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The Fear of Death

Timothy Chappell

Abstract

Taking a somewhat indirect route that includes some autobiographical reflection, I address three questions. One is what it might mean to say, with Socrates, that philosophy is "studying for death". The second is why Christians should fear death at all, if the good of Heaven is really what they believe is beyond it. The third is the question what difference it makes to your philosophical view of death if you are a believer.

Keywords

death, fear, resurrection, near-death experience

> *Hosoi tygkhanousin orthôs haptomenoi philosophias . . . ouden allo autoi epitêdeuousin ê apothnêiskein te kai tethnanai.*
> *Plato, Phaedo* 64a
>
> When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.
> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*

Three Opening Questions

1. Why does Socrates say in the *Phaedo* that "those who chance to get hold of philosophy in the right way . . . study nothing other than dying and being dead"? And why does Bonhoeffer say—playing what is perhaps the same tune in a theological key—that "When Christ bids you follow him, he bids you come and die" (a saying which Bonhoeffer's own tragic death in a Gestapo prison amply confirmed)?

   Of course there is a long history of such sayings in all the world's main spiritual traditions. Socrates' remark reminds us at once of Solon's doleful doctrine that we should call no man happy until he is dead (Herodotus *Histories* Book 1; Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1100a11). And Bonhoeffer's famous saying, while it echoes the typical teaching of many

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Christian spiritual masters, for instance St Thomas à Kempis and Bianco da Siena (the author of that beautiful hymn "Come down O Love Divine"), is ultimately just a paraphrase of Jesus' even more famous saying that anyone who wants to follow him must "deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (*Matthew* 16.24).

However deep-rooted they may be in our and other religious traditions, it is easy to find something morbid about remarks like these. It is easy to see in them a nihilistic death-worship of the sort that Friedrich Nietzsche so vehemently condemns in Christians like Dante Alighieri, "the hyena who poetises on graves" (*Twilight of the Idols*, tr. R.F.Hollingdale, p. 67). No doubt those who like Alcibiades in the *Symposium* see the ascetism of Socrates as an incomprehensible negativity, or who like Nietzsche (and Percy Shelley and Thomas Hardy) see the Christians' elevation of the Cross as a ghastly celebration of grisly murder, are not entirely missing the point. Still there is more to be said to answer this first question. I hope to say a little of it here.

2. A challenge pushed by some atheists is this: Why do Christians fear death at all, if the good of Heaven is really what they believe is beyond it? So most recently Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion* argues (1) if Christians really believed in their own doctrine of Heaven, they wouldn't fear death; but (2) they do fear death, so (3) they don't really believe in their own doctrine of Heaven.
3. Finally, a question that applies directly to a lot of philosophical activity. Philosophers these days quite often meet together to discuss death as a philosophical topic. Very good. But one question that is typically not very prominent in the billing and programmes of philosophical conferences of this sort is a bit of an elephant in the room. This is the question: what difference does it make to your philosophical view of death if, like me, you're a believer, specifically a Christian, and hence someone with a very clear and emphatic view about what death is and what happens after death? Surely if you believe the doctrine of the resurrection as a Christian, that must change the way you see everything as a philosopher!

In this paper I want to look this elephant squarely in the face (trunk?). My answer to the question will be: Not everything, but a lot of things. We shall see that the believer and the unbeliever can agree on some important points about the fear of death, even though they also disagree on some other, even more important points.

But I will leave this third question hanging, at least to begin with. I will start with the second question, the challenge as to why Christians,

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if they are serious about the doctrine of Heaven, should fear death at all. From there I will move on to the first question, about what Socrates and Bonhoeffer and Jesus are talking about when they enjoin us to die. By the time I've covered that, it should be clear what I have to say about the third question, about what difference it makes philosophically what you believe about death theologically.

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The second question was: "Why would someone who really believes he is going to Heaven be afraid of death?" I want to approach that question obliquely, by way of another question: "What is the (reasonable) fear of death? What is it about death that we fear; and what are we right to fear?" My approach to this subsidiary question will also be oblique. But please bear with me—this is going somewhere, I promise.

Here is Claudio in *Measure for Measure* (Act 3, Scene 1):[1]

> Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
> To lie in cold obstruction and to rot;
> This sensible warm motion to become
> A kneaded clod, and the delighted spirit
> To bathe in fiery floods or to reside
> In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice;
> To be imprison'd in the viewless winds,
> And blown with restless violence round about
> The pendent world; or to be worse than worst
> Of those that lawless and uncertain thought
> Imagine howling—'tis too horrible.
> The weariest and most loathed worldly life
> That ache, age, penury and imprisonment
> Can lay on nature is a paradise
> To what we fear of death.

