ZYGMUNT BAUMAN

Mortality, Immortality

& Other Life Strategies

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Judith Adler, Jean Briggs and Robert Paine took the trouble of reading through parts of the manuscript. If only I had the ability to absorb and give justice to the perceptive comments and insights they generously shared with me.

I am deeply grateful to Anthony Giddens for his thorough reading of the text and penetrating critique.

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About this Book

This is not a study in the *sociology of death and dying*; not a book about the ways we treat people about to die and commemorate those already dead, the way we mourn the beloved and cope with the agony of bereavement, the rituals we devise to prevent the dead from disappearing from the world of living too fast or without a trace – and make their disappearance painless. The number and quality of studies dedicated to that large and important section of our daily life has been growing at a breath-taking pace in the last forty years or so (that is, since death emerged from that protracted conspiracy of silence in which it sunk towards the end of the nineteenth century and which, as Geoffrey Gorer pointedly observed, made all mention of death smack of pornography). The sociology of death and dying has grown by now into a fully fledged branch of social science, armed with everything an academic discipline needs to insure its own survival – a body of literature of its own, a network of university addresses, journals and conferences. This book draws from this achievement rather than adding to it. But the subject-matter of this book is not death or the 'handling of death' as a separate, though large, area of social life and a specific, though ample set of socially sustained patterns of behaviour.

Neither is this a study of the changing *vision* of death: of the images of death and its aftermath, of either the 'other world' or the void that opens once life closes – of that *mentalité collective* which shapes and is in turn shaped by our shifting attitudes to human mortality. After Philippe Ariès and Michel Vovelle (and without the benefit of their supreme historiographic skills) it would be indeed arrogant for this author to think of adding anything of substance to the grand historical canvas already painted.

The prime subject-matter of this book is not those aspects of human mentality, of the practices it supports and of the practices by which it is supported, which openly and explicitly address themselves to the facts and concepts of death and mortality. On the contrary, the immodest intention

of this book is to unpack, and to open up to investigation, the presence of death (i.e. of the conscious or repressed knowledge of mortality) in human institutions, rituals and beliefs which, on the face of it, explicitly and self-consciously, serve tasks and functions altogether different, unrelated to the preoccupations normally scrutinized in studies dedicated to the 'history of death and dying'.

We all 'know' very well what death is; that is, until we are asked to give a precise account of what we know – to define death as we 'understand' it. Then the trouble starts. It transpires that it is ultimately impossible to define death, though attempts to define it – to master it (albeit intellectually), to assign it its proper place and keep it there – will never stop. It is impossible to define death, as death stands for the final void, for that non-existence which, absurdly, gives existence to all being. Death is the absolute *other* of being, an *unimaginable* other, hovering beyond the reach of communication; whenever being speaks of that other, it finds itself speaking, through a negative metaphor, of itself. The sentences in this paragraph are, after all, also, without exception, metaphors: death is not like other 'others' – those others which the ego is free to fill with meaning, and in the course of this meaning-bestowing act to constitute and to subordinate.

Death cannot be perceived; still less visualized or 'represented'. As we know from Husserl, all perception is *intentional*; an activity of the perceiving subject, it reaches beyond that subject, it grasps *something beyond* the subject, it simultaneously calls into being an 'object' that belongs to a world which can in principle be shared, and anchors itself in it. But there is no 'something' which is death; nothing in which the stretched intention of the subject struggling for perception would rest, where it could cast its anchor. Death is an absolute *nothing* and 'absolute nothing' makes no sense – we know that 'there is nothing' only when *we can perceive* the absence of perception; every 'nothing' is a faced, perceived, contemplated nothing, and so no 'nothing' can be absolute – an unqualified nothing. But death is the cessation of the very 'acting subject', and with it, *the end* of all perception. Such an end of perception is one state of affairs the perceiving subject cannot conjure up: it cannot 'blot itself out' of the perception and still wish the perception to be. (As Husserl would say, there is no *noesis*, the act of cognition, without *noema*, the objects to be known – and vice versa.) Faced with such impossibility, the perceiving subject may only delude itself with a play of metaphors, which conceals rather than reveals what is to be perceived, and in the end belies the state of non-perception which death would be. Failing that, the knowing subject must admit its impotence and throw in the towel.

