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David Berman

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Simon Browne: the soul-murdered theologian

DAVID BERMAN*

Born in Somerset in 1680, Simon Browne was a Dissenting minister first at Portsmouth and then for the prestigious congregation of Old Jewry in London. Browne's early writings, such as *The True Character of the Real Christian* (London, 1709), show him to have been an able, liberal, but unremarkable clergyman and theologian. By 1722 he was married with a son and several daughters. However, Browne's life was radically transformed in the following year, 1723, when his soul was annihilated, leaving him a brute animal with no consciousness – or so he firmly believed. In 1732, the year he died, Browne achieved some fame as an opponent of the Deists, with the publication of his *Defence of the Religion of Nature, and the Christian Revelation* (London, 1732), against Matthew Tindal, and *A Fit Rebuke to a Ludicrous Infidel* (London, 1732), namely Thomas Woolston.

Browne's delusion

However, my concern here is not with Browne's anti-Deism, but with his 'extraordinary affliction', which, I shall try to show, is noteworthy not only as psychopathology but also as a living thought experiment. Browne is like William Cheselden's boy-patient, whose 1728 cataract operation shed clinical light on Molyneux's famous problem (Morgan 1977: 16–21). The problem which Browne's delusion illuminates is connected with Cartesian dualism. In short: can a human being live effectively without a mind and consciousness? To see how Browne's life addresses this problem we need to look closely at his disorder. Our primary source is the funeral sermon by his friend, Arthur Atkey, entitled: *The Rectitude of Providence under the Severest Dispensations* (1733). Here Atkey records that Browne 'imagined that Almighty God, by a

* Address for correspondence: Prof. David Berman, Department of Philosophy, Trinity College, Dublin 2, Ireland.

singular instance of Divine Power, had, in a gradual Manner, annihilated in him the thinking Substance, and utterly divested him of Consciousness: That though he retained the human Shape, and the Faculty of Speaking, in a manner that appeared to others rational, he had all the while no more Notion of what he said than a Parrot. And very consistently with this he looked upon himself as no longer a moral agent, a subject of Reward and Punishment.’ (Atkey: 22). Believing that he had lost his moral and spiritual faculties, Browne gave up all religious duties. He retired to the country, where he spent his time at first compiling dictionaries and grammars, and then defending Christianity against its formidable opponents.

Browne died in late 1732, as convinced as ever of his singular condition – although on some minor points he did modify his original belief. Thus he originally tried to dissuade anyone from praying for him, feeling that God was determined to punish him; but Browne relented on this towards the end of his life (Atkey: 23). He also came to believe that his mental substance and nature had not, as he initially maintained, been entirely annihilated in 1723. Atkey notes these changes, and his testimony is corroborated by two important documents by Browne himself, which were posthumously printed later in the eighteenth century. These documents, which date from the early and final periods of his illness, help to fill in our picture of his delusion. The first is a letter he wrote before retiring to the country, in which he describes himself as being ‘perfectly empty of all thought, reflection, conscience, or consideration... being unable to look backward or forward; having no conviction of sin or duty... But converted into a meer beast, that can relish nothing but present bodily enjoyment, without tasting them by anticipation or recollection.’ (‘An Account’: 690). In this letter, which was first printed in 1770, he also states that while he was originally horrified at having lost his soul, he ‘has now grown more calm’ – although he still thinks of ending his life (*ibid.*).

The second document is Browne’s Dedication (circa 1731) to Queen Caroline, which he intended to introduce his *Defence of the Religion of Nature* (1732) against Tindal, but which friends dissuaded him from printing. The Dedication contains a mixture of grandiosity and humility. Requesting the Queen to pray for him, he speaks of himself as having been ‘once a man, and of some little name, but of no worth’; yet his is an ‘unparalleled case’, and he is ‘the first being of the kind’ (‘An Account’: 691–2). He also adverts to the gradual erosion of his soul, that ‘by the immediate hand of an avenging God his thinking substance has for more than seven years been continually wasting away till it is utterly come to nothing... not the least shadow of an idea is left...’ (*ibid.*: 692).

We do not know what crime Browne thought he had committed which prompted God’s vengeance; and it is possible that Browne himself did not know, since he speaks unspecifically of a ‘life of defiance to God, under a Christian profession...’ (*ibid.*: 690). Yet while Browne does not blame God

for destroying his soul, neither, as he says, does he feel any ‘tenderness towards him’ (*ibid.*). Browne also believed, as we will see below, that his case raised problems concerning God’s providence. Atkey suggests that Browne’s disorder was brought on by ‘a violent Shock, which his Imagination received soon after a complicated domestic Affliction . . . The Loss of a beloved Wife, and an only Son’ (Atkey: 22). While Atkey does not describe the violent shock, a later account, by a Dr Caleb Ashworth, suggests that it resulted from Browne’s accidental killing of a highwayman, who attacked Browne and a friend. Browne, we are told, ‘being courageous, strong and active’, disarmed the highwayman of his pistol,

...and seizing him by the collar, they both fell to the ground. In the struggle to overpower him, Mr. Browne . . . getting uppermost, placed his knee on the highwayman’s breast . . . while his companion rode to town, at a distance, for help to secure him. After a considerable time he [the companion] returned with assistance; upon which Mr. Browne arose from off the man . . . but, to his unspeakable terror, the man was dead; and from that awful period Mr. Browne became a prey of that gloomy and singular imagination which haunted him all the remainder of his days . . . (Wilson, vol. II: 345)

Supposing that this story is reliable, it would go some way towards explaining why Browne might feel that – having taken someone’s life – he had defied God. Dr Ashworth’s account also seems to fit with Atkey’s in that the salient feature in both is death. Thus it is tempting to suppose that Browne’s killing of the highwayman reactivated traumatically his domestic affliction, the memory of his dead wife and son.

