

# NOTES AND DISCUSSION

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## SOME ATTITUDES

## TOWARD DEATH

Death is terrible to Cicero, desirable to Cato, indifferent to Socrates.—MONTAIGNE.<sup>1</sup>

The massive literature of modern psychology, which embraces so many important and unimportant subjects, fails conspicuously to deal with one fundamental human problem—many would term it *the* fundamental human problem—death. Why, when there are libraries of books on every aspect of normal or abnormal character in infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and (more recently) old age, is the human adjustment to death ignored? An essay by Freud,<sup>2</sup> several articles by Schilder,<sup>3</sup> a volume by Anthony,<sup>4</sup> and a few other scattered papers virtually exhaust the scientific literature on the subject. Does the vain Faustian spirit, searching ever

1. All quotations from Montaigne are from the Trechmann translation.

2. Sylvia Anthony, *The Child's Discovery of Death* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1940).

3. Sigmund Freud, "Our Attitude towards Death," *Collected Papers*, IV (London: Hogarth Press, 1925), 304-17.

4. Paul Schilder, *Goals and Desires of Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), pp. 61-110.

for the light, fear to examine the heart of darkness? Or has society, uncloaking sexuality, put death in its place as a secret rite not to be discussed in public? Has psychology, like so much of physics, become a kind of dignified engineering, forsaking truth for utility and therefore disinterested in a matter about which nothing can be done? Or is it felt that inquiry can disclose no more than what has always been known—that all men are mortal?

By itself, this article can hardly rectify such a long-standing condition. However, it does indicate that an empirical approach is possible in an area traditionally consigned to poetry, philosophy, and theology. These disciplines have made an indispensable contribution to man's conception of death; but the poet's sensitivity, the philosopher's intelligence, and the theologian's passionate humility can be fruitfully supplemented by a collection of prosaic facts viewed with a modest objectivity.

The facts which will be reported consist of 530 personal statements, ranging from a few words to many pages, in the London files of Mass-Observation. An organization of sociologists whose independence of academic circles has had some refreshing consequences following their work, Mass-Observation operates with a panel of two thousand individuals throughout Britain who voluntarily reply to questions mailed them each month.

The precise composition of the panel in May, 1942, is not ascertainable, but the 530 returns used in this article break down as follows: 60 per cent male, 40 per cent female; 70 per cent under forty years, 28 per cent over forty, 2 per cent age uncertain (no significant difference in age obtaining between males and females); 55 per cent from the "country" (places with 20,000 inhabitants or less), 33 per cent from "towns," and 12 per cent from London. It may be surmised that panel members were better educated, more vocal, more middle-class, and perhaps more intelligent than a representative sample of the national population. The 530 returns in a canvass of two thousand is normal for Mass-Observation surveys; that some further social or psychological factors distinguished respondents from non-respondents is likely, but their nature is indeterminable.

In May, 1942, panel members were asked: "What are your own personal feelings now about death and dying? Do you think about it much, occasionally, or hardly at all? Has the war had any effect on the extent to which you think about it, or your general feelings about it?"

The questions were not cordially received by some, who dismissed them

briefly and frankly. "Death," writes a subway-station attendant, "is one of the subjects at which my mind tends to 'job.' It's also 'taboo' as a topic of conversation in all my immediate circle of friends." A young woman confesses, "I have always had a tendency to shy from any discussion and hastily to switch my thoughts in other directions." And a soldier writes, "I try to think as little as possible about death and dying." But to strive to avoid a subject is not to be indifferent to it or even to be successful at avoiding it. "I excuse myself, with apologies, from answering this one," a woman writes, "having been suffering for the past few months from an abnormal state of mind and abnormally preoccupied with ideas about death." Consciousness can be a sword which cuts the hand that wields it.

How often do these people think about death? Replies range from "always" ("the thought of death is always present to some extent and degree"; "I have thought of death practically every day of my 'life' from early childhood"; "constantly"; "almost without ceasing") to "never" ("I never think about death or dying at all"; "I can't say that I ever really think about it"; "never give it a thought"). The categories "much," "occasionally," and "hardly at all" given in the question were not defined, and respondents often substituted terms of their own. Any statistical analysis, therefore, is bound to be of limited value, but, for what it is worth, we analyzed 155 of the most definitive responses.

