

Death

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It is ultimately the fear of death that, according to Thomas Hobbes, leads us to seek the protection afforded by a system of political order under a single sovereign power (see Hobbes, 1968 [1651]). One may well argue that death cannot be the only factor at work here (Hobbes himself also refers to the desire for “a more contented life”), and there can be no doubt that concern for the lives of others also plays a role in political life and action, but if one looks simply to that difference between what Hobbes calls “the state of Warre” and “the state of Peace” (the latter being the state afforded by a settled political order), then the main motivating factor in moving from the one to the other is surely the desire to preserve our own lives, and the lives of those who are close to us. Indeed, the idea of sacrifice for a wider community or for a set of ideals that go beyond personal life alone must itself depend on some degree of political ordering such that community can be realized or ideals take on a concrete form. Yet although death may appear as an important element in the Hobbesian account of the origins of political life, death itself is seldom, whether in Hobbes or elsewhere, the direct or explicit focus of

political reflection. This is unfortunate, since death or mortality is surely a central concept in the understanding of human life, and it is the nature of human life that undoubtedly provides the underlying frame according to which politics, as a human activity, takes shape.

1. What is death?

There are a number of ambiguities that surround the concept of death. It may be understood as a singular *event* (the cessation of life), as a *process* (that of dying), or as a *state* (that of being dead). It may also be understood as a *limit* (one that may be instantiated as event, process or state), and this is perhaps the most philosophically important sense – although one most often simply assumed rather than questioned.

Understood in one way, death is simply the *stopping point* of life. It is this sense of death that is often at the center of legal and medical discussions concerning the definition of death (see eg. Luper, 2009: 49-57 – much of this discussion concerns the *criteria* for death). There the focus is primarily on death as a limit instantiated as the event, observable and dateable, that marks the point at which the life in a body can be said to have ceased, and so at which that body ceases to be subject to one set of laws and medical practices and becomes subject to another. Understood in another way, death is the *constituting limit* of life. Here the focus is on the way death gives definition to life – makes it what it is. This form of limit is also instantiated elsewhere. So, for instance, the rules of a game set limits to the actions possible within the game, and in so doing the rules also define the game.

Death may be a limit in the sense of a simple stopping point (the end of the line), or it may be a limit in the sense of making possible the life whose ending it is. The question as to what sort of limit death is, and so the question as to the nature of death, is thus also a question concerning the nature of a life. Is a life made up merely of a continuous series of events whose ending is purely contingent – a series of events that that could in principle, therefore, be extended indefinitely? Or is the fact that there is an ending to the series a necessary condition for a series of events to make up a life – so that the idea of a life of indefinite extension is not the idea of a life at all?

2. Is death intelligible?

Death can appear as an ambiguous or equivocal concept; it can also appear as a thoroughly opaque concept. Death is easily intelligible in an abstract and general sense (in the third-person) as just the cessation of life – something that can be captured in historical accounts, in clinical notes, or official reports. It is much harder to make death intelligible in terms that have a more concrete application – an application to our own selves or to those around us (in the first- or second-person).

In the case of the death of others, part of the difficulty in understanding is in making sense of the apparent contradiction between our memory of the living person and their absence in death. Even though one may witness the event of dying, what occurs after is not easily identifiable as an experience *of death*, but is primarily an experience *of absence* – although it is an absence rendered all the more strange by the fact that it remains even in the presence of the body of the one who has died and never

gives way to a renewed presence. In the case of our own death, the difficulty is in making sense of a death that is genuinely our own. What we must do in such a case is make intelligible to ourselves a situation from which we must necessarily be absent – we must project ourselves into a situation from which we must also, by the very nature of the situation, be excluded. This is not something that we can do in any concrete fashion (so Zygmunt Baumann writes that “death is ... the unthinkable” – Baumann, 1992: 14). We can only render death in the abstract terms that already remove it from us and us from it. So we think of death, even our own death, in terms that already turn it into the death of someone else.

Undoubtedly the strangeness that is evident here, as it arises in relation to our own death and the deaths of those around us, is part of what underpins both the fascination and the fear that is so common in people’s attitudes towards death. Often we allay the fear, if not always the fascination, precisely by retreating from the first- or second-person approach to death, and reverting to the third-person. In its abstracted form, death is not only more intelligible, but, since it is also more remote, less threatening and more manageable. The more we try to understand death as it relates to our own lives the harder it is to make death intelligible or understandable.

