

Missing, Presumed Not Dead¹

Socrates had a number of arguments for the immortality of the soul. Less ambitious than Socrates, I don't argue that immaterial souls *exist*, nor do I argue that *if* they exist, they *must* be immortal. Instead, I argue that if they exist, we should at least *presume* them to be immortal. A presumption of immortality is, whilst less striking than a cast-iron assurance, philosophically significant.

The argument runs as follows:

1. Mereological simples are not subject to entropy
 2. For any x and any time, t , if x exists at t , and x isn't subject to entropy, then for any later time, t_n , we have reason to presume that x exists at t_n
 3. If we have reason to believe that x exists, but no theoretical reason to posit mereological complexity in x , we should presume that x is simple
 4. If immaterial souls exist, we have no theoretical reason for positing mereological complexity in them
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5. If immaterial souls exist, and if we have reason to believe that they exist, then we should presume that they are mereologically simple (from 3 and 4)
 6. If immaterial souls exist, and if we have reason to believe that they exist, then we should presume that they are not subject to entropy (from 1 and 5)
 7. For any x and any time, t , if x is an immaterial soul, and x exists at t , and we have reason to believe this, then we should presume that, for any later time, t_n , we have reason to presume that x exists at t_n (from 2 and 6)

In other words, line 7 tells us that if there are immaterial souls, we should presume that we should presume that they are immortal. As far as I'm concerned, 7 is already a pretty strong conclusion, but we can strengthen it on the following assumption:

The Presumption Assumption:

if you should presume that you should presume that p , you should simply presume that p .²

If so, 7 entails:

8. If x is an immaterial soul, and you have reason to believe that it exists, then you should presume that x is immortal³

The argument is valid. So, if premises 1-4 are true, then the argument (at least for 7, if not for 8) will also be *sound*. In what follows, I present reasons for adopting all four premises.

The truth of premise 1 is easy to establish. Its justification needn't detain us long, nor will it require that we take a stance on *exactly* what entropy is. So long as entropy is a measure of the molecular disorder, or the randomness, of a system (which on any plausible interpretation, entropy is), then premise 1 will follow. A single mereologically simple entity is not a system. It cannot be subject to entropy.

Socrates seems to have thought that if something is mereologically simple then it's also indestructible (Phaedo 78-79).⁴ For him, destruction was to be defined in terms of an entity breaking apart. Since a mereologically simple entity has no parts, it cannot *break* apart, and so it cannot be destroyed. I don't accept Socrates' definition of destruction. It seems to me that a mereologically simple entity, without breaking into parts, could simply cease to be. For example, an all-powerful God could simply snuff it out of being.

Moses Mendelssohn (2007), inspired by Socrates, argues that mereologically simple entities cannot go out of being – not because of the definition of 'destruction', but because of considerations concerning *time*. As Kant presents Mendelssohn's argument:

a simple being cannot cease to be at all because, since it cannot be diminished and thus lose more and more of its existence, and so be gradually transformed into nothing (since

it has no parts and thus no plurality in itself), there would be no time at all between a moment in which it is and another moment in which it is not, which is impossible.

(B413-414)

Jonathan Bennett is unimpressed. He writes:

Mendelssohn's argument fails, because it is based on a wrong view about what non-gradual or discontinuous change would have to involve. An item x can change discontinuously from being F to being G just so long as there is an instant t such that Fx at t and Gx at every instant after t . There is no question of x 's being G at the 'next instant': there is no 'next instant', for the set of instants-later-than- t has no earliest member.

(Bennett, 1974, p. 58)

Jonathan Simon and Colin Marshall (2017) are more sympathetic to Mendelssohn. On their account, his argument has to do with the relationship between discontinuous processes and the continuity of time, in addition to considerations about arbitrariness. If Mendelssohn's argument works – whatever it is exactly – then you'll have a stronger conclusion than my argument. You won't just have a *presumption* of immortality; you'll have a *proof* of immortality. But since it's not clear what Mendelssohn's argument is, and whether it works, I think there's room on the market for my less ambitious argument.

