

**LIFE AFTER DEATH IN BERTRAND RUSSELL: A CRITIQUE****Ratzinger E. E. Nwobodo, Ph.D**  
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The state of man after death is an object of endless reflection which concerns the entire humanity. On one side, it offers a belief in "afterlife". On another side, the likes of Bertrand Russell propose a belief that death is the annihilation of the entire human person. Therefore, Russell argues against life after death. For him, all that constitutes a person is a series of experiences connected by memory and habit, which are essential characteristics of the mind. He highlights that the mind is bound up with the brain and both annihilate at death. Russell denies the existence of the soul and considers the resurrection of the body a difficulty. He also labels the scientific theories of afterlife, inadequate. Moreover, he avows that it is not rational arguments, but emotions, that cause belief in afterlife. Russell's critique, thus, has set the stage for a radical; belittling of man to mere animals, misconception of Christian dogmas, and other biting controversies. This essay, therefore, using phenomenological and hermeneutical methods, attempts to expose and evaluate Russell's critique of afterlife. Ultimately, this essay sustains that the hope of life is not earth bound, and death is not the annihilation of the entire human persons.

**Key words: Humanity, Afterlife, Death, Human Person and Annihilation.****Introduction**

The issue of life after death is a challenging subject as it deals with endless speculations. It is one of the controversial issues facing humanity, given that no one who speaks of afterlife has had a direct experience of it, and even those who have died seem unable to recount their experiences. However, belief in life after death instinctively offers man; the hope of existing hereafter, the hope of meeting his loved ones again after death, and a whole lot more of sweet, hopeful, and encouraging experiences. Man, from time immemorial, has been curious about what becomes of him after death. He constantly ponders what happens to him after the death of the material body. Is death the total annihilation of human existence? Is there another form of life that awaits man beyond this earthly life? Does afterlife exist or is it mere figment of man's imagination or a product of emotion as Russell would suggest?

The concept of afterlife is a subject of heated debate, which has raised a lot of arguments and counterarguments among scholars of different fields. Some scholars uphold their unflinching believe and conviction of life after death. They base their arguments on the fact that the human person is a composite of two dimensions: a material dimension (the body) which decomposes at death and a spiritual dimension (the soul) which survives death, and as a result is immortal. On the other hand, some scholars deny the existence of life after death. For them, man has no spiritual dimension, and there is nothing in the human person that survives death. Prominent among these scholars is Bertrand Russell, who contends that life after death is an illusion and cannot be proven both scientifically nor rationally. Thus, for Russell, death brings the human existence to a total end. And if this is the case: what then are all these struggles and strives in life all about? What becomes the point of life and existence? What then is our future destiny? Is the human person merely ephemeral: a flower that blooms in the morning and withers in the evening?

These are the worrisome questions surrounding Russell's denial of life after death. Thus, in this article, I shall critically peruse Russell's argument against life after death, pointing out its strength and weaknesses. One would easily observe that Russell's denial of afterlife has led, in no small degree, to the radical; robbing of man's instinctive hope of existing hereafter, and robbing of man's hope of meeting his loved ones again after death. More still, Russell's denial has also led to the radical: belittling of man to animals, misconception of Christian dogmas, and a whole lot more of biting controversies.

### **Russell's Critique of Life after Death**

Russell (1872-1970) was a British philosopher, logician, mathematician, historian, writer, social critic and Noble Laureate. He vehemently upholds the belief that life after death is untenable, impossible, and does not exist. Consequently, he advances different arguments to prove his point. Russell's arguments against life after death include:

#### **Death as the Total End of the Human Person**

Bertrand Russell views the phenomenon of death as a necessary end which every human must embrace, regardless of one's status, sex, race, or age. Thus, he believes that death is inevitable. This notwithstanding, he argues that we can often delay it (Russell, 2004d, p. 6). Additionally, Russell observes that there are two processes of death: instantaneous and gradual process. However, he posits that the event of death is more of a gradual process (Russell, 1927).

Furthermore, Bertrand Russell's sense of death corresponds with that of the epicureans who teach that "after death there is no sensation, since the atoms that make up the bodies and minds come apart" (Russell , 1961, p. 141). His sense of death is, therefore, categorized under what Mondin refers to as "nihilistic sense of death". For Russell, there is nothing in the human person that survives the event of death.

Buttressing his point, he states: "I believe that when I die, I shall rot and nothing of my ego will survive. But I should scorn to shiver with terror at the thought of annihilation" (Russell, 2004d, p. 7).

