THE METAPHYSICS OF DEATH

Edited, with an Introduction, by

JOHN MARTIN FISCHER

Stanford University Press, Stanford, California

1993

"What do you want me to say? Your fear is older and wiser than mine?"

"I wake up sweating. I break out in killer sweats."

"I chew gum because my throat constricts."

"I have no body. I'm only a mind or a self, alone in a vast space."

"I seize up," she said.

"I'm too weak to move. I lack all sense of resolve, determination."

"I thought about my mother dying. Then she died."

"I think about everyone dying. Not just myself. I lapse into terrible reveries."

"I felt so guilty. I thought her death was connected with my thinking about it. I feel the same way about my own death. The more I think about it, the sooner it will happen."

"How strange it is. We have these deep terrible lingering fears about ourselves and the people we love. Yet we walk around, talk to people, eat and drink. We manage to function. The feelings are deep and real. Shouldn't they paralyze us? How is it we can survive them, at least for a while? We drive a car, we teach a class. How is it no one sees how deeply afraid we were, last night, this morning? Is it something we all hide from each other, by mutual consent? Or do we share the same secret without knowing it? Wear the same disguise."

"What if death is nothing but sound?"

"Electrical noise."

"You hear it forever. Sound all around. How awful."

"Uniform, white."

"Sometimes it sweeps over me," she said. "Sometimes it insinuates itself into my mind, little by little. I try to talk to it. 'Not now, Death.' "

—Don Delillo, *White Noise*

Rationality and the Fear of Death

Jeffrie G. Murphy

Cowards die many times before their deaths;
The valiant never taste of death but once.
Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,
It seems to me most strange that men should fear;
Seeing that death, a necessary end,
Will come when it will come.

—Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*

"To philosophize," writes Montaigne, "is to learn to die."[1] This remark forms part of a long-standing tradition in philosophy which teaches that a truly wise or rational man will not fear death, and this tradition has found its way into our ordinary language—e.g., it is common to describe a person who accepts a terminal illness with patience as "philosophical" about his death. And most people would, I think, so describe the attitude expressed in the quoted remark given to Caesar—a remark particularly interesting because, in addition to telling us a great deal about the kind of person Shakespeare conceived Caesar to be, it appears to contain what has often been offered as an *argument*

Reprinted by permission from *The Monist* 59 (1976): 187–203. I wish to thank Lewis W. Beck, Peter Laska, Barbara Levenbook, Ronald D. Milo, George Panichas, and Anthony D. Woozley for the kindness in commenting on an earlier draft of this paper. I am particularly grateful to Lars Hertzberg for commenting on several previous drafts and for prolonged and instructive conversations on the issues involved.

that one is irrational in fearing death. The argument is that death is necessary or inevitable in the natural order of things and that, once one sees this, one will also see that fearing death is irrational.[2] Such an idea is found in the Stoics and the Epicureans among others and is, in many respects, interestingly different from the way of thinking about death that Christianity introduced into our civilization. The most illustrious and systematic defender of the pagan conception, of course, is Spinoza:

> A free man, that is to say, a man who lives according to the dictates of reason alone, is not led by fear of death, but directly desires the good, that is to say, desires to act, to live, and to preserve his being in accordance with the principle of seeking his own profit. He thinks, therefore, of nothing less than death, and his wisdom is a meditation upon life. (*Ethics*, Four, LXVII)[3]

From Spinoza we get the idea, not merely that it is irrational to fear death, but that the absence of such irrational fearing is the mark of a kind of freedom or human liberation—the only kind of freedom or liberation possible in the realm of necessity. This idea of freedom as rational understanding, though a part of earlier philosophical traditions, is at the heart of Spinoza's philosophy.

