

Life Beyond Death Scientific Perspectives

- Francis P. Xavier¹

Often it is thought that the question of life after death is a matter of religious faith only, scientific and other rational considerations having no say on the question. The author points out that there are scientific considerations to support continued human existence after physical death. Using certain ideas of evolution and other scientific theories, he argues that the created being through the evolutionary process of matter-energy-life-awareness/consciousness-soul has the inner urge and dynamic driving force to reach the ultimate Reality. This unity and harmony with the highest form of Reality can be obtained only in and through the continuation of life in the human being who is the most evolved entity in the universe. Death is nothing but the boundary between life in time and life in eternity. So we should talk not of life after death, rather life beyond death.

- Editor

Introduction

Reality is dynamic – it is also a systematic unity. In the reality that we perceive there is always seeming change; but at the same time there is constancy and continuity. Take, for example, the cycle of the seasons. There is fall; but there is spring as well. During the fall the leaves seemingly die and fall, but in spring there are new leaves. The dynamic reality apparently changes, but we observe a basic continuity. In the same way in our life there seems to be an end of everything when we die. But how much can we be sure that a reality such as consciousness, which has evolved in time, will also end just like that, as time passes through its finiteness? One can raise the question: When a burning candle is blown out, where does the flame go? Does it just disappear into thin air? Is it

extinguished? The flame is dead, but the light, which is indestructible electromagnetic radiation, streams into interstellar space where it keeps going apparently forever.² In the same way, with regard to death, what happens beyond death is not visible.³ But what came into existence in time can exist even beyond death as time becomes eternal. Hence, from a scientific perspective, we can think, not of life *after* death, but of life *beyond* death.⁴ We can search how we might gain insight, through scientific and logical knowledge and perception, into life beyond death. We might surprisingly come to understand that, even without the support of religions and religious scriptures, there is the possibility of life beyond death. This life-beyond-life might have different parameters that need to be understood.

The dynamic structure of reality and the unity of nature are in agreement with the modern scientific theories in which dynamic systems, through the interrelation of its components, make the thing what it is and different from the other. This fact helps us understand the constancy and continuity in the changes that we experience in our everyday life. It is in the context of this dynamism that takes various forms that we experience our incompleteness in the present and perceivable life and hope for the future.

Time and Life

To exist as a human person is to be engaged in a process of becoming. To experience ourselves as becoming is to realize that we are incomplete and not in full possession of our complete reality. In our experience of incompleteness time plays an important role with regard to our understanding about life and the life-beyond. Human transcendence is necessarily a transcendence experienced within time. According to the analysis of Augustine, the human person is the subject of time in a distinctive way. Not only are we in time, but we are also conscious of being in time. Time allows us to think of the past, present, and future, but what we experience is always the present moment of time, the NOW of time. Most of us, when we think of the past, think in terms of events that occurred in the past that have, in one way or other, been part of our life or which might have their impact on our life. However, the past can be thought of in terms of our transcendental origin. When we think this

way, theologically it becomes the doctrine of creation. The question of the future, on the other hand, becomes the doctrine of eschatology, that is, life beyond death.

Without much difficulty we can accept that time, in which our universe, our planetary system, etc., began their evolution, has had a beginning (at creation). But it is progressing forward and it flows into the future transcending temporality and probably merging with eternity.⁵ Time is related to space (Einstein's space-time continuum) since we experience units of time through units of space. When we say that time 'flows' what is implied is not so much the 'movement' of time as our own perception of an individual voyaging through space. Further, living organisms develop an increasingly complex nature due to the upward sweep of evolution as the time arrow progresses in space. This implies that life can cross over the bridge of mortality, going along the cosmic time-scale. This is a pragmatic possibility without violating any known law of physics. Progressive evolution implies ever advancing levels of consciousness even to the level of being freed of time, since when the consciousness is highly evolved, the reality appears as a timeless continuum. And thus one could say that to be free of time is to be free of death.⁶

