life.

A further example of reincarnation in Western culture comes from Julius Caesar, who invaded Britain as a Roman general, and wrote about the campaign in *The Gallic Wars*. He stated that the indigenous people, the Gauls, were fearless in battle because they believed in reincarnation, and preferred death to injury:

'They wish to inculcate this as one of their leading tenets, that souls do not become extinct, but pass after death from one body to another, and they think that men by this tenet are in a great degree excited to valor, the fear of death being disregarded.'

The adoption of Christianity by the Roman empire in the fourth century meant that religion now served Rome. The idea of reincarnation was subsequently rejected by the Church because, for example, it meant that Saint Peter might reincarnate as a woman, which would be problematic to say the least. Then in the sixth century, the 2nd Council of Constantinople condemned reincarnation, and cursed anyone who taught it:

'If anyone assert the fabulous pre-existence of souls, and shall assert the monstrous restoration which follows from it: let him be an anathema.'

In spite of this, the teaching of reincarnation continued to exist in Western culture, but now outside the official religion of Rome, through the heresies. The main heresies were Manichaeism, Gnosticism, and Catharism; they all taught reincarnation, and were persecuted for it. Bernard Gui, a Dominican friar who was appointed as Inquisitor by Pope Clement V in 1307, stated in his

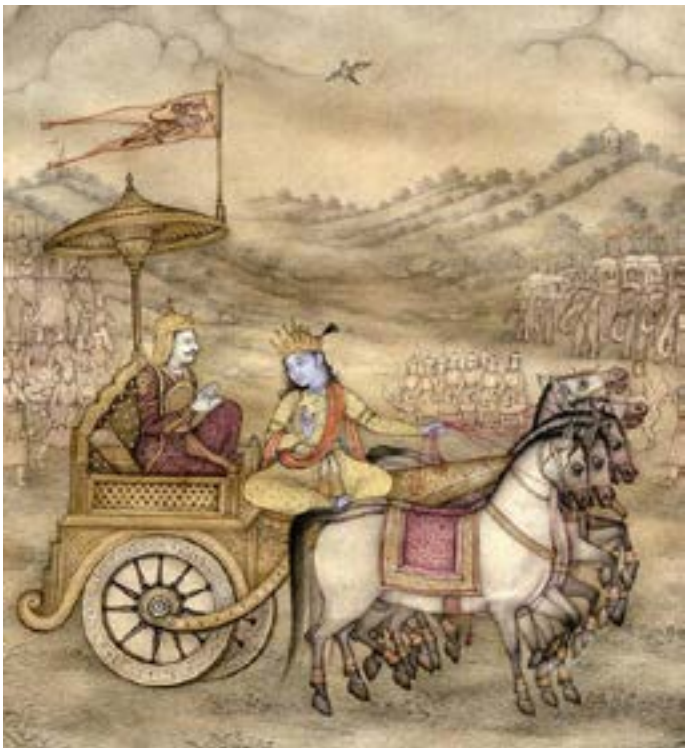
record of the Cathars:

'They also believe that when the soul leaves the human body, it passes into another body, either of a human or of a beast, unless the person shall have died while under their instruction.'

Expulsion of the Cathars from Carcassonne

The persecution of the heretics meant that the teaching of reincarnation in Western culture disappeared from recorded history. It is for this reason that many regard reincarnation as an exclusively Eastern idea.

The teaching of reincarnation does indeed inform the major religions of the East, including Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism.



Krishna instructing Arjuna

While each has its own identity and culture, each is founded on the idea of 'samsara', or repeated earth lives, and the liberation from 'karma', or fate, through 'moksha' or enlightenment. From the *Bhagavad Gita*:

'Death is certain for the born. Rebirth is certain for the dead. You should not grieve for what is unavoidable.'

'Worn-out garments are shed by the body: Worn-out bodies are shed by the dweller within the body. New bodies are donned by the dweller, like garments.'

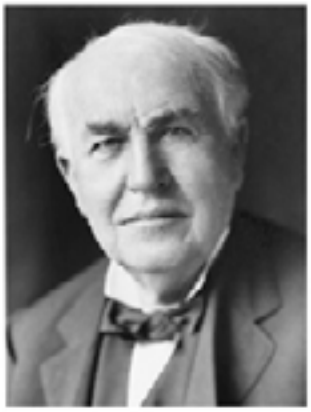
Perhaps the most important difference between the Eastern and Western approaches to the afterlife is that Western religion demands blind faith. In the East, however, it is possible to gain insight into matters beyond the world of the senses through 'prajna' or insight. This is the purpose of Jnana yoga, or the yoga of knowledge.

In Plato's *Myth of Er* it is stated that, depending on past deeds, the length of time between incarnations is a thousand years. The myth - told in the form of an allegory - recounts that returning souls must travel across a desert, from which a burning thirst arises, until they come to the river Lethe, or 'the river of forgetfulness', from which they drink.

