

Death Part II

The Significance Of Our Deaths

Hayden Ramsay

For Christians and for many others our deaths have more significance than our lives. However well we live, it is at the hour of our deaths that final preparations are made for the way we choose things to be from then. Other people are less impressed with the significance of death, placing their hopes instead in the significance or ‘quality’ of their lives.

I take the significance of human life for granted. Our lives include experiences of pleasure, instances of altruism, activities of imagination, creation and recreation, encounter with transcendence, meaningful relationships, ideas, true thoughts and contemplation, the enjoyment of peace... These and other goods of life account for our lives’ significance. Some think that *only* if it is richly provided with such goods does life have significance; that life’s value is identical with its quality; that it has no intrinsic or ‘sacred’ value.

I think this view is simplistic since being alive is not a mere condition for ‘quality activities’ – as having a body is a condition for throwing a punch. Rather, these activities *are* quality activities because they confirm and celebrate what it is really to be alive. Whatever of this, however, the questions of life’s significance and death’s significance are closely related. If we ask seriously: ‘What does death really mean? What is its significance?’ we will be returned to deep questions about the meaning of life.

First, though, we should consider the pessimistic view that the certainty and awfulness of death mean that life is meaningless. Our lives are over and done with within the tiniest fraction of total human history; even our most lasting contributions soon dwindle and are forgotten. Does this not illustrate the absurdity of the pantomime we call ‘life’, the melodramatic self-obsession of those who believe that what they do or offer matters at all?

Perhaps belief in the absurdity of life is a permanent human temptation, a lurking thought that pulls those who grasp it towards a shrug of the shoulders and just living for the moment – or even towards despair and suicide. Indeed, perhaps the consumer complaisance of ‘spend, spend, spend, for there is nothing else!’ and the

crippling despair of those who, like Simone de Beauvoir,¹ look the horror of nihilism in the face, have come together in a uniquely destructive way in modern and postmodern societies. In the face of death maybe all there can be today is ‘uncontrollable laughter’, laughter ambivalent between hilarity and madness.²

Yet there are different forms of absurdity. On the above view, it is life that is meaningless, absurd, a cheat; on another, saner view, the absurdity is that creatures such as us, creatures alive and warm and capable of so much else, could die. Writing on *Gaudium et Spes* 18, Joseph Ratzinger suggests that: ‘the text emphasises the non-naturalness, the existential absurdity of death. Man’s being . . . is identical, as it were, with a will to exist always and yet is characterised by the presence of nothingness, of the end.’³ What Ratzinger and so many others pick up is that most people feel – and not at our most selfish but at our most honest moments – that we are not *meant* to die. We are not the sort of creatures that should have to face death.

And this is not to complain, ludicrously, that we are not or should not really be finite, an animal species. As Françoise Dastur puts it: unlike other animals, the human dies before it has exhausted all possibilities of its being.⁴ The point is not that we are or should be supermen and not animals, but that we are the sort of animal that could go on indefinitely encountering and contributing to new possibilities of being. We are ‘the linguistic animal’, the animal that invents its own media of communication and expression and so could continue indefinitely to discover and enjoy new ways of being an animal.⁵

The absurdity-of-death view (unlike the absurdity-of-life view) does not counsel hilarity or despondency but something more like bewilderment. And it does raise a philosophical question: why is the human fate – death – something to which it seems we humans cannot reconcile ourselves? How can mortals be so terrified by their mortality?

Part of the reason may be connected with the limitations of individual experience. Very few of us have had even *near*-death experiences; and none of us has had the experience of death.⁶ Perhaps we cannot, either before or at the moment of death, experience death. ‘It belongs to the essence of death that it is radically ungraspable, inapprehendable, uncomprehendable’: death has no identity; it is

¹ See Guillemine de Lacoste ‘Simone de Beauvoir: from the creation of “New Man” to obsession with death’, *Philosophy Today*, Winter 1987, pp. 306–35.

² Françoise Dastur *Death: an essay on finitude*, trans. John Llewelyn (London: Athlone, 1996), p. 84.

³ Joseph Ratzinger *Commentary on The Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 5, ed H Vorgrimler (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), p. 140

⁴ Dastur, p. 67.

⁵ Herbert McCabe *Law, Love and Language* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1968), p. 76.

