

Thanatos

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https://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2016/1/images_editorial.pdf**Editorial: Images of Afterlife****Marja-Liisa Honkasalo**

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What would human life look like if it were not about images of this world and the otherworld? Could such a life sustain people, their societies and cultures in an appropriate way? These are questions, which preoccupy the contributors to this special issue. The goal of this volume is to gather a large scale of discussions to highlight how the questions may be taken seriously. Also, the aim is to show how the questions are meaningful for the scholars working in these areas or for those who are interested in the study of death more generally. The papers of this volume originate from the conference “Images of Afterlife”, organized by the research project *Mind and the Other*, at the University of Turku.

Why are the images of afterlife important? In this issue we ask how they do matter to us as researchers? There are two notions, afterlife and afterworld, which often run parallel to each other in scholarly discussions. In the Christian tradition, the spatial notion of the afterworld has been in use; heaven is a good example of this. Afterworld also points to a place with practices and common activities, which are carried out after one’s death. According to anthropological research, the otherworld in several cosmologies can be a lively place with ancestors, animals and plants (e.g. Cátedra 1992). The notion of afterlife, on the other hand, refers frequently to existential and temporal dimension of what happens after death. Philosophers, such as William James, commenced discussions about immortality which has led to logical rather than theological notions of the continuation of this life into the otherlife.

The images of afterlife are rich and manifold in various cultural, historical and religious contexts, as well as in a variety of symbolic expressions in artistic, media and popular culture. The representations of afterlife reflect cultural values, fears, anguish and punishment as well as hope. This is how Christianity has guided Western societies and researchers – us – to think, and it is indeed difficult to envisage images of afterlife without any cultural sedimentation of the Christian images, as for instance Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang (1990) demonstrate in their book *Heaven: A History*, (see Christian Jedan in this special issue). However, we argue among many other scholars in the domain of the studies of

cultures that the images of afterlife do reflect this life in a variety of ways and are based on the cultural beliefs and representations as well as ethics, which are considered important at any given time.

The present Western societies are frequently defined as secular. According to several authors, secularity means that faith has lost its cultural authority and the religious organizations have lost their power. However, this seems not to be case entirely, since there is an increasing number of active spiritual movements. The present development has made some researchers, like Professor Peter Nynäs from Åbo Akademi describe the current situation as “post-secular”. He writes that what we are facing currently are mere new modes of religiosity. The post-secular trends are present also in the imagery of the afterworld, for instance densely in pop culture but also in what authors such as Christoffer Partridge (2004–2005), Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2004) and Sarah MacKian (2012) have brought about as trends of re-enchantment, disappearance or privatization of religion, and spirituality-beyond-religion, respectively.

How has afterlife – the life and existence of souls and minds (or bodies) after death – been imagined in different historical, social, political and cultural contexts and how is it imagined today? It is equally important to discuss the change as the continuation. It seems that emotional and social bonds and ties between this life and the other that follows remain similar, although the sources of the afterlife images change. Despite the changes, something seems to continue. For example, bonding with the deceased in the afterworld seems to be an idea that humans widely share, independent of their cultural or religious backgrounds.

But does the bonding only occur with the dead? Is it only the life beyond and the contacts with the deceased that matter? Is temporality of the afterworld only one-dimensional?

According to the vast literature on the images and belief systems, some conceptions of the afterlife persist even though people may declare themselves as secular atheists, sceptics or whatever. Could we think that the continuity of this life, after one’s death, is important as well? An example is presented in a thought-provoking way by Professor Samuel Scheffler in his recent book *Death and the Afterlife*. Scheffler is a philosopher and works at the NYU in New York. In his book Scheffler posits himself in the discussion by writing that he does not believe in the existence of an afterlife in the similar manner as it is normally understood. However, he takes for granted that other human beings will continue to live after his death and in this meaning there will be an afterlife. To prove his argument he makes a thought experiment with two scenarios. In the first, the doomsday scenario, as he calls it, he asks us to imagine that the world will be completely destroyed thirty days after our death, in a collision with a giant asteroid. He asks how this knowledge will affect our attitudes during the remaining part of our lives. He claims that this knowledge affects people’s subsequent motivations and choices how to live. To what extent would people remain committed to the current projects and plans? He argues that the reasons to engage in them might weaken, even cease altogether. In addition, the emotional investment in them might decrease. The scholars working for instance with cancer research and attempting to find a cure would probably not see motivation for their research any longer because their results may take long and probably the cutting off future may make them, or their implementation, impossible. The same could happen with artists, social scientists and scholars working in the humanities too.