Whether or not we share Claudio's nightmarishly phantasmagorical vision of what it might be like to be conscious after death, his words present with unnerving accuracy the morbid dread and panic that the prospect of death can put any of us into if we dwell on it. (A large part of the cruelty and inhumanity of capital punishment, it seems to me, is the way in which it deliberately forces the inmates of "death row" to dwell almost exclusively on this prospect.) The last four lines of Claudio's speech are also, I suspect, intended by Shakespeare to remind us of what Achilles says to Odysseus in Homer: "Better Above, as the slave of a landless serf, than Below as king of all the dead" (*Odyssey* 11.489–491).

[1] A passage also cited, as some readers will remember, by Joe Simpson in *Touching the Void.*

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Now these are words which Plato condemns (*Republic* 386c) as fuel for cowardice. And the point about Claudio too, made instantly by his devout sister Isabella—whose chastity Claudio wishes her to sacrifice to save his life—is that he also is a coward. ("O you beast!" she says, "O faithless coward! . . . Die; perish.") Here I shall just take Plato and Shakespeare as my authorities: the morbid dread of death that Claudio expresses, and that a reader of Homer's Achilles' words might feel, is indeed no more than a sort of panic attack. It is indeed unreasonable, and it is indeed a failure of virtue, to think about death in this routed, craven, and hysterical way.[2]

Faced with the prospect of imminent death, we humans not only can do better than this; we generally do do better than this. In fact, I want to claim, such panic attacks as Claudio suffers from are more usual when we are at some reflective distance from death, than when we are staring it in the face.

To back up this claim, I am going, with apologies, to inflict a little autobiography on you. I will talk briefly about three occasions on which I myself have been confronted very directly and immediately with death, or an image of death. Please bear in mind that I am not doing this because I claim any special revelation or privileged knowledge. Nor, of course, do I claim any special exemption from the vice of cowardice. On the contrary, the point of my three anecdotes is that they are, to go by what I've read about others' similar experiences, entirely typical of the human experience of facing death. Two of them show us how very different a dread-filled brooding on the idea of death from a distance can feel from a close and actual encounter with the real thing. The third story brings out a point about fear and control.

Exhibit one, then, is my being throttled with my own school tie when I was 13 until I passed out and fell on the floor. (I know: what a lovely school I went to.) While I was down there I had exactly the experience that I've since read other people reporting as a "near-death experience".[3] (I had read none of that literature when this happened

[2] Another instance of craven panic in the face of death, it always seems to me, is Angelo Cavaradossi's nonetheless marvellous aria *E lucevan le stelle* at the beginning of the last act of *Tosca* (1900): "E muio disperato, e muio disperato, e non ho amato mai tanto la vita". Truly operatic sentiment had come a long way, in 123 years, from the equally bizarre and rather wooden casualness with which Don Ottavio greets the murder of the Commendatore in Act 1 of *Don Giovanni* (1787). He simply tells Donna Anna, the Commendatore's daughter, to leave this bitter memory behind ("Lascia, o cara, la rimembrenza amara"), as if it were something that had happened a year before rather than five minutes ago.

[3] Call me unscholarly, but I do think Wiki is not a bad starting point for the literature: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Near-death_experience. One thing that comes out there is the striking uniformity and commonness of near-death experiences: e.g. one survey is reported that showed that 18% of cardiac-arrest patients had a near-death experience, with 12% having "core experiences" (i.e. near-death experiences that displayed all or most of the

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to me, which rules out at least one sort of auto-suggestion.) To put it as soberly and literally as I can: I felt myself passing up a dark tunnel towards a place of light and glory that I could not see properly; then—though I did not hear a voice—I had a sense that equates to the words "Not yet; go back"; and then I found myself coming round on the floor in the middle of a circle of rather sheepish and alarmed schoolboys.

Please note that I am not interested, here, in whether a paranormal or a naturalistic explanation of this experience is the more convincing. (Anyway, what is more convincing to naturalists is as usual one thing, what is more convincing to paranormalists is another.) Rather, my point is that in this experience, which by the usual classification was undoubtedly a "near-death experience", there wasn't the slightest fear involved. The main thing I felt was a calm and steady, and really very happy, desire to get to the place where the light was, and then disappointment when that didn't happen.

