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TRANSCENDENCE

death and life
in psychotherapy, existentialism,
and buddhism

DAVID R. LOY

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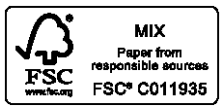

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PROLOGUE

Why was I born, if it wasn't forever?

—IONESCO

Every fear is fear of death.

—STEKEL

Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?

—TOLSTOY

The thought that really crushes us is the thought of the futility of life of which death is the visible manifestation.

—LEOPARDI

The meaning of life is that it stops.

—KAFKA

The nature of finite things is to have the seed of their passing-away as their essential being: the hour of their birth is the hour of their death.

—HEGEL

The major sin is the sin of being born.

—BECKETT

The terrible thing about death is that it transforms life into destiny.

—MALRAUX

Yaksha: What is the greatest wonder in the world?
Yudhishthira: Every day men see others called to their death, yet those who remain live as if they were immortal.

—*THE MAHĀBHĀRATA*

The king is surrounded by persons whose only thought is to divert the king, and to prevent his thinking of self. For he is unhappy, king though he be, if he thinks of himself.

This is all that men have been able to discover to make themselves happy. And those who philosophize on the matter, and who think men unreasonable for spending a whole day in chasing a hare which they would not have bought, scarce know our nature. The hare in itself would not screen us from the sight of death and calamities; but the chase which turns away our attention from these, does screen us.

—PASCAL

One can no more look steadily at death than at the sun.

—LA ROCHEFOUCAULD

We do not fear death, but the thought of death.

—SENECA

Death is easier to bear without thinking of it, than is the thought of death without peril.

—PASCAL

All our knowledge merely helps us to die a more painful death than the animals who know nothing.

—MAETERLINCK

He who most resembles the dead is the most reluctant to die.

—LA FONTAINE

The irony of man's condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive.

—ROY WALDMAN

"I had to die to keep from dying."

—COMMON SCHIZOPHRENIC REMARK

History is what man does with death.

—HEGEL

The self-assertion of technological objectification is the constant negation of death.

—HEIDEGGER

If what we call the problem of life, the problem of bread, were once solved, the earth would be turned into a hell by the emergence in a more violent form of the struggle for survival.

—UNAMUNO

The struggle for success becomes such a powerful force because it is the equivalent of self-preservation and self-esteem.

—ABRAM KARDINER

Immortality means being loved by many anonymous people.

—FREUD

One must pay dearly for immortality: one has to die several times while still alive.

—NIETZSCHE

The most horrible of all evils, death, is nothing to us, for when we exist, death is not present; but when death is present, then we are not.

—EPICURUS

For life in the present there is no death. Death is not an event in life. It is not a fact in the world. Our life is endless, in just the same way that our field of vision has no boundaries.

—WITTGENSTEIN

By avoiding death, men pursue it.

—DEMOCRITUS

Striving for life, I seek death; seeking death, I find life.

—SHAKESPEARE

Man has forgotten how to die because he does not know how to live.

—ROUSSEAU

How could those who never live at the right time die at the right time?

—NIETZSCHE

While you do not know life, how can you know about death?

—CONFUCIUS

It is true: we love life not because we are used to living but because we are used to loving.

—NIETZSCHE

Whoever rightly understands and celebrates death, at the same time magnifies life.

—RILKE

The artist carries death in him like a good priest his breviary.

—BÖLL

Art has two constants, two unending concerns: it always meditates on death and thus always creates life.

—PASTERNAK

Only the man who no longer fears death has ceased to be a slave.

—MONTAIGNE

A free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is a meditation not on death but on life.

—SPINOZA

To live in the face of death is to die unto death.

—KIERKEGAARD

The Kingdom of God is for none but the thoroughly dead.

—ECKHART

Since anxiety is the ego's incapacity to accept death, the sexual organizations were perhaps constructed by the ego in its flight from death, and could be abolished by an ego strong enough to die.

—NORMAN O. BROWN

As long as you do not know how to die and come to life again, you are but a poor guest on this dark earth.

—GOETHE

Who knows if what we call death is life, and what we call life is death?

—EURIPIDES

We live in a world of generation and death, and this world we must cast off.

—BLAKE

Q: Do not one's actions affect the person in after-births?
A: Are you born now? Why do you think of other births? The fact is that there is neither birth nor death. Let him who is born think of death and palliatives therefor.

—RAMANA MAHARSHI

Just understand that birth-and-death is itself nirvana. There is nothing such as birth and death to be avoided; there is nothing such as nirvana to be sought. Only when you realize this are you free from birth and death.

—DŌGEN

1

THE NONDUALITY OF LIFE AND DEATH

All of life is but keeping away the thoughts of death.

—SAMUEL JOHNSON

THE CONCERN of this chapter is not death but death-in-life: how and why we make the easiest thing of all into the most difficult, and the effects of that denial upon our lives. Today any serious discussion of this issue must take account of psychoanalysis, and that means beginning with Freud. Freud's life and work demonstrate how inevitably the two dimensions of this issue are linked. We seek to understand, as clearly and objectively as possible, the psychological impact of human mortality on human vitality, yet this concern is inescapably colored by the need that each of us has to come to terms with our own personal fate. A psychotherapeutic understanding can help us cope with our own mortality, but Freud's life demonstrates the reverse as well: that the problem of accepting one's own death cannot help affecting one's scientific inquiries in this direction. Along with his contributions to our understanding of the mind, Freud's difficulties in this regard reverberate through the subsequent history of psychoanalysis. We set the stage by recounting Freud's own struggles with our heaviest demon.

Freud. Freud's writings still have the power to shock, and none more than his theoretical discussions of death, which employ some of his more hasty generalizations and dubious arguments. Freud was rightly suspicious of

his attraction to philosophy, yet no attempt to explain the structure of the mind can avoid the ultimate questions, which is why the most important problems raised by psychology inevitably become philosophical and religious as well. A science of the mind that attempts to avoid these issues will have them sneaking in the back door, by remaining oblivious to its own metaphysical presuppositions. Freud was not afraid to explore the philosophical implications of his discoveries, but in doing so he was not able to escape his own time. Even the most revolutionary thinkers cannot stand on their own shoulders:

> The attempt to understand Freud's theoretical system, or that of any creative systematic thinker, cannot be successful unless we recognize that, and why, every system as it is developed and presented by its author is *necessarily* erroneous. . . . [T]he creative thinker must think in the terms of the logic, the thought patterns, the expressible concepts of his culture. That means he has not yet the proper words to express the creative, the new, the liberating idea. He is forced to solve an insoluble problem: to express the new thought in concepts and words that do not yet exist in his language. . . . The consequence is that the new thought as he formulated it is a blend of what is truly new and the conventional thought which it transcends. The thinker, however, is not conscious of this contradiction.[1]

Otto Rank, originally a member of Freud's inner circle, came to a similar conclusion. "Freud, without knowing it, interpreted the analytic situation in terms of his world-view and did not, as he thought, analyze the individual's unconscious objectively."[2] A century later we have more perspective on that world-view molded in nineteenth-century Vienna, with its bourgeois character-structure of self-discipline and sexual inhibition, in which scientific positivism contended with a pessimistic Schopenhauerian voluntarism. Both are found in the two aspects of Freud's character. On the one side there is the mechanistic, deterministic Neo-Kantianism of Helmholtz ("one of my idols"), encountered mainly through his stern psychology professor, Brucke ("the greatest authority who affected me more than any other in my whole life"), and evident in Freud's nev-

er-abandoned hope to ground his theories in physiology. On the other side are the tragic conclusions about human nature that his instinct theories finally brought him to, for Freud's concept of *libido* bears more than a passing resemblance to Schopenhauer's will which can resolve its predicament only by negating itself.

Freud's life and character have been scrutinized as carefully as anyone's. One feature that stands out is that he admitted to being haunted by death anxiety, to the point of thinking about death every day.

> As far back as we know anything of his life he seems to have been prepossessed by thoughts about death, more so than any other man I can think of except perhaps Sir Thomas Browne and Montaigne. Even in the early years of our acquaintance he had the disconcerting habit of parting with the words, "Goodbye; you may never see me again." There were the repeated attacks of what he called *Todesangst* (dread of death). He hated growing old, even as early as his forties, and as he did so the thoughts of death became increasingly clamorous. (Ernest Jones)[3]

This characteristic has been analyzed by Ernest Becker and Irvin Yalom, among many others.[4] Yalom points to Freud's compensatory need to be famous, and Becker shows how the psychoanalytic movement became Freud's own "immortality project," his unconscious way of surmounting death symbolically. The problem with such immortality projects (a phrase coined by Otto Rank) is the problem with unconscious motivation generally: when our conscious concerns only re-present what really drives us, they become symptoms and we become compulsive. This supports Fromm's conclusion that Freud's self-analysis was in important respects a failure—something that has serious ramifications for psychoanalysis, especially for those analysts who trace their lineage and credentials back to those analyzed by him. But once fear of death has been uncovered, what can be done with it except sublimate it in some way, as Freud did?

