

# Fragments of a Dialog on Death

Robert L. Latta

[Abstract]

Contrary to widespread belief, even if death is the end it entails no loss for the one who dies, and contrary to all-but-universal belief, though there is of course such a thing as point of view, there is no such thing as subjectivity. The objective picture of one's own death, or anyone else's, is the true picture.

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The time is the mid-term future. The interlocutors are a man of that time, who assumes the role of teacher, and a man from the present.

But is consciousness something I can see, with my eyes?

Of course it is. You can see it on the screen of a brain scanner. It appears as neural activity, because that's what it is, just as a stone appears as a stone because that's what it is. If it occurs in your own brain, then your brain can respond to it directly, too. But that's neither here nor there. You can see it with your eyes, and your brain can respond to it directly. It's a pain, if that's what it is—that's how you know it when your brain responds to it directly. And it's a neural event in your brain—that's how you know it when you see it, and that, of course, is what it really is.

But I know what a pain is without looking at it!

You do? All right, tell me, what is a pain?

Well, it's a pain.

A pain is a pain. That's not very informative.

All right, a pain is a negative feeling.

What is a feeling? And what do you mean by negative?

Well, a feeling is ... a feeling. I don't know. I think I'd better give up.

You're wise to give up. In order to understand consciousness, you must look at it. Literally look at it, with the eyes in your head.

Let me summarize. If you are to form an adequate concept of consciousness, you must look at it, just as you must look at hail to form an adequate concept of it. But when your brain responds directly to your own consciousness, you do not look at it. So you can form an adequate concept of consciousness only by observing it on the screen of a brain scanner and examining the brain, not by sitting in an armchair and thinking about your inner life.

You can, however, form an inadequate concept! Recall your own time. How did most people think of an experience—a feeling or a memory, for example?

They thought of it as something immaterial, as spirit, not body, and a little mysterious.

Why only a little mysterious?

Because it's nothing unusual to have an experience, unless it's strange, or especially joyous or painful.

And what does "immaterial" mean, or "spirit, not body"?

Nonphysical.

And why did they think that an experience is nonphysical?

That's easy. If you feel a pain, for example, it's real, no doubt about it. If it weren't real, you wouldn't feel it.

Is that correct?

Yes, it is. An experience is as real as a granite boulder. But in my time it was natural to think that it's impossible to see or touch a feeling, a memory, or the like, and it follows that it's something nonphysical. If you can see or touch something, it's physical, and if you can't see it or touch it, but it's real, then it's nonphysical.

That's right, that's the way most people thought. But were they right?

No, not at all, if you've taught me correctly. You can indeed see an experience, on the screen of a brain scanner, even if you can't touch it with your fingers.

But how is it that you know it occurs, without seeing it?

That's just it. You know it occurs because it's a neural event right there in your brain, and not a flash of lightning in the distance or something of that sort. But a neural event is physical.

Yes, you've learned well. And the bottom line is this: your consciousness is neural activity in your brain, and to understand it, you must think of it as neural activity, not as

some spooky, immaterial stuff.

There's one thing I still don't understand.

Yes?

What accounts for the vivid character of my experiences?

What do you mean, the vivid character?

Well, when I feel a sharp pain, or hear thunder, or see green branches against a blue sky in bright sunlight, it's so vivid. I don't know how else to say it. And when I'm deeply moved by love or music or something else, it's all so real.

But when you go to the ear doctor and take a hearing test, some of the sounds are extremely faint. Not vivid at all. You're not even sure that you hear anything. You don't really mean vividness.

No, I guess not.

You mean that your experience is experience. In a sense, experience, or consciousness, is conscious. In other words, consciousness is consciousness. Not very informative! You've fallen into a trap.

I have?

Yes. You're thinking of consciousness in the usual way again, as something subjective, immaterial, and vaguely mysterious: my feelings, my memories, my thoughts, my inner life as it is for me—that's the sort of stuff that makes up consciousness. But you can't get away with that. You'll just get confused and spout nonsense. That concept of consciousness is based on the brain's direct response to the neural activity in your brain that constitutes your consciousness, that is your consciousness, and for theoretical purposes, it's a bum concept. Totally bum and useless. Worse than useless. It'll get you nowhere. If you want to understand consciousness, truly to understand it, you must drop that concept like a bad habit.

