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Approaching Elsewhere: On Fear of ‘The After-life’

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Dying takes little effort, but writing about death is hard.

Abstract

Research data shows fear to be the predominant emotion accompanying thoughts of one’s own death. This is because there’s no convincing evidence of exactly what to expect thereafter. There’s also considerable confusion about which of the three main traditional hypotheses¹ of the ‘after-life’ is correct. The problem is that none of them can be empirically proven to be true. The upside is that this allows for equally plausible alternatives. In this essay I present a fourth, more reassuring, hypothesis that’s much more useful in reducing the fear of death and the ‘there-after.’

Introduction

My wife’s brother, Dick, has survived nearly a century on this earth. But now that his failing health has made a hospital stay imperative, it has compelled us to think about what the future will hold for him. Of course, by ‘future’ I mean what he will experience, if anything, after his death. And what will happen to the ‘him’ that he has been to us.

Death is a difficult topic to discuss objectively, dispassionately, philosophically. Beyond middle age, mortality is acknowledged but rarely welcomed. The arrival of death is almost always perceived as untimely. It’s rarely openly discussed, not only because it’s an uncomfortable, even frightening topic but also because so little about it is actually known or understood. There are no eye-witness accounts of a transcendent ‘after-life.’ No journals or books have been published about the subjective experience of disembodied selfhood after an individual’s verified death. The books that are available lack credibility in the scientific community. They generally fail to meet the minimum criteria for being reliably factual. Medical science can tell us the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of a person’s death, “What did he die from?” “Why did those organs fail?” But it can’t answer the metaphysical question, “What happens to him next?”

I’m not as old as my brother-in-law, but I’m getting on in years. And since I’m also dealing with life-threatening medical issues, I’ve been doing some serious thinking (some grave cogitation) on the topic of what I could expect might happen after I’ve used up my life. Taking on such a deep and important topic might seem quite presumptuous for someone like me who’s not a famous name in philosophy nor a media spokesperson for the field; I don’t even look like a philosopher. But this essay is first and foremost a profoundly personal project, one which, I hope, will bring some comfort to my wife and son, and to anyone else who has the time to read it.

I’m also writing in order to try to sort out in my own mind what I’ve long suspected are serious problems with the ‘after-life’ beliefs that have been circulating for many centuries among the deeply religious, the intensely philosophical, and the good people in our neighborhood. Mortality can’t be approached ontologically because there’s no science capable of providing the ‘what’ of some-

thing that doesn't objectively exist. "The physical and biological sciences point only to a final end" (Mathur p. 215). Therefore mortality's 'existence' in this essay is an epistemological construct. And it's also a call to view the impending end of life in a more benign way, based on what little information is currently available. I have no personal wisdom to offer because wisdom is based on experience, and the only experience of death resides in the dead. So I'm forced to apply a philosophical method to the ubiquitous problem of the fear of death—also sometimes referred to as "the end-of-life terrors" (Marano 40).

The topic of mortality remains salient in a number of professional and semi-professional fields: the field of medicine where every effort is made to avoid or postpone it; the field of palliative care where it's made as painless as possible; the field of religion where darkening spirits are salved with stories of rewards in a better place; and in academic philosophy which has stalled at the only two logically possible hypotheses about 'the after-death': either complete nothingness or some unspecified 'after-life.' While there are a number of books offering advice on 'dying well,' so far I've found little comfort in either the writings of philosophers, the theological pronouncements of religious professionals, or the pseudo-magical thinking of so-called 'New Agers' regarding what sort of future state I can expect after my death.

Assertions

I see death as a closed book (or computer file) whose contents are inaccessible. As an abstraction death is known only from the standpoint of reflection. Sociology tells us that every human being has their own way of grieving both their own mortality, and that of loved ones. Their many meaningful end-of-life rituals are collected and visibly listed on the cover of that book. But the enigma of what might come after death is hidden within its pages, unavailable to mortal eyes. Phenomenology can describe the activity of conscious living, "the essential or ontological structure of experience" (Fernandez, 193). And it can describe the consequences of a spent life. But there's no phenomenology of death because the very definition of death is the absence of consciousness phenomena; it's the non-existence of existence. There's no 'lived experience' in death.

