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The Self and Death: An Existential Dialectic

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Teach me to number my days aright, that I may gain wisdom of heart.

— Psalm 90:12

The Epicurean Dilemma

If one were to ask us point-blank, and indeed somewhat crudely, why we get all “hung up” about death — the death of our loved ones or our own eventual death — we might well want to respond with indignation. We might take the question more as a challenge and outright effrontery to our human sensibilities than as a serious query. We would rightly be aghast at the apparent flippancy of the inquirer or provocateur, as you may have it, in face of the evident human happening and sorrowful parting that is death. It isn't that we would favor or sustain a morbid preoccupation about death, but simply that we would beg to demand that rudimentary sensitivity and common decency prevail whenever this awesome and, for some, dreadful aspect of life's inevitable end comes to the fore.

Conversely, we cannot lightly dismiss the dilemma entailed in Epicurus's classic sophism mocking human concern for the moribund and his fate. To quote Epicurus: “The most terrible evil, death, does not touch me. Indeed when we are, death is not, and when death is, we are not.” In other words, for Epicurus, death is truly a nonproblem which does not merit man's excessive anxiety. To be so, to the mind of Epicurus, only promotes a species of escapism from the real challenges of life and, therefore, human inauthenticity, a line of reasoning taken up in our own time by the French existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre.¹

But if Epicureanism has had its ready followers, it has also had its dauntless opponents. In an entirely opposing point of view, one of these dissenters, the stoic, Cicero, envisages the fundamental task of all true philosophy as nothing more than a *commentatio mortis*.² In this perspective, the phenomenon of death is approached as *the*

sobering experience of reality, and is afforded the central place in all reflection on the human condition. Unless a meaning can truly be found for it, life itself is little more than a "useless passion," to use Sartre's famous expression.

With this divergence of views on the role and importance of death in life, it is obvious that the first-order duty of philosophy is to determine which position is the correct one — the Epicurean or the Ciceronean. And to do this, philosophy must remain faithful to its own proper methods. As a discipline seeking ultimate reasons for things, it must remember that these are reasons, or better yet, meanings, *for man*, that they have bearing and significance only for him. Thus, heeding Gabriel Marcel, philosophy must make man and, more specifically, the self its point of departure and central point of reference. This fact that philosophy gravitates around man discloses to us that essentially it concerns far more than the problematical order of impassive, neutral objectivity before reality, but is rather of the meta-problematical order insofar as it entails a necessarily *subjective* dimension in the sense of having bearing only, and uniquely, for man, the experiencing, knowing and affirming subject. As such, philosophy must go beyond the mere exercise of empirical objectivity "from without," as it were, and a mere transsubjective analysis of objects, and must concern itself more profoundly with grasping its objects "from within," thereby engaging in true, reflective analysis which seeks to recoup the lost meanings and unities given in original experience before the neutral dissection of reality by the particular sciences.

Man Before Death

When we consider man vis-a-vis the phenomenon of death, we are immediately confronted with two enigmas, that of man and of death itself. Man is a riddle to himself, because he can never turn his eyes on himself and grasp himself in the same manner as he perceives the objects in the world before him. One is even prone to ask: Is there, indeed, such a thing or separate substance as a "self" at all? David Hume, the most famous sceptic of modern times, answers unequivocally in the negative. In his pursuit of this elusive "self," he finds only individual perceptions and accordingly, reduces that self to nothing more than a "bundle or collection of different perceptions."³ To such a nonsubstantial self, lacking all internal consistency and real perdurance in time, death can obviously pose no real existential difficulties, and indeed, cannot even be consistently raised as a problem at all. Of course, Hume was wrong, because he failed to note that the "self" cannot be grasped over and above or apart from its perceptions, and it is precisely in them that it is given as an immediate datum of consciousness. Accordingly, the problem of personal identity, especially as it relates to death, does not dissolve as Hume

thought it should and, on the contrary, retains its full, problematic character and poignant relevancy.

