

[Essay]

The Being of Death

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Abstract

As thought through logic, death is separate from life, ending the finite existence of life. As understood through onto-logic, death and life are inseparable, extending through being as the nothingness of death. Heidegger recognizes the importance of death, as experienced through the death of the other and as impending in the future rather than abiding in the present, but as having no specified relation to nothingness. Derrida suggests a relation of death to nothingness by renunciation of the I. For Nishitani, nothingness is the key to understanding death; nothingness is at the start and end of every moment and on the near side of things. When objectified and separated from life, death is experienced in the finitude of death-of-life and death-of-death. However, life-of-death links life to death and nothingness of being, making death and life inseparable. Death is involved in life as the constant experience of nothingness.

“What’s it like to be dead? It ain’t nothin at all.”

– Cormack McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*.

“Nah, I shook my head, things that come out of nowhere go back to nowhere, that’s all.”

– Haruki Murakami, *Pinball*.

As a common understanding, the question of what is death has no answer: We live and die, period. As McCarthy’s character says, “It ain’t nothin at all,” and as Murakami says, its dynamic is a constant coming from and going to nowhere. This suggests that death after life is nonexistent and therefore non-experienceable. Having no identity as a being or thing and no location in the duration of time or distance of space, such death is nothingness, timeless, and spaceless, referring only to nothing. Yet death is not just an event or a verb for dying; it is also a noun about a state that is usually misunderstood as only non-life, which leads nowhere because no one dead is talking.

But is the nothingness of death also lived? An ontological perspective may provide an answer, which may be derived from answering four particular

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questions.

1. What is the relation of being and nothingness? The relation is one: Being is nothingness; nothingness is being. Without nothingness, being would not be being; without being, nothingness would not be nothingness. They are inseparable, two sides of the same ontological coin, which is an answer presented most convincingly not by Western philosophers but by Buddhist philosophers such as Keiji Nishitani.

2. What is the relation of being/nothingness and death? Because of the relation, death is also in the life of being, and so refers to something more than nothingness alone. Furthermore, as being, nothingness always has presence in the present. It is not sufficient to say only that death is an anticipation of the future or remembrance of the other's death in the past.

3. What is the relation of being/nothingness and life? Being (as conceived by Martin Heidegger and including nothingness) includes all beings of life and non-life; such being/nothingness is the living and thinking experience of *dasein*. As something thought, being/nothingness is death as well as life. It follows that, while death may be the pure, unexperienced nothingness of the death-of-life, it is, also and more importantly, the experienced life-of-death.

4. What is the relation of life and death? It is usually considered as life or death, whereby the one excludes the other, as indicated by death-of-life. However, as with being and nothingness, the relation of life and death makes them inseparable and necessary, as indicated by life-of-death, which is an experience of *dasein*.

Given the relations of being, nothingness, life, and death and the distinction between death-of-life and life-of-death, we are now positioned to argue that, from an ontological perspective, death and life are not separated and opposed. This common view of death or life goes back to the famous statement by Epicurus: "If I am, then death is not. If I am not, then death is." This death-of-life view requires little elaboration, if accepted *prima facie* as having no after-life. For better or worse, science has demystified the traditional appeal of such notions as soul. The mind is an appendage of the brain and body; each idea, however Platonic,

scriptural, or epiphanic, requires the electro-chemical activity of the brain as an interdependent organ of the body; when body/brain dies, the mind dies as well. Death-of-life is final.

However, the idea of life-of-death opens a new understanding. We turn first to Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida on being, then to Keiji Nishitani on nothingness.

HEIDEGGER

Heidegger introduces “dasein” as the living thereness of “Being”, the latter capitalized to include all things as beings. He starts the second part of *Being and Time* with the subject “Being-towards-death,” which recognizes that death is an integral aspect of the temporality of Being, which “is something that stands before us, something impending”.¹ This standing-before-us is understood by seeing the death of others, and the something-impending while experienced in the present, refers to the future hence its not-yet “towardness.” Both ideas lack ontological relevance in the presence of the present.

