Social Sciences meeting with speaker R. Berger, Seated left to right: A. Marc, S. Soemardjan, H. Hart, and D. Lerner.

Religion and Philosophy meeting with speaker G. McCool, and J.P. Mayer seated.

Religion and Philosophy meeting with speaker Joyce Carol Oates. Seated left to right: R.L. Rubenstein and W. Kaufmann.
THE ANATOMY OF DEATH

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The bones of death can be mapped by philosophical analysis, but since in a certain sense they are bones that live one needs too to explore their meaning through a theory of individual life and substance. I shall take these two paths in this essay. In doing so I shall be developing conceptions which I worked out in previous writings, including contributions to Man's Concern with Death\(^1\) by Arnold Toynbee and others, and Six Approaches to the Person.\(^2\) I shall begin by reflecting upon individual identity in its living context, in relation to death; and I shall deal second with the analytic conclusions one may extract from a consideration of the language of death.

I

The question of personal identity—"Who and what am I?" with which we puzzle over ourselves—is not for most people at all the problem of identity as pursued by the philosophers. I leave the latter question here on one side: it concerns how we know that a person at one time is the same person as he was at a previous time, and the roles of the body and the memory in identity. Rather the existential question is to do with value and purpose. The very fact that we can sometimes see ourselves utterly from within, and independently of our social and historical context, implies our capacity for a kind of vertigo in which all the value assumptions which permeate daily existence are suspended. Such an inner shock, derived from the feeling that everything that we have been and are is somehow adventitious, is repeated in the contemplation of death.

It is true that when I die there will yet linger on something of my social and historical substance. I may attract an obituary or two. What I have done will have its effects in the future. And memories of me, friendly or the reverse, will linger on in a few people’s minds. Some think by being
famous to increase this substance: many will still harbor the famous in their memories. Yet it is a thin kind of immortality, as also is that which is found in progeny. What am I to my greatgrandfather? I do not know who he was, and even with dear parents—well, how should I want to live their lives? Proud as I am of my children, I can scarcely expect much more in them, after my death, than fond memories of me, and may they keep tidy and cheerful my grave.

Since the question of identity sometimes takes a philosophical form and sometimes an existential one, it is perhaps useful to signal the distinction by the use of differing words. For this and for some other reasons I shall refer to the non-philosophical, existential question as being about my personal substance. Because in so much of living I identify with groups, and draw my substance from their substance by a kind of mystical participation (to use Levy-Bruhl’s old language); and because my status is so to speak ritually enacted by others in daily converse and transactions—because of such factors the who and what I am from at least a worldly point of view has to do with the social colorations and grandness or otherwise of my substance.

The figure of Father Time, and the image of Death, therefore mock us because they threaten our substance. Even the groups that sustain me, and will sustain me in ghostly form after my death, will fade and shift. For by process of death and time the sources of substance will be cut off. In my death, my substance virtually vanishes, save for those shreds which linger in other folks’ minds, and what is that to me?

Leaving aside for the present the possibility of immortality or rebirth or resurrection—possibilities, that is, of my existing after my death in some form or other—, any substance I draw from what people do or say about me after my death comes essentially as a contribution to (or diminution from) my present substance. I now derive perhaps satisfaction from contemplating my good repute after my death. But there is no such satisfaction, clearly, once I am dead. In so far, then, as it is natural for a person to hope and even work for the maintenance and aggrandizement also of his substance, death mocks, for it destroys such social identity, and is as we know the ultimate threat to status.

Substance one might regard as being mediated by performative and ritual acts: the esteem which I hope to have in the eyes of my friends and community is something which they communicate in words and gestures. To be praised, ignored, despised, flattered, humiliated, loved: such acts and
attitudes are the powers which I draw upon, in so far as I am a social being. Indirectly also what I do—my job, primarily—can be a channel of substance, for its value to the community, or rather its perceived and communicated usefulness and importance, will confer value on me.

What counts as the relevant community, of course, shifts. For some cultures the family and clan remain crucial. In more modern society it is increasingly identified with the nation state. For this reason it is the nation which feels entitled to call for the greatest of sacrifices, for a man to lay down his life for his country. This tendency towards the dominance of the national group even occurs when the ideology may be internationalist—as in socialist countries like those of Eastern Europe, where “the people” necessarily becomes defined as the Romanian people, Bulgarian people or whatever, and when the very process of centralization involved in socialism as commonly understood conduces to national identity. It is national socialism, however much it may be tempered by the slogan “Workers of the world unite!” Here in a most marked fashion a person’s worth is tied to his role in the life of the nation and the class struggle within the nation.

The individualism of much Western democracy and social democracy yields a more complex equation concerning substance. The thrust of personalism is towards valuing the idiosyncratic. Thus the individual is made to feel a tension: on the one hand his value to society rests upon his doing a job (which others in principle might do instead of him), but in himself his value is held to lie in his uniqueness. Yet it is unwise here to calculate that eccentricity is a virtue, for the same logic of the ritual and performative aspect of social life obtains: it is through the transactions of esteem and disesteem a person’s substance is enhanced or diminished, and this implies a considerable pressure towards conformism. It is true that modern society often produces the phenomenon of the lonely crowd, and solitude often spells a kind of freedom, since nonconformist conduct need not attract much disesteem. But by the same token, there is not much in the way of a supportive society around one—a group whose transactions of esteem give one a sense of importance, and thus meaning.

The individual, in participating in a network of ends or purposes, through his job and other institutional activities, can be said to have teleological value: he derives teleological substance from the groups to which he belongs. He also can be said to have attributive substance in possessing attributes that are esteemed—such as beauty, wealth, creativity, seniority or whatever. The two varieties of substance can attract differing
forms of self-satisfaction and despair. Thus when an institutional framework of purposes is threatened, there is too a threat to meaning. For instance, what happens when a whole way of life is coming to an end? This can breed the sort of despair which afflicts communities such as American Indian and Aboriginal groups where the old purposes and customs are being overwhelmed by the alien forces of White culture. Sometimes social change brings with it radical changes in attributive substance: thus being old, from being a prized attribute and sign of wisdom, can become a liability—the final loss of pretensions to youthfulness, which is the prized attribute. Since both teleological and attributive substance depend upon the continuance of a given society, it is natural that eschatologies of doom themselves provide a similar vertigo to that found in the contemplation of one’s own death. Present acts draw substance from the past, for it is the past which is the matrix of the group and through which it celebrates its identity; but also from the future, which is mediated to us by hope or foreboding. It is no surprise that religious symbolism should embrace both first and last things. Because of our typical dependence, for substance, upon the esteem which only a group can provide, the specter of collective death is peculiarly emptying. The vertigo it produces feels like an assault on meaning.

It is worth noting here that in the pregnant sense of the word in which we speak of “the meaning of life”, meaning has to do not with sense of significance, but rather with value. That is, to say that something or other is meaningless or pointless is to say that it has lost its value. The meaningful is that which has the power to move us. Thus collective death is peculiarly threatening, because it renders our teleological values empty and our attributive values without social basis. And in our own age, this is no idle speculation. The specter of collective death has a certain reality about it, because a nuclear war between the major powers could well end life in the northern hemisphere, and perhaps life altogether on the planet. It is easy to be discouraged about building a better world, when the military planners talk with ease about megadeaths. But the psychological mechanisms which serve to conserve and expand our personal substance continue to operate, and they tell us to believe that really the next war is just a bad dream: our leaders would not be so foolish as to start a nuclear holocaust.

In view of the teleological and continuing social life of attributive substance, it is not surprising that we are attracted to theories of history which see it ending successfully. The upward rhythms of the Marxist
dialectic, Hitler's vision of the thousand year Reich, the hope of the convergence to the Omega point in the thought of Teilhard de Chardin, the vision of the millennium in Christianity—these are different expressions of hope in a kind of justification by the future.

Nevertheless, there is often ambiguity and vagueness about these culminations of the future: this world is transformed into a new heaven and a new earth, and the millennium is only a figure for an uncalculated length of time, somehow between time measured and eternity. To this point I shall return.

How does religion essentially relate to the meaning of life? If I am right in seeing the latter as to do with the maintenance of value, then Christianity (for example) can be seen as involving a kind of communication of substance which should make the individual immune to meaninglessness. It will be instructive to consider the approach of Buddhism, which is diametrically opposite, in appearance at least, because it involves evacuating the individual of all permanence and substance. Let me expand on these remarks.

