

Existential Pessimism

The discussion we now commence on existential pessimism demands, first of all, an examination of the ontological roots of pessimism. It would be premature, at this point, to indicate the structure of the moods under study. It should suffice, however, to reaffirm the ontological status of pessimism insofar as it is that affective "coloration" with which man takes an existential stance towards the world. It is the view of F. Gevers that the affective disposition lies at the foundation of the gnoseological structure of man. If one takes a more integral view of human gnosis, this affective "coloration" we have referred to easily takes its place as co-constitutive of man as logos. As it is the well-reasoned view of Heidegger and Sartre, particularly, that man is anxious, our study of pessimism of necessity entails a detailed examination of the anxiety of man. The role of death in pessimism hardly need be proved. It will be part of the study in this chapter. Finally, we will examine how man attempts to evade the spectre of anxiety and of pessimism in hedonism. This will prepare us to appreciate Kierkegaard's peculiar though, in the opinion of this writer, definitely tenable thesis of "the anguished leap into the absurd" that constitutes man's affirmation of God specifically in Christianity.

The Structure of Anxiety: Ontological Roots of Pessimism

Heidegger:

The difference between *anxiety* and *fear*, by now familiar to every student of philosophy, may very well serve as our point of departure. Anxiety is not a mood in the face of something. That in the face of which one has anxiety is completely indefinite.

Not only does this indefiniteness leave factually undecided which entity-within-the-world is threatening me, but it also tells us that entities within the world are not "relevant" at all. Nothing which is ready-to-hand or present-at-hand within the world functions as that in the face of which anxiety is anxious.¹

Hence, we deal here with a condition of Dasein that qualifies his existential stance, i. e., which is co-terminus with his very being. Hence, Heidegger speaks of "the world in its worldhood that still obstructs itself."² It is not even with a summation of things "a collection of definites" that makes one anxious but the "possibility of the ready-to-hand in general". Of course, the very possibility arises because there is that being for whom there can be a world that is an interrelated system of present-at-hand and ready-to-hand: Being-in-the-world — Dasein.

Ontologically, however, the world belongs essentially to Dasein's Being as Being-in-the-world. So if the "nothing" —that is the world as such— exhibits itself as that in the face of which anxiety is anxious.³

Anxiety, however, is no mere possibility of Dasein. It is a basic kind of Being-in-the-world.⁴ Man is a fallen being, but this means something other than what Catholic dogma understands by the expression. What it simply means is the undeniable phenomenon of everyday fleeing. In this flight, one seeks the comfort of being absorbed by the things of the world or by the everyday publicness of the "they". And therefore, since falling is the everyday comportment of Dasein, the primordial state of being must be anxiety.

¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, trans. (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1982), p. 326.

² Ibid., p. 231.

³ Ibid., p. 232.

⁴ Ibid., p. 233.

Yet the everydayness of this fleeing shows phenomenally that anxiety, as basic state-of-mind, belongs to Dasein's essential state of Being-in-the-world which, as one that is existential, is never present-at-hand— but is itself always in a mode of factual being-there—that is, in the mode of a state-of-mind. That kind of Being-in-the-world which is tranquilized and familiar is a mode of Dasein's uncanniness, not the reverse. From an existential-ontological point of view, the “not-at-home” must be conceived as the more primordial phenomenon.⁵

Of course, it may legitimately be asked whether Heidegger has correctly analyzed the everyday phenomenon to be one of falling. All we have to do is to verify the truth of his allegations: Do I experience greater security in going by the “safer way”, by what has been established by “common” practice for “many” ages?

In summary: anxiety discloses man to himself.⁶ It is in the face of this self-disclosure that man flees. Man, then, in anxiety, is uncomfortable with himself. The majority of men experience anxiety in the way of their flight from it, but it remains an existential, i.e., belongs to man's existence as such.⁷ Anxiety discloses the facticity of human existence. Hence, from the phenomenon of anxiety, we are confronted with the “factual being” of man, possibility thrown into the world. But what happens when one is anxious? One's being is disclosed to oneself. But why should man turn away from the disclosure of oneself to oneself? Because in anxiety, one feels uncanny: everyday familiarity collapses, and one experiences “Nichtzuhause-sein” — not-being-at-home, and this is the experience of freedom bound up with the world, possibility thrown into the world.

Being disclosed to himself in ontological anxiety as possibility bound up with the world, man interprets the world. It is above all sense of finitude,⁸ the primordial sense of my existence as not chosen, but having to be chosen, a burden I have to bear

⁵ Ibid., p. 206.

⁶ Francis Gevers, “Philosophical Anthropology” (mimeo., Maryhust Seminary, n.d.) p. 84.

