Life after death: Is it logically possible?

By Graeme Davidson

Introduction
It is often hard to accept that a person you have been very close to and loved so much is gone from you forever. You may still be able to hear their voice and see them in your mind’s eye as if they are still around somewhere, if not in this world, then in the next – if there is a next world.

The Barna Research Group in Pasadena, California, found in a 2003 nationwide survey in the US that, although “millions of Americans have embraced many elements of a postmodern worldview – the vast majority of adults continues to believe that there is life after death, that everyone has a soul, and that Heaven and Hell exist” - 81% said they believe in an afterlife of some sort”. Another 9% were uncertain. Only 10% thought that the body rotting in the grave was all there was too it.

New perceptions about the hereafter are being grafted into the traditional perspectives. For instance, nearly 1 in 5 adults (18%) now contends that people are reincarnated after death. And one-third of Americans (34%) believe that it is possible to communicate with others after their death.” (See: http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=150)

Surely, death means the end of life, so, a priori, there can be no life beyond death. Therefore, the answer to the question is simple. Life after death is not logically possible.

But this is too glib. By death, we mean the cessation of bodily functions, which can wither and perish in the grave or in the flames of the funeral pyre. This is the death of our bodily identity. But does it also mean the death of our personal identity? The question then is this: Is it possible to give a logically coherent account of a person surviving beyond the ashes-to-ashes and dust-to-dust of their physical demise?

There are many conceptions of life beyond the grave:

1. Immortality through your bloodline
2. Immortality through your achievements, influences and the memories the living continue to have of you
3. Bodily resurrection of the same or very similar physical body
4. Emerging from death with a different body (including reincarnation) or ethereal form
5. The soul surviving without the body

Let us look at each of these in turn.

1. Immortality through our bloodline
Even the most ardent mortalist (if that’s the right word) would probably agree to the first two notions of immortality. They are logically possible and happen in fact.

a. If you have children, then through the passing on of genetic material through your bloodline you continue to exist. Over generations, your contributions to this pool dilute and mutate. Nevertheless, it is a form of immortality.

b. A variation on this form of immortality is cloning. Setting aside ethical and technical difficulties, if a clone of you is produced that is like you in all
respects, including minute details of behaviour, memories, thoughts, attitudes, beliefs and values, and so on. There is still a difference between your identity as a person and that of your clone. It is the difference in age between donor and offspring. This is no different in principle from distinguishing between identical twins.

2. Immortality through your achievements, influences and the memories the living continue to have of you

a. You will survive your death to a lesser or greater extent through records and memories of you, your achievements and the continued influence you have on others. The memories of “you” may be distorted, corrupted and become the object of heated debate as those who survive you unearth elements of your past and learn that you had a skeleton in the cupboard as well as the one in the grave. You may even become immortalised in song, legend and myth. Some people in fact achieve more fame – or infamy – through their deaths than their lives. But that, in principle, is no different from the way we view living people. We may be mistaken or deluded about the kind of people they are or only recognise their value after they leave a community.

b. As an aside, it’s a twist of irony that the Pharaohs of Egypt, who had a strong belief in immortality, have in fact become immortal, but not quite in the heavenly version of the ideal Egyptian afterlife that they believed in. And although theirs has been a bodily “resurrection” as mummies, it has been as archaeological and historical curiosities that they have achieved that immortality.

3. Bodily resurrection of the same or very similar physical body

a. Many of us talk of death in terms like “going to a better world” or “passing on” or “crossing over to the other side”, or “the day of the resurrection”, implying that there might be another life beyond this one. This throws up two of philosophy’s key questions: the relationship between body and mind, and whether one can exist apart from the other, and the question of personal identity.

b. Using cryogenics to freeze bodies of the dead, in the expectation of their revival when medical science has advanced, is something that is happening now. The question of body identity is like that of identifying babies in the maternity ward. It requires robust labelling and records of who’s who so your descendents will know who you are and the tax department can claim back taxes for all those years of your hibernation. Under these conditions, will the revival of your frozen body be like putting carbon-dioxide under pressure into flat champagne? The bubbly still tastes like bubbly. At least you’ll know who you are, or will you?

