THE HAUNTING OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT

by John A. Teske

Abstract. Understanding the human spirit, the thinking, motivating, feeling aspect of a person, need not entail supernatural reference in any more than a boundary sense. Methodological naturalism accounts for many putatively supernatural experiences in terms of naturalistic and scientific research. Fairy tales have natural functions, naturalistic accounts of miracles can have moral and spiritual power, and neuropsychological research can have value in understanding experiences of ghosts, apparitions, and presences. Even beliefs in personal immortality, at odds with current neurobiology, may serve a range of psychological functions and may raise more moral questions than they answer. Naturalistic accounts can make spiritual explorations possible where supernatural answers provide epistemic barriers.

Keywords: meaning; mortality; naturalism; neuropsychology; object-relations; phantom limb; presences; self; spirituality.

The human spirit—the thinking, motivating, feeling aspect of a person—is haunted. Like many a haunted house or ghostly possession in our developmentally primitive past, the haunting is a product of our imagination, of projected fears and anxieties. Unfortunately, it is often our beliefs about such haunting that block our understanding. I believe that this haunting is a deep problem for the life of the human spirit, a life for which egocentric denials of death, rooted in fear, might be better replaced by a message of redemption, sacrifice, and the transformation of our own lives and those of our fragmenting communities. I nevertheless believe that the meaning of our individual lives can transcend their mortal and contingent existence. The position I wish to explore here is a kind of methodological naturalism. Without denying the possibility of a supernatural realm, I only wish to argue that the life of the human spirit, and our understanding of it,

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need not entail any supernatural reference in any more than a limiting or boundary sense. It may be that relegating concerns of the spirit to the supernatural may empty it of the real, contingent, communal life by which it is constituted and within which it can have its only living meaning.

One of my deepest frustrations in teaching is with a huge leap, which I call "the escape to the supernatural," to a premature, defensive, and often thought-terminating answer to some very deep mysteries. We all need to make simplifying assumptions. The problem with the "escape to the supernatural" is that it doesn't simplify but, in all violation of parsimony, adds a whole new realm of entities and events that are by turns *ad hoc*, incomprehensible, less sensible, and less real. Worst of all is the insistence that if we are not talking about the supernatural, we cannot talk about the human spirit at all. The truth is that about the thinking, motivating, feeling aspects of persons there is a great deal that evolutionary biology, the cognitive and neurosciences in particular, and the human sciences more generally, have to say. Many of the mysteries of the human spirit are actually mysteries of the mind, and they are far less mysterious than they once were. But that there are mysteries yet unsolved does not entail that the solutions are anything other than cosmically, evolutionarily, historically, and developmentally rooted in perfectly natural processes. We are spiritually untroubled, in this era, that we no longer understand life as some substance that leaves a body when it dies, so why should we be troubled with understanding mental and spiritual life as the complex functions of a social organism rather than as a supernatural breath (Teske 1996)?

We continue to believe a house is haunted only if we are so afraid that we avoid it. Supernatural accounts may meet our need for closure, our rage for order, but to explain things this way closes us to understanding. Faith is what can help us cope with the mysteries remaining open. Yes, it is always easier to believe that we know rather than that we are unsure, even when the only justification we can provide is history, or a tradition that we know to be thoroughly human. But there are real dangers to such beliefs, dangers that divide us from each other and even from the realities of our own experience. This is not to suggest that we ought to worship science or should not critically evaluate the limits of this human enterprise, but just that we acknowledge religion as a human enterprise.

The human spirit is haunted when we believe its concerns *must* be supernatural. When we so believe, it is hard to see how our spirituality bears on our mortal bodies, our mortal minds, or the contingencies of our spirited lives. We must face the existential version of the usual argument about the causal conundrums of dualism. Why not consider the possibility that the "supernatural" may only detract from the ability to find spiritual meaning in this world, in the only existence of which we may ever have individual knowledge? What is then left to do here is to demonstrate the value of a methodologically naturalistic account of precisely some of the events

and phenomena most often thought to require the supernatural. We will provide some examples of naturalistic accounts that not only avoid eliminating spiritual and religious meanings but also enrich them.