No less enigmatic is that "single expressionless syllable," as Hegel would have it,⁴ that is death. At first sight, it may appear to be given to the senses for empirical grasp unlike the self. But upon closer scrutiny we see this is not at all the case. True, we may witness a person dying, indeed see him die, but do we see death? And even in such an instance as this, are we really capable of pinpointing the actual moment of death, at least in any rigorous, scientific sense? If we can, how is it that there seems to be no end to the debate among scientists and medical personnel as to what exactly constitutes clinical death? Empirically speaking, medicine has traditionally known four *atria mortis* — the brain, heart, lungs, and blood — but these, in the last analysis, turn out to be only certain approximations to the reality of physical death and not a full conceptual grasping of it.⁵ Even if we allow, for argument's sake, that empirical study does offer a certain conceptualization of death, we still do not arrive at a truly existential appreciation and understanding of it. It is indeed precisely at this particular juncture that we find ourselves up against an impasse, an unintelligible gap, to be exact. I experience the death of others, but until I, myself die, I do not experience the act of dying, which alone discloses to me what death is at root. For this reason, vapors of mystery always hover about death and those vapors are not capable of intelligible distillation and residual isolation.

We would underestimate the real import of the experience of death we are given in life, short of our own death, were we to state that we can extract from it only an inductive certitude that we, along with all others, shall die. Furthermore, we would seriously fall short of the mark if our intellectual concerting with death were to end with a resignation of spirit before the ultimate indefinability of death. The definition is, after all, not the climax of philosophic activity. In truth, the experience of the death of "the other" is more than a merely empirical, clinical datum. The loss of the other in death is, in a most profound way, also a personal loss for me. Life is essentially a "being-with" and, for this reason, the death of another entails the real, painful loss of part of my personal self in that this other, in his personhood, helped to constitute my own personality and really determine me as a person.⁶ In other words, apart from him, I am not, in a very real sense, the same person as before.

The Syllogism of Ivan Ilych

The fundamental tension existing before the empirical face, as it were, of death, on the one hand, and its existential, internal dynamics, on the other, can be otherwise formulated in a dialectic between the personal and impersonal dimensions of man's contingent existence.

This very conflict, which is nothing but a concretization of the enigma of man before death, is uniquely captured in the syllogism of Ivan Ilych, as found in Leo Tolstoy's dramatic soliloquy, *Smert' Ivana Il'icha* (The Death of Ivan Ilych). In a deathbed meditation, the terminally-ill Ilych recalls a classic syllogism learned while still a lad in school. "Caius is a man. Men are mortal. Therefore Caius is mortal." Formally speaking, the reasoning is impeccable. But, materially speaking, when it is applied to himself, Ilych is only troubled by its dissonant ring. "Yes, it is true of Caius, who is only man in general; Caius is mortal, and it is just that he die. But me, Vanja, Ivan Ilych with all my feelings and thoughts, for me it is another matter . . . All this cannot be — but it is!"⁷

The case of Ivan Ilych is so typical of life, that one easily identifies and commiserates with him. People often can face the reality of death as long as it is not their own. But when it is about to touch them, they are at a loss for words, and are more than willing to flee from it, and defy its signals. St. Paul's ominous words that death comes "like a thief in the night" (1 Thes 5:2) reverberates a sobering, axiomatic truth: *mors certa, hora incerta*.⁸ But the apostle intimates an even more important truth about death here. Death is problematical only when it is seen to affect *my* existence. Similarly, when Ben Sira admonishes us, "for him it (death) was yesterday, for you today" (Sirach 38:22), he refers to more than just the hour of death. More importantly, he insinuates that it will visit us personally. As a blunt fact of life, death is entirely anonymous and impersonal. We begin to shudder before it only upon perceiving its eminent, personal character. But for many, like Ivan Ilych, this *prise de conscience* comes only, if even then, on the threshold of death.