One can reveal the role that death-anxiety and death-denial play in life. The problem with Freud, finally, is that he did not discover that, in his theory or in his life. Death always occupied an awkward place in the development of his ideas, contorted one way and then another, in an attempt

to fit it in which never quite worked and never could work as long as there was something Freud did not want to see. In *Studies in Hysteria*, his first book, "death so pervades the clinical histories of these patients that only by a supreme effort of inattention could Freud have omitted it from his discussion of precipitating traumas."[5] But the fear of death as an explanatory factor was hardly new—it can be traced all the way back to the epic of Gilgamesh—whereas the theory of sexual libido repression might be a pathway to fame. So Freud had both personal and theoretical reasons for denying death in his early works, and there it languishes without an independent representation in the mind. "The unconscious seems to contain nothing that could give any content to our concept of the annihilation of life." Instead, he inclined to view the fear of death "as analogous to the fear of castration and that the situation to which the ego is reacting is one of being abandoned by the protecting super-ego."[6] These supposedly deeper fears are rooted in the conflicts of Oedipal and pre-Oedipal stages of development, according to the hydraulics of id, ego, and superego that direct the cathexis of libido. Not for the last time, "postulated strivings must take theoretical precedence over observed phenomena."[7] Having severed any direct connection between anxiety and death, Freud never rejoined them. Although he soon reversed himself and concluded that repression does not produce anxiety but vice versa, even his later death-drive had no theoretical connection with anxiety; the farthest he went was to state, vaguely, that what the ego fears in anxiety "is in the nature of an overthrow or an extinction."[8]

Most of Freud's followers followed him on this. Otto Fenichel, summarizing the conclusions of psychoanalytic literature before World War I, echoed Freud in doubting whether there is such a thing as a normal fear of death: the idea of one's own death is subjectively inconceivable, and therefore it must cover other unconscious ideas. The outbreak of hostilities turned Freud's mind more to the problem of human destructiveness. He could see motivations beyond those accounted for in his earlier theories—"I can no longer understand how we could have overlooked the universality of non-erotic aggression and destruction"—and he concluded that "the tendency to aggression is an innate, independent, instinctual disposition in man," one which he was later to describe as "the derivative and main representative of the death-instinct."[9]

In "Timely Thoughts on War and Death" (1915), Freud noticed that at bottom "nobody believes in his own death. Or, and this is the same: in his unconscious, every one of us is convinced of his immortality." On this matter, at least, Jung agreed:

> On the whole, I was astonished to see how little ado the unconscious psyche makes of death. It would seem as though death were something relatively unimportant, or perhaps our psyche does not bother about what happens to the individual. But it does seem that the unconscious is all the more interested in *how* one does it; that is, whether the attitude of consciousness is adjusted to dying or not.[10]

From this lack of concern, however, one can draw opposite conclusions, by regarding it either as a revelation about the immortality of the collective unconscious or as a costly delusion. In another short essay at the end of the war, Freud recommended more consciousness of death. "Would it not be better to give death the place in actuality and in our thoughts which is its due, and to yield a little more prominence to that unconscious attitude towards death which we have hitherto so carefully suppressed? . . . *Si vis vitam, para mortem.* If you would endure life, be prepared for death."[11]

Soon after this, however, Freud found another role for death in attempting to patch up his instinct theory. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) contrasts the pleasure principle, which naturally seeks repetition, with the more perplexing repetition compulsion found in fixations on traumatic experiences, which bring repeated suffering upon oneself. Freud put this fixation in the same category as a homeostatic tendency ("the Nirvana-principle") to recede to an earlier state of things, and concluded that life necessarily seeks death. "If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything dies for *internal* reasons—becomes inorganic once again—then we shall be compelled to say that '*the aim of all life is death*.'"[12] In accordance with a dualistic predisposition, perhaps inherited from Brucke (who reduced all forces to attraction and repulsion), Freud postulated two antagonistic instincts: the anabolic, which contributes to growth and development, and the catabolic, which expends energy. *The*

Ego and the Id (1923) adds aggression, which may be projected outward (sadism) or harnessed by the superego and turned inward (masochism) in order to pacify one's own guilt. Putting these three phenomena together in his last major work, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1938), Freud ended up with a basic and admittedly speculative dichotomy between two cosmic tendencies, the life-drive that tends toward greater unities and the death-drive that tends to undo these unities and destroy. Eros and Thanatos are doomed to perpetual conflict or, at best, uneasy and temporary compromise.

One need not be a philosopher to marvel at the breathtaking leap from these three psychological patterns to such a metaphysical conclusion. The logic is hard to follow, unless one is already committed to an instinctual libido theory that must be patched up if it is one's claim to immortality. The rest of us may harbor doubts, as did many of Freud's own followers.

Jung, no longer one of them, criticized this cosmological duality, which he believed to reflect the attitude of the conscious mind more than the dynamics of the unconscious. For Jung, the logical opposite of love/eros is hate, but the psychological opposite of love is a will-to-power, for when one predominates the other will be lacking. From his understanding of the collective unconscious (a monism that Freud's dualism was a self-conscious attempt to avoid), Jung viewed Freud's theory as a psychological prejudice: Eros is not the same as life, but someone who thinks so will naturally oppose Eros to death, confronting the highest principle of good with the evil of destruction.

From that perspective, Freud's final, Manichaean dualism amounts to another version of our oldest psychological tendency, here extrapolated into humankind's most basic psychic forces. If aggression in particular is grounded in a biological drive, the result can only be his tragic attitude toward the human condition: a pessimistic view of therapeutic possibilities leading to grim conclusions about the future of humanity. Is this an objective view of our situation, or a projection of Freud's own death fears? Freud jumped from one extreme to the other. First death was not an important element in mental functioning, then it became one of our two primordial instincts. Despite Freud's awareness of his own death-anxiety, *neither approach allows an independent role for death-fear*. Making death a drive reduces death-*anxiety* almost to an epiphenomenon, an effect rath-

er than a significant determinant of human behavior. As Robert Jay Lifton concluded about Freud's libido theory, this "de-deathifies death." So Freud courageously endured his own death anxiety without analyzing its effects on his life and his work. His blindness here is too remarkable to be anything other than a willful inattention, a *not wanting to see*, which is of course the definition of repression.

Life and death do require each other insofar as awareness of one implies awareness of the other. We can fear death (which is not the same as resisting dying) only if we know—or believe—ourselves to be alive. There cannot be life without death, whether they are antagonistic instincts or, more humbly, a dualistic way of thinking. This raises another therapeutic possibility. Rather than antagonistic forces that batter the ego, might Eros and Thanatos be the two tendencies of the ego itself, which is mentally constituted only to find itself in the tragic situation of contemplating its inevitable demise? For Freud, the death-instinct never reveals itself directly but insinuates itself inside the manifestations of Eros. Then perhaps the death-instinct is really the equal-but-opposite force of Eros: tails to its head, but one coin not two. That would mean, on one side, the life-fear that existentialists and psychoanalysts have described so well, and, on the other side, a death-wish which intuits the meaninglessness of the whole struggle and wearies of it. If, however, this situation is not a war of instincts but a way of thinking—a life-versus-death game that one unwittingly plays with oneself—there may be an alternative. If the ego is constituted by that game, what happens if that game ends?

This chapter will explore that possibility, which is suggested by Buddhism. It is not a perspective that Freud would have been sympathetic to. Rather than *seeing through* the dualism, he exhorts us to fight on the side of life. In spite of his reference to a Nirvana principle, Freud's few references to Buddhism are hostile and uncomprehending. His last works repeat his contemptuous rejection of the consolations of religion. We should fight the good fight as long as we can. There is no place in Freud's thought for coming to terms with the death principle by finding a meaning for death.

Repression. However unsatisfactory Freud's final understanding of death may finally be, that does not reduce the importance of what he discov-

ered, and that is first and foremost repression, which for him is the foundation-stone of psychoanalysis. "The essence of repression lies simply in the function of rejecting and keeping something out of consciousness." Something (a mental wish, according to Freud) makes me uncomfortable, and since I do not want to cope with it consciously I ignore or "forget" it. This clears the way for me to concentrate on something else more agreeable, but at a price: what has been repressed retains "a strong upward-striving force, an impulsion to get through to consciousness." Therefore the process of repression demands a continuous expenditure of effort. Freud compared the repressed mental wish to a guest who is not allowed into the drawing room. An ever-present guardian censor is necessary to guard the door, for the impetuous guest might otherwise force his way in.[13] We experience the effect of this as a persistent psychic tension.

Yet a repressed phenomenon tends to make it back into the drawing room of consciousness anyway, by adopting a disguise that allows it to pass the censor. For a neurotic, this disguise is the symptom. What is not admitted into awareness irrupts in obsessive ways that affect consciousness with precisely those qualities it strives to exclude. Since the symptom re-presents the repressed phenomenon in distorted form, symptoms are symbolic. Freud described this tendency to symptom-formation as *the return of the repressed*. The phrase suggests that this process is not just negative. The tendency to return to consciousness is also a blind impulse to resolve the problem, to heal the psychic wound caused by this alienation between consciousness and some of its contents. "The dialectic of neurosis contains its own 'attempts at explanation and cure,' energized by the ceaseless upward pressure of the repressed unconscious and producing the return of the repressed to consciousness, although in an increasingly distorted form, as long as the basic repression (denial) is maintained and the neurosis endures" (Brown).[14] The therapeutic process can assist this natural impulse toward a resolution by helping to translate the symbolized symptom (which has become fixated) back into its original form. This book may be viewed as an attempt to understand more of the implications of this process: implications which extend beyond what Freud envisioned and which may also go beyond what contemporary psychotherapists theorize.

