



A Fate Worse Than Death

I'm going to die. But "*I*" might not. That's what scares me.

I have no need of nightmares. The terrors come to me even in sunlit hours, in still moments when I am not diverted by the mundane tasks of everyday life. Example after gut-wrenching example comes to me: of disease, accident, neglect, abuse, deprivation, violence, misery. Years ago, in a vain attempt to banish them from my mind, I began making a list of the manifold forms of unspeakable suffering to which living creatures, animals as well as humans, have been subjected. Rarely does a week pass without news of yet another affliction to add to my litany of horrors. Their number and their magnitude overwhelm me.

"Had I a hundred tongues, a hundred lips, a throat of iron, and a chest of brass," wrote Virgil, "I could not tell men's countless sufferings." Truly, the world overflows with pain—real pain. The torments are not the product of my fevered imagination. They *have happened*—somewhere, at some time, to some pitiable creature whom Chance has disfavored or God has forsaken. And this terrifies me.

Well, surely, you say, *I* have no cause for alarm. That the lot and legacy of millions is one of agony, grief, and desperation may warrant my pity or charity. But fear is not justified—I have no reason to expect that these cruelties will be visited upon my life.

Ah, but there's the problem, you see. It's not *this* life that worries me—it's the *next* one.

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When I was a child, on occasion I would wonder at my good fortune in having been born in

the best country in the world at the best time in human history. No one told me this, in so many words. Like my friends and family, I took it for granted. Life in the American Midwest in the late 1950s just was—*obviously*—the best way of life there was, and, at least for ordinary folks, the best there had ever been. Though I attached no particular significance to this proposition, it didn't escape my notice. I was, as I thought then (and as I think even more so now), privileged. I knew it could have been otherwise. There but for the grace of God went I.

I was grateful, too, though equally perplexed, that I had been introduced to the one true religion that would guarantee my eventual rescue from the woes of incarnate existence. Much of the appeal that Christian doctrine held for me in my early years owed to its promise of life—*my* life—after death. Why I found myself in my fortunate body and circumstances may have been an intriguing enigma. But it was less important than the question of what would happen to me when the inevitable finally occurred.

The consoling promise of a Christian heaven soon faded, however. As my secular education proceeded, the foundation of that promise in scripture, habit, and natural human longing first cracked, then crumbled. Though I cannot rule out the possibility of a spiritual life after death—for I cannot *disprove* it—it seems to me far more unlikely than likely. I think this chiefly because I cannot get beyond the evident link between the brain and consciousness. The contention that mind is an epiphenomenon—what physicists call an “emergent property”—distinguishable from but wholly dependent on brain activity, will not loosen its vise-grip on my imagination. Having lost my faith, I am reduced to reasoning my way to reassurance.

Reason leads me, however, not to reassurance, but to trepidation.

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Because no one returns who has crossed the frontier that separates life and death, we can only speculate about the country that lies beyond. Among the many afterlife fantasies our longing spurs us to construct, all stray far from what the facts of biological existence permit us

to infer. In all likelihood, the landscape on the far side of the mortal boundary is utterly featureless, and our “experience” of it, if we can call it that, is total and everlasting oblivion.

There is another possibility, however. Though perhaps less probable than a sentence of absolute nothingness, it is also consistent with the facts. But for me it is far more disturbing. When I die, I will be gone forever. I will never live again. And with my death I will have escaped the danger that I might be compelled to endure one of the endless number and variety of living hells to which sentient beings have been condemned. But alas, “I” may not be so lucky. For if I lived once, when it was merely possible that I would exist, after my death it will be equally possible that “I” will live again.

“I”? Who is this “I”?

If we accept the view that prevails in science today, mind and brain are not two discrete features of the human animal, but rather are complementary descriptions of a single entity. The brain generates an “emergent” property—*mind*—which can be thought of as the brain experiencing the sensory input it receives and the operations it performs on that data.¹ Mind, in other words, is the brain experienced from within—“subjectively.” This internal experiential state has a qualitative “feel” to it that at present no one is able fully to explain. By itself, though, the fact that our subjective experience can’t be accounted for satisfactorily does little to erode the verdict that the body contains no immaterial self—that no “soul” inhabits it, that awareness is nothing but the epiphenomenon the brain naturally, albeit inexplicably, gives rise to. When my brain dies, therefore, my mind will cease all activity, and I will be consigned to a state of permanent and abject insensibility.

Let us grant that the scientific view of mental awareness is correct. Nevertheless, the fact that my brain’s awareness and consciousness (i.e., its awareness that it is aware) arise from the natural operation of the brain does not rule out the conclusion that, although I will never live again, “I” almost certainly *will* live again. Why? Because “I” could be—quite literally—anyone.