This is why the frequently suggested exit from the quandary ('I cannot visualize my own death, but I do observe death of others. I know that all people die, and thus, so to speak, I "know death" by proxy, and I know death is unavoidable, and I have a clear idea of mortality.') would not really do. The death of others is an event in the world of objects 'out there', which I perceive as any other event or object. It is *my* death, and my death only, which is not an event of that 'knowable' world of objects. The death of others does not affect the continuity of my perception. The death of others is painful and shattering precisely because it does not do it. I may dread the death of another more than my own; I may shout, with total sincerity, that I would rather die myself than live through the death of a beloved other – but this is precisely for my knowledge that *after* that death *I would have to face* a particular nothing, a void which the departure of the beloved other would create, a void which I do not want to perceive but which, stubbornly and to my horror, will be fully and clearly perceivable. What I cannot truly grasp is an altogether different state – a void or fullness *without me to tell it as such*. It is my death that cannot be narrated, that is to remain unspeakable. I am not able to experience it, and once I go through it, I shall not be around to tell the story.

In the light of the above, it is really curious why our own death fills us with horror. I will not be here when it will have come, I will not *experience* it when it comes and I most certainly do not experience it now, before its coming – so why should I worry, and why should I worry *now*? This – impeccably logical – reasoning has been attributed to Epicurus, and it has lost none of its logic since antiquity. And yet, for all its undeniable wisdom, rational elegance and assumed power of persuasion, generation after generation failed to derive from it much succour. Though it is obviously correct, it sounds and feels fraudulent; it seems to pass by our real worry, to be curiously remote, indeed unrelated to all we think and feel about our death and all that makes us fear it so dreadfully. How can we explain this baffling incapacity of reason to placate the anguish? Why does philosophy so abominably fail to console? What follows is but a tentative answer to this question which stands little chance of ever being answered conclusively.

Humans are the only creatures who not only know, but also know that they know – and cannot 'unknow' their knowledge. In particular, they cannot 'unknow' the knowledge of their mortality. Once humans tasted of the Tree of Knowledge, the taste could not be forgotten, it could only be *not remembered* – for a while, with attention shifting to other impressions. Once learned, knowledge that death may not be escaped cannot be forgotten – it can only *not be thought about* for a while, with attention

shifting to other concerns. Knowledge has, so to speak, an olfactory rather than a visual or audial quality; odours, like knowledge, cannot be undone, they can be only 'made unfelt' by being suppressed by yet stronger odours.

One can say that culture, another 'human only' quality, has been from the start a device for such a suppression. This is not to imply that all the creative drive of human culture stems from the conspiracy 'to forget death' – indeed, once set in motion, cultural inventiveness acquired its own momentum and like most other parts or aspects of culture 'develops because it develops'. But this is to imply that, were there no need to make life worth living while it is known that, in Schopenhauer's words, life is but a short-term loan from death, there hardly would be any culture. Death (more exactly, knowledge of mortality) is not the root of everything there is in culture; after all, culture is precisely about *transcendence*, about *going beyond* what is given and found before the creative imagination of culture set to work; culture is after that permanence and durability which life, by itself, so sorely misses. But death (more exactly, awareness of mortality) is the ultimate condition of cultural creativity as such. It makes permanence into a task, into an urgent task, into a paramount task – a fount and a measure of all tasks – and so it makes culture, that huge and never stopping factory of permanence.

