Do We Have Epistemic Support for The Existence of Afterlife?

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The Asian Conference on Ethics, Religion and Philosophy 2016
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract
In a paper discussing our attitude towards death, Freud (1915) put forth that it seems impossible to imagine our own death, so much so that in the unconscious we are all "convinced of our own immortality". In more recent efforts, Smullyan (2003) explicitly endorsed Freud's hypothesis and took the inability to conceive oneself as non-existing to be the reason for ones belief in afterlife. I suggest that Smullyan's argument aligns with conceivability accounts in the epistemology of modality, which takes the ability to imagine certain scenarios as a guide to their possibilities. Following such view, that we find the non-existence of our own consciousness inconceivable would provide epistemic support for its impossibility. The consequence of this modal statement (that it is impossible for our consciousness to be non-existent) seems to be a commitment to some form of afterlife--that our consciousness must continue to exist despite the death of the body.
This paper presumes the truth of the conceivability account, and in turn granting that Smullyan's argument for afterlife is valid. However, I shall suggest two worries of the argument before granting its conclusion. Firstly, I shall examine whether its premise is indeed true--that is, whether we really find the non-existence of our consciousness inconceivable. Secondly, I believe the very same account could turn against afterlife if we start the argument with other appealing premises (such as ones derived from physicalism). Thus, given the truth of the conceivability theory there are at best both evidence for and against afterlife.

Keywords: Conceivability, Possibility, Afterlife, Epistemology of Modality, Consciousness

Introduction

For pretty much the entire course of human history, inquiring the plausibility of any form of being after bodily death had been a seemingly impossible task, but nonetheless one of deepest concern for our very existence. The task seems impossible, since we could not possibly gain any experiences of it—as Epicurus remarked, 'Death…is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not.' On the other hand, we can't help but keep pondering this topic, for it strikes us that some important truth beneath the topic directly addresses our ultimate fate. Contemporary thinkers therefore had still been contemplating on afterlife, a recent effort by Raymond Smullyan (2003) argued in favour of the existence of afterlife by appealing to things other than our positive experience of it—in particular, he claimed that he believes in the existence of afterlife because of 'his inability to conceive of no afterlife.[1]'

This paper primarily aims at investigating more deeply into this intriguing thought. I believe that Smullyan was on point in thinking that that particular inconceivability of non-existence contributed at least implicitly to our attitudes towards afterlife. The paper consists of three sections. In section I I shall unpack Smullyan's claim in more detail, attempting to clear up any notions that might be ambiguous in the premise; in section II I shall look into an existing theoretical account in the literature in support of Smullyan's argument—in particular, the conceivability account in the epistemology of modality; in section III I shall discuss some possible objections and replies regarding the argument.

Before moving on to section I, one clarificatory point is in order. While believing in afterlife in virtue of the premise, Smullyan did not consider his discussion as amounting to *an argument for afterlife*. He made it clear that the inability of conceiving in his part contributed only an explanatory role to his belief in afterlife—that is, the phenomenon of his believing in afterlife is explained by this certain psychological feature (inconceivability), which bears no role in suggesting the truth of such belief. For all Smullyan knows, he might well be mistaken about afterlife as a result of an incompetent mind. However, this paper aims at establishing a more ambitious claim—that our inconceivability of non-existence indeed plays a justificatory role to our belief in afterlife, in other words, I argue that if the former is true, then we indeed have some epistemic reasons to believe that the latter is true.

[1] Smullyan (2003), pp. 16.

I. The inconceivability of non-existence

When Smullyan (2003) discussed his belief of the existence of afterlife, he admitted that he wishes the belief to be true. However, he also claimed explicitly that such belief is due to the inconceivability of his non-existence, not wishful thinking. This distinction is crucial to the understanding of Smullyan's view, as the two are easily confused. While (in)conceivability remains a plausible candidate for amounting to epistemic support, more non-epistemic factors could intervene in the case of wishful thinking (such as the agent's practical interests). Consider the following case to see how the two notions might come apart. Suppose I were to compete in, say a basketball match. On all occasions I would like to win the match; but at the same time, it is perfectly compatible with me being able to conceive myself losing at the same time—indeed, if the opponents were professionals, it is even a bit hard to conceive myself winning. Thus, if what we sort after is the best approximation of what really could be, it is crucial to keep wishful thinking clearly out of the way.

