

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Non-personal immortality

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of non-personal immortality. Non-personal theories of immortality claim that even though there is no personal or individual survival of death, it is still possible to continue to exist in a non-personal state. The most important challenge for non-personal conceptions of immortality is solving the apparent contradiction between on the one hand accepting that individual existence ends with death and on the other hand maintaining that death nevertheless is not equal to total annihilation. I present two theories of non-personal immortality found in Schopenhauer and William James and derive a set of systematic core theses from them. Finally, I discuss whether the notion of non-personal immortality is consistent, and whether a non-personal afterlife could be desirable.

Keywords: immortality; afterlife; William James; Arthur Schopenhauer; consciousness

Most theories of immortality presume that immortality is a *personal* state:¹ being immortal implies that you continue to exist as a person after your death, and that even in your deceased state, you're still the same person you were when you were alive. Once you're dead, you should (at least in principle) be able to look back upon your earlier life and recognize that your current state of existence is continuous with the earlier phases of your life.² To put it simply: you may be dead, but you're still there. For a personal theory of immortality, our lives contain two distinct phases: a pre-mortal and a post-mortal phase. Together, they constitute a single life held together by the fact that you are always the same person. Of course, there are different conceptions of *how* personal identity can persist beyond death. For some, an immortal soul will do the trick, for others, it's the resurrected body, for yet others, it's a mixture of both, or something completely different. But in all these cases, it is agreed that, fundamentally, life after death will be an extension of *my* life – I am the one who continues to exist.

But this poses a problem: how could this condition – that personal identity remains intact beyond death – ever be fulfilled? Explaining what constitutes personal identity is itself a supremely difficult philosophical question, and it only becomes more difficult once we start asking how personal identity can be explained not just within the boundaries of biological life, but even beyond. But maybe this isn't necessary after all: couldn't there be life after death without continuing to exist as the same person? Of course, this post-mortal existence without personal identity will still need to involve some measure of

continuity, or else it would simply mean that someone else will exist after my death. Thus, if there is to be some kind of immortality without personal identity, it must be immortality with *non-personal* identity: I am identical to whatever persists after my death even though the person I once was has perished. Unfortunately, it seems as if this concept of non-personal immortality is a non-starter since it requires the fulfilment of two apparently contradictory conditions:

- (1) The *person's* existence ends with their death: the person I refer to when I use the word 'I' ceases to exist after their bodily death, completely and irreversibly.
- (2) *My* existence doesn't end with my death: *something* that can legitimately be called 'I' doesn't cease to exist, even though whatever continues to exist after my death isn't the same person as me.

Attempting to resolve this contradiction seems to put us in a dilemma: if 'existence' means the same in (1) and (2), we end up with a contradiction – I exist and don't exist at the same time. And if 'existence' in (1) means *personal* existence, while in (2), it means *non-personal* existence, the contradiction may disappear – but then we need to explain not just what non-personal existence is, but how *I* can exist in a non-personal state. Most importantly, what could 'something' in (2) refer to? Of course, my corpse will enjoy a kind of non-personal existence after my death, but in no meaningful way could it be said that it is *I* who continues to exist in this state. Obviously, to resolve the apparent contradiction, we need a way to distinguish *my* existence from the existence of the *person* I happen to be. My aim in this article is to investigate whether it is possible to do this: devise a scenario in which both conditions are fulfilled and give a meaningful account of what 'my existence' could mean other than a kind of personal existence. To do so, I will follow a more or less inductive approach: I will begin by looking at two particularly clear and accessible accounts of a non-personal theory of immortality, given by Arthur Schopenhauer and William James. Building on an analysis of their examples, I will sketch a proposal for what a theory of non-personal immortality might look like and will suggest that the best candidate for a non-personal continuation of my existence is a non-personal consciousness. Finally, I will discuss two fundamental objections against non-personal theories of immortality: (a) that non-personal immortality is inconsistent (i.e. that the two conditions can never be both satisfied), and (b) that non-personal immortality, even if it is consistent, is not desirable. My proposal is merely a first stab at a theory of non-personal immortality, though, drawn from two particularly elaborate and promising examples. Of course, non-personal conceptions of immortality appear in a variety of other religious and philosophical contexts; examples include, arguably: the *Advaita Vedanta* idea of the self (*atman*) merging with ultimate reality (*brahman*); Zhuangzi's notion of returning to the eternal cycle of the *Dao* in death; or the early Stoic concept of the soul's reunion with the universal *logos* at the end of time. I cannot do justice to these different and complex theories here. Further research will have to show whether the account I propose can fruitfully be applied to these other ideas, and whether answers to the challenges outlined in the last section of the article can be found in them.

