

Post Mortem Experience

in the Context of

Non-duality



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Introduction

The question of 'post mortem experience' in the context of non-duality is problematic since the philosophy denies the existence of a 'soul' and there is no longer a brain to process sense data or think. Therefore, it can be questioned whether the question itself has any meaning!

Any analysis of the concepts of non-duality will, of course, be difficult since the concepts themselves are seen only as 'pointers' to reality: *finite* instruments being used in an attempt to probe the *in-finite*. Since they are all we have however, we must at least try to be as clear and unambiguous as possible. Therefore before I begin an attempt at an analysis of the concept of post mortem experience it would be appropriate to start with some definitions.

Definitions

Non-duality The philosophical position that there is no fundamental distinction between mind and matter, and that there are no separate entities and therefore no separate 'individual' minds.

Consciousness The *only* absolute reality is *pure awareness* itself, which is synonymous with Consciousness - written with a capital to distinguish it from the illusory, everyday sense of 'human consciousness'.

Experience To distinguish between the 'pure experience' of Consciousness and 'embodied experience' where sensory data, thoughts and emotions etc, are 'contents' in the field of awareness, I shall refer to 'embodied experience' as simply 'experience'.

Analysis

To approach this question in a methodical manner let's start by assuming the following as 'axiomatic' in non-duality:

1. Consciousness (or pure awareness) is unitary, i.e. 'Consciousness is all'.
2. 'Individuals' do not exist.
3. Time does not exist.

4. All processed sense data, memories, thoughts, conditioning etc. (i.e. the totality of human and non-human experience, 'past present and future') exist as contents within this unitary Consciousness.
5. Experience necessitates embodiment, i.e. a body-mind structure of some kind.
6. All experience is finite.

It could be argued that only (1) is 'axiomatic' and that the rest follow. However, let's stay with the six statements above.

Now let's ask the question: is there a kind of 'pure experience' which does not necessitate any form of embodiment? In other words, what is Consciousness 'conscious of' when there are no sense data, memories or thoughts?

Mystics and sages have often tried to convey the idea that Awareness is 'aware of Itself' in a formless, contentless way. But this would not be finite 'human experience' because no 'individual' is having it. Some contemporary writers ¹ have offered cautious descriptions of 'their' experiences, but by their own admission, these were still the experiences of body-minds and therefore filtered and interpreted. All such descriptions must be flawed and inadequate. No-one has described the 'pure experience' of Awareness beyond embodiment or 'post mortem experience' after the total destruction of the body-mind structure.

I now make the following propositions:

- a. No individual can experience directly what another experiences. It is conceivable, however, that there might be some form of quantum non-local 'cross-feed', due to a kind of 'resonance' between the complex patterns or configurations that we know as 'individuals' or 'egos', and that this gives rise to the persistent idea of reincarnation.
- b. The totality of experience in (4) above is never experienced 'all at once' (in superposition).
- c. Neither time nor space possesses independent or absolute reality ² but is derived from experience. It can even be said that time (or space) *is* experience.

Now, from (6) and proposition (b) experience is always presented to Awareness in finite, 'self'- contained units.

No individual 'owns' experience. There are no separate individual awarenesses, i.e. from (1) and (2) there no separate 'souls'. If it were not for Consciousness, the one pure aware presence, there would be no experience. Also, from (3) and in the physicists' 'Block-time' sense, the totality of experience in (4) simply *is*.

Even if the entire Universe (the whole of existence) came to an end it would still be a *finite* form in space-time. This would mean a kind of 'Bekenstein Bound' ³ on the available content of experience. On the other hand, if the Universe were *infinite* (in a purely quantitative sense ³ then so would be the available content of experience.

Now, (1) implies that Consciousness cannot 'not be', and since in non-duality there are no separate entities anyway, then *experience* cannot 'not be'. There cannot be existence without experience. The Universe is a 'content' of Consciousness, and can only be experienced in finite units (the illusion of 'selves' in humans). Thinking of the Universe as a sort of infinite-dimensional phase-space then every 'point' or element of experience is a unique perspective on *what is* and simply *is*. It must be remembered that '*what is*' refers to the entire Universe, past, present and future, and, if we accept the *many worlds* interpretation of quantum mechanics, this means an inconceivable number of *branch* universes that have arisen, or will arise, as the result

of an observation. In a *finite* Universe, because Consciousness is 'infinite' ⁴, this would imply (with reference to the *Poincaré Recurrence Theorem* ⁵) that every unit of experience would be 'repeated' an infinite number of times. In an *infinite* Universe there would be no such repetition. All of this represents *content* within Consciousness. Moreover, this repetition is an *appearance in time*. If however, the amount of information in the Universe that is presentable to Awareness is *infinite* there would be no repetition. Even if the informational content of the Universe were grossly limited to something like the set in *Groundhog Day*, there would not be any *sense* of 'repetition' - as was experienced by the character in the movie. This is simply because there *is* no repetition and to recognize a repeated state anyway implies a memory of that state *in addition* to the present one with which to compare it. Hence the two states would be different! It would not be the exact, same state nor the same individual. On the contrary, although experience (not the *bounded* experience itself) would be never-ending, it would be eternally fresh. Not, that is, repeated in any *temporal* sense, because that one state would be the *totality* of existence.