c. When you are thawed out a century later, will you have the same memories, thoughts, and so on, as you did when you died? Or will your death and time in the freezer have addled your brain so that you and others who once knew you many years ago don’t recognise you as the same person? It is logically possible that you do emerge from the freezer like Austin Powers did in one of his movies as much the same person as you were before you died. The question of whether you in fact do emerge as much the same person is an empirical one.

d. The idea of the resurrection of the body appears in the Israelite scriptures. For instance, in the Book of Job we read, “My flesh may be destroyed, yet from this body I will see God.” (Job 19:26). Among first Century Jews
there was a strong belief that the dead would rise from the grave during an apocalypse. This is mentioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in early Christian writings, including Matthew’s account of how the graves opened and the dead walked the streets at the time of Jesus death – illustrating how his death was a cataclysmic event. The story of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is of his rising from the grave, complete with the wounds of his death. It also states in the Nicene Creed of the Church, "I believe in the resurrection of the body" (it’s worth noting there is no mention of belief in the survival of the soul in this Christian creed of 325, or any other major Christian creed).

e. You can imagine God reassembling the molecules of your body at some future time to your unique personal template to reproduce you as the complete human being you once were. You might not get exactly the same molecules you had at the time of your death (but, then, that is no different in principle to how our live physical bodies are changing all the time as cells die and new ones appear). What matters is that you and others will recognise you for the person you once were.

f. There is no attempt to isolate the body from the soul in this scenario. It seems to avoid the thorny philosophical issues of whether we have an immaterial soul that can survive without a body and the question of establishing our identity as individuals without bodies.

g. Does that mean this resurrection of the complete person is logically possible, like it’s logically possible that you are brought back to life after your body’s been frozen in a cryogenic chamber?

h. Let’s imagine that Armageddon, the Day of Resurrection, has come and everyone who has ever lived as a human being rises again as the individual he or she once was. It would be one huge jamboree of people of all ages, shapes, sizes, colours, creeds and beliefs, reaching back in human history to a primeval Eve.

i. Does that involve you looking like you did at the moment of death – riddled with cancer, wrinkled and crippled with age, cut and bleeding from the wounds of a violent death, unconscious or comatose as you were when you passed away so that you are unaware that you have been resurrected? What if you died like philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch did, from Alzheimer’s or some other disease that destroys the brain? Does that mean Iris Murdoch rises from the dead as she was when she died, not knowing her Descartes from her Aristotle, who she is, or whether she ever lived before? Or do you get the healthy body and the mind you had before you died violently or began to degenerate into old age and dementia? And what happens if you were eaten by a cannibal? In the resurrection, do you end up as part of the cannibal’s body or do you get back your original body?

j. If you do get a healthy mind and body at your resurrection, that raises the question of whether, when you rise from the dead, you are the same person that you once were. If it’s a semblance or even a replica of who you once were, then it is not really you. It’s an imitation. For it to be logically possible, you will have to be the person you once were when you were alive in all essential matters – how you looked physically and how you behaved, your perceptions, thoughts attitudes, prejudices, beliefs, emotions and especially your memories. This will also determine whether others will recognise you as the same person and whether you yourself will view yourself as the same person. We would expect those who died during the Crusades to rise, shouting vengeance on the Infidel in a language of the Middle Ages, and for Queen Victoria to be running around looking for her beloved Albert – or would it be her faithful Mr. Brown? To
use John Lock’s words from his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, we would expect that there would be an “extending of our consciousness back to any past action or thought” – in other words, your personal identity depends on continuity of memory of yourself.

k. Even though you mightn’t have seen your old friends since your death centuries ago, is that any different in principle from anyone else you know that you haven’t seen for a long time. Your appearance will have changed, but there are experiences that you once had in common that you can point to.

l. How, though, will you know that it’s you who has been resurrected? What if a replica of you with all your attributes appears on the Day of Resurrection instead of you?