Schopenhauer: the immortal will

Schopenhauer is probably the one philosopher who has developed the most elaborate concept of non-personal immortality – although he didn't really intend to. Schopenhauer had no particular interest in defending immortality. On the contrary, he believed that death and the awareness of our own mortality are the driving forces behind

religion and philosophy, and explicitly rejected the Christian idea of individual immortality through resurrection. He also rejected the materialist claim that death is equal to absolute annihilation, though. Instead, he maintained that death is the end of our individual existence, but not the end of our essential being.

Schopenhauer's concept of non-personal immortality follows naturally from his general metaphysical framework. The title of his major work – *The World as Will and Representation* – already contains the whole programme of his philosophy. Drawing on Kant's distinction between things-in-themselves and things as appearances, he claims that the world (or reality) as thing-in-itself is the will, while as appearance it is my representation. Thus, Schopenhauer defends a metaphysical idealism according to which things are real only insofar as they are objects of consciousness. I have no direct access to the tree growing outside my window as it is in itself; all I have is a mental image, the appearance of a tree. Similarly, all of empirical reality (including our physical bodies) is merely appearances. The world is not a dream, though – empirical reality is still real, but subject-dependent; it is not *ultimate* reality, but the appearance of ultimate reality shaped by our subjective consciousness.

Ultimate reality is what Kant called things-in-themselves. But while for Kant, things-in-themselves are merely objects of thought, a mysterious and unknowable X in themselves, for Schopenhauer the one and only thing-in-itself is the will.³ Our bodies are what Schopenhauer calls objectifications of the will (the will made flesh, so to speak), and through bodily sensations like hunger or pain, we become aware of the fact that the will is what we essentially are. And not just our bodies – all of empirical reality is nothing but manifestations of the will, from inanimate objects to plants, animals, and human beings. The will is blind, though, which means that it doesn't pursue any particular aim. Every manifestation of the will strives simply for self-preservation, and nothing more. As a consequence, all individual manifestations of the will fight each other in a permanent struggle for space, time, and matter to preserve their existence, thereby producing the universal suffering of everything which exists. Thus, from a rational point of view, there is no reason to fear death: it would be better for us if we had never existed in the first place. But our fear of death and our yearning for immortality have no rational foundation; they are simply expressions of the blind desire to exist.

This general metaphysical picture contains three important consequences for the concept of non-personal immortality which we need to unpack:

- (a) If the brain (like any other physical object) is merely real as an appearance, and if consciousness depends on the brain, then the death of my brain is the end of my consciousness. Thus, from an empirical point of view, there can be no reasonable hope for an individual, conscious life after death.
- (b) Time, space, and causality are the subjective forms of conceiving the world of appearances and not ultimately real. So, the thing-in-itself is not subject to temporal and causal processes. Most importantly, it neither begins nor ceases to exist.
- (c) For Schopenhauer, space and time are the *principium individuationis* of appearances. They are the necessary conditions for there being a plurality of appearances in the first place. The thing-in-itself – the will – is an undifferentiated unity and only splits up into multiple manifestations when it is perceived under the subjective forms of time and space. Thus, our *individual* existence is merely another appearance of the will and not ultimately real.

These three points make it possible for Schopenhauer to claim that on the one hand, death is the end of existence, because it is the end of the individual appearance; but on

the other hand, death is not absolute annihilation, since it is not the end of what we ultimately are, namely the will:

You as an individual end at your death; but the individual is not your true and ultimate essence, but rather a mere manifestation thereof. It is not the thing-in-itself, but only its phenomenon which manifests itself in the form of time and accordingly has a beginning and an end. (Schopenhauer (1974), 274)

Our ultimate essence is the will, and it persists as thing-in-itself, even after one of its manifestations has perished. So, death can never truly annihilate us: 'It is just as impossible for us to fall out of existence as it is for us to fall out of space', says Schopenhauer (1966, 489). Moreover, time is only real in the world of appearances, and thus the will exists without beginning or end in a timeless eternity. So, if the will is our 'true and ultimate essence', then our existence can never end. For Schopenhauer, this is the only meaningful interpretation of immortality: we are indestructible and eternal – not as individual beings, but as the thing-in-itself, the one will, whose temporal manifestations we are: 'With death consciousness is certainly lost, but not what produced and maintained consciousness: life is extinguished, but with it not the principle of life which manifested itself in it' (*ibid.*, 496).