¹ In addition to producing awareness, mind contains, receives, generates, and processes beliefs, ideas, emotions, attitudes, sensitivities, dispositions, expectations, memories, aspirations. It includes the ability and readiness to assess, reason, calculate, choose, decide, act, and react. Mind is also conscious—it is aware of its awareness, its content, and its activity.

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There are few things in this world of which I can be reasonably sure. Like René Descartes—the 17th century French mathematician and philosopher—I have little doubt that I exist. It seems equally evident that there was a time when I did not yet exist. I did not exist because my body, with its brain, did not exist. I was mere potential, a hypothetical possibility. But then, thanks to my parents, my potential existence became an actuality. As it happens, in the year of my birth, more than 97 million new human beings came into the world. On the day I was born, more than 250,000 made their debut on the stage of human existence. But only I became the particular embodied subject who bears my name and whose life story is the story of my life. Why I became *that* particular subject—that individual person—is unknowable, except in the true but trivial sense that every newborn can become no one *but* the person who develops in that new body.

When I die, the world will, in a sense, return to the *status quo ante*. Just as was the case before my birth (or, if you prefer, my conception), on the day I draw my last breath there will be hundreds of thousands of possibilities for the advent of other human subjects (and hundreds of thousands more on each day thereafter). Nearly all those possibilities will exhibit the requisite features and potential of *homo sapiens sapiens*. To be sure, none will possess precisely the same characteristics that have uniquely marked me out from the rest of humanity. Nevertheless, this new set of possibilities, though not the same set that prevailed before I was conceived, will be in nearly every relevant respect indistinguishable from those that existed all those years ago, of which mine was just one of many.² If the world will once again offer hundreds of thousands of possibilities for the existence of human beings; and if this new set of possibilities will be in nearly every relevant respect indistinguishable from those that existed

² Although the possibilities will, in a quantitative sense, be identical, qualitatively they will not be, for the environment a new human being will enter at the time of my death—from immediate surroundings to the planet as a whole—will differ substantially from the environment inhabited by other human beings when they were born.

before I was born; then after my death it will be equally possible that “I”—a human being with a unique awareness and subjective experience of life—will live again.

Let me be clear: I do not mean that I—the person who has just died—will live again. I have no grounds whatsoever for believing in the re-embodiment of the consciousness that was uniquely mine when I was alive. By “I,” in short, I do not mean I, Michael Briand; he will be dead and gone, never to live again. Rather, by “I” I mean *some* incarnate experiencer of existence who will look out upon the world from a unique, subjective point of view, just as the experiencer I currently know as myself has done—and “I” will be *that* person. If a unique, embodied awareness and experiencer of existence occurred once, and it was I who turned out to be the locus of that experience, why could this not happen again? Why couldn’t “I” be “I, So-and-so,” just as “I” am now “I, Michael Briand”? What law, or principle, or deity rules out the possibility of being the subject—the “I”—in some other body, in some other place and circumstance not yet realized?

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Who am I? I am an elaborate, complex mental construct assembled out of my interaction, over time, with my body, family, community, society, language, culture, religion, economic system, state of technology, period in history, and natural environment. My (interpreted) experience of these factors form my sense of myself as a unique, individual person situated in a larger context.

But there is something each of us shares in virtue of being human that is not constructed, or at least is minimally constructed. Every normal human body (its brain, specifically) develops within it an experiential awareness of itself, of the world around it, and of its relationship to that world. Let us call this a person’s “I-ness.” My I-ness is that intangible, unlocatable, but almost palpably-real center of my being. It is not thought—that silent talking to ourselves that constitutes most of our mental activity during waking hours. Rather, it is a state of contentless sentience—like that described by those who can achieve a deep meditative state, or perhaps like the experience of a pre-verbal child who in the moment has no needs or desires and is not being stimulated from within or without.

Who I am, then, consists of two elements: my personal identity, which is a mental construct assembled out of the sum total of the various connections my mind makes to the world around me; and my I-ness—the contentless awareness that persists even when my mind blocks out the “content” that those connections provide. The same is true for you and for every other human being.

