

Die beiden Siegeressays im Bundeswettbewerb Philosophischer Essay (Dez. 2014/Februar 2015)

(Die beiden Essays wurden nach der Winterakademie auf Schreibfehler durchgesehen.)

1. Platz:

Ragna Heyne, Hölderlin-Gymnasium Heidelberg

I. The temporal immortality of man, that is to say, its eternal survival also after death is not only in no way guaranteed, but this assumption in the first place will not do for us what we always tried to make it do. Is a riddle solved by the fact that I survive forever? Is this eternal life not as enigmatic as our present one? (Wittgenstein, Tractatus 6.4312)

Imagine death. Just, for a second, imagine being dead. Picture the end of your life. Try imagining what follows it. Can you? No, you cannot. No one can. Up to the moment in which we actually do die, there is no chance for us whatsoever to have an idea of what our existence may turn into after death. That is, in fact, and always has been, one of the biggest problem formulations of all in the mind of humanity. Prior even to the question "where do we come from", we tend to want to know where we are going after this present life. Thousands of philosophers, theologians, scientists and, quite frankly, probably every human individual, has asked themselves that question - without finding any kind of satisfactory answer. The one thing we do know, however, is that this current life we lead now must eventually end. We know that we, as humans, have to live with the condition of being mortal, which means that everything we do, everything we know and everything we are is just temporary. This gives our lives a temporal component that can be found even in the quote of Wittgenstein, who speaks not of the immortality of the soul of man, but of the "temporal immortality" of it. The word "temporal" in this context is very important, as it underlines the decisive role that time plays in human existence. This perception of time, as well as the measurement of time, can be seen as a characteristic human trait: No animal uses a clock, no animal is ever late, no animal thinks about the future. Only humans have the ability of overlooking their life seeing it as an ongoing string of events in time. This enables us to conclude that the stream of time will not stop at the event of our death, that after us, the world will go on turning, and naturally, it arouses the question of whether our existence lasts forever - in whatever form unknown to us in the present - or not. Time is, just like space, without doubt crucial for our existence: if time did not pass, no events could ever take place at all, nothing would be able to grow or evolve, everything would just be frozen - life, as we understand it, could not actually be. Life is bound to time. The fact that a human can realise this changes his life in a drastic way: We know that time cannot be turned back. Every moment that passes is gone forever in our concept of time, we know we only have a certain amount of moments to live through, we, and we alone, know about our own temporal limitation. From this consciousness of our approaching death we derive a great fear - the fear of time running out. We cling to our existence by stating that, even after death, some part of us carries on existing. Of course, considering the fact that we are currently living and are thus unable to imagine a state of not living or not existing, the idea of our existence simply ending and the stream of time carrying on without us is a frightening notion. We are scared by that image because everything we do not know is instinctively categorized as dangerous by the human mind, so we try to find an explanation for this undefined mysterious state of non-being to make it seem less threatening. We are not able to accept the fact that we have no idea about where we are coming from or going to, which makes us constantly try to find the answers to those questions. Because we, as humans, are able to perceive, or to at least get a glimpse of, things that are bigger and that last longer than ourselves, we are reluctant to accept the fact that we cannot last forever and are, in fact, just a really small part of the picture we see. Of course when facing this world, and thus facing our own insignificance, our own smallness within the eternal stream of time, the notion of our souls living forever is a very reassuring one, because it gives us more time. It minimizes our fear of temporality, of our time ending, even our fear of leaving