So, for Schopenhauer, death is a return to some kind of non-personal original state, from which our individual life once emerged. The apparent contradiction within the concept of non-personal immortality seems to be resolved. As Schopenhauer puts it:

We might indeed assert that our being-in-itself continues after death, because it would be wrong to say that it was destroyed; but we might just as well assert that it is destroyed, because it would be wrong to say that it continues; at bottom, the one is just as true as the other. (*ibid.*, 493)

My existence continues in a non-personal mode insofar as the will continues to exist, and can never cease to do so, since beginning and ending are temporal events which only belong to the world of appearances. My individual existence ends, though, insofar as my individual being (which has never been more than a temporal manifestation of the will) perishes forever in death. Once we leave the empirical point of view behind, there is no difference between life and death anymore, and thus no contradiction between ceasing and continuing to exist. We might elucidate this idea by using a Buddhist metaphor:⁴ the will relates to its manifestations like the ocean to the waves. Individual waves come and go but they are nothing other than the ocean. When a wave vanishes, it becomes part of the ocean again from which it was never really separated. Ultimately, there is no difference between the waves and the ocean – the waves *are* the ocean – just as *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no difference between life and death.

One might object that this is not actually a concept of *non-personal* immortality: if the will is simply the blind desire for existence, then the end of one of its manifestations just means that it will manifest itself again in one way or another. One individual being perishes, another begins to exist, and the eternal will remains unchanged – isn't this rather a theory of *reincarnation*? Schopenhauer actually agrees, though he refuses to speak of reincarnation (or rebirth), since the individual consciousness doesn't survive death and therefore can't migrate from one body to another. Schopenhauer instead coins the term *palingenesis*, namely a 're-emergence' of an individual being from the will. Right now, we exist as manifestations of the will. Sometime in the future, we will die and cease to exist. But the will is going to continue to manifest itself in some way: death means to put off one kind of individuality and to put on another one. These individual

manifestations are not strictly identical, since there is no causal chain that links them (remember that causality only belongs to the world of appearances). But both of them are manifestations of the one will, so they aren't strictly different, either. The permanent process of regeneration of all beings is 'the succession of the life-dreams of a will in itself indestructible' (*ibid.*, 502).

If this were the end of it, then it would be correct to say that Schopenhauer just proposes a theory of reincarnation – albeit an unusual one. But for Schopenhauer, death is not just a passage to the next re-manifestation, but also the opportunity for final redemption:

Beyond all this, death is the great opportunity no longer to be I . . . Dying is the moment of that liberation from the one-sidedness of an individuality which does not constitute the innermost kernel of our true being, but is rather to be thought of as a kind of aberration thereof. The true original freedom again enters at this moment which in this sense stated can be regarded as a *restitutio in integrum*. (*ibid.*, 507–508)

Our individual existence, like all appearances, is subject not only to space and time, but also to causality, and therefore strictly determined by the principle of sufficient reason. But death destroys this individual appearance, and thereby liberates us from the chains of causality, giving us the opportunity for a final denial (*Verneinung*) of the will. Once we have learned to give up the will to exist (through contemplation and asceticism), there will be no more palingenesis, which is nothing more than the will's permanent desire to remain in existence. Those who deny the will to live don't just die apparently (as physical appearances), only to re-emerge immediately as a different manifestation of the will, they die ultimately and irreversibly because the will to exist has been extinguished and the process of palingenesis comes to an end: '[They] willingly [give up] the existence that we know; what comes to [them] instead of it is in our eyes *nothing*, because our existence in reference to that one is *nothing*' (*ibid.*, 508). Still, whatever non-personal immortality is, it is not nothing – it's only the extinction of individual existence. This extinction can never be understood from an empirical point of view, which is confined to thinking in the forms of time, space, and causality. Thus, for Schopenhauer the state of non-personal immortality (at which we arrive by denying the will to exist) is real, but ultimately inconceivable.

Schopenhauer propounds two arguments for his theory of non-personal immortality, a metaphysical and an evaluative one. The metaphysical argument claims that non-personal immortality is the only form in which immortality is possible at all; the value argument claims that it is the only form of immortality which could be desirable. As we will see below, these arguments will resurface in a general theory of non-personal immortality.

The metaphysical argument. Schopenhauer starts from three premises. First, a metaphysical monism according to which everything that exists is either the will or a manifestation of the will. Second, the principle of *ex nihilo nihil fit*, to which Schopenhauer adds: *et in nihilum nihil potest reverti*, that is, nothing that exists can come from nothing, and nothing that exists can become nothing. Third, the ideality of time, according to which time is not ultimately real but only belongs to the world of appearances. From these three premises it follows that the will as thing-in-itself is eternal, while all its temporal manifestations will perish after some time. Appearances can never be persistent, so individual immortality is impossible. But neither can they be annihilated – this is precluded by the second premise – so they, too, have to be eternal, just not as individual appearances, but as the will, the non-individual thing-in-itself.

