

Why Believing in the Afterlife is Valuable

A (somewhat) humorous talk given at a philosophy student debate at Queen's University

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Some people would find it surprising that I am speaking at this debate. Most of my students know me as that sarcastic english bastard, fond of drinking, swearing and generally abusing students, especially the little first years and the poor graduate students. People might also be surprised because in my classes I tend to treat religion like a criminologist teaches crime. Crime exists. There are many good reasons for preventing it but it is human, it's inherently interesting, and it's the price one has to pay for living in a free society. I tend to think similar things about religion. Religion exists. There are many good reasons for preventing it, but it is human, it's inherently interesting, and it is the price one has to pay for living in a free society.

In particular of all the aspects of religion that pique my interest, one of the most fundamental is that when someone dies it immediately triggers in people fundamental questions about what has happened to that person, and there is a disconnect between what we know empirically to be true about their body, and how we continue to relate to them as a person as though they were still alive.

In fact all cultures in the world deal in some way with the question of death, what you do when someone has died, how you dispose of the body, and what happens to that person after death. Some of you here may strongly adhere to such a worldview, and probably there will be little that Prof. Mercier or I can do to talk you out of that worldview. Worldviews are deeply held, socially reinforced, cultural commitments that typically change in peoples lives over a long period, several months or several years. That's how long it takes us to change our minds about what's ultimately important in the world. If you are already convinced of the value of a belief in some kind of afterlife, then I hope you'll forgive me if I don't address myself to you. Equally, if you are already convinced that belief in any kind of afterlife is irrational and therefore dangerous and generally ought to be suppressed, there's nothing I can say that will dissuade you. So I'm going to write you off too.

But perhaps you are somewhere in the middle. Perhaps you are someone who doesn't really know what to think about the afterlife, and probably you think that if people want to believe in karma or purgatory or some kind of post-mortem existence, then that's their own business and why should I care. If you're one of those people, then I want to convince you that their belief in the afterlife (and I will go through different kinds of beliefs) is valuable, and even if you don't share their views yourself, you should be glad that they do, even if some of them turn out to be suicide bombers.

So let's talk about some specific scenarios. The first I want to consider is the notion that personal existence continues in some form after one has died. There is no strong scientific evidence that this is true. What we do have are the accounts of ordinary people who have seen ghosts (some of you may have seen ghosts), and the accounts of shamans or religious professionals who deal with interaction between the ordinary physical world and the world of the departed, and the experience of billions of Chinese people throughout the ages for whom reverence for the spirits of departed ancestors is a core component of their cultural worldview.

In fact the souls of the departed is the most widespread form of supernatural agent that people encounter throughout the world. How does this happen?

First of all, we treat people in two completely different ways. In our minds, we treat them as living, breathing bodies. But we also treat them as thinking, feeling persons. When someone dies, we immediately know that they are no longer a living breathing body, but we continue to treat them as though they are thinking feeling persons. We continue to treat them with dignity and respect even though they couldn't possibly care. We say "John would have liked it like that." We continue to represent in our own imagination as persons even though we know that their bodies are dead. And here's my first important point. People believe in the afterlife in part because they have this experience of someone's personality

continuing to be an effective agent in their imagination even after they have died. People do not believe in the afterlife as the result of logical arguments or rational inquiry. They do so because it makes sense of their own experience. Belief in the afterlife arises out of the psychology of ordinary human experience of dead people.

From a psychological perspective this is a form of dissociation. It's a kind of pathology.

The question is why is this pathology so persistent throughout cultures and across history. Why do we continue to treat dead people as though they are living. The answer to this is that it is natural to do so. To imagine interacting with dead people allows us to process our grief. To ease slowly from thinking about them as alive one day and dead the next. For some people this persistence of postmortem personality lasts a short while. For some people it lasts a long time. This is just like children who grow up believing in Santa Claus. Eventually they stop believing in it and this is natural. But while they believe in Santa, no parent should contemplate intervening in that child's life. It is entirely natural and eventually they will grow out of it. The persistence of postmortem personality is a bit like this. We are infantilized by death and regress into child-like beliefs about gods and ghosts and afterlives. But what about people who persist in believing in afterlives even after they should have grown out of this. Isn't this a kind of psychopathology akin to adults believing in Santa Claus? Yes it is a psychopathology, one of many low-grade psychopathologies

that afflict human beings. The question is why is this belief pandemic throughout human culture?

