

A Question (and Two Sub-Questions) about the Afterlife

I am a confirmed atheist, a diehard historical materialist who believes that after I die and the complex chemical bonds that make up my cells unwind and the pathways between my cerebral neurons dissolve, that'll be the end of me.

Nonetheless, I am fascinated by the idea of an afterlife, a fantasy that so many of my fellow mortals seem to believe in. Of course I can understand why one would cherish a belief in an afterlife. After all, we work so hard to stay alive while we are alive; it would be a shame if all of that hard work were to go for naught if there were no life to live after our lives were over. And then there is grief. When we lose a loved one, it is a great balm to think that Grandpa or Mamma is up in the sky, lovingly looking down at us.

[But, as a life-long student, I've always felt that an eternal afterlife would be a living hell for me. In my mortal coil, I've struggled to learn a smattering of Latin and ancient Greek as well as the rudiments of human prehistory and history, and I've managed to read (mostly in translation) only a handful of the great works of human literature. What a burden it would be if time were to stretch out endlessly for me: I would feel compelled to learn every language that ever existed and read every book ever written, not to mention gaining at least some competency in biology, chemistry, physics, and mathematics. And don't get me started on music: oh, how many instruments to learn how to play or classical scores to master!]

But, leaving aside my personal animosity about an eternal afterlife, and foregoing any consideration of non-Western theological traditions such as the Buddhist concept of Saṃsāra, I want to pose a few questions I have about the afterlife as it is commonly conceived of in Western culture:

1. When a soul goes to heaven (or hell), does it share in the omniscience of God, or does it know only what it managed to learn while in its earthly body?

If the former—that somehow one's soul merges with the Divinity in heaven—that would seem to abrogate the idea of a continuity of one's individual existence in the afterlife. No Grandpa or Mamma up there. And for those blighted souls—as shall be my fate, no doubt—who end up in hell, eternal punishment without the continuance of individual consciousness doesn't really sound like much of a punishment at all.

If the latter—that is, that one's life in heaven is somehow a continuation of one's life on earth—then that raises a series of other questions:

1a. How will my afterlife soul be able to communicate with other souls?

My Spanish is good enough to carry on rudimentary conversations with people from Spain or Latin America, but how will my afterlife soul talk to a Chinese, a Russian, a Sudanese, or a Zimbabwean soul? And what if my afterlife soul wanted to trace his family tree by talking directly to all of his ancestors? I'd do fine going back to my Scotch-Irish predecessors who emigrated to the United States in the mid-19th century, but what will I do when I meet their Old-English ancestors, or, going even further back, when I tried to communicate with ancestors who spoke only Celtic or Latin (okay, I could probably remember how to conjugate a few Latin verbs!). And how could we talk to our Paleolithic Cro-Magnon, or Neanderthal, or Denisovan ancestors? (And even if we could communicate with our even more distant *homo erectus* or *homo habilis* ancestors, would we have anything to say to them?)

Okay, I'll grant the supposition that all souls in heaven can somehow communicate with each other, as if equipped with a Star-Trekesque universal translator or an updated version of Google Translate. But this still begs another question:

1b. Do souls in heaven—Grandpa or Mamma looking down on us—know what has happened on earth after they died?

Assuming, again, that souls do not share in God's omniscience, how could they, post-mortem, learn about what has been going on on earth? Do they just look down on loved ones who are still alive? Do they have access to television? (And if so, are there factions of souls in heaven who only watch CNN, or Fox News, or Al Jazeera?) Do souls in heaven have the internet? Can they see our Facebook posts or our Instagram photos, or read our Tweets?

Assuming, as would seem to be the case, that heaven is a closed system, and that those harp-strumming angels remain ignorant of what has happened on earth since they died, imagine the scene when a new soul passes through the pearly gates. Would it be greeted by throngs of pre-departed souls clamoring to know if women ever got the right to vote, if the Red Sox ever managed to win a World Series, if Kanye West and Kim Kardashian are still together?