Magic and Miracles

The first example is a developmental one, and it acknowledges that supernatural accounts have some appropriateness when they ultimately serve quite natural, real-life meanings and purposes. We sophisticated adults realize that magic is really not supernatural, that there really isn't a tooth fairy or a Santa Claus. Yet we also recognize the importance of such beliefs in the lives of our children and their power as symbols and metaphors for all of us. Ultimately, we teach our children about grace and faith when we encourage these beliefs, and by participating in the construction of such beliefs we do build a reality that has spiritual significance, though the significance doesn't reside in fairy dust or jingling sleigh bells. It resides in our joint life, in the creation of living bonds of relationship, family, and community, in which faith and hope can guide us past the crises and pain that are inevitable in our lives. Like the role of ritual in the organization of our lives, its value lies not in expiation of some other world but in organizing our shared, social, communal life, working beyond mere individual habit to root and construct truth and permanence.

So when my then nine-year-old daughter, encouraged with increasingly sophisticated artifice to believe in a rich tooth-fairy mythology, left a desperate note under her pillow one night with a newly lost tooth, it required an answer. My daughter needed to know the truth, having been taunted at school, and was begging the tooth fairy to leave a message as to whether she was real or just her parents. I felt an obligation to be honest but did not want to sow seeds of mistrust and cynicism, so here is what I wrote back, in my best fairy script:

> Of course we are real, but we aren't what you think we are. We have to be honest with you. Are your dreams real? Do you really have hopes for the future? Do you really imagine wonderful things? We really are part of your imagination, and we don't want you to ever let us die. We aren't *just* your parents, but we are *also* your parents. And now that you are old enough, we are also part of you, and you will be called on to help us.

When I saw my daughter read it, and then quietly look up at me and smile, I knew that what I wrote her was true, and I had done the right thing.

Santa Claus, that unfortunate icon of the consumer frenzy we call Christmas in our advanced, capitalist society, is also a conspiracy of love. Teaching children that they are worthwhile, and valued, and special in the eyes of the universe, Santa is also the internalized, watchful eye of a parent, difficult to differentiate from children's image of a watchful, loving God.

Even if they *know* they haven't been particularly good, they will be forgiven and valued. Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus, but he doesn't always wear a red suit, he mainly does his shopping at the mall, and he takes much joy in the smile on your face, because he is right there in the room with you, in those frazzled bodies of your parents. And finally, when you learn this, you are not disappointed, but moved by real love for real people in a real world who are willing to make sacrifices for you. Is this message less powerful, less spiritual, because it is natural and real rather than supernatural, because it is constructed by flawed, contingent, finite beings who don't always get it right? Or does that make it all the more powerful when they *do*?

My second example may also be developmental, a Bible story learned by many of us as children, the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. It may be that there is a broader meaning of miracles as events that increase one's faith, and there is nothing that requires miracles to be supernatural. I want to present a version of this story that makes it less a story of supernatural intervention but just as—if not more—miraculous.

In the classic story, the only miracle described in all four Gospels (Matthew 14:13–21, Mark 6:30–44, Luke 9:10–17, John 6:1–13), Jesus is with a large crowd, and they need to be fed. One lad contributes five loaves of bread and two fishes, and Jesus prays over them and then passes out enough loaves and fishes to the crowd to leave twelve baskets of leftovers. While we are pleased with the generosity of the lad who contributed the food, the point of the story is the miraculous evidence of the supernatural and the witness provided by the five thousand men and their families.

In an alternative version of this story, we get a richer vision of a normal human crowd. Like any human crowd gathering in a deserted area, quite a few (especially those with children along) are likely to have some food or drink stashed among their belongings. This would not be unusual, and one can even imagine a few kids running around with some small morsel. Some haven't brought anything, while others have plenty but are afraid that if they share it they won't have enough for their own families. Jesus is human, too, so maybe he doesn't really know whether there is enough to go around, either, but he knows what he is going to do. He has faith that there will be enough. One family sends over a lad with some loaves and fishes; perhaps through this boy, the crowd can be fed. Jesus, looking like some crazy naïf, has his disciples start to pass the food out to the crowd *as if there would be enough*, trusting in these people and their potential to care for each other. Feeling this complete trust and love, how freeing and liberating might it feel to identify with this spirit and begin also passing out one's own hidden provisions? And how would it feel to find out that there were *twelve baskets* of food left over?