The logic of the doctrine of the special creation of man by God is that man has a unique capacity for communication with God. There is some sense in which he can participate in the divine substance. Now it so happens that the monotheism of Christianity implies that there is only one holy being, and so only one source of holy substance. Consequently, the capacity for holiness is not something intrinsic to man, and so the soul itself is a gift of God. Still, in effect the transactional situation is this—that if man puts himself in right relationship to God he will gain something of the divine and deathless substance of God. As Christianity sees it, Christ is the channel of communication, so individual Christians have to go through Christ to gain that access through which the immortal substance flows.

The logic of this in turn is that the Christian really has all that he could possibly want: for to partake of the substance of God is to participate in the infinite. There is no one with more power and substance than God: in having access to that power the Christian has more than the kingdoms of this world. And yet there turn out to be certain paradoxes about this power, in the light of which the Christian has the capacity for deathlessness. For one thing, in participating in God's being the Christian participates in the career of Christ. For God's nature is not just a static affair, but is stamped with a character derived from his incarnation: is stamped indeed
by the story of salvation, or as one might say, the myth of salvation. Thus God is not just an essence, but contains so to speak a moving myth, so that the Christian as well as taking a share in God's substance in general takes part in the myth. Indeed the central rites of Christianity re-enact the myth and in doing so convey its character to the Christian, so that through the rituals he is assured of participation in the divine substance. But it turns out, of course, that Christ in his life and death has emptied himself of power. The Christian then has all the power he could possibly wish for, since he has the power of God communicated to him; and yet that power turns out to be self-emptying. This dialectic between the pomp of power and the humility of Christ runs through much of the Christian liturgy and should run through the Church's life.

Thus the Christian idea of the conquest of death is that of the capacity of the person to share in the power of God, which is, however, communicated to him under the form of the myth of Christ's life, death and resurrection.

I may add here in parenthesis two things: the triumphal sense of sharing in God's power and substance reached its apogee in the Western Church, through the almost magical mediation of that power through Host, monstrance, hierarchy and indulgences. Yet through all that, and through the numinous glory of the Orthodox Liturgy and the transforming energy of the Protestant preacher there is sounded the note of the Suffering Servant. There is a hint of desolation in the midst of the divine substance. And this leads me to the second observation. Who knows? The Christian may picture himself as crowned with the saints in glory in the hereafter, but the existence of that hereafter is not literal, and heaven is not a literal place: the Christian is in effect gambling on the existence of God, who inscrutably provides a resting place for the faithful. Since God of his nature is unprovable, save by "proofs" themselves in doubt, the Christian, in so far as he feels the power of God's substance in his own life, is yet making an ontological gamble. This is not Pascal's wager, but the gamble of faith, seen in modern times as involving more than moral commitment or a decision for Christ but as an ontological gamble too. The Christian's certitude, therefore, in the face of death is not a certainty.

Nevertheless, because of the nature of God as having eternal substance, in action however through the myth of salvation, the Christian concept of the person always contains what may be called a "transcendental footnote". It always has built in to it some reference to transcendent destiny.
In this sense, death no longer has its sting, because my personal substance in the last resort is not based upon merely this-worldly teleological and attributive evaluation. On the other hand, this cannot give the Christian this-worldly certainty: the assurance of sharing in God's deathless substance is an assurance contained within faith which is necessarily both an existential and ontological gamble, a fact both symbolized by and accentuated by Christ's self-empty.

Since the theme of Suffering Servant is central in Judaism, it would be possible to rewrite the above description with a different "transcendental footnote", for a similar structure of gambling is to be found in Judaism, though expressed in terms of a national identity and destiny.

I now turn to an opposite way of looking upon death, and on individual substance: the Buddhist. At the heart of the Buddha's analysis of the nature of the world and of salvation there lies the so-called anatmayada or theory of non-self. The individual is de-substantialized, and this in two ways. On the one hand the forward continuance of the individual and his past and present are chopped up minutely into instants of time; he becomes an ongoing swarm of events. Second, the individual is broken up into different factors or skandhas—states of consciousness, perceptions, feelings, dispositions, bodily states. (Alternatively, for the purposes of meditation one may contemplate the individual as made up of bone, marrow, pus, urine, synovic fluid, liver, etc., etc.). The destruction of the unitary person by his dissolution into events and factors and the absence of any identifiable eternal self "behind" all these, means that the whole exercise of the maintenance of my individual substance is pointless. In the last resort there is no substance. It is true that by skillfulness in means the Buddhist religion develop an apparatus of god-like Bodhisattvas and the celestial Buddhas: assurance of rebirth in the Pure Land, for instance, is much like the Christian promise of heaven. But ultimately these dreams dissolve—the Pure Land is a kind of prelude to the disappearance of the individual into the ineffable plane of nirvana.

It should be noted that not only is the dissolution of substance a different way of dealing with it than the divine other-worldly enhancement of substance which the Church could mediate through Christ's sacrifice, but it is also predicated on the natural continuance of the individual through an endless round of rebirth (endless, that is, unless liberation is attained). The problem remains that the Buddhist dissolution of substance has to be done without inducing despair and humiliation: it is easy for the sense that
there is no ego, that I am after all nothing, worthless, to be a danger to true serenity, for in feeling all that the individual is still playing in the "worldly league". Thus the rituals and festivals of Buddhism and the figures of celestial Buddhas are means of assurance. One must feel that the Buddha is a sure refuge even if in the end he is no refuge, just as one must reign with Christ even though Christ is the servant after all. For all their differences there is a certain congruence between the opposite paths of Christianity and Buddhism. Incidentally the doctrine of rebirth has its own vertigo: by accepting the yearning for continued existence it shows forth an ultimate ennui.

The fact of impermanence, so much emphasized in Buddhism, and the vertiginous threat posed to individual and society when one's death or the death of one's society is contemplated, account perhaps for the vagueness and ambiguity which we earlier noticed in the pictures of future consummations. Very often end-time shares a characteristic with primordial time, of being in a sort of timeless time. They are to time what sometimes uncharted outer regions were to map-makers, places that were non-places, and hence "Here be dragons".

One may of course reject both the Buddhist and Christian pictures and other religious ways of understanding death. Western tradition in bifurcating into two main ideologies beyond Christianity, namely scientific humanism and Marxism has pursued the analytic and mythic modes found respectively in Buddhism and Christianity. Perhaps something of the appeal of Buddhism in the modern Western world lies in the fact that it combines compassion with a de-mystification of the person; while Marxism's appeal lies in its powerful recreation of the mythic, substantive mode in a modern age when the anthropomorphisms of Eden and Revelation are less serious-sounding than the dialectical ballet of economic and cultural forces. But perhaps it is nationalism above all that has as an ideology in the modern world sublimated death most spectacularly. Millions and millions have gone willingly, if nervously, to their deaths out of an attitude that death for one's country is a meaningful act; and refusal to do so is sinful cowardice in which a life is truly thrown away for it has recoiled from the glorious sacrifice that endows the flower of youth with the greatest and most sublime substance.

II

If the question of the meaning of death is at one level bound up with substance, there are also things to be said at the linguistic level. I want to
show that only in a metaphorical sense do we face death daily (save exceptionally) and so the bringing of death to bear as a focus of existence (as with Heidegger) represents more a method of meditation.

Though it may be said that we are all dying, since we are moving onwards towards death, which is inevitable at some time or other, it is not so in a more literal sense: for if I were to say that a friend of mine is dying, I would be taken to mean that he or she is now reaching the end of his or her life, through some mortal sickness or the final tiredness of old age. Of course I may turn out to be wrong—what appeared to be the final stage of life may in fact not have been so: the patient was dying it seemed, but recovered. Moreover it is proper to say that a person died fast or slowly, over a long or a short time. Thus dying is a process. Consequently, when people say they fear death, they may in fact have in mind that they may fear the process of dying, which can of course be painful.

But it is possible to undergo death without the process of dying as when a person dies in her sleep. Such a death may be described as peaceful or merciful, but not agonizing, or heroic or otherwise.

Indeed it only makes sense to talk of (for instance) an heroic death in the case of those who in some sense face death: but though facing death may take the form of dying—as someone on a sickbed or on a stretcher during battle—it need not do so, for the soldier may face death throughout a battle without at any time being in process of dying. Of course, someone can face death in an heroic manner without actually dying: only if he dies does he die in an heroic manner, because he faced death in an heroic manner.

Dying, incidentally, is not the same as being in a situation where there is a high probability of death: in some battles there is for each participant such a high probability of dying, but each participant is not dying. Of course, if one is dying there is a high probability of death, since one can only truly say of someone that he is dying if he does indeed end up actually dying or if alternatively he would certainly have died had it not been for some intervention. Thus one might say: “X is dying” means “X is in such a state that if the natural process continues he will actually die”.

