Appendix: on the afterlife

An anonymous 16th-century Spanish poet once wrote a “sonnet to Christ crucified” that begins with the words

No me mueve, mi Dios, para quererte
El cielo que me tienes prometido…

(“It is not the Heaven you have promised me that moves me to love you…”) The poem ends declaring that “it is, in the end, your love that moves me, and in such a way/that even if there were no Heaven I would love you1.”

This book was originally written in the above spirit: we cannot know anything about an afterlife, but we can experience God’s love in this life, and be filled, as a result, with such joy and gratitude, that we will not even consider worthwhile any other way to live. I intended to leave it at that, because I wanted to make the book as non-speculative as possible; and yet, the more I thought about it, the more it seemed almost hypocritical to start the book with a passage from 1 Peter on the Christian hope, and to avoid altogether commenting on the nature, and, as it were, the plausibility of that ultimate hope.

There are, in fact, a number of difficulties with the traditional Christian expectations for the afterlife. The only goal of this note is to show that there is at least one “model” that appears to address most of these difficulties in a satisfactory way; a “proof of principle,” as it were. It is impossible to know, of course, whether the model proposed has anything to do with reality, but at least it is not (in my opinion) any more far-fetched than a number of things that some scientists (such as cosmologists or string theorists) appear to believe in these days…

The difficulties

An important but often overlooked aspect of the Christian concept of the afterlife is that it does not merely postulate the immortality of the soul, but also “the resurrection of the body.” In other words, it postulates a sort of “corporeal” existence, in a sort of “material” world: “there will be new heavens, and a new Earth”; even if the “matter” is, possibly, very different from that to which we are used, and our “bodies” are quite different as well (cf. the liturgy according to which “Christ will transform our frail bodies into glorious bodies like his own”). This expectation is in line with the Jewish understanding of human beings as “animated bodies,” as opposed to the more Platonic notion of “embodied souls” (which could presumably do without the body if necessary); but note that, also in contemporary scientific thinking, it is very hard to imagine how a “disembodied intelligence” similar to a normal human mind could exist at all, so

1 Nobody knows who wrote this very famous (in the Spanish-speaking world) poem, and this kind of “selfless immortality” for its author seems actually rather appropriate.
the idea of an “embodied” afterlife could be said to go some way towards addressing that problem, at least in principle.

Nonetheless, the idea has problems of its own, which perhaps can be most simply summarized in the following way: if it was at all possible to make a “perfect” (say, devoid of any suffering) material world for free beings to exist in, why was not this done in the first place? Suppose that God can do anything that does not entail a logical impossibility. It seems then that the idea of a perfect material world for free human beings must be logically impossible, that is, self-contradictory in some way (as I have argued at length in Chapter 4 above). But if that is the case, how can an embodied afterlife be possible?

The question of personal freedom in the afterlife raises some difficulties as well. As argued above, the reason we need, in our world, the ocean of entropy at the microscopic level is to allow us (under the assumption of finite or reusable material resources) to erase old information from the macroscopic world in order to “write” new information, which is what free agents in a material world do all the time. If freedom (which entails unpredictability) does not exist, and no new information is ever produced, then entropy is in fact not necessary, and one could in principle have a material world that carries out a perfectly choreographed dance, without ever missing a step, from the beginning to the end of time. This is in fact nothing but the clockwork universe envisioned by Newton and his successors (Chapter 2). But it seems a waste of matter and energy to physically create such a universe, when one could just as easily contemplate it in one’s mind (today we would say, simulate it in a “perfect” computer). In any case, it is troubling to imagine that the afterlife would be like that.

In Christian thought, the end of times is described as the time when God will bend all things to his will (see 1 Corinthians 15:24-28). So, perhaps, it would indeed be the case that we would not be free to do anything “unpredictable,” and the whole of the afterlife would be like a perfectly choreographed dance. But, again, one might ask, what is the point of an “existence in time”—or, at least, in “something like time”—if there is to be no true becoming, no arising of anything truly new? The evolving of the ideal mechanical universe never creates anything new, merely unfolds the unchanging set of instructions provided by its initial conditions, or indeed by its state specification at any given time. If this is the only alternative, then it seems that a totally disembodied, atemporal existence—beyond all space and time—would be a more sensible and (to my mind) much preferable way to “spend” eternity.

