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Mortality and Morality

H. James Nersoyan

Clarifications of the problem of immortality are genuinely helpful to the extent to which our understanding of death is accurate. The problem of death appears to be one of the latest taboos in process of being dispelled. No doubt references to it in literature are copious—and this could not be otherwise, but death is increasingly a subject of open discussion in popular periodicals. It follows sexuality in this respect.

Freud, who was largely responsible in dispelling the taboo imposed on human sexuality, placed opposite what he called “sexual motive power” the death instinct. “We may suppose,” he wrote, “that the final aim of the destructive instinct is to reduce living things to an inorganic state. For this reason we also call it the *death instinct*.” This instinct is universal in scope. Freud assumed that the given condition of reality is inorganic, that life is an intrusion, that the reproductive power thus secured a foothold for itself in an inorganic mass, but that the tendency back to the inorganic is built into the life instinct itself. The death instinct finds an outer expression in aggression, a view which seems to entail the conclusion that a condition of bringing about the millenium of peace is to accept, as distinct from being resigned to, the fact that we are mortal beings. We are aggressive in the sense that we are inclined to divert the power of the death instinct from our self—which would be the active equivalent of rebelling against our own mortality.

This is already an indication of how the fact of mortality radically conditions our moral behaviour. Freud's view that the life and death instincts coexist in the id has its metaphysical equivalent in contemporary philosophical thought. Tillich, for example, writing in a vein reminiscent also of Heidegger, will say that “in every process of growth, the conditions of life are also the conditions of death. Death is present in every life process from its beginning to its end, although the actual death of a living being does not depend only on the ambiguity of its own individual life process but also on its position within the totality of life. But death from outside could have no power over a being if death from inside were not conspicuously at work.”

The idea is not new of course but it is being given a renewed emphasis in the West. Ordinarily we are conditioned to think with Hesiod that Clotho spins the thread of life, and that Lachesis provides the measures of black and white strands in it. We all wait for Atropos with different degrees of consciousness and urgency. She it is who carries the “abhorred shears” and will cut the thread of life some

time in the future. Death in this myth is a wholly future event, and so it is in our ordinary imagination—not without reason.

While it is true that in reality at large living and dying are concurrent processes, the individual is either alive or dead, and it is man's attitude toward death while alive that is a foundational determinant of his morality.

But the phrase "either alive or dead" is accurate only to a point. Life is a thing of degrees. An amoeba and a man surely do not live at the same degree of what we may call "abundance"—borrowing the term from the New Testament. There is life and there is more abundant life, and if this is so then we must look upon death not, curtly, as the cessation of life, but as the diminution of life and its eventual reduction to point zero.

Thus we may return for a moment to the statement quoted earlier that "death is present in every life process." Inasmuch as we ordinarily use the term life and death as states of being that cancel each other out, that statement would be equivalent to something like "blue is present in every patch of red." Actually the statement seems to be pointing to an ordinarily unsuspected aspect of the relation of life to death. Its aim appears to be a performance—the performance, namely, of shifting our attention from our self, in our isolation from the rest of reality, to our being a mode of reality. For the individual—whether a cell or anything smaller or larger than a cell—death puts an end to life. For the society of which the individual is an element the fact of death is part of the process of survival.

A society, whatever else it is, is the sum total of its individuals, not at any one time but throughout its history, and as such it may constitute a selfhood. This no doubt is the principal reason why the meaning of the term self is so very dubious or uncertain. At a certain level of "self"-consciousness a society becomes a nation, for example. It has been pointed out more than once in the relevant literature that a nation has its selfhood as a man does, and that a man has his selfhood as a cell does. Now, to claim that the attribution of selfhood to a nation is an accident of language would be an exaggeration, for though the individuals composing a nation change totally from time to time, there is a procreative continuity between them. It may be argued against this last contention that continuity is a relation and that there can be no relation to something that is not there, such as a past generation of individuals. But then the further question arises of whether anything past is, in the full sense of the term, non-existent. Whitehead, for one, would answer this question with a powerful No.

