

Immortality

Could it be a Dangerous Illusion?

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Could the idea of immortality be illusory? Deceptive? Even dangerous? We can think about this from several perspectives. One is metaphysical: what would have to be the case for human beings to survive forever, as individuals? Another has to do with meaning: is the belief in immortality comforting and helpful to human beings, or not?

Problems with the notions of God and immortality

Philosophers usually consider the first perspective and have offered many arguments to the effect that personally surviving our physical deaths is metaphysically impossible. They have contested conceptions of a surviving immaterial soul somehow capable of preserving consciousness, memory, and personal identity with no brain, persisting forever in the company of a God understood to be the ultimate creator in an eternity somehow outside time. Some who dispute the survival of a person after the death of the body suggest that a persistence after death be understood in more modest terms, not as personal survival but rather through descendants, cultural products we have produced, and the memories of others. But survival in this sense is surely different from immortality. Even for Aristotle, Newton, and Confucius, it will not be forever.

How useful is the idea of immortality for the living of a human life? God is said by theists

to provide a firm authoritarian basis for moral judgments, which are deemed to have no credibility without such grounds. The alleged need for a divine grounding of moral judgments is a standard topic in ethics courses, the common verdict being negative on this theory. Here, in a nutshell, is the problem: if there are moral standards independent of God, and God is good in the sense of measuring up to those standards, then the standards do not depend on the authority of God. They are independent of it. If, on the other hand, God is the sole moral authority, then God is good only in the sense of measuring up to his own standards. Those standards could be anything at all. On this view, no sense can be made of the belief that God is good: to say of any being that it measures up to its own standards is not to state anything praiseworthy about it. There can be no content to the claim that God is good, and the supposed divine foundation of morality falls apart. This argument goes back to Plato and is called the *Euthyphro* argument in reference to the early dialogue in which Plato articulated it. Were God to be the author of moral commands and the sole source of moral value, he would be completely irresponsible. One may add to this argument the further point that appeals to the judgments of the divine are not sufficiently certain or stable to provide a moral foundation more solid than that of secular reasoning.

Having a sense that one is moving with divine blessing toward an eternal life in the com-

pany of God is thought by theists and believers to be the only way of giving meaning to a human life. For those who live in difficult or desperate circumstances, the belief that there is a better life to come may be of great comfort. Though disputed by atheists and some philosophers, this theme is a less frequently discussed topic than those of metaphysics and moral foundations. However the balance may shift after the appearance in 2019 of Martin Hagglund's work, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*.

Meaningfulness and a recent book

Hagglund contests the metaphysical possibility of personal human survival for eternity and disputes the acceptance of theistic moral foundations with a *Euthyphro* argument. He would reject any assumption that we can know that immortality is in our future. But these themes are not his primary concern. Rather, his focus is on issues of meaning and value. Hagglund argues that eternal life would be undesirable because it would eliminate meaning – both in this life and in that after-life. Any comfort would be false comfort, based on illusion and self-deception. He maintains that belief in immortality jeopardizes our appreciation of values in this life. If we and the people we value will survive forever, then there would be a fundamental sense in which nothing could go wrong for us. On the presumption of immortality, there would be no reason to care for each other because our ultimate survival and welfare would be guaranteed. And there would be no project worth busying ourselves with if we were to know or believe that the time available for it would be infinite. Hagglund contends that under such conditions life would be meaningless.

We are within this life: we know it; we live in time within it. Every human life will end. The meaningfulness of my life presupposes that I understand myself as a finite mortal. Finitude is at the heart of what Hagglund calls secular faith,

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which establishes value and meaning and is to be distinguished from religious faith. All world religions hold that the highest form of existence is eternal rather than finite. Against that presumption, Hagglund argues that our finite lives in this world are what we have – *this life in this world*. It is these lives that we should value; it is in the living of these lives that we can find our meaning and responsibility. In exalting the transcendent, religious faith effectively devalues our finite lives. From a consistent religious point of view, the end of this world would not be a tragedy. The result would be some sort of

nirvana or eternity in the company of God, in comparison to which nothing worldly matters. This life in this world is to be cared for as worthy in itself, not on the supposition that it makes sense as an element of God's purpose.

