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# **“The Immortality Thesis: Empirical Claim or Methodological Postulate?”**

Paul Tibbetts

## **Part One. The Immortality Thesis as a Disguised Empirical Claim**

The question I propose to examine in this paper is whether the doctrine or thesis of immortality is an empirical claim, subject to experimental verification and observational findings, or whether it is more a methodological issue. If an empirical claim (EC) then the contributions to theologians, philosophers, or even the intelligent layman are beside the point because irrelevant; observational data rather than scripture, metaphysical considerations, intellectual and logical consistency, or even deep-rooted emotional demands, would be the sole criterion for determining the validity of the immortality thesis (IT). Those defenders of the (IT) who reinforce their arguments with the empirical findings of parapsychological research are in effect claiming that this thesis is not purely a theological or even a metaphysical issue. Even though arguments in defense of the (IT) are seldom based exclusively on parapsychological phenomena, such arguments do appear to draw some amount of aid and comfort from experiments in telepathy, ESP and other suggestive studies. However, to the extent that positive parapsychological findings are shown to be the result of clumsy laboratory techniques, sloppy experimental design, or even questionable inferences in the experimenter's part, the position of those theorists who draw upon such findings is also weakened. Even when the findings of the parapsychological laboratory are beyond such criticisms, and when the experimenter is a reputable and careful student of human behavior, there is always the possibility that his findings will eventually become integrated into physical and neurophysiological theories; perhaps not into existing theories but into possible extensions of those theories in the future.

Some theorists in psychophysics have suggested, for example, that such phenomena as telepathy may eventually be accounted for by further research in the area of 'biocybernetics', or the brain's capacity for transmitting, receiving and processing information. After all, if an engineer on earth can modify the course of a Mariner rocket thousands of miles away by means of signals in the form of electrical pulses, then surely the human brain, the most physically complex biochemical-electrical structure in the known universe might very well be able to transmit and receive signals from one room to another! Besides the visual, auditory, kinaesthetic and other sensory receptors, it is entirely possible that deep within

the brain there are additional receptors sensitive to electrical signals from an entirely different range of the electromagnetic spectrum of energy than the now known sensory receptors respond to. This is an interesting and testable hypothesis that may very well someday receive empirical confirmation; the phenomenon of telepathy, or the transmission of information over a distance without the use of mechanical devices, would then be explained in terms of the cybernetic laws governing information transmission in the human brain. What would then happen to the supposed support such parapsychological phenomena had previously given to the (IT)? By becoming scientifically respectable and integrated within an expanded biocybernetic theory, the finding of parapsychology would now I suspect be somewhat embarrassing to defenders of the (IT), at least to those who had drawn upon such research to support the survival after death hypothesis; later they would argue that such findings were not relevant to the (IT) to begin with. (I am assuming of course that the defender of the (IT) who draws upon empirical findings is more interested in those phenomena which have not as yet been explained by science than in what has been successfully interpreted in terms of well-confirmed empirical theories.)

Given that in the area of parapsychological research the above eventuality is a very real possibility, then why wait until this development actually takes place? Is it because the (IT) is not otherwise defensible? Would it be less convincing without the questionable support of the *Society for Psychical Research* or the research publications of the department of parapsychology at Duke University? It is interesting to note that those who maintain that the science of human behavior (esp. behaviorism), genetics, and cybernetics reinforce the thesis of determinism are arguing in a way identical to the defenders of the (IT) when the latter draw upon empirical findings: both pre-suppose that empirical considerations in some way add to the veracity or truth-value of their respective claims concerning the possibility of free-will or personal survival after death. I am of course rejecting such claims.