Scheffler argues that the “doomsday scenario” highlights some very crucial phenomena of human values. People do not care only about their own experiences. The afterlife really matters to people and it matters in more than one way. “What happens after our death matters to us in its own right, and, in addition, our confidence that there will be an afterlife is a condition of many other things mattering for us here and now”, he writes (2013, 32).

As human beings, we attach meaning to the survival of particular people who matter to us. We have a tendency to personalize our relation to the future and we hope that some people, at least our loved ones, would survive after our death. Some of us think that the doomsday scenario presented by Scheffler only describes that the afterlife that matters to us is a personal one, that we care only about the afterlife of people who are closest to us and most dearly loved. However, with his second example he wants to demonstrate that this particularistic relationship to the afterworld is not the whole story. He makes another example using the novel "The Children of Men", written by the novelist P. D. James. In the novel the writer presents a scenario in which all people would become infertile after 30 years. This scenario, according to Scheffler, brings about as much horror among people as does the doomsday scenario. This makes Scheffler to draw a conclusion which is more radical than the first one. People's reaction to the imagined extinction does not portray particularistic relationship only to the loved ones but also to those who we do not know and have never met and to those who we are not able to meet because they come after us. The existence of people who we do not know, as well as the existence of the people we love, matters more to us than our own survival.

What matters to us depends, according to Scheffler, on our confidence in the existence of the afterworld. It is not the personal or personalistic afterworld that matters but the existence of life after we have passed away. The infertility example is interesting also when considering temporality. The afterworld is not directed only forwards one-dimensionally but the reverse is also true. What matters is the life of those humans who come after us. The disappearance of the humankind is a horrifying scenario because "our conviction that things matter is sustained by our confidence that life will go on after we ourselves are gone. In this respect, as I have argued, the survival of humanity matters more to each of us than we usually realize; indeed, in this respect it matters more to us even than our own survival" (ibid., 81).

Scheffler's argument lets us think critically of some crucial values of today's society, such as individualism, neglect and devaluation of sociality.

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In the contemporary West, the collective of explicitly Christian religious representations is challenged and completed by individual conceptions and beliefs, which, in turn, derive from various different cultural sources. The keynote speakers of the conference "Images of the Afterlife" highlighted a variety of social and cultural sources. Professor Tony Walter, one of the keynote speakers emphasized the meaning of social bonds in this regard. The contemporary social change seems to replace the "one-directional" images of reunion with the dead family members and loved ones with angels, with powerful liminal beings, able to cross the boundary between life and death. The angels seem to portray with increasing intensity in the contemporary imaginary. How the angels are now compared with their historical representations in art history was the theme of Professor Altti Kuusamo, who portrayed the modern origins of the Christian figures, including angels, and the variety of their cultural shapes in early modernity. He demonstrated how the fine arts witnessed the transformation of the image of angels from divine troops to personal helpers and guardians. Professor Jussi Kotkavirta analyzed psychoanalysis as the central cultural script that defines the modern Western subject's ways of thinking of death. The fourth keynote speaker, Professor Laura Huttunen, focused her lecture to the very question of afterlife imaginary of the survivors that is broken because, due to political violence, the persons to be imagined and their bodies are missing. She delineated a present-day political view into the shaping of the images of the afterworld. Applying examples from the Yugoslavian Civil war, she discussed the meaning of sociality and failed ritual in relation to death and the afterworld.

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This special issue of *Thanatos* contains three articles and three reviews. Together, the papers serve as a meaningful illustration of the significance of the questions we, as editors, wanted to pose. In the first article, Christopher Jedan analyzes the consolatory function of the conceptions of afterlife. As a philosopher of religion and ethics, he argues that the consolatory modes of the conceptions of afterlife, both the idea of fulfilled life, as it was formulated in ancient Greek tradition, and the later Christian idea of consolation against the threat of death, are entangled with each other. Instead of shifting the focus away from worldly life, they help to “intensify” its meaning, as Jedan puts it. Portrayed from this perspective, the main thrust of both modes of consolation is to dignify fundamental life-choices. The author thus invites us to think about how a biographic closure is constructed: as a bucket list or as a bouquet of the deceased’s virtues.

