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Belief, Doubt, and Faith in Life After Death

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Abstract: This essay distinguishes between propositional belief and faith and considers the relationship between these two forms of belief, arguing that faith is not an entirely separate form of belief from propositional assent and that it does require a minimal cognitive content. The essay then goes on to consider beliefs about, and faith in, life after death and develops a metaphorical account of this faith using an Aristotelian concept of the soul as a form of life together with a theological understanding of the death of Jesus in the New Testament. It is argued that the truth claims of assertions about life after death are beyond evidential support, but there are strong reasons for doubting the literal truth of such assertions. Faith in life after death however can be considered rational and truth-seeking. The essay concludes that semantic agnosticism is the proper attitude towards belief in life after death and justifies this position against two possible objections.

Keywords: Life after death, Resurrection, Faith, Belief, Soul

This essay is concerned with human beliefs about life after death. Inevitably, decisions must be made about limiting this topic and focusing on an aspect of life-after-death beliefs which I hope the reader will find interesting and thought-provoking. The first of these limiting decisions lies in the focus of my interest in the nature of afterlife beliefs rather than in their specific content. That is, what sort of beliefs afterlife beliefs are rather than what specific things human beings believe about life after death. I discuss the nature of afterlife beliefs through the lens of a distinction to be made between two different forms of belief. The first form of belief is propositional belief; belief that something is the case. The second form of belief is belief *in* some person, thing, or condition. My argument will be that we have sound reasons for doubting *that* there can be life after death, but that this doubt is perfectly compatible with continued belief *in* or confidence in life after death.

Secondly, for reasons which I think will become apparent, I will reject any idea of the soul that is somehow separable from the body and which survives the biological death of the individual human being to whom it belongs. I take this to be a broadly Aristotelian position in line with Aristotle's thought that the soul is

'the actuality of a body that has life,' (*De Anima* III) and life is to be understood in terms of the capacity for self-sustenance, growth and reproduction. Souls belong to biological entities, or at least are properties of living biological things. A soul is a form of life. To speak of a soul is to speak of a life. For human beings, this unique soul can be described as the intellectual life or the mind. I take this life of the mind to be connected with self-awareness and self-reflection rather than an exclusive focus on the abstract life of pure reason. We human beings reflect upon our own lives and experiences of the world and the feelings and responses such experiences generate. We are reflective beings who produce beliefs about ourselves and our world.

Beliefs are basic to the human way of being in the world. They are much more complex than the simple abstract philosophical definition of a belief as an attitude we have whenever we take something to be the case. To have a belief involves holding information about the world which can be used flexibly and combined with other beliefs to produce new understandings or to drive novel action. Several philosophers have sought to link the capacity to hold beliefs directly to the capacity for language such that beings without language, for example, human babies, are incapable of beliefs (Davidson 1982, 1984; Heil 1992). More recent research however has shown that some animals can form rudimentary beliefs about their world (Clayton and Dickinson 1998). Language however makes use of the capacity for symbolic and imaginative thought and enables beliefs to be abstracted from direct perceptual information about the world. Human beings can hold beliefs about objects of the imagination and abstractions from the world. This grants human beings a much more open-ended existence, one that is much less limited by the world in which we live. One consequence of this openness is that human beings are orientated towards the future. Inevitably, this raises for us the question of where this future ends. The question of whether we might continue to exist after our death is the inevitable consequence of the kind of thing that a human being is.

1. Propositional Beliefs and Faith

H. H. Price offered a thorough analysis of belief-in and its relation to propositional belief. He distinguishes two uses of the language of belief-in in everyday language. The first is as a synonym for propositional belief, for example when a child states their belief in Father Christmas, the child is asserting their belief that Father Christmas exists. The second use of belief-in is to denote a distinctive class of evaluative beliefs. Price suggests that someone might say they believe in their doctor. To believe in one's doctor in this sense is not to believe that one's doctor exists, but to have formed a positive opinion of their abilities and professional skill which leads one to accept their advice and act upon it.

