**The Concept of Death in Philosophy and Experience: Martin Heidegger, Thomas Nagel and Philip Gould**

**Introduction**

This essay examines three approaches to the concept of death: an existential approach by Heidegger, a pragmatic evaluation by Nagel, and an experiential account by Philip Gould, who was not a professional philosopher but who wrote a detailed description of the time before his death from cancer. I compare and contrast the different approaches, and use Gould's account as real-life check on the two philosophical analyses.

**Martin Heidegger**

Heidegger's evaluation of death comes in his main work, Being and Time (Division Two, chapter 1, sections 46-53).

People in general (Heidegger calls them The They) don't want to talk about death. It is the last obscenity. But death "cannot be outstripped" and is beyond the scope of experience or phenomenological investigation. What can be experienced is being-alongside-death (i.e. other people's death) and "respectful solicitude" of the dying, which is the mode of behaviour called for on such occasions. More usefully, we can experience our own being-towards-death. This is not just in the last years of life: from our birth, our being is directed towards death. But the process of death is not like, for example, the ripening of fruit. A person may die with unfulfilled potential of all sorts - in both their own view and in the view of others. When Heidegger seeks to investigate death, he concludes that only investigation of our being-towards-death is possible.

At this point in Being and Time, Heidegger is starting to examine how one grasps one's human nature as a whole. He wants to know if death can permit us to view our existence in its totality in some way. Studies of one person dying by another living person are of limited use here. We are addressing the subjective experience, so we must look at our own being-towards-death. We can see death as certain at some time, and always possible at any time. We live in the face of the end. Death is part of a our being. Rather than treating death as an event to be ignored, Heidegger says that a more thoughtful, honest and logical approach (he calls it authentic) would be for a human being to use death to as a means of concentrating on his own existence. Death puts our existence into perspective.

We need to look at Heidegger's argument in more detail:

He looks at our finitude, or the way in which we see ourselves as having boundaries to our experiences. Death, like birth, sets a boundary on our lives, and this setting of a boundary is a major factor by which death affects our attitude to life. We know that the holiday will come to an end but we don't know when; only that it might happen at any time. We therefore feel finite, limited in what we can do or will get done before we die. Whatever we think will happen to us in the future, death is the only thing that is certain. In Tolstoy's novella The Death of Ivan Ilych , when Ivan knows he is mortally ill, he becomes obsessed with the way he has lived his life, and what he can do to make amends for what he sees as his mistakes. Ivan leaves this reckoning until the very end of his life. But Heidegger asks for a much earlier "anticipation of death", a realistic inclusion of the death-factor in our projects and the way we evaluate them. We must be aware of the boundaries of our existence. Then, at the hypothetical point of death, we will have known of the possibility of death all our lives. It will have affected our projects and what we have done with our lives. Indeed, all of the time, in the present, we are aware of the possibility of death. We can try to forget it. We succeed most of the time. But overall, Heidegger sees death there as "integrating factor" in what he calls an authentic existence.

Heidegger is not gloomy about death. It is only in relation to being-towards-death that one becomes passionately aware of one's freedom.

**Thomas Nagel**

Thomas Nagel's analysis forms chapter 1 of his book Mortal Questions.

Nagel takes a somewhat different view of death from Heidegger. He is concerned with axiology, that is, the evaluation of death. Essentially, he is asking whether or not death is a "bad thing". He believes that the valuation of death as bad comes about only because of what death deprives us of. More life, says Nagel, like most goods, is better than less. But it is the loss of life rather than the state of being dead that is objectionable. Being dead is no worse than suspended animation, or that period of time before we were born. So why do we regard the state of death as objectionable? We can't mind what is going on in the situation, we can suffer no misfortunes when dead, and there is a symmetry between posthumous and pre-natal non-existence.

Time is a factor in all questions regarding death. Here Nagel and Heidegger are on common ground. Good or ill fortune is associated with our history and possibilities rather than the pleasantness or unpleasantness of the moment. According to Nagel, if we lose our minds (but do not die) we lose our sense of history and possibility. We enter a state of reverse childhood. Is such a state to be pitied? It may not be. It is may be loved ones and carers who are the main sufferers. Hopes and possibilities are as important as pain and suffering. We don't wish to lose the former time-acquired attributes any more than we want to suffer in the moment. But if we are in a state in which we can appreciate neither, then it is of no consequence. An embryo or unborn child, or a dead person is in such a state.