Browne and Schreber

Before considering the philosophical significance of Browne’s disorder, I want to say something more of its psychopathological interest, particularly since Browne seems to have passed unnoticed by writers on the history of psychiatry and mental illness. He is not mentioned, for example, by Hunter and Macalpine (1963) or by Porter (1987*a* and 1987*b*). I suggest that there are striking similarities between Browne’s case and that of the celebrated Daniel Paul Schreber, the most interesting of which is the central but shadowy theme of ‘soul murder’, as Schreber calls it. According to Schreber’s detailed autobiography, God was involved in a ‘plot whereby [his] soul was to be murdered and [his] body used like a strumpet’ (Schreber: 59). God was both ally and enemy for Schreber (*ibid.*). For Browne, too, as we have seen, God seems to be of a dubious moral nature, performing mainly the traditional role of a benevolent God, but also that of a puzzlingly sadistic enemy. Browne’s paranoia regarding God comes out especially clearly when people refused to believe that he had actually lost his soul. This ‘affected him in the tenderest manner’, says Atkey, and in a ‘gloomy Hour, he would

represent the incredulity, which was manifested towards him, as a judicial Effect of the same Divine Power, that had occasioned this strange Alteration in him, as if God had determined to proceed against him in this way, and would have no application made in his Behalf' (:22-3).

In short, not only had God caused Browne's soul to evaporate, but, apparently, even more hurtful to Browne, God had determined that no one should believe this 'most tremendous reality'. This phrase occurs in another document by Browne, a letter of about 1728 to his friend Billingsley, which mentions the impending visit of a Mr Levesly, whom Browne hopes to convince that his 'case has not been a delusion of fancy' – if, Browne cautiously notes, 'God should still have left me the power of speech' (Kippis, 'Corrigenda').

So Browne's delusional system, like Schreber's, was inaccessible to falsification. Browne interpreted disbelief in the reality of his belief as having been contrived by God, as an additional punishment for his putative defiance. Browne's illness also seems to agree with Schreber's in having what seems to be two phases: the first phase being acutely agonizing and confusing; the second phase was calm and settled, which allowed both men to function more or less successfully. Thus Atkey states that Browne's condition

...at first differed little from Distraction, but afterwards settled in a Melancholy... [which] was of such a Nature, as to give him less Trouble than some other Species of it. He had little or no Terror upon his Mind: He considered himself as one who, tho' he had little to hope, had no more to fear, and was therefore, for the most part, calm and composed; and when the Conversation did not turn upon himself, as it was rational and generally very serious, so it was often very cheerful and pleasant. What was most extraordinary in his Case, was this, that, excepting the single Point I have mentioned, on which the Distraction turned, his Imagination was not only more lively (which is less to be wondered at) but, (in the opinion of those who knew him before, and since) his Judgement was even improved beyond what it was in his more flourishing Times. (: 23-4)

Atkey notes that Browne's intellectual ability was particularly in evidence, showing itself in his 1732 books against Woolston and Tindal; as 'both of these works were drawn up by the strength of his natural Genius, or from the Fund of Knowledge he had formerly laid in. For, during the whole Time of his Retirement, he enjoyed hardly any Advantages from Books or Conversation' (Atkey: 25). This judgement corresponds closely with that of Schreber's psychiatrist, Dr Weber, who describes Schreber in the second phase of his illness as showing 'no signs of confusion or of psychological inhibition, nor is his intelligence noticeably impaired. His mind is collected, his memory is excellent, he has at his disposal a very considerable store of knowledge (not merely upon legal questions, but in many other fields), and he is able to reproduce it in a collected train of thought' (Schreber: 385-6).

Yet despite their evident ability and normality in nearly all areas, both Browne and Schreber persisted in their delusions until the end. Their systems also had other elements in common: for example, a concern with divine miracles and a successively mistaken belief that their mental faculties were 'wholly perished'; although in Schreber's case, it was God who 'jumped to the false conclusions that [Schreber's] mental faculties were extinct' (Schreber: 206). In his *Dedication to the Queen*, Browne confidently asserts that his soul has now been finally annihilated by God, although he admits that he was equally (but wrongly) confident on two earlier occasions, circa 1724 and 1728 ('An Account': 692–3). Schreber, on the other hand, always speaks of his soul murder as impending; and that it is God who falsely believes that it has been accomplished.