Does the alternative version not provide an even more powerful miracle,

one that not only fills the bellies of the crowd but also heals their hearts, their spirits, and their community as well? Which has the deeper lesson about life and meaning—the multiplicative magic of supernatural intervention (and its implicit denial of an orderly and knowable world), or the healing power of love and trust between people, evoked by the open-endedness, the uncertainty, the anxiety of living beyond oneself and one's own personal needs and fears?

I have no doubt that there are many mysterious events for which natural explanations yet elude our grasp, and there is no reason to expect that natural law, as we currently understand it, will provide the whole story. But I also think it not unreasonable to believe and act as if it can, that we may understand the supernatural as *that which yet eludes our understanding* rather than that which must needs violate it, throwing doubt on our ability to understand or make sense out of things *at all* rather than merely requiring humility about its limits. It is my position that, while we must beware of the arrogance with which limited knowledge can tempt us, belief that knowledge of the supernatural is in our possession and that we can rest upon its accounts is a far more dangerous temptation, a hubris bred of ignorance and fear.

Apparitions, Ghosts, and Presences

My third example is a favorite of dualists, supernaturalists, mystics, and new agers of all stripes. This is the belief in apparitions, in ghosts, in presences of many forms. I have no doubt that these beliefs and these experiences serve many purposes, some of which have psychological or spiritual value. But I again want to propose that naturalistic accounts may provide spiritual value in the transformation of our actual lives, value to which supernatural accounts may blind us.

In discussions of spirituality and the supernatural, my students invariably raise questions about ghosts and apparitions and eagerly volunteer experiences of family members or friends. One report involved an aunt who was grieving the early death of her husband. The aunt had been going through a period of real emotional difficulty, including difficulties with her increasingly errant teenage son. During an evening of especially fitful sleep, she insists that her dead husband appeared, held her for awhile, and assured her that everything would work out. In the weeks and months to follow, she was able, by continuing to remember this ghostly encounter, to bring her errant son back on track. My student was quite certain that his aunt's belief in ghosts is one she is likely to hold until the day she dies. She had a powerful experience, to be sure, one that appears to have played a role in producing some positive and healing effects in the relationship between the aunt and her son and some valuable guidance in the son's life. Nevertheless, there are a number of considerations that suggest the possibility of a more naturalistic account of experiences like this and, I will

argue, the further possibility that such an account might have a real value of its own.

The first consideration comes from the clinical psychology literature in the "object relations" tradition (e.g., Kohut 1977), including some recent work in the social psychology of self/other representations (Aron et al. 1991, Westen 1991). The upshot of this work is that we normally carry with us representations of functions served by important others in our lives, including shared experiences and memories, shared emotional schemata, and shared expectations about joint activities. In the context of living relationships with others, these representations are likely to include anticipations of functions that are fulfilled by a relational partner as well as functions that we are likely to meet for the other.

These emotional schemata, shared memories and associations, and plans for action and expression may well be part of what is behind a number of otherwise mysterious or synchronous events. For example, when a college girlfriend, preparing to leave for a weekend away, suddenly showed up at my doorstep "knowing that you needed me," one need not posit any supernatural communication but only some sensitivity to an unspoken pattern of emotional distress. Something similar may well be happening in reports of distant friends who, upon telephone contact, sometimes say, "I was just thinking about you." Again, there may be many common patterns of association, provoked by our media-saturated environment, that provide unintentional access to mutual images and memories. Of course, our memory of such events may be a result of our *post hoc* marking of these experiences as special or remarkable against an unremembered background of experiences and memories that have no such mutuality or synchrony. Nevertheless, the mutualities that do occur may involve quite real and quite natural mutual and reciprocal causal chains (Berscheid 1983) that we can map out, understand, build on, and use to transform our life and the lives of those around us.