Since not everyone undergoes the process of dying, either because of dying in one’s sleep or being suddenly struck down, and since some people are in process of dying without knowing it, questions of courage, serenity, etc., in the face of death do not always arise, as we have seen. Moreover, though we can continuously take death into account, e.g. by paying in-
surance premiums, it is not accurate to say, as far as ordinary usage goes, that we are continuously faced with death. This might be true of someone in a peculiarly hazardous occupation, say a motor racing driver; but scarcely of a university professor, even in the riotous sixties.

What then of Heidegger's *Das Freisein für den Tod*? I think the imperative to reflect upon death, as if we face it daily does represent a kind of meditation. The vertigo which it induces, because it reminds us of the perishing of our social substance and of this-worldly meaning, can be used constructively, in that freedom may accrue upon the willingness to assert a kind of independence—that is, independence of the social rituals and the performatives through which our substance continuously is fed. It may, somewhat paradoxically, form the basis for a new kind of personalism, in that the very emptiness of substance which the vertigo induces can be seen everywhere else—in other persons. We thus begin to see them afresh, not as having status, ability to help or harm us, bewitching beauty, curmudgeonliness or whatever: but rather to see them in themselves. It is in this direction also that a certain rapprochement is possible between Christian and Buddhist models of the human being.

There is, of course, a lot of interest at the present time, through the Hospice movement and in other ways, in helping people who are in process of dying. I do not need to expatiate on this front, beyond saying that while some folk may be prepared for solitude they are liable to suffer through loneliness, for the ebbing of life almost demands an increase in the close ness of friends and relatives.

Death itself is a passage from one state to another: at any rate the dead one leaves society, and it is worth saying something briefly about the concept of mourning. It is in fact an affirmation of the value of the mourner that one expresses sorrow, for sorrow is proportionate to loss, or at least perceived loss. It is thus in its own way a celebration of the individual who has passed away. But the loss is not just related to the individual—but also to the state of his achievements. The death of an old man who has led a full life, mostly happy, attracts some grief, but it is much tempered by the reflection that he has had a goodly ration of life's blessings. The loss of someone very close who is cut off in youth or prime is more insufferable and intensely felt, for there is a loss both of the individual as he actually was and as he would continue to be. We mourn an unfulfilled future. And that sense of loss can easily turn to anger, as if we expect justice in this world.
Perhaps I conclude with a feature of some funerals which may illustrate something of my discussion. It is not uncommon for those who return from the funeral and the burying or cremation of the dead one to have a meal together. It is not uncheerful. Why? The reason lies in the fact that it itself is a kind of ritual, though not fully perceived as such. It is a rite of passage too, during which the relatives and friends return to normal life again. They have previously been in close ritual and emotional contact with death. That itself is disturbing. The cold corpse is symbolically powerful, simultaneously peaceful and charged with a certain fearfulness. Return to normality demands a kind of shaking off of the grief and seriousness.

The more perfunctory it is, the shallower our grasp of death, and the less we have honoured the dead one with our grief. Modern technology supplies methods of hurrying the dead on their way, unseen, cosmetic, here today and gone tomorrow. It is a paradox of a society which claims to honor the rights of individuals that it often does so little to honor the individuals themselves. Thus from another angle again we see that the dignity of the person can be seen in death. Death causes vertigo in life.

NOTES

I want to pick up a couple of central points from the wealth of interesting ones which Professor Smart made in his paper. The comments I am going to make, I realize, since arriving here, are going to be blindingly simple and self-evident to this distinguished audience, but you must bear with me.

The first concerns personal death; the second, in a sense concerns general death. I’m worried by a phrase that Professor Smart uses in his paper, but very much avoided in his comments on his paper just now, and that is “substance”: the psychological and social accretions which give us some sort of sense of identity and validity. And also about death appearing basically in the process of dying. Now, there’s an old saying which comes up continually in Hollywood movies—very vividly, for instance, in that movie “Hud,” which was on BBC TV recently—and that is that “Nobody gets out of this life alive.” In youth, none of us really believe that. For young people death is not their concern, but later on—and I assume this takes in most of the audience here—in mid-thirties, and mid-forties, etc., it becomes a prime concern. I also think it becomes a prime element in one’s emotional, intellectual and creative life. I’m talking really about the phrase invented by the psychoanalyst Elliott Jaques that is, the “mid-life crisis.” By that Professor Jaques meant a period of intense depression which sets in sometime when you are half-way around the track, when your children tend to be grown up, or growing up, and your parents die. Now, the thing about parents is that they stand, as it were, between you and the ticket office, and once they die there is no one ahead of you in the line. Now, what the mid-life crisis is about is having to accept the fact not only that one’s youth is over and won’t return, however fervently you jog or press-up or whatever, but also having to accept the
emotional reality, not just the theoretical reality, of the inevitability of one’s own death.

Now, I think this is probably one of the most difficult things anybody has to do, and it’s notable in the arts that there are, relatively speaking, few great artists who manage to negotiate the mid-life crisis, and the ones who do tend to be the very greatest of them. I’m thinking of someone like Beethoven or Shakespeare or Dante or Bach or Donatello. That is, their work, in the later stages, moves into a new dimension. Their later work is richer and better than their earlier work. It’s more profound, it’s more tragic, it’s more reflective, it’s more serene. This serenity doesn’t come, as Professor Smart suggests somewhere in his paper, from the process of dying, either heroically or through sickness, but from an earlier, a prior acceptance of the fact of mortality.

Now, in this context, I think to talk of “substance” is not a way of facing death, it’s a way simply of cheering yourself up—that is, of avoiding death. One of the functions of religion, presumably, is to redeem death, as well as to redeem life, but not to have religion does not absolve one from thinking about the subject, and from bringing it into one’s life. I think rather the reverse: if you can die with all the consolations of the church, it becomes easier. Those of us who do not have any taste for these consolations are not thereby exempted from having to face actually what has happened, or the reality of what is happening.

What I think I’m saying is that death, either your own or someone else’s, is basically only meaningful for the living—i.e., for yourself when you are alive—and it is, in a sense, an essential aspect of living.

The second point I want to make is based on a phrase Professor Smart uses, “the vertigo of collective death.” The simple fact of the matter is that what Durkheim would have called “altruistic suicide”—that is, heroic death for a cause—is being made obsolete by modern technology, by modern collective society. We now have reached the point where war is more dangerous for the women and the children and the old, who are not fighting, than it is for those who are at the battle front. And the awareness of ubiquitous and arbitrary death, which descends very much like the Black Plague descended on medieval communities—that is, on the unjust and the just, without discrimination, without warning and without reason—is, I think, central to our experience of this century. We’ve had two world wars to show it, we’ve had extermination camps, we’ve had genocide, we’ve had nuclear and biological weapons, and we have also something we don’t
automatically think of: we have the fact of the earth itself being shadowed by nuclear weapons, orbiting out there in outer space.

Now what has happened, this vertigo of collective death, which is a phrase of Professor Smart’s I admire very much, means that death itself has become not only another aspect of the omnipresent technology, but it’s also become absurd. It’s become random, it’s become totally disconnected with any personal rhythms or reasons or substance. The whole psycho-analytic attitude which asserts that somehow or other even a dreadful disease like cancer, for instance, is part of a personality—saints get cancer, they say—that has been removed from us, given the fact of total destruction. I think we haven’t really faced this problem. A Hiroshima survivor said, in a phrase I quote several times in my book, *The Savage God*, “There exist no words in any human language which can give comfort to guinea pigs who do not know the cause of their death.”

Now I suspect that this is a problem which the arts have been trying to face in this century, and very few of the other disciplines have. And I also suspect that that sense of strain which is common to all the best in modern art of any type, comes from this need to forge, as it were, a language of mourning to cope for the possibility of this collective death.

Thank you.
DEATH AS A SOURCE OF PHILOSOPHY

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While we live, we live irremediably, and when we die, we die irremediably too. Of course, not all of us are equally convinced that death is irremediable; but the great variety of escapes from death, none very plausible, that men have conceived, shows that they take the danger to be great, for only a great danger could stimulate the creation of so many intellectually desperate remedies. Desperate or not, the most intellectually interesting of these remedies, or, to speak more neutrally, of these reactions, have of course been those proposed by the philosophers. Who that has studied philosophy does not remember how Plato tried, in the Phaedo, to prove the implausibility and even the impossibility of death? Who does not remember how the Stoics hardened themselves against the fear of death and the abhorrence of suicide.

