

PERSONS AND DREAMS OF POSSIBILITY IN RELIGION AND SCIENCE

by Edwin C. Laurensen

As we ponder the intellectual landscape of the last one hundred fifty years, we are struck by the fragmentation of the concept of the person. Indeed, we wonder if such a thing exists. And yet we live and interact as social, political, religious, and legal beings, acting as if we know who and what we are. Despite continuing horrors, in many societies we worship human rights. Self-expression, self-development, and self-aggrandizement through possessions and accomplishment rule our days. And where the individualism of the enlightened West and those who have adopted its values does not rule, the embedded understanding remains of a personal essence that may survive death.

The efflorescence of the individual and its accompanying destruction of the shackles of superstition have thrown the individual into the most radical doubt. But for all our perceptions of determinism, manipulation and manipulability, brain scans that would betray our ability to conceal our intentions and lies, cultural contexts that create us and allow us to think the thoughts that render our culture's truths relative and contingent, as yet we can see no way to shed our perceptions of separateness. Nor can we avoid the brute facts of individual desire, suffering, and death.

If we have no soul, if we have no essence, can religion tell us anything useful about ourselves? Is there a place where the external and internal perspectives meet? Can we harbor them simultaneously?

These problems are both philosophical and empirical. Philosophically, their nature does not depend on scientific specifics; their outline has been known since Darwin and Nietzsche (if not before); disbelief in the Freudian formulations that were taken to overthrow human notions of self-mastery one hundred years ago merely displaces the issue. But the problems are empirical at least in the sense that, from the evidence of both popular and high culture, people no more doubt that they are potentially coherent

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persons (and individuals) than they ever have. They seek genuineness, to follow their bliss, to be in flow, but they do not doubt that there is something to seek. Further, how can we do without notions of human rights, since it is the individual who suffers from their deprivation? Do we have any concept of the legitimacy of political authority that is not based, at least in a roundabout way, on the consent of the governed (other than discredited concepts founded in revelation or the “mission” of parties with no ideology left beyond maintenance of their own power)? But who is there to consent?

As a lawyer I deal in a world in which everything rests on the concept of the responsible individual. Debates pervade the theoretical literature on punishment, intruding incoherently into legislation and practice, with regard to the sense of retributive notions, on the one hand, and the denial of the possibility of individual self-control implicit in the “civil” detainment of those classified as sexual predators, on the other. But for most legal purposes those are peripheral issues, whereas the existence of a person who can contract to bind herself to take (or not take) future actions, and who is responsible for the consequences to others of both her deliberations and her negligence (and all style of formulations in between—recklessness, bad faith, “gross” negligence), is never questioned. If such notions rest on quicksand, we have nonetheless built remarkably successful (relatively, that is) societies on that foundation. But, convinced though we are of the importance of the rule of law, democracy, and the centrality of insisting that it is the norm for people to manage their own affairs, we have a weak grip—if any—on how to foster their emulation (for example, Iraq).

As I have written this piece, the March 2007 *Zygon* arrived in the mail, with its article by Leon Turner, “First Person Plural: Self-Unity and Self-Multiplicity in Theology’s Dialogue with Psychology,” touching on many of the same themes. What Turner does not treat is that the theological concepts of personhood that he parses, in contrast to the fragmentation of the self in portions of the modern “human sciences” (allied with and informing the philosophical fragmentation of the self), pervade our everyday practical lives and our experience. The potentially bridging notion of the narrative self to which he alludes at the end can hardly support the autonomous political and legal self. Why find an end in the narrative self if there is no point to the narrative? If we cannot at least *construct* selves to serve as a foundation for our notions of how a society should operate, where can we look?

The easy “answer” lies in hand-waving pabulum asserting the need to understand that there is neither individual without community nor community without individuals. The hard problem lies in figuring out whether it matters that we have no idea whether we can solve the apparently insoluble problem. The apparently insoluble problem is that, if it is the point of the community to foster the flourishing of individuals, and if individu-

als neither exist nor can be fostered without the community, is an inter-self-referentially closed system, with parts at least partially undefined and shifting in their boundaries, sufficient? If we found a way to unconflictually hand off part of our individuality to our communities—even to multiple communities—would we merely displace the question of “why bother,” or would we solve it?

Is there a distinctive contribution to be made by a journal devoted to religion and science in addressing matters of this degree of fundamentality? I suggest that it could do so only by acknowledging the role of imagination. We will not learn what, if anything, we can understand and project about ourselves from scientific facts considered solely from an external perspective. Facts can constrain possibilities, but they cannot tell us what possibilities are. Religion is part of our dream of possibilities; its study provides a lens for the observation of many aspects of what the human enterprise is and can be about, of explorations of what it might mean to have different notions of our selves, and why it might matter if we did. If the acid analysis of science eats us away to nothing, it will eat itself. That is why this journal matters.