⁷ Ibid., p. 85.

⁸ H. J. Blackham, *Six Existentialist Thinkers*, p. 92.

without knowing why, or whence or whither.⁹ Gevers put the disjunction well:

He can accept the he is thrown into an ocean of being, alien and even hostile to himself in which he must exist; or he can seek a ground of being which means simply a Creator who is author both of man's being and of the being of nature.¹⁰

It is important that within the mood of ontological anxiety, one draws an interpretation of the world. Whether the conclusion be theistic or atheistic, ultimately optimistic or irreversibly pessimistic, the undergirding mood is anxiety. It is observation of many commentators of Heidegger, Luijpen among them, that, at least in "Being and Time", there is hardly any other way open from anxiety besides nihilism. We may not concede to this negativism in the description of anxiety that Heidegger proposes but we can surely appreciate the fact that he rightly establishes the most intimate links between anxiety and pessimism.

The factual existence of man (isolated possibility) disclosed in anxiety is, in other words, man's specific creatureliness. Is this not to beg the question? If one grants that the possibilities either of being-thrown into the world or of Being who is the ground of what is and hence the center of meaning for the *Vorhandenheit* and for man are equally given in the disclosure of anxiety, then we see that the affirmation of God is supported by an original possibility given in the experience of anxiety. Let us not, however, assign too much to anxiety for it does not, of itself, yield an explicit knowledge of God. It opens the door in Gevers's terms, to religion but is not yet religion.¹¹

Freedom, for Sartre, is not an attribute to man nor is it a quality of the will for all these suggest the logical priority of "essence" to freedom. There is however no distinction or question of priority between *being man* and *being free*. In fact, the essence of man is suspended in freedom. Anguish is the mode of being freedom as consciousness of being. In anguish, man gets

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.

¹⁰ Gevers, "Philosophical Anthropology", p. 87.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

the consciousness of his freedom; freedom is in question for itself.¹² This also means then that anguish is always anguish before myself, never fear of beings in the world.

A situation provokes fear if there is a possibility of my life being changed from without; my being provokes anguish to the extent that I distrust myself and my own reactions in that situation. The artillery preparation which precedes the attack can provoke fear in the soldier who undergoes the bombardment, but anguish is born in him when he tries to foresee the conduct with which he will face the bombardment, when he asks himself if he is going to be able to "hold up".¹³

The examples and explanation Sartre provide give us the impression that the central distinguishing feature of anguish is its reflective character, i. e., directed to the self and to one's own comportment.

In other words, it is to my essence, suspended in freedom, plays in Sartrean anthropology, the person is what he, quite literally, makes of himself. Person and action are, for Sartre, only logical distinctions.¹⁴ This anguish is at the same time, therefore, the experience of the oppressiveness of freedom and of the groundlessness of human existence. Freedom, precisely as human freedom, cannot lend stability and immutability to my existence. Within a given situation, there are various logical Possibilities. That possibility which I actualize has a reality founded on my freedom, on my choice without anything determining me to its actualization. No motive is efficient enough to explain my choice, and thus between the situation and that which I am in the choice I make is a gap which is my freedom.¹⁵

Since I opt for my possibility for the sake of what I will be after undergoing the situation that appeals to me, I am only related to what I will be, but I am not what I will be because there is the intervention of time, because what I am is not the foundation of what I will be (= the gap of freedom), because no actual existent can determine what I am going to be.

¹² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 65.

¹³ Loc. cit.

¹⁴ C. R. Bukala, "Sartre's Dramatic Philosophical Quest" *Thought* XLVIII: 188 Spring, 1973, p. 89.

¹⁵ Sartre, op. cit., pag. 68.

Anguish is precisely my consciousness of being my own future, in the mode of not-being ... The decisive conduct will imanate from a self which I am not yet. Thus the self which I am depends on the self which I am not yet to the exact extent that the self which I am not yet does not depend on the self which I am.¹⁶

This is anguish of the future. But there is also such a thing as anguish of the past: having made a resolution, one becomes conscious of the resolution but moves to do that against which he has made his resolve. What he realizes then in anguish is that while the resolution remains there, it is ineffective. In fact it is surpassed by the fact that one becomes conscious of it. It is still me, because even across the temporal flux I realize constantly my identity, but it is also not me because it has become object of my consciousness. This is the realization of the permanent rupture of determinism: it is nothingness which separates one from oneself. By taking my position in existence as consciousness of being, I make myself not what I am. My present stance is discontinuous with a past decision or resolution because of nothingness. The "I" is a conscious I that takes its place in existence, before its possibilities and is then not the resolutions that it is. Very clearly, the anguish is the specific consciousness of freedom.¹⁷ This is the painful process by which man specifies himself, manifests his essence. Prior to this is of course his situatedness, his existence. It is in this sense that existence precedes essence.