According to the big bang theory, "Time began with movement, and space was created by the internal trajectory of the expanding mass's internally differentiating parts."⁷ Thus time began, so to say, with matter coming into existence, expressing itself as energy and then life, bringing in consciousness in due course. And the flow of time is continuous from one moment to the next not losing its link with the past and ever establishing a link with the future. This smooth flow of time is an eternal state of affairs.⁸

For logical thought, creation is a singular act or event. In the words of Neville, "Creation could not be a succession of acts because then a prior creation would be required to make them mutually relevant so as to be successive, just as eternal creation is required to provide the context for temporal succession of future, present, and past."⁹ So creation is not just being, but becoming since from matter energy evolves and from energy life, from primordial to complex forms. Life-form becomes

complex in nature as perception, senses and consciousness evolve. All this happens in time and space. Hence, as time merges with eternity, one expects that the consciousness (expressed as life in human beings) crosses over the boundary of the present. Thus human life, as Neville puts it, “is both temporal and eternal, and not one without the other.”¹⁰ Thus life that begins in ‘time-space’ as temporal would become a-temporal, even eternal, at some boundary. At this boundary, taking the individual into consideration, time that has been immanent becomes transcendent. “There is no dichotomy between immanence and transcendence. There is only a distinction and a relationship in the experience of ‘the boundary.’”¹¹ This boundary is where the present temporal life becomes the eternal life-beyond-death.

Death, the End of the Observable

We have seen and observed people dying. Very often we raise the question: What is death? What happens at and beyond death? Biblically speaking, life beyond death is very strongly indicated: “Your dead shall live, together with my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing, you that dwell in dust for...the earth shall cast out the death.”(Is 26:19). “Many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake.”(Dan 12:2). We can notice that both these passages strongly imply the resurrection of the physical body. Physical death is likened to sleep.¹²

What is death? It could be described in various ways. According to Kantonen there are three types of answer: The first is that of biological science and the naturalistic philosophy based on it, according to which life is solely a natural process and death its absolute end. The second is that of idealistic philosophy, according to which the soul has its own life underived from the body, and death is the release of the soul from the body. The third is that of Christian faith, according to which both life and death are defined on the basis of human’s personal relationship to God.¹³

Clinical Death

The declaration of Sydney, adopted by the 22nd World Medical Assembly in August 1968, defines death as ‘a gradual process at the cellular level with tissues varying in their ability to withstand deprivation

of the oxygen supply.’ In the case of brain-damaged patients death can be described as cessation of brain activity, or cardio-respiratory activity, and the time interval may extend to hours or, occasionally, days. Even within medical society certain authorities would argue in favour of multiple kinds of death occurring at different times. These include organismal death, psychic death and vegetative death. Thus death cannot be instantaneously determined under present medical criteria, though legally ‘death’ occurs precisely when life ceases, and it does not occur until the heart-beat stops and respiration ends. It is a staged process which a person goes through.¹⁴

Near-Death Experience

Still a comprehensive and clear definition of death is not easy. Taking death beyond the physical world, Moody attempts two contrasting definitions of death, namely, annihilation of consciousness and passage of the soul or mind into another dimension of reality.¹⁵ He has studied numerous cases of near-death experience and classifies them into three categories:

- i. The experience of persons who were resuscitated after having been thought, adjudged, or pronounced clinically dead by their doctors;
- ii. The experience of persons who, in the course of accidents or severe injury or illness, came very close to physical death; and
- iii. The experience of persons who, as they died, told it to other people who were present. Later, these other people reported the comments on the death experience.¹⁶

Near-death experience, which is also known as out-of-body experience, is due to personal consciousness, and it is an activity accomplished without the body, since in the near-death state sensory capability has ceased. One cannot be conscious externally, because sense transmission has stopped. Physiologically, sensation has become incapacitated. This, according to Geis, indicates that the human being is

immaterial.¹⁷ She/he does not become immaterial at some state of his/her existence, but she/he is immaterial by his/her very humanity.¹⁸ Thus death takes us beyond the physical cessation of bodily function or activities. In this context, one may say that death seems to take us on to another phase of reality, namely, from the physical to the non-physical world, from the temporal to the a-temporal realm.

