



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## The wisdom of ghosts

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### Abstract

According to Carolyn Larrington, legends of the past ‘offer particular kinds of answers – beautiful and mysterious answers. . . – to very large questions through a kind of metaphorical thinking . . . which, in their stripped-down clarity, show us what’s really important in an unfamiliar light’. The claim that ‘what is really important [is disclosed] by casting it in an unfamiliar light’ I take into a philosophical engagement with the figure of the ghost. Far from being of dubious interest for the philosopher of religion, the continuing fascination with ghosts and hauntings offers promising ground for the discussion of religion, for the study of ghosts holds out the possibility of engaging with the wonder and terror of the human condition. The figure of something that is dead yet alive is a creative representation of the fact that we who are alive are also mortal, destined to die. The resulting confrontation with death arouses anxiety, but also has the potential to enrich life. The wisdom of the ghost thus enables the possibility of returning philosophy of religion to the great themes of human existence – birth, suffering, loss, and death – which provide rich resources for understanding religion and its relation to the experience of being human.

**Keywords:** ghosts; existence; death; grief

### Introduction

Carolyn Larrington introduces her ‘journey through the supernatural landscapes of the British isles’, *The Land of the Green Man*, with the following comment: ‘The legends of our past offer particular kinds of answers – beautiful and mysterious answers. . . – to very large questions through a kind of metaphorical thinking, through structures and patterns which, in their stripped-down clarity, show us what’s really important in an unfamiliar light’ (Larrington (2019), 9; my emphasis). Larrington’s claim that ‘what is really important [is disclosed] by casting it in an unfamiliar light’ informs the argument of this article. ‘British folk legends and the supernatural creatures who inhabit them’, she notes, ‘have important things to say about human existence’ (*ibid.*, 8): an idea I take into a philosophical engagement with the figure of the ghost. Far from being of dubious interest for the philosopher of religion, the continuing fascination with ghosts and hauntings offers promising ground for the discussion of religion, for the study of both holds out the possibility of engaging with the wonder and terror of the human condition. The figure of something that is dead and yet alive is a creative representation of the fact that we who are alive are also mortal, destined to die; and as the existential psychotherapist Irvin Yalom argues, ‘a confrontation

with death arouses anxiety but also has the potential of vastly enriching life' (Yalom (2008), 75).

Identifying the existential concerns that shape the figure of the ghost makes possible a creative method for exploring religious ideas and practices. Rather than reducing the philosophical discussion of religion to a set of propositions in which one might or might not have good grounds for believing, the connection of religious sensibility to the complexity of relationship – with other human beings and with the universe itself – is placed centre-stage. As Ernest Becker states in his classic work *The Denial of Death*, 'the best existential analysis of the human condition leads directly into the problems of God and faith' (Becker ([1973] 2020), 68). Thus, pursuing the ghost enables a return for philosophy of religion to the great themes of human existence (birth,<sup>1</sup> suffering, loss, and death), thereby providing rich resources for understanding religion and its relation to the experience of being human.

### **'There are more things in heaven and earth . . .': the ghost and the philosopher**

The philosopher of religion may not be convinced that the investigation of ghosts has much to offer. 'The ghost' might be used as a cipher for the possibilities and problems associated with claims for disembodied existence (so, Ryle (1949), Strawson (1964), Price (1972)); but, while potentially useful for interrogating ideas of an afterlife, this is not the same as considering 'the ghost' presented in the pages of the ghost story, where it appears as a spectral presence haunting the world of the living.

If inclined to investigate claims for ghosts understood thus, the philosopher of religion, schooled in the analysis of belief, might consider the grounds for 'believing in' the existence of such entities, appraising the evidence provided for or against the proposition 'ghosts exist'. Focusing on the question of their existence suggests ghosts to be, as Yi-Fu Tuan defines them, '*dead persons who, in some sense, are still alive*' (Tuan (1979), 113; my emphasis). While succinct, pursuing evidence for such a claim does not capture what is most interesting about their continuing ability to fascinate. As D. Z. Phillips argues when challenging a similar approach to 'another' supposed spirit – God – a not-particularly fruitful set of conclusions emerge that fail to capture what the language is getting at. Turning the Christian claim that 'God is Spirit' into an argument for a supernatural agent misunderstands – even distorts – the language of the believer: 'The Bible says that God is a spirit and they that worship him should worship him in spirit and in truth. Let's make the philosophical substitution: "God is a person without a body and they who. . . ." On the other hand, let's forget it!' (Phillips (1988), 7). Might a similar conclusion be reached regarding the question of ghosts? A discussion shaped by questions of whether or not they are 'real' manifestations of dead people loses the possibility of considering what, exactly, the lure/lore of ghosts reveals about the nature of the human condition.