It is also fair to question the integrity of those who argue in this way. I strongly suspect that both the determinist and the defender of the (IT) postulate their respective claims *prior* to empirical inquiry rather than on the basis of such inquiry; this is not so much *post hoc* explanation as an example of beliefs which originated in Sunday school, introductory psychology, or some other sociocultural influence. This is not to minimize the significance or even validity of the above theses but only to suggest that long before many of us became professional philosophers, theologians, or psychologists we were committed to one or even both the determinist and immortality arguments. With regard to such issues, I personally suspect that each of us tends to be partial toward that empirical data which seem to support his beliefs and to suppress conflicting evidence. Let me be more specific. In so far as the defender of the (IT) argues that memory, cognitive activity, awareness and a sense of personal identity to some extent survive the cessation of life processes at death, then he must either reinterpret or simply

ignore the vast amount of experimental literature dealing with the functional dependence of these psychological activities on structurally intact and properly functioning neural processes. It is unnecessary to document these findings at this point since even the intelligent layman nowadays has some awareness of the psychophysiological, medical, and clinical research into the functional dependence of cognitive and emotional behavior on physiological and social conditions. In my opinion, if parapsychological research tends to support in one way or another the (IT), then the empirical studies mentioned above offer conflicting findings.

With regard to the confirmation of empirically-based hypotheses, it is well known that the same set of experimental data can be used to support mutually exclusive theories. Ideally the empirical scientist seeks data which tend to confirm one of the conflicting alternative hypotheses. I will assume along with the philosopher of science Karl Popper that one of the genuine functions of the scientist is to *falsify* empirical hypotheses rather than simply to confirm them. This for the reason that the mark of a metaphysical as distinct from a scientific hypothesis is that no set of empirical data could even in principle refute the hypothesis in question. If an hypothesis only required positive confirming instances to be verified then the conflict between competing hypotheses would never be resolved. It is due to the presence of negative instances that theories are called into question and rejected.

With this in mind we can then ask the defender of the (IT) the following question: What empirical evidence would you accept as proof of the falsity of your thesis? If he admits none then he is in effect saying that his hypothesis is not falsifiable. If on the other hand he allows that such-and-such findings would seriously weaken if not refute the (IT), then it is simply a matter of setting up the experimental situation, either now or when it is technologically feasible.

On the other hand, those who reject the (IT) would maintain that there is at present ample evidence against such a claim. However, the hypothesis that there is no personal survival after death is equally unfalsifiable. What evidence would the defender of the negative thesis admit as confirming or at least making plausible the (IT)? He will in all likelihood admit to none, since what sort of empirical evidence in this world would confirm this thesis? In so far as neither position will not (or can not) describe the sort of empirical evidence that would cause him to reject his position we have reached an impasse. Neither therefore convinces the other for neither can imagine how his respective position could be falsified by conflicting evidence.

I will maintain that the use of scientific or other empirical findings to support or reject the (IT) is a serious mistake on both sides, based on a conceptual confusion as to the epistemic status of this thesis. I will propose that the (IT) is subject to *neither* confirming *nor* disconfirming empirical evidence for the simple reason that it is not an empirical claim to begin with. Nor will I argue that it is some sort of 'metaphysical' claim; the (IT) when viewed from the perspective to be suggested below is neutral with regard to questions concerning the ultimate nature of

such things as mind, reality or universals, topics which metaphysics has perennially been occupied with. What I will maintain is that the (IT) is a *methodological postulate*. In the second part of this paper I will first discuss what methodological postulates are and their role in both scientific and non-scientific inquiry. I will then suggest how interpreting the (IT) as a methodological postulate avoids many if not all the objections this thesis is subject to when disguised as an empirical claim.

### **Part Two. Scientific Theorizing and Methodological Postulates**

According to the descriptive account of scientific theories, those statements within the theory which are well-confirmed provide a literal description of their subject matter. That is to say, between a scientific statement and its empirical referent there is a one-to-one, isomorphic correspondence such that every true theoretical statement in the theory could be translated without residue into statements about directly observable things or events. E.g., the statement, "The surface temperature of the star Alpha Centuri is 4,000 degrees centigrade" could, according to the descriptive view of scientific theories, be translated into a set of directly confirming observations. This would also apply to such statements as "The hydrogen molecule contains  $x$  number of atoms," or "We are now living in the fourth interglacial period." Each of these theoretical statements directly corresponds to a specific set of observational data.

