

# THE GOSPEL OF LIFE AND THE INTEGRITY OF DEATH

• David S. Crawford •

“The technical management of life and death implies an avoidance of the necessity of love, or put better, it implies a kind of falsification of love and its fruit.”



“She would have been a good woman,” The Misfit said, “if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.”<sup>1</sup>

## *I. The unthinkability of life and death*

### *1.*

An interesting—and, from a Christian perspective, sad—feature of contemporary society is its treatment of life and death. Clearly, the ceaseless development of medical technology, by its very nature, invites or implicitly embodies a new anthropological and ethical perspective. At first glance, this new perspective seems, paradoxically, to both relativize and absolutize life.

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<sup>1</sup>Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” in *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977).

The relativizing tendency is perhaps more visible, given contemporary debates over euthanasia and “physician assisted suicide.” The social movement in favor of these options, sometimes wrapping itself in the slogan “death with dignity,” represents a willingness to end life purposefully when it no longer seems worth its cost in suffering. Here, an extrinsic standard is used as a calculus for evaluating a life’s worth. The value of life is measured based on the quality of experiences it supports, its pains and pleasures, the degree to which it promises “happiness,” “contentment,” “well-being” and so forth. But the implications of this calculation are clear. Life constitutes a platform for various kinds of experiences, both desirable and otherwise. Hence, it is a relative good in relation to the experiences it both makes possible and imposes. In *Evangelium Vitae*, John Paul II criticizes this very sort of relativization, to which he attached the lapidary phrase “culture of death.”

The modern tendency to absolutize life, however, is also prominent. We see this second tendency in any number of developments, such as the sometimes obsessive attempts to prevent suffering and death, whatever the ethical cost and by whatever technical means. If doctors are sometimes asked to take positive steps to help end life, they are also sometimes asked to take every measure, however extraordinary, to maintain it. We also see this tendency in what seems at times to be a fixation on health and safety, which are frequently taken as themselves constituting ethical first principles. While of course illness, accidents, and death remain a normal part of human existence, they are often treated as a failure of either medical technology or social policies, as though the narrative of modern progress is identical with a gradual movement toward their abolition. If the death with dignity movement sees death as a good to be achieved, the health and safety movement sees death as the absolute evil to be avoided. In this sense, the latter would appear to treat life as an absolute good.

The apotheosis of this second tendency is apparent in current dreams of technically achieved immortality. At the margins of science and philosophy, there are those who seek a so-called “post-human” state, whose attributes are to include, not only radically extended lifespans or “time budgets” and the “eradication of disease” and suffering, but also the “augmentation of human

intellectual, physical, and emotional capacities,” including (of course) the capacity for values such as benevolence and tolerance!<sup>2</sup> There are frequent claims that, for example, “in around 20 years we will have the means to reprogramme our bodies’ stone-age software so we can halt, then reverse, ageing. Then nanotechnology will let us live forever.”<sup>3</sup>

Mainstream medical researchers, on the other hand, have more chastely limited their sights to the possibility of significant lifespan extensions. The difference between the “wild-eyed” futurists and the “sober-minded” technicians however may be smaller than first appears. Leon Kass for one has questioned whether it is possible to limit the thirst for more years. What age would be optimal? If, as he puts it, “life is good and death is bad,” then of course “the more life the better, provided . . . we remain fit and our friends do, too.”<sup>4</sup> Kass also suggests provocatively that the goal of technologically achieved immortality has been an implicit structuring element of modern rationality from the beginning.<sup>5</sup> How else can one understand modernity’s displacement of contemplative reason by a technical and instrumental reason aimed fundamentally at the alleviation of human suffering? What greater suffering is there than disease, aging, and death? Certainly talk of

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<sup>2</sup>Nick Bostrom, “Transhumanist Values,” <http://www.nickbostrom.com/ethics/values.html>. Transhumanist Max More has even tried to enlist Catholics, with their focus on life and the alleviation of suffering, to join him in such a quest. See “Why Catholics Should Support the Transhumanist Goal of Extended Life,” a paper delivered at the conference, “The Idea of Earthly Immortality: A New Challenge for Theology” (Rome, September, 2009), <http://strategicphilosophy.blogspot.com/2009/09/why-catholics-should-support.html>.

