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## LET US BEGIN WITH DEATH

I remember very clearly the first time I really understood that sooner or later I *would have* to die. I must have been around ten years old, perhaps nine. It was eleven o'clock on a night like any other night and I was already in bed. My two brothers, who shared the bedroom with me, were snoring peacefully. In the next room my parents chatted quietly while undressing; my mother had switched the radio on – she would leave it on until late to allay my nocturnal fears. I suddenly sat up in the dark: I *too* would have to die, it was my lot, what would inevitably happen to me, there was no escape! Not only would I have to endure the death of my two grandmothers, of my beloved grandfather, of my parents, I myself would also have to die. What a strange and terrible thing, so dangerous, so incomprehensible, but above all, what a totally irremediably *personal* thing.

When one is ten years old one thinks that all things of importance can only happen to the grown-ups, but suddenly I came to realize the first really important thing – in fact the most important thing of all – that would inevitably happen to me: I would die. Not yet, of course, not for years and years, only after all those I loved had died (all except my brothers who were younger than me and therefore would die later) but I was anyway going to die. I was going to die, in spite of being me. Death was no longer something that happened to other people, something that was their problem and not mine, nor some general law that would apply to me when I became a grown-up, that is, when I had become somebody else. For I also realized then that when death happened it would happen to me and I would still be myself, the same self that was now coming to this realization. I would be the protagonist of a real death, the most authentic and important

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one, of which all other deaths would only be rather painful rehearsals. My death, the death of my self! Not the death of 'you' or 'you', much as I might love them, but the death of the only 'I' that I knew intimately! Of course it would not happen for a very long time but . . . was it not somehow already happening? Was it not the case that when realizing that I, I myself, would die, this realization was also part of my own death, of that terribly important thing that was happening to me and to no one else at this moment, although I was still only a child?

I am sure that it was precisely then that I at last started to *think*. That is, when I understood the difference between learning or repeating other people's thoughts and having a thought that was truly *mine*, a thought that involved me personally, not a hired or borrowed thought like the bicycle one might hire or borrow to go for a ride. It was a thought that seized me much more strongly than I could seize it, a thought that I could not discard at will. I did not know what to do with this thought, but it was clear that something had to be done urgently because I could not ignore it. Although I still held uncritically the religious beliefs that my education had instilled in me, they did not seem to be of much help when faced with the certainty of death.

One or two years earlier I had seen a corpse for the first time, by chance, and what a surprise it was. The open bier of a lay brother who had recently died had been put on view in the atrium of the Jesuit's church in Garibay Street in San Sebastián, where I went with my family to Sunday mass. He looked like a bluish statue, rather like those recumbent figures of Christ I had seen on some altars, but with a difference: I knew that he had been alive and now he was not. 'He's gone to heaven' said my mother, who felt rather uncomfortable and would have preferred to have spared me the sight. And I thought: 'OK, he may well be in heaven, but he is also here, dead. Wherever he may be he is not *alive* anywhere. Perhaps being in heaven is better than being alive, but it is not the same thing. When one is alive one is in this world and has a body that walks about and speaks and is surrounded by other people who are alive and not by spirits – even if being a spirit is wonderful. Spirits are also dead, they have also gone through that strange and horrible thing, death, they are still dead.' And so it was that when that unthinkable thing, my own death, was revealed to me, I started to think.

It may seem strange that a book that wants to be an introduction to philosophical matters should start with a chapter devoted to death.

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Will not the neophytes be discouraged by such a lugubrious subject? Would it not be better to start by speaking about freedom, or about love? But I have already mentioned that I want to take as the starting point for this invitation to philosophy my personal intellectual experience and, in my case, what led me to start thinking was the realization of the certainty of death – of *my* death. For the certainty of death not only leaves us pensive, it turns us into thinkers. On the one hand, awareness of death makes us *mature*: all children believe themselves to be immortal; very young children think also that they are omnipotent and that the world revolves around them, except in those countries and in those families where they are threatened with annihilation from very early on – their childish eyes surprise us by revealing a deadly tiredness, as if they were already old *veterans*. We begin to grow up when the idea of death grows within us. On the other hand, the certainty of our own death *humanizes* us, that is, it turns us into real human beings, into ‘mortals’. For the Greeks ‘human’ and ‘mortal’ were the same word, and so should it be.

