

HUMAN DEATH: A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS



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ABSTRACT

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This inquiry provides a philosophical analysis of the problem of human death. There are three main emphases in the thesis. First, there is a consideration of the general problem of the definition of death, which results in the adoption of the definition of death as "the total absence of life". The second area has to do with a critical analysis of certain established philosophical positions on death, including the Stoics, Montaigne and Heidegger. The main conclusion of this part of the thesis is that, in order to be consistent with the accepted definition, there is no inside knowledge of death.

The third aspect of the inquiry deals with the formulation of an alternative position on the problem of human death. This alternative is based on the conclusions of the previous analysis, and argues for a position characterized by openness and flexibility; moreover, it includes a discussion of the connection between this formulation of the problem of death and the problem of the meaning of life.

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A nobleman asked Master Hakuin; "What happens to the enlightened man at death? What happens to the un-enlightened man?"

The Master replied: "Why ask me?"

"Because you're a Zen Master!"

"Yes," said Hakuin, "but not a dead one!"

Philip Kapleau, Ed. The Wheel of Death
(New York: Harper and Row), p. 60.

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PROLOGUE

...not bothering with the problem of death is equivalent to divorcing philosophy from the profoundest theme which has troubled, mystified and haunted mankind from the beginning of time.

There is considerable controversy among some philosophers over the question whether death is a philosophical problem or not. In view of this fact, a few general comments will be made at the outset of this inquiry.

The main controversy seems to be between those who see philosophy as a scientific endeavour and those who see it as a human endeavour, and set up a dichotomy between the two. On the one hand, there is the view that philosophy's role is solely to clarify knowledge and language. On the other hand, there is the position that philosophy is an endeavour that attempts to provide an ultimate explanation of the universe or the nature of man. The latter position is often described as being extreme and speculative by philosophers of the first persuasion.

The orientation of the present philosophical investigation is to clarify knowledge and language in the process of investigating an important aspect of the human condition; viz the problem of death. It is, in this sense, a middle position between the two above views. This kind of position is justified due to the fact that what is thought to

¹Jacques Choron, Death and Western Thought (New York: Collier Books, 1963), p. 271.

constitute a philosophical issue is often a function of geographical location and arbitrary stipulations, and not a function of anything indigenous to philosophy.

The question "What is philosophy?" has many answers, but minimally, it is characterized by intellectual curiosity and "wonder". Philosophers concern themselves with widely differing issues and philosophy is, in fact,

...many different things and in the final count it is up to the individual philosopher to pursue problems which he thinks relevant and for which he is best suited.²

In general, then, the problem of death is a philosophical problem for the almost trivial reason that many philosophers past and present do concern themselves with the problem, and it is a potent source of intellectual curiosity and "wonder".

There are, in addition, more specific and important reasons for considering the problem of death as a distinctly philosophical problem. These reasons originate in both (a) the scientific and (b) the human orientations in philosophy.

a) Death is a philosophical problem because it does not belong to one particular area of knowledge. For example, it is claimed that the nature of death is a problem that biology should be concerned with and not philosophy. There are however, many differing views within biology itself and many open questions. As an illustration, consider the relatively new discovery that there are certain unicellular organisms that are amortal. It is a philosophical problem to sort out the meanings of different claims of biologists and to ask such questions as to whether "amortal" means "immortal" or what "death" means, in this

²Ibid., p. 272.

case, or for that matter, what "life" means. Secondly, the philosopher attempts to analyze the presuppositions or paradigms employed by the biologist that enabled him to arrive at his conclusions and in this way clarify the problem of death.

This procedure applies to other sciences as well. There is, for example, the major problem as to whether death is, in psycho-analytic terms, a primary phenomenon or a secondary phenomenon.³ The philosopher's role in this case is to analyze the positions critically in order to arrive at some general conclusions about the problem of death.

b) There is a second and more practical dimension to the role of philosophy with respect to the problem of death. This role is to point out, subsequent to a critical analysis, the implications of this knowledge for human beings as they live. In the context of the problem of "human" death, this means that philosophy may, for example, suggest ways to deal with the problem of death, since it is a "pressing" human problem. This is done from a point of view connected with, but unlike the views of any particular science. As this inquiry will argue, the problem of death lends itself to this orientation in philosophy since there seems to be no final answer to the problem. There are many definitions of death, and it is a philosophical issue not only to put these definitions together or show how and why they cannot be integrated, but also to indicate what this means for man.

The outcome of this project may possibly be a position consistent with a scientific theory; i.e., the position may have "empirical

³An example of one who holds the former is Rank, and the latter, Freud.

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content"; however, it is not as restricted as each particular science is, within its respective field. Philosophers can view the human condition in a less specialized or more eclectic manner and in this way enrich the sciences and vice versa.

The philosophical endeavour is both a technical and a creative activity and, in practice, most philosophers attempt to accommodate both elements, as do scientists. In as much as this is the case, the distinction between science and philosophy breaks down, at least from this general perspective. Thus, the problem of the rift in philosophy may be a straw-man; however, it is a well-supported one.⁴

⁴Several good examples of scientists who help to break the distinction down are Copernicus; Kepler and Einstein. There is a multitude of philosophers who also do so. In fact this narrower view of philosophy is a recent phenomenon.

INTRODUCTION

It was indicated in the Prologue that the problem of death has many aspects and is virtually necessarily inter-disciplinary in nature. One of the more specific reasons for the multi-dimensional nature of the problem is the lack of one precise definition of the term "death". Death is defined in many different ways depending on the context of the discussion. Nevertheless, these many definitions do have, à la Wittgenstein, a "family resemblance", that is, they do all, evidently, in one way or another, refer to something called death. The problem is that the network of family resemblances appears to be fundamental; i.e., there is no Platonic "Idea" of death or, in other words, there is not one definition of death in which all the other definitions participate.

For example, there is the widespread view that "death" designates the "cessation of consciousness" or "the absence of life". In Section A of Chapter I, it will be argued that this is not the only definition of death, particularly given the recent discoveries in contemporary biology already mentioned; namely, the theory that certain simple organisms do not die, but merely change their form, and are thus amortal. This may indicate that death is not the absence of life, but a transformation from one form of life to another. This kind of investigation is in its infant stage, and is fraught with philosophical problems, as indicated in the Prologue. At this time, man could only

be said to be amortal on the basis of a very loose analogy, and it is "human" death that is the focus of this inquiry.

The argument that death is not the cessation of consciousness or the absence of life is also put forth by religious thinkers or believers in general. These people argue that man is or has a spirit, and this aspect of human nature either continues after the demise of the physical body, or, is immortal. Included in this group would be the claims for survival by parapsychologists. These claims are countered by physicalist-materialist thinkers who do not admit of the existence of mental states, or reduce them to epiphenomena of the brain or central nervous system.

This small sampling indicates the immensity of the problem of death, and this may be further compounded with the admission of other disciplines such as psychoanalysis and sociology. A responsible inquiry, then, must inevitably focus on certain aspects of the problem, and cannot deal with the entire scope of the issue of death.

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The most generally accepted definition of the term "death" is that it refers to the total absence of life.⁵ This inquiry will analyze the above definition, since it seems to be the operative one in most fields. The main objective is to attempt to determine at which point the organism can be said to be not alive, or, the point at which one can say that the organism now partakes of something called "death" and not something called "life". The fundamental parameters of

⁵The definition as the "cessation of consciousness" will not be considered further since there are many problems with the meaning of "consciousness", which are beyond the scope of this investigation.

this definition of death would seem to be the demise of the physical body, however variously that demise is formulated, depending on the discipline and paradigm being employed.

The foregoing having been said, this investigation will not be concerned, except in passing, with the problem of survival, whether approached from a theological point of view, or a psycho-parapsychological perspective. This issue is of considerable importance in certain contexts; however, for present purposes it will be set aside. The reason for this is, as will be further clarified in Chapter I, that the issue of death is conceptually distinct from the issue of survival.

The first part of this investigation, that is, Chapter I, will deal with the kind and limits of knowledge that it is possible to have with respect to death, given the above definition as the total absence of life. This first step is necessary in that it will elucidate the nature of death from a certain point of view, and will provide a jumping-off point for the subsequent discussion.

The subsequent discussion, that is, Chapter II, will concern itself with an attempt at a formulation of a possible position on the problem of death. This position will fulfill the following four conditions: (a) It will correspond to the facts of the situation or, take into account the nature of the human situation vis à vis death.

Secondly, (b) it will not constitute a "remedy" for death, that is, it will not cover up or avoid the problem. Third, (c), it will be formulated as a plausible state of affairs, that is, as a conceivable position; and finally, (d) it will remain this side of religion, in that it will not presuppose religious faith as a basis

for its legitimacy.

As a final remark, it should be repeated that the problem of death is a complex philosophical issue. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a particular starting point for an analysis of a segment of the problem and to proceed on that basis. The purposes of this inquiry are to articulate the major elements of the problem of "human" death, given a specific definition of death, to provide a critical analysis of a number of established positions on the problem, and, on this basis, to suggest an alternative way of viewing "human" death.

A project of this kind will inevitably suffer to some extent in depth for the sake of a comprehensive view of the problem, and should be evaluated on the basis of its breadth as well as its depth. Nevertheless, there is an adequate degree of detailed analysis to allow for a critical evaluation of the project. This investigation may also be seen as a prelude to a larger work, and for this reason, certain relevant issues that are not herein treated in detail, will be indicated as topics for future research.

CHAPTER I

A - The Argument Outlined

The argument to be analyzed in the first part of the thesis, for the purpose of clarifying the problem of death, can be formulated as follows:

- P₁ The term "death" is to be defined as the "total absence of life".
- P₂ Death, it follows, is not an event in life and not a lived experience.
- C Therefore, it is meaningless to claim that we can have knowledge of death as it is from the inside.

Before proceeding to a detailed analysis of the argument, some remarks with respect to terminology are in order. The phrase "knowledge from the inside" refers to the possibility of having knowledge, by acquaintance, of death. This kind of knowledge requires the possibility of an immediate experience of death. For present purposes, this includes unconscious or subconscious forms of experience. Some philosophers and psychologists claim that the latter kinds of experience may be possible in the case of death; however, this inquiry rules them out on the basis of the definition of death as the absence of life. This means that the total absence of life will be shown to include the absence of all immediate experience of death.