Object relations theory teaches us that these portions of our mental and experiential life do not simply cease upon the loss of the other. We all have some experiential awareness of the role such processes may play in mourning a loss, in the emotional upheavals resulting from our anticipations and expectations of another being left unfulfilled. Object relations theory also suggests a process of internalization of the lost other, as we learn to complete some of the lost functions by our own actions. It is quite possible for such actions to be experienced as being "not self" or as external to the self in some way, especially under varied emotional or cognitive circumstances. A kind of "life after death," whether it be the death of a relationship or the actual mortal demise of a loved one, is produced by perfectly real and natural psychological processes. How these are experienced may differ from individual to individual, depending upon the quality of the previous relationship, the severity of the loss, one's perception of one's own capaci-

ties, and one's own psychological makeup, including one's belief structure and current state. Thus, for example, I can cook for myself the Chinese food that I once helped an ex-lover cook, in full awareness that this is a valued skill that I learned from her. Or, I can imagine the voice and countenance of my late father speaking to me "over my shoulder" as I try to get on with my life, without believing in any supernatural presence.

One can also understand how my student's bereaved aunt might continue to attribute the guidance of her wayward son to the ghost of her deceased husband, despite the possibility that an objective outsider could well observe direct causal influences of changes in the aunt's behavior upon the subsequent development of her son. The effects may be quite real and quite well within the reach of a naturalistic understanding. As I suggested to my student, it is possible that a naturalistic account might also help the aunt see the real effects that she herself might have had upon her son, understand these as part of a naturalistic account of how her husband might well live on *in her own actions*, and expand her conception of herself accordingly rather than, perhaps, passively awaiting the next supernatural intervention.

A second consideration is the "phantom limb" phenomenon, a common experience after amputation of a limb that involves not only a whole host of sensations perceived to be locatable in an absent limb but also a strong sense of the phenomenological "reality" of the phantom limb as being part of the "self." No one really believes that this "phantom" has any reality other than in the mind and brain of its perceiver, including (normally) the perceiver. Ronald Melzack (1989, 1992) has summarized a huge body of empirical research on this phenomenon and suggests that such phantom limb experiences actually represent normal bodily experience "but without the input that normally modulates the central neural processes that produce the experience" (1989, 4). This is also supported by the evidence that damage to particular areas of the brain (e.g., the right parietal lobe) can produce a *denial* that part of the body belongs to oneself (e.g., "hemineglect"). In some sense, our experience of a bodily self is *not* dependent upon having a body, since even paraplegics with high-level complete spinal breaks still retain "virtually every quality of sensation and affect . . . from excruciating pain to orgasm" (1989, 9); nevertheless, it *is* dependent on having a sufficiently intact central nervous system.

In a highly interdependent species such as ours, with a lengthy period of childhood dependency, extensive social shaping of our bodily and emotional lives, and a capacity to form very long-term relational bonds, we could easily develop extensive cortical representations of bodies other than our own, which, when "severed" from our lives, could also result in some kinds of "phantom other" experiences under the right circumstances. It does not seem unreasonable to suggest, given the extensive role of epigenesis and development in shaping the structure and functioning of the

central nervous system, that some capacity to represent other bodies, particularly bodies with which we have decades-long familiarity, might be piggybacked upon our own bodily self-representations. I merely want to suggest here that such representations would readily provide capacities for the projection of expectations of presence, appearance, and anticipated actions. We may all experience some variant of these capacities when we regularly experience false "fleeting glimpses" of a missed loved one, dream about or imagine an absent other, or feel the bodily ache of missing contact. This extension of Melzack's theory also readily lends itself to empirical predictions about apparitional experiences.

