Death Part I

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What Is Death?

Most people are disturbed at the thought of not existing some time in the future. Some philosophers think it impossible (for me) to imagine (me) not existing: there is no experience of nothingness.[1] Some say this dissolves the personal fear of death; to others, it does not help at all. The question whether we should be disturbed or not at the prospect of our own deaths (or of the deaths of loved ones, or of death in general) is best answered in the context of an enquiry into death. In this series of essays I will ask: What is death? What is death's significance? With what ethical and emotional attitudes should we approach death? Is there life after death?

These short essays revisit familiar questions. But the questions do have a tendency to vanish since we are skilled at evading death-talk (at least until the emergency of death occurs – when we are preoccupied). It is perhaps better to ask the questions every so often than to risk losing sight of the puzzle of death altogether. The essays provide few answers: as Josef Pieper reminds us, death is the profoundest mystery of all.[2]

Is there a difference between death and annihilation? Annihilation is being wiped out, destroyed, snuffed out by intention or event. It is being suddenly rendered nothing. I do not think this captures what human death is – even for atheists. Death – even sudden, accidental, or homicidal death – is not sheer destruction.[3] Death ends a life. However it comes, it does not just stop a life, snuff it out. Even the most sickening and tragic deaths are not meaningless. Death completes a person's biography (and radically contributes to the biographies of

[1] It is easy to grasp objectively that I will die, but subjectively it is difficult to think that 'one day this consciousness will black out for good and subjective time will simply stop', see Thomas Nagel *The View From Nowhere* (New York: OUP, 1986), p. 225.

[2] Josef Pieper *Death and Immortality*, trans. R. and C. Winston (London: Burns and Oates, 1969), p. 56ff.

[3] Cf *Gaudium et Spes* 18: 'A deep instinct causes man rightly to reject the idea of death as annihilation.'

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others); death offers commentary on what we have done, failed to do, endured, or suffered.[4]

There is always a structure and so some meaning to death. Sometimes the structure is that of *dying*: due to sickness, disability, old age, or sheer will, people suffer a period of physical disintegration. With this severe damage to health comes damage to vital organs and eventual cessation of vital functions. This is dying, which leads (normally) to death.

Where an elderly person suffers natural diminishment but no illnesses other than those normally associated with his / her degree of diminishment, we do not usually speak of 'dying'; at least not until near the end. Instead, we speak of the processes of 'old age'.

Dying and old age are the two most common structures for understanding death. There are, however, others: not all death comes about as a result of dying or aging. 'Sudden death' covers accidents and unforeseen events such as fatal heart attacks and strokes. Suicide is a structure of decision and action that culminates in death by self-killing. Another, and growing, cause of death is euthanasia – killing for good, though arguably confused, motives. Others include intentional attack, such as violent assault or execution; and making decisions we foresee to have probable lethal consequences, such as self-defensive acts or acts in justified wars. Dying, old age, accident, emergency, suicide, euthanasia, assault and murder, foreseeable death – each of us will undergo at least one of these, at least once. As a result of one of these structures we will all meet our deaths; not as meaningless annihilation, but as an event that places a limit on a structure – a structure that completes our lives.

But what *is it* to die? If death is something separate from dying and aging and being attacked or having an accident, what is it? If not simply the annihilation of a flame, a lethal gesture that spoils a good story, then what?

The first thing to get clear about is that death is very real. The reality of death hovers around us with each step off the pavement, every heart beat, every breath. For none of us is it more than a very few decades ahead. That it is often out of people's minds for weeks at a time is an achievement of hope and courage, perhaps of grace. Or else it is simple evasion, blocking, immersion in the present.

But, as St Augustine and St Thomas argue, not everything that is real is a positive existent. Take God, the source of all real-ity. He is 'the real', but he is not a 'something', not part of the universe's

[4] See Joseph Ratzinger on *Gaudium et Spes* 18: 'Death is not an extrinsic moment at the end of a life unaffected by it, nor . . . a biological process [with] nothing to do with what is really human, but is a constantly determining aspect of human life', *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* Vol. 5, H. Vorgrimler, ed. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), p. 140.

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furniture, as Herbert McCabe explained.[5] God is not some kind of thing in the way in which tables and chairs and women and angels are some kinds of things. God is real but not an item: he is the explanation of why there is a universe containing items.

Philosophers of death often ponder the wise Epicurus, who asked: why should we fear death since once it happens we are not around to suffer it? Everyone feels there is something profoundly logical about this – yet something tricksy too, some sleight of hand that has not captured the full truth of the matter.

Epicurus was on to something important. I would like to reply to him: 'in a sense you are right: there *is* nothing for me to fear about my death since, so far as philosophy tells us, when it comes there will be (for me) nothing. However, though my death is no-thing, it is very real. Everyone undergoes complete loss and total abandonment, and that is a very real thing to fear now.'