On the basis of the foregoing, then, the following analysis will argue that it is not possible to have an experience of death, and that therefore there is no knowledge of death, as it is "from the

inside".

The Definition of Death

P₁ The following illustration of the first premise of the above argument serves to situate the problem of the definition of death.

Today I saw a poster saying: "Dead' undergraduate speaks." The inverted commas mean: "He isn't really dead." "He isn't what people call dead. They call it 'dead' not quite correctly." We don't speak of "door" in quotes. It suddenly struck me: "If someone said, 'He isn't really dead, although by the ordinary criteria he is dead' - couldn't I say "He is not only dead by the ordinary criteria; he is what we call 'dead'." If you call him 'alive', you're using language in a queer way, because you're almost deliberately preparing misunderstandings. Why don't you use some other word, and let "dead" have the meaning it already has?"⁶

There are several salient points to be extracted from Wittgenstein's poster example.

a) The first point centers around the discussion of the kind of definition appropriate to the problem of death. One should attempt to provide the term "death" with one definition. This does not mean however, that it is possible to formulate a universal definition of death, one that would be predicable in all applications of the word. As indicated in the Introduction, there are many definitions of death depending on the purpose and context of the discussion. For example, there are medical, legal and social definitions of death. Wittgenstein's point is that in order to have a coherent discussion, one definition of death is appropriate to a particular context.

It should be pointed out that, strictly speaking, it is not possible to claim that there is not one definition of death. There is

⁶Ludwig Wittgenstein, Lectures and Conversations, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley and L.A.: University of California Press), p. 65.

no basis on which to say one way or the other, given the fact that death has many meanings but no referent. Nevertheless, insofar as one can tell, the many definitions of death are not, for the most part, commensurate. There appears to be at most, "a network of family resemblances". This fact has a bearing on the kind of definition that one may adopt in order to investigate the problem of death. The formulation of death as the total absence of life is an operational definition. This definition will be shown to be a defensible definition, and it allows one to analyze the problem of death from a certain point of view. There is not, however, a final justification for this definition, or any other. This point will be returned to a little later.

The foregoing remarks indicate that it is not appropriate to attempt to provide an overall definition of death and that a better approach is to proceed to sort out the various definitions of death proper to specific contexts, without attempting to "tie them all together".

b) This second point concerns the specific definition of death appropriate to this inquiry and the reasons for choosing it. The definition of death as the total absence of life is the definition implied in Wittgenstein's poster example, and the one most appropriate to this inquiry as a whole. There are several reasons for the adoption of this definition.

Firstly, death as the absence of life is a generally accepted definition in contemporary philosophy in that, for one thing, it is the best definition "this side of religion". To illustrate this point, consider as a contrast, the definition of death as the separation of

the soul from the body. In certain religious and metaphysical contexts a great deal has been made of this approach to the problem of death. The present investigation, however, sides with those philosophers who have difficulty with this position because it is difficult to see how one would go about verifying (a) the existence of the soul, and (b) its separation from the body at death. These comments are not made with an attitude of outright disbelief but rather with the view that there is more hard evidence, again, this side of religion, to support the view that death is the total absence of life. By hard evidence, reference is being made to the desiccation of the physical body, the disappearance of the person from his social environment, and so on. This does not, in itself, prove that there is, or is not a soul; it does however, make this definition of death less appropriate in the present context.⁷

The second reason for choosing the definition of death as the total absence of life is that it sets up a clear distinction between life and death. As Wittgenstein points out, for a coherent discussion, the student of the poster example must be considered either dead or alive.

It is conceivable that there would be a context where one might be interested in considering the 'message' someone has left behind, that is, someone who is deceased. In that context, it is conceivable that one might consider the student alive. This state of

⁷The phrase "hard evidence" is included here to indicate that this inquiry is not concerned with 'evidence' that claims an experience of death through its effects in the world. The definition of experience clarified earlier makes this point clear. The lack of empirical evidence for the existence of the soul leads authors like Wittgenstein and Edwards to claim that the definition of death as the separation of the soul from the body is inadequate. For present purposes, I am following this line of reasoning.

affairs could occur in a "mystical" context, where, for example, someone may wish to argue that the student "lives on" in this manner.

Wittgenstein would object to this scenario on the grounds that nothing could count as an answer one way or the other. Furthermore, for Wittgenstein, it is precisely this kind of misuse of language that mistakenly leads one to attribute a kind of "ethereal" life to the student.⁸ Wittgenstein's specific objections to the notion of survival may be put aside, since the problem of survival is not central to this inquiry, and will be considered only in passing.

Survival is not inconceivable, from certain points of view, such as, parapsychology, modern biology and in certain philosophical positions, such as Gabriel Marcel.⁹ The majority of authors, however, treat the problem of death, and what can be known about death, as a separate issue from that of survival, and it is my intention to follow this line of reasoning.

It must be pointed out that, on the other hand, the definition of death as the total absence of life does not imply that death is annihilation. This distinction is not obvious, but it is important for all that follows. The words "absence of life" do not include as part of their meaning, a reference to a permanent end. The claim that death means annihilation presupposes that it is possible to gain inside knowledge of death, and this is not possible according to this thesis. The claim that death is an absence does not commit one to the stronger

⁸There are other kinds of mysticism that may be more difficult to argue against here; however, this is not the concern of this endeavour.

⁹For a general discussion of Marcel's views on death and survival, see the article by Gary Kenyon in Gnosis, Vol. 2, No. 1, Spring 1980.

claim that death is annihilation. Annihilation is a concomitant belief to the definition of death as the total absence of life, that is, it is associated with it, but it is not part of the definition.

To return to the poster example, in the ways that one usually speaks of being alive or being dead, the student is, indeed, dead. In agreement with Wittgenstein then, the present inquiry would suggest that one reformulate the statement "'dead' undergraduate speaks", if one wished to express the fact that we have something to learn from the student who is dead, through his works, done while he was alive.

The definition of death as "the total absence of life" precludes the possible confusion that the student can speak to anyone and that therefore he is alive. The thrust of the poster example is to enable one to arrive at a point where one can say that "X is alive" or "X is dead" and not "X is dead and X is not dead". This last statement is a contradiction and should be avoided within any particular context. The example is almost simplistic but it illustrates the problem, namely, that it is essential to sort out the different ways that one speaks about death in order to pursue one consistent line of thinking about the problem.

The third point to be extracted from Wittgenstein's view of the problem is that there is, as mentioned earlier, no absolute justification for the truth of any one definition of death. This is because all definitions of death are formulated from the point of view of life. The definition of death as the total absence of life is a defensible definition; that is, there are some good reasons for choosing this definition as opposed to the definition of death as, for example, the separation of the soul from the body, given the context of

this investigation. The general theme of this work is not, however, to attempt to establish the only definition of death, a project that is, on the basis of the foregoing, impossible to complete. The intention is rather to clarify the particular definition of death as the total absence of life, to give some good reasons for assuming it, and then to analyze that which follows from its adoption. "Death" will be defined, for all that follows, then, as "the total absence of life".

This state of affairs may involve some rather unpalatable psychological conclusions. As Paul Edwards points out:

Most human beings, whether they are religious believers or not appear at times to have great difficulty in regarding death as truly and really the absence of life.¹⁰

This aspect of the problem will be considered in detail in Chapter II, in the context of the consideration of appropriate positions on death. At this point it is necessary to explicate certain logical and epistemological issues that relate to the definition of death as the absence of life.

Death Is not a State

P₂ "So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since as long as we exist death is not with us, but when death comes, then we do not exist."¹¹

The most important implication of the conclusion that death is the absence of life is that death cannot be something in life, that is,

¹⁰ John Donnelly, Ed. Language Metaphysics and Death. Paul Edwards, Existentialism and Death: A Survey of Some Confusions and Absurdities (New York: Fordham University Press, 1978), p. 32.

¹¹ "Epicurus, Letter to Menoecus," Philosophy Looks To The Future. Walter Fogg and Peyton Richter, Eds. (Boston: Holbrook Press, 1974), p. 162.

it cannot be an event in life or a state of being. "Death is not an event in life; we do not live to experience death...."¹² It immediately follows that any view of death which presupposes that it is an experience in life, is ruled out. This result is significant, since it challenges many philosophical positions on death. An excellent illustration of this point is found in a short story by J.P. Sartre, The Wall. In this story, three prisoners have been sentenced to die and the protagonist is contemplating his situation:

I can feel the wounds already; I've had pains in my head and in my neck for the past hour. Not real pains. Worse. That is what I'm going to feel tomorrow morning. And then what?¹³

It is the "then what" that Pablo has trouble with. Death is not something to be experienced. As Tom responds:

We aren't made to think that, Pablo. Believe me; I've already stayed up a whole night waiting for something. But this isn't the same; this will creep up behind us, Pablo, and we won't be able to prepare for it.¹⁴

There is something about death that eludes our normal or usual ways of testing, studying and gaining knowledge about things. It can neither be confronted nor avoided. Chapter II will deal specifically with this issue; however, at this point certain views on death that are eliminated by the definition as the absence of life will now be considered.

¹²Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. D. Pears Trans. (London: Routledge Press, 1961), No. 6. 4311.

¹³J.P. Sartre, The Wall. New Directions (New York, 1969), p. 8.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 8.

For example, this definition eliminates the view that death is, "a shadowy and especially, a very painful and undesirable form of existence...."¹⁵ If death is the absence of life, then it is not a form of existence at all.

Similarly, death cannot be a deep sleep or a life in a realm of darkness. If someone is asleep, one still presupposes that the person is alive, whether they ever awake or not (comatose state). Also, a life of darkness is still a life, that is, it is the ascription of a state to someone. The point is that death cannot be a state of darkness or of sleep, because it is not a state at all. Finally, death cannot be considered as the crown or culmination of someone's life. "In any intelligible sense the culmination of a person's life must be an event or sequence of events in his life."¹⁶ A person's death is not a moment in his life.¹⁷

The specific reason for the failure of the above views of death is that death as the absence of life means that it is the absence of experience.¹⁸

¹⁵Paul Edwards, *Existentialism and Death*, p. 33.

