

Lack and Transcendence

The Problem of Death and Life
in Psychotherapy, Existentialism,
and Buddhism

David Loy



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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.

—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 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

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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