



## The Significance of Insignificance : Two Ways to Learn to Die in an Egocentric World

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[Essay]

## The Significance of Insignificance

### Two Ways to Learn to Die in an Egocentric World

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#### Abstract

The claim that philosophy is training for death has an astonishing pedigree. In both the East and the West, the oldest philosophical traditions maintain that philosophy's central function involves coming to terms with mortality. My aim is to sketch two approaches to this question, both of which involve a recognition of one's insignificance. I will first present a therapeutic reading of the Socratic/Epicurean tradition, suggesting that the arguments surrounding mortality should be understood as tools for developing certain attitudes rather than simply as tools for ascertaining the truth. I next present some basic traditions of meditation in outline, arguing that they are similar in certain fundamental respects to pursuing the 'life of reason,' understood therapeutically. In both cases, we find practical techniques for cultivating awareness of one's insignificance, as well as a recognition (and acceptance) of one's mortality.

#### 1. Introduction

The claim that philosophy is training for death has an astonishing pedigree. In both the East and the West, the oldest philosophical traditions maintain that philosophy's central function involves coming to terms with mortality. And yet, despite a sometime-consensus regarding the goal of philosophy, there has been no such consensus on the manner in which philosophy is to achieve this goal. Nevertheless, as I hope to show, there is at least a common thread in some of these approaches: namely, the attempt to recognize one's own insignificance.

My aim in what follows is to sketch two approaches to this question—one of which is much more alive today than the other. I will first present a therapeutic reading of the Socratic and Epicurean tradition, suggesting that the arguments surrounding mortality should be understood as tools for developing certain attitudes rather than simply as tools for ascertaining the truth (though these are certainly compatible). I will next present some traditions of meditation in outline

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(*vipassanā* and *zazen*), arguing that they are similar in certain fundamental respects to pursuing the ‘life of reason,’ provided this is understood therapeutically. Although most people no longer think of the life of reason in the terms I will suggest, the traditions of *vipassanā* and *zazen* meditation are alive and well—and provide practical techniques for cultivating awareness of one’s insignificance, as well as a recognition (and acceptance) of one’s mortality.

## **2. Existential and Propositional Knowledge: Two Approaches to the Life of Reason**

The Socratic and Epicurean view that philosophy is a kind of preparation for death is usually understood in a more or less rationalist way: following the Epicurean strategy, when we fully understand the nature of death, we will be free from fears regarding it. On the Epicurean view, to understand death entails understanding that it involves the absence of the possibility of any kind of experience whatsoever. Through a startlingly seductive and brief series of arguments, we are then led to the claim that death cannot be a harm.

The responses to Epicurus’ therapeutic argument are legion. One common response—and one that I will argue misses the point of the Epicurean strategy—centers on the nature of argument. The idea that reason by itself can beat back the fear of death—that rational argumentation could in fact conquer finitude—is itself problematized by our continuing struggle with Epicurean thinking. Emil Cioran, for example, writes that “those who try to eliminate the fear of death through artificial reasoning are totally mistaken, because it is impossible to cancel an organic fear by way of abstract constructs...All attempts to bring existential questions on to only a logical plane are null and void” (Cioran, *On the Heights of Despair*, 26-27).<sup>1</sup> Françoise Dastur makes a similar claim when she writes: “The idea that we may free ourselves from the anxiety that arises from our being mortal merely by appealing to reason constitutes an illusion or trap that in the end is just as deceptive as any of the discourses about ‘the beyond’ or technico-scientific fantasies about the indefinite extension of life” (*How Are We to Confront Death?*, 42). Robert Solomon, in a similar vein,

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<sup>1</sup> Cioran comments earlier in the book, with wonderful irony, “These lines written today, April 8, 1933, when I turn twenty-two. It is strange to think that I am already a specialist in the question of death” (15). Cioran tames his self-indulgence and megalomania with self-deprecating wit: he knows he is still young. To make such pronouncements at twenty-two may inspire doubt. It is a doubt Cioran himself shares.

writes that “confronting death is a very emotional experience...Thinking about death, by contrast, seems curiously detached, abstracted, and out of touch with the phenomenon it ponders” (153).<sup>2</sup> He goes on to claim, perhaps somewhat bitterly, that our attempts to address the question of death philosophically are ultimately an *evasion* of death: “What happens, particularly in contemporary Anglo-American attempts to argue that ‘death is nothing’, is that the natural perplexity surrounding the question is supposedly resolved by ‘clarifying the question’...But some questions cannot and should not be clarified, and this is one of them. What we see here is an analytic philosopher’s trick: First, eliminate everything that isn’t death as such...and Bingo! – there’s nothing left. Death is nothing” (169).