Gustove Dore, *Dante and the River of Lethe*, 1880.

The deeper they drink the more they lose all memory of their past life. Then they must stand before the Fates and choose a future life. Those who drink least from the river remember their past lives and choose their future life wisely.

In spite of reincarnation being regarded as an Eastern idea, many Western thinkers have expressed a belief in it. The list of those who have is surprising, and includes Arthur Schopenhauer, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Rudyard Kipling, Henry Ford, Carl Jung, Thomas Edison, Jack London, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, General George S. Patton, Salvador Dalí, and Benjamin Franklin.



Rudyard Kipling and Thomas Edison

Henry Ford and Arthur Schopenhauer

Quite apart from any personal reservations the reader might have about those listed (and there are many more), each of them made serious contributions to the modern era, and each justified being regarded as an original thinker.

Benjamin Franklin wrote his own epitaph:

'The Body of B. Franklin, Printer;
Like the Cover of an old Book,
Its Contents torn out,
And striped of its Lettering and Gilding,
Lies here, Food for Worms.
But the Work shall not be lost:
For it will, as he believed,
Appear once more,
In a new and more perfect Edition,
Corrected and Amended By the Author.'

As with the other views of the afterlife, entertaining the idea of reincarnation is not the same as being convinced of its validity. For the idea to have an impact on our actions, it must become more than just a possibility, but a conviction. Blind faith could not possibly lead to such a conviction, but insight might. This would depend on whether direct experience prompted the subject of reincarnation to become sufficiently important for the individual concerned that it resulted in an intuitive insight into the matter.

Henry Ford, for example, was quite convinced of it. In the *San Francisco Examiner* 26 August 1928, he stated:

'I adopted the theory of Reincarnation when I was twenty six. Religion offered nothing to the point. Even work could not give me complete satisfaction. Work is futile if we cannot utilise the experience we collect in one life in the next. When I discovered Reincarnation it was as if I had found a universal plan I realised that there was a chance to work out my ideas. Time was no longer limited. I was no longer a slave to the hands of the clock. Genius is experience. Some seem to think that it is a gift or talent, but it is the fruit of long experience in many lives. Some are older souls than others, and so they know more. The discovery of Reincarnation put my mind at ease. If you preserve a record of this conversation, write it so that it puts men's minds at ease. I would like to communicate to others the calmness that the long view of life gives to us.'

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Eternal Recurrence

'The things which are now will be repeated.'
Marcus Aurelius

Bill Murray as the television weatherman Phil Connors in Groundhog Day, 1993.

I have been here before, But when or how I cannot tell: I know the grass beyond the door, The sweet keen smell, The sighing sound, the lights around the shore...

Dante Gabriel Rossetti

One of the most popular accounts of eternal recurrence comes from the comedy film *Groundhog Day*. In the film, Phil Connors, a cynical weatherman, finds himself having to live the same day over and over again in the small town of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. At first he thinks it is deja vu, but after endless repetitions he becomes convinced that he is condemned to live the same day over again forever. He finally overcomes his cynical nature when he sees a dying old man, feels compassion for him, and is then released from the endless cycle that keeps him trapped in the small town.

Harold Ramis and Danny Rubin, who wrote *Groundhog Day*, had an interest in Buddhism. The Buddhist teaching of rebirth is more akin to eternal recurrence than the Hindu and Jainist view of reincarnation. From the Buddhist perspective, we are trapped by the wheel of repeated lives until we learn compassion for others and so are released from our egotistical self which is the cause of our karma.

The ideas of reincarnation and recurrence are sometimes mixed, but there is a difference between them. With recurrence we do not reincarnate into a different body and live a different life after death, but are born into the same body and have to live the same life continually over again.

While the idea of living the same life over again might seem absurd, it is partly because our conception of time is linear. We assume that time progresses from the past into the future, rather than to consider the possibility that it is cyclical. It follows that, in order to understand eternal recurrence, we have to consider a more developed view of time.

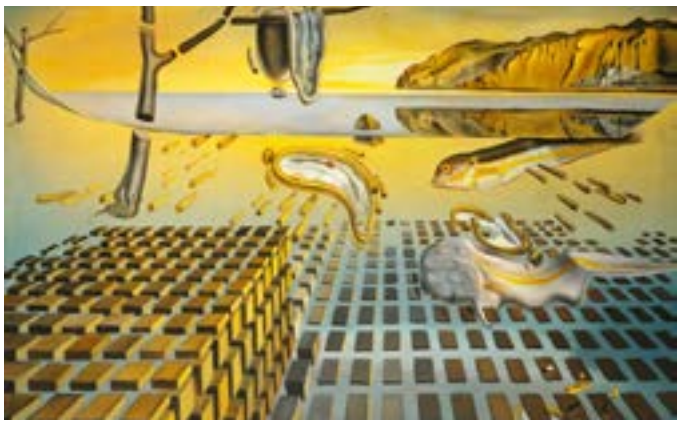
Charles Hinton, the mathematician and great-grandfather of Geoffrey Hinton, regarded time

as the fourth dimension, and as existing equally alongside the three dimensions of space. He wrote *A New Era of Thought* to point out that our common conception of time is an absurdity. Our view of time is like that of a passenger on a train who thinks that the station we have left no longer exists and the one we are heading towards will only be ready on our arrival. Once we abandon this naive view of time we have to rethink our relationship to reality.