Finally, there is what might be called the “self” problem. There can be little doubt that we derive much of our sense of self, of personal identity, from the near-unlimited capability of matter, as we know it, to be molded into different forms and shapes: into different bodies. Doubtless, also, the reason behind our wish to have “bodies” in the afterlife stems, as well, from this (partial, but strong) identification of our selves, or “ourselves,” with our physical bodies.

Yet, as pointed out in Chapter 5, there are good theological reasons to be wary of this (or any) strong self-identification. It seems inconsistent that after urging us to a radical destruction of the
ego, God would “reward us” with new material bodies that, once again, would merely foster a sense of a separate, individual identity. It is further inconsistent with the idea of the “bending of all creatures to God’s will” considered earlier, and even, one might argue, with experiences of self-transcendence (if not self-immolation) in the mystical visions of the saints. Are we not called to be, in the communion of saints, all one in God, and God one in all? What sense does a new round of material self-identification make?

Perhaps the whole difficulty can be summarized by arguing that by the time we “get to Heaven” we have had to give up so much, including all our self-centered desires, material attachments, and indeed, some would argue, our very self, that the notion of a continued, separate existence in time no longer even makes sense. This is clearly the line of thought followed in Buddhism, with the explicit (and to my mind, eminently logical) conclusion that the only possible future for us at that point must lie beyond all matter and form, beyond all categories of time, and space, and even of “existence as we know it”: this is Nirvana, or “unbinding”—at least, for those Buddhists who envision it as a transcendental, ontological reality.

The challenge, for the more traditional Christian thinking, is whether the above truly represents the only possible logical, self-consistent option. I wish to argue below that, to the contrary, at least in principle, a “model afterlife” that meets many of the traditional Christian expectations can, indeed, be envisioned.

The past, as God may remember it

The notion of an afterlife to be developed in what follows can perhaps be visualized best by keeping in mind what has been called the “block universe” model (see Chapter 2). This is a picture of the world, inspired by relativity theory, in which all of spacetime is seen as “simultaneously present” to an outside observer. In fact, whether this picture can properly include the future in a truly free, open universe, is questionable, but here I’ll be concerned primarily with the past, so assume that the block universe has an upper, possible subjective, “edge,” where the present instant (by our local time) is found. Below that lies the past, and the motion of any material particle up to the present time can be represented by a “world line,” or trajectory, in that four-dimensional mathematical space.

This is a classical picture that does not cover any of the quantum aspects of the world; but we can envision a suitably modified version of it as an approximation to how the world may look to a hypothetical observer with an “atemporal pole”—the capability, so to speak, to exist, at least in part, outside of space and time, “looking in,” or in this case perhaps more descriptively, “overlooking” the spatio-temporal universe. God has traditionally, in Christian theology, been assumed to be such a “being,” and I will also assume in what follows that this describes as well some of the nature of what may be called our “souls” after death.

Let me, however, start with God, and with the very tricky question of his “knowledge” of the world. In Chapter 5 I took the position that there should be no difference between God’s
“mental” representation of a thing and the thing itself. This gives all of reality a distinctly “mental” flavor, but it might be argued that modern scientific developments (such as the hybrid objective/subjective nature of quantum fields, and the recent ideas that place information at the basis of all physical reality) hint at such a possibility, and in any case this would be “God’s mind” we’d be talking about, and we have no idea what “kind of thing” that is, anyway. Alternatively, and somewhat fancifully, we could say (as I did in Chapter 5) that all of reality (at a minimum, all of spacetime, and the whole universe of matter and energy) is, itself, God’s “memory bank.”

This suggests strongly that what we call the past is not completely gone, if God remembers it: in fact, if God remembers it at all, it has objective existence. And the “block universe” model does suggest that God must remember the past as a matter of course, since all he has to do is “look” at it: it is there, permanently present to his awareness, like a space-time diagram to a physicist engaged in a relativistic calculation.

