Three Faces of Death: Epicurus, Heidegger, and James

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The certain prospect of death could sweeten every life with a precious and fragrant drop of levity—and now you strange apothecary souls have turned it into an ill-tasting drop of poison that makes the whole of life repulsive.

—Nietzsche

Epicurus taught that death was a non-issue: it was something to be completely ignored because it had no bearing on life whatsoever. Martin Heidegger, by contrast, saw that acute consciousness of death was a life-defining anxiety; it reveals our own unique selfness, and affirmation of this allows us to be authentic individuals. William James, in opposition to both of these ideas, argued for the possibility of eternal life and transcendental meaning by way of a spiritual resolution. Although Epicurus and Heidegger are polar opposites in their attitudes toward death, they both view death as the end—the end of all consciousness, self, and existence. James, finding this notion overly tragic and perhaps unbearable, says that through a “will to believe” we can fashion an alternate attitude concerning death. Perhaps death does not have to be the end, he argues; perhaps we can passionately affirm that our souls go on where our bodies perish. The ideas of all three philosophers bring death to the foreground; Epicurus proposes an attitude of ignorance, Heidegger suggests affirmation, and James embraces resistance. In each philosopher’s conception, one’s attitude toward death has major implications for one’s attitude toward life.

I would like to talk through all three positions, and in doing so show how the attitudes of Epicurus and Heidegger, different as they may be, reveal the importance and momentousness of life, whereas James’ philosophy trivializes life in reference to something beyond it. Although James would consider his view more optimistic than the gloomy Epicureans’ or Heideggerians’, he is actually relegating life to a status beneath that which the other philosophers would give to it. In other words, Epicurus and Heidegger are content with life alone, whereas mortal life by itself does not ultimately satisfy James. In order not to slip into pessimism, James thinks, there must be the possibility of life after death. Epicurus and Heidegger do not see such a need, yet they are certainly not defeatist about life’s potential meaning. James’ attitude toward death is actually the most pessimistic of the three; it suggests that the notion of a meaningful life is hindered without the possibility of eternal life (life after death). Even with their remarkably different ideas, Epicurus and Heidegger affirm life’s meaningfulness despite the fact that it ends with death.

Epicurus

As an atomist, Epicurus thought that all matter was composed of a finite number of atoms. When we die, the atoms that made up our body disperse and go on to form other things. The same goes for the soul.

Death, then, is completely ceasing to be. The experience of death is much like our experience prior to birth, which is, of course, absolutely nothing. In a beautiful passage, Epicurus explains that this conception of death makes it functionally a moot point:

Grow accustomed to the belief that death is nothing to us, since every good and evil lie in sensation. However, death is the deprivation of sensation. Therefore, correct understanding that death is nothing to us makes a mortal life enjoyable, not by adding an endless span of time but by taking away the longing for immortality. For there is nothing dreadful in life for the man who has truly comprehended that there is nothing terrible in not living. Therefore, foolish is the man who says that he fears death, not because it will cause pain when it arrives but because anticipation of it is painful. What is no trouble when it arrives is an idle worry in anticipation. Death, therefore—the most dreadful of evils—is nothing to us, since while we exist, death is not present, and whenever death is present, we do not exist. It is nothing either to the living or the dead, since it does not exist for the living, and the dead no longer are.²

He goes on to explain that it is the quality of life that should be admired and aspired to, not the quantity. “Live well” should be our guiding maxim, not “live long.” And we certainly should not desire to “live on” after our bodies expire; it is foolish to desire something that is impossible.

Though his idea of an atomistic soul is archaic, Epicurus’ notion of death is still viably relevant. For anyone who rejects transcendental salvation and examines it only as a physical phenomenon, death is nothing but the absence of life. It is not something we feel or something that happens to us, because we cease to be. Epicurus himself puts it best: “Death is nothing to us. For what has been dispersed has no sensation. And what has no sensation is nothing to us.”³ Some readers would dismiss this view as pessimistic because it includes no hope for an afterlife or the immortality of the soul. They would fail to see, however, that Epicurus’ philosophy is wholly life-affirming. Tend to the quality of life, he says, because that is all we have. In suggesting an attitude of complete indifference toward death, he is placing a focus on life. Life is what is important, not what happens at death.