A third consideration likely to provide a piece of a naturalistic account of experiences of apparitions or ghostly presences is the "sensed presence" in unusual environments reported by Peter Suedfeld and Jane Mocellin in the environmental psychology literature (Suedfeld and Mocellin 1987, Mocellin and Suedfeld 1991). It appears that some kinds of extreme or unusual environments produce "the experience of another entity appearing to provide help or advice, even when no such entity was in fact present" (1987, 33). Such experiences are commonly reported in a range of extreme or unusual environments that impose relatively monotonous sensory and social experience, like deserts. Many of these experiences involve "sensed presence" of a loved one, often a sibling or a lost friend. The common environmental factors appear to be of restricted physical and social stimuli: "information from the ambient world is greatly attenuated and attention is refocused to residual and endogenous stimuli [which] could be the origin of the externalized sensed presence" (Suedfeld and Mocellin 1987). While stress is neither necessary nor sufficient for the experience, the experience itself, in providing a sense of security and/or other resources, appears to be associated with successful coping and provides no factual basis for attributing psychopathology.

As I have indicated, the above considerations provide a direction for naturalistic exploration that can elucidate or clarify, at least in part, some of the phenomena at issue and provide a handle on understanding them differently than if our understanding of such phenomena were to be restricted to the supernatural. Indeed, the latter move would act to constrain us from further understanding. Willem Drees makes a similar point in his discussion of "pathological explanations" (1996, 173–75). He indicates that drugs, sensory deprivation, or other preparatory techniques with physiological consequences can facilitate religious experiences. On the other hand, "the combination of cultural symbols and physiological consequences of preparations do not thereby falsify the experience as an experience of something; one might hold that the preparations induce greater receptivity rather than 'cause' the experience" (p. 173). I agree with Drees that we should not try to explain all religious experience as pathological. Indeed, it has been part of my presumption that the suggested consider-

ations are part of the deeper structural explanations that Drees also appears to be seeking.

There are two further reasons for exploring naturalistic accounts of religious or spiritual experiences, one methodological and the other psychological. The methodological reason is that supernaturalistic accounts seem to be so much more *ad hoc* and would require throwing over much of the scientific enterprise. The very character of scientific and naturalistic accounts is that they may, indeed, sometimes provide perfectly adequate explanations for fairly low-probability events. While that improbability renders them automatically suspect, the naturalistic accounts enable greater potential for epistemological access than do the supernaturalistic accounts.

There is also a psychological, or perhaps existential, reason for holding out for naturalistic accounts. For many people who have had religious, mystical, or spiritual experiences, it does not seem to matter a great deal whether the phenomena experienced were supernatural or not. The power of the experience is in the difference it made for how they understood or lived their lives. On some level, whether the events involved turned out to be psychogenic, supernatural, mythical, or even linguistic constructions would not take away the power that they had, the intensity of personal transformation involved, or the value of the experience for providing, even grounding, the existential, subjective meanings of their lives. Many of these people are psychologically sophisticated enough to understand the role of their own psychology and physiology and the "preparatory techniques" in producing the experience, without eliminating or making less meaningful the transformative content. If anything, such an understanding only enriches their value, where it is relevant at all. Experiences can be *generated* by a brain, whose current state is the product of any number of determinative causal conditions, without those experiences being *about* that brain.

Personal Immortality

This brings me to one of the most vexing contributors to the haunting of the human spirit, the belief in personal immortality. For many people, this belief is foundational and drives much of the rest of their religious belief and practice. Nevertheless, if our mental lives, our intellectual endowments, even our moral feelings are embodied in and dependent on having an intact nervous system, how is it that we expect our soul or spirit, which is often defined in terms of these characteristics, to *also* be capable of continuing beyond biological death (Teske 1996)? No one since the demise of vitalistic biology seriously believes that one's life functions—one's breathing, one's heartbeat, one's cortical activities—do anything but simply stop at death. They do not leave and go elsewhere, no more than the bounce of a ball does upon deflation. We understand that "losing your

mind" is really not meant literally. Why then the persistence of a belief in the continuation of the life of a soul or spirit?