The meaning of life is not to be found in the notion that we will survive in some kind of spiritual bliss forever, but rather in the choices we will make, expressive of our spiritual freedom. We have lives that are limited: we are mortal and some day we will die. Hagglund states that the condition of our freedom is that we understand ourselves as finite. To survive as material beings with physical needs, we must spend time maintaining our physical bodies. But that is not all of our time as human beings; we have the freedom to choose the projects and goals we will pursue with our free time. Even under conditions of isolation and restraint we have a freedom to choose what to do with our time: that is what Hagglund calls spiritual freedom. If we

construe our time as infinite, there will be no need to make choices. Thus Hagglund argues that in order for the question of what to do with our lives to make sense, we need to be finite.

For many loves, friendships, and projects, we will wish that they could go on longer. When our loved ones die, we are likely to miss them and miss the things we did with them. But that longing for ‘more time’ is misunderstood if we understand it as a longing for eternity. Wanting something to go on longer does not mean wanting it to go on *forever*. The notion that we will find ourselves in eternal rest should not make us complacent to endure the discomforts of this world, however severe and tragic they might be. Weber wrote of the disenchantment of the world; Charles Taylor echoed the thought, contending that in the secular age spirits have been lost from the world. These notions presuppose, however, that the spirits were there in the first place. One might contend that, there or not, they were believed by most people to be there, and to insist that the world is devoid of them is to undermine those beliefs and the understanding of the world that presumes them. The result: disenchantment. And not only that, say theists: we are left with loss of comfort and loss of meaning. Against such notions Hagglund insists that beliefs in transcendent immaterial entities are not harmless. They are damaging, provide only false comfort if they provide comfort at all, and cost us an appreciation of the worth and significance of this life, this life that is to be treasured and that is our only one.

Destructibility

An ancient theme in philosophy and theology is that of change, of the variability and destructibility of things in the mundane world. Plato thought of grades of reality; the highest would be constant and invariable. The eternal Platonic forms could not be known by the senses but only by the immortal soul. Invisible and invariable, only as such would they be secure as objects of knowledge and understanding. Bodily existence, in Plato’s philosophy, is an imperfect and inferior form, distorting and,

worst of all, temporary. It will end. The body only confuses the soul’s quest for stable knowledge. The Stoics and after them Augustine also urged against loving anything destructible. Such an object of love was insecure; it could be taken away, resulting in disappointment and sorrow. Buddhists recommend detachment from the changeable things of our mundane world. To the contrary, Hagglund insists that without attachment there can be no purpose or meaning. In this life, we are attached: we must select and chose our attachments, not seek to vanquish them.

For Augustine, the secular world was at best a means to an end; one should turn for meaning and value to the unchanging and permanent eternity of God. Hagglund reverses this ordering in his insistence that it is only the destructibility of objects, relationships, and persons that makes them worth caring about. If everything valuable is eternal, why would we care about the mundane relationships and things of this world? Without change and destructibility, caring would make no sense: the beloved could come to no harm. Platonists and theists maintain that meaningfulness is impossible with change; Hagglund challenges that assumption, insisting that meaningfulness is impossible without it.

Eternal bliss?

Nor should the goods and uncertainties of this life be discarded in a quest for timeless bliss in God’s presence. Eternal bliss really is an illusion, though persons who believe in survival after death will not survive to find out that they were mistaken. (This is a fact that I have long found to be highly frustrating.) There is a powerful argument to the effect that surviving after death to experience eternal bliss in the company of God is an illusion. At the start of the road to this conclusion, suppose that God necessarily exists; this is what is maintained by theists supporting the ‘perfect God’ conception. Note the usefulness of this conception for avoiding unanswerable questions: if God *necessarily* exists, could not fail to exist, and caused the world, the question ‘then what caused God?’

does not arise. You do not need to take that turn; it is conveniently blocked. God could not fail to exist because he necessarily exists and that, in turn, is because he is a perfect being and existence is a necessary aspect of that perfection. For him not to exist would be a logical impossibility. Accordingly, there can be *no time* at which God does not exist. Existing independently and ‘outside’ time, God creates time, which exists only through the act of creation. (Do not pause to ask when the act of creation occurred: there can be no logical sense to the question.) God, on the perfect being conception, must be timeless. You are near the end of your journey where you will arrive at its logical implication. Any human experience with God would be timeless. Now you stop. Timeless experience is impossible.