I will not go on and recall the reactions of subsequent philosophers to the fear of death. To do so would be to repeat too much of the entire history of philosophy. I have, in any case, been more interested in the philosophers’ subtler, more concealed responses to the fear. In trying to understand how such more concealed responses affect philosophy, I have studied the lives of twenty-two philosophers, beginning with Montaigne. Let me name them, in historical order, not because I hope to discuss them all here, but simply to indicate the range of evidence I have tried to use. The philosophers are Montaigne, Hobbes, Descartes, Pascal, Spinoza, Locke, Leibniz, Berkeley, Voltaire, Hume, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Mill, Kierkegaard, James, Nietzsche, Santayana, Russell, Wittgenstein, and Sartre. Before I end, I will summarize something of what I have discovered of the reactions of these philosophers to death, which I mean to include the death of those, notably their parents, whose life has sustained and has therefore,
in a sense, been synonymous with their own.* To make what I will then say more plausible, I will describe, in what detail I now can, the instance of Friedrich Nietzsche. I choose him because he is interesting in himself and because the evidence relating to him is relatively clear, but not because I suppose his life to be representative of those of the other philosophers except in the very general point I am trying to make.

Nietzsche’s father, a country parson, died of what was called “softening of the brain” when Nietzsche was four years old. A few months later, Nietzsche’s younger brother, Joseph, died, and Nietzsche was left in a family composed of himself and five women, his mother, his younger sister, Elisabeth, a grandmother, and two maiden aunts.

To judge from Nietzsche’s autobiographical writings, the death of his father was a catastrophe that cast its shadow over the whole of his subsequent life, which it divided, as Nietzsche remembered it, into a brief demi-paradise followed by a long period of sorrow and affliction, affliction that became physical no less than spiritual. I will not describe his physical suffering, which he himself describes to his friends with grim eloquence, but concentrate, as my purpose makes necessary, on his suffering from human isolation. “If only I could give you an idea,” he wrote to a friend, “of my feeling of loneliness! No more among the living than among the dead do I have anyone I’ve felt related to.”

As his thought shows, Nietzsche’s loneliness expresses his need for his long-dead father and, though he came at times to hate them, for his still living mother and sister. It also shows his constant struggle to gain independence of all of them and of all they represented. When young he had written, “In everything God has led me securely, as a father his weak little child . . . I have firmly decided to dedicate myself forever to his service.” His extended and violent attack on this decision shows that he never got emotionally free of it, and his contrary aims were, as he sometimes recognized, analogous and, it seems to me, compensatory. As he once explained, in 1881, to a friend, he had never despised Christianity in his heart. When Zarathustra said of Christ, “He died too early; he himself would have recanted his teaching, had he reached my age,” Nietzsche, I think, was expressing a fantasy in which his father was Christ who, as

*Complete references will be found in my book, *The Philosophers; Life and Thought*, to be published by Oxford University Press during 1978. Much of this essay is derived from the book.
such, had come to learn that his son, Nietzsche, was right. But such a fantasy was not an easy one to sustain because it required an identification with suffering and ostracism, and, even beyond this, with the suffering that was caused, not only to the Christians but by them. It was in an access, I think, of such masochism that Nietzsche said, “I do not read but love Pascal.” The reason he gave was that Pascal had been murdered, body and mind, by Christianity. This means, I take it, that Nietzsche felt that his father, the representative of Christianity that he had been closest to, might somehow have been responsible for his, Nietzsche’s sufferings. In the face of the death, the pain, and the emotional bondage Nietzsche had endured, he could retain the security of his childhood ideas only as they continued to exist in their opposites. He therefore blamed his troubles on “that damned ‘idealism’ ” that reminded him, it appears to me, of his father and his father’s death, for Nietzsche identified pity and self-sacrifice with “the turning against life, the ender and sorrowful signs of the ultimate illness.’

I have made many assertions in the last paragraph. Let me attempt to cite more of the evidence in their favor, especially in favor of the assertion that the relationship with the father was decisive for Nietzsche’s philosophy no less than for his life.

First, let me recall some of Nietzsche’s aphorisms on fathers in his early books. These show an ambivalence toward the father, that is, his father, not even hinted at his early autobiographical accounts. The aphorism, “If one had no good father, one should then invent one,” means that Nietzsche may have understood that he had idealized his dead father, that is, invented him better than he had really been. But the aphorism, “Fathers have a great deal to make up for having sons,” says that simply to be a son is painful, and that a father, that is, his father, is for that reason guilty. “In the ripeness of life and understanding a man is overcome by the feeling that his father was wrong to beget him,” is surely the same attack on the same father (and on himself, the son who ought not to have been born). Two further, later aphorisms have a perhaps more complex meaning. The first of these is, “Often the son already betrays the father—and the father understands himself better after he has a son.” In context, this aphorism means no more than that later generations reveal the potentialities of the earlier ones. Perhaps, however, the words, “der Verräter seines Vaters,” carry the associations of betrayal. If such is the case, the aphorism implies the father’s self-discovery in the antagonism of the son, who, despite this antagonism, fulfills the father.
The second aphorism says, similarly, "What was silent in the father speaks in the son; and often I have found the son the unveiled secret of the father," meaning that the father, in spite of appearances, could know and come to effective expression only in the son. Here the context is unambiguously negative, for the immediately preceding sentence in Nietzsche’s text is, "Aggrieved conceit, repressed envy—perhaps the conceit and envy of the fathers erupt from you as a flame and as the frenzy of revenge."

In Zarathustra and the Genealogy of Morals Nietzsche insists on the blood relationship between himself, or the person or persons in whose name he is speaking, and the priests. Zarathustra, for example, proclaims that the priests are evil enemies. "Yet," he proclaims, "my book is related to theirs, and I want to know that my blood is honored even in theirs." Then, significantly for Nietzsche, Zarathustra adds that the priests are meant to live as corpses, that their speech smells of death chambers, and that "whoever lives near them lives near black ponds out of which an ominous frog sings its song with sweet melancholy." I think that this passage reflects the scene of the burial of Nietzsche’s father, which he more than once described in the most heartfelt words. The Genealogy of Morals lays down that priests are ill and neurasthenic, and that the ascetic priest opposes the healthy person because "the priest is the first form of the delicate animal . . . ." Then, in the Antichrist, Nietzsche complains that "philosophy has been corrupted by theologian’s blood. The Protestant parson is the grandfather of German philosophy," as Protestant parsons had been the father and grandfathers of his own philosophy. In the Will to Power he again insists on the closeness of philosopher and priest and states that the philosopher aspires to take authority into his own hands. In the abrupt words of his probably unrevised text:

"The philosopher is a further development of the priestly type:—has the heritage of the priest in his blood; is compelled, even as a rival, to struggle for the same ends with the same means as the priest of his time; he aspires to supreme authority."

Ecce Homo records Nietzsche’s claim to be defined and set apart from all the rest of humanity by the fact that he has exposed Christian morality. He says, "Blindness to Christianity is the crime par excellence—the crime against life." What is most terrible of all, he says, is that "the concept of the good man signifies that one sides with all that is weak, sick, failure—suffering of itself," and he immediately exclaims, "Ecrasez l’infame!"
It is in *Ecce Homo*, I believe, that Nietzsche reveals what he has against the father he is never tired of praising, and what he has, therefore, against Christianity and conventional goodness. Here, in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche makes the last of the reviews of his life, still referring with great feeling to the death of his father. In almost the same words he used to characterize the ascetic priest in the *Genealogy of Morals*, he calls him "delicate, kind, and morbid." He then adds, "In the same year in which his life went downward, mine, too, went downward: at thirty-six I reached the lowest point of my vitality . . . ." He himself, he tells the reader, is a decadent, but also the opposite, for he has turned his will "to health, to life, into a philosophy." He states, "I consider it a great privilege to have had such a father," and he concedes that any other privileges he may enjoy stem from this one. But he adds the fatal qualification, "not including life, the great Yes to life." He recalls, on the one hand, that his father was responsible for his involuntary entrance "into a world of lofty and delicate things," and, on the other, that there had been a heavy though fair price to pay. He says, "That I have almost paid with my life for this privilege is certainly no unfair trade." He praises the "incomparable father" who passed on the inability to predispose people against even himself. Soon thereafter, he says, most revealingly, "At another point as well, I am merely my father once more and, as it were, his continued life after an all-too-early death." The open identification with his father is here joined with the sense of recurrence that plays so crucial a role in his thought. Then, further on in the text, there is an astonishing sentence, as if he had suddenly forgotten the paradise of his early childhood, "Altogether, I have no welcome memories whatsoever from my whole childhood and youth." Finally, in the last passage I will cite in this connection, Nietzsche speaks of his admiration for the fact that "precisely at the right time, my father's *wicked* heritage came to my aid—at bottom, predestination to an early death."