However, in opposition to the descriptive account there are a number of scientific statements which correspond to nothing observable. E.g., "New York City lies at such-and-such latitude and longitude," or "The mathematically-defined area swept out by the orbit of Neptune," or finally "The average American family has 2.3 children" are purely theoretical concepts with no physical referents. It follows that statements containing such concepts cannot be literally descriptive; they describe not actual but postulated situations. In this latter sense such statements play a valuable and even indispensable role in science for they express the theorist's need to postulate ideal or limiting concepts in order to simplify theory. The *instrumental* account of theories maintains that no theoretical statement in science directly describes or corresponds to what is immediately observed. Referring to the examples above, the surface temperature of a sun, the structure of a molecule, or interglacial periods would for the instrumentalist be concepts postulated by the demands of a particular theory. Change the theory and the sorts of things that need to be postulated will in turn vary. Accordingly, if such concepts as the equator and the upper speed of light come into existence with the sciences of topography and relativity physics then the assumption by the descriptivist that such concepts directly correspond to observable states of affairs is not only gratuitous but theoretically unnecessary. As the physicist Pierre Duhem expressed it, "... what the physicist states as the result of an experiment is not the recital of observed facts, but the interpretation and the transposing of these facts into the ideal, abstract, symbolic world created by the theories he regards as established."<sup>1</sup>

Rather than providing insight into the supposed ultimate nature of reality, an insight which would give us that glimpse of the real nature of things that metaphysics traditionally sought, the instrumentalist argues that a scientific theory is simply a system of rules, definitions and postulates for analyzing and expressing in symbolic/mathematical terms the subject matter of gross, everyday experience. What is most valuable about a scientific theory is its potential as an instrument for inferring from one set of observational data to some other set. As the philosopher of science Ernest Nagel has remarked, within the instrumental view of science,

Theories are intellectual tools, not physical ones. They are nevertheless conceptual frameworks deliberately devised for effectively directing experimental inquiry, and for exhibiting connections between matters of observation that would otherwise be regarded as unrelated.

[On] this view the pertinent question about theories is not whether they are true or false but whether they are effective techniques for representing and inferring experimental phenomena. The fact that theories contain expressions which describe or designate nothing in actual existence, or which are not associated with experimental notions is indeed taken as confirmation for the claim that theories must be construed in terms of their intermediary, instrumental function in inquiry, rather than in terms of their adequacy as objective accounts of some subject matter.<sup>2</sup>

In my estimation, the greatest virtue of this position is that scientific theories and scientific statements are not in conflict with either the assertions of religion or metaphysics for the simple reason that the former does not claim to be making ontological claims as to the 'ultimate nature' of its subject matter. Rather, scientific theorizing provides a reliable intellectual and methodological tool which enables us to anticipate and thereby control the sorts of things we find in our world. In this sense, then, the primary function of a scientific theory is to 'find our way about' rather than to construct all-encompassing explanations as to the ultimate rationale behind gross experience. Many of us are of course drawn at times to such all-inclusive accounts of reality; this is the expression of the metaphysician in each of us. I am certainly not one to minimize the intellectual satisfaction of large-scale theorizing, especially when it is done by truly imaginative thinkers as Spinoza, Hegel or Whitehead. Even with this in mind, I would still maintain that it is a serious conceptual error to assume uncritically that scientific theories and scientific statements provide objective accounts of some ultimate reality *other than the reality of everyday experience*. Nothing is lost when a theory and individual scientific statements are interpreted instrumentally, that is, as methodological devices or methodological postulates for organizing observational data. Accordingly, a scientific theory can be said to function as a "leading principle" or "inference ticket" (to employ the terminology of the philosophy of science) by means of which empirical statements are drawn.