My second anecdote similarly shows how being face to face with death need not be frightening at all. This was a climbing accident that happened to me on Ben Nevis on April 5 2008. I was avalanched while leading the third pitch of Zero Gully. For complicated technical reasons to do with the way the belay and the rope behaved, I took a 70 metre bouncing fall down the gully, which was long enough for me to have plenty of time to think "I've really torn it this time; the belay will never hold this fall; I am definitely going to die any minute now, and so is my partner". And I did think that, but I was totally calm and detached about it. The most strongly negative feelings that I had as I fell were embarrassment that I was falling at all (as a rule, climbers try not to), and annoyance at the sheer inconvenience of it all. I was completely certain that I was about to die in the next two minutes or so, and completely unfrightened by the prospect.

In taking that attitude I was not, to go by all the evidence I've read about similar catastrophes, in any way unusual; actually, such calmness in the face of death is probably commoner than panic is. See, for instance, Fergus Fleming, *Killing Dragons: the conquest of the Alps* (London: Granta, 2000), p. 281, who reports the findings of a survey conducted in 1892 by the Austrian Albert von St Gallen Heim:

> In nearly 95% of the victims [of accidental mountaineering falls] . . . a similar mental state developed . . . no grief was felt, nor was there paralysing fright . . . There was no anxiety, no trace of despair, no pain;

most typical features of such experiences, which include things that I experienced too: calm, a tunnel, a light beyond the tunnel, a sense of meeting someone, a sense of being sent back, and a reluctance to go back).

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> but rather calm seriousness, profound mental acceptance, and a dominant mental quickness and sense of surety.[4]

I do not know for sure whether such mental states are statistically typical of those who find themselves close to death in other contexts than mountaineering accidents. What evidence I have, e.g. from reading about wars and talking to intensive-care patients, suggests that they are. Compare, for instance, C.S. Lewis's description, in *Surprised by Joy* (p. 197), of his nearly fatal wounding in the Great War:

> Two things stand out. One is the moment, just after I had been hit, when I found (or thought I found) that I was not breathing and concluded that this was death. I felt no fear and certainly no courage. It did not seem to be an occasion for either. The proposition "Here is a man dying" stood before my mind as dry, as factual, as unemotional as something in a textbook. It was not even interesting.[5]

In wartime cases too, then, it looks as if a Claudio-like dread and anxiety is likelier in those who contemplate death from a distance, say from a philosopher's study, than in those who are eyeball to eyeball with it.

Unlike these first two experiences, the third that I want to report did involve fear. This was when I had my knee ligaments repaired in hospital, twelve days after the climbing accident that I've just described. Before the operation, I faced being put under general anaesthetic. Somehow this was a prospect that scared me much more than the idea of surgery itself (or indeed the original accident).

The fear involved was, I think, of three distinct sorts. First, a lot of it was just instinctive: it was an animal aversion to being knocked out. Secondly, there was a dread of losing control over my own consciousness, and still worse of *willing* to lose that sort of control—a dread of controlling my own loss of control. Thirdly, I was frightened of being conscious of my own consciousness disappearing. It seemed to me that experiencing that would be pretty much exactly like experiencing death. And like Woody Allen, I was unafraid of death, I just didn't want to be there when it happened.

But, of course, this third thing I feared simply didn't materialise, for reasons that I really ought have anticipated from Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 6.4311: "Our life has no end in just the way in which our visual field has no limits". As I sank under the anaesthetic, there was no moment at which I was conscious of my own departing consciousness. Of course there wasn't, because my consciousness of my own consciousness disappeared at exactly the same time and rate as my consciousness did. Looking back, there is simply a gap in my

[4] Thanks to Jim Furness for this reference.

[5] Thanks to Professor Mark Nelson for this reference.

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memory between chatting to the anaesthetist with a leg which was sore in one way, and waking up two hours later in the recovery suite with a leg which was sore in another way. After the event I am left thinking that this part of my fear was just philosophically incoherent, and that if I'd read the *Tractatus* more carefully beforehand, I would have realised that.

This leaves us with the other two components of my fear of losing consciousness under anaesthesia: the animal dread of being knocked out, and the fear of losing control. These, I believe, are also the main components of a reasonable fear of death. Claudio-like cowardly panic about death is, as I've said, unreasonable. But wanting to remain conscious, and wanting to have some control over what happens to you—these are perfectly reasonable wants, and when their satisfaction is radically threatened, they generate perfectly reasonable fears. This answers my question about what the fear of death is, and what it is reasonable to fear in death.

Or at any rate it gives us a preliminary answer. There is a bit more to be said, I think, about the notion of control. In most of the world's spiritual traditions, it is a familiar thought that there are different kinds of control, and not all of them are good; there are some kinds of control of which it is *better* to be deprived.