One fairly profound answer is discussed in detail by Ernest Becker (1973) in *The Denial of Death*. Human beings appear to be the only animals who are aware that they will die, that they are finite beings, and in this may lie the root of human psychology, including its manifestations in religious belief. We may spend much of our lives trying to overcome, escape from, or deny this basic existential fact. One of the ways to do this, ubiquitous throughout human history, is in the formation and sustenance of belief systems that include various possibilities for rebirth, resurrection, reincarnation, or other forms of continuing beyond our mortal demise. It is, of course, difficult to imagine how any complex biological organism could have evolved without being structured to fear and to avoid things that might lead to harm or death. Fear and avoidance of death is probably built into us. It should be no surprise that we can build a psychology, a mental life, that would include heavy components of anticipatory avoidance, and that much of this could be elaborated, personally, socially, historically, into belief systems that would vouchsafe such components.

There is also the fear of the unknown. Human beings, in their rage for order, regularly make up stories about the unknown that provide some handle on this fear. It is like the artifact built into the Cartesian method, which makes the *cogito, ergo sum* an inescapable conclusion. We cannot imagine, we cannot remember *not being*, not because it is not possible to *not be* but because it is impossible to imagine or remember when there is *nothing it is like* to not be. So, we elaborate belief systems in which there might be *something that it is like to be* after one is dead, and we defend them with varying degrees of success against our own lingering fear that there might not be something. But then, this may be as good a reason as any to suggest why our belief structures might be better elaborated in service of the lives we can imagine than the death we cannot.

It is not just fears, denials, and limits of imagination that are behind beliefs in personal immortality. There is also the fulfillment of a wish for personal continuation. As Unamuno (1921) once indicated in his *Tragic Sense of Life*, the immortality we crave is an experiential continuation of this present life. Unfortunately, bodily mortality means that there is no longer a nervous system to do the experiencing. Students rarely have difficulty imagining a disembodied, dreamlike existence; but it gets harder when they also have to imagine the absence of any sensory experience or sensory memory (lacking the requisite surface structures and central processing), no emotional life (lacking an intact limbic system, Papez circuit, frontal cortex), indeed, no memory or knowledge at all. The experience of disembodied life would appear to be *very much like nothing at all*. Of course, this does not entail that such an existence does not obtain, but it substantially reduces the motivation for believing in it.

The problem is that there is something, well, incredibly *bodily* about the continuation of our experiential lives in which we seem to be so interested. As Pannenberg's (1982) discussion of the Hebrew *nefesh* makes clear, *embodiment* is included in biblical understandings of soul. Our experiential consciousness, including our consciousness of ourselves, seems to be tied to bodily change. "Life as we know it is inextricable from change: our bodily growth and decay, our daily news and weather, the resolution of old adventures and the possibility of new ones" (Updike 1989, 217). We seem to want something *better* than this. "If we picture the afterlife at all it is, heretically, as the escape of something impalpable—the essential 'I'—from this corruptible flesh, occurring at the moment of death and not at 'the last trump' as Paul stated" (p. 215). Unfortunately, it may be precisely the experiencing subject that is *most* dependent on what John Fowles calls "the tender pragmatisms of flesh" (1974, 247). In denying our mortal bodies, do we not deny the very selves we hope to save? Camille Paglia (1990) provides the following diagnosis:

> It is not flawed choice, flawed action, or even death itself which is the ultimate human dilemma. The gravest challenge to our hopes and dreams is the biological business as usual that is going on within us and without us at every hour of every day. Consciousness is a pitiful hostage of its flesh-envelope, whose surges, circuits, and secret murmurings it cannot stay or speed. (p. 7)

It is not, of course, merely the corruptions of our flesh from which we wish to escape but, perhaps, our very sense of who we are. Is this not the kind of "escape from self" that Roy Baumeister (1987) sees as the root of much contemporary pathology? Is it not possible that our hopes and dreams might loom as greater goods than even our continued consciousness? As I regularly ask my students, "If there is nothing worth dying for, what is worth living for?" and I try to gently suggest that the lesson might be that a life is meaningful only to the extent that it is lived beyond the self. Even a personal immortality for which it seems so reasonable to quest might represent its own kind of hell, George Bernard Shaw's "unimaginable horror." "What man is capable of the insane self-conceit of believing that an eternity of himself would be tolerable even to himself?" (1910, preface). Witness the imaginal horror of vampires and zombies, whose immortality represents something darker than an eternal afternoon at the beach. Is the suffering here merely the ennui of dramatic characters in a television program that has gone on too long and exhausted the believability of coherent lives? No, in some sense these are characters that desperately *want* to die. But they are also characters who have "sold their souls" for immortality. Perhaps personal immortality is like not having a soul. To the extent to which our spiritual lives are about living beyond ourselves, giving ourselves to something larger than we are, personal immortality, in saving the self, could lose the spirit.