<sup>3</sup>Statement from scientist and futurist Ray Kurzweil, quoted in Amy Willis, “Immortality Only Twenty Years Away, Says Scientist,” *The Telegraph* (14 August 2012), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/science-news/6217676/Immortality-only-20-years-away-says-scientist.html>. Similarly, Aubrey de Grey tells us that people will soon be living 1,000 years without disease. See Caspar Llewellyn Smith, “Aubrey de Grey: We don’t have to get sick as we get older,” *The Observer* (31 July 2010), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2010/aug/01/aubrey-de-grey-ageing-research>.

<sup>4</sup>Leon Kass, “*L’Chaim* and Its Limits: Why Not Immortality?,” in *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002), 257–74, at 262.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, at 261.

“reprogramming,” “software,” and “time-budgets,” as well as the conceptualization of aging as a genetic disorder, smacks of the sort of mechanistic worldviews associated with the origins of modernity.

The modern “death with dignity” movement is also largely driven by our technological civilization. There are the problems raised by the radically increased ability to sustain the critically ill for ever longer periods of time. But there is the more subtle problem of our underlying way of seeing human reason and action in primarily productive terms. As Joseph Ratzinger puts it, these practices turn

death into an object of production. By becoming a product, death is supposed to vanish as a question mark about the nature of being human, a more-than-technological enquiry. The issue of euthanasia is becoming increasingly important because people wish to avoid death as something which happens to *me*, and replace it with a technical cessation of function . . .

Ratzinger goes on to say that this “dehumanizing” of death results in the dehumanizing of life: “When human sickness and dying are reduced to the level of technological activity, so is man himself.”<sup>6</sup>

Of course, the formula “life is good and death is bad” is qualified even by the absolutizers, as the quotation from Kass already suggests. Immortality by technical means, like death by technical means, is valued according to a calculus of experiences, desirable and undesirable. No one would want the immortality of Tithonus. The relativizing and absolutizing tendencies therefore go hand in hand. From this point of view, the relativizing side is predominant with respect to life itself. Only the underlying experiences life supports are conceived of as absolute goods or evils. Hence, life and health are to be managed as instrumental goods by means of medical science and technology, and the same impulse that leads to the indefinite extension of life underlies the desire to manage death by means of clinically procured suicide.

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<sup>6</sup>Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 71–72.

## 2.

The impulse to dominate life and death departs radically from the idea of life as a gift and death as perhaps its most defining moment. It departs from the primordial wisdom contained in the thought we are “given” birth. That we are given birth stands for the larger proposition that our radical and continuing ontological dependency means that life can only follow the structure and logic of its original giftedness in every moment right up to the last. The same logic governs death. Even if “life is tantamount to some form of activity,” “death is, by contrast, pure passivity, the ‘night, in which no one can work’ (Jn 9:4),”<sup>7</sup> as Robert Spaemann puts it. This is why physician assisted suicide, as the name implies, cannot be an act of death but only an act of killing. Death can only be received if it is to be human. Spaemann continues, “since we are aware of death and can suffer death in a conscious anticipation, we are able to transform the pure suffering into an *actus humanus*.”<sup>8</sup> What *can* be a human act, then, is preparation for death, which can be a primary shaping force for life.

