

Is there life after death?

Essay

As I have grown up, people sometimes remark that I look like my aunt. My father's family and her friends often make gentle jokes at her expense and follow her positive example. Her favourite teddy sits on my shelf, next to the one that was my father's. And I carry her name, [redacted], as part of mine. She died four years before I was born. In this essay I will explore the ideas surrounding life after death, examining beliefs held by people of Faith, scientists, and our great writers. I will state my opinion, whilst looking at others and I will be exploring the different approaches of the three perspectives. I conclude that whilst the beliefs of the religious are unproven (and probably unprovable) and scientists have made little progress in determining whether life continues beyond death, the belief of writers that the dead live on through memory and memorial is - in our culture at least - impossible to disprove. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (New Testament, John, 3.16). In common with the other Abrahamic faiths, as well as countless other world religions, Christians believe in life after death. The concept of an afterlife is not new for religions and archaeologists point to grave goods as being evidence for such a belief in prehistoric cultures. However, outside of Buddhism which celebrates evidence that its adherents have had past lives, no contemporary religion even tries to evidence life after death. It is Faith that leads believers to bury their loved ones, knowing they will meet them again. The Faith that they have never lost, and hope that one day, they will be found in heaven to meet again and finally get their happily ever after. It is probably no surprise that scientists disagree on life after death. Whilst some will come from a Faith perspective and not require scientific validation for their beliefs, others have sought to research it. A University of Southampton study in 2008 concluded that 40% of those who survived a cardiac arrest remained aware during the time that they were clinically dead, before their hearts were restarted. The study's leader, Dr. Sam Parnia said, "The evidence thus far suggests that in the first few minutes after death, consciousness is not annihilated." Despite this, no scientific study has been able to conclude that any aspect of a person's consciousness survives beyond a few minutes of death. "When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st: So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, So long lives this, and this gives life to thee." Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 is often read merely as a love poem. But it is really a view on an existence beyond death. Shakespeare argues that so much of what we regard as beautiful - such as a summer's day - are imperfect and ephemeral. But that, despite the irony of us knowing little of his subject and much of the day he describes, the life he gives the subject of his verse lives on in the lines he devotes to them. Many people live on and are remembered through their work and the works of others. For example, Leonardo Da Vinci is remembered for painting the world-famous portrait, The Mona Lisa. He will forever live on and be remembered for his work, as we will speculate as to who she really was. In the same way, attacks on statues – such as that of the slaver Edward Colston in Bristol in 2020 – are an effort to eradicate the memory of those that some people believe should not be remembered. Ironically in Colston's case, the act of vandalism gave further life to Colston, and his memory was again discussed. On 7th July 2005, four young Muslim men detonated suicide bombs on London's transport network. They believed that by dying in this way they would not only be fighting back against what they saw as attacks on their co-religionists but would achieve reward in heaven. Many Muslim scholars have pointed out that this conflicts with Islamic Theology and condemn these young men's actions. The fifty-two innocent people that they killed live on in memory, memorial, newspapers, legal documents, books, drama and their grave markers. And now one of those fifty-two, my aunt, lives on in this essay.