Most of the great philosophers have touched on the problem of death, but few have dealt with it systematically or in detail. In the mid-17th century, English philosopher and physician, John Locke, postulated that the dead would be miraculously resurrected during the 'Last Judgement.' This is when the 'worthy' will be allowed to live for ever, but the 'unworthy' will be returned to eternal death. Late 17th century Dutch/Portuguese philosopher Baruch Spinoza suggested that fear of death can be overcome through distraction, by focusing on the enjoyments had in life instead. Mid 19th century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer declared that the fear of death is the driving force behind all human activity as a denial of death itself. Early 20th century phenomenologists Max Scheler and Martin Heidegger attributed the lack of knowledge about death among both philosophers and the masses as psychological repression. Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud went so far as to hypothesize that "the goal of all life is death" (Chodorow p. 130). By 1967 the number of experimental studies undertaken on attitudes to death was still disappointingly small (Edwards Vol. 2, p. 307). It has never been a well-funded research topic.

Whenever science suggested that death is just a natural phenomenon that affects all living creatures, the Catholic church's doctrinal response for centuries has been that the ending of a human

life should be understood as punishment from God for Adam and Eve's disobedience in Eden. One of the early Christians, Augustine of Hippo, said that the fear of death can't be relieved by means of any human efforts. It can only be overcome through Divine grace.

Many well-known writers have suggested that life is absurd, first because death seems to be a pathology for which we have not yet managed to find a cure. And second because all the hard work over our life spans just advances us to that inevitable end. What's even worse is the feeling that life itself is merely engaging in mindless drudgery—like in the Sisyphus myth whose main character had to repeatedly push a boulder up a steep hill for all eternity. (Note: The gods didn't sentence Sisyphus to death. They doomed him to push a boulder up a hill *for all eternity*. Some people would consider living for all eternity a good thing, even if it meant repeatedly pushing a boulder up a hill!). But thinking of life as just the downhill slide to death is a reductive line of thinking. It assumes that the purpose of life is merely to arrive at "the other side of life" (Sartre p. 691). It's as though the experiences of life are worthless, and the destination is all that matters; as if life's desired goal is in fact, as Freud hypothesized, the non-conscious state of being dead.

Contrary to the pronouncements of many authors, I disagree with the *cliché* which says that 'death is a part of life.' I tend to agree with Sartre when he wrote that, in metaphysical terms, death "isn't an ontological structure of being" (Sartre p. 710). Technically, death is the cessation of "the being of a being" (Heidegger p. 7), followed by the absence of life. And neither is it the end of a story. Death is the cancellation of a dynamic narrative, the utter sublimation of a life like dry ice.

In his letter to Menoeceus, the early Greek philosopher Epicurus said that 'death is nothing.' It doesn't concern the living because they're not dead, and it doesn't concern the dead because they don't exist any more. The Stoics, like Epicurus, called the fear of death irrational. But this doesn't help anyone to feel better when their fear of death is based on the expectation that dying will be unpleasant or painful, or when belief in an 'after-life' includes the worry about Judgment Day and Divine retribution which may also be unpleasant or painful.

Furthermore, the virtually universal fear of death isn't irrational at all when death is defined as the complete annihilation of a person; or when the word 'fear' refers to worry or disappointment, as in "I fear my projects will remain unfinished." If, in hindsight, life has been enjoyed, but it's believed that death will be the end of love, and joy, and everything else of value, then it seems especially justified to fear its loss. To overcome the fear of death the Stoic Seneca advised thinking of it constantly, but in a manner which acknowledges the human animal as part of nature; as participating in the natural cycles of death and new birth. But I don't see this as very useful either because, for one thing it distracts from more creative things I could be thinking about. And for another, it doesn't give any real hope for the survival of my consciousness, the continuation of my subjective, although perhaps not embodied, 'selfness.'

Twentieth century French existentialist philosopher and feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir saw death as an alien intruder into life. In her book, *A Very Easy Death*, she wrote,

There is no such thing as a natural death: nothing that happens to a man is ever natural, since his presence calls the world into question. All men must die: but for every man his death is an accident and, even if he knows it and consents to it, an unjustifiable violation (pp 105–6).

Her partner, existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, insisted “what we should note right at the start is death’s absurd character” because of our inability to stop it from carrying us away at any moment (Sartre p. 692). In his major work, *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre saw death as an outrage that comes from outside us, and wipes out all our projects.

