

Death of a heretic

Kris King – May 7th 2011

<http://www.rantinaminor.co.uk/2011/05/death-of-a-heretic/>

One day, in the (hopefully) far distant future, my heart will issue its last, vital beat, my lungs will resign from their tediously repetitive job of inflating and deflating to provide me with oxygen, and, in quick succession, every organ, system, and function within my body will shut down, never to be restarted. The deafening noise of the trillions of explosions in my brain will go quiet, and the light that lives just behind my tired eyes will go out for the last time. There will be no one home. Every biological function that I had enjoyed without ever having paid them much thought will have come to their natural ends, and I will be dead.

No longer will I be able to bask in the privilege of another conscious thought as my mind, and the brain it calls home, succumb to the ravages of decay that eventually plague every organism the moment it stops fighting. The cosmologically insignificant period of time I had previously occupied will be over, and I will be unceremoniously returned to my pre-birth state of complete and total non-existence. I will have absolutely no awareness of anything; not the gradual dissolution of the star stuff of which I'm made, not the feelings of those I leave behind, not even the fact that I have ceased to exist.

It's often said that the hardest thing for any human being to ever have to face is the crushing inevitability of their own mortality. No-one wants to imagine that all of this has to end at some point; no-one wants to contemplate a time when they won't be here any more. It would not be unreasonable to suggest that the worst aspect of being an animal that was fortunate enough to have evolved such a consciousness is that, by definition, we are cursed to worry endlessly about what happens when it finally stops working. To counter this deeply-embedded fear of the greatest of unknowns we developed both the biggest, and the most harmful, distraction technique a species could ever foist upon itself ... we simply pretend that it isn't going to happen.

The notion of an afterlife has, since time immemorial, been a source of comfort and hope for billions of people around the world; the idea that there is nothing to fear from death because, although it spells the end of the physical, there is a far greater, non-corporeal world beyond this to look forward to. A world where there is no pain, no anguish, and no end – we will be the infinitely-blessed recipients of an eternity of consciousness; an endless existence of love, of laughter, and of joy that will never be cut short by the cruel, cold, indiscriminate hand of death.

And it will be the most excruciating, abominable, interminable suffering a sentient being could ever be subjected to ...

Like anyone else my thoughts will occasionally turn to the subject of death, particularly my own, and that's entirely to be expected – it's natural. I am, after all, a living being who would ideally like to stay that way for a good long while. It's perfectly normal that I worry about how I'm going to die, and whether or not it's going to hurt. Will I go quickly and quietly, or will it be protracted and painful? Will there be people around me when it happens, or will I be alone? These thoughts are not just mine; they are common to us all, regardless of whether or not you believe in an afterlife.

As an atheist, I don't ... for me death is the end and, as such, I often worry that there will come a time when I will no longer exist. This concern isn't really present in a believer but then, by contrast, I don't worry about whether my eternity is going to be spent in blissful paradise or screaming agony. You see it's not enough for a believer to invest in the idea of a life after death, they have to separate them out into *two*; one for the good people, and one for the bad (naturally, the believer is convinced they're going to the good one). They can't stomach the idea that an eternity of unbridled joy might also be available to the annoying neighbour who shot their cat up the arse with an air rifle; they can't handle the thought that life might not actually be completely fair so they invent two post-death theme parks you can visit: Cloud Land and Torture World.

If you've ever wanted an example of how faith is inherently divisive, this is a particularly good one.

The “us and them” mentality is laid bare for all to see here, with every believer absolutely *certain* that they’re going to be riding the Bliss Flume in Cloud Land while everyone else gets sent hurtling down the Flaming Sulphur Rapids in Torture World. They, after all, have chosen to believe in the *right* version of the après-vie experience, unlike those idiots who believe the wrong one or, in my case, don’t believe in one at all. This complacency is an inevitable by-product of the process of layering delusion on top of delusion in a desperate attempt to shield themselves from the harsh reality that they’re little more than fashionably-dressed bags of meat with an unavoidable expiry date. It’s like forming a cocoon around yourself made from a thousand sheets of bubble-wrap to ward against sharp and pointy things that might pierce your fragile body; you’ll be convinced of your total safety right up until the moment you suffocate to death.