Charles Hinton

Hinton inspired the Russian mathematician and thinker P. D. Ouspensky to write the book *Tertium Organum* to lay out the implications of time as the fourth dimension. Ouspensky pointed out that a more developed time-sense would lead us to revise many of our assumptions about our perception of the world. He went on to write the novel *Strange Life of Ivan Osokin*, to illustrate the idea of recurrence. In the novel, Osokin has the opportunity of living his life over again, only to find himself repeating exactly the same mistakes. Ouspensky went on to lay out the idea of recurrence more fully in the book *A New Model of the Universe,* and in particular in the chapter *Eternal Recurrence and the Laws of Manu*, in which he stated:

'The mystery of existence before birth and existence after death, if there is such existence, is the mystery of time. And 'time' guards its secrets better than many people think. In order to approach these mysteries it is necessary first to understand time itself.'



The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory

Salvador Dali, 1954.

Others shared a similar interest in time as a dimension. One such person was the aircraft designer J. W. Dunne, who had a number of experiences of precognitive dreaming.

J. W. Dunne and an early aircraft

On one occasion he dreamt of a volcanic eruption on a French colonial island that killed 4,000 people. A few days later, he read a newspaper article about an eruption on the French colonial island of Martinique, which killed 40,000 people. Multiple experiences of precognitive dreams caused him to write the book An Experiment With Time, in which he suggested that precognition was possible because time has a dimension quite beyond our common experience of the moment.

Another person who questioned the naive view of time was Carl Jung, who co-founded psychoanalysis with Sigmund Freud. Jung co-wrote the book *Synchronicity* with the physicist Wolfgang Pauli to make the case for a more developed view of time and - perhaps more importantly - the way such a view alters our conception of the self. Jung was a psychologist, and what intrigued him was not just the phenomenon known as 'synchronicity', where apparently unconnected events are twinned, but that we are allowed to witness this. For Jung, this meant our common conception of time was naive, and the experience of synchronicity served as a prompt to reconsider it. At the very least, the synchronous twinning of events points to the existence of time as a dimension. Jung stated that his interest in the subject had been prompted by conversations with Albert Einstein:

'It was Einstein who first started me off thinking about a possible relativity of time as well as space, and their psychic conditionality. More than thirty years later this stimulus led to my relation with the physicist Professor W. Pauli and to my thesis of psychic synchronicity.'

Carl Jung

Another who shared an interest in time as the fourth dimension was the playwright, J. B. Priestley, who explored the theme in what have come to be known as his '*Time Plays*', including a *Dangerous Corner (1932), Time and the Conways (1937), and An Inspector Calls (1946).*

The idea of eternal recurrence is not simply that after death we live the same life over and over again, but that our conception of time is limited by the senses and by the thinking we have gleaned from sensory observation. It follows that, if our conception of time changes, what we understand as 'reality' will also change.

It follows that if some aspect of our inner life survives death, then our conception of time will also change, and past, present, and future will no longer exist as independent entities. From this perspective, all discussions of life after death are based on a misconception of time, and what is required is a change of perception. Quoting Ouspensky:

'The fundamental problems of being, that is, the enigmas of birth and death, of coming into existence and of disappearance, never leave man. Whatever he may think about, he is actually thinking of these enigmas or problems. And even when he decides with himself to leave these questions alone, in reality he seizes upon every possibility, even the most remote, and tries once more to understand something in the enigmas which he had recognised to be insoluble.'

P. D. Ouspensky

Time is an enigma, and an enigma tells us that we see the world incompletely. Once we realise this, then we become open to possibilities which previously we might have dismissed as too absurd to consider.

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Spiritualism

'Do not be afraid that I am off my head. All that I can say is that someone positively inspires me...more than this: someone enters me.'
Madame Blavatsky

William James attending a seance, 1895.

The modern Spiritualist movement began with the Fox sisters, Leah, Margaretta, and Kate. The sisters came to public attention by putting on demonstrations of what they claimed were communications with a dead spirit, by means of table 'tapping'. They were later shown to be frauds, and the matter would have ended there if interest in the practice hadn't brought the attention of the wider public to the phenomenon of trance mediumship.

