

SURVIVAL AND TIME

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Over the past few years, rising interest in the phenomenon of death, as well as in parapsychology and the occult, has made it intellectually respectable once again to deal seriously with the issue of life-after-death. One aspect of the larger debate which warrants careful exploration is the relationship between survival and time within the context of Christian theology. But a discussion on survival will not prove worthwhile if it is conducted, as too many such discussions are, loosely and informally, without sufficient attention to detail. Both logical and linguistic considerations are very important. And since talk about life-after-death takes many different forms, it is crucial that we distinguish among them.

1. *Views of Survival*

We will begin by clarifying various views of survival which are held (rightly or wrongly, singly or in combination) by professed Christians. The most prominent of such views may be classified under three categories, as follows:

- A. Personal
 - 1. Immortality of the soul
 - 2. Resurrection of the dead
- B. Impersonal
 - 1. Biological
 - 2. Influence
 - 3. Memory
 - 4. Process
- C. Existential

In the first category, immortality and resurrection have in common the fact that they are concerned with personal survival, i.e., the continuation after bodily death of the person (or, at least, the essential part of the person), the subject of experiences.

These two views¹ can be differentiated as follows: Immortality (deriving from Greek antecedents) involves a dualistic human nature whose incorporeal soul/mind is "freed" or "escapes" from its corporeal/physical body at death. Resurrection (a Hebrew heritage) maintains a monistic human nature whose mind-body ceases to exist at death and is later "recreated" (though not necessarily out of the same "stuff"). In the former case, the soul's survival is, so to speak, "automatic" (Christians, however, insist that it is still ordained by God) because while soul and body interact or influence each other, they remain two separate and separable substances. Thus death is conceived as analogous to passing through a door from one room into another. In resurrection, on the other hand, a person's survival is neither automatic nor guaranteed. Death (as non-existence) is the natural end of life, and only a special divine act enables life to begin once more, since God must make over again the same individual (in an appropriate sense of "same"). Both immortality and resurrection stress that at least something of us survives death: our personalities and characters continue, and we are able to have further experiences of some sort.

The four views of survival which I have called "impersonal" are alike in not depicting a person as continuing to have experiences of any kind after death. What those who hold such views have in mind is something else: First, in terms of biological "immortality," what survives is our genetic material (via sperm or ovum) passed on to our offspring. We "live on in our children" (and other descendants). Second, we also "survive" by means of our influence. Whether this influence turns out to be large or small, we do affect other people and indeed the world itself: our lives make some difference! Third, we likewise "live on" in the memories of a few fellow human beings. Now, these three positions are frequently interwoven, as one might expect. And

¹I have attempted an exposition of these two positions along with an analysis of their strengths and weaknesses in my article "Immortality and Resurrection: A Reappraisal," *Religion in Life*, 43 (Autumn 1974): 312-324.

they seem to have an advantage over their counterparts in that we know that they actually occur. Yet the type of survival which they envision is significantly limited vis-a-vis most other options. They are limited in impact and duration as well as by the fact that it is not we ourselves who survive.

The fourth view in my second category, the process view,² is similarly impersonal, though rather more permanent. The concept is that although we do not survive death as experiencing subjects, we do survive in God. "Within the process framework immortality means that my experiences, intentions, feelings, joy, sorrows, goals, and decisions, because they have also been experienced fully by a related and perfect God, are retained as they were forever in the memory of God."³ Our lives, then, along with the values in them, are preserved intact forever. And they will possibly be used by God in his ongoing creative relationship with the world.

The existential view, given as my third major classification, appears in many forms,⁴ but its basic points are fairly standard. This view does not deal with life-after-death in terms of that period of time following our demise; rather it focuses exclusively on the here-and-now. Its advocates insist that eschatological language (in fact, all theological language) is a language of self-understanding and commitment. In other words, for an individual to assert his or her belief in resurrection, immortality, or survival of death is roughly equivalent to asserting his or her openness to life, to confidence and security, and to decision for authentic existence. Perhaps it is not too great an oversimplification to say that the existential understanding is primarily one of personal psychology.

² The best summary and evaluation of this position which I know is to be found in Tyron Inbody, "Process Theology and Personal Survival," *Iiff Review*, 31 (Spring 1974): 31-42.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁴ There are philosophers in this camp like Heidegger, as well as theologians such as Tillich (whose approach is more ontological) and Bultmann (whose approach is more anthropological).

2. "Eternal Life," "Survival," and "Time"

Given the foregoing background information, we can now turn to the question of survival's connection with the concept of time. But the views as presented here do not appear to have suggested anything very problematical or philosophically interesting about that particular issue.⁵ The underlying problem surrounding survival and time can, in my opinion, be best illustrated perhaps by reference to the notion of eternal life.