Death is never what gives life its meaning: it is, on the contrary, that which eliminates all meaning from it. It can’t be prepared for, or accepted, or incorporated into life, or tamed to suit oneself. Worst of all it’s the end of all possibilities. In considering death, we should avoid the temptation to regard it as a resolution chord at the end of a melody...We ought rather to compare ourselves to someone sentenced to death who is bravely preparing himself for his execution (pp. 700, 692).

Late 20th century British philosopher Richard Wollheim saw death as “the great enemy” because it takes away our capacity to experience anything at all (Bakewell p. 299-300). During the same time period, American philosopher Galen Pletcher suggested that perhaps more than anything death is “a constant reminder that you cannot proceed endlessly through the projects of your life” (Pletcher p. 72). Elias Canetti, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1981, denied death any positive meaning. He warned that “we shouldn’t acknowledge death as something positive” because this will exert “a corrupting influence” over the enjoyments of life (Canetti p. 233). So what are appropriate thoughts and feelings when considering the end of life?

Emotions

The best known summary of the emotions likely to be experienced by most people as they approach their own mortality comes from Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in her seminal book *On Death and Dying*. She observed five ‘stages’ of dying in this order: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. But sociological research has shown that people can also feel anxious, traumatized, and even deathly afraid of dying. In fact it’s been argued that not being anxious would be remarkable, and perhaps even diagnosable as a so-called ‘mental illness’ (Warren p. 43) We fear and hate death because it removes us from our family, friends, and community. It disappoints our expectations of the future. It frustrates us with our own powerlessness. It makes us realize that sending our prayers ‘up to the gods’ will ultimately do nothing to delay it. Our expiry date comes according to its own timetable. While it may be hastened through self-destruction, it’s generally assumed that, when an individual’s ‘appointed cosmic time’ arrives, it can’t be avoided.

Our attitudes toward our own death might also be “a source of anguish” because it’s a topic within the realm of the unknown (Sartre p. 732). And when something is unknown it’s easy to assume and fear the worst. The Spanish existentialist philosopher Miguel de Unamuno said he was never afraid when being shown horrifying pictures of torturous ‘Hell.’ What terrified him most was the thought of his non-existence, an absolute featureless and futureless nothingness devoid of him.

In 1951 the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas published a poem titled “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night.” In it he passionately insisted that his father rage against his impending death.

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
 Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
 Because their words had forked no lightning they
 Do not go gentle into that good night.

But Thomas's poem leaves unanswered the question, "Why should his father rage against the dying of the light?" The answer might be because Thomas assumes that some very undesirable state will be experienced by him (and by us) when his life is finished. But there's no evidence in all of medical science that supports this assumption. And religions can't do anything more than tease believers with fanciful or horrific *a priori* tales of what might possibly occur after life. Their flagrant and somewhat naïve claims of unsubstantiated *possibilities* don't offer any estimates of logical *probabilities*. This leaves frightened believers with only a single option: praying for Divine intervention.

Thomas's poem is in sharp contrast to the 1976 Blue Öyster Cult lyrics to their rock classic "Don't Fear the Reaper."

All our times have come
 Here, but now they're gone
 Seasons don't fear the reaper
 Nor do the wind, the sun or the rain
 We can be like they are
 Come on baby, don't fear the reaper...

So then which of our emotions are the most appropriate when facing death? What is our best course of action: to rage against death or to have no fear of the Reaper?

Visceral dread grows from the anticipation of contingent *possible* outcomes, and from the anguished expectations of imagined states. "What if heaven isn't real? What if there's only the empty nothingness that Sartre spoke of? What if I'm reborn as a lowly worm?" But the dread subsides when these sort of tremulous 'what-ifs' are abandoned. What makes us afraid are the grim metaphysical assumptions inherent in the various long-established responses to those questions. The certain prospect of death not only creates fear whenever the thought of personal mortality arises, but as the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche put it, it also "makes the whole of life repulsive," (Kaufmann p. 165). So, after careful contemplation, it seems to me that it's better to just wonder what will come after the end of life without inventing metaphysical worst-case scenarios that are guaranteed to cause unavoidable trepidation.

For the young dying of old age is an inconceivable occurrence in a far too distant future. The knowledge that one will die begins to provoke the greatest anxiety in late mid-life with the arrival of grandchildren, retirement, unfortunate chronic health issues, and the realization that the family name might not be carried into the next generation. There's also the uneasiness about whether one has done enough with the opportunities life has offered. There's regret over ventures that won't be realized because plans for one's own future, and that of friends and family, will never be implemented (Doka, p. 114, 116). So it can be felt as an abandonment not only of family and friends but of projects as well.