Alongside Peter Unger (2005, pp. 486-490), and against Socrates and Mendelssohn, I see no obvious contradiction in a mereologically simple soul being snuffed out. Accordingly, premise 2 represents my compromise with that possibility. With Socrates, I *do* accept that a simple entity cannot decay, nor can it be torn apart. Consequently, the most recognisable modes of destruction, such as entropy, for example, are not open to it. There's a sense, therefore, in which its destruction would be *miraculous* – a violation of a sort of conservation principle. This insight, that the destruction of a simple would be in some sense 'miraculous', animates premise 2.⁵

Some argue that physics has revealed to us the spontaneous creation and the spontaneous disappearances of simple particles. Lawrence Krauss (2012) gathers this evidence to suggest that the laws of physics allow for creation, and for the destruction, of simple particles ‘from nothing.’ David Albert (2012), in his scathing review, points out that the things that pop in and out of existence, in Krauss’s report, are not at all fundamental. Their popping depends upon an underlying arrangement of quantum fields. He writes:

The fact that some arrangements of fields happen to correspond to the existence of particles and some don’t is not a whit more mysterious than the fact that some of the possible arrangements of my fingers happen to correspond to the existence of a fist and some don’t. And the fact that particles can pop in and out of existence, over time, as those fields rearrange themselves, is not a whit more mysterious than the fact that fists can pop in and out of existence, over time, as my fingers rearrange themselves. And none of these poppings — if you look at them aright — amount to anything even remotely in the neighborhood of a creation from nothing.”

Nor do these “poppings” amount to the spontaneous ceasing to be of anything metaphysically simple. You might accuse me of confusing simplicity and fundamentality. Krauss’s particles are *simple*, since they don’t in any obvious sense have *parts*. The fact that their existence supervenes upon the arrangement of underlying fields merely renders them *non-fundamental*. But it doesn’t render them complex, and thus they are still a counterexample to the notion that the spontaneous destruction of simples would be in some sense or other, miraculous. Such poppings out of existence happen all the time.

But, it seems to me that, on the assumption of field theory, particles aren’t really a part of the fundamental ontology of the universe at all. Talk of particles, according to field theory, is just a more convenient way of talking about the arrangement of fields. And so, simple particles going out of existence cannot be a counter-example to anything if, as it turns out, simple particles don’t really exist.

Of course, you might say that these particles exist even though their existence is *grounded* in the arrangement of fields. But *why* say that?

If you can give a complete description of the universe without referring to particles; if particle-talk is just a useful shorthand, then the particles of physics are nothing more than what Russell would have called incomplete symbols. Souls, by contrast, aren't introduced by their adherents as a mere *façon de parler*. Souls are thought to be, by those who believe in them, explanatorily ineliminable. Soul-talk cannot be paraphrased away, and so souls are taken to exist.

Krauss's particles are not an example of something simple popping into existence if, in the final analysis, they don't exist. But if you insist that Krauss's particles *are* a counterexample to my argument, we can simply add some premises to specify that the entities that we should presume to be immortal need to be both simple *and* (unlike Krauss's particles) ontologically fundamental. We can then concede that the argument only goes through if souls turn out to be both simple *and* fundamental. We know of no putative counterexamples to premise 2 so amended.

Having said that, we should ask: what about temporal parts? Temporal parts, if they exist at all, certainly *cease* to exist, even if they're not subject to entropy (and even though they are plausibly as fundamental as anything else). And yet, I think it's relatively easy to isolate these putative counterexamples, whose very identities, if they exist at all, seem to be tied up with a particular location in time. Once we've quarantined the counterexamples, we can salvage the insight.

If *x* is simple (and if its identity *isn't* tied to a particular time, such that it *doesn't* fall within our quarantined class of exceptions), and if *x* is ontologically fundamental, as substance dualists would insist that our souls are, then its destruction would require something quite unusual. And, if some phenomenon is unusual, we're allowed to assume that, at any given time, that phenomenon isn't happening. It *could* be happening. Unusual things *do* happen. So, I won't argue that *sans* more evidence, you have *knowledge* that it's not happening. But it's *probably* not happening. And so, you have something like a licence to *assume* that it's not happening; a reasonable *presumption*. This is

enough to justify line 2 (especially if we add a clause to insist that x is ontologically fundamental). If x is mereologically simple, ontologically fundamental, and it was known to exist at t , then, since it's immune to the normal modes of destruction, *sans* evidence to the contrary, it's reasonable to presume that it exists at any *later* time.