### **Personal Identity**

Personal identity deals with the "issues of defining personhood, what attributes are necessary or sufficient for something to be called a person, or what a person ontologically speaking consists of" (Eddebo, 2017, p. 17). Russell (1961) argues that a person is a series of mental experiences or occurrences connected by memory (p. 139). He posits that there is no mental experience which is not connected with some living body. In other words, for Russell, memory and body are major components of a person. But since it is indubitable that the body decomposes at death, Russell maintains that the body cannot be a criterion for personal identity. On the other hand, Russell asserts that memory being a criterion for personal identity is difficult, given the fact that our memories are lost over time. But he argues that lost memories can be recovered through hypnotism or through psychoanalysis (Russell, 1961). Consequently, Russell maintains that memory is one of the criteria for personal identity.

Additionally, Russell posits that there is a seeming general notion that memory is entirely a mental phenomenon, but for him, this can be denied. Sequel to this, he argues that memory is a form of habit. And since habit is a characteristic of the nervous tissue, it implies that memory is not entirely mental, given the fact that memory is connected to the nervous tissue which is a material structure. Employing the argument that memory is a form of habit, Russell maintains that habit is, therefore, an element analogous to memory. More so, he asserts that since habits, just like memory, are also formed as a result of past experiences, then habit could be considered as one of the criteria for personal identity.

Consequent upon the foregoing, Russell asserts that using "memory" and "habit to define what a person ontologically consists of, is a broader and acceptable definition than by memory alone. The human person, for Russell, is therefore, not ontologically composed of body and soul, but of experiences connected by memories and habits. Affirming this, he

argues that a person, simply speaking, consists of experiences connected by memory and habit. Therefore, Russell argues that if we are to believe in the existence of afterlife, we must suppose that the personal identity (memories and habits) of the said individual survives the death of the body. Corroborating this, he states: "if we are to believe in the survival of a personality after the death of the body, we must suppose that there is continuity of memories or at least habits, since otherwise there is no reason to suppose that the same person is continuing" (Russell, 1961, p. 142). On the other hand, since it is obvious that personal identity (memories and habits) inhere in the body; Russell, therefore, concludes that it is logically impossible that it will continue to exist on its own after the death of the body.

### **The Mind-Brain Correlation**

Russell equates memory and habit with the mind. He defines the mind "as a group of mental events which form part of the history of a certain living body" (Russell, 1927, p. 298). And mental event, for him, is any event in the living brain, one which is experienced and remembered, and it is against this backdrop that Russell argues that the mind is bound up with the brain structures. He posits that when the brain is destroyed, at death, memory and habit (mind) are also destroyed with it, for they are inseparably bound together (Russell, 2004a). In other words, for him, there is no mind without the brain. Buttressing his point, Russell illustrates the relationship between the mind and the brain with the analogy of a river and the river bed in which the river flows. He believes that the mind is connected with the brain as a river is connected with the river bed. He writes:

Our memories and habits are bound up with the structure of the brain, in much the same way in which a river is connected with river-bed. The water in the river is always changing, but it keeps to the same course because previous rains have worn a channel. In like manner, previous events have worn a channel in the brain, and our thoughts flow along this channel. This is the cause of memory and mental habits. But the brain, as a structure, is dissolved at death, and memory therefore may be expected to be also dissolved. There is no more reason to think otherwise than to expect a river to persist in its old course after an earthquake has raised a mountain where a valley used to be (Russell, 2004a, p. 43).

Therefore, he argues that the river cannot persist in its course if earthquake has raised a mountain over the river bed. In the same way, there is no reason to expect the mind to continue to exist after the death of the body.

Furthermore, Russell argues that a drop of water is not immortal because it can be resolved into oxygen and hydrogen, and it would be skeptical for one to say that a drop of water has a quality of aqueousness that can survive its dissolution (Russell, 2004c). In like manner, Russell posits that the brain which is immortal, burns a lot of energy in coordinating the body's response to stimuli as well as in processing information around the body. For Russell, this energy is lost at death, and therefore not available for collective mental activities such as thinking, and it would be skeptical for one to say otherwise. He states:

What we call our 'thoughts' seem to depend upon the organization of tracks in the brain in the same sort of way in which journeys depend upon roads and railways. The energy used in thinking seems to have a chemical origin; for instance, a deficiency of iodine will turn a clever man into an idiot. Mental phenomena seem to be bound up with material structure. If this is so, we cannot suppose that a solitary electron or proton can 'think'; we might as well expect a solitary individual to play a football match. We also cannot suppose that an individual's thinking survives bodily death, since death destroys the organisation of the brain, and dissipates the energy which utilised the brain tracks (Russell, 1927, p. 4).

Russell, therefore, holds that just as our thoughts and the energy in the living brain cannot survive the death of the brain because they are inseparably bound together, so also the mind cannot survive the death of the brain. He conclusively maintains that whatever metaphysical opinion held about the mind and the brain, the intimate causal relationship that exists between the two is quiet overwhelming, and "it is difficult to believe that, whatever a 'mind' may be, a human mind can exist apart from a physical organism (Russell, 1999). This, for Russell, sets to prove that mental life ceases with the extinction of the brain at death. Against this backdrop, he declares that life after death is impossible because the mind ceases after death.