My primary purpose in this paper is sympathetically to develop this pagan way of thinking about death—a way of thinking that many writers (e.g. Carl Jung)[4] regard as excessively rationalistic. This charge of excessive rationalism in part no doubt grows out of a desire to be as obscurantist as possible on important matters—a desire to convince ourselves, as J. L. Austin once remarked, of how clever we are by showing how obscure everything is. But part of the charge I suspect (particularly when it comes from psychiatrists and psychoanalysts) is based on the belief that rational thinking about death can ultimately provide no genuine solace or comfort to those troubled about the matter. (Why, for example, should the fact that death is a "necessary end" ease our minds? It might, if anything, seem to make matters worse, since inevitability precludes hope.) As the continued prevalence of sexual guilt and neurosis in a supposedly "sexually enlightened" age seems to indicate, intellectual understanding does not guarantee emotional peace.

I should certainly agree that there are no guarantees here. But surely there is evidence that rational thinking sometimes provides solace for some people—e.g., witness the lives and deaths of Spinoza, Hume, and Freud. It is not to be expected that all men will derive comfort from the same source, but this is no reason unjustly to discriminate against those who might find comfort in being reasonable. The primary goal of philosophy, of course, is not comfort but understanding; and understanding does not necessarily comfort. However, I am convinced that it is a fact that judging a fear to be irrational can sometimes be instrumental either in directly extinguishing that fear or in prodding a person to gain help (e.g. through therapy) in extinguishing that fear. For this reason, it will perhaps be of some practical use if it can be shown that it is irrational to fear death. I should not, of course, want to overestimate the probability here—something that "rationalists" are indeed perhaps inclined to do.

Judging the rational status of the fear of death has its most obvious practical utility, however, not in providing immediate comfort to people experiencing the fear, but rather in coming to terms with such issues as recommending therapy for others or in planning programs of education for children. Should we try to desensitize children to a certain degree by, for example, exposing them to the deaths of others rather than, as is our present practice, shielding them from such unpleasantness?[5] I take it that we cannot properly answer this sort of question unless we first make a judgment concerning the rationality (i.e. the appropriateness and utility) of this fear and the role it may play in human life. The fear of death makes people "feel bad," but not all feelings that are unpleasant to those who experience them are to be extinguished. Neurotic feelings of guilt or shame (i.e., feeling guilty or ashamed when one has really done nothing wrong), for example, should surely be extinguished. They are inappropriate and harmful. However, genuine moral feelings (e.g., outrage over unjust treatment of self or others, guilt over *real* injury or wrongdoing to others) are appropriate and moreover probably produce good consequences—e.g., action against injustice, restitution for injury. And yet these feelings, though perfectly rational, are just as unpleasant to feel as those that are irrational. Thus the question of what feelings to extinguish is not to be answered solely by a consideration of whether they make the person feeling them suffer. Some suffering is appropriate and beneficial. This is not to say that suffering is irrelevant to

rationality; for it is irrational to approve of suffering, either for oneself or others, for no good reason. My only point is that, since in some cases there may be good reasons, the appropriateness or desirability or rationality of a feeling is not solely a function of that feeling's hedonic tone.

Before beginning my development of the argument that (in a certain sense) it is irrational to fear death, it is necessary that I indicate what I mean to include, for purposes of this chapter, under the expression "the fear of death." The phrase is used in ordinary language to cover a very heterogeneous group of phenomena, and it is obviously not true that all feelings that could be characterized by the phrase "fear of death" are irrational. When Spinoza, for example, claimed that it is irrational to fear death, he surely did not mean to suggest that it is irrational to do such things as look both ways before crossing a street—i.e., he surely wanted to distinguish a reasonably prudent concern for one's safety from that fear of death which he regarded as contrary to reason. It is presumably not irrational to fear a *premature* death and thus take certain steps—e.g., give up smoking cigarettes, reduce cholesterol intake, exercise—in order to prolong life as long as possible. Thus these concerns, even if they are properly characterized as involving a fear of death, are not directly my concern in this paper. I am rather concerned simply with the fear that one will die *simpliciter*, the fear based on the certain fact of human mortality—not the fear that one might die early (perhaps avoidable) but the fear that one will die sometime (certainly unavoidable). Thus my concern lies in assessing the rationality of fearing death in the sense in which death is *unavoidable*. Unavoidability is dramatically illustrated for the man who knows that he has a terminal illness, but the certainty of death is no greater for such a person than for the rest of us. He simply has a better guess as to the time. My subject, then, is man's necessary mortality as an object of fear and of the kind of self-deception that fear induces.