Can there be an answer to the problem of death, from the critical perspectives of Cioran, Solomon, and Dastur? Ignoring the obvious anachronism of referring to arguments with their origins in ancient Greece as being from ‘analytic philosophers’—a silly claim, in my view<sup>3</sup> – one wonders, on Solomon’s view, whether or not there’s anything that *can* be said philosophically about death. He seems, rather, to come close to advocating the view of the Nobel Prize-winning author Elias Canetti, who claims “Ich anerkenne *keinen* Tod,” that he “does not acknowledge death in any form.”<sup>4</sup> One then must wonder why refusing to talk about death itself in any form (as opposed to the social dimension of death) is *less* an evasion than trying to grapple with it in argument and analysis.

Dastur, by contrast, does offer a positive response to how we should confront death—but one that proves, in my view, every bit as perplexing as the one she aims to replace. Rather than thinking of death as the unfortunate consequence of living, we should think of it as the very condition through which existence is possible. “Death would no longer appear as a scandal, but rather as the very foundation of our existence” (44). To achieve this requires the cultivation of *Gelassenheit*—the classic Heideggerian notion of ‘letting being be’—with an attendant ability to leave room for “the incalculable, the irremediable, and all the negativity that existence can attain” (45). *Gelassenheit*, Dastur explains, is “a letting be that lets all things return to themselves at the

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Solomon, “Death Fetishism and Morbid Solipsism”.

<sup>3</sup> It is silly because ‘analytic philosophy’ is a historical philosophical movement with its origins in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century.

<sup>4</sup> Canetti, *The Agony of Flies: Notes and Notations*, 1994, pp. 80-81.

moment one stops making use of them for one's projects, the moment when one is able to deprive oneself of one's ego" (42). On Dastur's view, death is not a problem to be dealt with. To treat death as a puzzle is to misunderstand it, and misunderstand as well our relationship to it. Much like Cioran and Solomon, Dastur is unimpressed by the syllogism when it comes to confronting our own mortality.

And yet, there is another way of understanding both the Epicurean and the Platonic strategy that makes it much more plausible. On my reading, the cultivation of arguments is designed to alter the kind of *attitude one has*, rather than simply the kind of syllogism one employs. The use of reason, in effect, can accomplish precisely the goal that Dastur reserves for *Gelassenheit*—namely, it enables one “to deprive oneself of one's ego” (42). In confronting mortality, the issue is not simply to come up with the best argument, but to facilitate the proper *attitude towards oneself*. Moreover, this is precisely the view philosophers like Pierre Hadot *already* attribute to Socrates, Plato, and Epicurus. As Hadot notes in regard to Socrates, “knowledge is not a prefabricated object, or a finished content which can be directly transmitted by writing or by just any discourse” (26-27).<sup>5</sup> It is not, in other words, something one achieves by simply memorizing particular syllogisms, or particular positions, or particular speeches. This is a point present throughout the Platonic corpus: wisdom is not to be found in the memorization of arguments. It is to be found in living a certain kind of life. In this respect, as we will see, Cioran, Solomon, and Dastur all misunderstand the function of argument in confronting death. Arguments are not magic bullets. They cannot *by themselves* change our relation to death. But it hardly follows from this that they can serve no function in coming to terms with mortality.

The power of argument alone to produce existential change is notoriously minimal. The best arguments in the world seem nearly impotent to bring a person from one conclusion to its opposite—at least when one feels there's something at stake. Some of Plato's dialogues show this—e.g. Euthyphro—but so too do routine conversations about things like factory-farming. While Dastur is right that the Socratic approach is, in effect, to separate from the body, this can most profitably be understood along therapeutic lines: the life of reason is to be understood as the attempt to identify oneself with the universal over the particular—to come to see oneself as an instance of *reason itself* rather than as a

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<sup>5</sup> Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*

mortal being destined for death.<sup>6</sup> At the core of this strategy is an attempt to cultivate an awareness that one's individual existence is insignificant. It is this, I contend, that allows us to appropriately confront our own mortality.

I do not mean to imply that those who argue that death is not a harm are engaging in mere rhetorical trickery. I agree with Stephen Rosenbaum when he writes, in response to Mary Mothersill, that "there is no reason to believe that [Epicurus] would have been willing to peddle ataraxia by means of rhetorical trickery" (125).<sup>7</sup> My point is about what the effect of argument is meant to be, and I leave it as an open question whether or not arguments must track truth to have their intended effect. Cioran and Dastur see arguments as producing what is standardly called propositional knowledge, and hence they regard such arguments as unable to properly respond to our usually sub-rational view of death. So far as it goes, this view is correct. But the view also ignores the fact that an argument may well be the means for acquiring a *different* attitude toward death—that it may well be a first step to acquiring what I will call an 'existential' knowledge of one's own mortality.