These suggest a tendency for women and older persons to think most often about death. (No significant difference in frequency of thoughts of death was noted between inhabitants of towns and country.) The former finding correlates, on the social level, with the greater interest of women in organized religion and, on the psychological level, dare one say with their greater vanity? A friend indignantly counters that men are more vain and makes the plausible suggestion that women think more about death because their functions as mother, housekeeper, and nurse bring them into more intimate contact with it. This, however, is another sociological explanation. There should also be a psychological explanation, though we may not have hit upon the right one.

The latter finding, that older persons tend to think most often about death, while hardly surprising, requires qualification. Our group includes no person younger than perhaps sixteen and so provides no direct evidence on the thoughts of children. Retrospective accounts, however, as well as empirical studies of children, indicate that childhood and adolescence are often periods of excessive preoccupation with death, which diminishes

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with maturity and may return with old age. Thus a man of thirty-five writes, "These moments when I have really thought about my own death are rarer than they used to be. They were most frequent between the ages of fifteen and twenty but have occurred since I was about ten years old." A woman over forty says, "I do not think about the subject so much now as I did when I was a child—when I had rather a marked fear of death." And another elderly woman says, "Latterly I have thought less about death than at any time during my life. . . . It was never absent from my thoughts as a child and girl." The child discovers death in the course of his scientific inquiries into the nature of his world, but, because of his limited experience, the discovery remains intellectually perplexing and, being irreconcilable with his magical notion of self, a frequent source of emotional torment. Maturity brings the experience required for understanding death, but also the opportunity to disregard it, by way of work, love, sport, and every conceivable activity. Age restricts activity, obliging introspection to be borne as best it may.

Yet conscious thoughts of death are but the core of a penumbra which envelops the matter in the mind. A young woman writes:

I do not think of death, and yet it is at the back of my mind almost all the time. Not in conscious thought but like a shadow which is cast by things. I once heard or read a line somewhere—"Look your last on all things lovely every hour." That's what it is. I *know* all the time that I must look my last. Sometimes, apropos of nothing, when I am picking primroses in the woods, listening to music, bathing in the river, drinking coffee . . . there comes this sudden pang, and I feel as I did on the last day of holidays before going back to London and school.

And a young man:

The idea of death has for many years been constantly with me, not in any morbid or religious sense but as a moral incentive to live as though each day were my last. . . . It merely means that I should like to leave my affairs in order, the daily task accomplished, wrongs, conscious or unconscious, righted, friendships intact and no ill-feeling anywhere.

Similar feelings are undoubtedly common—so common one cannot undertake to trace their range, for they merge with aspects of remembrance and anticipation, morality, art, and the most ordinary perception of things and events.

Death comes always to others. If the two billion men on earth have an average life-span of fifty years, over a hundred thousand die every day.

The death of strangers is not even common—it is axiomatic and evokes no interest; for a thousand deaths of a thousand men, a thousand children, one substitutes a concept, a word. Few events affect us less. But if, in this primordial deluge of death, a single case be momentarily observed, strong emotions can disturb the bystander. A woman writes, “The night before an execution is usually one of acute nervous misery for me . . . and I am conscious of shock caused by the irretrievable and irrevocable nature of the punishment. It is *too much*.”

It is difficult to estimate the effect war had upon such general attitudes. More women than men, and more people over than under forty, say that the war increased their thoughts about death, but the majority maintain that it had no effect. It seems that war altered the frequency and intensity of thought more often than it changed its nature. “I don’t think the war has changed my feelings; it has made them stronger,” one man writes, and others repeat his words. Many people, especially those fully immersed in the war, became more fatalistic, indifferent, and callous. An officer in the Royal Air Force writes:

To me Death seems a very much less serious matter than it did. At lunch you talk to Jimmy; at teatime you are told that he has been killed. The first time it happens you are shaken; by the twenty-first time your brain registers the fact and then somehow prevents your senses being shocked and forbids memories to appear. Also you know that Jimmy is dead, but as far as you are concerned is he more dead than if he had flown to China by air and left there?

But it is impossible to summarize adequately the complex, multitudinous, and changing emotions that war nourished. In many cases not callousness but heightened sensitivity developed. An elderly woman states that “the thought of the death of the young people which is going on all over the world . . . and the death in torture and agony of those in the occupied countries make me suffer so much I cannot bear to listen to news about it or to think about it all.”

The death of one’s self is quite a different matter from the death of others, and one suspects that dwelling upon the latter subject often serves to exorcise the former. One may become compulsively preoccupied with the death of others:

I have a morbid habit of picturing the death of a beloved friend or relative and from that trying to imagine my reactions.

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As a child I dreaded my mother's death—I used to run home from school half-terrified lest I should find her dead if she merely had a headache.