### **Emotion as Factors for Belief in Life after Death**

Emotions could be defined as sentimental propositions, lacking logical reasoning. Russell strongly argues that emotion is what prompts people to cling tenaciously to the doctrine of afterlife. He states: "It is not rational arguments, but emotions, that cause belief in a future life" (Russell, 2004a, p. 44). These emotional factors, according to Russell are: "fear of death" and "admiration of man's excellence". However, for him, the most important of these emotions is the fear of death.

## **Fear of Death**

Russell believes that the fear of death is instinctive and also biologically useful. It is, for him, an emotional phenomenon. He argues that it is the fear of death and annihilation that cause people to hope and believe that there is another form of life beyond this present one. Buttressing his point, he states: "if we genuinely and wholeheartedly believe in the future life, we should cease completely to fear death" (Russell, 2004a, p. 44). For him, our great warriors who have died fought their enemies with courage, and "it is therefore an advantage to be victors in the struggle for life to be able, on occasion, to overcome the natural fear of death" (Russell, 2004a, p. 44). He further declares that a character in Plato's *Republic* assures Socrates that, at the thought of death, the human mind becomes tormented with fear that the stories of afterlife, precisely eternal punishment, might be possibly true (Russell, 1961, p. 112). Although the fear of death trigger humans to hope and wish for continuous existence after death, Russell asserts that the fact that man fears death speaks also in favour of the belief that death totally ends all. In other words, life after death is untenable. Additionally, he writes:

Metaphysicians have advanced innumerable arguments to prove that the soul is immortal. There is one simple test by which all these arguments can be demolished. They all prove equally that the soul must pervade all space. But as we are not so anxious to be fat as to live long, none of the metaphysicians in question have ever noticed this application of their reasonings. This is an instance of the amazing power of desire in binding even very able men to fallacies which would otherwise be obvious at once. if we are not afraid of death, I do not believe that the idea of immortality would ever have arisen (Russell, 2004d, p. 5).

## **Admiration of Man's Excellence**

Russell points out that another emotional factor which cause the belief in the afterlife is the "admiration of the excellence of man". So different and unique are the types of human excellence which have been admired at different ages and places across the universe. Russell observes that seeing the marvellous inventions and capabilities of man, some people come up with the conviction that it will be unintelligent (on the part of an intelligent agent or creator) to let man perish totally after death. For him, this is mere emotions and not rational arguments. Russell cites the words of the Bishop of Birmingham as a witness to the

admiration of man and the unique excellence of his mind. Quoting the Bishop of Birmingham, Russell states:

His mind is a far finer instrument than anything that had appeared earlier, - he knows right and wrong. He can build Westminster Abbey. He can make an aeroplane. He can calculate the distance of the sun....Shall, then, man at death perish utterly? Does that incomparable instrument, his mind, vanish when life ceases? (Russell, 2004a, p. 45).

In other words, Russell concludes that, man, after admiring his excellence cum the unique achievements of his mind in the world, cannot buy the idea of total annihilation at death. Admiration of man's excellence, for Russell, therefore, serves as an emotional factor that cause humans to wish, hope, and believe in continuous existence after death.

For him, the fact that there is no logical and rational argument to prompt the belief in life after death indicates that the event of death is the extinction of the human person. In other words, life after death is impossible.

### **The Soul as an Unknowable Entity**

Russell argues that nothing can be known of the soul. He commences by tracing the scholastic substitution of the word "soul" for the word "subject". The scholastic philosophers substituted the word "mind" for the word "soul", in order to avoid theological implications, and afterwards, the word "subject" was substituted. The word "subject", for him, "still survives, particularly in the supposed contrast of 'subjective' and 'objective' (Russell, 1961). Subject is one who perceives whereas, object is that which is perceived. Sequel to this, Russell argues that the subject is always perceiving other things but cannot perceive itself. In other words, nothing can be known of the subject or soul, and therefore, we cannot assume that it exists (Russell, 1961).

Furthermore, Immanuel Kant argues that things in themselves are outside space and time, and cannot be perceived by the mind because they are not objects of sense perception, and the categories of human understanding cannot be applied to them (Omogbe, 1991). For Kant (1956), the soul is a thing-in-itself. Against this backdrop, Russell, borrowing a leaf from Kant's argument, holds that the soul cannot be perceived, and thus, does not exist. Paraphrasing Kant, Russell (1961) states:

The Ego (or Soul), as a thing-in-itself, is also not in time or in space, though as an observable phenomenon it appears to be in both. What we can observe in perception is a relation of a phenomenal Self to a phenomenal Object, but behind both there is a real Self and a Real thing-in-itself, neither of which can be observed. Why, then, assume that they exist? (p. 120).

