

## THE DIVERSITY OF DEATH

Frithjof Bergmann

*University of Michigan  
Ann Arbor, Mich.*

Just after I finished college, I worked for a year in a nursing home, and while I was in graduate school I returned to the same job during the summer vacations. My field of study was philosophy, which I now teach. I had thus read a good portion of what philosophers, theologians, and psychologists have written on death before I actually encountered fatally ill patients whom I nursed as a nurse's aid. I remember that two things surprised me when I first began to work. One was the matter-of-factness, the degree of realism with which most patients foresaw their own dying. They talked about it accurately and directly. I had sat through many lectures in which the word death was uttered only with a special intonation, but the men and women in the wards did not cast down their eyes when they spoke about it. The other unexpected feature was the great diversity among their attitudes. Each man's bearing was individuated and sharply defined; it seemed to manifest his total character. Each man saw death as singularly as each saw life.

The fact that these two observations came unexpected to a person with my kind of academic training and that they were surprises reflects a general condition of the literatures to which I had been exposed. In their writings philosophers, psychologists and theologians usually assume that death has but a single, central meaning. Their titles often promise that *the* meaning of death will be revealed; later, that meaning is laid down as univocally as one would state a fact. The individual differences—if any are acknowledged—are relegated to a lower level. Their diversity shows only that men, in their unlikeness, cope with death's monadic meaning in ways that vary and that are peculiar to them. These differences merely represent the different reactions that men have to the one unaltering significance of death. No one would write like this after working for several weeks in a nursing home. Death there never has the same meaning for two patients. Its aspect is as diverse as that of life.

Martin Heidegger's philosophy is probably the most prominent and extreme example of writing in which death is discussed in far-flung generalizations. Heidegger not only holds that death has but a single meaning—that of "nihilation"—but goes further and asserts that this meaning is so absolute and patent that life's own meaning is only the counterpart of it. Life, too, has but a single meaning, and it no more than echoes the single meaning that is possessed by death. Mortality thereby becomes for Heidegger so central that he fashions his definition of man from it: man *is* the being that anticipates its own death, he *is* the expectation of his "nihilation." Therefore, he lives in dread. Dread structures the totality of man's experience, and all attempts to conquer or surmount it remain but futile self-deceptions.

I shall not produce a long list of authors and of titles that also speak of death as having but one meaning, though that would be easy. In this essay I do not want to measure the disagreement that may exist between me and others. I wish to explore, instead, the actual diversity of death's meanings and give some indication of their multiformity. To show how disparately death can be conceived and met is more my purpose than disputations or polemics.

Most of us know in any case that death has different meanings to different men; showy refutations of the contrary assumption are not needed. Yet it is one thing to know something in the context of practical every-day experience; it is quite another

to incorporate that knowledge with its train of implications into the body of one's theoretical beliefs and to make it part of one's abstract and discursive thinking. Practice is often wiser than theory; much of our abstract thinking must be educated and raised until it attains the discretion that practice reached much sooner. The old adage, that we should practice what we believe, needs a twin. We also must believe, and learn to believe, what we already practice.

In the context of practice, we all know very well that death has many meanings, but we know it much less well in another context—that of our abstract thinking—and least well perhaps when we philosophize about it. The aim of this essay is only to bring these two contexts together, to introduce a knowledge that we already have in the domain of practice into the sphere of theoretic and philosophic thinking.

Treatises, especially those composed by philosophers, often begin with a general definition, as do many of the writings on death. This is a barren start, however, for if one tries to conceive death abstractly, if one means to discover what is essential to it, one is very apt to find that its irreducible significance is simply that life has an end. Irrespective of all personal context and all circumstances, death represents no more than the fact that you and I will cease to be, that we will not persist beyond a certain limit. If one sets out from this rarefied and drained conception, however, only a very small range of the possible attitudes toward death comes into view. One asks: with what bearing can men encounter the fact that their lives must end? The almost inevitable answer is that they can do it with greater or lesser fortitude. One may extend this and add that men meet death also with panic or with resignation and, of course, also with relief, but this question does not lead one much further. It conjures up a kind of continuum that stretches from despair to acquiescence, from frantic resistance to the recognition that death can be the lesser of two evils, but it gives the impression that these gradations are sufficient, that they comprise the possibilities. They do not. There is a host of other aspects under which death can be perceived, and these are not determined by the stoutness or faintness of one's heart. They find no place within the order of this continuum and need to be defined outside it. To give even a faint conceptual outline of these attitudes requires a quite different framework: not one that starts from a posited essential significance of death, but one that lays down at the beginning a basic and sweeping philosophic distinction, a framework that divides the fact of man's mortality from his more general finitude.