The strangeness of death is one reason for thinking that the way death functions as a limit to a life is not merely as its stopping point. Indeed, it may be that to understand death only as such a stopping point is already to think of death in the third-personal terms that essentially remove it from any genuine connection with our own lives. If I try to think of death as not merely the ending of a life, but the ending of *my*

life, then I am actually led to attend, not to death as mere cessation, nor even, one might say to *death* as such, but back to the character of that life that is my own. This may mean that I become fearful of the circumstances of my dying, or anxious about the consequences for the things I value or the persons for whom I care, but still it is back to my own life that the thought of my own death turns me. Moreover, this is so even for those who see death, from a religious perspective, as a transition to some other life or form of life. In this respect, one of the characteristic features of death, or the thought of death, is that it 'individualizes' – It forces us to attend to the fact that our lives are our own (which does not mean that we are somehow disconnected from others or that any one life is not implicated with many other such lives).

The unintelligibility that attends on death is thus an unintelligibility itself tied to the difficulty in making sense of that from which we are necessarily excluded, but also to the absolutely basic and almost impenetrable character of what we might call the "ownness" of our lives – the character of our lives as our own and of our experience of ourselves as just an experience of our own being-ourselves. This "ownness" does not consist in any contingent fact or facts about our situation, but rather concerns the character of our lives as something that is ultimately our own responsibility. Even within the constraints of the choices that we face, it is we who must make those choices and who must bear the burden of them.

3. Is death necessary?

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger characterizes death as “our ownmost possibility” (Heidegger 1962 [1927]: 294). This is most often understood as meaning that no-one can die another’s death. A more significant sense that can be attached to this idea, however, is that death belongs to us in a unique fashion such that it is only because we die that there can be any sense of what is our own – only in the face of death can there can be any sense of self or of a personal life. This way of thinking about death does indeed treat death, not as a stopping point (not like the “final chord of a melody”, see Sartre, 1969 [1943]: 531), but instead as a limit that also defines or constitutes that which it limits. It is thus that our deaths are properly our own just as our lives are also our own, and the latter is intimately tied to the former.

In Heidegger’s earlier writing, especially *Being and Time*, as well as in Sartre’s critique of Heidegger (Sartre 1969 [1948]: 531-553; see also Schumacher, 2011: 61-84), the precise concept of limit that is at issue here is not entirely clear. The idea is given much more direct specification in some of Heidegger’s later works. Thus in an essay from the 1950s, in which he refers to limit as it occurs in the idea of boundary (in German, *Grenze*), Heidegger writes “A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing. That is why the concept is that of *horismos*, that is, the horizon” (Heidegger, 1971 [1954], 154). In Heidegger’s terms death is the *horizon* within which a life appears and takes shape as a life. Moreover, like the visual horizon in relation to the field of vision, death never presents itself as something that appears within our lives – it can

never be directly approached or apprehended, but always recedes before us. So long as we live, and even as we lie dying, death remains always ahead of us.

The way death is tied to the “ownness” of our lives, to the individuality of our existence, is itself a function of the way in which a life cannot be reduced merely to certain biological processes nor to any mere series of behavioural or experiential events (even though both may be necessary for the possibility of a life). To have a life is to have a sense of oneself; it is to have a sense of certain things as mattering to one; it is to have certain concrete concerns, cares, and connections. For there to be a life is for that life to have a definite character, a shape, that belongs to it alone – it is to have a life that is defined, that is limited, and that is finite (see Malpas, 1999, 2012). Moreover, inasmuch as the concerns, cares, and connections that contribute to our lives extend beyond ourselves in ways that encompass aspects of the wider world – other people, places, things, events – so the mortality and fragility of our lives also reflects the essentially dynamic and changing character of that wider world (see Malpas, 1999). One might add that recognizing the fact that our lives are our own, and that the content, the very stuff of our lives, is bound up with other persons and other things, also means recognizing that our being *as ourselves* is also essentially a being *with others* and a being *in the world*.

It might be argued, however, that the essentially finite character of a life need not itself imply any special significance that should be attached to death as such. The limitation that comes with finitude is surely as much spatial as it is temporal, and death is a form only of *temporal* limitation. This, however, would be to confuse two different

forms of finitude: the finitude of placed existence and the finitude of lived possibility. There is a finitude that derives from the mere fact of existence – to exist is also to be at a determinate spatio-temporal place. Such placed existence (which does not require remaining in the *same* place) is not obviously incompatible with continuing to exist in that way for an indefinite time. Even though at any one time, one would find oneself always in some finite place, over an infinitely stretched span of time there seems no limitation on the places in which one could find oneself or the different shapings into which one's putative life could flow. Even a spatially finite existence might thus be capable of an infinite succession of actions and experiences. In such an infinite succession, however, it is open to question whether there would be only one life being lived in that succession (perhaps there would be many) or, indeed, whether there would be any life at all.

