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On Death

Philosophers have maintained an "all or nothing" attitude toward death. Philosophers focused on ideas outside of themselves will maintain a Spinozian rejection of death, and humanist, introspective Philosophers will place death at the center of their thoughts. Of the introspective Philosophers, the romanticist Schopenhauer and the existentialists Heidegger and Sartre, with the added literary perspective of Tolstoy, demonstrate varying conceptions and attitudes towards death with one common thread: it is important and must be discussed.

"Death is the true inspiring genius, or the muse of philosophy." (Schopenhauer 243) Arthur Schopenhauer had these choice words to say about death concerning Philosophy. Indeed, he believed "All religious and philosophical systems are principally directed to this end [finding comfort over death], and are thus primarily the antidote to the certainty of death." (Schopenhauer 243) His position on death as a reality may, at first, seem like something to fear. He claimed that "the death of an organism is either the claiming of its physical material by nature or the result of another organism's violent will." (Abelsen 269) In other words, we are always at odds with nature. We will eventually succumb to nature's torments, the violent tendencies of beasts or our fellow man, or else perish by our own biology. But death, for Schopenhauer, is nothing to fear, and the solution is finding comfort in a broader perspective, and eliminating our sense of individuality. "The immediate consciousness," he says "'imagines himself' as separate from the species, and therefore is afraid of death." (Dagan 75) But we can calm ourselves by directing our attention to the immortality of the species, realizing that since we are but one manifestation of a greater "will to life," a return to nature through death "simply breaks the illusory separation between him and other individuals." (Dagan 73) Abelsen has this to say about Schopenhauer's idea of "the altruist" who no longer fears death:

> "The principle of individuality evaporates altogether and there is no longer a personal will which could have motives-this is the quietive of the Will itself. The altruist becomes an ascetic and calmly awaits death, the ending of the physical expression of the Will to Live" (Abelsen 269)

The problem with Schopenhauer's engagement with death is that while it may provide some comfort to the individual, this comfort is arguably unattainable. The same solutions to

confronting anxiety over death contribute to an anxiety over the meaninglessness of one's life. Considering the survival of the species is of no use in daily, personal life, where one deals with daily, personal pursuits. The creative may consider the survival of the species in considering the lasting impact of their life's works on the species, but I don't believe it's satisfying to take the depersonalizing approach while one is still living. Such approaches will lead to the question of why my life matters in the first place. The answer to Schopenhauer would be, of course, that none of us individually *do* matter, but as a species we do. But if our goal in Philosophy is to find "the antidote to the certainty of death," (Schopenhauer 243) how do such words, even if they are true, help us? We must thus find a more personalized approach to death, one which can be found in Existentialism.

Of the existentialist positions on death, Heidegger's is the most robust. But Heidegger is a Philosopher to be deciphered as much as understood, so before discussing his position on death we must first understand his terminology. Central to Heidegger's philosophy is that human life is characterized by Dasien, or "being-there." While other things "are," "man alone exists." (Heidegger 276) As Von Schoenborn notes, "Dasein is manifest in its public being with others," (Von Schoenborn 104) or daily life, what Heidegger calls 'everydayness.' In this everyday life, we view the things around us by their utility, or 'readiness-to-hand,' "the kind of being which equipment possesses." (Blok 111) We also participate in a 'three-fold-falling,' in which "We lose ourselves in idle chatter, in daily business, in absorption in conventional projects and small purposes, finding superficial comfort and reassurance in these distractions" (Kerr 56) Viewing the world by its utility and engaging in idle talk and daily business contributes to a sense of *Das Man*, which has been translated as "the public," "the anonymous They," but which Kaufmann chooses to translate as "the One," and describes as "the despot that rules over the inauthentic Being-there of our everyday lives." (Kaufmann 78) This inauthenticity produced by these distractions profoundly isolates us the more we realize its existence. This realization manifests itself as anxiety and becomes possible within the confrontation of death.

"It's essential to the basic composition of Dasein that there is *constantly something still to be settled*." (Heidegger 276) Dasein, by its very nature, is approaching death. Importantly, Heidegger makes no claims with regard to the afterlife in discussing the end of our Dasein. "If 'death' is defined as the 'end' of Dasein – that is to say, of Being-in-the-world – this does not

imply any ontical decision whether "after death" still another Being is possible." (Heidegger 292) Regardless of the afterlife, coming to terms with our own mortality, "[gaining] a vivid realization of death as a constitutive part of life," (Gray 118) is central to living authentically. Heidegger believed that we hide behind the deaths of others to avoid confrontation with our own. As Hick says "we must avoid the mistake of focusing attention upon the deaths of others." (Hick 98) Death, as it exists for us, can only be understood through our own death, through our own elimination of the Dasein. To concentrate on the death of others, of the *Das Man*, is to "shield ourselves from that which could make us genuine persons." (Gray 121) But how exactly does a confrontation with our own death help us live authentically? Deciphering Heidegger may be fruitful with regard to understanding *what* he thinks, but it offers little in understanding his Philosophy put into practice. To understand this, we must turn to the literature of Tolstoy.