Freud traced the hysterias and phobias of his middle-class Viennese patients back to repressed sexual wishes, to conclude that sexual repression is the primal human repression—although, as occurs with many of us, his attention gradually shifted from sex to death as he aged. Today psychoanalytic attention has joined him there, although having taken a different route which concludes that consciousness of death is our main repression.[15]

In focusing on the psychological effects of death-denial, Ernest Becker's last two books, *The Denial of Death* and *Escape from Evil,* synthesize the work of many predecessors, especially Otto Rank and Norman O. Brown. Becker builds on an insight of William James: "Mankind's common instinct for reality . . . has always held the world to be essentially a theater for heroism." Why do we want to be heroes? Our natural narcissism and need for self-esteem mean that each of us yearns to feel of special value, first in the universe. Heroism (in the broad sense: e.g., Freud as an intellectual hero) is how we justify that need to count more than anyone or anything else. Human society can be understood as a codified hero system, a symbolic-action structure whose roles and rules function as a vehicle for heroism. For Becker, this is the common denominator behind the cultural relativity that anthropology discovers, which is nothing other than the relativity of hero-systems.[16] Primitive peoples often believed that their rituals were responsible for keeping the universe going, and much of the problem with contemporary society is that technological man, increasingly reduced to a consumer, has difficulty attributing any such a role to himself.

But, to carry the analysis a step further, why do we need to be special? This reaches one of the wellsprings of human motivation: that desire is first of all and most of all a reflex of the terror of death. We need to be heroes because heroism is what can qualify us for a special destiny. And we need that special destiny because the alternative is literally too much to contemplate. The irony of our unique ability to symbolize—language—is that it serves to reveal our fate more clearly. Man is the animal that knows it will die. This fear of death is useful in keeping our organism armed toward self-preservation, but it must also be repressed for us to function with any modicum of psychological comfort. The result is us:

hyperanxious animals who even invent reasons for anxiety when there are none. This is also the conclusion of Otto Rank, Melanie Klein, Norman O. Brown, and more recently Irvin Yalom, who argues that a considerable part of our life energy is consumed in the denial of death.[17] Most animals have fears programmed into them as instincts, but we humans fashion our fears out of the ways we perceive the world—which unlocks a door that Becker himself does not open, since it suggests that if we can come to experience the world differently we might fashion our fears differently too. Or is it the other way around: do our fears cause us to perceive the world in the way we do, and might someone come to experience the world differently who was brave enough to confront the thing we most avoid?

The reason man's essence was never found, says Becker, "was that there was no essence, that the essence of man is really his *paradoxical* nature, the fact that he is half animal and half symbolic."[18] But this moves too easily from an existentialist view that man has no essence to the familiar claim that our essence is dualistic: in Becker's terms, a god with an anus and all the other accoutrements of mortality. Does such a modernized mind-body dualism grasp our immutable human condition, or is it another historically determined understanding, one of many possible? The question is important because this duality lies at the heart of Becker's argument. The mind looks down at the body, realizes what flesh implies, and panics. As a consequence, "everything that man does in his symbolic world is an attempt to deny and overcome his grotesque fate. He literally drives himself into a blind obliviousness with social games, psychological tricks, personal preoccupations so far removed from the reality of his situation that they are forms of madness." Even our character traits are examples of this. Ferenczi called them secret psychoses, not much different from a repetition compulsion, because they mechanize a particular way of reacting. These sedimented habits are a necessary protection, for without them we become overtly psychotic. To see the world as it really is is not only terrifying but devastating, because "it *makes routine, automatic, secure, self-confident activity impossible* . . . . It places a trembling animal at the mercy of the entire cosmos and the problem of the meaning of it." Thus the bite in Pascal's aphorism: "Men are so necessarily mad that not

to be mad would amount to another form of madness." For Becker, this is literally true: normality is our collective, protective madness, in which we repress the truth of the human condition, and those who have difficulty playing this game are the ones we call mentally ill. Rank describes neurosis as nothing but the individual coming to feel the metaphysical problem of human existence. If schizophrenics are suffering from the whole truth, because they feel that metaphysical problem more deeply, then William Burroughs is right: a paranoid is someone who knows a little of what's going on. Psychoanalysis reveals the high price of denying this truth about man's condition, what might be called "the costs of pretending not to be mad."[19]

This gives a more existential slant to such key Freudian concepts as guilt and the Oedipal complex. In spite of all that Freud discovered about childhood development, his libido-instinct theory kept him from grasping the main point. According to Becker, the early experience of children is their attempt to deny the anxiety of their emergence, their fear of losing support and having to stand alone, helpless within an awesome world. This leads to what he calls the great scientific simplification of psychoanalysis:

> This despair he avoids by building defenses; and these defenses allow him to feel a basic sense of self-worth, of meaningfulness, of power. They allow him to feel that he *controls* his life and his death, that he really does live and act as a willful and free individual, that he has a unique and self-fashioned identity, that he is *somebody*. . . .[20]

Freud traced guilt back to early ambivalent feelings of the child, particularly hate and death wishes toward parents alternating with fears of losing them. But there is a simpler explanation. "Guilt, as the existentialists put it, is the guilt of being itself. It reflects the self-conscious animal's bafflement at having emerged from nature, at sticking out too much without knowing what for, at not being able to securely place himself in an eternal meaning system."[21] Such "pure" guilt has nothing to do with infringements or punishment for secret wishes; the major sin is the sin of being born, as Beckett put it. For existential psychologists, it is the worm in

the heart of the human condition, apparently an inescapable consequence of self-consciousness itself. Schizophrenics sometimes say they feel guilty just for existing. Perhaps here too they suffer from the truth, whereas the rules of our collective, protective madness require us to find a more specific fault to feel guilty about.

Becker sees the origin of this guilt in the child's reaction to bodily processes and their urges. "Guilt as inhibition, as determinism, as smallness and boundedness" is implied by the constraints that our basic animal condition imposes upon us symbol-using gods. But this may beg the question. Is such mind-body dualism the cause of our anxiety or its effect? Do we panic because we discover ourselves to be consciousnesses with bodies, or is our panic what motivates us to dualize ego-consciousness from body?

The most detailed historical study of death in Western culture is Philippe Aries' *The Hour of Our Death,* a monumental—indeed, interminable—survey of the last millennium. Although Aries' approach is not psychoanalytic, his conclusions are all the more relevant, since his evidence comes from a different perspective. At the moment the most interesting for us are the first two stages of death-awareness he distinguishes. In striking contrast to what came later, death in the Middle Ages was "tame." While recognized as "evil," it was nonetheless accepted because inseparable from life. Contrary to the universalist implications of Becker's thesis about death-repression, there do not seem to have been the extremes of terror and denial that we now associate with death; it was a repose, a peaceful sleep from which one might or might not reawaken with the eventual resurrection of the body.

But this changed. "The strong individual of the later Middle Ages could not be satisfied with the peaceful but passive conception of *requies*. . . . He split into two parts: a body that experienced pleasure or pain and an immortal soul that was released by death."[22] Evidently it was this dualism that later attained philosophical reification in the *Meditations* of Descartes, whose legacy we still struggle with.

Aries' argument supplements what Johan Huizinga wrote in *The Waning of the Middle Ages,* Chapter 2 of which begins: "At the close of the Middle Ages, a sombre melancholy weighs on people's souls. Whether we read a chronicle, a poem, a sermon, a legal document even, the same impression of immense sadness is produced by them all." Huizinga does not

seek the cause of this melancholy, but Chapter 11 begins: "No other epoch has laid so much stress as the expiring Middle Ages on the thought of death. An everlasting call of *memento mori* resounds through life."[23] Is it a coincidence that this new awareness of death spread just before the acceleration of Western civilization that began with the Renaissance? If history is what man does with death, as Hegel put it, then a more death-conscious society will create more history.

> The Renaissance humanists themselves evidently needed a fantasy of misery and catastrophe in order to contain the renascent energy they were riding. Ficino never ceased complaining of pain and melancholy, yet this "bitter desperation" was the source of his psychological philosophy. Petrarch kept before his mind the "great overarching reality of man's life: his death." Yet the more occupied with death, the more these humanists thought, built, wrote, painted, and sang.[24]

Burckhardt pointed out that although the Renaissance brought an increased feeling of strength and freedom, this was accompanied by "an increased isolation, doubt, skepticism and—resulting from all these—anxiety."[25] He also noticed the most outstanding symptom, now so common we take it for granted and scarcely notice it: a morbid craving for fame. The desire to be famous (which will be discussed in chapter 5) is a good example of how something repressed (such as death-terror) reappears in consciousness in distorted form (the passion for *symbolic* immortality), which is therefore a symptom of our problem (if what I really want is personal immortality, no fame will ever be enough—but that is usually experienced as "I am not yet famous enough"). This craving and the other traits of Burckhardt mentions are associated with greater self-consciousness. Increased consciousness is increased awareness of the end, and therefore increased need to resolve the anxiety such awareness brings with it, whether by becoming an immaterial soul or by attaining some symbolic immortality through one's reputation.

