Intimations of Mortality

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Abstract
The nearness of death can lead me to see the empirical world as separate from myself since, only too soon, it will exist without me. This raises the question whether I might partake of some other mode of existence without the empirical world. Logically, such existence may be possible; but our inability to validate any conception of what is actually the case without ultimate reference to experience, or to the possibility of experience, renders us permanently unable to have grounds for believing in the reality of it. This inability does not eliminate the logical possibility, but a logical possibility is all we are left with. And we do know that only the very tiniest proportion of logical possibilities is actualized.

When we are in the midst of life it comes naturally to some of us not just to enjoy it but to be consumed with curiosity about it. There are quite a lot of people who make a serious study of human beings, their behaviour and beliefs, their arts, their institutions, their past, their environment. Some study their bodies, their anatomy and physiology, their disorders. There are also those who study the earth on which we find ourselves, and its relationship to other worlds, and the cosmos itself. For most of the time these interests take specific and focussed forms, but sometimes very general questions are raised. What is life? What is space? What is time? Within this world of ours such questions naturally arise; and the pursuit of one of them can be engrossing. But they are all interests and questions arising *within* life. They may be *about* life and the world, but only as these are experienced by beings already inside them.

However, for each one of us there comes a time when he is not going to be alive in the world for much longer. Then he may start to see these questions in a new light, for he realizes that they are about a world that is soon not going to include him. They can begin to appear as if they had to do with somewhere else, or somewhere soon to be 'else', with him not there. The overall situation that has always engrossed his interests and concerns may now be glimpsed, at least partially, as if from outside. What is that (no longer unequivocally 'this') world? How does it come to exist at all? Can even any meaning be attached to the question whether it has an

doi:10.1017/S0031819110000628 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2011

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819110000628 Published online by Cambridge University Press

explanation, or a purpose, or a significance? Where could any such things be located? (Not within it, obviously, for that would make any explanation circular.) And what about the humans who are transiently in it, of whom he is still one, if not for much longer? Is this their whole and sole mode of existence?

Of course, this second set of questions could have been asked all along with the first; but the standpoint from which they are now seen is different, so the perspective is different. To take a lighthearted comparison, it is a bit like comparing a party surveyed at the door in a valedictory glance by a departing guest with the same party experienced by a wholly engrossed guest in mid-room and mid-hubbub.

The world, like a party, is variegated and indeterminate, but on so unimaginably vaster a scale that it is impossible to convey in language the perception of it as enclosed within experience and yet carrying on separately from oneself. The chief problem in communicating this difficulty lies not in the words 'carrying on' but in the word 'enclosed'. Every possibility I have for apprehending, imagining or inventing, in any way whatsoever, is contingent on the apparatus I have for doing so, and all of it is this-worldly. Even my freest and most imaginative speculations are events in a this-worldly life. I cannot get outside it, or outside its possibilities – except by dying. And as I approach death it is as if I receive tiny, inarticulable glimpses, the barest possible intimations, of the empirical world as a whole. The overriding impression is of its limitedness. The rest of this paragraph needs to be taken as a metaphor. I have heard two or three astronauts at different times tell how when they looked at the earth from the moon they were astounded at how small and insignificant it was when seen from outside, the more so because surrounded by so much emptiness, and then beyond that all the myriad other worlds that they found themselves looking at elsewhere in space. One described how, when he raised his hand to his face, he was astonished to see the entire world disappear behind his thumb.

Once, for a few seconds, I thought the world was going away from me in something like that way. I felt my consciousness suddenly being dragged away, and thought I was having a stroke. In those moments I thought I was dying. And the experience was not that I was leaving the world, it was that the world was leaving me. It seemed to be becoming separated from me, its closed-offness cutting it adrift. It was as if the whole of everything I had known was in a bubble floating off into a surrounding blackness – a bubble crowded with light and people, but a bubble nevertheless. It was an entirely different perception from any I have otherwise

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819110000628 Published online by Cambridge University Press

had. And although I did not die on that occasion, the fact is that, being now in my eighties, I know I am bound to die before very long. So what, I find myself wondering in a new way, will happen when I do?