Philosophers perhaps prefer the term 'belief-in' to 'faith' because, as with our use of 'mind' rather than 'soul', the former lacks the religious overtones of the latter. My preference though is for the term faith, which I take to be a synonym for trust or confidence in some person, thing, idea, or state of affairs. To have faith in some person, institution, or idea is to have confidence in it and to allow this trust to shape one's actions and intentions. It is a much thicker concept than propositional belief. In this essay where I use the word 'belief' I will mean propositional belief and where I use the word 'faith,' I will mean the form of belief-in that expresses trust or confidence in some thing, person, idea or institution. The word 'faith' is not intended to imply religious belief. Faith is not the exclusive preserve of the religious believer. To have faith in something or someone is to make a practical commitment beyond an attitude of propositional assent and beyond mere affective confidence. Faith thus understood necessarily entails action, but belief does not. Belief and faith are two different mental attitudes.

Accepting Price's argument that there are at least some examples of faith that are irreducible to propositional beliefs, three models of understanding this relationship spring to mind. The first model of this relationship is one of dependence. Faith follows belief. It may be the case that some form of propositional belief about something is necessary for a person to have faith in that thing. For example, I have confidence in a vaccine to protect me from a virus because I believe the vaccine is effective in stimulating the body to raise antibodies to the virus and that these antibodies are a good defence against the virus. If either of these propositional beliefs is undermined, my faith in the vaccine will be diminished. On this model to have faith in something one must have at least some positive cognitive beliefs about it. The second model is to separate belief and faith, making the latter a matter of reasonless attitude. This model removes all epistemic considerations from the attitude of faith. To place one's confidence in someone or something is a pure act as it were. It may be the case that there are instances where we trust something or someone knowing that it is impossible to obtain positive evidence to support this confidence. The third model like the first posits a connection between cognitive belief and faith as trust in some thing, but on this model, the cognitive beliefs need not be about the thing being trusted at all. I call this model the value model.

To grasp this model, consider a person suffering from a terminal illness who is offered a new experimental treatment. The effectiveness of the treatment is unknown, but the patient decides to accept the offer. It may be the case that the patient's overriding motivation is that they do not want to die and are willing to try any treatment that is offered even if there are no rational grounds for any effectiveness of the treatment. Such an attitude might lead the patient to try any one of several so-called alternative treatments for their illness, but there is a

philosophically more interesting analysis of this case. The patient has no basis for the belief that the experimental treatment will be effective. Can we say that they have faith in the treatment? In agreeing to the treatment, the patient need have no confidence that the treatment will work. The patient is not blindly putting their trust in the unknown in the hope that the gamble will pay off and retrospectively justify their decision. Faith however is a significant part of the decision to try the treatment. It lies, not in the treatment *per se* but in the process of scientific research and medical practice which led to the discovery of the new treatment. The patient need have no faith or expectation that the treatment will work, but their confidence in evidence-based medicine will lead them to the belief that even if the treatment fails in their case, something new will have been discovered. New knowledge about the experimental treatment will be gained as a result of their case. They are making a reasonable decision to try something unknown.

To see the significance of this way of looking at the question, consider again the example of faith in a vaccination above. I suggested that if I lose my propositional beliefs about the way the vaccine works, my confidence in the vaccine's ability to protect me against infection will falter and eventually fail together. This suggests that the strength of one's confidence in a thing is proportional to the strength of a network of supporting propositional beliefs. The cognitive component of faith however need not necessarily consist of belief in the relevant propositions. Faith might reasonably coexist with propositional doubt. Suppose I continue to believe that the vaccine is good at raising my antibody levels and thus my defensive capabilities against the virus. However, I also come to believe that the virus itself is evolving and capable of evading to some extent my defences against infection. In this instance I have two competing beliefs which pull in opposite directions: one supporting my faith in the vaccine, the other undermining it. Suppose further that I also believe that there are potentially serious side effects to the vaccine. How I weigh these competing beliefs reduces to my judgment on which course of action has the better outcome for me.

Put more generally, the minimum cognitive aspect of faith is mere belief that it is worth putting one's faith or trust in someone, or something. It is sufficient for me to have faith in P if I believe that there is value in acting as if that P is true. I do not need to believe that P. Thus, faith is compatible with considerable doubt and scepticism about propositional beliefs. This third model is almost identical to the model of the relationship between faith and belief in a religious context proposed by Richard Swinburne (2005). Swinburne argued that it is the purposes to which one is committed that is the key factor in determining one's attitude to the religious life. Belief plays a secondary role to these commitments. What is important is the value assigned to the realisation of certain religious states of affairs. This value enables religious faith to endure without religious belief. There

is an irreducible cognitive aspect of faith, though this cognitive element may be minimal and connected only to the value of acting in a particular way or in accordance with a particular belief.