All this suggests that the Platonic, Cartesian, and now commonsense mind-body dualism that Becker too presupposes might not be the unvarying essence of our human nature but another example of nurture

being taken for nature: an historically determined conception now so deeply ingrained that its metaphysical origin has been forgotten. And if this dualistic conception is a result of our death-anxiety, it falls under the definition of repression, something that can afflict whole civilizations as well as individuals.

This can be made clearer by relating it to the existential-psychological perspective on the Oedipal complex. Contemporary psychoanalytic theory understands the Oedipal complex as a shorthand term for the early conditioning of the child. An existentialist perspective understands this early conditioning as what Norman O. Brown has renamed the Oedipal *project.* Here too a Freudian interpretation approaches yet does not quite grasp the main point: the Oedipal desire is not to reunite with one's mother by becoming the father, but to resolve that separation from mother by becoming one's own father. Why? To become one's own father would be to become the creator and sustainer of one's own life, so "the essence of the Oedipal project is the project of becoming God—in Spinoza's formula, *causa sui,* self-caused; in Sartre's être-en-soi-pour-soi."[26] To be one's own father is to be one's own origin. Becker calls this the flight from contingency, and this flight is precisely what Buddhism finds problematic. From the Buddhist viewpoint, the Oedipal project is the attempt of the developing ego-self to attain closure on itself, to foreclose its dependence on others by becoming a self-sufficient Cartesian-like ego. It is the wish to become what the Mahāyāna philosopher Nāgārjuna described as *svabhāva,* "self-existing"—something that is not possible. Yet that does not stop us from trying, for this is the way the burgeoning sense-of-self strives to compensate for its burgeoning sense of unreality. Rather than just a way to conquer death, however, this is more immediately the quest to deny one's groundlessness by becoming one's own ground: the socially conditioned (but nonetheless illusory) ground that we know as being an individual, autonomous person.

Then what Freud called the Oedipal complex is due to the child's discovery that he is not part of mother, after all. The problem is not so much that Dad has first claim on Mom, as what that contributes to the child's dawning realization of separateness: "But if I'm not part of Mom, what

am I part of?" This generates the need to discover one's own ground, or rather (since there is none to be found) the need to create it. This is an Oedipal *project* because it never succeeds, except insofar as I create some security for myself by identifying with certain social groups and their values, goals, etc. Then growing up is not a matter of discovering who or what one really is, but joining the general amnesia whereby each of us pretends to be an autonomous person and learns how to play the social game of constantly reassuring each other that, yes, you are a person, just like me, and I'm okay, you're okay.

If this is what happens, the Oedipal project is problematic for a different reason than Freud offers or even Becker suspects. The basic difficulty is a sense of lack, which originates from the fact that our self-consciousness is not something self-existing but a mental construct. Rather than being self-sufficient, the sense-of-self is more like the surface of the sea: dependent on depths it cannot grasp because it is a manifestation of them. Buddhism makes this point by deconstructing the sense-of-self into sets of interrelating physical and mental phenomena; consciousness is only one factor, an effect of certain conditions and a cause of others. Problems arise when such a conditioned consciousness seeks to ground itself, that is, wants to become unconditioned and autonomous, which is to say *real*. If consciousness is ungrounded it can try to realize itself only by trying to objectify itself. I strive to become real by becoming some*thing*. Then the Oedipal project can never be completed because there is a contradiction in the very attempt: the ego-self is the effort of awareness to objectify itself in order to grasp itself—which it can no more do than a hand can shake itself or an eye see itself. The sense-of-self that arises is a fiction, a mental construct that is delusive insofar as, in grasping at it out of the need to ground ourselves, what-is-grasped is confused with what grasps.[27]

*The consequence is that the sense-of-self always has, as its inescapable shadow, a sense-of-*lack*, which it always tries to escape.* It is here that the theory of repression becomes so valuable, for Freud's concept of the return of the repressed—that what-has-been-repressed returns to consciousness distorted into a symptom—shows us how to link this fundamental yet hopeless situation with the symbolic ways we try to overcome our sense of *lack* by making ourselves real *in* the world. We experience this deep sense of *lack* as the feeling that "there is something wrong with me." To the

extent that we have a sense of autonomous self, we also have this sense of *lack,* but it manifests itself in many different forms and we respond to it in many different ways. In its "purer" forms *lack* appears as ontological guilt or, even more basic, and ontological anxiety at the very core of one's being, which becomes almost unbearable because it gnaws on that core. For that reason, all anxiety wants to become objectified into fear *of* something (as Spinoza might say, fear is anxiety associated with an object), because then we know what to do: we have ways to defend ourselves against particular feared things.

The tragedy of these objectifications, however, is that nothing objective can ever be enough if it is not really something objective we want. When we do not understand what is actually motivating us—because what we *think* we need is only a symptom of something else—we end up compulsive. Then is the guilt that seems to bedevil humankind not the cause of our unhappiness but its effect? "The ultimate problem is not guilt but the incapacity to live. The illusion of guilt is necessary for an animal that cannot enjoy life, in order to organize a life of nonenjoyment" (Brown).[28] In Buddhist terms, if the autonomy of *self*-consciousness is a delusion which can never quite shake off the feeling that "something is wrong with me," that sense of inadequacy will need to be rationalized away. Such an approach implies that no satisfactory mental health can be gained except by resolving the sense-of-*lack* that shadows the sense-of-self, by somehow resolving—ending? transforming in some yet-to-be-understood way?—the sense-of-self's Oedipal project of self-grounding.

Transference. The insightful things that existential psychology has discovered about transference are illuminated further by the Buddhist idea of a groundless *lack* that needs to find security and meaning somewhere.

Transference in the narrow sense is our unconscious tendency to take emotions and behavior felt toward one person (e.g., a parent) and project them onto another (e.g., psychoanalyst). But if transference in the wider sense is distortion of encounter, as Rollo May defined it, then we all do it most of the time, which is what Freud concluded: It is a "universal phenomenon of the human mind" that "dominates the whole of each person's relation to his human environment." It is our earliest and our most natural way of trying to fill up our sense-of-*lack*: by identifying with someone

who, we think, *is* real. Transference reveals that we never grow up, remaining children who distort the world in order to relieve our sense of helplessness, who perceive things as we wish them to be for our own safety. The need to find security by subjecting ourselves to others persists, transferred from parents to teachers, supervisors, and rulers. This is not simply an emotional mistake but a matter of experiencing the other as one's *whole world,* just as the family is for the child. In this way we tame the terror of life, by focusing the power and horror of the universe in one place. "*Mirabile*! The transference object, being endowed with the transcendent powers of the universe, now has in himself the power to control, order, and combat them." This natural fetishization of man's highest yearnings and strivings explains our urge to deify the other: "The more they have, the more rubs off on us. We participate in their immortality, and so we create immortals." Rank said that we need to erect a god-ideal outside ourselves in order to live at all, and the transference-object fits the bill.[29]

The problem is that this process is unconscious and uncritical, a regression to wishful thinking that is not fully in one's control, and therefore dangerous. We children of the twentieth century do not need to think very hard to come up with examples of this phenomenon, but examples have never been lacking. Humans have always been hypnotized by those who represent life or *being,* and eager to submit to charismatic personalities who legitimize their power with a little symbolic mystification. "Each society elevates and rewards leaders who are talented at giving the masses heroic victory, expiation for guilt, relief of personal conflicts." Alas, these leaders are usually the grandest, most mindless patriots, "who embrace the ongoing system of death denial with the heartiest hug, the hottest tears, the least critical distance."[30] Government is the organization of idolatry, as Shaw put it. The source of privilege is prestige, and the etymology of prestige reveals its roots in deception and enchantment.[31]

If we contemplate the phenomenon of transference on the broadest possible scale, what does it reveal? From the Buddhist perspective, the functions that psychoanalysis identifies as transference exemplify a psychic tendency that is almost universal. Since transference includes ego-models, we can do it with someone we have never met. Figures like Socrates and Wittgenstein tend to become models—*heroes*—for philosophers, even as sports champions and film stars are for many others. The

person not fascinated by one model is fascinated by another, because *this is how we choose the cosmology for our own heroics,* even if those heroics must be vicarious; at least we can identify our universe with the one that our hero lived, thought, and acted within. And that brings us closer to the heart of the matter, for transference applies to more than people. We admire not only outstanding sportsmen, but their teams; we identify not only with national leaders, but with nations; not only are we impressed by Freud or the Buddha, we are converted to psychoanalysis and Buddhism.