¹⁶Paul Edwards, "Heidegger and Death As A Possibility," *Mind* 84, 1975, p. 553.

¹⁷As Edwards points out, something that led to a person's death can be a "crown"; e.g., saving a life, but one's own death cannot be anything of the kind. The present inquiry is concerned with what can or cannot be said about death itself.

¹⁸The definition of "experience" has already been indicated and rules out unconscious experiences as well as dreamless sleep since even if there is no experience in this case, one is still expected to awaken.

"...part of what is meant by saying that a person is dead is that he no longer has feelings or experiences."¹⁹ Therefore death cannot be a state, since to be in a state means to be experiencing, which in turn implies that one is living.

I cannot experience my death; I can only have experiences related to it...; there is no getting around the impossibility of an empirical death. Some day I shall suffer death, but I can never experience it.²⁰

Jaspers uses the word "suffer" death here in the same sense that "it will befall me". The point being made is the same one discussed earlier in reference to Sartre's The Wall, namely that death will "creep up behind me".²¹ This is the situation due to the fact that one cannot experience something that is, by definition, not experienceable. Death as the total absence of life is not experienceable. Therefore, the question, "what does it feel like to be 'dead' is a meaningless question because there is no way of getting a verifiable answer."²²

In another sense, however, the above question is not meaningless, since it may lead to some interesting problems related to the question, such as how one is to deal with the problem of death, given the impossibility of an answer to the above question. In other words, it is by having this question as a starting point, and by subsequently discovering that an intelligible answer to the question cannot be

¹⁹Paul Edwards, Existentialism and Death, p. 42.

²⁰Karl Jaspers, Philosophy. Vol. II. Trans. E.B. Ashton. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 195.

²¹See p. 16.

²²Harry Weinberg, Levels of Knowing and Existence (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), p. 199.

provided, that one is led to the discussion of the most significant aspect of the problem of death. This most significant issue is that of determining how man is to approach the problem of death given the epistemological complexity of the problem.

Before proceeding to a discussion of this issue, however, it is important to analyze certain positions on death that attempt to argue that even though death is defined as the absence of life, and even if survival is not considered, one can still know something about the nature of death, from the inside.

Knowledge of Death

The discussion from this point on will consider the conclusion of the argument on Page 1, namely that it is meaningless to claim that one can have knowledge of death, as it is from the inside. The statement is formulated as death "from the inside" in order to make a distinction between, (a) the nature of death, which is here claimed to be nothing more than the absence of life, and (b) any position which attempts to give the concept of death more content than that contained in (a), and as discussed at the outset of this inquiry, thereby presuppose an experience of death.

There are two main approaches employed in the attempt to "get at" death from the inside. The first is the argument that one may gain knowledge of death by means of the death of another person. This first approach to the problem of death fails because the net result of the analysis is a body of information dealing with the mental states of the survivors, and not the actual death experience of another person.

But the death of others is experienced as the loss sustained by those who remain behind, and not as the loss of being which the deceased himself has sustained.²³

It is not possible to know what the dead person experienced since at that point he is no longer there. Again, the question we are asking here is "What is death like as it is to the dead?"²⁴ This question is subject to the same criticism as was the similar question as to what it feels like to be dead. If the investigation were directed at the problem of how much one can know about, for example, another person's closeness to death, then the inquiry would be conceivable (since the person is still alive); however, as it stands, nothing can be learned about death by means of the death of another.

Such an inquiry, (the death of another) will also fail to answer our questions since people who were close to death did not really experience death as distinct from closeness to death.²⁵

In conclusion, all that remains of our investigation of the death of others are our feelings, thoughts, and so on, about the death of another. This outcome may appear negative, but it has a positive aspect in that it has pointed out certain important epistemological limitations one must deal with vis. à vis the problem of death.

The second major approach to gaining knowledge of death from the inside is that of applying a phenomenological method to the concept of death. Insofar as this approach has as its goal the formulation

²³ John McQuarrie, An Existentialist Theology (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 118.

²⁴ Paul Edwards, Existentialism and Death, p. 38.

²⁵ Paul Edwards, Heidegger and Death as 'Possibility', p. 563.

or articulation of the nature of death, on the basis of inside information, it is inadequate. This is due to the fact that there is an insurmountable obstacle preventing the completion of the project. The problem is that all other phenomena such as sleeping, eating, loving and even history, religion, and life itself, are open to phenomenological analysis "because our experience of these matters is a living through them, so that we are then able to reflect upon them and describe them."²⁶

Death, on the other hand, as has been argued earlier, is not lived through, it is not an event in someone's life. It is, then, neither something that I do, nor strictly speaking, something that happens to me.

If we introduce the word 'state' to mean any action or passion, we can express our (and Heidegger's) point by saying that, unlike rest, sleep and peace, death is not a state.²⁷

It is therefore not possible, on the basis of the above analysis to undertake any project of the following kind;

We do know that there is such a thing or such an event as death, that death is inevitable, that we all must die, and so on, we still do not realize in full measure what death is and what it means until we somehow 'experience' death.²⁸

The two major criticisms to the above inquiry may be expressed very succinctly. The first is that, given the foregoing analysis of the problem, it is not that one does not know in "full

²⁶ John McQuarrie, Studies in Christian Existentialism (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1965), p. 51

²⁷ Paul Edwards, Heidegger and Death As Possibility, p. 560.

²⁸ Ferrater Mora, Being and Death (Berkeley and L.A.: University of California Press, 1965), pp. 175-76.

measure" about death before the experience; it is rather that one does not know at all. The second point, and the more important one, is that in the case of death the 'experience' itself "seems to be excluded by the very nature of death."²⁹ The final state of affairs is that there is no such thing in life as an experience of death. It is possible, then, to gain a little knowledge of death, or to have a glimpse of death, as it is from the inside.

A final example to illustrate the mistaken tendency to treat death as a state and thus have knowledge of it, from the inside, is the following. Our language creates confusions with the problem of death. For example, I can say that I am dying or that he is dying, but not that I am dead or that he is dead. This problem

...centers about our old friend, the verb "to be". To be implies to exist. "Dead" then becomes a state of existence. We "are" dead. But "being" in connection with ourselves can only be in terms of "living", of feeling and sensing.³⁰

Aside from the fact that it is difficult to see how the verb "to be" could be our "old friend", the point is well made that one does tend to include death in the same class as "life experiences" and the verb "to be" fortifies this tendency and creates a linguistic confusion with the problem of death. It makes us think of death as something experienced in life and that we should be able to investigate it. In the case of death however, from this point of view, there is nothing to investigate.

²⁹Paul Edwards, *Existentialism and Death*, p. 38.

³⁰Harry Weinberg, Levels of Knowing and Existence, p. 200.

The following will provide a further illustration of this linguistic confusion.³¹ Consider these three statements:

- 1) John is playing ball.
- 2) John will have an operation tomorrow.
- 3) John will be dead from cancer in six months.

All three statements seem to apply to the same person, namely, John. This is, in fact, not the case, since although (1) and (2) can be said to apply to John, in the sense that they presuppose that John is alive and engaged in some kind of activity or in some passive state; the final statement (3) does not apply, since John will not be there.

It is a mistake to think that John will "be in the extremely passive state of deadness".³² The situation is, in fact, much more radical than that, that is, John is no longer the subject of the action or passion; in other words, he is not in a state at all. If death is the absence of life, then "being" dead means John does not experience anything and statement (3) does not apply to him as a state-ascription statement. It can be asserted of him, however, but not as a future state. We can still say he will be dead in the sense that he will be gone. Our use of language leads us to think that (3) applies to John, in the same way as (1) and (2). It also leads us to think that we can go one step further and proceed to find out what that state of deadness is. The outcome is a confusion about the problem of death.

At this time a recapitulation of the main points in the argument presented to this point is in order:

³¹This example is similar to the one used by Edwards in his article, *Existentialism and Death*.

³²Paul Edwards, *Existentialism and Death*, p. 42.

- a) The definition of death relevant to the present inquiry is "the total absence of life".
- b) Given this definition, our knowledge of death is quite precise, that is, it is the absence of life.
- c) The attempt to get at death from the inside is not a plausible project. This is because no amount of information about the death of others or about our own death will get us any closer to a knowledge of death. In order to be, in principle, a topic for investigation, death would have to be a state of the living; however, it has been shown that it is not intelligible to claim that death is a state. The final result is that, as Heidegger has said, we cannot "paint a content" into death.³³

B - The Death-Dying Distinction

The conclusion reached in Section A; viz, that death is the absence of life and that consequently nothing can be known about it, from the inside, does not solve the problem of death. Therefore, the question must be asked as to where one goes from here; i.e., must one simply say nothing about death and hope that it is resolved by means of, for example, a deus ex machina. Unfortunately, this is not a plausible outlook since death remains a serious problem for most human beings, and, if one school of psychoanalysis is correct, the most serious problem for man.³⁴

³³Quoted from Edwards, Heidegger and Death as Possibility, p.559.

³⁴As examples, see Rank's theories in Ernest Becker's The Denial of Death, and Herman Feifel, Meanings of Death and New Meanings of Death, as well as the philosophical treatment of the problem that facing death is a prerequisite to full humanness.

Although it is true that nothing can be known about death from the inside, that is, it does not submit to an analysis of the empirical kind, yet one still speaks about death. It is essential at this point in the inquiry to clarify the way in which it is legitimate to speak about death and to show that this procedure does not falsify the conclusion that death is not investigable empirically. The way in which this project will be accomplished is through an explication of the relationship between the notion of death and the notion of dying.

Death has been defined as the total absence of life, while dying is to be defined as the set of attitudes and models that one may formulate about death. It is possible to investigate dying; however, it is not possible to investigate death.

Several clarifying remarks are in order at this point with respect to the definition of dying. In keeping with Edward's distinction, "dying" refers to anything that can be said about death.³⁵ This is due to the fact that all discussion of death takes place from the point of view of dying, since death is not accessible. From this point on, this definition of dying will be referred to as dying_g.

