

# Philosophical Models of Death

## INTRODUCTION

The vital question on death for the Middle Ages was the question of the subsistence of the rational soul after its separation from the corruptible body. At a later time, the concern of speculative thought shifted to rendering more precise its understanding of the corporality of the human person. If man is bodily, what does death, the end of his corporeal presence, mean for his existence? And more basically still: Is man his body? Is there any other realization of being person without corporeal presence? From the history of philosophy is thus evident a plurality of possible approaches to the problem of death. And just as linguistic analysis invites attention to a philosopher's linguistic use — often left unexamined and surreptitiously deceptive; so it seems equally important to inquire, critically, into our conceptual models of death.

We propose to find some answer to the question: How ought one to think about death? "Ought" is not the unjustified intrusion of valuation; we do not aim at a mere presentation of possibilities. We aspire rather to propose an approach to the problem of death that is critical of some contemporary models, decidedly optimistic, but that maintains an openness to Christian adaptation.

*Models*

Not death then, nor what happens at death, nor "after" is the direct concern of our duty. Our interest in the "conceptual approach" to death however is not a mere thought-exercise; a conceptual approach should truly be an *approach* to the problem of death. It therefore must bear reference to the experience and the nature of death. We must now clarify our notion of "model".

We have used "conceptual framework" as a synonym, and broadly, a conceptual framework is a subject's view of reality. But the same thing can be said of the whole of human knowledge. Precision is in order. Specifically, then, a conceptual framework is the manner a subject thinks of things. It is the basic interpretative act of human cognition.<sup>1</sup> By *basic*, we designate an act that makes cognition possible, one that results in "understanding". "Knowing" that this book is on my desk means that I have interpreted the black, rectangular object with printed words as something that offers me the possibility of reading it, that which I call "book". As *act*, it is a subject's; reality is reality only for a subject. But this is not taking sides with subjectivists. The subject is not free to interpret a given state of affairs in a way that suits his fancy, else the act would not be interpretative but autistic. It should also be clear that we conceive of human cognition as something other than objective reality (things-out-there) making impressions on a wax tablet ("tabula rasa in qua nihil scriptum est"). The thing-in-itself cannot be the subject of predication; it is beyond the veil of intelligibility. For reality to be real, it must be retrieved from the brute givenness of reality by the subject. A conceptual framework therefore arises not from the immanence of a self-contained, a self-sufficient *cogitans* but from the very intentionality of consciousness.

On this score, our alliance with Kant is qualified. With him we affirm the interpretative function of the subject in cognition. Man does not know unless he orders intuition according to some pattern. But we deny as mythical his "pure understanding" hypo-

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<sup>1</sup> John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge* (Glasgow: Fontana Books, 1978) pp. 101-104.

thesis — that self-subsistent, self-sufficient unity and his version of a conception as based on the spontaneity of thought.<sup>2</sup> And so while a model of death is one's way of "looking" at death, it at the same time has already "looked" at death. Because we have assigned to the "model" the task of putting form to intuition for understanding to take place, we also say of the model that it is *a priori*. The importance of the conceptual mould also becomes manifest in this characteristic. If a model is such that it excludes encounter with some aspects of reality, it is for this reason inadequate. If one's model of causality allows only for a linear pattern of cause-effect (agent-patient; stimulus-response) then such a model leaves out, *a priori*, any other pattern of causal relation, e.g., the causality of persons in intersubjective encounter. As a result, relations of the latter sort are "interpreted" according to the linear pattern or are dismissed from recognition. It need not even be said that no model will ever be fully adequate since the meaning of things responds to subjectivity in its non-specifiability. Yet one model may be more adequate than another in that it maintains an openness that another limits. It is also characteristic of an inadequate model to simplify interpretation of experience by tailoring it into a single significance.

### *Presuppositions of Thanatology*

If by presuppositions, one understands the ground of the possibility of thanatology, then what follows is not so much an enumeration of presuppositions as preliminary statements. They summarize the limitations as well as the ambit of philosophical reflection on death.

All philosophizing on death supposes that death, to the extent that one reflects on it, is *intelligible*. This may seem problematic for we are familiar with more than one contemporary thinker who has stamped death with the mark of absurdity. We are taking intelligibility to mean "significance" or "cognizability". That which is intelligible is therefore that about which affirma-

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<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* Transcendental Logic, 1-6; Great Books of the Western World (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952)

tions or denials may be significantly made. If the statement "death is meaningless" is to have any meaning at all, then it must be that death has been encountered (become significant for; cognized) by man as meaningless. An analogy from Buddhist philosophy: the second of the Four Noble Truths asserts that "there is a cause of suffering" which is identified with craving (*tr̥sna*). The first thing meant by the truth is that suffering is intelligible, i.e., something can be meaningfully said about it inasmuch as a cause can even be assigned to it.

We have also hinted, however, at the *options* one may take with regard to death. One may either be an optimist or a pessimist. Perhaps "option" is misleading, for it suggests that man stands before a choice, with either side as appealing as the other. This is not in fact the case. Since man's stance with the world is never neutral but involves him in all that characterize him as being-man (affectivity, cognition, volition) he does not at first stand indifferent to either. His fundamental intuition of the world (which is not to be chronologically interpreted) is neither primarily nor mainly "conceptual apprehension" but the birth of existential significance. It is therefore also the birth of either optimism or pessimism. By demonstration, one may attempt to show that his optimism about death is reasonable and not arbitrary, but optimism is, fundamentally, not born of a logical argument, which is not to say that it is irrational or merely "sentimental". Reality is ambiguous in the sense that it is open to either optimistic or pessimistic interpretations. To conclude with an optimist that "in dying is eternal life" is more than conceding the validity of the demonstration. It is sharing the same existential ground that gives rise to and sustains the arguments for his optimistic conclusion. Between philosophizing on life, or on some aspect of human existence, and reflecting on death is one significant difference: if philosophical reflection on life is authentic, it will rest on lived experience; this is in no way possible with death. This is precisely our next point.

