

Illusions

The things that you're liable

To read in the Bible

It ain't necessarily so

— from the Gershwins' 1935 opera *Porgy and Bess*

The Gershwins were on to something here. The character Sportin' Life, played by Sammy Davis Jr. in the 1959 movie, tempts Bess away from Porgy with the promise of drugs and a high life in New York, while casting doubt on the veracity and moral authority of the Bible in the song "It Ain't Necessarily So." Take away his drug dealing propensities and Sportin' Life, with his song, could have been a humanist.

Take his skeptical view of immortality or, at least, very long life:

*Methus'lah lived nine hundred years
Methus'lah lived nine hundred years
But who calls dat livin'
When no gal will give in
To no man what's nine hundred years?*

What about a man what's eighty years? Just asking.

* * *

Humanists are iconoclasts, illusion-busters if you will, focussing on the improbability of most religious beliefs. The idea of immortality is, at once, one of the most pervasive and most preposterous of such beliefs.

I first thought about this when, as a boy, I read *Gulliver's Travels* about Gulliver's encounter with the Struldbrugs, ordinary humans who cannot die. But their existence is a curse

because they continue to age. At 80 they are declared legally dead, but still they go on, in decline, forever. This did not sound so great from my youthful perspective, and it sounds even worse now as I fight off the ravages of even moderate old age.

But maybe it does not have to be like that, some will say. Maybe immortality implies a cessation of aging, maybe even a return to eternal youth. Maybe. But you can see how the idea is getting complicated.

The notion of immortality, central to much religious doctrine, is that some actual part of us, of every human being, lives on into eternity – not just some artifact we leave behind but something that continues to exist as us. It could be tangible, it could be ethereal, but whatever it is, it is often referred to as "the immortal human soul." The idea of this appeals to many millions of humans because it means we don't just die and disappear forever but will live on and perhaps be reunited with loved ones who have passed before us.

One might suppose that a God who could confer such benefits on those who die (at least those who had led good lives) might do more for the good and the innocent during life, but the disarray and widespread suffering that is evident in the current world seem to suggest the absence of a deity's involvement in everyday life. Where is God when you really need him? Well, it will all come out in the wash, after

we leave this life. Presumably He will be more magnanimous than.

As I imagine you can see, the idea of our “immortal souls” does not hold up well when subjected to any sort of rational analysis. Where, exactly, does our immortal soul reside? Is it in us somewhere, some part of our brain, perhaps? But why can we never find it? Is it something that supersedes temporality – something that is supernatural and is not subject to any kind of human verification? Well, maybe.

And where does our immortal soul reside for its eternity? On some sort of flash drive, to conserve space? In black holes? In the clouds? Or, in the modern world, in *the* cloud? In future humans, if we have been good? In mosquitoes if we have been bad?

So we are to stake our hopes on an invisible, colourless, odourless soul, undetectable in any way, but which is always with us and is the only part of us that survives our death. And it will live forever, though never in that eternity being detectable by anyone, by any means, in the living world. There are, of course, claims of netherworld contacts, but these, going back to Houdini and beyond, have been shown to be tricks and delusions. And the shady world of those making such claims is rife with charlatans, often exploiting the grief of those who have lost loved ones with phony claims of abilities to communicate with the dead. In this issue of *HP*, Jim Alcock writes about how seeking connections with the dead was a source of the rise of parapsychology.

Also in this issue of *HP*, Trudy Govier discusses a recent book, *This Life*, by Martin Hagglund, in which he argues that the limitations on life give purpose and value to our existence. Just as the elimination of time through immortality would remove any incentive to act in a socially responsible way (why worry about the poor, the sick, the huddled masses – their suffering is less than an infinitesimal part of their existence), so would it drain value from any human action or accomplishment. It is our temporary status as humans, and the concept of time, that confers meaning on what we do.

In one sense, of course, we are all immortal

– something of us does live on after we die. The life of every human will, in some ways, have an impact on the world; consequences of our existence will be felt by subsequent generations, sometimes in a major way, sometimes in a small way. For better or for worse, we all leave markers of our presence here on planet earth.

It must also be conceded that magical thinking, as in belief in immortality, does provide comfort and solace to many people, and it seems a bit churlish to question something that is so important to them. But to such people I say, unapologetically, that reason and truth matter. Searching for immortality? Don't waste your precious time.

And, to those who prefer to hold onto their illusions about eternal life, at least remember the uncommonly wise words of Sportin' Life:

It ain't necessarily so.•

– Gary Bauslaugh (who turns 80 this year)

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