

Expanding the “Arc of Existence:” Tatian, Fechner and the span of Becoming.

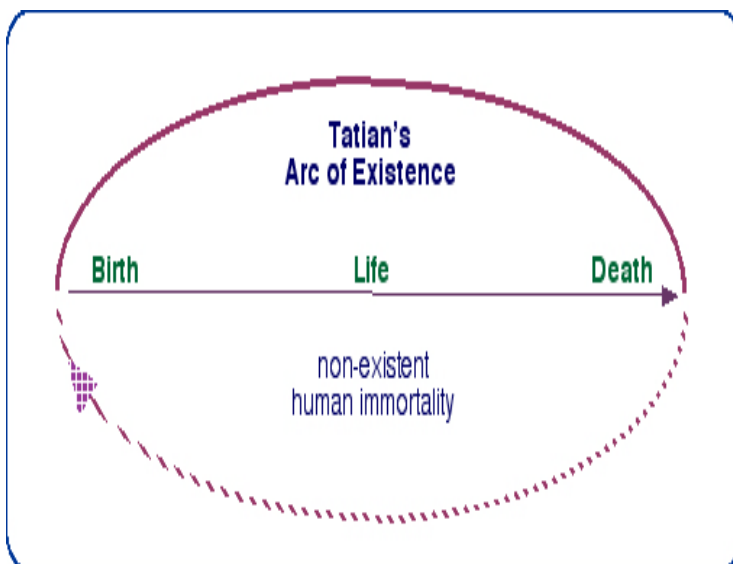
The Arc of Existence is the construct of Tatian, a second-century Greco-Roman writer. Tatian wrote the Arc of Existence to refute those who believed in human immortality. The arc was specific: the span of human life is only from birth to death; there is nothing human after a life’s natural existence.

Is Tatian correct? Or, does the expanse of his arc fall short? Read on.

Whereas certain philosophers promise their adherents life after death and describe human existence as a circle without beginning or end, Tatian holds out to his readers the prospect of their own transience. He speaks of ‘our own span passing away.’ Man passes, changes, finishes his span, dies. Not a circle without beginning or end, but an arc, a short segment of the circle with a defined beginning and definitely prescribed end would be the proper figure of human life, according to Tatian. Man’s life is described by the arc of existence.

This is Tatian’s Arc of Existence as explained by Jaroslav Pelikan in “The Shape of Death,” (Abingdon, 1961).

Tatian’s Arc says, death means natural physical death. When life reaches its end, life is done. The body ceases life functions and then decays. Tatian’s arc denies any expectation of human immortality; denies any concept of reincarnation (samsara); and, denies any circular human existence. Tatian is specific in his thesis that humans have no authority or control over “what happens next” - after their physical demise. That authority remains solely with the “source of which life has originally come.” Pelikan adds, “Neither for his original birth out of the nothingness of non-being, nor his ultimate rebirth out of death can man take the credit.” Tatian places the source of life



in the sovereign realm of the Creator. It is only the Creator that has authority over immortality; to believe otherwise would place a human existence as equal to a cosmological existence. The “original source” beyond the human is the arc’s theological orientation.

There is another orientation. The “what happens next” offers the potential for something else after organic death. This raises further questioning. What was the before nothingness? What came from non-being? What is rebirth? What goes to the what happens next? These are the issues of the arc’s metaphysical orientation.

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To investigate both orientations, let us first discuss what is or is not beyond human life, a in the after life. Many faith traditions believe Heaven is the after life. Heaven is the most referenced after life state of existence. The pleasure of Heaven is often the goal for the manner in which one lives one's life. Zillions of people believe in a Heaven. It answers the where of the "what happens next" question. Heaven is at the theological end of Tatian's Arc. So if Heaven is accepted, then, what goes to enjoy the pleasures of that Heaven? For many, the answer is the "soul."

