

Death, the killer virus SARS-CoV2 and our collective fear

Recently, US philanthropist Robert T. Bigelow, who [runs his own institute](#), offered what is believed to be the highest amount of money awarded for frontier research, if not in the scientific enterprise at all; only the Nobel Prizes are higher, as far as I know. A total of 1.8 million dollars is to be awarded for a text that irrevocably proves that death does not mean the absolute end of consciousness. The award ceremony is taking place in Las Vegas, Nevada, these days.

Bigelow is an aerospace entrepreneur who used to work on remote Earth habitats for NASA and still has many contracts with all sorts of aerospace companies and makes his money from them. He probably experienced a conversion experience of his own, much like astronaut Edgar Mitchell, who, while flying back to Earth from the Moon, famously described the beauty of the Earth and its embeddedness in a cosmic whole [as a spiritual experience](#) that changed him. Mitchell went on to found the „[Institute of Noetic Sciences](#)“ in Petaluma, California. Much like Bigelow: He founded his own institute and has used his money over the years to fund academics who tread unusual paths, such as [Charlie Tart](#), who studies extraordinary states of consciousness.

Now Bigelow has turned to „survival research“, that is, research that tries to find out whether human consciousness survives death. If you want to know what the assembled community of researchers who have been working on this question in recent years have to say, you can find the [award-winning essays on the website of Bigelow's institute](#). [The first prize](#) was \$500,000; the winner is Jeff Mishlove. [The second prize](#) of 300,000 went to Pim van Lommel, who published the first prospective study on near-death experiences in the Lancet back in 2001 [1]. The third prize was 150,000 dollars. Then there is another category of 11 prizes of 50,000 dollars each and 15 consolation prizes, which still received 20,000 dollars each. Not that you think now that everyone won and got a prize. No. There were many more entries, and the jury must have had quite a lot of paper to read.

Those who have received prizes have long been among the outstanding researchers in the field. My colleague [Michael Nahm](#) also received one of the prizes in the second category, and my former assistant and colleague [Andreas Sommer](#) at least received a consolation prize.

The prize, the amount of submissions, [also the media hype around it](#) show that the topic of „death, dying, living on after death“ is highly topical. I would go so far as to say that the fact that we have culturally banned death from life is the key to also understanding the chaos

around the SARS-CoV2 pandemic and our mindless response to it.

Various statements by politicians, but above all their behaviour, show us: they – and they by proxy for all of us – fear death more than the devil fears holy water. And because most fear death so much, people have always developed rituals, narratives and stories to deal with death. For a long time, the Christian narrative was valid in our culture: death is actually the transition to a new, the actual life. Depending on which form of theology one adhered to, it was believed that this new life, abbreviated as „heaven“, would be reached after a more or less long period of transition and purification. This, according to classical theology, was dependent on a person's moral actions during his or her lifetime. In very unfavourable cases, there could also be a permanent descent into „hell“, an unworld with great heat or cold, in any case unpleasant and undesirable. In his „Divine Comedy“, Dante reserved hell for various evildoers: traitors, ecclesiastical dignitaries who have betrayed their vocation, unrepentant murderers and tormentors of men, not forgetting politicians and princes who have ill-treated those entrusted to their care, pleasure-seekers and licentious people [2].

Behind this, of course, is the presumption of a moral universe or a God who dispenses justice. For the fact that justice does not prevail on earth, that the evildoers, liars, cheats, traitors and egoists generally get further than the others, you don't have to read Machiavelli. That is relatively obvious for anyone. In other cultures, the assumption of a moral balance has given rise to the doctrine of reincarnation: In the next life, the seed that has been sown in the present, will come to fruit [3, 4]. Those who have sown evil will reap evil, and vice versa.

Therefore, the question of death, and especially of what comes after death, is and always has been a central question for human thought and culture. In modern times, triggered above all by Heidegger's analysis, but prepared by many other thinkers, the human being has come to the centre as a being who has knowledge of and can reflect on his own end. At the same time, the experience of wars, the Holocaust, the dropping of atomic bombs and the unwillingness of the „rich“ – individuals or nations – to make changes for the benefit of the „poor“ has also given rise to a fundamental doubt about cosmic justice. The scientific world view, which is ultimately nothing more than a postmodern religion of the would-be rational, has done away with the notion of a God, an afterlife and any justice that would be anchored outside human discourse.

