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A Question of Endings

Lawrence Kimmel

Prefatory Remark

What is the nature and meaning of death? As a philosophical question, the answer is surely, as it is for every such question: "It depends." On the context of the asker, among other things: social, cultural, historical, existential...whether young or old, whether under duress or at leisure, whether in harms way or secure, whether in pain or depression or in the bloom of health. We are inclined to think of death, abstractly as well as referentially, as an event, something that happens, or as a state, something that has happened. So inclined we expect an objective response to a neutral question: one lives for a given length of time and then one dies. But there is a depth to the question of death that invites coherent resolution rather than abstract conjecture; its source is the passion of imagination rather than a measure of reason. Our most intimate concern and what makes the question both acute and deep is the awareness of the inevitability of our *own* death. It is only here that imagination fully engages the frustrating mystery and resistant logic of absolute limits. Whether the personal question of identity and destiny is foremost on an agenda of inquiry into the nature and meaning of death, it is the background of every inquiry: We would know the complete sense of our lives which includes our death. In knowing that we are going to die, it is an insistent and further need of our nature to know *what it is to die*. Death is the final paradox on the far reaches of self knowledge. This is the setting of our question, the force of our desire to know. The problem of course is that death is nothing, or rather, a something that *cannot* be known, nor can we desist from pursuing the

question. If philosophy begins in wonder, wonder comes up against the limits of its possibility in death.

I

“What kind of world is this anyway? Why not make fewer barnacle larvae and give them a decent chance?...the sea is a cup of death and the land is a stained altar stone...If an aphid lays a million eggs, several might survive...It’s a wretched system.” --Annie Dillard

Is it a wretched system? Is life a bad deal given the cost? It is, of course, the only deal so the question is moot. That doesn’t still the impulse to complain, however, or in our best days under the apple bough, to sing in our chains like the sea. A parallel to Dillard’s grievance is found in John Barth’s familiar modern myth “Night Sea Journey” in which creatures thrashing through the night sea speculate about their situation, their maker, their destiny, and their journey swimming toward some rumored distant shore. Millions die in the process, yet they keep on thrashing, occasionally crying out ‘Love!’, ‘Love!’, until the narrator at last alone, sole survivor of all who began is drawn into a rushing final surge to the shore, toward Her in whom some mindless destiny is to be fulfilled. But with his last breath he pronounces his blasphemous desire and hope that all who come after will find the grace of denial of this heritage, and so be spared the meaningless, mindless repetition that claims such carnage. The key to the mythic parable, if one is needed, is realizing that the narrator is a spermatozoon, the vital element of continuance in a drama that echoes Dillard’s conclusion: it’s a wretched system.

Barth’s message concerning oppressive cycles of suffering is an echo of the philosophical pessimism of Schopenhauer who’s recommended denial of the will is an acknowledged poor second alternative given in the counsel of Silenus:

‘Better not to have been born at all!’ Compared with the anguish of being alive the stillness and oblivion of death seems a consummation devoutly to be wished. While Schopenhauer finds the system no less wretched than Dillard, Nietzsche’s rejection of the pessimism of his teacher offers a more positive view of the matter: while acknowledging that Nature is extravagant in its waste, he celebrates the glory and abundant fecundity of life.

Familiar expressions in both Hebraic and Greek scriptures record the cycles of human life from a god’s eye view:

As for man, his days are as grass. As a flower of the field, so he flourishes. For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and the place thereof shall know it no more.

(Old Testament, Psalm 103)

As is the life of the leaves, so is that of men. The wind scatters the leaves to the ground: the vigorous forest puts forth others, and they grow in the spring season. Soon one generation of men comes and another ceases.

(Iliad, Book VI)

Whether lament, anger, or exultation, whether recorded in naturalistic or poetic terms, the human response to this dissolute cycle of life and death in which animals feed on animals, brothers murder brothers, and all living things are consumed in death, has found expression from the earliest literature in which rage and sorrow speak to the cost of life in death, and particularly of the consciousness of death in life. The very horror of the spectacle that Dillard depicts along with the inevitable sentence foreseen by everyman is a common occasion for the pretence that it is not there. Literature on the other hand, as exemplified by Dillard’s remark, has made a tradition of assembling reminders that it

is there, seeking to discover especially in the sacrificial lives of men and dying gods, not a justification of the system, but some semblance of meaning in our subjection to it.

