

EDITORIAL FOREWORD

Kenneth A. Bryson's thesis in *Persons and Immortality* confronts some ponderous questions and formidable realities. They are intriguing. He argues that there is reasonable hope for immortality. His arguments deviate from traditional views, and so they will invite the reader to re-spur his own desultory thoughts about (1) mind-body dualism, (2) God's nature, (3) our identity. These are the big three that, in my judgment, will draw the reader into Bryson's text. The careful reader will agree, I think, that Bryson has handled adroitly these difficult topics that link into his thesis about immortality. This is not a book to buzz through. His prose and arguments are weighty.

In his corner, no longer an antimony but an ally, is the fact that religion and science these days are more often, and with greater ingenuity, discovering where they can agree. From E.O. Wilson's acceptance of God as a possible explanation of creation, to Stephen Jay Gould's naturalistic articulation of science/religion common denominators and Stephen Hawking's stalwart willingness to say that it is within the purview of science at least *to consider* the question of God, it is no longer clever to dispute the partialities of science or denigrate the ontological story spawned by religion. Bryson knows this, and so he draws without reserve from the wells of atomic physics to help support his thesis.

Bryson's approach to the huge question of immortality is ignited by our monumental after-death curiosity and fear, and the latter are ignited, in turn, by our obstinate clinging to the idea of God and what He wants of us. Bryson's labors on behalf of these "permanent things" make no sacrifice in philosophical acuity, critical scholarship, and courageous insight in abandoning familiar paths of inquiry he thinks untrue. He does not leave us empty; he fills their place with positive replacements that make sense. We recognize in ourselves a "psychological addiction to God." Are we to abandon this addiction, or shall we try to account for it as reasonably as we can? Perhaps the biblical James is wrong: "For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away" (*James 4:4*).

Four interrelated central lines of thought, in my judgment, affix the argument as Bryson sees it. These lines of thought are really different from what we are used to, and they are what make Bryson's book fascinating for the reader and a mark of excellence in scholarship.

(1) Immortality means nothing to us if we abandon our individuality and merge, as Buddhists believe, into an inchoate, impersonal, cosmic whole. Since we are embodied in this life, therefore, we need our bodies to survive our death.

(2) Our personal identity no longer can be understood through an abstract definition of "human nature," which rests on the old "essence definition." (It led also to the disembodied self through a dismantling dualism. This does us no good in our afterlife addiction.) Rather, personal identity is defined through our relationships: to ourselves, to others, to nature (God's creation).

(3) Accordingly, mind-body dualism has to be abandoned. The Cartesian split is false. What takes its place? Matter (body) reduces to mind (soul) in Bryson's account. Now we can more clearly see our way toward a meaningful personal immortality.

(4) What about the inexplicable mystery of God's goodness and the existence of evil in the world? God has two aspects from which to view His being. There is God the creator (this aspect of God is indirectly responsible for evil in the world). There is also God the perfect and divine being to whom we pray and, importantly, to whom we reach out for moral direction. In making choices to be moral (to avoid evil), we show the teleological nature of our spiritual needs and inspiration. These two aspects of God merge into one comprehensive Being. And our capacity to choose good over evil makes sense of the reason why both we and God the Creator would want to be immortal.

Of course we have free will. Through choice and reflection, we make ourselves (the person-making process Bryson alludes to). Hence our existence captures an entelechy that is distinctly human and spiritual. Becoming immortal is becoming God-like, that is, continuing in the afterlife to strive for the morally perfect.

Along the way, Bryson criticizes several key figures in the broad philosophical tradition that have a bearing on what we can reasonably believe about our survival after death. His criticisms are necessary in order to shift our understanding both from secular epistemology and from the usual theologically embroidered story of our immortality that is founded in Greek philosophy (overly rationalistic) and stresses only our soul as surviving. The shift moves us toward Bryson's alternative that he thinks makes sense to our modern mind.

(1) Aquinas does not have it quite right. Body and soul are separated in what is implied in Christian theology about an afterlife. We need our bodies to be complete individuals or persons. (2) Descartes's mind-body dualism, too, does not comport with science; we know, for example, that we need our bodies to think. Nor does it relieve our desire to know who we are after our death. Our bodies help to define our personalities. (3) Kant's moral philosophy, which, for Bryson, makes little sense when only secular, that is, godless and not tied to what we believe God wants of us, is incomplete. (4) Hume's "bundle theory" of perception has no unified "self" at all. What can immortality mean to us if we have no self?

Natural law. What makes Bryson's book a natural law study is its take on this age-old moral tradition. It goes like this: Traditional rationalism in definition of natural law is abstract and does not come to grips with the local and particularistic nature of our moral choices. We may "have a nature," but (1) we create it, and (2) it is defined by relationships, not by an essence. (3) Moreover, we create this nature by our choices. Hence through a few tidy conceptual linkages, Bryson acknowledges personal freedom; redefines our nature as essentially relational; indicates how evil got here in the first place; and makes a large place for

our desire to continue to live.

Essences as the prototype for limitations of meaning and hence as prototypes for “human nature” (rational animal) as the basis of teleological natural law no longer suit the scope of what we know. Essences are out of step with science and modern culture. The belief that human nature reflects certain constants or universals is probably true, as evinced by current social, anthropological, and genetic studies. But the definition need no longer base itself on a stoney set of necessary and sufficient features, of which “rational” has philosophically been determinative of what ought to be our moral quest and values. For Bryson’s purposes, “rational animal” also provides no grounds—indeed, it repudiates those grounds—that preserve the value of our bodies as essential components in idiosyncratic survival.