Once we recognize that any given scientific statement of fact is entirely relative

to a specific conceptual framework and set of methodological postulates then the empirical claims of the scientist are seen in a new light. Scientific theories are then properly interpreted as elaborate methodologies for deriving predictions rather than as generating ontological statements as to what matter, mice and men are 'in the final analysis.' Finally, in contrast to being a systematic metaphysics in laboratory dress, science is a refinement of the techniques of inquiry already present in everyday experience. As John Dewey once noted,

The separation and opposition of scientific subject-matter to that of common sense, when it is taken to be final, generates those controversial problems of epistemology and metaphysics that still dog the course of philosophy. When scientific subject-matter is seen to bear genetic and functional relation to the subject-matter of common sense, these problems disappear.<sup>3</sup> (Also see 4-6)

By way of contrast, let us briefly compare the instrumental account of scientific theorizing with the view that the postulates of science carry metaphysical implications. The philosopher Thomas Hobbes once remarked after reading Euclid's treatise on geometry that his entire perspective of man and reality was radically transformed; he now came to see that both human and physical nature could in principle be explained in terms of universal physical determinism acting in accordance with mathematical principles, as expressed in the sciences of mechanics and thermodynamics. Two centuries later another materialist, T. H. Huxley, so effectively argued that Darwin's biological findings largely confirmed Hobbes's physicalism that even today his name is synonymous with anti-spiritualistic accounts of man. However, it should not be overlooked by both defenders and critics of Huxley's position that he was one of the first to recognize that the doctrine of materialism is simply a methodologically useful hypothesis rather than a metaphysical first principle. In his influential essay, "On the Physical Basis of Life" (1868), he argued for example that

... there can be little doubt, that the further science advances, the more extensively and consistently will all the phenomena of Nature be represented by materialistic formulae and symbols.

He then concluded on a note of extreme caution to scientists:

But the man of science, who, forgetting the limits of philosophical inquiry, slides from these formulae and symbols into what is commonly understood by materialism, seems to me to place himself on a level with the mathematician, who should mistake the x's and y's with which he works his problems, for real entities—and with this further disadvantage, as compared with the mathematician, that the blunders of the latter are of no practical consequence, while the errors of systematic materialism may paralyze the energies and destroy the beauty of a life.<sup>7</sup>

If more theorists in the physical, biological and behavioral sciences today were to take seriously these remarks by Huxley then perhaps less extravagant claims would appear in the technical and semi-technical scientific literature. I cannot resist the temptation to quote two examples of such excessive claims. Dean Wooldridge, a cyberneticist of some stature, argues that "our thought and actions must be as rigidly controlled by the operation of inexorable physical law among the physical particles of the universe as is the movement of wind and wave"<sup>8</sup>, and that "the origin and properties of the human organism—physical, behavioral, mental, subjective and objective—are completely and in detail the consequence of the normal interaction of the ordinary laws and particles of physics. In such terms, man is a machine."<sup>9</sup> This reductionistic thesis parallels a recent statement by B. F. Skinner in his *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. With regard to free-will, Skinner argues that "Man's struggle for freedom is due not to a will to be free, but to certain behavioral processes characteristic of the human organism, the chief of which is the avoidance of or escape from so-called aversive features of the environment."<sup>10</sup> Even the "self" is nothing more than "a repertoire of behavior appropriate to a given set of contingencies."<sup>11</sup>

To the extent that scientists make statements such as these then upon their shoulders has fallen the mantle historically worn by speculative metaphysics and dogmatic theology. Statements such as "In the last analysis . . ." or "Such-and-such phenomena are nothing more than . . ." are exactly the same sort of phrases that absolutists in philosophy and religion have always employed when defending a given cherished thesis. Modify the vocabulary and a Skinner is easily transformed into a Hobbes, and a Wooldridge into a Lucretius; that Skinner and Wooldridge are theorists who have little respect for traditional metaphysical arguments and a priori reasoning obviously does not automatically exempt them from defending the identical sorts of claims proposed by historical materialism. Most importantly for our purposes, neither Skinner nor Wooldridge seem able to recognize that scientific statements (whether about consciousness, behavior, physical reality, or whatever) are entirely relative not only to certain empirical findings *but also to the theoretical or conceptual framework in which such statements are embedded*. In this respect, then, Huxley was a far more sophisticated theorist than either Skinner or Wooldridge in so far as Huxley explicitly recognized that individual statements but also entire theoretical frameworks should in no case be assumed to entail necessary, metaphysical-like implications.

