Review ofMark Johnston, *Surviving Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010)

In Johnston’s Hempel lectures, published under the title *Surviving Death*, he suggests that death threatens us because it ends our conscious awareness and our life with others (p. 5). Moreover, it threatens the importance of goodness “by severing even the generic connection between goodness and just desert, the very connection that goodness itself demands, not as a motive to be good but as a condition of moral coherence (p. 305).” The “central ambition” of Johnston’s lectures is to provide some sort of answer to this third threat (p. 318), by showing that death does not really sever the generic connection to just desert, so it is important to be good after all (cf. pp. 356, 370.) In what follows I will briefly sketch Johnston’s case, then make some comments about his claim that the good and the extremely good can “overcome” death.

Johnston distinguishes between people who are “good enough” and those who are extremely good. We are good to the extent that we view everyone from the impartial moral point of view, according to which each of us is “just one of the others, one among many whose needs are equally real and pressing (p. 341).” The good can “overcome” or “see through” death in that they care about the flourishing of individual personality as such, which continues after they die (p. 375). But extremely good people are best positioned to overcome death, as they literally survive. Their further existence involves nothing supernatural; it is constituted by “the onward rush of Mankind (p. 14).” Johnston goes on to suggest that Christianity turn itself into a philosophical view centered on his account of identity. He intends his book to be a contribution to theology as well as philosophy.

In theory it is possible, according to Johnston, to live on through others even if we are evil. We might survive as our own clones (p. 322), or as both of the people who result from Parfit-style division (p. 308). However, extreme goodness also positions us to survive, given Johnston’s view of personal identity, which might be summed up as follows.

First, selves do not exist. Consider the way a motion picture produces the illusion of existing objects: slightly differing images are projected on a screen in rapid succession, and the brain assimilates the images as gangsters moving about, shooting guns, smoking cigarettes. The individual images on celluloid are real enough, but the gangsters are not. Something similar happens when we wake up in the morning: a perspective or “arena of presence” opens up, in which furniture and a torso (ours) appear. That perspective remains open for the rest of the day. The next morning a perspective is again opened up. We get the impression that the perspective is a persisting object, and we call it the (our) self. But there is no such persisting object, no more than there are persisting gangsters on the movie screen.

If not selves, what are we? Persons. To be sure, in tracing personal identity over time, we tend to appeal to the self, saying: same self, same person. We must abandon *that* way of tracing identity after we give up the illusion of the self, but perhaps we can trace identity some other way. In looking for an alternative, we can presume that nature supplies the joints at which identity is carved. For example, we might embrace the “Neo-Lockean” view that persistence is constituted by psychological continuity. The account will tell us which person we will be in the future, which will help us to determine what our interests are, assuming that we can equate these with the interests of the person we are by our account. We can then accommodate the interests of this person; that is, we can *identify* with these interests—absorb them into our practical outlook the familiar way.

In reaching this point, however, we have presumed that *nature*, objective facts, determines which person each of us will be tomorrow, if anyone, and that thereby it determines which interests it is appropriate for us to identify with. Johnston says this presumption is false (p. 280); it has things the wrong way around: one’s *pattern of identification* determines who one will be. Since this pattern can vary, identity is malleable. You and I are Protean. We are the people whose interests we identify with. Most of us are small souls since we do not identify with the interests of others. We share oblivion with evildoers. However, extremely good people are large souls; they put the interests of other human beings on a par with their own. Hence they identify with the interests of folks who will be around after they die, and are variably and multiply constituted by those who make up “the onward rush of Mankind.”

Why say one’s identity is determined by one’s pattern of identification, a subjective matter? According to Johnston identity is analogous to color; just as certain responses I have to the surface before me help determine that it is red, so certain responses I have to human interests help determine that those interests are mine, and that I persist (p. 273). He claims (in Chapter 4) that this way of understanding identity is the best explanation of the facts that (a) different communities might have different “patterns of self-concern, guided by different framing narratives about the extent of a person (p. 247),” (b) that could survive any amount of rational scrutiny of evidence, yet (c) relativism about identity is not coherent (pp. 354-358), and (d) personal identity is not the sort of thing that transcends evidence (p. 287). Thus Johnston supplements his no-self doctrine with something very close to a no-person doctrine. (Some readers will probably try to exploit Johnston’s case for the no-self doctrine so as to defend animalism [which Johnston criticizes on pp. 301-304], by arguing that other approaches to identity derive their plausibility from the mistaken view that there is a persisting self.)

