

'Afterlife' Persuasively Redefined

Kai Nielsen

Do we believe or must we believe that after our deaths and even after the collective death of all human beings *now* living that human life in some way must continue for our lives now to be meaningful, for life to have worth? Some believe that without such a belief people would find no reason to carry on. Is that so? We know, of course, that on our planet human life and indeed any life as we understand it will eventually come to an end with the inevitable heat death of the sun. But that will be a very, very long time in coming and it does not now give us the chills. But what if we knew that within a year a large asteroid would hit our planet and obliterate us all, or that massive starvation was uncontrollably and imminently upon us, or that a new even more deadly uncontrollable Ebola outbreak would come upon us that would kill us all, or that all human beings would become infertile and with the death of the last living human being human life would die out forever? If any of these things would obtain, would our knowledge of that leave life for us living now morally, and more broadly speaking humanly, meaningless? Must we, to keep a moral compass, believe that human life will continue? I am not speaking of personal immortality but of the continuing life of the human species for, say, the next ten thousand years. Suppose we knew that within two years one or another of the aforementioned disasters or something like them would finish us all off, but before that we could live as we variously do now. Would a belief that some such disaster is imminent and that there was no way of preventing it make our lives beforehand meaningless or without point now?

Some very able philosophers think so. I do not, at least not so decisively. For that couple of years or so there would remain all kinds of things that are worth doing that do not require long-term plans. As Mark Johnson perceptively wrote, there would be simple human joys that come from:

...eating, drinking, sensing, moving one's body, conversing, hanging out with friends and family, making love, raising children, playing, enjoying nature, music, dance and telling and listening to stories. This kind of joy is wholly legitimate, a proper response to these activities, and also self-standing, in that it does not give hostages to futurity as a condition for its legitimacy (Johnston, 2014, p. 48).

Johnston goes on to say, "...then here is the value of trying to find a reasonable way of living in the here and now and of being helpful to those now in distress. Finally there is the continual effort—itsself valuable—to appropriately value things as they are" (Johnston, 2014, p. 48).

What comes after, no matter how horrible, no matter how terminating, will not negate those values. But on the contrary would the knowledge of the impending and unavoidable catastrophe so traumatize us that we could find no value in these other plainly valuable things? It might for some but not for others. We need have no reason to be utterly demoralized by the fact that there will be a last day not only for us alone but as well for all of us as individuals. Still, would knowledge that there would be no human beings after all the individuals who happen to be living now are gone make things meaningless for us or undermine the value we accord to human life? Scheffler thinks so (Scheffler, 2013). Is he right?

It is indeed true that the survival of humanity matters and matters more to most people than their own survival. Most of us are not like the crude billionaire character in Aldous Huxley's novel *After Many a Summer* (Huxley, 1955). In most circumstances we, of course, do not welcome our own death. We normally care about our own lives very much, but our own survival is still of less importance even to us than the survival of the human race. There is no selfish gene that blots this out. Suppose an architect has a design for a wonderful art gallery. Suppose that he is told reliably that the earth will be destroyed by an asteroid in six months' time. He may very well lose his motive for completing his design. What would be the point? Similarly, a graduate student would no longer struggle to finish her PhD or a medical student her last year of medical training. But, as Mark Johnston has shown, not all human values, not even all perfectly legitimate human values, will be lost, though some of them will, including humanly very important ones. Waiting for the obliteration by an

asteroid, some may commit suicide but others, perhaps most others, such as a mother and her child may hug together with love and caring as they await the final stages of their imminent obliteration. Their love would still matter up until and including their final moment. When obliteration strikes, of course, nothing will thereafter matter but their love for each other and the expression of it retains value until death. Even though the death of humanity, including themselves, is nigh. All values will not be annihilated for us with such knowledge. But still a lot—an extremely important lot—of what is valuable will be impossible for us with the gaining of such knowledge unless we are in a delusional state of denial. Would it be a bad thing to be delusional under such circumstances? I am puritanical enough to believe that it would be. But is this a deliverance of rationality and reasonableness? What kind of response is that?

Bibliography

- Huxley, A. (1955). *After Many A Summer*. London, UK: Penguin Books.
- Johnston, M. (2014, Jan-Feb). Is Life a Ponzi Scheme? *Boston Review*, 39(1), 42-48.
- Scheffler, S. (2013). *Death and the Afterlife*. (N. Kolodny, Ed.) Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.