We often treat man's mortality not alone as his most constricting limitation; we go further and superimpose these notions on each other until they coincide and are the same: man is finite; he is mortal; these two become identical. They seem to articulate one and the same condition, yet they are very different, for the fact that I must die is clearly but one of the many limitations that confine me. It may be the most irreparable and final limitation; it may also be the one that some regard as most important, although others might disagree on this point and consider other confinements yet more drastic. Still, it is not the whole set of our limitations, but only one of them. Even in the dimension of time, death is not the only restriction from which I suffer. I am finite in both directions, bordered both in the past and in the future. In addition, countless other boundaries circumscribe and hold me. We are limited in talent, in our capacity to experience, in our energy and power, in our ability to sustain emotions, in our endurance of the repetitious, in space and movement, in sympathy and understanding, in intelligence, in passion and in perseverance, and in all else. There is nothing that we possess to an infinite degree, unless it be our capacity to commit errors.

This our finitude is so ubiquitous, is so much with us, that our minds boggle if we

make the attempt to imagine it away. The difficulties in which medieval theologians embroiled themselves when they tried to develop the concept of a single truly infinite being are well known. Would it still be an infinity if it were bound by the laws of logic? Would its infinite power prevail even over an equally infinite resistance? Could any other creature still be free, still act, still will, if there were one such being that had omnipotence? These problems were engendered when one endeavored to give only an abstract definition of *one* genuinely unlimited being! That measures the impossibility we would encounter were we to aim, not only at a thin conceptualization, but at a real envisionment and picture of what it might be for us, for humans, to be limitless. By comparison, it is far easier to imagine a human life that would still be finite in other ways, yet be infinite in the one respect that constitutes mortality. It would be immensely stretched. Ages upon ages of youth would be followed by eons of adolescence; after these would flow still larger measures of interminable middle age that imperceptibly would turn into millenia of slow decrepitude. To imagine it this way is not sheer whimsy, for an important question is thereby raised: would one really want this infinitely prolonged life if all or even most of one's presently existing limitations still obtained? Would not the rest of our finitude, all our other limitations, even if we were healthy, become eventually intolerable, if we had ages upon ages to explore them, if we were still the same, no better, but had to live with ourselves forever? One could still advance the further question: can one envision any changes that would make an infinitely prolonged life acceptable to us? Would we find a life of infinite duration supportable even if we were granted other wishes and not just the one fairy tale request that we might not die, or would we still weary of it in the far distant future, no matter which of our other limitations were abolished?

The difference between our finitude and our mortality could be elaborated much more fully. One might add that our experiences of the two are radically different: my finitude is more present to me than my mortality. I chafe against it constantly. It is quite ineluctable. In one way or another, everything reminds me of it and compels me to give it recognition. This is not nearly as true of my dying. It only haunts me, but is not perpetually present. My finitude has also a quite different temporal structure. It exists in my past, my present, and my future. It is in my life in a way in which my death is not. These cleavages need not be pursued, however, for once these two—finitude and mortality—have been distinguished from each other, one can transcend the notion that death is met with postures that fall somewhere between panic and acquiescence. One then sees that most men perceive death against the background, against the precondition, of their finitude. The attitudes of most men toward death cannot be delineated or understood if one approaches this task directly, as most philosophers and other writers have. One's conception of death is not simply a response to the fact that life must end. Primary is the response to the more encompassing and more present fact of our finitude. The significance one gives to death is only an afterthought to that more fundamental posture.

The meanings that men give to death hinge on the meanings they give to their lives. The conceptions of death are as variegated and complex as those of life. Death has no essence. It has no core of its own. Its substance is all borrowed, is wholly circumstance. Its shape is utterly determined by what manner of life it ends.