The syllogism he had learnt from Kiesewetter's Logic: "Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal," had always seemed to him correct as applied to Caius, but certainly not as applied to himself. That Caius—man in the abstract—was mortal, was perfectly correct, but he was not Caius, not an abstract man, but a creature quite, quite separate from all others. He had been little Vanya, with a mamma and papa, afterwards with Katenka and with all the joys, griefs, and delights of childhood, boyhood, and youth. What did Caius know of the smell of that striped leather ball Vanya had been so fond of? Had Caius kissed his mother's hand like that, and did the silk of her dress rustle so for Caius? Had he rioted like that at school when the pastry was bad? Had Caius been in love like that? Could Caius preside at a session as he did? Caius really was mortal and it was right for him to die; but for me, little Vanya, Ivan Ilych, with all my thoughts and emotions, it's altogether a different matter. It cannot be that I ought to die. That would be too terrible." Such was his feeling. (Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*)

I shall now proceed by arguing in the following stages. First, I shall develop a general account of the concepts "rational fearing" and "irrational fearing." Second, I shall attempt to analyze the concept of *death*—what is it and why do people tend to regard it as a terrible and thus fearful thing? Finally, I shall apply the general account of rational fearing to the topic of death.

I

I should like to develop a general account of the distinction between rational fearing and irrational fearing in the hope that this account may ultimately be used to illuminate the fear of death. The account that I shall offer purports to capture and distinguish between some intuitively acceptable cases of fearings that are clearly rational and fearings that are clearly irrational. If the account looks correct for the clear cases, then we may have some confidence that it will help us come to terms with the rational status of the fear of death—a case where pretheoretical convictions no doubt are in conflict.

Now at the outset, it is important to realize that the expression "Jones is irrational in fearing" is crucially ambiguous. On the one hand, we can mean that the *fear itself* is irrational—i.e. inappropriate or not fitting to its object. On the other hand, we can mean that the *person* is irrational in the *role* that he allows his fears (however rational in the first sense) to have in his life. Spinoza, remember, does not say that the fear of death is itself irrational. What he says is that a rational man will not let himself be *led* by the fear of death. There is a sense in which fear of death is obviously rational—i.e. obviously fitting or appropriate. Indeed, as I shall later suggest, one's own death and suffering in part define the concept of the fearful. However, just because fear is rational in this sense, it does not follow that a person is

rational in being led by this fear. This sense of "rational," characterizing persons, involves more than fittingness or appropriateness and requires a consideration of *utility*. (Again we have a parallel with the moral feeling of guilt. Are Dostoevskiian characters—e.g. Stavrogin—who live a life dominated by guilt for their wrongdoings to be judged rational or irrational? In one sense, I should argue, they are rational; for guilt is the appropriate or fitting feeling for moral wrongdoing toward others. They are not like persons who feel guilt when they have really done nothing wrong, and thus they are not irrational in *that* sense. However, though their guilt feelings may not themselves be irrational, the *characters* seem irrational because they allow themselves to be dominated and destroyed by those feelings.) In this chapter, I am interested primarily in the question "When is a *person* rational in fearing?" and am interested in the rationality of feelings themselves only insofar as this issue is relevant to the rationality of persons.[6]