The value argument. For Schopenhauer, nature seems to show no interest in individual beings, and only cares about the species. From nature's point of view, the individual is without value, and thus there is no difference between death and sleep: 'In the morning the fly exists again; it also exists again in the spring. For the fly what distinguishes the winter from the night?' (*ibid.*, 478). Humans are no exception: '[The] individuality of most people is so wretched and worthless that they actually lose nothing in it, and that what in them may still have some value is the universal human element' (*ibid.*, 491). If individuality has no intrinsic value, it would be irrational to hope for personal immortality, since it can never be in my best interest to hope for something without value. Death liberates us from the burden of individual existence. It is the correction of a mistake that should never have been made: 'At bottom, we are something that ought not to be; therefore we cease to be' (*ibid.*, 507).

James: universal consciousness

A couple of decades after Schopenhauer, William James developed a different model of non-personal immortality in his Ingersoll lecture *Human Immortality* (1897). In contrast to Schopenhauer's idealist metaphysics, James accepts the naturalist claim that consciousness is a function of the brain. He then asks: does this imply that immortality is impossible because consciousness ends with biological death? His answer is no: immortality is still possible even if consciousness really is a function of the brain.

By 'function', James means dependent variation: changes in brain states correlate with changes in conscious states and vice versa. One possible interpretation of this dependence is that the states are causally linked: brain states *produce* conscious states. But this is not the only option. James contends that there are two possible interpretations for the relation between brain and consciousness: Either (1) consciousness is a product of the brain, that is, conscious states are caused by brain states, or (2) consciousness is not a product of the brain, which means consciousness exists independently of the brain and just interacts with it (James (1992), 1106). The second interpretation can be split into two different options: either (2a) as a theory of combination or (2b) as a theory of distribution. (2a) means that the brain bundles pre-existing strands of consciousness so that an individual consciousness emerges; (2b) means that an original superindividual consciousness is split up into individual consciousnesses. In his lecture, James defends a type (2b) theory.

Usually, when we claim that consciousness is a function of the brain, we're thinking of a type (1) theory, just like light is a function of the candle that emits it. The light depends on the candle: if I extinguish it, the light vanishes, and before the candle is lit, there is no light. James calls this a *productive* function. But there is another type: a *transmissive* function. In transmissive functions, not the existence of an object, but only its qualities depend on the function. For example, a prism breaks up white light into different colours, but doesn't create the light. Its function is transmissive, not productive, because the light that enters the prism exists independently of it. If I destroy the prism, the light remains unchanged. The prism's function only affects the light's qualities or appearance. Similarly, the pipes of an organ have a transmissive function for the air that flows through them. They don't create the stream of air; they merely shape it in a certain way to produce a particular sound. So, when we say that consciousness is a function of the brain, says James, why not interpret it as a transmissive function: 'My thesis now is this: that, when we think of the law that thought is a function of the brain, we are not required to think of productive function only; we are entitled also to consider . . . transmissive function' (*ibid.*, 1110). James illustrates this idea with an image he finds in Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem *Adonais*:

Life, like a dome of many-colored glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity. (*ibid.*)

If we imagine that this dome is more translucent in some places than in others so that it only lets a few single beams of light pass which differ from each other with regard to their place, brightness, or colour, then we have a perfect analogy for consciousness as transmissive function: the white light of eternity is the analogue of consciousness itself, the translucent spots of the dome are our individual brains, and the single beams of light are our individual consciousnesses:

Why, as the white radiance comes through the dome, with all sorts of staining and distortion imprinted on it by the glass, . . . even so the genuine matter of reality, the life of souls as it is in its fullness, will break through our several brains into this world in all sorts of restricted forms, and with all the imperfections and queernesses that characterize our finite individualities here below. (*ibid.*, 1111)

The brain is thus just a gateway for consciousness itself, whose stream it shapes and regulates, thereby creating the individual mind. Just like Aldous Huxley half a century later, James regards the brain as a kind of ‘reducing valve’ for consciousness,⁵ whose opening and closing correlates with the level of activity in the mind. After physical death and the end of all brain activity, the individual stream of consciousness will perish, but not the super-individual consciousness itself:

And when finally a brain stops acting altogether, or decays, that special stream of consciousness which it subserved will vanish entirely from this natural world. But the sphere of being that supplied the consciousness would still be intact; and in that more real world with which, even whilst here, it was continuous, the consciousness might, in ways unknown to us, continue still. (*ibid.*)

As an analogy, think of brain and consciousness as relating to each other like a receiver and radio waves. Right now, we are standing in the middle of a raging torrent of electromagnetic waves that we usually don’t notice at all. But if we turn on the radio, these waves flood through the receiver and are transformed into airwaves by the radio, which we then perceive as music. Music is a transmissive function of the radio: the radio doesn’t create the music; it just modifies the music contained as information in the radio waves so that it becomes audible for us. When we turn off the radio, the music vanishes, but it doesn’t cease to exist. It’s just that this particular receiver has ceased its function. The music is still there and can be made audible again by another suitable receiver.

