A Level Religious Studies.

Philosophical Problems of Life after Death.

Language Problems.

Linguistic philosophy challenges whether it is meaningful to talk about life after death. *Flew* argued that the concept of life after death was contradictory. Flew compared the phrase, ‘surviving death’, to ‘dead survivors’. To classify the crew of a torpedoed ship into ‘dead’ and ‘survivors’ covers all possibilities and no one can be in both groups. Likewise, ‘surviving death’ – it is self-contradictory and therefore meaningless.

*Schlick* claimed that it was not only conceivable but also imaginable that you could witness your own funeral. Flew challenged this by arguing that if ‘you’ are viewing your own funeral, then what you are witnessing is not ‘you’ but your own body (an empty shell). This is playing the language game, but it does not deny the meaningfulness of life after death. A dualist view would answer both of Flew’s criticisms.

In his work ‘*New Essays in Philosophical Theology’* (1955) Flew argued that words such as ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘her’, ‘Peter’ are person words referring to physical organisms and have meaning only in this context. They indicate actual objects that you can point to, touch, see, hear and talk to. Thus it is not meaningful to apply such words to either an immaterial or spiritual body newly created by God.

A J Ayer in ‘*The Central Questions of Philosophy’* (1976), commented that there is no reason why the meaning of words have to stay exactly the same and that they can only be used in one context.

Paul Bradham in *‘Immortality or Extinction’* (1982) questions whether the personal pronoun ‘I’ is a person word in the same sense as Flew’s examples. He argues that *‘there is a real difference between our subjective experience of our own selfhood and our objective experience of the individuality of others’.* In other words, how we see ourselves from within our own minds is different to how we perceive others from what we can actually see and the evidence we have.

Reported out of body experiences display the concept of selfhood being applied to something other than the body. Many people how claim to have had these experiences describe *themselves* as ‘floating’ above *their own body*.

Despite these language issues this does not mean to say that the concepts being expressed have no reality.

Things to do.

1. Explain why language can be a problem when talking about the possibility of life after death.
2. Why do you think Schlick claimed that it was conceivable that you could witness your own funeral? Explain how you think this could happen.
3. Explain why Flew argued that it was not meaningful to apply words such as ‘you’ and ‘I’ to spiritual or immaterial bodies.
4. How could out of body experiences suggest that the spiritual ‘I’ is the some as the physical ‘I’?

The Problem of Continuity.

Advocates of materialism face a major problem when it comes to the question of life after death, as there is nothing that could continue through death. If nothing continues then in what sense can one say that it is the ‘same’ person after death? The only solution would be for the body to be recreated.

MacKay in ‘*The Clockwork Image’* (1974), draws and analogy with a chalk message written on a chalk board and then erased. Just as the message can be rewritten using chalk, or even spoken, so God could recreate us after death. The criticism is that nothing survives of the original, so how can it be the same? It would be more accurate to refer to it as a replica.

Hick’s ‘Replica’ Theory and Continuity.

Hick acknowledges that there is a problem about continuity but he argues that it is meaningful to call it the same person if someone dies and appears in a new world with the same memories etc. He uses the world ‘replica’ in inverted commas because he uses it in a particular sense – namely that it is not logically possible for the original and the replica to exist at the same time, or for there to be more than one ‘replica’ of the same original. Hick used the following example to explain his point;

*A person dies and reappears in a different world. This can be likened to waking up from sleep. The person then would regard themselves as the same person as the one who had died.*

Hick argues for the idea that a living person ceases to exist in one location and being exactly similar to him in all respects, subsequently comes into existence at another location – namely in the next world. For Hick a person is an indivisible, psycho-physical entity and therefore the body is a necessity.

Response to the ‘Replica’ theory.

Some philosophers have challenged Hick’s conclusion by arguing that there can only be an automatic and unquestionable identification when there is bodily continuity. As soon as this is lost, then it is debateable whether it is correct to call two people the same person. This would raise the further problem of the appropriateness of divine judgement on such a being – how can a person be judged if it is not the same person?

Dualism and Continuity.

As dualism allows for mind and body to be separated, it allows for mental continuity. However it involves isolating the ‘ghost in the machine’, which is not physical and therefore elusive. It has been suggested that Hindus in meditation do not experience God, but their own spirit. However, most see the memory as the key to continuity. The problem with this view is that most people would argue that they are more than the sum total of their memories.

Reincarnation.

Reincarnation involves the movement of the soul (in the sense of the conscious character and memory-bearing self) from body to body, in other words, the ‘I’ that is now conscious, has lived before and will live again in other bodies. There is no guarantee or need to remember past lives. The problem that arises is in deciding in what sense it can be said that we keep our identity and have continuity. Many would respond by saying this is irrelevant as what is important is the development of the soul. However, without memory or bodily continuity, in what sense are we able to say that the reincarnated person is the same person that died 500 years ago? Another problem that arises is exactly who is the person who has been reincarnated? Supposing that this is the third reincarnation. Which of the three people are you? An answer to this might be that you are all three, as the essential part of each individual is the soul and it is that that continues.

Things to do.

1. Explain how Mackay comes to terms with the ‘replica’ theory.
2. What are the problems with MacKay’s analogy?
3. How does Hick argue that continuity is possible?
4. Why is it easier to argue for continuity from a dualist point of view?
5. How might a believer in reincarnation argue that continuity is possible?
6. What are the problems with continuity if reincarnation is to be believed?

Answer the following question with your own thoughts, but think also about the opinion of others. Give reasons for your answers.

* If we have a physical body after death where do we exist after death?

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