The image of throngs of souls gathering when a newcomer arrives in the land of the dead is nothing new and has a long history in Western literature. Homer's Odysseus, instructed by Circe, went to the borders of Hades, dug a trench, and offered a blood sacrifice of sheep to elicit the shade of Tiresias, the prophet of Thebes:

I took the victims, over the trench I cut their throats
and the dark blood flowed in— and up out of Erebus they came,
flocking towards me now, the ghosts of the dead and gone . . .
Brides and unwed youths and old men who had suffered much
and girls with their tender hearts freshly scarred by sorrow
and great armies of battle dead, stabbed by bronze spears,
men of war still wrapped in bloody armor—thousands
swarming around the trench from every side—
unearthly cries—blanching terror gripped me!

(Homer, *Odyssey*, Book XI, ll. 39–48, translation Robert Fagles)

In the Homeric Hades, everyone—from a noble hero to an obscure peasant—lives a shadowy afterlife. As the shade of the great Achilles put it:

“No winning words about death to *me*, shining Odysseus!
By god, I’d rather slave on earth for another man—
some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive—
than rule down here over all the breathless dead.”

(Homer, *Odyssey*, Book XI, ll. 555–558, translation Robert Fagles)

And is shown by the fact that both the ghosts of Agamemnon and Achilles ask Odysseus for news of their sons, it would seem that souls in Hades do not know about what has happened on earth after they had died. One exception is Odysseus’ mother, who tells her son that Odysseus’ wife, the paragon of fidelity Penelope, is still being faithful to him even after he has been off fighting the Trojans for ten years and trying to make his way back to Ithaca for another ten years. And then there is the seer Tiresias, who in death, like in life, can foretell the future. Tiresias warns Odysseus about not killing the cattle of Helios and about the men who are paying suit to Penelope in his Ithaca palace; Tiresias ends his speech by telling Odysseus what he must do to assuage Poseidon’s wrath before Odysseus dies.

Inspired by this episode, Vergil, in his epic poem written eight centuries after the *Odyssey* was composed, has his hero Aeneas, accompanied by the Sibyl and protected by the Golden Bough, descend into Tartarus. On the banks of the Styx, Aeneas encounters souls waiting to be ferried across by Charon:

A huge throng of the dead came streaming toward the banks,
mothers and grown men and ghost of great-souled heroes,
their bodies stripped of life, and boys and unwed girls
and sons laid on the pyre before their parents’ eyes.
As thick as leaves in autumn woods at the first frost
that slip and float to earth, or dense as flocks of birds
that wing from the heaving sea to shore when winter’s chill
drives them over the waves to landfalls drenched in sunlight.

(Vergil, *Aeneid*, Book VI, ll. 348–355, translation Robert Fagles)

Like Odysseus, Aeneas was seeking advice about his future. He finds it when he meets his deceased father Anchises, who tells him that he will sire an Italian son who will establish a dynasty that will rule from Romulus to Caesar Augustus. But, unlike the Homeric episode, no souls approach Aeneas to ask about their children. And unlike Homer's Hades, how one lived one's life matters in Vergil's vision of the afterlife: Vergil's Hades has a Tartarus where punishments fit for the crimes are meted out to those souls who lived evil lives, and an Elysian field where the good (including poets like Vergil!) can relax, play sports, and dance on golden sands.

In Western culture, the *locus classicus* for a description of the afterlife is Dante's *Divine Comedy*, written between 1308 and 1320. Unlike its Classical models, the *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*, the protagonist of this foundational Italian epic poem—the poet Dante himself—does not travel into the lands of the deceased seeking advice on how to return home or find a homeland after decades of being away fighting a foreign war. Dante, rather, is adrift in spiritual confusion, the poem beginning with Dante being literally and metaphorically lost in a dark woods. Led by the poet Virgil, Dante traverses down the nine rings of the *Inferno*, after which, led by his courtly love Beatrice, Dante ascends through the island of *Purgatorio* and the nine celestial spheres of *Paradiso*. Through his odyssey, Dante is presented with a vision of the ideal life: a rejection of sin, penitence, and the soul's ascent to God.