Russell, thus, standing on the notion of the soul as a "thing-in-itself" maintains that the soul cannot be perceived and thus, does not exist. Consequent upon this, he insists that afterlife does not exist.

### **The Denial of the Soul as a Definite Substance**

Russell denies the existence of the human soul and the body as definite substances. He asserts that right before his age of reasoning, everyone seems to believe that man consists of body and soul. However, he argues that the common notion of the body and soul, as definite substances, was just an idea popularized by the thoughts of philosophers and thus, cannot be accepted. He writes:

Before we can profitably discuss whether we shall continue to exist after death, it is well to be clear as to the sense in which a man is the same person as he was yesterday. Philosophers used to think that there were definite substances, the soul and the body, that each lasted on from day to day that a soul, once created, continued to exist throughout all future time, whereas a body ceases temporally from death till the resurrection of the body. The part of this doctrine which concerns the present life is pretty certainly false (Russell, 2004a, p. 42).

Russell categorically rejects the idea that man is composed of body and soul. He argues that these two; body and soul, do not last from day to day. This is because the matter of the body is continually changing by the process of nutriment and wastage, and its continuous existence can only be a matter of appearance and behaviour, not of substance. In the same vein, there is not a bare entity which suffers the occurrences attributed to the soul: thoughts, feeling and actions (Russell, 2004a, p. 43). Therefore, Russell denies the existence of the soul, and also denies the reality of the soul as a substance distinct from the body. Russell argues that the idea of the soul as distinct from the body is an old distinction which has evaporated quite as much because 'matter' has lost its old solidity as because 'mind' has lost its spirituality (Russell, 1961, p. 133).

Additionally, he highlights that immortality of the soul is a doctrine widely held by Christians and non-Christians, by civilized and by barbarians. And that humans cannot stop entertaining the afterlife belief just the way we think ourselves virtuous and our enemies wicked. More still, Russell (2004c) expresses that people desire immortality of the soul; either as a redress for the injustices of this world, or as an affording possibility of meeting again after death, those whom they have loved (p. 51). In other words, the idea of the soul surviving death is one that men desire to believe in. However, Russell opines that the believers in immortality of the soul objects his arguments on two grounds: first, the believers in immortality hold that the soul is totally distinct from the body, and secondly, that the soul differs from the empirical manifestations of the body. Refuting this, Russell replies: "I believe this to be a metaphysical superstition (Russell, 2004d, p. 5).

Russell claims that the soul grows just as the body does. He argues that the soul derives from both the spermatozoon and the ovum, and as such, one cannot seriously believe the soul to be something indivisible, perfect and complete throughout the processes of growth: conception, gestation and infancy (Russell, 2004c). In other words, just as the body grows, matures and decays after death, so does the soul. It is mortal and not a single persistence entity. Similarly, David Hume (1907), in affirmation, asserts that the closeness between the body and the soul enables us to conclude that the destruction of one leads to the destruction of the other, hence, there is no reason to suppose that the alteration occasioned by the demise of the body and the subsequent loss of senses and other organs, would still leave the soul with its usual life. In the same vein, notable seventeenth-century scholars such as Richard Overton, John Milton, and Thomas Hobbes, claim that the soul also totally annihilates at death (Johnston , 2010). In the end, Russell insists that the soul is a logical fiction and not a single persistent entity, and as such, life after death is only a fantasy.

### **The Inadequacy of Scientific Proof of Afterlife**

Science is "the attempt to discover, by means of observation, and reasoning based upon it, first, particular facts about the world, and then laws connecting facts with one another and (in fortunate cases) making it possible to predict future occurrences" (Russell, 1961, p. 117). Russell regards science as the best available source of truth, though it is by no means infallible. Concerning immortality, Russell affirms the existence of psychical research or parapsychology, which professes actual scientific evidence for survival after death. One of the theories of parapsychology is trance mediumship. It is a condition whereby the medium (Martin & Augustine, 2015) travels into a sleep-like state or trance, "in which his or her

consciousness is apparently suspended and replaced by the consciousness of someone who has died and who is, in this way, communicating with those still on earth" (Hick, 1994). Russell applauds the theories of psychical research to be so overwhelming that they cannot be rejected by men of scientific temper.

Moreover, Russell goes on to highlight that the believers of afterlife will cling to the evidence of psychical research, whereas those who regard the evidence as implausible will seek further explanations. However, he states: "For my part, I consider the evidence so far adduced by psychical research in favour of survival much weaker than the physiological evidence on the other side" (Russell, 2004d, p. 4). In line with Russell, John Hick (1994) affirms that it is impossible to believe that all ostensible communications from the deceased to the medium are what they profess to be. For Hick (1994) there can be a vast conscious and unconscious amount of fraud on the part of the mediums (p. 130). In the same vein, Russell writes: "I do not like to think that after I am dead, I shall be at the beck and call of silly mediums, and be obliged to utter whatever may appear to them to be words of wisdom" (Russell, 1961, p. 137).

