Naturalism, Death, and Functional Immortality

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I consider a naturalistic approach to death, seeking a naturalistic or “functional” version of immortality. Making use of John Dewey and some other classical American philosophers, I first articulate the naturalism of this project. I then discuss what such naturalism means for understanding the self and its survival. Finally, I consider the existential question about to what extent such a view of immortality is satisfying.

1. Introduction

Everyone dies. Now given this fact of our existence, I hold that the meaning of living, that is, of our experience, is never a completely separate issue from the meaning of our deaths and dying.1 It is from this context that I wish to articulate another approach to the meaning of death, which is simultaneously an approach to the meaning of our living.2

My approach is a naturalistic one. I shall articulate a kind of immortality in this world that is not to be conceived in a traditional Western sense of eternal, immutable, or otherwise ongoing existence of one’s individual personality beyond the death of his or her earthly lived body. I wish, instead, to articulate what I shall term a naturalistic or functional immortality.3 Concerning this view, there is in the final analysis a significant question regarding to what extent one can live as a naturalist and with that alone, that is, an existential question about the extent to which such a naturalistic view of death is satisfying, and in this I shall later turn to some of the essays of John J. McDermott on the matter.

This approach is in the spirit of understanding philosophy’s proper role as one of being relevant to life, or, as James Campbell has said recently said with reference to pragmatism: “Philosophy’s job is to address our problems of living – whether the metaphysical ones that tormented James, or the scientific ones that challenged Peirce, or the social ones that invigorated Dewey – and to be ever vigilant in challenging the purely intellectual solutions to which philosophers too often acquiesce.”4 As for the job at hand here, it is one of addressing our mortality by way of the issue of immortality, with the problem being one of whether or not we can live satisfactory lives without any certain knowledge of or even belief in personal survival after death and without much likelihood of
our even being remembered as individuals for very long beyond our current existence. The concern here is thus not one simply of abstractions, for it is about our living with this fact.

Now let us proceed from here by addressing a matter of terminology, especially the word *immortality*. The term appears employed quite often to refer to a survival, or continued existence, of the individual human personality. This is what is often meant when immortality is characterized as *eternal life*. Such immortality typically means, in short, the perpetuation of “personal” or “subjective” consciousness beyond one’s death. Kai Nielsen characterizes the position well:

> In speaking of immortality we are speaking of the endless existence of a person after what we call her ‘death’ or at least the death of her body. What is agreed on all sides, and what is an inconvertible fact, is that after a time for all of us our bodies cease to be energized and left alone they will simply rot, and no matter how they are manipulated, when they are thoroughly in that state there is no evidence of their ever being re-energised. (In that respect we are not like batteries.) Believers in immortality believe that, all this to the contrary notwithstanding, we, as human beings, persons, selves, somehow do not really die but have instead an endless existence after such a de-energisation and dis-integration of our bodies or (if you will) our ‘earthly bodies’.

As Nielsen clearly and forcefully puts the matter, immortality is most often understood, again, as the unending existence of the person beyond death. This, however ultimately incoherent or unlikely, is the major component of what believers in immortality typically mean by the term.

I should be clear from the start that the view under consideration here, that of *functional* immortality or what George Santayana called “ideal immortality,” is of a very different species from the more conventional species described above. According to the functional view of immortality, there is no necessary postulation of eternal life as it is most often understood. Rather, there is, according to this view, an end of one’s personal experience beyond which he or she does not go, at least not as first-person endeavor. In other words, given the naturalism this position entails, which we shall address shortly, there is no ultimate personal survival of the body’s demise, or at least not as we can know consistent with naturalism. Yet while there may be no such ultimate personal or subjective survival, death does not necessarily mean an absolute end of the self simultaneous with one’s biological demise, particularly if the self has an irreducible social aspect. We will return to this notion of the self, but let us move now to first briefly consider at least a preliminary formulation of the view of immortality under consideration by turning to some of the remarks of Charles S. Peirce.