



Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives

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The sheer impossibility of eternity

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There are three deaths. The first is when the body ceases to function. The second is when the body is consigned to the grave. The third is that moment sometime in the future, when your name is spoken for the last time. ('Metamorphosis', p. 23)

First you notice there are many blunders: the good are going to Hell and the bad to Heaven. When you approach the woman at the front desk to inquire, you find she is recalcitrant and insolent. ('Reins', p. 52)

There is no afterlife for us. Our bodies decompose upon death, and then the teeming floods of microbes living inside us move on to better places. This may lead you to assume that God doesn't exist - but you'd be wrong. ('Microbe', p. 54)

Just as there is no afterlife for a computer chip,

there is none for us: we are, after all, the same thing. ('Impulse', p. 79)

In the afterlife you meet God. To your surprise and delight, She is like no god that humans have conceived. ('Apostasy', p. 98)

There is no afterlife, but that doesn't mean we don't get to live a second time. ('Reversal', p. 109)

These are the beginnings of just six of the forty 'tales of the afterlives' in David Eagleman's extraordinary new book *Sum*. This is quite simply the strangest, most provocative, beguiling and fascinating book I've read in a long time. Unsurprisingly, it has caused something of a publishing storm, not least because of the power of Stephen Fry's twitter feed, which is quite surprising when you consider its sombre subject matter: death and reality after death.

In just 100 pages, we're offered forty versions – parallel universes, parallel narratives, parallel afterlives. Some are mutually exclusive and contradictory; some might cohere into some sort of bigger picture (just). But that's not the point. Eagleman has called himself 'a *possibilian*'. In answer to the question of whether or not any of the stories could be true, or whether any are more probable than others, he says:

None are meant to be serious proposals. The only serious proposal is the emergent message of the book: that there are many possibilities, and we should be discussing the size of that space instead of battling over the details of the pitifully few stories that our ancestors entertained ... They are all equally improbable.[1]

Then if asked if he believes in anything at all, he simply states, 'I believe in possibility'.

It is perhaps not surprising that the book has struck chords with thousands on both sides of the Atlantic. It resonates with prevailing postmodern winds of metanarrative incredulity (to paraphrase Lyotard), and seems perfectly reasonable. But I couldn't help but be reminded of the pragmatism of Bob Hope who quipped, 'I do benefits for all religions – I'd hate to blow the hereafter on a technicality', and of G.K. Chesterton's oft-repeated but equally apt little maxim: 'Merely having an open mind is nothing. The object of opening the

mind, as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something solid.'

However, it would be grossly unfair to suggest that this book merely rides the tides of popular culture. It is truly a work of genius and sharp originality. Each story subverts and challenges assumptions (of theist and atheist alike). The cumulative effect is nothing short of dazzling. Eagleman has the satirical wit and deep ingenuity of Douglas Adams (I was occasionally reminded of his *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, such as in 'Spirals', pp. 29-31), a relentless logic and, above all, a fearless creativity. To suggest other influences or evocations, from the likes of *The Truman Show* ('Death Switch', pp. 66-68) or *The Matrix* ('Blueprints', pp. 101-103) or the phenomena of quantum mechanics ('Conservation', pp. 84-88), does not diminish the achievement. It is far from derivative and packs an extraordinary diversity into a Tardis-like space.

The experience of reading the book is itself suggestive. Each tale lasts only a few pages, but almost every time I found myself having to put the book down to get my mind around its disorientating effect. One cannot help but wonder about the mind that can be so relentlessly surprising. David Eagleman is an American neuroscientist who studied literature as an undergraduate, which is itself a powerful and unusual combination.

Sum appears, at first, to be even-handed over the myriad possibilities of cosmic metaphysics. Yet the crosshairs of Eagleman's sights seem primarily set on traditional religious convictions, whether about reality, God or the afterlife. There seems a spine-tingling relish at the iconoclasm involved in multiple redefinitions of God or gods. Take, for example, his characteristically clever tale 'Absence'. Here is the scenario:

God is gone. The rumour is that He stepped out long ago, saying He'd be right back. Some people hypothesize that God is never planning to return. Others say God went crazy; others assert He loves us but was called away to spawn new universes. Some say he is angry, others say He contracted Alzheimer's. Some hypothesize he is on siesta, others on fiesta. Some say God does not care; some say God cared but has passed away... (p. 56)

The description of the effects on those left behind is pointed, to say the least:

The new religious wars do not pivot on God's definition but instead on His whereabouts. The New Crusaders mount attacks against infidels who believe God is returning; the New Jihadis bomb those who don't believe that God has other universes to attend; the New Thirty Years War rages between those who think God is physically ailing and those who find the suggestion of fallibility sacrilegious. The New Hundred Years War wages between those who have concluded He never existed in the first place and those who have concluded He is on a romantic junket with his girlfriend. (p. 57)

You get the idea. It's a fresh take on the old gibe that religion causes war and suffering (which at some levels is undeniable, though it's not so simple as that) and that we're better off without it altogether (much more questionable, especially after the atheistic regimes of the twentieth century). Of course, there are thirty-nine other tales, each with different targets in view. The conclusion tentatively suggested by the whole lot (if one is suggested at all) is that it is better to avoid convictions altogether.

