LIFE AFTER DEATH: I

Anna Kalypsas: a philosophers and teacher
Mel Etitis: one of her best students
Kathy Merinos: a student of more average ability
Theo Logos: a religious believer with philosophical interests

(Anna Kalypsas, Mel Etitis, and Kathy Merinos are sitting together on a bench by the harbour wall, somewhat subdued as they look out at the sea. Theo spots them, and walks over to join them.)

Theo: Good afternoon! Enjoying the breeze?
Mel: Not really, Dr Logos; we've just heard that a close friend of Anna's died yesterday. (He sits down by them, on the harbour wall.)
Theo: I am sorry. Was it someone I knew?
Anna: No, I don't think so. She was a colleague of mine when I was still teaching at the University.
Theo: Was it expected?
Anna: Not at all — no-one suspected that there was anything wrong with her. One moment she was teaching a class, the next she'd collapsed; she was taken to hospital and died in an intensive-care ward the next morning.
Theo: A heart attack?
Anna: No, a brain tumour.
Theo: But it was sudden? She didn’t suffer much?
Anna: Not so far as we know, no. She didn’t regain consciousness after the initial collapse.
Theo: That is some comfort, presumably. Was she a believer?
Mel: Why, Dr Logos?
Theo: Well, she might at least have had some peace of mind at the last, knowing that death isn’t the end of our existence.
Anna: No, she wasn’t.
Theo: I see. Well, in any case it will be of further comfort to you Anna.
Anna: Why, Theo?
Theo: Well, you are a dualist, are you not? I assumed that you believed in life after death, though not in a religious sense, obviously.
(Mel stirs uncomfortably, Kathy looks interested, and Anna rouses herself, allowing herself to be distracted.)
Anna: Well, no, it’s not that simple I’m afraid. There are lots of ways in which people think about the mind, but they don’t match up in any straightforward way to the attitudes people have to what happens after death (or before birth, if it comes to that).

Theo: Hmm... As usual, I seem to have blundered in to an area that is more difficult than I had realised. *(He settles more comfortably on the wall.)* What are all these ways of thinking about the mind?

Anna: I’ll tell you what, Theo, let’s start with the simple and obvious division, and see how the complexities come out as we go along — otherwise we’re just going to get lost in all the detail. Have you got any paper?

*(Theo hasn’t, but Mel produces a notepad. Anna jots down a table:)*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physicalist</th>
<th>Dualist</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Nothing; when you’re dead you’re dead.</td>
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<td>• Resurrection of the body.</td>
<td>• The soul/mind/etc. lives on.</td>
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<td>• [Buddhist rebirth.]</td>
<td>• Reincarnation.</td>
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There — that might be oversimplified, but is it clear?

Kathy: Is ‘physicalist’ the same as ‘materialist’?

Anna: Yes — I’ve always preferred the word ‘physicalist’, because ‘materialist’ has other connotations, in politics and so on.

Mel: And should it be ‘dualist’? What about people who think that there are more than two kinds of thing?

Anna: Well, this is meant to be a simplified schema. If you take ‘dualist’ to refer to anyone who takes the world to be more complex than the physicalist does, then it can take in trialists and the like. And before anyone says anything, I’ve missed out non-physicalist monists too — for example, idealists. Perhaps we’ll come back to them, but is it all right if we stick to these two main sorts of position for the moment?

Theo: I suppose so — but why does ‘Buddhist rebirth’ come on both sides?

Anna: To be honest, it’s because I’m not sure that I understand it, but it seems to me that it could fit into either a physicalist or a dualist account. Maybe we can sort that out when we come to it. I did say that this was a simplified schema; it’s a starting point.

Now, I know that we started with the dualist side of things, but does anyone mind if we look at the physicalist side first? I think that that’ll make things clearer in the end.

*(General agreement.)*
OK, so the obvious view of the person who thinks that everything’s just physical is that the death of the body is the death of the mind, that the person’s just over and gone. There are at least two exceptions to that view, though.

Theo: Well, I rather think that my own position is an example of one of those exceptions, Anna. As a Christian I believe in a life after death, but I hold that on the Last Day, the day of judgment, as it were, god will raise me from death, calling back my body from the dust into which it will have decayed. There is no need for any mysterious non-physical soul — all that is needed is god’s power and goodness.