As an alternative to this disembodied, socially isolated, and overly rational concept of our nature (silent, as well, on our vital capability to choose), Bryson proposes three relationships that constitute the perspectives through which our nature is defined and which account for both the self that lives now, at this moment, and the person that self-presents in the afterlife. “The natural law is expressed in human relationships rather than in human nature” (p. 80). He thinks these relationships are not only obviously evident but they clarify, as well, the natural orders, patterns, and laws of the universe as we know them—in particular, those familiar to our social experience. Importantly, unlike an abstract “human nature,” they identify our unique personalities that go with us after death. These important relationships, central to Bryson’s immortality thesis and its logic, are our relations to ourselves, to others, and to nature and the world around us.

Some years ago, I too came to see the shortcomings of “rational animal” in a number of respects. It fails, for one, a vigorous and widely ranging applicability of the moral life as we know it, which comprises far more than the obligation to fulfill our rational nature. Aristotle’s “social animal” seemed a sturdier ground for a definition of our nature. Tentatively, I posited “human being-in-society” as a more useful idea for the way in which we evolve toward a higher moral self; for all of our social morality rests on our relations to other persons. Bryson has spelled out and extended these social bonds.

Technology and nature. Bryson greatly respects science. But he is critical of unexamined technological changes when they seem to damage nature or our spiritual interests (for instance, direct themselves toward the worst excesses of materialism). Skeptical myself of political intervention in the culture and greatly dubious of the capacity of central governments to foresee cultural consequences, I doubt most technological changes can be examined with sufficient prevision to thwart socially destructive results. The history of wise political forethought is dim. Bryson fears technological fixes to social problems. I fear political fixes because they are coerced, not freely chosen. Do we have to fish between the devil and the deep blue sea? I wonder whether Bryson is overly harsh in believing technology robs our significant relationships, especially those with nature, of their natural ends

toward self, others, and the world.

Our technocratic mentality, he thinks, downgrades and alienates our humanness, setting us further from goodness. By materializing everything, it degrades the richness of our lives. It invades and alters nature, that most precious relationship we have to the world which the creator God put us in. Bryson says, "the psychology of modern technology [is] the incessant addiction to power and control..." (p. 147). Sometimes by innuendo, the stereotypes of exploitation, oppression, domination, and economic inequality creep into Bryson's text regarding his negative view of technology. Thus, it would be easy for him to fall into the worst excesses of communitarianism, which is statism. But he does not bite this poison apple. His "spiritual change of heart" and emphasis on personal freedom, our choice of relationships, and our individuality save him from the falsehoods of crude economic determinism. *We* make our soul. And it is our soul, not our economic condition, that defines the person-making process that, engaged in with moral sensitivity, admits us to heaven.

I have noticed that technology-bashing is most often done by people who emphasize only its dark side: its (1) frequently mechanistic modes of application; (2) sometimes foolish waste and disutilities; (3) unintelligent, dangerous, and sometimes criminal atrocities like torture, terror, and war. Yet the same nuclear discoveries that manufacture bombs also manufacture energy—our lifesaving possibility to abandon the waste and pollution of fossil fuels. Technological genius works both ways. The weaving loom and the home arts do nothing, it is true, to destroy nature; but they kept India in poverty until she discovered the computer, leaving time for play and leisure, innovation, and the astonishing market system that spells economic betterment.

A too lavish love of nature's ways (romanticism) is as pernicious a philosophy as too slavish a love of technology. What is technology anyway? We can only define the extreme cases. The hard cases blend the simple into the complex: fire? the flint knife? the well or the aqueduct? the sun window or the agriculturalist's greenhouse? the hybrid seedcorn? How to place these innovations?

In his effort to preserve the integrity of our third relationship, that to nature, Bryson makes a beginning by differentiating between the mindless stockpiling of energy that may deplete a useful resource and benign intervention with benign purposes like skinning a fish or drawing water (for instance, the proposed new Israeli waterfall that will aerate water from the Dead Sea as it spills into the desert plains of northern Sinai and thence into the channels of the Nile). Bryson's formula is a useful distinction. But it is hard to make judgments that face the future with facts we do not have.

Nature is not always good: crop failure, property losses, drought and freeze, disease, floods, typhoons, tornados. It is putting technology to work—distribution of food, administration of medicine—that gets us out of nature's disasters. The buffalo plow never cured any society of starvation, but the resourceful technologies

of water delivery can save a society from ruin.

Technology is not the villain. The villain, as Bryson recognizes, is disregard for effective, valuable, and humane applications of these useful means toward useful ends. It cannot be Bryson's object to defend another dualism. The technocratic mind-set faces in two directions: We can use it to express that singularly curative quality of hope. Or we can be careless and arrogant. It is certain that a sustaining arrogance can dispel all hope of spiritual recovery.

Science and technology are preoccupied with results (technicism), but results can only be evaluated as ethical when they are aligned with a celebration of the divine telos within psyche (p. 147).

Bryson's *Persons and Immortality* should occupy shelf space in every divinity department, religious institution, theology school, and philosophy library. And it should be prominent on the shelves of medical schools and accessible to their ethical-counseling services regarding end-of-life decisions. What I have said should make clear that Bryson has worked hard and conscientiously at matters of life and death for their practical, moral, logical, and religious implications as they affect dying individuals. And indeed affect all of us who harbor hope for continuation. The teleological perspective on life bestows on us these difficult questions which our psyches, anyway, affirm as essential in thinking about the quality of human life, about each other, and about why anything exists at all. The greatest moral advance of all times, in my judgment (its origin in Judaism, continuation in Christianity, embodiment and emphasis in Locke and the American legal system), is that the individual is important and that the individual's own life counts as nothing less than an absolute good. If we can be convinced that our personal immortality is an essential plank in this irreproachable moral idea of the sanctity of the individual person, then a mature and comprehensive defense such as Bryson's should be taken very seriously.

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