Plants and animals are not mortal because they do not know that they will die, they do not know that they *must* die. They die without ever grasping the individual link between themselves and death. Wild animals may foresee danger, may be saddened by illness or old age, but they are unaware (or appear to be unaware?) of the basic necessity of death. A mortal is not one who dies but one who knows that he or she will die. We could even say also that neither plants nor animals are really alive in the same way that we are alive. The real living beings are only us, the mortals, because we know that we shall cease to be alive, and that life consists precisely of that realization. Some say that the immortal gods exist and others say they don’t, but nobody says that they are *alive* – only Christ has been called ‘the living God’, and that is because we are told that he was born, became a man like us and like us had to die.

To start talking about philosophy by talking about the awareness of death is therefore not a whim or a desire to appear original. Nor do I mean that the sole subject, or even the most important one, with which philosophy deals, is death. On the contrary, I tend to think that what philosophy is concerned with is life, with what living means and how we can live better. But it so happens that it is the certainty of death to come which, by turning us into mortals (that is to say, into humans), also turns us into living beings. One starts thinking about life when one sees oneself as mortal. Speaking through Socrates in the dialogue *Phaedo* Plato says that to philosophize is ‘to prepare

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oneself for death'. But what can 'to prepare oneself for death' mean, other than thinking about the human, mortal life that is ours? It is precisely the certainty of death that makes life – *my* life, unique and unrepeatable – something so deadly serious for me. All the tasks, all the undertakings of our lives are ways of opposing resistance to death, which we know is inevitable. The awareness of death is what turns life into a very serious business for each of us, into something about which each of us must think; into something mysterious and awesome, a kind of precious miracle for which we must fight and which requires effort and reflection. If death did not exist there would be lots of things to see, and lots of time in which to see them, but there would be precious little to do – almost everything we do, we do in order to avoid death – and nothing to think about.

For many generations the apprentice philosophers have started out in their study of logic with the following syllogism:

All men are mortal  
Socrates is a man  
therefore  
Socrates is mortal

It is quite interesting to note that the task of the philosopher should start by recalling an illustrious colleague sentenced to death, and by following a line of argument that indeed sentences all of us to death. For it is clear that the syllogism is equally valid if instead of Socrates we insert your name, dear reader, or mine, or that of anyone else. But the meaning of the syllogism goes beyond its mere logical correctness. If we say

Every A is B  
C is A  
therefore  
C is B

our formal reasoning is still valid, and yet the implications have changed considerably. I am not worried about being B if indeed I am an A, but I cannot help feeling rather alarmed by the fact that by virtue of being a man I am also mortal. In the first syllogism, furthermore, the connection between a general and impersonal observation (that all human beings must die) and somebody's individual fate – Socrates, you, me – who happens to be a human being, is succinctly

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but clearly established. But what appears at first to be a somewhat flattering connection that should have no bad consequences then turns out to be a death sentence. A sentence already carried out in the case of Socrates but still pending in our case. There is really quite a difference between knowing that something terrible will happen *to everybody* and knowing that it will happen *to me!* The anxiety that arises when going from the general assertion to the assertion of which I am the subject reveals to me what is unique and totally irreducible in my individuality, the wonder that constitutes my being:

*Other people died, but all that happened in the past,  
the season (everyone knows) most propitious for death.  
Can it be that I, a subject of Yakub Almansur,  
shall die as the roses have died, and Aristotle?*<sup>1</sup>

Others have died, all have died, all will die, but . . . what about me? Me too? Note that the implicit threat both in the syllogism and in the wonderful Borges quatrain is based on the fact that the individual protagonists (Socrates, the medieval Moorish subject of Yaquub Almansur, Aristotle) are *already* necessarily dead. They too had one day to reflect on the unavoidable fate that I now face. But reflection didn't help them to evade it.

