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**THE END OF PHILOSOPHY:
ON JOHN BROCKMAN**

by Jay Bail

1

There are certain writers whose thought is so important that it doesn't matter whether you agree with them or not. A verbal tension so powerful, an ascetic appetite so huge and consuming forces us both to accept the vision as a revelation and to resist it as a duty.

John Brockman's *Afterwords* (Anchor, \$3.50) has recently been published. Composed of three separate works, two of which have appeared in somewhat altered form, *Afterwords* deserves to be read and experienced as few books do in these times of informational overload.

For John Brockman is the kind of writer you both agree with and don't agree with at all. Either way you must pay a pro-found attention to what he says in this remarkable book. In short, sharp strokes of words, he breaks through the very forest of meaning by denying meaning, eschewing traditional forms of activities, thoughts and emotions. It is not what he says that is so valuable; *it is his whole manner of negating what can be said*. His words backtrack on themselves, stalk their own meanings, and thrash about in the underbrush of our sensibilities. There is a total devastation of language, isolating and withering the very hands our dreams are made of.

Artaud might stumble out of his frenzied asylum to shake the chaotic hand of Brockman. Wittgenstein might pause a moment, sit up from his numerous notebooks (ah so ah yes) into the square root of minus *Afterwords*. And even Dostoyevsky, poor scoundrel, lost in the wilderness of his vows, might honor Brockman by asking him for a small loan.

2

An incredible chaos of Brockman is the source of both agreement and disagreement. For if chaos exists, does this reality also exist? Brockman says no. If we agree that man, amid his words, thoughts, constructions is faceless, nameless, beingless, then shall we also accept purpose and drive and love? Brockman says no. If nothing but words exist, do we?

Brockman says no.

If nothing but words exist, do we?

3

Brockman says no.

Things. The tightrope of unimpeachable triviality.

Things. They caress and fondle, soothe and warm, and then finally burst into more things, more events, words, smiles, emotions, and handwavings. You can't lift a conception without things invading in hordes. And always the things make sense, there is a reason for their being, a purpose to their face. And yet...

Things. Their self-righteous inescapability—an illusion. Events, places, hands, words are knots of tenuous existence that, if untied will reveal nothing, a void, an is-ness. Do not believe what is in front of your mind—it is not real, nor is your mind. These bonds of love, those of envy, that of man, and this of child—all gone, lost in the whorl of happenstance. Man is dead, traditional gatherings of entity-patterns are dissolved, and the universe is not real. It simply *is*. Any description will deaden, delimit, decrease the actual existence. It simply *is*.

4

A half-century of art, caught in things. And more things. Covering like moss. A living theatre celebrating the arbitrary, the minutiae of taste. Novels avalanching over our certainties with the grime of inconsequentiality. Painting as a Great Reveler, the splash of liquid on canvas, the rampage of formlessness, the feast of the grotesque.

(A series of timeless tableaux, Brockman writes, an infinitely successive series of nows. But this can't be. It isn't. A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably. We are free from the pictures and the lives lived in the mind are at an end.)

To examine words minutely is to break the back of verbal meaning, destroying the moving form in a perfect ease of shattered bodies. To disassemble intellectually is to destroy the whole, to be lost among the fibers of organic isolation. Never forget the wholeness you started from, the values and constructions you dissected in the name of investiture. Always remember that a taking-apart implies a putting-together or else you will be lost in the high drift of chance.

5

There is no one writing like John Brockman. To agree with him is to realize his value in dissecting, destroying, revealing the certainty behind uncertainty behind certainty.

To disagree with Brockman is to still realize the value of demolition. For if there is nothingness, and if there is somethingness, then to realize the first is to resurrect the importance of the second. And in the last, the first was born; and at the first we shall discover the last.

6

(Replace all words pertaining to ownership with words concerning functions, operations ... Consciousness does not exist; indeed, there is no reason to believe that it ever did exist.)

(The perception of a signal happens 'now' but its impulse happened then. The present instant is the plane upon which the signals of all being are projected. This instant, the interval, constitutes all that is directly experienced ... The interpretation of the ordering of the brain takes place while new ordering is continually happening .. It is almost as though there were two parallel planes.)