There is another argument against drawing such implications that should be briefly mentioned before moving on. In opposition to some of the claims made above, the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty once remarked that

I cannot conceive myself as nothing but a bit of the world, a mere object of biological, psychological or sociological investigation. I cannot shut myself up within the realm of science. All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of

science would be meaningless. The whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced, and if we want to subject science itself to rigorous scrutiny and arrive at a precise assessment of its meaning and scope, we must begin by reawakening the basic experience of the world of which science is the second-order expression. Science has not and never will have, by its nature, the same significance *qua* form of being as the world which we perceive, for the simple reason that it is a rationale or explanation of that world.<sup>12</sup>

### **Part Three. The Immortality Thesis as a Methodological Postulate**

Thus far we have exclusively focused on methodological postulates in scientific inquiry. Let us now briefly turn to their function in other dimensions of human existence. In economic theory, the judicial process, foreign policy, and political life, for example, certain basic assumptions serving as leading principles are indispensable to the conduct of intelligent behavior. It hardly needs saying that the type of situation one finds in the scientific laboratory is not representative of the vastly complex sorts of problems encountered in the above and other areas of human existence. Whatever the human condition is, it clearly is not a sequence of well-defined problems, with check lists of the relevant dependent and independent variables, and clearly-formulated objectives. Consequently the criteria we employ in the laboratory to distinguish rational from irrational working hypotheses (namely, their theoretical justification and experimental consequences) are too inflexible and restrictive for evaluating the leading-principles and postulates men formulate in response to everyday and more far-reaching ethical issues. What we require are criteria which will emphasize the consequences of a given postulate for releasing a man's spiritual, creative and constructive energies.

For some men the (IT) serves this function admirably; for others this thesis preaches a false optimism. Some men, such as the Stoics and Spinoza draw support from the doctrine of universal determinism; others, such as Epicurus, Marx and Wooldridge, from materialism; and still others from the postulate of an 'open-ended universe', where there are genuine options available to men and where human action can affect the head-long rush of the material universe as it plunges into an unknown future. William James suggested that with regard to certain religious issues a choice is inevitable; even the decision to make no choice was, he argued, an option for skepticism. In any case, belief or disbelief in immortality represent genuine conceptual and emotional alternatives. I suggested in the first part of this paper that empirical evidence is in all likelihood irrelevant to this issue. Nor is it a matter to be resolved on purely intellectual grounds, no more so than most far-reaching ethical and religious commitments. When interpreted as a methodological postulate, a postulate which commits us to the belief in a moral order beyond this world, our decision is not compelled by reason or evidence. Rather it is determined by the sorts of possibilities for moral growth and optimism which disbelief in the postulate of immortality holds out to us. I know of no more

fitting passage to conclude with than the last paragraph of William James's "The Will to Believe."

In all important transactions of life we have to take a leap in the dark . . . If we decide to leave the riddles unanswered, that is a choice; if we waver in our answer, that, too is a choice: but whatever choice we make, we make it at our peril. If a man chooses to turn his back altogether on God and the future, no one can prevent him; no one can show beyond reasonable doubt that he is mistaken . . . Each must act as he thinks best; and if he is wrong, so much the worst for him. We stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist, through which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive. If we take the wrong road we shall be dashed to pieces. We do not certainly know whether there is any right one. What must we do? 'Be strong and of good courage.' Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes . . . If death ends all, we cannot meet death better.<sup>13</sup>

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