I am not afraid of dying myself . . . [but] I am absolutely terrified of anyone I am fond of dying. . . . I would much rather be killed myself than lose anyone—and often feel that I would definitely become suicidal if I did lose my husband or my brother or sister. I seem to have no control over my emotions where this is concerned.

One may strive to avoid the subject:

Since the war I have made an effort not to think about death being always round the corner, which has been largely successful.

In the daytime hours . . . I hardly ever think of it—I have sufficient mental control not to.

Or the attempt to think about one's own death may be defeated by the blind strength of the ego:

Your question makes me realize that I cannot even imagine dying. . . . When I do think about it or discuss it with anyone in the comfortable light of day, my feelings are a mixture of curiosity, apprehension, and disbelief. . . . Everyone has a sneaking and quite irrational idea that, though everyone else can die, they somehow never will. When I was a child, I was convinced of this.

My own death. . . . I find it extremely difficult to think about. It does of course come to mind now and then casually and in conversation, but in these casual references I make to it in thought and conversations the idea of my death is not there in the real actual form that it is sometimes.

But ultimately, at one time or another, and in one form or other, thoughts of death turn back upon the self from which they come.

The last thing we would suggest is that there need be any overriding harmony or consistency about these thoughts within any one person and still less among individuals within a society. The unity of a man must encompass all his moods and disabilities; of a society, every sectarian enterprise; nature readily tolerates complexity, paradox, superfluity, confusion, error, conflict, stasis—and death. One is struck, in these testimonials, by the contradictions, ambivalence, and vacillation that characterize the individual's thoughts of his death. To the same person, death can appear both pleasant and terrifying, abhorrent and desirable, tragic and triumphant, awesome and repellent. Here are four examples:

Death is as completely necessary as birth—it is something natural, unavoidable, and therefore not unpleasant. . . . The idea of being screwed down in a box and buried—and there being left to rot—terrifies me.

An apprehension of an early death gave rise until comparatively recently to fears on this account. . . . Perhaps youthful sentiments of the joy of life, of love, and of one's associations have represented death as something hideous and abhorrent. . . . Now I see it as something quite as natural as sleep, and I can imagine that at least it must approximate to the beauty and tranquillity of sleep.

Two sets of feelings about death and dying. Which set I favor depends on circumstances and digestion. First and most usual feelings are that death is rather tragic. There is so much of interest in life that it seems a great pity to lose it. . . . The second set of feelings is opposite to the first. . . . When I feel that life is a tragedy, then death becomes not very unwelcome. Life seems on these occasions so futile, so short in duration, so full of trouble, frustration, ugliness, and so on that to lose it would be no loss.

Generally I prefer *not* to die yet (particularly as it would distress my wife, who is a semi-invalid and largely dependent upon me). But I am ready to die. . . . At times the notion of being *blotted out* quite overwhelms me; at times the idea of *eternity* bewilders me; but, generally, I am reconciled, with perhaps a touch of cynicism—"What's the use of being anything else."

Fear is often taken as man's primary reaction to his death. We shall start our chronicle of these reactions at the opposite end of the scale, where death is welcomed or anticipated with pleasure. Montaigne writes:

I have seen one of my intimate friends forcibly courting death with a real affection, that had become rooted in his heart by diverse specious arguments that I was unable to refute; and, as soon as it presented itself crowned with a halo of honour, rush at it with fierce and ardent hunger. . . . If I were here to string together a long bead-roll of those, of both sexes and all conditions and sects, during the happiest ages, who have either awaited death with firmness or voluntarily sought it, and sought it not only to flee the ills of this life, but some merely to flee the satiety of living, and others in hope of a better condition in another place. I should never have done.

The individual believing in immortality affords a prominent example, and a third of the men and almost half of the women in our sample say that they believe that death is not the end of life. One cannot know what proportion of these replies represents convention and what conviction, or which conviction is founded upon calm and simple faith and which upon

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anxious hope. The firmest conviction of the intellect may yield, *in extremis*, to the firmer conviction of the body: it is said that there are no atheists in foxholes; and, in the ninth hour, even Jesus cried out “Eli Eli lama sabachthani?” Nevertheless, we are left with such declarations as this, from a sixty-four-year-old man:

I assume I am not so very far from the great change. . . . I have entire confidence in the continued existence of myself as a self-conscious intelligence but little changed as to character, knowledge, or perceptions by dying. . . . I think about death . . . with the calm expectancy of entering a good rest and holiday free from the cares of maintaining my physical body and its paraphernalia.