My controlling assumption throughout is that Spinoza is fundamentally correct, at least in this context, in his attempt to analyze the concept of rationality (for persons) in such a way as to give a central place to concepts of self-interest or self-realization—what he calls "profit."[7] The basic idea in some ways anticipates Darwin and Freud in claiming that man is basically an animal whose reason functions, as instincts function in other animals, primarily for self-preservation and self-enrichment. A similar concept of rationality is found in Hobbes, who argues that no rational man could knowingly frustrate his own long-range self-interest. And Philippa Foot has recently reiterated this view: "Irrational actions are those in which a man in some way defeats his own purposes, doing what is calculated to be disadvantageous or to frustrate his ends."[8] This "egoistic" analysis of rationality might be challenged by philosophers of Kantian sympathies who believe (as I am inclined to) that *moral* rationality involves something different. However, since I do not see the problem of the rationality of fearing death as a moral problem, I do not think that Kantian scruples need detain us on this particular issue. Fear, after all, is not a likely candidate for a moral feeling. Its primary significance, unlike that of such genuine moral feelings as guilt and shame, lies simply in the avoidance of danger.

Having laid my controlling assumption on the table, I shall now offer the following as an account of the distinction between rational and irrational fearing.

It is rational for a person P to fear some state of affairs S if and only if:

(1) P holds the reasonable belief that S obtains or is likely to obtain,

(2) P holds the reasonable belief that S (a) is not easily avoided and (b) is very undesirable, bad, or evil for P,

(3) the fear of S could be instrumental in bringing about some behavior or action that would allow P to avoid S, and

(4) the fear of S is compatible, at least in the long run, with the satisfaction of the other important desires of P.[9]

If conditions (1) and (2) obtain, the fear is rational in the sense of being fitting or appropriate to its object. Conditions (3) and (4) have to obtain, however, in order for the *person* to be rational in his fearing.

Since this general account is probably not intuitively obvious, I shall comment upon each of the four conditions separately.

(1) P *holds the reasonable belief that* S *obtains or is likely to obtain.* This, I take it, is the least controversial of the conditions I have put forth. Perhaps paradigm examples of people who suffer fears we regard as irrational are those who suffer from psychotic delusions. Paranoids, or alcoholics experiencing delirium tremens, for example, may fear the demons in the water faucets, the Martians in the closet, or the pink spiders on the wall. The best reason we have for thinking that these fears are irrational is the absence of any grounds or evidence that there might be demons in the water faucets, Martians in the closet, or pink spiders on the wall.

(2) P *holds the reasonable belief that* S *(a) is not easily avoided and (b) is very undesirable, bad, or evil for* P. Except for one problem to be noted shortly, this condition also seems fairly noncontroversial. Phobias, I take it, are acceptable examples of irrational fears. We should tend to characterize as irrational persons who are "scared to death" of (nonpoisonous) snakes or of high places. This is not because, as was the case in (1) above, there are no snakes or high places, but is rather because snakes and high places are normally harmless. Typically we pass these fears

off as "silly" and would not regard a person experiencing them as seriously irrational unless they had other harmful effects—a point to be explored when I discuss (4) below.

Now what may appear to some as a problem with the condition is the claim that *S* must be bad *for P*. This may strike some as too egoistic, and they might argue that it is perfectly rational to fear that something bad will happen to another. On this point I am inclined to argue as follows: One can certainly care deeply (perhaps on moral grounds) that others not die, but this caring typically is not, in my judgment, to be explicated as a kind of *fearing*. Wanting others in general not to die is, I suppose, simply part of what it means to be a morally sensitive person placing a high value on human life. One's own fear of dying, however, is hardly to be understood in this way. Fear is a very personal (self-regarding) feeling, and thus it seems to be tautological that one can literally fear only that which deeply involves oneself. The following conversation, for example, would be extremely odd: "I am terribly afraid." "Why?" "Because people are continuing to die in Bangladesh." One's own suffering and death, it could be said, *define* the concept of the fearful.

Thus I am inclined to think that one can literally *fear* evil happening to another only if that other is so close to one (a wife or child perhaps) that what happens to that other in a sense happens to oneself. As Freud says about the death of a child: "*Our* hopes, *our* pride, *our* happiness, lie in the grave with him, we will not be consoled, we will not fill the loved one's place."[10] For reasons that will become apparent when I later analyze the nature of death, I think there is a sense in which it is true (at least for some parents) that a part of them would die in the death of their child.