Existential knowledge, as I am using the phrase, is knowledge integrated into one's life. Propositional knowledge, by contrast, is knowledge of a conceptual or linguistic sort—it is whatever might fill out the propositional content of a 'that' clause (in, e.g., 'I know that x'). The possession of propositional knowledge does not require a corresponding existential knowledge, and one might likewise possess existential knowledge without corresponding propositional knowledge. This distinction is implicit in a great deal of the literature on death denial: despite everyone knowing that one dies (in the propositional sense of 'knows'), one remains ignorant (in an existential sense) of one's own mortality. One can say with ease and confidence 'All men are mortal, I am a man, and therefore I am mortal,' and yet behave as if one's own life is unending, routinely marrying magical thinking with the propositional awareness that one is a mortal being.

Insofar as one believes that arguments will only ever produce propositional knowledge, one is likely to take a dim view of the power of Epicurus' or Plato's own arguments designed to deal with death. Indeed, such arguments, on this view, will only ever reinforce a propositional awareness of mortality. One might

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<sup>6</sup> This might involve giving up part of what we regard as central to the human condition, as Martha Nussbaum suggests in *The Fragility of Goodness*. That, however, is a separate issue.

<sup>7</sup> Rosenbaum, "How to be Dead and not Care: A Defense of Epicurus".

shake one's head in assent far more readily about one's impending death, but one will not thereby be any more capable of facing death on the existential level. What reason giveth, self-deception taketh away.

If arguments are capable of generating existential knowledge, on the other hand, the criticisms offered by Cioran, Solomon, and Dastur are, in effect and with all due respect, shallow ones. When we approach argument as potentially transformative (or 'therapeutic' as I will use the term), Plato's tussle with mortality becomes far more compelling and, indeed, far more sophisticated than a simple syllogistic one-two punch.

### **3. A therapeutic reading of Plato on mortality**

It is relatively uncontroversial to claim that Plato advocates the life of reason. What this means, however, is by no means transparent. To put the view I will defend succinctly, the life of reason is one in which one submits oneself to rational discourse, where such submission is designed to change the way one regards *oneself*. In this respect, the life of reason is meant to alter our being-in-the-world—and hence to facilitate a kind of existential knowledge—it is not simply to pursue persuasive argumentation.

The life of reason involves putting oneself in the right relationship to arguments. The relationship, I contend, is exemplified in *Crito*, *Phaedo*, and elsewhere by the figure of Socrates. In *Crito*, the personified city presents, in a speech, a series of arguments designed to show that Socrates must accept his execution, no matter how much he might not want to. The figure of Crito, by contrast, offers a flurry of arguments all designed to lead to a pre-determined end: the escape of Socrates. Crito has little concern for whether or not his arguments are any good. He manages to give several obviously rehearsed arguments in a matter of minutes. His aim is not to test these arguments, it is simply to achieve his goal: to save his old friend. In the person of Crito, reason is instrumentalized; it serves whatever pre-given ends one has. By contrast, Socrates presents reason as separated from all antecedent desires and hopes—as capable of exploring things in a way that is detached from one's current circumstances. This picture of reason, presented in the figure of Socrates considering escape, stands over and above human existence—as something divine. When Socrates says, at the end of the dialogue, "let us act in this way [not escaping], since this is the way the god is leading us" (54d, 57), the 'god' in

question, I suggest, following James Arieti, is *logos* itself.

The idea of the divine (theos) in Greek has the connotation of those things beyond the power of human beings: the sea, the sun, time, and so on. Here, too, we see *logos* as existing beyond the mere power of mortals. It directs us, though like other gods, offers no guarantees for its direction. Socrates' dedication to reason is a dedication to a way of living: he endeavors to be the kind of person who always follows where *logos* leads, even when it means death. "At all times I am the kind of man," he tells Crito, "who listens to nothing within me but the argument that on reflection seems best to me" (48). As Pierre Hadot remarks, "the person who talks with Socrates must submit, along with Socrates, to the demands of rational discourse—that is, to the demands of reason. In other words, caring for ourselves and questioning ourselves occur only when our individuality is transcended and we rise to the level of universality, which is represented by what the two interlocutors have in common" (32). The life of reason, as exemplified by Socrates, involves giving up one's sense that one's own individual wants and desires are in any sense significant to what one should believe or do. The life of reason is thus the overcoming of the sense of one's own individual importance in the face of universal *logos*.

One finds a similar picture of reason in *Phaedo*. In considering some well-known fables about the afterlife, Socrates famously claims that "those who practice philosophy in the right way are in training for dying, and they fear death least of all men" (67e). This is so because philosophy cultivates an attitude in which one separates from bodily concerns—concerns like the fear of losing a friend, or of being shamed by public opinion, or even of not enjoying sufficient pleasure. Thus, "any man whom you see resenting death [is] not a lover of wisdom but a lover of the body, and also a lover of wealth or of honors, either or both" (68b-c). To live life dedicated to the ends of a social world, or to the ends of the body—to dedicate oneself to pleasure, or honor, or wealth—is to identify with things fundamentally related to one's own individuality: to *my* wealth, *my* pleasure, *my* honor, *my* body. To pursue a life according to *logos* means to dissociate from such particularities, and hence from the presumption that one's *particularity* matters in some significant sense.