The term dying however, also refers to a set of experiences that ostensibly leads to death. This definition of dying will be termed dying_s. Information about dying_s experiences does not provide information about death since, except on the basis of past instances, one cannot determine if something is a dying_s experience or not. To verify a dying_s experience, it would have to actually result in death, and then it would be too late, for the reasons already discussed,

³⁵ See Paul Edwards, *Existentialism and Death*.

namely, that death is an absence of experience.

It is, therefore, not possible to have an experience of death, and it is not possible to have an experience of dying. In other words, it is not possible to "get at" death, nor to "get at" dying. Thus, the above statement that dying can be investigated refers to dying_g and not to dying_s.

Generally speaking then, it is human attitudes and models that are the object of a philosophical investigation into the problems of death and dying.³⁶ The present investigation is concerned only with the former. The problem of dying itself, that is, the investigation of dying_s, would comprise an attempt to specify a set of experiences that have in the past led to death and may include a consideration of such issues as aging and physical suffering. The present inquiry issues from the perspective of dying_g as it is defined above, and as such is concerned with the study of attitudes and models about death and not about dying_s.

There is another way in which death may be legitimately spoken about, and that is the way in which Heidegger refers to death as a phenomenon of life.

"Death in the widest sense, is a phenomenon of life."³⁷

Heidegger means by the above that death is spoken about, but he does

³⁶A detailed analysis of the epistemological status of death claims would be a topic for further research. Human attitudes and models about death are not solely personal observations, but neither are they like statements about tables and chairs. This problem is also mentioned in the Prologue.

³⁷Martin Heidegger, Being and Time. Trans. MacQuarrie and Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 290.

not mean that death is accessible in the ways already ruled out. In other words, death is something that happens, but it is nevertheless not a state that someone can be in. It may be a curious use of the word "phenomenon" since death is a phenomenon with no positive content. In any case, the point is, as Edwards explains, that death may be meaningfully spoken about even though it is not an actuality; i.e., it cannot be given a positive content, nor is it a possibility. (Death is not a possibility if it is an absence). Death is spoken about, that is; life does cease, and in that sense it may be called an actuality and does, in that context, qualify as a phenomenon of life.³⁸

The foregoing discussion indicates that, assuming that Edwards is correct in his interpretation of Heidegger, there is, in the end, no substantial disagreement between the two authors regarding the distinction between death and dying. Therefore, a more detailed consideration of their views will further elucidate the relation between death and dying. The focal point of this section is the following quotation from Heidegger:

If death is defined as the 'end' of Dasein - that is to say, of Being-in-the-world - this does not imply any ontical decision whether, 'after death' still another Being is possible, 'either higher or lower, or whether Dasein 'lives on' or even 'outlasts' itself and is immortal. Nor is anything decided ontically about the 'other-worldly' and its possibility, any more than about the 'this-worldly'; it is not as if norms and rules for comporting oneself towards death were to be proposed for edification; But our analysis of death remains purely 'this-worldly' in so far as it interprets that phenomenon merely in the way in which it enters into any particular Dasein as a possibility of its Being.³⁹

³⁸ For a detailed discussion of this point, see Paul Edwards in Heidegger and Death As Possibility.

³⁹ Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, p. 292.

This quotation indicates that (a) Heidegger is, in line with the present inquiry, not concerned with survival; (b) neither is he concerned with answering the question as to what death is, from the inside (nothing is decided about the 'this-worldly', nor about the 'other-worldly'). The second point is open to some controversy since some of the language used by Heidegger leads one to think that he is attempting to know death "from the inside". When he states, for example, that he interprets death as it enters into a Dasein as a possibility, he seems to be saying that death can, in this way, be known. However, Edwards has shown very clearly that Heidegger's use of "possibility" in this context results in the conclusion that death is indeed the absence of life and cannot be investigated from the inside. That this is so can be seen by the statement by Heidegger that,

In accordance with its essence, this possibility offers no support for becoming intent on something, 'picturing' to oneself the actuality which is possible, and so forgetting its possibility.⁴⁰

One cannot, then, say that death is sleep, darkness, or anything else and then act on the basis of that knowledge as certain; that is, use it as a basis to deny death or face it, and so on. Death is, in effect, an open question. This is what possibility means in this context.

From this point of view, Heidegger's account of death is both consistent and worthwhile. For Heidegger, "death is the impossibility of every way of comporting oneself toward anything, of every way of existing."⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 307.

⁴¹ Paul Edwards, *Heidegger and Death As Possibility*, p. 559.

Furthermore,

Heidegger means that it (death) is a total absence, that it does not have a 'positive content' which can be pictured, that it is not 'a state'....⁴²

Under this interpretation, Heidegger is not, as Marcel claims, "at pains to express a certain existential experience of death in life."⁴³ Death does not enter Dasein except in the sense of "befalling it", as Sartre and Jaspers indicated earlier.

The foregoing represents a sufficient analysis of the first major element in the distinction between death and dying. The discussion will now shift to a consideration of the other element, namely dying. For Heidegger, dying is "that way of Being in which Dasein is towards its death."⁴⁴ This definition of dying is essentially the same one as the definition of dying_g presented earlier, that is, a set of attitudes about death that represent what can be said about death, but that do not define death. "Our view of an afterlife as well as of death depends on our paradigms, models and metaphors."⁴⁵

It is now clear that, as was argued in Section A, death cannot be the crown of a person's life, nor is it possible to have knowledge of the death of another person. Dying, however, can be the "crown" of a life in the sense that a great value may be placed on certain actions

⁴²Ibid., p. 560.

⁴³Gabriel Marcel, Tragic Wisdom and Beyond (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 125.

⁴⁴Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, p. 291.

⁴⁵Warren Shibles, Death - An Interdisciplinary Analysis (Whitewater, Wisconsin: The Language Press, 1974), p. 74.

done prior to death or certain events that caused death. Similarly, closeness to death may be investigated in certain ways since it falls within the area of dying.

The next problem to be faced at this point is to determine ...how an event within the world, the disappearance of life functions in a physical body, is connected to something outside the world, the limit of the world.⁴⁶

On the one hand, there is death as the total absence of life and on the other hand, a set of attitudes and models formulated about death, or, in other words, dying.

Death and dying are related as a "given" or; as a basic fact; that is, dying is not sleeping or eating, it is dying. One who is said to be dying is also said to be on his way to death. This does not imply that dying experiences are assumed to be death experiences, since as the earlier analysis showed, it is not possible to verify this claim.

For example, one who is said to be dying, and doesn't die, even those who 'experience' dying on the operating table, cannot, in the present context be said to know death from the inside.⁴⁷ These people have come as close as one can come to death, perhaps, but as Section A showed, there is no such thing as a "little" knowledge of death as long as death is the total absence of life. It is not possible to go from a knowledge of dying to a knowledge of death. Death and dying are not

⁴⁶Edith Wyschogrod, "Death and Some Philosophies of Language," Philosophy Today. Vol. XXII, No. 4. Winter 1978, p. 264.

⁴⁷For a discussion of these 'life after life' experiences, see Raymond Moody's Life After Life and Reflections On Life After Life.

related

...like the reflections or images of an object (in a lake or a mirror or on a photographic plate) are related to the objects whose reflections they are.⁴⁸

The situation is, therefore, that there is a given connection between death and dying, but that connection cannot be further defined, since one of the terms, namely death, cannot be investigated. On the other hand, it may be said that death is relevant to man in his life, that is, it is something that has been occurring for a long time and it is quite likely to continue. Secondly, it is relevant to man in that he cannot say when it will "befall" him. Yet, the relation of death to dying, that is, to our view of death is simply "there" and cannot be further specified.

Conclusion

Chapter I has provided a starting point for this discussion of the problem of death by giving death a definition as "the total absence of life". Some reasons were provided for the adoption of this definition, reasons which help to situate the present discussion in a specific context. Second, the major implication of this approach to the problem, namely that death is not an event in life, and cannot be known from the inside, was discussed. Included in this section was the critical appraisal of certain definitions of death which are inadequate in view of the analysis. Third, two major attempts at getting to know death from the inside were shown to be untenable if death is truly the absence of life. A third illustration of the impossibility

⁴⁸Paul Edwards, *Existentialism and Death*, p. 46.

of knowing death from the inside was an example from a linguistic viewpoint.

In Section B, the major distinction between death and dying was explicated as a means of discovering a legitimate way of speaking about death, given the failure of the positions in Section A and an attempt was made to clarify the nature of the relation between these two notions.

It was indicated that there is a "given" relationship between death and dying, but that the nature of that relationship cannot be further described.

Chapter II will be concerned with the relevance that this state of affairs has to man's ways of dealing with the problem of death.

CHAPTER II

In Chapter I, the discussion centered around the general question as to what the meaning of death is in the sense of, "what is its nature." An argument was presented giving support to the definition of death as the "total absence of life", and the ensuing discussion analyzed the ramifications of this position, the main implication of the position being that there can be no inside knowledge of death, but that one can still discuss the problem of death from the point of view of dying. Finally, an attempt was made to indicate the nature of the connection between death and dying.

In Chapter II, the discussion will emphasize the consideration of the problem of the meaning of death in the context of how it affects man.

A - The Problem of Human Death

The fact that it is not possible to attain inside knowledge of death through an analysis of dying, nor through an analysis of death itself, is the central factor in the consideration of man's position vis à vis his death. Epicurus was correct when he said,

As long as we exist death is not with us, but when death comes, then we do not exist.⁴⁹

Unfortunately, as Chapter I indicated, this formulation of the problem as an exclusive distinction does not, in fact, solve the problem of

⁴⁹Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus, p. 162.

death.