Having distinguished between propositional belief and faith and outlined the relationship between these two forms of belief we can begin to consider the nature of belief in life after death. I'll begin with a consideration of how such beliefs arise in human beings. After a brief excursus to consider the nature and finality of death and consider how beliefs have been understood philosophically in terms of an immortal soul, I'll argue that if afterlife beliefs are considered to be propositional beliefs, they cannot be supported. This is largely a matter of a lack of evidential support for life after death and the existence of strong counterarguments to the belief. If afterlife beliefs are propositional in nature, a reasonable person has good grounds for rejecting them, but little in the way of positive supporting evidence. It does not follow from this however that this same reasonable person needs to reject faith in the afterlife. What follows offers two metaphorical understandings of such beliefs, one theistic and one atheistic. Each of these understandings has different consequences for the believer and these are discussed in the final section of the essay.

2. Afterlife Beliefs

It is true that not every belief that a person holds is based on evidence. One may have grounds for holding certain kinds of beliefs, for example, perceptual beliefs without further supporting evidence. When convincing contra-evidence comes to light though such grounded beliefs are rejected in favour of new interpretations of the perceptual evidence supporting the belief in the light of the new evidence. I might believe that there is a person in the room with me, but on switching on the light I see it is my coat hanging on a hook. The belief that a person can survive their death however does require some sort of evidential support. It is at just this point that we encounter a difficulty, for if death destroys the self, then, *a priori*, there can be no evidence of its survival. The absence of such empirical evidence need not, however, be held to reinforce disbelief in the afterlife. Neither belief nor disbelief in life after death strictly speaking is verifiable. Belief or disbelief in the afterlife therefore would seem to be a matter of faith and not of reason. It would be a matter of assessing the benefits of both propositional attitudes and forming a judgement upon which to act.

It will be as well to define precisely what we mean by death before going further. It may seem a trivial point, but if we define death simply as the termination of life, then there can be no life after death. If life persists after death, understood as the end of life, then by definition, death has not occurred because life is still continuing. So, when we speak of life after death, we must have a more

specific definition of death in mind. It seems clear enough that what we have in mind when we speak of life after death is not the absolute termination of life but the end of our biological life. The precise definition of such a state need not trouble us since what matters for current purposes is the death of the individual in general, not the need to define when death has occurred for a specific individual. Disputes about the precise definition of death are concerned with whether this particular individual is in fact dead. No one seriously disputes that individuals die and that after their death their body is destroyed either through natural processes or through distinct cultural practices to dispose of the dead. The concept of life after biological death depends upon the coherence of the idea that something survives an individual's biological death and that this something constitutes the continuing 'essentials' of the individual such that it can be identified with the formerly living biological individual.

Both philosophical and theological considerations of the possibility of continued existence after biological death have tended to focus on the idea of the soul. This is true whether such an existence is considered as a disembodied state or, as in a more traditional theological perspective, some form of resurrected embodied existence. The soul has been understood as the link between biological life and post-mortem life, but anti-theist philosophers such as Antony Flew have challenged the idea of a personal life after death on the ground that the notion of the soul as a designation of the self is unintelligible. Flew considered that the immortality of an individual's soul is of no more interest to the individual than the news that their appendix will be preserved forever in a jar of preservative fluid (Flew and MacIntyre 1955, 270). Flew is of course famous for his embracing of theism in later life and it might be thought that such a change of outlook would have a significant impact on his beliefs about life after death. However, in his account of his change of mind, he confirms his belief that he will not survive his death (Flew 2007, 1).

Flew's amusing comparison brings together two philosophical problems concerning the afterlife: the question of its credibility and that of its intelligibility. The problem of credibility concerns the question of how we can believe in something which, by definition, lies beyond the boundaries of evidential experience, whilst the problem of intelligibility is concerned with the question of what it means to speak of life after death. These two problems correlate well with the distinction between belief and faith in the afterlife. Belief is concerned with credibility, whilst faith is connected to intelligibility. The view of the soul as a form of life in the Aristotelian sense assumed in this paper rules out the possibility of a soul surviving the death of an individual. As a form of life, the soul dies with the biological death of the individual form of life. Even rejecting this view of the soul in favour of a more platonic view of the soul as immortal

fails to advance the cause of the credibility of afterlife beliefs since, as Flew has pointed out, a person is not their soul. The two terms are not interchangeable.

