

Death Part 3:

Our Attitude Towards Death

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A brief glance at the literature on death suggests philosophers are less interested in death than the fear of death. The fear of death was certainly the central issue for Epicurus and the Roman moral philosophers who reflected on his legacy. Later, Christians seemed not to philosophise about this fear itself so much as to accept it and to try to offer rationales or remedies for it. Contemporary moral philosophy has returned to ancient Roman debates, making its central concern about death the rationality and/or inevitability of our fear.

Should we fear death? In a sense, this is a silly question. Fear of death is paradigmatic of human fear: part of the way we learn what fear is (and so come to develop intelligent habits of responding to fear and danger) is by experiencing fear of death. As R. Ewin argues in *Reasons and the Fear of Death*, the fear of death is pre-rational: we reason from it, not to it.¹ The real questions we should be asking are: How great should the fear be? What effects should it have on our choices, on our moral and practical lives?

In other times the *ars bene moriendi*, the art of dying well, was part of the moral and spiritual equipment of a good and holy life. Christoph Schönborn remarks that today this wisdom has broken down; part of the failure of materialist and consumerist culture is our panicked helplessness in the face of death.² In other words, we do not know what to do with the great and necessary fear of death. As a result, its effect on moral and practical life is out of control – sometimes foolishly small, at other times cripplingly large (e.g. in those who seek to evade or postpone death by cosmetic surgery, proposals to clone us for rejection-free organs etc.). Modern people often find themselves astonished or resentful when someone's death touches on their lives or when their own health breaks down; yet we tend to accept without comment vast expenditure of resources in attempts to overcome certain causes – or even suspected causes – of death. It seems, paradoxically, that with increased longevity death becomes invisible to us *and* is given higher profile, since we now

¹ R. Ewin *Reasons and the Fear of Death* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), p. 2.

² Christoph Schönborn *From Death To Life; the Christian Journey* trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995), Ch. 6.

live long enough to experience illnesses and dysfunctions unknown to our ancestors and to care about them very much.

Many people take an out-of-sight, out-of-mind attitude towards death, tidying up the elderly and dying in institutions on the verges of our communities or seeking changes in the homicide laws so they can be finally tidied out of life much sooner. But our dread of death does not seem to lead us to alter our modern 'lifestyle' ethic so as to respond to death as inevitable, as opportunity for conversion and reconciliation, as opportunity for solidarity and service. If the fear of death is a universal human experience and we are not responding to it with the creativity and enlightenment of our ancestors, what changes could we make in our modern attitude towards death?

Among pessimists here is Alasdair MacIntyre.³ MacIntyre thinks there is no 'good death' possible at present because there are no coherent social structures, rituals, traditions or institutions that can give dying meaning. MacIntyre argues that until we have significant cultural change, we will continue to glorify the individual and trivialise death. Our deaths will continue to be meaningless removals of the individual from power and presence since we lack any generally agreed upon practices of making death – or life – meaningful.

MacIntyre has subsequently gone on to suggest ways of recreating a culture of meaning and goodness. The revival of moral realism – in particular, a realist approach to virtue, in which MacIntyre has played a leading role – suggests that social regeneration may be possible; that it is possible still to live well, and die well. If we were to propose good ethical practices for dying well, what might they be?

There is a range of responses here. People of flinty disposition will respond to the tough logic of the Stoics: there is nothing to be gained by prolonging life since one will be dead just as long, for an infinite time.⁴ If there is no good reason to live longer, there is certainly sufficient reason to die now; but *how* to die? *Which* death to meet, and how to meet it? When exactly is 'now'? Stoic wisdom here is unlikely to convince modern men and women.

At the far remove from the 'let's get it over with' approach is Thomas Nagel. Nagel regards death as 'a great curse. . . . I would be glad to live forever.'⁵ He argues that the meaning of death cannot be grasped purely objectively: we need to ask from the inner, subjective viewpoint what death is, and how beings with an inner life can come to terms with something so awful. But when we reflect on what it means for me, live and kicking this minute, to be over with, finished so that I cannot even experience 'my' nothingness, the next minute, the task almost defeats

³ Alasdair MacIntyre 'The Right to Die Garrulously' in *Death and Decision* ed. Ernan McMullin, (Boulder, Co: Westview, 1978), pp. 75–84.