It is perhaps morally regrettable that most of us do not identify a very wide range of persons (perhaps the whole human race) with ourselves to such an extent that we could fear their deaths. It is surely not psychologically regrettable, of course, since if we did make such an identification we could probably not stand the emotional damage that would result. However, regrettable or not, it is false that very many people would sincerely agree with John Donne's observation that each man's death diminishes me. We may not be islands, but neither are we continents or worlds.

(3) *The fear of* S *could be instrumental in bringing about some behavior or action that would allow* P *to avoid* S. This condition is at the heart of Spinoza's concept of rationality as involving self-preservation, as securing a "profit" in one's life. One way to characterize an activity as rational is to see that it has a point or purpose—that it at least appears to accomplish something. And surely it is avoidance behavior that gives fearing its significance. Suppose we imagined ourselves to be in a position of a Creator giving man the instinct of fear. What could this be except giving man the general capacity to make self-protective responses to danger? Fear's primary biological function is found in self-defensive behavior—what physiologists call the "fight or flight" reflex. And surely such fear, in addition to being biologically functional, is a part of what we understand by a rational approach to danger. If one discovers a hungry and aggressive tiger in the room, a state of affairs that surely satisfies conditions (1) and (2), who would doubt that the resulting fear is appropriate and that a person is rational in being "led" by the fear to the extent that he attempts to get out of the room as quickly as possible?

Since this condition will (not surprisingly) play a role in my later argument that it is irrational to fear death, I shall defer further discussion of it until later.

(4) *The fear of* S *is compatible, at least in the long run, with the satisfaction of the other important desires of* P. If the first three conditions are unsatisfied, we can perhaps, some may argue, conclude nothing more than that in such fearing the person is *non*-rational. The present condition, however, surely gives us a test for genuine *ir*rationality with respect to fearing; and indeed its nonsatisfaction is a mark of fearings that we should call *neurotic*. A phobia, for example, becomes clearly a neurotic symptom, and not just something silly or eccentric, when it so pervades the life of the person who experiences it that he is rendered incapable of leading a successful and satisfying life. A person who merely shudders when he sees a spider, for example, is perhaps just a little silly. A person who is so afraid that he might see a spider that he never leaves his home and has that home visited by a pest exterminator several times a week is something more than silly. He is pathetic and is in need of help.

Even fearings that would normally be quite rational become

irrational when this condition is unsatisfied. A certain fear of germs, for example, is certainly rational. There are germs, many germs are very harmful, and a fear of them can prompt a person to take reasonable precautions against disease. However, a person who is so afraid of germs that he washes twenty times a day, sprays all items in his house with germicide, refuses to leave his sanitized bedroom, etc., has crossed the boundary between reasonable prudence and irrational fearing.

As with condition (3), this condition will play an important role in my later discussion of the fear of death.

II

The conditions I have outlined above provide a very rough way of distinguishing two very different ways of attempting to come to terms with death—what I shall call the "other-worldly" and the "naturalistic." Other-worldly Christians, for example, who counsel that at least certain persons (the saved) should not fear death, tend to argue that the fear of death fails to satisfy conditions (1) or (2)—i.e., they argue either that there is no such thing as death or that death is a good thing. In practice, of course, these two claims—insofar as they are intelligible at all—tend to be collapsed together. Naturalistic writers, such as Spinoza, tend to argue that a rational person will not be led by the fear of death because such fearing fails to satisfy conditions (3) or (4)—i.e., they argue that the fear of death is pointless (since it cannot help us to avoid death) or harmful (because it interferes with the satisfactions that life offers).