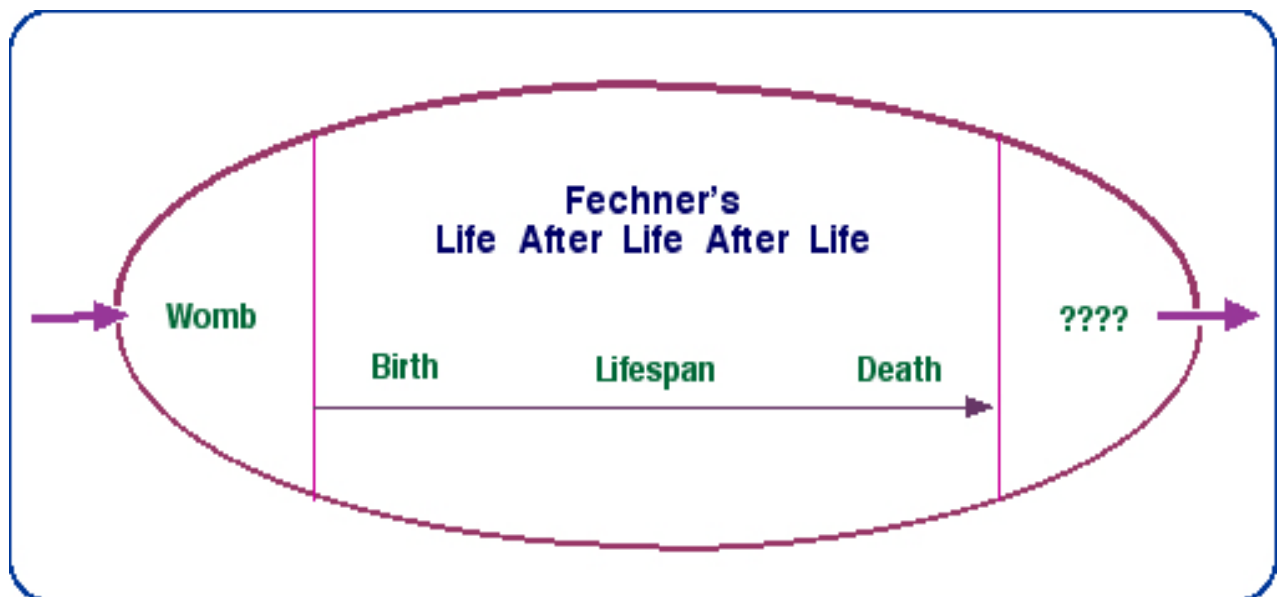
What is the soul? This is tough, considering all the variants of the soul concept that exist from classical thinking through numerous religious beliefs into modern philosophical thought. One line of soul thinking is, the entire body is a tripartite construction consisting of the body, the rational and the irrational. Another is the Cartesian "ghost in the machine." And another is, the soul is the governing entity, the psyche of the human species. The problem in explaining the soul is, where is it? Is it a physical organ, sinew, fluid, or molecule? If the soul cannot be identified, pointed to, held, or surgically removed, does it actually exist? (This is similar to the debate over the mind and brain being separate entities.)

Explaining the soul is difficult. Even so, many agree there is a soul. Moreover, many believe the soul goes somewhere after death. As an anecdotal exhibit, this writer conducted a survey of twenty graduate anthropology students taking a Death & Dying course. The survey asked: if they believed in a Heaven; do humans have souls; if so what is a soul; does a soul die with the person; if not, where does the soul go; and, what happens to the soul when it gets there? The twenty students prescribed to various western and eastern faith traditions, including atheism. Not all believed there was such place as Heaven. All twenty indicated they believed humans have a soul, but were unsure of its description. Out of the twenty, eighteen believed the soul went somewhere after death. Among those, none could be definite about where it went. Most were sure the soul did not return to human life. That is, it stayed wherever it went. The reader is encouraged to consider these questions, and to conduct their own survey.

Let us agree, for this discussion, that a soul does exist. Also, let us agree the soul is a separate entity within the body, which does not die along with the body's organic death. So, what happens to the soul? Does it hover over the dead body, the corpse, not knowing what to do with itself? Is it lost or stuck? The answer might as well be Heaven. What then? Do souls just pile up in Heaven? Do they just hang around with nothing to do? Or, do souls get used again? Are they sent back for further assignment? Maybe.

If souls have some existence before and after death, then it may be possible that souls have an existence before birth? This was a view posited by Tatian's teacher Justin Martyr. That is, if one believes something exists after human life, then one must believe there is some form of existence before human life. If the soul somehow emigrates to somewhere, then it must be possible that it immigrated from somewhere, prior to its entering its human life form. One might accept the soul moving on to a Heaven, but would one accept something like a pre-Heaven? Hold that thought.