An illustration of the limitations of the philosophical analysis which Phillips criticizes is mirrored in Jonathan Miller's screen adaptation of M. R. James's classic ghost story, 'O Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad'.<sup>2</sup> Professor Parkin (Parkins in James's original), a Cambridge don, is holidaying on the Norfolk coast. He is introduced to the viewer as a solitary, rather lonely figure, an intellectual who prefers to talk to himself rather than his fellow guests. Socially insecure, he displays considerably more security when it comes to his understanding of the nature of things; and it is this philosophical certainty that is to be punctured by an encounter with a spectre that challenges his carefully constructed worldview.

One scene in particular illustrates this sense of certainty and what proves to be its limitations.

'Do you believe in ghosts?' the Colonel, a fellow guest, asks Parkin.

'Ghosts. . .It's a tricky one isn't it. . .Not sure what you mean', Parkin replies. He knows what he is being asked when asked if he believes in 'Australia'; he is not at all sure what he is being asked to believe when someone asks him, similarly, about ghosts.

The Colonel tries again: presumably what is meant by the word 'ghost' is 'the survival of the personality'. 'Ah', breathes the Professor, relieved to be on surer ground. Such a question 'has the grammatical appearance of a real question, but does it really *mean* anything?' We know what it means 'to survive an accident', but what does it mean to 'survive death'? (Phillips rehearses a similar argument: 'If we hear that someone has survived an accident, we know what is meant. But if we hear that someone has survived his death, we do not know what to make of these words' (Phillips (1970), 1–2)

The Professor, repeating the kind of argument familiar to the university seminar, is clearly enjoying himself. The Colonel, however, is not, and turns to Shakespeare in order to draw a line under what is rapidly becoming a tedious conversation. 'There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy', he tells Parkin. The Professor responds with a phrase of which he is inordinately proud, and which he repeats later when alone: 'there are more things in philosophy than are dreamt of in heaven and earth'. The story that unfolds reveals the arrogance of this positioning.

The philosopher of religion viewing this conversation might conclude that Parkin and the Colonel's discussion is defined by a common set of concerns: both assume the question of the ghost can be answered by considering whether or not the human personality 'survives' death. Yet, as the story unfolds, the difference between their respective positions is made stark. Parkin's scepticism, based on linguistic analysis, does not fare well in his encounter with the supernatural. By way of contrast, the Colonel's openness to the possibilities of the universe enables him to rescue Parkin from the terrifying apparition conjured up by the Professor's unwise blowing of an ancient whistle found in a dilapidated graveyard: of which more later. Parkin may be reduced by his encounter to a gibbering wreck, but the Colonel knows what needs to be done (James ([1904] 1994), 90), effectively saving Parkin's sanity (or, at least, saving it in James's original). James wryly concludes his story with a suitably chastened Parkin: 'the Professor's views on certain points are less clear cut than they used to be' (*ibid.*, 91).

## Defining ghosts

James's conclusion offers one way of expressing the wisdom of ghosts: they undermine certainty, introducing ideas of 'not-knowing' – of 'not-understanding' – to life and experience. Such a claim resonates with Phillips's injunction to philosophers of religion that they should resist attempting to 'understand' that other great mystery, God: the divine cannot – should not – be so easily pinned down (Phillips [1988] 1993).

Unwillingness to accept 'not-knowing' pervades the uses to which the figure of the ghost is put in academic literature. Much like Parkin, the pervading sense is that 'of course' the ghost does not exist. If reference is made to 'the ghost', it must be demythologized.

Some examples reveal the reach of this approach:

In psychoanalysis, the ghost is subsumed into ideas of 'haunting': a way of referring to experiences and/or feelings that lie beneath the surface of the patient's carefully

constructed conscious world that are forcing their way to the surface. Analysis is akin to 'a practice of exorcism'. (Frosch (2013), 38)

'an unlaidd ghost' is troubling the present and 'it cannot rest until the mystery has been solved and the spell broken' (Freud (1909), 122)

This metaphorical usage extends to 'hauntology', 'a trend in recent critical and psycho-analytical work' (Davis (2005), 373). For a method that takes absence as seriously as presence (Derrida ([1972] 1981), 1–27), the ghost becomes a means of illustrating voices excluded from texts, but which haunt them. Neither dead nor alive, 'the ghost is an ethical injunction insofar as it occupies the place of the Levinasian Other' (Davis (2005), 373). Thus, in the work of cultural theorists Alberto Ribas-Casasayas and Amanda Petersen (2016), spectres and the spectral ('espectros') are employed as tools for Hispanic literary criticism. The ghost becomes a means of considering the 'traces' of the colonial past in the cultural present.