Anna: Quite — in other words, the resurrection of the body. It’s a view that’s been popular at various stages of the history of Christianity, but I’m not sure that it makes sense I’m afraid.

Theo: I fail to see any problem. God is omnipotent — he can do anything; all that is required is that he perfectly recreate me (that is, of course, my body).

Anna: Well, perhaps the best way to get at the worries I have is by using a science-fiction example. I suppose that you’re all familiar with Star Trek style transporters?

(All nod except Theo, who looks bewildered.)

I see — not a Trekkie then, Theo? Well, all to the good, perhaps; Star Trek isn’t exactly consistent in what it says about transporter technology. Let’s say that a transporter works by taking a data-snapshot of you — a mass of data that’s complete, accurate, and detailed right down to the sub-atomic level. Let’s assume that it’s 100% accurate, in fact — I don’t suppose that that worries you as a physicalist, Theo?

Theo: Actually, I have some worries even about a less than 100% accurate device, given the principle of indeterminacy.

Ann: Oh Lord, let’s not get bogged down in current scientific theory! Tell you what — assume for the moment that it’s possible, and then if later on you decide that something important hangs on that, we’ll come back and try to sort it out.

Theo: Very well, that seems fair. Go on, then, Anna.

Anna: OK. So, the machine takes this deep-structure picture of you and stores it; then your body is disintegrated into its component particles (painlessly and instantaneously, of course), and uses the picture to recreate your body at your destination. As you arrive, your experience is of standing in one place and suddenly finding yourself in another.

Theo: I see. Well, fascinating, and very useful, I suppose. The precise significance to our current discussion escapes me, however.

Ann: Don’t worry, it’ll become clear. Now, suppose that transporters become the standard means of getting about. Every morning you step into the local transporter depot, and
emerge from the one in, oh, I don’t know, Canterbury; then every evening you do the same in reverse. Week after week, trouble-free commuting.

Theo: Yes, fine; a reasonably pleasant prospect (although I should prefer to go to York if possible).

Anna: OK, York it is. So all goes well, until one day the transporter malfunctions. It does everything right up to a point: it takes the deep-structure snapshot, sends it to York, you step out of the York depot and walk off to the minster as usual. The only problem is that your body here isn’t disintegrated. As far as the Theo in England is concerned, it’s a normal commuting day; as far as the Theo here in Greece is concerned, nothing happened — he hasn’t gone anywhere.

Theo: Hmm... well, I can certainly see some practical problems. Who would own my house, for example?

Anna: True, but we can develop some more interesting problems. One of the employees of the transporter company takes you to one side and explains the situation; you discover that it’s not that nothing happened — it’s that you haven’t been disintegrated when you should have been. “No matter,” says the man, “we’ll have it fixed by tonight, so if you could come along tomorrow morning and we’ll disintegrate you — then everything will be back as it should be.” I assume, Theo, that you’d happily go along with that?

Theo: Hardly! That would be to submit meekly to my own murder.

Anna: Would it? You’d still exist in England after all. The only difference is that your body here in Greece is disintegrated a little later than planned. If that’s murder, why isn’t it murder when things go as planned?

Mel: Could it be because Dr Logos in Greece has now experienced things that Dr Logos in England hasn’t? I mean, if the machine’s working properly, then the person who steps out at the other end has all the memories of the person who stepped in at this end — but when the machine goes wrong, they’re different people, because the Dr Logos in Greece has memories that the Dr Logos in England hasn’t.

Anna: Nice try, Mel, but I don’t think that it works. After all, you now remember things that you didn’t remember yesterday (and vice versa), yet you’d surely want to claim that you’re the same person now that you were then. Having the same memories is a useful guide, but it can’t define what it is to be the same person.

Mel: True, but that’s not quite what I meant. I mean, when Dr Logos has to decide whether or not to be vaporised he’s experienced things that the person in York hasn’t. It’s not
memory but fact; the person in York hasn’t forgotten the events in the transporter station, he hasn’t experienced them in the first place.

Anna: Ah, I see what you mean. Yes, that’s a good point. I think that my first response, at least, would be to accept that that’s an important factor, but to deny that it affects the main point of the example.

Kathy: I’m a bit lost, I’m afraid. What exactly is the main point? I mean, why does it matter whether or not Dr Logos would let himself be vaporised? What does that have to do with life after death?