It is in this sense that there is *no direct experience* of death. This does not mean that philosophizing on death is not possible; it will only mean that such philosophizing must take on some other form. Death does make its impact on the living; especially in

the death of a loved one, one can speak of an "experience" of death.<sup>3</sup> We do not adopt as point of departure the commonly expressed sentiment that life becomes the basis for reflection on death; it assumes as parallel conditions "life" and "death" and in fact assimilates death into life by making the latter the point of intelligibility for the former. Because it has already neutralized the sting of death it is usually uncritically assumed.

The death that interests us in the death "models" is the death of a person; necessarily involved then is the *mystery* of personhood. The philosopher cannot forfeit his role to the physician. Discussions that revolve around the cessation of organic functions interest the philosopher precisely because he must reflect on the death of MAN. We do not have in mind that which pious literature refers to as "the death of the soul", and the reason we deny the exclusive competence of empirical observation is not because there is such a thing as "death of the soul". To do so, as often happens, is to be deliberately equivocal in the use of terms — a case of misplaced piety! The death we refer to is that same thing that physicians approach by means of cardiographs and encephalographs. What we assert is that even after these devices shall have told us what happens to heart and brain activity, the philosopher will be perfectly justified in raising his distinct question: What is death?

## I. DEATH AS ACT

The phrase is from Rahner and it summarizes his thesis on death. It is with model that we are concerned in this part of our study. The "final option hypothesis" that has been popularized in recent years is not totally different from Rahner's model although, in its various presentations, it has been developed along distinct lines. In presenting the "death-as-act model" the more general remarks we make hold for any other theory for which death is dominantly something that man *does*, rather than *undergoes*. Rahner's theological model, however stands in a philosophical tradition that we find represented by Heidegger. Hence,

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Joseph Gevaert, *El Problema del hombre* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1978), pp. 298-299.

our treatment of the "death-as-act" model will start with Heideggerian philosophical foundations.

#### A. *Death as My Ownmost Possibility — Heidegger*

There is a fundamental mood that discloses the being of man to himself: anxiety, the disclosure in which Dasein brings itself before itself.<sup>4</sup> That in the face of which I am anxious is not something in the world, nor within myself. In fact, anxiety is not concerned with anything at all. One is anxious in the face of the possibility of one's own being; one is anxious about one's own being-in-the-world. In other words, in the ontological mood of anxiety, the awesome reaches and depth that constitute the possibility of my being stand open before me, and I feel uncanny, I feel not-at-home.<sup>5</sup>

The being that anxiety discloses to me — my being — does not however reach to infinity. It is not unbounded, continual being-there. Rather, the possibility of my being which is opened to me in anxiety opens in the possibility of the impossibility of every possibility — death, the end of all possibility, but my possibility nevertheless! Death, as my ownmost possibility, punctuates the possibility of my being.<sup>6</sup> "Death is something that stands before us, something impending."<sup>7</sup> The possibility that is death is not one among the many possibilities that constitute the possibility of my being. Rather, the very possibility of my being is given to me as being-towards (unto) —death. Death is *the* extreme possibility that is non-relational and is not to be outstripped! "In anxiety in the face of death, Dasein is brought face to face with itself as delivered over to that possibility which is not to be outstripped."<sup>8</sup>

As my possibility, death "individuates" me and calls for my comportment towards it. I will die in utmost solitude and not even if the whole town were to be gathered at my death-bed would

<sup>4</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, trans. (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1962), pp. 226-227.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 233.

<sup>6</sup> Manuel Dy, "Martin Heidegger's Phenomenology of Death" *Journal of Graduate Research*, University of Sto. Tomas 9:3 (1980) 44-54.

<sup>7</sup> Heidegger, op. cit., p. 294.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 298.

my solitude at death be attenuated. *My* death then reveals to me the possibility of *my* being. When I free myself from the delusions of the multitude and from the complacency of everydayness, accepting the extreme possibility of my being and anticipating it by moving towards it without illusions and without hesitation, then I win my *freedom unto death*, the mark of authenticity. As possibility, it is not yet here, and it is being inauthentic to hide it beneath some form of availability, e.g., "Death comes to everyone", "Death lurks at every bend." — and similar nonchalant remarks. As my possibility, I must understand death as a possibility, cultivate it as a possibility and put up with it as a possibility.<sup>9</sup> From death, therefore, one can, more meaningfully, look at life. There are, however, to be no false hopes in death. Death does not offer itself as the maturation of one's existence, not the fulfillment of ripeness of age. In fact, death in most cases comes too soon, leaving one unfulfilled!<sup>10</sup> It is, however, my ownmost, extreme possibility and presents me with the possibility of my being, offering me the freedom unto death.

For as long as man is man, one or the other form of potential being is always open to him. Among these forms of man's possible being is also the end of his being-in-the-world, and this end is death. The end of man as potential being limits and determines the possible totality of man's being.<sup>11</sup>

#### B. *Death as Act — Rahner*

Man, for Karl Rahner, is essentially "man becoming", man validating himself in his free, ethical acts.<sup>12</sup> Human existence is a process of self-enactment through the free, ethical acts of man that posit his nature. The validity of every free act and its absoluteness lies in nothing less than their "making" man's being. Every act of man that is truly his postulates an absoluteness that is incommensurable with passing time and that asserts a defi-

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 305.

<sup>10</sup> Gevaert, op. cit., p. 301.

