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# How Death Shapes Life

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**Abstract**

Life and death: they're opposites. But each one can be defined by the other. That means death shapes life. But how? When things go well, death shapes life from the background of our awareness. This fact has profound consequences for every facet of life: politics and governance, interpersonal relationships, and all forms of human consciousness.

Want to make lasagna with bechamel sauce? Make the bechamel, remove it from the heat, then prepare the rest of the dish's ingredients. By the time you're ready to assemble the lasagna, the sauce will be thick and creamy.

This type of cooking instruction tells you to prepare a mixture and then let it stand while you complete another part of the recipe.

From the point of view of life, death is a bit like the mixture that is left to stand. Take in the first two lines of Rainer Marie Rilke's short and stunning poem 'Der Tod' ('Death'), as translated by Burton Pike:

> There stands death, a bluish concoction
> in a cup without a saucer.

What an opening! Death is standing, the way liquid stands still in a vessel. It's standing, waiting for you to get farther along with whatever you are doing. It will be there while you're working, it will be there when you're done, and in some way it is a background part of those other tasks. The blue concoction is a better image for death than bechamel sauce – because it's blue, it is isolated in a cup, ungrounded by any platform beneath it, and because it is not waiting to be integrated into anything lovely, desirable, and whole, like lasagna.

A few lines later, it's suggested in the poem that someone long ago, 'at a distant breakfast', saw a dusty, cracked cup – that cup with the bluish concoction standing in it – and this person read the word 'hope', written in faded letters on the side of the cup. Hope is a future-directed feeling, and in the poem, the word is written on a surface that contains death underneath. As it stands, death shapes the horizon of life.

How, though? How does death shape life?

For a start, it shapes life from the background of consciousness. Even when we get through the day with ease, the prospect of death – even our own – is still in some way all around us, like the sauce cooling in the saucepan that we have set aside, or Rilke's blue concoction. Here's a very basic truth: whatever else makes us do the things we do, we can do them because we are alive. You might quietly wonder: what would the world be, without me in it? Anything you do, anything you are, gives an answer to this question. The world would be missing your singular way of existing in it.



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When we entertain these questions – and we do, from a young age, when we worry what the world would be, bereft of the people we care most about – we are comparing a world containing person X to a world without X. Contemplating these scenarios is a way to start imagining part of what death would mean. It is also a way to focus on what our activities or what other people mean to us. Notice that if raising the question directs attention back to these things, death is no longer thematized. Any awareness of it has been a stepping-stone bringing us back into the swing of things.

The philosophers Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger each discuss death (in their own ways) as a horizon that implicitly shapes our consciousness. It's what gives future times the pressure they exert on us. A horizon is the kind of thing that is normally in the background – something that limits, partly defines, and sets the stage for what you focus on. These philosophers help us see the ways that death occupies the background of consciousness – and that the background is where it belongs.

Heidegger observed in our attitudes an asymmetry we can easily fall into: the fact that someone else – anyone else – is going to die is easier to face fully than the fact that we ourselves will die. The novelist George Saunders once described this asymmetry as an inborn confusion: 'death is real, o.k., sure – for you, but not for me'. Even when we try to face it, the prospect of our own death is especially hard to fathom.

But even the prospect of other people's death can make us feel uneasy, distracted, or derailed when it comes to the foreground. Death can have this effect whether it's mass death, or deaths of specific persons unknown to us that we only hear or read about, or deaths of people so close to us that they tear the fabric of our lives when they go.

When things go well, death stays in the background. This fact has profound consequences for every facet of life: politics and governance, interpersonal relationships, and all forms of human consciousness. Both in politics and in everyday life, one of the worst things we could do is get used to death, treat it as unremarkable, or as anything other than a loss.

We're familiar with the ways in which making the prospect of death salient can unnerve, paralyse or derail a person. An extreme example is shown by people with Cotard syndrome, who report feeling that they have already died. It is considered a 'monothematic' delusion, because this odd reaction is circumscribed by the sufferers' other beliefs. They freely acknowledge how strange it is to be both dead and yet still there to report on it. They are typically deeply depressed, burdened with a feeling that all possibilities of action have simply been shut down, closed off, made unavailable. Robbed of a feeling of futurity, seemingly without affordances for action, it feels natural to people in this



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state to describe it as the state of being already dead.

Cotard syndrome is an extreme case that illustrates how bringing death into the foreground of consciousness can feel utterly disempowering. This observation has political consequences, which are evident in a culture that treats any kind of lethal violence as something we have to expect and plan for. A glaring example is gun violence, with its lockdown drills for children, its steady stream of the same types of events, over and over – as if these deaths could only be met with a shrug and a sigh, because they are simply part of the cost of other people exercising their freedoms.

**'Both in politics and in everyday life, one of the worst things we could do is get used to death, treat it as unremarkable, or as anything other than a loss.'**

It isn't just depressing to bring death into the foreground of consciousness by creating an atmosphere of violence – it's also dangerous. Any political arrangement that lets masses of people die thematizes death, by making lethal violence perceptible, frequent, salient, talked about and tolerated. Raising death to salience in this way can create and then leverage feelings of existential precarity, which in turn emotionally equips people on a mass scale to tolerate violence as a tool to gain political power. In the United States, it's now a regular occurrence to ram into protestors with vehicles, intimidate voters and poll workers, and prepare to attack government buildings and the people inside. This atmosphere disparages life and then promises violence as a defence against such cheapening, and as a means of control.

To be sure, not everybody gets caught up in this dynamic. But the atmosphere takes an awareness of death that should just be a background precondition for living life, and forces it into the foreground, distracting us from whatever we find ourselves ready and eager to do. Politics should connect to forms of governance that build all the structures we need to keep death standing in its cup, off to the side of what Rilke's poem calls 'this meal full of obstacle' ('dieses Essen voller Hinderniss').

It might not seem directly related to politics, but when you react to a life cut short by thinking, 'if this terrible thing could happen to them, then it could happen to me', that reaction is a basic form of civic regard. It's fragile, and highly sensitive to how deaths are reported and rendered in public. The passing moment of concern may seem insignificant, but it gets supplanted by something much worse when deaths are rendered in ways likely to prompt such questions as 'what did they do to get in trouble?' or such suspicions as 'they probably had it coming', or such callous resignations as 'they were going to die anyway'. We saw some of those reactions during the first pandemic of the twenty-first century, we often see them in war, and they are encouraged by fascism – the kind of politics that extends political differences to differences in human worth, by celebrating the pain of political opponents, or calling for their execution, or promoting policies that wilfully put masses of lives deeply at risk. These attitudes are all refusals to recognize the terribleness of death.

Deaths can seem even more haunting when they're not recognized as a real loss, which is why it's so important how deaths are depicted by governments and in mass communication. The genre of the obituary is there to present deaths as a loss to the public. In the United States, the movement for Black lives in the 2020s, with its focus on deaths within the criminal justice system, made clear for everyone what many people knew and felt all along, which was that when deaths are not rendered as losses to the public,



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then they are depicted in a way that erodes civic regard.

‘. . . when you react to a life cut short by thinking, “if this terrible thing could happen to them, then it could happen to me”, that reaction is a basic form of civic regard.’

So, deaths should be acknowledged in a way that does justice to their gravity, both in interpersonal contexts and by political representatives when deaths are part of a public emergency. This acknowledgement belongs to the kind of life that aims to keep the blue concoction where it belongs.

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