The curious ineffectuality of Epicurus' logic is the direct outcome of culture's success. One may say that culture 'overfulfilled the plan'; it has 'overdone it'. (Yet, in all fairness, it could not do it at all without overdoing . . .) Epicurus' dictum would perhaps sound more convincing were we confronted with death in its 'raw state' – just a cessation of biological life, of eating, defecating, copulating. Thanks to culture, however, this is dazzlingly not the case. We have gone far beyond what we now call – with more than a hint of disdain – 'animal existence'. Eating and defecating and copulating will stop when life stops, but neither is the real 'life content'. What occupies most of our time (that is, if only we have time left after satisfying our 'animal' needs), what we are taught to consider the most important and most worthy thing in life, does not have to stop when our metabolism grinds to a halt, not the day after, not ever. And to make them last, to prevent them from stopping, from 'going to the grave with us', is the mission which culture made into our responsibility. Culture's 'overdoing' rebounds daily as our own individual inadequacy. Whatever we do for what we believe to be our responsibility, is unlikely to be enough. Death, when it comes, will brutally interrupt our work before our task is done, our mission accomplished. This is why we have every reason to be worried about death now, when we are still very much alive and when death remains but a remote and abstract prospect.

And so we beget kinship trees – offspring we care for and want to help around rough corners of the future; will they be able to negotiate them once they are bereaved? We build businesses of which we shall never be able to say that they are, finally, secure against competitors or that they do not need to expand any further. We 'make money', and the more money we have made, the stronger are we compelled to make still more. We dedicate our emotions and efforts to institutions or groups whose fate we wish to follow through, now and in the infinite future, and which we want to assist in what we hope will be a never-ending string of successes. We become collectors – of antiques, paintings, stamps, impressions or memories – knowing only too well that our collections will be never complete and 'finished', and that their incompleteness is the most exciting of the satisfactions they bring. We become creators – and can the 'life work' of an artist, a painter, a writer ever be brought to its 'natural' end? We develop a passion for knowledge, for consuming it, for adding to it – and each new discovery shows only how much remains to be learned. Whatever task we embrace seems to possess the same vexing quality: it sticks beyond the probable reach of our *biological lives* – of our task-performing, things-doing capacity. To make the plight still worse, this irritating feature of the tasks that give 'true content' to our lives cannot be cured. It is, after all, precisely because of that feature that the tasks in question are capable of giving life meaning which *transcends* life's biological limitations and allows us to live, to enjoy life, and to stretch ourselves to make life more enjoyable still – and all this despite what we know about the limitations, the endemic brevity and ultimate futility of life's efforts. If for one reason or another culture's suggestions lose some or all of this quality, or without losing that quality cease to be viable proposals – life loses its meaning and death becomes the only cure for the anguish and misery it itself caused in the first place. Durkheim's 'anomic suicide' comes when culture ceases to allure and seduce.

Transcendence is what, everything having been said and done, culture is about. Culture is about expanding temporal and spatial boundaries of being, with a view to dismantling them altogether. Their expansion and effacement of boundaries are partly independent, partly interpenetrating endeavours, and culture's ways and means in pursuing them are partly specialized, partly overlapping.

The first activity of culture relates to *survival* – pushing back the moment of death, extending the life-span, increasing life expectation and thus life's content-absorbing capacity; making death a matter of concern, a significant event – lifting the event of death above the level of the mundane, the ordinary, the natural; directly or indirectly (yet still more

importantly), making the job of death somewhat more difficult. Commenting on Camus, Maurice Blanchot points out that 'to give death certain kind of purity was always the task of culture: to render it authentic, personal, proper ... Instinctively, we feel the danger in searching for the human limits at too low a level ... at a point at which existence appears – through the suffering, misery and frustration – so denuded of "value" that death finds itself rehabilitated and the violence justified'. At that bottom level, where it resides until processed and ennobled by the labours of culture, death 'attracts no horror, not even an interest'. It may well be 'something as unimportant as chopping a cabbage head or drinking a glass of water'.[1]

The second relates to *immortality* – surviving, so to speak, beyond death, denying the moment of death its final say, and thus taking off some of its sinister and horrifying significance: 'He died, but his work lives on.'; 'She will always remain in our memory forever.' Though separate, the two activities depend on each other. Obviously, there is no dreaming of immortality unless survival is secure. But, on the other hand, it is the culture-endorsed assignment of life-transcending, immortal value to certain human acts and attainment that creates the potential of 'life expansion'.