And yet, there is still something vaguely unreal, and highly subjective about the past. No two people remember it in the same way. Pictures, recordings and other modern devices help fix it somewhat, but they only provide a particular point of view, a cross section through a narrow range of wavelengths and sensory experiences, and one that does not include at all the internal states—thoughts, emotions, hopes, and the like—of the people involved.

Given this, it may not seem unnatural to suggest that God’s memory of the past will also be different in critical respects from our own, and yet, since it is the only one “fixed,” as it were, for all eternity, it is the only one with objective existence, the only “official” one—the one that counts, the real one. The point, of course, is not that God would remember things that did not happen; that would amount to a falsification of history. Rather, it is that we should not expect God to remember things that are not worth remembering.

Paramount among these things is sin, or moral evil. It has been the long-held position of most Christian thinkers that evil has no substance of its own: it can only “exist” as the absence of good, or as a perversion of the good (something intrinsically good, or at least value-neutral, used for a wrong purpose). But for God to remember evil forever, into eternity, would be, in effect, to give it an imperishable substance, something that we simply cannot expect God to do. Evil must, by its own nature, be confined to the transient world: it is something that the contingency of the world allows to arise and, even as it arises, to cease, to pass away; and in its passing, it must not be possible for it to leave a permanent mark in the memory of God.

We may imagine, then, that if our lives are preserved forever in some way in God’s memory, the only mental or spiritual states we would find there are those that already carried within them a seed of eternity, as provided by God’s grace: experiences of insight, of love, or of wonder; realizations of truth. There is also an additional reason why states completely disconnected from God’s grace—what the church calls states of mortal sin—should not be part of God’s permanent memory, and it is simply that these are states in which we have willfully excluded God from our
soul. Of course, God is present even in those states in his most basic, impersonal aspect—as the mere foundation of the order and freedom of the material world—but not in his spiritual, personal aspect as grace or love. Hence, even if past states of mortal sin could somehow be preserved “frozen” in God’s memory in an impersonal way, they would not be accessible in a personal way, as subjective experience, to our souls after death, since those souls—the ones we would traditionally call “saved” souls, anyway—would be, ultimately, of the same “substance” as God’s grace and love.

This, then, is the possibility I wish to consider here: that after our death our souls gain the ability to step partly outside the world of space and time, matter and energy, and “see” the block universe from this vantage point, and come right back into it at will; into our own lives, remembered faithfully, but also transformed, by God. These are lives from which now all the sins, all the shameful moments have been erased, and all that are left are the “days of grace”: the moments already lived, consciously or unconsciously, in God’s companionship.

What I envision here is something like my after-death soul, going back to my own past—perhaps to this same present moment in which I write—and being there, literally there, with the past “me,” experiencing the same sensory impressions, reliving the same thoughts: definitely embodied, but at the same time no longer an agent, since what I would be doing would “have been done” already. This sounds a bit like the old staple of science-fiction stories, the “travel back in time” scenario, but there is no paradox involved for several reasons. The “returning soul” returns as a purely spiritual entity indistinguishable in principle from any other source of grace—of encouragement, support, or love—to which I might, at this moment, choose to make myself receptive. It should not be envisioned as carrying, in any way, any insights, “memories” or “prophecies” about the future; indeed, one important point about this proposal is that there is no need for the after-death soul to have any memories of its own, since the past itself is there and available to be re-experienced at any ‘time.’

Nonetheless, for the continued existence in ‘time’—by which I mean, in some post-death reality that resembles time—to have any meaning, the after-death soul must still have some ability to become, to change, or to grow. What I propose here is that this growth takes place through the continuous exploration of the “block universe,” and in particular the re-living—in an embodied way, that is, from the inside, as described above—of lives other than one’s own.