This truth shapes what compassion means. It is true, of course, that beyond striving to restore health, medicine has a role in alleviating human suffering as far as possible. But if modern rationality is ordered from its beginning only to this alleviation, then it is difficult to find suffering’s underlying truth or human meaning. But if we lack the framework for finding much value in suffering, this fact will magnify its devastating effects in untold ways. This is why *Evangelium Vitae* makes the argument that authentic compassion—as the word itself implies—means a “suffering with,” rather than the elimination of suffering at whatever cost. Genuine compassion can in no way be reduced to simple acts of alleviating suffering, nor to the sentiments that often accompany such acts. Rather true compassion is a good for both its

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<sup>7</sup>Robert Spaemann, “Death—Suicide—Euthanasia,” in *The Dignity of the Dying Person: Proceedings of the Fifth Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life* (Vatican City, 24–27 February 1999), eds. Juan de Dios Vial Correa and Elio Sgreccia (Città Editrice Vaticana: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), 123–31, at 124.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

recipient and the one who gives it. “Suffering with” is an education in dying for both.

If both death with dignity and the anti-aging movements relativize life to experience, they would also seem to relativize it to freedom. But here we encounter a point of transcendence. In fact, just under the surface, even the relativizers manifest the basic impulse to live forever. One advocacy group, for example, in resisting the negative connotations of the term “physician assisted suicide,” insists revealingly that “[d]ying patients who see their lives being destroyed by illness sometimes come to view death as the only way to escape their suffering and, therefore, as a means of self-preservation—the opposite of suicide.”<sup>9</sup> This sort of language is not uncommon in the movement’s literature. It is meant to dispel the notion that self-destruction in these circumstances is an act of despair. It represents the idea, rather, that this self-destruction is in fact an act of transcendence. Of course, many or even most people who seek such assistance in their suicides might envision an afterlife. At the same time, there is no indication that the mention of “self-preservation” has anything to do with or requires such a belief. Rather, the focus is on the potential loss of subjective integrity in the face of suffering, and it is thought that this integrity can only be reclaimed through a radical act of freedom. It is a question of refusing to submit to the diminished capacity and dignity that come with suffering, illness and dying. It is the refusal, the No that is important here. The act of will itself therefore seems to be the only possible point of transcendence. This final (and yes, desperate) assertion of the subject belies a more primitive impulse than the desire to escape from unbearable suffering. It manifests the yearning in the face of seeming helplessness to take life—by seizing control of death—into one’s own hands. From this odd point of view—if this point of transcendence can be understood as an ersatz surmounting of death—the absolutizing tendency reemerges.

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<sup>9</sup>Timothy Quill and Jane Greenlaw, “Physician Assisted Death,” <http://www.thehastingscenter.org/Publications/BriefingBook/Detail.aspx?id=2202>.

## 3.

The passage from Ratzinger suggests that the technological activism exemplified in these movements causes a forgetfulness of death itself and its profound implications for human existence. In doing so, this activism also makes death all the more unintelligible and, in the end, all the more terrifying. Both movements bespeak the idea that salvation lies in control. But where personal wellbeing is thought of in terms of this sort of domination, then dying and death have implicitly become a “pure passivity,” a falling into non-being. Who can possibly think what it is not to be? Both the idea of self-destruction as self-preservation and the technical pursuit of deathlessness are ploys to achieve forgetfulness. The terror nevertheless remains because at some point death must be faced. Paradoxically, then, the effect of these movements is to increase terror while all the time making it difficult to think very seriously about either life or death.

All of this raises a basic question, which in fact, *Evangelium Vitae* asks: “*Why is life good?*”<sup>10</sup> An initial response might be that continuing to live is the most fundamental appetite for any living thing. Life constitutes a constant struggle to remain in existence, which means maintaining differentiation from the rest of cosmic reality.<sup>11</sup> If life is the being of living things (a human corpse is not a human being, after all), then it is definitionally good. But clearly this is not yet adequate to the encyclical’s question. If life is the struggle to remain an organism, this is both a necessary part of and not yet adequate to its explanation. The movements toward the technological management of life and death recognize and gain traction from this disproportion between organic and fully human life. Indeed, they often emphasize the insufficiency of simple organic life to account for the fully human meaning and purpose of

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<sup>10</sup>*Evangelium Vitae*, 34. Emphasis original.