‘*In the beginning* God created heaven and earth... formed man of the dust of the earth, and breathed into him the breath of life...’ The codicil however, is ‘...dust thou art and unto dust return.’ So goes the story in a few short chapters of *Genesis*: beginning and end, non-being-to-non-being, earth-to-earth. So told, the life of man is but a dust that stirs, and settles. But what interests us most in this telling is what happens east of Eden among the residuals of creation suffering the ensuing curse of death. In violating the conditions of Eden Man gains knowledge of good and evil in innocence overcome, but at what terrible price? In the moment of negotiation with the serpent everything is changed: the wages of existence are now suffering and death. Once this story is told, the simple passage of being into non-being becomes intolerable. For better or worse, the narrative is no longer God’s but Man’s. God’s occasional voice eventually becomes silent, and there remains only the sound of creatures bound to the seasons of the earth. The problem of Adam in Eden that spawns the temporality of the earth-born frames the consciousness of human existence. The ensuing riddle of death is without final resolution, or perhaps death is the final resolution—not an answer, simply an end to the question. Part of the point of the story of Eden is that Man chose death (albeit in the promise of the knowledge of good and evil). The literature of human culture has in a sense been a troubled discernment of just what it is that was chosen.

The question of death pervades the arts; and its most powerful expressions leave the question open. Typical of the *Vanitas* tradition of the late 19th and early 20th centuries by painters like Felicien Rops, Max Klinger and Paul Cesar Helleu is a picture of a beautiful woman in a ball gown at a vanity table before a mirror. Our first impression is to be drawn into the beauty of the woman, but a second perception

shifts to a larger gestalt of the whole painting—a boney skull of death. A rabbit/duck shift in perspective, only here the elision in perception is beauty/death. This graphic paradox of death in life allows us to make inferences about beauty and brevity, construct interpretations about vanity and time, but there is no answer, really—only the question of death remains in the silence of the frame. There is fullness to the silence of death yoked with beauty—a visual analogue to the poet’s lament that...after many a summer/ dies the swan.

Death, wherever, however, and whenever it occurs is the boundary of consciousness and life, and in the ordinary discourse of life we are at a loss about the meaning of such absolute limits. On further reflection and for the individual concerned, the limit of consciousness is only a question mark. I am the whole of my existence, but most of all I am this particular, acute consciousness independent of whatever descriptions or prescriptions befall the accoutrements of my body. Beyond this there is nothing—or rather, it is a nothing consciousness cannot assimilate.

Consciousness, common to every human life, nonetheless has stages. Eden is the world of childhood, a time of forever in which nobody dies. East of Arcadia however, is the fateful world of choice caught in the grip of the paradox of life in death/ death in life that has been the passion of creative imagination in world literature. If love is the primal energy of literature, death is the crucible in which it is formed—the ground, limit, and full stop of inquiries into the meaning of life. In the metabolism of nature we can trace the life energy of leaves back to the branches, through the trunk to the roots and to the earth, which itself is the fecund remains of leaf, branch, trunk and root that sustain the cycle of life from death, earth to earth. The woods decay and weep their burden to the earth, and the earth yields new life. We can track the mystery of this cycle, but the hiatus of consciousness remains a mystery unto itself.

II

Wisdom yields perhaps only the words and worlds of old men, in which no child believes, just as the child has hopes and fears the old can no longer remember. It is well to remind ourselves that as there are stages in the perception in life, so too are there stages in the perception of death. Youth is endowed with an aggressive energy in which passion engages competition and is fulfilled in production and possession. The fires are banked in the aged, who more passively accept and appreciate the passing occurrences of life. If death means nothing to the child, it means only risk for the young. Living with death is a gradual learning of age that brings refinement of perception as diminished compensation for loss. This is to say that there are different ways of dying as well as living and different perspectives on both relative to stages in life and positions in culture. The modern European dies no more than lives in the way of his ancestors. There may be an interest in an analysis of historical differences along with differences among living cultures, but here the point is only to mark the fact that it is so.