The Paradox of Death

The knowledge that we are destined to die, that our terrestrial existence will one day end, carries more than epistemological import. More radically, we stand before an existential fact of life that signs our very beings at their depths. We are, indeed, as Heidegger has rightly insisted, "beings-for-death," with the clear, logical implication that we must consciously live out this truth of our nature and existence, if we are to lead genuinely authentic existences.⁹ Therefore, the question we must constantly bear in mind and candidly ask ourselves is, paradoxical as it may seem: How must I *live* my death? How must I decide my existence in view of the fact that I am a being-for-death?

The paradox of death reveals a notable ambivalence. Death as a privation of life is a negative phenomenon. It is an outright evil. But the condition of the possibility of this evil is life, a positive good. I may be a "being-for-death," but my potentiality for death is only a

concomitance of the actuality of my existence in life, i.e., of my being alive. That I *can* die, that I have the potency for death, oddly enough, highlights a facet of my living. If this potency is, accordingly, truly integrated into my lived existence, a basic negativity is transformed into a positivity, and thus what was once a mere privation can serve as the surest means to *recapitulate* a life. Ironically, that which is the deprivation of life is what can give real consistency to life.

This profound truth is the thought underlying the psalmist's prayer of petition: "Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain wisdom of heart." Unless we have learned to face death already in life, unless we have succeeded in patterning our life in view of eventual death and, making our life-decisions against the backdrop of death, our life is deprived of the crucial anchoring point which alone can keep it on the straight and narrow path to meaningful existence.

The commitment to life has intelligibility only if prior, considered attention has been afforded death. Real authenticity cannot accrue to my life-decisions if the subject of death has been left out of my decision-making process. And, indeed, unless my life is paradoxically formed, as it were, in death, the particular events in my life cannot be annealed into a real, personal *history*, but remain merely the sporadic, atomized events of a rambling chronicle.

The Good Death

A classic epitaph reads: *Cogita mori ut discas vivere* (Think about death and learn to live). This sound advice, which takes heed of the psalmist, aptly sums up the life-death dialectic undergirding man's project of self-realization in time. If human existence as such, however, cannot be fully understood and appraised apart from a consideration of life's being indelibly signed by death, how much more meaning and value must life's last moments take on, those final days before human existence's ultimate appointment with destiny in time? This being the case, how could knowing that life's end is imminent not be anything else than a grace, a blessed opportunity for ultimate summations, reconciliations, and reawakenings of the spirit? In truth, a "good death" would seem then not to consist in a tranquil death as such or in an unconscious death in sleep, but rather in the precise knowledge that death is approaching. A good death might entail suffering, but it need not. Its specificity at any rate consists in the knowledge that death is approaching and in the conscientious preparation of oneself for this moment of stark reality and naked truth.

Ivan Ilych, for one, died a good death. After having struggled wearily through the characteristic, psychological stages of death — those of denial, revolt, and acceptance — he was prepared to meet his Maker. Ironically, it was only when he was set to die that he realized he could really begin to live. Until that moment his life was

entirely conventional, lacking depth and dramatic timbre. It was owing precisely to this superficiality and triteness of existence that he could not bear the thought of death. What had he really accomplished? What serious thought had he ever entertained during the course of his life? Did he ever really live *qua* man? Or had he only existed from day to day, much like the brute animal?

It was not facing death that terrorized Ivan Ilych. It was knowing that he had wasted his time and energy in nonmomentous activity and vain banalities. Were all his hopes for a truly meaningful existence forever to be blighted? In true accord with the paradoxical character of death, this was not to be the case. The frank admission that he had not lived his life as he should have gave him an unfamiliar and most unexpected strength and freedom before death. His previously amorphous existence now enjoyed an unprecedented consistency, which not only offered a sorely needed source of consolation, but also fortified him to confront the ultimate challenge lying before him. So armed, he could now join in chorus with Simeon, and exclaim: "*Nunc dimittis . . .*" (Lk 2:29-32). His death thus became a victory of life, and the poignant words of the joyful Byzantine Easter hymn, ". . . by death he conquered death," referring to Christ, could be properly applied to Ilych.