The philosophical life changes what we in fact are. Rather than identifying ourselves with our wants and desires, our fears and hopes, we identify ourselves with something *beyond* what we currently are—namely, the pursuit of truth itself. Because one cannot be certain of what happens in the afterlife, as the *Phaedo*



repeatedly makes clear, it would be a mistake to think that actually attaining truth is the goal and sole purpose of the life of reason. It is simply living in such a way that we identify with thought itself—with the god *logos*—that marks the measure of the philosopher.

The point here is about what we might call psychological identification. Our thinking can be permeated by the physical—and this simply out of force of habit (81c). By contrast, “those who practice philosophy in the right way keep away from all bodily passions, master them and do not surrender themselves to it” (82c) “Philosophers see that the worst feature of this imprisonment is that it is due to desires, so that the prisoner himself is contributing to his own incarceration most of all” (82e). The process of disassociation from one’s bodily urges is accomplished when the soul follows the instruction “to trust only itself and whatever reality, existing by itself, the soul by itself understands” (83b). We identify with what is most universal within us: *logos*.

Socrates’ response to the objections of Simmias and Cebes is the model of the philosophical. As Phaedo recounts, “What I wondered at most in him was the pleasant, kind, and admiring way he received the young men’s argument, and how sharply he was aware of the effect the discussion had on us, and then how well he healed our distress and, as it were, recalled us from our flight and defeat and turned us around to join him in the examination of their argument” (89a). Socrates helps his interlocutors to turn away from the body and identification with it—the fear and distress that characterize creaturely existence. By returning to *logos*—to argument without attachment to pre-given conclusions—he both offers consolation and embodies what that consolation provides: an easy attitude toward death.

And yet, as Plato reminds us, the attitude isn’t actually ‘easy’ at all. Socrates makes it clear that there is a danger of misology if one does not maintain the right approach: one can come to hate argument if argument leads one away from those things to which one is attached (89d-90d). The desire to simply cling to one’s convictions—what one wants to be true, as opposed to those things attained through *logos*—is the very opposite of the philosophical attitude. Cultivating and maintaining a philosophical attitude is an on-going endeavor, and one even Socrates must struggle with: “I was in danger at this moment of not having a philosophical attitude about this, but like those who are quite uneducated, I am eager to get the better of you in argument, for the uneducated, when they engage in argument about anything, give no thought to the truth about

the subject of discussion but are only eager that those present will accept the position they have set forth.” (90e-91a).

The philosophical attitude, then, is one where what matters is only *where reason leads*, not one in which arguments are utilized as agonistic devices at the service of the competition of egos (*pace* Nietzsche’s reading of Socrates in *Twilight of the Idols*). To be philosophical is to give up one’s attachment to oneself—one’s sense of one’s own importance—and to submit one’s life to *logos*.

*Logos* itself can be transformative, provided that we approach it in the right way. On the view I am defending, there is no reason to suppose that reading Plato’s texts therapeutically entails not taking its arguments seriously. Indeed, learning to take arguments seriously, even when they go against one’s own vital interests, is precisely the *way* in which *logos* can be therapeutic. We are transformed from agents who act based upon their particular wants and desires *even when they reason* into agents who detach from such wants and desires in such a way that allows them to identify with the universality of *logos*.

By contrast, consider briefly an alternative therapeutic reading of *Phaedo*’s arguments, one where the arguments are read as devices designed to ease the suffering of those present. In considering immortality, Socrates admits that the attempt to demonstrate the truth of immortality has significant practical benefits—he will “distress those present less with lamentations” (91b). One might try to read some of Socrates’ arguments here in light of this claim. Indeed, the argument for the soul’s immortality occurs in the midst of the visible distress Socrates’ comrades suffer. As Socrates says after giving the initial argument: “I think you and Simias would like to discuss this argument more fully. You seem to have this childish fear that the wind would really dissolve and scatter the soul, as it leaves the body, especially if one happens to die in a high wind and not in calm weather” (77e). Cebes responds with laughter at this remark, but then adds (with what seems like seriousness) “perhaps there is a child in us who has these fears” (77e). What follows is immensely interesting: Socrates says we must “sing a charm” to chase away the fear of the scared child. Cebes, by asking who will charm away the fears of Socrates’ comrades once Socrates is gone, tacitly admits that Socrates has thus far performed this very role: he has assuaged the fear of death that is the perennial pre-occupation of most persons. The arguments—and, ultimately, the myths that Socrates resorts to at the end of the dialogue—are the very ‘charm’ Socrates aims to sing in order to ease the

lamentations of his friends.

