

The Phenomenon of Death and Dying

A Meditation on My Mortality

The difference between all things is life.
What all things have in common is death.

Lizi: “Yangzhu”¹

Der Tod ist kein Ereignis des Lebens.
Den Tod erlebt man nicht.

Wittgenstein: *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*²

I

Human beings have been confronting the mystery of death since the dawn of humankind. The Mesopotamian myth, *the Epic of Gilgamesh*, is perhaps the oldest recorded human effort to struggle for an acceptance of the inevitability of mortality.³ For Western culture there was a time before civilization when death did not belong to human beings. Hesiod, in *Works and Days*, ascribes the coming of death through the misdeeds of Prometheus and Epimetheus and the presence of a woman, Pandora.⁴ Conversely, in the myth of the golden race men were “far from all ills, they feasted happily, death came to them as sleep.”⁵ As compared to the later race of iron, which was destined to toil unceasingly and to die in grief, the golden race feared

¹ 列子〈楊朱篇〉：「萬物所異者生也，所同者死也。」

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, 6.4311, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978, p. 113.

³ See G. S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971, pp. 132-152.

⁴ “Before this time men lived upon the earth apart from sorrow and from painful work, free from disease, which brings the Death-gods in. But now the woman opened up the cask and scattered pains and evils among men. [...] The earth is full of evils, and the sea. Diseases come to visit men by day and, uninvited, come again at night.” Hesiod, *Works and Days*, trans. Dorothea Wender, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973, pp. 61-62.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62

no death in the land of happiness. In the Christian tradition, death came to humankind because of sin. Eternal life was meant for human beings, but because of one man's disobedience, the tree of life was barred from humans forever. It was only through the resurrection of Jesus Christ that human beings were again promised true life. "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all made alive."⁶ The major Western philosophical and religious reflections on death were developed against these ancient Greek and Hebrew backgrounds. Death was seen as an evil and consequently the earthly life is not worth living. Theognis of Megara lamented the futility of life in the sixth century BCE as follows:

For man the best thing is never to be born,
 Never to look upon the hot sun's rays,
 Next best, to speed at once through Hades' gates
 And lie beneath a piled-up heap of earth.⁷

There is, however, a striking difference between the Western and the Chinese culture regarding the view on death. The ancient Chinese did not share Theognis's pessimistic view on life. Ancient Chinese culture knows neither a creation myth nor a God as creator of the universe. Death and life were always seen as parts of nature, like night and day, like *yin* and *yang*.⁸ As such death was taken for granted and accepted as a fact of life. Human being is born to live and to die. There is a strong emphasis on the high value of earthly life. For the ancient Chinese, there was no interest in the immortality of the soul or a paradise after death. Instead, prolongation of life was preferred. Not to die and to stay alive forever was the wish of many emperors and later of the religious Daoists. However, it is surely not true that the Chinese did not meditate on the meaning of death. To come to terms with the ultimate end of life is certainly the major tasks of any philosophy.

⁶ *I Corinthians*, 15:22

⁷ Theognis, *Elegies*, trans. Dorothea Wender, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973, p. 111.

⁸ See Ying-Shih Yu, "'O Soul, Come back!' A Study in the Changing Conceptions of the Soul and Afterlife in Pre-Buddhist China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 47 (1987). Yu cites Joseph Needham: "If one bears in mind the conceptions of different peoples (Indo-Iranian, Christian, Islamic, etc.) there was no such thing as an 'other world' in ancient Chinese thought at all—no heaven or hell, no creator God, and no expected end of the universe once it had emerged from primeval chaos. All was natural, and within Nature. Of course, after the permeation of Buddhism, 'the case was altered'." p. 381.

I too, like all other human beings, know that I must die. But my anxiety over death is not so much about the reason why I must die but rather when I shall die. Perhaps *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was the first ancient text that spelled out this haunting fate to the human consciousness for the next few millennia: “When the Anunnaki, the judges, come together, and Mammetun the mother of destinies, together they decree the fates of men. Life and death they allot but the day of death they do not disclose.”⁹ Hence *mors certa, hora incerta*. This uncertain certainty is therefore the most pressing problem for all philosophical meditations on death.