This leads me to my second point which is that the psychopathology of belief in the afterlife persists because it is incredibly interesting. As soon as a particular view of the afterlife stops being interesting, people cease to believe in it. From this point of view we can see the evolution of religious beliefs as a gradual whittling down of many possible options to a few really widespread beliefs such as karma, the veneration of ancestors, and purgatory. The reason these beliefs are so widespread is that the various alternatives to them have been whittled away over eons of psychological evolution, leaving us with a few that really seem to stick. To suggest that these beliefs about the after life are things that we can turn on or turn off through a rational process of argumentation is ridiculous. These beliefs are not entered into through logical argument. Rather they are the cultural byproducts of billions of human minds dealing with dead people. In short beliefs about the afterlife are things that happen to human minds in the course of millenia of human evolution. It's quite possible that one day we will no longer have these beliefs at all, but to say that they are bad is rather like saying catching a cold is bad. It's something that happens to us, and when it does we can deal with it in some way, but it's not something that you can attribute moral value to in and of itself. We do not choose religious beliefs. They happen to us.

So we ought not to attach moral values to beliefs in the afterlife, but that doesn't mean we can say they have no value at all. My argument here is that these kinds of beliefs in the persistence of postmortem personality continue because they are interesting. They make our lives less boring. The afterlife as a product of the human imagination is an incredibly rich and stimulating notion. It produces horror movies. Voodoo. Zombies. Dracula. Ghosts. Resurrections. Religion. Just think how bankrupt human culture would be without belief in the afterlife. No more undead. No more tall, dark and handsome vampires sucking the blood of blonde virgins. What a tragedy that would be. If vampires didn't exist I might as well commit suicide now. Vampires, demons, ghouls and ghosts are essential to making my life worth living. They provide excitement, intrigue and are full of rich erotic symbolism. This is why religious beliefs persist even though they are pathological. Without them we would be culturally dead. We would be living robots. Following logical procedures with relentless efficacy. How boring would that be.

The third scenario that I want to consider is the notion of the afterlife as a place of judgment, and this requires us to think a little bit about moral psychology. The basic problem with moral ethics in Western tradition is that it has taken its cue from the 10 commandments, and considers ethics to be largely a matter of stating moral propositions: thou shalt do no murder: thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife's ass etc. And we have translated these moral rules into our secular legal system, creating statute laws that define in the

abstract the types of behaviour that are to be declared criminal and judging whether the specific actions of individuals meet the abstract definitions of legally-constituted crimes. Negotiating the difference between the specific circumstances of specific acts and the abstract propositions of the law is of course notoriously difficult, which is why we pay lawyers such a vast amount of money. But there is another way to think about morality and that is from the perspective of moral psychology, and this is the tack taken by Confucian philosophy, which is based principally in understanding how feelings motivate moral behaviour, not abstract ideas or moral principles. The two feelings that principally regulate our moral behaviour are sympathy and fear. Human beings, even hardened criminals and selfish children, have an intuitive sympathy process in their psychological makeup. Story of Mencius. Secondly, if you give one child two sweets and another child three sweets, even very young children intuitively know that this is unfair, and will be affronted by this. Even if that child is not the one who is shortchanged, they can execute a process of moral reasoning by which they imaginatively put themselves in the place of the other person and sense the moral outrage that that person would feel at being shortchanged. They do this in an entirely automatic way because this is the way our minds have developed over millennia of evolution. From these feelings of sympathy and unfairness, it is possible to deduce moral laws such as no stealing or coveting of people's assets, but those laws are not what motivate people to do good. People are motivated to do good, to cooperate with people because evolution has selected for this as a successful strategy for promoting the welfare of the species.

But I haven't come here to talk about goodness, but about evil. The other chief psychological motivator is fear. Fear derives from the amygdala, one of the oldest parts of our brain. When the Asian Tsunami struck a few years ago, the combination of fear and sympathy was so strong that people donated billions of dollars to aid agencies. Those agencies had no idea what to do with that money and most of it remains unspent. Which is why I make it a general rule never to give to charity. In contrast everyone regards global warming as an ongoing threat but nobody really does very much about it because it doesn't activate their fear mechanism in quite the same way. The only way that activists can get people to respond to the environment is to scare them with apocalyptic scenarios. When people are scared, then they will act. So what does this have to do with the afterlife. In short, the concept of hell is very useful in motivating people to act in accordance with their conscience. If someone thinks they are being watched by an omnipotent judge who has the power to condemn them to an eternity of awful punishments in hell, they will think twice before doing something wrong. This is why religious art has produced some fantastical depictions of sadistic punishments in hell. You can see this in Buddhist iconography, depicting hells beneath hells beneath hells, where people are working out their karmic debt being punished in any number of excruciating ways for the evil they committed when alive. You can also see this spectacularly in Christian art. The best example of this is the painting of the last judgment by Luca di Signorelli in Orvieto Cathedral in Italy, which Michelangelo likely plagiarized for his painting of the Sistine Chapel. This picture is gruesome, a veritable David Cronenberg of art with

all manner of disgusting punishments being applied to the bodies of the deserving sinners. It is graphic violence at its most extreme, and would make anyone think twice about doing wrong.