Regarding the death of others, Heidegger states: “In the dying of the Other we can experience that remarkable phenomenon of Being which may be defined as a change-over of an entity from dasein’s kind of Being (or life) to no-longer-dasein.”² He provides no other way of experiencing no-longer-dasein or learning about death in one’s own life. Dasein’s kind of Being evades the experience of death itself, not the mere idea of death.

Regarding “something impending”, Heidegger talks of being-towards-death, not about being-as-death or life-of-death. Death itself is a matter of “towardness,” an impending not-yet that is anticipated in the future rather than experienced in the present. Accepting the fact that the future does not exist except as an idealized anticipation, this towardness is an inadequate notion for the death-driven anxiety recognized by Kierkegaard, Heidegger himself, and other existentialists. Something more present must be involved, namely the experience of death in the present, not just the death of the other and not something impending in the future. Instead, death is the lived being-as-death; it is the perpetual perishing of living

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), p. 294.

² *Ibid.*, p. 238.

and abiding in the moment, perishing because the present is slipping away into the past. This nothingness is not just impending but confronts the very being of the present and induces Kierkegaardian anxiety, a point Heidegger makes in his essay “What Is Metaphysics?”

If death is only impending in the future, then *dasein* does not experience death in the present, which is a conclusion explicated by Heidegger: “When *dasein* reaches its wholeness in death, it simultaneously loses the Being of its ‘there’. By its transition to no-longer-*dasein*, it gets lifted right out of the possibility of experiencing this transition and understanding it as something experienced.”³ While losing its *thereness*, *dasein* cannot experience death as such: “*Dasein* never perishes. *Dasein*, however, can demise only as long as it is dying.”⁴ When dying becomes death, not-being-there can no longer reveal the perishing of being-there – like Bishop Berkeley’s forest log that cannot reveal its fall in the absence of someone being-there. Epicurus expressed the idea more simply: If I am, then death is not; if death is, then I am not.

Dasein losing its “*da*” remains an interesting idea. Is the end of “*da*” the end of “*sein*”? By analogy, one can suppose that, when the mind loses its body, the mind and everything else ends, especially if one does not believe in life-after-death. But *sein* is not necessarily organism-dependent; it is a word designating an ontological universal, stressed by Heidegger who capitalizes “*Sein*” to indicate that it does not consist of individual beings alone or as the mere sum of them. Furthermore, *sein* is not explicated as consciousness of a self or I, which gives still further credence to Being as a special case that is removed from ordinary suppositions of living and dying. As Heidegger puts it, “Being and the structure of Being lie beyond every entity and every possible character which an entity may possess. Being is the *transcendens* pure and simple.”⁵ The point of interest, but left undeveloped, is that nothingness also is *transcendens* pure and simple.

DERRIDA

Derrida mostly agrees with Heidegger. Citing Emmanuel Levinas, Derrida agrees with the notion that death is learned primarily from the other: “It is for the

³ Ibid., p. 281.

⁴ Ibid., p. 291.

⁵ Ibid., p. 62.

death of the other that I am responsible, to the point of including myself in death.”⁶ Derrida agrees also with the idea of being-toward-death, but here he talks about the elephant in the room neglected by Heidegger – namely the individual “I” that would do the dying: “I do not end, I never end, I know that I will not come to an end.”⁷ He refers to Heidegger’s ontological mode of demising that cannot be experienced by dasein and so makes dasein imperishable for two reasons. First, language fails to grasp what death is except as a metaphor or fantasy. Death can be known only through language and thought, but it cannot be understood “as such,” only as demise, which is neither dying nor perishing.⁸ Second, since I am necessary to know my end but cannot know my end except only as demise, I can never end, which leaves an aporia of the ending of knowing and knowing of ending (a soteriological condolence of not worrying about what cannot be known). I can know my dying only through, as Heidegger argued, “being-toward-death.” Dasein can “therefore end without perishing.”⁹