Fictive literature which celebrates differences also seeks to discern in each concrete instance of difference an intuition of universal meaning, under the presumption that whatever lies beyond the bourn from which no traveler returns, we are all joined as fellow travelers. 'Never send to know for whom the bell tolls...' is a poetic conceit within a particular culture, but a sound can be found in every culture to announce the meaning of this measured inevitability. Consciousness is the sustaining current of human existence, but however we choose to live or die we are creatures caught in the web of time, and we know it in our most intimate and alone moments.

There is a story, possibly apocryphal, of a last conversation between Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein as her life

companion was lying in bed dying of stomach cancer. Gertrude asked quietly “Alice...Alice...what is the answer?” Her friend replied. “I don’t know, Gertrude.” Later, Gertrude spoke again, more faintly: “Alice...what is the *question*?” Stein, philosophical to the end was also plain to a fault, and there is no reason to think this was not a genuine question— a question she puts to herself: it is a question that is an answer which remains a question. Inquiring into the question of death, we need less an answer—or what is surely the case, many answers—than a deep and sustained reflection on the question. But what *is* the question? What are we asking, to whom, and why? Judging from the diversity of the literature on death, there is no general answer and perhaps no single question in the asking. The rule in philosophy that one should never attempt to answer a question until she fully understands the question applies here.

There is a line from scripture in the liturgical music of the Mass: “Be not afraid...for I am with you always...” It is a line that may or may not carry the weight of promise and reassurance for anyone hearing it. Some in the congregation will hear the words as syllables sung to a familiar tune, but there will be someone at Mass for whom these words will be personal, intense, and utterly necessary. We are each at different places in our lives and worlds, and not everything makes sense or is meaningful independently, and just so. The same is surely true about any script, any question, any answer, including and perhaps especially the question of death. Death is not a question, or not in question for a child, and though it may become a pressing question for those in harms way or the very old, it may or may not be framed in pain, sorrow or terror. If there exists no neutral context in which to put this question, what philosophical inquiry is possible? In an earlier essay in volume one of this series I analyzed the idea that death is nothing, in the sense that it is not a possible experience in one’s life. People die, of course, and death is a meaningful word, but to understand the

limiting concept requires a comprehensive view of the many disciplines and discourses which surround it, and in its various contexts of use. What is death? Is there one question here or a thousand? And, in philosophical terms, to whom but ourselves do we put the question? And in which case, what is it we don't know in our asking? The most general and pointed response seems to be that my ultimate concern is not with *your* death, or anyone's death, but my own: this is the question the meaning of which I want to understand.

A philosophical investigation of the question begins by allowing the question to take hold of imagination. So understood the question of death—my death—is such that theoretical investigation is irrelevant, and if speculation is idle, how do we proceed? Wittgenstein recommends as a test and corrective to vacuous philosophical questions that we first ask ourselves: Why am I asking the question? What don't I know? What do I want? If the question is genuine, then what is it that I am fearful or hopeful about that this question may bring to the surface? Such are the issues, confronting us, I think. Perhaps the question of death can only be personal, and it will be personal in different ways for the same person in different circumstances, and at different stages of her life. It may be useful at this juncture to point out that the appeal and force of fictive literature is to find in such personal moments and concrete circumstances, intuitions that will resonate with emotional and spiritual needs and perceptions that transcend their individual expression. If this is so, it is appropriate for our purposes to draw on the non-theoretical, non-explanatory discourse that has addressed itself to the issue of death from the beginnings of human thought. The approach of literature to such questions comes in the form of an invitation to share in the experience of the writer. Like the question of faith, a response to the intimacy of death is more like bearing witness to feelings and shared perspective than that of discovering or reporting some independent truth. The

understanding we want requires the engagement, then, of creative imagination. Thought, in the absence of imagination is abstraction; imagination is experiential. If death as the limiting frame of consciousness is not a possible experience, our only resource of understanding is imagination, which again confirms the domain of philosophical inquiry. But, still, if there is no possible experience, what is it I am then to imagine? I can imagine being a bug, a rock, a plant, an angel—indeed familiar characters in literature—but in every case to so imagine is to attribute consciousness to the thing I become: consciousness is a necessary condition of intelligibility in such imaginative metamorphosis. Each of these is an experiential possibility through imagination, so exists as possibility in a way which imagining my death does not.