Sorry, I have a number of bad habits.

But in spite of your bad habits, you've hinted at a genuine question, an important one. What is it that makes consciousness what it is? What is it that makes it consciousness? How does consciousness differ from other things, which aren't consciousness? How does it differ from lightning? And how does it differ from neural activity that doesn't constitute consciousness? A lot of that occurs in the human brain. But there's only one way to answer that question, and that is to examine the neural activity that constitutes consciousness. That neural activity is consciousness. It's not the basis of consciousness, and it's not a correlate of consciousness. It is consciousness. If you want to know how

water differs from other things, what do you do?

You examine it carefully.

Of course. So, if you want to know how consciousness differs from other things, what do you do?

You examine it carefully.

And what does that mean?

You examine neural activity in the brain.

Just any neural activity?

No, you examine that neural activity that constitutes consciousness.

You've got it.

But now I'm perplexed again.

I don't blame you. Consciousness is perplexing. But you've got to get it right if you want to know the meaning of death.

I have experiences, don't I? They're my experiences, aren't they? I tell the dentist, "I have a toothache," and it's true, isn't it? I really do have a toothache. I'm not fibbing to the dentist. I feel a delicious chill running down my spine. I really do feel it. I enjoy a taste of ice cream. I do truly enjoy it. The taste is an experience, and I enjoy it. And I suffer sadness. Sadness is an experience, and I suffer it.

So what's the difficulty?

Well, I don't see how I can have, or feel, enjoy, or suffer, a neural event in my brain. It doesn't make any sense.

You tell the dentist that you have a toothache.

Yes.

You say, "I have a toothache."

Yes.

What does that mean?

Well, it means two things, I guess. It means that a toothache happens, and that it's mine, not yours and not his or hers.

And what does that mean, "It's mine"?

It means that I feel it.

And what does that mean, "I feel it"?

It means that it's mine.

Now you're going around in circles. "It's mine" means "I feel it," and "I feel it" means "It's mine."

How confusing!

Let's try to overcome the confusion. "I have a pen." It's pretty clear what that means. There's a pen in my pocket, or on my desk, or somewhere else nearby, at hand, ready for use. "I have an apartment." That's a little harder to explain clearly, but only a little. I have the right to use a certain apartment, because I've signed a contract and I always pay the rent on time. "I have a toothache." That's much more difficult to explain. It doesn't mean that there's a toothache at hand, ready for use, or that I have the right to use a certain toothache.

No, certainly not.

So what does it mean?

Before I thought about it, I thought I knew, but I see I don't. I have no idea.

The beginning of wisdom! Let me explain, then. I'll tell you a little story.

One day long ago, very long ago, in the stone age, two hunters were making their way through the forest. It was summer. Grog remarked, "Today heat." Mog replied, "Today heat." There was a meeting of the minds, as you would put it. Later in the day, Grog came down with a toothache. He remarked, "Today toothache." But Mog didn't understand. He didn't have a toothache. Only Grog had one. There was no meeting of the minds, and Mog replied, "Say what?" Grog was taken aback. If Mog understood "Today heat," then why didn't he understand "Today toothache"? But he replied simply "Good man forget," and thought deeply about this problem. He wanted to communicate successfully. He thought for many days, and recovered from his toothache, and then he found the answer. If today is heat for Grog, then it's heat for Grog and for Mog, for both of them. But if today is toothache for Grog, it might be toothache for Mog, and it might not — probably not. So he invented a new rule of speech: instead of saying "Today toothache," say "Grog toothache." He taught this new way of speaking to Mog. One day Mog remarked, "Mog toothache," and Grog understood, and was able to help with medicinal bark. Later Grog, who was a genius at language, made a further improvement: instead of saying "Grog toothache," say "I toothache." The point is that the objective way of speaking, "Today toothache," didn't work, whereas the subjective way, "I toothache," did.