While we are trying to understand the life-death concurrence in a society only, we may consider for a moment a peculiar sort of society, called church, about which philosophers ordinarily have very little to say if anything. The individuals of a church do not belong together in the way in which those of a nation do. The peculiarity from our perspective of the church is, that here social selfhood has no physical continuity except symbolically through the act of touching. A church is a social self where every individual has been touched by a representative of the society—the priests by the bishop, and all the baptized faithful by the priest. This indicates a new dimension of selfhood, a peculiarly human one, where physical-

ness is transcended while acquiring the value of a symbol. Here physicalness is included in and points to something beyond itself. It indicates a dimension of relatedness among individuals where death is overcome, for the overcoming of death is not a physical matter. Man is the only animal that knows he will die, and the only means at his disposal of overcoming the anxiety-ridden anticipation of death is either to abandon himself to superior forces or to relate with all his faculties to a larger self. The church with its claims and ideals is such a self. The nation is such a self. In a world of knowingly immortal men there would be no church and no nationalism. Both religious devotion and nationalism are attempts at finding immortality within larger, indefinitely lasting realities by yielding one's self to them. These larger selves are often subject to larger selfishnesses, which are nevertheless overcome when these selves in turn place themselves within selves yet larger. What I am driving at is, that the statement "man is immortal" is, in the absence of a definitive philosophical evidence to that effect, also a command. It means, "do not center yourself on yourself," or, "the morally right thing to do is not to cling desperately to your own life in a transient phenomenal world."

The church and the nation are only two examples of culturally very significant institutions directly related to human mortality in the manner shown. W. E. Hocking has insisted that religion is the mother of all the arts, a theory that extends further the relationship between mortality and human values. Our mortality is with us at all times whether we are conscious of it or not, which is evident enough. I shall now try to make explicit some of the ways in which the relation obtains between mortality and such traditional virtues as courage and wisdom. These too will serve as mere examples.

To begin with courage, which is the antidote to fear.

"Men fear death," Francis Bacon wrote in his essay on death, "as children fear to go in the dark; and as that natural fear in children is increased with tales, so is the other." Bacon who belongs in the age of reason so-called, is claiming that the fear of death is not a rationally controlled reaction. The emotions caused by the onslaught of death is due to the fact that we concentrate on such deaths as are frightful in their external manifestations: "groans and convulsions," Bacon says, "and a discolored face, and friends weeping, and blacks, and obsequies and the like show death terrible." In fact, Bacon argues, death is no such terrible thing, because there are a number of emotions which cause men to risk death, such as revenge, love, honor, grief and fear itself. His point is, then, that if death were the terrible thing it is made out to be, under no circumstances would it be risked by reasonable men.

Whether death is universally feared may be questioned. I shall submit without arguing the point that it is, and that those do not fear death who have found a religious or a philosophical answer allaying that fear.

The theory that the fear of death is not a rational fear was already advanced by Lucretius much before Bacon on grounds of his own. Among the arguments based on his materialistic atomism and advanced in *De Rerum Natura*, one stands out because its validity is not confined to the limits of Lucretius's general position:

a person, Lucretius argues, cannot be the same before and after death, for a person is his body and his soul conjoined, and the dissolution of his body at death is a matter of plain observation. The implication is that a person who may come back to life after death will always be *another* person and any misfortune that may befall another person cannot reasonably be *my* concern now. My death in other words, will demonstrably be final. Even if a person similar to me in all respects is re-organized, out of my dispersed atoms, his misery will not be *my* misery. So why fear? A person fears reasonably misfortunes that may befall *him*, while there is a complete vacuum between the two lives which the memories of the previous person cannot bridge.

The arguments both of Lucretius and of Bacon are clever, but they miss the point in some important respects.

Bacon is under the mistaken impression that when a person says I fear death, he means "I fear the cessation of my biologically active continuance." He is under the impression that life is something uniform in all living beings and that it is the termination of *that* that people fear. Actually as we saw, death is a diminution of life to the point of zero, and it is that diminution itself that is feared and not merely its final limit. There are some lives, according to the people who happen to be living them, which are not worth living. A loveless life is probably most generally viewed as such a life. When, therefore, a person risks death for the sake of preserving a relationship of love, he is acting out of, and not in disregard of, the fear of death in the humanly relevant meaning of the term. The fear of death is the fear of the loss of life at a certain degree of abundance, while this degree changes from person to person, from moment to moment.