Having long ago given up on applying this tiny child’s Elastoplast to the gushing, fountain-like wound of my own finiteness, I’ve had to embrace, albeit with great difficulty, the thought that this really is it. This life is *all* that there is and, one day, I *am* going to die, whether I like it or not. To discard the comfortable delusion of an afterlife, and to acknowledge the eventual end of one’s own weird, complicated, and surprisingly short little life, I think, is possibly one of the most terrifyingly challenging things you can ever do. I’ll even go one further and suggest that it makes you an immeasurably better person as a result ...

For a start a non-believer will value life, all life, more than his faith-head friends. It makes sense – if our true destiny is an eternal existence that begins once this one is over then this life is just a trivial blip, a hollow and meaningless exercise in passing the time that serves only to act as a preamble to existence proper. Our physical lives, and everything we do with them, are utterly cheapened to the point of worthlessness when stood next to the grand infinity of the perceived world beyond. To an atheist, life is more precious, more glorious, and more worthy of respect and protection entirely *because* it is limited in its span.

The idea of an afterlife diminishes everything we do here on earth; the achievements we rack up in our 70 or so years are meaningless when you consider we’ve got an eternity on the way. Many believers question atheists as to how they can possibly live their lives knowing that there’s nothing at the end of it; how can we get up in the morning? Isn’t our godless existence completely meaningless when there’s no heaven to work towards or hell to avoid? No, it is precisely the *opposite*. Every achievement is *ours*, and not something we have to share the credit for with the invisible sky wizard. Every day is a blessing *because* it is one of a precious few. Every deed has greater worth *because* we’re not doing it to curry favour with a deity who insists on keeping score. The love and compassion we share with others is infinitely more valuable *because* it’s something that comes directly from within *us* and requires no celestial third-party to inspire it.

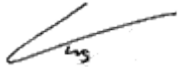
When we die, all that remains of us are memories in those we leave behind. Our fond remembrances of those who are no longer with us are the most precious things we possess because they are but tiny fragments of evidence that those people were even here. On the cosmic time-scale our existence ultimately amounts to nothing, and the only way this can ever change is for us to leave our mark; do something that tells the universe, “I was here”. Immortality comes only through the persistence of memory throughout the ages – when we take false comfort from imagining that our departed loved ones are waiting for us in another life we’re so busy looking forward to seeing them again that we forget almost everything about their lives that meant anything enough worth preserving.

For better or worse, Adolf Hitler will likely be remembered for many centuries, maybe even millennia, after you and I are forgotten for the simple reason that we all continue to propagate the memories of his life’s deeds. You, me, and even Hitler are only able to determine *how* (or even whether) we achieve immortality through our ability to decide how we act in *this* life. Your every deed will influence how you are remembered when you are gone, and the impact you have on those around you will dictate whether your memory will endure, for better or worse. Religions argue that one should lead a good life in order to achieve blissful immortality, and on this we can agree. Where we depart in our opinions is that they see this eternity as literal, having clearly never considered how unrelentingly torturous a consciousness without the promise of death would truly be.

So, when I finally go the way of Python’s parrot, what then? Well, frankly, in terms of the physical, I don’t care – burn me, bury me, dump me in the canal, or keep my corpse around for scientific or sexual experimentation, I don’t care. I won’t be in a position to complain, so why on earth should I worry? What I *do* worry about is how I will be remembered; will I have had a sufficiently positive impact on those around me to be worth preserving as a memory? All I know is that this is the only chance I will ever have to make a mark ... it is the only life I have in which I can do something, and

be someone, worth remembering.

Call me a heretic if you like, but *this* life is the only one that matters because it's the only one we have and we're supposed to *live* it. We're not here to spend it grovelling for admission to Cloud Land, or apologising to some supposed omnipotent tyrant for being broken because, if we do, we will have wasted every precious second ... get off your knees and start living ...

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized, cursive letter 'A' followed by a small, illegible mark.