Although my primary purpose is to develop the pagan naturalistic tradition represented by Spinoza, it might be worth pausing a few moments over the obvious weaknesses in the other-worldly tradition. First, and most obvious, the set of beliefs that underlie that tradition (distinction between soul and body, immortality of the soul, etc.) are not very likely candidates for reasonable beliefs. Indeed, if they are held in a literal or "fundamentalist" sense, they might better be offered as candidates for obscurantist superstition. Second, and more important for our present purposes, is the following: Even if these beliefs are accepted, there is an important sense in which they really do not provide answers to the question "How are we to come to

terms with death?" For they are, after all, *denials* that there is such a thing as genuine death. Socrates (at least according to Plato) seemed to have this kind of other-worldly outlook—e.g., he says in *Apology* that, after his body passes away, it is not unlikely that his soul (his true person) will pass to a kind of heaven where he will converse with such departed luminaries as Hesiod and Homer. This seems to me to be a way of *not* facing death and certainly does not deserve to be characterized, as many people have characterized it, as facing death with *courage*. For what is courageous about accepting the fact that one will move to a place where one will be better off than ever before? And what is intellectually commendable about believing such things in the absence of any shred of evidence?[11]

There is one other argument that condition (2) is not satisfied which, though also found in naturalistic writers (e.g. Lucretius[12] and Hobbes), shares a common feebleness with the arguments noted above. It is, very generally, the argument that the death of *P* is not bad for *P* because it cannot *hurt P*. Hobbes puts the argument in the following way:

> There be few lingeringe diseases or sudden paynes that be not more sensible and paynefull then death, and therefore I see little reason why a man that lives well should feare death more then sicknesse.
>
> ("Of Death")

Even more comforting thoughts are expressed by the Christian poet John Donne:

> From rest and sleep, which but thy picture be,
> Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow.
>
> ("Death, Be Not Proud")

These arguments are so far beside the point that they at most demonstrate only one thing—that the fear of death must be very terrible indeed for some people if they are willing to grab at such small straws and take comfort in such inanity. Though it is natural that some people might confuse a fear of death with a fear of pain (or, in our own day, with a fear of winding up one's days being treated as a nonperson in one of our contemporary hospitals), it is quite obvious on reflection that the fear of death and the fear of pain are quite distinct. It should also be clear on reflection that all things bad for us (e.g. loss of reputation) do not necessarily have to "hurt" in any literal sense. If the fear of

death just was the fear of pain, then there would indeed be little reason why anyone should fear death. For death is not always a painful affair, and, in most of those cases where it might be, we have drugs or (if it comes to it) suicide. Thus Hobbes and Donne have perhaps provided us with reasons why we should not fear a *painful* death, but these are not reasons why we should not fear death *simpliciter*. They have not given us reasons why death itself, independent of suffering, is not a very undesirable, bad, or evil thing for a person.

III

What, then, is death such that it is a very undesirable, bad, or evil thing for a person? *That* it is bad is, I take it, obvious; for death, along with suffering, in part define the very concept of what is a bad thing for a person and (as I suggested earlier) the very concept of the fearful. Thus, I should argue, explaining what is bad or fearful about death is part of explaining what death itself is.

The death of a *person*, unlike the death of a beast, represents not merely the extinction of an organism. It also represents the end of a conscious history that transcends itself in thought. All I mean by this high-sounding phrase is that, to use the language of Sartre, persons define themselves in large measure in terms of their future-oriented *projects*. What I am is in large measure what I want to accomplish. This is perhaps a very "bourgeois" conception of personality, for it is a definition in terms of individual agency. In more collectivist societies, the conception of a person might well (for better or worse) be different and the fear of death correspondingly different.[13] However, the analysis I am offering does seem to me true of at least a great many persons in society as we now find it. Our self-identifying projects may be bound up with persons very close to us, and this explains why we sometimes, as I noted earlier, see the deaths of our children or wives as a partial death of our own persons. But it is rare (and perhaps regrettable) that the range of such persons included in self-identification is anything but quite narrow.

