

## A Brief Eternity. Pascal Bruckner

Bruckner is an Enlightenment man. He appeals to the reason of individual people, largely neglecting the interests of the society, especially the families to which those individuals belong.

The theme of the book is the issues of advancing age. For Bruckner, this starts about 50. Vanishing physical prowess and sex appeal. What you do for an encore after life's major accomplishments? What is the substance of life? What is the balance between repetitions, such as the cycles of the hours of the day, the seasons of the year, and the stages of one's life and new adventures and experiences? Curiously, he addresses these as issues primarily for people younger than himself. Bruckner is discussing what Merriam-Webster defines as middle age, running from 45 to 64, more than "young old age" 65 to 84 and certainly not "old old age."

Bruckner's biography lists no wife or children. It is amply clear that he has dedicated his life to intellectual pursuits. I am widely read, but Bruckner is in a class by himself. This book is worthwhile simply for the bibliography, the intellectual history he presents and great quotes from well-recognized authors.

With a focus on older people, he asks the most fundamental question of philosophers: what is the meaning of life? Is it fulfillment through personal accomplishments? Is it love? Is it health?

Affluence and medicine have given us an extra 30 years of longevity. Retirement laws in place since Bismarck often dictate that we spend them in retirement. How do we make a good accounting of this time? He notes that in our modern age we can do things all out of sequence. A man can summit formidable mountains, attend university and have children as his school mates are having great-grandchildren. Our sense of age-appropriate activities has been distorted.

Yet, the reality of physical decay persists. Bruckner is perhaps unduly harsh on the subject of old Lotharios pursuing sweet young things, and cougars tender young boys. His discussion emphasizes sexual attraction, body to body, more than the attraction of people to one another. It would downplay certain observable facts.

Older men such as Harrison Ford and the recently deceased Sean Connery have a timeless appeal. Women will ignore signs of aging such as crepe-like skin. They are, and have always been, attracted to wealth, intelligence, and personality. My wife shuts me up when I mention the almost two generation difference between us. She has made her commitment and doesn't want to think about it.

Bruckner mentions the phenomenon described in "Regulating Sex" of older First World women vacationing in Africa, the Dominican Republic and elsewhere with the express intent of having sex with hard bodied young men. The batikhaexa, older women who sponsor Third World immigrants in order to take sexual advantage of them, are a recognized phenomenon of Sweden and elsewhere in northern Europe. He instead discusses the still rather rare circumstance of older women such as Mme. Macron in France who attract husbands a generation younger.

Bruckner ignores a couple of factors in female-male May-December relationships. The most obvious is prostitution. An older guy can simply rent a younger body if he wants one. The girls are pleased to have a client who is grateful for whatever they offer. With regard to more permanent relationships, Bruckner briefly mentions but does not investigate the notion of the marriage market. Their social

and economic background establishes what will be beneficial to both parties. First world men are relatively attractive as marriage partners to Latin American, Southeast Asian and Eastern European women. Societies in which male/female role distinctions have not been erased still recognize traditional obligations for spouses to one another. Great sex may not be at the top of the list for either. If a man can fulfill his expected role, age is not such a large issue.

Bruckner is scathing about the Baby Boomer generation, who have spent the inheritance from prior generations and mortgaged future generations for their own pleasure. They live for the present. "Thus we would be the cannibal generation that takes advantage of both sides of history, leaving behind us an immense debt and granting ourselves privileges that are just so many larcenies. And our successors have the feeling that they live less well than we do. In addition, they curse us for our role in what awaits them – the destruction of their health, of their illusions. Isn't it time for us to make our exit?" See Comment one for some more pithy quotes.

People have historically not looked just for the present. Bruckner writes: "In the history of ideas, three forms of immortality are generally distinguished: that of the people, for Jews; that of the polis for the Greeks; and that of the individual, for Christians."

I will quibble just a bit. Afterlife is indeed an individual concept, not prominent in Jewish or Greek thought. However, to earn that afterlife Christians were expected to support their society. In Christian marriage St. Augustine identified three inherent goods: fides, proles, et sacramentum - faith, trust, and love between husband and wife, and parent and child, that goes beyond the faith demanded of any other temporal relationship. The Christians, just like Greeks and Jews, succeeded because they were committed to perpetuating their bloodlines and their culture.

In this age, as neither Christians nor Jews believe in immortality, the Western democracies have no compunction about maximizing present consumption at the expense of future generations. I am alone among my age mates in having started a late second family. They are unconcerned that they by and large do not have children and grandchildren, nor that those whom they do have are gay, incels or otherwise unlikely to have children. They are willing participants in the "Suicide of the West."

Bruckner observes that our desires lessen as we become older. Not only our sex drive, but our seeking new adventures, new friends, entertaining new ideas and giving up old ways. Case in point: observing that today's Levis are nowhere near as well-made as they were in my youth, I have started buying ordinary cotton slacks. My son and I dress in ironed shirts. My contemporaries stick with Levis and T-shirts because that's what they've always worn.

