

## Deadness

**I**t's not clear exactly when I died. It came upon me slowly, not the dying, but the realization that it had happened. Perhaps it doesn't matter when it happened, but it's my life, and anything to do with living and dying would be important to me, I should think. I care about this, as anyone would, and in my quiet moments it is just this sort of question that seeps in and keeps me awake at night. Maybe it's the unanswered questions that make death work like this.

Nobody expects to die unless they're lingering at the end long enough to consider it rationally. Instinct insists that we remain in denial until the very last minute. Otherwise life would be hell, or else total insanity. But it turns out this mortality brinkmanship isn't the way it works after all. I feel compelled to guess that the act of dying may well be different for everybody. Some people get whacked head-on by a truck going 70, and presumably that's just like flipping a light switch. Other people linger for years while the biology peters out like an old rusty excavator sinking into a muddy field.

But I'm making assumptions I can't justify. Does the guy in the car-crash or the exploding bomb, let's say a suicide vest—does he go out instantly? Or is there some transition phase that doesn't rely on any functioning blood and guts? If there's a soul, does it jump right out of that nearly instant splat of brain on dashboard, or does it suffuse the smoky ruins for a while, take a few minutes to disentangle itself from the physical world, perhaps an hour or two to condense into some new ethereal format, maybe even days or weeks to recover from heaven knows what kinds of metaphysical discombobulation?

And the lengthy dissipation of the wasting patient, years abed with fading comprehension and burgeoning delusions—does this signify a gradual change of state, from alive to dead, or is there still one moment when the last dendrite snaps free, and the final synaptic fiber pulls away from the cleft, and one critical neuron sputters into silence, and then the switch is thrown? Maybe the switch isn't a switch, but it does seem like there should be a defining moment, at least functionally, where the light is finally out, regardless of how bright or dim it may have shone just before.

I'm not a philosopher, not at all. I hate philosophy. It's mere gossip, a diversion, an exercise of denial of the ignorance we all resent and rail against, each in his own way. I ask these questions because now that I'm dead, it is more than a little appalling that I still have no idea how or when it happened. Memory suggests a gradual transition, but logic says otherwise. I can remember only a very slow and puzzling emergence into this world of the dead, and a long vague period of uncertainty. It didn't even occur to me that I was dead, not for weeks and weeks. But try as I might, I cannot recall any moment when it happened, when anything happened. No transition point, alive before and dead after.

It makes some sense, considering that death means loss of everything, including one's faculties of observation. After all, how could one remember the moment when memory became impossible, due to lack of suitable facilities? But here, now dead, the puzzle remains, and that of course calls into question most rational assumptions about the nature of death.

At this juncture I suppose I should provide reassurances that I am not deliberately playing with terminology. The situation is clear, dire even, and this is not an attempt to contradict or question the reality of my situation. The dead do not debate. We have no need, for there is no one to convince. We are alone in death, and are therefore left to our own devices if we wish to make sense of anything. I do admit, however, that it seems unjust or unjustifiably ironic to pass through one of life's ultimate questions and still learn nothing that sheds any light at all on the mystery.

How much of the day are we actually alive?

And what do we mean by 'alive'?

Part of the day we're consumed with compulsions, and once one of these compulsions initiates it plays through to the end, unless some kind of extraordinary, forceful, and (shall we say) artificial effort is put forward

to stop it. And then, in that time, when the compulsion is in abeyance, held there by force, what aspect of that state or experience is living?

We spend one-third of our living time dead anyway, dead to the world, no consciousness, perhaps dim awareness of dreams, fragmentary delusional nonsense, but for a major portion of sleep we're very simply not present. Gone.

Yes, we believe there is some existence persisting during that time, but lacking any subjective awareness of it, what good is it, what does it mean, how does it figure into the process of living?

If we indeed are passengers in this flesh-bot, then what portion of our residency is spent actually being alive? Or, shall we say, acting alive? It seems that we act more alive when we're not under the control of one or another of the body's ceaseless compulsions. When we're not craving food, or craving entertainment, or craving some hard-wired implacable need to fulfill lust and other desires. These things take away large portions of the day.

Consider life before sexual maturity, if such a thing even exists. Perhaps we should call it life before conscious sexual maturity, conscious sexual activity. Prepubescent life is naive, and we pursue pleasure in a simple naive manner. Sooner or later we become aware of the sexual component, and this occurs perhaps accidentally or perhaps by design of the society around us, but in any case, it happens at about the time that the hormone storm begins, and life becomes a constant distraction. Initially we're enjoying, shall we say, non-sexual pursuits, and then the hormones kick in.