The difficult concepts verbalised here are likely to seem at first either egregiously reincarnational (everyone will be reincarnated as every sentient being that has lived or will live in the entire history of the Universe, perhaps an infinite number of times!) or like a trivial tautology (every experience that has been, or will be experienced, will be experienced). It is certainly not the traditional notion of reincarnation which assumes a continuous entity - a 'soul', that passes 'successively' through a vast number of host incarnations, evolving in the process. This is clearly dualistic. Also, it is certainly not the trivially obvious statement that everything that has ever been experienced by an embodied sentient being has been experienced by some-one or something.

From the ‘perspective’ of Consciousness there is the closure of one self-contained unit of experience (at physical death), then (not in a temporal or sequential sense, since time does not exist) a ‘new’ one opens up (at birth, or perhaps conception). This is not saying that ‘you’ or ‘I’ will have all possible experiences in succession. It does not imply, for example, ‘I’ will be born as ‘you’ and experience ‘your’ life and ‘you’ ‘mine’. From proposition (a) this would clearly be meaningless. Rather, there cannot be the *total absence* of experience - although there may be the experience of *absence* (‘pure experience’) - and that therefore *every conceivable experience will be had*. It must be emphasised again that this is not the experience of an ‘individual’ - which does not exist anyway, but represents the totality that is presented to Consciousness, which is the *only* reality. Also, it must be borne in mind that the future tense is an unfortunate necessity as this is contemplated by the ‘individual’ time-bound human mind.

Conclusion

Within the context of non-duality there cannot be infinite (eternal) absence of experience, although there will be (and there already *is* - because there is *no time*) the ‘experience of absence’ . Consciousness is *all* and there is ‘nowhere’ it is not, nor any time - past, present or future - when it is not. No ‘individual’ can have *every conceivable experience* but neither is there any ‘individual’ for whom there will be the *total absence* of experience. The term ‘post mortem experience’ is, therefore, meaningless. *All* experience must be embodied (or incarnate) (5). It is infinite in the sense that it will never *not be*, even if finite in content. It is discontinuous, i.e. experienced in discrete units as apparent ‘individual’ egos.

I have made every effort to be clear about any assumptions and present a reasoned case but I am aware that my arguments stretch our everyday concepts of time, consciousness and experience to breaking point. However, considering the main ‘axioms’ it seems to me that the above conclusion is inescapable in non-dualistic philosophy. If my understanding of the underlying concepts of Non-duality - or *Advaita* , to give it its traditional name - is correct, then the response of an adherent to this philosophy could be anything from great joy at the prospect of infinite vistas of experience to - in the shadow of the horror and suffering faced by much of humanity - a great dread of this perfect justice and terrible democracy of Consciousness. Even if this conclusion did not derive from, or appear as ‘given’ from a state of self-realization, but was merely believed as a religious precept, then it would certainly have a profound effect on the way he or she lived and treated other people. It would truly be the case that what you do unto others you do unto yourself : the ‘tables are turned’ countless times.

Notes and references

1. David Carse, Peter Francis Dziuben, Bernadette Roberts, Suzanne Segal and John Wren-Lewis, to mention just a few.
2. Julian Barbour gives a good case for this in *The End of Time*.
3. The following definition of the *Poincaré Recurrence Theorem* can be found on the website of the University of Maryland.
(<http://www.math.umd.edu/~lvrmr/History/Recurrence.html>)

“If you play bridge long enough you will eventually be dealt any grand-slam hand, not once but several times. A similar thing is true for mechanical systems governed by Newton’s laws, as the French mathematician Henri Poincaré (1854-1912) showed with his recurrence theorem in 1890: if the system has a fixed total energy that restricts its dynamics to bounded subsets of its phase space, the system will eventually return as closely as you like to any given initial set of molecular positions and velocities. If the entropy is determined by these variables, then it must also return to its original value, so if it increases during one period of time it must decrease during another.”

4. Awareness or Consciousness is ‘infinite’, or rather ‘non-finite’, in the sense that it has no physical or temporal bounds.
5. The following definition of the *Bekenstein Bound* can be found on Wikipedia.
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bekenstein_bound)

“The Bekenstein bound is a conjectured limit on the entropy .. or information that can be contained within a region of space containing a known energy. It implies that information must be material, requiring finite size and energy. In Computer Science, this implies that there is a maximum information processing rate and that Turing machines, with their (by definition) infinite memory tape, are physically impossible if they are to have a finite size and bounded energy”.

Bibliography

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8. Tipler, Frank. 1994. *The Physics Of Immortality*. Pan Books, 1996.
9. Wren-Lewis, John. *The Dazzling Dark*. Read the article online at <http://www.capacity.org/wren/archive.htm>.