Clearly, you and I don’t share a personal identity; the “content” of your mind, though it might resemble mine, is hardly identical to the content of *my* mind. But what about our I-ness? Although it’s difficult to achieve in practice, it’s not difficult to imagine blocking out from our awareness everything that contributes to our sense of who we are as unique individuals. If we can imagine subtracting this identifying content from our minds, what’s left is pure experiential awareness. Thus your contentless awareness is exactly the same as mine. To be sure, our respective awareness-states are located at different points in four-dimensional space-time. After all, they’re the product of physically distinct and separate human brains. Because they are, any sensory content being registered by them will differ. My awareness might be fixed on the sun sinking beneath the horizon as I stand at the edge of the western sea, and yours might be directed toward a mountain range beneath a rising sun flooding a desert landscape. But the experiencing—the subjective *feel* of being alive and sensing oneself inside and the world outside—is the same. The *content* of that feel—what we would be aware *of* if we mentally processed what we are looking at—is *not* the same, because the experienced awareness occurs in minds whose substrates are two physically-separate brains. But if I could exchange my awareness *per se* for yours while retaining the content of my awareness, and if you could do the same, we would experience nothing different. My contentless awareness is interchangeable with yours, and vice versa. Detached from their respective contents, they are *identical*.

If, then, my contentless awareness is interchangeable with and identical to yours, it is interchangeable with and identical to that of *any* human being now alive. Indeed, it is interchangeable with and identical to that of any human being who has *ever lived*. That

means—significantly—that the subjective feel of being alive and sensing oneself and the world outside was the same for those unfortunate creatures whose miseries and agonies I once catalogued so compulsively as it has been and is now for me. Only the respective contents of their awareness and mine—the distinctive experiences and the qualitative feel of those experiences—differed.

But if my contentless awareness is interchangeable with and identical to that of any human who has ever lived, then it is interchangeable with and identical to that of any human being who will *ever* live. This is what makes my blood run cold. For if the part of me that is my I-ness is identical to that of any other human being; and if, therefore, the part of me that is my I-ness could be the I-ness of any other human being; then what is to prevent a recurrence of my I-ness *in the future*? Neither logic nor the facts rule it out. Just as before I was born, when I die there will be hundreds of thousands of possibilities for the physically embodied human experience of I-ness.

None of those possibilities, of course, will be realized in a new human being who will experience *my* former I-ness and who will possess *my* former personal identity—the (potential and actual) characteristics that made me unique. Nevertheless, although this new set of possibilities will not be the same set that existed before I was born, it will afford hundreds of thousands of new human beings the same human experience of contentless awareness—of I-ness—that I have had. And because their I-ness will be the same as the I-ness that is presently mine, in an important sense “I”—not “I, Michael Briand,” but some I-ness-bearing human who will be known to himself or herself as “I, So-and-so”—will live “again.”

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It consoles me not at all that, because in this life I have no memory of a previous existence, I will have no recollection of my current life in any future incarnation of I-ness. It terrifies me *now*, in *this* life, to wonder whether, after I die, “I” will awaken to an awareness marked by pain, terror, misery, or suffering of the sort so much of humankind has endured, generation after generation, century after century, millennium after millennium. Moreover, I see no logical

or factual stopping point to repeated incarnation—to life after life after life. I feel doomed to a kind of perversely cruel immortality: an endless succession of embodied I-ness in which I am deprived of both knowledge of my previous incarnations and reassurance with respect to my future ones.

Some theories of reincarnation hold hope for existentially wiggled-out persons like me. Hinduism, for example, like Christianity and Islam (but unlike Judaism and Buddhism), has the merit of offering the believer reassurance that he won't be caught forever on the wheel of perpetual re-embodiment. Once the soul (the I-ness) has had sufficient experience in embodied life to achieve enlightenment, or *moksha*,³ it becomes free, no longer bound to the condition of incarnation. It is a comfort to believe that one can work one's way, through moral striving and self-perfection, to liberation from physical life and to everlasting spiritual joy. Like the Christian heaven, nirvana is a consummation devoutly to be wished.

But wishing is the thinnest of gruels to one who is starved for reassurance. The Hindu idea of reincarnation and ultimate liberation of the soul into eternal, conscious bliss is a lovely theory—aesthetically appealing, morally and psychologically satisfying. Unfortunately, there isn't an iota of evidence to support it.⁴ I-ness is, as best I can determine from the (admittedly meager) evidence currently at our disposal, completely dependent on the activity of a living brain.⁵ If the soul requires embodiment, then the soul—the I-ness—now occupying my body either must die or must find another body to inhabit upon my death. If the latter, sloughing off the particular mortal coil where “I” am currently resident will not save me. “I” will live again, in a different—perhaps horribly different—time, place, and circumstance. After all, “I” landed in

³ Specifically, *moksha* is the ability and willingness to see that the physical world, including the existence of individual human beings, is an illusion (*maya*)—there is only the ineffable unity of Brahman.

