

Death and Dying

"I believe that when I die I shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive." A quote from Bertrand Russell. He goes on to say: "I am not young and I love life. But I should scorn to shiver with terror at the thought of annihilation."

There is more to this quote - easy to find, just put 'Bertrand Russell and Death' into Google - but this is the part that would seem to embody the two main issues in philosophical discourse, and public discourse too, around death and dying.

So.

Does anything of me survive after death?

Am I afraid of dying?

Both of these questions have a long history, going back at least to the ancient Greeks. And surely before, in the many aboriginal and hunter-gatherer societies that existed.

Belief in an after-life, of whatever kind, is often related to some kind of religious belief - though it may be part of a spiritual sense that is not strictly related to a specific religion. Belief in the extinction of our being by death would seem to be an aspect of a non-belief in any kind of non-human being or world.

It is perhaps important to say here that we are not talking about memories, life-histories, documents or other kinds of material left behind. Of course we survive in that sense (as I will in this website). But the point at issue here is, that strange and amazing phenomenon, that huge and complex awareness that we have of the world, and of ourselves: consciousness. And yet which seems to exist, though subjectively experienced as a totality, objectively in a mere speck of time, in a speck of space.

I call myself a humanist. And I do not believe in any form of after-life, in the sense of the survival of consciousness, nor some kind of piece of energy left floating around. One person I have spoken to about this says she believes there is a kind of consciousness-sludge that we merge with for a time. Not very comforting, in comparison with the beautiful place where some people believe they go and will meet again with their loved ones. That would indeed be comforting. I wish. But for me, I cannot bring myself to believe it.

Besides, there is another aspect to a place after death. In the ancient Greek civilisation based on Athens, death was connected with Hades, the name of the King of the underworld, this realm also being given the name Hades. He, and his realm, were generally feared. And in many belief-systems, punishment for wrongdoing in this life is there in the many forms of after-life.

But in ancient Greece, the tradition of scorning fear of death was also clearly articulated, as by Epicurus and by Lucretius. Epicurus says, in his *Letter to Menoeceus*: "Accustom yourself to believe that death is nothing to us, for good and evil imply awareness, and death is the absence of all awareness. Therefore a right understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not by adding to life an unlimited time, but by taking away the yearning after immortality."

Not unlike Russell, one might say, and expressing what many non-religious people would say today.

So these are the two areas of discourse around death and dying which are well-recognised.

However, there are some issues which do not seem to be so commonly discussed in established public discourse, at least not as part of a discourse about death itself.

Several people I have spoken to say they are not afraid of death, but they are afraid of possible situations and circumstances that might occur leading up to death. Thus: fear of mental deterioration; fear of pain; fear of how they will be cared for if they need to be; fear of unharmonious interactions with relatives. All of these were often mentioned. And into this discussion would come an expression of the need for planning, in the event of such contingencies.

So not a fear of death itself, but a fear of what might precede it. Also expressed was a fear of not being able to say "Goodbye" in a coherent and dignified way. All of these were mentioned with considerable emotional force, sadness and despair and some degree of anger. I think they should be taken seriously as fears around death and dying, even if not of death itself.

And connected with these fears, the issue of the deliberate ending of life and a regret that this is so prevented by legal difficulties was expressed. This whole legal issue certainly needs to be further discussed and cleared up - by which I mean not just clarified, but rectified, in my view in the direction of greater personal choice for the dying person.

Another issue that has come up, which again is rarely touched on especially in philosophical discourse, is sadness. I myself am very aware of a feeling of sadness that when I die I will no longer have contact with my friends and family, with people I love. And I feel sad too that they will no longer have me around (a sadness I flatter myself is justified!). It is strange to me that this aspect is not more 'officially' a part of public discourse, since it is what we experience so much of in relation to death. I think death, that of others and that of myself, is profoundly sad. I suppose if I believed in a heavenly afterlife, I could rejoice. But even people who do hold such a belief seem to be sad around death. So I think sadness, the tragedy of death, should be more honoured, should be given a greater place in our mental architecture around death and dying. It does seem to be in some cultures. As is also the tradition of 'lying-in' for the body - which I believe to be of great value, and would seem to an extent to be connected with sadness.

I also believe that it is a great error to separate children from the experience of death and dying. They should always be included in funerals and any other discussions or considerations of death, and never fobbed off with stories of meeting in Heaven and the like. Well, I don't believe I have the right to say what people who adhere to religious systems should do, but that is my general view.

Perhaps it bears mentioning here, what many people who read this will already know, the first thing I did in my life (well, it was what I wanted to do from the age of 12, and did) was to become a doctor. I have therefore of course seen dead bodies, seen people die, even directly saved one person from dying, and also have spoken with people whose loved one had just died. I do actually vividly remember the experience of being with someone (which happened a number of times) at the moment of dying. I had this strong feeling that at one moment this was a live person, and then, the next moment, here in front of me was what seemed more like a piece of meat. An inelegant way to put it perhaps but that's how it felt. Some would say it is the moment when the soul leaves the body. This whole range of experience is something that most people do not get. I believe it is very valuable and feel grateful and privileged to have had it.

There is just one further aspect I want to mention. Curiosity. I am deeply curious as to what will be happening in fifty years time. One reason I have for wanting to live to as ripe an age as possible is, that the longer my life the more I will know of what happens in the coming years. I find it deeply frustrating that what I know will be limited (so severely by now) by my own life-span! Especially perhaps in this time of ecological threat. But more generally, how and in what way people will learn, indeed *if* they will learn, to live together more harmoniously. Of course technological advances are always interesting too, but it is the future of living together that fires my curiosity most.

In other parts of this website I elaborate on this whole issue of how people can more successfully live together - and indeed, as stated elsewhere, it is my main motive in putting this website together to make accessible the work I was involved in at the Poly and S-W London College and elsewhere to do with co-operative structures and collective decision-making. I guess people reading this may be getting fed up with these phrases, but I do seriously believe that unless we evolve in that direction, our survival is in serious jeopardy. So: I am frustrated to know that my curiosity will be left unsatisfied by my death. It almost makes my wish to be up there looking down take on some sort of belief-status! Almost.

So, to wind up: Fear of death; fear of what might precede death; beliefs or non-belief in any kind of after-life; sadness; curiosity - these are the main issues that I recognise around that most fundamental phenomenon that we are all faced with: death and dying. Please don't stop yourself thinking about it. It is often said, and was an important maxim of the Natural Death Centre (for whom I ran 'video-message' workshops for a time) that the awareness of death and dying makes us value and enjoy our presence in life more. I do believe that to be so.

(addition August 2013. Coming from anxiety about a medical condition of my own, I have recognised something else of importance, certainly to me: the need to tidy up. Many people reading this must have had the experience of having to deal with those boxes left in the attic or at the back of the garage or shed - sorting out those old things of a parent or relative who has died, throwing away a lot, deciding what to keep... So: putting one's 'affairs in order', winding things up, seeing some sense, all that seems important. It becomes like a task, like a job in a way, to be done at that time. And I recognise a fear that I won't have proper time, or energy, to do that, or just won't have given it the proper attention. Obviously making a will, leaving instructions - but also, my vision is of leaving a clear space, a bare floor (plain-carpeted perhaps) with just a few things perhaps labelled! I suppose a filing cabinet, properly organised, would do. But I like the image of the floor. What an ideal way that would be to die. Of course saying goodbye properly, that most of all, already mentioned).