Apart from the harbored life of dasein or even the individual I, death remains unexamined in *Aporia*, and Derrida ends with the concession that death is beyond borders and demarcations – outside the text, so to speak – yet he probes beyond the textual border of being-toward-death by asking how this ending demise can be realized. Derrida speaks of trying “to withdraw from death by making the I, to whom death is supposed to happen, gradually go away; no, be destroyed before death comes to meet it, so that there should be no one left to be scared of losing the world in losing himself in it.”¹⁰ Derrida concludes, “Here I give myself the gift of death.” In place of the dread of being-toward-death, losing the I can be a gift as it was for Abraham or Job and his willingness to sacrifice everything to God, as discussed in Derrida’s subsequent book *The Gift of Death*.

Derrida probes new ontological ground by asking what dasein would be and do to live death and be imperishable – not just to live metaphorically as if dead or contingently as toward-death (Heidegger), but to live without the individual I or self, which requires a renunciation of self-generated desire and attachment. An ontology of life without self (*anattā*) and with nothingness (*sunyatā*) as its base is

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 39.

⁷ Ibid., p. 38.

⁸ Ibid., p. 37.

⁹ Ibid., p. 39.

¹⁰ John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 302.

presented by Keiji Nishitani.

NISHITANI

The question persists: What is the nature of death that could extend beyond being-toward-death and experience of the other's death and that may be part of *dasein* and life itself? Nishitani's Mahayana Buddhist understanding of nothingness provides an answer, which differs from the Western understanding in three respects. First, in linking death and nothingness in *Religion and Nothingness*, he draws from Heidegger, although the latter made no such link. The discussion of death starting in the second part of *Being and Time* did not examine nothingness, and his main essay on nothingness "What Is Metaphysics?" did not discuss death. For Heidegger, *dasein* was always intact – fully alive, so to speak, even in demise – which was a position accepted by Derrida and others.

Second, the Western understanding that being is already and always pre-given makes nothingness relative, as illustrated by the deriving of non-being (usually equated with nothingness) from being. In "What Is Metaphysics?" Heidegger states: "Nothing is the negation of the totality of beings; it is non-being pure and simple."¹¹ The "what-is" comes first; only then can negation occur to produce nothingness. He refers to Hegel's prominent statement, "Pure being and pure nothing are thus one and the same," but the latter also starts with the idea of pure being that is immediate and indeterminate.¹² Similarly, Sartre says that nothingness comes after both consciousness and being: "Consciousness is prior to nothingness and is derived from being."¹³ A nothingness-as-something results from the deliberated action of negation that requires the pre-given being of *dasein* or a deliberating actor. Neither Heidegger, Hegel, nor Sartre entertains the reverse idea of Buddhists that the totality of being also may derive from pre-given nothingness.

Third, Eastern thought about nothingness includes no such derivation from the primordially of being. Buddhists view nothingness from the standpoint of nihility or the Sanskrit term "*śūnyatā*", usually translated as emptiness. Suzuki argues that emptiness "is what makes relativity possible; emptiness is an intuiting

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, *What Is Metaphysics?*, trans./ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Harper Perennial, 2008 (1929)), p. 97.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), p. lvi.

truth whereby we can describe existence as related and multifarious.” He reproaches Buddhist and Western scholars who “are content to interpreting it (*sūnyatā*) as relativity or mere nothingness. . . . A true *prajna* (wisdom) obtains only when the dualism of being and nonbeing is transcended.”¹⁴ The negation of mere nothingness differs from the emptiness or ontological primacy of nothingness that is not nonbeing but that is being itself. Most Buddhists agree, for example Eugene Herrigel: “The void is just exactly All. It is the every being of Being – and it is not; it is just simply Nothing – and it is not.”¹⁵