You arrive at the conclusion that experience of bliss in the company of a timeless God is not possible. Why so? The matter of time is central to the argument. Stressed by Hagglund is the claim that experience is extended through time, stretched from past to future. There is a past extending to an instant present, which disappears into an ongoing future. One way to understand this distension is by thinking of a melody: it moves through time, with past notes appreciated as leading up to the present, and the present including anticipation of the future. Think about what human experience is. Experience requires extension over time. If God exists in a timeless world, you cannot experience bliss in the presence of God.

Now a theist might seek to avoid this logical challenge by interpreting immortality as living on in time that goes on forever. Perhaps, after all, that road was only a detour on the way

to understanding. God is in time, and eternity is to be understood as ongoing time, ongoing forever. On this theory, immortal human souls would go on and on, forever. Eternity in an ongoing time would be more than trillions and trillions of years. But it is hard to see how boredom and despair could be avoided in that situation.

Contrary to those theists who regard death as a threat to meaning, Hagglund argues that it is death that makes life meaningful. There is nothing degrading about being alive or about the correlative fact that I will someday die. I am mortal. To lead my life, I have to believe that my time is finite and understand my dependence on a fragile material body always at the risk of death. It is death that limits our time, with the implication that we must choose how we conduct our lives and relationships and how we choose our commitments. I have to ask and decide who to be, whom to love, and with what to keep faith. “My death is therefore

the necessary horizon of my life,” Hagglund says (200). We are bound to bodies that are beyond our control. We are bound by time and bound by history, and everyone who enters our life is similarly finite. Relationships should be treasured, not because we will live for eternity, but precisely because we will not. We do not need to be liberated from finitude, because it is the finitude of our lives that provides the basis of value. Hagglund argues for a social democratic vision according to which value is marked by free time, resulting in spiritual freedom.

Secular faith requires existential commitment that has motivational force in a situation of uncertainty and that uncertainty is necessary in a changing physical world. Secular

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faith is fragile and relational in the sense that it – and we – depend on others in this life. It is this interdependence that has become so clear and so painful in this time of pandemic. What we love is worthy of commitment and struggle and calls for our care because it is finite. To be committed, we must be finite; were we infinite, everything would be possible: there would be no need for choice and no choice. From a secular perspective, we have to care for each other and for what we pass on. We have to make the most of the time we are given and do it without the false comfort that norms and satisfaction will be guaranteed in another realm. Responsibility does not depend on divine command.

What would theists say?

How could theists respond to such arguments? An especially strident account from the Christian perspective is that of William Lane Craig, in his essay “The Absurdity of Life without God.” Craig cites the works of Pascal, Dostoyevsky and Kierkegaard to support his view that man without God is a being miserable in his insignificance. Bored and anxious, regarding himself as nothing more than an infinitesimal speck in a dark and bleak universe, man is in desperate need of belief in God. (For Craig, this must be a Christian god – and the human being is ‘man.’) If God does not exist, existentialists like Sartre would be right: life would be absurd. If God is denied, human life becomes worthless and absurd, leading only to the grave. Far from structuring meaning and commitment as Hagglund maintains, death is an ongoing threat that implies the ultimate insignificance of human beings and our projects. Craig maintains that to those who do not believe in God, life will seem absurd and be experienced as absurd. The universe will be pointless and our lives will have no purpose. A human being will be only “a blind product of matter plus time plus chance” – a “lump of slime that evolved into rationality.” The only way life can be meaningful is to suppose that it does not end at the grave, that human beings at the end may “enjoy eternal

life and fellowship with God.” Death destroys meaning and only the promise of immortality can save it.