Lucretius fails to take account of the fact that death itself is feared and not merely a state of being which may or may not turn out to be the case *after* death. Nor is it a matter of course that I should be indifferent to the projected painful situation of a self because of a lack of continuity in time between that self and myself of the present moment. What I am mindful of is not the oneness of the experiencing person, but the experience itself, because the pain is not inherent to the self. It is inherent to the experience. If I knew that Peter will be sick tomorrow, I would not want to be Peter tomorrow. Likewise, though there may not be identity between myself and a reassembled or resurrected person, which is only like me in every respect, I would be concerned about the well-being of that person and fear his torments.

But the root of the problem is that both Lucretius and Bacon as well as many thinkers and the generality of men consider death as *one* of the things a man fears. Yet the question may legitimately be asked—what is the common element that is feared in all the things that people fear? I think this common denominator is reduction in the abundance of life and of diminution of life. Whenever *anything* is feared, it is feared because it threatens life and the abundance of life, and it is because man, as distinct from other animals, has the conscious anticipation of his death that the field of his fear extends much farther than threats to his physical survival. It is possible to define fear as an emotional reaction to such objects as

threaten a man's life and more abundant life, and if this definition is acceptable then all fear is the fear of death.

It is now clear that it is for this reason that courage is a cardinal virtue. Combined with wisdom it is the ability to face death. It is a peculiarly human virtue. One does not think of any of the immortal gods as courageous. In a world where death is omnipresent, it is only to be expected that courage should be so highly valued.

I will now consider a second cardinal virtue, wisdom, in its relation to mortality.

We have already seen Bacon's analysis of the fear of death as analogous to the fear of darkness. The question arises, why is darkness fearful? An old, probably Cornish, prayer asks the Lord to preserve us from ghoulies and ghosties, and long leggety beasties and things that go bump in the night. Darkness is no doubt feared because in it a man lacks security against unwelcome objects. But even in perfectly familiar and safe surroundings there is an element of unpleasantness about darkness, and a person who freely chooses to spend long hours in the dark is thought of as rather morbid. Since to see is to relate, the malaise of darkness is to be analysed as due to the inability to relate visually. The fear of darkness is the fear of the lonely aloneness. This explains the famous mystical phrase "dark night of the soul" which is precisely the emotional pole of what the mystic would describe as isolatedness from God. A contention which also supports this analysis is: "those who have made their peace with God do not fear death."

This analysis of the malaise of darkness is relevant to my consideration of wisdom. I think it can safely be said that the term wisdom has been applied to a quality whereby a person relates well to his environment, or more generally to the Other. In ancient literature wisdom refers both to technique or know-how and to knowledge, that is the knowledge of the ultimate reality, as well as to a virtuous disposition generally. Lavelle in his *Spiritual Intimacy* is faithful to this traditional use of the term wisdom when he says of it that "it is a sort of science but in it theory and practice are no longer distinguishable: it is the science of the spiritual life, the only one where there is necessary identity between knowing and doing." It is in this way that wisdom is the virtue whereby the I and the we become integrated, the I relates to the other. The common denominator between technique or skill and correct theory is that both are means of overcoming the helpless loneliness of the individual. Both skill and theoretical knowledge overcome anxiety in a crisis—and wisdom is the quality whereby one overcomes the anxiety of individuality itself as it encounters as it must, the other, namely the rest of the world. We have already seen that self-integration in a larger self was a way of overcoming death or the threat of death. To the extent to which the anticipation of death fills man with anxiety, wisdom is a way of overcoming anxiety through successful encounter with a future where the only absolute certainty is death itself. From this perspective a saying of Gabriel Marcel strikes me as particularly perspicacious: "We may go as far as saying," he writes, "that the principal objective of wisdom, as it has always been defined, consists after all in the exorcism of anxiety."

I have been pointing out some of the ways in which man's mortality affects his

morality. As mortality is built into the nature of man, so the expectation of death is built into the values which inform his moral behaviour. It is so inevitably, regardless of our awareness of the fact. It is impossible, and perhaps somewhat futile to speculate as to what kind of a morality would rule our lives had we been immortal and perpetually vigorous. But that we would have a radically different set of moral values is a certainty. This certainty entails the view that if there is everlasting life, our knowledge of how it will feel can only be fragmentary if anything.