**Heidegger**

Heidegger’s discussion of death starts from his position as a phenomenologist. For different reasons than Epicurus, Heidegger starts with the idea that death is biological perishing and nothing more. Unlike Epicurus, however, Heidegger does not think of death as a non-issue. Here, death is the paramount issue, and the one that precipitates Heidegger’s concept of authenticity.

In Heidegger’s conception, each Dasein (“being-there,” a consciousness that is aware of being conscious) is constantly “thrown” into a situation involving others. Each individual is connected to and must take part in a world constituted by what Heidegger calls “the They”—the abstract, generic pronoun, “one.” A Dasein is always defined in terms of its relation to the other people (Being-for-others); the connection to the other is represented by our similar ideas and cares. Heidegger writes, “In relation to this

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sort of Being (the everyday manner in which we join with one another in absorption in the ‘world’ of our concern) representability is not only quite possible but is even constitutive for our being with one another. We are satisfied with being absorbed in the same projects and concerns as other people—with one key exception.

“This possibility of representation breaks down completely if the issue is one of representing that possibility-of-Being which makes up Dasein’s coming to an end…,” Heidegger continues, “No one can take the Other’s dying away from him.” Death is the one experience that we do not share with other people. “The dying of Others is not something which we experience in a genuine sense; at most we are always just ‘there alongside’.” Unlike our habits, our projects, our cares, and everything else by which we define our identity, our death is ours and ours alone.

Consciousness of death individualizes a Dasein that was previously wholly absorbed in the being-for-others of the They.

Heidegger goes on to explain that the They characteristically evade this individualizing aspect of death. They deny its weightiness, making it an abstract commonplace:

In the publicness with which we are with one another in our everyday manner, death is ‘known’ as a mishap which is constantly occurring—as a ‘case of death.’ Someone or other ‘dies’, be he neighbor or stranger. People who are no acquaintances of ours are ‘dying’ daily and hourly. ‘Death’ is encountered as a well-known event occurring within-the-world. As such it remains in the inconspicuousness characteristic of what is encountered in an everyday fashion. The “they” has already stowed away an interpretation for this event. It talks of it in a ‘fugitive’ manner, either expressly or else in a way which is mostly inhibited, as if to say, “One of these days one will die too, in the end, but right now it has nothing to do with us.”

The They speak in terms of “one dies”—it trivializes death as just something that happens and is of no immediate concern. It becomes vague and meaningless, when actually it is the most profoundly meaningful thing. “Dying, which is essentially mine in such a way that no one can be my representative, is perverted into an event of public occurrence which the ‘they’ encounters.” The They evades death, it “tranquilizes” death, and it “does not permit us the courage for anxiety in the face of death.”

We must reject the evasion and the tranquilization of death that the They provides, Heidegger thinks, and face death authentically. By anticipating death and by feeling angst over its impending certainty, Dasein is able to realize itself—a self at least somewhat free from the They. Heidegger writes, “Anticipation turns out to be the possibility of understanding one’s ownmost and uttermost potentially-

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5 Ibid., 284.
6 Ibid., 282.
7 Ibid., 296–297.
8 Ibid., 297.
9 Ibid., 298.
for-Being—that is to say, the possibility of authentic existence.” The certain prospect of death is what discloses the utter individuality of each Dasein. “Death does not just ‘belong’ to one’s own Dasein in an undifferentiated way; death lays claim to it as an individual Dasein.”

Charles Guignon points out that Heidegger’s idea of authenticity is not about “getting in touch with some ‘inner’ reality,” but about “living in such a way that your life has cumulativeness, purposiveness, and wholeheartedness.” Paraphrasing Heidegger, he says that the inauthentic Dasein lost in the They “[drifts] with the flow of the latest fads and preoccupations…fragmented and disjointed, lacking any cohesiveness or focus.” Authenticity, then, is living with a sort of regulative wholeness given by the consciousness of death. The inauthentic go along with the They’s tranquilization of death—“one dies,” it is a distant and immaterial part of life. Authentic individuals affirm the personal, individuality-constituting, and angst-ridden “I will die,” and their actions and attitudes are adjusted accordingly. In Guignon’s interpretation, the authentic attitude of a being-toward-death leads to a certain sense of personal integrity and directness of action. He writes, “To take a stand on your own death, then, is to live in such a way that, in each of your actions you express a lucid understanding of where your life is going—of how things are adding up as a whole. A life lived in this way becomes simplified, focused, and coherent in its future-directedness.”

