

Images of Afterlife: An international conference at the University of Turku October 22- 24, 2014

Marja-Liisa Honkasalo: Opening words

On behalf of our research project 'Mind and the Other' (funded by The Academy of Finland 2013-2016), I wish you all welcome to our international conference 'Images of Afterlife'. We are happy to inform you that there are more than 70 participants from ten countries and 55 papers from various different academic disciplines in our conference. We have invited you to this conference with the intention to create a lively discussion about the cultural variety of the images of the afterworld.

Why are the images of afterlife important? How do they matter to us? 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. In our project we argue – among several others – that the representations of afterlife reflect cultural values, fears, anguish and punishment as well as hope. This is where Christianity has led us, and it is somehow difficult to imagine images of afterlife without any cultural sedimentation of the Christian imagery. The present Western society is frequently defined as secular. According to several authors, secularity means that faith has lost its cultural authority and religious organizations have lost their power. However, this seems not to be case, since there is an increasing number of active spiritual movements. The present development has made some researchers (like Peter Nynäs from Åbo Akademi) describe the current situation as post-secular. He writes that what we now have are new modes of religiosity. This phenomenon is present also in the imagery of the afterworld as we will hear during the forthcoming three days here at the University of Turku.

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. From which ones, is an interesting research question. Our first keynote speaker professor Tony Walter will talk about the contemporary change that seems to replace the "one-directional" images of reunion with the dead family members and loved ones with angels, powerful liminal beings which are able to cross the boundary between life and death. The keynote speaker of our second day, professor Altti Kuusamo, will portray the modern origins of the Christian figures, such as angels, and the variety of their cultural shapes in early modernity. Our third keynote speaker, professor Jussi Kotkavirta will talk about psychoanalysis as the central cultural script that defines the modern Western subject's ways of thinking of death. The fourth keynote speaker, anthropologists Laura Huttunen, delineates in her speech a present-day political

view into the afterworld. Applying examples from the Serbian Civil war, she discusses the meaning of sociality and failed ritual in relation to death and the afterworld.

In this conference our aim is to let you discuss about changing beliefs. How has afterlife – the life and existence of souls and minds (or bodies) after death – been imagined in different contexts and how is it imagined today? It is also equally important to discuss continuation. It seems that bonds and ties between this life and the otherworld 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 deceased? Is temporality of the afterworld only one-dimensional?

According to the vast literature on the images and belief systems, some conceptions of the afterworld persist even though people may declare themselves as secular atheists, sceptics or whatever. I will shortly present here an example that is presented in a thought-provoking way by professor Samuel Scheffler in his recent book 'Death and the Afterlife' (Oxford University Press 2013). 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 e.g. 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 don't 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 (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 novelist PD 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 don't know and have never met and to those who we are able to meet because they come after us. The existence of people who we don't 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).

According to how I have interpreted Scheffler, his argument lets us think critically of some crucial values of today's society, such as individualism, neglect and devaluation of sociality.

To close my opening words, I will present you some Finnish imagery of death and afterlife that connects us with the previous thoughts.

The following pictures are from the Mausoleum of Sigrid Juselius in Pori, a town at the Finnish westcoast. The mausoleum is constructed by a man, whose only child and beloved daughter Sigrid died at the age of only 11 years. The father wanted to build a mausoleum for her and ordered one of the most famous Finnish painters of the late 19th century, Akseli Gallen-Kallela, to do the fresco-type paintings to the mausoleum.

From a series of paintings depicting passing of time through the seasons of the year, spring, summer, autumn and winter, I have chosen to show you the spring picture. The theme of continuation is most vivid between this painting and the frescos depicting the afterworld.



Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865-1931): *Spring*, 1903. Study for the Frescoes of the Mausoleum of Sigrid Jusélius (1887-1898) in Pori.

The other part of the mausoleum portrays the otherworld. This portrayal can be seen from the video filmed in the mausoleum (starting from 6:30 and ending in 7:20):

<http://www.sigridjuselius.fi/saatio/sigrid-juselius-mausoleum/>

What is interesting in the frescos depicting the otherworld is the continuation of the themes of life. Gallen-Kallela has painted beautiful trees and flowers, which all are 11 years old. This was the age of Juselius' daughter when she died. The very same animals live in the otherworld too. What is different is the atmosphere of peace and eternal spring.

With these short words I wish you welcome to this conference. I look forward to having several interesting discussions together.