The Buddhist term for all this is attachment, yet that is such a vague, indiscriminate concept that this is an area where Buddhism has much to learn from psychotherapy, which has been investigating more methodically how delusion functions. What ties all these together into a nearly universal phenomenon of the human mind is more than our desire to tame the terror of death: it is our need to organize the chaos of life by finding a unifying meaning-system that gives us knowledge about the world and a life-program for living in it, informing us both what is and what we should do. A meaning-system teaches us what our *lack* really is and how we can overcome it. Children absorb this from their parents as part of what it means to be a person; we locate ourselves in the universe by internalizing the meaning-system of someone we identify with. Then we wake up to find ourselves comfortably inside such a meaning-system. "All of us are driven to be supported in a self-forgetful way, ignorant of what energies we really draw on, of the kind of lie we have fashioned in order to live securely and serenely."[32]

Also essential to that lie is *negative* transference, for our antipathies are as important to our meaning-system as our sympathies: history is the story of how we work out our problems on others. If transference is distortion of encounter, what transferences are more powerful than hatred and resentment? Negativity is the best example of a karmic projection that rebounds to haunt us. It is our usual way of dealing with what Jung so aptly called *the shadow*: those aspects of ourselves that we cannot cope with because they threaten the particular identifications by which we try to overcome our sense of *lack.* If that sense-of-*lack* manifests in consciousness as an obsession with certain symbols, the shadow is a constellation of those symbols that represent failure to us, which we cannot accept or integrate.

> This guilt-feeling based on the existence of the shadow is discharged from the system in the same way both by the individual and the collective—that is to say, by the phenomenon of the *projection of the shadow.* The shadow, which is in conflict with the acknowledged values, cannot be accepted as a negative part of one's own psyche and is therefore projected—that is, it is transferred to the outside world and experienced as an outside object. It is combated, punished, and exterminated as "the alien out there" instead of being dealt with as one's own inner problem. (Neumann)[33]

Freud's view of aggression was pessimistic. The sad truth "is that men are not gentle, friendly creatures, wishing for love, who simply defend themselves if they are attacked, but that a powerful measure of desire for aggression has to be reckoned as a part of their instinctual endowment." Again, the bedrock of libido-instinct, which allows only a dim prognosis for the future. But if history is what man does with death, there is a reason why we try to work out our problems through others. "The death fear of the ego is lessened by the killing, the sacrifice, of the other; through the death of the other, one buys oneself free from the penalty of dying, of being killed" (Rank). We feel that we are the masters of life and death when we control the fate of others. This allows us to project death/*lack* outside us, personified in the enemy who is perceived as trying to kill us. No wonder, then, that people tend to rejoice when war finally breaks out, as even Freud and Rilke did at the beginning of the Great War. Projecting death/*lack* over there liberates the space for life here. We feel newly bonded to our fellows in a joint life-against-death project that no longer festers unconsciously because it is no longer individual but has become collective, is no longer unwinnable but something we have some measure of conscious control over. Our private "immortality accounts" become merged. We mourn our dead, but not too much if the number of enemy dead is greater.[34]

Thus war is sacred. It seems to give us the most purchase on our amorphous sense-of-*lack,* which we otherwise struggle with in a far more abstracted and symbolic form. "War is a ritual for the emergence of heroes, and so for the transmutation of common, selfish values. In war men live

their own ennoblement. But what we are reluctant to admit is that the admiration of the hero is a vicarious catharsis of our own fears."[35] A catharsis of our own fears about our own death, and about our own sense of lack. In this ritual, the enemy has an important role to play, for only through Judas can evil be redeemed. "War is a blessing for the world and for all nations," the Ayatollah Khomeini proclaimed in 1984: "Through war God purifies the Earth." War is an attempt at moral cloture. "The irony is that men are always dissatisfied and guilty in small and large ways, and this is what drives them to a search for purity where all dissatisfaction can come to a head and be wiped away." The irony may be greater than that. Rank declared that all our human problems and their sufferings are due to man's attempt to perfect the world. As Becker put it, evil arises from our urge to heroic victory over evil.[36]

Paradoxically, the amount of evil humans bring into the world has increased at the same time that we have ceased believing in evil. Look at our agonies over Nazi crematoriums. We cannot understand how such a thing could have happened in the supposedly civilized West. On the last page of *The Hour of our Death,* Aries is struck by what he calls a contradiction: "The belief in evil was necessary to the taming of death; the disappearance of the belief has restored death to its savage state." As a consequence, today "neither the individual nor the community is strong enough to recognize the existence of death." But Aries' contradiction is not so puzzling. A belief in evil is necessary for a belief in goodness, and, however painful their struggle may be, it is a reassuring game. We know where we are, we expect to cash in our chips. But if there are no chips and no place to cash them in, *no sacred redemption of the secular,* then the only alternative is a secular redemption—and the pressure that exerts on the secular becomes demonic if redemption is not possible in that form. When wars and revolutions do not bring the absolution we need, we will need repeated wars and continuing revolutions. "The Devil is the one who prevents the heroic victory of immortality [victory over *lack*] in each culture—even the atheistic, scientific ones."[37] If so, when religions decline we will have to find a secular Satan. How could either capitalist or communist countries have justified their own horrors without the other! Since we can never attain cloture on the security we crave, never fill up our *lack* and make ourselves really real, we always need a devil to rationalize our failure and

to fight against. But as long as we do so, the chief cause of our problems will continue to be our attempted solutions.

"The striving for perfection reflects man's effort to get some human grip on his eligibility for immortality."[38] Then we can never be perfect enough—and that, in a nutshell, is the problem with all these distorted, because heavily symbolized, immortality/becoming-real projects. When we play the game according to these rules we cannot win. The best we can do is hide the fact from ourselves by projecting our victory sometime into the future. As Hazlitt realized, it is essential to the triumph of reform that it should never succeed. But we cannot afford to play that game anymore. Today civilization is not likely to survive a heroism that redeems evil by eliminating the enemy, which is why that form of struggle has for the most developed countries been largely sublimated into economic competition. Yet neither can our biosphere support the delusion of victory through sustained economic growth, the cult of an ever-increasing Gross National Product.

Death-in-life. A century of theory and practice has brought psychoanalysis to one of the great insights of existentialism: anxiety is not adventitious but essential to the self, not something we have but something we are. Many have concluded that it is not possible to eliminate our anxiety, yet that conclusion does not necessarily follow. What is implied, rather, is that such an end would also end the ego-self as usually experienced. Norman O. Brown is sympathetic to such a possibility: "Since anxiety is the ego's incapacity to accept death, the sexual organizations were perhaps constructed by the ego in its flight from death, and could be abolished by an ego strong enough to die."[39] But for Rank and Becker, as for Freud, anxiety cannot all be overcome therapeutically, because it is impossible to stand up to the terrible truth of one's condition without it. Rollo May and Irvin Yalom view anxiety more positively, as a guide that can point the way to a more authentic life; the aim of therapy, therefore, is to reduce it to a more manageable level.[40]

Evidently we must choose between anxiety and repression. If we cannot face the truth of our condition, which is mortality (or groundlessness, according to my Buddhist interpretation), we must forget that truth, which is to repress it. The difference between neurosis and normality—

that undramatic, unnoticed psychopathology of the average, according to Maslow—is how successful that repression is. The neurotic has a better memory than most of us, so anxiety keeps breaking through into consciousness and must be dealt with more harshly in order to preserve some purchase on one's fate, some circumscribed sphere of action. All of us react to our anxiety by "partializing" our world, by restricting our consciousness within narrow bounds, to areas that we can more or less control which provide us a sense of self-confidence. The neurotic, who is inhabited by meanings that she cannot cope with, has more difficulty sustaining the illusion of self-confidence and so must confine herself even more narrowly. The psychotic can do this hardly at all, and in self-protection de-animates himself, often referring to himself as a toy, a puppet, or a machine. The literature on schizophrenia is full of expressions like "I had to die to keep from dying."[41] Lucretius mentions those who commit suicide because of their intense fear of death. Better an end with terror than a terror without end; best of all to die without actual death, by de-animating.

The difference between these three is a matter of degree. When you grow up unable to give yourself freely to the cultural roles available to you, your life becomes a problem. Tillich called neurosis the way of avoiding nonbeing by avoiding being. Rank said the constant restriction of the neurotic's life is because "he refuses the loan (life) in order thus to avoid paying the debt (death)." Then the anguish and despair that the neurotic complains of are not the result of symptoms but their cause; those symptoms are what shield one from the tragic contradictions at the heart of the human situation: death, guilt, meaninglessness, groundlessness. "*The irony of man's condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive.*"[42] Thus we bind ourselves without a rope, to use the Zen expression, by selling our birthright of freedom for a pottage of petty securities, to use a biblical one. In order to avoid pain we choose not to look at something, but that something is so crucial to life that we end up restricting our consciousness within very narrow limits. We become the diner in a restaurant who complains that the food is inedible and moreover the portions are too small.

This supports Jung: life and death may be logical opposites but they are not psychological opposites. Buddhist teachings contain many admoni-

tions against such dualistic thinking. We differentiate between good and evil, success and failure, life and death, because we want one and not the other. This does not work, however, because the two terms are interdependent: each gains its meaning only by negating the other, so affirming one half also maintains its opposite, the pole we strive to avoid. In order to live a self-consciously "pure" life, I must be preoccupied with impurity; my hope for success is proportional to my dread of failure; and my clinging to life will equal my fear of death.

