

Mark Johnston

Surviving Death.

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Mark Johnston's *Surviving Death* is an immensely interesting book. While it is not without technical discussions of issues in philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, and personal identity, it is also a very readable book—and one that, despite some modest technicality, lets its author's personality shine through.

Johnston's aim in *Surviving Death*, a series of lectures, is 'to show that there is something in death that is better for the good than for the bad,' and to do so in purely naturalistic terms (13). Johnston argues 'that the good, but not the bad, can overcome death, in part by seeing through it' (14). The sense in which the good 'survive' death is not, however, to be construed along traditional lines (e.g. a soul survives death). In fact, the traditional view of survival, Johnston maintains, has very little to recommend it. Rather, a person survives death to the extent that she is able to transcend her individual self, and to embody dispositions toward the good—dispositions which live on in the 'onward rush of humanity'. By identifying with dispositions toward the good, one is able to move beyond the egocentric view of personal interests, and act instead in light of the interests of *all* humankind, at least where such interests are not opposed to the good. When one becomes the sort of self that identifies with humanity, and acts accordingly, this very same self-constituting disposition can be seen as the means through which one's individual death comes to matter very little, as well as the means through which what one *is* lives on in the dispositions of the good in others.

This, in the broadest terms, is the view Johnston defends. Along the way, of course, Johnston has to deal with some significant philosophical obstacles, not the least of which is the objection that what is here counting as 'survival' shouldn't count as surviving at all, as it is not my *self* which survives, but the disposition to the good that I have cultivated (a disposition the possession of which is always doubtful).

Johnston's work showcases an incredible amount of erudition. It also manages to provide a naturalistic reading of much of the doctrine of resurrection that we find in the New Testament. In navigating these waters, Johnston helps himself to recent theology, contemporary analytic metaphysics, canonical philosophers (like Kant, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer), classical Buddhism, and a feast of literary examples. For these reasons alone, the book is worth one's time.

I will not rehearse the individual arguments that Johnston presents for specific doctrines. Johnston argues (convincingly, I think) that the idea of a 'self' is inherently problematic, and hence that survival of some substantial self is implausible (we should construe persons as 'higher-order entities,' much like species). Once this is established, we must look for an alternative understanding of 'resurrection,' or 'surviving' death.

Johnston finds a route to this conclusion by demonstrating the way that an appropriate orientation toward the good (*agape*) can allow what is *important* about a good person to be carried on by others with the same orientation—others, that is, who manifest *agape*.

I will focus on an area of Johnston's argument that requires greater argumentative attention. In my view, despite all of its merits, *Surviving Death* does not adequately show that death is worse for the bad than for the good. To bring this out, consider first the following claim: 'This way of seeing things is available to those who are good enough; they can see through death in a way that the utterly selfish cannot. For the utterly selfish, however, the obliteration of their individual personalities [in death] is the obliteration of everything of real importance to them' (341). He goes on to claim that

for the good, the other world, even if it exists, is an irrelevance, perhaps even an irritation.

Paul was nonetheless right about one thing: the wages of sin, which he identified as the obliteration inherent in death. If goodness is *agape*, then all we can really mean by 'sin' is the condition of those of us who cannot make our way beyond egocentrism. We are then left only with our small individual personalities, and they are, indeed, obliterated by death. (351)

Through 'love of individual personality as such,' and hence through recognizing that one's own personality is but one among equals, we move beyond egocentric concerns and come to identify with the general disposition toward the good, wherever it is found. The crucial move here, as is obvious, is the equation of the 'bad' (or, at least, the non-good) with the egocentric. It is attachment to our finite, individual personalities (as more important than the personalities of others) that prevents us from attaining the perspective of *agape*, and hence which keeps us from 'seeing through' death.

This argument is fine, so far as it goes. But it only shows that the perspective of *agape* is better than the egocentric perspective. We might agree with Johnston that the person with *agape* has a better life, and is not done an equivalent harm in death, as the person without *agape*. We might accept this, that is, and still maintain that it is *not necessarily* true that the good have a better death than the bad. For Johnston's argument to get to the conclusion he wants, he needs to argue additionally that the bad *just is* the egocentric; and it is here, I think, where there is an argumentative gap. Granted, it may well be possible to fill in this gap, but it is a gap all the same.

It seems to me correct to claim that egocentrism is at the core of much of the bad behavior we engage in, and Johnston has done us a service by showing how this is so. Johnston has also shown, in my view, that *agape* is *sufficient* for lessening the pang of mortality (and maybe even eliminating this pang). But the conclusion Johnston requires is that *agape* is *necessary* for overcoming death. If it is merely sufficient, it would still be possible to survive death by cultivating *other* dispositions (different from *agape*) that might also 'live on' in the onward rush of humanity. And if the good *just is agape*, as Johnston maintains, this would mean that there could be other non-good dispositions that could equally allow us to survive death in the way Johnston understands this concept.

I do not know whether there are any such dispositions, but I am not willing to exclude them *a priori*, and I do not think Johnston has provided sufficient argument as of yet to show their impossibility. I can imagine, for example, someone committed to *certain interests* found in many future persons, but not all. In this respect, said person would have moved beyond egocentrism. Provided that those interests are constitutive of one's identity, such interests could also allow for a kind of 'resurrection' in future persons *regardless* of the moral content of these dispositions. One can imagine, for example, certain racist and sexist groups operating in just this way: they cultivate a disposition, for instance, to support the cause of white supremacy. Such persons may even be willing to sacrifice themselves for this cause. Insofar as there are future persons who also have this disposition, I do not see why Johnston's views of personal survival of death would not apply. The person would indeed live on, much as the person who has attained *agape*, by having his fundamental, non-egocentric (albeit race-centric) dispositions cultivated in others. This indicates that goodness is not necessary to survive death, even though we would all regard it as *preferable*.

There are ways, of course, to argue against this possibility. One might argue that all evils are ultimately egocentric. I have a hard time seeing how such an argument would go if it were also 1) to avoid the conclusion that *all* action is egocentric, and 2) to avoid begging the question. My inability to see such an argument, however, doesn't mean there isn't one.

Alternatively, one might accept that a racist disposition like the one above is, in fact, non-egocentric—it involves the interests of a group, after all—but that it lacks certain other relevant features that can be found in *agape*, and which prevent the analogous arguments from being made. Once again, I do not know how that argument would go without being question-begging, but it might be available all the same.

It is my hope that Johnston will, at some point, elaborate on his view in a way that bridges the argumentative gap I have tried to articulate here. Even if no such bridge is to be found, though, *Surviving Death* is a provocative, engaging, and worthwhile book. It is certain to re-invigorate our thinking about the prospects that the good allows in relation to our mortality.

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