There is a moral issue in the inferiority of moral choices that involve getting or keeping, relative to giving or sacrificing, something that is personal, even the whole person. How might Kohlberg's (1981) theory of moral development classify the reasoning contained in much conventional Sunday school teaching about "eternal rewards"? Moral reasoning that justifies actions in terms of personal rewards (or costs) tends to get classified as "preconventional" and relatively egocentric and undeveloped. One is pressed to ask of normal, mature, well-intentioned adults, Which is more moral: being good, avoiding evil, holding to a particular set of beliefs in order to obtain some heavenly (or avoid some hellish) afterlife, or acting morally simply because it is right, even at substantial personal cost? Whether or not one believes that some theological reflection may be necessary to ascertain the ultimate purposes of human life, it does not look like the status of one's personal afterlife should be a central concern.

For many Christians, even those safely ensconced within conventional religious understandings, one must ask about the greatest "miracle," the greatest sacrifice of all, that of Christ on a cross. What kind of sacrifice is it if he *doesn't really die*? Doesn't the ultimate sacrifice really mean the sacrifice of a whole self, a soul, a giving of oneself away? What becomes of it if it is motivated by the belief that one gets it back? It makes more sense to see a sacrificial act as a real sacrifice, a "giving away" without hope of return, for the benefit of others, for the benefit of purposes larger than oneself. What better "model for the Godly life"?

It is true that any organism that is to survive requires some sort of distinction between self and nonself and, therefore, some degree of "selfishness." Indeed, this distinction probably has a built-in, neurological basis (Flanagan 1992). Nevertheless, this biological boundary may be only loosely tied to our personal, experiential, or psychological sense of "self-awareness," a capacity that appears to exist only in higher primates. We are all aware that this psychological boundary may be more fluid, as when we do not recognize a benumbed foot as our own or feel psychologically violated when possessions are burgled in our absence. While much can be said about the evolution, development, malleability, social interdependence, and even pathology of such boundaries, my central concern here is with the *sacralization* of these boundaries, both in religious discourse and in experience. Rituals of purification and ideas of pollution, defilement, and corruption all have to do with the sacralization of these boundaries. One need only consider the morning ablutions of most Westerners, cleansing rituals that go well beyond the need for personal hygiene, in which the only "graven image" is that of their reflection in the bathroom mirror. I believe the current circumstances, at least in many Western, postindustrial, capitalist economies, involve a sacralization of individuality itself and a shrinking of communal notions of spirituality to a focus on the self. Such

a focus denudes and erodes both our social interdependence and the very sense of having integral selves with meanings and purposes in larger systems.

I am suggesting that the egocentricity, even narcissism, of a sacralized self, of the notion of the immortal preservation of our personal identities, may serve only to help alienate us from the real life of community in which we might otherwise find greater meaning. Are not redemptive acts always other-directed? If we ask, Salvation for what? there must be some purpose larger than merely the survival of the individual beyond death. Moreover, the notion of an immortal, immaterial soul may be quite foreign to a biblical view of human life (de Silva 1979). Indeed, a religious system that includes as central components creation, incarnation, and resurrection does not seem to favor a dualistic theology (Thatcher 1987). Under this view, a focus on individual beings is a distortion of the biblical perspective (Macquarrie 1987), and, if Rolston (1987) is correct, perhaps of religious sentiments more generally. As Ian Barbour (1990) indicates, a biblical view of human nature is more consistent with seeing ourselves as relational, including our membership in a people that can be bound in covenant. The alternative alienates us not only from nature, from our bodies, and from our mortality but also from the communal world in which individual mortal lives may find their meaning. Our spiritual lives may well be about the repair of our social covenant.