⁴ See Marcus Aurelius *Meditations*, 4.50; Lucretius *De Rerum Natura*, 3.2.

⁵ Thomas Nagel *The View From Nowhere* (New York: OUP, 1986), p. 223.

us. However much we philosophise and theologise, the subjective reality is too much to embrace, so we, once again, postpone the thought.

But people have not always postponed the thought. People have not always had Nagel's utterly negative experience of the subjective viewpoint; or if they have, they have not always placed such emphasis upon it, or reacted with such extreme repugnance at the prospect of their deaths. If people have not always recoiled from extinction, it is because people's practices of dying have not always meant understanding death, as Nagel does, *as* extinction. Even for the unbeliever, death has not always been this entirely negative subjective meaninglessness. Death has formerly *meant* something more – acceptance of the natural cycle, self-sacrifice, the reaffirmation of the values in which one dies, peace, an opportunity for moral reevaluation by the bereaved, a final test in the virtues. We need not be indifferent to when and how we die, as are the Stoics, nor need we become paralysed by the subjective view of death as sheer horror and meaninglessness. We can recognise its solemnity and importance to us, and attempt to live with it.

For some, living with death means attempting to eliminate the fear altogether. We might do this by changing our desires; for example, so as to reduce them to the minimum desires necessary for avoiding present pain.⁶ But can we succeed? How many of our desires can we change at will, especially when we have our true goal of eliminating fear hovering consciously in our minds? Also, is there not a fairly broad spectrum of desires that humans will necessarily?

If we cannot drastically reduce the objects of our desire, perhaps we can do so more moderately. Nagel suggests we might reduce fear by externalising our interests as death approaches; for example, by concentrating on the welfare of those who will survive us; or on the success of projects or causes that we care about independently of whether we will be around to see them through. This is sensible 'disinvestment in mortal, individual life.'⁷

This approach is more realistic, but it does still call for a very high degree of self-control, objectivity and subsequent indifference towards many of *my special* pleasures. After all, much of death's badness is that it takes away goods I personally enjoy; I may not rank them very highly on any objective scale, but I would care very much about losing them by 'disinvestment'. F. A. Kamm writes that death injures us precisely by removing goods we would enjoy. It also insults us by beginning to remove them while we still exist; and terrifies us by finally ending everything.⁸ Kamm thinks we cannot lessen this injury,

⁶ See discussion in David Furley 'Nothing To Us?' in Malcolm Schofield and Gisela Striker, eds *The Norms of Nature: studies in Hellenistic ethics* (Cambridge: CUP, 1986), pp. 75–91.

⁷ Nagel, p. 230.

⁸ F. A. Kamm 'Why Is Death Bad and Worse than Pre-natal Non-existence?' *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 69, 1988, pp. 161–4.

insult and terror by disinvestment from our real interests, but can by: (a) realising some important goods are complete in themselves (e.g. knowing a truth, having a good character) and that however long life lasts, the amount of these goods does not increase once gained; (b) not being over-concerned with personal affronts and realising that vulnerability does not reflect on something's or someone's intrinsic merit; and (c) appreciating having the goods of life more than craving that either they or oneself not be permanently over with.

Kamm's suggestion is interesting. It involves turning our attention to thoughts of permanence, intrinsic worth, and gratitude. However, though this might distract me from my fear for a time, it may not still the fear altogether. His focus is still objective goods and objective truths about the good; but when the time comes, I may also hope to make some sense of my personal struggle for the goods, my own successes and failures; I may look for inner peace, and some personal meaning and satisfaction in my life's story. This personal dimension must be satisfied for my fear to lessen.