Is death just a subjective experience? In the realm of observation living implies movement - ability to act and achieve. The sign of active life is growth. Both movement and growth need energy. So far as this creative and formative energy is in some entity, it is considered to be active and alive. When the ability decreases, the potentiality to live is reduced. When it is temporarily absent, one is not vibrant with signs of life. When energy has permanently gone off, one is declared dead. But what happens to the energy that we label 'life' at death? Does the energy just vanish away (like the flame from the extinguished candle)? Does the energy get instantaneously destroyed? Physics states: Energy cannot be created or destroyed, but can be transformed. If death is the cessation of energy, does everything fall apart or does it emerge into another phase of reality? Subjectively speaking, for the individual death is an encounter with reality that leads one into a different phase. It is, according to Lifton, a form of awareness that combines the immediate and the ultimate,¹⁹ that is the temporal and the eternal. It is a fusion of the mortal and the immortal, so to say, into one and the same personality. That fusion is an encounter/confrontation of temporal and material breakdown (of energy) with revitalization on a higher plane of newer (and ever lasting) energy.²⁰

The Separation of Body and Soul

Even the classical concept that at death body and soul get separated needs closer scrutiny. For example, Pieper upholds the hypothesis:

First, that it is not man's body nor his soul which "dies," but man himself; and, second, that the spiritual soul, although profoundly affected by death, connected with the body by its innermost nature and remaining related to it, nevertheless persists indestructibly and maintains itself, remains in being.²¹

The sense of immortality, as expressed by Lifton, could be expressed in five general ways, namely, the biological, the theological, the creative (through ‘works’), the natural, and the special mode of experiential transcendence.²² Immortality of human life could be viewed at three levels as: a) a possibility; b) a probability; and c) a certainty.²³ The physical aspects of the human being, namely the body, might suffer decomposition and disintegration at death, but the consciousness (and its culmination, the soul) continues to be, as consciousness in its structure presents itself as being *of* things, whereas nothing physical so presents itself.²⁴ The premise here is that consciousness is immaterial and the immaterial is indestructible,²⁵ and hence consciousness is a-temporal.

Evolution

Even if we approach death from the point of view of evolution what we see as the evolutionary process ensures survival on a more complex plane of awareness. On the one hand, the origin might be matter (atoms, molecules, etc). But as evolution progresses, the nature of evolved beings, like the stages of rockets soaring high in space, points towards permanence of life that would continue even beyond observable time. Though life begins as a single cell, due to evolution, awareness emerges through complexity in higher forms of life. This gives, eventually in human beings, expression to ‘personality’ creating an identity for each human being. This emerges without losing identity with the origin of matter and at the same time establishing a contact with the higher form of life.²⁶ Thus evolution could be considered as the trajectory of continuation of life, namely, immortal life till all converge into the ONE, immortal and supreme.²⁷ In the concept of Teilhard de Chardin evolution is convergence towards the Omega Point which is expected to merge with the eternal.

Thus death is not gloomy, depicting the end of everything. It is more positive. It opens the window to a newer reality on a higher plane of the continuum of time and life. As life emerges from matter, and as awareness (consciousness) appears along the corridor of time, and as soul, as the higher form of consciousness, makes its way on the line of life, the time-continuum keeps flowing along. And all that is created in time tries to keep up with the dynamic force of evolution.