<sup>11</sup>Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 4: “So constitutive for life is the possibility of not-being that its very being is essentially a hovering over this abyss, a skirting of its brink: thus being itself has become a constant possibility rather than a given state, ever anew to be laid hold of in opposition to its ever-present contrary, not-being, which will inevitably engulf it in the end.”

existence. It is right to object that the goodness of human life both includes and absolutely transcends this basic struggle shared with all organisms. However, the implicit judgment in these movements that life is a good because it supports a set of experiences, however desirable, cannot possibly account for the fullness of life's goodness, either. This is because we cannot think of our lives as only a set of experiences.

If all organisms possess a "nature" that encloses their "growth, maturity, decline, and death," "[i]t is not thus with man. His existence is not the unfolding and fulfillment of 'nature,' but the enactment of a 'history.'"<sup>12</sup> Mere organisms cannot be said to have a history, yet the human person's life is only intelligible as such. Aristotle reminds us of the ironic saying that we should count no one happy so long as he is still living.<sup>13</sup> We would not call Priam happy when he came to such a bad end. But the phrase indicates also that some kind of closure is needed before life's full drama and importance can be measured. Like history in general, personal history cannot possibly be "one damn thing after another" until the last thing. Form is necessary for a whole, and being a whole is necessary for personal history. The quest to manage life and death implies a rejection of this final and defining form. The endless ability to redo things or start again would guarantee this. In the end, technical deathlessness, were it actually possible, would drain life and action of their drama and importance rather than extend or heighten them. Horizontal deathlessness would therefore not in fact be human deathlessness. It would be more like death by ennui.

As the above quotation from Ratzinger suggested, an anthropologically richer account of death is necessary for an adequate account of life's goodness.

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<sup>12</sup>Romano Guardini, *The Last Things: Concerning Death, Purification after Death, Resurrection, Judgment, and Eternity* (New York: Pantheon, 1954), 18.

<sup>13</sup>*Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 1, ch. 10.



## II. Love and death

### 1.

Now there may be no Gospel teaching quite so foundational as that life in this world is a penultimate and relative good. At the same time, there may be no teaching as constant as that life is sacred, that it belongs to God, and that intentionally taking life—even one’s own—is among the most serious offenses against God. Like the attempts to dominate life and death, then, we are faced with the simultaneity of absoluteness and relativity of life as a good. Indeed, this simultaneity is well described in an introductory passage from *Evangelium Vitae*:

Man is called to a fullness of life which far exceeds the dimensions of this earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God. The loftiness of this supernatural vocation reveals the greatness and the inestimable value of human life even in its temporal phase. Life in time, in fact, is the fundamental condition, the initial stage and an integral part of the entire unified process of human existence. It is a process which, unexpectedly and undeservedly, is enlightened by the promise and renewed by the gift of divine life, which will reach its full realization in eternity (cf. 1 Jn 3:1–2). At the same time, it is precisely this supernatural calling which highlights the relative character of each individual’s earthly life. After all, life on earth is not an “ultimate” but a “penultimate” reality; even so, it remains a sacred reality entrusted to us, to be preserved with a sense of responsibility and brought to perfection in love and in the gift of ourselves to God and to our brothers and sisters.<sup>14</sup>

Hence, the “Gospel of life” expresses, first of all, the priority and superabundance of the life to which all are predestined in Christ. Earthly life is only “penultimate,” just the beginning of the “fullness of life which far exceeds the dimensions of this earthly existence.” It is the starting point for a “supernatural vocation” to share in “the very life of God.” At the same time, it *is* this beginning. It is the “fundamental condition, the initial stage” of the fullness of life. Not only is it the beginning, however, it is also “an integral part of the

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<sup>14</sup>*Evangelium Vitae*, 2. Emphasis original.

entire unified process of human existence.” So it is absolute in the sense that it is already the sacred beginning of the ever-greater life that is the promise of the Gospel. But the encyclical also understands “earthly life” to be good “in itself.” It is good in itself precisely because it is the enactment of a personal history. It is not only the path to eternal life, but possesses its own form and finality, as a foundational response to the love in which eternal life consists.