'How many people will find it worth while living once they don't have to die?' asked, rhetorically, Elias Canetti. The question is rhetorical, since it has been asked in order to elicit an answer deemed to be obvious: not many, perhaps none. But the question is rhetorical also for another, more seminal reason: we all *have* to die, and we *know* it. It is here that the most sinister, and the most creative, paradox of the human predicament is rooted: the fact of having to die condemns *a priori* all survival efforts to ultimate failure, while the knowledge of having to die may well dwarf and make futile, pompous and absurd even the most grandiose of human projects. If 'meaning' is the product of intention, if action is meaningful in as far as it is purpose-oriented – then what is the meaning of life? This question, and the stubborn necessity and relentless urge to *ask it*, is the curse of the human condition and the source of interminable agony. But it is also life's mind-boggling chance. There is a void to be filled; a void which in no way limits the range of contents with which it can be filled. Purposes and meanings are not 'given'; therefore, purpose can be chosen, meaning can be created *ab nihilo*.

The woe of mortality makes humans God-like. It is because we know that we must *die* that we are so busy *making* life. It is because we are

[1]Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), pp. 269–70.

aware of mortality that we preserve the past and create the future. Mortality is ours without asking – but *im*mortality is something we must build ourselves. Immortality is not a mere absence of death; it is *defiance* and denial of death. It is 'meaningful' only because there is death, that implacable reality which is to be defied. There would be no immortality without mortality. Without mortality, no history, no culture – no humanity. Mortality 'created' the opportunity: all the rest has been created by beings aware that they are mortal. Mortality gave the chance; the human way of life is the outcome of that chance having been, and being, taken up.

Thus death makes its presence in human life weighty and tangible not necessarily (and not mainly!) in those selected places and times where it appears *under its own name*. True, death is the explicit target of many of the things we do and think of. There are hospitals and hospices, graveyards and crematoria, funerals and obituaries, rituals of remembrance and of mourning, special treatments meted out for the bereaved and the orphaned. If this were the end of the story, if death called just for one more repertory of specialized functions, there would be little indeed to set it apart from so many other 'objective circumstances' of the human condition. This is not, however, the case. The impact of death is at its most powerful (and creative) when death *does not appear under its own name*; in areas and times which are not explicitly dedicated to it; precisely where we manage to live *as if* death was not or did not matter, when we do not remember about mortality and are not put off or vexed by the thoughts of the ultimate futility of life.

Such a life – life forgetful of death, life lived as meaningful and worth living, life alive with purposes instead of being crushed and incapacitated by purposelessness – is a formidable *human* achievement. The totality of social organization, the whole of human culture (not certain functionally specialized institutions, nor certain functionally specialized cultural precepts) co-operate to make this achievement possible. They do not openly admit that this is so; they do not admit that most things we do (and are socially determined and culturally trained to believe that we do them for altogether different reasons) serve in the end the 'purpose of all purposes' – making possible a meaningful life in a world which 'by itself' is devoid of meaning. They cannot admit it, as admitting it would detract from the effectiveness of the achievement which consists mostly in forgetting its true reasons. The emancipation from mortality practised by social organization or promised by culture is bound to remain forever precarious and in the end illusory: thought must conjure up on its own what reality would neither supply nor permit. For this feat to be plausible, a volume of daring is needed which will be sufficient only if courage is unselfconscious of its

futility. Memory of illegitimate birth must be erased if noble life is to be practised at ease.

Human culture is, on the one hand, a gigantic (and spectacularly successful) ongoing effort to give meaning to human life; on the other hand, it is an obstinate (and somewhat less successful) effort to suppress the awareness of the irreparably surrogate, and brittle, character of such meaning. The first effort would be lamentably ineffective without the constant support of the second.