For the person to survive their biological death some sort of bodily continuity will be required. For the naive Christian believer this may not be overly troubling since resurrection, theologically speaking, entails the affirmation of bodily existence by seeing it continue in some form in the afterlife. For the critical philosopher, however, the prospect of a resurrected body provides a classic identity problem. Bernard Williams (1973) provided an argument in support of a requirement for bodily continuity to ensure continuity of identity. He invites us to consider a person, A, who undergoes some sudden change and acquires a character and memories exactly like those of an historical figure, B. For psychological continuity theories, this is sufficient to claim that A & B are the same person. Williams then invites us to consider that a second person, C, undergoes a similar change and also acquires the character and memories of B. Again, psychological continuity theories support the identification of C with B. Thus, if A and C and both identified as B it seems that we are committed to the view that A and C are identical. We can't simply deny one of the changes, to either A or C, since each is equally valid, and the only option is to deny that both A and C are B. Williams points out that this condition must apply in the case of A even in the absence of a second person undergoing the sudden change of character and memory.

Coburn (1959) offers a counterargument. He asks us to consider the case of George who suddenly disappears, but a while later George* appears who is physically identical to George and has the same memories and character that were associated with George. On Williams' view, George and George* are not the same person. Coburn finds this unacceptable because if George had committed some crime it would be impossible to hold George* accountable for it even though he sincerely recalls committing the crime. The essence of Williams' argument is that George* is not George, but only exactly similar to George. In other words, George and George* are quantitatively identical but not numerically identical. What is required for continuity of identity after death is numerical identity. Not only must the person be embodied and have the same memories, but the new body must also be in physical continuity with the old body.

Except in very limited circumstances, it may prove impossible to satisfy the demand for numerical identity. At the very least it is not clear how we should define bodily continuity. After biological death, the material body is destroyed. Whilst it may be true that God could reconstruct a person's body from the material it was once made of, it is always possible that the same material may have been part of more than one person's body. Not even an omnicompetent divine being could judge which molecules and atoms belong to which body since the shared components will belong equally to whatever bodies they have been

part of. No one body could be said to have priority. In these circumstances, we seem to be presented with a 'Ship of Theseus' problem. Just how much material from the biological body would be needed to ensure continuity?

There are examples of theologians who acknowledge this continuity problem. Wolfhart Pannenberg (1998, 574–576) for example insists that bodily continuity is not necessary for the resurrected life. It is sufficient for the resurrected life to be similar to the life before death as long as some things carry over. Pannenberg defends this view through a defence of the immortality of the soul, but his argument is not dependent on this move. What Pannenberg seems to have in mind is that the human consciousness, in the form of memories perhaps, survives death to be deposited in a new, post-mortem body. This post-mortem life is conceivable as a new form of life. At death, the old form of life ends and a new one begins with the memories of the old life intact. Pannenberg certainly thinks this is sufficient to allow the new form of life to be accountable for the actions of the old form. The new post-mortem form of life would thus experience itself as in continuity with the life that existed before death, but the position remains vulnerable to Williams' argument against psychological continuity. The best we can say of this new life, as conceived by Pannenberg, is that it is a new form of life that has some connection with the old form of life but that it is not identical to it. For Pannenberg this is sufficient, and perhaps he is right. Insisting on bodily continuity arguably sets the bar too high. Perhaps what really matters is the perspective and perception of the new, post-mortem form of life. If this new form of life understands them-self as being in continuity with the pre-death form of life perhaps that is all that matters to settle the issue. Such a settlement is beyond our ability now in this present life however and so the question remains unanswerable.

These arguments and others like them seem to me to undermine the credibility of the propositional belief that the individual human consciousness survives the death of the individual human being. The distinction between absolute death and biological death is of no avail to us in seeking to ground the possibility of belief in life after death. The credibility problem remains unresolved and afterlife beliefs are left lacking the kind of evidential support they require. It does not follow however that faith in life after death is unintelligible. Faith in life after death can still be a reasonable course to adopt. In the next section, I offer two accounts of the intelligibility of faith in life after death: one theological the other atheistic.