⁶ I do not think those who have had heart attacks but been ‘revived’ were truly dead.

not the line between being and nothing: it is interminable.⁷ We rebel against a fate that, both logically and experientially, we cannot imagine. Or perhaps we can imagine a little of it, but then we immediately flee from the connection between this imagined horror and the subjective reality of our lives. As Thomas Nagel puts it, the objective truth of death is more than we can cope with, and so ‘our problem has no solution, but to recognise that is to come as near as we can to living in the light of truth.’⁸

Or perhaps it is because we are truly not meant to die. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is somewhat ambiguous here: ‘In a sense, bodily death is natural, but for faith it is the “wages of sin” ... Even though man’s nature is mortal, God had destined him not to die.’⁹ Perhaps Christianity must always entertain a certain irony when it contemplates death: death is the last enemy, part of the human condition, tasted even by Christ; but death is also the focus of Christian acceptance, the summons to the afterlife, the gateway to beatitude.

Josef Pieper is more direct. He thinks death is part of human nature.¹⁰ However, before the Fall we were merely ‘able to die’ and would have freely willed to die at the appropriate time, as Christ willed to do; whereas the post-Fall soul is deprived of the power to immunise the body against corruption, and death will come whether we will it or not. Pieper recommends that insofar as it is humanly possible we should strive to accept the imposition of death freely and even with joy (*hilaritas mentis*), recognising the justice of imposed death as a consequence of sin, and so, in a sense, recognising the goodness of our own deaths.¹¹

This distinction between a mortality that is in our own control and a mortality whose debt may be called in at any time does, I think, help to explain our subjective disbelief that *I* will soon be dead. This is not disbelief that I am mortal, capable of death: it is disbelief that death will happen to me, Hayden Ramsay, at any moment, and

⁷ Alphonso Lingis ‘We Mortals’, *Philosophy Today*, 1991, pp. 119–26.

⁸ Thomas Nagel *The View From Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 231.

⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), 1006, 1008.

¹⁰ J. Oguejiofer ‘The Question of Death’ in *The Philosophical Significance of Immortality in Thomas Aquinas* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2001) asks: how can we die if the rational soul is our life-source and is self-subsistent and imperishable? He answers: because body is material and so changeable ‘and, as a result, can lose the dispositions on account of which it is fitted to receive life from the soul’, p. 141. There is genuine debate as to whether before the Fall death would or would not have been natural. Thomas thinks pre-Fallen man was supernaturally gifted immortality contingent upon his obedience (*Summa Theologiae* 1 – 2, 85, 6; 1, 95, 1; 1, 97, 1). For Augustine too, the pre-Fallen would not have died, but rather been ‘assumed’ after their time of trial (*City of God* 14, 10).

¹¹ Josef Pieper *Death and Immortality*, trans. R. and C. Winston (London: Burns and Oates, 1969), p. 72.

without any neat consultation process or official enquiry occurring. Death will end it all for me, and it might all be over before I finish this paragraph. Post-Fall death is absurd because it laughs at personal autonomy; which is no doubt why, in an age that would rather laugh at the Fall, personal autonomy over our deaths is such a major challenge to Christian ethics.

But even if death is absurd, unwelcome, because it is imposed on and not willed by a creature of will, I do not think that the meaning of death is simply loss of control. The significance of our deaths is more than the experience of either accepting loss of control or having control wrenched away. Death matters because life matters; or, more precisely: it is in the light of our deaths that we understand much of the meaning of our lives.

Christopher Hamilton reminds us that, for Heidegger, death was not simply the limit or end of life.¹² Rather, death relates to our lives as lived out day by day. If we live an inauthentic life, going along with the crowd, giving in to compromises and betrayals, we live a life devoid of meaning, a life that is really a living death. Mortality challenges us instead to give our lives meaning, to live life to the full. But living life to the full is not ignoring death; in fact, it is precisely the opposite: living always with death in prospect.

Hamilton is not fully convinced by this, and neither am I. He fears it will breed despair. I fear it will breed resentment of death, which is another form of inauthenticity for a mortal. But I do think that Heidegger is right that death relates to our lives as lived out day by day. *Examining our lives*, as philosophers since Socrates have counselled us to do, certainly includes coming to understand the significance of our deaths; in fact, at *Phaedo* 64a Socrates thinks it is 'practising dying'. And coming to terms with our deaths is not just resigning ourselves, but moral and practical recognition that it is mortality, and understanding and responding well to mortality, that makes our lives truly human lives.