This book is an attempt to lay bare this work of culture. It has, on the whole, a character of a detectivistic adventure. (And thus, owing to the nature of all detection, it is bound to rely on conjecture as much as it does on the unassailable power of deduction, and much as it would wish to rely on the hard evidence of induction.) With certain predictable qualifications, one could perhaps describe the method applied in this book as that of the 'psychoanalysis' of the 'collective unconscious' concealed in, but also analytically recoverable from, culturally created and sustained life. The analysis rests on a hypothesis – a *heuristic assumption* – that the analyzed social institutions and 'cultural solutions' are sediments of the processes which had been set in motion by the fact of human mortality and motivated by the need to cope with the issues that fact posits; as well as by the parallel need to repress the awareness of the true motives of such arrangements. This book is an attempt to find out in what respect, if any, our understanding of socio-cultural institutions may be deepened by making the above assumption and exploring its consequences.

The social institutions and cultural patterns subjected to analysis in this book would seldom be found in studies dedicated to the problematic of death and dying. Most such studies start from the point to which our culture has already brought us. They take not just the form, but the very presence of 'social realities' for granted, and stop short of penetrating the 'made-up' nature of cultural products. They therefore accept as unproblematic the confinement of death (or rather of its still protruding and visible, unassimilitated, resistant to all cultural processing, 'hard leftovers') to explicitly, purposefully designated enclaves and functions; they concur with the culturally accomplished reduction of the *issue* of mortality to the series of named, publicly recognized *problems* of the dying and the bereaved. Most certainly, such investigative practices are fully legitimate in addition to being scholarly respectable; in fact, one cannot easily imagine how the enormous inventory of variable yet invariably ingenious treatments accorded by different cultures in different historical periods to the problems posited by death could have been put together – meticu-

lously and convincingly as they are – were it not for the deliberate narrowing of focus that marks such investigative practices.

And yet something quite crucial has been left out in the result, and is bound to remain undiscussed as long as the focus remains as it is: namely, the 'mortality connection' of such aspects of life as the cultures in question did manage to wrench out of the deadly embrace and then cover all mention of the provenance by a sort of unwritten Official Secrets act. As far as these aspects of social life are concerned, the suppression of the memory of their erstwhile 'mortality connections' is a necessary condition of their emancipation. It is precisely such aspects of social existence that have been chosen as the main subject-matter of this book; and thus the mystery of 'by-passing' or forcefully suppressing their links with the issue of mortality constitutes a major problem for this study.

I propose that the fact of human mortality, and the necessity to live with the constant awareness of that fact, go a long way toward accounting for many a crucial aspect of social and cultural organization of all known societies; and that most, perhaps all, known cultures can be better understood (or at least understood differently, in a novel way) if conceived of as alternative ways in which that primary trait of human existence – *the fact of mortality and the knowledge of it* – is dealt with and processed, so that it may turn from the condition of impossibility of meaningful life into the major source of life's meaning. At the end of such process death, a fact of nature, a biological phenomenon, re-emerges as a cultural artefact, and in this culturally processed form offers the primary building material for social institutions and behavioural patterns crucial to the reproduction of societies in their distinctive forms.

In other words, mortality and *immortality* (as well as their imagined opposition, itself construed as a cultural reality through patterned thoughts and practices) become approved and practised *life strategies*. All human societies deploy them in one form or another, but cultures may play up or play down the significance of death-avoidance concerns in the conduct of life (Ariès wrote profusely of the 'taming' or 'domesticating' of death in pre-modern societies; death-avoidance, re-forged into daily concern with health and obsessive worry about death-carrying agents, becomes on the contrary the most salient feature of modern life.) They also offer formulae for defusing the horror of death through hopes, and sometimes institutional guarantees, of immortality. The latter may be posited as either a collective destiny or an individual achievement. In the first case, it serves as a major means of social division and surfaces spectacularly in the phenomenon of tribalism and tribal enmity. In the second case, it serves as a major vehicle of social stratification, supplies

the core content of distinction and privilege as well as the main bait for status-seeking efforts and a coveted stake in positional strife.