How can death be real but nothing, not a real *thing*? I do not mean, surreptitiously, to swap 'dying' for 'death' here – to say that though *death* is not a something, *dying* is, and that the suffering and distress of dying is the thing that we really fear in death. I have already distinguished death from dying, so I cannot take this way out. In any case, it is not true that dying is all that people who fear death fear. Furthermore, dying is not the only structure that leads to death. It is death itself, so I claim, that is real but not a positive thing.

One way to understand how this can be so is to consider some of the things St Augustine said about evil. The truth about evil and the truth about death are, not surprisingly, related. In the *Catholic and Manichaean Ways of Life* Augustine joins debate with the Manichaean approach to evil, an approach he endorsed himself in his pre-Christian days.[6]

The Manichaeans argued from human experience of rivalry between good and evil in the world around us and within our own hearts. Evil cannot come from the Good God, thus it must come from an equally powerful and eternal supreme being, the Evil God. The good part of the universe is engaged in a struggle to free itself from the realm of this Evil God, separating itself from the Kingdom of matter, physicality, body, sex, and finitude.

Augustine, by now a Christian, could not accept a rival god, and so argued: God is pure being; the opposite of such pure being would be non-being, i.e. non-existent; therefore there exists no nature contrary to God. Not being content with disproving the Evil God, he also attempted to prove that evil itself does not exist. What is evil for x is simply what is contrary to x's true nature and being; but what is

[5] See Herbert McCabe *God Matters* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1987), Chs 1–4.

[6] St Augustine *The Catholic and Manichaean Ways of Life*, trans. Donald Gallagher and Idella Gallagher (Washington DC: Catholic University of American Press, 1966), Book 2.

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contrary to being is simply not-being; therefore evil does not exist. Secondly, if God created everything and God is good, then everything is good not in the sense of morally good, but in the sense that to exist is good in itself.

To the Manichaeans' objection that evil demonstrably *does* exist, Augustine responds: everything that *exists* is good and comes from God; 'evil' is simply a description of (1) some lack in an otherwise good thing, a *privation*, *corruption* or *loss* of some good aspect of the thing (e.g. blindness is not a positive thing but a lack or failure of sight); or (2) some aspect of a thing whereby it has a *tendency to corrupt or damage* other things in the process of working out its own good but, for these purposes, incompatible nature (e.g. in themselves lightening, fire, scorpion, person, car . . . are good and play vital parts within the harmony of creation, but they might well hurt others in the process).

This then casts us back upon our first question: must not an Evil God be to blame for these lacks and tendencies? To which Augustine replies: *privation of goodness* (e.g. blindness) is not caused by God but by something else (e.g. a sudden flash of lightening), which while good in itself has an unfortunate effect upon eyes which are too close to it. Likewise *tendency to harm when incompatible* is not an aspect of a thing itself, which is simply acting in accord with its good nature, but an aspect of the inevitable impacts of things upon each other in a natural universe.

This might explain 'natural' evils, but what about evil acts performed by human beings? Is not chosen evil on the part of human beings evidence that at least one creature created by God is bad, or a mix of good and evil? Augustine replies that angels and humans who perform evil acts are not acting according to their true natures; rather they are acting *unnaturally* in the sense that they are consenting to some privation/lack of their own proper goodness.

On such arguments, Augustine concludes that the cosmos of all created things is a single, good system: the universe is all good, not partly good and partly evil. From his stance there developed the orthodox understanding of evil for mediæval Christians.

Now, what does all this have to do with death? Augustine argued passionately for the deep and terrifying *reality* of evil but argued 'evil' was not some independent thing: it was simply loss of good. I suggest death too is real and fearful – it is loss of life, a great good. However, death is not some independent, positive thing which causes us to lose our lives: it simply is this loss of life. Our deaths are real enough, but the reality is just the loss of the positive good of life. And this loss, though frightening and in cases tragic, does give completion and allow for structure and sense in human living – in a way non-mortality or annihilation would not. For believers in afterlives, too, there is the acceptance that life is now complete, the choices

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made, our eternal futures set. We do not live our lives under sentence of death, we do not live awaiting death-as-punishment; but we do live with the knowledge everything precious will soon be lost and this explains much of the preciousness, as well as our planning and acting both to achieve and to let go.

Fear of death is rational because of this real truth that we lose everything: even if all will be returned to us, we do lose everything; but there is not some other fact over and above the loss to be dreaded, prayed against, faced up to. Epicurus is right gently to mock those who imagine themselves locked in grim combat with death: striving with death is really just striving to save our lives, and that is not something it is always rational – or rational always – to do. Our lives are not always in jeopardy; nor are we constantly put to the test of martyrdom, and sometimes we have 'had enough'. But Epicurus is wrong to ignore the awful reality that I will one day lose everything, lose life itself; that is something rational people do fear.

If we can accept that Death does not exist though our deaths are real, we can part-demythologise death, and thus distinguish what is truly fearful (loss to me and loss of me by others) from what is illusory (the prospect of encounter with an unimaginable enemy). We can also go on to say something about the ways in which death is *not* sheer loss, but a way of losing that can make some sense of our lives, speak some truths about our choices, allow us to demonstrate goodness and virtue.

