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Just Thinking, 01/27/03:

Is There Meaning When the Curtain Closes?

by Justin Katz

Mark, of the Minute Particulars Web site, tells me that he's yet to receive a satisfactory response from atheists when he refutes their assertion that "things matter because they end." Because our lives are finite and short, the thinking goes, they are so very "precious." Of itself, there is nothing in that statement with which a religious person would disagree. As with evolution, however, the atheist means this as a justification apart from God, removing the necessity of Him and, therefore, reason to believe in Him.

The construction may sound poetic, and it's got a nice circular quality whereby the atheist can say, "precisely," to the suggestion that, with nothing being eternal, *nothing* would be *unprecious*. We ought to treasure everything, you see, from pleasure to pain, from love to hatred, because the point of life is to enjoy everything because everything... ends. And, well, there's nothing that you can enjoy forever. I see many of our culture's modern problems hidden in those sentences; a rape ends, after all.

What symmetry the theory has falls apart quickly when the attempt is made to expand upon it and make it relevant to living life. In a previous round of this periodic discussion, Jody Wheeler responded to Mark thus:

While we were here, while we did what we did, and acted as we acted, that is what was important. That can never be removed, even on our passing. That the monuments we created fall down, that the bridges that we build wash away or get replaced, that is just the fact of a thing, the starting point for the opportunity to set ourselves against the tide of change and challenge it so as to impact, as deeply, magnificently and fully as possible, for as long as possible. Nothing can ever change the fact that we did it. Others may forget. Others may never know. We know. We remember, to the end of our days, what we accomplished and what transpired as a product of our efforts.

The paragraph can be peeled sentence by sentence, and Mark has done so. The underlying problem, tellingly endemic among atheistic arguments, is that it skirts a vague spirituality and never really justifies its more grandiose points. The fact that a deed done can never be negated is meaningless without some presupposed logbook of activity in the universe, and if the actor's memory *is* that logbook, then death would erase it.

This way of looking at accomplishments also presents no payoff for deeds that won't come to fruition until after one's death. Perhaps, in those cases, we will know not what "transpired as a product of our efforts," but what *might* transpire. But such a limited hope is surely a dubious motivation. More disquieting is that the only injunction put forth is to push for change. No specificity — just change for its own sake, as a fluid monument of our existence.

I think this may have something to do with the increasingly desperate drive to become famous — at worst, infamous. Fame increases the likelihood that a deathbed assumption that some aspect of the life lived might endure for a time would be correct. Attempting to explain death without reference to God to his daughter inspired Billy Joel to write the song "Lullaby (Goodnight My Angel)." The lesson comes with the ending:

Someday we'll all be gone
 But lullabies go on and on...
 They never die
 That's how you
 And I
 Will be

That is Billy Joel's "immortality": living on through a melody, creation. The solace offered when I cried at first realizing that I would die was that my end was a long way away. Leaving some piece of myself with greater longevity than my life span would cast that "long way" further into the future. This sort of "afterlife," however, only lasts as long as somebody someday knows. Such concepts as entropy and corrosion become overwhelmingly gloomy.

No *New York Times* bestseller will outlast the Earth. Almost none will last even that long. In his 1819 poem, "Ozymandias," Percy Bysshe Shelley describes a crumbling statue in the desert, notable only for its "sneer of cold command" and an engraving: "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" Perhaps while observing his face wrought in stone, Ozymandias would have thought the despair to derive from a feeling of insignificance in the face of such accomplishment. How right he would have been!

Minute Particulars Mark suggests that the despair and meaninglessness and inability to construct a system of morality without the Eternal is not "a reason superstitiously to fashion a 'sky god' or some fictitious set of rules." For Mark, "the existence of God implies eternal law which implies natural law." Confusion around the distinction between starting from God and discerning meaning and holding up meaning as proof of God, he believes, "causes many misunderstandings between... those who think not all be-ing is material being and those who think all be-ing is material being."

In my view, this is no "confusion" causing "misunderstandings"; this is the essence of the difference between faith and no faith. Those inclined toward non-faith seek to explain the world from "me" out. They want belief about reality and morality to derive logically and consistently within them. A believer is comfortable taking his own longing for external meaning and a sense of morality as proof that they exist, and they can only exist in a reality that includes God.

An atheist instinctively distrusts answers to a longing that strike him as inexplicable in their independence from rationality. For this reason, the fact that a scenario both with meaning and without God is untenable ultimately leads atheists to believe that there is no meaning — not that there is a God. Then, they proceed to invent ways to impart or skirt the meaning that they so clearly sense to exist. Mr. Wheeler’s eloquence toward stating his own conviction only further betrays the position’s flimsy construction. What atheists refuse to believe is that they are not so precious that all of reality ought to be defined on the basis of them.

As a writer, I think part of what makes the creative means of defining a piece of reality and “making a mark” so appealing is that the audience is posited. The author is reaching forward to others, imagining a laugh or an “aha!” Similarly, a reader reaches back toward the writer, perhaps picturing him testing out facial expressions to better describe them or smiling at a secret woven into the text. Now that a few years have passed and I can peruse my novel, *A Whispering Through the Branches*, with some degree of separation, I have discovered that the connection is not tangibly made. The writer is a different person, and I might as well be imagining the writing.

Yet, I sense the younger man’s thoughts and feelings, just as I sense the thoughts and feelings of William Faulkner. We can *feel* the connection. We can *sense* that we are part of something much bigger than ourselves. Even when we don’t believe it, we know, somewhere in our souls, that our being “can never be removed, even on our passing.” What gives life its meaning, and its wonder, is that it moves beyond our limited vision yet does just that: moves on.