Theo: A good question, Kathy; I have been wondering that myself.

Anna: Well, my own intuition is that the person who steps out in York isn’t Theo at all, but an exact copy. It doesn’t matter how perfect a copy it is, it isn’t the original. In some circumstances it might make you feel better that a perfect copy would survive your death — for a start, you’d be as confident as you could be that your long-term projects and plans would be carried out as if you hadn’t died at all. Still, you’d feel much the same if you left an heir whom you trusted to carry out your wishes. In neither case does it make sense to say that you’ve survived your death.

Mel: Doesn’t it matter how exact a copy it is? Isn’t there a principle that two things that share all their properties are the same thing?

Anna: The Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles, yes. But we’re not talking about that strict kind of identity here; if we were, we’d have to accept that personal identity, our survival into the future, is impossible anyway. After all, as I said before, we all change constantly — both mentally and physically.

Mel: Yes, I know, but even if strict identity isn’t necessary for personal survival, it’s surely sufficient.

Anna: Ah, a good point. Well, I suppose that I have two responses to that. The first would involve a technical discussion of the status of the Principle — is it an empirical or a metaphysical principle? If it’s the latter, then your point is a strong one; if it’s the former, then it’s open to a counterexample such as the transporter case, and we’d be back to where we started. I think I’d also want to get into the question of the relationship of this principle with Leibniz’s law (the Principle of the Indiscernibility of Identicals). But rather than get bogged down in all that, I’ll stick to my second response.

There just isn’t strict identity in the transporter case. Now someone like Leibniz would have said the same thing for a slightly different reason: he thought that space had no external existence, but was an internal property of each individual. Being numerically...
distinct – being in two different places – would be enough to take two things out of the scope of the Principle. I don’t have to go that far, though. I can simply point out that the Theo in York would have a different property from the Theo in Greece, because the latter would have the memory of stepping into the transporter and stepping out again in York, while the former would only have the memory of stepping in.

Theo: But could you not say that about any stage of a person’s life? I now have the memory of responding to you, while the Theo of a moment ago had only the memory of hearing what you said.

Anna: Yes — you’re not strictly identical with your earlier self, but that’s OK, because what makes you the same person you were a moment ago isn’t strict identity.

Theo: I am a little lost, I confess. If it is not identity – strict identity, if you like – that makes me the same person that I was yesterday, what is it? And why would the Theo in York lack it, whatever it is?

Anna: Well, I could say that I don’t know — I don’t have to. All I have is to know is that there’s a difference between having a copy of something and having the thing itself. In fact I want to explain it in terms of the mind, but we’d better leave that until we get on to the dualist approach. And to be honest, I’m not really sure how a physicalist such as you can explain personal identity at all satisfactorily. Still, don’t let’s get into that argument now. The main point is that the appeal to bodily resurrection faces real problems.

Kathy: But I still don’t see how the business about Star Trek affects Dr Logos’ idea of the Day of Judgement, with the resurrection of the body. I mean, god’s omnipotent isn’t he? He’s not limited to what our technology can do, is he?

Anna: Sorry, you’re right Kathy, I’m racing on too fast. The point is that I was supposing that the transporter device produced an exact copy, perfect in every detail. Now, you can’t get better than perfect, can you? God’s omnipotence doesn’t make any difference here; a copy’s a copy, not the real thing.

Mel: I’m not sure about this, but what about Dr Logos’ point — the one about the principle of indeterminacy. Doesn’t that make a difference at all?

Anna: I don’t see how. It doesn’t affect the main point about a copy not being the real thing.

In any case, the principle claims that particles have pairs of properties that can’t both be determined; the more accurately you measure one property, the less accurately you can measure the other. But it’s not that we just don’t happen to be able to do it; the point of the principle is that the world is in fact indeterminate until observed. That means
that being omniscient won’t help — there’s nothing to be known. In fact, come to think of it, there’s a sort of argument against the existence of god in there somewhere

Theo: In what way?

Anna: Well, if god’s truly omniscient, then the world should be determinate, because every particle has been observed. But the world isn’t determinate, therefore there isn’t an omniscient god.

Theo: But have you not contradicted yourself, Anna? You said a moment ago that if indeterminacy held, then god would be unable to know every detail of a human body — but then you argued that god would know every detail, and therefore his existence is contradicted by indeterminacy.