Thus death is not only necessary, it is the prototype of that which is necessary in our lives. If the syllogism went: 'all men eat, Socrates is a man, etc.' it would be valid, physiologically speaking, but it would be somehow lacking in impact. Now, apart from knowing that death is so necessary that it exemplifies necessity itself ('necessity', etymologically speaking, is that which does not cease, which does not cede, with which we cannot make a pact or negotiate), what else do we know about death? Very few things, certainly. One is that it is absolutely personal and non-transferable: nobody can die instead of somebody else. That is to say, it is not possible that someone's death can prevent somebody else from dying sooner or later. Father Maximilian Kolbe, who volunteered to take the place of a Jew who was being taken to the gas chamber in a concentration camp, only replaced him *vis-à-vis* his executioners, not *vis-à-vis* death itself – his heroic sacrifice only gave the victim he saved a little more time, not immortality. In one of Euripides' tragedies the meek Alcestis offers to

<sup>1</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Quatrain* from *The Maker*, in *Selected Poems*, edited by Alexander Coleman (several translators), London, Allen Lane 1999.

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descend into Hades – that is, to die – instead of her husband Admetus, a rather nasty egoist. In the end Hercules himself went to rescue her from the kingdom of the dead and made good the outrage. But not even Alcestis' self-sacrifice would have saved Admetus from his fate as a mortal, it would only have delayed it. The debt each of us owes death has to be paid with our life, not with somebody else's.

Not even other essential biological functions such as eating or making love appear to be so totally non-transferable. After all, anybody can eat the meal intended for me if I do not attend the dinner, or make love to the person that I would have been willing and able to love. Indeed I can be force-fed, or be made to give up sex for the rest of my life. But when it comes to death – *my* death or that of somebody else – name and surname are spelled out in full. This is why death both individualizes us and at the same time makes us all equals. When it comes to death nobody is more or less than anybody else, above all, nobody can be *another person*, different from whom he or she is. When we die we are definitively the person we are and nobody else. Just as when we are born we bring into the world something that had not previously existed, when we die we take away something that will never be again.

We know one more thing about death: not only is it certain, it is perpetually imminent. It is not just the old or the sick who die. From the moment we start living we are, so to speak, ready to die. As the old saying goes, nobody is too young to die nor too old to live another day. Even if we are in perfect good health death is always lying in wait, and it is quite common to die – by accident, or as victims of crime – when we are quite healthy. Montaigne said it well: we do not die because we are ill but because we are alive. When one thinks about it, we are always *at the same distance* from death. The important difference is not that between being healthy or ill, safe or in danger, but between being alive or dead, that is between being and not being. There is no middle ground, nobody can really be 'half dead', that is just a figure of speech, for while there is life things can be sorted out, but death is by its very essence irrevocable. The main characteristic of death is that we can never say that we are safe from it nor that we can escape its threat even momentarily. Although at times death may seem *improbable* it is always *possible*.

Fatally necessary, perpetually imminent, intimately ours, solitary. What we know about death is certain (indeed it is part of our most *unquestionable* knowledge) but that does not make it any more familiar or any less inscrutable. In the end, death is still that which is

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totally unknown. We know that somebody has died but we do not know what dying, *seen from the inside*, is like. I think I know more or less what it is to die, but not what it is for me to die. Some of the greatest literary works – Tolstoy’s magnificent novella *The Death of Ivan Illych* or Ionesco’s tragicomedy *Exit the King* – may provide us with some insights into the matter, but always leave the fundamental question unanswered.