For there to be a life depends on that life exhibiting a certain degree of unity or connectedness as that is expressed *both* in the sense of one's life as one's own (in the idea of the life that I live as mine) *and* in the sense in which the elements that make up that life (the choices, attitudes, actions, experiences, and so on) are connected with one another. In fact, these two senses are the same: the connectedness of elements is articulated through the belonging of those elements to the same life where the notion of the sameness of a life is in turn articulated only through the idea of the connectedness of the elements (the circularity that appears here is inevitable, but not vicious, and reflects the unity of a life as formed through the constant interaction among the elements of that life as mediated through the idea of that life as indeed

one's own – a process in which narrative has an important role – see Malpas, 2012).

The possibility of such a unity, both in the sense of the ownness of a life as well as the connectedness of the elements of that life, is itself dependent on an essential limitation.

There is no proper unity, at least not of the sort required for a life, in that which has no end. For a life to have a character as the life that it is depends on a limiting or narrowing-down of the lived possibilities that belong to that life. One simple reason for this is that, even though a life is always constituted in terms of an open set of possibilities, those possibilities are always delimited. A life that was always open to all and every possibility, whose elements were infinitely proliferated, would be a life whose unity as a life would itself be lost in that very proliferation; it would be a life whose very character as a life would be undermined; it would be a life that could never even be present to itself as *this* life, as the life that is *mine*.

Some of the considerations at work here are similar to those present in treatments of the idea of immortality elsewhere in philosophy (eg Williams, 1973), in literature (eg Borges, 1998 [1949]), and even in popular entertainment (eg the Harold Ramis film, *Groundhog Day*, 1993), to the effect that a life without end would be a life given over to such boredom that it could not be endured. However, the conclusion argued for here is much stronger: it is not merely that an endless life would be a life that was diminished in value or interest, but that it would not be a life at all. The claim thus concerns the conditions that make for the very possibility of a life. As such, the claim at issue is an ontological one: lives cannot be extended endlessly, but are essentially finite. Moreover, even though the finitude at issue here encompasses more than just temporal

finitude, death nevertheless plays a key role. What makes our lives our own is the fact that our lives cannot be extended into an infinite series of possibilities, and it is this fundamental limitation that is the essential character of death. In this respect, death may be understood as belonging to the very essence of finitude (although for a contrary view see Sartre, 1966 [1943] – much of the argument presented here nevertheless echoes elements of Sartre’s discussion while arriving at a different conclusion).

Yet even were one to accept the need for life to have some sort of limit that belongs to it, it is not clear that what is needed is a *real* limit or merely the *idea* or *representation* of a limit. Thus, one might argue that since death, as the horizontal limit to our lives, is always ahead of us, so our own death can never itself have any effect in our lives; therefore, if anything is necessary to life, it can only be that we have the belief that we will die, but not that our belief need ever be realized. Certainly, to have a sense of one’s life, one must have some sense of one’s own death, and to have a sense of one’s death cannot immediately be identified with the fact that one will die. However, the reasons for thinking that death is necessary to the possibility of a life are not reasons that derive solely from the role the idea of death plays in giving shape to a life, but also from the impossibility of a life having shape if it is extended to encompass too great a range of possibilities. One cannot say in advance at what point the extension of a life may lead to a loss in the very shape and character of that life, but as a life is essentially finite, so there must be some point at which a life will cease, and at that point it will encounter its inevitable end and limit (which is not to rule out the possibility

that one life might dissolve into a different life, so that different lives may succeed one another even though they might also be causally and temporally connected).

If death is an ambiguous term, then there is another ambiguity that has emerged in the preceding discussion – in one sense death is the ending of a set of bodily processes that also bring about the ending of life, but it seems possible that a life may end even while the bodily processes on which it depends may continue. Cases in which some bodily processes continue even though all higher brain processes cease may be thought to provide an imperfect instantiation of this possibility. Another, perhaps better example, at least as exemplified in our contemporary experience, is given by the psychological fragmentation and loss of self that may result from some forms of external psychological trauma. What may be said to occur in such cases is a situation in which a life ends, in spite of the relatively unimpaired continuation of the body, as a result of a breakdown in the larger framework of action, attitude and experience as causally and intentionally embedded within a larger environmental context.