Another way to justify line 2 appeals to the principle of sufficient reason. Indeed, Spinoza (EIIIP13L3c) appeals to the principle of sufficient reason in order to claim that, for there to be some change in a state of affairs, there must be some cause. In the absence of a cause, the state of affairs remains as is. Things in motion remain in motion until caused to rest, and things at rest remain at rest until caused to move. Granted: if an entity is subject to entropy, then there are all sorts of causes at work, which should lead us to worry that, if left for long enough, it will cease to exist. But if an entity isn't subject to entropy, nor to the normal modes of decay or destruction, and if it was known to exist at t , you need a sufficient reason to claim that it no longer exists at some *later* time. I have no reason to believe that God, or anything else, snuffs souls out of being,⁶ so I have no sufficient reason to believe, of any given soul, that *it* will cease to be.

A final way to justify line 2 runs as follows. John McDowell asks us to:

Consider someone who keeps himself reasonably well up-to-date on events of note; suppose he listens to a reliable radio news broadcast at six o'clock every evening. Can we credit such a person at three o'clock in the afternoon on some date late in the life of, say, Winston Churchill, with knowledge that Churchill is alive? ... Intuitively, the answer is 'Yes.' Something like that is the position we are all in with respect to masses of what we take ourselves to know, concerning reasonably durable but impermanent states of affairs to whose continued obtaining we have only intermittent epistemic access. If challenged, we might say something like 'If it were no longer so, I would have heard about it'; and we are quite undisturbed, at least until philosophy breaks out, by the time-lag between changes in such states of affairs and our hearing about them. ... It would be difficult to

overstate how much of what ordinarily passes for knowledge would be lost to us, if our epistemology of retained knowledge did not allow that sort of knowably risky policy to issue in acceptable knowledge claims when the risks do not materialize.

(McDowell, 1998, pp. 422-423)

If you know/knew that x exists at t , and if you would have heard otherwise by some later date, t_n , had x ceased to exist, you can be said to know that x still exists at t_n . This line of reasoning doesn't just deliver a *presumption* that x still exists, but *knowledge*.

In order for the claim that you "would have heard otherwise" to do the epistemic work that McDowell gives it, it needs to be *true* that you would have heard otherwise. Consequently, Sanford Goldberg argues that the principle can only guarantee knowledge if you have a reasonable expectation of timely updates (alongside other conditions):

So, for example, imagine McDowell's subject above only listened to the radio weekly. Even so, if he is within one of the intervals between the weekly radio reports he gets on political matters, my own impression is that such a subject would still be in a position to know that the Prime Minister is still alive (given that (s)he still is); and this impression becomes overwhelming if we assume that news of the Prime Minister's death would have quickly made its way to the subject one way or another (even if not at first by radio).

(Goldberg, 2010, p. 162)

McDowell's subject can expect a timely update about the death of a prime minister, and so he can claim to know that the prime minister is alive on the basis that *he would have heard otherwise*. But how regular do the updates need to be? Goldberg suggests that it depends on the sort of news we're talking about. For example:

[W]hen one aims to have knowledge (or even merely true beliefs) about the local weather forecast for the weather three weeks hence: even if one knew ten days ago, on the 1st of

the month, what the weather report was for the 20th of the month, once ten days has gone by there is no impression that one continues to know, on the 10th, what the weather report is for the 20th of the month: weather reports change with great frequency. Similarly, some types of news—the outcome of major national elections, the assassination of political leaders, the start of major wars, the outcome of the widely followed championship game, scandals or deaths involving the very famous, and so forth—can be expected to be announced immediately, following the relevant events. For these types of news, timeliness requires more or less immediate reporting. For other types of news, by contrast, timeliness merely requires that there be periodic reports (where the time between periods is a function not only of how quickly regular developments arise but also how often hearers expect to be updated on such matters).

(Ibid.)

But let's imagine cases in which Goldberg's timeliness constraint is violated. You're on a desert island and your only contact with the world is a weekly radio broadcast. Between broadcasts you do not know that the president of the USA is still alive. He might have died. Knowledge is lost because of your lack of access to timely updates. But it would be natural, I think, for our castaway to assume that the president *is* still alive, at least until he hears otherwise. As McDowell points out, until "philosophy breaks out", we don't tend to be too worried by "the time-lag between changes in ... states of affairs and our hearing about them" – and so, even when Goldberg's timeliness constraint is violated and knowledge is lost, even when we're not able to receive updates, and even though – in our particular case – we can't expect God to let us know if and as and when he annihilates a soul, it seems as if we have to operate, at least with a *presumption* that all sorts of things haven't changed (even if that presumption doesn't always generate *knowledge*).⁷

For any and all of these reasons, line 2 stands up to scrutiny.