Beyond Death

Once material objects come into existence, energy as equivalent of matter ($E = mc^2$) is exhibited, and out of energy life emerges. As life form becomes more and more complex, the level of consciousness advances through the noosphere into the realm of the spirit. In the case of human beings, created in the image and likeness of God, the life-breath becomes the soul. However, the life that emerges sometime along the eternal flow of time is expected to go on to the destiny of time, namely, eternity. This continuation of the eternal flow will be after the physical death of the human beings. (The scope of discussion here is not about eternal reward/punishment. It is just about exploring the possibility of life beyond death from scientific and logical perspectives).

Thus it can be seen that the human being has an eternal destiny. Hence human life should be considered in a cosmic perspective which is, along the corridor of time, ever evolving. The human (physical) life, evolving as human personality and then as consciousness finally leads to the spiritual element (soul) and survives and subsists beyond death. Thus a passage beyond the limits of the present life which can be life even beyond death seems possible, and it moves towards the ultimate reality, known as God.²⁸ The origin of matter ('creating power') may never be distinct and differentiated from created being, but rather becomes the dynamic force within for the continuous evolution from the physical into the spiritual (*finitum capax infiniti*). Thus, as Paul affirms, the Creator enters into creation, without confronting it, so that by this permeation all evil (or enemy), including death, will be overcome (I Cor 15:24-28). Thus there emerges a new reality at death. A passage is made from the temporal to the a-temporal in order to merge with the origin of matter itself. Thus the human being is an unfinished system at death.²⁹ Hence the system continues to evolve, of course on a different level, till life merges with the eternal flow of time, in order to conglomerate with the Origin of origins.

Cry for Freedom

This process can also be understood as a cry for freedom from within. In creation there is a struggle for liberation from the bondage of

decay. The tissues constantly change and are transformed into new reality as the old ones decay. Matter in nature, especially in human beings, seems to hunger for the new power of a new reality (in creation). As Moltmann puts it, "The cry for liberty therefore unites humanity and nature in a single hope."³⁰

Thus the spirit or consciousness intercedes with sighs too deep for words (Rom 8:26). "This cry for freedom is universal."³¹ Even the attempts in physics "to construct a world alien to consciousness and in which consciousness is extinguished"³² have not succeeded, especially in the wake of modern physics based on the principle of indeterminacy and the theory of relativity, to suppress the cry of freedom of the spirit from matter.

Moltmann foresees liberation as a five-dimensional reality. According to him, liberation takes place today:

- i. In the struggle for economic justice against the exploitation of man.
- ii. In the struggle for human dignity and human rights against the political oppression of man.
- iii. In the struggle for human solidarity against the alienation of man from man.
- iv. In the struggle for peace with nature against the industrial destruction of the environment.
- v. In the struggle of hope against apathy in asserting the significance of the whole in personal life.³³

He explains further the significance and implication of this universal cry for liberation:

There is no liberation from economic need without political freedom. There is no political freedom without economic justice.... If we add the third dimension of the alienation of man from man through radicalism, nationalism and sexual discrimination, the reciprocal effect of condition on one another expands even more. As long as the alienation of man from man is not overcome, it will be impossible to achieve either economic liberation from hunger

or political liberation from oppression Further, a human society deserving of the name cannot be built without peace with nature Exploited, oppressed and alienated people are often 'a product of their bad conditions.'... There will be neither economic nor political liberation, nor the liberation of nature, without man's conversion from fear and despondency to the faith which Paul Tillich called 'the courage to be,' in defiance of non-being.... This is shown by liberation from panic and apathy, the fear of death and the death instinct.... We only hear the divine cry for freedom when we listen to the universal cry for freedom.³⁴

Ultimately the cry for freedom, on the level of the individual, is liberation from death into eternal peace and harmony. The existence and continuance of life beyond death (known as 'pareschatology') depends on some nonphysical component of the human being which can become immortal.³⁵ Since there is some component in the human being which is vastly greater than the human being,³⁶ which is not merely materialistic or temporal, the cry for freedom is ever growing as the human being grows up reaching its finale at death.