And this contrast is so obvious that throughout adolescence, if one has a modicum of self-awareness, one recognizes the intrusion of the compulsion as an external influence that is not intrinsic to the process of simply living. Unfortunately, however non-intrinsic it may be to the process of simply living, it seems to be an inevitable component of having a body.

Later, we learn to suppress the raging hormones and behave in a relatively rational manner, and yet rational behavior, as a function of concentration and control, is hardly natural and is hardly living. And so the spontaneity of childhood is first interfered with, disrupted, intruded upon, and then later, through the exercise of the suppression of all that intrusion, it's simply subjugated and lost for a different reason. There seems

to be little choice between behaving as an animal in rut most of the time, and behaving as an automaton, restricting, inhibiting, preventing, and controlling so that one can choose activities.

This is the next great tragedy: that we learn to choose our activities. Instead of going in the direction that we're leaning, we try to decide what we should do. Once 'should' enters into the equation, there's little hope for spontaneity, because we are now inundated with a thousand origins of shoulds. Where does this lead? It leads to a day of dealing with compulsions, to eat, to experience some kind of gratification, compulsions to sleep, to avoid, and scattered through that fog and jostling of compulsion on top of compulsion, mixed in with resistance and grappling for control, a few minutes here and there are spent doing something that produces at least a modicum of legitimate fulfillment. Doing something that we might call living.

Perhaps Art, in a word, or the expression of a deep creative impulse, is the only opportunity to be both deliberate and spontaneous at the same time. Perhaps these are the only moments when we are in fact alive in any sense, other than the artifice which adulthood substitutes for the spontaneous pursuit of inner impulses that we enjoy in childhood.

To pursue this notion, this line of thinking, we should put some attention on defining what it is that characterizes childhood, and in that context what characterizes playing. Then examine a day of adulthood and see where any exercise of natural spontaneity ever takes place.

Surely there is some, but does it occur much outside the realm of straightforward compulsion and repression? Are we re-inventing Freud? God help us.

The alternative, of course, to all this consideration, reflection, and analysis, is to support the delusion that there is such a thing as normal life. That we can put on our suit and tie, or whatever costume we are assigned, and go to the office, go to the factory, go to the battlefield, and pursue our assigned role. And if we embed ourselves sufficiently in the assigned role, then we can be content in the illusion until it shatters. And then we're back at the beginning, the beginning of nothingness, emptiness, meaninglessness, the beginning of an eternity without direction. Is this death? Or is it life?

We can, as some sage used to say, give a direction to time by taking up

a challenge, a project, an endeavor, even a role, an assignment, but these are only ways of putting things back in motion so the process of existing can appear to continue along a course, but it is a circuitous one, never truly discernible, never a circle. We are not in orbit around a central core: we are as leaves in the hurricane.

Consider in light of all this the larger system that calls itself human. The body is a civilization—major city-states in the form of organs, and populations in the form of cells, and the cells with their own internal serfdoms of organelles, etc. But these layers of innocent citizenry live in a natural universe, in a hierarchical environment of microbiomes. Ten times the genetic material as the body itself, the microbiome is the world of micro-organisms that live in us and on us, and create the milieu in which the rest of our biological structure performs its daily functions.

And this is the wet machine. This is the inscrutable contraption in which we ride. This is the cosmic car driving down some unknown road. We are in a self-driving car, a great Googlemobile, Muskmobile, which knows its own path and tells us nothing.

Where, in all of this, do we live? When are we actually alive? Am I alive, writing this? Perhaps more so than when I'm consumed with sleep and all I can do is stagger to the bed and let the entire physiology shut down consciousness, except for its brief bursts of weird fantasy. I am perhaps, at this moment of creativity, meager though it may be, more alive than when I am consumed with hunger and I go and get the food, and then enter into an automaton daze and shovel the stuff into my face while the taste and other sensations utterly obliterate all awareness of anything else. At such times there is nothing but taste. And afterwards I am assaulted by the chemical components of the aftermath of eating, and I find myself satiated, consumed with satiety itself, and then for some reason the body slips ever so gracefully into another bout of pure unconsciousness. An hour, an hour and a half, of total unconsciousness while all the facilities of physiology are consumed with the process of consuming what I have consumed.

Writing this, am I more alive than when the insidious arousal of lust appears and then we spend our time either attempting to ignore it, or attempting to sublimate it into some other activity, to distract ourselves from it, while, even in the absence of our attention, it still grows stronger and stronger. Until eventually the bio-structures command the attention,

and physical sensation obliterates any semblance of free will, and another form of extraordinary overshadowing automatic behavior takes over.

So we discover that there are little gaps between these diverse moments of utter helplessness. And in those gaps we try to create momentum, that the gaps themselves may stretch. But this whole exercise still seems futile, while on the larger scale the whole body collapses in ruin around us.