When the ghost appears in philosophies far removed from psychoanalytic or post-structuralist framings, it does so in not-dissimilar ways. Alasdair MacIntyre employs the ghost as a metaphor which illuminates the shift from Aristotelian to post-Kantian moral theories. As a result of this conceptual move, MacIntyre argues, 'moral agency begins to have an attenuated, ghostly quality' (MacIntyre (1982), 309). In Philip Goff's 'Ghosts and Sparse Properties: Why Physicalists Have More to Fear from Ghosts than Zombies', there is discussion of the ghost in a form that Parkin and the Colonel would understand: the ghost is defined as '*a pure subject of experience*: a creature whose being is exhausted by its being conscious' (Goff (2010), 123). Yet it quickly emerges that Goff's interest is less in 'the ghost' per se and more in what the conceivability of the ghost means for criticism of different forms of physicalism. Something is lost, it seems to me, by this approach. Goff might see ghosts as 'scary' for the physicalists he critiques, but the humorous tone of his remarks assumes that there is nothing genuinely threatening about the figure of the ghost itself. Hence his conclusion: 'A priori physicalists: Scared of zombies, petrified of ghosts. A posteriori physicalists: Equally scared of zombies and ghosts (more or less). Funny physicalists: Chummy with zombies, petrified of ghosts' (*ibid.*, 136).

Sarah Owens's cultural history of the ghost is closer to the approach I advocate. The ghost takes central place in her study, and Owens takes care to consider the different forms ghosts take in a variety of times and places. In contemporary culture, she argues, ghosts are 'no longer confined to the short story', rather, 'they are beginning to be woven into the larger, more complex and expansive plots of novels where they express emotions, fears and secrets,<sup>3</sup> and offer subtle ways of imagining the past and of *thinking about life and death*' (Owens (2017), 263; my emphasis).

Her last point shapes my exploration: the ghost offers 'ways . . . of thinking about life and death'. There is an urgency in the existential themes to which the ghost directs attention. The ghost emerges, less as a weird piece of philosophical speculation or as a metaphor for another activity, and more as an indicator of what is important for shaping a human life, namely, connection and relationship, while, beneath this theme, lurks the terrifying spectre that threatens both: death itself.

### **Loss, mourning, and the ambivalence of relationship**

Why fear death? The conversation between Parkin and the Colonel about the continuation of the human personality is haunted by the opposite possibility: that death destroys the self and is therefore to be feared. Read thus, the ghost provides evidence that death need

not imply the annihilation of the personality, that something of individual consciousness might 'survive' death. Their discussion is framed by this claim: Parkin rejects it, the Colonel accepts it. The ghost is thereby tethered to discussions concerning personal identity: *my death is to be feared, and thus the concern is with whether or not good evidence can be provided for the claim that I will survive death.*

There is another way of considering the fear of death, made manifest in the ghost story, which certainly demands consideration of human identity. The isolation of Professor Parkin is mirrored in the depiction of the ghost as a lonely figure, drifting, largely unobserved, through the fabric of the living world.<sup>4</sup> In H. P. Lovecraft's *The Outsider*, this loneliness takes centre stage. The narrator is the ghost.<sup>5</sup> The fear of death as concerning *my* fears about *my* continuing existence is part of the story, but by no means where Lovecraft places his emphasis. The terrible loneliness of this spectre that 'cannot recall any person except myself' (Lovecraft ([1939] 2002), 43–44) suggests something else: the need for relationship.<sup>6</sup> The horror of Lovecraft's final reveal cannot be understood without this desire. Seeking others, the outsider, initially 'with chief interest and delight', happens upon a celebration in a castle that seems 'maddeningly familiar, yet full of perplexing strangeness to me' (*ibid.*, 47). Delight at human company quickly turns to horror, the partygoers fleeing his presence. Glimpsing his image in a mirror, he realizes that *he* is the spectre responsible for their flight. Yet Lovecraft provides the reader with a 'happy ending' of sorts: the outsider finds new relationships with his own kind, for 'now I ride with the mocking and friendly ghouls on the night-wind' (*ibid.*, 49).

The horror of Lovecraft's story relies to an extent on the putridity to which the individual, as corpse, is subject: but a further set of concerns also derive from his tale. Are we atomistic individuals, radically separate from each other and the world, the question of death principally one concerning individual survival? Or are we relational, connected to others, dependent upon the physical world for our very being? The threat death poses to the others with whom life in this world is shared poses far-reaching questions for identity not captured solely by the concern with personal immortality.