But how can this certainty of death and the uncertainty of its timing be the theme of philosophical reflection? I must first know what death is before it can be thematized. But as Wittgenstein tells us, death is no event of life. We have no experience of death. Epicurus has saved us from the fear of death by announcing that death is nothing to us, because “so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist. It does not then concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more.”¹⁰ And Confucius teaches us that “not knowing about life, how can we know about death.”¹¹ I have no knowledge of death. All I know about death is its negative meaning: death is not life; it is the ending of life. Hence all the fear about death is not really death itself but the fear of no longer being alive. The stoic Epictetus clearly explains the reason of man’s fear of death. “What disturbs men’s minds is not events, but their judgements on events. For instance, death is nothing dreadful, or else Socrates would have thought it so. No, the only dreadful thing about it is men’s judgement that it is dreadful.”¹² Neither thought nor experience of death in itself is possible.

The notion of death comes from the experience of worldly events: we take news about death in natural disasters or in accidents for granted; we know that many people die in hospitals everyday because of various diseases; we read literature in which death is part of the plot and we enjoy films about murder or war. Even if we do not have an

⁹ *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. N. K. Sandars, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960, p. 107.

¹⁰ Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus,” in Whitney J. Oates ed., *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, New York: Random House, 1940, p. 31.

¹¹ Confucius, *The Analects*, 11:11 「未知生，焉知死。」

¹² Epictetus, “The Manual,” chapter V in Whitney J. Oates, *op. cit.*, p. 469.

interest in news or films, death is still commonly present in everyday life. The fish or beefsteak of our dinner reminds us that these animals were once alive and had to die so as to become our food. Cemeteries are places where dead people are buried. The names on the graves tell us that they were once people of flesh and blood. They have existed once like ourselves but they are no longer there. The tablet in front of the catholic cemetery in Happy Valley, Hong Kong reveals a simple but thrilling truth: “Today my corpse comes back to its original earth, some other day your body will do the same.”¹³

The awakening of knowing my own death cannot be an intuition simply because death is no experience. I cannot deduce from the syllogism that since all men are mortal and I am a man therefore I am mortal, because the major premise: “All men are mortal” is not a self-evident truth. As long as I am still living and there are millions of living people around me this statement is not necessarily true. The meaning of this syllogism is not logical but existential only when I am facing the pending threat of the possibility of my own death. However, it is not at all clear that one can really accept one’s own mortality. Leo Tolstoy’s *Ivan Ilyich* is perhaps one of the most vivid literary descriptions of knowing the existential meaning of this syllogism.¹⁴ It is indeed most painful for Ivan Ilyich to recognize that he is no exception from Caius, who is mortal according to the syllogism. “And Caius was certainly mortal, and it was right for him to die; but for me, little Vanya, Ivan Ilyich, with all my thoughts and emotions—it’s a different matter altogether. It cannot be that I ought to die. This would be too terrible.”¹⁵

Of course, Ivan Ilyich’s attitude towards death is the most ordinary one, not just among Western people but also among Chinese. The insight of psychoanalysis agrees on a general denial of death. Freud wrote as early as 1915, in “Our attitude towards Death,” about the phenomenon of this ambivalence of accepting one’s own death:

[...] we were of course prepared to maintain that death was the necessary outcome of life, that everyone owes nature a death and must expect to pay the debt—in short, that death was natural,

¹³ 「今夕吾軀歸故土，他朝君體也相同」

¹⁴ See esp. chapter 6, Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960, pp. 137-140. Heidegger’s existential analysis of death is clearly influenced by Tolstoy. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Tuebingen: Max Niemeyer, 1976, p. 254n.