In her article, archeologist Marja Ahola reinterprets Finnish Middle Neolithic earth graves in Kukkaroski burial ground, which was excavated in 1970s. Applying ritual practice theory, she challenges the previous assumption that Finnish Stone Age burials would just have been simple inhumations. Even though skeletal material is missing in Finnish Stone Age graves, the excavations unearthed red ochre and fire, imported materials such as flint, amber and slate, as well as complex grave structures. A careful analysis of these indicates a complicated mortuary practice and a belief system which involved taking care of the deceased. In addition, graves on top of each other and shared grave goods are interpreted as a way of connecting with past generations. Ahola’s reinterpretation provides new insights into the Neolithic belief systems and burial practices.

In their article on afterlife imagery in contemporary Sweden, the sociologists Annika Jonsson and Lars Aronsson study how afterlife imagery is conveyed among people ranging from spiritualists to atheists. Based on internet data and interviews, the authors claim that what was common to all groups, ranging from believers to atheists was that the modes of imaging were about relations: about social bonds between the living and dead. The results strengthen the ideas of earlier studies where the relationship-centered imagery was prominent. Why this is the case in society that becomes more privatized and celebrates the ideas of autonomy, remains an interesting topic for further studies.

Lucy Bregman, a religious studies scholar, discusses in her paper afterlife imagery among North American Protestants in the twentieth century. She brings forth how, based on contemporary sources such as funeral sermons, up until mid-twentieth century there prevailed the idea of “natural immortality”. According to this idea, people in all cultural and historical contexts have believed in the immortality of the soul. Afterlife imagery of natural transitions, such as birds that migrate appeared frequently in sermons. During the twentieth century, however, this imagery was criticized by theologians for its Platonism, and challenged by the death awareness movement and the medicalization of dying. As a consequence, it disappeared from Protestant funerals, and in Bregman’s words, was replaced by “a focus on mourners, and celebrating the life of the deceased.”

Tiina Väre, Milton Núñez, Jaakko Niinimäki, Juho-Antti Junno, Sirpa Niinimäki, Rosa Vilkkama and Markku Niskanen discuss in their archeological study the naturally mummified corpse of an early 17th-century Vicar of Kemi parish, Nikolaus Rungius. The Vicar in question died in 1629 and was buried under the old Keminmaa Church in Finnish Lapland. According to local lore, Väre et al. points out, Vicar Rungius had stated before his death that “If I speak the truth, my corpse will not decay”. The review presents latest findings based on a computed tomography scanning conducted in 2011, and discusses the afterlife of the mummy of the Vicar through centuries, and the significance of his

dead body, which has not decomposed, but by an early twentieth-century scholar “in its own way” was “still spreading the gospel.”

In his paper Milton Núñez, Professor emeritus in archaeology, introduces two unusual burials from Hailuoto island in the north-west of Finland; of a farmer who is supposed to have hanged himself in the eighteenth century and was buried on an uninhabited island, and of a beheaded, craniofacially deformed adult male whose buried, coffinless corpse had been pinned down with two stakes sometime around 1450–1610 AD. Núñez discusses the burials in the light of archaeological, bioanthropological and ethnohistorical data, and considers whether the burial methods may have been intended to prevent the posthumous restlessness of the two corpses. Núñez’s text offers an example of a culture that expected its dead members to continue their existence in the afterlife and participate in the lives of the living – unless their dead bodies were physically prevented from getting up or returning to inhabited areas.

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This special issue of *Thanatos* is based on the conference “Images of Afterlife” that was held at the University of Turku on 22–24 October, 2014. The editors had responsibility of the conference together with the research project *Mind and the Other* (The Academy of Finland, 266573). Altogether more than 70 participants took part in the conference from ten countries and 55 papers from a variety of academic disciplines were presented. This interest illustrates the importance of the theme and its examination from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Biographical notes:

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Kaarina Koski (PhD) is an adjunct professor (docent) of folklore studies. She works currently at the University of Turku as a lecturer of folkloristics and a postdoctoral researcher in the research project *Mind and the Other*. In her publications, she has analyzed preindustrial belief legends concerning death, ghosts, graveyards and the Lutheran Church, as well as the theoretical issues of narrativity, genre, cognition and conceptualization. Later she has turned her attention to contemporary phenomena and written about contemporary beliefs and uncanny experiences, as well as participatory internet culture. Contact: kaakos@utu.fi

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