Before you balk at the idea of letting total strangers occupy your body and relive your life, recall that these are lives that have been purged from sin, and that they are to be observed from a perspective of nothing but pure, positive, life-affirming love—from God’s perspective really, to

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1 Actually, the notion that the past may exist, in some permanent sense, “out there,” rather like a place one might somehow visit, is occasionally encountered outside of science-fiction in (respectable) contemporary physics. Wheeler and Feynman once speculated that positrons might be ordinary electrons moving backwards in time, for instance, and the theory of general relativity allows for special solutions called “closed timelike curves” that appear to allow for the possibility to travel backwards in time. In this context, the present proposal can be viewed as primarily a postulate on the accessibility, under restricted conditions, of certain regions of space-time (including what we call the past) to a hypothetical kind of being (our after-death souls).
the extent that such a thing is possible for the still-finite souls. Try to think of it, instead, the other way: what it would be like, for instance, to relive the childhood of your father or your mother\(^1\) from within their own body, see the world as it appeared to them through their own eyes; and to do this entirely from a perspective of nothing but pure love, uncontaminated by any resentment or blame.

There can be little doubt that most of everybody’s childhood would be “saved” in God’s memory (there is a pun in the word saved, and it is intentional). We may also expect to be able to access large chunks of the lives of most saints; a favorite fantasy of mine is to “be” St. Peter someday, to walk with Jesus down the roads of Galilee. Although, from all of the above, I might expect his momentary betrayal of Jesus to be edited out of what would be my subjective experience of his life, I should perhaps clarify that I do not expect all of his (or anybody’s) painful experiences, whether physical or emotional, to be missing: on the contrary, suffering that is endured and overcome through God’s grace is an important part of anybody’s life, that should definitely be preserved. For the soul re-experiencing it, it would be a life and love-affirming experience. Suffering than ends in despair is, of course, a different matter entirely.

As the souls experience more and more lives, they do not accumulate memories, in the sense of something they carry with them to the next experience; but one can imagine them growing, “extending” over a greater and greater area of spacetime, of the history of the universe, and, in some way, “making it theirs.” As this happens, and they grow to know and love more and more beings, different souls also become more and more alike. The final goal, of course, is something like the knowledge and love of God, which encompasses everything and everybody in the history of the universe. This should not be imagined as being limited by either space or time. Re-living the lives of every human being who ever lived on earth could take several billion years, but there would be nothing boring or tiresome about it, just a constant stream of new revelations, of new subjective worlds, new ways and thoughts about things, and unique manifestations of love\(^2\). In this ‘time’ many more billions of years of what is now the future would have been added to the history of the universe, and you could certainly count on eventually “reliving” the lives of all your descendants as well, and all of the future of the earth.

Nor is there any reason to stop with earth. If you can “step outside of space,” then you can “step back in” anywhere in space. We could thus spend countless more billions of years learning what other beings capable of spiritual life have been up to in other corners of the universe, from the moment they first looked up at starry skies unlike any we have ever seen.

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1. I have said above that no specific memory (including any detailed memory of its previous “life”) may be carried by the visiting soul, but it may not stretch credibility too much to assume that a certain “spiritual resonance” may still exist, and be experienced somehow, when visiting the lives of people to whom we were especially close in our earth-bound life.

2. The life experience would feel interesting, if for no other reason than that it would feel interesting to the person whose life it is, and whose mental states we would be sharing.
Does this process ever end? Most current cosmologies do suggest that, eventually, our universe will become incapable of sustaining life, and although the process of coming to know and love everybody who’s ever lived and who ever will live anywhere would probably take, in human terms, many more years than the lifetime of the universe, we are clearly not limited by that (it is all, remember, forever preserved in God’s memory). Still, for a finite number of creatures, this is clearly a finite—though unimaginably long—process. At the end of it, there are still several options.

Beyond the future

One possibility is simply that, our task completed, we may just come to rest into a fully timeless existence. As we have grown in knowledge and love we have all become more and more alike, our souls stretching over more and more of the historical universe; when they finally become all-encompassing, with a knowledge and love of all things comparable, in a way, to that of God himself, we may indeed all come together to rest in God, in a reality that is wholly beyond time, space, matter, energy and, indeed, all the categories of ordinary existence. (In any event, it must be understood that such a reality would always be available to us at least in part, as the ground and foundation of our entire afterlife experience.)

Another possibility is simply that God might create a new universe once the present one is “exhausted”; or, alternatively, that there might already be “other universes” out there, perhaps even infinite in number. In this way, existence in ‘time’ would never have to end.