¹⁵ Tolstoy, *ibid.*, p. 137.

undeniable and unavoidable. In reality, however, we were accustomed to behave as if it were otherwise...It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators. Hence the psycho-analytic school could venture on the assertion that at bottom no one believes in his own death, or, to put the same thing in another way, that in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality.¹⁶

What Freud describes about people's disbelief in their mortality is the vulgar inauthentic understanding of death, which later becomes a central problem of Heidegger's *Daseinsanalysis*. Other people die and I shall die too, but not now, and in the future I can perhaps survive death by the advancement of medical science. Death is not my business right now and I do not want anything to do with it. According to Philippe Aries, Death has become "shameful and forbidden"¹⁷ in the contemporary world. Death should not be discussed in social environment. Aries explains this "new sentiment characteristic of modernity": "One must avoid—no longer for the sake of the dying person, but for society's sake, for the sake of those close to the dying person—the disturbance and the overly strong and unbearable emotion caused by the ugliness of dying and by the very presence of death in the midst of a happy life, for it is henceforth given that life is always happy or should always seem to be so."¹⁸ Although death is encountered every day in news and media, it is indirect and hidden from everyday life. Compared to the practice before the 20th century, "One no longer died at home in the bosom of one's family, but in the hospital, alone."¹⁹ Death has become a taboo and as such it should not be seen and experienced directly. It has become an external objective event.

Hence if death has become only an objective event which has no concern for me, does it then mean that I can think death away? If I can never experience death directly, how can I philosophize on a non-phenomenon? To recall Epicurus once again: Death is nothing to us.

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death," in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, London: The Hogarth Press, 1957, p. 289.

¹⁷ Philippe Aries, *Western Attitudes toward Death*, trans. Patricia M. Ranum, Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974, p. 85.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Why should I bother to think about this nothingness? What is the meaning of any philosophical reflection on death? How can I come to understand the phenomenon of death? Is a phenomenology of death and dying possible?

II

“Death, it seems to me, is in fact nothing other than the separation of two things, the soul and the body, from each other.”²⁰ This assertion of Plato is clearly a positive answer to Socrates’s agnostic attitude toward death in the *Apology*: Death is either a dreamless sleep or a transmigration to other places.²¹ Based on the conviction that death is nothing but the soul separating from the body, Plato determined the Western metaphysic of death and the meaning of philosophy for the next two millennia: Philosophy is the preparation for death. Plato, in the speech ascribed to Socrates, proclaimed the religious significance of philosophy in *Phaedo*: “That a man who has truly spent his life in philosophy has good reason to be confident when he is about to die, and to be of good hope that when life is over he will secure very great blessings; [...] that all those who betake themselves to philosophy in the right way are engaged in one thing only, namely training themselves for dying and being dead.”²² Philosophy is the purification of the tainted soul, so that when one dies, the purified soul will leave the body to enter the realm of the universal. Hence, death is no longer to be feared and indeed it is to be welcomed, because death, instead of the end of life, is in reality the beginning of the true life.

This concept of the immortality of the soul, which later combined with the Christian idea of the after-life, has been the most important idea for Western culture. Of course, despite the fact that the message of Jesus Christ lies in his resurrection of the bodily existence and nowhere in the Bible can immortality of the soul be found, this Platonic idea that death is only the soul (*psyche* or *spiritus*) departing the body has penetrated into the mentality of Western people for many hundred

²⁰ Plato, *Gorgias*, 524a, trans. Terence Irwin, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, p.103.

²¹ See Plato, *Apology*, 40c, trans. Thomas G. West, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979, p. 47.

²² Plato, *Phaedo*, 64a, trans. R. Hackforth, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972, p. 41.

years.²³ Life does not end in death. Death is only a stage of change. With the help of philosophy and religion, death is overcome. I should believe that the death of my beloved ones means only a momentary separation from them. Our souls will be meeting again in another space and time when my death comes. Bereavement is a temporary sorrow.