Although trance mediumship emerged in the nineteenth century as a new phenomenon, the practice of communication with disembodied spirits had existed since at least the time of ancient Greece. The 'Pythia', or female oracles - 'frenzied women from whose lips the gods speak' - were consulted in matters of importance by, among others, Croesus, King of Lydia, and by Philip of Macedonia. The practice continued until the seventh century AD, through the Sibylline Oracles. Then the emperor Justinian banished all forms of pagan culture from Roman lands and from that time onwards there are few records of the existence of the oracles and their practice.

It is worth remembering that what is known as recorded history is what was deemed acceptable by the authorities of the day; what occurred in private - particularly if its expression led to persecution - went unrecorded.

So it was that, in the sixteenth century, what appeared as a forgotten practice came back into public view through the publication of the *Daemonologie* by King James I. In his very personal account he stated that most witches were women, and that they had the capacity to glean information by supernatural means. He oversaw the torture and execution of Agnes Sampson, of whom he had accused of witchcraft. After telling her that he thought all witches were 'extreme

liars', she said she wouldn't want the King to think her a liar:

'And thereupon taking his Majesty a little aside, she declared unto him the very words which passed between the Kings Majesty and his Queen at Oslo in Norway the first night of their marriage, with their answers each to other: whereat the Kings Majesty wondered greatly, and swore by the living God, that he believed that all the Devils in hell could not have discovered the same...'

By the time of the nineteenth century, Western society had become sufficiently free of the influence of the Church to allow trance mediumship to re-emerge without fear of being associated with witchcraft. The problem was not now the Church, but the ingrained prejudices of Skeptical materialism. The admittance of fraudulence by the Fox sisters provided easy game for the Skeptics of the day. Charles Bradlaugh, who founded the National Secular Society, was a vocal critic of spiritualism, and his journal, *The National Reformer*, helped expose mediums such as Henry Slade as frauds.

Hypnotic Seance by Richard Bergh, 1887

Others were not so convinced the practice could be dismissed so readily. The Society for Psychical Research was set up to investigate the matter from a disinterested and scientific perspective. Presidents of the Society included the founder of modern psychology, William James, the French philosopher, Henri Bergson, the former Prime Minister, Arthur Balfour, the biologist, Hans Driesch, the chemist and physicist, Sir William Crookes, and the physicist and mathematician, Sir Oliver Lodge. They could not all have been dupes.

Like witches, most trance mediums were women. Two of the most notable were Anna Kingsford and Victoria Woodhull.

Anna Kingsford, c. 1880

Anna Kingsford, the second British woman to qualify as a doctor, was a Buddhist and a vegetarian, and refused to experiment on animals owing to her beliefs.

Victoria Woodhull, c. 1870

Victoria Woodhull, the first woman stock broker

on Wall Street, made enough money to set up her own political party, the Equality Party, and then went on to become the first woman to run for American president. It is difficult to dismiss such idealists as common frauds.

As for the relationship of spiritualism to the afterlife, the writer Allan Kardec, who founded the doctrine known as 'Spiritism', provided the most complete expression of its main tenets in *The Spirits Book*:

'On its re-entrance into the spirit world, the soul again finds there all those whom it has known upon the earth, and all its former existences eventually come back to its memory, with the remembrance of all the good and of all the evil which it has done in them.'

While this shows that spiritualists clearly believe in reincarnation, what marks them out from other belief systems is the assertion that it is possible to communicate with disembodied souls. From Kardec:

'Spirits manifest themselves spontaneously, or in response to evocation. All spirits may be evoked, including those who have animated the most obscure of mortals, as well as those of the most illustrious personages, and whatever the epoch at which they lived...'

Allan Kardec

The difficulty with Spiritualism is much the same as with any other teaching of life after death. For those who are not willing to take its communications on trust - and are equally unwilling to dismiss them out of hand - they inevitably find themselves in a position of agnosticism. Even putting aside the prejudices of materialism, it is impossible to be certain of the validity of what is transmitted owing to its second-hand nature. Such is the desire to resolve the issue of life after death that the influence of the unconscious mind cannot be ruled out.

Indeed, those who accepted there may be more to spiritualism than mere fruadulence - Frank Podmore and Charles Bradlaugh, for example - put the phenomenon down largely to the activity of the unconscious mind. The difficulty with this explanation is that the reality of the unconscious mind must be admitted without defining exactly what it is, and in that way substituting one unknown for another.

It is reasonable to ask, if the spiritual world is as real as the material world, then surely its existence should be open to direct investigation in the same way the world of the senses is open to direct study, and should not be reliant on second-hand accounts from trance mediums. As with the other views of life after death - or not - we are ultimately reliant on our own intuitive judgment, and if we find ourselves unable to decide, what is needed is not more information, but better intuition.