Additionally, Russell observes that men seem to find the evidence of psychical research very convincing, and thus, they cling tenaciously to them. Nevertheless, he argues that "the evidence of scientific research at best, would only prove that we survive death, not that we survive forever (Russell 1961). He also posits that no matter how accurate the researchers are, critical minds would still find it very difficult to accept their testimony. He, further, concludes that although it is obvious that our personality does not survive death; however, we shall require much stronger and more convincing evidence than psychical research, if we suppose that our personality survives the death of the body (Russell, 1961). Some may regret the thought that we shall not survive but it is a comfort to think that all the persecutors and evil men will not continue to exist for all eternity (Russell, 1961, p. 147). Finally, Russell insists that whatever science has to say as regards immortality is not very definite. He asserts that science may still proffer stronger scientific evidence of immortality in the future, but since as at the moment, most of its proofs are inadequate, he denies the existence of life after death.

### **Disastrous Moral Effects of Afterlife Belief**

Russell criticizes the Christian doctrine of immortality of the soul. Bitterly, he states: "In countless ways the doctrine of personal immortality in its Christian form has had disastrous effects upon moral... (Russell, 2004b, p. 30). He claims that the Christian accentuation of the immortality of human soul affects the ethics and morality of Christian communities via negativa. Hence, Russell observes and argues that the desire for future life, not only robs man

his rationality, but also cripples his morality. On this note, he elucidates that "the Spaniards in Mexico and Peru, used to baptize Indian infants, and then immediately dash their brains out: by this means they have secured that these infants went to heaven" (Russell, 2004b, p. 30). It is an act of murder, and consequently, a degeneration of moral life. All for the desire to exist hereafter.

Furthermore, Russell argues that the consciousness of afterlife; eternal bliss or perpetual woe, provoke humans to easily condemn law breakers and consider them fit for eternal damnation. For him, if there were no afterlife beliefs, such may not occur. He observes that the obsession for life after death seems to make man unable to seek for the root cause of one's evil acts in order to proffer solutions. On the contrary, humans have become more interested in wishing criminals and law breakers eternal torments in hell, that we now fail to understand the possibility of heredity. Buttressing this, he states:

When a man acts in ways that annoy us we wish to think him wicked, and we refuse to face the fact that his annoying behavior is a result of antecedent causes which, if you follow them long enough, will take you beyond the moment of his birth, and therefore to events for which he cannot be held responsible by any stretch of imagination (Russell, 2004b, p. 34).

The excerpt reveals clearly that Russell did not discard the possibility of hereditary circumstances in man. On this note, he argues that the behaviours and personalities of man that are determined by heredity are "handed on to our posterity, but cannot, in the individual, survive the disintegration of the body" (Russell, 2004a, p. 44). Thus, for Russell, it is clear that both the acquired and the hereditary part of our personality are bound up with the bodily structures.

Notwithstanding the whole arguments advanced by Russell in denying the possibility and tenability of life after death, he acknowledges that philosophy cannot decide the problem afterlife. He concedes the aphorism "life is larger than logic", and thus writes:

You may believe this on the ground of revealed religion, but that is a ground which lies outside philosophy. You may believe it on the ground of the phenomena investigated by psychical research, but that is science, not philosophy. In former days, you could believe it on a philosophical ground, namely, that the soul is a substance and all substances are indestructible... But the notion of substance, in the sense of a permanent entity with changing states, is no longer applicable to the world. It may happen, as with the electron,

that a string of events are so interconnected causally that it is practically convenient to regard them as forming one entity, but where this happens it is a scientific fact, not a metaphysical necessity. The whole question of personal immortality, therefore, lies outside philosophy, and is to be decided, if at all, either by science or by revealed religion (Russell, 1927, p. 309).

Having discussed extensively Russell's critique of life after death in the foregoing, we observed that some of his arguments are centered on the dogmatic teachings of the Christian religion. We also discovered that no matter how logically sound his arguments seem, there are certain flaws underlying some of them. Therefore, we shall proceed to critically evaluate these arguments in order to lay bare their strengths and weaknesses.

### **The Strengths of Russell's Argument on Life after Death**

Russell is regarded as one of the greatest thinkers and logicians of his time. He could be applauded for being logically consistent in some of his arguments against life after death. These arguments include:

#### **Emotion as the Cause of the Afterlife Belief**

Russell (2004a) argues that it is emotions, and not rational arguments, that cause the belief in a future life. He posits that the most prominent of these emotions is the fear of death. This assertion is considered true because death inspires fear. It has remained a mysterious phenomenon. But there are people who desire afterlife without fear of death. The martyrs for instance never feared death. However, according to Battista Mondin (2019, p. 267), one of the features of death is fearfulness. This attribute of death emanates from the fact that death is inescapable and a necessary end. George Ekwuru (2010) corroborates this thus:

Just as man fears death, he has the tendency of fleeing and evading every discussion about death. The most fearful dimension of death is the fact of inescapability, the understanding that it is a necessary end. Death also inspires fear because of the mystery surrounding it, namely, the fact that no one has first-hand theoretical or practical knowledge of it. Death terrorizes us, not only because it is painful, but also, because we are unwilling to lose our human consciousness permanently (p. 323).