Line 3 of the argument is just an instance of Occam's razor. Since parts of entities are entities, and since, by Occam's razor, we shouldn't multiply entities without necessity, we also shouldn't multiply parts of entities without necessity.

Onto line 4. Philosophers who believe in an immaterial soul do so because its posit, allegedly, has a theoretical payoff. You might posit souls to be the subjects of consciousness. You might posit them to be the referent of personal pronouns. You might posit them to explain personal identity over time. But all of the theoretical roles that an immaterial soul is given by those who posit them can be done by a mereologically simple entity. Souls might need to have multiple powers, multiple properties, multiple faculties, and multiple functions. But I don't see why they would need to have multiple constituent *parts*. A simple can have multiple properties and two simples can have *different* properties. If souls exist, they *might* have parts, but we have no *reason* to believe that they do.⁸ That's all that line 4 tells us.

With that, all of the premises are secured, and so the argument appears to be sound. It seems that if you believe that there's a theoretical role for immaterial souls to play, then you also have reason to presume that, at any future time, souls that once existed *still* exist. The only assumption I haven't defended is the presumption assumption, and even *without* that assumption, we'll have established a presumption of a presumption of immortality.

So, what happens to souls once the body has died? Where do they go? Do they continue to experience consciousness? Do they go to heaven, or to hell? Are they reincarnated? I don't know. When a person dies, their soul seems to go missing. But if they ever existed at all, they must be presumed, still to exist.

Notes

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² There's a large philosophical literature about presumptions. See (Godden & Walton, 2007) for a survey. In this paper, I can afford a good deal of neutrality between the various debates recorded in that literature. This much I will endorse, from (Godden, 2017, p. 489): "When true, the sentence 'Presumably, p ' indicates the presumptive modal status of p , marking it as having a defeasible, but default and actionable acceptability. The correlative of a presumption's default acceptability is a burden of proof born by any who would refuse to grant the presumption."

³ An anonymous reviewer raises a fascinating issue. Line 8 says that for any time t_n after t we should presume that x still exists at t_n . But this conclusion only follows if the phrase, "we should presume that..." obeys a principle of agglomeration. Indeed, this assumption underlines line 7. It is this assumption that's going to stretch our presumption from t_0 to t_1 , and from t_1 to t_2 , and so on and so forth, all the way to infinity. The reviewer's concern stems from the worry that justified belief doesn't agglomerate in this way, and so, neither should presumption. Consider a fair 1000-ticket lottery with exactly one winning ticket. For any given ticket, you should only have 0.1% confidence that it will win; surely not enough confidence to constitute belief (in any context). Accordingly, you should believe of each ticket that it won't win, and yet you should believe with certainty that one ticket *will* win. This paradox leads many people to deny the agglomeration principle – doing so will allow that your disbelief regarding each ticket won't stretch to the conjunction of *all* of the tickets. But I disagree with that response. I think the agglomeration principle is *true*. The fact that the principle is *intuitive* is what explains the paradox in the first place. Thankfully, there are elegant solutions available for lottery style paradoxes that *don't* require the denial of the agglomeration principle (see for example Leitgeb, 2014, pp. 160-163). For that reason, I trust that lines 7 and 8 are safe.

⁴ Here, I'm reading Socrates charitably, and assuming that his distinction between visible and invisible entities really has more to do with the distinction between divisible and indivisible entities.

⁵ An anonymous reviewer is right to point out that, by the lights of premise 2, the *creation* of a soul would be equally as miraculous as its destruction. I am happy to agree and to state explicitly that this argument for a presumption of future immortality generalises backwards in time just as it works forwards in time. That is to say: by the lights of my argument, if I possess an immaterial soul, then, for any time *t* prior to my birth, I should presume that my soul existed at *t*.

⁶ Admittedly: various religious traditions might cite Divine revelation as a source of knowledge that some souls are annihilated. But those considerations lie beyond the scope of this paper.

⁷ I note in passing that this presumption is an important principle in Talmudic law, known as a דמעיִקרא חזקה.

⁸ In fact, Swinburne (2019) argues that souls can only play the roles given to them if they are mereologically simple, in his language, “necessarily indivisible”.

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