Yes, I can see that.

Now here's another point. If you want to talk about cats, and not just in general, then you've got to have some way of identifying particular cats.

That makes sense, but please explain.

If I say, "Cat hungry," you don't know what cat I'm talking about. But if I say,

“That cat hungry,” then you do know.

Indeed, there was an elegant silver cat in an alcove. But it didn’t look hungry. It looked self-satisfied.

Yes, I see.

And if I have no way of letting you know what cat I’m talking about, then we can’t talk about particular cats.

Obviously not.

It’s the same with particular experiences.

It is?

Yes. If you want to talk about experiences, and not just in general, then you’ve got to have some way of identifying particular experiences.

For example?

If I say, “Toothache bad,” you don’t know what toothache I’m talking about. In this case, however, I can’t say, “That toothache bad,” expecting you to make out what I mean, because you won’t be able to do it. You can look around the room, but my words won’t make any sense to you.

No, they won’t.

But there’s a solution. I can say, “My toothache bad.” If I do that, you know what toothache I mean, don’t you?

Yes, of course. You mean your toothache, the one you have right now.

That’s right. “I have a toothache,” “my toothache,” “the toothache I have now”—if I talk that way, you understand. There’s a meeting of the minds.

Indeed there is. But I’m afraid I don’t have any medicinal bark.

The point is, this way of speaking— “I have a toothache,” “She has fond memories of Paris,” “He enjoyed a whiff of her perfume,” and so on—this way of speaking was invented in order to solve practical problems of communication. It won’t do to say “Today painful” when you have a pain. Your listeners won’t get it. The reason is that the causes of the pain don’t lie in the day, but in your body. And it won’t do to say “Fond memories of Paris inflated,” because your listeners won’t know what fond memories of Paris you’re talking about.

No, they won’t. That makes sense.

Now let me ask you a question. I think you’ll be able to answer.

I’ll try.

In your time, you said things like, “I feel a delicious chill running down my spine.”

There are two possibilities here. One is this: These words simply state the reality. There is an entity “I.” That entity does something. It feels. There is something it feels, namely, a delicious chill. And of course there is something besides the entity “I,” namely, the delicious chill. To put it shortly, there are two things, “I” and a delicious chill, and the former feels the latter—whatever that means.

And the other possibility is ... ?

This way of speaking is useful in that it solves certain communication problems, but it hides the reality. The reality is that an organism generates a neural event that constitutes a delicious chill. That’s all that happens. So the chill does indeed occur, it’s as real as can be, but there’s no entity “I” that “feels” it.

So, which is it?

The latter.

Do you mean that there’s no such thing as my experience?

That’s right. There is such a thing as the experience that you, that organism there, generates, but no such thing as the experience you have.

No such thing as my consciousness?

That’s correct.

There’s no such thing as your consciousness, or her consciousness?

No.

No such thing as my inner life?

No. That flow of experiences that you call your inner life does of course roll on, and it’s just as important, and just as splendid overall, as you think it is. But it’s not yours, because there’s no you that has it.

That’s shocking.

Maybe at first. It’s not shocking to me. On the contrary, it’s the basis of salvation.

Salvation?

Salvation comes in reality, never in fantasy and error. But I’ll get to that later.

All right, later. But when I feel a pain, it’s all so clear! I—feel—a pain.

The pain occurs. But there’s no you that feels it, no subject of experience. There’s only you that generates it, and that you, the real you, the one that actually exists, is an organism, whether you like that at first hearing or not.

At first hearing, I don’t think I like it much.

Let’s invent a new way of speaking.

All right, that sounds like fun.

Instead of saying, “I have a stomachache,” let’s say, “This organism generates a stomachache.” To begin with, is it true that this organism generates a stomachache?

Well, I guess it is, if a stomachache is a neural event in the brain. Something goes wrong in the stomach, neural impulses go to the brain, and a stomachache happens, unfortunately.