Throughout the centuries there have been many legends about death, many promises and threats made in its name, no end of rumours about it. Very old tales – possibly as old as the human race, or rather, as old as those animals that became human when they started asking themselves questions about death – are the universal foundation of the various religions. Come to think of it, all the anthropomorphic gods are gods of death, gods concerned with the meaning of death, gods who distribute rewards or punishments or grant reincarnation, gods who have the key to eternal life. Above all, gods are immortal – they never die, and when they pretend to die they either resuscitate or go through a metamorphosis. Everywhere and throughout all times religion has been used to give a meaning to death. Were there to be no death there would be no gods – or rather, we, the human mortals, would be gods, and would find atheism divinely pleasant!

The most ancient legends do not attempt to comfort us but to explain the inevitability of death. The oldest epic known to us, the story of the hero Gilgamesh, was written in Sumer approximately 2,700 years BC. Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu, two brave hunters and warriors, confront the goddess Ishtar, who kills Enkidu. Gilgamesh then sets out to find the cure for death, some magical herb that will restore youth and preserve it forever, but he fails just when he thinks he has found it. The spirit of Enkidu appears and explains to his friend the dark secrets of the kingdom of the dead, and Gilgamesh resigns himself to entering it when his hour comes. This kingdom of the dead is really just a sinister replica of the world we know, a profoundly sad place, just like the Hades of the ancient Greeks. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Ulysses summons the spirits of the dead, among which is that of his old companion Achilles. Although Achilles’ shadow is still as majestic among the dead as his presence was among the living, he confesses to Ulysses that he would rather be the humblest swineherd in the world of the living than a king on the shores of death. The living should not envy the dead. Other, later religions, such as Christianity, promise a happier, brighter existence to those who have abided by God’s precepts – and of course also

promise an eternity full of refined tortures to those who have not obeyed them. I use the word 'existence' because what is promised cannot really be regarded as being truly life. Life, in the only way we can conceive it, is full of unforeseeable changes and swings between the best and the worst. Eternal beatitude and eternal damnation are nothing but two perpetually frozen states, not modes of life. Thus not even those religions that offer the greatest *post mortem* assurances can guarantee eternal 'life' – they can only promise eternal existence or duration, which is not the same as human life, our life.

And indeed how could we really 'live' if there were no possibility of dying? Miguel de Unamuno eloquently argued that knowing that we are mortal as a species but not wanting to die as individuals is precisely what individualizes each of us. He vigorously rejected death – most especially in his admirable book *The Tragic Sense of Life* – and he asserted no less vigorously that he wanted to preserve his personality in this world and in the other, were such another world to exist: he did not want to exist in any other way than as don Miguel de Unamuno y Jugo. This raises a serious theoretical problem: if our personal individuality stems from our knowledge of death and our refusal to accept it, how could Unamuno continue to be Unamuno were he to be immortal, that is, when death is no longer there, to be feared and rejected? The only eternal life that would be compatible with our individual personality would be a life in which death would be present but only as a perpetually postponed possibility, something always to be feared but that in fact would never come. It is not easy to imagine such a state of affairs, not even as a transcendent hope, hence what Unamuno called 'the tragic sense of life'. But still, who knows . . .

The idea of continuing to live after death in whatever way, good or bad, is certainly both worrying and contradictory. It is an attempt at not taking death seriously and regarding it as a mere shadow. It is even an effort to reject or somehow disguise our mortality, that is to say, our own humanity. It is paradoxical that we normally call 'believers' those people who hold religious convictions, since what mainly characterizes them is not that in which they believe (mysteriously vague and diverse things), but that in which they do not believe: that which is most obvious, necessary and omnipresent – in other words, death. The so-called 'believers' are really 'unbelievers', for they deny death's ultimate reality. Perhaps the most sober way of facing this anxiety – we know that we shall die but we cannot imagine what it is to be dead – is Hamlet's: 'To die, to sleep; to sleep: perchance to

dream!’ In fact the possibility of some kind of survival after death must have occurred to our ancestors through observing the great similarity between someone deeply asleep and a corpse. I believe that if we did not dream, nobody would have thought of the astonishing possibility of life after death. If when we are motionless, with our eyes closed, apparently absent, deeply asleep, we know that in our dreams we travel through different landscapes, we talk, we laugh, we love . . . why should this not also be the case for the dead? Thus pleasant dreams must have given rise to the idea of paradise and nightmares were seen as premonitions of hell. If we can say, like Calderón de la Barca in his famous play, that ‘life is a dream’, then it is even more plausible to affirm that the so-called other life, the afterlife, is also inspired by our dreaming capacity.

