

The Strangeness of Death

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“Pity she won’t live. But then, who does?” – *Bladerunner* (dir. Ridley Scott, 1982).

The life of Gautama, who came to be known as the Buddha, the Enlightened One, is famously said to have been irrevocably changed by his experience of three things: poverty, old age, and death – it was this experience that started him on the road to enlightenment. There is no doubt that the encounter with death can be a life-changing experience, perhaps more so than either poverty or old-age, and not only because death may be construed as an especially powerful emblem of human suffering. Quite aside from the emotional impact of death, it would seem to have an inevitable and irreducible strangeness that challenges our sense of our own existence.

Although, in most modern western countries, the physicality of death is generally at a remove from our everyday lives, the strangeness of death cannot be a matter of our unfamiliarity with it – even if death has not touched us personally, through the death of a friend or family member (and the likelihood of any human being reaching adulthood without some experience of death in this way must be small), death, both real and fictional, is something that we see everyday in newspapers, television, movies and books. Thus, while it may well be that many of us would prefer to avoid any encounter with death at all, such avoidance would seem to be difficult, if not impossible, to maintain: death is something that is present to us in the everyday history of individuals, families, communities and nations; in the fragility and vulnerability of our bodies; and in the inevitable tendency to decay and corruption in even the most robust of the things that we see around us.

Part of the strangeness that attaches to death may well be tied to its very ubiquity, almost its ordinaryness, coupled with the enormity, the tragedy, of what death is. It surely has much to do also with the difficulty, as well as the pain, that is associated with separation and loss. This is perhaps especially, but not exclusively so, where the loss is unexpected or against the normal way of things. The death of a child

is thus almost always more difficult to come to terms with than the death of a grandparent. Yet while both the difficulty of loss as well as the commonplace, but tragic character of death present us with aspects of death's strangeness, perhaps the real heart of that strangeness consists in the difficulty in grasping the idea of death as something that will happen, not merely to others, but to oneself. Indeed, one may even go so far as to say that while the death of others may often be hard to accept, to understand, or with which to reconcile oneself, one's own death presents a very different order of difficulty in understanding, and it is this that is the real source of death's strangeness.

The strangeness of death may be said to consist in a certain opacity, even 'unrepresentability', that arises when we try to encompass the idea of our own death. Such unrepresentability can be seen to follow from the difficulty in making sense of death as the limit of a life from within the perspective of the life it limits. We can, of course, understand the facts of death, of the cessation of the bodily processes that animate us, just as we can also imagine the possibility of the world being such that we are not a part of it. What we represent to ourselves in these cases, however, is not our own death as such, but rather something more like the abstract idea of death. Thus we can certainly think of the possibility of our own life coming to an end, that is, of there being a point at which our desires, plans, actions and so forth fail to gain any purchase on the future, and are abruptly halted, and yet in thinking like this we are, in effect, forced to think of ourselves from what is an essentially third-person point of view. Yet to think about our own death is not to think of death as if it were the death of another.

The difficulty that attaches to the idea of our own death, its strangeness or 'unrepresentability', does not mean, of course, that we cannot even think of ourselves as capable of death, but the thought of our own death must always remain something that can never be fully encompassed, that remains opaque to us. As a result, we are often led to think of our own death in ways that reduce its strangeness by placing it at something of a distance from us. So death is always the death of someone else, never ourselves, and even our behaviour may be such as apparently to be predicated on the idea of our own immortality. Moreover, even when we do give consideration to the fact that there will, sometime in the future, be an end to the temporal span of our lives, and that at that point our desires, plans, actions and so forth will be brought to a halt, still this need not bring the idea of death any closer to us. To give proper recognition

to the fact of one's inevitable death is to give recognition to the fact that what is at issue in that idea is the ending of the very perspective from which the idea is itself considered. What is at stake in death is thus our being the particular being that we are. As a consequence, giving proper recognition to the fact of our death must involve something like an acknowledgement of the way in which our life matters to us in a way that it cannot matter to any one else – of the fact that the life we live is indeed our life. Such an acknowledgement must also involve an acknowledgement of the particularity of that life – of the way it is made up of a concrete set of cares, commitments and concerns. The strangeness of death is, in this respect, essentially tied to the strangeness of our being creatures for whom, as Martin Heidegger put it in *Being and Time*, our own being is already at issue for us.¹