Humanists would likely respond with amazement and rage to these ideas and the uncompromising insistence that all atheists must be miserable, leading, as they must, absurdly meaningless lives. Existentialists may have theorized bleakly along these lines in postwar Parisian cafes, but there is no reason to think that every non-theist will reach their desperate conclusions. In Craig’s fundamentalist account, there is no attention to worldly activities; but, in that aspect, the account is bizarrely insensitive to things that people actually do and value. Anyone who has successfully comforted a wailing infant will reject the claim that what she did was meaningless. The child was suffering and so was she; that is now over. The relief of its ending is not cancelled by the fact that in one thousand years both mother and child will be dead. They are relieved for now and for a time, and that relief counts; bringing it about was a worthy achievement. Like housework and gardening, her soothing will be needed again, and repeated, but its significance is not eliminated by that fact.

And the same sort of argument may be repeated many times. A recent book about Syria’s secret library describes men risking their lives in darkness and peril to rescue books from the ruins of bombed buildings so as to repair and stock them in an underground library treasured by beleaguered citizens. (*Syria’s Secret Library: Reading and Redemption in a Town under Siege*, by Mike Thomson, 2019.) People treasured the rescued collection and the knowledge and relief it conveyed. What if people later had to leave the town and the library? What if, ultimately, the rescued books were destroyed? The achievement of rescuing them remains an achievement, and the solace found in studying them remains a solace treasured by those who experienced it. It makes no sense to suppose that their dedicated courage and projects of learning and relief from the miseries of war were meaningless because these things were experienced in time and did not last forever. People find value and meaning

in ways not recognized by orthodox theology or the bleak existentialists.

The influential theist C.S. Lewis maintained that if one entity lasts longer than another, it has greater value. He believed that Christians are people who are going to live forever: given this assumption, the lives of Christians, being eternal, would have greater value than other human lives. The underlying assumption here is that a longer life logically proves greater value and that is just what Hagglund would deny. Indeed, duration as a guarantor of value is questionable. Lewis also argued that human beings find in themselves desires that cannot be satisfied in this world, and the very existence of those desires shows that we are made for another world. (Presumably the background argument here is that God would not have created us with desires that could not possibly be satisfied.) We desire more than this earth can give us; unlike Hagglund, Lewis presumes that such desires could not be based on illusions or fallacies. Though we should be thankful for earthly blessings, we should not mistake them for something else: on this view, believers will be united with God in eternity. The theory would be contrary to ‘perfect being’ theologies: God does not exist outside time, he is in time with his human creatures, and the notion that persons can survive forever to experience bliss with God does make sense. We are meant to look forward to the eternal world, but that does not mean we should fail to care about this one. Clearly, Lewis is further from bleak existentialism than Craig. Far from maintaining that earthly lives would be meaningless, he maintains that they gain (extra) meaning because of the promise of heaven. The ‘extra’ will be illusory, though, if personal survival for eternity is impossible, and any comfort one might derive from belief in it would be based on an illusion.

In *A Secular Age*, the philosopher and theist Charles Taylor claims that anyone who defines his or her life without religious belief will experience that something is missing. In less direct language than Lewis, Taylor states that a human desire for an enchanted world with ‘spirit’ and the promise of eternity indicates a

need for immortality. Our contemporary world is a secular one in which belief in God is optional. But much has been lost in the accompanying cultural shifts, Taylor maintains. He refers to yearnings that he understands as a desire for ‘fullness’ (apparently a kind of spiritual experience) and the sense of loss that we experience when a loved person dies. Taylor understands eternity as abolishing time. Thus his account is vulnerable to Hagglund’s insistence that experience must be distended over time and if God is not in time, we cannot survive to experience bliss in God’s company. In discussing Taylor, Hagglund emphasizes the distinction between going on longer and going on forever. The fact that we want our togetherness with a beloved to go on longer does not show a desire for eternity; rather, Hagglund argues against Taylor, it indicates that we have found enjoyment and meaning in this life and would like more of that.