The problem is that true life is negated by clinging to it. If the difference between normality and psychosis is a matter of degree, the restriction of the psychotic life-sphere merely aggravates our usual partial paralysis into a complete death-in-life. Since fear of death rebounds as fear of life, they become two sides of the same coin. Then genuine life cannot be opposed to death but must embrace both life and death. Rightly understanding and celebrating death also magnifies life, declared Rilke. Anticipating her death in a German concentration camp, Etty Hillesum experienced this paradox:

> By "coming to terms with life" I mean: the reality of death has become a definite part of my life; my life has, so to speak, been extended by death, by my looking death in the eye and accepting it, by accepting destruction as part of life and no longer wasting my energies on fear of death or the refusal to acknowledge its inevitability. It sounds paradoxical: by excluding death from our life we cannot live a full life, and by admitting death into our life we enlarge and enrich it.[43]

So the great irony is that as long as we crave immortality we are dead. This gives a different slant to the famous antiphon of Notker Balbulus: *media vita in morte sumus,* in the middle of life we are in death. La Fontaine noticed that those who already resemble the dead are the most reluctant to die. Aries is struck by the fact that in the late Middle Ages the idea of death was replaced by the concept of mortality in general. "The sense of death henceforth diluted and distributed over the whole of life, and thus lost its intensity." Yet life too lost its intensity at the same time, as he notices elsewhere: "It is a curious and seemingly paradoxical fact

that life ceased to be so desirable at the same time that death ceased to seem so punctual or so powerful."[44] In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the living corpse became a common literary theme; what better image could there be of our situation today? Aries' study supports the conclusion that the subdued neurosis of death-in-life which now passes for normality does not reflect man's unchanging nature, but characterizes only one particular, historically conditioned nature: ours. The issue becomes whether such a conditioned nature can be reconditioned or deconditioned.

An End to Transference? Becker is dubious. Transference is necessary for the "safe heroism" which is all that most of us can manage. Such projections are necessary to endure our life and our death, for "life is possible only with illusions." The problem is that even the most individuated and creative people can manage only a limited amount of autonomy. None of us can endure being our own sun. We must erect a god-ideal outside ourselves in order to live at all, and to avoid this being perceived as our own creation we must forget we have erected it. For this reason, Becker believes the promises of non-Western traditions such as Buddhism are deluded. "There is no way of standing on one's own center without outside support, only now this support is made to seem to come from the inside. The person is conditioned to function under his own control from his own center, from the spiritual powers that well up within him. Actually, of course, the support comes from the transference certification by the guru that what the disciple is doing is true and good."[45]

Freud and Ferenczi saw a more positive side to transference, for it also indicates a natural attempt to heal oneself through creating the larger reality one needs to discover oneself, as part of the patient's effort to cure himself. Thus Rank concluded that "projection is a *necessary unburdening* of the individual; man cannot live closed in upon himself and for himself." Then the question becomes how to choose between transference-objects. What is *creative* projection? What is *life-enhancing* illusion?[46] As Jung put it: what myth shall we live by? How can we ensure that our illusions are capable of correction, that they will not deteriorate into more dangerous delusions? This allows a more sympathetic view of religious faith than Freud had. Hegel pointed out that God is the perfect spiritual object pre-

cisely because he is the most abstract. If the problem with transference is that it fetishizes our highest yearnings into the narrow compass of particular objects, one solution is to expand those strivings and feelings of awe to the greatest possible extent: into the cosmos as a whole. "It also takes the problem of self-justification and removes it from the objects near at hand. We no longer have to please those around us, but the very source of creation."[47]

For existential psychologists such as Becker and Yalom, however, this can only be a lesser evil. Since transference involves projection, repression, and thus self-deception, all transference heroics are demeaning because they are unconscious and not fully in one's control. Man cowering before any god, even God, is not a satisfactory solution if transference always involves sheltering oneself in alien—because alienated—powers. "Transference, even after we admit its necessary and ideal dimensions, reflects some universal betrayal of man's own powers, which is why he is always submerged by the larger structures of society." So Becker too cannot help hoping. His exposition of Kierkegaard lets pass without criticism Kierkegaard's idea that, once the self has demolished all its unconscious power linkages and supports—the energies we usually draw on while unaware of their true source, the lie we have fashioned to live securely—"the self can begin to relate to powers beyond itself." He is even sympathetic to Tillich's version of this, the hope that man may become "truly centered" on his own energies.[48]

That brings us to the crux of the matter: If we consciously destroy our unconscious power linkages, those securities big and small that compose our character structure and stabilize our world, what will happen?

> Take stock of those around you and you will . . . hear them talk in precise terms about themselves and their surroundings, which would seem to point to them having ideas on the matter. But start to analyse those ideas and you will find that they hardly reflect in any way the reality to which they appear to refer, and if you go deeper you will discover that there is not even an attempt to adjust the ideas to this reality. Quite the contrary: through these notions the individual is trying to cut off any personal vision of reality, of his own very life. For life is at the start a chaos

> in which one is lost. The individual suspects this, but he is frightened at finding himself face to face with this terrible reality, and tries to cover it over with a curtain of fantasy, where everything is clear. It does not worry him that his "ideas" are not true, he uses them as trenches for the defense of his existence, as scarecrows to frighten away reality. . . . The man with the clear head is the man who frees himself from those fantastic "ideas" and looks life in the face, realizes that everything in it is problematic, and feels himself lost. And this is the simple truth—that to live is to feel oneself lost—he who accepts it has already begun to find himself, to be on firm ground. Instinctively, as do the shipwrecked, he will look round for something to which to cling, and that tragic, ruthless glance, absolutely sincere, because it is a question of his salvation, will cause him to bring order into the chaos of his life. These are the only genuine ideas; the ideas of the shipwrecked. All the rest is rhetoric, posturing, farce. He who does not really feel himself lost, is without remission; that is to say, he never finds himself, never comes up against his own reality. (Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*)[49]

This passage is so much to the point that I hesitate to quibble, but there is a difficulty: its conclusion does not resolve the problem raised at the beginning. The individual should free himself from those fantastic "ideas," yet to what end? Feeling himself lost, shipwrecked, he looks around ruthlessly for something to cling to and ends up grasping at "genuine ideas." Are these genuine ideas any the less trenches for the defense of his existence? Or, to continue the analogy, can't a piece of driftwood sometimes work as well as a boat, and therefore, in Ortega's own terms, be as problematic? If ideas are what serve to shore up the self and shield us from anxiety, those of the shipwrecked may be as reassuring and therefore as dangerous as any other. Is there another alternative? Ortega's assumption here seems to be the same as Becker's: once we realize that the human condition is chaotic and terrifying, we must cling to whatever we can in order to make sense of it. But what if, instead of finding oneself in such a fashion, one were truly to *lose* oneself—that is, let go, sink, drown? What might happen then? Do

we really know? Madness is one possibility; is there another? R. D. Laing opined that the mystic swims in the same sea the psychotic drowns in. Are there different ways to die, with different consequences? Can one die to *oneself*? Then what is it that remains to live? And if we do not know the answers to these questions, how may we find them?

We have seen that existential psychology replaces Freud's sexual reductionism with the fear of death and (a hope within every fear) the desire for immortality. As different as these monologies are, they both imply tragic conclusions about the human condition. The most that the early Freud could offer was sublimation or rational control of the libido by the ego, which tries to make the best of a bad thing. There are times when psychoanalysis can only "transform your hysterical misery into common unhappiness."[50] His later view was more pessimistic, postulating a struggle between the life drive and the death drive that death will always win. Becker can hardly be called more optimistic. If our deepest, most repressed fear is of death, we are stuck with various transference-projections or psychotically acknowledging the terror of our situation; for each of us is indeed going to die. Again, death always wins—in this case even before we die, in the psychic paralysis of death-in-life.

> Since there is no secular way to resolve the primal mystery of life and death, all secular societies are lies. And since there is no sure human answer to such a mystery, all religious integrations are mystifications. . . . *Each society is a hero system which promises victory over evil and death.* But . . . it is not within man's means to triumph over evil and death.[51]

The difference between Freud and Becker is that Eros and Thanatos are instinctual drives, while anxiety about death is a reaction of the animal who is conscious enough to have become aware of itself and its inevitable fate; so it is something we have *learned*. But what have we learned? Is the dilemma of life-confronting-death an objective fact we just come to see, or is this another dualistic way of thinking that has been mentally

constructed and projected, that is, *a deeply repressed game which each of us is playing with oneself*? More precisely, the Buddhist critique of ego-self suggests that life-versus-death is not a game the ego plays, but that game whose play is the ego.

Then death/nonbeing-terror is not something the ego has, it is what the ego is. Anxiety is generated by this fictional self-reflection for the simple reason that I do not know and cannot know what this thing I supposedly am *is*. Hence the sense-of-*self* will inevitably be "shadowed" by a sense-of-*lack*. The irony is that this death/nonbeing-terror that is ego defends only itself. Fear becomes the only thing inside, which makes everything else the outside: that which one is afraid of. The tragicomic aspect is that the self-protection this generates is self-defeating, for the barriers the ego erects reinforce the suspicion that there is indeed something lacking in the innermost sanctum which needs protection. And if what is innermost is so weak because it is *nothing,* then no amount of protection will ever seem enough.

