

CREDO

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I wrote this recently in response to a message from an acquaintance innocently enthusing about a spiritual path and 'research' into life after death. From the spontaneity and strength of feeling in my reply, I deduce that it really is something I believe. Nothing more or less than that; certainly not a universal or transcendent truth.

Thanks for your message. My fundamental position (insofar as it's possible to have such a thing) is that life is *both* 'spiritual' and 'material'. These two aspects are not identical but they are inseparable, and any attempt to do so – let alone to hold one more important than the other – is completely misguided, because (a) it can't be done in practice, (b) it ignores the nature of lived life, and (c) the attempt is deeply disenchanting, and who benefits from that?

In fact, as Max Weber pointed out a century ago, it is the primary act of disenchantment, one which has haunted our culture ever since Plato, then St Paul, and more recently Descartes, and all their successors. Nietzsche, one of Weber's exemplars, made the same point. 'The "apparent" world is the only one,' he wrote; 'the "true" world is merely added by a lie.' All true worlds are within this one.

So I am neither a spiritualist nor a materialist. As my teacher Gregory Bateson said, the supernatural and the mechanical are two related species of superstition which are ultimately destructive. Both agree to treat the living world as 'mere' matter, devoid of agency, subjectivity or even meaning of its own. They differ only in that one side says that that's all there is, while the other seeks more elsewhere, in some other, 'higher' or 'inner' world. It is insane to disrespect our bodies and the Earth, our only home, as both these philosophies do. I am not saying 'This is all there is,' but that whatever else there is, it is somewhere here too.

Nor do I think speculation about what happens at or after death is helpful. In response to such questions, Confucius was supposed to have pointed out that 'You don't understand life, so how can you hope to understand death?' And when the Buddha was asked (three times) whether the soul survived death, he refused to answer. Afterwards, when Ananda asked him why, he replied that it was because there was no way he could say either 'yes' or 'no' without being misunderstood.

Belief in reincarnation is more strongly present in some cultures and not others. Of course, I accept its possibility (how could I not?), but I do not know whether it is true or not (how could I?). Nor do I think we are supposed to, so to speak. The point, rather, is to live, as fully and with as much integrity as we can, now. On his deathbed, Thoreau was asked if he was ready for the next world. He replied, 'One world at a time'. While we are alive, this one is more than enough.

It also follows that as embodied beings in this world, we are fully ecological. We are each unique and therefore limited creatures, whose autonomy is completely dependent upon countless other lives. And there is no life without limits. In practice, even unlimited compassion is unsustainable. You are not a universal, perfect, unlimited being, even though you partake of what is universal. Sooner or later, from time to time, you have to breathe out – consolidate – say: that's enough for now, or, that's the best I can do – and be grateful for all that supports you.