Nishitani speaks of “traces of the common view that simply sets nothingness over against existence as a mere conceptual negation persist. The longstanding Western view of nothingness has yet to divest itself of this way of thinking.”¹⁶ In extending beyond the phenomena of conceptual negation and into the nothingness itself, Nishitani points to the example that heat is possible only with non-heat, with its absence or nothingness: “To sum up, a hot thing merges into being as what it is in itself at a point beyond all categories of substance, quality, quantity, and the like – namely, on the field of *sunyatā*, or absolute nothingness.”¹⁷ For Nishitani, nihility as the experience of nothingness is the ground or field of being, which was empty before *dasein* or consciousness attended and intended to it, before it was objectified and constructed as something and then identified by what it was not. The latter is the phenomenal consequent of consciousness affirming and negating, constructing and deconstructing.

What is the thing of consciousness, as it is constructed as an object? Everything experienced has a “near side” and “far side.” Its near side is first apprehended in the ground or field or domain of nothingness out of which something arises into consciousness; its far side is then identified and constructed. The near side is prehended as primary experience, which is what Buddhists call suchness or “*tathatā*”. The far side is prehended as secondary experience of things objectified in language and thought.

Nishitani concludes, “Both being and emptiness are seen as co-present from

¹⁴ Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, ed. Christmas Humphreys (London: Rider and Company, 1972), p. 342.

¹⁵ Eugen Herrigel, *The Method of Zen*, ed. Hermann Tausend, trans. R.F.C. Hull (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), p. 114.

¹⁶ Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 96.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

the start and structurally inseparable from one another. . . . Emptiness is not to be posited as something outside of and other than ‘being’. Rather, it is to be realized as something united to and self-identical with being.”¹⁸ Being and nothingness are linked necessarily and interdependently, and most Buddhists believe that neither has primordality over the other. For example, Nagao states: “The phrase ‘all things are empty’ means that everything is nonexistent.” He adds, “But this negation is not mere nothingness. It rather indicates an affirmative absolute being, free from objectifications and qualifications.”¹⁹

That said, Nishitani goes on to tie the nihility of nothingness-as-emptiness to death: “Death and nihility are equally real. Wherever there are finite beings – and all things are finite – there must be nihility; wherever there is life, there must be death.”²⁰ This starts with the nihility of nothingness-as-emptiness and concludes that death is the only way for life to exist and be experienced. And the reverse is also true; wherever there is death, there must be life, a return to the whole of being. Dasein’s every moment or other unit of time involves not just a start but an end. Being is both perpetual perishing and emerging. This is expressed as “eternal recurrence,” borrowed from Nietzsche, and interpreted from the standpoint of time and loss of the present in death – “when time becomes a circle, then time returns to the home-ground of the present, that moment wherein time itself is always present as a single whole. Then all things scattered limitlessly throughout time are gathered together again into one.”²¹

While indebted to Heidegger, Nishitani goes beyond the idea of “something impending” to “being-toward-death” by referring to “the possibility of Being and therefore the possibility through which life and all possibility are revealed. Being-toward-death is being toward one’s ownmost being-able-to-be.” Death and nothingness are not impending; they already are there as life and being.²² Nishitani advances both “death-sive-life” and “life-sive-death” as an interplay between death and life, the “sive” or “of” indicating both the common notion of the death of life and the uncommon notion of the life of death.²³ The latter is

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 97.

¹⁹ Gadjin M. Nagao, *Mādhyamika and Yogācāra: A Study of Mahāyāna Philosophies* (Albany: State University Press of New York Press, 1991), p. 209.

²⁰ Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 82.

²¹ Ibid., p. 229.

²² Keiji Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*. trans. Graham Parkes (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 166.

²³ Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*. pp. 93-94.

clearly ontological: As being is possible only with nothingness as its field from which it emerges, life is possible only with death as the field from which it emerges.

