

On the Hereafter

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By Peter M.K. Chan

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Ever since the days of Plato, western religious opinion has always been that personal immortality pertains only to the rational parts of the soul. The biological and emotional parts should be allowed to let go with the body. The reason behind this move is not difficult to seek. For one thing, a personal soul without desires and emotions is more likely to be peaceful. For another, nothing but its more divine-like aspects should be allowed to persist into eternity. But the truth of the matter is that in the more sophisticated of religious deliberations, personal immortality with memory has in fact never been thought of as a desirable commodity.

Some, such as the more philosophical of Buddhist schools have always held a more radical point of view. It is that if eventual freedom from all sufferings is to be achieved, to let go of the biological and the emotional is not sufficient. Memory and the identity of self that it entails should also be transcended. The reason is that for as long as memory and self-identity persist, personal ambition would continue to lurk. What that nurtures again would be psychological torment. Thus, if all suffering is really to be overcome, all personal interests and concerns (and thus memories) should also be put to rest. To be able to do that, according to Buddhist thought, is to enter the state of torment-less bliss called nirvana. This is a state of being free not only from the burden old memory, but of any sense of self. It should thus be seen that contrary to popular understanding, nirvana is not a personal kind of place. What that implies is that those who enter would not know who they were. Such a state of being, if I may say so, is quite analogous to the situation of Adam and Eve before they ate the fruit of the 'tree of life'. Before they ate, according to the story, they had no sense of themselves -- being unable to

recognize even their own nakedness.

Of course, early Christianity also had much to say about the burden of our old and depraved selves. You see, one of its unique claims is that the human race does not only inherit the genes of Adam and Eve, but also their original sin (what in fact was the emergence of memory and self-identity, as I have just indicated). Thus, one of its key battle cries is about the renewal of incarnated souls (not unlike the Islamic concept of self-directed jihad). It is believed that this could be brought about by an act of faith as facilitated by Divine grace. Only in this way, or so it is said, could the soul be redeemed or made ready for the kingdom of heaven.

The trouble with such a doctrine is that a couple of subsidiary wrinkles need also to be ironed out. One

is the belief that departed and redeemed souls are not amnesiacs. They need to know who they were for the purpose of final reckoning. The other is the belief that straight entry for such personal souls into heaven would bring with them traces of human depravity unfit for what is also supposed to be a holy kingdom. It is thus a case of 'either-or' but not both. To tackle this problem, some of those who were supposedly in the know were smart enough to propagate the idea that disembodied souls would first be herded into a sort of quarantined center or transit hall; and that it is only after the final judgment that the ones that have really been redeemed would be admitted into heaven. This center or hall is known in Catholic circles as purgatory - a more sanitary sounding kind of place than the classical underworld mentioned in the Apostle Peter's account of where Jesus went before his resurrection.

However, it should be observed that the introduction of purgatory buys only time but not solution. At the end of the day, redeemed souls with old memories and senses of self would still have to be kept in check. The rebellion of Satan or Lucifer in particular should be kept in view. In this connection, I should like to point out that despite other criticisms that one may level against the Apostle Paul on other issues of doctrine, he was at least quite clear-headed (in my view) about this one. It was to his credit to have taken the Genesis pronouncement of 'dust to dust' more seriously than most, and thereby appear to have accepted what it entails. One must take seriously his contention that if there were not going to be any resurrection of bodies of an incorruptible kind, his Christian faith and commitment 'would be in vain'. Why, may I ask, should he be so desperate for an incorruptible body when he already had a redeemed soul? Let me tell you what I think. He seemed to be saying that old memories and personal identities should be allowed to disintegrate with the body. And the bodies of those who are redeemed would be resurrected new and incorruptible for the new heaven and the new earth. He also seemed to be saying that memory and self-identity are in fact on the side of the body (a touch of what I have referred to as minimal dualism if I may add), and that what is new about these incorruptible bodies is that they are ready to begin afresh with new memories of perhaps a more desirable kind.

The trouble of this scenario, I should like to point out, is that the kind of hereafter being envisioned is as good as none. For in the absence of old memories, new bodies or brains, incorruptible or otherwise, would not be able to know who they were or suppose to replace. That renders empty the hope of reuniting with friends and kin. It goes without saying therefore that this Pauline scenario is not very palatable for most. Thus, for purpose of making the hereafter more marketable, some later theoreticians were again to suggest that these incorruptible bodies would in fact be reunited with old souls and memories that have been kept waiting in purgatory. But the trouble of this move is that it is

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taking everything sort of back to square one. I said 'sort of' because the end result might be worse rather than better. Let me explain. Since the new incorruptible bodies and old souls with depraved memories are now both destruction-proof, who is to say what new complications might eventually ensue? Many new dramas of Eden and their aftermath could now be played into eternity. This is why I said that the Apostle Paul was clear-headed about this one. At least, what he envisioned was that in the complete passing away of all that which is old, a new game would be set for incorruptible brains and new memories. That, I suppose, is the only way to erase permanently the quilt of a tormenting soul (for the terrible Roman cruelties he had once personally inflict or helped to inflict on the Christians for instance). Some people, you see, would rather completely forget than to carry their past for an eternity. As you can see therefore, a materialist theory of mind is actually of no real threat to certain religious scenarios when some of their finer prints are taken into account.

For those who are not religiously in the know, let me also point out that this scenario is in fact consistent with the Biblical pronouncements (in the book of Genesis) that "from dust thou art, to dust thou shalt return", and that to die is to return to "the place of one's ancestors" - a polite label for the ancient family graveyard. For those who are religiously in the know, let me also say that anyone that

takes these pronouncements seriously should also accept what they literally entail. It is that there will not be any personal hereafter, and that this is what is meant to be a human creature. What comes into being, in other words, must in the course of time also peters away. The laments of King Solomon (in the book of Ecclesiastics) on the futility of human existence, if I may also point out, are lamentations about this very fundamental fact. Unfortunately, for reason of our human desire for more personal time in a personal hereafter, this basic truth has remained difficult for many to accept. It is distinctive of human nature not to take literally what it does not like. As always, the neighborhood of truth is always less comfortable than the familiar circle of falsehood. This may also explain why religious dualism is still able to attract and 'hypnotize' the immortality crowd.

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