<sup>11</sup> William Luijpen, *Existential Phenomenology* (Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1960), p. 335.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Tallon, "Personal Becoming" *The Thomist* 43:1 (1979) p. 108.

nitive end for man, a validating consummation. It is this absoluteness that sustains every free act, for every act that man posits in possession of himself is an assertion of the trans-temporal worth and definitiveness of his decision. Therefore, within the act itself, the absolute cannot be doubted for my decision supposes its enduring validity, its absoluteness.<sup>13</sup> In his present mode of existence, man is born into eternity, for eternity is not primarily duration that stands in contrast to time. Eternity is rather the mode of spirit and freedom which are fulfilled in time.<sup>14</sup> This is a specifically Thomistic insight. "Aeternitas est interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio." And therefore, eternity distinguishes itself as the measure of permanent being, i.e., being in perfect self-possession, undiffused over time.<sup>15</sup>

Man is mortal, man moves towards his end because of the freedom of the spirit. This indeed seems paradoxical! Freedom, however, is rightly understood by Rahner as the summons to finality, not the possibility of constantly changing one's course of action. Freedom is that which sets one to a goal, to the irrevocable, without which it becomes meaningless and miserable.<sup>16</sup> This is exactly Louis Lavelle's notion of freedom: freedom is greatest when there is no longer any choice.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, freedom is not to be found where there is indifference to ends; rather, where there is commitment to an end, one is governed by "interior necessity", i.e., one is master over himself to the extent that he sets himself without vacillation towards the end, and this is the essence of freedom. Man moves towards completion and fulfillment. There then is a free decision to death, for the final, for the irrevocable.<sup>18</sup> As every act of decision transcends its object towards finality and completion, every act of decision is a decision for death. The physical side of man's nature is constantly open for further development and therefore precludes the finality that every free act strives to attain. The consummation of freedom

<sup>13</sup> Karl Rahner, "The Life of the Dead" *Theological Investigations* Volume IV (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966), pp. 348 f.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 348.

<sup>15</sup> *Summa Theologica* I, Q. 10, a. 4, corpus.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Rahner, "On Christian Dying" *A Rahner Reader* G. McCool, ed. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 35.

<sup>17</sup> Emerita Quito, "The Paradox of Freedom in Louis Lavelle" *Unitas* 46:2 (June, 1973), 224-239.

<sup>18</sup> Rahner, "On Christian Dying", pp. 352-353.

cannot take place according to the present mode of man's corporality.

Because the freedom of man itself calls for death and because decision is, in essence, a decision for death, then man DIES his death. Death is therefore the act of man to which all his free acts have tended. It is in death that man achieves the finality and consummation that the whole of life has been an orientation to. Death is the consummation of man's history as a free person, that in which this history breaks through into the absolute future which is its goal, and in which God as the ultimate is encountered.<sup>19</sup>

We must say: through death — and not after it — there is (not: begins to take place) the achieved definitiveness of the freely matured existence of man. What has come to be is there as the hard-won and untrammelled validity of what was once temporal; it progressed as spirit and freedom in order to be.<sup>20</sup>

Insofar as finality is attained and that which man has become attains definitiveness and eternal validity, death puts an end to man, to the openness for new determinations, the vagueness and indeterminacy of temporal existence.

Human existence is an interplay of self-direction and passivity. At death, man is most completely subject; against his liking it, he dies. At the same time, it is his most clear act of decision. At death, he therefore decides whether to rebel against the subjection (which ultimately brings to nothing his rebellion) or to accept his impotence in the hands of God. As he is subject to that over which he has no control, he must decide whether to assent in faith or to rebel in despair.

Let us now re-trace our steps. Man *becomes*, by the free, ethical acts he posits. These decisions appeal to the absolute and aspire for man's consummation and end. In the present condition

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<sup>19</sup> Karl Rahner, "Theological Considerations on the Moment of Death" *Theological Investigations* Volume XI (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974), p. 318; also cf. Karl Rahner, "Death" in *Encyclopedia of Theology* (London: Burns and Oates, 1975), pp. 329-333.

<sup>20</sup> Rahner, "The Life of the Dead", p. 348.

of temporality, man is continually open to change and to new determinations. At death, however, he attains the definitive state to which all his free acts have been oriented. Since all his decisions have been decisions for death, his dying is itself the act whereby he consummates himself, that by which he affixes the stamp of finality to everything that he has made of himself.

## II. DEATH AS NEGATIVITY

### A. *Critical Questions*

Notably opposed to the Heideggerian hypothesis of death as "my ownmost possibility" is Sartre. Among the important questions he raises is the intriguing jab at Heidegger: How can one prove that the death which will overtake me is *my* death?<sup>21</sup> It is a fact difficult to see how Heidegger can be acquitted of the sleight-of-hand Sartre imputes against him. Death, we have seen, is supposed to present Dasein with the possibility of his being, because it is *my* death, it individualizes me. But in this lies the Sartrian objection: that which individualizes death, making this death my death, is my being, my existence as person. In other words, Dasein individualizes death. But death, as my death, says Heidegger, individualizes me, individualizes Dasein. Death individualizes by virtue of its being individualized!<sup>22</sup> It is not a problem of logic we are concerned with. Rather, the vicious circle seems to indicate the gratuity of assigning to death an individualizing function or of interiorizing death within the individuality of Dasein. Heidegger opted for a conciliatory position: death is my possibility; its uniqueness being that it is the possibility of the impossibility of any possibility. Sartre tolerates no compromise: death is the nihilation of all possibility and the unmitigated *unveiling of absurdity*. One cannot but take into account the impediment of death, and yet it retains its character of being unexpected. There is therefore, at the heart of every human project, the chance of death.<sup>23</sup> Only when a symphony has been com-

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<sup>21</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Hazel Barnes, trans. (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), p. 683.

