

THE ATHEIST AFTERLIFE



The odds of an afterlife: Reasonable.
The odds of meeting God there: Nil.



DAVID STAUME



151 Howe Street, Victoria BC Canada V8V 4K5

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Proofread by Tara Mathey

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The Atheist Afterlife

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This book is dedicated to
Freethinkers everywhere.

Freethinker (*noun*): One who has rejected authority
and dogma in favour of rational inquiry.

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Introduction

Part of the joy of living is endeavouring to understand what the experience of life is all about. We can experience life without examining it, but every increase in understanding seems to make the experience more wonderful, and certainly more honest.

An understanding of 'life' requires an understanding of 'death', in the same way that an understanding of 'day' requires an understanding of 'night'; we can only appreciate one with reference to the other. The meaning of 'life' – if it waits for us anywhere – awaits us in the meaning of 'death'.

Do we live in a world where death is final and fatal, as the evidence suggests, or is it possible for our consciousness to survive?

It's a fascinating question for a number of reasons. First, the alternatives couldn't be more different: we are either extinguished or we survive in some extraordinary way; the alternatives describe two very different worlds. Second, the answer requires a deep understanding of difficult concepts such as 'mind' and 'consciousness' and their relationship with 'body'. And third, in this subject, perhaps more than any other, we are all prone to some degree of bias.

The dividing line between belief and non-belief in an afterlife is very close to the dividing line between belief and non-belief in God. Religious people generally accept the concept of an afterlife on faith, as a promise made by God, with Heaven a reward for obedience and Hell a punishment for sin. Atheists, on the other hand, in their rejection of faith, generally reject the concept of an afterlife as a fiction – a fiction bestowed by a fictitious God.

It's not surprising that the concept of an afterlife has become so closely connected with religion because all religions affirm its existence. But while the phrase 'non-religious afterlife' is awkward, it is not a contradiction in terms. The concept of an afterlife

can be removed from its religious context and examined on its own merit.

This book is the result of prising the concept of an afterlife out of the grasp of religion and applying rational thought to the subject *without prejudice*; that is, neither accepting it on faith, nor dismissing it as a religious fiction.

Although the balance of evidence and reason make the existence of an afterlife doubtful, the question is unresolved. There is no final proof one way or the other, and a number of scientific and philosophical questions remain unanswered. But while we can't make a definitive judgement about the *existence* of an afterlife, we *can* do three things:

- We can make a definitive judgement about the context and conditions of an afterlife *should it exist*;
- We can make a definitive judgement about whether or not that context requires a God; and
- We can come closer to answering the questions that will prove or disprove an afterlife's existence.

The Atheist Afterlife describes a rational, non-religious afterlife that requires nothing more than physics. This is what an afterlife would look like *if it exists*. It is possible to determine a *model* of existence even though the *question* of existence is unresolved. The second goal derives from the first, because an afterlife that requires nothing more than physics requires no God – but I guess the title of the book gave that away already!

When we build a rational model of an afterlife we find that many of the religious conceptions of life after death are irrational and harmful. False belief in eternal damnation, for example, has fostered fear and guilt over natural forms of sexual expression for thousands of years, while false belief in eternal reward seems to justify acts such as hijacking aeroplanes and flying them into skyscrapers. We should all be concerned about what people believe about life after death, because people take actions based on these beliefs that affect countless lives.

But *The Atheist Afterlife* is more than just a thought experiment to remove God and put the boot into harmful theology. *The Atheist Afterlife* brings us closer to answering the questions that will one day either

prove or disprove an afterlife's existence by presenting an original and testable support for mind-body dualism – the proposition that our brain and mind are separate.

The question of mind-body dualism is at the heart of the question of the existence of life after death. Philosophers generally frame this question in terms of our brain and our mind, with the question: are our brain and our mind the *same* thing, or two *different* things? It's a crucial question, because if our brain and our mind are the same thing, an afterlife is *impossible*; but if our brain and our mind are two different things, an afterlife is *likely*.