It doesn't help much to argue that fear of death is pointless, because that doesn't avoid it. Though logic tells us that fearing our eventual end is psychologically harmful (Murphy p. 52), the feeling of fear can't simply be turned off at will like a light switch. Our fear is based on what we've long been led to believe and expect. It requires a reconsideration of beliefs and expectations, and a reforming of our thoughts so that fear will subside of its own accord. Like Epictetus, assistant professor of Modern Eastern Civilizations, Aruna Mathur, insists that "our capacity to deal with the mortality issue depends greatly on the beliefs we harbor" (p. 215).

Even just thinking casually about our own ending can bring all sorts of other emotions to the surface: embarrassment at being unable to stop the dying process; frustration and anger with the lack of personal power to prevent it; sadness because it stops our ability to care for our family and improve society for future generations, and so on. Not surprisingly, if illness, frailty, and pain are part of the process of dying, the positive emotion of hope may arise due to the belief that death means relief from suffering. But no matter what emotions are felt, there will almost always be some amount of doubt, uncertainty, and fear in what most people believe will come after death. And the once popular accounts of 'near-death experiences' that at one time offered some comfort have mostly died out due to their non-verifiable assertions. From the earliest accounts, almost every explanation of what we may expect in 'the after-life' has suffered from contradictory theological interpretations of the many self-referential 'inspired' writings, and the egregious logical flaws of hopeful hypothesizers.

Illogic

Socrates spoke of the relationship between philosophy and dying. He believed that the physical body held a *psyche* (in Greek ψυχή, translated variously in English as soul, spirit, mind, or consciousness) a disembodied entity that exists before birth, and separates from a lifeless body to be reborn into a newly embodied self. But his reference to the relationship between death and philosophy can be misunderstood. He's often paraphrased—sometimes in a paraphrase of a paraphrase—as saying something like 'all of philosophy is a preparation for dying,' or 'philosophy is itself a kind of cultivation of dying,' and so on (Yourgrau, p. 137). These sort of vague paraphrases have often puzzled me. So I decided to research the source.

In *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* Socrates is quoted in *Phaedo* as saying quite clearly that "a true lover of wisdom (referring to a philosopher or student of philosophy) will never attain the wisdom worthy of the name elsewhere than in the next world..." Then he asks the rhetorical questions, "Will he [the philosopher] be grieved at dying?" implying a 'no' answer. And then he asks, "Will he be glad to make that journey?" Here he implies a 'yes' answer. He concludes, "So if you see anyone distressed at the prospect of dying, it will be proof enough that he is a lover not of wisdom but of the body." (p. 68b-c). Socrates says nothing about philosophy being 'the cultivation of dying,' nor that the study of philosophy is intended as 'a preparation for dying.'

What he means is that philosophers who are working to attain ultimate wisdom in life don't realize that they will never be able to actually reach what they desire until after their deaths. The reason is because only the philosopher's immortal, immaterial soul or consciousness, relieved of the incumbrances of the tedious body, is able to attain what he perceives to be the ultimate wisdom: experience of the 'after-life' without a break in the continuity of consciousness or the loss of selfhood. And

if this holds true, he argued, then philosophers ought to look forward to death. Understandably, today Socrates's metaphysical perspective is considered problematic, but it was his way of finding solace just prior to his state-ordered execution and suicide.

To me philosophy has always been about life not death. It's about figuring out how to organize the way we live with and among others so that we'll all find life worth living. It's about feeding a hungry curiosity within ourselves about ourselves and the world we live in. Archaeology has revealed that from the earliest times in human history people have been trying to understand the mysteries of their own existence in relation to the stars, the natural world surrounding us, and our mortality. In many early cultures death was believed to be a transition from the earthly plane to some other, unknown world. The evidence for this is the fact that warriors were interred with their weapons and sometimes their horses; venerated community leaders were buried with various eating utensils and fancy clothing; and children were laid to rest with their favorite toys and pets.