Martha Nussbaum argues that fear of death is not hateful but appropriate; it plays a positive role in life.¹³ Nussbaum, together with a long line of Aristotelian thinkers, believes human death is the condition for many of our most important practical possibilities. It is precisely as *mortals* that many of the possibilities that make sense of and give value to our lives are possible for us. Were we gods, we would no longer have these possibilities to explore and many familiar forms of value to enjoy. These include raising a child, cherishing a lover, performing demanding work or thought or creation, exerting ourselves to build cities and political systems, or to form friendships,

¹² Christopher Hamilton *Living Philosophy: reflections on life, meaning & morality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), Ch 11.

¹³ Martha Nussbaum 'Mortal Immortals: Lucretius on Death and the Voice of Nature', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 50, 1989, pp. 303–51.

or to make altruistic sacrifices. Indeed, any value connected with growth, change, process, planning, renovation is a value for us only because we can and will die. Were this fact to change, or were we to cease to believe in it (until, unexpectedly, one morning we popped off), then our way of life – not our particular civilisation but civilisation itself – would change utterly.

Nussbaum claims we cannot keep our key values and yet become immortals – we cannot be as the Greeks believed the polytheistic gods of Olympus were. Leon Kass, Chair of the US President's Council on Bioethics, agrees: 'immortals cannot be noble'.¹⁴ Either the stories of marauding, arguing deities falling in and out of love are simply our, human ways of mythologising polytheist divinities; or they indicate that polytheism is incoherent.

Nussbaum opposes 'a hatred of finitude and a love of godlike existence.'¹⁵ She argues that joy of life and fear of death are related. She also thinks that if we appreciate this, we will lose the hatred of human limitation. Thus fear of death can have good consequences:¹⁶ not only does this fear maintain our will for self-preservation, it also explains our will for creative activity expressed in projects that enrich life both for self and others, for now and in the future; projects such as having and rearing children; creating works of art, good political systems and legal systems, ideas, scientific and philosophical enquiries; creating worldly beauty, and values that express the creator and live on.

Both Nussbaum's points seem good ones to me. Many basic human values are intelligible only through appreciating the fact of mortality; and fear of our mortality contributes to our sharing in and extending many of these forms of value.

Nussbaum returns us here to the wiser world of Aristotle. Death is my enemy, but it is also my context; so even my fear of the enemy can be fertile soil for serving human values and my own or others' happiness. In Christian tradition, too, the most important facts about me can only be fully spelled out on the (often suppressed) assumption of my impending death. For example, I am a living ensouled body; it ages, sickens and needs repair and care; I yearn for others like me to follow me; I express myself in social creations that extend human resources and ingenuity beyond individual effort to vast and inter-generational projects; I am biologically structured

¹⁴ Leon Kass 'L'Chaim and Its Limits: why not immortality?', *First Things*, May 2001,

¹⁵ Nussbaum, p. 343.

¹⁶ And, on the other hand, unreasonable fighting against death can have bad consequences in terms of 'work patterns, parenthood, the social security system, and species renewal', as Kass, *op cit* argues. For Kass, benefits of mortality and finitude include interest and engagement in the world around us, seriousness and aspiration in life, the beauty and love of perishable things, and striving for virtue and moral excellence, including self-sacrifice.

and divinely graced to seek, recognise and respond to truth, goodness, and beauty; I am impelled to seek a post-mortem future for myself or others if I come to believe this to be possible; I must live in the here and now with a view to a future beyond the grave. These crucial facts about me are effects upon me of my mortality or my appreciation of my mortality; fear of mortality encourages me to exert myself and so flourish in these physical, psychical, social, intellectual, and spiritual ways.

The significance of death for all of us, including nonbelievers, is that it is death that explains the central valuable activities, experiences and relationships we engage in to enhance our transience. Wise men and women do not frolic, or despair, in the light of their mortality; rather, they realise that (under Providence) fulfilment and not just indulgence is possible in the few years allowed to us. Death does not mockingly rob us of the goods of life; rather, life declares the good always in wary acknowledgment of the approach of death.

*Dr Hayden Ramsay
Polding Centre, 133 Liverpool Street
Sydney NSW 2000 Australia.*