That I shall leave this world, or the world will leave me, seems to me as certain as anything can be. Is there anywhere else for me to go? When I reflect on this apparently simple question I find in it not one but three terms that simply may not have anything to refer to. Once I am dead there may be no 'me', and therefore no question of my 'going' anywhere. That question might be like: 'Where does a flame go when it goes out?' – the answer, of course, is that it does not go anywhere, it ceases to exist. However, if there is any sense in which a me, or something possessing a genuine connection with me, could continue to exist after my death, it brings us up against a limitation of yet another of our terms, 'anywhere else'. If, as both physics and philosophy lead us to conclude, time and space are of their nature characteristics of the empirical world, there is not, and cannot be, 'anywhere else'. In other words, if there is any reality other than the empirical world it must be a reality that is not characterized by time or space. This means that if death is a change from my being in this world to my being in some other state, and is not the total and complete cessation of everything I am or can be, then that other state is timeless and spaceless.

This is just about as far as rational thinking carries us. I do not see how it can take us much farther. It is logically self-evident that all sorts of realities in addition to the empirical world may exist or be the case, inapprehensibly by us, and that from within this empirical world we have no way of apprehending them. But no way *is* no way. All my notions of what existence is, and what possibilities are, have been shaped by the being that I am and the experiences I have had – as are all my notions of what I myself am or might be. I have evidence that there is far more to me than I understand, and I see clearly that it is logically possible for something about me to remain undestroyed by my death, but if that possibility is realized I am not able to form any determinate conception of what any such something is, nor of its mode of existence. Imagination could run riot over such questions, but there would be no way of securing it to anything in whose reality I had grounds for believing. *Anything* – or perhaps anything that is not self-contradictory – *could* be the case, but there is an infinite number of different possibilities, and we are without good reasons for believing of any one of them that it is the true one. Only from outside the limitations imposed by being in the empirical world could understanding of such things be even

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819110000628 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a possibility. From within the empirical world there can be no understanding, and – even more prohibitively – no knowledge. All we can know is that either death is the end of everything for us or, if it is not, something is the case that it is impossible for us to know. We may believe one thing, or another thing, or something else, but any such belief scarcely deserves to be called even a conjecture, because it is a ticket in a lottery whose tickets are infinite in number. The most that can be said for it would be that it *could* be true – but then, so could each of the others.

Even so, this situation does provide one of the most powerful of all human instincts, the instinct of self-preservation, with an opportunity and a temptation. Because it is *possible* that death is not the end of us, our urge for survival is motivated to clutch at this possibility and exaggerate its likelihood, telling ourselves that it is not necessarily all that improbable, may in fact even be quite probable, perhaps approaching a degree of likelihood enough for us to give it a certain tentative credence. After that it becomes only a question of which of the different possibilities we attach our credence to. We may try to defend such a position by declaring it boldly to be a matter of faith, not of knowledge, and may even secretly pride ourselves on believing something we do not know to be true. Indeed, we may go so far as to attribute cowardice, or at any rate a lack of adventurousness, to those who are unwilling to take the jump: an unwillingness to commit is seen as a sign of weakness, lack of character. The number of times I have heard agnosticism described as wishy-washy runs into the hundreds.

In spite of all this, though, let us for a moment suppose that one of the possible forms of survival is, in fact, the case. Are we to be precluded from believing in it even though it is the truth? Against this question another needs to be put: on what could any such belief be based? There could be no rational ground. The characteristic way in which religions meet this problem is by saying that although they have the truth it cannot be arrived at by human beings unaided, and for that reason it has been revealed to us by a higher power. But to anyone who does not make the equally ungrounded leap to a belief in the higher power the justification is circular. We are in the position described thousands of years ago by the pre-Socratic philosopher Xenophanes:

> '… even if by chance [man] were to utter
> The final truth he would himself not know it …'

Of those people who believe in the existence of a higher power, some claim to have direct, unmediated cognition of it. Logically, of course,

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it is possible that what one or some of these people are claiming is true – perhaps they do have direct cognition of a transcendent being – but the rest of us have only their word for it. Their credibility is severely compromised by the fact that in important respects such people contradict one another. This means that many of them, however sincerely, must be putting mistaken constructions on their experience. And this means that perhaps all of them are.