Each of these thoughts is logical; each one in fact, combats unfounded notions that induce vital fear; yet, none can lift the horror from the mere thought of not being.⁵⁰

Human beings are in an ambiguous position with respect to death. On the one hand, there is the impossibility of knowing death from the inside; and, on the other hand, there is a fact of life that deeply concerns most men. This state of affairs leaves man in a somewhat untenable position, that is, it is virtually certain that we will die, and death may represent the elimination of our being; and yet, at the same time, we cannot "get at" death. Thus, the second part of Epicurus' thesis on death is mistaken. Consider the following,

So that the man speaks but idly who says that he fears death not because it will be painful when it comes, but because it is painful in anticipation. For that which gives no trouble when it comes, is but an empty pain in anticipation.⁵¹

Again, these thoughts are logical, perhaps the world should conform to logic, but in fact, it does not. The problem of the "anticipation" of death is the salient part of the problem of death, due to the fact that nothing can be known about death from the inside. It is this issue that creates the untenable position, and not the actual death moment. In other words, the problem is that one cannot find an answer to death, at this moment. Therefore, the pain is "empty" only from a particular theoretical standpoint, and very real for most people dealing, in practice, with the problem of death.⁵²

⁵⁰Karl Jaspers, Philosophy, p. 197..

⁵¹Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus, p. 162.

⁵²This issue will be treated in more detail in Section B.

On the other hand, it is quite possible that many of our problems and fears vis à vis death may be based on confused ways of thinking about the problem. A closer look at the problem of death will reveal that it is not, in fact, death that was being investigated, but certain images and metaphors, cultural and psychological habits, which must be examined critically on this basis.

Given the foregoing analysis thus far in the inquiry, and especially the relationship between man and death, a study of dying_g is justified and important.

In this chapter, an alternative position on death will be developed. In effect, this alternative claims that there is no ultimate position to be taken on death. Insofar as any explanation of death is considered as the final or true answer, it is insufficient. This is so because, if death is defined as the absence of life, then we cannot know if any particular explanation is correct or not, as there is nothing with which to verify it.

Therefore, the most appropriate position to take on the problem of death is a flexible one, or to have the attitude of an on-going intelligent inquiry, with respect to death. This position will be called the "floating" position.⁵³ This "floating" position is a position; however, the coming discussion will show it to be significantly different from most explanations of death.

The methodology to be adopted in this chapter will be to explicate the characteristics of the floating position by comparing and contrasting it with a number of established philosophical

⁵³ See J. Choron, Death and Western Thought, p. 227.

treatments of the problem of death, both in the history of philosophy and in contemporary thought. This project, as explained at the outset, is not intended to be exhaustive, in the sense of following up the many important issues that arise in connection with any approach to the problem of death. It is an attempt to articulate a certain point of view and to show that it is a plausible state of affairs.

B - The Stoics and Montaigne

A consideration of the Stoic views of death will serve as a good starting point for the discussion of the "floating" position.⁵⁴ The reason for this is that the Stoics addressed some essential issues regarding the problem of death and, moreover, their thought elucidates a number of clearly defined positions on death and dying that are relevant to the present investigation.

There are three main Stoic views on the problem of death. The early Stoics, for example, Zeno, attempted to achieve "complete impassibility", "total imperviousness to harassment" with respect to the problem of death and the fear of death.⁵⁵ They tried to build up an indifference to the problem, that was coupled with a belief in fate. This early Stoic position was an attempt to use one's strength of character to force the problems to go away. On the other hand, if the attempt did fail; that is, if death happened to slip through the barrier one had set up, then there was always an appeal to divine

⁵⁴ I have called the position to be explicated here the "floating" position since it is easier to refer to by one word rather than the cumbersome "ongoing intelligent inquiry".

⁵⁵ Jacques Choron, Death and Western Thought, p. 65.

providence or fate.

The second Stoic view, a later view, is illustrated by the dictum of Seneca, that to avoid the fear of death "one must think of it constantly". This position shows that in Stoicism there is a polarity of views on the problem of death; that is, either one attempts to push the problem aside or one rushes headlong into it. And to the extent that this does not work, "accept your fate as part of nature". Finally, the Stoic Marcus Aurelius believed that philosophy held the answer to the fear of death.

There are serious doubts as to the effectiveness of any of these views, from the point of view of the present inquiry. First, in response to Zeno, as Choron points out,

...the ideal of complete impassibility has been from the start a superhuman and unattainable goal.⁵⁶

In other words, it is not possible to avoid the problem of death completely; it is something that makes itself evident at some point in almost every person's life. Therefore the attempt to push it away is not a sound philosophical stand on the problem, since it does not account for the facts of the situation.

A similar criticism applies to the view of "running at" death, by thinking of it constantly. If death is the absence of life, then, as Chapter I has shown, there is nothing to run at. This point is made by Heidegger when he explains that as a possibility, there is nothing to picture in death.⁵⁷ Consequently, the question is, what would one

⁵⁶Ibid, p. 66.

⁵⁷See Chapter I, p. 27.

hope to gain by "running at" death? Again, this position does not correspond to the facts of the situation, namely, that for man, death is a serious problem, and, he cannot "get at" death.

The final major criticism of the Stoic view of death applies to all three of the figures treated in this section. The view that philosophy alleviates the fear of death included such beliefs as that man is a concatenation of elements with a soul. So even though Marcus Aurelius believed that "all is opinion", there were some basic propositions that were accepted at the time and not questioned.⁵⁸ For the contemporary mind, such notions as "soul" and "fate" are also "opinion" and open to serious question. Moreover, modern man views himself more as an individual, and in fact has great difficulty in seeing himself in any other way. Therefore, although the Stoic views on death were probably very effective in their time, nevertheless; as philosophical positions on death today, they have serious deficiencies. The most important deficiency is that modern man does not have the same "escape valve"; i.e., he cannot resign himself to a fate that takes care of everything.⁵⁹

A figure in the history of philosophy whose work will help to clarify some of the deficiencies in the Stoic view of death as a prelude to the "floating" position, is Montaigne. This is due to the fact that Montaigne's views on death fall into two periods, "...the first is

⁵⁸Marcus Aurelius, Meditations (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1956), p. 157.

⁵⁹This discussion is on this side of religion as Chapter I noted.

identical with the Stoic position, the second represents a decisive step beyond Stoicism...."⁶⁰

The early Montaigne had the same view of death as Seneca.

Let us disarm him (death) of his novelty and strangeness, let us converse and be familiar with him and have nothing so frequent in our thoughts as death.⁶¹

Montaigne believed, along with Seneca, that death was a part of nature, a natural change in the universe, and his dictum at this time was,

"Il est incertain ou la mort nous attende, attendons la partout."⁶²

What is significant about Montaigne is that he eventually found this to be an ineffective way of looking at death. Instead of the expected sequence of events occurring, namely, concentration on death, or "running at it", leading to familiarity with it, which eventually leads to indifference to death, he found that

'Tis certain that for the most part, the preparation for death has administered more torment than the thing itself.⁶³

Consequently, Montaigne shifted his position to a consideration of life and not death. He advocated a kind of non-concern about death. He employs the example of a peasant who seems unconcerned with death and deals with it when it happens. Death (for the later Montaigne) is the end of life and not the object of life. This later view of death

⁶⁰Jacques Choron, Death and Western Thought, p. 98.

⁶¹Salvador Dali, Ed. Essays of Michel de Montaigne (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1947), p. 300.

⁶²Les essais de Michel de Montaigne. Tome I (Paris: Abel L'Angelier, 1969), p. 91.

⁶³Salvador Dali, Essays of Michel de Montaigne, p. 389.

is superior to the initial one of "running at" death, particularly in view of the fact that it advocates that "we should lead human life in accordance with the human condition."⁶⁴

There are problems, however, with Montaigne's later position, since although the emphasis is shifted from death to life, it may have been shifted too far. That is, Montaigne seems to argue not quite for an ignoring of death, but it is close to it. Once death has become a problem for a person, it is highly questionable whether one can attain the peasant's pre-reflective equilibrium with respect to death. Once one begins to "see" and "think", it is doubtful whether one could return to Plato's cave and start over. In this sense it does not seem that Montaigne's position is quite in line with the facts of the human situation vis à vis death.

A second problem with Montaigne's thesis is that he has a skeptical belief in annihilation. It is not possible on the basis of the analysis in Chapter I to say anything one way or the other about annihilation. To be consistent with the present inquiry, one would have to take a more agnostic position and declare "I cannot say".

The conclusion of this part of the chapter is, and the purpose of the foregoing analysis has been, to point out that the obvious but common attempts to (a) run at death (Seneca, early Montaigne) or (b) to avoid it (Zeno, Epicurus), are not tenable positions; moreover, even the later Montaigne's position has some serious deficiencies, although it is better than (a) and (b). Another alternative is needed, one that neither avoids death, nor ignores it, nor runs at it, and yet

⁶⁴ Jacques Choron, Death and Western Thought, p. 102.

corresponds to or accommodates the facts of the situation. That is, one that deals with the dual aspect of the problem; namely, man's inability to know death from the inside, and that acknowledges that it is a problem to be somehow encountered.

C - The "Floating" Position.

The Stoic positions on death, as well as Montaigne's views, are inadequate in the specific ways that have just been discussed and for the general reason that they do not correspond to the facts of the situation. Insofar as they attempt to provide the explanation of the problem of death, they miss the most important aspect of the problem.⁶⁵

The notion of "floating" on the other hand, points to the dynamic character of the attitude toward death being argued for in this chapter. This attitude is, indeed, a position on death, but it differs significantly from most other positions due to the fact that it is not put forth as a solution to the problem of death. It begins by acknowledging explicitly that it is impossible to gain inside knowledge of death, and proceeds to present a state of affairs that takes this fact into consideration. From this point of view therefore, "there is not one lasting position on death that might be called the right one."⁶⁶

In agreement with Jaspers, one cannot approach the problem of death from any particular final position,

⁶⁵ Many of these positions are meant to be aids in alleviating some of the fear of death and are not without value as such, as will be discussed later. At this point it is their philosophical content that is at issue.

⁶⁶ Karl Jaspers, Philosophy, p. 201.