<sup>22</sup> *loc. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 685-687.

pleted can one intelligently say whether it was beautiful or not. But imagine a symphony that is left off at mid-point; it will never be possible to say anything about it. Something analogous holds for human existence; if it is at the close of our existence that the meaning of all that we have been becomes clear and definite then, indeed, man is in a most hapless position, for the moment at which the accounts are closed is not ours to set. In other words, the freedom that has characterized by life's acts amounts to nothing because the close of life which is supposed to fix the significance of my free acts is itself bereft of freedom.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, it is only in the light of what comes after that what has been done can be meaningfully talked about. Getting up from bed is the first step towards moving to a classroom only if after getting up from bed, I in fact move to the classroom. The significance of a battle is established by what follows it. If death is an act of my life, it requires a future to give it meaning. But because death is the *last* act of my life, it is deprived of that future which alone can give it meaning and must therefore be left to suspend in utter meaninglessness.<sup>25</sup> Finally, death is my transformation into *en soi*, that kind of a being for which, Heidegger's own terms, nothing more is out-standing. In death, facticity overcomes project, and the other's point of view triumphs over the point of view I am toward myself. What he "thinks" of me can not be undone because there is no more "doing". All these objections to the Heideggerian model rest on the basic unfreedom of death and its negativity and, in their light, assertions on death as act appear to arise from a selective reading of the experience of death.

Having attended to the Sartrean objections to Heidegger's phenomenological presentation, we are ready to systematize our critical questions on a "death as act" model. Does such a model open up to confrontation with the polyvalence of reality, or does it result in a reduction of sorts? There are some tell-tale indications of such a reduction in the "death-as-act" model. While Rahner concedes that death is repulsive to man inasfar as it is

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 687-689.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 690-691.

unnatural, there is, in his view, not really very much to this aspect of death.

Death is "unnatural" in its *immediate effect* upon the physical side, which is an essential part of man's nature, inasmuch as in death this *cannot at once be transformed* and raised in glory to that state of final perfection for which man's life, taken as a single and continuous whole is designed.<sup>26</sup>

This is among the most patent expressions of a fundamental inadequacy of the Rahnerian model. The disruptive force of death, its painful and negatory impact are reduced a priori to the mere inconvenience of a delay in the glorification of the body. The model is unable to confront death as a threat and the seemingly innate aversion man has for death is dismissed as a surface phenomenon which is really underlaid by a decision for death. The theory gives the impression of being "insensitive" to the actually dying person, to the struggle and to the darkness that are embodied in that horrible contradiction to life and decision which is the cadaver! By situating decision on a level beyond verification and observation one leaves out consideration, and in fact depreciates the fact of dying in all its concrete forms.<sup>27</sup> While it would be the death of metaphysics to regress to empiricism, no theory is fully acceptable that devalues lived experience.

The model presented is susceptible to attack also from a different direction. Because of the fact of decision and freedom in life that progress with the maturation of a person, the theory's proponents argue that in death, the process must really reach its culmination. In other words, the logic of existence also governs death. We have all reason to demand: On what grounds? Why should the logic of life be the logic of death? Gisbert Greshake specifically addresses himself to the Rahnerian concept of the dialectic of passivity-activity which the eminent German theologian postulates to be operative in death (death as the peak of passivity and of activity).<sup>28</sup> If at birth, there is hardly a way of speaking

<sup>26</sup> Rahner, "On Christian Dying", p. 554, underscoring ours.

<sup>27</sup> Gisbert Greshake, "Toward A Theology of Dying" *Concilium* 4:10 (1974) 64-79.

<sup>28</sup> loc. cit.

of personal activity that balances off the evident passivity, why should not the same thing happen at death? Underlying all these critical questions is the sentiment that the outright assertion of continuity has not been fully justified. We return to Sartre: it is possible to say that death is the climax of life, its melodic conclusion, only if death really arises from life. But does it? The death-as-act theory assumes it does. It is not clear that the assumption is justified. In a rather sober outlook on the matter, Pohier discusses the limits that encompass and define man's life in the following manner:

He cannot have a human relationship with the origin or with the end of his life, nor can he appropriate them. The beginning and the end of his life constitute one of the most striking and at the same time most concealed signs pointing to what his life and its contingency are.<sup>29</sup>

Built into the model is the optimism that allows only for a happy conclusion!

Because it is death that seals one's life and gives one's free, ethical acts definitive validity, death therefore matters most. It is at death that one attains the freedom of decision by which one fully disposes of oneself. Does this not seem, however, to be an apotheosis of death at the expense of living? No doubt, Rahner and other theologians of similar conviction insist that the culminating, fully free act the dying man posits is not isolated from one's life of decision. These acts of decision in life, however, could not be of such a definitive character as to define a person *in aeternum* owing to the insuperable openness of the corporeal state of existence to change and to transformation. The act in death qualitatively distinguishes itself as the most free of decisions and is *the* determinative, meaning-giving act of one's life. The proponents of the theory, however, seem to be threatened by a dilemma. Either they admit that it is the free act in death that absolutely counts, in which case they will be hard put to

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<sup>29</sup> Jacques-Marie Pohier, "Death, Nature and Contingency" *Concilium* 4:10 (1974) 64-79.

prove that they take the whole of life seriously, or they insist that the free act of death carries the weight of one's particular decisions in life. But in this case, they would be equally culpable of an inconsistency. O'Connell's objection hits the point squarely: If man's previous life decisions truly weigh upon man at the moment of final choice, is the final act of choice as fully free as it is theorized to be, with the clarity and absoluteness that is postulated considering that the choices in one's life that weigh upon the final act were not fully free?<sup>30</sup> Joseph Roche's formulation lends support to the accusation that the model of death so proposed assign to life a preparatory role to death.

If death is the condition for the fulfillment of man's freedom, the final step in freeing himself from all the facticity imposed on him by his own body, then his whole life can be seen as a passage from the imposed to the personal, a progressive becoming free. Life then is a *rehearsal* for the definite option of death.<sup>31</sup>

Surely, there is more to life than the launching pad to death!

### *B. The Lineaments of a Dark Model*

Criticism of the previous model centers on its seeming lop-sidedness, its a priori optimism and its inability to lead to a confrontation with the darkness of death and with the terror of dying. The issue is not whether man is ultimately annihilated by death. Rather what is demanded of a model is that no dimension of experience be precluded, or reduced and resolved simplistically and a priori.