Man exists before he can be defined. Man first exists, situates himself, and only afterwards defines or creates himself. In the beginning man is nothing; only after he has made his appearance will he become what he wishes to be. This is the burden to make himself to be what he wants to be. In making himself be what he desires to be, he wants himself. A man without definition is a faceless man. Sartre sorts out as man's primary task the creation of his own essence...¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 68-69.

¹⁷ Sartre, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

¹⁸ Bukala, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

But the capture of the essence, as might be already clear, is never complete for the essence which I manifest is the self with its a priori and historical content. Anguish, as the revelation of freedom, is also the nauseating awareness that, once more my essence has slipped through. Between what I am, in freedom, and my essence is the irreparable breach wrought by freedom. The self that is apprehended in anguish is the self that exists in the perpetual mode of detachment from what is; I am anxious in the face of my being that is perpetually beyond its essence, perpetually non-coincidental to itself. This writer believes that the experience of man existing in the mode of negating what he is, of out stripping his essence, underlies the so-called "no-soul" or insubstantiality theory of Buddhism. We recognize at the same time that Buddhism's *anatta* is a logical consequence of *anicca*, the doctrine of momentariness which is of applicability to everything that is.¹⁹

In the phenomenology of Sartre, then, anguish is anguish before freedom that is instigated and bound by nothing. At heart of anguish is freedom that does not rest on anything. Indeed it cannot be said to be a "property of the will" because it is anterior to the essence of man and is the space within which essence is suspended. From out of the disparity between what I am now and what I am in project (that is, however, nothing more than possibility), from out of this nothing, there arises anguish. I will not necessarily find myself where I make an appointment with myself (I, as project) and even lose the strength to bring myself there. In anguish, the breach between essence and freedom by nothingness is revealed to me. Between what I have been or what I have wanted to be and what I will be is similarly also no connection, inasmuch as there is the freedom that is the possible destroyer in the present and in the future of what I am.²⁰

It is possible that Sartre has overstated the case for freedom but he has definitely brought to the fore the ontological rela-

¹⁹ cf. Magdalena Villaba, *Prelude to the Wisdom of the East* (Manila: UST Press, n.d.), p. 58.

Joseph Roccasalvo, "Greek and Buddhist Wisdom: An Encounter Between East and West", *IPQ* XX:1 (March, 1980),

²⁰ cf. Sartre, op. cit., p. 75.

tion between freedom and anguish. Man is anxious about himself as having to be in freedom. There is, in anxiety, a lack of certainty, the dizziness that results from starting into the depths of one's freedom. And thus, wherever his freedom makes an impact on him, there man is anxious, and freedom makes its impact on man at all times, even in the lie of choosing to ignore it.

An Approach to Pessimism

Anxiety as the confrontation with the self is not neutral. If man flees from anxiety, it can only be because there is something profoundly disturbing about the confrontation with self. In anxiety one gazes at the depths of freedom; security is threatened and the inert, destabilized. Anxiety brings to the fore man's factual existence, his finitude and contingency. I have to be without having chosen to be. Throughout my existence is an underlying contingency: I just happen to be. Project is therefore, in the same measure, given to me as contingency. My choices and values rest on my freedom.

Because anxiety is the experience of one's factual being and of the contingency of existence and project, it also brings man face to face with nothingness. The full import of the assertion that man is "*creatus ex nihilo sui et subiecti*" strikes home only in anxiety. "*Ex nihilo*" implies nothing less than the suspension of one's essence in nothingness. For Sartre, the awareness in anxiety of nothingness is the disturbing realization of my freedom, itself without foundation, as the basis of value. Since freedom is the unique foundation of values, there is nothing which justifies me in adopting this or that particular value. The very presentation of a value as value is at the same time a questioning of the value. In his thrownness, man frantically clings to anything that supports his existence but must ultimately concede to non-dependability of anything else besides himself.

Anxiety therefore is profoundly unsettling. It unravels the nothingness that surrounds my existence and the utter vulnerability of value and meaning. Therefore, too, pessimism as the negatory interpretation of existence takes its point of departure

from anxiety. It is because man is anxious that he can be pessimistic. Pessimism is anxiety that has pursued a negatory course.

Who is a pessimist? What constitutes a pessimistic standpoint? Albert Camus, one of the most powerful and influential writers of the century, provides us with vivid descriptions of pessimism in one's horizon.