Anna: True. But I wasn’t trying to put forward a coherent position, I was just expressing some thoughts about the way that indeterminacy might affect what we say about god. In any case, the principle of indeterminacy isn’t set in stone — future science might well show it not to hold. The main point for the moment is that it doesn’t affect the argument against the resurrection of the body.

Theo: I have to admit to being a little lost, Anna; what exactly is the argument against bodily resurrection? *(Anna begins to explain.)* No, no, let me try to sort it out for myself.

You are starting from the proposition that there is a difference between something and a copy of that thing. In particular, there is a difference between, say, this bench still being here tomorrow and an exact copy of the bench being here instead. Finally, you claim that the most that god could do on the Last Day is create perfect copies of our bodies — and so we (as physical beings) should not exist again, only exact replicas of us.

Anna: That’s it in a nutshell.

Theo: Hmm, I cannot claim to be wholly convinced, but I should like to hear about your dualist approach, Anna. It would seem to make the issue of life after death a simple matter, yet you seem not to think so.

Anna: No, I’m afraid I don’t. Perhaps, though, we should get something to drink?

*(General agreement is followed by a move to a nearby café, where drinks are ordered, and the four settle down to continue their discussion.)*

Theo: So, Anna, tell us what stands in the way of a dualist life after death?

Anna: Well, first I should make clear that there’s not one dualist theory but many; I mean, I hope that what I say applies to all of them, but I can’t be absolutely sure.

Theo: Fair enough. Go on.
Anna: I'll start with a view that in fact few dualists have ever held, I think — the view that the person is in fact just a mind, and that the body is nothing but a container, perhaps temporary, which serves as a sort of vehicle for it. On that kind of view, you can see that death might be seen as an opportunity for the mind to leave its vehicle, and continue to exist unencumbered.

Kathy: But I thought that’s what all dualists believed... The ghost in the machine, isn’t it?

Mel: That’s Gilbert Ryle’s catchy slogan, but it doesn’t have much to do with any real dualist position.

Anna: That’s right, I’m afraid; it’s a straw man, and one that’s getting pretty tatty, given the number of lazy writers who’ve pulled it out of storage just to have the pleasure of knocking it down and sneering at it.

You should understand, Theo, that this is one of very few areas of philosophy in which one sort of view has become such a dogma that the essence of philosophy has been almost lost. Any view that differs substantially from the holy truth of physicalism is treated as unworthy of serious consideration, and anyone who disagrees is treated like a Flat Earther or a crystal healer.

Theo: Why do crystals need healing?

Anna: Never mind, Theo — you’re better off not knowing.

Theo: Well, in any case I am surprised; I had thought that the very essence of philosophy was a willingness to question every and any position, especially when it one’s own.

Anna: So it is — in just about every area but the philosophy of mind. Still, back to our muttons. Most if not all dualists regard the Ghost-in-the-Machine picture as pretty silly. It’s clear that an essential part of a person — at least, a human person — is bound up with the body. All sorts of things that make us what we are — perception, memory, emotion, things without which we’d just not be persons — are either physical or a combination of mental and physical.

Theo: I see what you mean; so the dualist’s mind could not just drift off on its own.

Anna: Well, it could for all I know. One of the main reasons for my dualism is the evidence of my own experience of what it’s like to be a conscious, perceiving, feeling being; I don’t have any evidence for disembodied minds, and I can’t think of any evidence against them. The point is, though, that even if your mind did go on existing after your body died, it wouldn’t be anything to do with you as a person. It would be like freezing your body after death; you wouldn’t think that that constituted life after death, and neither would the survival of this unperceiving, amnesiac mind.
Theo: So you do not believe in ghosts?

Anna: If you mean the disembodied spirits of dead people, then no — I don’t think that that makes much sense, at least not in the standard, popular versions. Though later we might come back to one way in which it could be made to make a little sense. For now, though, can we agree that simply having the mind outlast the death of the body doesn’t give us life after death in the sense of the survival of the person?

Theo: I suppose so. I am a little worried, though, that you seem to be leaving god out of this; after all, he is omnipotent, and you have suggested no logical problem with life after death.

Anna: No, you’re quite right Theo. I’m leaving god out of things for the moment, until I’ve looked at the secular possibilities. In some ways bringing in god would complicate things, in some ways it would make them easier, but in complicating ways. Is it OK if I carry on leaving him out for now?