Nonetheless, we cling to life, and the prospect of advantages and enjoyment to come. These anticipations carry a heavy weight in our evaluations. We may endure great suffering and but not want to end our lives because of these possibilities. It takes great age, when hopes and possibilities may be almost nonexistent, or very great suffering, to make us wish for death, or in extremis to commit suicide. In that sense, death is a "bad thing" even though in fact, as argued above, so far as our awareness is concerned, its status is identical with the period before we were born.

Towards the end of the chapter, Nagel makes the following somewhat cryptic observation: "...death, no matter how inevitable, is an abrupt cancellation of infinitely extensible goods. Normality has nothing to do with it, for the fact that we will all inevitably die in a few score years cannot by itself imply that it would not be good to live longer.....If there is no limit to the amount of life it would be good to have, then it may be that a bad end is in store for us all."

**An Interim Assessment of Heidegger and Nagel's Approaches.**

Heidegger and Nagel both seem to agree that the problem of philosophical investigations of death, is that death has no empirical reports. It is simply the end of life. We shall not know about the death, especially when we are dead.

What we do know of death is that it is inevitable. We approach death via life. Sometimes (terminal illnesses) we have an idea when it is likely to come. At other times (sudden accidents) we do not. Normally, given good health and no fatal accidents, we might now expect to live for 80 to 100 years in the West. We can only contemplate death from the standpoint of being alive, approaching its possibility, and what we can glean from observing the lives and deaths of others.

Both Heidegger and Nagel assume the finality of death, with no after life, and that the only possibility for investigation is to approach death from the standpoint of life. Heidegger sees death as the culmination of the process by which we live our lives, particularly our attitude to our finitude. His chief concern is death in relation to time on the adoption of what he calls an authentic view of life, particularly how we go about our various projects in the light of the inevitability of death.

Nagel's approach is axiological. Does death have a value? It is "evil", according to Nagel. It ends our aspirations. Unlike Heidegger, he seems to see death as only a "bad thing", not as an ultimate destination by which we steer a course through life.

So Heidegger wants us to live and approach death authentically; Nagel sees it that as ending our aspirations. They both agree on the importance of time. But their accounts of how we view the approach of death through time are at variance. Heidegger sees death as a marker in our approach to our own finitude and how we live our life in light of that; Nagel refers rather to our valuation of our hopes and potential, and what we lose when we die.

**The Experiential Approach: Philip Gould**

Philip Gould (Lord Gould of Brookwood) was not a philosopher. His career was spent as a political analyst, and he was instrumental in the conduct of focus group research for the Labour party which contributed substantially to Tony Blair's landslide win in the UK 1997 General Election.

In January 2008, a diagnosis revealed that Gould was suffering from cancer of the oesophagus. By 2011 it was clear that surgery and other treatments had failed, and that Gould was as he said, entering the "death zone". He was quoted thus:

"This time it was clear...I was in a different place, a death zone, where there was such an intensity, such a power. And apparently this is normal. And so, even though obviously I'd...rather not be in this position, it is the most extraordinary time of my life, certainly the most important time of my life." (Independent 19 Sept 2011)

He proceeded to turn this late period of being-towards-death into a project by writing about his situation. His memoirs were published in 2012 in a book entitled When I Die: Lessons from the Death Zone.

One of the things which happened to him in the earlier stages of his cancer in 2009 was that he began to take more interest in religion and philosophy. In 2010, after initial treatment, it was found that his cancer had returned. He recalls a conversation with Tony Blair, in which the former Prime Minister apparently inspired him with the words "you have to use this recurrence to find out your real purpose in life". Gould takes his advice. In the early stages of the cancer he naturally wanted to cling to life. But eventually it was clear that his cancer was terminal and at that point he observes that "in truth, having an idea of the likely timescale of your life is a privilege not available to many". However, he also reports feeling confused, the need for a purpose (he recalls again is conversation with Tony Blair of 2010, above), the feeling of a new reality together with a loss of influence on events, but still the determination to continue treatment with no thoughts of suicide. This mood develops. Later, he observes that death is regarded as "decline, of growing irrelevance, ending of growth, cessation of contribution. But for the dying it is a time of assessment, a pre-death moment of judgement." He speaks to David Sturgeon, a consultant psychiatrist, who told him that for a good death there is a need for acceptance of death and to see the dying process as the most important time of one's life. Gould speaks of "reckoning": he talks at length and in detail to his wife, children and sister. He makes sure of his family's security after his death. He speculates on the different attitudes available to someone faced with imminent death. Both acceptance or denial are natural reactions. Gould opts for acceptance. As time goes on and the point of death nears he says he has found a courage that he did not know he had. He comments that the possibility of human error causing his death (bad decisions about his surgery, for example) have to be lived with in the run-up to death. Eventually he enters a period of ecstasy, and intense enjoyment of life, the arts, and what he comes across in everyday life. He has closer relations with his loved ones, and an intensity of feeling that he did not have in his earlier life. He observes that life is about change, becoming a different person. Life is your actions, what you do, and that is all it consists of. Towards the end, he also speaks of losing a sense of a linear time.