To take Heidegger’s ideas further, death reveals to us the importance and solemnity of life. We realize that our lives are finite and completely contingent. Because there is no transcendental salvation or fundamental necessity to human existence, our lives are all we have. We must make every decision with death in mind; every action and thought must be on some level accompanied by the mantra “I am going to die, and my world will be gone.” This is a life-shaping state of awareness. And although “angst-ridden,” it does not have to translate to unhappiness or defeatism. In the words of David Hilditch:

[Authentic] Dasein is resolute and steadfast in its commitments to realizing its possibilities in the face of death. Authentic Dasein “sticks to it.” Thus, its resoluteness is marked by angst. It sticks to it even though it senses that to be ‘deworlded’ is always and everyway a possibility. Thus, one commits oneself wholly—but in a world that is ungrounded, without the guarantees of stable, underlying structures of meaning ‘behind’ its thrownness.

The authentic individual accepts his own contingency and finitude with no accompanying sense of quietude or melancholy. Rather than despairing and giving up in the face of certain death, there is a steadfast resoluteness” which resolves life as meaningful even though it will end. With affirmation of death comes an affirmation of life—a passionate, intense affirmation that is lost on those who deny or evade death.

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10 Ibid., 307.
11 Ibid., 308.
13 Ibid., 126.
14 Ibid., 130.
15 David Hilditch, “Notes on Death in Heidegger” (Unpublished Notes, 2010).
Heidegger’s view of death is clearly much different from Epicurus’. Instead of being a non-issue, death is the issue. But although their processes of reasoning are very different, both philosophers arrive at similar ends concerning how the knowledge of certain death should influence and shape our lives. Because death is the end, life is what is important. Life’s quantity is irrelevant and the quality is what matters. The prospect of impending death reveals the value and momentousness of living well and remaining “resolute and steadfast.” For Epicurus and Heidegger, the fact that death is ‘the end all’ does not necessarily mean that to live life is meaningless or futile. In fact, they both affirm the possibility of life’s meaningfulness even when transience and contingency become evident. Death enables us to give life the weighty concern that it deserves, and it invites us to cherish and make the most of what we have—because one day it will be gone.

James

Rather than starting from the assumption that death is the absence of life and nothing more, James assesses the matter from his pragmatic standpoint. He thinks in terms of pluralism, possibility, and “the will to believe.” In James’ theory, “Truth” is not some absolute, grounded “state of the world.” Truth is a function. True ideas are “those we can assimilate” and false ideas are “those we cannot.” He says that “the truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events.” The criterion for an idea’s Truth does not lie in its correspondence to the world, but in its “cash value.” James extends this notion to include the possibility of religious or spiritual conviction—including, presumably, a belief in immortality.

In his essay *Is Life Worth Living?*, James explains how using his pragmatic method to develop a spiritual belief saves him from “philosophical pessimism” and “the nightmare view of life.” By this he means the materialistic and atheistic philosophies of, say, Epicurus or Heidegger. The idea that life ends with death and that there is no choice but to come to terms with that, according to James, is a “[a] particular death-in-life paradox and [a] melancholy-breeding puzzle.” To combat this apparently devastating problem, James recommends “nothing more recondite than religious faith.” He suggests that life without faith is ultimately empty; “Destroy this inner assurance [of faith], however, vague as it is,” he writes, “and all the light and radiance of existence is extinguished … Often enough the wild-eyed look at life—the suicidal mood—will set in.” He goes on to say that “the most adverse life would seem well worth living if we could be certain that our bravery and patience with it were terminating and eventuating and bearing fruit somewhere in an unseen spiritual world.” He qualifies this by saying that “curiosity, pugnacity, and honor” may be enough to make life appear worth living, but that these worldly concerns

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17 Ibid., 229.
18 Ibid., 228.
19 Ibid., 41.
20 Ibid, 42.
21 Ibid, 44.
22 Ibid, 41.
23 Ibid., 59.
24 Ibid., 60.
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Life appears as truly, profoundly meaningful if it is viewed as a means to some other end—namely, the “terminating and eventuating…in an unseen spiritual world.”