We shall illustrate the nature of this complementarity—show how the interpretation of one's life precedes and generates the meaning one discerns in death—with three very different examples. Each of these presupposes the distinction between mortality and finitude. The response to man's finitude is in each case more fundamental and prior to the meaning with which death is invested. At the same

time, none of these attitudes fits into the gradations that lie between panic and acquiescence. They lie beyond the range that any more direct and frontal approach would place in focus.

The attitudes I shall try to sketch derive from Camus, from the German poet Hölderlin, and from Nietzsche. Mentioning these names makes it superfluous to say that the statistical frequency with which these attitudes occur is not in question; neither do I wish to suggest that they are especially admirable and should be emulated. To judge them seems to me not of primary importance. My main concern is to demonstrate their possibility and to suggest some of the rationale that motivates them.

The single idea with which Camus' name is most powerfully associated is that of the Absurd. One often thinks that Camus judged life to be absurd because it ends in death, but this is a misconception and one that does him and his existentialism a disservice. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus defines and describes his notion of the Absurd at length, and he makes it quite clear that it is not mortality that makes life absurd, but that it is rendered that by a number of other limitations. He illustrates the experience of the Absurd with several examples. The most important and most forcefully presented of these is his discussion of human intelligence. Camus is impressed with and concentrates on the conflict between our passion for lucidity, our great thirst for understanding and the inherent untowardness, the insuperable paucity and clumsiness of our intellectual tools and procedures. He is struck by the accursedness of the human creature: that man, though possessed by a passionate drive for understanding, should nevertheless find himself so ill-equipped and therefore thwarted. In essence, Camus' point on this score is that it would be tolerable to have the shoddy intellectual endowment of most humans if at the same time one did not also want to know much, and that human life would also make sense if his intelligence were ample enough to justify the strength of his desire. It is the disproportion between these, the fact that man has a monstrous thirst and yet receives no more than drops, that renders man's condition absurd. It would be all right if we were only stupid, but to be simultaneously so curious seems perverse.

The other examples illustrate similar disproportions: man's desperate search for a firm basis to support his actions is mocked by the ambiguities of all his causes and the hollowness of his principles. We are afflicted with a need for meaning; the universe seems override to meet that need, yet it refuses. In one of his best pages, Camus likens us to a man who observes from the outside the conversation that another carries on behind the glass walls of a telephone booth. As do this man's mimicry and gestures, so everything in us and in the universe calls out for meaning and for interpretation, and yet we encounter only silence. It is as if a demon had arranged it; the most important needs of man are not answered. He himself seems constructed and the universe seems purposely designed to tantalize him. It is to this perversity, to these other limitations that Camus' notion of the Absurd reacts. It was not provoked by man's mortality.

The attitude that Camus recommended and espoused in response to this absurdity he himself called "rebellion," but that word, too, is easily misunderstood. It is best elucidated if we consider Camus' argument against suicide. The entire book, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, poses the question: Does the absurdity of life require of me the act of suicide? Am I obligated to kill myself if I find life too paradoxical? Camus answers: "No." His reason is that suicide would yield to the absurdity of life. We should not "join" the Absurd; we should confront it, face it, and be relentless and unmitigating in this. Given the fact that life is absurd, our only honorable response lies in our refusal in any way to evade or shirk or palliate that fact. This is what pride, what integrity requires.

In Camus' judgment, we should not try to give life meaning, for even that

constitutes an attempt to soften and to hide the absurdity of life from ourselves. The effort to invest life with meaning is not only futile; it is almost disgraceful. It is to curry favors, to become obeisant, to recognize a court that has no claim to judgment. The disproportion between man's aspirations and man's capacities is an affront. The enterprise of self-transcendence, of self-perfection becomes ridiculous and pathetic in its light. Suicide would be capitulation. Camus responds with scorn, with aloofness. It is reminiscent of Homer's Achilles, who also withdrew after he had been affronted by King Agamemnon. Although there is much to be said in criticism of Camus, there is a sense of dignity, of man's worth, even of grandeur in his unyielding, unremitting distance from life. One may disagree, but there is something commanding in his attitude, just as there is in that of Achilles.

