

FROM OUTSIDE OF ETHICS

One of an occasional series of reviews of books outside the bounds of moral, political, legal, and social philosophy that may nevertheless be of deep interest to people working in those fields.

Johnston, Mark. *Saving God: Religion after Idolatry*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009. Pp. 248. \$24.95 (cloth).

Johnston, Mark. *Surviving Death*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010. Pp. 408. \$35.00 (cloth).

Although they are presented as companion pieces, these books are very different. One is a self-described jeremiad, a fiercely comic attack on the conceptions of God at work in the great monotheistic religions, on idolatry and supernaturalism. It aims to do better: to sketch and defend a wholly naturalistic source of religious salvation, a salvation we need and without which authentic virtue is impossible. Though it gives arguments, it “is not a work of philosophy” (*Saving God*, xi), and its intended audience is correlatively broad. The other is a demanding exploration of the ethics and metaphysics of personal identity. It is no doubt a work of philosophy, whatever its audience, but its conclusions are no less dazzling: that the self that is the object of privileged self-concern does not exist; that, in its most terrifying form, death is impossible; and that it is something one can literally survive.

Despite the stylistic discrepancies that make them hard to integrate, Mark Johnston’s *Saving God* and *Surviving Death* belong together. What they most significantly share is respect for ethical ideas found compelling by many but largely dismissed by philosophers: that we need salvation; that it is part of the task of philosophy to reconcile us to the “large-scale defects of human life,” to show how radical virtue is possible and to help us face the challenge posed by death to the importance of being good. That philosophy should address these matters is an unfashionable thought. Do they call for reasoning or therapy? But Johnston takes them seriously. In doing so, he has written two of the most unusual books in recent philosophy. Whatever the fate of their particular arguments, they should inspire more unconventional work in ethics, work that is attentive to spiritual demands often neglected in secular thought. In this review, I try to isolate the lines of argument most relevant to moral philosophy, most rich in possibility, and most suggestive of directions for future work.

I

What does “God” mean? According to Johnston, “God” is a descriptive name that means “the Highest One”: the most perfect being there could possibly be. To believe in God is to have an attitude of faith and trust in what is in fact the Highest One. It follows that it is not sufficient for belief in God that I take the god of my religion to be God. After all, I might be wrong.

One of Johnston’s provocative claims is that many theists do not believe in God, despite themselves. We have a religious sense, albeit mainly negative, of

what the Highest One could be: it could not have malicious intent or contempt for truth, nor could the Highest One act contrary to reason. If we lacked even this much, revelation would be impossible: nothing could be presented in experience as the Highest One if we had no conception of what it would be. This is a general truth about what it is to experience something as F. The question thus arises: Are the gods of the three monotheistic religions God? To begin with, Johnston argues, we know enough about what they are supposed to be like to know that they are not the same god: “on any close inspection, Yahweh and God the Father seem to be quite dissimilar personalities, as dissimilar, you might say, as Tony Soprano and Mr. Rogers” (30). Nor, in their thirst for supplication and revenge, should they strike us as perfect beings. But Johnston’s main complaint is intellectual: insofar as these religions are supernaturalist, their gods ask us to suspend or reject our best epistemic practices, the practices of science that justify naturalism. This is something God would never do. If this is right, then even if they exist, “either the gods of the three monotheisms are not God, or they are God, but only seen through a very, very dark glass” (75).

For some readers, the path to this conclusion will be the heart of the book. It may strike them as tendentious, even offensive, and impossible to ignore. I will, however, ignore it here. This is in part because I am not ready to assess the readings of scripture that figure in Johnston’s argument but more because the excitement of *Saving God* lies in its attempt to provide an ethics of salvation that does without the elements of traditional theism. If “[one] kind of ideal reader would be an intelligent young person who is religious, but who feels that his or her genuine religious impulses are being strangled by what he or she is being asked to believe” (xi), another is the atheist who feels that his religious impulses have not been strangled by what he knows. These impulses crave an object. Can it be found in a wholly natural world?

