

Analogy of unborn baby helpful in understanding mystery of death

Living in Exile

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Nothing is more evident than the existence of God — and nothing is more obscure. God is everywhere and yet it's virtually impossible to imagine how God exists. Why?

If babies in the womb could talk, they could help us with this. A baby inside the womb cannot see its own mother or even imagine its mother's existence, not because the mother doesn't exist, but because the mother so totally encompasses it. A baby must first be born to see its mother and form a picture of her.

That image can be helpful in our struggle both to believe in God and to believe in life after death.

We're creatures of the senses. That's our nature. We draw life through our physical senses, from what we can see, feel, touch, taste and smell. Hence, when we try to imagine anything, the pictures we draw are ultimately based upon what we've experienced through our senses. And so it's hard for us to imagine and believe in a reality that's totally beyond our present one. Our imaginations simply run dry.

We can imagine death because it's physical. We've seen it, felt its bitterness, but we can't imagine what life looks like beyond death. How can one picture "the resurrection of the body and life everlasting"?

And yet, that's what we're asked to do, imagine life after death, imagine the

unimaginable, picture what cannot be pictured and put our faith in something that goes beyond what our minds can think. How do we do that?

The analogy of a baby in the womb can be helpful: Imagine you could talk to a baby in the womb. Having never seen the light of this world, knowing only the confines and securities of the womb, the baby would, I suspect, be rather skeptical of your story of the existence of a world beyond the womb. You'd be hard pressed to convince it to believe both that outside of its mother's womb there exists a world infinitely larger than what it is presently experiencing and that it is to its advantage to eventually be born into that immense world.

On the basis of everything it has experienced, the baby simply lacks the tools to imagine the world of which you are speaking. Unable to picture that world, it would have difficulty believing in it and would struggle to let go of the world it knows, the womb.

If a baby in the womb possessed self-awareness, it would have to make a real act of faith to believe in life after birth. It would surely fear birth as much as we fear death.

In our fear of death, we are not unlike babies in the womb fearing birth. This world, for all its immensity and for all it offers, is just another womb, bigger than our mother's womb, but ultimately still small and constricting in terms of its potential to offer full and eternal life.

And like babies in the womb, it's virtually impossible for us to imagine life beyond our present experience. And so we clutch on to what we know, to what gives us life, our umbilical cord, our present life and its routines, and we fear everything that might loosen our

grip on that. We fear life after death in the same way a baby fears life after birth.

That's because our situations are basically the same. We're still in a womb, still being gestated, except now we call it aging. And inevitable is the day when a new pelvic thrust, death, will awaken, in the deep, dark recesses of our minds and bodies, the memory of just such a push many years earlier. And, as years earlier, a dim passage will promise a new world and, just as the first time, we won't have much say in the matter. We'll have to trust that being born is what's best for us.

To my mind, there are few things as helpful in understanding death as the analogy of birth, except that it's not an analogy. Seen through the eyes of faith, death is not like a birth, it is a birth: We're initially born from our mothers' wombs into a seemingly large world, which, for a time, leaves us literally speechless. However, this seemingly immense world is, itself, limited and basically just another womb within which we are again being gestated and readied for birth into an even larger world which, I suspect, will, in its magnitude and beauty, leave us again mute.

And, just as initially we had to first be born before we could see our own mothers, so too we must first die, be born again, before we can see our true mother, God. After this second birth, just as after the first, we will lie open-mouthed and awe-struck before a beauty, magnitude and love that we had never imagined.

Birth and death require the same act of faith, a trust that a fuller life and a more meaningful contact with the mother awaits us beyond the womb.