

THE USES OF DEATH

Review of *From Here to Eternity: Reflections on Death, Immortality, and the Resurrection of the Body* by Randall B. Smith

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A Presbyterian colleague once explained to me that his rule of faith is to believe whatever is most “uplifting.” He found it more uplifting to believe in reincarnation than in death, judgment, and resurrection, because it “gives us as many chances as we need to get it right.” The fact that Christian scripture and his denomination’s doctrine staunchly opposed his view gave him no pause, because he thought those were really about “uplift” too.

This attitude troubled me because it seemed not just wishful thinking, but thoughtless wishing. Historically, millions have found the prospect of rebirth after rebirth a better reason for despair than rejoicing. Buddhism sought an escape from the wheel of rebirth; it did not call the wheel an escape. Moreover, my colleague seemed to separate whether to believe something from whether it is true. Isn’t thinking it true what it *means* to believe it?

One early section title in *From Here to Eternity* reads: “The Challenge: Finding a View of the Afterlife That Does Not Make This Life Meaningless.” My first dismayed thought was “Oh, no—is this going to be *that* kind of book?” Is it going to be the kind of book that sets what is “uplifting” over what is true, as my colleague did? To my relief, the answer was “No.” It is not that kind of book; it is the opposite of that kind of book. Unlike my colleague, it asks: “What kind of authentic life can be built on illusion?”

Yet Smith’s book persuades me that I should have cut my colleague some slack. For although the book urges us to seek hope, it urges a *reasonable* hope, and though it encourage taking our shared intuitions seriously, it demands doing so with complete honesty. The Creator Himself must be the source of our intuitions about meaning – and where else, but with them, could we start? “The problem with your colleague,” I can imagine Smith saying, “was not that he consulted his intuitions and searched for meaning, but that he was lazy. He didn’t follow the trail of breadcrumbs far enough. You should have urged him to follow it further. His hope of reincarnation was not a reasonable hope, because it was incapable of accounting for *all* of our shared intuitions about life and death.”

It turns out that the Church agrees with Smith about intuitions. As we read in the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes*: “Not only is man tormented by pain and by the advancing deterioration of his body, but even more so by a dread of perpetual extinction. *He rightly follows the intuition of his heart* when he abhors and repudiates the utter ruin and total disappearance of his own person. He rebels against death *because he bears in himself an eternal seed which cannot be reduced to sheer matter.*” [my italics]

One might even call close scrutiny of our intuitions another approach to what Thomas Aquinas calls the “preambles of faith.” St. Thomas shows that since the reality, power, wisdom, and goodness of God can be philosophically demonstrated, it is reasonable to consider Revelation possible; and since reasoning cannot find out everything we need, it is reasonable to consider Revelation necessary. The interrogation of intuitions arrives at this conclusion by another path. Since in view of the promptings of our hearts, we cannot ultimately be at rest in any other understanding of our destiny than that proposed by the faith, it is reasonable to hope that it is true, and no considerations demonstrate that it isn’t. So though faith exceeds reason, faith is reasonable.

Consider the intuition that love is somehow stronger than death. Lazy consideration leads some people to hope that our beloved dead live forever “in our hearts,” but this hope is not reasonable. Even the pagans knew memory fades. Following Joseph Ratzinger, Smith suggests that perhaps this is why Homer depicted the souls in Hades as mere shadows, like dry leaves. Surely if love really is stronger than death, then it is reasonable to hope that we can be reunited after death with those whom we loved in this one.

Smith’s book doesn’t address every hot issue. For example, although it makes clear that there is a real judgment, and *that* damnation is more than a mere logical possibility, it spends little time on that theme and does not take up such controversies as the new universalism. What it does do—with unerring aim—is zero in on the sorts of things that preoccupy everyday people – and Smith has in mind all everyday people, not just believers. We are all going to die anyway, so is it better to ignore death, or in some sense to live *toward* death as a kind of liberation? (Chapter 1.) Since death strikes us with fear, wouldn’t it be better to monkey with our biology so that our present lives could be extended forever? (Chapter 2.) Granted that non-Christian views aren’t adequate to make sense of our intuitions about the meaning of human life, what did the pagans say about immortality? (Chapter 3.) It would be too much to say that everyday people are preoccupied with examining pagan thought, but insofar as the pagans had many of the same preoccupations we do, their reflections are worth thinking about too. These three chapters are almost like a very good, short liberal arts education.

At the risk of caricature – for Smith’s discussion is subtle and dense -- let me offer just a few hints of the themes in these chapters. *Why not ignore death, viewing it as mere nothingness?* The prospect of nothingness does not quell our fears; “quite the opposite,” Smith observes. We may even prefer hell to nothingness. *Why not just focus on what we can control?* This makes it difficult to answer someone who after losing his self-sufficiency, decides that life is no longer worth living. *Why not say that our greatness lies precisely in facing the prospect of extinction?* By nature we are beings who look to the future, our own and that of posterity; it is hard to see how we can face obliteration without living in its shadow.