When "control" simply means liberty of action, autonomy, the literal control of our own limbs and lives, there can so far forth be nothing wrong with that. The ability to make and follow up effectual choices is part of what "control" normally means, and this is simply and straightforwardly a good thing, of which death's deprivation is simply and straightforwardly a bad thing.

But control can mean a lot more than this; it can also mean our desire to control and dominate our surroundings and our neighbours, to promote our self-image, to get others to think well of us, to "get ahead", to rat-race or to schmooze, to "build our reputations" or our careers: the *libido dominandi*, as Augustine calls it in the *City of God*. The desire for *this* sort of control can become something that controls us, something that, in three marvellous words of Kipling's, turns us "hot, uneasy, snatching":

> "And at the last what wilt thou do?"
> "At the last I shall die."
> "And after?"
> "Let the gods order it . . . I have never wearied the gods. They will remember this, and give me a quiet place where I can drive my lance in the shade, and wait to welcome my sons: I have no less than three—ressaldar-majors all—in the regiments."
> "And they likewise, bound upon the Wheel, go forth from life to life—from despair to despair," said the Lama under his breath, "hot, uneasy, snatching."
> (Kipling, *Kim*, Chapter 3)

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We do not need to share Teshoo Lama's complete renunciation of *every* kind of control—which Kipling in fact spends a lot of time poking gentle fun at—to get his point that there are some kinds of control that are far from innocent, and which we are therefore better off not seeking; some kinds of control that we need to let go of, if we can. Surrender (Arabic *islam*) is a key theme in the spirituality of all the world's great religions. The urges of the *libido dominandi* constitute a false self, the self that Jesus and the Buddha alike tell us has to die. We can only be free to become our true selves—whatever those turn out to be—when the false self is dead. But the only thing that can completely kill the false self is death. There is a paradox here—unless you believe in an "afterlife".

To help us let go of the urge to control, and to kill off the false self, is the point of ascetism. Ascetism goes too far when, like Teshoo Lama's, it condemns good and liberating control along with bad and enslaving control; it does not go far enough when it fails to tackle bad control. The very idea of ascetism is hardly known to our society at large.[6] It is not surprising, then, if the kind of expressions of the ascetic impulse that we find in Jesus, and Socrates, and Buddha, and Bonhoeffer, and a thousand other religious teachers, seem excessive to us, acculturated as we are. But this point, like many others, is one at which we should be prepared to look and think beyond the limits of our own culture.

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Perhaps we can now see answers to the second and to the first of my original questions, and also to the subsidiary question via which I have approached my second original question.

On the first question: when Socrates and Buddha and Jesus and Bonhoeffer talk about the love of death, or the call to come and die, or the renunciation of desire, they are talking about letting go of pathological control by way of ascesis. They probably have different accounts of what sorts of control are pathological: as the case of Teshoo Lama shows, Buddhists tend to think that all control is pathological. But that is a separate issue.

On the subsidiary to the second question: the fear of death that is reasonable, and not just craven cowardice like Claudio's, is partly an animal and instinctive fear of being knocked out, and partly the fear of losing control. The latter fear divides into a reasonable part and an unreasonable part, according to whether the fear is of losing the innocent, harmless and natural sorts of control, like the ability to

[6] One way to start to learn how to think about ascetism is to read *A Time To Keep Silence* (London: John Murray, [1957]), Patrick Leigh Fermor's marvellous memoir of his visits to Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries in France in the 1950s.

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move one's limbs or see a choice made effective or love others or engage with the goods; or of losing the pernicious, pathological and destructive sorts of control—domination of others, the urge for fame, the manipulation of images: the kinds of control that control *us*. To lose innocent control is, of course, to suffer a grievous loss; to lose pathological control is a blessing and a relief, and no one sensible will regret it. So insofar as death deprives us of innocent control, death is a bad thing and to be feared. But insofar as it deprives us of pathological control—if we have not already worked our way free of that by one form or another of ascesis—it is a boon.

So on the second question, why (if at all) a Christian might reasonably fear death, despite his belief in Heaven, we may say this: Any human may reasonably share the animal and instinctive fear of being knocked out, and the fear of losing innocent control. And Christians are, as a rule, humans; so they can reasonably share these fears too.

But that isn't quite it on the second question, as we can see if we connect that up with what the third of my original questions: the question about how a believer and an unbeliever might differ as to how, if at all, they view the fear of death philosophically. I explore these connections in the last section of the paper.