Still, the forty tales are presented together in one volume, and ask to be tackled as such. Eagleman states on his website that he wrote over seventy-five, but picked these because they 'created the right combination'. So what is their accumulative effect? What struck me most was the irony that, for all the book's impressive creativity, the scope of the human imagination is clearly finite. Eagleman's objections to many traditional (especially Judaeo-Christian) articulations of God and reality simply seem to be derived from the impossibility of conceiving the eternal or divine. So, for instance, the god of 'Reins' (pp. 52-53) was overwhelmed by the sheer scale of bureaucracy required to manage the human race: 'God realized that He had no concept of the skills required to run an organization of this magnitude' (p. 52). Consequently, power was wrested from his hands by committees who felt they could do a better job. Thus the possibility of omnipotence is inconceivable (a problem common to the god of 'Seed', pp. 92-94).

Or take one of my favourites: 'Prism' (pp. 72-74). This tackles the perennial question of what age we will be in the afterlife. Eagleman's solution is brilliant, and resonates with the increasingly common experience of fragmented lives. But solving it was beyond the wit of this tale's particular god. Omniscience is thus an impossibility too:

God resolved at the outset that He wanted every human to participate in the afterlife. But the plans weren't thought out to completion, and immediately He began to run up against some confusion about age. How old should each person be in the afterlife? (p. 72)

Most interestingly, though, is the sheer impossibility of imagining eternity itself. As soon as one applies the mind to imagining the afterlife – and the pervasive biblical statements of heaven being eternal – language disintegrates. There is no earthly (or even cosmic) equivalent that can remotely do justice to what is being claimed. Our experience of inhabiting this physical universe means that we cannot conceive of existence without decay or attrition. Eagleman touches on this in 'Conservation' (pp. 84-88) and also in the final tale, 'Reversal' (pp. 109-110). In the latter:

At some point the expansion of the universe will slow down, stop and begin to contract, and at that moment the arrow of time will reverse. Everything that happened on the way out will happen again, but backward. In this way our life neither dies nor disintegrates, but rewinds.

This is, I suppose, the 'what goes up must come down' take on existence.

But the fact that I cannot conceive or imagine something doesn't make it unreal or untrue. I've no idea how omnipotence or omniscience are possible, but as Jesus himself said in a rather different context, what is impossible for human beings is possible for God (Luke 18:27). Or take the experience of eternity, so easily dismissed as twanging rainbow-strapped guitars on clouds (a distortion rightly subverted by 'Ineffable', pp. 75-76): what could be more boring? Yet, the apostle Peter made the extraordinary statement that the Christian's eternal inheritance can never '*perish, spoil or fade*' (1 Peter 1:4). Stop to consider each of those three verbs. Every experience of this life

is characterised by at least one of them. It's no surprise that we quickly assume that if there is life after life, then that will also be characterised by them. But why should we? Of course, we can't blame anyone, least of all David Eagleman, for jumping to such a conclusion. Yet what if there was someone who had experienced life after life? Even if the vocabulary that person used to describe it could never match up because it would be bound by this-world-experience, we could at least take his or her word for it. Which is of course precisely the claim of Jesus of Nazareth. As he said to incredulous religious leaders, '*I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence*' (John 8:38).

Nevertheless, whether accidentally or not, *Sum* manages to cohere with a number of theological realities. The shocking conclusion of 'Egalitaire' (pp. 5-7) is a case in point, as it exposes the pervasive fallacy of thinking that all have the right to enter heaven. Or take the moving articulation of the pain and tragedy of life's passing, as in the third death of 'Metamorphosis' (p. 23), as quoted at the start. Life on earth is truly grass-like in that, once it has passed, the ground really does not remember it (Psalm 103:15-16).

In case you've not quite grasped the point, however, this is a brilliant book! I cannot think of another book that has so intelligently, so provocatively and so inspiringly probed reality. A number of tales encouraged me to think about this life in new and fresh ways, which is a great thing in itself. But it also helped me both to understand common objections to my faith better and to see where the flaws in my own floppy thinking lie. Which is not bad going for only 100 short pages.

[1] www.davideagleman.com/SUM.html

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