7

There are two parallel planes that cut across differing reality levels. One (interpretation) has to do with continuity, cause-and-effect, time, space—and conscious will. The other (chaos) involves drift, abruptness, frozen shards of time—and arbitrary whim. The first entails a whole world of conceptualization and an endless range of possibilities. The second is eerie, hollow, frozen to a perpetual is-ness, utterly non-human. Yet from another standpoint, this chaos is the life-giver from which all possibilities flow, the infinite present, the undying atomic particles, the sound of one hand clapping.

Any phenomenon must be considered through the bifocality of both element and entity. To understand the significance of the whole entity without a knowledge of the elemental components is incomplete. Seeing the components without evaluating the characteristics of the entity to which they belong is likewise incomplete. One leads to a sterile consideration of values without any means of application or, indeed, a fitting knowledge of what events these values shall apply to. The other leads to utter randomness without any knowledge of meaning, or the means toward meaning—coherent intellect.

This randomness is what Brockman—and a good deal of western thought—considers as direct experience. But what does 'direct' mean? Why do we so willingly go out of our minds to come to our senses, presumably the seat of The Direct Experience? Why is *that* direct and thought not? Why should we see the interpretive capability of the mind considered as a block to Reality, a filter through which only part of The Truth seeps in? A Direct Experience means beyond doubt, means certain; while something discovered through rationality is considered imperfect, uncertain. Therefore, what is certain and perfect must be true because we do not doubt it. Truth then becomes the certainty of convenience, the inability to doubt.

And since to doubt implies falseness, anything capable of doubt must be incomplete and false. The mind only is capable of doubt, and man's distinguishing humanistic characteristic is his mind; therefore, man is false, dead, a cardboard sign in a vacant lot.

And so, to know through intelligence becomes a knowing through falseness. To know through not-intelligence becomes true. 'Directly experienced' means not open to question, a tyranny of truth, an incommunicable sameness.

The faith of the gods rests on their inability to speak. Their holiness springs from a fountain of matchless stupidity.

8

(The difference between human experience and neural experience is the difference between illusion and reality, between choice and no choice ... The ordering and arrangement are a continual functional happening. The ordering and arrangement are all happening. The ordering and arranging are all that is actually happening. Nothing else ever happens.)

(Navigate through reality with no pretense of knowledge. The unity is methodological. The unity is in the activity and will not lead to any final answer. It is a path. All paths are the same; they lead nowhere. Keep moving ... Not sex, not unconscious urges, not iconic archetypes, not metaphysics. There is no purpose. There are no goals.)

9

There are no goals. If you say so. If you wait for the Godot of your values, if purpose must somehow invade you with the certainty of its presence—then nothing will happen. For there is nothing but a swarm of neuron happenings, intervals, methodological patterns. Brockman is totally correct throughout. There *is* no purpose.

But why not make some purpose? Life does not exist in the body of a tortured god but in the hands of your own will to elaborate. There are no goals except the sense of your own crucifixion *towards*.

10

(What must be analyzed is the process, the operant concept of what something is doing, rather than static, fixed states of being. ... The information that was received without consent or awareness. The notion of free man, the notion of individual choice, is no longer valid.)

11

Realization of chaos calls forth varying attitudes to life, based on three fundamental premises: (1) the reality of only drift; (2) the reality of only purpose; (3) the reality of both drift and purpose.

Challenge lies in overcoming the impossible, riding the daylight down. If it is true that man is simply a product of physiological functioning, organic patterns of entity, and that there is no free choice—then he ought to attempt to create some, to write on water. To do, in whatever realm of being, is precisely the challenge *because it is impossible*. For truth is the challenge of the impossible as well as the inertia of the probable. Which step you take—towards the impossible or into the probable—is the measure of one's thrust to life. The first is *always*, the other is the *never-having-been*. The first is never being because it is about to become. The other is never being because it has always been. One is the future, the other the past. Hence, is-ness, neural experience becomes the present, mindless, blurred widow of chance.

It is impossible to be conscious without an attempt to kill the sky.

12

(There is no continuity, no accretion, no incremental serial advances, no depth. There is no nature. There was never anyone but me talking to me of me. No nature: just a nature created in what it says.)