Man is Sisyphus who has been condemned to the everlasting destiny of rolling a rock to the top of the mountain from which it falls back by its own weight. There can hardly be a more terrible punishment than useless and hopeless toil which is not to say, however, that it is without dignity: there can be dignity in the acceptance of an absurd task.²¹ In the *Plague*, the concluding paragraphs suggest the conviction that destruction and nothingness are never vanquished. Over life looms the dark cloud that finally settles on man to make him vanish forever.

None the less, he knew that the tale he had to tell could not be one of final victory. It could be only the record of what had to be done, and what assuredly would have to be done again, in the never-ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts, despite their personal afflictions by all who, while unable to be saints their utmost to be healers.

And indeed, as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperilled. He knows what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: the plague bacillus never dies or disappear for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-closets; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when for the bane and the enlightening of men, it roused up its rate again and sent them forth to die unhappy.²²

Camus may have had in mind, when writing *The Plague*, his city's occupation by the enemy. But he definitely means more. One of his characters says: "But what does that mean—'plague'? Just life, no more than that."

²¹ Conor O'Brien, *Camus* (London: Uln. Collins Sons and Co. Ltd., 1970), pp. 20-30.

²² Albert Camus, *The Outsider* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1942), p. 119.

Meursault, in *The Stranger* (The Outsider), is condemned to death actually for not weeping at his mother's funeral. When he is certain of death, he experiences the freedom of one who is certain: the certainty that he can really rest on is the certainty of death!

What difference could they make to me, the death of other, or a mother's love, or his God; or the way one decides to live, the fate one thinks one chooses, since one and the same fate was bound to 'choose' not only me but thousands of millions of privilege people who, like him, called themselves my brothers.

Surely, surely he must see that? Every man alive was privilege class. All alike would be condemned to die one day; his turn too, would come like the others. And what difference could it make if, after being charged with murder, he were executed because he didn't weep at his mother's funeral, since it all came to the same thing in the end? The same thing for Salamano's wife and for Salamano's dog.

What then characterize a pessimistic outlook of human existence? In outlining the following points, we are aware of the danger of simplistic reduction and of ignoring nuances, but a phenomenology of pessimism lends credence to our synthesis.

1. There is the intransigent conviction that meaning and value have no other foundation than a gratuitous act of man;
2. Reason and intelligibility are ultimately unattainable and for this reason are transient categories;
3. Death definitively levels out; there may, however, be certainty and dignity in its acceptance;
4. Human endeavor and enterprise are carried within an absurd cycle of interminable beginnings and inconclusive ends;
5. Darkness is a constant threat and is entrenched in its inevitability.

Pessimism may speak of meaning and affirmation; the world, however, does not eventually become meaningful. What the pessimist means when he refers to affirmation and meaning is the ongoing struggle against the un-meaning and absurd. Rebellion is

meaningful, even if it be against the un-meaning and absurdity which cannot be overcome.²³ While it is not to be doubted that Camus refused to surrender man to the Absurd in the sense that his heroes are those who sink their teeth into death that has already sunk its teeth into them and hold at least the certainty of death, it is likewise impossible to question the Absurd in Camus. *Existence is Absurd*, and in THE FACE OF THIS ABSURDITY man *can be desperately heroic*. There is dignity in Sisyphus at work. But this does not in any way diminish the absurdity of this task nor the ultimate defeat of his existence by meaninglessness. But if we are peeved by this ambiguity in pessimism, by the relentless drive for affirmation along the tracks of negativity then we may be sure we have in some way truly hit the ontological depths of pessimism. The very existential stance of pessimism implies at least belief in the meaningfulness of being pessimistic; the denial of the meaning of holding existence as meaningful is at the same time an affirmation, in some vague manner, of meaning.

Thus, for example, the most thorough-going denial that the world has any meaning takes it for granted that such a thing has above all an existential meaning which is in question. Man is by nature a creature that believes, and he goes on believing even when he lapses into scepticism and nihilism. He may believe in nothingness or in non-being, and at once this becomes expanded into a faith.²⁴

Sartre's treatment of the Absurd is doubtlessly pessimistic. Man is a being-for-itself, the gap in being, that is fundamentally *desire to be*, "since desire is a lack and since the for-itself is the being which is to itself its own lack of being."²⁵

It is as consciousness that it (*pour-soi*) *wishes to have the impermeability and finite density of the in-itself*. It is as the *nihilation of the in-itself* and a perpetual evasion of facticity that it wishes to be its own foundation.²⁶

²³ Anthony Padovano, *The Estranged God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966), p. 106-107.

²⁴ Nicholas Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation* (New York: Collier Books, 1953), pp. 44-45.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 723.