nothing behind on this earth. Of course the riddle of life is not solved by saying life is eternal. It's just that nobody ever wanted that to be an explanation. It is just a small consolation for us because we are simply scared - scared of this world we know nothing of, scared of leading a meaningless short life, we are scared of being, what we know we are - limited. Actually, this life that has a consciousness of time could be seen as a cage: A cage we live in for about eighty years, a cage binding us to time and space. A big cage - but still a cage. We know we will never be free of time that, by passing, takes more and more of our opportunities away; and we will never be free of space, of physical things, of our bodies who chain our mind, who limit us to only stay within the rather tiny (compared to everything else living on earth) variety of movements we are able to make. Now looking at an eternally alive soul that even after death carries on existing means looking at freedom. Furthermore, death would even be a good thing as it could be seen as the liberation from all bonds of this insignificant life - if our souls were immortal, we would all find not peace but rather freedom in death, which would mean that death is really not something to be afraid of. Of course, this survival of only our soul, the free aspect of our existence, after death is not a solution to all riddles of existence. It only puts time and space into a perspective, for those are the only two things we would actually leave behind in death if our souls were immortal. Thus, by arousing the question of whether an eternal life would not be as enigmatic as the present one, Wittgenstein really asks what enigmas our existence consists of other than space and time. The real question is now: Are we more than just a sum of traits and actions thinned by time? Is there something mystical, something enigmatic about us? Does our existence contain a secret so big that it would still be a secret to our immortalized souls? The soul of a person could be described in two different ways: it could either be all of a person that is not physical, meaning the emotions, character traits, thoughts, even a person's intellect, or it could exclude those things that are conscious to us (such as thoughts) and be a term describing only the very essence of a person's being. In that case, direct thoughts would be considered as something motoric and thus would belong to the brain, which is part of the body. The soul is now something completely abstract, something that, while living, we are barely aware of. Thoughts and even our ordinary feelings are biochemical processes in our brains, they can be scientifically proven and are thus not part of the abstract concept of our soul. For the answer to Wittgenstein's question, this understanding of the word "soul" means that the state of existing our souls would be in after our death can have nothing to do with what we call life. These souls cannot think, they cannot act, they cannot change. Immortal souls would simply be frozen for all eternity - free of time and space but lacking the ability to use their freedom. No doubt that life would be just as enigmatic as our present one, if not even more so- just in a completely different way. This world is an exciting one: Doomed as we all are by our consciousness of time, by our constant fear - limited by the conditions of our existence, we can still learn, we can move, we can grow. If our souls, however, were immortal, death would not end, but alter our existence in every way imaginable. We would go from our prison of time and space right into a prison of no time and no space. If in this present world we are completely lost trying to solve our riddles and we keep finding insufficient answers, our immortalized souls are just existent, not acting, just perceiving, not thinking, just alive, not living. As much as death may scare us, as much as we may be reluctant to face the fact that we will eventually die, I say let us love life more than we fear death. Life after death will be just as enigmatic as this one and we, our personalities and our bodies, as well as our souls, will always be surrounded by secrets and chained to some kinds of conditions, there will always be some kind of cage walls or borders for us, we should not let our fear become another one of those borders. We will never be completely free, not even in immortality. So I say let us live now, let us not give up searching for answers. We can comfort ourselves with the idea of the essence of our being always carrying on existing, but let us still try to understand though not expect to understand. And let us be brave in the face of mortality as well as in the face of immortality.

2. Platz

Niklas Uhmeier, Stadtgymnasium Detmold

“The temporal immortality of the soul of men, that is to say, is eternal survival after death, is not only in no way guaranteed, but this assumption in the first place will not do for us what we always tried to make it do. Is a riddle solved by the fact that I survive forever? Is this eternal life not as enigmatic as our present one?”

What comes after death? Is there heaven, is there hell? Will we be reintroduced into an eternal circle of death and rebirth or is there absolutely nothing, will our souls prove not to be eternal and simply fade away? These questions, and many more, all different and at the same time very similar in many ways have concerned humans ever since they had the capacities of mind to be concerned. And ever since we thought about this riddle, as Wittgenstein calls it, we have constructed answers. I deliberately chose the word “constructed” since there obviously is no clear answer for this question, up to this day, no one who was gone came back to report what he experienced. Of course there were people whose heart stopped beating and who came back to life, but no one whose body was rotten, whose vital functions were truly never able to do their work again, was ever revived to share his new won wisdom with us.

In the past, there may have been questions of equal or comparable importance, like for example the origin of life in general, the cause of our existence or simply the cause of thunder and lightning. These questions once were as mysterious as the riddle of death. Many of these questions have already been answered, many riddles solved, for others we at least have got theories often including signs for what their answers could be.

There also are many theories about what comes after death, but since death is completely excluded from our earthly perception, these will always stay assumptions, as Wittgenstein already recognized. There are two eternities in our lives, or better, one before and one after life, which both are external to our perception. These two infinities limit our life that starts with birth and ends with death. I think that it is this impossibility of empirical perception that makes death so fascinating, so intriguing, so scary. However, the time before our birth is just as mysterious as death, however we do not think about it as much, it has such a low value for us that we do not even honor it with an own term. Maybe this is wrong, since the time before birth is in many ways identical to death, to being dead. It might give us clues of what is to await us. Was there a life before birth that we forgot or was it the eternal emptiness that we fear so much to return after our life? Should our lives in the end be like a flash in the dark, coming out of nothing, fading into nothing? Since we do not remember anything about the time before birth, it seems to be logical that there was no “I”. As I said, the time before birth is, just as is death, necessarily an eternity, but this concept is very hard to grasp, since this means, that in case an “I”, has existed before birth, it must always have existed.