Belief in the continued human-like existence after death withered substantially with the advance of scientific thinking. It was argued that, without evidence, belief in an 'afterlife' can't be maintained. (This is technically incorrect, since any belief can be maintained, even if it's false). And it was also seen as an inconsistent use of the word 'life.' Correctly stated, the question isn't, "What can we expect after death?" but rather, "What can we expect after life?" The vernacular usage of the term 'after-life' doesn't refer to any meaningful state. It's a contradiction to its common understanding to say that 'life' is a description of what comes after death. It's a paradox, and an empty referent to an imaginary state that holds no properties.

Most of us don't realistically believe we could actually live a fantasy life, so why believe in a fantasy 'after-life'? We might gain some consolation from such a belief, but in no way does it make that belief a reality. Nevertheless, many contemporary religions continue to promote the *a priori hypothetical* doctrine of an 'after-life' where the virtuous are well-rewarded and the sinful are painfully punished. This threat of Divine retribution is today still responsible for the most salient fear among believers. For centuries religions have presented life after death as a dark time of mysterious judgments, administered by supernatural beings who demand worship, love, and fear. No wonder so many people are afraid of death. Even the promise of eternal existence in a spiritual realm brings little comfort when the eventual monotony, boredom, and pointlessness of eternal existence are envisioned.

In most religions the belief in an 'after-life' is predicated on faith in a paranormal being without substance. But what sort of 'existence' would such a being have without material eyes and ears, a brain, a heart, and so on, without the cohesion of interacting parts required to constitute a functioning individual? Within what sort of structure does the consciousness of such a being reside? A hypothetical being that is conceptually articulated but is lacking substantiality—an autogenic (self-produced) being "that founded its own nothingness" (Sartre p. 176)—would be as bizarre as water without H₂O.

Some of my students argued that perhaps a life after death means simply existing as 'a free-floating consciousness integrated within the Divine,' or as it's often stated, 'being part of God.' But this posits an existence like a transparent fog where the vaporous 'being' is missing the necessary boundaries that differentiate people (and objects) from one another. Or they would be like an indistinguishable

water droplet in the Pacific ocean. Such an homogenized ‘after-life’ is quite unappealing to me. I don’t want to live forever as an emulsified molecule blended into some other being, be it a god or otherwise. A quote from the English moral philosopher Bernard Williams seems appropriate here: “It should be me who lives forever” (Williams 88).

Neither contemporary theology nor modern science can give us a definitive answer about what to expect after life. Both have nothing more to offer than possibilities and speculations. And, regrettably, no matter how much science and technology have advanced our knowledge and understanding of life, they haven’t yet been able to present any concrete facts about what, if anything, comes after life ends. No expert or authority is able to say with certainty what may be confidently expected.

When the remains of life just prior to death are very unpleasant, acceptance of death brings the hope of relief to those whose bodies are barbed-wired with numerous aches and pains. So, given the belief in the three standard options of either total nothingness, eternal existence in pleasure or pain, and somewhat random rebirths are all unpleasant, perhaps the best way to proceed is with an unconventional but much less troubling fourth option.

The Fourth

I propose going with my original fourth option, a non-conventional approach to death that I find quite comforting. After all, there are no experts whose insights into death give them the exclusive right to dictate to us what we will experience in ‘the after-life.’

Again, most people are prone to committing a common cognitive error: they seem to accept that there are only three possibilities for what may happen to a person after life has run out: (1) blinking off to nothingness; (2) receiving everlasting rewards or punishments in a supernatural ‘after-life’; or (3) having to endure an unpredictable reincarnation from which all personal memories are expunged. I see the fear of death as resulting from the assumption that these three are the exclusive choices available to us, most likely because, having been inculcated in us so thoroughly and for so long, we simply take them for granted. All of these have been offered by very intelligent people as metaphysical *possibilities*, but no one, as far as I’m aware, has ventured so far as to suggest which one is the most logical *probability*. This is because there’s no experiential precedent for comparison, correlation, or calculation. And it seems to have been forgotten or ignored that these three options are not based on fact; there is no robust scientific data, no solid medical verification, nor any computerized algorithms that have established these three options as the only cogent possibilities. There have been many anecdotal testimonials presented as evidence of an ‘after-life’ on which people have built their faith (see, for example Wilshire pp. 135-148). But such tales of personal ‘experiences’ can’t be reliably extrapolated to a universal metaphysic. Surely this isn’t the best humanity is able to come up with!?

