

How Believing in an **AFTERLIFE** Can **RUIN** your life

John Shand gives us a grave warning.

It should surely be the case that a belief in the afterlife should make one's present life better. There may be difficulties in acquiring and sustaining the belief, but managing the difficulties should make one's current alive-life, so to speak, a happier one. There must be consolation in knowing that this life isn't all there is. Perhaps the greatest fear is death – it certainly is for some – so sustaining a belief that one does not really die, lifts one of the great anxieties from our lives.

There is certainly a case that can be made from observation that people will believe almost anything in order to hold to belief in an afterlife. Chief of these observations is that people may with their own eyes witness death occurring, combine that with a complete lack of evidence to those same eyes of any persistence beyond death, and yet believe that there is such persistence. A lived truth up against a mere possibility, yet for many the former cannot oust or subdue the latter.

Of course, belief in God is one of the main reasons that people feel able to believe in an afterlife. Although religious belief is not a necessary condition for belief in the afterlife, it is quite often seen as such, and for many, religious belief is sufficient condition for holding that there is an afterlife. If you think there is a God, then the blatant lack of evidence for an afterlife can be dismissed, or left unscrutinized, as it stands protected by the bigger scheme.

But surely any support for a belief in an afterlife, no matter how tenuous, is better than none? Isn't it bound to be a comfort? It may not work out like that. Thinking that you are going to live on after you die carries with it awful possibilities, as by its very nature you have no certain idea what it would involve. It cannot but help be indefinite for most of us, or at least subject to doubt for all but the most single-minded and fanatical. By its very nature, one's life after death looks like something one can only be uncertain about. We cannot see beyond life to know what it would really be like – and few have seriously sustained the idea that there are those who have come back 'from the other side' to tell us what it is like. But the more vague and uncertain our belief in the afterlife is, the worse a belief it is, unless we think we are definitely going to Hell. It is moreover worse not only for ourselves, but for those we love.

To see how such meditations can ruin your life, consider this. Grim thoughts, albeit self-admittedly irrational ones, enter the heads even of those who have lost loved ones and are theoretically sure we do not survive death; morbid thoughts, such as wondering whether they're somehow cold, conscious and trapped in their grave. These thoughts apply to one's coming death too. Will one wake up in the grave and be locked there forever? Who can tell, if the form that one's existence takes beyond death is utterly mysterious? Even if we manage to strip ourselves of such irrational fears, and convince ourselves that the person dead and

buried is no longer there, we may still find it disturbing to contemplate their remains as we stand above the grave. Imagine how much worse and potentially obsessive such meditations might be if you have the slightest indefinite belief in an afterlife. In that case, the question of what it will be like acquires a renewed urgency. Will it be one of constant pain? Or one of endless frustrations, where one finds oneself no longer able to act, and yet desperately willing to do so? Will it consist of your



existence in some terribly crippled state compared to what you have now? Will you be conscious in the crematorium furnace? If one's essence is a non-physical soul, why not? One could be both there, and burning. If you think you do not know whether an afterlife could happen, or think that it might happen, endless indefinite possibilities open up. There is no reason why they should be nice ones.

If, on the other hand, one can be as sure as one can be that one does not survive death, then one might have a chance of quelling whatever irrational thoughts naturally force themselves upon one. In fact this is usually what happens if one firmly thinks that this life is all there is; one entertains such grim thoughts passingly, but usually manage to snap out of them. Not so if one has a belief in the afterlife where anything goes as to how it might turn out. The ghastly uncertainty as to what it might be like is definitely worse than the certainty of knowing that there will be no state that you will be in after you die.

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