Theo: Of course, of course; do carry on; as long as we bring god back in at some point.

Anna: Fine, and of course I shall. OK, so where were we? Oh yes, we’ve said that recreating the body some time in the future doesn’t give us what we wanted, and that the survival of the mind doesn’t either. Perhaps we can discuss reincarnation and rebirth another time — for now, the reasons for rejecting a disembodied life after death are equally reasons for rejecting the relevance of any sort of transfer of such a disembodied mind from one body to another. It might happen, but it no more gives you the survival of the person than does being an organ donor.

Mel: Yes, I’d really like to talk about reincarnation properly some time, Anna.

Anna: Fine — remind me some time.

Theo: But if we do not discuss that, what is left? You seem to have dismissed the notion of life after death altogether.

Anna: Not quite; there’s one option that I’ve not touched on, and which I left out of the schema that we started with. Instead of treating the resurrection of the body and the continuation of the mind as separate options, we can put them together.

Kathy: But how does that help? How can two failures make a success?

Anna: Well, the problem with the resurrection of the body was that the recreation, the copy of the physical part of the person lacked the sort of link with the person that’s necessary for us to count it as survival; the continuing mind fills that gap. On the other hand, the problem with a bare continuing mind was that it would lack essential elements of the person, such as memory; the recreated body supplies those.
On this sort of picture, the, what happens at death is this: the body dies, but the mind continues to exist. As a disembodied mind it lacks much of what made the person, so it continues to exist but not as the person — almost as a sort of person-label, but one that contains some of the essential nature of the individual whose mind it was. Then, at some later stage, the person's body is recreated, and the mind is united with it. Now the mind has access to exact copies of all its memories, as well as being back in a complex relationship to a specific set of bodily functions — the senses, etc.

Theo: So, just as, on your view, one needs both the mind and the body for the person in this life, so one would need both for the person to continue into another life?

Anna: Precisely. It goes without saying, I suppose, that I don’t actually believe that any such thing happens, because as an atheist I know of no power that could resurrect our bodies in the right way, but it’s certainly a genuine possibility.

Theo: Are you saying, then, that we bring god in only at this point, to act as the necessary power to resurrect the bodies and unite them with the minds?

Anna: Ah, no, not exactly. I've been leaving god out of it, as we agreed earlier, but now I'll have to bring him back in. After all, as you pointed out earlier, I think, Theo, god is supposed to be omnipotent; now, that doesn’t help with the simple resurrection of the body business, but it certainly does open up all sorts of extra possibilities. For example, although it’s in fact the case that our memories, perceptions, and so on, depend upon the physical body, they needn't — that is, it’s logically possible that a disembodied mind have memories and so on. And, given that god can do whatever's logically possible, he could arrange matters so that, at the moment of death, the functions of the body were taken over by some new, perhaps mental, entity.

Kathy: A sort of astral body?

Anna: Well, for want of a better term I suppose... Anyway, whatever we choose to call it, it’s a possibility. It would raise various theological issues, I think, but there’s no real philosophical barrier.

Mel: But you don’t believe it, Anna?

Anna: Of course not, no. For a start, I don’t believe in the existence of a god who could do all that. And I’m not sure that something so unlike me would be me. In any case, it all seems a very clumsy and cumbersome business; I prefer my explanations to have more simplicity, more elegance.

Theo: Now, Anna, what appears to you to be simple and elegant need not be what appears so to god.
Anna: Perhaps, but we agreed a long time ago that we’d not appeal to that sort of ‘god works in mysterious ways’ response, didn’t we?

Theo: I suppose so — but it seems a little hard to refuse to accept that god’s actions might be beyond our comprehension.

Anna: That’s the point, though: if they’re beyond our comprehension, then we can’t talk about them, and we certainly can’t rest our beliefs, much less our lives, on them. How could you act on what you don’t understand?

Theo: Yes, well, I see your point; perhaps we can discuss that some other time.

Anna: I’m sure we shall. And I haven’t forgotten reincarnation and rebirth, either — we can bring in karma, too. After all, we’ve been talking only about the metaphysical problems of life after death; there’s a whole set of questions about the moral purpose of the different ideas.

Oh, and Theo... thanks; you managed to take my mind off things for a while.

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