Man exists in the consciousness of being not the in-itself, of utter gratuity and vacuity. He exists then as lack of and desire for the in-itself in its impermeability and massivity. But he desires the mode of an in-itself in the being of a for-itself. He wants to have a real doughnut in the doughnut's hole. This is man's aspiration to be God. Man is the being whose project is to be God.²⁷ Already in the first chapters of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre rejects the God concept as absolutely unthinkable, inherently contradictory, in much the same way as the equal sides of a square make its simultaneity as a circle an impossibility. Sartre summarizes himself rather clearly.

Is not God a being who is what he is — in that he is all possibility and the foundation of the world — and at the same time a being who is not what he is and who is what he is not — in that he is self-consciousness and the necessary foundation of himself?²⁸

If God is an impossible aspiration, to be God is the aspiration of man not because of any perversity but because of his very being and nihilating and lacking, then man has really hitched his wagon to a galactic illusion! But there is more here than must the peculiarity of Sartrean ontology.²⁹ Here is painfully expressed man's search for his roots and for his destiny and the contemporary conviction that he can call on nothing either to justify or to save him. Pessimism consists precisely in recognizing that each step man takes brings him no further than from where he started and no nearer to the *fata morgana* that has deluded him. We will let Sartre verbalize his own pessimism.

The being of human reality is suffering because it rises in being as perpetually haunted by a totality which it is without being able to be it, precisely because it could not attain the in-itself without losing itself as for-itself. Human reality therefore is by nature an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of surpassing its unhappy state.³⁰

²⁷ Ibid., p. 724.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 140.

²⁹ cf. Régis Jolivet, Sartre: *The Theology of the Absurd* (New York: Newman Press, 1967), pp. 37-39.

³⁰ Sartre, op. cit., p. 140.

There can be no better definition of the absurd!

The pessimist will not stand any talk that distracts attention from meaninglessness and indifference. If man cannot lay claim to anything for certain, let him at least sink his teeth into the certainty of death and let his strength be his indifference. The prison chaplain who tries to caution the impact of death on Meursault by offering to him the love of God and the possibility of an after-life is violently discharged from the doomed man's cell. It was his bigoted refusal to accept absurdity that made the priest hardly anything than a corpse.

Living as he did, like a corpse, he couldn't even be sure of being alive. It might look as if my hands were empty. Actually, I was sure of myself, sure about everything, far surer than he; sure of my present life and of the death that was coming. That no doubt was all I had; but at least that certainty was something I could get my teeth into — just as it had got its teeth into me.³¹

There is dignity — a confidence in the face of an absurd end to an absurd existence. When we speak of existential pessimism, therefore, we do not deal with manic-depressive psychosis but with an ontological grounding of one's horizon.

Jasper's philosophical analysis of the contemporary situation assures us that pessimism is not merely a possibility. Man's whole being is once more at stake, this time menaced by a world of his own making. Quite paradoxically, man is threatened by the work of his hands. The powers he has conjured no longer submit to the sway of his wand.³² It seems to be the asphyxiation in the Nothingness that hurls man to despair.

Today, although the possibilities of an expansion of life have become immeasurable, we feel ourselves to be in so narrow a spirit that our existential possibility is deprived of its breadth. Since this has been generally realised, a sense of despair has affected human activity (or, as regards those who do not realise it, an unconsciousness) — a sense of despair which, objectively regarded, might just as well herald an end as a beginning.³³

³¹ Camus, *The Outsider*, p. 118.

³² Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age* Eden and Cedar Paul, trans. (New York: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1957), pp. 193-194.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 215-216.

Death and Existential Stand-Point

Our local dailies always carry obituaries and, without being uncharitable, it is possible to admire the many different literary master-pieces composed to announce that death has occurred. Our phraseology is revealing; we have a preference for such euphemisms as "called back to his heavenly home", "returned to His Creator", "asleep in Christ" in place of the terse but dismal word: Dead. But the very fact that man flees from it merely proves that he stands "in conspectu mortis".

Thrownness into death reveals itself to Dasein in a more primordial and impressive manner in that state of mind which we have called "anxiety". Anxiety in the face of death is anxiety "in the face of" that potentiality for Being which is one's ownmost, non-relational and not to be outstripped. That in the face of which one has anxiety is Being-in-the-world itself. That about which one has this anxiety is simply Dasein's potentiality-for-being. Anxiety in the face of death must not be confused with fear in the face of one's demise. This anxiety is not an accidental or random mood of "weakness" in some individual; but as a basic state-of-mind of Dasein, it amounts to the disclosedness of the fact that Dasein exists as thrown Being-towards its end.³⁴

The last point is important for while a person may be able to integrate the inevitability of death within a horizon that allows him to overcome fear of death, there will always be in man that anxiety in the face of death which is affirmed by the fact that he flees from it. Again, terminology may be confusing for psychologists do not always understand anxiety in the same manner as we have just discussed. Ignace Lepp, for example, approaches the problem of death on the psychological plane. He distinguishes between *fear of death* and *anxiety over death*.³⁵ He claims that while fear is helpful and indeed necessary if an organism is to protect itself from harm, anxiety can be paralyzing and injurious. He is not of course referring to that ontological affective mood by which man's being is unveiled to himself: anxiety. From on-

³⁴ Heidegger, op. cit., p. 295.