Only when we think of death from the perspective of our own life – from the perspective of the first-person – does death arise as strange or unrepresentable. If we do away with the first-person perspective altogether, and so do away with the perspective that gives us a view from 'within' our life, and from which our life (and our death) appears as our 'own', then the unrepresentability, the strangeness, of death largely disappears. Yet at the same time, if we do away with the first-person perspective, so it may also seem that we do away with any conception of death as death. Death may be an ending, but it is surely more than just that. In this respect, the tendency to think of death in third-person terms tends to turn death into simply another event in life. But properly understood, of course, death is not an event in life at all, but the very ending of a life. Thus the idea of death would seem necessarily to be tied to the idea of the first-person, and so to the idea of the individual life or self. One obvious consequence of this is that if one adopts some variant on a 'no-self' position such as that which is often taken to be a core element within Buddhist thinking, then death ceases to appear as problematic, both in terms of its representability and our emotional response to it. Moreover, inasmuch as Buddhism does indeed deny the existence of a self, this denial is not countered by resorting to alternative conceptions of the self. What is at issue is whether there is anything that the self is, and, on the strong version of the no-self view, there is nothing that corresponds to the self at all.

¹ See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p.XX.

The idea that death presupposes a notion of self is already indicated by the way in which, as I noted above, the fact of death is tied to the individuality of our existence – to the fact that things matter to us in different ways depending on the particularities of who and where we are. It should be no surprise to find that when we give up on the particularities of our existence, then death also loses its sting. If our existence as individual selves is directly tied to our having certain cares and concerns, certain values and orientations, to standing in certain concrete relations with others and the world, then the abandonment of the ‘self’ that is constituted in this way, will also mean abandoning much of that on which our fear of death is based.

Of course, if abandonment of the fear of death depends upon the abandonment of our sense of ourselves, then one might wonder whether the price that is exacted here is actually too high. Indeed, there is something odd about dealing with the fear of death, which arises out of our commitment and concern for ourselves, and for our own lives, by abandoning that which is the basis for such concern and commitment in the first place. While the simile may be too close to the point at issue, it seems very much like curing the disease by killing the patient. Indeed, abandoning the perspective of the self, and its commitments and concerns, may entail other consequences beyond just the calming of the fear of death. Much of our moral life would seem to be bound up with the particular relations we have with others that are themselves tied to the particular lives we lead and the persons we are. One might wonder whether one can possibly keep a hold on any form of ethical orientation and commitment without also retaining some sense of individual involvement. Sometimes, in fact, this appears as a problem within some schools of Buddhist thought in which an emphasis on the complete unreality of the self, and the conventional world, is seen to lead to a disregard for issues of ethical conduct in apparent contradiction to the Buddha’s own emphasis on such matters.

In the discussion above, I referred briefly to Heidegger’s idea that the character of our mode of existence is determined by the fact that, for us, our own being is at issue for us. The connection between death and individual existence is a key element in Heidegger’s work. Indeed, while he does not aim so much to assuage our fear of death, Heidegger does have a positive conception of death as it stands in relation to individual existence. Death is, according to Heidegger in *Being and Time*, our ‘ownmost possibility’ and one way of explaining this is to say that no one can die my death for me. What is at issue here does not concern any mere point of grammar,

nor is it to do with ownership or failure of substitution, instead it concerns the way in which my death marks out my life as my own, as a life for which I must ‘own up’, whose possibilities are my possibilities, and so define and constitute me. In this respect, Heidegger’s emphasis on the ‘ownmost’ character of death connects directly with what I have termed the strangeness or unrepresentability of death: the strangeness of death concerns the way in which death marks out my life as my own even while it also marks the limit of that life.

Yet if death is tied to individual existence in such a way that doing away with the self does away with death, then is it also the case that doing away with death does away with the self? On Heidegger’s account, this conclusion would seem to be inevitable. Heidegger understands death in existential-ontological terms which is to say that he takes death to be that which makes possible (‘constitutes’) the existence of the self whose death it is. This means that without death, there can be no self, no individual existence. The claim that death may actually be a requirement of the possibility of individual existence is not only to be found in Heidegger. It also appears in the work of other existentialist thinkers, notably in Camus and de Beauvoir (but not, significantly, in Sartre), as well as in Bernard Williams’ famous essay ‘The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality,’²

There is, however, an initial and obvious difficulty with the idea that death is necessary for individual existence: with respect to any existing individual, its death is always in its future; that future death cannot be relevant to the determination of the individual’s present existence, unless it is present merely as an idea or concept; thus, if there is a connection between death and individual existence, it cannot involve death as such, but merely the *idea* of death – death need not be an inevitable feature of being who and what we are, it only needs to be thought to be so. Now there is something to this point, but it also gets the picture slightly wrong, and the way it gets it wrong is actually tied to the strangeness, the unrepresentability of death with which I began this discussion.