⁴ One in three Americans (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/01/new-age-beliefs-common-among-both-religious-and-nonreligious-americans/>). I am not one of them.

⁵ John Searle, a critic of conventional theories of artificial intelligence, argues that only a biological process can produce mental states. Similarly, George Lakoff maintains that thought is tied to the nature of a physical organism in its environment. Finally, unlike the early proponents of artificial intelligence, today's so-called “connectionists” insist that high-level symbolic processing cannot be abstracted from the hardware (e.g., a brain) in which it is carried out. It thus appears that matter alone—and probably only living, carbon-based matter—is capable of accumulating and processing information. If this is true, then when matter becomes disorganized (as when a brain decomposes), phenomena such as consciousness must cease.

this body this time, a fact that “I” did not foresee during any previous incarnation. So why not a different body at some future time? If every body that is, ever was, and ever will be experiences I-ness, then won’t some future body have, not the same *identity* I have, but the same experience of I-ness my body now has? In short, won’t “I” exist once more? Christianity, Hinduism, modern science—all fail me. Any way I look at it, “I” live incarnate—again and again and again.

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If there were any justice in the world, those who lead exemplary lives in their current go-round would be rewarded with a life in the next that is free from pain and suffering. That would require *reincarnation*, though, not the serial incarnation I find more plausible. The latter is more consistent with the fact that each new generation so readily repeats the mistakes made by its predecessors. Our species is ruled still by the passions and habits that governed our hunter forebears two million years ago.

There is every reason to expect, then, that the world “I” will be born into upon concluding this life will closely resemble the present one: a world with numberless possibilities for suffering, allocated in a manner that, as it happens, disfavors the dark-skinned, the female, the meek and timorous, the gentle and delicate, the caring and compassionate. The embodied “I-ness” that follows my current incarnation is unlikely to find itself occupying circumstances that are as nearly as favorable. The number of positions for light-skinned, male, educated, Anglo-European bodies will be limited. I’m far more likely to find “I” am a nonwhite woman living on a couple of dollars a day in a place where natural disasters occur frequently, where health care and education are primitive or nonexistent, and where my freedom to make my own decisions and choose my own life is restricted by custom or law, or both.

What, then, is an anxious soul to do? The reasonable course would be to devote myself to improving the world as quickly and substantially as I can, the better to enhance my chances of landing in circumstances at least as congenial as those I inhabit currently. There is only so much I can do by myself, of course. I need others to join

me. But few of us are disposed to such prudence. We all exhibit “present bias,” preferring immediate rewards to greater gains in the long-term. Worse, we cherish the illusion that escape from misery is possible for any individual who wants it badly enough. In any event, we are not our brothers’ keepers.

It is easy to ignore that one’s own well-being is affected by the conditions in which others live their lives. If the droughts and floods brought on by climate change, the pandemics unleashed by urbanization and international travel, and the inequality exacerbated by unregulated globalized trade and finance aren’t enough to impress upon us that our personal well-being is bound up ever more tightly with that of our fellows, perhaps reflecting on our fate after death can help. If my surmise is correct, every one of us will be born into the future world we are creating today through our collective and individual choices. It is a world in which most of us will find that our situations are—to put it mildly—far less agreeable and advantageous than the ones we have known in this life. The only insurance we can have against the abundant suffering and widespread horrors of the next phase of incarnate existence is what we can accomplish together, in *this* life, to mitigate them.

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I suffer from a kind of existential survivor’s guilt. I cannot understand why fate has favored me above the wretched of the earth. What am I, what have I done, that justifies exemption from the anguish and misery so many lives are heir to? Perhaps what I require is not existential reassurance, but a good therapist. Be that as it may, the questions remain, and they are questions of the most profound and fundamental import: Will “I” awaken from death to a new life, just as “I” once awakened to this one? What world will “I” awaken to? And who will “I” be? What kind of life will “I” lead?

To live, or not to live? That was Hamlet’s question. It is not mine. Demented by the torments of incarnate life, he would have fled. But he hesitates. He ponders the unknown

dreams that might come to him in the sleep of death. They give him pause, puzzle his will. He loses his resolve—better the devil he knows than the devil he doesn't.

To live—and to live again? That is *my* question. I would not flee this life, for the devil I know has proved pleasant enough. Like Hamlet, I dread traveling to the undiscovered country from which no one returns. But unlike him, I have little doubt. In the abundant agonies and miseries of my fellow creatures I have all the evidence I need that the undiscovered country is a dreadful place indeed.