III

Confronting one's own death in imagination is a signature issue in existential literature, expressed as a confrontation with nothingness. Sartre's philosophical analysis of this confrontation may seem contrived, but contextual descriptions in his fiction are remarkable in their intuitional disclosures. The arts in general may present our best opportunity to inquire into the question of death in the full openness of imagination. In the philosophical novel—Dostoevsky, Tolstoi, Proust—the nature of death often becomes transparent within the complex personal relationships among characters over the space of the novel. Poetry strives for a greater intimacy of expression in framing a concrete image, metaphor, or analogy—following an intuition of the sort, for example, that in the nothingness of death, the mind seems drawn into the density and darkness of what is observed in space as a Black Hole. In its death throes, a star it implodes upon itself to become a darkness so dense that it absorbs all passing light, and from which no light escapes. The blackness is not empty but fully imploded

space, a complete condensation of light, hence the paradox: the color of light is black. On analogy with death, there can be no experience of this, no inside looking out, it is an enigma: whatever we learn of it is by analogy, inference, indirection, and the expressions of metaphor. The imaginative experience of death, on this analogy, is being drawn into the density of such darkness, a conception of consciousness imploding on itself. My example is a pale analytic of the dramatic force of poetic discourse, obviously, but perhaps the point will be clear anyhow.

It is the special province of the poetic imagination to capture the acute intimacy of death in such condensed form. The philosophical difficulty consists in the extremity of the margins of experience—a problem of sense: it is less the strangeness of the unknown than the inaccessibility of the unknowable. As death is an impossible experience, what is the imagination to lock onto, in trading off knowledge for understanding? There are apparently no limits to the creative impulse of the arts, with the understanding that the resulting expressions at best yield sense, not truth—or if truth, then it is a truth of the heart immune from verification. An alternative within literature to the condensed crystallization of emotion in poetic metaphor is found, for example, in Tolstoy's *Ivan Illich*, which investigates the emotional response of an individual to the awareness of impending death, describing anxiety, denial, regret, anger, fear, humiliation...and final acceptance. This is a painful and moving portrait of an individual life approaching its end, an examination of the life-consciousness of an individual person as he resists the gradual realization that he is dying.

In either case, in life and in literature, the problem of imagination concerning death itself, the inner sense of the reality of it, remains. I can imagine dying, the process, but it is another kind of logic required to imagine being dead. It is clearly possible to imagine my family, my colleagues and friends, the university, etc. going on (as it will) without me. But imagining this with the emotional import of experience,

entails that I become a spectator. The content of this image is held in my continued perception of things. I can imagine being killed, but again consciousness continues even as my body is broken to pieces amid the disintegrating wreckage of the airplane.

There are two related ideas that we are contending with: death as end—of life, of consciousness; and death as a limit—of understanding, of consciousness

In the *First Critique*, Kant argues or rather simply acknowledges that at a certain point reason comes up against its own limits. In discussing the *antinomies*, and later distinguishing the phenomenal and noumenal, Kant outlines the incorrigible and absolute limits of the understanding. For example on the question of the beginning of existence—the juncture of nothing/ then something—we are inclined several contradictory ways—that something must have existed always, as against the impossibility of a beginning *ex nihilo*; but then we are left with the idea of infinite time—indeed that a infinite period of time has already elapsed. We are impelled to make claims that cannot be established, confronted by equally plausible and contradictory claims that are equally indeterminate, yet there must be an answer. It is natural and compelling for human beings to want a rational picture of the world and of human existence that is understandable. But it is also clear that knowledge cannot satisfy that need. Kant waxes uncharacteristically eloquent and resorts to metaphor in this section of the *First Critique*, in which he pictures sensibility as an island surrounded by the raging seas of unintelligibility, filled only with illusions of a distant shore.