The first three chapters of the book consider in general terms (one is tempted to say existential terms) this universal and permanent role of mortality in the process of social structuration and the setting of cultural agenda. The last two chapters, on the other hand, face the fact that the concrete ways of tackling that universal role of mortality change over time and are culturally specific; a circumstance which will be shown to have far-reaching consequences for society as a whole – determining to a large extent its overall character, also in aspects ostensibly unconnected, or related only obliquely, to the phenomena of death and dying.

Two types of strategies (which *contemporary* society, not without a contradiction, tries to deploy *simultaneously* – the circumstance that makes even more futile the barren efforts to draw, or to efface, the *time-boundary* between the 'modern' and 'postmodern' eras) come under a closer scrutiny: the *modern* type, with its characteristic drive to 'deconstruct' *mortality* (i.e. to dissolve the issue of the struggle against death in an ever growing and never exhausted set of battles against particular diseases and other threats to life; and to move death from its past position of the ultimate yet remote horizon of life-span right into the centre of daily life, thereby filling the latter with the defences against non-ultimate, relatively smaller and thus in principle 'soluble' problems of health hazards), and the *postmodern*, with its effort to 'deconstruct' *immortality* (i.e. to substitute notoriety for historical memory, and disappearance for final – irreversible – death, and to transform life into an unstoppable, daily rehearsal of universal 'mortality' of things and of the effacement of opposition between the transient and the durable).

To sum up: in its intention at least, this book is not a contribution to the specialized discipline of sociology of death, dying and bereavement, but rather to sociological theory in general. An attempt is made here to trace the cognitive profits which may be gained from the interpretation of major socio-cultural processes as both *arising from* (triggered by) the prominence of death in the human existential condition, and *deploying* that prominence as the principal building material in the socio-cultural organization of historically specific forms of practical human existence. What this book offers is a perspective from which to view anew, from an uncommon yet crucial angle, the apparently familiar topics of social and cultural life.

This book is an exercise in *sociological hermeneutics*. The meaning of social institutions and collectively pursued patterns of conduct is sought

through considering them as members of such sets of strategies as are, in a sense, pre-selected and made realistic (available for choosing and possible to deploy) in given social figurations. In this instance, sociological hermeneutics demands that the continuous and changing aspects of life strategies alike be traced back to the social figurations they serve (in a dialectic process of reciprocal determination) – and forward, to the patterns of daily life in which they find expression.

In all or most interpretations – those exercises in comprehension, in 'making sense' – the interpreted phenomena may be ascribed more system-like cohesiveness than they in fact demonstrate. What is in real life an agonizingly confused, contradictory and often incoherent state of affairs, may be portrayed as endowed with simple and regular features. A special effort has been made here to avoid this danger, to refuse the temptation to represent the analyzed life strategies and their behavioural consequences as more coherent and less ambiguous than they indeed are. And yet strategies had to be offered 'identities' to separate them and distinguish from their alternatives, and hence little could be done to prevent them from appearing more self-contained and complete than they have ever been or can be. Any reading of this book ought to be done with this proviso in mind. We do not live, after all, once in a pre-modern, once in a modern, once in postmodern world. All three 'worlds' are but abstract idealizations of mutually incoherent aspects of the single life-process which we all try our best to make as coherent as we can manage. Idealizations are no more (but no less either) than sediments, and also indispensable tools, of those efforts.

1

Living with Death

Unlike other animals, we not only know; we *know that we know*. We are aware of being aware, conscious of 'having' consciousness, of being conscious. Our knowledge is itself an object of knowledge: we can gaze at our thoughts 'the same way' we look at our hands or feet and at the 'things' which surround our bodies not being part of them. Our knowledge shares in the existential, inalienable, defining quality of *things*: it cannot be (except in fantasy) *wished away*, that is annihilated by the sheer exertion of will. 'It is there', stubbornly, relentlessly, 'permanently' in the sense that it lasts longer than our active awareness of its presence, and that its 'staying there' is not synchronized with our look. We know that we can look at it again and again, that we will find it in place the moment we focus our alertness on the right point – turn our eyes (our attention) in the right direction. (When the thought we are looking for, and know 'to be there', cannot 'be found' at the moment, we call the failure 'lapse of memory'; we explain the difficulty in the same fashion in which we think of the absence of other things we expected to find in a certain place but did not – like a lost pen or a pair of glasses: we do not suppose that the things ceased to exist, only that they have been moved, or that we could not locate them as we have been looking in the wrong direction.) When our knowledge is hard to bear with, our only escape is to treat it the way we treat things that offend us: we sweep such things away, put them at a distance from which their stench or repulsive sight is less likely to affect us; we hide them. Offensive thoughts must be *suppressed*. Failing that, they must be prettified or otherwise disguised, so that their ugly look would not vex us. But as with all things, escape is seldom complete and conclusive. We must not suspend our vigilance; we must keep trying – and we know it.