...whether it be the harsh ataraxy, the withdrawal from the boundary situation of a rigid, point-like self-being that is no longer impinged upon, or the negation of the world in which a man fools and comforts himself with fantasies of another life in the beyond.⁶⁷

This quotation does not preclude the value of any or all of the above positions as they are relevant in a person's life. The criticism is directed at the employment of these or any views on death as the final word. A person may adopt any of these positions with the view that they may be incorrect in the end. The point is that the question may be left open while at the same time temporary positions may be taken up as they are appropriate. Therefore, depending on how someone is viewing death at a certain time, by adopting the "floating" position,

...he is not contradicting himself if death seems to make him despair and at the same time to make him conscious of his inmost being; if he fails to understand and feels trustful all the same....⁶⁸

Psychologically, one may experience many conflicting emotions with respect to death, if one adopts the "floating" position. The specific conditions for arriving at this position, in order for it to be capable of being put into practice, and the justification for it as a worthwhile state of affairs will be considered in Section D. At this time, it is necessary to clarify the nature of the "floating" position, in more detail. First, it may be objected that this alternative position makes death a subjectivistic phenomenon, that is, "I have my view of death and you have yours, and that is that." This is not the case however, since as Jaspers points out, "only the fact of death is

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 196.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 201.

always the same."⁶⁹ As discussed in Chapter I, death is, in the widest sense, a phenomenon of life, that is, it evidently befalls all human beings, and it is spoken about in this way.⁷⁰ On the other hand, each person has different views on death, given his heredity, environment and choice. Therefore, each person attempts to work with the problem of death in his own way; nevertheless, each person must acknowledge the general conclusion that there is no inside knowledge of death. Therefore, there are subjective and objective aspects to the problem of death, and it is not a subjectivistic phenomenon.

To return to the characteristics of the floating position, it may be described as the attempt to continue examining one's views of death as an ongoing project.

Therefore, any rigid position on the problem, that is, any position taken as a solution to the problem, rather than as a guide or a temporary explanation, is unacceptable. For example,

...the search for certainty and for incontrovertible proofs of survival upon death will continue for it has proved itself to be one of the most potent remedies against the fear of death and the haunting sense of the futility of life.⁷¹

Two things may be learned from this quotation. First, the beliefs in mortality and survival are equally "remedies" for death, from the point of view of this inquiry, since neither can be verified. However, the term "remedy" is equivocal in this context. Insofar as any view of

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 201.

⁷⁰See Chapter I, p. 27.

⁷¹Jacques Choron, Modern Man and Mortality (New York: MacMillan, 1964), p. 47.

death is considered a "remedy" in the sense that it solves the problem of death, or is a final answer to the problem, it is false, given the analysis in Chapter I. On the other hand, if something is considered a "remedy", in the sense that it is a period of one's life or "what seems to make sense at the present time" for a person, then it is consistent with the "floating" position.⁷²

Virtually anything could, in principle, be a remedy for death. One may adopt any of the positions discussed in this inquiry thus far, and many others. Furthermore, it may be the case that man needs these remedies, when dealing with the problem of death, since, in the end, they are all one has to go on, given that death can neither be "run at", nor avoided. It may be psychologically unhealthy as well as philosophically unsound to attempt either extreme approach.⁷³ The crucial factor is the way in which they are adopted.

The most appropriate approach to the problem of death, in view of the foregoing analysis, is

...to remain detached and floating between and above various possibilities....⁷⁴

This description is provided by Choron about Jaspers' view of death, a view that is quite similar to the "floating" position. The positions are not exactly the same however, since,

⁷²From now on remedy_f will refer to final positions on death and remedy_t to temporary positions which are consistent with the "floating" position.

⁷³For a psychological discussion of this point see Feifel, Meanings of Death, pp. 19-20.

⁷⁴Jacques Choron, Death and Western Thought, p. 227.

Learning to die means for Jaspers learning to keep the awareness of the ultimate situation of death open, to choose freely the authentic foundering in order to attain through it the only true Being - God.⁷⁵

The present inquiry is in agreement with most of the above quotation, except for the assertion that the situation leads to God. If the issue of death is to be truly kept open, and treated as an on-going inquiry, then one cannot claim that it leads to the attainment of anything, since the problem is precisely that we do not know. By adopting the "floating" position as a way of encountering the problem of death, one may discover many things; however, it is the approach itself that is most important in this inquiry and not the possible eventual outcome of transcendence, meeting God, and so on. Jaspers' notion of philosophical faith saves him from actually contradicting his own open attitude toward death, and claiming an answer to the problem, but he does come dangerously close to making a claim that there is a remedy for death, and thereby rigidifying his position. This is precisely what must be avoided with respect to the problem of death.

Another problem that must be clarified in connection with this aspect of the discussion of the floating position is that the statement that, "one must treat death as an ongoing inquiry" does not imply that death should become the object of life, as Seneca and the early Montaigne claimed.

"Teach us to care and not to care, teach us to sit still."⁷⁶
Sitting still here means to watch, to give up some of our control of

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 230.

⁷⁶ T.S. Eliot, "Ash Wednesday," Selected Poems (Faber and Faber, 1954), p. 85.

the situation, as will be discussed in Section D. It is evident that we are dealing with a paradoxical situation; i.e., one should care and not care, at the same time; but it must be pointed out that this may be the best way to deal with the problem of death given the elements of the problem. These elements are, again, that death is for most people a relevant issue; yet, on the other hand, we cannot "get at" death.

A further clarification of this aspect of the problem can be had by considering the views of Heidegger on death, and it will serve our purpose to further explicate the "floating" position by considering the former in this context.

It is only in the realization of our existence as essentially and necessarily being toward death that man can rise above the petty day to day life to become truly himself and truly free.⁷⁷

This accurate statement about Heidegger's view of death leads one to think that Heidegger's views are in the same vein as the early Montaigne and Seneca, in the sense that Heidegger seems to claim that man must be toward death in order to be free. The question must be asked as to whether Heidegger means that one must always be considering death, in the sense of "running at it". There are some delicate distinctions to be made here, but the distinctions are crucial to the decision between what a rigid attitude is and what a "floating" attitude is, towards death.

Heidegger advocates the unveiling of all unauthentic notions of death. This would be a reasonable thing to do if we knew what death

⁷⁷ Jacques Choron, Death and Western Thought, p. 237.

was; however, as we saw with the Stoic view, we cannot "run at" death because there is nothing to run at. Now, although, as we have seen in Chapter I, Heidegger's definition of death corresponds to the one presupposed in the "floating" position; namely, a 'possibility' in the special way that the term is employed in that context by Heidegger, the Stoic spirit is still evident in the way that Heidegger suggests that we should comport ourselves towards this 'possibility'. For example, he says, "the being toward death is essentially anxiety."⁷⁸

And,

But the state-of-mind which can help open the utter and constant threat to itself arising from Dasein's ownmost individualized Being, is anxiety.⁷⁹

These remarks, and others like them, if not by commission, then by omission, lead one to see Heidegger's attitude toward death mainly as one in which

The anxiety-filled creature resolutely takes death upon itself and attains the anxiety-ridden freedom to death.⁸⁰

This interpretation puts Heidegger in the same class as Seneca and the early Montaigne, since Heidegger does not leave much room for a balanced ongoing inquiry into death that is not completely anxiety-ridden.

He does not attempt to define death in the same way as the Stoics did, as, for example, a dissolution of elements; nevertheless, he does seem to advocate a "running at" death as the way of dealing with the problem. The emphasis in Heidegger's position is on an attitude of

⁷⁸ Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, p. 310.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 310.

⁸⁰ Jacques Choron, Death and Western Thought, p. 236.

confrontation; furthermore, he offers little explanation of how there could be even the possibility of at least a partial reconciliation with the problem of death in order for life to go on without overwhelming anxiety, but rather implies that a constant state of agitation is the 'normal' state of affairs. In this, Heidegger sounds very much like Seneca or the early Montaigne, insofar as he is placing the emphasis on a raw confrontation with death.

It should be repeated that Heidegger is subject to these criticisms mainly through omission; that is, he does not explain how one is to be authentically toward death, except that one must be anxious. Thus, although Heidegger does not want us to settle on any one view of death, his language tends toward a solidification of the position of anxiously running at death. It is not clear whether this view is (1) possible to maintain psychologically and (2) a very sound philosophical position on the problem of death. The first point has to do with whether the human psychological make-up can remain healthy in a state of perpetual upheaval of life, and the second is the philosophical question as to whether it makes sense to be continually anxious about something that one cannot, in the end, know from the inside. That is, if we cannot know death, perhaps it is not appropriate to be anxiety-ridden about it.

From the point of view of the "floating" position, Heidegger is asking, on the one hand, for too much, namely a complete unveiling of death; and on the other hand, too little, in that he does not allow for some degree of equilibrium in life. A better way to deal with the problem is to, along with Heidegger, acknowledge that there is no solution to the problem or remedy, but to couple this awareness with

the attitude of an ongoing intelligent inquiry. Another way to say this is that perhaps one should not try too hard, since in the end we cannot, in any case, "get at" death. This is not to say that there is no anxiety connected with the "floating" position. The notion of anxiety is an important element in the problem of death, and will be considered in the next section.

D - Specifics of the "Floating" Position

The notion of anxiety, along with those of acceptance and failure, will be considered in this section in order to complete the description of the nature of the "floating" position.⁸¹

The problem with Heidegger's account of authentic being toward death is that he overemphasizes the place of anxiety. There may be, and in fact, it is the case, that for most people, there is some anxiety attached to the consideration of the problem of death. This is, however, only one part of the overall picture. It is one thing to claim that there is anxiety connected with the problem of death and quite another to suggest that to be anxious is the only way one can be authentically towards death. As many authors point out, including Heidegger, there is an element of "failure" connected with one's dealings with death and dying. It is at this point that anxiety may become an issue. Basically, "failure" means that one's views on death

⁸¹ It is not my intention to provide a detailed psychology of the "floating" position. This inquiry wishes to characterize the position generally and to show its plausibility as a way of dealing with death. Thus, there is no specific definition of, for example, anxiety, since this itself is a complex philosophical and psychological problem. Anxiety may be referred to perhaps as some kind of "human uneasiness" to borrow a definition from G. Marcel in his Problematic Man.

come to be seen as questionable and open for discussion. (This includes the "floating" position in order for it to remain an open inquiry).