While, with its late Medieval Christian worldview, the *Divine Comedy* is fundamentally different in spirit from its Classical antecedents, echoes of the Greek and Roman concept of the afterlife do appear in Dante's epic. When Dante's Virgil first leads him through the “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here” Gates of Hell, they encounter a throng of souls who, because in life they cared only for themselves and gave no thought to their fellow humans, were barred from both heaven and hell:

There sighs, complaints, and ululations loud
Resounded through the air without a star,
Whence I, at the beginning, wept thereat.

Languages diverse, horrible dialects,
Accents of anger, words of agony,
And voices high and hoarse, with sound of hands,

Made up a tumult that goes whirling on
For ever in that air for ever black,
Even as the sand doth, when the whirlwind breathes.

(Dante, *Inferno*, Canto III, translation Henry Wadsworth Longfellow)

Here, like in my sub-question **1a**, Dante is confronted with souls who speak “languages diverse, horrible dialects.”

Later, when Beatrice first brings Dante up to Heaven, a throng of souls surround him, offering their radiance to the newcomer who has arrived “to multiply our loves”:

As in a quiet and clear lake the fish,
If aught approach them from without, do draw
Towards it, deeming it their food; so drew
Full more than thousand splendours towards us,
And in each one was heard: "Lo! one arriv'd
To multiply our loves!" and as each came
The shadow, streaming forth effulgence new,
Witness'd augmented joy. Here, reader! think,
If thou didst miss the sequel of my tale,
To know the rest how sorely thou wouldst crave;
And thou shalt see what vehement desire
Possess'd me, as soon as these had met my view,
To know their state. "O born in happy hour!
Thou to whom grace vouchsafes, or ere thy close
Of fleshly warfare, to behold the thrones
Of that eternal triumph, know to us
The light communicated, which through heaven
Expatiates without bound. Therefore, if aught
Thou of our beams wouldst borrow for thine aid,
Spare not; and of our radiance take thy fill."

(Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto V, translation the Rev. H. F. Cary)

But, unlike my **1b** question, these souls who greet Dante in heaven do not query him about recent events on earth. And, being suffused with God’s radiance, the degree to which these souls retain an earthly individuality is not clear.

Dante does encounter many real individual souls in heaven. He sees, among others, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Saint Peter, Saint John, and King Solomon; he listens to Charles Martel discuss the role of love in the proper functioning of society and to the troubadour Folquet de Marseilles’ complaints about how money is corrupting the Church; and he discusses monotheism with the monk Peter Damien. Like Aeneas in the real Vergil’s epic, Dante also meets an ancestor, his great-great-grandfather Cacciaguida, who, being able to see into the future like Tiresias in the *Aeneid*, warns Dante that he will be exiled from Florence (an event that had already happened by the time that Dante had finished his epic, but before the 1300 setting of the poem).

Okay, I know that this deep dive into the classics really doesn’t help to answer my facetious questions, other than to point out the universality of speculations about the afterlife,

something that is documented as early as Tablet XII of *Gilgamesh* (a late, 13th—10th-century B.C.E., addition to the 18th-century B.C.E. Sumerian epic poem), or in the 2nd-century B.C.E. *Bhagavad Gita*. One can be pretty sure, however, that people have wondered about what happens to them after they die ever since humans have had the power of thought.

And I know that my facetious questions may be somewhat offensive to my friends and family members who are people of faith. And I am sure that, within the vast tracts of theological literature of which I am ignorant, better minds than mine have seriously addressed these questions. Still, as an atheist and not an agnostic, I am also a person of faith, albeit faith in science and not in Scripture. And, in a spirit of catholic universalism, I hope that we can all smile at my silly questions.