

Case 1 – Is There Life After Death?

In 1975, the philosopher and psychiatrist Raymond Moody published *Life After Life*, a book that brought widespread attention to reports of near-death experiences (NDEs). These experiences were described by people who had been declared clinically dead or very close to death. Despite differences in culture, religion, and personal beliefs, many of these reports shared striking similarities.

Common features of near-death experiences include a feeling of leaving one's body, observing medical staff working on one's physical body from above, travelling through a tunnel, encountering a bright light, experiencing intense feelings of peace and sometimes meeting deceased relatives or other beings. Some individuals also report a "life review," in which they relive significant moments from their past. In several cases patients have described details of events in the hospital room that they could not have perceived through normal sensory means, such as conversations between doctors or the location of medical instruments.

Supporters of the idea that NDEs provide evidence for life after death argue that these experiences are best explained by the survival of consciousness beyond the physical body. On this view, near-death experiences offer at least some evidence for the existence of a soul that can continue to exist after physical death. This can be claimed to support religious beliefs such as the existence of heaven and hell.

However, critics argue that near-death experiences do not show that life after death is real. They suggest that NDEs can be explained by natural causes, such as lack of oxygen to the brain, the effects of drugs or the brain's response to extreme stress. Others argue that cultural expectations influence what people experience; for example, individuals may interpret hallucinations in ways that fit their existing beliefs about death and the afterlife. From this perspective, NDEs may tell us more about the human brain than about what happens after death. Even if these experiences are genuinely unexplainable by science it is not clear that they support particular religious beliefs about the afterlife as described in holy books such as the bible.

Study Questions

1. Should we trust people's accounts of near-death experiences?
2. Are near-death experiences evidence of an afterlife?
3. If near death experiences are true, does this prove that Christianity – or any other religion – is true?

Case 2 - Can Machines Have Minds?

In 1950, the mathematician and computer scientist Alan Turing proposed what later became known as the Turing Test. Instead of asking the abstract question “Can machines think?”, Turing suggested a practical test. If a human communicates via text with two unseen participants—one human and one machine—and cannot reliably tell which is which, then the machine should be said to have a conscious mind.

Today, advanced AI systems can hold long conversations, write essays, answer questions and even appear to show emotions such as empathy or humour. In some public demonstrations and experiments people have mistaken AI chatbots for real humans. This has led some to claim that machines are now passing or coming close to passing the Turing Test. On this view acting like you have a mind is enough to say that you have one.

However, others strongly disagree. They argue that AI systems do not actually *understand* what they are saying. Instead, they generate responses by recognising patterns in large amounts of data. On this view, AI does not have beliefs, feelings or awareness it only imitates the way people with minds speak. Some people believe that only beings with brains can have minds and therefore that AI will never have a conscious mind. Others believe that having a soul is necessary for having a mind and so again AI could never possess a mind.

This disagreement raises both philosophical and ethical questions. If a machine behaves in ways that are indistinguishable from a human, should we treat it as minded? Or is having a mind about what is happening *inside*—such as consciousness, understanding or intentions—rather than outward behaviour? Can we ever be sure what is going on inside a machine’s ‘mind’

Study Questions

1. Is passing the Turing Test enough to show that a machine has a mind?
2. Is it possible now or at some time in the future for AI to have a conscious mind?
3. If an AI system could have a mind does this mean that we should treat it morally like a human and for example give it rights?

Case 3 – The universe: Design or Chance?

The philosopher Richard Swinburne tries to argue that the universe is too unlikely to have come about by chance. He uses an example to illustrate this: Imagine a scenario in which you are kidnapped and placed in front of a machine that will shuffle ten decks of playing cards and draw one randomly from each. Only if an ace of hearts is drawn from each pack will you be free. In any other instance, a bomb will be detonated and will kill you. Imagine now that you are still alive – that you got the ace of hearts ten times in a row, much to your kidnappers' annoyance. You would find this incredible and amazing and requiring explanation. You would not accept that it happened by chance since the odds are so small and the outcome is so beneficial and desirable to you.

Swinburne argues that the probability of our universe existing is far, far smaller than in this example, which suggests the need for an explanation. The laws of nature and physical constants appear to be set at just the right values for life to exist. As Stephen Hawking has noted, "The laws of science, as we know them at present, contain many fundamental numbers, like the size of the electric charge of the electron and the ratio of the masses of the proton and the electron. ... The remarkable fact is that the values of these numbers seem to have been very finely adjusted to make possible the development of life." If these values were even slightly different, life would be impossible. According to Swinburne, this makes it more reasonable to believe that the universe was designed by an intelligent being than that it came about purely by chance.

Critics disagree. They argue that even very unlikely outcomes can happen without design, and that we may simply be impressed by the result because we are here to see it. Others point out that we do not know how many universes there might be or whether different laws were possible in the first place. Even if we do accept that there is evidence of design in the universe we might still question whether the traditional idea of God is a likely cause of this design. Philosophy David Hume suggested that multiple God, an old senile God or infant deity is just as likely.

Study Questions

1. When is it reasonable to explain something by chance, and when is it reasonable to explain it by design?
2. Does the fact that life exists in the universe give us good evidence that the universe was designed?
3. Is an all-powerful, all-loving and all-knowing God a good explanation for the existence of life in the universe?