A similar view is that *the dead* are real, but that they are beings that do not exist. Palle Yourgrau has recently argued for this.[7] Building on logician followers of Meinong, who first developed the view, we can argue that there are some objects that do not exist.[8] 'By extending our ontology to the nonexistent, by embracing all of being, we are able to purchase the realm of the dead, the unborn, the future, and the possible.'[9] In terms of a response to Epicurus on the fear of death, Yourgrau can reply: 'it is irrational to fear *being one of the dead* since these do not enjoy existence, either happy or otherwise; but it *is* rational to fear joining the dead since losing existence is terrible. How dreadful to be one of those beings (like the unconceived) that do not presently have existence; how much worse to have once had existence but lost it.'

Yourgrau thinks of the dead as nonexistent beings. Of course, believers will find this difficult: if they do not exist, the dead are not doing or undergoing anything, which makes it hard to make sense of heaven, hell, or purgatory. But even for nonbelievers in post mortem survival the matter is more complex. Most people pay

[7] Palle Yourgrau 'The Dead' *The Journal of Philosophy*, 1987, pp. 84–101.

[8] See also, Terence Parsons *Nonexistent Objects* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

[9] Yourgrau, p. 91.

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at least lip-service to respect for the dead – most are offended at people disturbing corpses or desecrating graves (e.g. the recent return of Aboriginal skeletons from Manchester to Canberra for burial); mishandling or abusing human remains; defacing or destroying graveyards, gravestones, war memorials, and other symbolic commemorations of the dead; failing to see through a dying person's wishes or the last will of the deceased. Partly, this is respect for past persons; partly it is our own sensitivities and non-rational fears (e.g. of being haunted by the dissatisfied ghosts of the dead). But partly too it is respect for the dead themselves, for those who were living persons and who are now "the dead". Disrespect is shown to them *as our dead* if their graves and remains and memorials and bequests are violated.

This sense, shared even by many nonbelievers, that the dead continue in some sense to exist does suggest a difference between 'the dead' and the 'merely non-existing'. Perhaps it is no more than our sense that we, all of us, make up "humanity": we contribute to the human race when we are alive, and we contribute in a different way after our deaths; when we die, we are not just out-of-ontology, over and done with. Our contribution continues: to be an ancestor, a forebear, part of the unalterable genealogy and cultural and economic inheritance of living persons, is to play an important role in humanity understood thus, organically, as a single body. The dead cannot be non-existents if they feature still in our lives, continue to elicit important moral and emotional responses.

It is wrong to overstress the comparison between the dead and future generations, as Yourgrau (and Lucretius[10]) does. The dead do not *not exist* in the way in which future persons do not *not exist*. The dead have lost their lives; individuated once by their bodies, they are individuated now by their histories, their relationships, their instructions, and, if they have them, their future states. Unlike our future generations, our past generations have a fixed identity. Future generations can have no identity, because they have never existed. We can make mistakes in what we attribute to our ancestors because their history remains true for ever; but attributing qualities to our descendants cannot be right or wrong, because there is no truth about how they are – only the truth that there will, some day, be *a* way that they are, if they ever are.

Though the dead exist, it is certainly true that dead people do not exist. Post mortem there will exist no person who is me. If there were post mortem persons, there could be no more to fear about [a painless] death than any other major address-changing experience. Hence the point argued by St Thomas Aquinas and others: barring the

[10] See Thomas Nagel's ground-breaking discussion in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), Ch. 1.

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resurrection of the body, there are no *post mortem* human persons.[11] There is a major difference between arguing for the existence of a *dead person*, and arguing, as St Thomas and others do, for the existence (albeit fragmentary) of all *the dead*.

No one should underestimate our sense of the reality of death, especially as we get older and its approach looms. But grasping that death is (nothing other than) loss of life can perhaps retrieve a little comfort from the frightening reality of our mortality; for many people can and do contemplate loss of life, and sacrifice of life, with resignation, willingness, even longing. If we can learn like these to live well with the prospect of loss of life, there is at least nothing *else* about death to fear. Other fears must refer to other 'last things' – or be unfounded.

We are mortal creatures. That means our natural fate is not annihilation, for lives are ended by deaths, and the structure of even sudden deaths does not just destroy and obliterate us. Death always says something about the moral quality – including the final moral quality – of the human life it brings to an end (for non-human creatures, death says something about the natural qualities of the species whose member dies). Furthermore, death does not have an unexpected face: it is loss of life – which is hard enough, but is something we can at least comprehend, prepare for, and accept. Things can still make sense and life be lived authentically and in a spirit of joy despite the fact we will soon die. We can, if not fully at least accurately, comprehend the loss of our lives, and, as the wisest of the Greeks thought, it is good to do so while we still can.[12]

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[11] St Thomas Aquinas *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, 15; *Summa Theologiae* 1, 76, 1; 77, 8. See Robert Pasnau *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), Ch. 12 for recent commentary.

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