m. We can imagine this happening, but unless there is some logical way of differentiating between the ‘you’ who’s still rotting in the grave and your imagined stand-in at Armageddon, it will be you who’s there at Armageddon. Who does the ‘you’ still in the grave refer to in this instance, other than the dead person you once were? It’s not who you are now.

n. What if someone else inhabits your body on the Day of Judgement? You look like you did about the time of your earthly demise, and your family and friends act as if it’s you. But you start talking and acting like Adolph Hitler, insisting to God that former Jews, gypsies, homosexuals and communists be immediately sent to hell while Nazis of Aryan stock be sent to Heaven!

o. In regular life we do talk of people who are possessed. That means that they act as if something or someone else has taken over their lives. They may be deluded into believing that they are Hitler, Napoleon, Jesus, the Devil, a cat or whatever. We regard it as a delusion if it happens before you die, so why not treat it in the same way if it happens at Armageddon. The logic of the case would become much more difficult if personal identities were swapped with bodily ones, so that you found yourself with Hitler’s body, but you still acted like you do now, and Hitler had your body and acted like Hitler. We will look at that issue of having a different body in Section 4 below.

p. If you rise from the grave the same as you were when you died in an unconscious state or with impaired memory, this consciousness of who you are would be that of others who remember you when you were alive. And if, by chance, your resurrection includes a healthy body and mind, is this any different in principle from the changes that come from adopting a healthy lifestyle, undergoing cosmetic surgery or waking from a long coma? Similarly, if you regain your memory or lose some of your personal attributes so there’s only a Mr. Hyde and no Doctor Jekyll, then is this any different in principle from having undergone intensive psychiatric treatment or regaining the memory you lost? You are still the same person, even though there have been drastic changes in your life.

q. So, maybe it is logically possible that you could survive your death in a bodily resurrection.

4. Emerging from death with a different body (including reincarnation) or ethereal form

a. What if the bodily resurrection is not an Armageddon, as many Christians assume, but a reincarnation as another being – another human being, an animal or even a plant? The Bhagavad Gita says, “As a man leaves an old garment, and puts on the one that is new, the spirit leaves his mortal body and then puts on one that is new.”
b. There is some evidence for this view in the way in which some people seem to be born with knowledge and experiences that aren't easily explained, such as the astonishing genius of a Mozart. Hypnotic regressions to a former life, déjà vu-like experiences and memories of a past life that the person has no other way of knowing about but which historians establish as substantially correct, also lend credence to this view.

c. Even so, you can come back with a different body in science fiction, because you are substantially the same person with different limitations and abilities. In principle, this is similar to your having prosthetic limbs and facelift surgery after a terrible accident or acquiring a new skill or acting a part in a stage show. You have many of the same views, thoughts, attitudes, memories, etc. that give you conscious continuity so that you and others can recognise you as the same person in many essential ways. We often talk of a cluster of personal traits that give you personal identity and as long as a sufficient number of these traits are present, then we say it is you rather than a pale imitation of your former self or even someone else.

d. If, on the other hand, you are reincarnated as a mouse, we would expect to see evidence of your former life in your mouse-like behaviour.

e. But is that expectation reasonable? People who are immobilised by a stroke may not be able to communicate to others. Nevertheless, they can still perceive, think, remember, have emotions and so on. Couldn’t you still think as you did when you died while behaving as a mouse in your new life?

f. The problem with having your identity associated with a mouse is that of proving an ongoing connection with your former living self. Unlike stroke victims, most of us don’t have any memory of a former life as another human being or any other form of life, and we are suspicious of those who claim they do. We know that stroke victims can retain a sense of their identity, because enough stroke victims have regained their ability to communicate to tell us of their memories of what happened and many of these memories we can correlate with what we know happened.

g. Nevertheless, if you are a stroke victim, we accept that you are the same person. But if you behave like a regular mouse, the more we are inclined to say that it is a mouse and not a reincarnated human being. The mouse can’t both act in all ways like a mouse and be a former human being.