The real promise of faith is not that I will live forever, which given my flaws and limitations I might well abjure, but that my life will have meant something when the sands of time run out. It may be an inescapable tenet of faith that we cope with death better by believing that there is something more. But how is such a belief to help me live an individual, mortal life if it is a false belief that there is more of *me*, a lie that hardly seems noble, rather than believing that the only meaning of my life beyond my death is how I have lived for purposes larger than my own? Of course, this also means that those larger purposes may not be mine to forever determine, and I may not know *what* that meaning will have been, or, finally, even *whether*. I merely pray *that* it will have been. The good news is not that death doesn't really happen, that we do not reach some terminus as bodily, individual, sapient centers of self-awareness, but that it has lost its sting, that we need not fear it, because our lives *will have meant something*. It is this meaning, whatever long-range importance our lives will have had to our communities or to the world, that transcends death. But like a story, without the boundary that is its end, its *finis*, an individual life cannot be a part of some larger epic. If the meaning of something is constituted by its role in some larger whole, then without that boundary it can have no meaning. Meaning may require a *telos*, a purpose, an end, but it also requires a *finis*. If the choice is meaningless existence or meaningful death, my faith teaches the latter.

Conclusion

I have argued against the haunting of the human spirit and provided means by which some of its ghosts might be exorcised. Many specific supernatural beliefs can be understood more fully in terms of scientific and clinical psychology. I have also argued that these understandings themselves do not disenable profound spiritual questions about the meanings that extend beyond our individual lives and individual consciousness. Indeed, I have tried to argue that what is often considered "supernatural" is in fact an escape, a distraction from, and a constraint upon further and deeper understanding, understanding that may well have spiritual significance in the contemporary era.

I addressed my remarks to four major domains. First, I argued that the real-life implementation of tooth fairies and Santa Clauses often serves quite natural purposes, developmentally, symbolically, and socially. They also involve important spiritual, to say nothing of moral, functions of which we best not lose sight. Second, I argued that even biblical miracles may have more moral and spiritual power when we account for them in terms of natural human powers of trust and community rather than in terms of external, supernatural interventions, violating natural law. Third, I argued that experiences of ghosts, apparitions, or presences are addressable using clinical and social-psychological understanding of object-relations and self/other representations, neuropsychological understanding of phenomena like that of "phantom limbs," and research by environmental psychologists on the experience of "presence" in unusual environments. Such understanding may also enrich real human relationships and real self-understanding. Fourth, I argued that beliefs in the qualities of personal immortality, at odds with current understanding of biological and brain function, serve a range of psychological functions like denial of death and the fulfillment of continuation wishes but also may represent self-escape. Personal immortality, in its relationship to the sacralization of self in Western culture, may raise more moral questions than it answers, and questions of meaning may be better addressed by taking mortality seriously as *finis*.

Philip Cushman (1996) has argued that, for questions of *meaning*, "deep" but unknowable ontological questions are irrelevant. I have tried to suggest that they may not only be irrelevant but actually provide epistemic barriers against exploring what we can know. I provide no final answers here to ontological questions bearing on the haunting of the spirit, no proof for the nonexistence of the ghosts that I have tried to help exorcise. I am only suggesting that in constructing meaningful and manageable lives we might find that some of these alternative, more naturalistic accounts enable us to make more productive, more generative, and ultimately more spiritual explorations. The position here is a methodological naturalism, which, although allowing for the possibility of a nonnatural reality (which

questions of ultimate meaning may well require as a kind of final "boundary condition"), encourages the pursuit of explanatory routes to which we do have epistemic, scientifically researchable, and practical access. It asserts that we take these naturalistic accounts seriously, not as alternatives to or in opposition to non-naturalistic accounts but as routes to a deeper understanding of questions about human existence that are posed by metaphysical, religious, or spiritual discourses. In the end, such naturalistic accounts allow us to better pose, and take more seriously, deeper questions about the meaning of life, which our spirituality, manifest in the functions of our complex neuropsychology, embedded within a highly interdependent social and historical world, and informed by our mythopoetic and religious traditions, requires that we consider.

NOTE

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