The evidence seems to me to be strong. Nietzsche was, in effect, accusing his father of passing on to him his weakness and the possibility of an early, similar death, for which reason he, Nietzsche, would denounce and surpass nationalism, Christianity, and conventional truth and goodness, everything connected with the father he felt so close to. For all these signified the death whose threat to him he had painfully learned to oppose with life and life's values. His father, he had come to feel, had been drawing him, as in a dream he had drawn Joseph, his brother, down to the grave. This feeling, I think, is the nerve of the emotion that animates
Nietzsche's philosophy—the simultaneous longing for the father and re-
jection of him.

It is possible that even the relativity or murkiness of the truth that
Nietzsche stresses reflects to complexity of his love in antagonism. The
criterion of truth, Nietzsche prefers to believe, may be, not the usual
objectivity, but the arousal of feeling, the imparting to thought of the feeling
of strength, the feeling of strength being exerted against resistance. In
brief, "The criterion of truth resides in the enhancement of the feeling of
power." Given his loneliness, his illness, and his fears, Nietzsche was
willing to accept as truth whatever restored his pleasure, creative ac-
complishment, self-esteem, and feeling of power. Truth in this sense often
meant the feeling of power given him by his ability to see sharply and state
sharply what he had seen. This power to see and state sharply, this surgical
mind and tongue, was largely the gift of his painful, conscious or near-
conscious ambivalence. As person and thinker, he loved, moved, and had
his being in intelligently and painfully formulated ambivalence. To say this
is of course not to give a magic key to his individuality, but it is to stress
the degree to which death, his father's catastrophic death and his fear that
he might inherit a like death from his father, was a source of his whole
philosophy.

At this point I should like to remind the reader that I have dwelt on
Nietzsche primarily as an example of how death may serve as a source of
philosophy. I should further like to recall the names of the philosophers,
beginning with Montaigne and ending with Sartre, that I cited on an earlier
page. It is needless to emphasize that each of them is an individual, and that
the pattern of Nietzsche's life fits Nietzsche alone. As in the case of
Nietzsche, however, it can be shown that death was a source of their
thought. Perhaps I should say, death and its antecedents, sequels, and
psychological analogues, which include anything felt or perceived to be a
threat to life. Consider, for example, the ages at which the philosophers I
have named lost their parents. Of the twenty-two philosophers, two had
lost both parents and eleven at least one by the age of six. In only six cases
did both parents survive until the philosopher was fifteen. But the mere
survival of parents may not shield children from experiences that are
psychologically threatening to life. Schopenhauer was seventeen when his
father died; but although he was no longer a child, the circumstances of his
life made the blow particularly devastating; and it was the more dev-
astating because his father had appeared to be losing his mind and had, it
was believed, committed suicide. Mill was given an unbearable education by a domineering, apparently cold father, and he came almost to despise his mother. James's father had been tragically mutilated and ended his life in a strange form of suicide. Wittgenstein's father could be extremely harsh to his sons—enough, perhaps, to provoke the suicide of two of them and raise the specter of suicide in Wittgenstein's own mind. If these are the facts, only the families of Locke and Berkeley are left to qualify as good in the conventional psychological sense; and Berkeley, it may be recalled, was, for unknown reasons, suspicious as a child, while Locke was at first rigidly disciplined by his father. Death and other painful psychological separations are no doubt common in early life, but it seems nevertheless notable that at least twenty of the twenty-two philosophers may be supposed to have experienced them. They certainly fit the generalization proposed by psychologists that persons of exceptional accomplishment have suffered exceptionally heavy parental loss in childhood.

If I go beyond the philosophers I have listed, I may name Jaspers as an apparent exception to the generalization I have just made. He praised both his parents, who survived late into their fifties; but Jaspers was cut off from much of life by illness. The once famous philosopher, Hans Vaihinger, is an example of how a sensory defect, like the death of parents, or like severe illness, may affect a philosopher's experience and so his philosophy as well. Vaihinger "wanted to be a man of action," but his extreme nearsightedness forced him into scholarly pursuits. He regarded the contrast between his physical constitution and the way he would like to live as irrational and his defective vision made him sensitive to other frustrating aspects of existence. It seems likely to me that his desire to modify the Kantian categories in to something more empirical may have depended on his experience of near-blindness, as may his whole "as-if" theory of life-serving fictions.

Two more summary comments can be made on the philosophers' relations with their parents as threats to life. The first is that a parent's death might leave the philosopher in fear that he had inherited some vulnerability or even death itself from the parents. Descartes feared that he had inherited pallor, weak lungs, and a probably early death from his mother; Kant assumed he had inherited a narrow chest and consequent weakness and hypochondria from his mother; Schopenhauer was preoccupied with the problems of insanity and suicide as the result of his father's strange behavior and presumed suicide; Kierkegaard was convinced that he would die young
because of punishment visited on his father; James may have felt his breakdown to be a repetition of his father's; Nietzsche believed that he had inherited madness, perhaps, and an early death from his father; and Russell was haunted by the fear of hereditary madness. The least result of such, usually concealed fear or resentment was a powerful ambivalence, for the parent, the source and support of life, was also felt to be the direct source of weakness and death.

The second comment I have to make on parents as threats to life concerns the philosophers' acceptance or rejection of the idea of God. In my accounts of individual philosophers I have adopted the psychoanalytic view that a child's idea of God is likely to be modelled on its father. That is, it may combine elements taken in any proportion from both parents, but the predominant image in our culture of God as masculine and the formal and often practical dominance of the man in family life has made the association of God with father more natural than with mother. However that may be, it strikes me as significant that the four philosophers, Hume, Nietzsche, Russell and Sartre, who lost their fathers earliest in life are all atheist or close to it. Hume, to be accurate, seems to have believed in some very remote creator, but his discussion of God is more marked by carefully expressed skepticism than by faith, while Nietzsche, Russell and Sartre are all explicit atheists, but such as miss God badly and say so. The remaining atheists among the philosophers are Mill and Santayana. However, Mill, who considers the possibility of God's existence calmly, and who takes Jesus as the ideal guide for humanity, is an atheist, as he says, out of identification with his atheistic father. The instance of Santayana is more complex, for he was attracted, with his sister, to Catholicism, but both his parents were disbelievers, so that even if they were gods in his childish imagination, they taught him the atheism to which he remained faithful in the end.

About mothers and gods I have only a brief word to say. If we except Russell, because he lost his father, too, quite early, the three who lost their mothers earliest are Descartes, Pascal, and Rousseau. Granted Descartes' strong rationalistic leanings, his choice of what I take to be an irrationalistic God is surprising and may have something to do with the early death of his mother. Pascal's belief in God is so basically irrationalistic that it for the most part excludes itself from the realm of philosophical discussion. Rousseau does argue metaphysically for the existence of a God. But his "Profession of Faith of the Vicar of Savoy," which contains his major attempt to argue so, is not really typical of him, and may have been prompted by
a temporary desire to argue like a philosophe. What seems more natural to Rousseau is more obviously related to his lack of a mother: an ecstatic identification with the whole of nature, a belief in immorality that allows him the hope to be completely himself, without contradiction, division, or need, and a faith that he is fundamentally a spiritual and moral being. It is possible, then, that the early loss of a mother biases philosophers in the direction of an irrationalistic or more emotionally apprehended God. I raise this possibility hesitantly, but I do not think that the instance of Kierkegaard contradicts it, for reasons that I cannot go into here.

I do not want to be dogmatic in my biographical interpretations; but though I have often felt hesitant in making them, I do not hesitate to conclude that death is directly and indirectly a source of philosophy. Death is often the challenge to which philosophy is the answer, sometimes quite openly so. Like sportsmen, philosophers may be of the sort that need to experience great stress. The explanation of the need may be that the mastery of external stress wards off old anxieties, perhaps because in returning from danger to safety one’s feeling of safety is renewed. Alternatively, the explanation may be that, to overcome fear, one coordinates one’s powers and arrives at an experience so intense that one becomes addicted to it, for it creates a self that at moments measures up to one’s fantasies. Both mountain climbers and philosophers may be engaged in exploring their reactions to new exacting experiences and use their sport or occupation in order to explore their own potentialities.

Philosophers are like mountaineers. At least one daring philosopher, Berkeley, had been a daring mountaineer; and I have been told that both Wittgenstein and Popper were mountaineers. It is true that literal mountaineers are rare among the abstraction-prone men we are concerned with; but more than one of them would agree with Husserl when he said that the philosopher’s radical search for truth requires him to risk his life in its behalf. For philosophers and other intellectuals, especially the great ones, take deliberate intellectual risks and endanger themselves sometimes even physically in order to arrive at intellectual power and self-mastery that is also, as in the mountain climber, a mastery of the world; and, like the climber, they are often impelled by the fantasy that they will climb a Himalayan peak and survey all existence. The risks they undergo and the price they pay add to their satisfaction when, they feel, they accomplish something intellectual. Wittgenstein therefore respected Russell for having
exclaimed, "Logic is hell!" He himself thought that the measure of a man's greatness would be in terms of what his work cost him."