"Central to human experience is the struggle to evoke and preserve the sense of self as alive, and avoid the sense of the self as dead" (Lifton).[52] This gets at the dualism of life-versus-death, how each term feeds off the other; but is this struggle inevitable, as Lifton supposes, or is there an alternative that resolves that struggle? Any threat to our particular symbolic life-versus-death game becomes a danger to be taken with the utmost seriousness. But if the ego *is* that game, then ending that game should end the ego—which implies that the reflexive sense-of-self can die. What makes this more than idle speculation is that there is such abundant testimony to the possibility and perhaps the necessity of ego-death:

> No one gets so much of God as the man who is completely dead. (St. Gregory)
>
> The Kingdom of God is for none but the thoroughly dead. (Eckhart)
>
> Your glory lies where you cease to exist. (Ramana Maharshi)
>
> We are in a world of generation and death, and this world we must cast off. (William Blake)

A moving example of death and resurrection is one of the primary sources of Western culture, but examples are found in many religious traditions. The problem is demythologizing these myths, in order for their truth to spring to life again within our myth—in this instance, within the technical, more objectified language of modern psychology. Blake's quotation (from *The Vision of the Last Judgment*) points the way by implying that we are not seeing clearly but projecting when we perceive the world in terms of the dualistic categories of generation and death.

Buddhism. Blake's claim is central to the Buddhist tradition. "Why was I born if it wasn't forever?" cried Ionesco. The answer is in the *anātman* "no self" doctrine: I cannot die because I was never born. Anātman is thus a middle way between the extremes of eternalism (the self survives death) and annihilationism (the self is destroyed at death). Buddhism resolves the problem of life and death by deconstructing it. The evaporation of this dualistic way of thinking reveals what is prior to it. There are many names for this prior, but it is significant that one of the most common is *the unborn.*

In the oldest Buddhist scriptures, the sutras of the Pali Canon, there are many references to *nirvāṇa,* the state of liberation, but few descriptions of it. The two best known accounts both refer to "the unborn," where "neither this world nor the other, nor coming, going or standing, neither death nor birth, nor sense-objects are to be found."

> There is, O monks, an unborn, an unbecome, an unmade, an unconditioned; if, O monks, there were not here this unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned, there would not here be an escape from the born, the become, the made, the conditioned. But because there is an unborn. . . . therefore there is an escape from the born. . . .[53]

In another sutra, the Buddha declares: "The sage who is at peace is not born, does not age, does not die, does not tremble, does not yearn. For him there does not exist that on account of which he might be reborn. Not being born, how can he age? Not aging, how can he die?" Escaping from the born suggests soul-body dualism, yet other texts make it clear

that this is precisely what is being denied. In one curious passage such immortality is said to be attained "by physical means," for the sage "touches the deathless element with his body."[54]

Similar claims are common in the later Mahāyāna scriptures and commentaries. The most important term in Mahāyāna philosophy is śūnyatā, and the adjectives commonly used to explain śūnyatā are unborn, uncreated, and unproduced. The best-known Mahāyāna text, the laconic *Heart Sutra,* explains that all things are śū*nya* because they are "not created, not annihilated, not impure and not pure, not increasing and not decreasing." Nāgārjuna echoes this in the prefatory verse to his *Mūlamadhyamika-kārikās,* the most important work of Mahāyāna philosophy, which uses eight negations to describe the true nature of things: they do not die and they are not born, they do not cease to be and they are not eternal, they are not the same and they are not different, they do not come and they do not go.

In Chinese Buddhism, the *Cheng-tao Kê* of Yung-chia, a disciple of the sixth Chan (Zen) patriarch, proclaims: "Since abruptly realized the unborn, I have had no reason for joy or sorrow at any honor or disgrace."[55] The seventeenth-century master Bankei, one of the most creative and beloved figures in Japanese Zen, believed he was at the point of death from tuberculosis when the following experience transformed him:

Then I felt a strange sensation in my throat. I spat against a wall. A mass of black phlegm large as a soapberry rolled down the side. It seemed to relieve the discomfort in my chest. Suddenly, just at that moment it came to me. I realized what it was that had escaped me until now: All things are perfectly resolved in the Unborn. I realized too that what I had been doing all this time had been mistaken. I knew all my efforts had been in vain."[56]

The Unborn became his central teaching. "When you dwell in the Unborn itself, you're dwelling at the very wellhead of Buddhas and patriarchs." The Unborn is the Buddha-mind, and this Buddha-mind is beyond living and dying.[57]

These passages (and many more could be cited) are important because, although it may not be clear to us what the unborn refers to, they are not just philosophical statements but refer to some transformative experience. For a case that combines such personal experience with a profound philo-

sophical acumen, we shall turn shortly to Japan's foremost Zen master and philosopher, Eihei Dōgen (A.D. 1200–1253).

We have seen that for Buddhism the dualism between life and death is only one instance of our more general problem with dualistic thinking. The paradox of such dualism is that the opposites are so dependent on each other that each might be said to contain the other. This paradox is more than an intellectual game. If it is important for me to live a pure life, I must be preoccupied with impurity: I must discriminate all situations and my responses to them into pure and impure. To bifurcate in this way is also to bifurcate myself from the situation. Being *pure* in a situation becomes more important than *living* that situation. That is why "the only true purity is to live in a way which transcends purity and impurity," as Chan master Hui-hai put it.

Replacing the concepts of purity and impurity with life and death yields a proposition by now familiar: the only true life is to live in a way that transcends life and death. The same problem applies to the dualism between life and death. We discriminate between life and death in order to affirm one and deny the other, and our tragedy lies in the paradox that these two opposites are also interdependent: there is no life without death and—what we are more likely to overlook—there is no death without life. This means our problem is not death but life-and-death.

> At issue are the boundaries of the self as a symbolized entity, and for that issue the end and the beginning are of a piece. There is a clear sense of the relationship between awareness of death and a delineated self. The second is impossible without the first. Even prior to the disturbing syllogism, "If death exists, then I will die," there is an earlier one: "Since 'I' was born and will die, 'I' must exist." (Lifton)[58]

There is an implication here Lifton does not consider: if we can realize that there is no delineated ego-self which is alive *now,* the *problem* of life and death is solved. Such is the Buddhist goal: to experience that which cannot die because it was never born. This is not a clever intellectual argument which claims to solve the problem logically while leaving our

anguish as deep as before. The examples above refer to some experience more transformative than our usual conceptual understanding. It is no coincidence that the *prajñāpāramitā* scriptures of Mahāyāna also emphasize that *there are no sentient beings.*

> [The Buddha:] "Subhūti, what do you think? Let no one say the Tathāgata cherishes the idea: 'I must liberate living beings.' Allow no such thought, Subhūti. Wherefore? Because in reality there are no living beings to be liberated by the Tathāgata. If there were living beings for the Tathāgata to liberate, he would partake in the idea of selfhood, personality, ego entity and separate individuality."[59]

Such a claim is possible only if the dualism of life and death is not something in the objective world but a way of thinking projected onto the world, one of the conceptual structures with which we organize it. And if our minds have created this dualism, they should be able to un-create or deconstruct it.

This provides the context we need to understand the cryptic remarks of Dōgen, for whom the clarification of life and death is the most important issue in Buddhism. Dōgen's most pointed comments on life and death—his preferred terms are "birth and death"—are found in three fascicles of his major work, the *Shōbōgenzō.* First, from *Shōji,* "Birth and Death":

> If you search for a Buddha outside birth and death, it will be like trying to go to the southern country of Yue with your spear heading towards the north, or like trying to see the Big Dipper while you are facing south; you will cause yourself to remain all the more in birth and death and lose the way of emancipation.
>
> Just understand that birth-and-death is itself nirvana. There is nothing such as birth and death to be avoided; there is nothing such as nirvana to be sought. Only when you realize this are you free from birth and death.
>
> It is a mistake to suppose that birth turns into death. Birth is a phase that is an entire period of itself, with its own past and

> future. For this reason, in buddha-dharma birth is understood as no-birth. Death is a phase that is an entire period of itself, with its own past and future. For this reason, death is understood as no-death.
>
> In birth there is nothing but birth and in death there is nothing but death. Accordingly, when birth comes, face and actualize birth, and when death comes, face and actualize death. Do not avoid them or desire them.

From *Shinjin-gakudō,* "Body-and-Mind Study of the Way":

> Not abandoning birth, you see death. Not abandoning death, you see birth. Birth does not hinder death. Death does not hinder birth.

Death is not the opposite of birth; birth is not the opposite of death.