³⁵ Ignace Lepp, *Death and Its Mysteries* (New York: The McMillan Co., 1968), p. 32.

tological anxiety, of course, one may pass on to this asphyxiating obsession that Lepp describes which may be related to the despair of the "grave" man, which Sartre does not approve of. In this "anxiety" (here a psychological use) man in fact "resigns" his freedom and becomes inert, forfeiting his very capacity to take matters into his hands and asserting the freedom of his essence. This "anxiety" is then posterior to but not a necessary consequent of the ontological mood of anxiety previously discussed.

The example he provides is illustrative. A woman is told by a fortune teller that on the fourteenth of February, she would kill her husband. Five years pass in misery, the girl dreading the approach of every Valentine day. She finally breaks down under the pressure of "anxiety" and finds release by hacking her sleeping husband to death. What actually happened was that the "prediction" *caused* her to kill her husband, to make the prediction come true. In other words, she bound herself to a relation of causal necessity to the prediction which could have easily been dismissed as quackery. She did not resist; she buckled down under the pressure which her own refusal to take up her freedom had created. We are not, by the way, passing moral judgement. We are merely delineating this psychological disposition from ontological anxiety.

News of an acquaintance death may be "interesting" news, in the sense that it is something that relieves us different from Reagan's victory over Carter in the 1980 US presidential elections. The death of a friend, however, may constitute an authentic experience of death, at least the most authentic available to man. The death of a friend I love in a real way involves me; it is an experience that is more than a fact that occurs to a third-person reference.³⁸ Certainly, the bells that toll for the death of a friend also toll for me!

Efectivamente, yo no tengo una experiencia directa de mi muerte, ni puedo obtener un conocimiento concreto de ella por la pura asistencia, neutra e impersonal, a la muerte de los demás. Pero en la persona amada la muerte me hiere a mi mismo, ya que el sentido de mi existencia

³⁸ Lepp, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11.

está radicalmente ligado a la persona amada. Allí la muerte irrumpe concretamente como amenaza del amor e hipoteca el sentido mismo de la existencia.³⁷

The other, in his uniqueness, is, quite tragically, revealed to me in his otherness and irreplaceability by his demise. His death manifests a person as

“un ser singular, inconfundible e insustituible, único. Es esa unicidad la que se manifiesta de un modo trágico en la muerte de la persona querida.”³⁸

In this profound experience of death, I may authentically accept my Being as Being-towards-death, and death then becomes my ownmost, non-relational possibility. Death is real when Dasein is brought face to face with itself as delivered over to that possibility which is not to be outstripped.³⁹ And there is something quite distinctive about death as my possibility for it is not a possibility in the sense that the priesthood is a possibility for me. Death is the possibility of no longer being-there, the possibility of the impossibility of any possibility at all.

With the confrontation with death it is possible to think away completely the Ego-pole-that-I-am definitely occasions a valid question. But whatever be its resolution, death remains an anticipation of a vacuum.⁴⁰ Therefore, the anxiety that unsettles man and delivers him to himself as factual and utterly contingent is the same mood that establishes within his basic horizon anti-being, the possibility of his non-being, the stark reality of death. Man will attempt flight, but no matter the velocity nor the altitude, he knows he lies, and he knowingly miserably lies to himself. He flees — and he flees from what he confronts at every turn.

In considering death within a pessimist's horizon, it will be of great importance to note our observations on anxiety in the face of pessimism and to be assured that man is by the kind of

³⁷ Joseph Gevaert, *El Problema del hombre* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sigueme, 1978), pp. 298-299.

³⁸ Gevaert, op. cit., p. 65.

³⁹ Heidegger, op. cit., p. 298.