There is much more that I should like to say on death as a source of philosophy, but life (the philosophers say) is short, and I must end. I have tried to be relatively empirical in my remarks. I have used psychology, but without any intention to maintain a psychological determinism. Perhaps I have done little more than repeat in my own factual, prosaic way the moral of an Amerindian legend. According to this legend, the first human pair in existence were granted the possibility of renewing their youth year after year. However, an insidious trickster-like figure persuaded them that to be immortal would be to give up the experience of falling in love, of having and bringing up children, and of growing old in mutuality and wisdom—of everything that gave human life its value. The human pair agreed with the trickster's reasoning and gave up their chance to keep renewing their youth. Later, however, when it was too late, they thought the matter over. "He was right," the man said, "but all the same, I'm sorry." The woman concurred, for he was not only the primal philosopher, but a good, and an honest one. I certainly respect him, as, I think, having heard him, you do. It's wonderful to be alive, but we resist paying the price; and so, among other things, we philosophize.
**COMMENTARY**

**PETER MUNZ**

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I was very stimulated but also very provoked by Ben Scharfstein's paper. I am looking forward to his book on the subject which is to be published by the Oxford University Press and I will here confine myself to a few critical comments.

First, I would like to express my concern about psycho-history. Psychoanalysis, the science on which it is based, requires a patient to be present; it is necessary for him to associate freely; to present and connect not only his dreams of the past but also his dreams that are responses to his own and his therapist's reactions to his free associations, and so forth. The test of the method is pragmatic. Either the patient benefits or he does not. But if a historian psychoanalyses dead people using biographical information from no matter what intimate sources, there can be no pragmatic test, no responses to associations and no free associations in the first place. It seems therefore, that the whole enterprise is somewhat misconceived.

Next, I would like to point out that the method which Ben Scharfstein employs tends to diminish one's interest in the truth of the propositions philosophers put forward and to direct it instead towards the psychological sources of those propositions. Though not without interest, it belittles the real importance of what philosophers have said. For example, no matter how justified Nietzsche might have been psychologically, I feel one ought to stress that on many important questions he was quite simply wrong. It takes all my courage to say so in the presence of Walter Kaufmann; but I am convinced that Nietzsche, for example, was wrong in his assessment and treatment of Christianity. I am not a Christian and I am not saying this as an apology for Christianity, but as a matter of historical accuracy. Christianity was not, as Nietzsche argues, a slave morality;
but a rejection of an ancient tribal conception of justice. It was not directed, as Nietzsche thought, against life and nature (at least not in its initial thrust), but against the primitive, if necessary, practice of the ethics of mere retribution and revenge.

Ben Scharfstein’s approach tends to obscure questions of this kind. I think they ought not to be obscured and that we ought to ask ourselves, even in philosophy, whether propositions that are due to the fear of death are right or wrong. This is specially important because I believe that the fear of death is something that ought to be resisted. “For the sake of love, one should not,” Thomas Mann once wrote (and I am quoting from memory), “grant death power over one’s mind.” If one uses death and the fear of death as a source for philosophy one will, by logic as well as by psychological compulsion, get more death and more thoughts of death. It can become an overriding obsession and we have to be very much on our guard not to give in. If childhood memories of the father’s death are a frequent source of philosophising, as Ben Scharfstein explains (and I have no reason to doubt his explanations), then we ought to resist childhood memories and give good marks to those philosophers who manage to do so successfully; and bad marks to those who give in. We know well that many infantile passions and fears must be resisted and sublimated. It does not go without saying that the fear of death should not be one of them.

Without necessarily disagreeing with Ben Scharfstein, I am surprised that he did not point this out when he was discussing death as a source of philosophy. He never mentioned that in many cases death is the source of wrong or, if you wish, bad philosophy and that for this reason much philosophy has actually become a source of death. I am here thinking not only of obvious examples like Schopenhauer but also, and perhaps more relevantly, at the present time, of men like Wittgenstein whose self-hatred turned often into general hatred and whose masochism Ben Scharfstein very rightly referred to. Here, if anywhere, is a case where death was a source of philosophy; and philosophy a source of death.

For that matter, the fear of death always strikes me as inherently irrational or unreasonable. (I am never quite sure about the precise difference between these two words.) I think Ben Scharfstein implied this; but he did not make this explicit. I am also surprised that he failed to distinguish between two important questions: Do we philosophise because we want to compensate ourselves for death; or do we philosophise in order to prove that death is not really real? At the end of the paper I got
the impression that Ben Scharfstein believes that the first is the case; and at the beginning of the paper, I had the impression that he was arguing in favour of the second question.

But let me return to my contention that the fear of death is irrational. Looking at evolution one sees that death is essential for evolution. If life could continue in a way other than by cells dying and producing others, there would have been no change at all and we still would only have unicellular organisms. (This may, of course, not be a matter for complaint, but just a matter of taste.) Fear of death, from an evolutionary point of view, is therefore something odd that requires explanation. Without death, evolution is inconceivable; and yet we know very well that the fear of death has great adaptive value. This is something that requires discussion and I fear that a psycho-history approach to the great philosophers might not shed much light on the heart of this matter. Ben Scharfstein insisted that we ought to study philosophers’ responses to death but I suspect that his own method will tend to obscure the differences between right and wrong responses in the light of the ambiguous role death plays in evolution.

Given his own title, Ben Scharfstein has singled out philosophers. Theologians too, however, have addressed themselves to the problem of death and they have always had a professional interest to allay our fears of death and they have tried to do so by making use of revealed knowledge. On the other side, scientists have written on the subject and have come to the conclusion that death is necessary to make the evolution possible. This conclusion ought not to be underrated, modest though it is when compared with the enormity of our concern and the enormity of our death wishes. The most comforting and enlightening book I have ever read on this subject was written by a famous biochemist. I am referring to Jacob’s *The Logic of Life*. I have found this the most serene and the most comforting way of understanding the necessity of death and if anything has reconciled me, this book has helped me more than the writings of philosophers and theologians. Leaving out theologians, one should perhaps compare the philosophers and the scientists. Philosophers in their concern for death and their interest in the impossibility or implausibility of death (as Ben Scharfstein put it), seem to me to have made a very bad fist of it. And there was nothing in Ben Scharfstein’s paper to persuade me otherwise. But then, we must accept the limits imposed upon the paper by the title and not expect Ben Scharfstein to carry the argument beyond those limits.
THE ART OF SUICIDE

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In the morning of life the son tears himself loose from the mother, from the domestic hearth, to rise through battle to his destined heights. Always he imagines his worst enemy in front of him, yet he carries the enemy within himself—a deadly longing for the abyss, a longing to drown in his own source, to be sucked down to the realm of the Mothers. His life is a constant struggle against extinction, a violent yet fleeting deliverance from ever-lurking night. This death is no external enemy, it is his own inner longing for the stillness and profound peace of all-knowing non-existence, for all-seeing sleep in the ocean of coming-to-be and passing away. . . .