If this is Camus' attitude toward man's finitude—an attitude that is perhaps best condensed into the word "scorn"—then we might now make the attempt to sketch a conception of death that grows from it, that sees death beyond the foreground of this response to man's finitude

Camus gave perhaps the single most concentrated and heightened expression of it in the closing line to his novel *The Stranger*. The hero of that novel, Meursault, anticipating his imminent execution, says of the crowd of spectators, "They shall greet my death with howls of execration." That line is memorable for its venom. To Meursault, life was without rhyme or reason. He is not Camus' hero, but an exemplification of the human condition. He lived—not well, not badly—until, as Sartre has said, life began to stalk him. A succession of circumstances linked up with each other, and he commits a murder. That act is itself absurd. It is momentary, sudden, committed for no deep reason, and yet sufficient to define and brand him, to deliver him to judgment. The point is not that Meursault is innocent or guilty; it is rather that the way in which these things happen should affront us. The nature of Meursault's trial is similarly absurd: he did commit a murder, but that is not what he is condemned for. The jury finds him guilty because Meursault's attitude toward his mother's funeral offends them. This man says, "They shall greet my death with howls of execration."

He flings his life down like a gauntlet. With insolence and indignation, he spits it back into the crowd's, the world's, face. Trapped, taunted, hoaxed by life, guilty and innocent, but above all outraged, his supreme response is his death, the highest, topping counterinsult that he can deliver. It is his way of besting the affrontery of man's condition.

Socrates said that to live is to be ill for a long time. Camus might have said that to live is to be degraded. His response to that degradation was not to seek to stem the tide, not to salvage scraps. The point of living was to better the instruction, to rise above and top the insolence of life. In that perspective, one's death could be one's final and triumphant answer. That would be one way of dying that does not lie between despair and acquiescence.

Let me now turn to one of Holderlin's poems.\*

A single summer grant me, great powers, and  
 A single autumn for fully ripened song  
 That, sated with the sweetness of my  
 Playing, my heart may more willingly die.

\*I quote Holderlin's poem in a translation by Walter Kaufmann. My remarks on it, and the present essay, owe much to the chapter on "Death" in Walter Kaufmann's *Faith of a Heretic*, Doubleday & Co., New York, N.Y., 1961.

The soul that, living, did not attain its divine  
 Right cannot repose in the netherworld.  
 But once what I am bent on, what is  
 Holy, my poetry, is accomplished.

Be welcome then, stillness of the shadow's world!  
 I shall be satisfied though my lyre will not  
 Accompany me down there. Once I  
 Lived like the gods, and more is not needed.

At the center of this poem lies the thought that to accomplish what one was bent on, what is holy to one, is all that matters. More is not needed. After that death is welcome.

The idea that a single summer, or a single autumn, of writing great poetry will suffice presupposes a very strong sense of the stark and drastic nature of human limitations. Hölderlin, conscious of what it is to be a man, conscious of the smallness and insignificance of his being, asks in response to that realization for but one thing: that his poetry, his task may be accomplished. Given his finitude, given his limitations, it would be pointless for him to endure forever. It is as if Hölderlin had surveyed the totality of his being, the small territory that he represents, and had said, "If from this plot of ground one splenied harvest can be raised, then more than one could hope or ask for has been granted."

His attitude toward man's finitude is totally different from that of Camus. It is much humbler and therefore perhaps more appealing. Holderlin is not affronted by his finitude. Who is he to find it disgracing? Instead, he looks at himself as a small and not very promising quantity of raw material and decides to use it, quite literally to consume and to exhaust it.

One has, I think, to put the matter into such crude language to understand the attitude toward death that is here suggested. One can perceive oneself as a quantity that has only so much in it, that has only a given sum of potentialities that can be used up and depleted. If one sees oneself so, then one can feel that what matters most is not to waste that substance. One's attitude toward death might then derive from this more basic attitude in the following fashion. One could see oneself in a kind of race with death. If one is fortunate and is given the opportunity to use up and exploit most of what one represents, then one does not leave much to death. Alternatively, to abandon the somewhat hackneyed metaphor of the race: given one's finitude, and given the notion that it can be used, one can see oneself involved in a kind of sharing with death. If one is fortunate, then what one leaves to death is as nothing compared to what one gave to others and to what one oneself consumed. One leaves to death only the offal, the burnt-out and worthless ashes. There is then more than a dash of contempt in one's attitude toward death. There is also an admixture of bemused and even of malicious humor. Poor death, it gets only the dregs!