⁴⁰ cf. Peter Koestenbaum, *The Vitality of Death* (Connecticut: Greenwood Pub. Co., 1971), pp. 29-30.

being he is, anxious, pessimists and optimists alike. To show that a pessimist's pessimism is intellectually honest and humanly possible, it will be necessary to make some admission about death. It is quite evident that some philosophical traditions are outspoken optimistic about death. This writer is convinced that Thomas Aquinas may be safely classified under this category, and it is not easy to discount the impression that he many times is more interested in the *anima separata* than in the fact of death, the fate of man, *compositum ex anima et corpore*. But even for the Angelic Doctor, there can be no doubt that death, the separation of subsistent rational soul from the *corpus passibilis* is a "radical happening".⁴¹ In fact, Scholastics in the tradition of Aquinas are not entirely in agreement as to whether the *anima separata* may still be identified with the suppositum-hypostasis. Is the soul of Peter still the person Peter? Death therefore effects a profound transformation that is characterized by absence and non-Dasein. This is hardly denied.

Death, especially in cases when it comes as the end of protracted illness or in old age, is the conclusion of that slackening of energy and capability, not only of bones and sinews but of mind and will as well. When sickness and disease strike in youth, the body resists and without trouble wards these off. Gradually, however, the capacity to withstand disease diminishes and periods of convalescence lengthen. And a time comes when once committed to a sick bed, there is hardly a chance of being on one's feet again. The aging man is also haunted by the ghost of still-born possibilities. He could have been many things but by choosing to be what he was, he turned down all other life's offers. He is anxious because of this sense of loss, because of that nagging feeling that he has allowed the fulness of life to slip by him unaware. In desperation he clings to what he can call his own, his creations, his assurances that his life was not totally futile, but even these soon crumble, or escape his ever-weakening grip.⁴² Death therefore presents itself as a loss of man's capacities, grimly embodied in the corpse's *rigor mortis*.

⁴¹ Summ. Theol. I, q. 75, a. 4, corp. for his description of man; also *De Anima*, a. 8. corpus.

⁴² cf. Ladislaus Boros, *The Mystery of Death* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), p. 50; also Paul-Louis Landsberg, *The Experience of Dead* (New York: Arns Press, 1977), p. 5.

The threat of absence that death poses gives us no immediate certainty of survival. The experience of the death of a friend leaves only one with a profound silence and the stillness of the graveyard "says nothing as to whether this is a sequel to annihilation or only a disappearance with regard to ourselves."⁴³ It may be that in man there is an innate longing to somehow endure which is why not even the shadowy existence in Sheol was sufficient comfort to the Jews. But this innate longing does not carry with it the certitude of its fulfillment. Aquinas laboriously establishes the subsistence of the human soul via its ideational capacities;⁴⁴ and in the *Quaestio Disputata De Anima* conceives of no less than twenty-one objections to the thesis on the immortality of the soul.⁴⁵ Gabriel Marcel does not, to the mind of this writer, really prove. He rather appeals: the love I bear by friend is so full of meaning and fulfillment that I cannot surrender him to annihilation in death. Value would be annulled in pure scandal were death to have the last word.⁴⁶ It is of course clear that for such an argument to be convincing one will have to share Marcel's optimism about love, value and meaning. And while it used to be thought that it was of the essence in Christianity to maintain that, as Christ had been raised from the dead, so too shall we who participate in his life in the Spirit, models of systematic theology exist today which conceive of the resurrection quite differently. Kaufman offers one such model. He remarks:

Contemporary belief, of course, will not necessarily involve the conviction that the crucified Jesus became personally alive, again; rather, it will see the events of Jesus ministry and death — especially as appropriated through that strange event called the "resurrection" — as the actual establishment of the kingdom of God, the founding of a new community of love in which the purposes of God for human history are being realized and the anarchy of human history is being overcome through God's power and love.⁴⁷

⁴³ Landsberg, op. cit., pp. 12-13.

⁴⁴ *Summ. Theol.* I, q. 75, a. 2.

⁴⁵ *De Anima*, a. 14.

⁴⁶ cf. Gevaert, op. cit., pp. 329-330.

⁴⁷ Gordon Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 426.

A dismal existential stand-point towards death is therefore a humanly possible position, one in fact that is rooted in the grim silence of death. In its unspeaking, death expresses: *first*, that something radically happens that results in man's no longer being-there; *second*, death testifies to the loss of those capacities we have associated with being human, and *third*, death is mute on the fate of man. It says nothing about anything beyond the grave. The certainty of survival is not an immediate datum of the experience of death. The battle with death is lost before it begins for anyone who faces the fact of death without a priori learning. "The splendour of the battle cannot be in its outcome, but only in the dignity of the act. The definitive is the inevitable."⁴⁸ It is obviously this insight that one expects to be dominant in death viewed darkly. Again we must observe that the intuition behind such a conviction is available even to one who may not be pessimistic.