Death may refer to the dissolution of the unity that makes for a life as that occurs in conjunction with a complete or partial dissolution in bodily functioning (which may itself be sufficient to bring about the ending of a life) or it may refer simply and solely to the dissolution of the unity that makes for a life (which may occur in spite of some continuation in bodily functioning). Death is a necessary condition for the possibility of a life in only the second of these two senses – the possibility of a life is dependent on its delimitation, but that delimitation is not identical simply with the physical delimitation that is identical with the cessation of bodily functioning. The finite

character of a life is thus *intrinsic* to that life as such, and so cannot be overcome by, for instance, any simple prolongation of bodily existence.

It is a feature of many arguments concerning the possibility of overcoming death – arguments such as those advanced by contemporary trans-humanists (eg Max More, founder of the Extropy Institute) – that they tend to be narrowly focused on only the first of the two senses of death distinguished above. They focus, in other words, on the dissolution of the unity of a life as that occurs only as a result of the dissolution of bodily functioning, and so take the finite character of a life to be *extrinsic* to that life. Since it is assumed that the life of a person is only contingently related to any particular body or form of embodiment, and since the life of a person is indeed assumed to consist in something like the mere continuity of psychological states (life as a series of events), then so long as the dissolution of the body can be prevented or postponed, or psychological states can be given alternative embodiment in digital or other form, then there is no barrier to the possibility of a life being indefinitely extended. On such an approach the finitude of a life is purely a consequence of the physical limitations of that in which the life is embodied.

Underpinning the transhumanist approach is a relatively weak conception of the conditions that must obtain for there to be a life. Not only transhumanists, but many others, have tended to think of lives in a similarly “weak” sense as just a conjoined set of states, attitudes, experiences, dispositions or events whose conjunction may amount to little more than that of causal or psychological connectedness (see eg. Parfitt, 1984; at this point the question of the nature and significance of death, and its connection to life,

overlaps in the philosophical literature with the much-discussed question concerning the nature of personal identity, see eg. Luper, 2009: 24-37). Such an approach to the character of a life is also likely to result in a similarly weakened conception of death: if a life consists in nothing more than a set of psychological states or dispositions that are connected by relations of similarity, temporal contiguity, or causal connection, then death need not represent a significant interruption in such connectedness, and certainly need not be viewed as an insuperable barrier to its maintenance. It is precisely this weakening of the concepts of both life and death that brings with it a loss of any sense of the “ownness” of a life. Death may thereby lose its sting, but so also does life lose its singularity and its concreteness – it is no longer *my* life that is at stake, but merely the continuity of an almost anonymous series of events and experiences.

Are we harmed by death?

A staple of much of the philosophical literature concerning death is the question as to what extent death must be considered a misfortune or harm. This question is usually taken to have its origins in the claim by the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–271 BCE) that death is “nothing to us”. Epicurus’s argument to this conclusion is simply put: it is that, understood as annihilation, death is the ending of the very possibility of benefit or harm – these are categories that properly apply to those who live, not to those who are dead. As Epicurus writes: “for the time when we are, death is not present; and for the time when death is present, we are not. Therefore it is nothing either to the living or the dead, since it is not present for the former and the latter are no longer” (Warren, 2004:

19). In support of this view, Epicurus' follower, the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius (ca. 99 BCE – ca. 55 BCE), points to the fact that before birth we did not exist, and yet we generally do not regard that period of prior nonexistence to constitute a harm.

The Epicurean position, as well as the Lucretian development of it, has given rise to an enormous literature (see eg. Warren, 2004; see also Schumacher, 2011: 217, who argues that the Epicurean challenge is the most important in any attempt to think about death). Most of that literature focuses on consideration of whether there can be such a thing as posthumous (or, with Lucretius in mind, "prenatal") harms or benefits, and whether what are often taken to be the "experientialist" presuppositions of the Epicurean position should be accepted ("experientialism" being the view that only what is experienced can be either harmful or beneficial). In the light of much of the preceding discussion, however, one might ask whether the idea that death is "necessary" for the possibility of a life does not mean, contrary to Epicurus, that death is therefore beneficial, on the grounds that life is surely a benefit, a good, rather than a harm. Such a question immediately leads on, however, to a further question as to whether life is indeed to be given a positive evaluation. There is certainly a tradition of thinking that takes the pain and suffering of life to outweigh its joys and pleasures, and so to view life as more a curse than a blessing. Yet perhaps the proper approach here, at least in part, is closer to Epicurus' own position: if death makes life possible, then it makes possible both the harms and the benefits that arise only in relation to life, and as such, death must stand outside of our usual evaluations.