There is hardly a thought more offensive than that of death; or, rather, of the inevitability of dying; of the transience of our being-in-the-world. After all, this part of our knowledge defies, radically and irrevocably, our intellectual faculties. Death is the ultimate defeat of reason, since reason

cannot 'think' death – not what we *know* death to be like; the thought of death is – and is bound to remain – a *contradiction in terms*. 'Neither my birth nor my death can appear to me as *my* experiences', observed Merleau-Ponty. 'I can only grasp myself as "already born" and "still living" – grasping my birth and death only as pre-personal horizons.' Sigmund Freud is of a similar view: '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.' Edgar Morin concluded in his pioneering study of the anthropological status of death that 'the idea of death is an idea without content'; or, to put it another way, it is 'the hollowest of the hollow ideas', since its content 'is unthinkable, inexplicable, a conceptual *je ne sais quoi*'. The horror of death is the horror of void, of the ultimate absence, of 'non-being'. The conscience of death is, and is bound to remain, *traumatic*.[1]

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[1] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenologie de la perception*, quoted after Robert Jay Lifton, 'On Death and Death Symbolism', in: *The Phenomenon of Death: Faces of Mortality*, ed. Edith Wyschogrod (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 93; Sigmund Freud, 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death', in *Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 14 (London: Hogarth, 1957), p. 289; Edgar Morin, *L'Homme et la Mort* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), pp. 29–30. In the preface to the second edition of the book (published originally in 1951), Morin suggests that the knowledge of death is a much more decisive break between human modality and animal existence than tool-production, brain or language: all such normally pinpointed 'human-only' characteristics are either metaphors or extensions of the work of biological evolution and mechanisms of survival that evolution made available to animal species. Not so our knowledge of death. 'Death – that is, the refusal to die, the myths of survival, of resurrection, of immortality – what do they tell us about specifically human quality, and the universally biological quality? Is there any continuity in this break?' (pp. 7–8).

Arthur Schopenhauer insists that 'without death there would hardly have been any philosophizing'. *All* religious and philosophical systems (Schopenhauer would add, were the word part of his vocabulary, all *culture*) are 'primarily an antidote to the certainty of death which reflecting reason produces from its own resources'. (*The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1966), p. 463.) This, in Schopenhauer's view, is the case, one would suppose, precisely because 'a man to his astonishment all at once becomes conscious of existing after having been in a state of non-existence for many thousands of years, when, presently again, he returns to a state of non-existence for an equally long time. This cannot possibly be true, says the heart.' (*Essays of Schopenhauer*, trans. Rudolf Dircks (London: Walter Scott, n.d.), pp. 54–5).