The Refutation of Epicurus

Pondering what has hitherto been said in this meditation on the reality of death and its place in man's life, it appears that one central thought has been defended and developed, namely, that the ultimate paradox of death is nothing other than the invincibility of life. This insight, however, needs additional clarification and elaboration if it is to be fully intelligible. What has been captured artistically by Leo Tolstoy in the character of Ivan Ilych now needs to be philosophically articulated. To be fully adequate and convincing, this philosophic understanding must be able to dissolve the riddle contained in Epicurus's scoffing presentation of the problematic or else it will fail to counteract, let alone subjugate, the cynical attitude conditioning it.

Italian philosopher Michele Federico Sciacca, in his minor classic, *Morte e Immortalita'* (Death and Immortality) isolates Epicurus's fundamental error in his failure to distinguish the *state of death* from the *act of dying*.¹⁰ The state of death is a mere datum for blunt, empirical observation. As such, it does not formally enjoy any special, intrinsic intelligibility, and is a merely neutral phenomenon, common to all organic life, be it vegetative, sensitive or rational, beyond the sphere of value and existential meaning. However, if one considers the *act of dying*, the fact that *I*, a human person, die, our formal standpoint essentially changes. My death as such, insofar as it is *my* act and *my personal* experience, can never be the object of the blunt observa-

tion of another. He can never enter into me, and experience what I experience. But it is exclusively on this formal level that one can penetrate the real, human meaning of death, and discover its true import for life.

"He is dead" is an observable fact for anyone who cares to look, but "I am dead" is a contradictory proposition.¹¹ The one makes sense; the other is devoid of meaning. In the why and wherefore of any determinate, personal act of dying, one sees the pledge of life. It is, therefore, not death but life that has the last, decisive word, whence follows Sciacca's classic enthymeme in "Eureka": "I die, therefore, I am immortal."¹² A "proof" of immortality in epigrammatical form! As the one who dies, it is I who can personally accept it, and hence integrate it into my future. Accordingly, death can enter into the sway of my personal decision. Since it is I who die, since it is my last personal act of terrestrial life, it is equally my last spiritual act of transcendence over matter in time. It is my life's transcendence and valiant victory over death. Yes, I die, but that "I" is oblivious to death. Dying foreshadows not the end, but a beginning. It bespeaks not irreversible disintegration, but eternity and immortality.

REFERENCES

1. Sartre affirms death to be only a contingent fact, a pure fact just as is birth, carrying no peculiar ontological import, as one like Heidegger, who defines man as a "being-unto-death," would maintain. Echoing Epicurus, Sartre writes: "Since death is always beyond my subjectivity, there is no place for it in my subjectivity. This subjectivity does not affirm itself *against* death but independently of it although this affirmation is immediately alienated. Therefore we can neither think of death nor wait for it nor arm ourselves against it; but also our projects are independent of death — not because of our blindness, as the Christian says, but on principle." Cf. *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Citadel Press, 1969), p. 524.
2. Eberhard Jungel in his *Morte* (Death) (Milano: Marzorati Editore, 1968) (It. trans.) quotes Cicero as follows: "*Tota enim philosophorum vita commentatio mortis est.*" (The entire life of philosophers is a continued thinking about death), p. 74.
3. Cf. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, part I, section VI.
4. Hegel, G. W. F., *The Phenomenology of Mind* (New York: Humanities Press, 1966), p. 605.
5. Jungel, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
6. Eberhard Jungel therefore hits upon a profound truth when he tries to isolate the essence of death in its aspect of "irrelationality," *op. cit.*, pp. 51-54.
7. We offer only a paraphrase, though nearly exact, of Ilych's words.
8. Cf. Xavier Tilliette, S.J., "*Mort et Metaphysique*" (Death and Metaphysics), *Revue de Sciences Religieuses*, 67:2 (1979), p. 162 for a discussion of this axiom.
9. Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 279-311.
10. Sciacca, Michele Federico, *Morte e Immortalita* (Death and Immortality) (Milano: Marzorati Editore, 1968), pp. 81ff, 113ff, 131.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 114-116.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 186.