Now, this discussion needs a more recent view. Nineteenth-century German philosopher Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801-1887) wrote a very interesting book called *Life After Death*. It is his only book translated into English. In it, Fechner offers the concept that the human body dies twice. The first death is upon birth from the womb. That is, the fetus was a body in the womb. It had to die that existence to be birthed. After that death, the body became a person and lived its life as an individual. The second death comes as that earthly body ceases. Fechner believes, just as there is a life after the death in the womb, there is also a second life after the death in this world. Something must exist after that second physical death.



This writer offers a précis of two other elements in Fechner's Life after Death.

Our lives continue on after we go to the grave.
 Think of how we carry the memory of a loved one
 after we have put their remains in the ground.
 Think of the ways we memorialize our lost souls
 with headstones, monuments, statues, plaques, buildings,
 names over doors, photo albums, portraits, artifacts and heirlooms.
 Some past lives may be contained, retained and maintained.
 One might say they are institutionalized; for example,
 Washington, Victoria, MacDonald, Lincoln, Pontiac, King, and so on.
 Are these not lives after death?

Fechner also believes that when we remember a lost one,
 it is not us who creates the remembering.
 It is the lost one who returns to be remembered.
 We are being visited by that life after death.
 One can feel it. This is not far fetched. (Sorry for the pun Fechner.)
 Has this happened to you, too?

Some would say, the spirits are returning. Maybe the word "spirit" answers all
 questions in this entire discussion: of a life after death; of the existence of a soul
 before and after; and, the what happens next. The concept of spirit appears in
 many faith traditions. It represents not only a divine entity, but a transcendental
 entity. It represents an attitude, a human self worth, a congealing doctrine, an
 esprit de corps, a lingering, a resilient philosophy, a ghost, an ancestor, the "other
 side." Possibly, the human spirit is the human soul that carries on from the
 generations before the womb, to the generations that follow the grave. On and
 on it goes.

This is the basis of what is called Process, or Becoming.
 Process is both a philosophical and a theological construct. Alfred North
 Whitehead (1861-1947) posited Process as a philosophical concept. Charles
 Hartshorne (1897-2000) added the divine to Process to make it a theological
 concept. This writer offers a contemporary explanation of Process.

Consider the three dimensional product
well know in the construction industry as the "Traffic Cone."
This conical item, often bright orange in color, is known for its use
to demarcate areas where builders and constructors
do not want people or vehicles to enter.
It is a safety notification device of that which is being constructed,
for those who are doing the building,
and for those who are traveling nearby.
Often a large quantity of these cones are used on a work site.
Their storage takes up a great deal of space when not in use.
Because they are hollow cones, they can be placed one over the other
This is the basic idea of Process.

The cone at the very bottom is holding up all cones above.
The cones above cannot be held up without the cones below.
The cones below are the uplifting force for the cones above.
The cones above receive their placement from the cones below.
The stack, as it grows higher, receives its form from all the cones.
Cones above, receive some form of energy and influence from all below.
There is a transfer of energy between all cones in the stack.
The cone at the very bottom is the origin of that energy.
A transference of something is within this entity, this stack of cones.

Life is no different than that stack of Traffic Cones. Our parents transferred a
substance, an influence, an energy, to us while we were in the womb. Before
we were conceived, they received that same substance, be it influence or
energy, spirit or soul, from their parents. How far back in time does this go in our
genealogies? Maybe forever. If we have children, we move that same
substance on to our offspring and they to theirs. On and on it goes; the
Process, the Becoming.

This is "life after death, after death, after death,"

This is the spirit coming from somewhere, going on to somewhere.

Is this the soul transmigrating over the generations?

Is this life without a defined beginning or end?

Tatian, did your arc fall too short?

One fact is for certain:

whoever we are today, some part of us no matter how small

- whether spirit or molecule -

has been given to us from the very first soul, a long time ago.

This is Tatian's "source of which life has originally come."

It is a very long ever expanding Arc of Existence.

Best Regards to All.

Chaplain on Signal Mountain 2010