Kant's conclusion and counsel is that we simply abandon the attempt to see the universe as a whole, *sub specie aeternitatis*. The absolute limits of reason with respect to the existence of the universe in time and space, are analogous, of course to the absolute limits of consciousness, with respect to individual in life and death. As death is a limit to life and experience, it is also a limit to understanding. I cannot

comprehend my existence from outside my existence, so imagination must find other resources for understanding these limits. Kierkegaard gives an existential twist to the same point, speaking of the absurdity of the mind trying to think what cannot be thought. He has in mind not only the transcendental conceits of Hegel, but of the ordinary human being confronting her own existence, aspiring to know what is not within the domain of knowledge. Kierkegaard's philosophical argument cites the additional modality and movement of faith which opens the possibility not for rational understanding, but for existential resolution. The force of this suggestion is the idea that the question of death is an appeal not to thought and reason, but to imagination and passion, and can be answered only in the paradox life. Pascal has a similar view in his insistence that the heart has reasons which reason does not know. Such resolution is committed to the idea that existence is more fundamental than knowledge and that the total human consciousness is not comprehended in reason, but finds extension in imagination.

IV

But what does it mean to say that the answer to the question of death as an absolute limit cannot be answered in thought, only in the living experience of imagination? It seems we once again come full circle to where we began, with a question within a question. And having made this circle, what more do we understand about our own death? It is hardly enlightening to say we can only live in the imaginative experience our own death. Even that is a confusing way to put it. At most it returns us once again to the surrogate domain of fictive literature which makes experience of other lives possible within creative imagination, and provides the resource of metaphor to bridge if not transcend the antinomies of reason.

Heidegger's concept of human being as being unto death, requires—in order to become fully alive—that the individual cease the pretence of anonymity with respect to death. To acknowledge that “one dies”, is for Heidegger a way of putting oneself and others at ease about death. He cites Tolstói's account in *Ivan Ilyich* as exemplary of the idea that it is only in confronting the reality of one's own death that one becomes fully alive, authentically human. Heidegger insists that anxiety is a necessary mode of realization that discovers the meaning of life in the concrete particularity and consciousness of one's own death. However, it is not clear that crisis is a requisite condition of realization either of one's own death, or of authentic existence. If Plato's account is to be believed, the death of Socrates shows no anxiety in confronting death; his calm demeanor is possibly explained as philosophically distanced, but the particularity of the circumstances attests to genuine courage and argues against the anonymity of death.

Sartre, opposing Heidegger's idea of being unto death, and so the notion that it is death that gives meaning to life, insists rather that death is that which on principle removes all meaning from life. Sartre is struck instead by the determinations of chance at the heart of every project, and the heart of chance is the variable if inevitable fact that death may at any point reduce human potential and possibility to absurdity. At still another positive extreme, Holderlin, in his poem *To the Fates*, provides a poetic affirmation that requires neither definitive knowledge or supplemental assurance, such that a single summer that ripens into a single autumn in the accomplishment of the hearts project is enough to welcome the stillness of the shadow world: having once lived like the gods in the fullness of life's power, nothing more is needed. In this case, death is welcomed soberly, not from pain, not in anxiety, not with resentment, or in the expectation of any promise of transcendence, but in simple gratitude for the fullness of life.

Images and metaphors of death in literature are of course drawn from life however we may try to extend them beyond that source. In addition to the variability of individual and cultural values that make death a litany of differences, it should also be noted that the modern temper is constituted in a radically secular age that lacks anything resembling genuine conviction in immortality. However many among us may be given to a rhetoric and profession of hope in eternity, the operational values that serve as the currency of culture attest to the fact that death is a wall not a window to eternity. No longer conceiving of life against a background of eternity, time becomes foreshortened in death, and the density of individuated experiences become proxy for an extenuation of life. As death is not a passing through time into eternity, it becomes, in the temper of the age, a truncated occasion for sensuous moments that sustain immediacy.

Images of death in the visual arts have remained variable in symbolic depiction, both allegorical and realistic—the hooded figure with scythe, sand sifting through the hour glass, the carnage of war, the putrefied corpse. The world of art is graced with exemption from argument or explanation and free from the expectation of closure. In the power of its expression death remains an open and elemental question within the mystery of creation.