To view death as simply an event in our future – the event that marks the halting of our normal activities, plans and so forth – is to treat death, as I noted earlier, from a third-person perspective. To understand death in the first-person, to understand death in its strangeness, is to understand it in direct relation to my individual existence

² In Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

here and now. Understood in this way, however, death appears not merely as some future event, but rather in terms of the way in which my life is something in which I necessarily have a stake, the way in which my life is indeed at issue for me, the way in which my life is made up of a set of concrete and particular cares, concerns and commitments. My life cannot be anything at all, and yet still be my life, while the things that make my life what it is are themselves vulnerable, fragile, and prone to disruption and loss. Death is thus not merely a matter of the inevitability of bodily or even psychological decay, but is rather tied to the fragility of the relations we have with the world, and the vulnerability of the things about which we care and to which we are committed. There is, of course, some capacity to tolerate shifts in those relations and in our cares and concerns, but they cannot be stretched out interminably without also diminishing and losing any proper sense of our ourselves as individually existing beings, as particular selves or persons.

It is all too easy to respond to this point, as many philosophers have, by simply asserting the possibility of constituting one's life around a set of values, projects and commitments that are either relatively unchanging or else impervious to change at all. The difficulty is, however, that the more impervious to change are the things about which we care, the less plausible it is to take those things as things that are likely to evoke our care and concern in the first place. That which we care about is typically that which needs caring for, and there is little sense in caring for that which does not require our care, that which will continue much as it is independently of us – and, most significantly, this must apply as much to our care and concern for ourselves as to anything else.

Moreover, any project that does indeed extend over an excessively long span of time is likely also to be a project that, even if it requires some care and attention, will be open to characterisation only in correspondingly broad and general terms. The problem is that the more we look to define ourselves in relation to increasingly more general and continuing projects, values and commitments, the more abstract and formal those projects, values and commitments are likely to become, and so too, the more abstract and formal will be the idea of the self that is at issue. Moreover, what makes up the fabric of our lives is not that which is general or abstract, but the concrete and the particular, the fragile, and the transient: this person (whether it be our

own self or another – as Camus writes in ‘Helen’s Exile’, the ‘face of the beloved’³), this community, this place, these things, perhaps even this particular feeling, glimpse or moment (just think of the things that mark out your own life, and that are the focus for what you most care about, and consider whether these things could truly be sustained forever without any loss or diminishment). In this respect, the way in which death functions as a condition for the possibility of individual existence, as a condition for the possibility of a self, is not through its functioning as a future endpoint, but rather through the way in which we project ourselves into the world by means of our specific, and yet also fragile, situatedness.

A staple of the philosophical literature concerning death is the question as to what extent death must be considered a misfortune or harm.⁴ If death is indeed a necessary condition for individual existence in the way that I have suggested here, then it may seem as if this question can no longer have any real sense to it. Of course, the timing and manner of one’s death may be considered more or less fortunate or unfortunate, more or less a source of harm to the life that it limits, but it would seem that death as such can be neither good nor ill. Yet this would be to tell only part of the story. If death is a matter not merely of the limited character of our own bodily existence, but rather of the transient and fragile character of the things about which we care; and if care and concern is essentially geared towards caring for those things (including ourselves) that are indeed transient and fragile such that care is properly accorded to them; then it is inevitable that death, while it is a necessary part of that individual existence that is defined in terms of care and concern, will also stand in tension with such care and concern.

Death may thus be a necessary condition for individual existence inasmuch as it is tied to the way in which such existence defines and constitutes itself (that is, the way in which it constitutes itself as mortal), and yet death will also appear, from within that individual existence, as that against which such existence sets itself – as that which appears in the light of our care and concern as a misfortune and a harm. So death can make possible our existence, while also, as I noted above, standing as a challenge to our sense of such existence. Moreover, there is no way to reconcile the

³ In *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, XXXX), p.XX.

⁴ See, for instance, Steven Luper’s entry on ‘Death’ in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, [www\plato.stanford.edu](http://www.plato.stanford.edu).

character of death as necessary condition with death as misfortune or harm – both are aspects of the way death presents itself. Here the strangeness of death with which I began this discussion reappears, though in a slightly different form, and in a way that does not allow of any resolution. Indeed, we may say that it is a strangeness that belongs irrevocably, not merely to death, but to individual existence as such – a strangeness that also belongs to life.

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