NOTHINGNESS

Nishitani argues that nothingness as well as being permeates existence in the world – all identities of things and the three dimensions of time (past, present, future) and of space (length, width, breadth). In time, nothingness is before and after the somethingness of experience that arises out of nothingness, abides in nothingness, and ceases back into nothingness. In space at a given time, nothingness is on the near side of things while abiding in experience; identified things are not what they are – the “not” comes with the “are”. Logically speaking, non-being negates being and being affirms non-being, as death negates life and life affirms death. But ontologically speaking especially in accordance with Eastern thinking, neither negates nor affirms the other. As being and nothingness are wrapped around one another, life and death are wrapped around one another, symbolized by the Chinese Taijitu.

Nothingness is no more primordial and foundational to being than being is primordial to nothingness. Materially speaking, nothingness appears most prominent. It constitutes most of the material being of matter and energy; even the atoms of matter are 99 percent empty space. Living existence is not in a state of being-there as in Western thinking but rather a state of nothing-there in Eastern thinking. And existence is, ontologically speaking, very largely nothing at a given time, and in time it comes from, abides in, and returns to the nothingness emphasized by Nishitani.

Nishitani’s central theme for nothingness is no-self or *anattā*, which is not peculiar. Whereas self is lauded in contemporary society, it usually is rejected in perennial philosophy and theology. Jesus’ entreaty in Luke (Bible, 9:23) is well known: “If any man would come after me, let him first deny himself.” Meister Eckhart stated that, to join God, one must work “to reduce the self to nothingness.”²⁴ Chung Tsu says the perfect man has no self. Noted above is Derrida’s I that can go away and lose itself in the world.

But the most systemic treatment of no-self is in Buddhism, starting with the

²⁴ Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*, trans. Raymond B. Blakney (New York: Harper and Row, 1941), p. 23.

Buddha (1917: 48) whose first words upon his enlightenment are: “I have obtained deliverance by the extinction of self.” Later, the Buddha states, “Self is death . . . The cleaving to self is a perpetual dying.”²⁵ As the self is a perpetual dying, so the non-self is living. The death of self provides a nothingness or emptiness for an open involvement in life and liberation from suffering. Nishitani speaks of “absolute nothingness or emptiness that would break through this self-attachment and deny the self-centered prehension of personality.”²⁶ He deems this possible because an I or self is not a stationary and verifiable subject – not the thinker of what is thought, not the seer of what is seen, etc. He rejects Descartes’ claim to doubt because the I must exist as a cogitating ego to have doubt. What am I is impossible to say; the I can be known only through its effects as a hypothetical construct. With the I nihilated, Nishitani puts forth the Great Doubt: “It is the moment at which self is at the same time the nothingness of self, the moment that it is the ‘locus’ of nothingness where conversion beyond the Great Doubt takes place. For the Great Doubt always emerges as the opening up of the locus of nothingness.”²⁷

To cope with the nothingness of death, the task is to abandon the illusory self or I. Most Buddhists, especially in the Mahayana tradition, nihilate the self to attain emptiness or nothingness, disattachment, and the state of nirvana, which applies to other selves even as admonished by Rinzai: When you see the Buddha, kill him. Again, this is not peculiar to Buddhism. Bertrand Russell sees the possibility of subordinating the personal self into a universal identity to overcome the fear of death and “to make your interests gradually wider and more impersonal, until bit by bit the walls of the ego recede, and your life becomes increasingly merged in the universal life.”²⁸ Or, as said by Roy Baumeister, “The most effective solution to this threat (of death) is to place one’s life in some context that will outlast self.”²⁹ The Hindus denigrate the self in favor of *sadguru*, which is the perfect, undifferentiated guru that has become one with divine and cosmic consciousness. The liberation of nothingness starts with the annihilation of self.

²⁵ Buddha, *The Gospel of Buddha*, ed. Paul Carus (Chicago IL: Open Court Publishing, 1917), p. 153.

²⁶ Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 95.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²⁸ Bertrand Russell, “How To Grow Old,” *Portraits from Memory and Other Essays* (New York: George Allen, 1956), p. 50.

²⁹ Stephen Cave, *Immortality: The Quest To Live Forever and How It Drives Civilization* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2012), p. 299.