It was always going to be philosophy that moved this debate forward. Religion has its set views and its scriptures aren't changing, and science has more practical and realisable challenges to address. Philosophy, on the other hand, has never grown tired of reasoning through the issues of the relationship between the mind and the body – the relationship on which the possibility of an afterlife depends. Philosophy has never been comfortable with a religious afterlife because philosophers seek wisdom, and wisdom is not found in faith; but philosophy has always

known that a lack of sensory evidence for something does not guarantee that it doesn't exist.

Philosophy has had one arm tied behind its back by the absence of a law prohibiting an afterlife, and the other arm tied behind its back by the absence of any logical mechanism to support it.

Until now.

▪ PART ONE ▪

THE THEORY

SAMPLE



CHAPTER 1

Everything that is born must die

As scientific knowledge and rational thinking has increased, and faith-based thinking has decreased, our knowledge of the world has improved and enlarged. This has enabled us to account for the phenomena previously credited to God, such as conception, the formation of the universe, and the development and diversity of its life forms. As the light of reason and science illuminates one mystery after another, the gaps filled by God have reduced in size and number.

Today, it is apparent to many people that God is an invention to explain life's mysteries. But not all mysteries are equally amenable to scientific investigation. For an afterlife to exist, our consciousness must survive the death of our body. But consciousness is

difficult to *define*, let alone *measure*, and when we claim that this awareness survives death, our proposal involves the immeasurable transitioning to the immaterial. Safe in its obscurity, the afterlife was God's last bastion; the gap that would remain in 'His' hands forever; the fortress that would never be breached.

Well, I wouldn't be so sure.

It seems that there is only one certainty in life – and that is that we'll die. Whether our death is peaceful, traumatic, expected or unexpected, it will happen. We can do our best to push the date as far into the future as possible, but the bottom line is: everything that is born must die.

If all-that-we-are dies with our body, death would be an extinguishment. We would be snuffed out. 'We' would not 'be'. Not a spark, not an ember. Nothing.

But if all-that-we-are *doesn't* die with our body, nothing could be replaced with *something*.

There are a number of religious scenarios for that something. We could find ourselves lining up at the Pearly Gates in robes and sandals; we could find ourselves surrounded by gardens, vineyards, full-breasted maidens and lithe young men; we could be taken

across the River of Death to await judgment in the Hall of Osiris; or we could be relegated to an eternity of torment in some sort of underground Hell-kitchen. But none of these are supported by reason. They are works of the imagination. They may cover a kernel of truth, but kernels of truth are better discovered than covered.

It is possible to reason a rational alternative to nothingness, dogma and myth. There is the *possibility* of a rational something in addition to a rational nothing. I call this the *Inside-Out Theory*. The Inside-Out Theory requires nothing more than physics, and is more extraordinary and beautiful than any religious concept, even the one with the vineyards, full-breasted maidens and lithe young men! And when you think about it, that shouldn't be a surprise. Rational theories, such as Big Bang Cosmology and Evolutionary Theory, are far more extraordinary and beautiful – when comprehended – than any of their religious 'counterparts'.

The Inside-Out Theory is different from most other conceptions of an afterlife. The first difference is that it doesn't claim to be more than it really is. It doesn't claim to be inspired, and it doesn't claim to be true. It

is a thought experiment that is only as valid as the assumptions on which it is based and the strength of its subsequent reasoning. The second difference is that it could be testable. The Inside-Out Theory paints a detailed and explicit picture of what a rational afterlife would look like, including its *geometry*, and it is this *exactness* that could be testable.

We will explore the geometry of a rational afterlife in some detail. I mention it here to make the point that the discipline in the best position to prove or disprove the existence of an afterlife could be *mathematics*. But even if a mathematical *proof* of an afterlife was forthcoming, it's hard to imagine that there would be consensus that it expressed a physical *truth*. So while it might be possible to test the assumptions of an afterlife theory, or disprove a theory by disproving its assumptions or demonstrating a contradiction of known law, it is unlikely that we could ever conclusively prove the existence of an afterlife. If it exists, it exists beyond our bodily senses, beyond our capacity to measure it, and beyond the reach of concrete proof.