The theological virtue of hope is inspired by God's revealed word in Scripture. This does not mean, however, that the books of the Bible do not know of the darkness of death, or of a pessimistic outlook towards death. To avoid a protracted discussion on "pessimism", we take it to mean a negatory interpretation of

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<sup>30</sup> Matthew O'Connell, "The Mystery of Death: A Recent Contribution" *Theological Studies* 27:3 (1966) 434-442.

<sup>31</sup> Joseph Roche, "The Human Person in Contemporary Philosophy" *Philippine Studies* 18:1 (1970) 103-146.

life and human experience.<sup>32</sup> Many of the expressions of a pessimistic sentiment are found in the Old Testament: it will not do, however, to explain the pessimism of the Old Testament books merely as indications of an inadequate eschatology. The eschatology of the Old Testament must be seen in faith as completed by the proclamation of the New Testament, that is true. On the other hand, the validity of the insights and inspiration of the Old Testament authors is not diminished by the fact that more was to be said in Jesus Christ. What we are arguing for is an approach of respect for the uniqueness and enduring validity of Old Testament pessimism.

That man is a creature of God, in fact the crowning glory of creation, Old Testament writers do not doubt. We find sufficient praise of the exaltedness of man in almost every page. But it is likewise not forgotten that man is a weak, fragile being, he is dust that breathes. Man's life is brief, and his lifespan hardly any longer than a few breaths.

Behold, thou hast made my days a few handbreathes,  
and my lifetime is as nothing in thy sight.  
Surely every man stands as a mere breath!  
Surely man goes about as a shadow!  
Surely for naught are they in turmoil;  
man heaps up and knows not who will gather.  
(Ps 39, 5-6, RSV)

Man is flesh, and death is the way of all flesh (Jos 23, 14; 1 Kgs 2, 2). With reason, Hans Wolff refers to the "demythologization of death" in the Old Testament.

In general, the Old Testament sees death in all its hideousness. It is surrounded by no halo of any kind. No holiness, whatever, let alone divinity, consecrates death, any more than the grave. If death is ever given any title of honor at all in poetry, it is the cynical one of "the king of terrors".<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> For a lengthy discussion on pessimism, cfr. Ranhilio Aquino, *The Believing Pessimist. A Philosophical Reading of the Qoheleth*, in: "Philippiniana Sacra", Vol. XVI, No. 47, May-August, 1981, pp. 207-261.

<sup>33</sup> Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), p. 102.

The very legislation of Israel reflects its utter aversion for death. Contact with corpses rendered one ritually unclean (cf. Num 19, 11). And in Hebrew poetry, death was mourned as the end of that which characterized man most: proclaiming and praising Yahweh. The cry of the Psalmist is plaintive:

I am reckoned among those who go down to the pit;  
I am a man who has no strength;  
like one forsaken among the dead,  
like the slain that lie in the grave,  
like those whom thou dost remember no more,  
for they are cut off from thy hand.  
(Ps 88, 4-5, RSV)

There was Sheol, the abode of the "shades", but the shadowy existence in such a dismal underworld was never a consoling thought for the Israelite. All the same, while death was extremely far from God, it did not present a counterforce. God ordained life and death.

Qoheleth is an interesting figure of the Old Testament and there is much to be said in his favor by an age that, in many ways, allies itself in sentiment to him. "Vanity" (hebhel) was his favorite word and it was his summary-evaluation (rather, devaluation) of human life and endeavour. Did the teachers of wisdom exhort man to be wise? Qoheleth laments: death comes to all, wise man and fool alike. (Eccl 2, 16) Death in Qoheleth is the great leveller; it is indeed the great sickle that cuts all down and when all has been moved out of existence, there is neither fool, nor wise man, nor king nor servant, nor pious nor impious. What for was being all this then (Eccl 9, 2)? There is nothing more pointless than to toil and later, to abandon all that one has gained to someone else who never lifted a finger in toil, but this is precisely human life and there is no denying its vanity! If man gloried in his uniqueness, he had to be reminded that he had to die, and so did a beast, and there was no way of saying whether his fortune was any different from the beast's (Eccl 3, 19-20). The twelfth chapter of Qoheleth summarizes his thoughts on death in striking images, univocally pessimistic: the snapping of the silver cord, the breaking of the golden bowl,

etc. And he ends on precisely the note from which he took off, for which he is remembered: "Vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas!".

For a more balanced view, we would have to quote the equally frequent expressions of hope and confidence in death from Old Testament books, but our brief examination has tried to make clear that the Bible also knows death to be the very opposition of what it is to be human!

In a thoroughly provocative article (Theology and the Darkness of Death), Bartholomew Collopy questions the capability of theology to confront death in its darkest reaches with models that are a priori optimistic or conclusively affirmative.<sup>34</sup> He therefore draws the lines of a model for which death is tangled and unresolved. This he hopes will call theology into struggle. He considers the following points essential to such a model.

1. *Death breaks the whole person.* Death is most menacing when no part of man enjoys the guarantee of being free of its reach. Death then is a most real and radical threat to man. "In its darkness, death is the cold fact of human dispensability in the universe, the empirical proof that human life is finite, markedly inabsolute, eminently transient."<sup>35</sup>

2. *Death is unacceptable as a dislogicality.* Death is the climatic discontinuity of the rhythm of life, a sundering of life's patterns. The innate aversion for death should not be dismissed as unimportant. In man is the piercing sense of death's loss and blankness. In the silence and coldness of the corpse, human life has been delivered by death unto emptiness.