This brings death into focus as the final end of individual human consciousness. More precisely, it is more like „the elephant in the room“, as the Americans say. Something that stands in the middle of the room, but which is studiously overlooked because it would be inappropriate, because it would disturb the party or cause embarrassment if one were to refer to it. And precisely because we can no (longer) talk about what death means, precisely

because we no longer lay out the dead at home to say a proper goodbye, precisely because we no longer (can no longer) tell stories about what is after death and whether there is something there, precisely because we also drown out our fear of perhaps suddenly ceasing to exist, that is precisely why this fear is now catching up with us.

Instead of being afraid of what is worth being afraid of, we are instead afraid of something that is „actually“ not as threatening as it appears to us. Those who repress the fear of the actual must shift the fear to the non-actual, to borrow a few terms from Heidegger.

What is the „actual“? It is, for example, the question of what the meaning of life is, what a happy life consists of, what values I want to realize in my life and why, and whether I believe in the unconditionality of values and morals, even if this unconditionality causes me discomfort. The real question is about the profound justification of life, my personal life, but also life as such. Is all life, and with it its meaning and purpose, random and at our discretion? Or are there deeper structures, connections and thus also guidelines, something like unconditional values, moral principles that (should) guide our actions, even if they don't suit us? To put it another way: Is individual life embedded in a larger context? Or is it a more or less random flare-up that is extinguished by gusts of wind?

In the end, behind the question of death is the question of life and its justification. And clinging to life is a sign that we are afraid of what is after or beyond.

There are people who are not afraid of death. Some lose it just like that, without any experience [5]. But usually there is a deeper experience behind it. Pim van Lommel and many near-death researchers have repeatedly emphasized that an important consequence of a near-death experience – not always, but often – is that people lose their fear of death because they experience that there is something greater than their own small life, or more precisely, because they experience that this small life is embedded in a large context of meaning. People who have a deep spiritual experience of oneness also have this experience. Presumably, spiritual unity experience and near-death experience, as different as the context is, are very similar in content. Both are about the experience of a benevolent, loving security in the cosmos, which at the same time also contains the connectedness with all others and the moral imperative to behave accordingly in one's personal life.

The collective fear of death that is driving people and governments to ever more bizarre behaviour and decisions in this Corona crisis is, I believe, the key. Phrases like „every life is precious“ are, in my view, simply hypocritical and mendacious. For politicians who utter or have uttered them accept and have accepted, without batting an eyelid, deaths in other countries due to unnecessary military aggression or dubious economic-structural „necessities“. They stuff billions into utterly nonsensical preventive medical measures euphemistically sold as „vaccinations“ when they could save several orders of magnitude

more lives with the same sums invested in clean water or education in Africa.

A little bit of reflection shows us that our fear of the supposed killer virus SARS-CoV2 is a masked, general fear of death because we have nothing with which to counter that fear. Let us not misunderstand each other: SARS-CoV2 does claim lives. And those who die from it often die very painfully. The death rate varies greatly from country to country, and in some countries it is very high. But here in Germany it is not and has never been exorbitant. In a recent publication, the RKI compared the death rate from SARS-CoV2 with the excess mortality during the last major influenza waves [6, p. 148]. The difference is probably mainly that SARS-CoV2, unlike other pathogens, was and is relatively new and active worldwide rather simultaneously, whereas waves of infections due to known pathogens are mostly sequential and often regionally limited and therefore receive less concentrated attention. Hardly anyone in our country is interested in a measles epidemic in Nigeria that claims tens of thousands of lives.

But SARS-CoV2 has forced us to come to terms with our own finitude, with the fact that we are precisely not immortal. And also with the fact that the transhumanist fantasies of the endless extension of individual life that Harari describes as the project of the 21st century [7] are air castles in never-never-land, or worse, highly problematic fantasies of omnipotence.

A good colleague of mine, the English philosopher of science Nick Maxwell [8], recently said very aptly in a conversation: „It’s a good thing I’m going to die someday. 95% of what I say and do is nonsense, and it’s probably the same for other people. Imagine if everyone lived forever. Then the nonsense would go on and on, and we’d never have a chance to make things better.“ That gets to the heart of the matter.

