

AFTERLIFE?

HAPPINESS-LONGING as undifferentiated,
differentiated, and fused ----- Elliott #1765

At a Christmas party last night ('83), a scientist specializing in military electronics said to me, "I haven't paid much attention to religion--but I'm going down the tubes soon, and I'm more than curious about what's going to happen to me. Could we talk about that sometime soon?" "More than curious" translates as "at least somewhat worried." I said you're not alone; let's have this for one of my "Perplexities and Faith" 9am Sunday forums soon. *This thinksheet is a few notes toward that forum.*

1. Our culture's happiness-longing has been radically thisworldly, so afterlife interest has been on most folks' back-burner. (My 1966 Hudson Inst. study on Lat.American priests' subsiding afterlife-interest correlated with their becoming increasingly a destabilizing political influence: the priest should shift from promising the poor a better afterlife to "identifying" with the thisworldly condition of the poor--a shift I praise the Marynollers, among others, for fostering.)
2. The afterlife issue has several dimensions: (1) Afterlife relations with Being and beings? (2) Misery/happiness destiny? (3) What, if any, continuities with this life? (4) This life's meaning(s) in light of death/afterlife? This from Jn. Betjeman's "Sun and Fun," on #4: "But I'm dying now and done for,/What on earth was all the fun for?"
3. The afterlife is the person's ultimate metaphysical conundrum: what is so "real"--if anything is--that it survives mortality? Reason, here, is self-canceling: it's equally rational-reasonable to argue for as against mortality ("mortality" meaning, literally, death without survival of the person). The notion that nonsurvival is more rational, more "scientific," is an illusion of a culture strong on physics and weak on metaphysics (which is the reverse of, say, the culture of India). The survival question, like all life's existential questions (e.g., love, intimacy, honor), must rather be addressed to the affectional-intuitional dimension of our human being. Again, our culture has been weak in this dimension, so we are in deep trouble over all the essential existential human issues--e.g., prayer, sex, honesty, faith, love, hope. The afterlife question should be treated in the context of this cultural imbalance as well as in some other contexts.
4. The behaviorists have honed Freud's pleasure/pain principle into a personal/social-control instrument (+/- "reinforcements"). In (sub)cultures of belief in an afterlife, postdeath can be used motivationally (rewards/punishments backfunctioning, in this life, as promises/threats); but this--for almost all who've gone through our public-school system--is as dead as God and conscience. (Kant's three abiding realities--God, immortality, and conscience--have atrophied in a school system that brackets them as unnecessary to "the education of the whole person," in the current jargon of the educational establishment.) But this cannot be gainsaid: human beings flee misery (their own and, with few exception, others') and pursue happiness (it, understandably, being the third--after "life" and "liberty"--of the three values promoted in our Declaration of Independence).
5. In small children, as Piaget shows, happiness-longing is undifferentiated by the divide of death. As the child (1) experiences others' death and (2) develops abstraction power (earlier than Piaget thought), happiness-longing becomes differentiated: one longs for happiness here/hereafter--as the Germans say, "this side" and "that side." Sets of moral-ethical values/virtues are applied, variously, to both sides. Or, disbelieving in an afterlife, one differentiates life as happiness-hopeful and death as happiness-impossible. The third possibility, viz., happiness-longing as fused, has two forms: (1) The early-Christian belief that "life," here/hereafter, is a relationship with God; negatively, the dead here will be dead-nonexistent there; and (2) The mystical-modern-Christian belief that God, who loves us more than we can love ourselves and wills better for us than we can will for ourselves, will grant us here/hereafter as much "life" as we are willing to open ourselves to, for God-others-ourselves.*

*For the Bible's four views of unbelievers vis-a-vis an afterlife, see my #33. See also #444 and #596.