Another intriguing similarity is that both men had been separated from their wives prior to the onset of their disorders, a separation which in Schreber's case led to an increase in libido that found a partial outlet in nocturnal emissions – six in one night, as he tells us (Schreber: 44). According to Freud's 1911 account, Schreber's heightened libido became directed towards a homosexual object, an object choice that was unacceptable to his conscious ego; and it was this conflict that lay behind his (and others) paranoid psychosis (Freud: 45, 59–63). While there is no evidence that Browne, too, experienced heightened libido following his wife's death, it is suggestive – given Freud's etiology of paranoia – that Browne's disorder was precipitated by the unusually close physical contact with another man, that is, the highwayman.

Dualist without a soul

While further comparisons might be drawn between the two cases, I shall now consider the philosophical implications of Browne's case. Like nearly all theologians at the time, Browne was a mind/body dualist, a believer – as Gilbert Ryle has put it – in the 'dogma of the Ghost in the Machine' (Ryle: 17). Browne's commitment is clearly expressed in his 1728 letter, where he describes himself as 'a wretch, all body, without so much as the remembrance of the ruins of that mind that was once a tenant in it . . . and that the thinking being that was in me is, by a consumption continual, of five years duration, now wholly perished, and come to NOTHING' (Kippis, 'Corrigenda').

What, philosophically, does Browne show? One way of answering this is to see his disorder as addressing a question similar to that which Locke posed in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) iv.iii.6 concerning the possibility of thinking matter. The problem in Browne's case was not whether God could create mind and thought in a material system fitly disposed, but whether God could destroy mind and thought, while preserving the living human being. There is evidence that this was also, in some measure,

Browne's own view. Thus Atkey states that, although Browne 'considered his Case as one of the greatest Difficulties in the moral Providence of God, he constantly represented it as a Demonstration of the Natural. For, according to his own Account of Things, he was a living Monument how far the Power of the Deity could extend itself in destroying its Workmanship' (Atkey: 32).

Could God do what Browne thought he had done to him? Could He annihilate a man's mind and consciousness, while enabling him to act and appear to others as a normal human being? What I am asking here is whether this was feasible within the (then) received dualist framework? I think the answer is Yes. For the accepted view, to quote George Berkeley's *Principles* (1710), was that one's immaterial soul was naturally immortal, and could not 'be broken or dissolved by the ordinary laws of nature'; but that it could be supernaturally annihilated or 'dissolved' by God (Berkeley, sect. 141). Hence, if God did exercise this terrible option, then the offending party would or could become a mere (brute) animal, without mind or thought. It is suggestive that no early writer on Browne (as far as I know) denied this possibility. They obviously found it difficult to believe that it had actually happened. It might also be hard, even for a Brownean sympathizer, to understand or describe in detail how memory could operate without thought – but it was, I think, nonetheless feasible within an eighteenth-century conceptual framework.

Of course, dualists were primarily interested in the survival of bodiless souls, not in the existence of soul-less bodies. Yet Browne would have been more interesting to the anti-dualistic materialists. He could be regarded as a *reductio ad absurdum* of dualism, or at least an embarrassment to the dualists. And there is some evidence that Browne was seen and used in this way towards the end of the eighteenth century, when dualism was losing its hold (Berman: 779–81). Andrew Kippis, the editor of the *Biographia Britannica*, notes with approval this change in opinion. 'The doctrine that the soul doth not exist separately from the body, has not only been advanced by sceptical philosophers, but hath been adopted of late by men of the most ardent zeal for religion . . .'. This is taken from volume three of the *Biographia Britannica* (1784: 608). In the same volume, in the 'Corrigenda and Addenda', Kippis prints Browne's 1728 letter to Billingsley, in which Browne describes his condition, while affirming dualism. In introducing the letter, Kippis says that 'It is too curious to be omitted.' It also seems likely that its interest for Kippis, apparently a religious anti-dualist, was that it also showed how crazy was belief in dualism, since it helped to produce such an 'extraordinary frenzy'.

While it may be doubted whether Browne's case resolves any philosophical issue, it does (like most notable thought-experiments) raise some interesting questions. I shall conclude by mentioning two, the first of which is virtually the inverse of the problem of solipsism. In short, whereas the solipsist maintains that 'he' is the only existing mind, Browne held that everyone has a mind but himself. So whereas the solipsist is trying (absurdly) to persuade us that we have no minds or internal psychic life, Browne was anxious to

convince his friends that he had none. And yet while both positions are close to being practically self-contradictory, it is not clear that either of them can be refuted.

Another (more psychiatric) issue is this. If one accepts an anti-dualistic position – as most of us now do – that human beings are essentially living bodily persons, then it is tempting to think that Browne was closer to mental health after 1723 than before. All that he needed, it might seem, was some encouragement to see the merits of materialism over dualism. And this is what his friend Billingley apparently thought. For Browne's letter to him begins: 'You went away without Collins, which I have therefore sent after you. You may profit by him; I cannot so much as wish to profit by that...' (Kippis, 'Corrigenda'). By 'Collins', Browne must have meant one of Anthony Collins's pamphlets, probably the last (1708), arguing for the materiality of the human mind. But was Browne really on the verge of healthy materialism, or (as seems more likely) was his condition an extreme pathological form of dualism?

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