Major philosophers in the history of Western philosophy are in general believers of Plato. Descartes's *sum cogitans*, established as the indubitable ground of truth in the *Second Meditation*, is the rational demonstration of the immaterial essence of the mind against the body. Hence it requires no further proof that the mind, because of its very essence, is immortal.²⁴ "A free man thinks of nothing less than death, and his wisdom is a meditation not of death but of life."²⁵ With this statement, Spinoza is echoing what Plato has said about death. He explains further: "A free man, that is, one who lives according to the dictate of reason alone, is not led by the fear of death, but directly desires what is good."²⁶ The important task of a free man, a philosopher, is to contemplate with reason the good, the eternal and the universal. Thus there is no place for any concern for the finitude of human existence. Kant, though realizing the weakness of the rational arguments for immortality, nevertheless stresses that immortality of the soul is necessary for the achievement of the highest good. Kant's moral argument for immortality was first advanced in the *Critique of Pure Reason* as a "postulate of practical reason": happiness and virtue do not correspond in this life, though reason demands that they should; for although happiness is attainable in this world, virtue is really attainable only if there is infinite progress, hence there must be another life. Kant says with confidence: "The situation is quite different with moral faith [...]. Here the purpose is inescapably established and—according to all the insight I have—only a single condition is possible under which this purpose coheres with the entirety of all purposes and thereby has

²³ For an excellent study of the idea of death in the West, see Philippe Aries, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981.

²⁴ The change of the title from the first edition of Descartes's *Meditations* of 1641 to the second edition of 1642 clearly shows the belief in the immortality of the mind if it is ontologically separated from the body. Initially it read: *Meditationes: in qua Dei existentia et animae immortalitas demonstratur*; then it was changed to *Meditationes: in quibus Dei existentia et animae humanae a corpore distinctio demonstratur*.

²⁵ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Prop. LXVII, trans. Andrew Boyle, London: Everyman, 1993, p. 183.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

practical validity, viz., the condition that there is a God and a future world. I also know with complete certainty that no one else is acquainted with other conditions that lead to the same unity of purposes under the moral law.”²⁷ Even the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, believes only in the death of the empirical ego. The transcendental ego is immortal because it is neither born, nor does it die.²⁸

I do not have to go through the list of the past great Western philosophers to give me the metaphysical comfort of death. Indeed there are ample philosophical arguments to explain the fear of death away. Death is either, in the Epicurean tradition, nothing, because when death comes, life vanishes completely; or in the Platonic school, death is the release of the soul/mind from the body. In either case, death is seen to be something external to the essence of life itself. The fear of death is ungrounded because of our ignorance of the nature of life and of the mind. The phenomenon of death has no mystery.

But am I sure that the certainty of this knowledge of death is the answer to my fear of it? Has Socrates not warned the Greeks of the *hubris* of claiming knowledge of the unknowable? In the *Apology* he asks: “For to fear death, men, is nothing other than to seem to be wise, but not to be so. For it is to seem to know what one does not know: no one knows whether death does not happen to be the greatest of all goods for the human being; but they fear it as though they knew well it is the greatest of evil.”²⁹ Socrates’s agnostic attitude is well justified, because for him, believing that “there is nothing bad for a good man, whether living or dead, and that the gods are not without care for his trouble”³⁰ is only faith but not knowledge. Thus he can have no fear of impending death.

In contrast to the Greek and Judeo-Christian tradition, the ancient Chinese considered death not as a punishment but a natural event. There was never a gruesome and morbid picture of death. Because the Platonic ontological distinction of *psyche* and *soma* was absent in the Chinese thought, the idea of the immortality of the soul was never an issue of interest. David Keightley rightly points out the difference between the ancient Chinese and other civilizations:

²⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B856, trans. Werner S. Pluhar, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996, pp.752-753.

²⁸ See Francoise Dastur, *Death: An Essay on Finitude*, London: Athlone, 1996, p. 10.

²⁹ Plato, *Apology*, 29a, p. 35.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 41c, p. 48.