h. You will probably want to interrupt me at this point and tell me that reincarnation should be evolutionary, especially for those who believe in Karma. A mouse has a good chance of coming back as a cat and then as an ape and so on until it comes back as a human being and then, through subsequent reincarnations and good living, to become a morally better human being.

i. The same arguments still apply. A cat can’t be a mouse in its former life unless we can logically differentiate the former mouse operating in the cat, and I can’t see how that’s possible. It’s only possible if cats and mice act like they do in anthropomorphic fairy stories – as if they are humans.

j. In the First Letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 15, St. Paul refers to how those who die receive a spiritual body. This conjures up images of flying angels and ghosts haunting ancient castles. But it could also refer to how you change, as a caterpillar metamorphoses into a butterfly, into a heavenly form that can’t be perceived by those who are living. Our personal identity becomes associated with a different bodily identity.
k. But if it’s not the same body that you used to identity with, how do we know that it’s you who’s survived your death? We are back to the question discussed a few minutes ago of how we can be the same person in a different body. And the same arguments apply.

l. We are the ones who watch caterpillars transform into butterflies and make the identity connection. Butterflies don’t. It’s only in fairy stories that butterflies, acting as humans would, look back at their former lives as grubs. There might well be angels or other heavenly creatures that exist in another world, but does that mean we transform and join them?

m. Your consciousness or personal identity is bound up in memories of how you behave and act, and that is limited by how you think about your present mortal body. If you are an obsessive swimmer and you can’t swim in your heavenly body, then you have lost an essential part of your personal identity. The same goes for the musician who plays instruments other than heavenly harps, the artist who relies on their senses to create, or the philosopher who needs their brain to think.

5. The soul surviving without the body

a. When champagne goes flat, the bubbles leave their liquid medium, yet continue to exist as carbon-dioxide, joining with all the other carbon-dioxide molecules in the atmosphere. In the same way, our essence – in the Hebrew Bible the breath of life, the Ruah or, in Greek, the pneuma, spirit, that effervescence – can’t just disappear, so the argument goes. In the same way that the carbon-dioxide from champagne continues to exist, our immaterial soul continues to survive. In the Phaedo, Plato describes how the body is a prison and how upon death the soul escapes from the bodily chains that have tied it to the body.

b. Evidence for an immaterial soul surviving death includes near-death experiences and the accounts of mediums who claim to make contact with the dead.

c. The experience of mediums or psychics suggests that they have insights, which are sometimes correct and sometimes wrong, into your former loved ones. This doesn’t prove that the dead continue to exist beyond the grave. For example, do these mediums read your mind or make shrewd deductions based on your behaviour towards your dead loved ones? And even if they do hear voices or have visions of your loved ones, is it your former loved ones they are having contact with from the ‘other side’ or your perceptions of your former loved ones that they have tapped into? And why do some people have this ability to tap into the memories of the dead and not others? The question of how these mediums have these insights is a matter for psychological research.

d. What about near death experiences? In an article in the British Herald of August 1, this year, Lord Peerson of Rannoch claims that while undergoing a painful operation for varicose veins, he saw a ‘ghost-like vision’

“He was unable to see the spirit's face but noticed he was wearing what he described as 'a greeny-brown tweed suit'. He said: 'It became apparent he was some kind of messenger. 'He reached out, took my arm and led me towards huge granite steps that descended into the earth. 'Each step was like a wave of deeper pain but I took them, half-dreamlike, half-conscious, following my companion. 'He then pointed to a huge doorway of a cave and beckoned me to go through, which I did. 'He did not follow as I found myself in the presence of God.' He went
on: ‘It was definitely a masculine presence that felt warm, strong and compassionate.’

e. In an article he wrote under the title *What I saw when I was Dead*, that appeared in the Sunday Telegraph, in August 1988, A.J. Ayer said that while he was clinically dead he had a vivid memory of being

“confronted by a red light, exceedingly bright, and also very painful even when I turned away from it. I was aware that this light was responsible for the government of the universe. Among its ministers were two creatures who had been put in charge of space. These ministers periodically inspected space and had recently carried out such an inspection. They had, however, failed to do their work properly, with the result that space, like a badly fitted jigsaw puzzle, was slightly out of joint.”