As a child during the great world war my first recollection of death was abstract and distant. Later, engaged as a participant in another war, death became commonplace and immediate. Much later, disengaged as a reluctant witness to nightly television coverage of yet another war, I learned yet another aspect of death. . Death at a remove in war, however real, remains an abstract thing. Even as a child listening to the hushed voices of the women as they gathered around the radio at night to hear news of the war, I sensed but not did not understand the fear of death that held them in bondage. Many years later, asking my young children to leave the room as the television gloried in the continuing trauma of body-counts in a despised war; the numbers alone

mutated the visceral reality of death. In war itself, killing fields scatter carnage in a routine that deadens the heart and numbs the brain to the reality of death. At 70 years of age, after suffering a heart attack, two spinal surgeries, open-heart surgery and the loss of many close friends and family, it is not difficult to remember the many different and shifting perspectives of death that have been part of my own journey in life. We learn of death in a thousand different ways as we walk through the valley of shadows; it is never the same.

If a child is lucky, her first intimate sense of the reality of death for may come from the loss of a pet. My first born was 5 years old when he first encountered death. We had two alligators adopted from his Montessori pre-school when the teacher that owned them moved away. The Caymans were named Joe and Sally. We had them for almost a year when one morning I heard Bret cry out, and I went to find him staring in anguish into the tank where Sally was floating belly up. As a single parent with two small children, whom I had to get to day-care and pre-school before I went to meet my first class of the day, I said that we must take Sally out of the tank, and bury her in the back yard by the fence. I wrapped Sally in a cloth, got a shovel and went with two boys ages 5 and 3 out to the back of our property to bury Sally. The three year old said that Sally would not like the dirt, that she couldn't breathe, and we should get a box for her. The 5 year old was still in tears, grieving. I felt the need to come up with some explanation for all this. Unfortunately I decided on the abstract account, that nothing in the universe is ever destroyed, only transference of matter and energy. Sally, in the earth would become the life energy to sustain other life. It seemed like a good story and we all went on to our day. More than a year later, I was awakened in the night by the crying of one of the children. I went into their bedroom and found Bret waking from a nightmare. I asked what was wrong, and in the grip of a painful anxiety he replied "I don't want to die". I explained that I, his father would live for many, many years, and then eventually I

would die, and then he would live on for many, many years, so he had nothing to worry about right now. That, again, seemed, albeit from a not very intelligent adult perspective, reasonable reassurance. I asked, “Now, what is it you are really afraid of?” and he said, in tearful misery: “I don’t want to become a Banana plant.” It took a moment to remember that the place we had buried Sally almost two years before was beneath some banana trees. In retrospect, I should probably have told him that Sally had died and had gone to live with Jesus in heaven.

The point of this story is about telling stories, and perhaps acknowledging differences in perception, including the limits of a child at a concrete operational stage of development. But the larger point is there is always and only a story to be told and it is a critical question to ask who will be able to understand a particular telling. It is hard to imagine a master narrative that that will clarify, much less answer the question of death for everyone.

Recall that Aristotle accounts for life in terms of the form of the soul: the living plant has a nutritive soul, the animal an animate soul, the human being a rational soul. When we remark that only human being die, we mean, of course, that we are the creatures who know we are going to die, it pervades our living. Death comes not only to the Archbishop but to the humble peasant. Animals also are killed and die out, their life forms disintegrating into the aether. What stories of death comprehend the whole of life—of plants, of animals, of mountains, no less than of Man? This question brings us full circle and back through Dillard to the point of the terrible intimacy of our bargain with life—in the realization that the end of every story is the uncertain truth that death holds dominion. The story of your own life, the life you are living—that within which you are a character just as you are the narrator that sustains the world of that character—comes to an end and trails off. As I *am* my world and my life the world of my consciousness, there is a critical sense in which the world ends in my dying.

In our allotment of time, and within the literature and litanies of death, we search for expressions of this final and mysterious intimacy in which we are all brought together, but

Voices only falter in failing light,
Drawn into tides and winds of night,
Bleed into resounding grave
Where mind and calling meet
In the bleak morning gray.

In death, there are no final answers only continuing questions, no theories that yield truth, only stories that search out sense, only the grace of creative imagination that sustains the meaning of our lives within death's limit. And that, as Joyce reminds us, is the he and the she of it.

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