Use of the Term "Eternal Life"

The Christian idea of eternal life has a long and distinguished history going back to the Bible.⁶ Those who hold it are usually trying to emphasize two points (minimally). First is the presumption that meaningful and self-fulfilling survival does not come either automatically or inevitably as our "right"; i.e., that survival is neither a logical necessity nor a "law of nature." Adherents of eternal life insist that survival depends, instead, entirely upon the will of God. Second is the assumption that life-after-death involves something besides the mere continuance of one's human character and personality for a time after bodily death. This "something more" is the conviction that what really counts is the quality of life rather than its quantity; or, to put this in Christian perspective, eternal life has more to do with our entering into a special relationship with God (available anytime) than with the mere extension of our life through time. Insofar as these two points are concerned, eternal life is compatible with each of the survival views already discussed.

Nontemporal Survival

There is, however, a further point that is not advanced by every exponent of eternal life, but which is truly divisive. This

⁵ I must admit to being perplexed about some of the details and implications of those positions, along with great apprehension over whether the views may be confused or inconsistent.

⁶ We find it in all the gospels—infrequently outside of John, however—and in most of the other NT writings as well.

additional aspect revolves around an attempt to preclude eternal life from continuing on into the hereafter, and springs from the supposition that eternal life lies (in some sense) beyond the limits of time.

Nicholas Berdyaev, e.g., has written: "Eternal life is not a future life but life in the present, life in the depths of an instant of time"⁷ and, more specifically, "There can be no eternity in time."⁸ And George W. Forell, in a popular textbook, echoes the same sentiment:

While the faith in the resurrection has always been a basic part of the Protestant Faith, the state between the death of a person and his resurrection has been widely and inconclusively debated by theologians. *The fundamental problem in all these discussions is the assumption that time is not only a category of the human mind but also a reality in God. The problem disappears, however, if one is prepared to take seriously the scriptural evidence that in God there is no time. . . .*

In line with the biblical witness it appears to be more accurate to assert that death means confrontation with the living God. Thus man is confronted by eternity at the moment of his death and no longer subject to the limitations of human time.⁹

Eternal life is thereby conceived to be nontemporal.

Now, whatever one may think about this sort of language with respect to God (and we will deal with that topic shortly)—i.e., that the concept of time does not apply to Him—one should be cognizant of the fact that this nontemporal view requires abandonment of the traditional Christian understanding of survival; namely, it means giving up the concept that the surviving individual will continue to have experiences. I confess to having great difficulty in grasping the idea of nontemporal survival; and while I can see ways of interpreting it, these seem hardly satisfactory.

⁷ Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 4th ed. (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1954), pp. 261-262.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 252. Author's italics deleted.

⁹ George W. Forell, *The Protestant Faith* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1960), pp. 247-248. Emphasis added.

For instance, one way of interpreting the remarks about non-temporal survival is simply to say that they reflect a basic confusion and inconsistency. Why? We may consider for a moment the oddity of combining Berdyaev's statement quoted earlier ("There can be no eternity in time") with the following comment, also by Berdyaev: "In eternity, in the spiritual world, there goes on a struggle for personality, for the realization of God's idea. Our natural earthly life is but a moment in the process which takes place in the spiritual world."¹⁰ But unless I am very much mistaken, if events (even spiritual ones) occur in succession (as indicated in the last quotation), then they can be ordered in a temporal sequence (in opposition to the first quotation). And if for some reason they cannot be so ordered, then they cannot constitute either a "process" or a "struggle." It might well be that such a spiritual time-series would not coincide with our own, but to claim (as the nontemporalists appear to) that changes occur, though not in time, is just misleading.¹¹

Another possible way of interpreting the suggestion about non-temporal eternal life is to hold that it is not the sort of thing which can take place in time, just as a day of the week is not the sort of thing which can have weight. This may initially sound promising, but I fear that it is not, for we would be making eternal life into something which cannot, by its very nature, be linked with our ordinary concept of a person. Why? Because the only things that can reasonably be called "eternal" in this sense are abstractions—abstractions which are not now, never have been, and never will be in time. Persons, however, obviously are and have been in time; and if they are able to survive death at all, it is hard to imagine how they could possibly be removed from time.

¹⁰ Berdyaev, p. 258.

¹¹ Change, therefore, implies time. Whether time implies change is, fortunately, a question which has no bearing on our immediate problem.

Dynamic versus Static

The language of nontemporal survival makes sense if we understand that it is associated with something such as the existential position (and restricted to that). But if we attempt to move beyond this limited perspective, we will be forced to choose between a static view of survival "beyond" time and a dynamic view of survival "in" time. I am convinced that we cannot have both.

