

“Mortality thoughts persist” (20 September 2019)

Ideas & Voices Editor Ron Rollins has cited an NPR item **in his daily moderator column**:

“The terrifying event that no one can escape—death.” I suppose it shouldn’t surprise me that many people consider death “terrifying.” But as a philosopher, I’ve come to terms with that inevitable prospect: Someday I shall cease to exist, and there is nothing I can do about it except to put it off as long as I can, or at least until living becomes intolerable. So why worry about it? Just quit smoking, don’t drink or eat too much, never run with scissors, never run a red light, always look both ways before crossing the street, never point a gun (or even a finger) at an edgy police officer...

I admit I don’t look forward to dying, but only because [1] dying often entails discomfort, and I am no masochist; and [2] I still have a sense of purpose: — things I hope to accomplish before I begin my final sleep. But after dying, death itself would seem a peaceful release from all craving, pain, and worry. I envision death as the most perfect slumber anyone can ever have, with no troubling nightmares, no need to get up to visit the loo, and from which no one ever awakens to more craving, pain, or worry.

“But what about the afterlife?” someone might ask. “What about Judgment Day? What about heaven and hell? Aren’t you worried about those?”

I anticipate something like the following dialogue might ensue. I answer, “I’m no more worried about them than I am about Sheol, Hades, Nirvana, Valhalla, transmigration...”

“What? What are those?”

“Afterlife realms, invented by various ancient religious men, none of whom had ever previously been dead, and who thus had no first-hand experience of death. Are you worried about those?”

“No.”

“Nor am I. But why aren’t you worried about them?”

“Because they aren’t in my religion.”

“And I don’t worry about your realms for the same reason.”

I’ve never been dead, but I’ve been unconscious on occasion. And that, I can report, is no experience at all: no sensation, no thoughts, no dreams, no awareness of self or of time passing. Only serene nothingness, for howsoever long brain activity remains beneath the level of consciousness. The subjective experience is like an eye-blink, even if the elapsed time from a conscious observer’s standpoint is minutes, hours, days, or even years. I’m inclined to think that death is like unconsciousness, only permanent. The eyes blink shut, but never reopen. At that moment, the *sentient being* that was “I” fades out, vanishing forever.

As I see it, life is a slice of consciousness, sandwiched between two half-eternities of oblivion, one with no beginning before birth, the other with no end after death. Fear of dying is natural; it’s a survival instinct. But death itself is *not being*—full stop! In death, survival becomes meaningless. There are no more worries, no more duties to perform, no more cravings to be satisfied or denied. During my time on earth, I’ll have lived and loved, worked and played, learned enough to realize how little I know, reveled in the company of family and friends and mourned their loss. It will be time to rest. I anticipate eternal peace as my door prize, resuming it from my original unconscious state prior to waking up in a womb. I find this prospect not in the least terrifying, but rather most comforting.

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