Johnston’s expression of the religious impulse is one of the most compelling moments in his book. Though it is not part of the meaning of “God,” it is part of the common conception of monotheism that God is the source of our salvation. “Genuine or true religion must be genuinely directed upon what religion is for. There are certain large-scale structural defects in human life that no amount of psychological adjustment or practical success can free us from. These include arbitrary suffering, aging (once it has reached the corrosive stage), our profound ignorance of our condition, the isolation of ordinary self-involvement, the vulnerability of everything we cherish to time and chance, and finally, to untimely death” (15). To be saved is to inhabit a form of life in which we are reconciled to this. Not that everything turns out for the best, but even in the face of these defects, there is “a way to go on, keeping faith in the importance of goodness, and an openness to love” (16). Who has not felt that life is broken, that the world is out of joint? For Johnston, religion speaks to this despair. It offers a new orientation in which the large-scale defects are somehow addressed and so affords “a reservoir of energy otherwise dissipated in denial of, and resistance to, necessary suffering” (16). Understood in this way, religion need not be theistic, as Buddhism is not. One might then ask: What is the difference between religion and a therapeutic process by which our emotional response to the large-scale defects is changed? Johnston does not address this question as such, but the answer may be that, in religion, the source of salvation is

cognitive. There is something we can know about the world and our place within it, lived attention to which constitutes the religious or redeemed form of life. In theistic religions, this is knowledge of God.

Johnston connects salvation with a radical abnegation of self-interest, an overcoming of ordinary, conventional virtue, in which we hear God's command to love one's neighbor as oneself. The ethical demand is the demand of agape, to care as much about the legitimate interests of others as one's own. This connection is undertheorized in *Saving God*: it emerges, in one determinate form, as the theme of *Surviving Death*. Even apart from it, the project is ambitious enough: to defend a naturalized theism that will reconcile us to the large-scale defects of human life.

The starting point for this constructive task is the idea of the Highest One as the absolute source of reality. Everything else is ontologically dependent on the Highest One, and the Highest One is dependent on nothing. It may seem to follow that God cannot have parts or even attributes since it would depend on them for its nature: God is simple. But this is a mistake. What we need, Johnston argues, is the concept of a dependent part, one that is ontologically derivative from the whole. We find such parts in living things: an account of what it is to be me need not mention this tooth, while an account of what it is to be this tooth would have to mention me. So it is with God and his parts or attributes. We can think of God as "the outpouring of Existence Itself by way of its exemplification in ordinary existents" (113), the bits and pieces of reality that depend on it.

Now, the obvious and immediate response to this proposal, other than dismay at its obscurity, is that it is a form of pantheism, on which God is identified with nature or the laws by which it operates. It is hard to see how lived attention to this could be the source of salvation and extraordinary virtue. Here Johnston would agree: "How could the Highest One just *be* the laws of nature?" (117). "On the hypothesis that the natural realm is all there is, talk of God has little point" (127). His doctrine is not pantheism, but *panentheism*: God is partly constituted by the natural realm, but his reality goes beyond what is captured in its purely scientific description. What science abstracts from is the realm of sense, "the realm of that in virtue of which things are intelligible" (128), and so, in effect, from the mind of God.

What follows is the densest and most difficult phase of Johnston's program. He begins with a picture of thought and perception as the presence to us of the world itself. Johnston cites Heidegger's conception of disclosure, but he may as well have mentioned John McDowell (*Mind and World* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994]). What is present to us is as fine-grained as the different ways that things can seem to be, as discriminating as Fregean sense. If the world is a totality of facts, these facts are true propositions, individuated by the rational consistency of mental acts which take them as their objects. When it is possible to know or perceive one thing but not another, or to accept and reject two claims without self-contradiction, our mental acts reflect distinctions in reality, not just in us. Except perhaps in complete hallucination, the modes of presentations that distinguish mental acts are "objective (if sometimes relational) features of the things themselves" (144). In Johnston's idiom, we are "Samplers" not "Producers" of presence.