For these reasons, the question of an afterlife tends to slip through the fingers of science and into the

hands of philosophy. But philosophy is capable of grasping this subject, analysing it, discarding the bits that are bad, and synthesising the remainder into a well-reasoned and cohesive whole. Philosophy can explore the possibility and the possible circumstances of life after death in a meaningful way and make confident statements. I believe that we have sufficient knowledge at the present time to move to a definitive position on what an afterlife would look like *if it exists*, and therefore move beyond afterlife *speculation* to afterlife *theory*: a powerful explanatory device based on the foundations of science.

The first hurdle on this road is this: if there's *no evidence* for something, shouldn't we just dismiss it?

To answer this we have to understand the essence of a rational conception of an afterlife. While a religious afterlife proposes a place such as a Heaven or Hell and a God to oversee it, a non-religious afterlife doesn't propose the existence of anything new. It proposes the *continuation* of something we *already know* – life – beyond the point where our senses tell us that it ceases to exist; it adds nothing supernatural or external to the world we exist in now, and is consistent with known law. Rationalists can savage the

complete lack of evidence and high improbability of a Heaven, Hell, and God all they like – and I’ll join them – but the Inside-Out Theory is a different beast altogether.

Our senses tell us that life disappears at the point of death, but our senses also tell us that the sun disappears at the point of sunset. To the modern mind that’s not a compelling analogy, but the fact that the sun continues to exist, unaffected, beyond our perception, as part of a larger cycle, would have been a *revelation* in times past. The proposition that there’s an afterlife simply says the same thing about life – that it could continue to exist, unaffected, beyond our perception, as part of a larger cycle too.

But in the absence of any *evidence* of an afterlife, the logical argument will always be won by the extinguishment theory, which says that death is fatal and final, because there’s absolutely *no* reason to doubt our senses, which tell us that life ceases at death, unless an extrasensory proposition provides *a credible mechanism* and can *support its assumptions*.

The Inside-Out Theory satisfies both requirements. It provides a credible mechanism of an afterlife and supports its assumptions by presenting an

original and probably testable support for mind-body dualism.

Any mechanism of an afterlife must be based on the assumption of mind-body dualism, and can only be as credible as the concept of mind-body dualism. Dualism is the proposition that there's a *physical* aspect of us, and a *non-physical* aspect of us. Philosophers generally frame this question in terms of our brain and our mind, with the question: are our brain and our mind the *same* thing, or two *different* things? If they're the same thing we can be confident that there is no aspect of us capable of continuing our consciousness when our current vehicle of consciousness – our body – dies. But if they *are* different things there *could* be an aspect of us capable of continuing our consciousness, and an afterlife becomes possible, even likely.

At this point we have to look at the concept of a soul, but briefly, because we can actually put the concept aside. It may appear soulless, but for the purpose of exploring the *existence* of an afterlife, we can relegate it to the sidelines and focus instead on the concept of mind.

There are two reasons for this. The first is that the concept of a soul is too nebulous; not only is there no evidence for the existence of a soul, there is no distinctive subjective experience of it either. If we put all human experience into a box, then take out physical experience, emotional experience, mind experience – that is, thinking, reasoning, imagining, and dreaming – then take out intuitive experience (which I'm including because it seems to be fairly common), what do we have left? We are left with self-awareness or consciousness ... but we have that *now* as part of the above experiences. Adding the concept of a soul over the top doesn't get us anywhere.

The second reason for putting the concept of a soul to one side is that we can solve the question of the existence of an afterlife at a 'lower level'. The concept of mind is intangible enough without overlaying an even more intangible layer. We can see and measure the products of our brain activity, such as the regulation of our breathing, but we can't see or measure our *thoughts about breathing*. We will explore this in more detail, but the point here is that if something as seemingly intangible as mind is found to be a function of a physical organ – our brain – then the

existence of a soul would be little more than wishful thinking.