It is safe to say that no secular humanist will be convinced that God and spirits were present in human history but are now missing; that our secular world has lost its spirits and thus become disenchanted; that life without religious belief is absurd; or that only belief in immortality can provide meaning in our lives. I predict that humanists will find Hagglund’s account interesting and plausible – though challenging in its length, density, and extensive philosophical and literary references. Notably, Hagglund offers no suggestions as to the attitudes non-believers should adopt towards theists and their conception of a meaningful life. Working through his account, I sought to formulate the difference between Hagglund and theists, specifically concerning the matter of meaningfulness.

A strange qualification

Theists say that commitment to immortality is necessary for the meaningfulness of mundane life. Opposed, Hagglund maintains that death (in other words, non-immortality) is necessary for its meaningfulness and belief in immortality is a threat to it. The notion of immortality should not be a source of comfort and that is not

only due to its metaphysically illusory nature. It is because in their transcending of mundane values, religious values would exceed all earthly values and cancel them.

Contradictory claims must have opposite truth values: if theist and anti-theist claims about meaningfulness were contradictory, one would have to be true and the other false. But that's not quite the situation logically speaking. The claims of theists are not contradictory to those of Haggglund. Rather, they are contrary. (When claims are contrary, they cannot both be true, but they can both be false. Here is an example of contrary claims that are both false: all birds can fly; no birds can fly.) Regarding meaningfulness and eternal life, the claims of theists and that of Haggglund are contraries and both are false. Here is the argument. Contrary to theists, many people find meaning in their lives without believing in eternal survival. And contrary to Haggglund, many people find meaning in life without attention to their mortality. On the level of straightforward description, both accounts are false. Many people – indeed, I suspect most – engage in activities and pursuits without reflecting either on eternal survival or on death. One can cook a meal, tend a child, go for a walk, take a picture, or write a book; both the engagement and the product will be finite but significant – without positing eternity or considering that one will die. Whether or not one believes in eternity, one might still need lunch or strive to meet a publication deadline. Thus, on a descriptive level, it appears that neither theists nor Haggglund can be quite right about the issue of meaningfulness in human life.

Theists (and the bleaker existentialists) will argue that a limited duration makes for meaningfulness because what is accomplished will at some point disappear. But a person nursing a baby, making lunch, or editing a book will rarely consider that implication and rarely have that interpretation. For her the activity is necessary, engages her, requires attention and skill, and has a point. There is no need to make reference to God, divine plans, survival beyond physical death, or the nature of eternity. And a similar

point can be made regarding Haggglund's account. He maintains that if we considered our time to extend infinitely, there would be no need to undertake any project. Yet people who believe they will survive death do undertake projects in this world. Indeed, some have undertaken and continue to undertake projects of great value – such as the ending of slavery and the abolition of nuclear weapons. When we consider the descriptive level, both theists and secularists seem to be wrong about meaning and immortality. On the descriptive level, both accounts seem to be false. On this interpretation, their accounts yield contrary claims and not contradictory ones.

How so? These accounts operate at the level of theory – it is conceptions and logical implications that are at issue. Theists, metaphysicians and their critics reason as theorists, arguing for theoretical conceptions and tracing their implications. From a stance of theoretical logic, the temporary or repeated nature of a mundane activity may be cited to argue its meaninglessness. But psychologically this is not necessarily the case. From the point of view of theoretical logic, if one will live forever, it may not make sense to undertake an activity on any particular day. But, psychologically, this is not the case either. The difference lies in interpretation and theory, and will not always appear at the level of practice and description.

At the End

Haggglund is a theorist and a metaphysician. He urges that we find meaning in the mundane activities of this life and regard any notion of immortality as an illusion. As will most humanists, I support this message. And as a theorist, I can appreciate the level to which his arguments apply. This life is what we have. Live it; appreciate it; strive within it. This is it. •

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