Given the lack of divine animus, of immanent man-god hostility, it was natural that death in China should not have been regarded as an affront to mortals to the degree that it was in Mesopotamia and Greece; rather it was part of the inevitable and harmonious order.³¹

The Daoist Zhuangzi was the champion in explaining that death is only the transformation of things and that therefore, death is natural. No other ancient Chinese philosopher said so much about death as he did. Zhuangzi says: “Life and death are destined, just like the eternal succession of day and night—a natural course of events. Men do not have the power to control it; this is true of everything in the world.”³² If death is merely a natural event, then any fear of death is meaningless. The important thing is the attitude of life facing this inevitability. He elaborates:

Life is the succession to death and death is the beginning of life. No one knows exactly the regular patterns for both. The birth of a man is the convergence of the vital energy, which in turn forms life. The breaking-up of the vital energy causes death. If life and death are closely related to each other, why then should I worry about death? Therefore, all things in the world are in the same circle of life and death.³³

Understanding that “a timely coming and a natural departure have nothing to do with joy or sorrow”³⁴ is Zhuangzi’s answer to the problem of death. Once again, death is the destiny of my natural existence and it is beyond my control. I have to accept this in apathy, because joy and sorrow over life and death indicate only my ignorance of the Dao. However, is it really true that Zhuangzi has no fear of suffering and of death? Does all the “wisdom” of death written in so many places in his

³¹ David Keightley, “Early Civilization in China: Reflections on How it Became Chinese,” quoted in Roger T. Ames, “Death as Transformation in Classical Daoism,” in Jeff Malpas & Robert Solomon ed., *Death and Philosophy*, London & New York: Routledge, 1998, pp. 60-61.

³² *Zhuangzi*, Chapter 6, “The Most Venerable Teacher,” trans. Wang Rongpei, Changsha: Hunan People’s Publishing House, 1999, p. 93.

³³ *Ibid.*, Chapter 22, “Knowledge Travels North,” p. 363.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Chapter 3, p. 47.

book show exactly the reverse? Was it not peace with death but the suffering of life and the anxiety of death that was the impetus for Zhuangzi to think life and death through? He says:

Once we assume the human bodily form, we keep this form till the end of our lives. By either confronting or conforming to the world, we race through our life in a gallop that nothing can stop. Isn't it sad indeed! We toil all our lives without seeing our accomplishment; we wear ourselves out without knowing our purpose. Isn't it sorrowful indeed! What's the use even if we say we are not dead yet? Our body decays and our soul decays with it. Isn't it the greatest sorrow indeed! Are men all in ignorance? Am I the only one who is ignorant while there are others who are not ignorant?³⁵

Am I the only one who suffers most in this world? The lamentation of Zhuangzi over the tragic sense of life shows precisely that human being is more than a piece of nature because he understands and is aware of his own suffering. Human being has to come to term with his own life and death. Pascal's thought illustrates this extra quality of human being over mere nature as follows:

Man is only a reed, the weakest thing in nature—but a thinking reed. It does not take the universe in arms to crush him; a vapour, a drop of water, is enough to kill him. But though the universe should crush him, man would still be nobler than his destroyer, because he knows that he is dying, that the universe has the advantage of him; the universe knows nothing of his.³⁶

In spite of all Zhuangzi's wisdom of death, I know I am going to die, and knowing that death is a natural process does not really help me in overcoming my own fear of death. My own death cannot be simply reduced to a natural phenomenon.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Chapter 2, p. 19.

³⁶ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, quoted in D. J. Enright ed., *The Oxford Book of Death*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 40.

III

Indeed, death itself is not horrible. It is just the end of life, whether it was a happy or sorrowful life, a beautiful or an ugly one, and whether one dies young or old. The dead has no problem; only those who are still living have questions. The most horrible thing about death is not its certainty but rather the uncertainty of its coming. Hence it reveals the radical finitude and contingency of human existence. To know that I must die but not to know when is an existential recognition of my own unnecessary existence. I have to reckon with the fact that there is no reason why I should be born here and then but not there and now; why I was thrown into this particular culture and world and why I am a Hong Kong Chinese male and not otherwise. I understand that there can be no answer to all these questions. To question the reason for my death is as futile as to ask why I was born. But the only reason for my death is because I was born. If my death is a mystery then my birth is equally mysterious. If my death is an uncertain certainty then my birth is an unnecessary necessity. If death is not an event of experience then birth is equally not an experience. I could not experience my birth because I can experience the world only after I was born. I cannot experience my death because when I am dead there is no more "I" to experience anything. The phenomenon of my death and my birth is forever outside my existence as possibility.