LIFE-OF-DEATH

Selfless nothingness involves the life-of-death, which is death experienced as the infinitude of being/nothingness, which is distinct from the finitude of the life-of-death. The latter involves a self-exercised negation of life and death as the commonly understood. While analytically distinct, the two are experienced in degrees of emphasis; even the saint or guru will experience dying, to some degree, as the finitude of death-of-life. Organs and muscles atrophy; cells die; each breath is a loss; a little dying each day gone irretrievably into nothingness. As life is the emergence of living form, death is its disintegration. Matter is still conserved in accordance with the first law of thermodynamics; even resulting ashes and gases have form. Such facts of dying are experienced as the death of life, yet at the same time everything lives and dies infinitely at each moment for all time, from particles to universes, from prokaryotes to humans.

Both death-of-life and life-of-death are lived *dasein*. They are lived not in the no-more of the past and not-yet of the future, but in the here-now experience of the present, and on the near side of the present from which experience originates. Thus Nishitani may speak of the inseparable unity of life and death: “Although contrary opposites in their natures and conceptually distinguishable as such, life and death make themselves present to us not as separate things but rather as one inseparable unity in which there is full distinction without any separation whatsoever. . . . The essential inseparability – the ‘absolute oneness’ – of essentially contradictory elements, such as life and death, cannot be understood without giving heed to their nonobjective character.”³⁰ Life/death cannot be objectified and separated; they constitute lived being/nothingness.

Another Buddhist understanding is the merging of *samsara* (the cycle of life) and *nirvana* (the cessation of strife). Abe comments: “We are always living and yet always dying at every moment. Without living, there is no dying; without dying, there is no living. Living and dying are non-dualistically one in our existential realization.”³¹ This realization leads to the “Great Death” in which the discontinuity of *samsara* (the cycle of life) is overcome by the continuity of *nirvana* (the cessation of strive). Therefore, “*Samsara* and *nirvana* are identical.”³²

³⁰ Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, p. 289.

³¹ Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), p. 165.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 166.

So understood, the ontology of nothingness does not involve the logic of negation and the construction/deconstruction of existence. Non-life and non-being are not ontological extensions; they are logical and dualistic negations of lives and beings. When Hamlet raises the question of “To be or not to be,” he should be saying, “To exist or not to exist,” albeit clumsy poetry. He is not speaking of being as such but rather of his existence that is negated by death as non-life and of life-or-death. He is speaking logically about his existence as a being and not ontologically about being and life-of-death as such.

In an existential and biological sense, we are alive or dead, but in an ontological sense, we are alive and dead. We may speak biologically of death or life, which reflects the finitude of existence marked by identity, temporal duration and spatial distance, which contrasts with the unmarked infinitude of being and nothingness. The ontological relation of “and” involves more than the “or” relation.

Being/nothingness is necessary for existence. It is the empty slate upon which is written the entities and forms of existence; it is Nishitani’s ground of “ultimate reality” that is empty, free of attachment, and realized in nirvana. Or, it is like Plato’s *khôra* or receptacle that, itself without form and existence, is a universal recipient and holder of existence; or like the being of Lao Tzu’s dao from which all things emanate and to which they return; or the Hindu understanding of Brahman. Such notions are consistent with Heidegger’s point that Being transcends beings that exist as identities in space/time.

While existence requires being/nothingness, does being/nothingness require existence? Can “sein” be without “da” and empty of “thereness”? Many things seem to have an autonomous being; while existing as ideas, their meaning transcends actual or even virtual experience – for example, Plato’s eternal ideas, Aristotle’s substance, many subsequent notions of substance and essence, as suggested by universals that transcend particulars and require no particulars for their universality. “1+2=3” simply is; regardless of the forms of existence that change over time and space and regardless of whether three particular things exist, one-plus-two will always equal three. Such universals seem to have being without existence, to have “sein” without “da”.