However, the most obvious fact about death is that somebody else’s death tends to cause us pain, but when we think of our own it *frightens* us. Some fear that there will be something terrible after death, punishments, threats as yet unknown; others fear that there will be nothing and this nothingness is for them the most terrifying thing of all. Although being something – or rather, being somebody – can be quite uncomfortable at times, indeed can prove quite painful, to be nothing seems somehow much worse. But why? In his *Letter to Menæceus* the Greek philosopher Epicurus tries to persuade us that death cannot be something fearsome for those who meditate upon it. Of course, the infernal torturers and horrors are but fables designed to scare the rebellious, and in his view should not frighten reasonable people. But, in addition, there is nothing to fear in death itself: its very nature determines that we and death can never *coexist*, for while we are still alive death is absent, and when death comes we cease to be present. The main thing is, according to Epicurus, that although we no doubt die we never *are dead*. What would be fearsome would be to remain conscious of death, to remain somehow present while knowing that we are gone for good, which is of course absurd and contradictory. Epicurus’ argument appears to be irrefutable but it fails somehow to reassure us, perhaps because most of us are not as reasonable as Epicurus would have wished.

But is *not to be* really so terrible? After all, we did not exist for a very long time and that has never caused us any kind of pain. After death we shall go (assuming that the verb to go is appropriate in this instance) to the same place, or the same non-place, where we were (or were not?) before we were born. Lucretius, Epicurus’ great Roman disciple, described this parallelism in unforgettable words:

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‘Look back at the eternity that passed before we were born, and mark how utterly it counts to us as nothing. This is a mirror that Nature holds up to us, in which we may see the time that shall be before we are dead. Is there anything terrifying in the sight – anything depressing, anything that is not more restful than the soundest sleep?’<sup>2</sup>

To worry about the years or centuries during which we shall no longer be alive is as nonsensical as worrying about the years and centuries during which we were *not yet* alive. Not being alive did not cause us any pain and it is not reasonable to suppose that being absent for good will cause us any. Really, when our imagination allows death to cause us pain – poor me, everybody is happy enjoying the sun and making love, everybody except me, who nevermore, nevermore . . . – it does so precisely *now*, when we are still alive. Perhaps we should reflect a bit more on the strange occurrence of having been born, which is as great a wonder as the terrible wonder of death. If death is not-being we have already defeated it once, on the day we were born. It is again Lucretius who in his philosophical poem *On the Nature of the Universe* speaks of *mors aeterna*, the eternal death of that which has never been and will never be. So we may well be mortal, but we have escaped eternal death. We have succeeded in stealing a chunk of time – the days, months, years during which we have been alive, each moment when we are still living – from that enormous death and, happen what may, that time will always be ours, time belonging to those who triumphed against death through being born – it will never belong to death, even if we must in the end die. One of the most acute intellects of the eighteenth century, Lichtenberg, echoed Lucretius in one of his famous aphorisms: ‘Have we not been resurrected once already? Out of a condition, to be sure, in which we knew less of the present than in this present we know of the future. Our former condition is related to our present condition as our present condition is related to our future condition.’<sup>3</sup>

There is of course no dearth of arguments against Lucretius’ position. One of them is based precisely on what Lichtenberg observed: while I was not yet alive there was no ‘I’, no self that could miss coming into being; nobody was depriving me of anything since I did not yet exist, that is, I had no awareness of missing something through

<sup>2</sup> Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, translated by R. E. Latham, London, Penguin Classics 1994, Book III, 971–7, p. 120.