3. Faith in Life After Death

Eberhard Jϋngel draws an interesting contrast in the way that Socrates and Jesus are reported to face their executions. Socrates who, according to Plato, believed

that the soul is immortal regarded his imminent death as a release into the life of the mind. As Jüngel says, Socrates greeted death with a swansong, but when Jesus died, he is recorded as uttering a cry of despair and abandonment, "My God my God why have you forsaken me?" Yet, Jüngel continues, it is the death of Jesus that is proclaimed as salvation (Jüngel 1975, 53). Jüngel's point is that Jesus dies facing the reality and finality of death, with no hope of resurrection. In the moment of death, Jesus is confronted by death's finality. At Socrates' final moment, he evades the finality of death, anticipating a much better life beyond the confines of bodily existence. Somehow then, our embracing of a belief in resurrection needs to embrace disbelief in life after death. The way forward here is to understand the language of life after death in metaphorical terms. It is not, I think, particularly controversial to hold that temporal language, the language of time, of succession, past present and future, before and after, can be taken literally only in respect of historical processes. If it is true that death is not an event in life, that we do not live to experience death (Wittgenstein 2003, 6: 4311) then metaphor is perhaps the only way that we can understand life after death language. To speak of life after death is to speak metaphorically. We must accept that it may be no more literally true to say that we continue to exist after we die than it is to say that before we were born, or perhaps before the moment of our conception, we existed.

To make the matter a little clearer it will perhaps help to think of life after death in terms of the language of eternal life. Nicholas Lash points out that the common view of 'entering into eternity' relies upon a mistaken image of jumping from a temporal existence to a timeless existence (Lash 1978, 274). This view sees eternal life as succeeding temporal existence as if the one picks up where the other ended. On this view, rather like that of Socrates, this present life is at best a preparation for the real life, the eternal life, which follows on from it. To die is to be released into ultimate reality and life in all its fullness. The old life is past and ceases to be anything other than a memory. Karl Barth, however, says of the past that because God was real then, it was real and full time and because of this its reality cannot be taken away by the fact that it is gone. God's reality in the past guarantees the past's reality even in the present (CDIII/2, 537). The meaning of the language of eternal life is to be found in this relationship between historical existence and God's eternity, not in some other existence after historical existence. A person's past life continues to be real now in the present and will continue to be real in the future, beyond their death.

Theologians, even when attempting to take seriously the finality of death have struggled at just this point. Jüngel for example denies that the resurrection hope dissolves the temporal limitations of life but also insists that God's creative relationship with human beings cannot be broken, even though in the same sentence he insists that the human life comes to an end (Jüngel 1975, 90).

Similarly, Moltmann in *The Crucified God* tells us that resurrection life is not further life after death, whether understood in terms of children, spirit, soul, or reputation (Moltmann 1974, 170). Instead, he insists that resurrection hope means 'the annihilation of death, in the victory of the new, eternal life'. I interpret Moltmann to mean that we must take seriously the fact that we have one life. A life that begins in time and develops to fullness in a definitive historical development. Those who have died do not extend their existence in another life. Rahner insists that even the resurrection of Jesus cannot be considered an event that took place after Jesus' death. Rather the Resurrection is a manifestation of what happens in Jesus' death (Rahner 1975, 174). A similar point is made by Moltmann's response to the death of God language that the crucifixion reveals, not the death of God, but that death is taken up into God (Moltmann 1974, 207). On this view, it is misleading to view resurrection as another state of affairs, or event after death, or indeed to speak of life after death as a prolongation of our temporal life.

Death then marks the end of our form of life. Lash makes the point that it is not just our bodies that cease to exist on death but the whole embodied way of life lived by an individual (Lash 1978, 278–9). A person is more than their body. They are their language and culture, their friendships, their family, and their activities at work and leisure. When a person dies, it is not just the biological matter that dies, but this whole network of relationships, communications, and activities. Much of this network consists in other people who like everyone else are finite individuals with a beginning and an end. These individuals will be at different stages of their historical life and development. We will experience the death of individuals in our own lifetime. But to the extent that these individuals are a part of our own life, we too experience a form of death. When a friend or relative dies, a part of our own life dies. In other words, the process of dying starts much earlier than the actual moment of death, or even the moment of, for example being given a diagnosis of a terminal illness.

