

Death is a concept that I have always feared and been fascinated by. It is difficult to wrap one's mind around the idea that eventually thought and consciousness will cease to exist. Since I was little, I have had dreams and sometimes nightmares about death, and as a result, I have been interested in understanding it. When I could not fall asleep at night I would lay in my bed, thinking about what it means to die and the process of dying. If I thought about it for too long I would begin to panic and feel a need to quickly get my mind off of the subject.

I grew up in a non-religious household; my mother is agnostic and my dad is atheist. With little spiritual guidance in my upbringing, I have never really considered the possibility of an afterlife. Even though I am not religious, I deeply respect people who have strong beliefs in afterlives because I would like to believe in one as well. As I am getting older and learning more about the world and other cultures, I wonder if I can find or create my own set of beliefs around death and the afterlife that I can have faith in, either by adopting the ideas of one or several religions. Is it possible for me to find my own belief in what comes after death and truly find comfort in it?

Each religion has its own beliefs and rituals and stories around death and the path to the afterlife. Some outline exactly what will occur after death, while others leave it open to personal interpretation. The purpose of each religion's belief is to inspire and give hope to its followers. It encourages people to make the most of their lives while still maintaining respectable values. Religion is the result of human's natural incline to do well and choose right from wrong.

Although all religion generally has a similar message and themes, there are still a vast number of diverse religions, each with different views and practices. Many religions describe an entity most commonly known as a "soul". A soul is a person's essence, or non-physical aspect, that determines personal identity and behavior. The idea that people have a soul that carries into an afterlife contradicts the Eternal Oblivion Theory, which states that after death comes a lack of awareness. This theory comes from the idea that the brainstem is what creates and controls the mind, and when a person dies the mind ceases to function or exist. Eternal Oblivion contradicts the idea that an afterlife exists. The philosopher Aristotle believed in soul, but argued that there was no separation of soul from the physical body and that when a person died, so did their soul. Contradictory to Aristotle and The Eternal Oblivion Theory, Plato believed that soul was separate from the physical body. He broke soul down into three essential parts: Logos—mind and reason, Thymos—emotion, spiritedness, and masculinity, and Eros—appetite, desire, and femininity. Each of these three components had an important function in a peaceful and well-balanced soul.

The Bahá'í Faith says the soul is a sign of God and that people have no existence prior to their life on Earth. When a soul is born into the material world it begins its journey towards God. When a person dies, the soul and physical body are separated; the soul then begins its journey through many planes of existence. The Bahá'í faith's afterlife, or spiritual world, is not clearly defined, leaving it open to interpretation by its followers; it only says that it's a timeless and placeless extension of the world we currently live in, much like a parallel universe.

Another interesting take on the concept of afterlife stems from Brahma Kumaris, a new religious movement created in India in the 1930's, and believes that souls, also known as Atmas, are an infinite point of spiritual light residing in the forehead of the bodies they occupy. They believe that a person's soul determines who they are; the physical body is just a garment for the soul to reside in.

In Ancient Aztec culture it was believed that after death there was a long journey to reach the afterlife. This journey required the help of a man's dog, which was often sacrificed at his

death. The deceased soul would travel through mountains and deserts, and confront terrifying creatures like lizards and serpents before arriving at Mictlan. Mictlan is the Aztec underworld ruled by its Lord and Lady, Mictlantecuhtli and Mictlantecuhuat. After four years the soul would make the final journey across the nine-fold stream to enter Chic Mictlan, the house of the dead, where they would remain for the rest of eternity.

In ancient Egyptian society, the body of the deceased was kept intact through mummification and given offerings of food and drink. The soul travelled to the kingdom of the dead where it was required to recite spells and rituals from the Book of the Dead, a sacred book stating guidelines on how to preserve and dead bodies and give them a proper burial. Then the weighing of the heart ceremony took place to determine if the heart is free of sins. The heart would be weighed against a feather in The Hall of Two Truths. If the heart was judged to be pure the soul passed on to the afterlife, it did not pass it was eaten by Ammit, a demon with the head of a woman and the body of a lion.

In contrast to many other religions, Buddhism says that people are not in an eternal state of being, that they are constantly changing entities; therefore we have no eternal soul. Buddhism accepts the same beliefs about the cycle of Karma that Hinduism does. The ultimate goal of humanity is to escape the cycle of rebirth and reincarnation through good behavior and balanced Karma in order to reach Nirvana. Nirvana is a place of spiritual enlightenment where one is free from all suffering.

In the Jewish faith a soul is given to an individual by God's first breath. It's said that death is not the end of human existence, but what comes after is not strictly defined and leaves lots of room for personal interpretation. Judaism prefers to focus more on the current life on Earth rather than afterlife. Some Orthodox Jews believe in a place similar to the Christian heaven, or in reincarnation through many lifetimes, or that they will wait for the coming of The Messiah, a descendent of King David, to resurrect them.

Similar to Judaism, Christianity believes that God created humanity and gave everyone there soul. What happens after death, however, is much more defined. Christians believe that when an individual dies, God judges their soul at the Gates of Heaven. If they have lived a good life abiding by Christian teachings they are let in to heaven, if they have not they are sent to hell for eternal torment.

In stark contrast to the beliefs of many cultures, which have accumulated a strong spiritual background over many generations, today's Americans are uneducated and distanced from the realities of death due to science and censorship of the media. Modern technology and medical equipment allows people to be kept alive for years longer than they would live normally, and often their extended life is not a good one. Dozens of babies are born everyday with underdeveloped lungs and are intubated with breathing tubes, the lack of oxygen that should have killed them often leads to respiratory and developmental problems as they grow up. Elderly people are kept alive in hospital beds and are nothing more than vegetables, this leaves it up to their family to choose when they should die as opposed to the natural death they should have already experienced. Life prolonged by scientific advancements is more often than not, a life confined to a hospital bed with tubes coming out of every orifice. These advancements distract people from the fact that they are biological beings part of an endless cycle of life, death, and decay. During the Bush administration, photos of dead and dying soldiers in the Iraq war began being censored from publication. When casualties were announced on the news, all that was seen was a number, no images. The wars overseas combined with modern technology has led to a detachment from the reality of death, making it a less and less of a tangible idea to Americans.

I believe that everyone has a soul that is completely separate from the body. Death is a byproduct of the soul leaving the body, whether if by necessity, choice, or force, and can happen slowly over a long period of time, as in the case of death in old age, or suddenly, as in the case of an accident, suicide, or murder. The film, "What Remains", documents the life and work of photographer Sally Mann and specifically highlights a body of work on cadavers called, "What Remains". Photographing the bodies is a solemn experience for both Mann and the viewer. Mann compares the bodies to empty shells. It is apparent that there is no life left in them; whoever used to be there is gone and all that remains is a casing which serves no purpose, so it decays and returns to the earth to nourish and replenish it. If one can find belief in afterlife and have hope there is nothing to fear about death. One must come to terms with the fact that death is an unavoidable life process and that after it's over you will not be in pain or suffering.

By addressing my fear of death through research and inquiry I have been able to dissect and understand the concept of death, making it easier accept. Through my research of various religious and cultural beliefs and rituals around death I've come to find my own idea that comforts me. I believe that one's spiritual and physical self are entirely separate, though they are closely intertwined during the life that we know. The body only encases the soul, and after death all that's left is a hallow shell. Even after my research I cannot tell myself, or anyone else, where the soul goes after molting its skin. Though people have attempted to understand it for thousands of years through religion and science, no one can define the afterlife. Until one reaches that phase of existence the afterlife is just an idea that each individual creates for himself or herself.

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