Case 4 –Eating animals and eating humans

The philosopher Jeremy Bentham, one of the founders of utilitarianism, argued that what matters morally is the ability to feel pleasure and pain. According to Bentham, when we think about whether animals should have moral importance the key question is not “Can they reason?” or “Can they talk?” but “Can they suffer?”. If a being can suffer, then its suffering should be taken into account when we decide how to act.

Many animals used for food—such as cows, pigs, and chickens—can feel pain, fear, and distress. Modern farming often involves practices that cause animals significant suffering, including confinement, separation from their young and stressful transport and slaughter. Bentham’s view suggests that this suffering matters morally in the same way that human suffering does. This makes it very difficult to justify treating animals in this way and killing them for food. If we would not treat humans like this then why should we treat animals in this way?

However, many people continue to eat meat. Other philosophers such as Immanuel Kant argued that animals do not possess the ability to reason and therefore have no moral worth at all. We are therefore only wrong to treat them badly when this cruelty might affect how we interact with other humans. Others take a less extreme position and argue that while animal suffering matters, it does not matter as much as human suffering, because, for example, humans have more complex and meaningful lives.

This raises a moral dilemma. If animal suffering is morally comparable to human suffering, then eating meat, especially when alternatives are available, may be wrong. But if there is a morally important difference between humans and animals, then meat-eating might still be justified.

Study Questions

1. Is Bentham right that the ability to suffer is what gives a being moral importance?
2. If it is morally acceptable to eat non-human animals is it also morally acceptable to eat humans?
3. If we can live healthily without eating meat, does that make eating animals morally wrong?

Case 5 – Virtual Reality and Reality Itself

Advances in virtual reality (VR) technology have made it possible for people to enter immersive digital environments that closely resemble the physical world. In these environments, users can work, socialise, form relationships, and experience pleasure, achievement and emotional connection. Imagine a future in which VR is so advanced that experiences within it are indistinguishable from those in everyday life. People can choose to spend most or even all of their time in a virtual world rather than in physical reality.

Some people might willingly choose such a life. In virtual reality, individuals could design their surroundings, pursue meaningful projects and avoid many forms of suffering found in the real world, such as illness or poverty. If a person feels happy, fulfilled, and emotionally satisfied in a virtual world it may seem that nothing important is missing. On this view, what matters is the quality of our experiences not whether they are “really real”.

However, others argue that a life lived primarily in virtual reality is lacking in an important way. They claim that experiences in VR are in some sense fake or inauthentic, because they are based on simulations rather than genuine contact with the world. This view echoes the philosopher Robert Nozick’s “experience machine” thought experiment, which asks whether we would choose to plug into a machine that could guarantee pleasurable experiences. Nozick argued that many people would refuse, suggesting that we value authentic real experiences over fake ones.

The possibility of living in VR also raises questions about knowledge and reality. If virtual experiences are indistinguishable from real ones, how can we be sure that we are not already living in a simulated world? This idea resembles philosophical scepticism about the external world, such as the “brain in a vat” scenario. If all our experiences could be simulated, then can we really guarantee the ‘reality’ of the world around us.

The case raises ethical concerns as well. If people withdraw into virtual worlds, what obligations do they have to the physical world and to others outside VR? Should governments or societies encourage or discourage extensive use of immersive virtual environments? And if harm occurs in virtual reality—such as violence or exploitation—does it matter morally if no physical bodies are affected?

Study Questions

1. Does it matter whether our experiences are real or simulated?
2. Would a life spent mostly in virtual reality be less meaningful than a life in the physical world?
3. Can we ever know that we are not living in a simulation?

Case 6 - Is It Reasonable to Believe in Miracles?

In 1748, the philosopher David Hume presented one of the most influential arguments against belief in miracles. Hume defined a miracle as a violation of the laws of nature, such as a person being cured of a terminal illness or someone rising from the dead. He argued that our belief in the laws of nature is based on constant and repeated experience, whereas reports of miracles rely on human testimony which is often unreliable. According to Hume, it is always more reasonable to believe that a mistake has been made than that a law of nature has been broken.

Hume illustrated his point by appealing to probability. Since the laws of nature are supported by an enormous amount of evidence any claim that they have been violated must have extraordinary evidence for it. For example, if someone claims that a person has been miraculously healed, we must compare two possibilities: either a miracle occurred, or the witnesses were mistaken, deceived or lying. Hume concluded that it will always be more likely that the testimony is flawed than that a genuine miracle has taken place.

However, many philosophers and theologians disagree with Hume's conclusion. They argue that if there are enough independent and credible witnesses then testimony can provide strong evidence. For Christians miracles in the New Testament are evidence of Jesus's divinity. Modern documented cases of miraculous healings are also used as evidence of the truth of religious claims, such as those investigated by the Catholic Church at Lourdes where medical experts carefully examine claims before declaring them miraculous. Supporters argue that if natural explanations are ruled out then belief in a miracle can be reasonable.

Others challenge Hume's definition of a miracle itself. Rather than seeing miracles as violations of the laws of nature, they argue that miracles are extraordinary events caused by God, but still consistent with deeper laws that we may not yet understand. On this view, a miracle does not overthrow science but rather reflects its current limits. If this is right, then the conflict between miracles and the laws of nature may be less severe than Hume suggested.

Study Questions

1. Are the miracles documented in the New Testament good evidence of Jesus's divinity?
2. Are modern day examples of miracles good evidence of the truth of God's existence?
3. Is Hume right that testimony can never be strong enough to justify belief in a miracle?