The same difficulty of asking too much of our objectivity affects Christopher Hamilton's approach to avoiding the fear of death. He suggests we should find consolation in relating death to times in life when we actually relish extinction of consciousness, for example, sleep and sex. Hamilton argues we have a cyclic need for these, so we should see death as part of a larger cycle of nature 'wherein we must yield our place to others . . . The temporary but repeated and welcome obliteration of the mind in life can in some way seem to find or seek its fitting completion in the total closing of the mind in death as part of a bigger cycle of growth and decay.'⁹

Again, Hamilton's view emphasises a detached and highly objective attitude. Perhaps this is a strategy for armchair philosophising when in good health; but when the issue becomes real, and death and the fear of death imminent, I expect – and hope – my comfort will come as much from reflection on the smaller private details of my own life, caring for the state of my personal relationships, and addressing my own questions of ultimate peace and hope, as it will from Kamm and Hamilton's larger and more objective considerations.

Can we cater for objective detachment from the world as death approaches, and yet do justice too to the personal experience of life and death, the particular goods we have loved, attachments we have formed, persons we have loved? Religion can help here. Part of religion's job is to provide the objective context for living and dying, while also doing honour, before and after death, to particular lives lived richly, with moral excellence, wisdom, and sacrifice. Few religions today offer this sort of tapestry of thought, acknowledgement, and

⁹ Christopher Hamilton *Living Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. 155.

celebration; few religions offer to the public wise discussion of life, mortality, and morality, and a life-philosophy designed so all individuals can find fulfilment, including ultimate fulfilment, through it. Yet we do need a new art of dying, and religion is well placed to make sense of modern death, to provide an alternative to the profoundly secularised and badly thought through mantra of 'dying with dignity'.

Many commentators have noted that having abandoned immortality, most of us go through life in reverse – focussing on youth, pampering the body, rejecting maturity, aging, experience, and death.¹⁰ We do not learn to die in modern societies; they are predicated upon avoiding death for the rich and ignoring the deaths of the poor. Thus we die alone, shamefully, counting it a mistake on our own or someone else's part. The best many of us can do with death in our psychologising age is to suggest 'coping mechanisms', which can help us get by, but which can also cloak a collective denial of what is really happening when we die.¹¹ Stanley Hauerwas believes the medievals would have been horrified at our modern desire for clean death, death that does not disturb too much, sudden death, or death in sleep. Medieval man wanted time to prepare, to have a good death [*A subitanea et improvisa morte, libera nos, Domine*].¹² Hauerwas, building on work of Daniel Callaghan, suggests that a good death today might be one where life's work is over; my moral obligations to dependants discharged; my death does not seem an outrage, or tempt others to rage or despair; and my dying is not marred by unbearable, degrading pain. This description is useful since it attempts to balance some of the broader concerns, the more private concerns, and the altruistic concerns that good religion holds together. There is more to be said though.

In modern individualist and privacy-mad culture, dying is made invisible. Death is not a public concern requiring public help (even public hospitals are private places now); hence, modern death seems impossible to bear. In response to this, a good death will always place death – visibly and publicly – in the context of our shared lives. Alphonso Lingis writes that 'one cannot drink the water and eat from the plants without absorbing corpses. Our bodies are the graves of our ancestors. . . . All the air we breathe is the breath of the dead.'¹³ We still live today, as we have always lived, surrounded by

¹⁰ See, for example, Arthur Imhof 'An Ars Moriendi For Our Time' in Howard Spiro, Mary McCrea Curnen and Lee Palmer Wandel eds *Facing Death: where culture, religion and medicine meet* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1996), Ch. 12.

¹¹ See discussion in Richard Momeyer *Confronting Death* (Bloomington Ind: Indiana UP, 1988), Ch. 1.

¹² Stanley Hauerwas 'Religious Concepts of Brain Death and Associated Problems', in Neil Messer ed. *Theological Issues in Bioethics* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2002), pp. 128–38.