3. *Death is optionless.* This was Sartre's rallying point and because it nihilates all of man's possibilities, the freedom of man is ultimately absurd and pointless. "What death does to human choice and freedom is to take no notice of it, to deny it, to leave it to charnel pointlessness. In death, the individual is unable any longer even in the most paltry way, to hold on to the self which

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<sup>34</sup> Bartholomew Collopy, "Theology and the Darkness of Death" *Theological Studies* 39:1 (1978), 22-54.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

he has been all the years of his life.”<sup>36</sup> Such a model would indeed give theology no pre-assured foothold. Instead, theology is pressed to recognize empirical bounds. Death becomes a most “untheological” experience. From this perspective, faith has only itself to rely on and what Kierkegaard meant by “the anguished assent to the Absurd” is rendered more clearly.

### III. A THOMISTIC PROPOSAL

There is no coincidence, except in logic and in mathematics, of *argument* with *insight*. This is another way of saying that what I know is not exhausted about my thinking on (my arguments for) what I know. Epistemologically, there also seems to be a qualitative difference between insight and argument. Argument is fully determined by relative horizon, by the “psychic grid” or the pattern of outlook prevalent in the social milieu at a given time, by one’s own exposure and experience, etc. When some argument loses ground, the insight that is not the product of the argument but is rather its “fundamental intuition” need not be abandoned.

We now propose a Thomistic model based on a “hermeneutic” reading of Aquinas that recognizes the epistemology of insight and argument. What is presented is therefore Aquinas as we understand him today — which is not to say that we have an Aquinas different from the 13th century philosopher. It is not impossible to discriminate between the point Aquinas wanted to make and the way he made his point. Obviously we are not in a privileged position that would enable us to distill Aquinas to the point of leaving only the “essence” for in the realm of understanding, there is no such thing as the “pure essence” of truth. There is only human truth that is as historical as it is trans-historical.

#### A. *Man: the Bi-polar Unity*

Rejecting the position that the soul is man as untenable, Thomas insists: “It is clear that man is not a soul only, but some-

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 45

thing composed of soul and body".<sup>37</sup> In fact, the soul is not even a person "cum sit pars speciei humanae".<sup>38</sup> This then must be the starting point of anthropology: man, a being, an inseparable unity. But having said this, the philosopher inquires into the "discontinuity" that is human existence, for indeed, human existence constitutes a "break" within material creation. Man, in the unity that he manifests himself to be, is at the same time a being that cannot be simplistically reduced to matter. The argument: Man is bodily, therefore he is nothing more than bodily is infirm. In man's knowing which is never bound to the singular concrete, Thomas reads the indications of some dimension of being human that cannot be reduced to the corporality of man.<sup>39</sup> A philosophy of man that rests on man's experience of himself cannot prescind from these manifestations of pluri-dimensionality in man.

Man, to be fully man, must be bodily. According to Thomas' horizon, the intellect and the will, man's rational faculties, characterized him as man. But the intellectual faculty of man allows him to know only by way of phantasms, i.e., in corporality. And so even if human soul and angel are spiritual substances, they are not simply identifiable. When man dies, an angel is not born!

Unde impossibile videtur quod angeli et anima sint eiusdem speciei. Secundum autem quid specie differant, considerandum restat. Oportet autem nos in cognitionem substantiarum intellectualium per considerationem substantiarum materialium pervenire.<sup>40</sup>

But herein lies the distinctiveness of the human kind for while he knows only thru phantasms, knowledge itself lies on a level beyond physical processes. Man's very being must therefore be such that in what he can do, he can totally transcend the limitations of materiality.

"Perfectissima autem formarum, id est anima humana, quae est finis omnium formarum naturalium, habet operationes omnino excedentem materiam, quae

<sup>37</sup> *Summa Theologica* I, Q. 75, a. 4, corpus (hereafter *S.T.*)

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, ad 2.

<sup>39</sup> *Quaestio Disputata de Anima*, a. 1, corpus; (hereafter: *De Anima*); also *S.T.* I, Q. 75, a. 2.

<sup>40</sup> *De Anima*, a. 7, corpus.

non fit per organum corporale, scilicet intelligere. Et quia esse rei proportionatur eius operationi, ut dictum est, cum unusquodque operetur secundum quod est ens; oportet quod esse animae humanae superexcedat materiam corporealem, et non sit totaliter comprehensum ab ipsa, sed tamen aliquo modo attingatur ab ea."<sup>41</sup> Man is bodily but is not a material thing!

All philosophizing on man that takes as its point of departure his bipolar unity will be characterized by some ambiguity that speaks of the polyvalence of what is reflected on rather than of any defect in philosophical thinking. It is this ambiguity (one can almost call it "double-talk") that becomes apparent in Thomas' treatment on man in *statu innocentiae*. Would man have been immortal in a state of innocence? The question is not mere idle speculation on what could have been. It is reflection on what man basically is. The answer Thomas makes is entirely consistent with the insight on man's bi-polar unity; Yes, (and what follows is as important): "non per aliquem immortalitatis vigorem in eo existentem; sed inerat animae vis quaedam supernaturaliter divinitas data, per quam poterat corpus ab omni corruptione praeservare, quandiu ipsa Deo subiecta mansisset."<sup>42</sup> The immortal man would have enjoyed would have been by virtue of the efficient cause. Further on in the body of the article, Thomas asserts that since the soul surpasses the capacity of corporeal matter, it would have been able to preserve the body from corruption by virtue of a gift. Man is therefore a *fragile* being and the tension that arises from his bipolarity points to this, but he also manifests himself in his aptitude to render his own fragility superable. "Sic ergo mors et corruptio naturalis est homini secundum necessitatem materiae; sed secundum rationem formae esset ei conveniens immortalitas."<sup>43</sup>

### B. *Death: the Undoing of Man*

Defining death as the "separatio animae a corpore" usually merely prefaces the statement on the perdurance of the "anima separata" and therefore of "life after death". This is not how-

<sup>41</sup> *Quaest. Disputata de Spiritualibus Creaturis*, a. 2, corpus.

<sup>42</sup> *S.T. I*, Q. 97, a. 1, corpus.

