

Life, Death, Universe

What really matters to us is not what happens to our bodies when we die, but what happens to us. Memory is what makes our lives personal.

Our great difficulty in thinking about death is that we can see it only in others, never in ourselves. The terrible thing about death is not the actual experience, but the feeling of insecurity it instills in us now.

Because all atoms of a given type are identical, it doesn't matter which particular ones happen to temporarily form part of our bodies and brains.

We face a dilemma. We have a strong urge to remain the same, yet the enjoyment of life seems to hinge upon novelty and change.

Everything about us is geared to self-preservation. The prime biological function of the self is to be afraid of death. Only by being so contrived can the self play its crucial survival role. The self can never come to terms with its own extinction. And the self is satisfied by nothing less than the prospect of having continued access to all the memories that define it.

The crucial point to realize is that the death or changing of the self from one moment to the next, and death as we normally understand it, differ only in degree. The only vantage point we have from which to think about death is the current self, and this is the very entity whose principle biological function is to avoid death at all costs.

What else can you be except the feeling of being one brain in the present? Death only marks a limit to what new experiences can arise based on the memory chain to which a brain has access. What death actually involves is a new start. A certain number of memories disappear. And after this very minor loss, the world continues as before, life carries on, a new neural network comes into existence, and as this new support system for the mind develops, a new self begins to emerge and a new narrative, a new "you" comes into being.

Again, it is pointless - literally self defeating - to attempt to understand death while in our typical selfish frame of mind.

To be a person is just to have the feeling of being part of an ongoing story, to experience being within a narrative. But what needs to be appreciated is that **any** narrative will do. While in the midst of one story we naturally don't want that story to end; we dread the approach of the final chapter.

Subjectively, there is never a break in awareness. Death is not the end of life, but rather a point of entry into a new phase of existence, the coming back into being as someone else. Whatever happens, it will happen in the present. And in the present moment there will be a '**you**' with a narrative and a secure feeling of self.

In truth, the basic feeling of being me is much the same for all of us. Our different looking faces, our varied personas conceal the fact that under it all we are pretty much alike and therefore need no great leap of imagination to put ourselves in someone else's place.

Death is like a spring cleaning of the mind, a replacement of body and brain - the opportunity to start again and see the world through a fresh pair of eyes. You will live again, but it will always seem as if it were for the first time. We are eternal participants in a much greater adventure that extends throughout time and space.

The Uncertainty Principle

Whereas on some occasions an electron would act as a tiny speck or bullet of matter, on other occasions it would just as obviously manifest itself as a wave. It could not be claimed in the new quantum picture of the world that particles even truly exist outside of our observations of them. As John Wheeler expressed the central quantum mystery: "Even to observe so minuscule an object as an electron, the measurement changes the state of the electron. The universe will never afterward be the same. To describe what has happened, one has to cross out that old word, 'observer' and put in its place the new word 'participator.' In some strange sense the universe is a participatory universe."

Somehow through the act of observation, subatomic particles are briefly summoned out of a kind of mathematical never-never land of potentiality and possibility into the solid world of tangible things and events. (An observation results in the "collapse" of the wave function to a localized point, a real particle.)

This is a staggering conclusion. Remember that all of the material universe is comprised of subatomic particles. Not one of these particles can be actualized or made real without an observation that collapses the wave function. Thus, the objective world cannot even be said to exist outside of the subjective act of observation. It is the mind that serves as the essential link between mathematical possibility and physical actuality.

Our intervention fragments the continuous wavelike nature of the world into separate, discrete particles. We force a dualistic split from the normal, ongoing state of continuity to a transient state of individualism.

Even more amazing, according to quantum experiments, every component of the universe, down to the level of each individual subatomic particle, is in some peculiar sense immediately aware of what is going on around it. This idea of subatomic particles having an elementary form of consciousness trains credibility to breaking point. There is no existence without the conscious act. Also, everything and every event is meaningful only in how it stands in direct relationship to the rest of the cosmos. Everything and every event in the universe seems to be attached to an all-embracing, quivering web that interconnects it with every other thing and event. Nothing stands apart. Reality has no boundaries.

To Aldous Huxley the brain was actually an impediment, a “reducing valve” that restricted what we would otherwise be able to see.

Near Death Experiences (NDE)

People who have come back from death like experiences have quite a story to tell. But there should not have been any tale to tell. How can a brain in which virtually all neurological activity has ground to a halt be capable of giving rise to an awareness of unprecedented depth and acuity? One explanation is that the unity feeling which is the central mystery of the NDE is not a product of brain activity at all. It results instead from the removal of the brain’s restricting influence. For the first time, the individual is set free to meld again with the whole unbroken field of reality.

The simple materialistic notion that consciousness can continue only so long as there is a brain to support it is becoming increasingly untenable. Quantum mechanics has helped us now know that we are deeply and intrinsically bound up with reality as a whole. Subject and object are one. The only reason we see it differently is that the self puts up artificial barriers and creates the feeling of difference and distance between itself and the rest of nature.

The brain is an organ of thought and memory. It does not give rise to consciousness. Consciousness is the very groundswell of creation. It is a permanent inherent property of the universe. But only when thought and self come to an end, when symbolizing, analyzing, boundary defining and ego-building cease, can genuine unfettered consciousness begin.

The situation in which we find ourselves is this: Nothing is contradictory in the feeling of being apart, existing within an overall system that actually has no parts. The core message of great religious systems is to forget about yourself, to lose yourself, and so, in the process, make contact with the much more important truth of the timeless awareness of the universe. We are nothing less than the universe in dialogue with itself.

We are simply part of an endlessly unfolding process. All of us alive today are really just minor variations of the same person. And standing behind this is the unfragmented consciousness of the universe.

It is that to which we ultimately aspire - the timeless, all-knowing condition in which subject and object, life and death, you and I, God and man are one.

We are already **one** with the universe, *apart* from it

Death is not the end. In the truest sense, **it is the essential prelude** to change and new life. Death is the point where the individual and the cosmos meet, where differences are reconciled, merging effortlessly in a realm beyond words and thought.

Paul Ouzts