Recent work on grief suggests the fruitfulness of orientating the discussion towards an investigation of the relational self. If for Freud the work of mourning was to enable the living to break their bonds with the one who has died in order that their libido can be freed to invest in the continuing experience of living (Freud ([1915] 1917), 244), others have sought a corrective to his approach. 'Continuing bonds' theorists challenge his seemingly brutal severing of the relationship between the still living and the now dead (Klass and Steffen (2018); Scrutton and Hewitt (2021)). In the aftermath of bereavement, the relationship with the deceased must be transformed rather than got over: a subtler reading than Freud's, which allows for a more permeable relationship between living and dead. As Tony Walter notes, 'the purpose of grief is . . . the construction of a durable biography that enables the living to *integrate* the memory of the dead into their ongoing lives' (in Klass and Steffen (2018), xiv; my emphasis).

Michael Cholbi builds upon this approach in his philosophy of grief. In bereavement, our sense of self is shaken to the core (Cholbi (2021), 33). A person of great significance for our identity no longer lives, and our relationship to them must be transformed in light of this changed reality. We need to work out *both* who the person was to us, *and* how we are to live after their demise: 'who shall I be in light of who I have been?' (*ibid.*, 82). Thus 'grief is something we do, rather than something that happens to us' (*ibid.*, 45).

This might not sound so different from what Freud proposes; however, it challenges an overly stark distinction between 'being dead' and 'being alive'. Cholbi illuminates this point with an example drawn from C. S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed*. Describing the searing pain of the loss of his wife, 'H.', Lewis suggests that death does not create a radical break in their marriage. Rather, their marriage is *transformed* by her death – in distressing,

painful ways, to be sure – but it is not ‘ended’ in any straightforward way. H.’s death is not ‘a truncation of the process [of a marriage] but one of its phases; not the interruption of the dance but the next figure’ (Lewis ([1961] 2013), 47; in Cholbi (2021), 57; also in Scrutton and Hewitt (2021), 854). The lost lover is to be *incorporated into* – not *removed from* – the ongoing life of the bereaved.

A crucial relationship is being reframed. Death does not merely threaten personal identity: it recasts understandings of what it is to be an individual in the first place. Our relationships shape who we are, and continue to be, regardless of whether the people involved in shaping that identity are dead or alive. I am reminded of Annie Dillard. Refusing to dodge the reality of transience, accepting that ‘each of us loses all we love, everyone we love. We grieve and leave’ (Dillard (1999), 120), she expands this vision by placing the experience of loss within the broader frame of the world itself. ‘The dead outnumber the living . . . the dead will always outnumber the living’ (*ibid.*, 49). ‘Our generations rise and break like foam on shores’ (*ibid.*, 118). The implication of her reflections is that dead and alive are more united than we think: ‘we live on dead people’s heads’ (*ibid.*, 124), she observes, as well as in the soil itself. We are not isolated from the flow of human history, Dillard’s image suggests, for the ghosts of the past not only walk among us, but shape us too. We are not atomistic entities standing bravely out from the world and the others who came before; we are social and historical beings whose existence is transitory, with all that this means for understanding identity and the reality of loss.

Before too cosy a relationship is assumed between living and dead, we should pause and consider the ambiguities of these past relationships that form us and shape our present. The horror elicited by the ghost challenges desires that the dead *should* return to the living: ‘when someone close to us dies we may be genuinely overcome with grief, and yet we are not happy with the thought of his or her return in the form of a spirit or walking corpse trailing odours of the grave’ (Tuan (1979), 114). Witness the response to Lovecraft’s outsider. There is an echo, too, of this ambivalence in Tuan’s definition of ghosts as ‘dead persons who, *in some sense*, are still alive’ (*ibid.*, 113; my emphasis). That clarification – *in some sense* – challenges the temptation to idealize the dead, reminding us to direct our gaze to the cosmic forces which shape, create, and destroy human lives.

Stories from across the centuries emphasize the necessity of accepting death as a part of life. A change has occurred that must be accepted (a notion that does better justice, perhaps, to Freud’s account of mourning). Thus in Virgil’s retelling of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, the impossibility of the dead lover’s return is acknowledged with painful poignancy: ‘I am taken, wrapped round by vast night, stretching out to you, alas, hands no longer yours’ (Virgil (2021), *Georgics* 4. 495); while Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) warns of the threat the returning dead pose to the living, Cathy’s spectre ultimately destroying the health and well-being of Heathcliff.

Edith Wharton’s ‘Pomegranate Seeds’ crystallizes the effect of failing to come to terms with the separation wrought by death. The second Mrs Ashby realizes that her husband is receiving letters from an unknown woman, gradually revealed to be his dead first wife. Opening the most recent of these, she struggles to read the faint, almost illegible writing. The message, however, is all-too-clear: “‘I can make out something like “mine” – oh, and “come”. It might be “come””’ (Wharton ([1937] 2021), 245). Her husband’s response to these missives is far from reassuring: she feels that he is being ‘dragged away from her into some mysterious bondage’ (*ibid.*, 234). His actions suggest a man torn between love for his first wife – ‘he raised the letter still closer to his eyes, as though he had not fully deciphered it. Then he lowered his head, and she saw his lips touch the sheet’ (*ibid.*) – and his desire to shake free from her hold and to create a new life with his new wife. “‘Of course we will go away together”’, he tells her. “‘We’ll go wherever you want”’ (*ibid.*, 235). The end of the story is ambiguous, the reader left wondering which wife will be

victorious. Will he come home, as his mother hopes, to continue his new life, or has he been reclaimed by his first love, as his new wife suspects?