<sup>43</sup> *Quaest. Disputata De Malo*, Q. 5, a. 5, corpus.

ever exactly Thomistic, although it is "traditional" in the sense that it is the familiar catechism approach. It is in the treatise on Christ's death that Thomas reflects on death. Was Christ a man during the days of his death?

When a man or an animal really dies, by death each *stops being man* or animal, for death in the case of man or animal is the result of the separation of the soul, the formal constituent of both. To say, then, that Christ was a man during the three days in which he died simply and absolutely is false.<sup>44</sup>

At death, therefore, the bipolar tension that is the metaphysical condition of man breaks up and man ceases to be man. Death fully breaks man! What this means for man who concretely exists is not overlooked by Thomas. In fact, he notes the painful paradox: man's drive is for life and life that abides, but life, alas, passes away. Death therefore snatches out of man's grasp that which his life seems directed to.

Now the goods of the present life pass away; since life itself passes away, which we naturally desire to have, and would wish to hold abidingly, for man naturally shrinks from death. Wherefore it is impossible to have true Happiness in this life.<sup>45</sup>

Man lives in the consciousness of the basic fragility of his existence and in the certitude that that for which he has an innate drive must also pass away. Ever in his prospects is his undoing!

It is in the following part of our study that we will engage ourselves in a hermeneutic of the "*anima separata*". For now, we turn to Thomas' treatment on the knowledge of the separated soul with our interest set on the status of such a separated soul. According to Thomistic ideogenesis, the intellect formed ideas by abstracting intelligible species from phantasms or images. Thus knowledge resulted from the most unique intercourse between man and reality. In a state of separation, however, the soul retains

<sup>44</sup> S.T. III, Q. 50, a. 4, corpus, underscoring ours; also cf. *Quaestiones Quodlibetales* (hereafter *Quodl.*) 2, Q. 1, a. 1, corpus.

<sup>45</sup> S.T. I-II, Q. 5, a. 3, corpus.

none of a man's sensitive faculties and so too no longer present are the phantasms on which knowledge depended in a state of union. There is a mode of knowledge proper to the separated soul (*per species ex influentia divini luminis participatas*), but Thomas is clear on the status of the separated soul.

Hence it is natural for the soul to understand by turning to the phantasms as it is for it to be joined to the body; but to be separated from the body is not in accordance with its nature and likewise to understand without turning to the phantasms is not natural to it; and hence it is united to the body in order that it may have an existence and an operation suitable to its nature.<sup>46</sup>

There is radical discontinuity wrought by death and the manner of speaking about human reality before death can in no wise be simply and undifferentiatedly transposed to whatever may be said about the "after" of death. When Thomas speaks of corruption, he does not merely designate a process that a hylemorphic substance undergoes. He views corruption — and hence death — as the "via ad non esse", the reversal to non-being.<sup>47</sup>

We earlier saw that in a state of primeval innocence, i.e., accordance to God's original offer to man, we would have been spared death as evil because of the aptitude of the soul to forestall corruption by its innate transcendence over material processes and by Divine virtuality. Because of original sin, however, man must be fully subject to death. "Et ideo omnes isti defectus (mors et alii defectus huius vitae) respondent peccato originali ut poena concomitans."<sup>48</sup> We are not in any way reversing the position we earlier maintained that man is, as man, vulnerable. This is, in fact, datum of Scripture that holds as an anthropological concept that man is dust that breathes and to dust therefore he must one day revert. (Gen. 2, 7; 3, 19; Ps 104, 29b) But in the death to which man is subject, in its negating and

<sup>46</sup> *S.T. I*, Q. 89, a. 1, corpus; *De Malo*, Q. 5, a. 4: "Nam cum naturaliter anima sit pars humanae naturae, imperfecta est sine corpore existens . . ."; also cf. *Quodl.* 3, Q. 9, a. 1 *De Anima*, a. 15: "Potentiae sensitivae sunt necessariae animae ad intelligendum . . . ut representantes animae intellectivae proprium obiectum . . .".

<sup>47</sup> Cf. *De Malo*, q. 5, a. 5, corpus.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, a. 4, corpus.

nihilating force, Thomas finds irreconcilable repugnance to perfectly ordered reality. In its unsparing destructiveness, death must somehow be related to the mystery of sin, to that false note that has turned the marvelous symphony of the universe into miserable cacophony!

It is to be admitted that Thomas does not attend to the "personalistic" ramifications of death in the manner personalists of our times do, and here must be recognized legitimate development of philosophical thought. What is also to be recognized however is the valid Thomistic insight that death subjects man to rock-bottom passivity. In the description of the physical or substantial dismembering of man, we ought to read a strong philosophical assertion of the abject submission of man to the "unbecoming" of death. Within such a model, it would seem unjustified to insist on death, *my* death, as that which can be the possibility of individualization! The Thomistic model confronts death as alien, as anti-being, as "inhuman"!

### *C. Death and Man's Transcendence*

Our brief presentation of relevant portions of Thomistic anthropology has indicated the grounds for affirming man's transcendence. The human person constitutes a discontinuity from material things and is not adequately approached if one takes as the terms of one's definition weight and space. Specifically his infinitely open horizon of knowing and his transcendental orientation to beatitude do not lend themselves to the terms of an empirically verifiable process.

Human transcendence in death does not mean that a specifiable dimension of the human person is immune to death so that it can be said that "something" in man dies and "something" survives. If this were so, we would have to draw up two columns with two sets of opposed statements on the two "parts" of man. There is *no such bifurcation* in any of the pertinent Thomistic texts. In other words, that very transcendence of the person in death does not remain unaffected by death.

It is important to note how Thomas establishes the subsistence of the soul: from our knowledge and our mode of trans-

cending the concrete, he concludes to a principle subsistent and incorruptible, capable of enduring but essentially ordained to the whole man.<sup>49</sup> Speculation on whatever is "after" death is therefore no "imagining of the wonders that shall be". Rather whatever may be said about the person then must be founded on our experience of man now, not because we a priori postulate continuity but because indications that exist justify speculation.