Life Indestructible

When life emerged from inorganic matter via organic cells, it was quasi immortal. Among species lower than human beings death is neither sought after nor feared. It is experienced, just like other phases of life, when the time comes. However, as evolution progresses to the higher forms of the species, the development of the complexity of the brain and the quality of the enlarged neocortex system seems to be accompanied by the dawning of self-awareness. As the human being emerges, the conceptualization of death comes in. By intuition or by instinct there arises an awareness of life even beyond death. This explains, in ancient history, 'rites of passage' at death. The dead were buried with provisions for the life beyond.³⁷ D. F. Jonas remarks: "The practice of wrapping the body in shrouds also echoes the covering of the foetus by membranes, and the cleansing of the body of the dead is a ritualistic equivalent (perhaps magical) of the cleansing of the newborn."³⁸ This is due to the phenomenon, believed by our ancestors, that each one has within him/herself a manikin or animal that dictates his/her activities. This miniature man is the primitive's soul. Lastly the soul is pictured as being a person's

breath (anima). In this context the understanding of life as a whole and of death could be a biological function. Jonas asserts:

Surveying the panorama of the evolution of life and earth in its totality, we may discern a continuum arising in inorganic matter and progressing from the simplest forms to increasing complexity, ultimately achieving self-awareness and a sense of concern about individual destiny. But whatever we hold life to be, a divine gift or an inevitable consequence of the chemical properties of matter, death is in either case an inherent part of it, and indeed essential for its continuation.³⁹

There is something inherent in the human being that directs one's hope towards something beyond the observable present, and there is something in the human being that arrives somewhere after the termination of the course, and therefore persists undestroyed through the events of death and in spite of it. This dynamic force '*within*' inevitably makes possible the indestructibility and imperishability of the '*soul*,' thus leading to '*immortality*'. Thus death is basically a mere transition which scarcely affects the core of our being, and what lies on the other side of death is a '*continuance*' of life. Thus the indestructible inner-self of the human being is immortal and leads to life beyond death.⁴⁰

Possibility of the Resurrection

Pieper further critically analyses the possibility of eternal life with regard to the soul. He writes:

One who is steeped in the empirical knowledge that the living person is a matter of the reciprocal influence of body and soul, and who regards death as the end of the real physical-spiritual man, stands mute and perplexed before the question of how a soul separated from the body is to be imagined as '*existing*' at all, let alone as '*alive*'.⁴¹

This perplexity with regard to the indestructibility of the soul would require the possibility of the resurrection (when the soul would be reunited with the glorified body).⁴²

Conclusion

In the physical world the theory of relativity has created an indelible impact. According to relativity, the velocity of light is very important and it is a demarcation line of moving objects. There are two types of objects in the world. Any object that could start from rest can never exceed the velocity of light, and the particles that have velocity above that of light cannot have velocity less than that of light (and they can never come to rest). Thus the velocity of light makes the bridge, analogically, between the two apparently different worlds. In other words, the velocity of light is the demarcation line between two phases of reality. In a similar way (though not exactly in an identical way) 'death' is the bridge between different phases with regard to the reality of life. From considerations of different angles and phases death is the demarcation point in the 'continuous' life process. Before death, life has the distinction of past, present and future time but after death it is one eternal flow of time. The external observable might change but the inner reality of life does not change in essence.

In death, therefore, life does not come to an end, but the phase of life changes, and it is the reality of dynamic life with a change-over for the better, that is, from temporal life into atemporal or eternal life. Thus death is a quantum leap, not into the dark but into the light of eternal life where the fragments of matter reach a new phase and a 'glorified' reality. Newton's first law of motion says: A moving object keeps on moving unless another force stops it. But there is nothing to stop the flow of life, created in time and space, and hence life keeps flowing even beyond death.