There is, then, both a longing for and a danger in desiring the returning dead who lure the living away from the present. How to come to terms with the nature of things? How to accept the reality of loss? If the ghost alerts us to the importance of such questions, religion offers a space that need not shy away from the devastation wrought by death, but which makes the knowledge of death's reality the bedrock for a deeper engagement with life itself.

### Religion, ghosts, and 'the majesty of death'

Rush Rhees introduces Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* with a tantalizing comment from Maurice O'Connor Drury: 'I think it would have been in 1930 that Wittgenstein said to me that he had always wanted to read Frazer but hadn't done so, and would I get hold of a copy and *read some of it aloud to him*'. They began reading the first volume, Drury says, but 'only got a little way through this because he talked at considerable length about it, and the next term we didn't start it again' (Rhees's introduction to Wittgenstein (1979), v; my emphasis).

A text 'read aloud': and what a text. First published in 1890 in two volumes, Frazer's attempt to explain 'a peculiar ritual of classical antiquity' (Clack (1999), 7) – that which shaped the succession to the priesthood of Diana at Aricia – had by 1936 expanded to thirteen volumes and offered a range of examples of ritual murder from across the world which Frazer made the foundation of his theory of religion. This rather prosaic description does not capture the entrancing character of Frazer's language, and it is not entirely fanciful to think that hearing the opening to Frazer's work sparked Wittgenstein's desire to write about it. Frazer's writing is mesmerizing, redolent with the magic of the best ghost story. The image of Wittgenstein listening intently to Drury reading Frazer's text conjures up the practice of M. R. James, writing for and reading to his friends a new ghost story each Christmas (Owens (2017), 224). Frazer's opening paragraphs certainly draw his reader/listener into Carolyne Larrington's world of legends and ghostly tales:

Who does not know Turner's picture of the Golden Bough? The scene, suffused with the golden glow of imagination . . . In antiquity this sylvan landscape was the scene of a strange and recurring tragedy . . . In this sacred grove there grew a certain tree round which at any time of the day, and probably far into the night, a grim figure might be seen to prowl. In his hand, he carried a drawn sword, and he kept peering warily about him as if at every instant he expected to be set upon by an enemy. He was a priest and a murderer . . . A candidate for the priesthood could only succeed to office by slaying the priest. The post which he held by this precarious tenure carried with it the title of king; but surely no crowned head ever lay uneasier, or was visited by more evil dreams, than his. (Frazer ([1922] 1954), 1)

These words instil a nervous anticipation in the listener: not least because of the shadowy presence of the priest-king, anxiously facing the prospect of his death at the hands of a rival. The mood conjured up by Frazer's words is far from accidental, as Wittgenstein makes plain: 'When Frazer begins by telling the story of the forest-king of Nemi, he does this in a tone which shows that something strange and terrible is happening here.' The answer to the question *why* this is happening is quite simple: 'Because it is terrible. In other words, what strikes us in these proceedings as terrible, impressive, horrible, tragic, etc, anything but trivial and insignificant, *that* is what gave birth to them' (Wittgenstein (1979), 2–3).

Frazer's description directs us not so much to a theory as to a mood; a mood which opens up themes – literally – of life and death. We are taken to this sacred grove, we are asked to share the shivers and terrors of the priest-king. Wittgenstein drives home this point: 'put that account of the King of the Wood at Nemi together with the phrase "the majesty of death", and you see that they are one' (*ibid.*, 3). The story of the priest-king makes real the terrifying, overwhelming spectre of death: not just for this man, but for us too. There is an echo here of the ghost story's effect, for both ghost and priest-king act as reminders of the 'majesty of death'. The evocative language of the stories told of both is necessary for conjuring up the full weight of this chilling phrase. As Rhees elaborates, 'it was because of a sense of "the majesty of death" that the rite itself had to be terrible. Sometimes, *unless the symbol itself were sinister*, we should not be alive to what was represented' (Rhees (1969), 153, my emphasis).