So far, James has only shown that immortality and the dependence of consciousness on the brain are in principle compatible. Within James’s framework, it might be true that consciousness continues after death – but why should we accept this framework? Doesn’t the available scientific evidence clearly favour the production model? James denies this: ‘[If] we are talking of science positively understood, function can mean nothing more than bare concomitant variation’ (*ibid.*, 1112). All we can observe is that brain activity and conscious activity change in correlation with each other. The production and the transmission model are both hypotheses supposed to interpret these observational data, and in this regard, they are equally plausible: ‘The theory of production is therefore not a jot more simple or credible in itself than any other conceivable theory. It is only a little more popular’ (*ibid.*, 1113). We might then accept that the transmission model fares at least no worse than the production model – but are there positive reasons in its favour, too? James proposes three:

- (a) The transmission model is simpler, since it doesn't have to explain how consciousness is generated over and over again in every individual brain. Consciousness itself already exists.⁶
- (b) The transmission model better fits the observational data that conscious activity only begins after a certain psychophysical threshold has been crossed. This is precisely what should be expected if consciousness depends on the transmissibility of the brain (*ibid.*, 1114).
- (c) The transmission model better explains certain phenomena like religious experiences or spiritist phenomena (*ibid.*, 1117).⁷

All in all, James concludes, there is no reason to reject the transmission model, and quite a few reasons to accept it. So, we are justified in believing in immortality as continued existence of the universal consciousness. But isn't this a rather unattractive kind of immortality? It means the loss of individual existence, and while it may not be the end of consciousness itself, it surely is the end of the one consciousness that matters most to me: my own. James disagrees. Like Schopenhauer, although softer in tone, he casts doubt on the value of individuality: 'If all determination is negation, as the philosophers say, it might well prove that the loss of some of the particular determinations which the brain imposes would not appear a matter of such absolute regret' (*ibid.*, 1121)

A systematic sketch

While the accounts of James and Schopenhauer differ in a lot of respects, they also agree on certain fundamental points, namely:

- (1) *Realism of the mental*: minds have an independent reality and can't be reduced to physical states or objects. The metaphysical foundation of this realism doesn't matter, though. Schopenhauer is an idealist monist and claims that reality is essentially mind. James rejects this position⁸ and comes closer to panpsychism. Still, they agree that the mental cannot be reduced to the physical and is ontologically independent of it. The mental is intrinsically real and irreducible.
- (2) *Monism of the mental*. In contrast to dualist models of immortality, James and Schopenhauer deny that individual minds exist as individual mental objects. Rather, they stand in some kind of part-whole-relation to a superindividual mind: individual mental states can ultimately be reduced to states of the one mind. For Schopenhauer, this includes a metaphysical monism according to which only the one mental substance (the will) is real. James on the other hand doesn't deny that physical things are real. Thus, monism must only mean that all mental entities are ultimately one.
- (3) *Eternalism*. The combination of realism and monism results in an eternalism of the mental. The mind didn't emerge together with the individual being but rather has always been around. Schopenhauer explicitly says so when he incorporates the idea of palingenesis into his theory, and also James admits that his model fits better with a belief in pre-existence or reincarnation than with the Christian idea of resurrection (James (1992), 1099). The reason is clear: in a realist-monist model in which the mind exists independently and individual minds are thought of as reducible to mind in general, nothing can cause the mind to begin to exist (since then it wouldn't be independent). But minds exist, and therefore, the mental has to be eternal (or sempiternal).
- (4) *Devaluation of individuality*. The individual is not what matters. For Schopenhauer, the only things of value are universal ideas; James isn't so outspoken about this

point, but still suggests that the loss of individual existence might not be so bad after all.

Are these perceived commonalities merely accidental? Perhaps. But we could also assume that they are not, and rather reflect general features of non-personal theories of immortality. If they are, we could then draw on them to sketch a proposal for such a theory:

Non-personal immortality: a being *S* is non-personally immortal iff (a) mental states continue to exist after *S*'s biological death which are sufficiently connected to *S*'s mental states and (b) *S* has ceased to exist as a personal being.

To be sufficiently connected even though *S* no longer exists in a personal state, *S*'s mental states need to be in some way reducible to states of a non-individual mind. This is the way to solve the apparent contradiction mentioned in the beginning: how can I cease to exist as an individual being while at the same time continuing to exist in a non-personal state? By being part of a non-individual, non-personal mind. What James and Schopenhauer do, is give accounts of a metaphysical framework in which the connection between personal and non-personal consciousness becomes understandable: (1)–(3) explain *how* condition (a) can be true, (4) explains why it would be *good* if condition (b) is true.