If I am correct that a person is self-defined largely in terms of certain projects—e.g., the desire to accomplish something in one's profession, to provide for one's family, to achieve certain

satisfactions, to redress moral injuries done—then we can see wherein much of the badness of death lies: death represents *lost opportunity*. My death might prevent me from finishing a book, from getting my children through school, from rendering aid to those who have a claim on my benevolence, from making amends for moral wrongs against others. It is this idea that death means *no more chances* that tormented Ivan Ilych—a man who had already thrown away the chances he had to live the right sort of life:

> His mental sufferings were due to the fact that that night, as he looked at Gerasim's sleepy, good-natured face with its prominent cheekbones, the question suddenly occurred to him: "What if my whole life has been wrong?" It occurred to him that what had appeared perfectly impossible before, namely that he had not spent his life as he should have done, might after all be true. It occurred to him that his scarcely perceptible attempts to struggle against what was considered good by the most highly placed people, those scarcely noticeable impulses which he had immediately suppressed, might have been the real thing, and all the rest false. . . . "But if that is so," he said to himself, "and I am leaving this life with the consciousness that I have lost all that was given me and it is impossible to rectify it—what then?" (Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*)

Mary Mothersill has put the point in the following way:

> Death is the deadline for all my assignments. . . . To know what it is like to hope that one will not be interrupted is to know something about (one sort) of fear of death. We may think of death (rather grandiosely) as the person from Porlock but for whose untimely visit, *Kubla Khan*, or so Coleridge claimed, would have been much, much longer than it is.[14]

At this point, I should like to raise the following query: Would one fear death more than (or in a way different from) the fear of permanent coma resulting from massive brain damage? If, as I suspect, most people would answer *no*, then this is support for the account I have been offering.

Now one thing we can learn from this account is in keeping with the Christian message that we should (within reason of course) live each day as though it may be our last. Knowing that death will come, we can make an effort to accomplish what we feel we need to accomplish—realizing that there will not always be chances to "do it later." There are, of course, those unfortunate and generally neurotic individuals who have no sense of self-worth, who feel that they never can accomplish anything

that matters, who feel that their very existence is an injury to others. These persons, unless they are helped by therapy, really lack self-defining projects and thus really lack a strong sense of themselves as persons. Not surprisingly, such individuals tend to fear death with the greatest intensity of all. For they fear, not simply that they will not finish, but that they will never even get started.[15]

Even if we are fortunate and are not plagued by neurotic self-doubts, and even if we make a prudent effort to accomplish what we think important with some sense of urgency in order to "beat death," we shall never be completely successful. Not only will we always fail to get something done that we think we ought to have done, but we shall also (as long as we remain persons) continue to generate new self-defining projects as we grow older. Thus, though with diligence we can perhaps prevent death from being as bad as it might be, for most of us it will, when it comes, be bad enough.

IV

What does all of this tell us about the rationality of fearing death? Applying conditions (3) and (4) of the previously developed analysis, conditions that I regard as perhaps doing little more than formalizing Spinoza's general account of the fear of death, I should conclude that a prudent fear of death is perfectly rational. By a prudent fear of death I mean simply (a) one that provokes people into maintaining a reasonable (though not neurotic compulsive) diligence with respect to living the kind of life they regard as proper or meaningful (e.g., maintaining their health, not making the mistake of Ivan Ilych) and (b) one that is kept in its proper place (i.e., does not sour all the good things in one's life). If the fear of death, even if initially inspired by the desire to accomplish important things in time, becomes a neurotic compulsion, then the saying "In the midst of life we are in death" is exemplified.