Within a perspective where the negativity that death presents is determinative, man's existence within the purview of death is, according to the parable Landsberg uses, ⁴⁹ the "tragedy of the noble bull." The progress of events is best drawn in parallel.

The bull-fight

1. The bull is released from its pen and bounds with joy and vitality into the arena, the scene of its death.
2. The first provocations call forth the attacking animal.
3. There then is frenzy inspired by a despair of life; the bull is reinforced by perpetual victory.
4. With lancets, the bandillero "decorates" the bull.

Human existence

1. Man is born — a normally joyful event — into a world which conceal his destiny and its attendant dangers.
2. The first encounters with a guileful world develop the best in man, the most enduring, but ultimately, the most unavailing.
3. The evil that cannot be overcome makes itself felt, but man carries on.
4. Man attains honors when he is weakened by life. He has in fact conquered nothing.

⁴⁸ Landsberg, op. cit., p. 49.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 46-49.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>5. With the entry of the Matador, death steps into the arena. Despite the foreboding of death, the bull remains dignified. He is manoeuvred into position and the sword strikes home.</p> <p>6. The bull is dragged away like a thing.</p> | <p>5. Man's steps near the grave. The only dignity left for him is to stand erect, facing the inevitable. He has in fact already been manoeuvred into a most vulnerable position.</p> <p>6. Man ceases to be there. What he is overtakes him. Sympathizers peer into the casket where he, a thing, lies.</p> |
|---|--|

Pessimism about death cannot but be pessimism about life. Birth becomes the first step towards the grave, human achievement, at most a transient value. If death is man's ultimate destiny whatever meaning he may have given to existence perishes with him. The energy and zest of youth mark the headlong rush to entropy. Empirical evidence seems to be on the side of pessimism for in death there is only silence, absence and the corpse! In an article, "Theology and the Darkness of Death", Bartholomew Collopy expresses doubt over theology's capacity to confront death in its darkest reaches. Christian reflection on death, particularly, is all too often a priori optimistic or conclusively affirmative; it seems to prescind illegitimately from a recognition of empirical bounds. But if theology is to speak to man, it must go with him thru the depths of pessimism about death. And thus Collopy quite reasonably calls on theology to cast off all conceptual presumptuousness, all assumptions that would make God a calculated, and consequently dubious, comfort.⁵⁰ The lineaments of the "dark model" Collopy offers provide us with a summary of a standpoint on death that is predominantly negatory.⁵¹

First: *Death breaks the whole person.* Death is a threat to the inner poise and balance of all human meaning. Death therefore annihilates the world of man for, if man is the center of a system of interrelated instruments and meanings, a hodological axis, the world which his meaning-giving pre-

⁵⁰ Bartholomew Collopy, "Theology and the Darkness of Death" *Theological Studies* 39: 1 (March, 1978), pp. 49-50.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 39-46.

sence structures crumbles when, in death, there is the transition from Dasein to non-Dasein. For a pessimistic standpoint on death, meaning may have meaning, ultimately qualified however by the levelling function of death.

Second: *Death casts a dyslogical shadow.* Death is climatic discontinuity, a sundering of life's patterns. Before man resigns himself to his impending death, he denies, rages, bargains and despairs. These protests of the human spirit are not to be taken lightly nor are they to be merely seen as the prelude to resignation. Man protests against death as he protests against meaninglessness, but is finally overwhelmed by it. Although he may go to his death with dignity, he does so in protest over the radical unacceptability of death. Because he has to die, man's life can be useless passion.

Third: *Death is optionless.* There is a certain sense in which death awaits man in the future; yet it may also be considered to be already "given" man. Human freedom will always be bound by death and while man would have wanted to keep within the ambit of his freedom this climatic discontinuity of his existence, the tragedy scorns his freedom.

What death does to human choice and freedom is to take no notice of it, to deny it, to leave it to charnal pointlessness. In death, the individual is unable any longer, even in the most paltry ways, to hold on to the self which he has been all the years of his life. In its blankness and silence death in no way affirms the self, offers no evidence that the dialectic of dying has ended in anything but the depletion and disappearance of the person.⁵²

Fourth: *The meaninglessness of death punctuates the futility of human existence.* This is hardly anything more than a summary for all that has been said so far. If human existence is man's becoming towards his unbecoming in death,

⁵² Collopy, op. cit., p. 45.

why the span of sixty or seventy years at all? There can hardly be a more poetic expression of these sentiments than Shakespeare's own.

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time.
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
that struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing. (Macbeth, Act V, Scene V).

RANHILIO C. AQUINO
University of Sto. Tomas
Manila

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 39-46.

⁵⁴ Collopy, op. cit., p. 45.