

Simulation Constraints, Afterlife Beliefs, and Common-Sense Dualism

(Commentary on Jesse Bering's "The Folk Psychology of Souls,"
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Abstract: Simulation constraints cannot help explain afterlife beliefs in general because belief in an afterlife is a precondition for running a simulation. Instead, an explanation may be found by examining more deeply our common-sense dualistic conception of the mind or soul.

Early on in his stimulating target article, Bering notes that the ability to conceive of an afterlife requires a dualistic conception of the relation between the conscious mind or soul and the body; and he is sympathetic (as I am also) to the idea that our common-sense concept of the mind/soul is dualistic, and in all likelihood innate. An important question for Bering is "how...we get from the common-sense dualism of infants to beliefs of the afterlife..." And a major part of his answer is given by his "simulation constraint hypothesis," the idea that afterlife beliefs are explained by our attempts to mentally simulate "what it's like to be dead": putting ourselves "into the shoes" of dead agents, we are compelled to ascribe to them mental states.

While simulation constraints may help explain the specific types of mental states we project into the afterlife (as Bering argues), I do not think they can help explain why people believe in an afterlife in the first place. The point of a mental simulation, after all, is to generate conclusions about an agent's mental states or behaviors (with the type of simulation run depending on the types of mental states or behaviors about which one wishes to derive information). The cognitive mechanisms involved in planning simulations, accordingly, must assume the existence of a mind—namely, that mind into the nature of which one aims to gain insight through simulation. But this must hold for the afterlife case too: prior to simulating a dead agent's mind, it must be assumed there is a mind to simulate. But that *already* is to assume an afterlife. This mind/soul may be taken to be phenomenally rich, or relatively barren (experiencing "darkness," "nothingness," or what have you), but it must be taken to exist, at least implicitly. Notice that Bering seems to grant this in referring to "simulation strategies to derive information *about the minds* of dead agents" (emphasis mine). It follows that nothing about a simulation itself can explain our belief in an afterlife, since some such a belief or assumption is a precondition for the planning and running of any such simulation.

If that is right, how might afterlife beliefs be explained? I believe that the route from our common-sense dualism to afterlife beliefs is considerably shorter than Bering supposes. Afterlife beliefs may fall out quite directly from how our common-sense dualism is conceived. It may follow from our dualism that the destruction of a person's body has no bearing whatever on the existence of his or her mind/soul—much as it is entailed by my common-sense conception of the apple and orange in my refrigerator that eating the apple will leave the orange intact. Most of the work in explaining afterlife beliefs on this view, therefore, will be done by a detailed account of our concepts of our body, mind/soul, and their interrelations (and how the question of an afterlife arises).

Regardless of the extent of the gap between our common-sense dualism and afterlife beliefs, discovering how one gets from the former to the latter will require a detailed characterization of our dualist conception, something we currently lack. We would thus do well to examine the features of our conception of the mind/soul that are implicated in our conceiving the mind and body as distinct. It will not do simply to say that we conceive of the body and soul as ontologically distinct, and leave it at that, because we must understand the particular type of distinctness involved, and how it is grounded in the concepts of body and soul. (Objects and events are also ontologically distinct categories, but are interdependent in ways that bodies and souls are not.) We should examine our conceptions of ourselves as conscious beings, selves, experiencers, “witnesses”, of the mind/soul as being essentially private, “internal,” subjective, or phenomenal. For it is something about these conceptions, arguably, that makes the mind/soul seem so utterly unlike anything physical that destroying the body can leave the mind/soul intact.

One way to tap children’s understanding of the privacy and “innerness” of conscious phenomena is to explore children’s understanding of dreams, imagery, and sensations, conceived of as private and “internal.” I shall hint at some possible directions for research, with a few anecdotes. (Since I am not a psychologist, they should be taken with a grain of salt; with that said, their purpose is merely to illustrate some questions for investigation.) At age three, my daughter appeared to understand the idea that dreams involve “pictures in her head,” and seemed able to sing her favorite song “in her head” and report when she had finished. She insisted that others could not see the pictures or hear the sounds “because they were hers,” and found the suggestion that others might see them or hear them silly. (Interestingly, she also insisted that she did not *see* the pictures in her head; they were just there.) This conception of privacy also applied to sensations like pain. Also at age three, she went through a brief stage of lying about having hurt herself (for sympathy, hugs, etc.) when noticing her baby sister receiving attention. That she confidently lied about feeling pain in the presence of others suggests she believed her sensations were accessible only to herself.

Another matter to explore is children’s capacity to conceive of objects, properties, and events in their experience as *merely phenomenal*. I have in mind the capacity to grasp that what appears in dreams is “not real,” as well as grasping the concepts of hallucination (including radical hallucination, as in “The Matrix”), illusion, after-images, and the appearance–reality distinction more generally. One way to get at some of these issues may be to probe children’s understanding of “inverted qualia,” the idea that what you visually experience when looking at objects we both call “blue,” for example, might be qualitatively very different from what I experience when looking at those objects. This idea can be explored intrasubjectively by adapting one of a child’s eyes to bright light, and then having the child look at a uniformly colored object one eye at a time. The object’s color will appear to alternate between two different shades. Assuming the child does not infer that he or she is causally affecting the object by blinking, some understanding of the concept of phenomenal color might be expected to reveal itself.

Conceptual abilities of these sorts enable Descartes to doubt away the physical world while his mind/soul (plus phenomenology) remains. This is a first step in Descartes' argument for dualism. However, it is also already very close to the idea of an afterlife, since it is the idea of a mind/soul existing without the physical world. This too suggests that the distance from our common-sense dualism to afterlife beliefs may be short, at least if our common-sense dualism is Cartesian in relevant respects.