This pervading sense of something sinister is why Frazer's description continues to resonate, and why it is helpful for illuminating the continuing power of the ghost. Regardless of what we do, what we achieve, what defensive shields we put around ourselves, death retains its awe-inspiring majesty. We share the fears of generations who went before, for there is no escaping the threat of death, as Frazer makes plain:

*We picture to ourselves the scene as it may have been witnessed by a belated wayfarer on one of those wild autumn nights when the dead leaves are falling thick, and the winds seem to sing the dirge of the dying year. It is a sombre picture, set to melancholy music – the background of forest showing black and jagged against a lowering and stormy sky, the sighing of the winds in the branches, the rustle of the leaves under foot, the lapping of the cold water on the shore, and in the foreground, pacing to and fro, now in twilight and now in gloom, a dark figure with a glitter of steel . . .* (Frazer ([1922] 1954), 1–2; my emphasis)

To *really* engage with this rite and its illumination of the majesty of death, we *require* this prose, this description. We need the tone that Frazer is at such pains to conjure up. Certainly, he intends to locate this rite in his broader theory of religion; but we miss something important if we read it merely through a lens which places Frazer and Wittgenstein in opposition when it comes to their respective understandings of how to investigate religion. It is tempting to see Frazer as 'the rationalist' who frames religious rituals as quasi-scientific attempts to make sense of the world and the threat of death, while Wittgenstein is the philosopher who challenges philosophical justifications, who claims that 'all explanation must disappear, and description alone must take its place' (Wittgenstein ([1953] 2009), 52), who eschews any generalized theory of religion. Brian R. Clack, resisting this polarization and the rendition of Frazer as a dyed-in-the-wool rationalist, claims Frazer's very language reveals something quite different: 'If we allow Frazer to speak for himself, we can certainly detect in these words a level of romantic imagination and, indeed, an implied criticism of over-rationalistic approaches to myth and ritual' (Clack (1999), 14). Frazer's language is not irrelevant to his method for investigating religion, Clack pointing to a passage from Frazer's *Folklore in the Old Testament*: 'a frigid rationalist will knock in vain at the rose-wreathed portal of fairyland. The porter will not open to Mr Gradgrind' (Frazer (1923), 291; in Clack (1999), 14).

To understand the forces that shape religion requires more than simply the exercise of reason or theory: it requires a willingness to engage with the feelings that pervade (and shape) religious practices. And Frazer's text bears out this interpretation, for he is at his best when his text reads like a story intended to elicit an emotional response. His language *transcends* the lapses into a reductionist theory of the sources of religion. Frazer's prose encourages his reader to *enter into the experience* of the priest-king and



those witnessing his prowling around the sacred grove. Far from belittling this ancient rite, his language demands that we take it seriously. This is a disturbing rite, something challenging and perplexing; and yet somehow it speaks to us. It is, we might say, a matter of life and death.

Frazer's reader – or listener – is left with a troubling sense of the things that cannot easily be dissected or dismissed. As Wittgenstein says of this rite, 'this is what took place here; laugh, if you can' (Wittgenstein (1979), 3). Like the disturbing nature of M. R. James's tale, we are forced to confront something which defies explanation and challenges the primacy of reason. Clinging to theories will not enable us to understand the content of such stories. Instead, we are to '*feel them*, take them into ourselves and let them have their effect on us' (Paul Ernst in Clack (1999), 109; my emphasis).

The ghost, like the priest-king, makes possible this intimate confrontation with 'the majesty of death'. The wisdom of the ghost lies not in providing evidence for a life after death, nor in stilling fears that the loved one has been lost forever; rather the *feelings* such stories evoke in the reader challenge comfortable assumptions of human progress and control. Our certainties are destabilized through the ghost story; and not in any simplistic 'intellectual' way that has little impact on the experiences of our own lives. *We* feel the chill of the grave, the breath of the spectre. *We* are reminded that we, too, will die. In entertaining the ghost story, we are provided with space to confront our fundamental dishonesty about the human condition, for 'we do not really control our lives' (Becker ([1973] 2020), 55). How hard to accept that, not as an abstract philosophical claim, but as a lived reality. To face mortality and what it means for the things we value in a life which is fleeting is far from easy, and the ghost story *itself* might be read as a means of prompting deeper reflection – enabling a form of wisdom, even – on the life that we live now.

'The majesty of death' implicitly threads its way through James's 'Whistle and I'll Come to You'. The role played by the whistle of the title is key to this interpretation. Found in an overgrown graveyard, this ancient object is inscribed with the words 'Quis est iste qui venit?' ('Who is this who is coming?') (James ([1904] 1994), 81). A wise person might not be keen to find out, but Parkin is a rationalist and he blows the whistle that summons the spectre that ultimately punctures his philosophical arrogance.