And a young man:

My own personal feelings about death are that it is just another form of life to which I look forward with great interest and pleasure. The human body is a convenient form for our earthly existence, but when it dies we (that is, our mind, or understanding or soul) do not. . . . If I knew I had to die tomorrow I should be quite happy about it.

To those convinced of immortality, death promises a continuation of the pleasures and the vanities of life. But there are as many or more who look frankly at death as annihilation, and love it therefore. “I have occasionally felt I would welcome extinction and the release from the worry and fear of insecurity in my old age,” a woman of forty-nine writes. With another woman, this passing feeling has become a firm resolution: “Death is the end, one just goes out. . . . I pray it may come soon, as I dread old age and helplessness, already my eyes and ears are giving out, a cataract growing. I long to be dead.” And a cancer victim writes:

Death, to me, is release from pain, like eternal rest, the end of all. . . . When I am having the agonizing headaches from which I suffer . . . I become semi-conscious with intense pain and sink into a horrible pit of smothering blackness, from which I must struggle back to life. At these times I think of death as a welcome friend.

The sick and aged express openly thoughts which most persons harbor in difficult times—that, as Montaigne says, “death can, when we please, cut short and put an end to all other discomforts. . . . This is the true and sovereign freedom, which enables us to snap our fingers in the face of violence and injustice, and to laugh at prisons and chains.” Then the hosts of the dissatisfied and unhappy regard death fondly. “As an adolescent I was so bitterly unhappy that I used to cross off each day on the calendar



at night and inwardly ejaculate, 'A day's march nearer home.' " And, Keats-like, some of the very happy join their numbers: "I have known moments of extreme happiness when I would really like to die so as to 'end up on a pleasant note' as it were."

A young woman declares: "I have found great comfort in the thought that my life would end sometime. Eternity to me is a cold, unfriendly thing, and I would hate to live forever." And an elderly woman: "The thought of being dead, i.e., finished, often attracts me very much. I have no desire to survive in any way, not even in anyone's mind." A young man states: "For some reason which is not quite clear to me the idea of the survival of the individual in some other form after death is quite repugnant to me. Death, surely, must be a complete extinction of the individual, both body and mind." A woman of fifty-three: "I think that, before my time comes, I shall be tired enough to slip out without much struggle. And I have no fear of, nor desire for, an after life." And a sick girl: "I do not think I shall live to be very old, nor do I want to. I often feel so tired, and then I think it would not be bad to die tonight. . . . I am always so tired, I think if I were dead I would be left alone and no one could expect me to do anything."

A surprising number of people write in this vein. The word "tired" recurs often in their accounts. Life is a heavy burden for them, and death the only way to set it down. Many are tired not so much of the relentless daily routine as of themselves; from routine they might escape. Immortality would constitute a sardonic punishment for them, who wish so much, as one puts it, "to be done with a self I have never been content with."

The idea of carrying on my own personality is . . . rather repugnant.

If I had any hand in the arrangements, death would end everything, and there would be nothing of the being I call *me*. . . . If, after death, any of *me* remains, and . . . I have to give another far longer turn on another stage, I shall be annoyed.

Next to those who relish the prospect of death may be put those who merely look at it indifferently, without pleasure or fear. A common enough attitude to death in the abstract, this is a rarer reaction to death in the concrete. Montaigne expresses it: "I looked upon death with indifference when I saw it in a general way, as the end of life. I master it in the lump; in detail it worries me. The tears of a lackey, the disposing of my old clothes, the touch of a well-known hand, a commonplace word of

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comfort, make me soft and sorry for myself.” But it occurs occasionally in our material, particularly among the old:

As those faculties lose their efficiency, a feeling of resignation creeps into one that the job is ended and it is someone else’s turn.

I had a long illness in 1933–35, and I came gradually to seeing [death] . . . without distress coming nearer to me. I would then have died quite naturally, as one breathes.

Being sixty-eight years old . . . by the time this war is finished and the mess is cleared up, I expect to be dead. I have a faint regret . . . [but] I have had my share of life. I don’t want to die particularly, but I should not feel any particular urge to live.

Montaigne noted the indifference which many men display at their own death:

How many of the people we see led to their death, and that not a simple death, but attended with ignominy and sometimes with cruel tortures, and exhibiting such assurance, the one through stubbornness, the other through a natural simplicity, that we may perceive no change from their ordinary demeanour; settling their domestic affairs, commending themselves to their friends, singing, preaching, and talking to the people, nay, sometimes jesting and drinking to their acquaintances, as cheerfully as Socrates.