Whatever the merits of this reading, it seems to leave little room for a conception of the life of reason as I have so far been considering it. Indeed, on this view, arguments are a kind of rhetorical trickery aimed at a pre-given end: namely, easing the suffering of Socrates' interlocutors. But this is precisely a conception of reason that Plato and Socrates reject again and again, even while recognizing the limitations of argument. Where argument ends, it has often been noted, *mythos* begins (see Arieti; Brisson)—and the *Phaedo* illustrates precisely this point. One cannot *know* what will occur after death. Arguments are thus limited in certain crucial ways. Nevertheless, living a life of reason does *not* entail giving up on *logos* simply because it cannot solve every problem. It involves, rather and perhaps mostly, the attempt to follow *logos* precisely when it is the least secure—when it seems unable to provide definitive answers. In this way, despite the limitations of arguments, one submits one's life to reason—and this is shown most forcefully when *logos* is limited by the very nature of the thing it is attempting to understand.

Nevertheless, I think it is correct to claim that the arguments employed *do* act as a kind of charm—and that Plato intends for us to think of them in this way (hence the cute claim about singing charms to ease our fears). But the 'charm' of the arguments is not that they ease suffering through rhetoric. The practice of considering argument—of engaging with *logos*—exemplifies the life of reason. In the face of insecure arguments, Socrates maintains his composure. He beats back the desire to simply win arguments—a desire rooted in the sense of one's own importance—and tries to navigate mortality and the afterlife on the insecure footing provided by rational discourse. His 'charm' is the life he models: a life where arguments are always taken seriously, but in which we do not take *ourselves* too seriously—where we do not take our individual existence as in some way more important than living a certain *kind of life*. The life in question, as I have been arguing, is one in which we recognize our own insignificance in the face of *logos*, where we submit our particular needs and wants to the universality of reason. That Socrates drinks his hemlock with equanimity, that he encourages objections to views of an afterlife that offer solace to anyone about to die, that he concerns himself more with rational discourse than Crito's worry that talking will mean he must drink more poison—these are the charm of Socrates: a life of reason in which what matters most is *logos*, and in which one sees oneself in one's particularity as insignificant.

#### 4. The Life of *Logos* as Coping with Mortality

On the view of rationalist approaches to death I considered at the start of this paper, many traditional approaches to death from a philosophical view simply reiterate another version of death-denial. Dastur, for example, claims that Plato's response to death—an "amputation of the body"—is effectively a denial of the very thing Plato hopes to confront. Cioran claims that any rational approach to death as a 'problem' is doomed to fail. Solomon, likewise, views the philosophical examination of death as a kind of morbid solipsism that ignores the way death matters to individual agents. If my 'therapeutic' reading of Plato is plausible, we are now in a position to respond to these critiques directly and succinctly: the arguments offered by Plato, read in context, provide us with a model of a kind of life. The force of these arguments can be felt only against the backdrop of the life of reason as presented in the figure of Socrates. Divorced from such a conception of the life of reason, such arguments may or may not have any existential force. But it is a mistake to claim that Plato thinks simply considering an argument can solve the fear of death. One must regard reason itself in the right way—as a guide for life, and as having more moment than one's sense of one's own importance.

The core features of a life of reason, construed in the way I propose, are twofold: First, it is a life in which one subordinates one's ego (here construed as the set of wants and desires with which we usually identify) to that impartiality characteristic of *logos*. One is detached from one's immediate desires and urges in such a way that it becomes possible to act for reasons in a mindful and reflective way, rather than simply immediately responding to the urges and habits one has accumulated over the course of unreflective living—including habits of thought which all too often short-circuit real inquiry.

Second, in subordinating the ego to *logos*, one detaches from the normal attendant needs of human life. This is not to say that one doesn't meet the normal needs of human life. Rather, these needs are not automatically met, they must first pass through the sieve of rationality. One no longer gives one's desires *prima facie* legitimacy, later constructing reasons that support these desires (as *Crito* seems to do). On this view, to say that human beings are rational is to talk about a capacity that we have—one that must be developed through practice—it is not to talk about something we always already are. Philosophy is therapeutic

precisely because it develops this capacity in such a way that we are transformed.

