

Editorial Preface

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It is no news that a central preoccupation of religious reflection is and has always been the task of coming to terms with the fact of human mortality. The terms it has adduced to understand and to cope with our mortal condition are familiar enough: hope, heaven, hell, resurrection, and immortality, just to name a few. One thing to note, however, is that these terms are intrinsically vague, like so many terms in ordinary discourse. Some take this vagueness as a fault, those who prize exactitude and scientific precision, others as a sign of richness. For the latter, there is ample room for clarification. For many philosophers of religion, this task of clarification is at the center of its business.

Indeed, the authors of the articles in this issue are concerned to give clarifying accounts of what counts as, or more precisely, what they count as, credible uses of such terms as “the resurrection of material beings,” “The empty tomb” “death’s badness” “the afterlife” and “the damnation of infants.”

We start with a discussion of the pragmatic interests in the payoffs of religious faith and practice. In an updated cost-benefit discussion of Pascal’s wager argument, Cei Maslen argues that for theists the expected utility of belief in god (heavenly benefits) are decisively higher than such expectations of non-theists. As he puts the matter: “...the supposed rewards of the afterlife promised to believers ought to act as a large disincentive to believers from abandoning their faith, but only as a small incentive to non-believers to adopting that faith...”

Biblical faith has long distinguished its understanding of the afterlife from Plato’s immortality of the soul, preferring instead a picture of the afterlife as essentially embodied, that is, in terms of the resurrection of the body. The next two articles offer two very different interpretations of whether it makes sense to affirm the resurrection in general and the resurrection of Jesus in particular.

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Thomas Atkinson discusses van Inwagen's arguments for the conceivability of the resurrection of human beings and concludes that his arguments fail. This is so because Inwagen's argument for the conceivability of the resurrection is inconsistent with his modal skepticism. If indeed Inwagen is correct that we ought to be skeptical about such claims as "it is possible that," when the issue is a metaphysical possibility, then he should withhold his claim to have established that the resurrection is metaphysically possible.

If the supernatural explanation of the resurrection of Jesus is not a likely account of what happened, then is there an account that is more likely and less offensive to those who reject this explanation? Leonard Irwin Eisenberg argues that such a naturalistic explanation does exist, even though it has a low probability of being true, but not as low as the probability of the supernatural account. On this naturalistic view, Jesus does not completely die on the cross. This was discovered by a few and then an elaborate plot was hatched, including a decoy burial and a later death and burial of Jesus.

Epicurus is famous for his arguments for the irrationality of a fear of death. In one of those arguments, the point is that death is, well, "not an experience one lives through." As such, death cannot be bad for the one who is dead. But his account of death's failure to be bad for the dead person does not consider the person who is bound for paradise. Taylor W. Cyr proposes what is best called a deprivation view of death's badness that does apply to the one who is paradise-bound. On this view, death is bad for a person who is paradise-bound because an early death can deprive a person of goods in this life that are not (could not be) compensated for in eternity.

In our next article, Andrew Eshleman calls into question the realist claim that if human beings did not actually survive death and come to dwell in a heavenly realm then there would be no reason to continue to use the terms and practices that celebrate the hope for an afterlife. According to Eshleman's fictionalist account, language about the future realization of the kingdom of God and the practices that celebrate it may still have an important role to play in one's religious life, even if there is no afterlife. As he sees it, hopes for the afterlife (even if it is a fiction) honor and celebrate the ideal of justice that the realization of the kingdom of God portends.

In the final article in this issue, Christopher Bobier considers Leibniz's views on an age-old worry about the future fate of a specific sub-set of those who die unbaptized, namely, the set of infants who die unbaptized through no fault of their own. While denying that they go to hell because of original sin, Leibniz is unclear as to what happens to them. Scholars disagree: some holding that they go to limbo, others that they go to heaven. Bobier holds that Leibniz does not endorse either view because he was convinced that we cannot ever know the fate of these infants. Rather, and somewhat like the fictionalist account of the afterlife just mentioned, Leibniz was not focused on deciding between these alternative views of the fate of such infants, but focused instead on God's justice.