A man who was being led to the gibbet said “for goodness sake don’t go by such and such a street, where I shall run the risk of being collared by a tradesman for an old debt.” Another entreated the hangman “not to touch his neck, for he was so ticklish he would shake with laughter.”

La Rochefoucauld has said: “One can no more look steadily at death than at the sun” (“Le soleil ni la mort ne se peuvent regarder fixement”). Indifference can be a consequence of this inability, of mature wisdom, naïveté, stupidity, or simply of other preoccupations.

We were surprised to note how many considered death a personal insult. “I should be more angry than fearful if I was told I only had another six weeks to live,” one soldier writes. And another: “I know that after death I shall not count, and this is infuriating.” A young man: “I resent (rather than fear) the idea, because there are lots of things I want to do and know and in particular I want to know what’s going to happen.” A man recalls that, as an adolescent, he was “violently antagonistic” to the idea; it seemed “maddeningly incomprehensible” to a woman. An old man says:

"I hate the idea of death and all connected with it. I hate passing a funeral. I hate going to cemeteries, and I hate thinking that my friends will die."

"I don't like death, and I don't want to die." "I regard the process of dying with fear and repugnance. It is associated with terror, pain, agony, and grief." Thoughts of death are "terrifying," "agonizing," "depressing," "morbid," "repellent"; one's death is "an unpleasant subject," "a melancholy fact," "lonely and isolated."

I cannot think about death with fear or despondency.

The thoughts of death honestly terrify me. I cannot reconcile myself to the thoughts of dying; nights I lie awake and cry bitterly because life seems so very short and the things I want so very very much to accomplish . . . recede farther and farther into the distance.

An old man, a retired clerk suffering from bad eyesight, writes:

Dying is constantly before my mind. . . . I am only sixty-six, but to think I have only thirty-four more Junes with their vivid green fields, young foliages, and blue skies, and the sun's friendly warmth, fills me with alarm. *Dying!!!* Good God. *Why?* I live a simple, good life, love my meals, *live alone*, contemplate, understand music, have a slight taste for poetry, have insatiable thirst for philosophic fundamentals (the truth) and am full of worries. *Die!!! Why???*

We all die too soon. I've got back into good condition and am doing physical jerks. I've an awful lot to think about and to do. No thanks, dying's not in my line and I don't think it is at all essential for a long time (with the aid of homeopathy). But if Hitler sends over to bomb our kids in reply to our *avowed* bombing of theirs I might get hit in mistake, and have to suffer obliteration goddamnit, and it would be a pity.

And death is filled with terror:

When I was a child . . . I had a fear of death and used to wake up at night in horror, imagining pain which I thought meant I was dying.

When I was very young, I used to wake up in the night and really feel afraid of the strange idea of dying—the inevitableness of it, that I *must* die one day—and it used to make me feel very frightened.

I have always been conscious that I am afraid of death. Occasionally, at night, if I concentrate on its inevitability, I produce a paroxysm of physical symptoms—rapid pulse, sweat, nausea."

A few of our informants assert, in the words of one, that "it is of being

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dead I think, not of dying.” Most, however, draw the opposite distinction between death and dying, as the following quotations illustrate:

I long to be dead but dread dying because it must always be painful.

I'm not afraid of death as much as dying.

My own death does not appear as a calamity to me. I have no fear or uncertainty about it, as I think that death is the end of all consciousness and existence. . . . Dying is a different matter. . . . I don't like to consider the numerous unpleasant ways of dying which threaten people in these times.

“It is not death that troubles them,” Montaigne remarked, “but very much the dying.” This curious and persistent distinction is attributable, perhaps, to the fact that dying is a condition of which the individual can readily conceive, by likening it to some previously experienced condition such as sickness, sleepiness, fainting, physical or mental anguish; but the insensibility of death is inconceivable. Freud observed that “our own death is indeed unimaginable, and whenever we make the attempt to imagine it, we can perceive that we really survive as spectators.” Many dying persons have recovered and reported their sensations; with the dying there can be communication—indeed, it can be said that all men are engaged in a prolonged process of dying. “The hour which gave us life begins our death” (Seneca). But the dead are incommunicado.

This concern with dying as opposed to death is reflected also in the frequent statement that pain and injury is more feared than death:

I am not afraid of death but am decidedly afraid of being hurt.

Fears of accidents involving broken limbs I am much more concerned about [than death].

On the whole I am much more apprehensive [in air raids] of being injured than killed.

I am terrified of being maimed. . . . I have more fear of losing my hands . . . or sight than of losing life.