The implications for mortality are immediate and obvious. The drive to further one's life—no matter the cost—ceases to be an immediate reason for action. Mortality is a fact of existence—and the fear of mortality, on this view, stems from an attachment to the ego—on the desire to perpetuate the existence of the ego no matter the cost. Whether or not death is a bad thing thus depends on the dictates of *logos*, not on one's pre-reflective desire to continue to live. Moreover, in a certain respect, identification with *logos* itself marks a kind of immortality. With the destruction of the body and the ego, *logos* remains unaffected. It lives on, so to speak, in others—in its instantiation in other agents who have devoted themselves to it.<sup>8</sup>

## 5. Meditation as Coping with Mortality

In the Buddhist Suttas of the Pali cannon, we are presented with a picture similar in many ways to Plato's own, at least in outline. We are told that three major attachments lead to significant suffering: attachment to sensual pleasure, bodily form, and feelings. One can even hear an anticipation of Plato's remarks when Gotama claims "that the world is impermanent, bound up with suffering, and subject to change, this is the danger in the world; the removal and abandoning of desire and lust for the world, this is the escape from the world" (192, Bodhi). The manner in which one is to 'escape' from the world is through a recognition of impermanence and the cultivation of detachment. The result of *vipassanā bhāvanā*, so-called 'insight meditation', I will argue, is structurally similar to Plato's account of the life of reason. In particular, *vipassanā* involves a recognition of the insignificance of the ego in the face of a universal (in this case, impermanence), a recognition that clinging to one's own particular beliefs and desires is the cause of much suffering, and a method by which we can come to give up such clinging—by which we can cultivate detachment.

To begin exploring these similarities, consider one of the techniques suggested for detachment from 'bodily form.' The form of death meditation in question is not *vipassanā*, but rather *samatha* (concentration) practice. Consider the following from the Pali cannon:

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<sup>8</sup> This view owes everything to the conception of immortality defended by Mark Johnston in *Surviving Death*, although Johnston marks *agape* as the disposition which lives on rather than *logos*.

- 18.(i) “Suppose there were a girl...neither too tall nor too short, neither too thin nor too fat, neither too dark nor too fair. Is her beauty and loveliness then at its height?”—“yes, venerable sir”—“Now, the pleasure and joy that arise in dependence on that beauty and loveliness are the gratification in the case of form”.
19. (ii) “And what, monks, is the danger in the case of form? Later on one might see that same woman here at eighty, ninety, or a hundred years, aged, as crooked as a roof bracket, doubled up, supported by a walking stick, tottering, frail, her youth gone, her teeth broken, gray-haired, scanty-haired, bald, wrinkled, with limbs all blotchy. What do you think monks? Has her former beauty and loveliness vanished and the danger become evident?”—“Yes, venerable sir”—“Monks, this is the danger in the case of form”.
20. “Again, one might see that some woman afflicted, suffering, gravely ill, lying fouled in her own urine and excrement...this too is a danger in the case of form”
21. “Again, one might see that same woman as a corpse thrown aside in the charnel ground, one, two, or three days dead, bloating, livid, and oozing matter...this too is a danger in the case of form”.
- 22-29. “Again, one might see that same woman as a corpse thrown aside in the charnel ground, being devoured by crows, hawks, vultures, dogs, jackals, or various kinds of worms...a skeleton with flesh and blood, held together by sinews...a fleshless skeleton smeared with blood, held together with sinews...a skeleton without flesh and blood, held together with sinews...disconnected bones scattered in all directions...bones bleached white, the color of shells...bones heaped up...bones more than a year old, rotted and crumbled to dust...this too is a danger in the case of form” (197-198).

The technique here is reminiscent—to speak anachronistically—of certain Stoic practices aiming also at the acceptance of the nature of things: one reminds oneself, through devoted attention, of the inevitable future mortal beings face. One thus becomes accustomed to the idea of death—one lives with it, as it

were—in such a way that its occurrence no longer shocks the system.<sup>9</sup>

Meditation on a particular object (*samatha bhāvanā*) is often presented as a prerequisite to mindfulness in general, as well as the practice that cultivates insight (*vipassanā bhāvanā*). In order to develop insight into impermanence, one must develop one's abilities to concentrate in a tranquil and detached way. It is only when this is developed that one is free to notice the arising and passing away of each individual thought, sensation, and experience. In this way, practices like death meditation may well contribute to one's ability to see the world in an appropriate way—namely, as it actually is—by cultivating *samādhi*—the one-pointedness of mind that enables the attention to remain focused and undistracted by thoughts of the past and present. While *samatha bhāvanā* develops such concentration, *vipassanā bhāvanā*, as the name tells us, cultivates insight itself.

It will be useful to spend a moment simply describing the core practice of *vipassanā* before examining the direct implications of the practice for coping with one's mortality—for learning to die in an ego-centric world. Unlike *samatha*, *vipassanā* is directly linked to the dissolution of one's ego-self along with attachment to things in the world. The core practice is anchored in the breath, as the breath anchors one to the present moment.