Death is a continuous process, co-terminal as it were with life itself. Just as the physical components of our bodies are constantly changing, just as the body is a dynamic entity, so our wider life is dynamic and constantly changing. These wider changes constitute an irretrievable loss. This seems clear when we think of the loss of friends and loved ones, but it also applies when someone changes their job or profession, or place of residence, leaving behind support networks and friendships. In all these changes, which are a part of life something is lost, and death is present. What is perhaps worse, or more difficult to accept is that we contribute to the death of others through blindness or error. The husband who betrays his wife for example has damaged his relationship with his wife even though the marriage may have been repaired and continues. The old marriage is dead and the new one is different. Dying is not something that just happens to

our bodies in the last few weeks or hours of our life. It is something that happens to the whole of our lives from the moment we are born. To live life beyond mere existence there is a sense in which we must be willing to take the risk of dying. To grow and develop we must be willing to die. Our encounter with different people, with different ideas to our own, continually challenges us to examine and move towards, if not embrace, the unknown, the unfamiliar or the disturbing. This risks the destruction of whatever safe world we may have constructed for ourselves. But not to risk this is merely another form of death as the safe world steadily dies around us. Death is unavoidable. If we can acknowledge and embrace this fact in both its literal and metaphorical senses, then we are at least on the way to embracing life beyond the countless experiences of death that life gives us.

One more thing may be said about this metaphorical theological account of life after death. If we consider eternity, not as timelessness, but as time-fullness then we can conceive of the individual finite life existing in eternity. A finite life constitutes an enduring part of the fullness of time. The form of life that constituted the individual has a finite time span, but that finite life exists in eternity. It is no less real for being, from the perspective of time, in the past. A finite life matters eternally.

The metaphorical understanding of life after death discussed here has been developed from the springboard of classical Aristotelian thought. I have deliberately elaborated this account of life after death in dialogue with the Christian theological tradition because using the Christian story I think helps draw out the details of such a faith. The account developed here views the death of Christ as representative. Christ is understood as representative of all human beings. For those who through this story find faith in God, the representative death of Christ is also atoning in that it becomes the way through which an individual opens their life to God. The account of life after death, at least as developed here, need not be interpreted in such an overtly Christian way. It could just have easily been developed in terms of the thought of Ludwig Feuerbach who called for a shift of philosophical focus from 'the realm of departed souls,' to that of 'embodied souls' (Feuerbach 1972, 175).

Ludwig Feuerbach's *Thoughts on Death and Immortality* is a blunt rebuttal of any idea of human immortality. His goal was to demonstrate the unity of God, nature and humanity, aiming to show that these are aspects of Universal Reason. The book argues that human individuals are merely incarnations of universal reason which is fully realised only in humanity as a whole. Feuerbach developed this thesis in material terms in *The Essence of Christianity*, reducing Christianity to projections of human self-transcendence. In *Essence,* Feuerbach tells us that the immortality of the soul is the image of Christianity and that once this immortality is doubted Christian faith itself must collapse (Feuerbach 1989, 177). He says that

faith in the heavenly life is merely faith in this life, that is it is the unreflective expectation that the next life will be identical to this life. Or rather, not precisely identical for it is envisaged that only those things that are considered of value are carried forward into the next life. Life after death is therefore an idealised or perfected form of this life. Any minister doing a funeral visit will be familiar with this phenomenon. It is something the bereaved fall back on and is revealed in expressions such as 'reunited in heaven', and 'looking down on us.' These expressions are difficult to read as anything other than an expression of the continued importance of this life, for it is the preoccupations of this life that are imagined occupying the dead.

According to Feuerbach, this natural belief is not a belief in new life but rather an affirmation of the old life in the face of death. Such a belief has no impact on our view of this life. If our belief in a life after death is to be transforming, then according to Feuerbach, it must take account of what is to be affirmed of this life and carried into the new life as well as what is to be denied continuance in the new life. Even this reflective belief though takes only what it affirms and approves from this life into the next life. It is no different from the common non-reflective belief in life after death. It remains a projection of the desires of this life. A transforming belief on the other hand would need to consider what new things may be present in the new life. That is, how the new life is qualitatively different from the old life. In short, what it is that makes life after death 'new'. Feuerbach moves this hope of a future perfected life from the individual's life post-mortem in heaven to the future of the human species as a whole. At its best such a view is an incentive to take the historical process seriously and to strive for a better future for humanity. This of course is Marx's view, building on Feuerbach's insights. Regarding religion as a narcotic, he argued that it maintains the social order by declaring it a divine order combined with the promise of a new life after death which compensates for any suffering or lack in this world.