In the modern secular society if we don't have hell we have to have something that mimics it. As Foucault demonstrates, the modern state developed rational processes that attempted to make up for the increasing failure of the religious imagination in secularizing Europe. The most famous of these examples is Bentham's panopticon, which envisages a circular prison in which everyone is under constant surveillance from a central podium. Foucault's point is that you don't even have to have anyone doing the surveilling. merely the idea that someone could see you is enough to make people think twice before behaving badly. The consequence of this is that we are becoming increasingly a society under surveillance, with cameras everywhere not to record crime as it happens but to deter it. If people believed in a powerful all-seeing judge and an eternity of physical torment, we wouldn't need those security cameras. Surveillance is the price we pay for not believing in hell. Personally I would rather have hell.

Parents instinctively know this. How many parents tell their children that if they do good they will be rewarded by santa claus, or if they do bad they will be got by the bogeyman. Even though they may not believe this themselves, they

know it is effective in developing the consciences of children. Similarly, as a middle class rational person, I too wish as many people as possible believe in divine retribution, for it will help limit the number of occasions that I will fall victim to criminality.

Let's think about this a little more. The problem with relying on the state for justice, is that even with cameras everywhere tracking our every move in the real world, and Facebook and google cookies tracking our movements on the Internet, it is still impossible for the system to keep track of what everyone is doing. For instance, i like to drive fast cars especially when I am a little drunk. Probably this is not a good idea, but I manage to get away with it when noone is watching. Also, I'm sure that if I put my mind to it I could become a master criminal, getting away with murder, because the police are only human. Whatever system we put in place, even if it is the most repressive, totalitarian, surveillance system in the world, we could still probably outwit it and commit terrible crimes if we really wanted to. In such situations, victims of crime are powerless. The justice system fails to catch whoever killed their child, and justice is thwarted. This is an absolute outrage, and one that our justice system can do nothing about. What we need in such situations is revenge. When someone murders our child and gets away with it, we naturally want to avenge the crime and do terrible things to the murderer. It is natural that we should want to do so. Our innate sense of moral fairness demands it. The only way to satisfy the demands for revenge is to hope that the person who committed the crime will be

punished for it after they die. Without such a hope, victims of unsolvable crimes will never get the revenge that they need and deserve. This is point that the modern rational legal system just doesn't get, and it is a point made clearly in one of my favourite films, the Boondock Saints. If you haven't seen it, you can watch a clip that I posted on the Facebook event page for this evening's debate. It shows two brothers and a hitman exacting revenge on people who have managed to outwit the justice system. Their motivation is that they believe they are acting on behalf of go(o)d. So if you live in a society where belief in in divine retribution is not widespread, you will have to come up with some alternative to it. This requires spending vast amounts of money on surveillance, giving some people the power to keep watch over everyone else, and exacting swift and brutal punishments for criminals. In practice this means creating the state in the image of god. This is exactly what happened in East Germany, and it is what takes place to a certain extent in China. The more atheist the country, the greater the power of the state, and the greater the need for the surveillance of citizens. It's not that you need religion for morality. It just makes it easier and cheaper and nicer than keeping tabs on all of your citizens.

So far I've looked at three basic reasons why you should be interested in the afterlife even if you're not a religious person. The first is that it's a natural low-grade psychopathology. It's one of those foibles that makes us human. The second is that it's inherently intriguing. It's something that powers the human imagination and gives us

marvellous works of art and horror. The third reason is that belief in divine or cosmic retribution inspires enormous fear in people and this is a vital tool in helping people to avoid becoming criminals.

Even if you don't believe in the afterlife, you should be grateful that other people do. Without them your life would be even more boring than it is right now.

Concluding arguments.

A final argument that I did not introduce before concerns beliefs in the persistence of personality in non-Western cultures. Specifically I am interested here in the Chinese notion of venerating the spirits of one's ancestors. This practice is key to the integrity of Chinese societies, and is part and parcel of Chinese people's identity in the contemporary world. To suggest that Chinese people are suffering from a dangerous pathology because of holding irrational beliefs in the afterlife would be perceived by many people as a kind of racial insult. Who are you white person to tell me about the core beliefs and values of my culture. Putting this rhetoric aside, I think that one important point to make is that the concept of self in Chinese culture is fundamentally different from in the West because it extends forwards and backwards across the generations. I am who I am because I am the child of my parents and because one day I will be the parent of my child. Just as I venerate the spirits of my ancestors, so also one day my spirit will be venerated by my children. I am not a self-contained autonomous rational independent unit. I am merely a link in a genetic and cultural process that transcends my own personal identity. What give his process meaning is the notion of ancestors not as dead bodies but as living participants in the continued social imagination. You white people might give up on your childish notions of heaven and hell, and justify this to yourselves in terms of your rational superiority, but that does not give you the right to pronounce judgment on my cultural identity. If we were all completely

rational about death, there would be far less cultural diversity in the world. From some perspectives such a world might be a kinder, saner, gentler world. But it is not a world that I would care to live in for all the tea in China.