There is, however, a line of argument that takes a very different approach, not only in taking issue with Epicurus, but also in taking issue, to some extent, with the claim concerning the necessity of death for the possibility of life. For many, whatever joys there may be in life, whatever achievements we may bring about, they are as nothing in the face of the inevitability of death. As Sartre puts it, death is "that which on principle removes all meaning from life" (Sartre, 1966 [1943]: 690), and so, inasmuch as death brings an end to our lives, so it may seem as if it also deprives those lives of any significance. This way of thinking is perhaps most famously exemplified by "absurdism" – a movement that has been especially prominent in twentieth-century art and literature, encompassing figures such as the Irish writer Samuel Beckett and the French writer and philosopher Albert Camus.

In Beckett's work (eg. Beckett, 1956 [1952]), there is an undeniable sense of the world, and life with it, as a place in which every meaning is countered by an absence of meaning, every hope rendered hopeless, every desire rendered futile – in which death appears almost as a grim joke foisted upon us by life. Camus' position, however, is slightly different. Although well-known (like Sartre) for his supposed formulation of the idea of the absurd in his early writings (see eg. Camus, 1955), of which death is one of its clearest expressions, Camus nevertheless refuses to give in to the idea that human life is therefore completely without value or that some form of happiness is unattainable. Indeed, for Camus, it is precisely the fragility and mortality of human existence that means it must be cherished and loved. Camus does not shrink from the brutal facts of suffering and death, but these are things to be striven against, even as we also know

that they cannot finally be overcome. Indeed, to recognize this situation as our own is precisely to encounter our humanity. Thus Camus writes that “I learn that there is no superhuman happiness, no eternity outside the curve of the days. These paltry and essential goods, these relative truths, are the only ones that can move me” (Camus 1967 [1938]: 69).

What gives content to a life are the concrete cares and concerns that also orient it. Yet the objects of such cares and concerns are themselves typically transient and fragile, such that the fragility of a life, its being inevitably given over to death, is in part a consequence of the fragility of the things around which our lives are oriented. It is not just that life is mortal, but that the lived world, and what matters to us in that world, is itself given over to change and impermanence. There is an inevitable tension here: what matters to us is that which we desire not to lose, that which we wish to protect from harm, and yet what matters to us is also that which we cannot hold forever, that which cannot be given any absolute protection. A similar tension obtains in relation to death: since death signifies the loss of that about which we care, so, from the perspective of life, death may well appear as a harm or misfortune even though it is also the fact of death that makes possible, and gives content, to life. The fact of such tension may be seen to reinforce the unintelligibility or “impenetrability” that was seen in the discussion above as attaching to the idea of death when addressed in the first- or second-person. Since such unintelligibility belongs, not only to death, but also to the very character of existence as “our own”, so it should be unsurprising to find that it is also a feature of life.

Is death relevant to politics?

For Hobbes, it is partly the fear of death that underpins the framework of political order. Yet if death is understood in the manner outlined here, according to which death stands in an essential relation to the character of a human life, then perhaps death has not only a negative, but also a positive role to play in the understanding of politics and the political, or at least, in the framework out of which these come.

Death itself appears as an issue in a number of contemporary political debates, most obviously in controversies concerning euthanasia or “assisted suicide”, but also as that in relation to which various forms of inequality find dramatic expression. Nowhere is difference and inequality more evident across continents and within societies than in the circumstances of our deaths. The way death is understood in such debates, as well as the manner in which it moves us, undoubtedly reflects fundamental aspects of the values and commitments that shape our societies and our ways of life. One might well argue that it is how a society responds to questions of death, which are also always questions of life, that marks the character of that society, and the ethics that hold sway within it. Understanding death, in its role as a constituting limit, as intimately bound up with the character of a life implies a very different approach to human life, whether construed individually or collectively, than that which is associated with a conception of death as merely the contingent ending of a life.

Hannah Arendt asserts that “natality, and not mortality, is the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought” (Arendt, 1958: 9). The reason

for this is that, according to Arendt, the political is the realm of action, and is always a beginning, always itself a form of *natality* – a being given over to an event that is the bringing forth of what is new such that natality is also tied to *freedom*. Yet political action is always tempered by its own limited character, both in the sense in which any and every action is finite in scope and capacity, and in the sense in which political action, as political, always arises in a context in which action is essentially contested. In this respect, politics emerges because of both the active character of human being, its emergence into and shaping of the world, and by the fact that this emergence, this action, always implies its own limitation, and so stands in an essential relation to the mortality of the one who acts. Indeed, natality and mortality are perhaps but two sides of the same finitude that is itself the basis for both the singularity (and so too the plurality) of human life, as well as its freedom. If such finitude is indeed relevant to political, no less than other forms of life, then, contrary to a range of contemporary political theorists, the consideration of these concepts, death as well as birth, also demonstrates the extent to which ontology remains significant to the political.

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