I believe that the theory that death is *extinguishment* has competition. With the description of a rational afterlife that requires nothing more than physics, supported by a new and probably testable support for mind-body dualism, the extinguishment theory can no longer win the logical argument about whether or not there's an afterlife *simply by turning up*.

The Inside-Out Theory has a number of components. Let's begin with the law that makes it *possible*.



CHAPTER 2

Laws that kill and laws that save

You're sitting in a car at a scenic lookout, high on a mountain road. You are admiring the view and appreciating the crisp mountain air, when a passing homicidal maniac driving a bulldozer swerves into the back of you. Suddenly you're pushed through the safety barrier and over the cliff. As you plummet to the rocks below you have two thoughts. First, you hope that the law catches up with him, and second, you ponder the laws that are about to catch up with you.

The Law of Gravity is your immediate problem. That is the term we use for what's causing you to fall and smash on the rocks below with an impact guaranteed to kill. But there's another law, the Law of Conservation of Energy, and it's this law that could

save you. The Law of Conservation of Energy makes it *possible* for your consciousness to survive ... if your brain and mind are separate things.

When the car hits the ground, its energy of motion – or *kinetic energy* – can no longer express itself because further forward motion is prevented by the ground.

So, what happens to it?

We know what *doesn't* happen to it, because energy cannot be extinguished. The Law of Conservation of Energy makes that impossible. Any energy unable to express itself in its current form will *transition* into another form. We see this in all known contexts, including relativity and quantum theory, and we *never* see it broken. In your current dire circumstance, the car's energy of movement will soon transition into heat and sound. Heat will be generated at the site of the impact and there'll be a sickening crash-crunch-tinkle as metal and glass hit solid rock.

If the relationship between your body and your consciousness is the same as that between the car and its energy of movement, your consciousness wouldn't be extinguished either; it would behave like every

other energy in the universe; it would obey the Law of Conservation of Energy, and *transition*.

We can separate the world into three interrelated categories. There's *matter* – the stuff of the world; *energy* – the stuff that moves the world; and *fields* – the area where stuff exerts its influence.

We don't know where in this structure consciousness sits, whether it fits into a category, straddles categories, or forms a new category. Consciousness is a mysterious thing, but for all the complexity we see in the world, nature appears to be economical with her principles. Apart from the concept of mind-body dualism – the proposition that our brain and mind are separate – the only thing that is being assumed when we suggest that consciousness will obey the Law of Conservation of Energy is this: consciousness, whatever its nature, will not behave differently from everything else in our experience; it won't contradict a law we *never* see broken, *in any context, anywhere*.

It's not a leap of faith.

Now we don't have much at this point, but what we have is important. If we assume mind-body dualism – and we will add substance to this assumption soon – there is little doubt that our consciousness

would obey the Law of Conservation of Energy and transition at the point of death. There is *no reason* to believe that it would behave otherwise. We have a law we never see broken, a reasonable expectation of consistency, and an existing analogy in nature. What more do you want?

Ah, yes.

If our consciousness obeys the Law of Conservation of Energy and transitions at the point of death, where would it go?

As we're currently assuming mind-body dualism, it would seem obvious at this point to say 'mind', but we need to explore some underlying concepts first.



CHAPTER 3

We experience two realities

We can put experience into *two* related but distinct piles, because we experience *two* realities. We experience an outer reality and an inner reality. And that's it. There are no others that we're aware of.

Outer reality is the external world; the world we experience with our senses. It is the out-there world that we can see, hear, smell, taste and touch. It includes trees, mountains and houses. It includes clouds, the sand under our feet, and the porcelain flying ducks on the wall. It includes the food we eat, the music we hear, and the smell of burnt toast. Outer reality is objective, real, tangible, out-there and in-your-face.

Inner reality is how we think and feel. It includes our emotions, desires, prejudices and attitudes. It