<sup>3</sup> G. C. Lichtenberg, *Aphorisms*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale, London, Penguin Classics 1990, p. 56.

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not being something. But I have now lived, I know what it is like to be alive, and I can foresee what death will make me lose. That is why death preoccupies me now, why it occupies me in advance, as it were, and makes me fear the loss of what I have. Anyway, future ills are always worse than past ills because they start to torture us now. Three years ago I had to have a kidney operation; let us suppose that I know for sure that after three years I must undergo another. Although my past operation no longer bothers me and the future one should not really bother me now, the fact is that I do not feel in the same way about both: the future operation worries and frightens me much more because it is drawing nearer, while the other recedes. Even if they were objectively identical they are not identical subjectively, for an unpleasant memory is never as disturbing as a threat. In this case the mirror of the past does not symmetrically reflect future pain, and perhaps this is also true in the case of death.

Thus death makes us think, turns us willy-nilly into thinkers, into thinking beings, but in spite of this we still do not know what to think about death. La Rochefoucauld says in one of his *Maxims* that we can look directly neither at the sun nor at death. Our newly discovered vocation as thinkers founders in the face of death: we do not know how to grapple with it. A contemporary thinker, Vladimir Jankélevitch, scolds us for not knowing what to do with death, for ‘oscillating between feeling anxiety and taking a nap’. That is, in the face of death we either try to numb ourselves in order not to tremble, or we tremble abjectly. There is in Spanish a popular ditty that seems to favour the ‘take a nap’ approach and goes more or less like this:

When I begin to think  
That I must die  
On my rug on the floor I lie  
And sleep my fill.

This is a poor subterfuge when the only alternative is anxiety. In fact there is no such alternative, for we could well go constantly from one extreme to the other, oscillating between a numbness that refuses to look and the anxiety that looks but sees nothing. A most unsatisfactory dilemma!

One of the greatest western philosophers, Spinoza, asserts however that this predicament should not discourage us: ‘A free man thinks of death least of all things, and his wisdom is a meditation of life, not

death.<sup>4</sup> What Spinoza wishes to point out, if I understand him rightly, is that death does not provide a foothold for thought: we cannot think anything *positive* about death. The reasons why it frightens us are always negative: losing the joys of life, in the case of our own death, or losing someone we love, in the case of somebody else's death; if we ever greet its approach with relief (it is not impossible to think that death in some cases is a good thing) we do so for negative reasons: it will put an end to our pain and distress. But whether feared or desired, death itself is pure negation, the reverse of life, and therefore it always, in one way or another, refers us back to life itself – a photographic negative to be developed so that we are able to see the picture better. Death makes us think, yes, but not about death but about life. Thought, awakened by death, bounces back from death's impenetrable wall and comes back time and time again to the subject of life. Beyond closing our eyes in order not to see death, or allowing ourselves to be blinded and cowed by it, we have the possibility (though it is not lacking in danger) of trying to understand life. But how can we do this? What tool shall we use to start thinking about life?

*Things to think about*

*In what sense does death make us really human? Is there anything more personal than death? Does thinking mean to become aware of our own humanity? Is death a paradigm of necessity, even of logical necessity? Are animals mortal in the same way as we are? Why can it be said that death is non-transferable? In what sense is death always imminent and not dependent on age or illness? Can a link be established between dreams and hopes of immortality? Why does Epicurus tell us that we should not fear death? How does Lucretius support Epicurus' argument? Do these arguments succeed in comforting us, or do they just aim at giving us peace of mind? Is it possible to think positively about death? Why can death lead us to think about life?*

<sup>4</sup> Baruch de Spinoza, *Ethics*, translated by Andrew Boyle, London, The Everyman Library 1993, Part IV, Proposition 67, p. 183.