The fear of death makes us hope and desire a future life, and this hope of a future life assuages the fear that death is the total end of human existence. Moreover, the fact that we would not see our departed loved ones again heightens our fear of death. Thus, we tend to

envision a future reunion in the afterlife. Against this backdrop, one can stand with Russell that the belief in afterlife was born out of emotions.

### **The Inadequacy of Trance Mediumship**

Russell (1961) exposes the inadequacy of trance mediumship in proving survival after death. Trance mediumship is a condition whereby the medium travels into a sleep-like state or trance, in which his or her consciousness is apparently suspended and replaced by the consciousness of someone who has died and who is, in this way, communicating with those still on earth (Hick, 1994, p. 129). But how do we prove that it is the actual consciousness of the intended deceased individual that is placed in the medium? Also, how do we prove that the medium is not fabricating stories, and thus, alleging the dead to be speaking through him? Moreover, since it is a personal experience, can it be objectively analysed? Affirming this, Hick posits that there could be a vast conscious and unconscious amount of fraud on the medium's part (Hick, 1994). With this, one can, in line with Russell, maintain that trance mediumship cannot prove the existence of afterlife.

### **The Weaknesses of Russell's Argument on Life after Death**

In arguing against the doctrine of life after death, Russell built some strong case against life after death. However, his arguments are not without some inadequacies. Thus, we shall, in what follows, examine the weaknesses of Russell's argument.

### **Memory as Criterion for Personal Identity**

Russell posits that memory is a criterion for personal identity, but this assertion is logically weak. Although memory is regarded as one of the criteria for personal identity, it is, however, not sufficient alone to ontologically identify a person. Memory cannot ensure personal identity as an enduring self over time, because it can be lost either permanently or temporarily. Let us take for instance; a situation whereby Mr. JohnPaul commits murder and afterwards, loses his memory as a result of accident. Is the Johnpaul before and during the murder (with his memory intact) still the same John Paul after the murder, when he has lost his memory? Arguing from Russell's point of view, the former JohnPaul is not the same with the later, hence should not be convicted for the crime of the former Mr JohnPaul. Furthermore, we keep making new memories daily as we grow in knowledge and experience, and as we do this, old memories fade away and are replaced. Consequently, memory alone is an insufficient criterion for personal identity.

Against Russell's argument, several research's and publications have shown that there children who reincarnated and are able to remember memories of their past life amidst scars from their previous lives. These cases are suggestive of the possibility of life after death as well as the ability of some, especially at a younger age, to recall memories of their past lives. Notable among such researchers is Ian Stevenson, the Director of the Department of Psychiatry and Neurology, University of Virginia. He dedicated his lifetime to investigation of past life experiences and came to the conclusion As he told Tom Shroder(1999) years later, “these forty-four cases, when you put them together, it just seemed inescapable to me that there must be something there ... . I couldn't see how they could all be faked or they could all be a deception” (p. 103).

### **Misconception of Christian Dogmas**

The Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body was for Russell, a mere fantasy. He argues that the resurrected body differs from the earthly body, because matter of which man is composed of cannot retain its identity when the attributes of the matter change. For him, since it is obvious that our bodies decay into worms and clays after death, it is easier to produce a new body than to reassemble worms and clays for resurrection to occur. It is obvious that Russell misconceives the Christian doctrine of the resurrection. Mondin (2019) debunking Russell's assertion explains the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. He posits that through the extraordinary intervention of divine goodness, there will be a transvaluation and transformation of the human body after death, which will make it capable of sharing the everlasting destiny of the soul (278). This goes on to establish the fact that the doctrine of the resurrection cannot be reduced to mere physics as Russell did. It is a miraculous act of divinity.

Additionally, in denying the immortality of the soul, Russell argues that the soul is derived from both the spermatozoon and the ovum. But this is a serious blunder on the part of Russell. It is logically incoherent to assume that substance is a derivative of accident. That which is immaterial, indivisible and subsistent cannot be derived from material and divisible phenomena like ovum and spermatozoon. It is crystal clear that Russell has an erroneous understanding of what the soul is. It is not derived from the ovum and the likes. The soul was created by God, and it is immortal.