Or perhaps fortunately. So those are the facts of the case: this organism generates a stomachache, in the way you just explained. What about the formulation “This organism generates a stomachache,” then? Does it leave something out?

That organism generates a stomachache, and you say, “This organism generates a stomachache.” I don’t think that leaves anything out.

No, of course it doesn’t. So, does “I have a stomachache” capture some aspect of reality that “This organism generates a stomachache” misses?

No, I don’t think so. How could it?

“This organism generates a stomachache,” then, captures the facts of the case just as well as “I have a stomachache,” if not better.

It captures them better, I’d say. It states the facts in a perfectly straightforward way, whereas the other doesn’t.

That’s right. But notice that the formulation “This body generates a stomachache” doesn’t include “have.” There’s no mention of having the experience. And so, of course, there’s no mention of an entity that has it—no mention, to put it technically, of a subject of experience, of an entity that has experiences. The formulation doesn’t include “I.”

No, it doesn’t.

But it states the facts of the case perfectly.

Yes, perfectly, if you’re right about the nature of consciousness.

But what have I done? I’ve stated the facts of the case straightforwardly. That’s all I’ve done. And what is the upshot? The notion of having an experience has disappeared, and with it, the notion of the entity that has it. I made those notions disappear simply by stating the facts of the case straightforwardly.

What do you conclude from that?

That those notions—having an experience, an entity that has experiences—don’t correspond to anything in the real world.

That’s correct.

That’s startling.

But surely, you don’t mean that there’s no such thing as “I.” I can’t accept that. Here



I am, right in front of you!

No, you exist. Don't worry about that. As you say, you're right there in front of me.

The question is, what are you?

Yes, indeed, what am I? That's an interesting question, to me, anyway.

If you want to know what something is, you've got to do what?

I've learned my lesson. You've got to look at it, with the eyes in your head.

That's right. And what do you see when you look at yourself or another person?

I see a man, or a woman.

And what is that?

What is it, indeed?

What do you see, literally, with your eyes?

Well, I see an organism, I guess.

An organism?

Yes, a living body that has parts that perform various vital functions: heart, liver, brain, and so on.

A living body, then, in sum?

Yes.

That's right. A human being is an organism that generates neural activity, some of which constitutes consciousness. That's what you see when you look, because that's what there is. You've got to use a brain scanner to see the neural activity, but that doesn't matter.

I'm an organism that generates neural activity, some of which constitutes consciousness?

That hits the nail on the head.

I feel like I'm the nail.

The basic point is, there's no such thing as subjectivity.

No such thing as subjectivity? What on earth are you talking about? What on earth or beyond? I'm speechless!

No, just a minute, that can't be true. When I taste okra, I think it's very good, and when another tastes it, she's so disgusted she doesn't want to hear the word again for the rest of her life. Isn't that subjectivity?

No, it isn't. It's simply a case of differing responses. If you kick a fairly large stone, it moves a little. If you kick a small stone, it moves a lot. Two different responses to your kick. Do you see any subjectivity in that?

No, I don't. But my feelings. Aren't they subjective?

What are your feelings?

Neural events in my brain, you tell me.

I tell you correctly. And a neural event is no more subjective than a bolt of lightning.

Do you see any subjectivity in a bolt of lightning?

No.

What is lightning?

A discharge of electrons, I think.

Do you see any subjectivity in a discharge of electrons?

No, I don't.

What is a neural event?

I've read that electrons move through a nerve, ions shuttle in and out, and so on. I forget. It's a remarkably complex electrochemical event.

That's good enough. Do you see any subjectivity in that electrochemical event?

No, I don't. No more than in a bolt of lightning. But a feeling, just as a feeling, not as a neural event – isn't that subjective?

What is a feeling, just as a feeling?

Let me try to recall. I hope I get it straight. An experience appears as a neural event, the so-called neural correlate of the experience, on the screen of a brain scanner. But a feeling, just as a feeling, is an experience.

It's an experience as an experience is usually conceived.

That's right.

In your time, not in mine.