The metaphorical account of life after death outlined here cannot be used in this way. We cannot look for another life to compensate for the failings of this life. Instead, it offers an incentive to treat each moment of life with a new seriousness. This is the life that matters because it is the only life that we will have. It removes any justification for viewing life as something that must be endured in the hope of a better future life. Finding faith in the metaphorical account of life after death has the effect of driving us to take the responsibilities and opportunities of this life with full seriousness.

Where I think the theological account differs from and is stronger than the materialist account, is that while both accounts take the historical process seriously, the theological account places the individual at the centre. Something is lost however in the move to focus the future hope on the species as a whole. Individuals lose their dignity as they become merely passing representatives of

humanity in its ever-progressive advance. The theological account speaks directly to this dignity and affirms the importance of the individual finite life. Moreover, it is only the theological account of life after death that is able to ground this hope. There is nothing inherent in human beings that means that they must survive their death. Quite the contrary; the view of the human soul as the form of the body indicates that the death of the body is the end of the soul. Life after death then is not something we have by right but only something that we can receive as a gift. This is true even in the metaphorical sense of life after death advocated in this essay. God acts as the guarantor of such a life. There is no other grounding of this hope available to the individual. Faith in life after death is an invitation to take risks in life to be ever more open to new beginnings and the experiences of death that such opportunities entail. Belief in the afterlife is not a proposition that can be used to shore up moral or philosophical systems with the promise or threat of a second life after the present life has run its course. While Kant required continued faith in a final judgement in order to maintain the coherence of the rational moral system, the metaphorical account implies a very different relationship between faith in life after death and moral systems. The dynamic that the metaphorical account affirms is that new life follows a letting go of one way of life to embrace a new, as yet unknown life. Far from shoring up a failing system faith in life after death is a motive to leave the system behind and move on to something new and as yet unknown. It is a progressive faith.

4. Openness and Faith in Life After Death

Both accounts of the ineligibility of faith in life after death discussed in this essay are compatible with the openness that characterises the human form of life, though each assigns a different significance to the individual human, the theological account offering, I believe, the stronger way to conceive the value of the individual *per se* rather than merely as a part of the species as a whole. Feuerbach believed that God was an objectification of the human capacity for self-transcendence which knows no limit. Belief in God he suggests is a way of closing down human openness. It seems to me however that Feuerbach himself also closes this openness. If it is true that the capacity for human self-transcendence leads us to the realm of the infinite, then this surely is the realm of religion which demands not a rational closing response, a retreat from openness but a commitment to continue to wrestle with the open question that human self-transcendence raises for us: the question of God. The truly human response may be better understood as agnosticism.

Agnosticism has been relatively unexplored by philosophers of religion (See Le Poidevin 2010 for a discussion of some recent work). This may be because agnosticism is perceived as being wedded to a realist ontology whilst philosophy

of religion has developed other ways of conceiving the truth of religious discourse. Recent thinking on agnosticism however is moving beyond his commitment. Le Poidevin (2020) proposes three types of agnosticism: truth agnosticism, defined in terms of the truth value of a proposition; existential agnosticism which is concerned with our attitude toward the existence of certain entities, most obviously God, and semantic agnosticism which relates to the truth-conditions of propositions. Le Poidevin sees modal discourse as the key example of this third form of agnosticism, but it is the most natural form of agnosticism for any context where we make judgments before we have any theory which can ground them (2020, 33). We can make an intuitive moral judgement, for example, that human cloning is permissible before we have any theory that grounds such judgments.

An interesting consequence of Le Poidevin's analysis is that it is possible to be semantically agnostic about moral judgments whilst being committed to their truth. I can judge it to be true that cloning is permissible without committing to any metaethical theory that grounds that truth. I would be committed to truth agnosticism with respect to the truth value of my moral judgement only if I found it impossible to eliminate expressivism. Le Poidevin extends semantic agnosticism to the realm of theology. If we eliminate expressivism, we are left with two main candidate theories to ground religious discourse: realism and fictionalism. Le Poidevin writes about statements which we take to be propositions relating to God, but we can make precisely the same argument with respect to belief in life after death.