Despite being written before Heidegger was born, Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* anticipates much of Heidegger's views on death, especially the ideas of (1) hiding behind the death of *Das Man*, and (2) the meaning that the confrontation of death elicits. The story begins at Ivan's funeral, at the death of "the other." Peter Ivanovich views death as "an accident natural to Ivan Ilych but certainly not to himself." (Tolstoy 9) Ivan Ilylich remembers having similar thoughts before his own, direct confrontation with his mortality, saying, "That Caius—man in the abstract–was mortal, was perfectly correct, but he was not Caius, not an abstract man, but a creature quite separate from all others." (Tolstoy 44-45) Ivan Ilylich in the first chapter and Caius respectively are the *Das Man*, a method of escape. As Perret puts it, for most of us "death is something that happens to other people." (Perrett 239)

This escapism is juxtaposed with Ivan's direct and forced confrontation with death, which contributes to a transformation to a Heideggerian "authentic life," albeit too little too late. In understanding that his life "had been the most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible," (Tolstoy 11) Ivan learns what should have been important to him. "He learns to care for others, feels sorry for his wife, and, for the first time, loves." (Kaufmann 81) There is, of course, a tragic element to this transformation. The reader is left wishing that Ivan confronted his death earlier, as this worldly satisfaction will soon be of no use to him. The end of the book also leaves open the question of the afterlife, just as Heidegger did, with the ambiguous "light" seen on his deathbed. But the transformation Ivan goes through is not one driven by the afterlife as Catholic

'last rites,' would be. Rather, the transformation is worldly, one which would have helped Ivan imbue his life with meaning had he gone on living. The book thus works as an effective persuasion piece for a Heideggerian conception of death. However, this focus on an individual story draws out a criticism that Kaufmann points out: "not all men are like Ivan Ilylich." (Kaufmann 81)

Why must awareness of death always result in anxiety? "Consider David Hume's complete lack of anxiety…or Socrates' calm in the face of death. Or the Stoic sages who, admiring Socrates, committed tranquil suicide." (Kaufmann 84) An awareness of death, even of our own, doesn't appear to always cause anxiety. And anxiety may not only result from an awareness of death. Consider Kierkegaard's view of anxiety, that "anxiety is the dizziness of freedom." (Kierkegaard 53) Could this not manifest itself and result in transformations without directly relating to my own death? Ethical concerns also arise in pushing for an awareness of one's mortality. Should we help others to live authentically by making them feel anxious about death? If so, at what age should we push for this? Additionally, an awareness of mortality and living "authentically" is not always a good thing. Consider the post-war fathers, so many of whom became emotionally distant figures in their child's lives, undoubtedly based in a forceful recognition of their own mortality. Admittedly Heidegger never officially pushed, ethically or otherwise, for this recognition. He merely claimed that if one wanted to live authentically, one must come to terms with their own death. But in stating these facts, he's at least implying such a push.

But besides these ethical and emotional critiques, a more factual one comes from the position of another existentialist, that of Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre, unlike Heidegger, believed that "death deprives life of the only kind of meaning that it might conceivably have had." (Hick 101) He does so by first establishing that death isn't the only personal experience. Just as "Dying is something which nobody can do for another," "nobody can love for me or sleep for me or breathe for me" (Kaufmann 85) either. I can live my life for the most part inauthentically, and in doing so my own personal death is of no importance to me. But life, as Sartre puts it, is "made up not only of waitings but of waitings which themselves wait for waitings." (Sartre 688) We are attached to the world through "loving this particle woman, toward my writing this particular book, toward my seeing, hearing, feeling…." (Kaufmann 85) All this waiting and potential for future

experience ties us to the world and makes death all the more destructive. For Sartre, the meaning we tie to death is not internal and personal as Heidegger thought, but external. “It is the timing of one’s death that makes all the difference when it comes to the meaning of one’s life.” (Kaufmann 86) Some deaths, like that of Sophocles, may “*resemble* a resolved chord, but will not be one.” (Hick 103) Imagine an aspiring writer dying just before his breakout success.

Sartre claims that death always threatens the series of waitings that ties us to the world. But perhaps his “always” is too pessimistic here. If one succeeds “in achieving – in the face of death, in a race with death – a project that is truly mine,” (Kaufmann 91) perhaps I have won. Alternatively, Tolstoy may still be right in thinking we can manufacture our consciousness in such a way that “one [can] live so that death cannot destroy life.” (Perrett 237) This simple life of Gerasim, one not oriented in creative pursuits and firmly situated in acceptance of mortality, seems to laugh in the face of Sartre’s theory. While Sartre or another external observer may not attribute any meaning to Gerasim’s life in the lofty sense, what does this matter in considering a satisfied and accepting one?

Last year, I thought I was going to die. Every day I was tormented by my mortality, and I found my wounds reopened by *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. What I realized was that I, in re-entering the life of the living, don’t frequently think about my mortality like I used to. Unless something reminds me of that state I was in last year, I can live my life blissfully ignorant of my death. It’s for this reason that I believe Heidegger’s intentions may never be realized. What I did begin, after that brush with my mortality, was an engagement with creative pursuits, and I suppose, as Plato would say, an attempt at immortality. But these pursuits could be cut short, as Sartre understood, and I’m in a race against the clock. Schopenhauer may be, and probably is, right about the realities of death as a return to nature, but this isn’t comforting. Creative pursuits are a better and possible way of comfort, but these do not rid us of that anxiety, of that ticking clock. The solution, as Tolstoy and I believe, is to live “so that death cannot destroy life.” (Tolstoy 430) But direct confrontation with death is not enough. We must go further.

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