4. “And how, monks, does a monk dwell contemplating the body in the body? Here a monk, gone to the forest, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty hut, sits down; having folded his legs crosswise, straightened his body, and established mindfulness in front of him, just mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out, Breathing in long, he understands: ‘I breathe in long;’ or breathing out long, he understands: ‘I breathe out long’...

The instructions are indeed simple ones—and they are the root spring for many varieties of meditative practice. The core focus on being present with the breath arguably grounds later meditative practices like *zazen* as well. Indeed, in the Zen tradition, Shunryu Suzuki goes so far as to say that sitting in such a position *just is* enlightenment—the realization of dukkha and impermanence.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The same bodily progression—from youth to scattered bones—is invoked in the charnel ground contemplations (284).

<sup>10</sup> In Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*.

The practice is more commonly described as one that must be developed, as the name '*bhāvanā*' itself suggests (though these two views are not necessarily incompatible). Rahula describes it in particularly accessible terms:

At the beginning you will find it extremely difficult to bring your mind to concentrate on your breathing. You will be astonished how your mind runs away. It does not stay. You begin to think of various things. You hear sounds outside. Your mind is disturbed and distracted. You may be dismayed and disappointed. But if you continue to practice this exercise twice daily, morning and evening, for about five to ten minutes at a time, you will gradually, by and by, begin to concentrate your mind on your breathing. After a certain period, you will experience just that split second when your mind is fully concentrated on your breathing, when you will not hear even sounds nearby, when no external world exists for you...if you go on practicing this regularly, you may repeat the experience again and again for longer and longer periods. That is the moment when you lose yourself completely in your mindfulness of breathing. As long as you are conscious of yourself you can never concentrate on anything. (79)

*Vipassanā* thus takes one's attention away from oneself—away from the ego and its attachments—and anchors it in the body's present moment. In this way one trains oneself to let go of those attachments that act as a constant source of distraction in one's daily life—that pull one into the future and into the past, never allowing one to simply sit within the present moment. The ability to step away from the ego, moreover, allows one to see things as they are, not clouded by our immediate desires, hopes, and thoughts. As one concentrates on the breath, we are told, insight will eventually come, and with it, liberation from the attachments that constitute normal human life.

There are at least two ways in which this practice allows one to face mortality. On the one hand, if one realizes impermanence by participating in this particular method, one will also realize one's own insignificance—that we are but one more collection of impermanent moments, no less conditioned by the ebb and flow of the world than any other thing. On the other hand, the practice of meditation leads us to a direct experience of our mortality through the direct experience of our impermanence as we train our attention on the breath, on the thoughts and sensations that arise, and on the nature of mentation itself. Indeed,



the breath itself marks a powerful reminder of our mortality, as well as an instance of impermanence.

The rising and falling of the breath and the arising and subsiding of thoughts—a primary focus of awareness in many forms of Buddhist meditation—are mimetic of the continual birth and death of human existence as well as the generation and extinction of the cosmos in general...The utter contingency of the breath, its rise and fall; its inevitable, final fall; the lack of necessity linking exhalation and the next breath, which may always be the last. The moment between, the still, turning point between in and out, shadowed in the chiasm—and always potential chasm—between systole and diastole... (87).

A core idea in virtually every Buddhist tradition is that death is not merely something at the end of life. In the Zen tradition of the Kyoto school, Nishitani claims “life consists of a chain of ‘births and deaths’ and in every moment arises anew and again perishes” (181).<sup>11</sup> Death, much like life and rebirth, is something that occurs in each particular moment. This indicates that death is not a foreign event at all—it is present at every instant in which life is present. We ignore this by constructing a sense of identity for ourselves that ‘endures’ through these moments. From the Buddhist point of view, though, there is nothing that endures—no in-itself that unites each momentary experience into a unified whole. Rather, each moment things arise and then pass away. Each moment births the world again. (see Rahula, 33-34). There are concretions of causes and effects that form in particular moments, and which causally relate to new moments, but there are not enduring substances that move ‘through’ these causal nexes. Living in light of impermanence is thus the key to accepting death: impermanence reveals that death is always already there. There is no ‘you’ that will die, as there is no ‘you’ at all. Accepting impermanence (*anicca*) amounts to accepting no-self (*anattā*), and with this acceptance comes a liberation from worries about mortality.

The realization of no-self, however, is not a ‘thought’ one thinks. It is, for lack of a better way of putting it, a way of being in the world. Simply striving for this way of being is self-undermining, as the very striving one engages in

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<sup>11</sup> Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*.

re-enforces the ego-structure one intends to overcome. Likewise, death-meditation (so-called) can remain fundamentally removed from the existential reality of living one's life. Such forms of meditation—what Wolfgang Fasching calls 'ideational' meditation—may well remain at the level of propositional knowledge: one can assent to the claim that death is inevitable, or even that it occurs in each moment, without ever allowing this claim to be integrated into one's life. Much as the Epicurean arguments can leave one with the sense that we are here just playing with language, and that our syllogisms can't ever reach the rough ground of daily existence, so too can ideational meditation remain merely conceptual.