The soul that is separated from the body is first of all not a spiritual substance of the same genus as the angel. Thomas does not postulate an acosmic, purely spiritual mode of existence "after" death. He insists, rather, that the soul remains a human soul, i.e., meant to be united to and therefore ordained to union with the body. The soul is not an angelic being for the soul remains *pars speciei humanae, non habens in se speciem completam*.<sup>50</sup> The transcendence of man, therefore is not to be looked for in some strange substance that is unrelated to the totality of man himself. If man manifests his being as transcendent of immanent materiality, then it is the whole man that must be transcendent. The soul that is separated from the body retains its relation to matter, a relationship that has been described as "transcendental". Thomas can hardly be read in any other way.

To be united to the body belongs to the soul by reason of itself, as it belongs to a light body by reason of itself to raise up. And as a light body remains light, when removed from its proper place, retaining meanwhile an aptitude and an inclination for its proper place, so the human soul retains its proper existence when separated from body having *an aptitude and a natural inclination to be united with the body*.<sup>51</sup>

In a cosmology of hylemorphism, that which concretely individuated a substance was matter in quantitative determination (*materia signata quantitate*). In virtue of this, an individual was concretely set apart from another. After the separation of body

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<sup>49</sup> cf. *De Anima*, a. 14; *Quodl.* 10, Q. 3, a. 2: "Anima autem rationalis habet per se operationem, quam exercet nullo organo corporeo mediante, scilicet intelligere . . ."

<sup>50</sup> *De Anima*, a. 7, corpus.

<sup>51</sup> *S.T.* I, Q. 76, a. 1, ad 6m.

and soul, did the separated souls, lacking quantitatively determined matter, coalesce into some amorphous mass? Were the Arabic Aristotelians after all justified in theorizing a separate, common agent intellect? Not so, Thomas maintained, for although human souls belong to one species, they are distinguished as forms of distinct bodies<sup>52</sup> and even after the dissolution of the union, the soul retains its being (and therefore souls, their multiplicity) as form of one body.<sup>53</sup> In another place, Thomas speaks of the soul in the following terms:

Et tamen quia anima intellectiva est forma transcendens corporis capacitatem, habet esse suum elevatum supra corpus; unde destructo corpore adhuc remanet esse animae.<sup>54</sup>

Whatever may be said of human transcendence in death, it will not be accurate to conceive of an a-material, angelic existence.

Does this not contradict our previous reading of death in Thomas as the undoing of man? In calling attention to the nature of the human soul as essentially in actual relation to matter, we did not say that man survives death. For Thomas, death is man's undoing and is the end of my concrete existence as man. But what we are to say of the subsistent rational soul still has to be spelled out. The answer is not an easy one; nonetheless, it is not untenable. There are ambiguities in the Thomistic text which are not, however, beyond resolution. On the one hand, the status of the soul as person seems to be denied<sup>55</sup> because "not every particular substance is a hypostasis or person, but that which has the complete nature of its species", and because the human soul is not the whole of man's essence it would not qualify. Therefore it would seem that a person cannot be other than the concretely existing being. In Scholastic terminology, is the hypostasis identical with the concrete, individual substance? Not quite, Thomas adds. "When in a being, there is nothing other than the specific essence, that very specific essence would subsist individually on

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., a. 1m.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., ad 2m.

<sup>54</sup> *De Spiritualibus Creaturis*, a. 9, ad 3m.

<sup>55</sup> S.T. I, Q. 75, a. 4, ad 2m.

its own, and so in a being of this kind, the complete substance would be one same thing with the nature", but this is not the case with man who is not ontologically unitary or simple.<sup>56</sup> In fact, the distinction between the person and the concrete substance allows that Jesus Christ was, while historically, concretely a man, the Second Person of the Trinity and not a human person.<sup>57</sup> The separated human soul is furthermore a center of consciousness and will. Precisely those activities that mark man's transcendence, knowing, willing and loving, constitute the activities of the separated soul. The soul that attains the last End delights in it. Thomas says of the state of beatitude:

And therefore these three must concur in Happiness; to wit, vision which is perfect knowledge of the intelligible end; comprehension, which implies presence of the end; and delight or enjoyment, which implies repose of the lover in the object beloved.<sup>58</sup>

Whatever else may be said on what death does to the transcendence of man, it is a Thomistic insight that there is a *realization of personal being in consciousness and volition that is not continuous with the concrete human existence that ends in death*. The personal existence "after" death results from death's profound shattering of that corporeal, localized mode of human existence preceding death. The soul does not survive death, for to say it "survives" is to imply that in some way it remains unscathed by death. This may have been an aspiration of Greek philosophies, but it is not Thomistic. The soul's mode of existence is totally conditioned by the fact that death has sundered the dialectic unity of human bipolarity. Death puts an end to man; through death, there comes about a personal mode of existence that distinguishes itself from the concrete, corporeal realization of what it was to be man.

### *Main Points*

1. To be man is to be *physis*, but to be man is to be irreducible to the complete material specificity of a material thing. In

<sup>56</sup> *Quaest. Disputata de Unione Verbi Incarnati*, a 1, corpus, our translation.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, ad 2m.

<sup>58</sup> *S.T.* I-II, Q, 4, a. 3, corpus.

knowing and willing are manifested transcendent and transcending dimensions of personhood that constitute man into a bipolar unity.

2. In death, man is *totally broken*; he ceases to be. That interaction of spirit and matter that constitutes the dynamic unity of the human being, man, is sundered in death. While there is a constitutive fragility of human existence, the dislogicality of death is not completely reconcilable with a conceivable harmony in reality.

3. Because the transcendent acts of man must be grounded in his ontological capacity for transcendence, there is, through death, a manner of personal existence after death in knowing, willing and loving which, while in some way related and oriented to the material universe, is radically new and distinct from the preceding concreteness of corporeal human existence.

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