Essentially, James is stating that life (often, at least) seems pointless and meaningless in relation to death. *We are going to die, so why bother even living?* James’ advice is simply to believe otherwise. If the apparent facts of contingency, objective meaninglessness and finitude become too daunting or anguishing, simply refuse them. As long as you can functionally assimilate a belief in spiritual transcendence that includes immortality, that belief is True. Life by itself, James strongly suggests, may not be enough; it may have to be supplemented by an afterlife. In fact, it *should* be supplemented to avoid falling into a “philosophical pessimism” that denies immortality and affirms that life is all we have. We must instead deny that life ends with death and affirm some sort of non-material transcendence. In order for life to seem worth living, we must deny that death is the end. James’ essay calls to mind the hopeful lyrics of Bob Dylan: “When you’re sad and you’re lonely and you haven’t got a friend…just remember that death is not the end.”

For those who cannot accept the cut-and-dried simplicity of Epicurus or the difficult, harrowing path of Heidegger, James’ view offers a positive alternative. Neither Epicurus nor Heidegger makes any reference to the possibility of life after death; they simply start from the assumption that there is no such thing. James finds the notion of a wholly transient life troubling and is presumably writing for those who feel similarly. He is also trying to combat philosophical views that reject immortality and spiritual transcendence, views he dismisses as pessimistic.

William J. Gavin has noted that the problem of death is an implicit aspect of much of James’ philosophy. He writes, “We should read [James] keeping in mind that [he] seriously contemplated suicide…and that ultimately he did not solve the issue as a methodological problem, but rather ‘got over it’ by exercising ‘the will to believe.’”

He suggests that James’ philosophical convictions concerning religious faith grew out of his own existential crisis; “[James had the] realization that he was accomplishing nothing and was running out of time. In other words, he was finite, and would die.” The realization that Gavin is referring to can be seen in a journal entry from 1870:

> Whilst in this state of philosophic pessimism and general depression of spirits about my prospects, I went one evening into a dressing-room in the twilight to procure some article that was there; when suddenly there fell upon me without any warning, just as if it came out of the darkness, a horrible fear of my own existence…I awoke morning after morning with a horrible dread at the pit of my stomach, and with a sense of the insecurity of life that I never knew before, and that I have never felt since. It was like a revelation…in general I dreaded to be left alone. I remember wondering how other people could live,

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25 Ibid., 53.
26 Bob Dylan, “Death Is Not The End,” from *Down In The Groove*, performed by the author, Columbia Records B0015XAT3E.
28 Ibid.
how I myself had ever lived, so unconscious of that pit of insecurity beneath the surface of life.\textsuperscript{29}

Confronted with these intense feelings of dread, James sought a solution. He found it in his conceptions of Truth and possibility—life can be worth living if “it were terminating and eventuating and bearing fruit somewhere in an unseen spiritual world.” In order to come to terms with the prospect of certain death, James chose to deny that it was certain. Resist death, James tells us, to maintain life’s meaningfulness, worth, and dignity.

Conclusion: The “fragrant drop of levity” vs. the “strange apothecary souls”

Death is among the very few phenomena that are of universal human concern. Whatever one’s attitude toward it, no one can escape the fact that death is inevitable. Pascal writes, “Imagine a number of men in chains, and all condemned to death, where some are killed each day in the sight of the others, and those who remain see their own fate in that of their fellows, and wait their turn.… It is an image of the condition of men.”\textsuperscript{30} As cryptic and hyperbolic as his thought may be, it elucidates a very real and concrete condition of life: everyone must die. Coming to terms with this fact is a crucial problem for any philosopher. As Albert Camus puts it, “There is but one true philosophical problem…judging whether or not life is worth living.…”\textsuperscript{31} The meaning of life is a daunting philosophical question because life is temporary and fleeting. The three philosophers I’ve discussed—in different places, different times, and different languages—sought to answer the question: What does death mean for life? What meaning can we possibly extract from a life that, by definition, has to end? I’ve recently seen a bumper sticker that read “The meaning of life is to live it!” But—if I may again quote a songwriter, Ray Davies—“If life’s for living, then what’s living for?”\textsuperscript{32}