Jung, SYMBOLS OF TRANSFORMATION

Not only the artist, that most deliberate of persons, but all human beings employ metaphor: the conscious or unconscious creation of concrete, literal terms that seek to express the abstract, the not-at-hand, the ineffable. Is the suicide an artist? Is Death-by-Suicide an art-form, the employment of a metaphor so vast, so final, that it obliterates and sweeps into silence all opposition? But there are many suicides, there are many deaths, some highly conscious and others, groping, perplexed, perhaps murderous, hardly conscious at all: a succumbing to the gravitational pull of which Jung speaks in the quotation above, which he envisions in terms of the hero and his quest, which takes him away from the “realm of the Mothers”—but only for a while, until his life’s-energy runs its course, and he is drawn down into what Jung calls, in metaphorical language that is beautiful, even seductive, the “profound peace of all-knowing non-existence.” Yet if we were to push aside metaphor, if we were no longer even to speak in a reverential tone of Death, but instead of Deadness—mere, brute, blunt, flat, distinctly unseductive Deadness—how artistic a venture is it, how meaningfully can it engage our deepest attention?
For the "artistic" suicide—in contrast to the suicide who acts in order to hasten an inevitable end, perhaps even to alleviate terrible pain—is always mesmerized by the imaginative act of self-destruction, *as if it were a kind of creation*. It is a supreme gesture of the will, an insistence upon one's absolute freedom; that it is "contrary to nature", a dramatic violation of the life-force, makes the gesture all the more unique. One can determine one's self, one's identity, by choosing to put an end to that identity—which is to say, an end to finitude itself. The suicide who deliberates over his act, who very likely has centered much of his life around the possibility of the act, rejects our human condition of finitude (all that we are not, as well as all that we are); his self-destruction is a disavowal, in a sense, of what it means to be human. Does the suicide who is transfixed by metaphor suffer a serious derangement of perception, so that he contemplates the serene, transcendental, Platonic "all-knowing non-existence" while what awaits him is merely a biological death—that is, deadness? One thinks of Simone Weil, taking inspiration from an early Christian teaching (later banished as heretical): one may hasten the "decreation" of his or her life by refusing nourishment, and God will not be offended. In fact, "decreating" oneself, in Weil's extraordinary imagination, is a mystic act; it brings one back to God. To Weil the body and its appetites and inclinations were vile, lived out "here below" (to use her phrase), so that any activity that hastened the decreation of the body would necessarily be good. The puritannical consciousness errs initially by imagining a tragic split between the physical self and the spiritual self—as if the spirit were not a function of the organic being in its entirety; the error is complicated by the invention of a metaphorical combat between the two, so that the body and the soul are locked in warfare. *Why*, if the body is God's creation, if its impulses are clearly part of God's design, should the body be treated as if it were a dangerous beast, a creation of the Devil? The "art" of the puritan's suicide is an art badly confused by metaphors taken from inappropriate sources.

In Sylvia Plath's famous poem "Lady Lazarus" the young woman poet boasts of her most recent suicide attempt in language that, though carefully restrained by the rigorous formal discipline of the poem, strikes us as very close to hysteria. She is a "smiling woman", only thirty; and like the cat she has nine times to die. (Though in fact Plath's next attempt, an attempt said not to have been altogether serious, was to be her last.) She is clearly proud of herself, though self-mocking as well, and her angry contempt for the voyeurs crowding around is beautifully expressed:
What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them unwind me hand and foot—
The big strip tease.
Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands
My knees
I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless I am the same, identical woman.

...............

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I’ve a call.

In this poem and in numerous others from the collections ARIEL and WINTER TREES the poet creates vivid images of self-loathing, frequently projected onto other people or onto nature, and consequently onto life itself. It is Sylvia Plath whom Sylvia Plath despises, and by confusing her personality with the deepest layer of being, her own soul, she makes self-destruction inevitable. It is not life that has become contaminated, and requires a radical exorcism; it is the temporal personality, the smiling thirty-year old woman trapped in a failing marriage and overburdened with the responsibilities of motherhood, in one of the coldest winters in England’s recorded history. Unable to strike out at her ostensible enemies (her husband Ted Hughes, who had left her for another woman; her father, long dead, who had “betrayed” her by dying when she was a small child) Plath strikes out at the enemy within, and murders herself in her final shrill poems before she actually turns on the gas oven and commits suicide. If her death, and even many of her poems, strike us as adolescent gestures it is perhaps because she demonstrated so little self-knowledge; her anguish
was sheer emotion, never translated into coherent images. Quite apart from the surreal figures of speech Plath employs with such frenzied power, her work exhibits a curious deficiency of imagination, most evident in the autobiographical novel, THE BELL-JAR, in which the suicidal narrator speaks of her consciousness as trapped inside a bell-jar, forced to breathe again and again the same stale air.

“‘There is but one truly serious philosophical question,’” Camus has said, in a statement now famous, “‘and that is suicide.’” Camus exaggerates, certainly, and it is doubtful whether, strictly speaking, suicide is a “philosophical” problem at all. It may be social, moral, even economic, even political—especially political; but is it “philosophical”? Marcus Aurelius noted in his typically prudent manner: “In all that you do or say or think, recollect that at any time the power of withdrawal from life is in your hands,” and Nietzsche said, perhaps less somberly, “The thought of suicide is a strong consolation; one can get through many a bad night with it.” But these are problems, these are thoughts; that they are so clearly conceptualized suggests their detachment from the kind of anguish, raw and undifferentiated, that drove Sylvia Plath to her premature death. The poet Anne Sexton liked to claim that suicides were a special people. “‘Talking death’ for suicides is ‘life.’” In Sexton’s third collection of poems, Live or Die, she included a poem characterized by remarkable restraint and dignity, one of the most intelligent (and despairing) works of what is loosely called the “confessional mode.” Is suicide a philosophical problem? Is it intellectual, abstract, cerebral? Hardly:

Since you ask, most days I cannot remember.
I walk in my clothing, unmarked by that voyage.
Then the almost unnameable lust returns.

Even then I have nothing against life.
I know well the grass blades you mention,
the furniture you have placed under the sun.

But suicides have a special language.
Like carpenters they want to know which tools.
They never ask why build.

In Sexton the gravitational pull toward death seems to preclude, or exclude, such imaginative speculations as those of Camus; that death is desirable is
never questioned. There is a certain mad, perverse, rather wonderful logic to Dostoyevsky’s Kirilov as he reasons through the necessity for his suicide (for, by defeating the life-instinct, he will become God—he will be the first man in history to become God), but Kirilov’s reasons would be incomprehensible to someone with the temperament of a Plath or a Sexton—“born” suicides, we might say, because their myth-making propensities are so narrowly circumscribed as to exclude the larger social, political, historical world which so intrigued Camus and Kirilov. (Indeed, Kirilov hints in one of his long speeches that his suicide may be a consequence of his realization that Jesus Christ was not the Son of God, but only a mortal human being like himself, doomed to extinction.)

Of course there are the famous suicides, the noble suicides, who do not appear to have been acting blindly, out of a confused emotional state: there is Socrates who acquiesced courteously, who did not choose to flee his execution; there is Cato; Petronius; Jesus of Nazareth. In literature there are, famously, Shakespeare’s Othello, who rises to his death, and Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra, both of whom outwit their conquerors by dying, the latter an “easy” death, the former an awkward, ghastly Roman death, poorly executed. Macbeth’s ferocious struggle with Macduff is a suicidal gesture, and a perfect one, as is Hamlet’s final combat with the enemy most like himself in age and spirit. The Hamlet-like Stavrogin of Dostoyevsky’s monumental THE POSSESSED worries that he may lack the “magnanimity” to kill himself, and to rid the world of such a loathsome creature as he (and he is loathsome, even in the context of the THE POSSESSED); but he acquires the necessary strength and manages to hang himself, a symbolic gesture tied up clearly with Dostoyevsky’s instinct for the logic of self-destruction as a consequence of modern man’s “freedom” (i.e. alienation) from his nation. (Stavrogin does not love Russia. He does not know Russia. The idle son of a wealthy landowner, he has not had to work; he has travelled in Europe, and elsewhere in the world, as a curiosity-seeker; so detached from common life is he that in order to feel anything at all, even so ordinary an emotion as fear or disgust, he must experiment along debased, sadistic lines. His suicide is a political act far more significantly than it is a private, subjective act: it is clearly paradigmatic and prophetic.)

Is the subjective act, then, nursed and groomed and made to bring forth its own sort of sickly fruit, really a public, political act? “Many die too late, and a few die too early,” Nietzsche says boldly. “The doctrine still sounds
strange: *Die at the right time!*" Nietzsche does not address himself to the less-than-noble; he is speaking, perhaps, not to individuals at all but to trans-individual values that, once healthy, are now fallen into decay, and must be hastened to their inevitable historical end. The fascination with Death in its romantic aspect, stimulated, if we are to believe the early novel *Confessions of a Mask*, by an obsessive contemplation of certain morbidly rendered illustrations of the martyrdom of St. Sebastian and other Western, Christian, comely martyrs, emerges into a rather flamboyantly public and political guise in the work and life of that extraordinary Japanese writer Yukio Mishima, who committed ritual suicide as a gesture of his despair over and his contempt for the "degenerate" spiritual condition of contemporary Japan. Faulkner's Quentin Compson, his father's son in a number of respects, appears to insist upon his sister's loss of honor in order that his suicide be justified: *The Sound and the Fury* must rank with *Moby Dick* in terms of its tragic scope, its exploration of the doomed linkage between a society given over to marketplace values and its most sensitive protagonists, but Quentin's powerful section, which details with fastidious attentiveness the young man's last day of life, is a rhapsody of Death itself, Death quite apart from social or even familiar implications, Death as sheer lyric metaphor.