Let's take a closer look to the inconceivability claim. Smullyan himself did not offer too much elaboration on it. However, he did quote others who share similar view in support of it. Consider for example the reasons Goethe gave for his believing in an afterlife, he suggested that 'he simply could not conceive of himself as not existing, and he could hardly believe something that he could not even imagine.'[2] Unlike Smullyan who merely granted a causal link between the inconceivability and the belief, Goethe explicitly reasoned that what is believable must be imaginable, which echoes with the conceivability account we will discuss in section II.

However, a deeper exploration of such link was perhaps offered by Sigmund Freud (1958), which pertained to his reflections on our attitudes towards death in face of the great war:

> *It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators. Hence the psycho-analytic school could venture on the assertion that at bottom no one believes in his own death, or, to put the same thing in another way, that in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality.*[3]

The passage by Freud was fascinating but perhaps even more mysterious—particularly, when it is impossible for us to imagine our own death, in what sense are we 'present as spectators'? What exactly is present? This brings us to the last point of disambiguation in this section—how should we understand Smullyan's term of non-existence? Obviously this does not refer to the discontinuation of ones bodily functions, such event is not only conceivable but also inevitable. Later in his discussion on sleep and dreams, Smullyan explicitly accounted that he considers one to have no afterlife only if one is consciousless, which amounts to having no experience at all. This seems to be the key to understanding Smullyan's form of afterlife—that our consciousness continues to be present after, and therefore independently from, our bodily death. In other words, it is the absence of our very

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[2] Smullyan (2003), pp. 15.
[3] Freud (1958), pp. 222-23.

own consciousness that Smullyan found impossible to imagine. More will be addressed in section III regarding consciousness and dream.

II. The conceivability account in the epistemology of modality

The conceivability account of modality is often credited to Stephen Yablo (1993) and David Chalmers (2002) in contemporary literature. However, as we have seen, previous scholars (in Goethe and Freud, and contemporary philosopher Smullyan too) were either implicitly or explicitly committed to the link between conceivability and possibility. In fact, traces of the view could be found in Hume's writing which he declared 'that whatever the mind clearly conceives, includes the idea of possible existence, or in other words, that nothing we imagine is absolutely impossible.'[4]

In this paper I shall borrow the theory articulated by Yablo (1993), which suggested that (in)conceivability is a guide to (im)possibility. Two dialectical points: firstly, I shall not attempt to argue that it is a better conceivability account than its alternative—the stronger entailment thesis proposed by Chalmers (2002). For one thing, the requirements for entailment in Chalmers' account are more stringent and it is less clear that our imaginations about afterlife would meet them. On the other hand, for the purpose of my argument, the weaker guidance account of conceivability would suffice for providing epistemic support. The second important note about this theoretical endorsement is that I do not plan to argue for the conceivability account in general either. There are other competing theories and considerable amount of literature had been dedicated to determine the best one for accounting our knowledge of possibility. Establishing Yablo's account as the correct one is too big a task for this study—the motivation for endorsing his theory is that it fits our current topic of interest (namely, how conceivability provides support for possibility). Therefore more precisely, this paper seek to establish that *if conceivability is a guide to possibility*, then we have epistemic support for our belief of afterlife.

Let's turn our attention now to the formulations of Yablo's (1993) account. By suggesting conceivability as a guide to possibility the conditions for the account is quite straight forward—in short, that p is possible is supported by the fact that p is conceivable. However, the details as to how we are to cast out the notion of conceivability matter. In Yablo's account, a proposition p is conceivable by subject S *iff S imagines a situation that he/she takes to verify p*.[5] Note that imagining and conceiving are interchangeable in Yablo's terminology. This amounts to the agent searching for a situation that verify the proposition and succeeded in doing so. For example, if one wonders the possibility of raining tomorrow, one needs only to imagine a situation that verifies this statement—namely a scenario in which there's rain tomorrow. If we are able to imagine this situation (in this case we indeed are), evidently that it will rain tomorrow is conceivable to us, and under this account it follows that this proposition is possible. However, consider the possibility of the existence of a round square. No matter how one attempts to imagine, there can be no scenario that verifies the proposition (there could be no scenario in which there exists a round square). Therefore the proposition is not conceivable. However, according to Yablo, this does not follow that the proposition is impossible.