Creation is groaning and longing for unity and harmony. The created being through the evolutionary process of matter-energy-life-awareness/consciousness-soul has the inner urge and inner dynamic driving force to reach the ultimate reality. This unity and harmony with the highest form of Reality can be obtained only in and through the continuation of life in the human being who is the most evolved entity in the universe. This is ensured by life beyond death. Thus death is not an end, but a passage or a bridge into the next phase of evolution, a step towards the Omega Point.

The cry for freedom in a created being finds its fruition in death which is a demarcation and a 'passover' phase between two phases of life, namely, the temporal and the atemporal (eternal). The created matter through the evolution of energy and life reaches the realm of consciousness, with its culmination as soul, and at the death of the physical body it does not vanish from reality but merges with The Consciousness. Thus life which originates from the eternal breath of life continues to exist even after physical death, and one understands, apart from any religious affiliation, that life is eternal, and hence there is life-beyond-death.

Notes

- ¹ Dr. P. Francis Xavier is visiting physicist at Boston College, Boston, USA.
- ² T. A. Kantonen, *Life after Death* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), p. 20.
- ³ D. Cohn-Sherbok and C. Lewis, eds., *Beyond Death* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), p. 5.
- ⁴ Cohn-Sherbok and Lewis, p. 9.
- ⁵ F. P. Xavier, "Eternal Flow of Time," *Indian Theological Studies* 39 (2002).
- ⁶ Reanney, *After Death* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1991), pp. 215-219.
- ⁷ R. C. Neville, *Eternity and Time's Flow* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 5.
- ⁸ Neville, p. 105.
- ⁹ Neville, p. 177.
- ¹⁰ Neville, p. 186.
- ¹¹ J. Moltmann, *The Future of Creation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), p. 1.
- ¹² R. A. Moody, *Life after Life* (Harrisburgh, PA: Stackpole Books, 1976), p. 106.
- ¹³ Kantonen, p. 11.
- ¹⁴ D. J. Horan and D. Mall, *Death, Dying, and Euthanasia* (Frederick, MD: Aletheia Books, 1980), pp. 27-35.
- ¹⁵ Moody, p. 13.
- ¹⁶ Moody, p. 16.

- ¹⁷ Or has an intrinsically immaterial dimension.
- ¹⁸ R. J. Geis, *Personal Existence After Death* (Peru, IL: Sherwood Sugden and Co., 1995), pp. 97-108.
- ¹⁹ R. J. Lifton, *The Broken Connection* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), p. 394.
- ²⁰ Lifton, p. 394.
- ²¹ J. Pieper, *Death and Immortality*, tr. Richard and Clara Winston (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 1969), p. 27f.
- ²² Lifton, p. 18.
- ²³ See Geis, p. 10.
- ²⁴ See Geis, p. 16.
- ²⁵ See Geis, p. 17.
- ²⁶ See B. Shannon, *Immortality in a Temporal World* (London: Vision Press, 1974), p. 172.
- ²⁷ See Shannon, p. 116.
- ²⁸ See Cohn-Sherbok and Lewis, pp. 119-125.
- ²⁹ See Moltmann, pp. 124-126.
- ³⁰ Moltmann, p. 98.
- ³¹ Moltmann, p. 99.
- ³² O. Rank, *Psychology and the Soul*, tr. G.C. Richter and E.J. Lieberman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 112.
- ³³ Moltmann, p. 110.
- ³⁴ Moltmann, pp. 110-114.
- ³⁵ See Cohn-Sherbok and Lewis, p. 139.
- ³⁶ See Cohn-Sherbok and Lewis, p. 182.
- ³⁷ See A. Toynbee and A. Koestler, eds., *Life after Death* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976), pp. 169-173.
- ³⁸ Toynbee and Koestler, p. 176.
- ³⁹ Toynbee and Koestler, p. 180.
- ⁴⁰ See Pieper, pp. 93-105.
- ⁴¹ Pieper, p. 117.
- ⁴² See Pieper, p. 118.