It is in view of man's ambiguous position with respect to the problem of death that an appropriate attitude is one that

...permits the temporary giving up of straining and striving, of volition and control, of conscious coping and effort.⁸²

It is, again, not possible to know death, to run at it. Thus, failure represents the awareness of the uncertain nature of one's expectations and remedies. This aspect of the problem of death is considered by many philosophers and theologians to be a necessary prerequisite to full humanness and individuality, as Heidegger, for example, argues.⁸³ It is also present in Kubler-Ross' discussion of the stages of death, which involves a working through of one's prior beliefs regarding death (and life).⁸⁴

It is not my intention to provide a detailed analysis of this problem or to consider the ethical implications of death. The purpose is rather to indicate that "failure" is an element of the "floating" position, as it is in many other positions on the problem of death.

A good illustration of failure is the example of a religious believer.

⁸² Abraham Maslow, The Farther Reaches of Human Nature (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 65.

⁸³ The discussion of whether contemplation of death makes one a better person, or whether death ought to be thought of at all is not being considered in the present inquiry.

⁸⁴ Kubler-Ross' views will be discussed in more detail later in this section.

As far as hell and purgatory and the power of ecclesiastic means of grace are concerned, of course, the only person who will need courage to risk dismissing them as untrue is one who has from childhood on absorbed those notions into the substance of his life...⁸⁵

The first point is that this type of person does not represent a small number of human beings, and second, as Jaspers points out, failure does not involve a denial of one's beliefs but a "risking the dismissal" of them, which indicates a willingness to open them for discussion. One may still make leaps of faith in these matters, but it is important to become more clear that, such and such is a "leap" and such and such is not.⁸⁶ One of the outcomes of this failure of one's remedies is that one can no longer believe in "authoritative guaranties" that are taken as knowledge. The "floating" position argues that with the problem of death one must accommodate something that one cannot dominate and control; and this requires a different approach from that required by most philosophical problems.

Thus, a consideration of the problem of death may involve failure and anxiety, but at least from one point of view, not necessarily.⁸⁷ Although Kaufmann suggests that it may be possible to deal with the problem of death without anxiety; nevertheless, the consideration of death does involve anxiety for most people, especially in the context of an initial encounter with the problem. In any case,

⁸⁵ Karl Jaspers, Philosophy, p. 197.

⁸⁶ Death is a philosophical problem for this kind of reason; viz that from a point of view "this side of religion", one can clarify the problem of death and show its many aspects and know how they relate or do not relate.

⁸⁷ See Walter Kaufmann, Existentialism Religion and Death and Without Guilt and Justice.

assuming that dealing with death does involve anxiety for most people, the most significant point to be made about it is that "it (anxiety) is not the end but the school."⁸⁸ The idea is that anxiety may be present at times, but the final result is not an anxiety-ridden person, a clear example of which is the early Montaigne, discussed in Chapter I, but hopefully, someone who sees the problem of death more clearly and sees that one need neither give it too much importance, nor too little. The "floating" position advocates a "working with" the problem as an ongoing project and not a confrontation with death, which is, in any case, an impossible task. The idea of working with the problem allows for changing attitudes towards death and involves both "fear and joy". The "floating" position is thus closer to Jaspers' notion of "authentic foundering" than to Heidegger's "resolute indeterminacy", especially for the reason that, as already discussed, the former allows for a partial reconciliation that enables life to go on to some extent, anxiety-free, and the latter does not.

The consideration of the notions of failure and anxiety leads to the discussion of the final element of the "floating" position, namely, the notion of acceptance. Acceptance may be seen as a response to the problem of death that follows the failure of one's rigid views on the problem, or remedies. In other words, the proposed attitude is not one dominated by anxiety, but acceptance.

The reason why acceptance is important to this investigation is that, to review the general problem,

⁸⁸ Ernest Becker, The Denial of Death (New York: The Free Press, 1973), p. 87.

...there is no question at all of my being able to construct the world, both personal and suprapersonal, at the heart of which my future death can take on a meaning.⁸⁹

In the case of the problem of death, there is an element of powerlessness, since, to repeat the main tenets of this inquiry, on the one hand death is an important problem and on the other hand, man cannot "get at death". Death cannot be faced directly, nor can it be avoided. Consequently,

Man has a legitimate need to face away from death. None of us can tolerate incessant exposure to death.⁹⁰

The "floating" position places the emphasis on life yet, it advocates neither always facing away nor incessant exposure, since (as has been shown), both these extreme views are untenable.

The notion of acceptance will be analyzed in some detail in order to complete the characterization of the "floating" position; moreover, it is necessary to show how the floating position differs from the Stoic view. This issue is important because on the surface, it may be objected that the "floating" position, by including such notions as failure and acceptance, reduces to the already refuted Stoic views of death.

The key to this possible confusion is the term "acceptance". It is to be distinguished from the term "resignation", the word most generally ascribed to the Stoic view of death. "Resignation" means,

⁸⁹ Gabriel Marcel, Tragic Wisdom and Beyond, p. 230.

⁹⁰ Herman Feifel, New Meanings of Death (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), p. 352.

"to patiently submit to another, passive acceptance or acquiescence."⁹¹

"Acceptance" means, approving reception; approval, ...belief in; assent.⁹²

The Stoic view of death, as discussed earlier, is basically one of resignation to one's fate. An in-depth study of particular Stoic philosophers, such as Marcus Aurelius, makes the issue slightly more complex, since he does at times refer to the fact that one should neither avoid death nor run towards it. Nevertheless, it still may be claimed that what is presupposed in this view is the doctrine of preparing oneself for a specific eventuality; namely, the natural dissolution of the elements that constitute a human being. Secondly, those elements have a soul which does not perish. Therefore, the view is not an ongoing open inquiry as the "floating" position is, since there is the underlying attitude of acquiescence to this fate.

The crucial difference between acceptance and resignation in the context of the problem of death is that the latter is a passive submission to a fait accompli and the other is an acknowledgement of a state of affairs coupled with an interest in the project. The former is essentially a closed attitude, the latter open, and this difference creates two drastically different views towards death (and perhaps life). In acceptance, there is an assent to something, in resignation the attitude is "that's the way it is".

The argument for resignation is not a sound position on the problem of death for the same reason that Socrates gives for not

⁹¹ Websters New World Dictionary. Second College Edition. (Toronto: Nelson, Foster and Scott; 1970).

⁹² Ibid.

fearing death;

For the fear of death is indeed the pretence of wisdom and not real wisdom being a pretence of knowing the unknown.⁹³

There are many difficulties in actually following Socrates' advice; that is, most people fear death whether it is wise to do so or not, just as the problem of death is not solved by Epicurus' exclusive disjunction, discussed in Section A. Nevertheless, the criticism applies to the argument for resignation in that resignation represents a solidification of the problem of death, a settling into one final position; namely, one that states, in effect, that "le jeu est fait".

Acceptance, on the other hand, is a more open attitude. The description by Kubler-Ross of the notion of acceptance, the paucity of the philosophical framework notwithstanding, is instructive in this context.

For Kubler-Ross, dying persons pass through certain stages. These stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.⁹⁴ The most interesting stage for present purposes is the last one, acceptance. Even though the discussion of these stages takes place in the context of a discussion of terminally ill patients, the idea can be extrapolated and applied to a general discussion of death. This is the case since the problem of death and dying is relevant both to those who have been 'informed' of their impending death and to those who have not, particularly in view of the fact that no one knows exactly when

⁹³ Quoted from Plato's *Apology* in Reginald Allen. Ed. Greek Philosophy: Thales to Aristotle (New York: MacMillan, 1966), p. 85.

⁹⁴ For a discussion of this theme see Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, On Death and Dying (New York: MacMillan, 1969).

death will befall him. Furthermore, the problem of death is evident and relevant to both types of people since the 'informed' patient may be cured, while the 'healthy' person may die in an accident, at anytime.

This having been said, the characteristics of the notion of acceptance may be explicated. Acceptance

...is not a resigned and hopeless "giving up", a sense of 'what's the use'...⁹⁵

Also,

...we have seen the majority of our patients die in the stage of acceptance, an existence without fear and despair.⁹⁶

Acceptance, then, is significantly different from resignation. It involves keeping the question open, along with, at least to some extent, a neutral attitude while one still lives. It is not necessarily a happy situation, but neither is it a pessimistic and sad state of affairs. The "floating" position is an ongoing inquiry into the problem of death, since the idea is neither to run at death, nor avoid it, or hope to find a final answer to the problem. This position allows one

...to see something as it is in its own nature rather than as we would like it to be or fear it to be or hope it will be.⁹⁷

In the case of death, from the present perspective, all one will end up "seeing" in this way is that death is the absence of life

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 113.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 120.

⁹⁷ Abraham Maslow, The Farther Reaches of Human Nature, p. 17.

and that it cannot be known from the inside. Thus the idea is to encourage an open, ongoing, floating attitude, since the impossibility of knowing death from the inside creates an ongoing dialectic between the person and the problem of death. It is not possible to know whether mortality or immortality or any other position on death is the right one. In fact, there is a good argument for the fact that the desire to know about death in the sense of getting an answer may be the source of neurosis.⁹⁸

What typifies the neurotic is that he "knows" his situation vis à vis reality. He has no doubts;...⁹⁹

In the context of the foregoing analysis of the problem of death, it is not difficult to see the psychological problems that could result if someone refused to accept the facts of the situation and compulsively attempted to make a remedy stick, or in other words, to know an answer to the problem of death.

One of the consequences arising from a consideration of the "floating" position is that it is not necessary either to fear this life or, to hope in an after-life.¹⁰⁰ Whether annihilation or immortality or something else is thought to be the truth of the matter,

⁹⁸Neurosis, in this case, refers to the psychological problems caused by a compulsive need to 'know' death and not the 'positive' neurosis that may be involved in psychological growth as a result of the adoption of the "floating" position.

⁹⁹Ernest Becker, The Denial of Death, p. 201.

¹⁰⁰The floating position does not preclude hope in the sense of a basic trust in the way the universe functions; it does, however, preclude the kind of hope that is based on a denial of this life, or that is based on one's particular expectations for an after-life.

this in itself does not preclude a relatively neutral or even a positive state of mind in life. In general, from the perspective of the "floating" position, the most important problem with respect to death is one of sorting out remedies, and attempting to determine which ones are more or less

... 'best' in terms that are directly meaningful to man related to his basic condition and his needs.¹⁰¹

In this connection it is also important to indicate, in general, how the present formulation of the problem of death relates to the adjacent problem of the meaning of life, since one is considering the problem of death in life, and the way in which one views death has a bearing on how one views life. Before proceeding to this final section of the thesis, a recapitulation of the chapter is in order.