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[4] Hume (1968), pp. 32.

[5] Yablo (1993), pp. 29.

One crucial feature in Yablo's theoretical framework that demands extra caution is that the negation of conceivability is not equivalent to inconceivability, and vice versa. The reason of the gap between the two notions are the plausibility of undecidable cases—cases in which the scenarios one imagined neither seem to verify nor falsify p. At this point it is necessary to compare the four possible outcomes (according to Yablo) one could arrive at when entertaining a modal proposition:

> ***Conceivability (CON)****: p is conceivable by S iff S imagines a situation that he/she takes to verify p*
>
> ***Negation of conceivability (~CON)****: p is not conceivable by S iff S cannot imagine a situation that he/she takes to verify p*
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> ***Inconceivability (INC)****: p is inconceivable by S iff S cannot imagine any situation that he/she does not take to falsify p*
> ***Negation of inconceivability (~INC)****: p is not inconceivable by S iff S can imagine situations that he/she does not take to falsify p*

Consider instances of undecidable scenarios. Since they neither verify nor falsify p, they could not be said to be CON or INC—rather they would be considered as ~CON and ~INC. In Yablo's theoretical construct, not only is conceivability a guide to possibility—inconceivability is a guide to impossibility as well. The problem here is that one cannot arrive at INC, therefore establishing impossibility of certain propositions, merely by failing to meet CON—this would only lead the case to ~CON instead of INC. Thus, in order to establish impossibility of certain propositions, one must test if ones imagination meets the specific requirement from INC—that in any situation imagined, one takes it to falsify p.

The case of a round square does not seem to be an undecidable, so let's see how it fares in the INC test. Now in every situation one imagines, not only is the existence of a round square not verified, it must indeed be falsified, since whether there exists a round square is not undecided in any of the situation—it is straight out false in all scenarios. Thus, we come to the conclusion that the existence of a round square is inconceivable, thereby grounding our belief that such entity is impossible.

Not only is CON and INC surprisingly independent from each other, their capabilities in guiding our knowledge of modal propositions should be treated separately as well. There are epistemologists who endorse the thesis that CON is a guide to possibility, but reject INC as a guide to impossibility. Furthermore, Murphy (2006) pointed out that the reliability of INC as a guide to impossibility is logically stronger than the reliability of CON as a guide to possibility—in that the former entails, but is not entailed by, the latter.

These two remarks about the CON vs INC distinction turns out to be crucial to our present topic. Smullyan's claim of finding no afterlife inconceivable is, after all, an instance of INC. Therefore, in order for the argument in favour of afterlife to work, we must be able to test its inconceivability by the INC requirement; and we must further presume the truth of a logically stronger proposal—that inconceivability guides our knowledge of impossibility.

For what matters, I'm inclined to think that it is indeed a case of INC and therefore an instance of impossibility. Consider Smullyan's claim once again, he believes in afterlife because he could not imagine his own non-existence. From here there seems to be no clue to tell whether the scenarios he imagine indeed falsify the non-existence—it might well be the case of ~CON for all we know. However, I believe the power of the argument resides in Freud's deeper elaboration of this intuition—'It is *indeed impossible to imagine our own death*; and *whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators.*' Reading 'present as spectators' as 'the continuous existence of the consciousness despite the perish of the body' as I outlined section I, what Freud meant was essentially that according to our imagination, us ceasing to exist seems to be falsified in every possible scenario. The point is not about our inability to verify our non-existence, which leads to ~CON; rather it has to do with our imagination being unable to stop regarding ourselves as existing (as spectators, according to him), which offers the falsifying power INC needs. To summarise, the argument goes as follows: in efforts of imagining our own non-existence, we cannot stop regarding our own consciousness as continuing to exist, therefore we find the cease of existence of our consciousness falsified in every possible scenario (therefore meeting INC), which in turn provides epistemic support for the impossibility of the claim. Thus, it is impossible that our consciousness does not continue to exist. Let the continuous existence of our consciousness be CE, formally we have obtained epistemic support for $\sim\Diamond\sim$CE, which is equivalent to $\Box$CE (necessarily, our consciousness continues to exist).