Ruminations on death can only take one so far. As Masao Abe notes (speaking from the Zen tradition) "self-estrangement and anxiety are *not* something *accidental* to the ego-self, but are inherent to its structure" (6). Meditations on death may well familiarize, but they are insufficient to root out the cause of suffering: the ego and its attachments—and above all its attachments to itself. Abe continues: "Examining one's life, one cannot fail to stumble upon either the fear of death which threatens to hurl us into a chasm of meaninglessness, or the mind-assailing guilt which often arises as a condemnation of the impurity of our acts. The fear and guilt rupture any semblance of tranquility we may have gained through our endeavor to escape or repress the fundamental anxiety in which we abide. Therefore, the basic anxiety and self-estrangement inherent in human existence can never be overcome unless we first overcome the ego-self" (7).

In *vipassanā bhāvanā*, as in *zazen*, one moves beyond mindful concentration on a meditative object and toward insight. As one watches thoughts, feelings, sensations, and emotions rise and fall, one gains an existential exposure to impermanence, and hence cultivates an awareness of one's constant mortality. As Graham Parkes puts the point, "such readiness involves renouncing the immortality of the soul and also the sustainability of the ego by seeing through the illusion of duration, so as to realize our implication in the utter momentariness of natural processes, the constant Heraclitean flux of arising and perishing" (97).

The point being made about impermanence is both empirical and, in one sense at least, non-propositional and pre-conceptual. It is empirical in the sense that the impermanent nature of the world is not an article of faith. As Gotama says repeatedly, one must see for oneself whether or not the recognition of

impermanence is revealed in meditation. Only experience itself can legitimate the claims we make on the propositional level. This means that in nearly every respect the recognition of impermanence is not to be achieved propositionally. The empirical is thus not to be construed as co-extensive with the propositional. Some kinds of knowledge are and must be rooted in the lived experience of agents. In this sense, learning to die will not be achieved by the memorization of arguments or principles. It will be achieved, if at all, by cultivating a way of being in the world—one where one is gradually able to let go of oneself in the recognition of the impermanent nature of things. *Zazen* and *Vipassanā* meditation are a training to do just that. These forms of meditation, we are told, can enable one to let go of attachments to thoughts, desires, feelings, and the body—to all those things that normally provide immediate reasons for actions, and which anchor us to the sense that these things are somehow of fundamental importance simply because they are *ours*.

My sketch of meditation leaves much to be desired. Hopefully, however, some core similarities between this meditation and my therapeutic reading of the life of reason have now come into relief. Both traditions involve training one to dissociate from one's particular ego and ego-attachments through the cultivation of a way of living in the world. Both aim to transform the way we understand the significance of the self. They aim to enable us to see that the bodily self that is the core of many of our attachments is fundamentally ephemeral, as well as the source of much of our suffering. *Logos* sacrifices the ego in favor of impersonal reason, allowing us to separate from those goods that derive their significance simply from being *ours* (wealth, honor, pleasure, and so on). Likewise, *vipassanā* aims to be transformative by revealing that the ego is no-thing—that it is and must be one more piece of the impermanence of the world. In both traditions, the core to coping with mortality is realizing, on an existential level, that those things to which we attach are insignificant—that *we* are insignificant, at least insofar as our identities are constituted by our particular wants, beliefs, and desires. Learning to die in an ego-centric world involves learning to give up the ego, either by subjecting it to universal reason (and identifying with *logos*), or by coming to see that there is nothing there *to be* attached to. Considering arguments and watching the breath are thus structurally similar: both cultivate detachment and presuppose the significance of insignificance.

## 6. Conclusion

I have tried, in this article, to outline two methods for coming to terms with mortality. Both methods, I have argued, rely on an existential recognition of one's own insignificance. No doubt there are many differences between the two approaches, but these differences should not distract us from certain structural similarities. Both views involve experiencing our relations to our thoughts and desires in a different way. Both involve a kind of training that is meant to culminate in a different attitude toward ourselves and our individual wants and needs. Both instruct a recognition of the dangers that attend clinging to the ego, and both promise a soteriology that involves the acceptance of mortality.

Philosophy can be training for death. This is a core conclusion that philosophy can (and does) reach, at least in the traditions I've considered here. This constitutes a powerful riposte to our death-denying tendencies. We are—each and every one of us—insignificant. Accepting this insignificance amounts to accepting that, once one has shuffled off of this mortal coil, nothing much will be different. The world will continue, largely unaffected. To learn to die is to accept this fact, and perhaps even to see it with the equanimity of Socrates drinking his hemlock, or Buddha on his deathbed.

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