If until recent times death has been a taboo subject in our culture, suicide has been nothing short of an obscenity: a sudden raucous jeering shout in a genteel gathering. The suicide does not play the game, does not observe the rules; he leaves the party too soon, and leaves the other guests painfully uncomfortable. The world which has struck them as tolerable, or even enjoyable, is, perhaps to a more discerning temperament, simply impossible: like Dostoyevsky's Ivan Karamozov, he respectfully returns his ticket to his creator. The private gesture becomes violently and unmistakably public, which accounts for the harsh measures taken to punish suicides—or the bodies of suicides—over the centuries. It is possible to reject society's extreme judgment, I think, without taking up an unqualified cause for the "freedom" of suicide, particularly if one makes sharp distinctions between kinds of suicides—the altruistic, the pathological, the metaphorical self-murder in which what is murdered is an aspect of the self, and what is attained is a fictitious "transcendence" of physical circumstance.

For instance, can one freely choose a condition, a state of being, that has never been experienced except in the imagination and, there, *only in metaphor*? The wish "I want to die" might be a confused statement mask-
ing any number of unarticulated wishes: "I want to punish you, and you, and you"; "I want to punish the loathsome creature that appears to be myself"; "I want to be taken up by my Creator, and returned to the bliss of my first home"; "I want to alter my life because it is so disappointing, or painful, or boring"; "I want to silence the voices that are always shouting instructions"; "I want—I know not what." Rationally one cannot "choose" death because Death is an unknown experience, and perhaps it isn't even an "experience"—perhaps it is simply nothing; and one cannot imagine nothing. The brain simply cannot fathom it, however glibly its thought-clusters may verbalize non-existence, negation of being, Death, and other non-referential terms. There is a curious heckling logic to the suicide's case but his initial premise may be totally unfounded. I want to die may in fact be an empty statement expressing merely an emotion: I am terribly unhappy at the present time.

Still, people commit suicide because it is their deepest, most secret wish, and if the wish is too secret to be consciously admitted it will manifest itself in any number of metaphorical ways. No need to list them—alcoholism, accidents, self-induced malnutrition, wretched life-choices, a cultivation of melancholy. The world is there, the world is, not awaiting our interpretations but unresisting when we compose them, and it may be that the mere semblance of the world's acquiescence to our metaphor-making brains leads us deeper and deeper into illusion. Because passion, even misdirected and self-pitying and claustrophobic, is always appealing, and has the power to drown out quieter, more reasonable voices, we will always be confronted by the fascination an intelligent public will feel for the most skillfully articulated of death-wishes. Listen:

Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so.
After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns,
we ourselves flash and yearn,
and moreover my mother told me as a boy
(repeatingly) "Ever to confess you're bored
means you have no

Inner Resources." I conclude now I have no
inner resources, because I am heavy bored.
Peoples bore me,
literature bores me, especially great literature,
Henry bores me, with his plights & gripes
as bad as achilles,
who loves people and valiant art, which bores me.
And the tranquil hills, & gin, look like a drag
and somehow a dog
has taken itself & its tail, considerably away
into mountains or sea or sky, leaving
behind: me, wag.

(John Berryman, DREAM SONGS, #14)

My thesis is a simple one: apart from circumstances which insist upon
self-destruction as the inevitable next move, the necessary next move that
will preserve one’s dignity, the act of suicide itself is a consequence of the
employment of false metaphors. It is, as the quotations from Berryman,
Sexton, and Plath indicate, a consequence of the atrophying of the creative
imagination: the failure of the imagination: not to be confused with gestures
of freedom, or rebellion, or originality, or transcendence. To so desperately
confuse the terms of our finite contract as to invent a liberating Death when
it is really brute, inarticulate Deadness that awaits—the “artist” of suicide
is a groping, blundering, failed artist, and his art—work a mockery of
genuine achievement.
COMMENTARY

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I'm going to talk about the paper more than the presentation. I'm not going to quarrel with any of the literary interpretations in it. And I'm not going to talk at all about points of agreement.

Toward the end of her paper, Professor Oates asked the question, "Can one freely choose a condition, a state of being that has never been experienced, except in the imagination and, there, only in metaphore?" And a bit later, "Rationally," she says, "one cannot 'choose' Death because Death is an unknown experience, and perhaps it isn't even an 'experience'—perhaps it is simply nothing; and one cannot imagine nothing. The brain simply cannot fathom it, however glibly its thought-clusters may verbalize non-existence, negation of being, Death, and other non-referential terms."

She's obviously talking about death envisioned as cessation of existence, more specifically as the cessation of consciousness, and I'd like to take up some of the points made in this general position.

First, I think it should be pointed out that people do choose, I would like to argue both freely and not obviously irrationally, to do things which, or to try to do things for which they have no clear picture in their experience, things which they have not yet experienced. And this happens all the time: in every case that we choose to do something that we haven't done before, in all cases of trying something for the first time. One chooses to get drunk, perhaps, never having been drunk. One chooses to read Dostoyevsky, never having read anything by Dostoyevsky before. One chooses to see a film which one hasn't seen—quite a common experience. One chooses to eat mangos or oysters for the first time, not having any idea what that is going to be like. One chooses to join the navy.
Not only haven't we experienced these things, these mundane choices, but very often we do not have anything like a clear picture of what they're going to be like in our imaginations.

Now does the fact that we haven't experienced these things, or that we have no clear picture of them in our imagination, render these choices in some sense unfree (question in the paper), or not rational (as is suggested in the paper)? It seems to me that neither of these things is at all clear, since we quite freely choose these things, and there is nothing particularly irrational in choosing something that we have not done and about which we have only the haziest pictures in our minds, if any pictures at all.

One's reminded of a short story or parable by Kafka, where he muses upon going somewhere else. It doesn't matter where he goes, he says. It just has to be away from here. Is there anything inherently irrational in choosing to change one's condition, without having a very clear idea of what that change will entail. I don't see that it does. This obviously applies to the question of suicide and the great unknown of death, and it applies to a lot of other decisions as well.

Now, one might say, and this is suggested by the paper, that although we in fact choose to do things we have not experienced as yet, or have not imagined very clearly, at least in theory one could imagine what they are like. But in the case of death, that is a certain picture of death, death is a cessation of existence and consciousness. This is not even theoretically possible. This is stated at the end of the paper, and I'm puzzled by this. I'm puzzled by this because I'm not sure what the difficulty is supposed to be. I have a speculation of what might lead one to suggest that we can't imagine a death of this sort, and I'll try to say what that is. I think it is a mistaken line of thought.

One wonders whether Socrates, when he entertains the two possibilities that death may be a dreamless sleep, or that it may be a meeting something like this (where one gets to talk to a lot of people)—in the first option was he terribly confused. Professor Oates' paper suggests that he was, that he really didn't have any idea what this would be like. Hamlet, when he wistfully considers the possibility that death might be a sleep without dreams—was he confused also? It seems not.

Now, certainly if death is the cessation of consciousness, one cannot imagine it in the sense that one would imagine what that state of consciousness would be like when one is dead. But this is a trivial truth, and to imagine the cessation of consciousness certainly need not and
should not be to imagine what sort of consciousness one would have of it.

Now I'd like to switch from the end of the paper, from this conclusion, to the beginning, where the motto of the paper is a quotation from Jung in which Jung talks about the yearning for death as the yearning for the profound peace of all-knowing non-existence. If one assumes, as I think one should, the beginning and the end of the paper are supposed to converge somehow, one gets the impression that what's problematic about Jung's idea is that this non-existence cannot be imagined. Now I think that there are problems with Jung's idea about death, or at least the one he talks about, but it's not this one. It's not that we cannot imagine non-existence, but rather that Jung's description seems unjustified. He talks about death as entailing some sort of great cognitive gain. It is not only non-existence, but at the same time it is all-knowing, and I think that the problems have to do more with the fact that death is supposed to be all-knowing than that it is some kind of non-existence, the non-existence of consciousness.

The first problem is simply, what reason does anybody have to imagine—despite what Jung says, despite what Plato suggested at one time or another—that we will know lots more than we know now when we are dead.

The second problem is closer to the problem of the paper. It is a problem of difficulty of imagination, but it's a different one from the one sketched in the paper. It's not that it's so difficult to imagine what non-existence might be like, but rather what an all-knowing non-existence might be like. It is not only unjustified to think that we might be all-knowing when we're dead, but it's perhaps incoherent to speculate upon a state where we both have no consciousness at all, and at the same time we're all-knowing. I think this is the problem in this view. It has nothing to do with the problem suggested in the paper, and also, it seems, it has nothing to do with the problem mentioned very often in the paper that people who contemplate suicide in this romantic way are dealing in metaphors. It seems what's wrong with this, or problematic about this, is not that it is a metaphor, but rather that it is an incoherent description.

Thank you.