My argument so far has been that the best way to ground faith in life after death is through a theological discourse. I have left open the question of how this theological framework is itself to be understood. Metaphysically it is intended to be agnostic. In surrendering all talk of literal life after death, the account abstains from such metaphysical speculation. Metaphor, however, is a warranted extension of language in which we speak of one thing in terms which are seen as suggestive of another (Soskice 1985, 15). It is a means of extending language and meaning from their current position so that it is possible to mean more than what is said. Metaphor is not straightforward, however. It is not always clear in which direction the metaphor is working. This is particularly so in the case of talk of life after death. Seeing life changes and new beginnings in terms of life after death sees the transfer of meaning from the literal to the metaphorical: change is understood as a form of death. This in turn opens the possibility that the idea of new life through a life change is itself an image of what awaits us after our biological death, even if we can give no credible account of how this image might be fulfilled. That is the point of metaphor. It extends meaning beyond what can ordinarily be said. The metaphorical understanding of life after death considered above is intelligible only because we can make sense of the metaphor in terms of

its referencing a literal understanding of life after death. The challenge is to understand this referencing.

Fictionalism and realism offer two different accounts of the truth of the metaphor of life after death. We are not able to judge which of these two alternatives will turn out to be true, but what is not in dispute is the truth value of belief in life after death. It may be that the metaphor applies only in a fictional sense, that is that its truth value obtains only in the context of the story of God and not in reality. Living a life in the light of this faith has the advantage that it fosters a positive stance towards the changes and setbacks that life entails and in the face of the death of loved ones, it provides a means for continuing to affirm the eternal importance and reality of the dead. Since belief in life after death provides benefits even if the belief that there is life after death turns out to be literally untrue, it is still a rational position to adopt.

I think there are two significant objections to this position. The first is that the position of semantic agnosticism about life after death is incoherent because it is impossible to be agnostic about one's own actions and intentions. That is acting on the belief in life after death implies realism. We are simply pretending to ourselves that we are agnostic about realism. The second objection is that whilst both fictionalism and realism offer distinct advantages, semantic agnosticism fails to support any of these or offer compensating advantages of its own. In terms of the first objection, it is true that treating something as real is very different from playing a game of make-believe and this seems to rule out the possibility of full commitment to faith in life after death. This need not necessarily be the case. Consider reactions to watching a horror film, or indeed any emotive film. The responses that the film generates are real and can last after the film has ended and we have left the cinema, even though we know that the film is fiction. Moreover, we do not always know if we are confronting a real situation or a fictional narrative. Or consider the case of a practical joke played by a friend. When the truth is revealed, that it was all a joke, we would not say that our feelings and responses were make-believe, except perhaps as a means of pretending that we were not fooled by the joke. Since it is possible therefore to be in a position of not knowing the reality of a situation we face and to have genuine reactions to it, I consider that the first objection to the agnostic position does not stand.

The second objection is more subtle and complex. However, I think that there are advantages to semantic agnosticism. The realist ties discourse about life after death to scientific or critical discourse and as such is held hostage to the kinds of arguments against propositional belief in life after death discussed earlier in this essay. This also applies I think to the position of truth-agnosticism regarding belief in life after death. From the position of semantic agnosticism, we need not refrain from using the language of life after death since even if realism is untrue,

the language continues to have at least a fictional object. The semantic agnostic has no concern about the falsification of their faith in life after death, but then neither does the fictionalist. However, perhaps there is still something lost in the fictionalist position for the fictional discourse has nothing to say about what actually may be the case. It is not made false by the absence of life after death.

William James expressed reluctance to adopt the truth-agnostic position with respect to belief in God because he thought that in so doing, he might be in danger of missing the most significant truth imaginable (James 2003). James' objection is based on the idea that fictionalism is based on the belief that realism is not remotely viable. Semantic agnosticism remains sensitive to the possibility of a realist meaning to the language of life after death. Semantic agnosticism then avoids the risk of fictionalism of missing the truth, but it does not commit the error of realism of making truth dependent solely on the literal existence of a transcendent reality. I conclude therefore that semantic agnosticism is entirely consistent with a person continuing to have faith in life after death. It is both a reasonable position to adopt, offers advantages and is entirely consistent with doubt about the propositional content of such a belief.

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