III. Challenges and replies

One immediate question is to challenge the main premise—is it really the case that we can't help but continue to regard ourselves as existing? In Smullyan's devil's advocate he presents a potential scenario against his own intuition—a scenario that not only denies INC but perhaps even establishes CON (that our own non-existence is conceivable). The scenario in play is a mental state similar to a dreamless sleep. Many of us had experienced dreamless sleeps in life and could arguably imagine such scenario. However, if such scenario is indeed analogous to the cease of existence, then it would seem that we could imagine the latter after all.

To respond to such challenge, one might argue that more specifications regarding the dreamless sleep are needed in order to appreciate its similarity to non-existence. As for now it is not at all clear that a dreamless sleep resembles non-existence close enough. Following Smullyan's response, it seems that even in the case of a deep sleep where no specific content of dream could be identified, there still seems to be some experiences of being in a blank state involved—in other words, even in a scenario where one experiences emptiness, certain degree of consciousness continues to exists—this is inevitable, as something must exist in order for experiences to be possible. For Smullyan, however, the absence of afterlife amounts to a total annihilation of ones consciousness[6]. If this is what dreamless sleep amounts to, Smullyan argued, then it is impossible for us to conceive/imagine it, since imaginations are experiences, and the latter inevitably involves some degree of consciousness—even the experience of emptiness requires a consciousness as a

[6] Smullyan (2003), pp.15.

subject. Emptiness simpliciter, the annihilation of consciousness altogether, would preclude any experience at all, and therefore can never be imagined.

The second challenge comes from the appeal to physicalism. Consider for example supervenience physicalism, a popular line of physicalism which suppose that everything (including, most importantly here, the mental) supervenes on the physical. If that is the case, how is it possible for our consciousness to exist independent from our corresponding bodies in the physical realm (i.e. after our bodily death)? If such independent existence is impossible, then our consciousness must be dependent on something in the physical realm if it were to continue to exist. But this is perhaps even more inconceivable—what in the physical realm could it possibly depend upon without being *ad hoc*? The corresponding body had since then perished and decomposed to scattered particles completely unrelated to each other now in the physical realm, how could our consciousness existence supervenes on these scattered particles? Still, to say that it supervenes on any other combinations of things in the physical are equally, if not more, ridiculous. Thus, it seems that every situation I imagine falsifies the claim that my consciousness continues to exist after bodily death, under the very same inconceivability account, it is impossible that my consciousness continues to exist after the bodily death.

I believe that this is actually a substantial challenge to the argument that I could only accommodate in response. Granted, for people who endorsed physicalism in the first place, running my line of argument could equally generates epistemic support against the existence of afterlife—nevertheless this would not cancel out the original support we obtained for afterlife, since the premise was based on a different source, indeed, a source that is deeply embedded to every conscious being as Smullyan and Freud suggested. Thus, I believe that for this group of physicalists, this potentially results in a cognitive dilemma—in that they possess epistemic support for and against afterlife. Such dilemma, of course, need not be actualised, as they might not be aware of these supports explicitly. As Freud pointed out, the inclination to believe in afterlife might well be 'in the unconscious.' Moreover, this is not the only way to go for physicalists—they could always abandon the theoretical commitment to the conceivability account and thus decline their epistemic support both for and against afterlife, leaving the options open for themselves. On the other hand, people who wish to keep epistemic support only for but not against afterlife could opt to reject physicalism. After all, the discussions above made theoretical assumption to begin with, and neither of the theories are remotely close to being universally accepted among philosophers. Thus, this paper is far from presenting a knock-down argument for either side. Rather, the consequence of ones beliefs lies in the hands of the believers themselves—by choosing their set of theoretical commitments. One might refer to the taxonomy of theory endorsements and their consequences as below.

	(In)conceivability	~(In)conceivability
Physicalism	Support for and against afterlife—potential dilemma	No support
~Physicalism	Support for afterlife	No support

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, while it is intuitive that we have difficulties not imagining ourselves as existing, this does not automatically transfer into epistemic support. Much depends on ones theoretical commitments. If one takes inconceivability as a guide to impossibility, then the belief of afterlife could be supported. On the other hand, if one further endorses physicalism, it turns out that the inconceivability account would bring about both epistemic support for and against afterlife.

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