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To answer the third question, we need first to get straight what the unbeliever and the Christian believe death is. This is easy in the case of the unbeliever, if only because you can settle it stipulatively: the unbeliever simply believes that death is nothingness. The Christian, by contrast, is often supposed to believe that death is not nothingness but nothing. In the words of an oft-quoted (and misquoted) sermon, "death is nothing at all . . . [the dead] have only slipped away into the next room"; there is only the vaguest distinction between the dead and the alive.[7] This downplaying of death strikes me both as a mistake in itself, and also as a deviation from Christian orthodoxy. Death is a profound and terrible scissure, whatever else it may be. As a Christian may reflect, if death were not a big deal, presumably Christ's conquest of it at Easter would not be a big deal either.

If not that, then what does the Christian believe about death? If she is reasonably orthodox, then I think she probably believes something like the following. (This is a cobbling together of paraphrased New-Testament texts.) Because Jesus was bodily raised from the dead at the first Easter, so too we, insofar as we allow ourselves to be

[7] From Henry Scott Holland's sermon at the funeral of Edward VII in 1910, in which he was presenting the nothing-at-all view of death, not as Christian orthodoxy, but as an inadequate view of death that Christians need to get beyond. See Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK 2007), pp. 20–21.

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patterned into his pattern, have the prospect of being bodily raised from the dead at some unknown time in the future, after which we will live a new and everlasting life, directly in God's loving presence, in a new heaven and a new earth. The essence of the goodness of this resurrection life to us will lie partly in something of which we can already have some experience here, namely the much deeper and richer experience of God's and others' love that it will involve; and partly in something of which from our present perspective we can simply have no conception at all, any more than a baby *in utero* can imagine the goods of a love affair, namely the opening up of new human possibilities, new prospects and projects and adventures stretching out in front of us like a sunny morning on the first day of a school holiday that goes on for ever.[8]

The Christian belief in the possibility of our entering the life of heaven can be defended philosophically, on two main grounds: first the historical evidence for Jesus' resurrection, on which see the Gospels and e.g. N.T.Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, and secondly on the testimony of the direct experience of believers, which is very widely indeed that the God whose love overwhelms me now "will not leave my soul to the sword, my darling to the mouth of the dog" (Psalm 22.20). But here I am simply presenting this belief, not trying to defend it philosophically.

If this is what the Christian believes about death, then death for him is so far from being the end, as the unbeliever takes it to be, that it is more like the beginning. On the Christian view, this present life is so related to the resurrection life that it would be a better way of speaking to call this the *pre*life and that life, rather than calling this life and the resurrection the *after*life.

This means that, though of course there are profound differences, death for the Christian is something much more like my experience of the general anaesthetic than it is like the blank finality that the unbeliever takes it to be. Death, for the believer, is not the end of everything; it is more like going to sleep, an image that Jesus himself uses more than once. It is not, therefore, anything more than a temporary loss of innocent control (though as I suggested above, the believer has every reason to hope that it will be a permanent loss of pathological control).

In this sense the unbeliever has a good reason to fear death that the believer simply lacks. For while both believers and unbelievers

[8] C.S. 'Lewis, *The Last Battle* (London: Bodley, 1956), p.171:

"Lucy said, 'We're so afraid of being sent away, Aslan. And you have sent us back into our own world so often.' –'No fear of that,' said Aslan. 'Have you not guessed?' Their hearts leaped and a wild hope rose within them. 'There *was* a real railway accident,' said Aslan softly. 'Your father and mother and all of you are—as you used to call it in the Shadowlands—dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning.'"

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can share in the animal aversion to death, Christians and unbelievers differ completely over what sorts of control they think we lose at death: Christians think we lose pathological control permanently and innocent control only until the general resurrection, unbelievers think we lose all control for ever.

In this sense, then, Richard Dawkins' challenge is actually quite well placed—and a useful stimulus to Christians to be more clear-headed in their attitudes to death. Christian believers, in so far as they understand their own belief, will not be afraid of death in anything other than the animal instinctive way. For the loss of innocent control that death involves is only temporary—and the interval during which it happens is one which the believer won't even notice, since it will consist in a blank unawareness like that of a patient under general anaesthetic. And the loss of pathological control that death involves is not a curse but the completion of one blessing, and the beginning of another.

And so, for the Christian, the fear of death is replaced with another sort of fear: the fear of the Lord that, according to the Book of Proverbs (1.7), is the beginning of wisdom. Socrates, I like to think, would agree.

Timothy Chappell
Department of Philosophy
Faculty of Arts
The Open University
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes MK7 6AA
Email: T.Chappell@open.ac.uk

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