How does Johnston argue for this conclusion? By insisting that, if we are producers of presence, intentionality must be reductively explained, and this cannot be done. We cannot identify “aboutness” with some mixture of causation and resemblance, as reductionists propose, since we cannot explain why any particular naturalistic relation, and not some subtle variant, “makes the lights of intentionality go on” (139).

Suppose he is right about this: there is no hope for reductive naturalism in the philosophy of mind. It is less clear why this is the sole alternative to his view, why we cannot be nonreductionists without the verdant metaphysics of objective presence. There may be an argument *from* reductive naturalism to the denial of that metaphysics. The naturalistic relations that are meant to constitute intentionality are not relations to facts as true propositions but to the states of affairs that make them true. Nothing can be caused by the brightness of Hesperus rather than Phosphorus. It follows that modes of presentation are not differences in what we relate to in the world but in the inner representations that mediate our relation to objects and properties. We are producers not samplers of presence. What Johnston needs, however, is the converse of this: an argument from the negation of objective presence to reductive naturalism, so that his refutation of the latter would afflict the former, too. For Johnston, “the almost universal conviction that we are Producers of Presence relies on an auxiliary hypothesis, the hypothesis of natural representation” (133). But it is not easy to see why. Perhaps the reasoning is this. If there is no objective presence, and reality is coarse grained, we need a reductive account of sense or mode of presentation. Presumably, the difference between a state of affairs’ presenting one way and another lies in the difference of inner representation that mediates between that state and me. Unlike modes of presentation taken as objective features of objects, representations are contingently related to what they represent. It is this relation that we try and fail to capture in naturalistic terms.

There are suggestions of this argument at 141–47, but it is not unproblematic. Why can’t the relation between mental item and worldly object be at once contingent and irreducible? And if it is not contingent, if representations are essentially related to their objects, why can’t they also be subjective: essentially dependent on the subjects to whom they belong?

Set these problems aside and turn back to the nature of God. Even if true, how does the metaphysics of objective presence make theological sense? How does it give us a God that could be the source of salvation? Johnston’s Thomistic thought is to explain God’s attributes by analogy. God’s mind is “the totality of fully adequate and complete modes of presentation of reality” (155), its power the laws of nature, its love the outpouring of existence itself in ordinary existents. He even suggests, more cautiously, that this outpouring is “for the sake of the self-disclosure of Being,” an end that constitutes God’s will (158). It is in lived attention to this pantheistic vision that our salvation is said to lie. That I exist at all is one gift, that reality is present to me another. In my gratitude for these gifts, I begin to be reconciled to the large-scale defects of human life.

You may anticipate an objection: Is this really it? *Mind and World* as onto-theology? The reenchantment of the world is satisfying, no doubt: all the ways that anything could seem shine forth prismatically; the world is intelligible in its deepest grounds, thought and fact coeval. But to call this “salvific” is too

much. It is not pantheism, but it is not different enough. My reaction is something like the reverse. Why should the metaphysics of objective presence *not* be found consoling? One might, without irrationality, be thus reconciled to life. The question is, why aren't there alternatives? Perhaps there are many ways to be redeemed, some of us by lived attention to God as natural law, others by nontheistic means. Come to think of it, when Johnston attacks the monotheistic religions in the earlier part of his book, he does so by arguing that their gods are not God, not that they cannot save us. He does say that "if there is a Highest One, there is nothing that is more deserving of our fealty" (95). But what he seems to need is something else: an argument that pantheism is special in that it is the only rational source of salvation or because it not only permits but compels our reconciliation to the large-scale defects of human life. (When I contemplate these defects, I want to be shown that it is wrong to feel despair, not just permissible not to.) As far as I can tell, we don't get either argument here.