The description of 'the thing that comes' is telling. It is 'frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar', in the words Freud uses to define the uncanny (Freud (1919), 220). Its movement both is and is not like that of a human person. This strangeness is unsettling, making Parkin 'unwilling to see it at close quarters. It would stop, raise its arms, bow itself toward the sand, then run stooping across the beach to the water edge and back again; and then, rising upright, once more continue its course forward at a speed that was startling and terrifying' (James ([1904] 1994), 83). The source of this figure and the feelings it elicits is underscored in the final confrontation. Parkin sees that it has 'an intensely horrible face of crumpled linen' (*ibid.*, 90). In Miller's film, what is most striking about the spectre is its representation as a mess of dirty, wafting fabric, its fluttering rags and linen face more reminiscent of a shroud than the shade of a person. Here is its horrible power, for the familiar representation of the ghost as a sheet with eye holes has a more sinister source, the sheet being the shroud that wraps the corpse. James's spectre is thus a *memento mori*, a reminder of death and the grave, rather than a comforting harbinger of a life to come. It moves like something alive, but reminds us of that which is dead: an apt description for Frazer's priest-king too. Parkin's terror at this encounter is in stark contrast to the lightness of tone he adopts in his debate with the Colonel. A moral for the reader is being advanced, for James's tale suggests that death is not mocked, its existential threat not something to ignore. The casual tone of Parkin's apparent philosophical wisdom is dispensed with in the presence of that which indicates the final destination of all living things.

The popularity of ‘The Three Living and the Three Dead’ during the medieval period makes plain the connection between ghosts and the majesty of death. Drawing on examples from church murals and manuscripts, Susan Owens describes the figures of the ‘three living’ as replete with the trappings of wealth, power and privilege. The ‘three dead’ who face them are ‘grisly apparitions’ (Owens (2017), 26), skeletons or corpses in various forms of decomposition. These horrible figures mirror the living and offer a stark reminder that ‘as we are, so you will be’. Not limited to the walls of churches, these figures also ‘lurked among the leaves of illuminated books’ (*ibid.*, 28), bearing a similar message: ‘no matter how wealthy you are, and how richly you dress . . . one day you will die’ (*ibid.*, 29). These ‘walking corpses’ (*ibid.*) act as reminders that none escape death. Death is not an abstract concept, but pervades the experience of living. Our living is bound up with our dying.

Tangible reminders of death’s inevitability occupy the charnel houses of pre-Reformation churches. At Naters, the bone wall, home to the skeletal remains of the town’s forebears, repeats the words of the Three Dead: ‘Was ihr seid, das waren wir | Was wir sind, das werdet ihr’, ‘What you are, we were | What we are, you shall be’ (Inge (2014), 145). As Denise Inge explains, the location of ossuaries within or next to churches meant that the living could not avoid the presence of death. Bones were placed where they could be seen, and far from being excluded or ignored, the dead were an integral part of the community. That which was hidden – the skeleton beneath the skin – was placed in a religious setting. This material reminder of death resonates with the immaterial presence of the ghost. Both confront us with questions of how to live in light of the fact that we are destined to share their fate. Ghosts (and bones) act as ‘moral guardians by giving us timely reminders that we, like them, shall die’ (Owens (2017), 270). Serious contemplation about mortality and the limits of our life is required in their presence.

Religion need not be framed as merely offering mechanisms for obscuring the reality and finality of death. Like any other human occupation, it can be, has been, and is used in this way. Irvin Yalom emphasizes religious claims for an afterlife in order to exclude it from an adequate grappling with death anxiety, the central concept in his existential psychotherapy. For Yalom, the religious is located in the sense of individual specialness and belief in an ‘Ultimate Rescuer’, ideas which, he claims, shape ‘immortality myths and the belief in a personal god, in virtually every religious system’ (Yalom (1980), 96). Defined through these psychological constructs, religious beliefs dodge the possibilities of grappling with death anxiety, for ‘though the physicality of death destroys us, the idea of death saves us’ (*ibid.*, 7). Death demands that we identify the things in life that are most amenable to the flourishing of a transient life. If Yalom refuses the possibilities of religion for this task, the presence of spectral figures and bones in religious contexts holds out a different formulation of what, precisely, the religious involves. Contrary to Yalom, the religious can be understood as a means of *engaging with* the facts of transience, suffering, dying and death, drawing them into the centre of life.

For Yalom, all forms of anxiety are ultimately death anxiety. Left unattended, the inability to entertain the inevitability of death taints the very act of living. As such, he considers the wisdom of following Rollo May’s claim that ‘anxiety seeks to become fear’ (*ibid.*, 43). Anxiety is not the same as fear, for it is not easily reducible to any particular thing, event or object, while fear is always fear *of something*. Read against this distinction, ghosts make possible the space to express the anxiety of *no-thing*. They give concrete form to something that, if left formless, distorts the ability to live well because of its all-pervasive yet unidentified character. The ghost ultimately acts as sign to mortality; and while Yalom does not accept that religion does likewise, there are, as noted above, religious artefacts that urge the living to grapple with transience, loss, and the grief that pervades relational human experience.