Now to Nietzsche. One of his leading ideas is the concept that one should live one's life as if one were making a work of art. This, as the other cases, presupposes a sense of man's finitude and of his ubiquitous limitations. We make a work of art by rearranging, by imposing style, by heightening some aspects of a limited material. This artist's attitude toward one's life again gives rise to a concept of death that is entwined with it. Nietzsche said that one's death should come at the right time; we all know well that all too often it comes too soon. By contrast, the side of Nietzsche's dictum that is more novel and that stings is that death can also come too late. This idea is directly linked to the concept of life as a work of art. If living be an artistic creation, then a life lived beyond its limits becomes tasteless as

any other work of art that does not know when to finish. Einstein refused the last operation that was recommended to him and is reported to have said that it would be tasteless to live longer. Nietzsche also thought that one should try to give a positive function to one's dying; in this he was again led by the notion that life should be a work of art. What he had in mind is that a death can close and unify a life as the final chords of a great symphony might complete it. His point was not that death can sometimes be preferable to protracted suffering, although that is true. He affirmed that the aesthetic drive should include even death. It is assigned its function in the artistic plan that one might try to foster in one's life.

These are three examples. It would be easy to add others that follow the same pattern, that also see death, not as a vast and undefined abstraction, but in the perspective that a particular interpretation of human finitude created. The heroic death requires such an understanding, for the act of sacrificing one's life deliberately for a cause assumes that the inconsiderable extensions of one's own self have been paced off. To sacrifice it gladly, one must have learned that one's own life is small. That knowledge tempers the aspect of one's death; it divests it of lyricism, makes it prosaic, an event in a fixed order.

The same mirroring occurs when death is experienced as a constantly present temptation, when it appears as the seductive alternative to every difficulty, when it glows with the promise of relief or liberation. That is the meaning it takes on for those who suffer from their individuality, for those who are incessantly disappointed by themselves and who cannot make their peace with their own limitations. There is no need to heap up further illustrations. Those we have adduced indicate with sufficient strength that the question concerning *the* meaning of death is presumptuous. Death is not a universal, independent, and anonymous fact that enters identically into every life. It ripens slowly in the center of our separate selves, grows from the totality of our being, is personal, and is our own.

The physician who attends a dying patient—and not only he, but equally all others whose professions involve assignments in that sphere—cannot dodge at least one clear implication of the fact that death is so multishaped, for that fact places him midway between the two horns of a dilemma. We all know the two sides: one is the "role," the other is "sincerity." The physician or chaplain may either stay on the well laid-out paths that convention and decorum measure out for him; he can keep his distance and his bedside manner, or he can try to be intimate and understanding. The very diversity of death, which we have stressed, makes the choice between these two alternatives a true dilemma, for it renders inadequate both of these options and leaves us troubled, no matter which of them we choose.

If the encounter with death obeys no simple stereotype, but is instead acutely subtle and specific, then the soothing clichés of the doctor who plays his "role" are bound to be grotesquely inappropriate and clumsy. If the true meaning that this event has for the patient can hardly be grasped even by those who know him best, then the nurse or the physician with a few hand-me-down rules plainly does not have a chance. The rote assumptions are apt to be so wide from the facts that the patient at best will be treated to the observation of an inapplicable show. If he is less fortunate, he will be asked to play his "part," which he may consent to do, though it is burdensome. If things go badly, the "role" the physician plays will hurt the patient and, irritated, he may expose it for the fakery it is. The "role" is clearly not the answer. However, to abandon the script, to be "direct" and "understanding" and "oneself" does not work, either, for, in the first place, one does *not* understand. If the experience of death has the kind of structure we suggested, then five or six glances are not much better than one or two. To throw a switch and try a little empathy is not enough. To be loose and relaxed does not mean that one