Instantaneous death in any form I don't mind, but all this fear of suffering, of being maimed or developing paralysis, crippling arthritis with its blindness and pain, of being blitzed and shell-shocked or having an accident which leads to loss of limb and lasting pain.

We persist in our effort to give a psychological interpretation of such statements—that mutilation injures the image of the body's integrity and of the ego's mastery, whereas sudden death preserves it; or a sociological explanation—that cripples are objects of pity and dependent upon others, whereas the dead are honored. But we dare not assert that these statements are less rational than our analysis and that they do not represent a choice based upon observation as objective and logic as good as our own. It is vanity for the analyst to think his understanding superior to that of his informant; it is merely somewhat different, because it serves a different purpose and/or addresses a different audience.

A good deal of time is evidently devoted to speculation on the manner of one's dying, and strong preferences are expressed for one form as against another. For Montaigne:

Death assumes shapes of which some are easier than others, and takes on different properties according to each one's imagination. Among natural deaths that which results from weakness or stupor appears to me gentle and pleasant. Among violent deaths I can less easily fancy falling down a precipice than a ruin crushing me, and dying by a sword-cut than by a musket-shot. And I would sooner have drunk Socrates' potion than stabbed myself as Cato did. . . . So foolishly does our fear regard the means more than the end! It is but an instant; but it is of so much importance than I would willingly give many days of my life to pass it by in my own way.

The ideal way of dying for most of our informants is suddenly or in their sleep, the object being to avoid pain and fear and to preserve the body intact. Where the two goals cannot go hand in hand, the latter will generally be sacrificed to the former, as in the choice of a violent but instantaneous over a protracted death.

The dislike of a death accompanied by bodily injury has already been mentioned. Several soldiers express their aversion to being crushed by a tank or bayoneted; civilians, to a "messy" death like being run over by an automobile. A Catholic woman who, for religious reasons, regrets the recent sudden death of her gardener, nevertheless says that she "would rather fall down in the sunshine with my face pressed into a flowerbed than be run over by a bus in Oxford Street." A young man feels "nauseated . . . when brought into contact with the fact of violent death." Montaigne says: "Although it all comes to the same thing, yet my imagination sees as much difference between leaping into a fiery furnace and into the channel of a shallow river, as between life and death." He goes on to describe a public execution in Rome, at which a man "was strangled with-

out the spectators exhibiting any emotion; but when they came to cut his body in pieces, the hangman dealt no blow that the people did not follow with pitiful cries and exclamations, as if every one had lent his own sense of feeling to that carrion.”

We surmise that preservation of the body supports these individuals' vanity and their unconscious conviction of immortality. The attitudes which prevail in the present group are, however, by no means universal, being rooted in each instance in the character of the individual and of his society. It is well known that suicides often fasten upon a congenial mode of death to the exclusion of others that are more convenient—the man who has chosen gas will not use a knife, and the one who has decided upon a gun will not drown himself. The sword Montaigne feared did not deter the Romans and Japanese; the Indian widow did not fail to leap upon her husband's funeral pyre; while custom leads the Tibetan to cut the flesh from his friend's corpse, mash the skull with stones, and feed it to hovering vultures.

Montaigne reports: “Caesar, when asked what death he thought the most desirable, replied, “The least premeditated and the quickest.”” Most of our informants who discuss the subject voice the same opinion:

I should hate to die in a hospital from some slowly creeping disease. I should like to die suddenly while still carrying out my normal activities.

I often wonder what sort of death I will have, whether it will be slow and painful (which is what I dread) like cancer or tuberculosis, or quick and sudden like a road smash.

I'm terrible strong of heart and lungs and shall take a fearful lot of killing. My mother took a year, and she was eighty-four. I might live to be ninety. Terrible prospect. I think of it pretty often and wish for a sudden death.

The war and aerial bombardment stimulated fears of new kinds of lingering death: “I have a special dread of being trapped under a building in a raid and dying from starvation or injuries.” A boy of eighteen hopes to “die peacefully in my sleep, or instantaneously. I should very much hate to die of cancer, of strangulation, or poison gas, or with dozens of bullets or bayonet wounds in my stomach.” A young soldier writes:

Sometimes . . . at nighttime in bed, I will start involuntarily thinking about myself being bayoneted, and taking two or three conscious or semiconscious days to die, being in too much pain to scream. . . . Then I think of drowning, of being run down by a tank, and of being gassed. . . . Then the realization will come upon

me how extremely likely it is that something of the sort will happen to me, and I have a strange feeling in my stomach, and I might perspire a little. Then I start thinking of how I can avoid it and then, that after that, when I die I stand a moderately good chance of dying quickly, or of accelerating my own dispatch, and with that I go to sleep.