This is not to mention the moral function of God in Johnston's scheme: to help us "overcome the centripetal force of self-love" (158). Does pantheism make altruistic motivation possible? But it was possible anyway, if less common than we hope. Does it show the irrationality of self-interest? How? What we lack is a worked-out theory of the ethics of salvation: of the rationality of radical altruism and despair, confronted with the facts. This is what we are promised in *Surviving Death*, at least for one specific fact, or prospect: that wise or foolish, just or unjust, good or bad, we come to nothing in the end.

II

I said before that, in *Saving God*, Johnston connects salvation—being reconciled to the large-scale defects of human life—with radical altruism or agape. On reflection, the link is far from clear. Why can't there be unreconciled altruism, bitter but selfless, or redemption without agape, a smugly egoistic reconciliation to the defects of life? Johnston answers these questions in *Surviving Death*. He gives two arguments. The first is that death is a threat to the importance of being good. Being reconciled to death is thus a condition of agape. The second is that, when we see how to be reconciled, how to see through death, we recognize radical altruism as "reason's own command" (*Surviving Death*, 236). Being reconciled to death is thus sufficient for agape, at least in the practically rational.

It is not hard to share the sentiments behind the first remark: staring at the void, the point of everything seems to fade. That the wicked may prosper and the good go to no reward can be felt as a cosmic insult. But is there really an argument here? Why should death imply that nothing matters? Why do the virtuous need a better fate if there is reason to be good? Surely not as an inducement to virtue.

Johnston knows that many will resist his claims. As he observes, "[the] dominant view [is] that it *doesn't* follow from the supposed fact that all alike go down to the nothingness of the grave that righteousness or goodness is less important" (7). He offers a diagnosis. "Modern moral rationalists" see the content of morality as categorical: "[moral] goodness is a normative property that attaches to acts because of the kinds of acts they are, and independently of

whether those acts are rewarded" (7–8). They wrongly infer that its authority is absolute. In a move that is reminiscent of Philippa Foot ("Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives," reprinted in her *Virtues and Vices* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978], 157–73), Johnston distinguishes the content of given requirements—are they conditional on the consequences or on what we happen to desire?—from their rational weight. The requirements of etiquette are categorical, too, but they matter very little. The unconditional content of morality settles nothing.

This seems right as far as it goes: the inference in question is no good. But it misses the deeper point. Why not think of importance itself as a property that actions have regardless of their rewards, in virtue of their good effects on others, or their relation to rights and needs? This is the real content of the dominant view—not the dubious inference above.

The treatment of the second argument, for the rational requirement of agape, is more complete: it occupies two-thirds of *Surviving Death*. In the background of these chapters is a powerful, accessible survey of the modern philosophy of personal identity as "an offshoot of the Christian, and in particular, the Protestant, theology of death" (22). This framing makes for brilliant pedagogy, though for Johnston it is more than that. His verdict is that the self that would be the proper object of privileged self-concern is an illusion; that death is therefore nothing to us; and that it is irrational to give less weight to the interests of others than to our own. In the final third of the book, Johnston argues for, and attempts to make intelligible, the prospect of personal survival after the demise of one's physical body and individual personality. This survival is not supernatural or other worldly: the good survive in the ordinary lives of others.

Although I will return to the final claim below, it is not my principal focus. This is in part for limitations of space, in part because it remains conjectural: "the thesis that we are Protean [in a way that would allow us to survive death] cannot be *demonstrated* in the course of half a lecture" (49). The argument for agape, in contrast, is intended as a demonstration. How exactly does it go?