### **Equation of the Mind with the Brain**

Russell pointed out that the mind is bound up with the brain such that with the dissipation of the brain, survival of the mind would be impossible. In other words, Russell is arguing that the mind and the brain are identical. However, this cannot be true because the brain is a material and physical entity whereas the mind is not a material entity (Omogbe, 2003, p. 32). The mind is the seat and faculty of mental events in man. The close connection between the mind and the brain is indubitable, given the fact that the mind ceases to function properly when the brain is affected, likewise the other way round. However, that does not mean that Russell is correct in his equating the mind with the brain. In dissecting the human head, one can only discover the brain and not the mind, and even if the mind is to be equated with the brain, as Russell insists, then animals would have minds since they have brains (Omogbe, 2003, p. 32). But animals have only brains, they have no mind. Russell, therefore, cannot be right in saying that the mind is identical with the brain.

### **Man as a Transcendental Being**

Russell's denial of life after death implicitly belittles man to mere animals. If we do not survive death, how are we different from animals that are slaughtered for merriment? The human person cannot be the same with animals. He is gifted with the rational soul, which distinguishes him from other animals, and this rational soul is immortal. In addition, the transcendence of man- which animals do not have, is also an instance in this regard. In general, transcendence could mean "going beyond". In anthropology, transcendence is the exclusive movement of man to rise above himself and relate with that which is beyond himself (Mondin, 2019, p. 199). And on epistemological ground, Bernard Lonergan (1992) in his discourse on transcendence holds that transcendence "is the elementary matter of raising further questions,...a development in man's knowledge relevant to a development in man's being" (pp. 658-659). As long as man is an intelligent being with rationality, freedom and responsibility, he has the capacity to grasp and affirm his own transcendence, but animals cannot. In other words, the transcendence of man in both epistemology and anthropology strongly argues against materialistic reductionism of the human person. There are also other dimensions of the human person beyond the materialistic and rationalistic which cancel the materialistic reductionism of the human person. For instance, the social personality and posterity of man are pointers to the fact that in the human person, even after death, the future generations continue to recall the achievements such persons made while they lived, and also the personality of those persons who have died are never totally obliterated from the minds of

the living. But this may not possibly obtain in animals. This is why it is a crime for one to commit murder, whereas, killing of animals for merriment is not considered as an abomination.

### **Nothing is known about the Knowing Subject**

Russell argues that the knowing subject always perceives and knows other things (knowable objects), but cannot perceive itself. Therefore, nothing can be known of the subject. This is not only erroneous but misleading. Knowledge is got through a dialectical process between the knowing self (subject) and the revealing self (object). The anonymity of the subject as posited by Russell is also in direct contrast with the Socratic dictum: "man know thyself", which implies that the subject cannot know other things if it does not know itself. Corroborating this, Humphrey Ani (2019) writes: "man know thyself was a universal invitation for one to verify and justify knowledge of the self, as a precondition to claim of knowledge of anything. One knowing oneself is the first step in one's ability to claim that one knows other things" (p. 19). In other words, this implies that the knowledge of the subject even precedes the knowledge of the object. In addition, we can know something of the subject the fact that it is a knower. And even the subject is aware that it is a knower. Buttressing this point, Bernard Lonergan (1992) in his discourse on self-affirmation of the knower states:

Am I a knower? The answer yes is coherent, for if I am a knower, I can know that fact. But the answer no is incoherent, for if I am not a knower, how could the question be raised and answered by me? For if I know that I do not know, then I am a knower, and if I do not know that I do not know, then I should not answer (p. 353).

### **Life is Bigger than Logic**

It is important to note that life is larger than logic. Life is a mystery, and it cannot be entirely subjected to logic. This implies that there are some experiences in life which are practically beyond logic, yet, we cannot prove that they are entirely illusions and fantasies. Some of them are: experiences where people were able to see spirits (dead family members), experiences where people who have died long ago were seen in another locality, alive and healthy, and so on. Therefore, philosophy with its reasoning and logics cannot decide on certain issues of life such as afterlife. And even philosophers often demonstrate their basic inadequacy of this knowledge, In line with Sullivan (2012), one can argue that philosophy cannot envisage the satisfaction of the soul's desire for an everlasting union with God, for this is not within the

power of nature, but a supernatural gift (p. 128). It is, therefore, evident that philosophy, with its limitations, cannot decide on the problem of afterlife. It possesses an insufficient knowledge to decipher the nature of human survival after death.

### **Justification of Life after Death**

Despite Russell's logicity in his denial of the reality of life after death and the arguments he put up to substantiate his claim, they do not disprove the fact that afterlife exists. Having done justice to the strength and weaknesses of Russell's arguments, let us therefore explore some bases upon which the reality of life after death can be pitched.