So, non-personal immortality should be understood in terms of non-personal *consciousness*. But couldn't there be another sort of non-personal immortality, such as in virtue of being enmeshed in the causal network that is the unfolding of the universe, even beyond death? Then, my consciousness may perish, but the ripples of my existence will spread throughout eternity, thereby making me in some sense non-personally immortal.⁹ Of course, it's possible to regard this scenario as a kind of immortality. If some people use the term 'immortality' to describe ideas like this, then we should first simply accept it. It's not a philosopher's job to tell others how to use their words. However, we could still note that 'immortality' has a very different meaning here, because this alternative model of non-personal immortality excludes any state of *conscious* survival. But if immortality doesn't include consciousness, what difference is there between immortality and annihilation? Consider this example: even diehard naturalists will agree that we will continue to exist in a non-personal state after death, as dead matter. Your body is made of matter that doesn't stop to exist when you die, and that constitutes you as an individual. After your death, the matter that constituted you will disperse and through the endless cycle of nature merge with other organisms (we might well call this process 'palingenesis', too). So, the matter that once was you will continue to exist after your death in a non-personal and non-conscious way. Why, then, should we call this a kind of non-personal immortality? Wouldn't the most natural way to interpret this scenario be to conclude that there is no immortality in a naturalist worldview? So, if these two models – naturalist mortality and non-conscious, non-personal immortality – differ in no essential aspect, where is the difference between this kind of non-personal immortality and no immortality at all? Therefore, it seems as if the only way in which non-personal immortality would constitute an actual survival of death is through non-personal consciousness.

Objections to non-personal immortality

A theory of non-personal immortality like the one just adumbrated faces two fundamental objections: (a) Is the idea of non-personal immortality consistent? And (b) even if it is consistent, is this something we should hope for?

First, the consistency objection. Assuming that non-personal immortality presupposes non-personal consciousness, we need to ask: what actually is non-personal consciousness?

Isn't every consciousness in some sense personal consciousness? Remember that non-personal consciousness is the kind of consciousness which is supposed to survive the death of the individual. Thus, non-personal consciousness should be understood as non-*individual* consciousness, or consciousness without an individual *subject*. A non-individual consciousness would essentially be no one's consciousness – which leads to the second question: how *could* there be a conscious state which is no one's state? Doesn't the very concept of a conscious state imply that there is some kind of subject of this state, someone (or something) *for whom* this state is conscious?

An argument against subjectless consciousness might run along these lines. For many philosophers, one essential quality of consciousness is intentionality; if you're conscious, you're always conscious of something. Whether this object really exists doesn't matter. You can think about winged unicorns and golden mountains, but these are objects of your consciousness, too, even though they only exist inside your mind. Being directed at an object is part of the fundamental structure of consciousness.¹⁰ Now, being directed at an object also requires a subject who is intentionally directed at the object. If being conscious means that something is given, then there needs to be something for which it is given, too.¹¹ So, consciousness has an intrinsically dual structure and presupposes a distinction between subject and object. Note that this subject shouldn't be confused with some kind of Cartesian self: subject and object in this sense are not to be understood as metaphysical entities, but as *phenomenological* elements or structural properties of the conscious experience. Now, if consciousness presupposes a subject-object structure, then consciousness without a subject is inconsistent,¹² and non-personal consciousness must be impossible.

One possible reply to the inconsistency challenge is to deny that 'non-individual' and 'subjectless' mean the same thing: maybe there is a way in which consciousness can be non-individual but still retain a subject-object-structure? Wolfgang Fasching develops an argument along these lines. He agrees that we should not think of the subject of consciousness as a metaphysical entity, but only as a phenomenal quality of the conscious experience itself. That is, some conscious experiences have a certain quality of *mineness* – it is me who has these experiences, and no one else. This mineness seems to be completely independent of all physical or mental facts about the actual me.¹³ It is perfectly conceivable that I could have been someone else. I could have had a different body, I could have lived in a different time and a different place, I could have had different character traits, thoughts, and perceptions. We can imagine a possible world in which none of the facts about me are the same as in the actual world. But still, the idea that *I* could have been this other person has a clear meaning: I would then be experiencing everything this other person consciously experiences as *my* experiences. For example, imagine we're both taking a hike and you stub your toe on a rock. You feel a pain in your toe. Now there is an experience of pain in a toe, but I don't experience this pain (I am not its subject). Still, I can imagine being you, so that the very same experience of pain would be my experience. That is, nothing about the experience changes except for the quality of mineness: while you are experiencing a pain in your toe, this experience lacks the mineness a pain in *my* toe would have. Another example: if someone told me that my body will soon be destroyed and my consciousness will be uploaded to a cloud server, then from my subjective perspective it is perfectly clear what it would mean for me to still be there after the upload. Either my stream of consciousness continues, or it ends in a big, dark nothing. Either some future experiences will exhibit a certain quality of mineness (like some present experiences do), or they won't. If they do, I have survived; if they don't, I'm gone.