As usual, I don't know exactly when it happened, but I realized some time ago that I had effectively gone mad, lost my powers of reasoning. I'm not sure if I had lost my memory as well, but it seems a distinct possibility. If I had, then surely I wouldn't have any way of knowing. In any case, everything's been getting reconstructed since then, and in recent times I find that I carry out the impression of reasoning and remembering fairly effectively, and people seem to believe that I'm a normal person, or surely would, if there were any.

I wonder, though, what must have happened in those early days when I was first reconstructing my internal environment, when I was first rediscovering that I was a person, and that there was a past associated with my person-hood, and that I was able to operate as a person, namely, to make decisions and take actions, understand things, figure things out. It's the latter in particular that becomes troublesome.

Figuring things out is problematic when you can't remember anything and you don't have any idea how to think. I would look at a box with something in it, and I would think, Well how do you open it? How do I get this thing open? What's in there? How do I find out what's in there? How do I rip the box apart? I don't have a tool for ripping the box apart. What tool would I need? Should I use a knife? Have I done this before? Do people generally use knives? Where shall I find the right kind of knife? Is there more than one kind of knife? What kind of knife is the one for opening boxes?

And then sometimes I would express my frustration, and someone nearby would say, Well, there's a little thing on the side that you pull. And I would realize, yes, there's a little thing on the side, but who would know to pull it? What is the purpose of a thing on the side? Are all things on sides meant to be pulled?

And then they would point out that there was the word "pull" written next to the thing on the side, and I would think, Yes, therefore I should pull

it. But can we assume there will always be a sign that says “pull” next to the thing we pull? How can we assume that? There’s no basis. If we’ve been here for a long time and we’ve gotten used to how things work we might feel confident that there would always be a sign. That we would always get to the reasoning behind the thing, in a simple word. In this case four letters: “pull.”

I remember returning from Europe one time. I’d been living amongst the people who speak European languages and for many years I was discovering that I could not speak any of the European languages except English. After a while it became second nature for me to appreciate that although the sounds people made apparently had meaning to them, they had no meaning to me, and I could infer only a little from facial expressions, body language, or their wild gesticulations that occasionally occurred when I seemed less than appropriately responsive.

And so when I returned to the United States I recall stepping from the airplane and walking through the terminal building and coming upon the section where they check your passport, and discovering, much to my relief, that I had a passport and that it checked, and then I came upon a door. And written on the door were four letters. They did not say “pull”—they said POOSH. And I asked myself, “Poosh. What is poosh?” And I thought, “I’m in America. It should be English. But it’s poosh. What is this poosh?”

And then after a while, after I had pushed the door open and gone some feet beyond the doorway, I realized that I had indeed pushed the door open. I had not pooshed it. I had pushed it. And so here again, even the pronunciation of a simple English word, having been steeped in years of European languages, the meanings of which I knew nothing, had somehow adapted my concept of their pronunciation and I had lost the ability to speak my own language. So you see how difficult it can become.

Lately, though, I’ve begun to call all of this back into question. That is, can I be certain that I did indeed go mad? Have I really lost my sense of reason? And in fairness, is that what madness would really mean? Inability to reason? That’s all it is? It seems that the present diatribe constitutes a display of annoying but palpable reason, at least in any conventional sense. I’m reasoning my ass off, you might say. Which raises the even more basic question, Is it even possible to lose one’s sense of reason? Surely all

sequential thinking is a form of reasoning, however demented it might seem to a third party. But the truth of the matter is that no third party is ever present. Nobody else is ever party to the reasoning process until it's been edited and verbalized out loud or in some tangible form, at which point it's not the reasoning process, but a product of that process, and most likely bears little resemblance to what seemed reasonable while it was taking place inside. What's more, there's the question of whether any sequence of thoughts is or is not reasoning. Crazy sequences in dreams are only really crazy in hindsight. During the dream they are more than reasonable—they're a priori credible and self-validating.

Uh-oh. There's that term: self-validating. My God, what ruin that notion brings to the whole concept of reasoning. What's the point of reasoning at all if a conclusion is self-validating? In fact, such conclusions aren't conclusions at all—they're direct perceptions, or cognitions as we might call them, not the result of a sequence of thoughts, one notion building upon its predecessor. Some sequential thinking may have preceded these so-called conclusions, but it served not as a logical production of the final idea, but only as a crude setting of the scene, assembling the elements as it were, prior to the final turning of the attention onto some pure recognition of reality. The cognition, in other words, isn't the result of anything other than the direction of the attention. It doesn't proceed from whatever thinking may have preceded it.

Death—being dead—is a cognition, isn't it? And so it ends. Here.