Review of: "The Near-Death Experience and the Question of Immortality: A Philosophical Approach"

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This is an interesting, sophisticated, and well-written paper on the evidentiary value of reported near-death experiences for the question of the existence of an afterlife. In a second section of the paper, the author raises the question of whether any form of afterlife, in particular any form of personal immortality, makes sense and/or is desirable. There, the author takes up the questions raised by the philosopher Bernard Williams in his 1973 essay "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality" and considers subsequent responses to Williams's thesis. In contrast to the first part of this paper, which is well argued but often needlessly vituperative and condescending, the second part is well balanced and, to my mind, more interesting. The author's comments in a final section entitled "The Religious Factor," which includes a brief description of Wittgenstein's view that it is *timelessness*, as opposed to infinite duration, that constitutes eternal life, are quite thought-provoking, as is the review of Wittgenstein's claim that a condition of personal immortality would solve nothing of philosophical interest. I think that this latter point is a very important one, as it undermines the notion that anything empirical, including immortality (or a voice from God, or manna pouring down from heaven), solves anything of philosophical or theological importance. All of these could, for example, be the product of our being in a digital simulation, and if this is the case, it would just move our philosophical perplexity up to the next level of the "matrix."

Speaking of digital simulations, the author might want to consider that if we are in a matrix, or at some point are able to download our consciousness into one, it might provide the basis for millennia of personal existence, if not actual immortality, and provide some vindication to those who claim they obtained a glimpse of such existence in their near-death experiences. Steinhart (2014, 2016) has considered the relevance of simulation theory to immortality.

The target the author aims at in the first half of the paper is an easy mark, but I believe that it would be helpful if the author toned down some of the criticism; for example, in discussing a near-death account of Benedict, whose claims are admittedly very speculative, he chooses to describe them as "apparently delusional." Later on, the author, in an effort to criticize those who "use esoteric language in order to make nonsense appear erudite," invokes the "so-called "death of God" theologians, describing them derogatorily as "55-year-old men in jeans." Apart from the fact that a number of recent theologians and philosophers take the contribution of the death of God theologian, Thomas J.J. Altizer (and others), seriously, the author's, *ad hoc*, *ad hominem*, and gratuitous comparison is a turn-off to the reader.

While in many ways this is an excellent essay, I would suggest that it is actually two papers. The first could be greatly improved by a more even-handed and less condescending approach to the material, as well as by providing the reader with some more introductory information regarding the volumes of collected near-death accounts that he is criticizing. The

second, which deals with questions regarding the coherence and value of immortality, could be expanded somewhat, but it is, in my opinion, closer to being a considered and valuable contribution to the literature.

References

Steinhart, Eric. 2014. Your Digital Afterlives: Computational Theories of Life after Death. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

Steinhart, Eric. 2016. Digital Theology: Is the Resurrection Virtual? In *Philosophical Explorations of New and Alternative Religious Movements*. Edited by Morgan Luck. New York and Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, pp. 133–152