understands. Real understanding requires a very deep and particular knowledge and an intellectual exertion for which most doctors lack both the equipment and the time. This is not insulting; poets, too, might not attain it. To give oneself the air of comprehension is therefore bound to be no more than a change of "roles"; it only substitutes one form of play-acting for another. To become informal because one wants to be "sincere" only magnifies the hypocrisy one wishes to escape; if anything, it introduces hypocrisy of an inferior brand, for it denies itself, it makes itself up out of the very stuff of which sincerity should be composed. Furthermore, what guarantee is there that every patient wishes to exchange intimacies with his physician, that he aches for nothing as much as for "understanding"? He may prefer privacy and a sense of reserve; if a doctor nevertheless forces his "concern" and his "sympathy" on him, the patient may well feel that the doctor takes advantage of his defenselessness to paw his soul. To drop one's role may also be a self-indulgence that hinders the performance of one's actual task. One can do some things as long as one stays inside the armor of one's appointed garb. A chaplain, for instance, may think that it would be better to meet the patient as "another human being." However, that is very risky, for usually there are several others in the situation who know the patient better and whom the patient respects much more as human beings. The task such a chaplain takes on can be performed better by friends and relatives, but friends and relatives cannot do what the chaplain might have done for the patient, if he had not become so "familiar." Such a chaplain therefore risks doing badly what others do already, while his own job remains undone. Obviously, neither of these two approaches—neither the "sincere," man-to-man treatment nor the ceremonious role-playing—have much to recommend them. One adopts them with misgivings because one must, not because either of them is appealing.

To see this more deeply, one should hold this dilemma, this choice between the two proverbial evils, against some very general and sweeping cultural considerations. Ritual always depends on exclusiveness; to function properly, it must be unquestioned. It cannot sustain itself if it is one of several competing alternatives. It must be alone in its context—a solitary king who answers to no one, who has no rivals, who never even dreams of being challenged. As soon as it is no longer the only possibility, it loses its stability and its balance; a devolutionary process starts to take it downward to its degeneration. Ritual is thus the most fragile and vulnerable of things. It needs monopoly to retain its nature. In the presence of competition, it becomes something else. If challenged, it either hides its shaken confidence behind a spectacular and shrill facade, becomes pompous and declamatory and thus transforms itself from genuine ritual into a theatrical show, or it withdraws to a more defensible "inner" reality, reforms away the embroidery of its appearance, and retains only what seems "rational" and "up-to-date." In this clearing of the decks, it invariably throws overboard its best and most precious possessions. It throws out the poem, but keeps the synopsis. It ceases to be ritual and becomes prosaic "custom."

In cultures less sophisticated and less pluralistic than our own, death is surrounded with rituals that function as genuine rituals that have not yet become either "show" or "custom." The whole community lives these rituals, and they enjoy an utterly unchallenged acceptance. They grow out of and in turn nourish a far more unified interpretation of life and of death. Death, in other words, has not been diverse in all ages and all cultures. Far from it. The individuated and differentiated perception of it was only augured in by the general individualism of our civilization, and this process is anything but complete. The energies of our individual thinking modified the substance of inherited, collective representations,



but not altogether. What we have is neither fish nor fowl. This is true, both for our conceptions of death and for the whole texture of behavior in which it is embedded. Tatters of no longer credible ritual are basted to personal and subjective material. This makes for the exasperating impasse. One cannot altogether dismiss the ritualistic; at the same time, it has been so emasculated that to use it makes one pathetic. The nimbus of the ceremonious has been so enfeebled that its surface no longer carries. It is no longer sustained by a collective faith; if one tries to walk on it, one sinks. Nevertheless, it is also impossible to brush it aside.

The best one can do in this situation is to adopt an attitude that neither strains painfully against the ceremonious nor blindly and naively employs it. One can stay inside one's role, but show that one is aware of its clumsiness and inadequacy. One can play one's part, yet at the same time confess that it is no more than this. This, I suggest, is what doctors—and not only they—are condemned to. Something of the aura that once enveloped the wonder worker, the magician, and the witch still clings to them. They cannot fight their way altogether free from this, although that aura is by now tawdry and no longer believed. There is no need to do this, for the aura still has its uses. The situation between a dying patient and his doctor is inherently disproportionate. The patient knows that the doctor really does not understand. He also knows that the doctor functions in an institutional framework and that he, the patient, remains for him one of hundreds of cases, even while the patient confronts his death. If the physician retains his manner, but at the same time communicates to the patient his own sense of its limitations, they can both admit to this disproportionateness; the lightly worn formality protects both and permits both to be honest.