It is complicated, and in order to simplify, I will proceed in a different order from the book. Start with the first-person concept, the distinctive use of "I" that figures in thinking "I am hungry" not "KS is hungry," where through self-concern the first thought has an urgency the second lacks. As Johnston argues, the subjective use of "I" is not a mere indexical, its content exhausted by the convention that "I" denotes the person or human being who used the word. Its mode of presentation is richer than that. Here is how Johnston brings this out:

The most immediate way in which I am given to myself is as the one at the center of this arena of presence and action. . . . The extent of that arena includes all the items that are in principle open to introspection in the broad sense. This includes the deliverances of proprioception and the immediate knowledge of which intentional actions [I am] currently performing or trying to perform. . . . So given in my total experience now is an apparent arena that, as it were, bounds my thought and experience and makes it seem like a unified whole. And this bound or arena is structured

around another apparent item, the implied position to which external items and mental events present. (139–40)

Although his terminology is idiosyncratic, Johnston's thought is not so strange. In effect, the mode of presentation associated with the first-person concept is the direct, unmediated mode of introspective self-knowledge. An account of the subjective "I" that ignores this aspect, like the mere indexical account, cannot be right.

Notice, however, that I can perfectly well imagine waking up to an arena of presence and action at the center of which is a rational parrot, a human being other than KS, or nothing physical at all. This is so far consistent with a view on which the subjective "I" rigidly designates the particular human being, KS, who is in fact at the center, given to me as the object of self-knowledge. The first of Johnston's many surprising claims is that this view is false. In whatever sense it is true that I am KS, this is not a fact of identity. The subjective "I" does not strictly denote a human being or any material thing. This conclusion is established, he thinks, by the "paradox of auto-alienation" (194–98), the crux of which is that, even when I know that KS is at the center now, the appearance of possibility in imagining myself as a rational parrot or Mark Johnston still remains. In other cases of rigid designation that generate illusions of possibility, as when the use of "water" for the actual watery stuff appears to leave it open that water is XYZ, the illusion fades when we learn the relevant facts, in this case facts of chemistry. Although it is semantically coherent to suppose that water is XYZ before I know the truth about H₂O, it is semantically incoherent afterward. If I am semantically competent, it no longer seems possible. By contrast, Johnston urges, there is no semantic incoherence in supposing that I wake up tomorrow as Mark Johnston, even as I know that he is not at the center of this arena of presence and action now. Semantic competence does not prevent this from seeming possible. These facts rule out a semantics for the subjective "I" on which it rigidly designates the human being KS.

Before I address this paradox, let me complete the line of thought. If it does not stand for a human being, what is the referent of the subjective "I"? Could it refer to a substance whose persistence conditions, unlike those of a human being, allow for survival through radical change, incarnated now in KS, later in the body of parrot, and then in no body at all? Am I an immaterial soul? No, for on empirical grounds we should doubt that there is any such thing. Could "I" refer not to a substance but to a "cross-time bundle" united by relations of psychological continuity and connectedness, as in the neo-Lockean view? No again, for in tracing cross-time bundles, unlike substances, we must employ criteria of "gen-identity," and the criteria invoked by neo-Lockeans are too complicated for us to use, at least as infants. A final thought is broached in chapter 3, that we might first pick out the arena of presence and action as a particular, defining "I" in terms of this, as a cross-time bundle of centers united by sameness of arena. The problem is that, although things may seem to occupy a container, an arena, when they are present to me, all we really have is the human being KS and his environment in relation to him. As Johnston puts it, there is no bed in which the stream of consciousness flows. If we attempt to use "I" in the imagined way, the best we can manage is to "trace" a merely intentional object,

the represented but unreal container of presence, as Macbeth might trace or reidentify the dagger that appears to him each day. Conclusion: the self that is the would-be object of privileged self-concern—the referent of the subjective “I”—does not exist.