My death is not an event of my own. However, the death of the other is an event, which I encounter in the world. I know that many people die every day. But they do not have equal meaning to me. In most cases, they are only facts of life. They have significant meanings only when the dead are someone close to me. Gilgamesh was aware of his own mortality only through the shocking encounter with the tragic death of his beloved friend. The awareness of the irredeemable and irreversible loss of someone I love comes before the awareness of my own death. Mourning and grieving over the dead body is not just for the sake of the dead but also for the still living. For the dead, he or she is forever gone. But the dead body itself is not death. The corpse only indicates that death has occurred to that particular person, who was alive before but is now no longer. The body, like a photograph or a video recording, reminds me only of him or her. The perpetual absence of the dead is of course not death itself.

Hence the *experience* of the death of the other is the phenomenon with which any philosophical reflection on death must begin. The possibility of a phenomenology of death lays therefore the scrutiny of

the phenomenon. However, Françoise Dastur in her book *Death: An Essay on Finitude*, points out the difficulty of a phenomenology of death. She says:

Death surely does not “present itself in person” in the world, and no looking will ever succeed in discerning its *eidōs*, its form or face. It therefore seems plain that death can never comprise the “thing itself” to which Husserlian phenomenology bids us return.³⁷

“To the things themselves” is the fundamental principle of phenomenology. Unlike perception, which can be the theme of phenomenological description, I have no intuition of death. All I have are ideas and thoughts about death, and as such they are indirect and secondary, and therefore not death itself. Death is not visible and not present in me. My awareness of death reveals death only as a possibility in my existence. Here Heidegger’s existential analysis of death of Dasein is most relevant. The existential meaning of death is “Being-towards-death,” whereas death is defined as “Dasein’s ownmost possibility—non-relational, certain and as such indefinite, not to be outstripped. Death is, as Dasein’s end, in the Being of this entity towards its end.”³⁸ Hence death is my ownmost possibility of my existence. Death is only an issue for my own self because I alone can have an authentic relation to my own death in dying. Death is the ultimate possibility to annihilate all possibilities of my existence. When death comes, my existence as Dasein ends. “Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein.”³⁹ However I cannot actualize this possibility like other possibilities, because there is nothing to be actualized. As long as I am alive death is not yet “present” but is only implicit in my existence, so that I can be dead at any time. “As soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die.”⁴⁰ This Being-towards-death as the possibility of my Dasein is far from a negative or pessimistic concept. It is most positive because my being as a whole is only revealed through the anticipation

³⁷ Françoise Dastur, *Death: An Essay on Finitude*, trans. John Llewelyn, London: Athlone, 1996, p.40.

³⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson, New York: Harper & Row, 1962, p. 303.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p, 294.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

of my death. My death gives meaning and defines the radical finitude of my existence. Heidegger says:

This certainty, that "I myself am in that I will die," is *the basic certainty of Dasein itself*. It is a genuine statement of Dasein, while *cogito sum* is only the semblance of such a statement. If such pointed formulations mean anything at all, then the appropriate statement pertaining to Dasein in its being would have to be *sum moribundus*, *moribundus* not as someone gravely ill or wounded, but insofar as I am, I am *moribundus*. The MORIBUNDUS first gives the SUM its sense.⁴¹

Heidegger's existential analysis of death is in fact a phenomenology of dying. Death, though a non-phenomenon, is nevertheless phenomenologically accessible as the possibility of the Being of Dasein. It situates back to the realm of my existence and it cannot be externalized as something objective and it cannot be regarded as none of my business. Of course I can be evasive of my own impending death by rational arguments or by forgetting. In fact, "proximally and for the most part Dasein covers up its ownmost Being-towards-death, fleeing in the face of it. Factically, Dasein is dying as long as it exists, but proximally and for the most part, it does so by way of *falling*."⁴² Death can only be understood not as a phenomenon external to my existence but phenomenologically as dying within my existence.