The following passage, from the most important fascicle, *Genjō-kōan,* relates birth-and-death to time:

> Firewood becomes ash, and it does not become firewood again. Yet, do not suppose that the ash is future and the firewood past. You should understand that firewood abides in the phenomenal expression of firewood, which fully includes past and future and is independent of past and future. Ash abides in the phenomenal expression of ash, which fully includes future and past. Just as firewood does not become firewood again after it is ash, you do not return to birth after death.
>
> This being so, it is an established way in buddha-dharma to deny that birth turns into death. Accordingly, birth is understood as no-birth. It is an unshakeable teaching in Buddha's discourse that death does not turn into birth. Accordingly, death is understood as no-death.
>
> Birth is an expression complete this moment. Death is an expression complete this moment. They are like winter and spring. You do not call winter the beginning of spring, nor summer the end of spring.[60]

What is Dōgen saying in these passages?
hoping this instance of one line is ok

Enlightenment is not other than birth-and-death. Dōgen does not offer the consolation of some heavenly pure realm or anywhere else transcendental, nor even the usual Buddhist expectation of rebirth (although he does not deny that possibility). We cannot escape birth and death, yet there is liberation in or rather *as* birth-and-death if we realize something about them.

Birth and death are not opposites. Birth is nothing but birth, death is nothing but death. Face and actualize them, says Dōgen: "Do not avoid them or desire them." Do not grasp at one and try to push the other away. Instead of repressing the problem of life and death, Dōgen's solution is a complete affirmation of both terms that is very different from our usual way of resigning ourselves to them. This does not contradict what was said earlier about the interdependence of life and death. To deny that life and death are opposites is another way to point out the problem with dualistic thinking. The mutual dependence of those supposed opposites means I live my life paralyzed by dread of death, and I resist my death clinging to the scraps of life that are being torn from my grasp. When life and death are not experienced as opposites they will not "hinder" each other in this way.

Then birth is no-birth, death is no-death. When at the time for dying there is nothing but death—with no repulsion from it nor seeking after it—then death is experience as no-death. Elsewhere Dōgen correlates this with an alternative way of experiencing time, a present "which fully includes future and past" and so is independent of future and past. Chapter 2 will discuss how our flight from death takes the form of trying to make ourselves real *in* time, as something that persists *through* time; and how I must accept my death in order to experience the *now* which is outside time. (In) that *now,* birth is no-birth because no ego-self is ever born. But *if no "I" is ever born,* then there is only the act of birth, and if there is only the *act* of birth *then there is really no birth*. Instead, the act of birth-in-itself and (in exactly the same way) the act of death-in-itself become *lacking*-nothing events, each of which may be realized to be complete and

whole in itself when not experienced in relation to something else. As an earlier Chan master expressed it, when Buddha is in life and death there is no life and no death.

Yet something does come to an end: the attempt at self-reflexivity which constitutes the Oedipal project that *is* the ego. If the ego-self is not some self-grounded consciousness but the process whereby consciousness tries to grasp itself—only to end up self-paralyzed—unmediated experience "of" the unborn is the final shipwreck of that project. The problem is resolved at its source. The ego-self, which has been preoccupied with making itself real, collapses and becomes no-thing. In terms of life-versus-death, the ego-self forecloses on its greatest anxiety by letting-go and dying right now. Die before you die, so that when you come to die you will not have to die, as the Sufi saying puts it. Of course, if the sense-of-self is a construct—composed of automatized, mutually reinforcing ways of thinking, feeling and acting—it cannot really die, it can only evaporate in the sense that those cease to recur. Insofar as these constitute our basic psychological defenses against the world, however, this letting-go will not be easy. It means giving up my most cherished thoughts and feelings about myself (notice the reflexivity), *which are what I think I am,* to stand naked and exposed. Hence, Buddhism calls it the Great Death. If there is no greater psychological suffering, perhaps there is also none more therapeutic, for this burns away the dross of life, all the symbolized money and power and prestige games that usually obsess us because they seem to offer us the hope of finally securing ourselves in the world.[61]

Earlier it was suggested that, if a sense-of-*lack* shadows the sense-of-self, the "purest" form of that lack is unprojected anxiety. Without any object to defend itself against, such anxiety can only gnaw on the sense-of-self. Chapter 3 will develop this by considering what Kierkegaard writes in *The Concept of Anxiety,* where he defines the paradox that the way to resolve anxiety is to become completely anxious: to let anxiety dredge up and devour all our "finite ends," those psychological securities we have hedged around us and then forgotten, in order to feel secure in a safe yet constricted world.

Needless to say, no such collapse of the ego-self can save the physical body from aging and rotting. Then how does it solve our problem? Because the Buddhist critique of the "empty" ego-self implies that, contrary

to existential psychology, death is not our deepest fear and (a hope inside every fear) immortality is not our deepest wish. They too are symptoms that represent something else: the desire of the sense-of-self to become a real self, to transform its anguished *lack* of being into genuine being. Even the terror of death represses something, for that terror is preferable to facing one's lack of being now: death-fear at least allows us to project the problem into the future. In that way we avoid facing what we are (or are *not*) right now.

One way to approach this is to reflect on whether immortality—the actuality of an existence that never ended—could really satisfy us. As much as we may fear death, would ceaseless life be the solution to our problems? Perhaps the only thing worse than not living forever would be living forever. Many have suspected that, like "the immortal" in Borges' story of the same title, our existence would sooner or later become a burden unless we discovered an eternal meaning-system to place it in, a cosmology wherein we have home and role. As the interminable succession of centuries undermined all my reality-projects, what anguish would accumulate! Mere immortality would become unbearable as soon as I no longer craved it. As with other symbolized (because repressed) games, victory in this form cannot satisfy me if it is really something else I want.

In this fashion, even our hope of immortality is reduced to a symptom, the most common symbolic way that what is actually an unrecognized spiritual craving to become *real* surfaces into consciousness. Conversely, death for us has become a complex symbol representing the feared failure of this reality-project, as well as a catch-all for all the ugly, negative, tragic aspects of existence that we cannot cope with and so project as the Shadow of Life which cannot be shaken off.

Then Freud's death-drive may be as genuine as our desire for immortality: not an instinct, however, but a distorted, because still symbolized, way in which the desire to "let go" of ourselves manifests consciously or unconsciously. If the sense-of-self is a perpetual yet futile attempt to grasp and ground ourselves, the effort involved must sometimes become wearisome. Then there is no need to postulate two distinct drives. "Death and existence may exclude each other in rational philosophy, but they are not psychologically contrary. Death can be experienced as a state of being,

an existential condition. Death can be experienced as a state of being, an existential condition. The impulse to death may not be conceived as an anti-life movement; it may be a demand for an encounter with absolute reality, a demand for a fuller life through the death experience" (James Hillman).[62] If the sense-of-self implies death-terror, the possibility of genuine life may seem to require death. The danger, of course, is that one might confuse psychological death of the sense-of-self with physical death of the body-mind.

Why do we need to keep projecting ourselves indefinitely into the future, unless something is felt to be lacking *now*? The obvious answer is that we are afraid of losing something then that we have now, yet many besides Freud and Ferenczi have found this unpersuasive. The standard reply is that if life is not something we have but something we are, there is nothing to fear because we shall not be around to notice (what) we are missing. As Epicurus stoically claimed, "The most horrible of all evils, death, is nothing to us, for when we exist, death is not present; but when death is present, then we are not." Montaigne too believed that we should fear death less than nothing: "Neither can it in any way concern you, whether you are living or dead: living by reason that you are still in being, dead because you are no more."[63] For life in the present there is no death, agreed Wittgenstein. Death is not an event in life, one does not experience death. Our life is endless in the same way that our field of vision is boundless.[64]

Their point is well taken, for it gets at the heart of what is wrong with making death-fear our primal repression—unless that death-fear is itself symbolic of a yet deeper fear, that right here and now I am not real. The Buddhist approach implies that, if nothing is lacking now, the issue of immortality loses its compulsion as the way to resolve our *lack,* and whether or not we survive physical death in some form is no longer the main point.

Such reflections inevitably bring us to the issue of time, which will be taken up in the next chapter. This is not a shift from psychology to metaphysics, but from one metaphysical conception to another, for a metaphysics of time is inescapable. Our choice is between a repressed metaphysics disguised as the objective, commonsense temporal system that we normally find ourselves within, or a more explicit and deconstructive approach which brings the repressed back into consciousness by revealing

how we ourselves have constructed the time schema that now constricts us. Time does not really exist without unrest, wrote Kierkegaard; it does not exist for dumb animals, who are absolutely without anxiety. The basic problem is that our grasping at the future rejects the present; we reach for what could be because we feel something lacking in what is. Brown summarizes the matter brilliantly: Time is "a schema for the expiation of guilt,"[65] which in Buddhist terms becomes: time originates from our sense of *lack* and our projects to fill in that *lack.* Pascal put it most bluntly: we are not; we hope to be. This tends to develop into a vicious circle. Uncomfortable with our sense-of-*lack* today, we look forward to that day in the future when we will feel truly alive.e use that hope to rationalize the way we have to live now, a sacrifice that then increases our demands of the future.

In this century the most influential philosophical examination of death and time has been Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time.* It had a significant impact on the first generation of existential psychoanalysts. For example, Ludwig Binswanger's influential paper "The Case of Ellen West" criticizes the lack of a temporal standard in the insane and contrasts their "inauthentically momentary mode of temporalization," such as occurs in "enjoying" (*sic!*), with "the authentic temporalization of ripening" that Heidegger considers to be the mark of authentic existence.[66] In the next chapter we shall see what is wrong with this understanding of temporality because we are now in a position to see what is wrong with Heidegger's understanding of death and time in *Being and Time.*