Earlier I said that Johnston tries to show that the good and the extremely good can “overcome” death. Let me make some comments about what he means and the case he makes.

Consider the merely good. Their point of view approximates, but falls short of, full moral impartiality, hence they lack the sort of goodness that ensures Johnstonian survival. However, unlike bad people, good people consider the interests of many others as intrinsically good. Will they be far less upset than bad people by the prospect of death? They can rejoice that, after they are gone, many others will thrive; this solace is denied to pathologically self-centered persons, who will think that nothing of importance will remain after they die. But death remains a source of great distress for the good. Johnston recognizes this, despite the fact that he speaks of their “overcoming” death. Here are some observations.

First, even from the detached point of view of the good, I will note what harms me as an individual. My interests are not more important than those of others, but persons bear interests (p. 309), and I am a person. I will see that it would be a seriously against my interests to die tomorrow, and likely that death will harm me whenever it comes. This is something I have in common with a completely self-centered individual.

Second, I cannot take much comfort in the thought that lots of people whom I care about will outlast me. It is indeed good that many of them will flourish; however, each of them is in the same boat as I: for most of them, dying would be tragic; if I care about myself, but no less about others, I’ll worry about the harm dying does *them* no less than the harm dying does me (cf. p. 130). I’ll worry about the fact that life is altogether too brief.

In many passages (e.g., pp. 318, 341, 353, 360) Johnston says that the good overcome death because they value “the flourishing of individual personality as such.” This claim is easily misinterpreted, especially when taken together with his view that the *only* reasons for action or preference are impersonal: purely prudential considerations lack any force. Readers might take him to be claiming that, when humanity is surveyed from the impartial point of view, *all* that matters is that there be flourishing persons with personalities, or lots of them, or a rich array of flourishing, or even (p. 356) that there be lots of individual personality. If the only thing that mattered to the good were that there *be* flourishing persons, then the good would not care whether any particular individual does well. To do so would be a moral failing. That some individual’s life is snuffed out would not matter, as lots of flourishing persons will remain. Good people certainly do not take this repugnant attitude.

However, Johnston does not accept this view about the concerns of the good. From the impartial view, it matters that there be a rich array of flourishing, but individuals matter too. Dwelling on the former, and putting aside the latter, we can rejoice that, after we die, “there will be plenty of individual personality around (p. 360-1).” But of course we must also acknowledge that a great many of the people who survive us will fare badly or die tragically.

Now consider the extremely good. Assuming they enjoy Johnstonian survival, would this secure “the generic connection between goodness and just desert?” I am not sure what that connection entails. But if it is an injustice that the good fare little better than the bad, the injustice will largely remain even if really good people live on indefinitely. After all, the vast majority of good people would not enjoy Johnstonian life-extension. Consider those who care about their friends, family, and community, and who assist distressed strangers whom they come upon. Still, by nature they stop short of complete impartiality (evolution has selected for selfishness [pp. 244, 340], and apparently “sin,” too [p. 351]). People like these are *merely* good. Since very few people are extremely good, nearly all will share the fate of those who are downright evil.

I discussed this reservation with Johnston. In response, he emphasized to me that he did not intend to show that justice and benefit converge. Instead, he says, “I want to meet the broader threat of death to the importance of goodness. I want to show the good are not patsies, that they need not be rationally discouraged by death, indeed that in the face of death, they are much better-off than the self-involved (personal correspondence).”

It should be apparent that Johnston argues with great resourcefulness. His writing is clear and engaging. His case for the no-self doctrine is particularly impressive. Anyone who contributes to the literature on the metaphysics of personal identity will want to read his book, as will those interested in the significance of death and the question of how the prudential point of view is related to morality.

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