If we opt for a dynamic—i.e., temporal—interpretation of survival (or eternal life), then it is entirely compatible with the notion of personal survival as continuing experiences, process, change, and struggle. If, on the other hand, we accept a static—i.e., nontemporal—interpretation of survival (or eternal life), then it will turn out to be either incompatible with the concept of personal survival (in the previously mentioned sense) or else internally inconsistent.

The situation is simply this: Those who believe in or advocate personal survival must reject the nontemporal (static) interpretation, and conversely, those who accept the nontemporal (static) interpretation must relinquish any hope of personal survival. Experiences after death can occur only if they are in some sense "in" time.

God and Time

Although the problem of God and time is not necessarily identical with the problem of human beings and time, it may be worthwhile to inquire as to why people have wanted to say that in God there is no time. Perhaps along the way we shall discover some hint as to the motives of those who seek to remove us from time as well.

For one thing, we certainly want to hold that God is not circumscribed by our human temporal limitations. He is "everlasting" in a sense and on a level different from what we experience in this world: He has no beginning and no ending. His

existence is independent and necessary, in contrast to the dependent and contingent nature of everything else. The Scriptures are indicative on this:

Before the mountains were brought forth,
 or ever thou hast formed the earth and the world,
 from everlasting to everlasting thou art God.

• • • • •

For a thousand years in thy sight
 are but as yesterday when it is past,
 or as a watch in the night.¹²

God is “timeless” both in comparison with all else (creator versus creation) and in terms of a vast difference in God’s subjective or psychological apprehension of time from our own.

For another thing, and closely related to the first, is the long-standing belief that God created time, and hence cannot really be “in” time. Gen 1 tells how God created the heavens and the earth, sun and stars, light and darkness—in effect, all those features by which people have determined the flow of time. Certainly in this sense God is “beyond” time, though this does not touch every temporal concept.

A third motive for wanting to separate God from time is the close relationship which exists generally between time and change, and, more particularly, between time and the twin processes of growth and decay. Many Christians, I believe, are fearful that placing God in time would inevitably make Him subject to corruption. Why? Because if one regards God as already perfect, it may be difficult to conceive how He could possibly change without becoming less perfect. This same fear appears to be behind various attempts at denying that God has any real involvement with the world, as well as at denying that He responds or reacts to what happens in the world; for to allow such experiences might seem tantamount to God’s changing according to changes in the world (thereby relinquishing absolute

¹² Ps 90:2, 4. Cf. 2 Pet 3:8.

perfection and possibly losing complete control of his own creation).¹³

Of these three motivations for removing God from time, only the last raises a legitimate philosophical issue (since the others are actually making points which are not controversial, though they are doing so by stretching language further than its ordinary applications). This last claim—that relatedness and even change would make God somehow imperfect and “powerless”—is both false and without biblical foundation. Unless one adopts the mathematical model of perfection, i.e., that to be perfect a quality must be extended without limit (to infinity), there is no justification for supposing that either relatedness or change are equivalent to imperfection.¹⁴ Besides, the language of the OT and NT supports the view that God is perfect (in whatever sense that term had meaning for those people), and yet He experiences, responds, and changes. The “timeless” nature of God never breaks loose from its temporal origins in the Bible. And to the degree that this discussion bears on the question of personal survival, much the same can be said.

3. *Conclusion*

As we have noted, there is a rather wide variety of survival concepts—running from the traditional immortality and resurrection through process and social to existential. We have also seen that time becomes a genuine problem only when there is an attempt to join personal survival (thought of as continuing experiences) with nontemporality, an effort often cast in the language of eternal life. Our examination of this problem has shown quite clearly, however, that one cannot literally have personal survival of death coupled with real nontemporality.

¹³ The similarity of such reasoning to that of the ancient Greeks and the ancient Gnostics is, of course, apparent.

¹⁴ The influence of Greek philosophy on later Christian thought is no doubt responsible for the introduction of this mathematical model of perfection.

Paul Tillich, despite his existentialist leanings, was able to perceive the need for keeping personal survival closely tied to time. First, Tillich argued that the language of life-after-death demands self-conscious individualization.¹⁵ Second, he contended that the language of life-after-death requires time and change:

Self-consciousness . . . depends on temporal changes both of the perceiving subject and of the perceived object in the process of self-consciousness. . . . Without time and change in time, subject and object would merge into each other; the same would perceive the same indefinitely. It would be similar to a state of stupor.¹⁶

Truly it is worth the effort to understand how survival and time fit together, and how they do not.

¹⁵ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963): 413-414.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 414.