As this lightning summary shows, Johnston’s account of self-identity is subtle and intricate. His conclusion is not unlike that of Elizabeth Anscombe in “The First Person” (reprinted in her *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1981], 21–36), though he does not cite her, and despite some echoes (as at 172 and 225), his argument is not the same. In sketching it, I have had to leave out details of great interest. Among them is a discussion of substance and temporal endurance that underlies the critique of neo-Lockean views. For Johnston, an enduring substance is not one that is wholly present at each time, as though it could never lose parts, but, more plausibly, one whose essence involves nothing that is not present whenever it exists. The nature of a substance is hylomorphic, involving matter and form, where the form tells us what it would be for the substance to exist at other times. For instance, an animal just is organic matter arranged by “a power of self-maintenance, development, and persistence” (51). Johnston’s application of this idea is controversial, as when he insists that an enduring substance could not be temporally intermittent. (This would be a quick argument against the possibility of time travel.) Even if we dispute such claims, however, the contribution to the metaphysics of persistence remains.

What about the paradox of autoalienation? It, too, is important even if it doesn’t work. And here I admit to skepticism. Although I can imagine experiences in which I seem to become a parrot or Mark Johnston, even when I know that the human being KS is now at the center of this arena, I cannot imagine such experiences as veridical. I can equally imagine, as an epistemic possibility, that I am not KS after all but a parrot or Mark Johnston hallucinating KS at the center or that I am not a human being but a shape shifter, able to morph into a parrot or lose my body altogether. What I cannot do is to hold the human being KS fixed at the center and have it seem a real possibility that I am ever anyone else. The possibilities in question are always ones in which he was never at the center at all. In this respect, my relation to the subjective “I” is like my relation to “water” on the common account. Once I know that water is H₂O, it no longer seems possible for it to be XYZ. But I can still suppose that I am wrong, that the chemists are deceived, and so conjure up scenarios of XYZ water, as Johnston conjures scenarios of becoming a parrot or a ghost.

There is more to say about this objection, but it is not clear how far it matters to Johnston’s project. He need not deny that “I” can be used in the way that I have described. What he cares about, ultimately, is the ethics of self-concern. The point of showing that the subjective “I” refers to nothing is to demonstrate the incoherence of egoism and the metaphysical impossibility of “my ownmost death” (159). If I have never existed, I can never cease to exist. Thus, it would be enough for Johnston if the fact that I am KS, understood as a matter of identity, has no more rational significance, no more power to justify action, than the fact that KS is identical to himself. And that is just what he believes.

The official view says that I have available a mode of presentation of the

identity fact that Johnston is Johnston which others do not have available to them. If I add to the factual content of the thugs' conversation ["We're going to beat up Johnston!"] the fact that Johnston is Johnston, then I am still left pretty cold. As a public-spirited citizen I am appalled, of course, but my special concern for myself is not engaged. But when I add the fact that I am Johnston, I really get warmed up. . . . The whole structure of my intelligibly egocentric self-concern now looks like it depends on my confusing a difference in the mode of presentation of a fact for a difference in the fact presented. That's bizarre. (147–48)

It is hard to see a cogent argument here. In the coarse-grained sense of "fact," the fact that I am KS is the fact that KS is identical to himself, but in the fine-grained sense familiar from *Saving God*, these facts are distinct: they are not the same truth. Why should the structure of practical reason be sensitive only to differences at the level of "truthmakers" or states of affairs, not to the level of proposition or sense, which is the level of rational intelligibility? It is true that on the mere indexical theory, where the content of "I" is exhausted by the convention of self-reference, the mode of presentation involved seems practically inert. As we might put it, why care so much about whoever said these words? But the view that "I" rigidly designates a human being is consistent with there being more to its mode of presentation: it picks out a human being as the one at the center of this arena of presence and action, the subject of introspective self-knowledge. It is this concept that engages with self-concern. If this is irrational, we have not been shown why.