But why not develop technology to transcend ourselves and live forever, free from natural constraints? If we throw away even our own nature, it is not easy to see by what standard our modifications are improvements. Even by our present standard, would we really be better off with, say, tuned-up compassion? To think so is to misunderstand the nature of compassion. Virtuous people don’t just feel more or less of a given emotion all the time. A good person feels

the right things, for the right reasons, toward the right people, on the right occasions, to the right degree. Feeling so much sympathy that I am unable to punish the convicted mass murderer doesn't make me compassionate; it makes me a ninny. So even though virtue is habitual, it can't be hard wired, and anything that can be hard wired isn't virtue

Someone might say "But if we live forever, we will have *time* to become perfectly virtuous!" No, virtue isn't a function of sheer age, but of which habits we cultivate – and if we aren't becoming better, we are becoming worse. Granted endless years in this life, a person who hasn't yet learned kindness even upon attaining the age of threescore and ten will probably just go on becoming nastier. Moreover it is curious that a culture devoted to extending life has become increasingly attracted to suicide. And there is something suspicious about the fascination many people have with "getting rid of the self you no longer want to be and of absolving yourself of responsibility for it" – not to mention the relationships we no longer want to have.

The specifically Christian view of death, resurrection of the body, and, yes, judgment, is not taken up until the second half of the book. (Chapters 3-6.) Smith discusses not only the end of the individual earthly life, but also the end of history, convincingly arguing that the Christian view of death achieves what all those other views cannot. One of his themes is that even in our churches, we often approach death in a manner more reflective of secular notions of the autonomous self than of the faith's deepest insights concerning Resurrection and the Body of Christ. He confronts various common misunderstandings, for example that heaven is just a place in which everything is like here, but better. Heaven is not just a place but a person; the redeemed will enjoy perfect communion with Christ, and, through Him, with others. Smith follows this critique with trenchant prescriptions concerning Christian social practices. Death should not be a solitary experience away from loved ones, mediated by beeping machines. As John Donne put it, "every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main."

An unusual strength of the book is that it takes the challenge of transhumanism seriously. You would think that just one experience of building "a tower that reaches the heavens" would be enough, but some people never learn; transhumanists are sprouting from trees. Ten years ago, when I taught about the project of transcending human nature—the sort of thing C.S. Lewis anticipated in *The Abolition of Man*—my students found it difficult to believe that anyone would embrace it. Now many of them are beginning find it difficult to believe that anyone *wouldn't* embrace it.

True, so far my students are still horrified by such proposals as the "enhancement" of soldiers so that they will be incapable of disobeying orders. Not many are attracted by such prospects as grafting in genes for chimpanzee muscles to make us stronger. Somewhat greater numbers experience a dark fascination with the idea of living 24 hours a day in virtual reality—but they are conflicted about whether what seemed real would be really real.

But these are sideshows. I suspect that for most of them, the real draw of transhumanism is the prospect of liberation from mortality. People who want to live forever just as they do now rarely ask hard questions. To Smith's great credit, he asks many of them. What would the world be like if the old never had to give way to the new? If we never faced death, could we take anything

seriously in life? Would we really want our existence to be reduced to an everlasting vacation at Disney World?

The question I find most troubling about the prospect of that sort of immortality is “How could we endure a world without the laughter of children?” For the abolition of death would also require the abolition of birth. My students are not much moved by this question, perhaps because there is so little room for the laughter of children in their lives even now. The pill has brought us a world which is “sex-positive” but children-negative—or in which children are a mere “lifestyle enhancement.”

Smith’s discussion of transhumanism is distinguished from Lewis’s by the attention it gives to the consequences of earthly immortality, something Lewis does not discuss at all. Never mind a “one child” policy; there would have to be a “no child” policy. “No sex for the next four hundred years?” Smith asks. “Or will we require sterilization?” He also points out that death, whether in plants, animals, or human beings, clears the way for new growth. What would a world be like in which the old no longer had to give way to the new? Would our elites become self-perpetuating?

Smith also elaborates a difficulty which Lewis *did* discuss: That “Man’s power over Nature turns out to be a power exercised by some men over other men with Nature as its instrument.” Who then would control the “instrument,” and how would its supposed benefits be distributed? For example, would immortality be restricted to those in power, or to those rich enough to pay for the technology? How would the Everlasting Few regard the mayfly existences of the rest of us?

Even apart from the immortality project, I wish Smith had been able to give more attention to the relationship between attitudes toward death and attitudes toward sex. By nature, the sexual powers are directed toward intertwined purposes of turning the wheel of the generations and uniting the procreative partners. It is hard to believe that the rising obsession with living forever has nothing to do with the separation of sexual intercourse from the hope of posterity.

But no book can do everything. Perhaps Smith can take up that topic in his next book.