Recently a young man writing to a semi-popular magazine conducting a survey on people's reactions to death said that immortal life should be quite a bummer. "Fear of death puts a little excitement into life," he said. In intimating that everlasting life should be boring or dull, this young man is falling victim to an easy, popular error: the error of transposing the emotions and values of a life conditioned by mortality to a life that is not so conditioned. It is of course a mistake to think that an everlasting life must—or can—be qualitatively the same as a mortal life, only endless. Yet even serious theologians make this mistake by implication, when they shy away from a doctrine of everlasting life in favor of life eternal, with the comment that eternal does not mean everlasting, though they are unclear as to what it does mean. An example will suffice to clarify this point. Consider boredom. Can an immortal being be bored? The answer is probably no. It seems to me that built into the feeling of boredom there is the feeling that I am wasting my time. But then nothing of an unlimited amount can be wasted. I will have the feeling that I wasted fifty cents of my only dollar if I gamble and lose it, instead of buying food to satisfy my hunger. But if I have an unlimited number of half dollars, the notion of waste will not occur to me. This example should be sufficient to show that an everlasting life, if it is the case, is, by definition, qualitatively different from a temporally limited life. It must be informed by a significantly different set of values. That it is bound to be qualitatively different we thus know. *How* different it will be, we have no way of knowing. Perhaps a neat way of saying this is that everlasting life is eternal—with the admission that everlasting and eternal are not synonymous, but that eternal refers to a rather unknown quality.

I have to come to the end of what I wanted to do in this paper: show the simplicity of the otherwise mystifying claim that life and death are concurrently present in the world, that all fear is the fear of death which is a reduction of the abundance of life and the exhaustion of it in individuals, and that our morality is radically conditioned by our mortality. It follows from this last observation that everlasting life, if it is the case, must be an experience which we cannot foreknow with a close degree of accuracy.

I should like to conclude with three hastily made observations.

1. If death is the wages of sin, we can reason by a kind of *modus tollens*, that where there is no death there is no sin. This assumes an extension of the point made in this paper, namely that *all* human conduct, good and bad, is conditioned by human mortality. It may be reasonably assumed, for example, though we cannot go into details here, that in a society of immortal people there would be no

murder. If life immortal were an evident truth, we would be living in peace together. But life immortal is not empirically and logically an evident truth. It is my hunch that many who profess it are nevertheless not penetrated by its truth even from a religious perspective. What we call evil may well be the consequences of the lack of evidence that life is immortal. It may be objected that there have been periods and places where belief in immortality was widespread and that crime, sometimes based on belief in immortality itself, was rife. My answer is, that the people who perpetrated such barbarisms did not realize the eternal quality of everlasting life, as defined earlier.

2. Two of the major criticisms of the doctrine of immortality made by materialism are the following: (a) the objection is that immortal life is desirable, therefore it is not true. It is an imaginative construct to satisfy this desire. It is a self-delusion. Statements about personal immortality are at best statements about human aspirations. This is the point of Ch. XVIII of Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*, and it is clearly wrong, for a state of affairs can very well be both desirable and true. Actually the whole of *The Essence of Christianity* proves nothing. It simply takes for granted that the beginning, middle, and end of religion is man. (b) A second objection to the doctrine of personal immortality is that it is socially harmful. This second objection even intimates that the doctrine has been invented by the haves, in order to keep the have-nots under control. This is a historical contention and history does not bear it out. It is simply not true that those who believe in personal immortality do, on that account, lose interest in the things of this world. That the doctrine has been utilized by exploiters does not entail the conclusion that it was invented by them for that purpose. That conclusion has only a strategic utility in the midst of revolutions, and it must be recognized as such.

3. Finally a third observation I would like to make is this: I have tried to show that in many ways our moral values are geared to respond to the fact of our mortality. In this way a bond is created between morality and religion, though the two are not to be identified. Religion answers the question: Why am I, a mortal being, here? While morality answers the question: Now that I, a mortal being am here, how do I live?

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