Religious persons are a notable exception to the general desire for a sudden death. A recent convert says, "I fear sudden death now, which once I regarded as the best form of dying, and I can fully appreciate the petition in the Litany asking for deliverance from it." And a woman of twenty-five, cited previously:

As a Roman Catholic I believe that there is life after death. . . . I would like to die in my bed and not too suddenly. My religion provides me with various helps to dying, and I should like to make use of them. About ten days ago our gardener fell dead on the lawn, while mowing, and though when I reached him a few moments later he looked not unpeaceful, I decided it was too unexpected to be wished for. Many people, when they spoke to me and commiserated with his widow, remarked that it was such an "easy way to die," and his widow said she was glad he hadn't suffered, but, for myself, I would rather have a little suffering and time to get used to the idea of my own death.

Somewhere in *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* T. E. Lawrence speaks of the Arab's preference for a slow death in which a man has time to compose his mind and achieve a spirit of resignation. It suggests an attitude that is not common in the West.

The Roman Canius Julius, Montaigne tells us, awaiting his execution, was asked by a friend what were his thoughts. "I was thinking," he replied, "to hold myself ready, with all my powers bent on seeing if, in that so brief and fleeting moment of death, I can detect the flitting of the soul, and whether it has any consciousness of its going." Our subjects are attentive to the very same problem:

I wonder what it must be like that split second before you snuff out.

I have wondered whether there are any last moment sensations when H.E. [high explosive] is dropped in close proximity; whether there is time to feel one's body violently disintegrating in the explosions before unconsciousness.

The images they have formed of that moment are of blackness, amputation, unconsciousness, and a surpassing sleep: "the idea of death is . . . 'sharpness' and the blowing-out of my candle"; "just like the blowing-out

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of a candle”; “like going under an anaesthetic”; “like having an aching tooth removed”; “an indefinite sleep, only deeper and blacker”; “a state of unconsciousness, lasting for a long time.” To die is “to pass out much as one goes to sleep at night, quite unconscious of the moment of going to sleep and without pain”; to die is “to lose consciousness, as in sleep, and forget that one had ever been alive.”

Several persons report their reactions at moments when they were in imminent danger of death. A seventeen-year-old girl, awakened by a bomb dropping nearby, said to herself, “Well, in another second or so I’ll know what it’s ‘All About.’” A woman states: “On one occasion I was run into by a motorcar, and in the brief moment of contact before I knew what was happening I was conscious of the thought, ‘This is the end of everything.’” The accounts, often quite similar, recall again the concentration of *Canius Julius*; it is as though, at these moments of crisis, the personality were detached from the body and objectively observed its fate.

Once I was involved in a motorcycle accident, and thought I was going to be killed; my thought, as I saw the bonnet of a car on top of me, was strangely impersonal and amounted to a strange interest in what it would feel like to be killed and how my friends . . . would be informed. Only later when I was safely out of it did I feel fear.

A member of the Royal Air Force describes the same sensations:

Once I was very near death when an aircraft in which I was rear-gunner was crashing. For three minutes before we hit the ground we knew that we must crash and that there was about an even chance of living through it. Afterward I was surprised to find that I had considered dying quite objectively—as if I had been a third party watching the crash. I remembered thinking of those who had been killed before and thinking—“This’ll be another”—and then wondering who would write home.

The constant dangers of war provoked numerous precautions against and preparations for death, but here, too, the individual generally remains strangely detached from his actions, which he performs because they are conventional or reasonable. His behavior seems to have objective but not subjective content. Thus, a woman writes:

The practical side of me recognizes that there is a possibility of death, so I have made a will, and told my husband to remarry as soon as possible, and even suggested my successor! I did all this in a detached sort of way, as though making ar-



rangements for someone else. The idea in my mind all the time was: this could not happen to me.

Others put the matter off, as does a housewife. "There are times when I think it would be wise to destroy old letters and papers, and make a will . . . so as to leave everything tidy and in order, but so far I've not got down to it." And there are those who sleep imperturbably through air raids:

I have been in about a dozen air raids in London and as many again in other parts of England but have always got into bed and slept through them, preferring to die in comfort rather than in an uncomfortable shelter. I feel that some extra precautions taken to avoid possible death offer so little extra security that they are not worth bothering about.

