

Christopher Belshaw

Annihilation: The Sense and Significance of Death.

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This book addresses puzzles related to two main questions, 'What is death?' (Chapters 1-3) and 'Is it bad that we die?' (Chapters 4-7). It then takes up the related questions, 'Is it worse if more die?' and 'What sorts of things are we as people?' (Chapters 8 & 9 respectively).

Belshaw presents a 'unified and biological account of death' (x) that captures the literal meaning of death as 'the irreversible breakdown of, or loss of function in, the organism as a whole' (1). This account—as close to a definition as we can expect (28), though it may be a 'good way' from complete (38)—is not generated by deep metaphysical analysis. Belshaw is skeptical that such analysis is possible and maintains that it doesn't matter whether we come up with a more precise definition.

Belshaw acknowledges the usual puzzles in arguing that death is often bad for the person who dies, but insists that 'their number and their extent have been exaggerated' (64). Specifically, he suggests that puzzles concerning *for whom*, *when*, and *how* death is bad are 'fairly easily solved' (64). He observes, for instance, that we often make assertions about people who have died even when we assume (as Belshaw denies) that a person who dies ceases to exist. We do this when we say that someone who died is 'is famous' or 'is remembered', and Belshaw maintains that 'it is hard to see that this is not exact enough, or that any puzzle remains' (74). Philosophers attempting to address puzzles about death are unlikely to find this sufficiently exact.

Belshaw explains the common view that death is bad when it deprives us of a good life by appeal to life-life comparisons, and he focuses on 'determining how relevant comparisons between our actual lives and some possible life are to be made' (84). In other words, he focuses 'the circumstances under which death is bad' (94). Though it can be bad for us to miss out on things that happen when we no longer exist, Belshaw denies the possibility of posthumous harms, on the ground that harm requires some change to one's 'internal condition' (151) whereas the person who dies is no longer able to undergo any such change.

Belshaw goes on to argue that there is an asymmetry between prenatal and posthumous non-existence: it is possible that death can be bad for us when it deprives us of future experiences, whereas it is not bad for us that we weren't born earlier because 'being born at a certain time is, in large part, responsible for who we are today' (161). This is a question of identity and, like other claims in the earlier chapters, it is tied to the question, 'What are we?' Belshaw admits as much, though the question is put off until the ninth chapter. There, he revives a closest continuer account of identity, rejects the

notion of strict identity over time, and argues that ‘there is nothing, or nothing in particular, that we are’ (xi). Though human beings are organisms with biological and mental qualities, it is possible that a person can persist through time through ‘substantial physical and psychological changes’ (194). Belshaw denies that we are necessarily animals, though we are animals right now (208), and he distinguishes between when a person ceases to exist—personhood is tied to psychological qualities—and the death of the human animal.

The arguments in *Annihilation* are shaped in interesting ways by the methodological presuppositions that ‘we are dealing with words, rather than concepts’ (xi), that, with some exceptions, the puzzles being considered are ‘linguistic rather than scientific’ (5), and that often what is being presented is a simple ‘noting and reporting on the ways in which we actually think and speak about these matters’ (15). Here are four such ways.

1. What we think and say is sometimes taken to be evidence for a claim being made. For example, Belshaw defends the claim that organs are not alive in the way organisms are alive ‘because this seems to be the way we mostly, usually coherently, and often confidently speak about such things’ (4-5). 2. Most of the claims are not overly interesting in so far as they are what we think and say already (Belshaw notes that he finds it odd when others disagree). 3. It isn’t clear what argumentative recourse we have in those (admittedly rare) instances in which we don’t agree with what Belshaw thinks we think and say, or in those (somewhat less rare) instances in which we don’t agree with what he predicts or speculates we *will* or *would* think in hypothetical situations. 4. Belshaw does not claim to offer demonstrative proofs that death has certain features (15), and he does not promise to prove that the Epicurean view— that death is annihilation and, as such, nothing to us—is false (71).

On the face of it, success in Belshaw’s project amounts to telling us what we already think and say, despite the fact that philosophers often find puzzles in defending what is commonly thought and said. Of course, Belshaw doesn’t merely *report* what we already think, for that project would be of almost no use. He is working to expand our understanding of death and the ways in which it can be bad by *clarifying* what it is we think and say. He thinks that a better understanding helps us see that many of the puzzles commonly addressed by philosophers are greatly exaggerated. What’s more, he sometimes abandons common inclinations as, for instance, in denying the possibility of posthumous harms.

Annihilation reflects a thorough and broad understanding of existing philosophical literature on death. It is engaged and engaging: a valuable resource which serves to remind us that attempts to address philosophical puzzles about death need not come at the expense of what we really think and say.

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