Firstly, the human person is a composite of two dimensions - the physical and the spiritual dimension. The physical dimension is the body and it decomposes at death, while the spiritual dimension is the soul and it is immortal. The soul is the form of the body, but it is different from all other forms because it is a subsistent form: a form capable of existing on its own. Aquinas (1948) maintains that the soul is a subsistent form because it has an activity that pertains to it without the use of any corporeal organ, namely, the act of intellection (1, Q. 75, A. 6). If the soul can perform the act of intellection without the body, it follows that it can also exist after the decomposition of the body. Ani (2019) corroborates this thus: "The soul can be separated from the body without dying out in itself, and it can exercise its power of intellection without necessarily depending on the bodily senses, even though the senses provide the primary images for abstraction or intellection" (p. 37).

Moreover, the soul is immortal because it has existence per se, and not as an inhering principle. However, one may say: since whatever exists per se can be corrupted per se, the human soul should be corrupted per se. Aquinas (1948), in contrast, argues thus:

However, this (per se corruption) is wholly impossible, not only as regards the human soul, but also as regards anything subsistent that is a form alone. For it is clear that what belongs to a thing by virtue of itself (secundum se) is inseparable from that thing. But existence belongs per se to form, which is an act, by virtue of itself. This is why matter acquires actual existence as it acquires the form; while it is corrupted so far as the form is separated from it. But it is impossible for a form to be separated from itself. Hence, it is impossible that a subsistent form should cease to exist (1, Q. 75, A. 6).

From the above passage, Aquinas concludes that it is impossible for a subsistent form to be corrupted per se. Form is the source of a subsistent thing's existence or being. A subsistent

form is, therefore, the principle of its own being. Since a subsistent form cannot be separated from itself, neither can it be separated from its being, therefore, the human soul, being a subsistent form, cannot cease to be.

In addition to the foregoing, the soul is also immortal because it is not subject to contrariety. Aquinas explains that corruption is due to the contrary state of being because coming into existence and departing from it are contrary states of being. Consequently, he attributes corruption to those things that are subject to contrariety. He argues that such contrary states do not exist in the soul, which is shown in the way it receives what are its contraries. In knowledge, contrary ideas are received in one relationship, so that they cease to be contraries in the soul. This dissolution of contraries by the act of intellectual knowledge shows that it is impossible for the soul to be corruptible (1, Q. 75, A. 6).

Self-transcendence is yet another justification for life after death. Transcendence is derived from the Latin word, '*transcendere*', which means "to ascend on" or "to elevate above or across". Self-transcendence refers to the property of man by which he constantly goes beyond himself in all he thinks, wills, and in all he realizes (Mondin, 2019, p. 199). Man's self-transcendence is theocentric. This is because man possesses a spiritual substance; the human soul, which projects itself towards the infinite (vertical transcendence), exceeding the limits of space and time, to penetrate into the realm of God, who is the foundation of every sense and wish. Since God is immortal, the soul which projects itself towards this union with God is, therefore, destined for immortality (unending existence).

Additionally, morality can lead us to assume that there is life after death. Every man, by the imperative of moral law, has an obligation to strive for holiness. According to Immanuel Kant (1956), holiness is a perfection which no human being ever attains in this life. However, if man has the moral obligation to strive for holiness, it means that it is attainable, but since it is not attainable in this life, we are led to assume that the progress towards it continues after death. Kant (1956) affirms this thus: "This infinite progress towards holiness is possible, however, only under the presupposition of an infinitely enduring existence and personality of the same rational being; this is called the immortality of the soul" (p. 127). Moreover, every human action, whether good or bad, has repercussions - its attendant reward or punishment, which cannot be exhausted in the present life. Therefore, when our actions are accomplished, the consequences of our actions still await us, if not now, then in the hereafter, where all shall justly receive that which is due for their actions on earth. This, therefore, presupposes the existence of life after death.

## **Conclusion**

In his critique of afterlife, Russell denied the reality of afterlife and existence of the soul as a definite substance, the composite nature of the human person, the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, and so on. For him, man is not composed of anything capable of surviving the decomposition of the body. He argued that it is emotions, particularly the fear of death, that cause people to uphold the belief in life after death. Moreover, we observe that his denial of life after death implicitly reduced man to mere animals. However, despite the logicity of his arguments, we also notice some flaws underlying them. Owing to these flaws, we observe that his arguments cannot entirely disprove the fact that there is life after death; thus, this essay while acknowledging the impacts of his contentions, extensively justified the existence and possibility of life after death. Finally, we came to the conclusion that although death is a necessary end for the human person, it does not bring life to a total end, since the soul, which is the spiritual element in man outlives the decomposition of the body.

Man has a destiny, which does not end in death. Death is, rather, a ticket to another form of life in the "Great Beyond". And the fact that tomorrow may begin without us does not mean that we are lost forever. This is affirmed by the Latin adage: *vita mutatur, non tollitur* (life is not ended but transformed). The implication of this is that there is something in man that outlives the decomposition of the body, and actualizes the everlasting destiny of the human person. This entity is called the soul, and it is immortal. In other words, life after death is possible, as against the likes of Russell who denied its existence and possibility.

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