In Section A, the nature of the ambiguous situation that man finds himself in, vis à vis the problem of death, was discussed. In Section B, there was a consideration of certain established positions on death, and it was indicated that although these positions may help one psychologically to deal with the fear of death, they do not solve the problem of death or resolve the ambiguous situation and are, from the latter perspective, inadequate. In Section C, the attempt was made to describe an alternative position on death, the "floating" position, and some good reasons were given for thinking that this position accommodates the definition of death as the absence of life, and the ambiguous situation of Section A. Finally, in Section D, the main elements of the floating position were outlined. These elements are (a)

¹⁰¹ Ernest Becker, The Denial of Death, p. 202.

the notion of failure, which may arise from a disillusionment with one's expectations and which can cause anxiety. Second (b), the place of anxiety in the "floating" position was discussed, as well as (c) the notion of acceptance.

There are parts of Section D, in particular, that blur the distinction between what is sometimes claimed to be the boundary between philosophy and psychology; however, such an integration of disciplines is warranted in this case since the ultimate goal is to explicate a philosophical position on death which includes the problem of giving some indication of how it could be, in principle, adopted.¹⁰²

In general, the "floating" position represents an attempt to articulate a way of dealing with the problem of death that (1) allows one to treat death as an ongoing inquiry but that (2) does not imply a constant state of anxiety. In other words, it is a position that allows for a continuous investigation of death, and also permits one to live in a healthy manner, other things being equal, and not in a morbid or fearful manner.

The final section of the thesis will consider how the problem of death, as it is formulated in this inquiry, relates to the problem of the meaning of life.

¹⁰²A further study could concern itself with how the floating position may be adopted in practice; that is, a psychological study of the position would analyze the different problems a particular kind of person might have in actually realizing the position. The present investigation wishes to claim only that it is a viable position. It is a philosophical position that involves certain psychological themes; it is not, however, psychology.

E - The Problem of the Meaning of Life

It is important to consider the problem of the meaning of life along with the problem of death.

...for death is not only the occasion par excellence that brings the question of the purpose of human existence sharply into focus, but it seems to impose a negative answer to the question.¹⁰³

The problem of the meaning of life covers a wide area of knowledge; therefore, no attempt will be made to be exhaustive. Nevertheless, there will be an attempt to indicate that approach to the problem that is most consistent with the "floating" position, presented in this investigation.

With reference to the above statement by Choron, it is the case that if death is the absence of life, then it looks as if life is either absurd or meaningless.

There is nothing that gives our lives meaning and, viewed from the outside, life, which ends in death, is senseless.¹⁰⁴

It has been argued that death as the absence of life leads to the conclusion that nothing can be known about death from the inside, which in turn means that there is no possibility of formulating a remedy for death. Thus, since one cannot "get at" death, there is no way to provide an external justification for a life that ends in death.

¹⁰³ Jacques Choron, Modern Man and Mortality, p. 161..

¹⁰⁴ Walter Kaufmann, Existentialism Religion and Death (New York: Meridian Book, New American Library, 1976), p. 242.

It is possible that a life which does not end in death is equally senseless; however, many people cling to life and see death as a frustration of their desires. Thus, a life that ends in death is indeed, senseless, since it ends before one would like it to.

The truth of the above statement however, does not mean that the problem of the meaning of life has been solved and that there is indeed a "negative answer to the question", as Choron states.

There are two reasons for this: (a) the analysis of death in this investigation precludes the possibility of claiming that there is no meaning of life at all and (b) there is a second approach to the problem of the meaning of life, and that is to place the emphasis on the discussion of meanings in life. Essentially, the same principle of the "floating" position that applies to the problem of death, also applies to the problem of the meaning of life. The remainder of this section will attempt to elaborate on this last statement.

A) One has to become clear about what can and what cannot be known about the problem of death; otherwise, one may accept a conclusion such as that there is no meaning of life, when there is no basis for the absolute truth of the claim. It is true that there is no basis for the claim that there is a meaning of life, since this presupposes that one knows something about the nature of death. This criticism applies as well to the view that life is self-sufficient or an end in itself. "...the proposition "life is an end in itself" has never been seriously and unqualifiedly entertained, even by those who, like Goethe and Feuerbach, have recorded it."¹⁰⁵

Life as an end in itself, cannot be maintained as the meaning of life because one would have to know death in order to make that claim, that is, one would need to step outside life and see that this conclusion is correct.

¹⁰⁵ Jacques Choron, Modern Man and Mortality, p. 169.

There are two sides to the problem, however. On the one hand, it is impossible to say that meaning X or meaning Y is the meaning of life, and on the other hand, it is impossible to say that meaning X or meaning Y is not the meaning of life. The point is that this fact does not end the discussion.¹⁰⁶ As with the problem of death, the most sound approach to the problem is from the perspective of how the issue affects man. Consequently, the suggestion is that, to be consistent with the "floating" position, meanings of life are acceptable remedies_t, that is, as temporary arguments. They have some worth and cannot be summarily dismissed as false. It is only as remedies_f that they cannot be supported, since there is no final justification for the meaning of death, nor for the meaning of life.

B) The project of finding meanings in life presupposes that life is, at least to some extent, self-sufficient. This means that the purpose of life is found in specific endeavours rather than in teleological explanations. There may be as many meanings in life as there are individuals and this is the subject of many psychological and philosophical works. The concern in this inquiry is simply to indicate the approach to the problem of the meaning of life that is consistent with the "floating" position.

That approach is one that acknowledges meanings in life and may be described as a middle position between a complete external justification of life, and the absolute meaninglessness and or absurdity of life. This middle position is the most sound one due to the fact

¹⁰⁶ A narrow analytic position would claim that there is no way to verify one way or the other and that therefore the problem is a pseudo-problem.

that it is not possible to provide a permanent meaning of life; and because the claim that life is totally meaningless is, in the present context, without a philosophical basis.

The present inquiry argues that man's ambiguous position, vis à vis life and death, which becomes clear as a result of an "intelligent appraisal", justifies the adoption of both meanings in life, which are self-sufficient, and also the adoption of ultimate explanations as remedies. There is no good reason, logical or psychological, not to adopt them in this manner, since there is no final justification one way or the other. Furthermore, these remedies have a practical value in that they may help man to live a healthier life.

The "floating" position argues for a view that places the emphasis on life, since that is the present state of affairs; however, it neither gives too much importance to death, nor does it glorify life.

The conclusion of this discussion is that neither life, nor death has one meaning; yet, they are not meaningless. Life and death have meanings in contexts. Therefore, the most important philosophical problem with respect to these phenomena is not that of gaining an insight into their natures, but to clarify man's position vis à vis these issues, from different points of view.¹⁰⁷ As this inquiry has shown, in this way the problem of death and the problem of the meaning of life are accessible to man; that is, it makes sense to speak about the problem in this way, and it is, thus, a "less ambiguous aim" than trying to find an answer to a question that, as it stands, is unanswerable.

¹⁰⁷The phenomena being referred to here are death and the meaning of life and not life itself, which may be investigated from the inside.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this inquiry has been to articulate a particular philosophical position on the problem of death. To this end, and in order to situate the position, it was first pointed out why the problem of death is a complex philosophical issue. It was argued that it is not possible to formulate a definition of death outside of a context; that is, there is not one definition of death that is appropriate in all the applications of the term "death". Thus, the most effective approach to the problem is to provide an acceptable operational definition for the term, and then to analyze that which follows from the adoption of that particular definition. It was shown that the "total absence of life" is an acceptable definition of death, and a number of other definitions were criticized from this point of view.

After providing some clarification of the problem of the definition of death, there followed a consideration of the major consequence of the definition of death as the total absence of life; namely, that death is not an event in life, and that it is, therefore, not possible to know death from the inside. It was then argued that this conclusion does not eliminate the possibility of a coherent discussion of the problem of death, but that death must be spoken about through dying, or through our attitudes and paradigms formulated about death. This procedure does not help one to "get at" death, but it does allow one to discuss the problem of death from the point of view of how it concerns human beings. It was indicated that there is, from

this point of view, a "given" relation between death and dying.

In Chapter II, the discussion concerned the kind of position, namely, an ambiguous position, that man finds himself in vis à vis the problem of death, as a result of the definition of death as the absence of life. Specifically, on the one hand, death must be acknowledged as a serious problem for most human beings, and on the other hand, man cannot "get at" death. A number of established philosophical views on the problem of death were subjected to a critical analysis in order to illustrate the nature of the epistemological limitations that are evident as a result of this state of affairs.

The discussion of the problems to be encountered, given man's basic situation vis à vis death, was followed by the formulation of an alternative position, that is, the "floating" position was articulated as a plausible approach to the problem of death. This alternative was explicated in part, by providing a comparison of it with certain other philosophical positions on the problem. It was argued that all positions on the problem of death are in the final analysis, "remedies" for death. As remedies_f, all positions on death are inadequate, but as remedies_t, they are philosophically sound, and may have practical psychological value.

The more specific characteristics of the floating position were then elaborated; namely, that it involves failure, anxiety and acceptance. Finally, the way in which this approach to the problem of death relates to the problem of the meaning of life, was presented.

The "floating" position, as an approach to the problem of death, fulfills the conditions set out at the start of this

investigation. First, it conforms to the facts of the human situation vis à vis death; that is, it acknowledges that death is an important problem and that one cannot "get at" death. Second, the "floating" position does not constitute a remedy_f for death, in the sense that it does not attempt to cover up or avoid the problem. Third, it is a plausible state of affairs, and finally, it remains on this side of religion. A final remark is that the floating position has considerable merit in that it can enable man to live a reasonably healthy life, other things being equal, and encourages one neither to attempt an escape from the problem of death, nor to be morbidly concerned with it.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸This last statement does not imply that it may not be "healthy" to avoid the problem at times as the distinction between remedies_f and remedies_t allows. These remarks are meant with reference to the "floating" position as a general approach to the problem of death, and not in the context of specific periods of grief or other temporary situations.

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