Bruckner dwells on the themes of sexual attraction and sex, overlooking the facts that (1) marriage offers many satisfactions besides sex, and (2) people who like each other for other reasons are pretty easily satisfied with their sexual relationship. Obviously writing for people outside of marriage, he says: "Sex, which in the West is in principle available to everyone, is in fact denied to many people: the declared freedom is above all the summons issued to the obscure and the ugly to resign themselves to solitude and unhappiness. Our society, by exalting everywhere and always the radiant power of pleasure, penalizes even more those who are denied it — the solitary, the old, all those refused the right to joy and a seat at the great banquet of erotic bliss. The frustration is all the greater because hedonism has been imposed as the sole norm."

Bruckner touches on the possibility of extended longevity, mentioning Larry Ellison who has cryogenically preserving his DNA and Ray Kurzweil who projects transferring our personalities from carbon-based to silicon based substrates. These concepts are out in the ether. Last year's "Borrowed Time" offers a more realistic picture. Our bodies age along a great many dimensions, and it is unlikely that we will come up with mechanisms to slow the process anytime soon. The record for longevity of 122 set by Jeanne Calment in 1997 does not appear to be under threat.

Approaching his conclusion, Bruckner asks what is a successful life, and when does it end? Having accomplished most of the big things we are ever going to do, what remains? Once again, he is focused on the individual, and not that individual's role in society. My take is that the individual can continue to give, to prepare others of his society and of his lineage to carry on. There are things to be done, things to be accomplished, but perhaps not through him alone.

Bruckner's riff on digital knowledge, the way children grow up as digital natives, is amusing. Immensely immersed in books as he is, Bruckner is clearly a man of a previous age. He would understand this one better if he had young children. Writing as a computer guy, a teacher and the father of six, I can say with authority that for all the time they spend with computers, the vast majority of kids don't use them well. As Bruckner notes, the geniuses of Silicon Valley wisely deny these geegaws to their own children.

Bruckner doesn't delve into what's happening to society. We are becoming genetically stupider, and we are purposefully dumbing down our education. A worthy undertaking for a person towards the end of their years would be to give something back to society. Contribute his superior genetic stuff to children, and pass on the habits of mind that made him successful to children and grandchildren

A five star effort.

Comment 1 –

Here follows a delicious quote about Baby Boomers

#### **OLD INFANTS AND YOUNG DOTARDS**

What is the baby-boomer generation? The one that exalted youth, theorized the rejection of authority, the end of hierarchies and of paternal power. Also the one that swept away every rule or taboo in the name of the omnipotence of desire, convinced that our passions, even the most unseemly, are innocent, and that multiplying them indefinitely is the way to come closest to bliss, great joy. But this indulgent generation wanted to teach its children nothing but the rejection of authority, which was identified with arbitrariness. It made its incompetence a dogma, its indifference a virtue, and its resignation the nec plus ultra of liberal pedagogy. The supremacy of fathers who were pals, of mothers who were girlfriends, denying all difference between them and their children and offering the latter only an ultra-permissive credo: do whatever you want. That is why these "adult juveniles" (Edgar Morin) did not equip their offspring for the tasks that awaited them and, believing that they were giving birth to a new humanity, raised anxious young people who are often tempted by conservatism. Hence, in their progeny, a demand for order, a moral rigidification and a need for points of reference at any cost: these young old people demand of their Peter Pan mothers and fathers that they finally acknowledge their age and their responsibilities. But pot-bellied, bald and

myopic, the children of the baby boom, who have often become prominent and orderly, remain attached to their illusions. Old rascals to the end, alongside young worriers who are ageing prematurely, aware that their parents, by refusing to grow up, have stolen their youth

A final example to date: the elevation of a young Swedish woman, Greta Thunberg, sixteen years old, into a heroine of the struggle against global warming. Nominated for the Nobel Prize, received by many heads of state and the pope. She carries in her wake tens of millions of high-school students, weeps for the planet and offers her anxious face, framed by two braids, as a symbol of the coming disaster. But our Scandinavian Pythia, a cross between Fifi Brindacier and Joan of Arc, limits herself to repeating what the media have been drumming into us for years: namely, that the human adventure is over, that the apocalypse is near. A strange kind of ventriloquism: people are delighted to find in her and her followers the concerns that have been inculcated in them, and swoon over this infantile echolalia. The little parrots scold us by proxy, teach us a good lesson on which we are supposed to meditate. But it's a simple echo chamber, and we find among the puerile people the words that have been put in their mouths by continuous indoctrination. This nihilism with a childish face is directly inspired by catastrophist sects. The propaganda of fear is doing enormous damage among our children, whom we tell day and night that the globe will catch fire and cataclysms will destroy us. In the name of the just war against climate disturbance, we are creating terrified generations, and in so doing we are robbing them of their insouciance. We are paralyzing them more than we are mobilizing them. The right to conflate everyone's age makes it impossible for children to experience their childhood. The "Global Strike for the Future" is occurring just when we are explaining to young people that they don't have one, that the general collapse has begun. If concern about the environment is universal, the end-of-the-world disease is purely Western and says a great deal about our culture.