Yes. The feeling, then, appears as a neural event on the screen of a brain scanner. So it's that which appears as that neural event.

You recall correctly. There's something, then, which appears as a neural event, namely your feeling. Is there something which appears as a bolt of lightning?

Yes, of course. If not, there's no bolt of lightning.

That's right. Now consider that which appears as a bolt of lightning, but consider it just as such, not as a bolt of lightning.

I'll try.

Do you see anything subjective in it?

No, I don't think so.

Please explain.

That which appears as a bolt of lightning is simply the bolt of lightning. The one and the other are one and the same thing. But a bolt of lightning isn't subjective. If it were, then, presumably, in the ordinary case, only one person would see it.

And that's not genuine seeing, is it?

No, of course not.

Why not?

Because the eyes don't come into play.

That's right. Please continue.

Similarly for a stone. That which appears as a stone is a stone, although it might appear as something other than a stone, as to an alien. But a stone is not subjective. It's a stone.

What about a feeling, then?

A feeling just as such, as a feeling, not as a neural event, is that which appears as a neural event. So the feeling on the one hand and the neural event on the other are simply one and the same thing. But there's nothing subjective about the neural event, and hence nothing subjective about the feeling. It's a neural event, just as a stone is a stone.

Well said. "Subjective" means that which pertains to a subject, meaning a subject of experience. But in reality there's no such thing as a subject of experience, and hence no such thing as subjectivity.

Now let me make a suggestion. In principle, a being might exist that consists of consciousness and nothing more. Just consciousness. But I don't mean a spiritual being. I mean a purely physical one.

That's a strange idea. But isn't consciousness neural activity in a brain?

That's what I've told you.

Unless I misunderstand, there's no brain in the picture you just painted.

You don't misunderstand. In the case of a human being, or an elephant or a dinosaur, consciousness is neural activity in a brain. But in general, consciousness is neural activity in a brain, or comparable physical activity, in a structure comparable to a brain, or not. Hence a physical being might exist that consists of a whirl of such activity and nothing else.

I see, I guess.

But in that case, where is the subject of experience?

Well, let's see. Nowhere, I guess. There's a swirl of experience, physical activity of a certain sort, and nothing more. So there's no subject of experience.

That's right.

But surely, if there's no such thing as subjectivity, that must be very significant.

It is indeed. It's the ultimate secret of death.

The ultimate secret of death?

It means that the objective picture of death is the true picture. I don't mean just any objective picture, of course. I mean the accurate one.

Yes, but why is the objective picture the true one?

Because if there's no such thing as subjectivity, then any subjective picture of death is nonsense, just noise and hot air, and that leaves the objective picture.

Indeed. What is the objective picture, then?

An organism ceases to function. In doing so, it ceases to generate neural activity, and hence ceases to generate consciousness. Another organism, developing in the womb, commences to generate consciousness. That's all.

That's all?

Yes. Is there something in that to terrify you?

I'm not sure. What about the organism that dies—the person who dies? From his point of view, everything turns black at the moment of death. Isn't that enough to terrify him, and me?

It's not true that everything turns black. You might as well say that everything turns orange or green. But the point is, you said, "from his point of view." That's not the objective picture.

What do you mean by the objective picture, then? Maybe I don't understand.

It's the picture you form as an observer who stands outside the situation. And the question is, what is that picture?

I stand corrected. And outside the situation.

Let me draw a comparison. Do you like chocolate?

Yes, very much. Too much.

Imagine a machine that makes wonderfully delicious chocolate candies. It does so for many years. But then it gets old and breaks down. It ceases to function. What happens?

It ceases to make chocolate, of course, if that's what you mean.

Yes, that's what I mean. But even before the machine breaks down, another machine is constructed and commences to make equally wonderful chocolate candies.

Good.

Is there anything in this to terrify you, as a chocolate lover?

No, of course not. The flow of chocolate continues. It's a pleasing picture.

And suppose that the new machine is even better than the old one. The chocolate it makes is even better.

So much the better, of course.