I have never had a cognitive experience of this kind, yet I do understand the possibility of it. My understanding is based not only on the fact that it is logically possible: I have had what may be comparable experiences in the arts, especially music and theatre. Great art is of profound yet unverbalizable import, and I have much direct experience of it. There are two artists in particular from whose work I have received some of the most valuable experiences I have ever had: Shakespeare and Wagner. But there is no way in which I can prove the authenticity of these experiences to people who do not have them and do not believe in their validity. Still less can I describe them in words. Genuine lovers of the arts often hold incompatible views in their estimate of individual artists: those whom some see as great are dismissed by others as second-rate, even worse. Wagner's work is thought by quite a number of people to be inflated, bombastic, posturing, disagreeably noisy, vulgar, self-promoting, tedious and superficial, if not empty. Yet they are seeing the same operas as I see, and hearing the same music. I know for certain that they are wrong, quite staggeringly wrong, but nothing I say seems to cause many of them to change their minds – they feel just as certain that I am wrong. In the absence of direct cognition on their part there is no way round this. All those of us who passionately love one of the arts are used to having experiences of this kind. Through art we are directly in touch with something true and bottomlessly significant; and because of the immediacy of the experience we cannot doubt that we are having it; but it is equally impossible for that experience to be conveyed by anything other than the work of art itself, and therefore impossible for it to be communicated by description or explanation. Anyone who does not share the experience has only our word for it. If he doubts our word there are no alternative means of persuasion.

One characteristic in common between the experiences of some art-lovers and the experiences claimed by some religious people is that they involve the transcendental. Great art speaks to us from a realm that is not the empirical. In responding to it we are in touch with something transcendental, and we know that we are. But it is unnameable: nothing can be said that conveys the experience. I have

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often told the story of Sibelius playing a record of one of his works to a visitor: when it was finished, the visitor asked Sibelius to explain it to him, whereupon the composer, without saying a word, played the record again.

I occasionally have direct cognition of the transcendental with regard to ethics. I know sometimes (not always) that a course of action is morally wrong. (Rarely do I know with the same certitude what is right, unless there is only one alternative.) This sense of certainty can be independent of empirical criteria, not derived from norms of behaviour or the application of rules of any kind, independent of human wishes or self-interest. There can be, and are, direct acts of moral cognition. Religious people are inclined to say that this is the voice of God speaking within us. I do not believe in God, but I know that the transcendental exists, and that I sometimes have direct apprehension of it, and that ethics provides examples, along with the arts.

From such direct experiences I have known since childhood that the empirical world is not everything there is, yet I have not been able to form any determinate conception of what else there could be. There is certainly something else that sometimes, perhaps all the time, manifests itself in this world. And because the something else is not graspable by thought I have always seen the world as both containing and bounded by the transcendental. To call this 'God' is to characterize it, indeed to personify it, and is a crude piece of anthropomorphism. None of the insights I have ever had points to the existence of a God. At quite an early age I became exasperated with the way religious people presume to gatecrash with their fancy-dress-party antics, and misunderstand, misappropriate and misrepresent, to the point of claiming that anyone with a sense of the transcendental must be essentially religious even if he does not realize it. This is the last word in uncomprehendingness. I would say, to the contrary, that anyone with a genuine sense of the extraordinariness of existence will find the explanations put on offer by the mainstream institutions of the various religions pitifully inadequate, and almost entirely irrelevant.

This last statement needs to be accompanied by a caveat about a small but significant group. Within each of the main religions there is also, outside the mainstream, a mystical tradition that tries to preserve integrity in these matters. Mystics do indeed claim to have direct apprehension of the transcendental, but the most striking thing about what they say is that – in spite of the multiple and detailed differences between the religions with which they are associated – they assert that the nature of the transcendental cannot be

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819110000628 Published online by Cambridge University Press

communicated. This point needs to be stressed, because some of them have so much to say in leading up to it, and then about its implications for humans and their lives, that they may mistakenly be thought guilty of talking about what they have said cannot be talked about. Another striking thing is that the ancillary things they say tend to be little connected with the particularities of their religion, but are similar for mystics in all religions. Buddhism does not postulate the existence of a creator God, nor of an individual human soul, and has for these reasons been said by many commentators to be not a religion at all but an atheistic or agnostic world-view, yet the mystical tradition within it is possibly the deepest and richest of them all, and encompasses much if not most of what is to be found in the others. This suggests that mystics of all kinds are describing similar experiences, and that these are largely independent of the doctrines of one, or indeed of any, religion. It is not surprising, therefore, that their writings have always held little appeal for the majority of adherents of their own religions, to whom they appear as an almost disconnected phenomenon, and who commonly regard them as unintelligible.

