



## INTRODUCTION

# Global perspectives on death and immortality

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Death is a fearful thing,  
Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*

The angel of death arrives,  
and I spring joyfully up.  
Rumi

According to many religious traditions, death is not an end but a transition into a new type of existence. Acknowledging this state of affairs, our special issue on ‘Death and Immortality’ addresses philosophical issues that are linked to the possibility of post-mortem existence by discussing such questions as: Is there a coherent model of persistence after death? Does belief in the afterlife require supernaturalism and a specific conception of the divine? Does such a belief have ontological or epistemic consequences for the human person? Which types of transformative practices are required in this process? Can such a belief be justified through empirical evidence or philosophical arguments?

To explore these questions from the perspective of global philosophy of religion, this volume features articles representing eight distinct traditions. Three of these, Jainism, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism, are traditions that are currently understudied by philosophers of religion in the West. This volume is the first to present scholarly pieces on philosophical consequences of the conceptions of death in these religious traditions. The five other traditions addressed in the following articles are more commonly studied in mainstream philosophy of religion. However, this volume presents selected alternative views within these traditions, namely, Mullā Ṣadrā’s Neoplatonist process metaphysics in Islam, the conceptions of Maimonides that do not follow the rabbinic established practice in Judaism, the dualist view of the Sāṃkhya school in Hinduism, Saṅghabhadra’s Sarvāstivāda perspective in Buddhism, and the examination of a contemporary theological *contretemps* concerning the immortality of the soul in Christianity.

When death is not considered to be an end, it is at least an essential transition. This transition may take various forms. First, biological death may be conceived either as a unique step or as a recurrent step in the life of an individual. Moreover, some traditions promote the proper achievement, not of biological death, but of another type of death, reached only by the wise and righteous ones. This good death is by nature unique and not necessarily physical. However, whichever way death is theorized, it marks a radical

reappraisal of the combination of the different principles that account for our existence. Theories on death therefore present the metaphysician with opportunities to delve into the nature and functioning of these principles. In this respect, articles in this volume shed new light on contemporary discussions in the philosophy of religion. It is particularly notable that they examine views which do not necessarily presuppose the common distinction between soul and body.

In her article ‘The Hard Problem of “Pure” Consciousness: Sāṃkhya Dualist Ontology’, Karen O’Brien-Kop examines a conception according to which subjectivity is radically distinct from experience. In this conception, only subjectivity is considered consciousness in a relevant sense; while mental awareness, mind, psychophysical functions, and other types of material reality are considered to be in the purview of the experience of consciousness. O’Brien-Kop then depicts the resonances between this form of dualism, and contemporary discussions on the hard problem of consciousness, especially Chalmers’s notion of consciousness as a fundamental ingredient of reality, and Ellis’s expansive naturalism.

In her article ‘Selfhood, Persistence, and Immortality in Jaina Philosophy’, Ana Bajželj investigates the particulars of a conception in which souls are radically distinct from a material reality that includes not only gross bodies, but also karmic and fiery bodies. Central to this conception is the fact that each existing substance is persisting and changing at the same time. From the perspective of global philosophy of religion, the Jain view, according to which the immaterial soul partially retains the shape of its last embodiment, suggests an interesting solution to the problem concerning how two immaterial souls can be differentiated in the absence of matter that would individuate them.

In general, Dharmic religious traditions can help to examine the hard problem of consciousness from a new perspective. They displace the problem of materiality typically by conceiving mental phenomena as a type of subtle matter which is as causally efficacious as physical phenomena. Within this framework, Ernest B. Brewster explains, in his article ‘Saṅghabhadra’s Arguments for the Existence of an Intermediate State (*antarābhava*) between Biological Death and Rebirth as Translated by Xuanzang (602?–664 CE)’, how the Buddhist author recognized the need for a temporal duration and a spatial extension of a soul between two births and how he met this need with his concept of an intermediate state. In Saṅghabhadra’s conception, what forms ‘the sequentially reproducing constituents of an individual sentient being’ is not a complex structure consisting of the soul and the body but aggregates of bodily forms, sensations, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness.

Another alternative to substance dualism is discussed by Ted Good in his article ‘Consubstantial Dualism: A Zoroastrian Perspective on the Soul’. In this piece, Good explains how, according to the Dēnkard school, breath, body, and soul are all produced by the light principle. The fact that these three creations of light are consubstantial explains that they cooperate against the attempts of the dark principle to disassociate them.

One common aspect I find compelling in these diverse ontological perspectives is that they dismiss our immediate phenomenal categories and encourage us to undergo religious transformative practices so that we can realize what really matters. From these perspectives, a good death should involve a change that is both epistemic and ontological, enabling a realization of the appropriate categories of reality. Moreover, most religious traditions emphasize an ethical life involving constant remembrance of death. In this dynamic, the good death essentially depends on one’s correct behaviour, thereby thinning the lines between epistemic, ontological, and moral progress. In his article ‘A Guide to the AfterDeath: Maimonides on *olam ha-ba*’, Josef Stern presents a fourth aspect of this multifaceted modification of the individual around death and describes the citizens of what Maimonides calls ‘the world-to-come’, as perfected intellects engaged in an intellectual and passionate love for God.

Now, the good death can bring about a minimal amount of ontological change, as it is depicted in Maimonides' metaphorical reading of the scriptures in which he notices that the wicked are called 'dead' and the righteous 'living'. This absence of focus on an ontological change is especially manifested in the Sikh approach, which promotes a necessity to 'die to oneself' by overcoming one's ego-centeredness. In this understanding of Sikhism, Arvind-Pal S. Mandair, in his article 'Death, Deathless States, and Time-Consciousness in Sikh Philosophy', invites his audience to view God not as an entity, but as the point at which life and death form a union. According to Mandair, a thoroughly reworked philosophy of time must be undertaken here because the good death leads us from the realm of time to the realm of eternity.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, Mullā Ṣadrā's approach stands out by being the one in which the soul endeavours the deepest ontological changes. In his article 'Life after Life: Mullā Ṣadrā on Death and Immortality', Muhammad U. Faruque embarks on a journey from a sensible world, in which the soul is a form related to the body, to an imaginal realm, in which the soul becomes a passive subtle matter related to the spirit after death, and further to an intelligible realm. Faruque utilizes Mullā Ṣadrā's arguments to respond to contemporary arguments against the immateriality of the souls.

Finally, one of the most important contemporary debates in Christian philosophy is the disagreement between the 'survivalists', according to whom the soul that was separated from the body at death somehow survives until bodily resurrection, and the 'corruptionists', according to whom humans cannot survive the loss of the body at death.

I have indicated above how contributions to this special issue, without necessarily presupposing the common distinction between soul and body, bring new perspectives to the debates concerning the constitution of the individual before and after their death. In her article 'How to Believe in Immortality', Carol Zaleski addresses the importance of this debate from a Christian practical viewpoint. She first tries to show that theological debates concerning the possibility of the immateriality of the soul have affected the contemporary practices of the Christian community. She then assesses the viability of the arguments at stake, concluding that, ultimately, considering harmony and fittingness of a given thesis within a broader set of beliefs or practices is more influential than advancing philosophical arguments to establish them.

Articles in this special issue collectively form an inter-faith investigation on what may exist after death and how we may justify belief in post-mortem reality. Although this special issue cannot cover all possible approaches to these questions, I hope it will convince the reader that global, diverse considerations on death and immortality can enrich the field of philosophy of religion. I also hope to make evident that despite their apparent differences all the religious perspectives featured in this special issue share similar concerns on a fundamental level.

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