But, says Fasching, if this mineness depends on neither physical nor mental facts about me and is therefore completely independent of the actual, contingent individual which I

happen to be, if it has no defining qualities other than being mine, then what difference is there between ‘my’ mineness and ‘yours’? There can’t be any: subjectivity is just subjectivity per se. There is only one subject and there never has been any other:

There is no denying that there are multiple streams of experience, but there is also an experiencing I to whom the streaming experiences are present – and my suggestion is that the plurality lies in the streams alone while the latter, the to-whom as such, is strictly singular. (Fasching (2016), 151–152)

If this is true, then the inconsistency objection is defused: a non-individual consciousness is conceivable even if consciousness presupposes a subject-object-structure because subjectivity need not be individualized. But isn’t this absurd? Isn’t it perfectly clear that there is a strict distinction between my consciousness and someone else’s? Fasching replies with two counterexamples. First, there are reports of mystical experiences from various spiritual traditions which tell about a dissolution of the self, for example the Christian idea of the *unio mystica* or the Buddhist experience of no-self, or *anatta*. If we believe these reports, then there actually are states of consciousness in which the individual subject dissolves. Second, there is the ordinary, everyday experience of the flow of time. Once my present experiences are over and I don’t experience them anymore, they become similar to someone else’s experiences for me. But while they aren’t directly present to me anymore, they are still in an important sense my experiences. So, if I can accept that some experiences are mine even if they are not present to me, why can’t I accept that someone else’s experience could be mine, too, even though I’m not currently experiencing them? Within the framework sketched by these examples, non-personal immortality seems at least conceivable, even though it is hard to imagine what a state of non-personal consciousness after death might be like.

Still, one might reply that Fasching’s argument – even if it is successful – doesn’t establish what needs to be established. All it shows is that there can be no plurality of individual subjectivities – but this is not the same as a subjectless consciousness. As we have seen, the mineness of an experience is the quality which individuates different streams of consciousness. The fact that certain experiences are mine and can only be experienced from my particular first-person perspective distinguishes my consciousness from all others. If other conscious experiences were accessible to me, then there wouldn’t be any difference between my consciousness and other ones anymore. We would become one individual consciousness.¹⁴ So, if Fasching is right and there is no ultimate difference between ‘my’ mineness and ‘yours’, then this means that you and I (and all conscious beings) are ultimately one – but not that this one is subjectless. For the prospect of non-personal immortality, this means: either I become someone else after my death because my individual I merges with the one and only I, but then I don’t exist anymore (the particular I that I am right now); or in death, everyone else becomes me because I am the one and only I that exists, but then immortality will still be the continuation of *my* individual existence. It’s just that I’m not what I thought I am. Again, it seems as if there is no middle way between individual survival and complete annihilation.

Finally, let’s take a look at the second objection: even if non-personal immortality is consistent, would it be desirable? This question is intimately bound up with the question of the value of individuality. As we have seen, Schopenhauer doesn’t hold individuality in high regard and calls it ‘wretched and worthless’, and James thinks that its loss needn’t be a cause for grief. But aren’t these just sour grapes – attempts at sugar-coating the bleak reality that there is no immortality *for me*? It’s like saying: ‘Non-personal immortality is all there is, so individual immortality can’t be any good!’¹⁵ But then, why should it matter to me that some super-personal consciousness continues to exist after my death if it

isn't *my* consciousness? For me as an individual being, death is still the end of existence, in Schopenhauer's as well as in James's model. From a subjective point of view, there is no distinction between a scenario in which a universal, non-personal consciousness continues to exist after my death, and one in which nothing exists anymore, and my individual existence comes to an absolute end. In fact, even if we don't believe in any kind of immortality whatsoever, we can happily accept that consciousness per se will continue to exist after my death: other people's consciousness. When I die and my consciousness vanishes once and for all, the consciousness of my children or friends will still be there. This may be welcome to them, and maybe to me, too, because I wish for their conscious lives to continue. But ultimately, if *my* immortal life is at stake, it doesn't matter if someone else continues to live. Life continues after death, of course, but not *my* life – and isn't this the one life I'm primarily interested in when I think about life after death? At best, the fact that others will live on can be a reason for me to hope for some kind of metaphorical immortality: I will survive in the memory of my loved ones or of future generations. But this is no real immortality – my life as a conscious being is over. In the most important sense of the phrase, I'm not there anymore. Just because someone or something continues to exist, this doesn't mean that I am immortal – even if this someone or something once stood in some relation to me. Why shouldn't this apply to Schopenhauer's one will or James's universal consciousness, too? It seems as if we are facing the prospect of complete annihilation again, only this time in an idealist disguise: if some consciousness that used to be me continues to exist, then this is just as if some pieces of matter continue to exist that used to be me. There is no significant difference between the individual mind merging with the one universal consciousness, and a corpse being reabsorbed by organic nature. Thus, whether non-personal immortality is desirable or not depends on more than just the value of individuality. Even if we are prepared to lower its value, the question remains whether the wish for non-personal immortality is a wish for *immortality* after all. For their critics, non-personal theories of immortality might just be elaborate versions of the claim that there is no immortality.