The essence of a good life and of life par excellence is that it ends so that something new can take its place, sometimes more quickly, sometimes more slowly. It is not the length of a life that denotes its value, but what and how much has been lived, loved and created in that span of time. Mozart created tremendous things in his 35 years of life.

Our cultural-medical attempt to prolong life, at any cost, is due to the fear of the end of life, the fear of death. And he who can no longer think and live death constructively is condemned to make life a perpetual death. For he lives in the fear of death, and this fear paralyses life to such an extent that it is like death in instalments.

If we really want a life that „counts“, then we must face death. We must decide, individually and socially-culturally: Is death the absolute end? And if so, is this end a catastrophe? I find that even for someone who has no spiritual-religious inclination, the individual end need not be a catastrophe, if life has been lived and shaped meaningfully in connection with others.

But perhaps a reconnection to deeper or higher levels – that used to be called „religion“ – is helpful? The essays that Bigelow has distinguished deal with such experiences and arguments. Some deal with empirical results that show that reincarnation is indeed a serious matter. My now deceased colleague Erlendur Haraldsson, whom I often invited to lecture, used to tell of his fieldwork among the Druze in Lebanon or Sri Lanka [9, 10]. In both cultures, the belief in a continuation of consciousness after death is widespread, in the form of re-embodiment. Erlendur's fieldwork uncovered a number of cases where a person, usually a child between the ages of 4 and 7, spontaneously told of a past life. The research then sought to find independent corroborative material, archival material, witness statements and interview material to verify or disprove the information given by the subjects. This research has a long tradition since Stevenson and has produced a dense series of cases [11-13]. Not all are convincing, but some are [9, 14]. A recent volume summarizes the most remarkable ones [9]. One in particular impressed me: a little boy who told of being another man's wife and hiding money there in the house, in the cellar. After some back and forth investigation, the „family of origin“ was located and the hidden treasure of money was indeed found. The interesting thing about the case was that the boy and the original target family had never seen each other, and they also lived relatively far away from each other.

This is just one case of many. There have, of course, been and will always be deceptions known in this field. But this should not lead us to dismiss all cases as implausible. My own view is that there are definitely enough cases that are convincing. They refute the view that consciousness is limited to this individual form of ours and is to be understood as the result of neuron activity in the brain. That this neuron activity is useful and necessary to guarantee functioning individual consciousness seems somehow obvious to me. Otherwise, nature would not have taken the trouble to create something as complex as a brain with all its connections. But perhaps this serves more to mediate and filter than to generate consciousness?

At the same time, this data also shows that individual minds are somehow more widely networked and reach deeper than our limited ego-perception would have us believe. In moments of deep inner peace we sometimes dive into a sea of spirit – the Zen tradition calls it „Great Mind“ and perhaps it is the same as the „Holy Spirit“ of the Christian tradition. An experience that conveys to us: We are part of a greater whole. In this experience, there is a lot of comfort and security in the fact that our own end in death is only a transition. Where to, we do not know. And that is probably very good.

All those who claim to know what happens after death are simply telling stories. In the same way that the story of the end of individual consciousness in death that the „scientific world view“ tells us, „naturalism“ or „materialism“ or whatever we want to call this attitude, is

also just a story. The fact that you put the adjective „scientific“ in front of a world view does not mean that it is better or worse than another. It only means that some people, sometimes scientists, but more often those who think they are, think it follows from scientific findings. Mostly, they overlook the fact that science is a process that goes on and on, and that what we currently know about the world is inconsistent and needs to be scrutinized. So much so, that scientists a few generations after us will probably shake their heads at us as much as we shake our heads at some of our 14th-century forebears.

The trouble is that this story of the end of individual life in death is held to be true by many who dominate the discourse – in the media, in politics, sometimes in cultural life, even in religion. In the end, what matters is not how things really are, but how we believe they are. That is also an opportunity. Because then we can also tell a different story.

The essays that Bigelow has priced do tell different stories. Some of an afterlife. Some of a new life in a new existence. Some even more different. In any case, they show that maybe we should make up some new stories, or come back to the old ones. Maybe they are even better than our newfangled stories of the end of life. And maybe these stories would have the power to take away our fear and give us hope.

Sources and literature

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