The idea of life-of-death recognizes the transcendence of being. Life exists in nothingness or emptiness of being, which occurs with every breathing moment that comes from emptiness and goes back to the same and which can be realized by the annihilation of the I/self. Nishitani adds that emptiness and life-of-death

are experienced immediately on the near side – starting with no Heideggerian “they”, no Christian sin, no Buddhist karma or attachment, no Tillichian finitude or boundaries of physical space or time. With self, body, and mind not yet to come or already gone, we live, so to speak, in pure being. We are not just finite beings but also part of infinite Being, with a transcending consciousness the realization of which includes a kind of cosmic presence.

DEATH-OF-DEATH

Life-of-death is not the so-called death-of-death, which is a dramatized absurdity of death-of-life. Referring to Jean-François Loytard, John Caputo speaks of “death pure and simple, the death of death-as-part-of-life. This *death of death* does not mean immortality, which is the way theologians like to blunt the point; it means there is nothing living left to die. . . . A million, million, million years from now, we’ll just be cinders.” With the extinction of the human race and solar system, he exclaims, “If that’s not nihilism, nothing is!”³³

But cinders and gases do remain, as recognized in the biblical coping of ashes to ashes long before cosmological speculation about cosmic nihilism and as recognized in energy and matter conserved in accordance with the thermodynamic law of conservation. From the final destruction of the solar system will come yet another solar system. Star stuff and information are not nihilated, not even in black holes as now acknowledged by Stephen Hawking. The sun’s matter and energy will remain, and in another four billion years or so will disintegrate to form still another solar system. As to the universe itself, no one knows. It could fly apart into a void of entropy, which gives Caputo reason to dismiss cosmic religion as hopeless. Or it could be within or beside other universes, another reason to dismiss cosmic religion as hopelessly unknowable. Or, it could be recyclable and its own *raison d’être*, a hopeful and knowable cosmos that lives eternally. These are the three current scenarios, but until things such as dark energy are better understood, no one can know.

Does any kind of death matter more or less? For us at our biological death, all of it is gone anyway, unless we take comfort in religions of a here-after. The universe (now 92 billion light years across and expanding) can hardly be mindful that this moment of human existence on a single planet and star among billions

³³ John C. Caputo, *Hoping Against Hope: Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2015), p. 8.

would involve any noteworthy loss. Our being, our cultural and technological civilization is not the point. It does matter to realize that, while here and living, from a universal or cosmic viewpoint, matter and energy go on creating, destroying, and recreating different systems and forms. Such is the essence of the Cosmic Religion of Einstein and those who followed him such as Carl Sagan and Stephen Hawking.

The universe probably was never made or meant for us. We cannot know its primal origin or final purpose even assuming a god-like maker or indeed even with a maker mindful of us. We have to make ourselves for the universe, which starts with understanding and accepting total Being, from the unfathomable infinitesimal to the infinite.

SOTERIOLOGY

Soteriological practice can be as revealing about death as can ontological analysis; in fact, the two are complementary. Through his meditations Descartes was able to analyze the cogito required for his being, a practice common in his day for philosophical as well as theological insight. Setting aside the desires and preconceptions of self or ego is a practice in modern science as well as philosophy. But Buddhists simply take such setting aside absolutely (which is not a matter of degree like Zeno's arrow never quite arriving but rather is complete, ground-zero clearing that leads to nothingness/being). They admonish the practice of discarding self, body, mind and its thoughts, and not just to understand death but to dispel suffering about death. The aim is to kill the self to be free to live. When asked what is death, Seung Sahn replied, "You are already dead," and goes on to equate death with emptiness: "This 'No' is no self, no other, no body, no mind, no world. So it is no life and no death. This is true emptiness."³⁴ Or, the Buddhist-inclined Catholic, Thomas Merton: "In order to live, I have to die."³⁵ The Catholic theologian Richard Rohr: "You must seek to be a blank slate. / You must desire to remain unwritten upon. / No choosing of this or that."³⁶ The postmodernist theologian John Caputo: "We should live as if we did not live. . . We should live without allowing any of the beliefs and practices that are the

³⁴ Seung Sahn, *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha*, ed. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Grove Press, 1976), p. 91.