Is this the end of it? Maybe not. As we have seen, the core idea of the Schopenhauer-James Model of non-personal immortality is that we are immortal because we are part of a larger, non-individual mind: just as a raindrop isn't destroyed when it falls into a lake, but simply becomes part of it, the individual mind survives by merging with a non-individual mind. If we adopt this model (and there is good reason to do so), then it all hinges on the question whether we can make sense of the idea of a non-individual, namely subjectless, consciousness. I have put forward a few reasons to be sceptical whether this is even conceivable. But against this stands the evidence at which Fasching hints – the testimony of mystics and others who have experienced altered states of consciousness and who claim that in fact there is consciousness beyond the individual subject. So, the task for any theory of non-personal immortality remains either to show why non-conscious modes of non-personal existence might deserve the label 'immortality' or to develop theoretical models to defend and make sense of the mystical claims of non-individual consciousness. Whether either of these endeavours might be successful, is an open question.

Competing interests. None.

Notes

1. A few cases in point: the SEP article on the afterlife by William Hasker and Charles Taliaferro puts the central question in the debate like this: 'Is it possible for *persons* to survive biological death?' (Hasker and Taliaferro (2019), *my italics*). Similarly, Shelly Kagan understands immortality in terms of personal identity: 'Could there

be someone who is the very same person that I am, even after the death of my body?' (Kagan (2012), 114). Stephen Davis claims that there are two core philosophical problems when it comes to discussing the possibility of life after death: 'the mind-body problem and the problem of personal identity' (Davis (2015), 14).

2. Unless your recognition is clouded by some contingent factor. For example, Buddhism assumes that we usually have no recollection of our earlier lives because our memory is blocked by karmic factors. After reaching enlightenment, though, we will regain complete knowledge of all our past rebirths (at least this is said about the Buddha, see the *Bhayabheravasutta*, MN I, 4).
3. There are different ways to interpret Schopenhauer's claim that the will is the thing-in-itself. See Nicholls (1994) for a thorough discussion.
4. From the *Lankavatara-sutra* II, 9.
5. 'To make biological survival possible, Mind at Large has to be funneled through the reducing valve of the brain and nervous system. What comes out at the other end is a measly trickle of the kind of consciousness which will help us to stay alive on the surface of this particular planet' (Huxley (2004), 23).
6. Here, James's theory has noticeably panpsychist overtones. His argument also resembles one that Nagel (1979) proposed in favour of panpsychism: that it allows us to avoid an emergentist theory of the mental.
7. Most people today will probably find this argument rather unconvincing.
8. 'I am myself anything but a pantheist of the monistic pattern' (James (1992), 1098).
9. I owe this point to an anonymous reviewer.
10. This point is contentious. Some philosophers defend non-intentional theories of consciousness and argue that there are at least some conscious states which have no intentional object, for example a headache. Others argue that there are non-dual modes of consciousness in which no distinction between subject and object applies. We don't need to get into this debate here, since our problem is whether there can be consciousness without a *subject*, not without an object. For a thorough discussion, see Crane (1998; 2003).
11. This classical analysis of intentionality has been defended, among others, by Husserl (1970, 171) and Strawson (1959, 97). Both argue (for different reasons) that the concept of a subjectless experience is incoherent. See also Lowe (1996, 25).
12. For an elaborate argument along these lines, see Zahavi (2005, 115–124).
13. On mineness, see Zahavi (2005, 124–126) and Nagel (1986, 54–57).
14. Husserl, for example, explicitly rejects this idea and argues: '[If] what belongs to the other's own essence were directly accessible, it would be merely a moment of my own essence, and ultimately he himself and I myself would be the same' (Husserl (1960), 109).
15. See, for example, Papadaki (2021, 441) and Janaway (2017, 3717), who argue that Schopenhauer's concept of non-personal immortality offers little solace in the face of death.

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