

Error Bars

by Mark Meier

Is death like standing in a room at night and turning off the lights? You would still hear your breathing. You hold your breath. Silence. Darkness. Yet you feel gravity, your feet on the floor. Then the air brushes your skin. Remove the air, at least the oxygen, and yes, you will die. Then you will know death, but you will not know it. You cannot imagine death, because you cannot imagine the inability to imagine. You cannot know what it is like no longer to know. You cannot exist in a way that mimics inexistence.

The general awareness of death has a gnawing anguish, like a circular saw working on your soul, but that is different from the moment when the soul finally springs in two, the saw blade stills, and you realize the terror of inexistence, because all you have ever known is existence. For me, it happened in graduate school when I was walking to get a can of tuna for a new stray cat. I was staked to the sidewalk, flabbergasted, my cleft soul flopping wildly, like a jack-in-the-box just launched from hiding.

Religions exist to cope with this moment of terror. The major monotheisms promise you a God who sorts death into Heaven and Hell, each of which, nonetheless, though better or worse than our feeble fantasies, permits us to imagine some kind of continued consciousness from this world into another. Mormons give you a planet. Even the Buddhists, in what we might call their theistic or edenic version, permit rebirth, the consciousness preserved at least hazily or in scraps, until nirvana is reached, the cessation of all suffering and the emergence of utter awareness. Here, too, the soul-as-brain somehow seems to persist indefinitely. But where is proof of this afterlife? You must assume it. Kierkegaard calls it “the leap of faith.”

Other Buddhists, call them agnostic rationalists, argue that you persist beyond death because your individual molecules will be recycled and your actions will live on in the consequences they had upon the universe. Say, for instance, you once planted a flower.

You kept a honeybee happy its entire life suckling on that flower. The honeybee has become a piece of you, and you, of it. Though this bee will die, and with it, its happiness and awareness of your charity, it has made honey that keeps the apiarist in wealth and perhaps brings a toothless man pleasure as this honey descends, heat-thinned, from his spoon into still swirling, slowly steaming chamomile tea. You live on through the flower, the bee, the honey, the toothless old man and all the things he does from that moment that that honey entered his life. Meanwhile, your own molecules shed from you constantly, fodder for dust mites mostly, but more importantly, after death, your physical existence could be said to continue, your carbon, oxygen, nitrogen, etc. recycled into soil, sky, laughter squeezed from lungs, and so forth. Hence, you can convince yourself that you will go on after death because, literally, your atoms and your actions do. You can imagine this kind of afterlife, and no leap of faith is necessary to do so, and that is supposed to comfort you.

Follow the rationalist Buddhist a little further. Eventually, humanity will go extinct. But the bees and asters persist, you say. Fine. They, too, will die. Memories of you and your deeds will disappear. But maybe you persist in a Venusian stew that girdles a now poisoned planet, and you are also present in the lifeless, storm-tossed dust below. Let the Sun go supernova. No matter, you say. Mass-energy are conserved. Your life-molecules, commingled with or loaned from Ceasar's, commingled with or loaned from a comet eons old, will radiate unto the edges of the universe, maybe fused into iron, maybe annihilated into x-rays. Either way, your existence is not yet ended. So let the Big Crunch happen, the inevitable reversal of the Big Bang given our Hubble constant, and all space-time will cease. Where are you then? What is seven billion years, or fifteen, or thirty-five, to eternity? Do you have an eternal afterlife, after all, you rationalist, agnostic Buddhist? Hegel wrote in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* that our fear of making errors is actually our fear of discovering truth.

Every day, I lead life to the gas chamber or the guillotine. Every day, I hold life in my hands, diseased, drugged, mutated, mutilated, or simply the control, which even then is often so genetically scripted that I am not sure it is life like ours, mice made to order like plastic action figures from a factory in China. But even in identical pink eyes, you sense that the brain behind them is not oblivious to oblivion. I still do not know what it is to die. My soul flops wildly.

What if God is a Mouse? And not a Mouse of Mercy, but a Yahweh or Wodan? Then Hell will be a cage and conscious, endless asphyxiation.