f. Colin Blackmore, professor of physiology at Cambridge, explained this experience thus. “What happened to Freddie Ayer was that lack of oxygen distorted the interpretive methods of his cortex, which led to hallucinations.” Ayer himself later said that it did not weaken his conviction that death meant total annihilation.

g. Ayer’s experience and that of Lord Rannoch are similar to many who have near death experiences. Others report out of body experiences where they look down at their own body on the operating table.

h. The fact is that these are like dreams. You wake up and remember a vivid and unusual experience. There is no evidence that you, in fact, left your body. It is as if you imagined yourself outside your body. And I, meaning the person you see in front of you now, can shut my eyes and imagine looking at myself from the other side of the room right now. But this doesn’t mean that an immaterial soul or consciousness has left my body. It just indicates that I have a good imagination. Voltaire expressed this notion when he wrote in his *Letter on Locke* “I am a body and I think”.

i. However, I can close my eyes and have a personal identity without any reference to my body. I can think and I have my memories. Surely, it is this self-awareness or consciousness built up over years of experiences that is my soul, the essence of who I am as a person. I may need my body, including my senses and brain to have those experiences, but biochemical and neurological reactions are not the experiences themselves. The experiences are independent of the body. Some philosophers have argued it is this bundle of experiences, rather than some Cartesian ghost-like soul or spiritual substance, that survives the death of the body.

j. Does this mean then, that those who die as infants or who are born without the ability to remember anything about themselves have no soul? Are they like most other animals – the brute beasts, as some philosophers used to refer to them – who don't have this ability or, at best, have this ability in a rudimentary form and therefore have no self-awareness or soul to survive their deaths?

k. There can also be fake memories. You might think that you are Napoleon Bonaparte and that you fought Arthur Wellesley, the first Duke of Wellington, at Waterloo. You may even convince others to join your Napoleonic army, but you are mistaken. Similarly, you may be fooled about who you are when you rise from the dead. The accuracy of your memory depends on others who can correct it. But that means they too will need to be able to identify your unique soul. And how can they do that when you are either an immaterial soul or a bundle of conscious perceptions in the ether?
Concluding argument

a. Even if we don’t produce logically coherent accounts of a person surviving the grave, we may still believe that we will survive our mortal demise. The arguments against immortality may be faulty. So, no matter what others think, is it still logically possible in some way to survive our physical death? Let’s look at the following story to see whether this is possible.

b. I awake one morning with a headache, get out of bed, and sleepily cross to the mirror. I stare with blank amazement. Instead of the usual unshaven, bleary-eyed morning reflection, I find nothing except the walls. I look back at my bed and there I see what I used to see when I looked at mirrors. This I find very vexing. My wife wakes and tells me to wake up. My body, for this is what it is, does not move. After prodding me and listening for my breath and checking my pulse, she realises what has happened, calls the doctor, then the undertaker - while checking on the validity of my life insurance policies before booking an overseas cruise. One could even imagine that I look down and watch my own funeral.

c. This sounds like a plausible story, but it does raise logical problems. I mentioned waking with a headache and getting out of bed. But what woke and had a headache and got out of bed? It wasn’t I as I was still in bed with rigor mortis starting to set in. In fact, “I” talking to you now could not talk of “I” surviving beyond my death as there is no “I” to perceive the post-death experience. I am not like H.G. Wells’ Invisible Man, who’s an ordinary man with sense organs that others can hear and feel but can’t see. The dead me has no sense organs to see or brain to process the sensory information. There is nothing any more to feel a headache or look in a mirror. I’m the man who was. The reason the story sounds plausible is that the “I” of the story shifts from the “I” who is in bed to the “I” standing in front of you now telling the story. In other words, there are two “I”s. My survival is not logically possible.

d. Surely, with God all things are possible. Couldn’t God defy our logic and cause our survival beyond the grave? Although all physical things are logically possible with God, God cannot defy logic. God cannot claim 2+2=5 and get away with it any more than God can announce that you will survive your physical death if that is logically impossible.