¹³ Alphonso Lingis *Abuses* (Berkeley, Cal: University of California Press, 1994), p. 168.

death. Our modern attempts to disguise this are purely cosmetic: behind the thin brick walls of hospitals people still die in the same sad and messy ways; the tubes that carry off the waste fluids of dying bodies cannot completely disguise from us the helplessness we will all soon taste.

Lingis's may not be the language of the average parish funeral today, but he says something important. Appealing to, among others, Levinas and Nietzsche, Lingis builds his ethics not on a rational commitment to shared values, but on a community prior to any rational community: the 'mortal community' of all of us doomed to death. In part, we become aware of others in the shadow of death – mortality is the condition of any positive morality.¹⁴ Thus, if we cannot cope with death, our ethical lives will be insecure, our grasp of the virtues academic.

Robbed of a context for dying and understanding death we have become more shy of death than afraid of death. 'What attitude should we take towards our deaths?' sounds like a philosopher's or a grief counsellor's question: we are too fastidious to let death become our personal issue. We have other people, ambulance men and detectives, to deal with that issue; reality TV and crime fiction take us quite close enough to death, thank you very much.

When death does become our issue – as it must – modern people turn to psychological coping strategies, or the consolations of religion. Strategies may help, though this will be largely a matter of taste and temperament; and what 'helping' is is itself the debateable issue here. Good religion at least has an objective account of 'help' to offer; it will explain that though the final loss of goods and relationships is imminent, their enjoyment has only ever been provisional and their value dependent on our willingness to accept this fact, especially at the end. But often enough today religion offers only a less professional version of secular grief counselling with a vague, half-believed promise that everyone goes to 'heaven'.

Perhaps we can make no final sense of modern death without a belief in the afterlife – something philosophy can be of only part-assistance to religion in demonstrating. For those who cannot follow religion and philosophy to the afterlife, there is still a (limited) consolation, though it takes courage to receive it. We can live in the light of the truth of our shared fate – the *hodie mihi, cras tibi* of Scottish tombstones accepted as reality, but not with the mocking cruelty of the originals. We can appreciate the intrinsic and non-temporal value of certain human goods, human characters, and human achievements. We can assist fellow-mortals who will survive us. We can recognise the life expectancy of our epoch and so commit only to

¹⁴ See Alexander Hooke 'An Ethic of Accompanying The Dying: reflections on the work of Alphonso Lingis', *Philosophy Today* Supp., 1997, pp. 153–60.

projects that are reasonable for our life span. And we can ensure involvements and projects about which we are passionate are as invulnerable as possible after our deaths.¹⁵ But without religion, or at least without the afterlife, we are unlikely to find a fully satisfactory modern context for facing death. New philosophies counselling indifference, despair and horror have been visited upon modern people in the last couple of centuries; now, the only serious paradigm of a good death that has a hope of working for significant numbers of us is the afterlife.

I remember clearly one day ten years ago looking forward to a concert and realising that in some years time there will be similar, and better, concerts going on, concerts I would love to hear; and they will be going on without me, listened to by others, others whose enjoyment will not be precisely the same as mine. Everyone will have this thought at some time: my world really is going to end. It does not make me *fear* death; nor does it tempt me to hate my mortality. For it is only millions of us, living and dying, teaching a little, sharing our enjoyments and enthusiasms, supporting common projects, that leads to each one of us for a brief time being able to engage in something that makes life seem blessed. The blessing may be fragile: it is certainly short, and it depends on the coming together of a whole range of factors. But I can only imagine the blessing being substantially better sustained or intensified if I imagine the afterlife. Therefore, we should both mourn and welcome the blessed shortness of our earthly lives. Death may be the one thing towards which we do and must counsel irresolvable conflicting attitudes.¹⁶

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¹⁵ See Steven Luper-Foy 'Annihilation', *Philosophical Quarterly* 37, 1987, pp. 233–52 on this sort of 'Neo-Epicureanism'.

¹⁶ See Amelie Rorty 'Fearing Death', *Philosophy* 58, 1983, pp. 175–88.