I think that this unconscious certainty that we came out of nothing is what makes us so afraid to return into this state of being. However, we already passed the first and second state of being, or non-being, maybe, which is why death still fills us with thoughts and fear ever since. Therefore every single religion on this planet of has an idea of what comes after our life in this world, they all offer their followers the possibility to be certain, to be assured, not fearless, but at least assured of what is to come. What I find interesting, is that even though all of these concepts of afterlife, are very different in their beliefs of how exactly the eternity will be spent, as for example the Egyptians believed in a very physical afterlife, even giving the dead their bodies and other very handy items like gold, pots and ships to join them in their afterlives, or the Nirvana, which is a rather abstract state of full content, they all do feature the idea of eternity, of being immortal from this point on. The Christians spend an eternity in either heaven or hell, the Vikings sit with their ancestors in the halls of Valhalla, even the Buddhist beliefs which state that life is in fact a circle of rebirth reserved an exit from this circle, the already mentioned Nirvana.

What is also very interesting is that being denied this eternity is in many religions the worst punishment one can receive, or that the bodies of the dead have to be treated in very specific ways in order to make it possible for them to enter eternity. For example some religions refuse to burn the

bodies of their dead members since they won't be able to enter eternity in case their bodies should be burned. It is often said that the souls of those who did not make it into eternity are restless, do not find peace.

From the fact that every religion offers eternity, offers immortality we can conclude that the human being seems to desire being immortal. Now the question is why this desire is so firmly rooted in the human nature. This question seems to be equivalent to another question which comes to my mind while reading Wittgenstein's statement, which is: "What exactly did we always try to make it do!?" The answer seems to be that we developed the concept of an eternal afterlife simply to gain certainty of what is to come. It lies in the concept of eternity, in its definition, that you have reached a final state, that the future is certain and that you do not have to fear it anymore, because you already know it. It is the uncertainty that bothers us so much about death, which makes it so uncomfortable, but at the same time forces us to think about death again and again. It may get so oppressing that it is able to spoil life since all you think about is death, for thinking about death is a very frustrating thing considering that once you started there is no end, no final solution that everyone can agree on. What the religions, as well as every other concept of an afterlife did is that they offered an exit from this train of thought. They give humans the option not to doubt anymore. They transfer the certainty of what is to come, that normally could only be reached by experiencing what is to come by yourself, into your life in this world. This is what makes them so attractive, since they literally offer you a copy of heaven on earth. I chose this formulation because, as I pointed out, the human desires an eternal life after death especially because it is eternal, because he does not have to worry at all what comes afterwards. Life after death would be pointless if it was not eternal, since it would in fact not differ from the life we live now in any relevant way. As an example the ghosts in folklore and children stories come to my mind, haunting the living, searching for redemption, driven by the desire to finally leave this world to find peace. What makes their remaining in this world so unbearable for them is that they know that they might find redemption, that they know there is still something to come, that they have not reached the final stage yet. This stage of being they are stuck in is truly, as Wittgenstein states, "as enigmatic as our present ones."

I also chose "a copy of heaven on earth" and not "heaven on earth" itself because the certainty you can reach by believing in eternal life is in its quality not as high as actually experiencing eternity yourself.

I think that it would at this point be very useful to have a closer look at Wittgenstein's statement again. We have already proven that Wittgenstein is in fact right when he says that "the temporal immortality of the soul of man is [...] in no way guaranteed", since there no relevant empirical experience has ever or could have even ever been made by anybody able to report to us. Wittgenstein then however states that "this assumption [...] will not do for us what we always tried making it do", leaving open what exactly he assumes the purpose of the assumption of eternal life is in fact. Concluding from the presence of the idea of eternity in every concept of afterlife, while all the other details vary drastically from religion to religion, we figured eternity to be an existential aspect of afterlife, since it offers humans the certainty of what will be, which in eternity is quite obvious the same that is now. Therefore the idea of immortality after death, even if not assured yet, does in fact do its deed. It does solve a riddle; in fact, the existence of eternal life after death, by it being eternal, does solve the greatest riddle there was, is and ever will be, which is: "What will be in the future?" Wittgenstein's last suggestive question could be answered with yes if he crossed out "eternal life" and simply replaced it with "life after death", since the fact that my state of being does not give me any clue just by lying after my death, if I still know that there is more to come, but not exactly what there is to come, like a second death expecting me, unsure, insecure about the next world I will enter.

Therefore I have to contradict Wittgenstein, since, even though the assumption of an eternal afterlife does in fact not solve any riddle of the human life, for it is only an assumption, the certainty of eternal life would answer the question "What is to come?", which is even more important than the question "What was?", which is however discussed more often since it in contrast to the first question cannot be answered. The fact that the first question cannot be answered makes it so important and this importance of course also transfers on its answer. It is of course pointless to discuss this question, but this does not automatically mean that this reduces the importance of its answer, since it is the most important question that can be asked, and only eternity can answer it, whether it is eternal existence or eternal non-existence.