## Plumbing the depths of the human soul: towards an existential philosophy of religion

Wisdom lurks in the pages of the ghost story and the figure of the ghost itself. This wisdom is multilayered, challenging philosophical certainty, directing attention to the nature of human identity and the role of relationship, and, crucially, demanding serious reflection on the existential threat posed by death.

All of which leads to a question of key importance to the philosopher of religion. Where is the power of religion located? The reason ghost stories continue to compel goes some way to illuminating the significance of religious perspectives. Regardless of the ways we structure the meaning of a life, regardless of the attempts of Silicon Valley billionaires to 'solve the problem of death' through radical life extension (O'Connell (2017), 180), the majesty of death forms the backdrop to transient human existence. The knowledge that we are destined to die can crush us, draining our energy or encouraging us to waste limited resources in pursuit of illusory solutions; or we can find ways of coming to an accommodation with the fact that our lives are passing, that death is inevitable.

To take seriously the reality of the human condition takes us into a disturbing landscape. The comforting stories of inevitable human progress are challenged by 'the dark depth of the soul' (Clack (1999), 129) that is entranced by fairy tales and legends, ghosts and spectres. These depths are evident in Frazer's priest-king and Wittgenstein's reflections on this practice. That which is most powerful in religious belief and expression defies the desire to categorize and 'tidy up' the experience of being human. It is not surprising that, as Brian R. Clack argues (Clack (1999), 72, 152–154), even Wittgenstein's most vociferous supporters are not entirely comfortable adhering to the implications of perspicuous representation.

A philosophy of religion that pays attention to feelings of dread and anxiety, found in religious belief and practice, opens up the depths and the not-knowing of experience. Not-knowing – 'hovering between life and death, presence and absence', as Davis describes 'Derrida's spectre' (Davis (2005), 376) – is applicable here, for it is this kind of ambivalence that makes possible wonder, opens up horizons, and demands a creative struggle with how best to live. Religious stories and practices enable a proper grappling with the reality of death, for they direct us to the significance *and* insignificance of our lives and the things that give them meaning. Confronted with 'the terrifying spaces of the universe' (Pascal (1995), 130), we may well become similarly terrified, unsure of how to find a way through. Religious stories, like ghost stories, provide space for engaging with the complex range of feelings attending to mortality. We are returned to the Colonel's employment of Shakespeare that attempts to puncture the human knowledge and logic on which Professor Parkin relies. How do we attend to that which is not certain, that which is outside our control? How do we place ourselves in a universe that is so much greater than ourselves and our desires?

The wisdom of ghosts lies in their invitation to explore the boundaries of what we think it means to be human, and to glimpse that undiscovered country that opens up in the face of death's reality. Read against this backdrop, religious belief, practice, and story create space to think seriously about the limits of life, framed by the reality of non-existence and death. 'In the midst of life we are in death', as the Book of Common Prayer has it, and just as death is a part of life, so it requires serious contemplation in order to discern fulfilling ways of living in a world of chance and change. Religion casts light on the nature of human existence in all its messy complexity, illuminating the pains (and consolations) of the human condition (Clack (2014)). As Wittgenstein notes, 'faith is faith in what is needed by my *heart*, my *soul*, not my speculative intelligence. For it is

my soul with its passions, as it were with its flesh and blood, that has to be saved, not my abstract mind' (Wittgenstein (1980), 33; in Clack (1999), 4). What better way of framing the wisdom not just of ghosts, but of religious practice itself?

## Notes

1. While I do not consider birth in this article, feminist philosophers of religion like Grace Jantzen (1998) have made this feature of existence a central part of their analysis.
2. First published in 1904, this is arguably the greatest of James's ghost stories. Jonathan Miller's adaptation for BBC TV's *Omnibus* in 1968 captures the unsettling effect of James' prose, while adding features of its own that are relevant to the approach taken in this article.
3. For example, Sarah Water's *The Little Stranger* (2009); Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall Trilogy* (2009, 2012, 2020).
4. A recent exception is found in the BBC TV comedy *Ghosts* (2019–present; director Tom Kingsley), which follows the exploits of a group of spirits drawn from different historical epochs, occupying a common property.
5. In this curious tale, it is not clear what exactly the narrator is: a zombie? A 'large coffin worm', as the line from Keats that acts as epigram to the story suggests (Lovecraft ([1939] 2002), 43)? The emergence from the grave, described at the outset, suggests something more spectral; as does the spectre's return to a castle that is both familiar and unfamiliar: 'I saw the moat was filled in, and that some of the well-known towers were demolished; whilst new wings existed to confuse the beholder' (*ibid.*, 47).
6. This is echoed in Strawson's (1964) rejection of the desirability of disembodied survival, for 'the strictly disembodied individual is strictly solitary'.

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