There’s no logical reason why we should meekly follow the command: “You may only choose from these three possibilities of what might come after death.” After all, they’re each simply the hopeful figments of someone’s anxious imagination. All three are merely invented scenarios based on fear: (1) fear of the annihilation of the subjective ‘self’; (2) fear of the boredom of eternal rewards or punishments; and (3) fear of a capricious rebirth. This makes the fear of death a fear of nothing more than futile hopes, imaginings, and assumptions. And they can’t be presented as ‘revelations from

god(s)' as long as convincing empirical evidence for the existence of god(s) continues to elude us. So why don't we come up with more tenable options to believe in—ones that don't generate misery and fear?

There is literally an unlimited number of hypothetical possibilities. For example, we could believe that 'the after-life' consists of having the freedom to choose and control absolutely anything we wish to experience after death. This could be living among the clouds in some celestial paradise; or being reborn into any family of choice, on any planet in the universe; or as any creature we choose. And it doesn't have to be a predetermined "the after-life." It can in fact be *her* after-life, or *his* after-life, or *my* after-life, or *our* shared after-life. The point is we could believe in the freedom of total control over our after-life existence, even so far as being able to choose total nothingness (perhaps set on an automatic 'return-to-existence' timer).

An active imagination and an open mind about the adventures that await us after life ends isn't an ontological statement of facts about 'the after-life.' It requires no evidence to defend it, as called for by the other three hypotheses, because in this fourth option no metaphysical assertions have been made about the objective nature of its being. But it can do wonders in reducing the fear people have been dying with for centuries. This personal approach to 'after-life' is no less plausible, just as logically feasible, and much more reassuring than the three disturbing universal myths that have existed for so long. There's no reason why we can't all invent our own hypotheses, equivalent *a priori possibilities* that are less problematic than those advocated by religious and secular dogmatists. Our own positive conceptions of 'after-life,' whatever they might be, would no doubt prove much more effective in reducing our anxiety about the future.

Approaching death in an authentically optimistic anticipation of the unknown—not just in the hope of an end to pain, but with simple, child-like wondering—can replace the vulgarity of common dread. It can also ease the grief that friends and relatives feel on behalf of the dead and the ostensibly doomed. Why let others dictate what we're to believe? Why not adopt the freedom of existentialism, abandon the standard worst-case scenarios, and think of the time and place after death as merely unexplored country? No one can say with certainty what "the unknown unknown" holds (Wilshire 127), and what our attitudes toward it ought to be. But if 'first philosophy' begins in wondering about conventional metaphysical beliefs (Descartes *passim*) then it should include wondering whether the three main beliefs about what is to be expected after death are all we're allowed, or all there can be.

Professor of Philosophy Ivan Soll points out that a number of respected thinkers, such as Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, essayist Albert Camus, cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker, existentialist philosophers Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre view death, "...as uniquely catastrophic... whose constant threat is intolerable...an omnipresent and ineluctable shadow that darkens our existence," (Soll p. 22). But death is only a shadow on our existence if our attention is focused on its illusory negative possibilities, such as absolute non-existence or eternal damnation. Death does not necessarily have to be seen as a negative experience. We're free to envision it as the possible exploration of a wonderful 'after-life.'

Of course, the problem is that, like the traditional three beliefs, such a positive view of 'after-life' is also only a hope or a wish, a fanciful expectation without any guarantees. In her book *At the*

Existentialist Café Sarah Bakewell observes, “If I’m about to die, I can’t choose whether to die or not; but I can choose how to face it” (p. 157). We may not know how to ‘manage’ dying or how to avoid it, but we can at least ‘manage’ our own thinking about it so that associated fears are reduced and emotional suffering is eliminated (Roy p. 17). As Epictetus insisted, it is not events that disturb people, it is their judgements concerning them.

Open-mindedness about the approaching unknown adventure of dying is a much more agreeable subject for consideration than any of the terrifying futures predicted by the three traditional approaches. While the belief in complete annihilation is abhorrent to most people, the standard belief in some enchanted Disneyland for ‘the good ones’—where there’s no need to care or think for oneself because everything is miraculously provided—is just as distasteful to others. And being reincarnated as a random organism is even less appealing. Open-mindedness about what to expect after life ends doesn’t eliminate all concern over what might occur, but it can certainly eliminate the fear of nothingness, the fear of eternal either/or states, and the fear of a disagreeable reincarnation. Ideally, the key is to remain neutral, to make an effort not to bias the outcome with any expectations, whether feared or wished-for.