Does the old machine lose something when it breaks down?

No, of course not.

Why not?

Because it didn't have anything in the first place. It made chocolate. It never enjoyed it. It was a machine that made something wonderful.

Can you make out the parallel with the case of death?

Yes, you've made it easy.

Go ahead.

A machine makes delicious chocolate candies for many years—a person generates splendid consciousness for many years. But then it gets old and breaks down—but then she gets old and dies. It ceases to make chocolate—she ceases to generate consciousness. Am I on track?

Yes.

Even before the old machine breaks down, another is constructed and commences to make chocolate that's just as good—even before the old person dies, another is conceived, and in a few months commences to generate consciousness that's just as splendid, or that becomes just as splendid eventually. The flow of chocolate continues—the flow of consciousness continues. The new chocolate is even better—the consciousness that comes later is even better.

What does that last point mean, with reference to the real world?

It means that if the human race plays its cards right, human consciousness will be even better in the future.

That's right, but it's a big if. Continue.

The old machine loses nothing when it breaks down—the old person loses nothing when she dies. That's because it was a machine that made something wonderful—that's because she was a machine that made something splendid.

What is that something splendid?

Human consciousness, of course.

A human being is a machine?

Not a machine, really. That image goes back to a time when heavy, clanking machines were the latest, dazzling technology. But a physical entity, yes.

Doesn't that insult the human race, to say that a human being is a physical entity?

Not at all. If you're correct, then whatever sublimity there is lies in the physical domain.

Is there any sublimity in the grand scheme of things?

What do you mean, the grand scheme of things?

Everything there is: the physical universe, or multiverse, and anything else there might be.

I'd say so, certainly.

Where is it?

In love, in music, in joy, in the grandeur of it all. In many things, probably, that we in my time, and perhaps you in yours, haven't yet discovered.

And if the grand scheme of things proves to be purely physical, if the physical is all there is to it, does that detract from that sublimity?

No, of course not. Why should it?

There's no reason it should. But the picture of death that you just painted—is it objective or subjective?

It's objective.

And what is your conclusion?

Just as there is no cause for sadness, much less terror, in the story of the chocolate machine that gets old and breaks down, there is no cause for sadness or terror in the story, the true story, of the person who grows old and dies.

Well said, and perfectly true. What about the subjective response, then?

Let me get clear. What do you mean by the subjective response?

When you think of death, you can stand back, outside of the picture, and ask, "What is death for a human being?"

Yes.

That's the objective response. Or you can ask, "What will death be like for me?" That's the subjective response, and it yields a subjective picture. There are many different subjective pictures of death, of course. Different individuals and cultures have imagined many different things.

Well, I'd say that basically, the subjective response yields a fearful picture.

It does?

What will death be like for me? When I close my eyes, right here and now, all turns dark. But when I die, my eyes will stop working. So all will turn dark.

Yes, go on.

When I plug my ears, the sounds in my immediate environment grow fainter. If I do it thoroughly enough, all goes silent. But when I die, my ears will stop working. So all will go silent. I will taste nothing, catch no fragrance, and feel nothing through my skin. In short, my senses connect me to the world, and when I die, they will cease to do so.

You will be cut off from the world.

Yes, and that means I'll be cut off from my family and friends, and from all the joy that seeing, hearing, tasting, and the other senses bring.

What will be left to you, then? Nothing?

Well, maybe not nothing. The "you" that you mean when you ask that question, the "I" that will be cut off from family and friends and the joy of sensation, is a soul. It's not a physical entity, so it doesn't perish with the body. But it remembers, imagines, thinks, desires, and initiates action, now and after I die.

In your disembodied state, then, you'll remember your former life in the body.

Yes, but experience tells me that memory fades with time. And what will I imagine, drifting in total darkness and silence?

Drifting?

I don't know. That's just my imagination—or my soul's.

It's yours, not your soul's, I assure you. But to return to your subjective line of thought, how long does the soul live?

It lives forever. It's immortal.

Why?