If we reflect on the ideas of Epicurus and Heidegger, we see that death does not have to be a petty tragedy or a gateway to the afterlife. They show us that it is possible take a positive or neutral attitude toward death without resorting to a belief in the otherworldly. James, however, is unable or unwilling to do this. James sees death as a tragic and depressing nightmare, the finality of which must be denied at all cost. Only by taking the proverbial “leap of faith” can we give life real worth. He would answer Davies’s question by saying that living can be for the benefit of some unseen and transcendental purpose. Epicurus and Heidegger might find it difficult to answer Davies’s inquiry. Perhaps they would counter by saying that it is in fact an empty question. Living isn’t for anything outside of life. We are here, we are living—we may as well live well because we are going to die. Death without transcendence need not hinder or destroy our willingness to live life, even if such living is not for anything in particular.

Epicurus and Heidegger are content with living—with life and nothing else. John Stuhr articulates how such a contentedness might look: “Desiring no spirituality…I pursue the only real virtues, the virtues of

\textsuperscript{32}Ray Davies, “Oklahoma U.S.A.” from \textit{Muswell Hillbillies}, performed by The Kinks, Velvel Records B000009DI1.
human beings, inescapably embodied beings, irreducibly temporal beings.” A strictly materialistic and atheistic life need not be accompanied by pessimism and “the suicidal mood.” Stuhr’s rejection of transcendental justification and meaning does not lead to pessimism, and neither do the ideas of Epicurus or Heidegger.

Epicurus looked at death and saw the end. But in this “end” he saw a non-entity, a meaningless and irrelevant happening (which will never actually happen to us in the typical sense). Heidegger also saw the end. But he looked further and saw a liberating and individualizing phenomenon which reveals to each person his responsibility and momentousness. Neither of these views strikes me as gloomy or melancholic. In fact, they appear to me as optimistic. Life ends with death, and it is precisely this fact that makes life meaningful. Such a maxim is anything but pessimistic.

The pro-death views of Epicurus and Heidegger reflect the first half of the Nietzsche quote above. “The certain prospect of death could sweeten every life with a precious and fragrant drop of levity.” Death shows us the importance of life. It reveals to us the necessity of living well, because life is all we have. Death does not negate life’s meaningfulness. On the contrary, death affirms the importance of life. James’ view, on the other hand, smacks of the second half of Nietzsche’s aphorism. “But you strange apothecary souls have turned it into an ill-tasting drop of poison that makes the whole of life repulsive.” Here, death becomes an evil; it becomes something to be overcome and avoided. James’ anti-death view tells us that life is ultimately not worth living if it is not supplemented by some higher order of reality. This is pessimism. Ordinary, finite life has been relegated to a status beneath spiritual transcendence. Death has become something to resist and rationalize away; James’ view has made life something to be supplemented.

James might respond to these charges by saying that his philosophy does not necessarily devalue life; it only provides an alternative when life by itself is not enough. But when is life not enough? James would say that life is lacking when the “philosophical blues” set in. If he would count the views of Epicurus and Heidegger as such, then he would fail to realize that the philosophical blues are not blue at all. Even if he meant a serious and suicidal depression in the face of death, belief in the otherworldly as an escape is not altogether necessary. If one is in hopeless despair about mortality and finitude, James’ “solution” is not the only game in town—Epicurus or Heidegger should do the trick.

In comparison to James, the ideas of Epicurus and Heidegger are a beacon of life-affirming optimism; they tell us that life does not need a supplement. Death can be the precious and fragrant drop of levity that Nietzsche wants it to be; it does not have to be the drop of poison that some would make of it. Thinking along similar lines, John Lachs has this to say: “Nature checkmates us in the end, and when that becomes plain, it is unbecoming to knock over the board in anger and pointless to play out every move. At that stage...smile...say it was a good game and now goodnight.” Rather than deny, fight, or resist it, accept and affirm death. And live better for it. Rather than take Dylan’s advice and remember that “death is not the end,” do the opposite. Remember—with joy, courage, and affirmation—that death is, in fact, the end.

REFERENCES