But how can this phenomenology of dying contribute to an answer of the puzzle of my death? Heidegger's analysis can be seen as a reverse of what Spinoza said about death: An authentic man thinks of nothing but death, and his wisdom is a meditation upon death in order to think about life. With this wisdom I can gain a philosophical consolation over the fear of my death. I should not be sad and sorrowful about my inevitable death. However, the greatest grief and sadness often comes not from my own death but from the death of my beloved. It is absolutely futile and extremely outrageous to tell my friend or myself that losing his son or my mother is inevitable and phenomenologically acceptable. Neither philosophy nor religion can resolve the mournful agony of this loss. Of course, it is not just the death of our beloved of which we are mournful but exactly the death of ourselves,

⁴¹ Martin Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time*, trans. Theodore Kisiel, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992, pp. 316-317.

⁴² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 295.

because the one I loved has constituted my own existence. When she is dead, part of life is also gone forever. Gabriel Marcel, arguing about the problem of death with Leon Brunschvicg at the 1937 International Philosophy Convention, replied to Brunschvicg with an unmistakable rigor: “the only thing worth preoccupying either one of us was the death of someone we loved.”⁴³ Though Marcel analyzes the phenomenon of death along the Heideggerian line of thought, he takes issue with Heidegger. To Marcel, the preoccupation with the death of the beloved is more important than just an existential understanding of death. “It is at this point that I (Marcel) am most radically opposed not only to Heidegger and Sartre but to most earlier philosophers as well.”⁴⁴ In one of Marcel’s play the following lines are most telling:

There is one thing I discovered after the death of my parents—that which summons us to survive is actually what sustains us. And those whom we have never stopped loving with the best of ourselves become like an immense skyscape, invisible yet somehow felt, under which we move forward, always more divided from ourselves, toward the instant where everything will be enveloped in love.⁴⁵

“To love a being is to say, ‘Thou, thou shalt not die!’”⁴⁶ Marcel’s sentence echoes the unspeakable grief and sometimes even anger of the bereaved in front of the dying person, whose death will be replaced, if anything permits, by the still living. “And what is imparted to the lover faced with the actual death of the beloved person who ‘must not’ die is that he himself experiences this death—for in this case, it is not really ‘another’ who is dying—not just from outside, but as if from within.”⁴⁷

Only through the deepest pain and grief of bereavement can I experience the uncertain certainty of my death and the unnecessary necessity of my life. The irrevocable loss of my beloved leads me to the confrontation of the absurdity and meaning of my mortality.

⁴³ Gabriel Marcel, “My Death” in *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, trans. Stephen Jolin & Peter McCormick, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973, p. 131.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁴⁶ Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, quoted in Josef Pieper, *Death and Immortality*, South Bend, IN: St Augustine’s Press, 2000, p. 12.

⁴⁷ Josef Pieper, *Ibid.*

IV

According to an anecdote, Confucius is said to have answered his disciple, Zikong, regarding the possibility of consciousness after death: “If we affirm the possibility of the capability to know after death, I’m afraid that the dutiful sons and obedient grandsons would neglect life in favour of death. If we rule out the possibility, I’m afraid that the undutiful sons and disobedient grandsons would abandon funeral. If you want to know whether human being has the capability to know after death, it is not too late to know for yourself after you die.”⁴⁸

Confucius’ agnosticism is contrary to that of Socrates. Confucius refuses to talk about death because there is nothing to talk about. What I have is my present life, and my task is to carry out my duties so as to make this life meaningful. Because there is love, death is meaningful and life is therefore worth living. Though I shall certainly die alone, I am not lonely.

⁴⁸ *Shuo Yuan*. Chapter 18: “Bian Wu.” 《說苑》. 第十八章: 「辨物」: 子貢問孔子: 死人有知無知也?」孔子曰: 「吾欲言死者有知也, 恐孝子順孫妨生以送死也; 欲言無知, 恐不孝子孫棄不葬也。賜欲知死人有知將無知也? 死徐自知之, 猶未晚也!」