Because no knife, no poison, and no other agent of death can finish it off. What will I imagine, then, in total darkness and silence, not just for a moment or two, but forever? And what will I do? What can I do but think, when I have no body? But what will I think about? And what's the point of thinking at all in such a situation? And what will I desire, and with what anguish, after thousands and tens of thousands of eventless years?

That sounds very bad. But something tells me there's even worse.

Indeed there is. Who knows what lurks there, swirling in the darkness of death? If my soul is there, then other human souls are, too, and maybe nonhuman souls of all kinds.

Nonhuman souls?

The souls of animals and aliens and who knows what—conscious robots from all

across the universe, for all I know.

Yes, we've got to take aliens into account, and perhaps even robots.

And maybe there are impersonal forces of kinds I can't even begin to imagine.

Do you mean impersonal like storms on Earth?

Yes. And maybe some of those souls are tormented, twisted, and malicious, not to mention the impersonal forces, which might do who knows what to me. Experience teaches me that others aren't always well-meaning.

The long experience of your entire species teaches you that, not just your own experience.

And maybe, among those souls, some burn with a desire to torment me. And maybe some of them can do it. Maybe they'll throw me into a cheerless gray swamp and leave me there to languish forever.

Ah, but there's the solution! If one spiritual power can throw me down into eternal hellfire, then another, or the same one, can lift me up into paradise. Make that an infinitely powerful, infinitely knowledgeable, infinitely benevolent force.

Why?

Because it makes me feel good to have such a protector.

All right, then, you've got it. But do any of these scenarios make sense?

No, I don't think so.

Why not?

Because there's no such thing as subjectivity.

What does that have to do with it?

There's no "I" that has experiences in the first place. Hence there's no "I" that will continue to have experiences when this body dies.

You mean that there's no soul.

That's right. Hence none of these things will happen.

No, they won't, you can be sure of that. Would you like to summarize, then?

If the objective picture of death doesn't scare or depress me, then there's nothing to scare or depress me, since the objective picture is the true one. I think that's the basic point.

And does the objective picture scare you?

No.

Does it depress you?

No, not at all.



Why not?

Because there's nothing depressing in it, and nothing scary, either.

What about the subjective response?

It leads to falsity and nonsense, and it tends to be very scary to boot. That's why people dread the prospect of death.

That's one reason, yes.

Is there no need for salvation, then?

There's a great need for salvation from ignorance and confusion, if that's what you mean.

That's not what I mean.

But ignorance and confusion threaten your prospects more severely than anything else.

My personal prospects?

Yes, your personal prospects, but more than that, the prospects of your species. It might even bring about extinction, the death of the species.

That gives me an idea.

Yes?

I remember hearing about an old farmer in South Africa. He would look up at the stars and say, "Well, if we make a mess of it, there are others out there who won't." Maybe, in the epoch the human race goes extinct, a new, alien race will emerge somewhere. In that case, consciousness continues and nothing is lost.

I see. Yes, it might be that the universe, or the multiverse, is swarming with alien species that generate consciousness. And robots and whatnot that do so, too. And it might be that much of that consciousness is superior to the human variety.

Superior?

Stronger in benevolence. More flexible and adaptive. Wiser and more discerning. With a greater capacity for joy in play and art. And so on.

I guess that's possible.

But still, human consciousness is unique. In all probability, it's far more different from this or that form of alien consciousness than the consciousness of one human being is from that of another. Besides, we don't know that there are any alien species.

No, we don't—or if you do, you're not telling. But isn't it possible that there are infinitely many species in an infinite universe, or an infinite grand scheme of things, to use your expression?

Yes, that's possible.

And in that case, it's to be expected, I suppose, that even human consciousness is replicated to infinity through the expanse of the grand scheme—the multiverse or whatever it might be.

Yes, that's to be expected. But we don't know that your picture of an infinite grand scheme represents reality, and since it might be no more than fantasy, we have no business assuming that it's fact.

But what if it is fact?