Words are simply one stage of a single line of development within a vast urge to elaboration—which includes other lines, such as vision, taste, touch). This urge drives right through words to merge into concepts and systems of conceptualizations. These systems are as different from individual words as a human being is from an individual cell. To refer to the human being as nothing but cells—and thereby dismiss consciousness—is to miss a vast complexity that is particularly human. To choose to ignore systems of conceptualization, as Brockman does, and to consider individual words alone as true, as Brockman does, is not to accommodate the different and quite unique entity that is a system of conceptualization. It is to avoid a complexity so vast that it has become a simple, new organism, unifying its properties to deal with the range of its increased potentiality.

Systems of conceptualization have a validity of their own. They do not depend totally on words. While they may cease to exist if all words should stop, it is equally true that when concepts stop, all words will also come to an end. For words that are not part of something are part of nothing, and words that are part of nothing become nothing themselves.

Both words and systems of conceptualization are real and both are vital. To deny one is, in essence, to deny the other. You cannot ignore rungs without changing a

ladder into mere pieces of wood. You cannot take cells or words and say that they are truer than humans or systems of conceptualization. They are neither truer nor falsier. *They are the same as.* Both are simply one stage in an irresistible hurtle toward complexity. But the other stages could not exist without it and it could not exist without the other stages.

13

(The author presents not ideas, but information. Not words and images, but a transaction that can be measured only in terms of information ... It is a question of searching for questions. It is an attempt to create a working model, not with an eye to truth but to convenience. The only rules applicable are those that are convenient to use. We move toward an always inferred, unknowable reality.)

(Experience a minute. Experience an hour. Can you experience a minute and an hour together, simultaneously, at the same time? This is an important question to ask.)

14

And the void is a concept, just as something is a concept. There is no reality but reality.

(The universe is finite: there is nothing beyond, nothing outside this finiteness. Just the next measurement, the next word.)

We create with words but we cannot uncreate through words. For there is no uncreation. There is no void. There is only continuous existence at different pitches of necessity. It is impossible to stop being. We cannot be certain that we were ever *not* or will be *not* since all our conceptualization of *not* are symbols of systems of purposive relationships. That they may refer by a congruence of functionality to an empirical fact is simply another system of purposive relationship. All that we can be sure of is that we are a maze of purposive relationships in a mirror of symbols.

It is impossible to die or be born since we are alive and to image the piles of increments (or the lack of them) that we refer to as birth (or death) is simply another purposive relationship within a mirror of symbols.

If death is the end of all, including purposive relationships, it is impossible to understand this within the ceaseless purpose of relationships. If death entails another reality level, it is impossible to understand this since we cannot take into account the variable functions of this vastly pitched system of purposive elaboration. We cannot know death because (a) it is nothing, or (b) it is every thing.

15

(Finite man, finite intelligence: control. Not in control, but as control, as reality, as intelligence. Finite intelligence: the mass is no greater than the singular man of the mass. Expect no life from the mass. Expect no voice from the people.)

(No sign of life but life, itself, the presence of the intelligible in that which is created as its symbol. Life is a knowledge, not an existence. Life is not lived, it is known, Known: not experi-enced. Imagine, you had an experience.)

16

Brockman is hardly a discursive writer. He does not reason from a premise to a conclusion but rather starts with a conclusion (the utter reality of words) and topples backward to several premises that may fit. Nor is the *what*, the content of his books of that much importance.

Brockman's value is nothing less than a violent *incursion* against meaning and, ultimately, against the whole concept of human. He pierces you with the sharpness of his abstentions to conjoin. As in a play or a novel, he does not tell you but shows you. He shows you by breaking all conceptual patterns. Short sentences butchered of a possible fullness of verbs, adverbs and adjectives. Disjunctive sentences falling over one another in a totalitarian isolation. Short paragraphs and chapters that chop off any attempt to expound, extrapolate, explain, excuse. There is no one writing like John Brockman because Brockman writes with the total brutality of an executioner who shows you how to make peace before he hangs your participles. And you make peace, you come to rest in the flux of words through a sophisticated ignorance, a purposeful amnesia of meaning. You must follow Brockman down all the blind alleys to understand and to experience the totality of negation.

Brockman is important because, while you do not fully agree with him, he has force-fed you the chaos of the particle. And the man who has been in the depths of the particle comes to the surface of meaning fresh, with the knowledge of the workability of life, with an abundance of chaos lived. And he will know the relative and utter necessity of being human.

For the chaos of the word exists always, while the meaning of the word is always new. Both are profound truths that together form the blood and the skin of this incredible wash of life.

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