What most of them say has a family resemblance which is made up of a selection from among the following features. This world of ours is a manifestation of something else whose inner nature is unknowable to us. Although the world is material and manifold, what lies hidden 'within' or 'behind' it is immaterial and undifferentiated (and therefore, in a sense, one). Although our world is in space and time this undifferentiated something is not in space or time. Although in the world of space and time everything is perishable and ephemeral, what is one and undifferentiated is imperishable and eternal. Because of this, the things of this world are unimportant and of little value: lasting value is 'outside' it. And because of that, our world has the character of a passing parade of shadows, a dream, an illusion, whereas true, timeless reality is the single, unknowable something whose inner nature we are not able to grasp. However, because it manifests itself in the things of this world it manifests itself in us. The mystic believes he can make contact with it inside himself. But we are all manifestations of the same something. And the fact that we have this transcendental element in common – and that what is transcendental is, as such, undifferentiated – means that we are all, in our innermost being, one. This reality is the foundation of compassion, which in turn is the foundation of ethics. In this world we can transform the moral quality of our individual lives by overcoming some of the ephemeral barriers between ourselves and others – by loving them, or by identifying with them to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819110000628 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the extent of always treating them as we want them to treat us. When we leave this world we may transcend altogether the barrier between ourselves and the totality of what is timeless. In both cases, liberation from individual selfhood is at the heart of what is involved. This, over and over, is something mystics say they have experienced: the disappearance of individual being into a oneness with timeless reality. But they always add that this is ineffable.

What will at once strike any serious student of the history of Western philosophy is how much this has in common with Kantian-Schopenhauerian philosophy. Whenever Schopenhauer differs in major respects from Kant, as quite frequently he does, it is usually in the direction of these ideas. For instance, Kant seems to have assumed that the transcendental was differentiated in a way that related to differentiations within the empirical world, whereas Schopenhauer argued that since differentiation presupposes either time or space, and since both time and space are characteristics of the empirical world only, differentiation must be confined to the empirical world, and therefore the transcendental must be undifferentiated. Similarly, whereas Kant argued that morality was based on rationality, Schopenhauer argued that it was not, it was based on compassion, and was applied metaphysics, because compassion was in its turn based on the oneness of the transcendental that is in all of us. When Schopenhauer, who did not believe in the existence of God, or of a human soul, first encountered Buddhism, he was dumbstruck by its extensive and detailed similarities with ideas he had already committed to paper. The two sets of ideas had been arrived at in unconnected civilizations in different continents, in historical epochs hugely distant from one another across great expanses of time, and in quite different ways. Schopenhauer arrived at his by carrying forward arguments from the central tradition of Western philosophy as this had culminated in the work of his greatest immediate predecessor, Kant – a tradition which was rooted above all else in rational argument, and saw itself as deriving from the Ancient Greeks. But, as he said, if deeply reflective people address themselves independently to the same problems it ought not to surprise us if they arrive at some of the same conclusions. The best of the mystics are wonderful to read, but for a Western reader there is probably more to be gained from reading Schopenhauer, because of the abundance of rational argument to be found in his work and its wide range of reference to the Western cultural tradition as a whole – not to mention its lucidity and attractiveness of style.

Because of my own view of life, which has mostly developed not from study but from direct experience of living, I have always been

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819110000628 Published online by Cambridge University Press

haunted by the mere fact of the possible authenticity of such a world-view as this. For that reason I have read widely in the mystics, and have written a book about the philosophy of Schopenhauer. Some of their main doctrines accord with and illuminate the way I find myself spontaneously relating to people, and to ethics, and to music and theatre – and also (which I have not mentioned up to now) to sex and its life-creating consequences. These are some of the most significant things in life, at any rate in my life, and I have found myself reading with an intuitive feeling that this, or something like it, could be true. Yet I have no way of knowing whether it is or not. It only might be. It is not what I consider most likely to be true, nor is it what I most want to be true. To take, for example, my own death: what I consider most likely to be true is that death will be the complete and utter end of my existence, with no successor existence of any kind that can be related to me as I now am. And if that is not the case, the next most likely scenario, it seems to me, is something along the lines indicated by Schopenhauer. But neither of these is what I most want. What I want to be true is that I have an individual, innermost self, a soul, which is the real me and which survives my death. That too could be true. But alas, I do not believe it.

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