At the end of the book, after his death, comments were added by his daughters and wife. In particular, his daughter Georgia comments on his singular drive and purpose, and his desire to give meaning to the experience of dying.

**Conclusion**

Philip Gould's candid observations and reportage give us an experiential check on the speculations of Heidegger and Nagel. In many ways his is a richer account of the relevance of death to life.

Nonetheless, we need to be aware of category confusion. Gould is reporting on the last stages of his life, and how in his particular case he reacted to it. Heidegger and Nagel are writing of the ordinary every day view of death. Our attitude to death at the age of, say, 50, when we feel unlikely to die before we are 80, may not seem to have much in common with Gould's sense of his imminent demise. But a respectable argument can surely be made that what is happening is that Gould feels more intensely the kind of emotions, and he engages in the logic which we could to be applying, when we are far from death.

This is not to say that Gould's experiences are necessarily typical of every human being. They are subjective reportage, though honest and candid. As he himself says, he eventually accepted death. Others may not. Tolstoy's story, The Death of Ivan Ilych, referred to above, tells of a man who takes a very different attitude to death from Gould. He bewails his shortcomings, panics, and screams and cries for several days in the face of death until the last minute. Death for Ivan Ilych is nonetheless a reckoning, as it was for Philip Gould, but their reactions to that reckoning are very different.

With those two caveats, what useful conclusions can be drawn from this collection of speculation and evidence?

Heidegger's advice to live authentically, that is thoughtfully, with the finitude of life is surely a good place to start. Death at the very least gives life the concept of a timescale. Attitudes to death will vary the closer we are to it, but our attitude to life would be much different if we lived much longer or shorter. If for example our expected life span was 50 years, we would arrange our activities, hopes and aspirations, and our life in general would be arranged differently compared to a situation in which our allotted span was 150 years.

Nagel may be correct in his view that death is objectionable because it takes away our hopes and aspirations. On the one hand, as Jacoby Carter points out, these aspirations and hopes have no present ontological value. That is, they are not real in the present. We only imagine that we have the advantages to come. They have not yet happened. Notwithstanding, we place a great deal of weight on these hopes. We are unwilling to give them up, even in the face of great adversity. But in some lives, there may come a time, particularly in old age, or in cases of terminal illness, with an individual less driven than Philip Gould, where a quick and painless ending of life seems a better option.

It could be argued that Gould is an exemplar for Heidegger. This is an idea that is not capable of too much extension, but there is some evidence from his account that Gould has led an authentic life in Heidegger's meaning of the word. Heidegger's concept of life and death being one process by which death focuses us on the authenticity of life and the way it is lived is the point of most importance in all this. Gould illustrates this magnificently. Consider some of his observations as a guide to authentic living in the Heideggerian sense, even when we are far from death: we need to think of our finitude; we have projects and plan with this in mind; we need to find a purpose in life; we need to realise that as death (or advancing age) approaches, our relevance, need to grow, and contribution need not necessarily diminish; to realise, as Gould says, "dying is a time of assessment, pre- death a moment of judgment", and that death must be accepted, and not regarded as an obscenity not to be talked about.

As regards Nagel, because his approach is so much confined to evaluating death the only common ground he seems to have with Heidegger is the notion that time is important in how we value life. Time, he argues, allows us to build up aspirations, which we are unwilling to give up, and makes us want to cling to life. But it could be argued that Gould also reached a conclusion which supports Nagel's argument. Gould, because of the person he had become, was keen to cling on to life, had hopes and aspirations and was motivated to the very end. Heidegger and Nagel, while not be mutually supporting, offer views which are not contradictory and which together extend our philosophical view of death.

While death ends our aspirations, the run up to death, even from far out, is an important time for assessment. Death has an influence on the way we live our life far beyond being the mere ending of it.

**Bibliography**

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The comment by Jacoby Carter is from his paper On the Value of Death https://www.ohio.edu/ethics/tag/nagel/