Lastly, another intriguing possibility is the following. I have said above that our knowledge would eventually become comparable to that of God himself, but only in a way: we would still, after countless billions of years and lives, truly know only, from the inside, the lives of spiritual creatures like ourselves. Yet, it can be argued, God’s knowledge of the universe is vastly greater. As the foundation of all being, God knows intimately every living and nonliving thing. One might then imagine our souls eventually growing—“branching out,” as it were—into other modes of knowledge, appropriate to other kinds of creature. We might then perhaps learn “from the inside” what it is like to be, not just a cat or a dog, but even a tree, a river, or a star. This kind of learning is truly open ended, and even in a finite universe, it represents a potentially infinite task, depending on how quantum fields (which in principle need to be described by an infinite number of coefficients, even in a finite region of space) are “remembered” by God (this is also related to the question of how finely divisible space and time are, ultimately).

Hell

Traditional Christian theology insists that we must have at least the possibility of damnation: a total rejection, on the part of a free human being, of the grace and love of God, at the instant of death. In the present model, one could imagine these cases as life-lines out of which, at the moment of death, no soul emerges into the atemporal world, to go on living and growing; sterile lives, so to speak, that fail to bloom into an afterlife.
Presumably, under these conditions, the soul remains “trapped” in its last mental state of utter rejection of God, in the region of spacetime represented by that last segment of its world trajectory. Presumably, too, this could be “hell.” I have argued above that this could not be eternally preserved in God’s memory, and it would therefore eventually be “deleted” from it—indeed, deleted from objective existence (in any event, it would be forever “closed off” to any other souls exploring that particular lifetime). Anybody who wants to hold on to the notion of an everlasting Hell could perhaps entertain the possibility that the deletion may take a finite “time” objectively but an infinite time subjectively, as seen from the inside; a little like falling into a black hole, only backwards. Personally, these refinements strike me as an unnecessary cruelty.

On the other hand, one can certainly envision the possibility that the deletion of sins from a (saved) soul’s history might be accomplished in part by the soul itself, working together with God on a “first pass” through its past. This might be an enlightening, humbling, and possibly painful experience—finding out just how much of one’s own life is really “not worth remembering”—quite consistent, I think, with the traditional concept of Purgatory.

Assessment

The above model is offered only as a “proof of principle” concept, and absolutely without any warranties, implicit or explicit, but I believe it has a number of features to commend it, from several perspectives.

First, from a theological standpoint, we often read that the “new creation” is not supposed to be a creation “ex novo” (“from scratch”) but “ex vetere” that is, “from the old.” This is, literally, what I am proposing: the new creation is the old creation; the “world to come” is the historical world, only transformed, redeemed—saved; purged from all the feelings of hate, greed, and despair, left only with the record of countless experiences of wonder, of truth, of kindness, of generosity, of moral courage. And it is the world we have built (in partnership with God, naturally). It is the history of the human spirit, forever preserved, and forever available. And it is not just the spiritual reality that is available, but, of course, all our attendant experiences of the world of matter and energy as well. To the extent that we may ever again feel a longing for the sensual world, it will all be there: every rose we ever smelled, every golden summer afternoon.

Second, and I think this is important, this means that what we do here and now matters, and matters tremendously. We are building our own (and everybody else’s!) Heaven, right here and now. Perhaps too often, Christianity has fallen into the trap of dismissing all too quickly “this vale of tears,” this present world, as something too fallen, too corrupt, or too painful to really deserve our love or our allegiance. (Certainly Buddhism, as well, may be said to have espoused historically a similar view.) What matters, in this perspective, is only Heaven, the world to come, the afterlife of which, ironically, we know nothing, and which we have merely entrusted to

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1 See, for instance, J. Polkinghorne’s *The Faith of a Physicist*, Ch. 9
somebody else to prepare for us. In this model, this is absolutely not the case. Every moment in
the material world counts; every moment offers us a chance to save it for eternity, by simply
letting God into it; by living it in a spirit of gratitude, of reverence, and of love. One is
unavoidable reminded of Abraham Joshua Heschel’s advice: “live your life as if it were a work
of art.” With God’s help, this is what it should become, for all spiritual beings to enjoy “in the
world to come.”