Accepting the process of dying with a neutral attitude, or with positive excitement as when approaching an unknown adventure, may seem like an overly simplistic solution to a centuries old problem. But it’s more than that. It’s “an act of hope that keeps us from falling apart when every empirical datum indicates one’s impending biological disintegration and social disappearance” (Roy p. 21). I believe it’s the most rational approach to this thorny metaphysical issue. As the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer pointed out early in the nineteenth century, “Truth goes through three steps: first, it’s ridiculed, then it’s violently opposed, and finally it’s accepted as obvious.” Open-mindedness is obviously a reasonable (dare I say logical) approach in the face of the unstoppable process of physical decline. I hesitated to use the word ‘logical’ because logic has gained the reputation of coldness whenever difficult emotional issues are under consideration. But especially in this situation, when the alternatives only present naked terror, bottomless grief, and fairy-tale absurdities, the reasonable logic of this fourth option can bring cooling comfort.

The modern approach of “We have a pill to fix that” doesn’t apply when it comes to mortality. This new fourth option I’m proposing will require the individual to develop a certain attitude, one which sets the mind to do a job, and then works to get it done. My best advice on how to improve the self-discipline required to take this open-minded approach is to practice it in discussions with others. Naturally, practice itself requires self-discipline, but if effort is put into open-mindedness—a truly philosophical endeavour—it will require much less effort than when having to deal with the anguish and fear generated by the conventional beliefs.

Conclusion

It’s impossible for anyone to know accurately what awaits us following death. And yet some people who confidently claim intellectual and/or spiritual authority insist they have it all figured out. Most people, including many philosophers, believe there are only three possibilities: (1) eternal nothingness (the loss of ‘self’); (2) eternal rewards or punishments (with eventual boredom); or (3) an unpredictable karmic rebirth (into some memoryless physical life form).

There are certainly good reasons to find these three hypotheticals undesirable, even frightening. Therefore I suggest the best approach is a fourth alternative: exercising the freedom we have to keep an open mind. By this I mean avoiding all the traditional beliefs, and maintaining a truly philosophically questioning attitude which says, "I wonder what happens next." This logical fourth choice doesn't leave one adrift within the Socratic ether-or dichotomy: either an impending nothingness or a mythical 'after-life.' And it avoids the fear of a disagreeable rebirth. But it does leave one important question remaining to be answered: Can this be done? After we've all been thoroughly indoctrinated into fearing death, are we able to actuate the freedom we have to change our minds about it?

To begin with, we need to consider what scares us about death. It turns out that it's mostly our assumptions; it's our own thoughts and beliefs that stir up our fears. It's got to be those because there aren't any *facts* about what to expect after death that can disturb us; there are only all the unverifiable cautionary tales we've absorbed during our lifetime. Discussions with others, and especially with a counsellor educated in the areas of metaphysics and epistemology, about this fourth way of looking at 'after-life' can be of great help in changing distressing thinking habits.

Counselling is achieved through the practice of collaborative autonomy between the counsellor and the client. Both are independent thinkers, but also interdependent thinkers. They work in partnership, generally listening to each other telling stories, asking questions, and making suggestions. The relationship in counselling is somewhat one-sided because the counsellor is the expert in the technical aspects of applied philosophy, while the client is the expert on her or his own emotions, assumptions, fears and so on. It is an enigmatic partnership, consisting of individual thoughts created by two people for the benefit of both. It leads to mutual self-discovery. And the thoughts they create can be in line with the fourth approach, as described above: neutralizing expectations by keeping an open mind about the possible continuity of 'life' after life. This will transcend traditional anxiety-inducing thoughts about that unknown land. To live a life worth living, without constantly submitting to the fear of the end of life, is what philosophers have been trying to achieve for centuries. Wondering about all the marvelous adventures we may possibly experience after death can free us from the burden of that heavy boulder of fear many of us have been pushing uphill for so long.

(*Addendum*: I dedicate this essay to my brother-in-law Dick who, on April 4, 2023, travelled on to explore that unknown land.)

Notes

1. I use variations of the word 'hypothesis' throughout this essay rather than 'theory' because a hypothesis is based on the shaky ground of untested assumptions or beliefs, while a theory is much more solidly established with evidential data, and a general consensus of experts in the field.

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