If there are numerous alien species that generate consciousness different from ours but just as good or better, or if human consciousness exists independently in many or infinitely many places in the grand scheme of things, then the extinction of human life on Earth is less of a tragedy than you might suppose.

But you're right to say that's a big if.

Still, you can take some comfort in it. If worst comes to worst, if the last few human beings are about to die, the situation might not be nearly as bad as it looks.

I have another question.

Yes?

If I am this organism you see before you, and there is no "I," no subject of experience or soul, that enjoys the pleasure this organism generates, then why is everyone so very concerned about his or her own pleasure? In a lottery, nobody thinks, "It makes no difference whether I win or someone else does." Everyone is eager to win the jackpot for himself, or for herself and her family and friends. Why all this selfishness?

That's an outcome of the process of organic evolution. A person who fights hard for himself and his family and tribe is more likely to survive and produce offspring, and hence more likely to send his or her genes into the future.

But there's another reason. You think of some pleasure as your own, and of other pleasure as another's. But what's the difference?

Well, in my time, of course, the standard answer was that this pleasure is mine, and that pleasure is his.

Yes, but what is the reality?

The pleasure I call my own occurs in my brain, and the pleasure I call another's, in his or her brain.

Yes. And so?

Well, what I call my pleasure plugs directly into my brain, I guess you can say,

whereas what I call his or hers doesn't.

How do you know about the pleasure of another person?

Though his behavior, including his words. Or I might see it on the screen of a brain scanner, though I never have seen such a thing.

And how do you know about your own pleasure?

My brain responds to it directly.

So what's the difference, from your standpoint?

What I call my pleasure is pleasure I feel, to employ the usual way of speaking. To put it differently, it's the pleasure that plugs directly into my brain, because it occurs in my brain. And what I call his pleasure isn't pleasure I feel, but rather pleasure that I can see he feels, again, to the usual way of speaking. To put it differently, it's pleasure that plugs into his brain, not mine.

That's right. So, to put it the usual way, you feel your pleasure, but you don't feel his. So it's natural that you care more about your pleasure, which you feel.

That makes sense.

But what does all this come down to, in reality?

The pleasure I call mine is neural activity in my brain, so it plugs directly into my brain, whereas the pleasure I call his is neural activity in his brain, so it plugs directly into his brain, not mine.

You've got it. Is there any reason, then, you should devote more attention and care to your own pleasure and pain than to another's?

Yes, I think there's a practical reason.

Explain.

I know a lot more about my own pleasure and pain than I do about another's, and so I know much better what to do about it.

That's right. But remember that what you call his pleasure is just as important as what you call your own. It's not really his or yours. It's simply pleasure generated by that organism over there or by this one here.

I understand that. But what would happen if my brain came directly in contact with another's pleasure?

Here that happens by design, routinely.

Really? How do you do it?

It's radio technology, basically. One brain transmits and the other receives, through large numbers of microscopic biological implants.

Telepathy!

Yes, telepathy: communication between minds—in fact between brains, of course—by means other than sensory perception. Needless to say, it's a purely physical process.

What is it like?

It's remarkable the first time you experience it. Another man feels an ocean breeze in his face, and you feel it, too.

In my face?

No, in his, because he feels the breeze in his face, not in yours. But the breeze you feel in his face is just as fresh and vivid as if it were in your own face. If you ever have this experience, that will bring it home to you, I think, that it doesn't matter which organism generates consciousness, whether this one here, the one you call yourself, or that one there, the one you call another.

As it happens, the conclusion I reach here, that there is no self or soul that has experiences in the reality that lies behind the forms of words we use, agrees with that reached by the Buddha approximately twenty-five centuries ago. See, for example, *The Soul Theory of the Buddhists*, Theodore Stcherbatsky, Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan, Delhi and Varanasi, 1976. In fact, however, the background from which I proceeded is not Buddhism, but rather Anglo-American analytical philosophy. Acknowledgement is due to Peter F. Strawson for his insights into the functional character of the practice of ascribing experiences to subjects. See his *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*, Methuen, London, 1979.

(ロベルト・ラッタ 英米学科)

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