Fear of death is irrational and properly extinguished, then, when it can serve no legitimate purpose in our lives—when it cannot aid us in avoiding bad things (e.g. failed assignments) in a way that is consistent with the successful and satisfying integration and functioning of our person. As Spinoza would put it, the fear of death is irrational when it redounds, not to our profit, but to our loss. For, other things (especially moral things) being equal, the pursuit of loss rather than profit could not be the goal of any rational man.[16]

To call the fear of death irrational is not, of course, moralistically to *condemn* those who feel it. A man is fairly to be blamed only for that which is in his control, and typically feelings are not in our control—at least not in our direct control. The irrational fear of death, if it pervades the life of a person, becomes a kind of neurosis, and normally the proper response to a fearful neurotic is not blame but, rather, a suggestion that he seek therapeutic help in extinguishing his fears.[17]

If a person can extinguish or have extinguished such irrational fears of death he will move toward being, in Spinoza's sense, liberated or free. To fear irrationally is to be a kind of prisoner to one's pointless passions, in bondage to feelings that preclude the enjoyment of what is now valued and the pursuit of what is wanted for the future. The meaningfulness of the present and the future are destroyed, and one is put in the pitiful position, described by Socrates, of caring so much about simply living that one loses whatever it is that makes life *worth* living. To quote Montaigne again:

> The thing I fear most is fear. . . . He who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave. . . . For as it is impossible for the soul to be at rest when she fears death, so, if she can gain assurance against it, she can boast of a thing as it were beyond man's estate: that it is impossible for worry, torment, fear, or even the slightest displeasure to dwell in her. . . . She is made mistress of her passions and lusts, mistress over indigence, shame, poverty, and all other wounds of fortune. Let us gain this advantage, those of us who can; this is the true and sovereign liberty, which enables us to thumb our noses at force and injustice and to laugh at prisons and chains.[18]

V

I am not sure how much comfort or solace, if any, can be derived from the way of thinking about death that I have outlined. One small comfort, at least to me, is that this way of thinking about death under some circumstances renders *suicide* a reasonable option, not merely for coming to terms with such misfortunes as pain, but also as a way of fulfilling (or at least not compromising) one's conception of oneself as a person. For if what one really values is the preservation of oneself as a certain

kind of person (e.g., one who does not become a vegetable as a result of a debilitating illness, one who does not dishonor oneself and betray one's friends under torture) one can see, in voluntary death, at least this comfort—that one will end as the person one is and perhaps admires, not as another person that one perhaps would despise. What this shows is that the general reasons we have for not wanting to die may, in a particular case, constitute reasons for wanting to die. An American journalist, Charles Wertenbaker, wrote the following before his own suicide:

> Problem with death is to recognize the point at which you can die with all your faculties, take a healthy look at the world and people as you go out of it. Let them get you in bed, drug you or cut you, and you become sick and afraid and disgusting, and everybody will be glad to get rid of you. It shouldn't be such a problem if you can remember how it was when you were young. You wouldn't give up something for instance to add ten years to your life. All right, don't ask for them now. You wouldn't give up drinking and love-making and eating—and why should you have given them up? Nothing is ever lost that has been experienced and it can all be there at the moment of death—if you don't wait too long.[19]

In a case like this, it is possible to see suicide not merely as reasonable but even as noble. This way of thinking, found in Greek, Roman, and some Oriental civilizations, and eloquently defended by David Hume (*Of Suicide*), provides the man who accepts it with an ultimate "out." And having an out is having a certain kind of limited freedom. For at least one's bondage is not total.

In closing, I must admit that even the above provides precious little in the way of comfort. The universe is impersonal, and is thus not kind. And it is just false that there is to be found, even by the exercise of our reason, a comfort for every sorrow. Even a man who clearly recognizes the irrationality of fearing death will sometimes, I am sure, be tormented by that fear anyway, and I make no pretense that I am any different. However, I am confident of one thing: that any occasional comfort, however little, that may be derived from rational understanding, unlike that which may flow from various forms of superstitious obscurantism, is at least consistent with human dignity and intellectual integrity.[20] And that, I think, is something.

CHAPTER FOUR

There's an old joke. Uh, two elderly women are at a Catskills mountain resort, and one of 'em says: "Boy, the food at this place is really terrible." The other one says, "Yeah, I know, and such . . . small portions." Well, that's essentially how I feel about life. Full of loneliness and misery and suffering and unhappiness, and it's all over much too quickly.

—Woody Allen, *Annie Hall*