Our subjects display the most varied ideational adjustments to their impending death: some accept mystical ideas; some, the ideas of an orthodox religion; the ideas of others are materialistic, nihilistic, idealistic, or what-not.

There are cheerful ideas, like those of a life-member of the "Rationalist Press Association":

I have given the matter a great deal of thought . . . and there is no reason whatever for despair. I am quite cheery about it. . . . Life should be taken seriously but happily: then death is likely to be serious and happy for one's self too. . . . I am satisfied that I know all that needs to be known about it to be able to continue in happiness. I am also aware that it is not possible to explain the matter in fullness to others.

And an old man:

I expect to take my memory across the valley, and I shall be surprised if the information I have gained from reading will not be at least partially useful. . . . The facts of the existence of the subtle worlds I expect to inhabit after parting from my body, and their conditions and inhabitants, form the chief interest in my reading.

There are zealously religious ideas:

At one time I was scared of dying, [but] . . . I accepted Jesus Christ as Savior and King, and naturally death no longer has fear for me because it means entrance into the presence of Jesus Christ.

I believe in the orthodox religion and live my life accordingly, and I have no fear of death or think about it.

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And people cling to their ideas despite their contradiction by experience and reason: "I tend to believe in reincarnation. . . . I try to forget the physical side of death. . . . The terrible waste of young lives in war increases my faith in reincarnation." A religious girl describes a class discussion on immortality: "By the time the evening was over, we felt we had no logical legitimate grounds to believe in immortality, though we all hoped for it."

Indeed, one has the feeling that, whatever their nature—whether dogmatic or agnostic, exalted or depressed, abstract or mundane, simple or sophisticated—these ideas serve their bearers as magic talismans, defending their image of self from the chaotic world which assaults it unremittingly:

I'm convinced that I shall live to be eighty or more so that even the worst blitz doesn't give me that particular fear [of death].

[A soldier]: I've told myself so often that nothing can hurt me, that nothing can prevent me from returning to my wife and family, . . . that I really believe that I shall come to no harm.

I used to scare myself into a frenzy, . . . [but] I have cultivated such a philosophical attitude to death that I can forget it for very long periods and face its prospect with equanimity.

After a great deal of horror at the thought when I was young I have now come to feel there is no objection to death in its proper place, i.e., at the end of a useful life.

My general feeling of death is a fatalistic and philosophical one—death is every man's fate. . . . I needn't worry about it. . . . It is wasting valuable time and thought to think about it at all.

A few persons are very honest about the adequacy of their ideas:

As with so many of the major problems of our existence I have to admit that I have no very decided views. My experience is that most of us go through life without very definite opinions. We put off making up our minds about many important matters. I admit to this in my own case.

These people want to live to see the end of the war:

I feel I have a duty to keep alive now so as to play some part in the social reconstruction that should follow.

I almost consider it a solemn duty to live while there is so much death in the air.

Especially during the London blitz, I felt even more strongly that I must live through it, in order to look back on it in after life and fit it into the scheme of things and describe my reactions to other people.

One woman would "just like to live to see the end of the world." Death is disliked "because of the cut-off feeling: of not knowing what will happen next and how things will go on." Their affairs are not in order. This woman did not want to die, formerly, until she had children and, now, until they are fully grown. That man declares: "My desk and belongings are too untidy at the moment for me to wish for death until I put them right, and I should like to be able to leave among my things little notes for those who come after." The young soldier asks:

Is it really going to be *for* anything? Is the supreme sacrifice going to be for a supreme reason? Can one be sure of this? . . . If one was absolutely certain that one's life . . . was going to give the opportunity for the ideal new world to be introduced, one would feel more happy about dying. . . . I cannot rid myself of the misgiving that if I give them my life, which is my dearest possession and my last, "they" may just turn round and with a shrug of the shoulders like the man who has put your money for you with great promises on a losing horse, say, "Sorry, but things just didn't turn out that way."

How can one sum up this melange of thoughts, feelings, and actions of which death is the focus? Death is essentially a matter of biology and chemistry, like alimentation, growth, or decay; the death of a cell or an insect is as indifferent a phase of its nature as the bursting of a bubble in the froth of the sea; and thought and emotion are neither operative nor relevant here. Thought and feeling form a dream world which man inhabits, six feet above the ground, and which is of consuming interest to him. That the dream world has only a trifling effect upon the real world, which alternately sustains and dissipates it, is his misfortune.

A philosopher, R. G. Collingwood, begins a recent book by asserting that "all thought exists for the sake of action." On the contrary, man often thinks where action is precluded. This article affords an instance of that fact.

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