³⁵ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Books, 1961), p. 47.

³⁶ Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2009), p. 174.

accidents of birth to block the deeper involvement of faith in life.”³⁷ The Stoic Marcus Aurelius: “Consider yourself to be dead and to have completed your life up to the present time; then live out according to nature the remainder which is allowed you. Now take what’s left and live it properly.”³⁸

The point is that, by living dead, a motley group of Western thinkers and Buddhists use practice to clear away the troubling attachments to existence and open the way to the experience of nothingness/being, much like the finding of being in the opening of the forest extolled by Heidegger. Yet the falling away of mind as well as body and self is a distinctive Buddhist canon, introduced by the Buddha and perhaps best illustrated by Rujing’s teaching to Dogen: “Zen study is a matter of shedding mind and body.”³⁹ Bankei says that the Buddha Mind is “unborn and marvelously illuminating” and the same for everyone as “the One Identical Buddha Mind.”⁴⁰ Being united as one for everyone, the Buddha Mind was never born and so can never die; it is the mirrored universe of being for all Buddha Minds.

The question arises: If self, body, and mind fall away, what is left of the existence and being of the world? What does it mean, ontologically, to live in the death of nothingness or emptiness? The answer is suggested in Montaigne’s famous statement: To philosophize is to learn how to die. This can involve two views. First, by having no biological being of living and dying or no body or material presence, we would forgo human desire, Epicurean and otherwise, something Marius the Epicurean could not do despite his admiration for the stoicism of Aurelius. We would struggle to be a disembodied spirit, lifeless and sacrificial. From the human standpoint of living body and senses, even of consciousness, we would be nothing and nonexistent, hollowed as well as hallowed.

The other view presented here – namely emptiness as a liberating or freeing from the finitude of existence to prehend the totality of being/nothingness. In contrast to the Western view that nothingness would be the disembodied agony of nihilism, the Eastern view has emptiness as the nirvana of nonattachment and

³⁷ Richard Rohr, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), p. 226.

³⁸ Marcus Aurelius, “Meditations,” trans. George Long, *Marcus Aurelius and his Times* (Roslyn NY: Walter J. Black, 1945), p. 76.

³⁹ Keizan, *Transmission of Light*, trans. Thomas Cleary (Boston: Shambhala, 2002), p.199.

⁴⁰ Peter Haskell, *Bankei Zen: Translations from the Record of Bankei* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), pp. 32-39.

freedom. Whether regarded as privation or liberation, renunciation aims at the particular exemplifying the universal, the part to the whole, singular to the universal. Through the practice of renunciation, the finite appearance of existence can access the infinite presence of being. Being/nothingness can be experienced to extend infinitely.

CONCLUSION

As thought through logic, death is opposed to life, closing the finite existence of life. As understood through onto-logic, death and life are inseparable, opening the infinitude of being that is inseparable from nothingness.

Heidegger recognized the ontological importance of death, especially regarding temporality, but viewed death as experienced through the death of the other and as impending in the future rather than abiding in the present. Derrida asked what *dasein* would be without the individual I or self, an answer of which requires a renunciation of self-generated desire and attachment. For Nishitani, nothingness or emptiness is being and is at the start and end of every experienced moment, at the near side of things as they first appear from emptiness, experienced in the present. Living existence or *dasein* is not in a state of being-there as in Western thinking but rather a state of nothing-there in Eastern thinking that makes being possible.

When objectified and separated from life, death is experienced in the finitude of death-of-life and death-of-death. Distinguished from death-of-life and death-of-death, life-of-death links life to death and the nothingness of being, making death and life inseparable and necessary. Death is involved in life as the constant experience of nothingness.

Soteriologically speaking, with the dropping of self, body, and mind, the life-of-death brings transcending meaning to the experience of life and to the ontological understanding of death. Life-of-death can be experienced as infinite being/nothingness, particularly with the renunciation of the finite existence of self, body, and mind.