The complaints in the last paragraph turn on an ambitious reading of the ethical material as giving an independent argument for Johnston's conclusion: insofar as it is the object of privileged self-concern, the subjective "I" cannot simply denote the human being KS. That is what one gathers from the book. But a modest reading is available. If Johnston is right about the paradox of autoalienation, the subjective "I" does not refer, except perhaps to an intentional object. Its failure to fit the facts is more profound than a failure to track distinctions at the coarse-grained level. The thoughts with which we justify giving "premium treatment" to ourselves rest on metaphysical mistakes (236). To recognize this is to see that the only rational pattern of concern is objective or impersonal. Since there is no self to ground them, there are no fundamentally egoistic reasons. If we should care about others at all, we should do so selflessly. One should love one's neighbor as oneself.

There is a final question, with which I will have to be brief. How does any of this mean that the good survive death? For Johnston, although there is no self worth privileging, the concept of personal identity is not defective. The question is how it operates. Here we can imagine variations: communities with different patterns of unmediated concern for future persons and corresponding conceptions of personal survival. There is no independent basis for these patterns, as there would be if the self were real. So far as the concept of a person goes, each pattern is equally good. How do we allow for this? Johnston's thought involves a reversal. Instead of taking the facts of personal identity to justify patterns of unmediated concern, we take patterns of unmediated concern to constitute the facts of identity over time. In this way, personal identity is "response-dependent," and persons are "Protean" (284). With the right pattern of

unmediated concern, one can survive, as a person, in another human being. Since the rational pattern is agape, unmediated love of all, the good survive in everyone, though their individual personalities are lost. For those who cannot escape egocentricity, who lack unmediated concern for others, there is no prospect of such survival. This is moral coherence: a world in which great injustice is punished and great virtue gets its reward.

III

We could pause here to entertain doubts. The argument for surviving death rests on the paradox of autoalienation. If the paradox can be solved while maintaining that the referent of the subjective "I" and the object of self-concern is a human being, as I have suggested, this argument cannot begin. Its other premise remains a conjecture even so: that personal identity is response dependent. We could give an evenhanded treatment of different communities, with their different patterns of concern, in other ways. And its conclusion is uncomfortable: it is not only the good who survive death but anyone whose concern for another is suitably unmediated; what one needs is concern for some, not all. It is small consolation that the survival on offer is thin, a pale image of self-identity.

Rather than pursue these matters here, I want to close by asking what moral philosophers can learn from these books, even if they are not convinced by them. In confronting the threat of death to the importance of being good, despair at the large-scale defects of human life, and the possible incoherence of self-concern, Johnston sets a philosophical task. How do we make sense of the ethical premises that drive these problems? Even as we feel their force, it is hard to convert it into argument; witness the failed attempts above. Yet it would be a mistake to put these premises aside.

Because he offers no theory of ethics or practical reason, no picture of what is involved in claims about the importance of being good or the rationality of despair, Johnston leaves the project of his own books incomplete. How could we pursue it? Thinking of death and the importance of being good, one might argue as follows. It is not a mistake to hold that our nature is involved in the foundations of ethics. It is an Aristotelian thought: our virtues are proper to what we are, fixed by our function or characteristic activity, our way of going on. No wonder, then, that it matters whether we are mortal animals or not. Look at it this way: if a rational butterfly came to believe that it was a mere caterpillar, might its virtues not then seem absurd? If it belongs to our nature to survive through death, our virtues proper to that existence and unintelligible without it, might death not seem a threat to the importance of being good? It does not make sense for creatures of the kind we wrongly think we are to orient themselves as our nature fits us to do. Life seems absurd; there must be something more. Is the sense of death as a threat to virtue an intimation of immortality?

I am not endorsing this line of thought, though I do not dismiss it. Nor do I offer it as interpretation. Its Aristotelian spin fits ill with the implicit Platonism of God as the Highest One, its perfections transcending the nature of kinds. My point is rather to suggest, however briefly, that a defense of Johnston's

premises could be made outside traditional theism, no doubt in other ways, too. His work reminds us that ethical ideas we may associate with religion have life outside it, that it would be superficial to ignore them, and that they might be right.

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