Knowledge that cannot be believed

And there are more than enough reasons for the consciousness of mortality to be traumatic. First and foremost, thinking about death defies thought itself. The nature of thought is its non-confinement, its 'untiedness' to time and space: its ability to reach into the time which is no more or the time that has not yet been, to visualize places that eyes cannot see nor fingers touch. In all such times and places, however, the thought that conjures them up remains present; they 'exist' only in and through its act of 'conjuring up'. The one thing thought cannot grasp is *its own* non-existence: it cannot conceive of a time or place that does not contain it anymore, as all conceiving includes it – thought, the thinking capacity – as the 'conceiving power'. (This incapacity of thought to imagine its own non-being had been perversely presented by Descartes as the world-sustaining potency of thought: we think, *therefore* we exist; our act of thinking is the one and only existence we cannot doubt, an existence by which all other certainties are to be measured.) Because of this organic incapacity of thought it simply cannot occur to us that our consciousness – so obvious, so pervasive, so ubiquitous – may, like other things, cease to be. Thought's power is, one may say, born of weakness: thought seems all-powerful because certain thoughts cannot be thought and thus are 'blotted out' by default rather than by design. Most importantly and crucially, the thought that cannot be thought and thus may well escape scrutiny is the thought of non-existence of thought. The resulting cosy self-confidence of thought, so comforting and so desirable, would be foolproof, if it were not for the knowledge of death. Death is, after all, precisely the unthinkable: a state without thought; one we cannot visualize – even construe conceptually. But death *is*, is *real*, and we know it.

There are, of course, other things we know of, without being able to visualize and 'understand' them. The spatial and temporary *infinity* of the universe is the classic case: indeed, it is a mind-boggling state of affairs for the very reason that its alternative – the temporal or spatial *confinement* of the universe – can be visualized no better. This is frightening enough: a spectacular insight into the irreparable disjointment between mind and body, between what the mind can *think* and what the body can '*see*', directly or metaphorically. But thought's quandary brought up by the reality of death reaches deeper than that. The predicament that death reveals is still more radically frightening. One can, after all, think of existence without stars and galaxies, without matter even; one cannot think, however, of an *existence without thought*. So death – an unadorned death, death in all its stark, uncompromised bluntness, a death that would

induce consciousness to stop – is the *ultimate absurdity*, while being at the same time the *ultimate truth*! Death reveals that truth and absurdity are one ... We cannot think of death otherwise than of an event of which we (who, as we know, have ceased to be) are witnesses; events at which we (we, thinking and seeing foundations of all experience) are present in that relentless, obstinate fashion that is the constitutive mark of awareness. Whenever we 'imagine' ourselves as dead, we are irremovably present in the picture as those who do the imagining: our living consciousness looks at our dead bodies. Death does not just defy imagination: death is the archetypal *contradiction in terms*, The non-being of matter is difficult, nay impossible, to *imagine*; to imagine the non-existence of mind is downright impossible. Such a non-being may be thought only in its denial. The very act of thinking death is already its denial. Our thoughts of death, to be at all thinkable, must already be processed, artificed, tinkered with, interpreted away from their pristine absurdity. As La Rochefoucauld used to say, one cannot look *directly* at either the sun or death.

Also in yet another respect death blatantly defies the power of reason: reason's power is to be a guide to good choice, but death is not a matter of choice. Death is the scandal, the ultimate humiliation of reason. It saps the trust in reason and the security that reason promises. It loudly declares reason's lie. It inspires fear that undermines and ultimately defeats reason's offer of confidence. Reason cannot exculpate itself of this ignominy. It can only try a cover-up. And it does. Since the discovery of death (and the state of having discovered death is the defining, and distinctive, feature of humanity) human societies have kept designing elaborate subterfuges, hoping that they would be allowed to forget about the scandal; failing that, hoping that they could afford not to think about it; failing that, they forbade speaking of it. According to Ernest Becker, 'all culture, all man's creative life-ways, are in some basic part of them a fabricated protest against natural reality, a denial of the truth of human condition, and an attempt to forget the pathetic creature that man is ... Society itself is a codified hero system, which means that the society everywhere is a living myth of the significance of human life, a defiant creation of meaning.'[2]

[2] Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973), pp. 33, 7. According to Becker, the essential incongruity of human predicament makes human existence irreparably *heroic*: an incessant struggle to transcend what in principle cannot be transcended. 'The fact is that this is what society is and always has been: a symbolic action system, a structure of statuses and roles, customs and rules of behaviour, designed to serve as a vehicle for earthly heroism.' (p. 4) 'But the truth about the need for heroism is not easy for anyone to admit'; in most men heroics 'is disguised as they humbly and complainingly follow out the roles that