Like the tendencies discussed above, faith affirms that human life is more than its simple organic existence. Indeed, faith has a healthy respect for the idea that life does not need to be preserved at any and every cost, however “extraordinary.” As the encyclical indicates, martyrdom testifies to the relative goodness of this life. Life is to be lived in a human mode, and it is possible to fail at this by forgetting or forsaking the very purpose and meaning of living. “Certainly, the life of the body in its earthly state is not an absolute good for the believer, especially as he may be asked to give it up for a greater good. As Jesus says: ‘Whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it’ (Mk 8:35).”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the encyclical goes on to say, “Jesus proclaims that life finds its center, its meaning and its fulfillment when it is given up.”<sup>16</sup>

2.

Christianity, however, would seem to heighten the paradoxical mystery of death rather than diffuse it. If there is life beyond death, when we die it is nevertheless we who really die. We cannot think of death as only an organic process and the soul as untouched by death. Hence, when we think of death, it is right to think not only of the entry into eternal life, but also of personal disaster. Indeed, this is not only because in some cases a life seems to have been cut tragically short, leaving behind dependents or unfinished work. We are saddened by the loss even of the elderly who have arrived at the fullness of years, have completed their life’s work, and are

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 47.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 51.

themselves now dependent on others. Because we really do die, because we experience death with the core of our being, we must think of death as a real suffering. Even with Christian faith the tragic character of death remains. While death is part of the natural cycle of life in the world as we know it, for us humans nothing could possibly be experienced as more *unnatural*, more out of sync with our desires, than death.

The understanding of death as a punishment for the Fall resonates with this sense of death's unnaturalness. Indeed, like sin, it was not part of the original plan. This view casts a negative light on death, but qualifiedly so. Insofar as death is a punishment imposed by God on the first parents and all the generations, it must satisfy (or perhaps it is better to say, it *establishes*) the essential characteristics of genuine punishment as we know it.<sup>17</sup> The idea of punishment evokes a moral and juridical context. A punishment is only really punishment insofar as it is ordered to the reinstatement of justice. In this sense, it serves a purpose that is related to the reestablishment of proper relations between the transgressor and the one offended. It therefore requires a corrective purpose and meaning. It is, we might say, an evil imposed for a higher or larger good. But this higher or larger good can never be wholly unrelated to the good of the transgressor. This also suggests that true punishments are not arbitrarily chosen and imposed, that they must in some way naturally flow out of and therefore "fit" the transgression. The Christian tradition has always seen death along these lines. It is not simply imposed as a penalty unrelated to the nature of the crime, but is in fact the natural result of Adam's and our repeated attempts to be "like God" without God, to declare ourselves independent from the gifted character of our existence. To live outside God is death. This had always been implied by the Old Testament understanding, which saw Sheol as an abyss, apart from and without praise of Yahweh.<sup>18</sup> The death that is life outside of God is clearly an evil, but God's allowing this "natural" consequence and implication of the transgression is at the same time remedial.

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<sup>17</sup>Josef Pieper makes this point in his *Death and Immortality* (South Bend: St. Augustine Press, 2000), ch. IV.

<sup>18</sup>Ps 6:6; 30:10; 94:17; 115:17; Is 38:15. Cf. Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 80ff.

The truth concerning the question of life and death is unveiled by Christ in the actions and story of his life and of his death on the cross. Not only does he descend into Sheol to bring praise and God's presence, he also reestablishes for us a place in his Kingdom. By plumbing the abyss of death, he shows us its human meaning. If humanity's destiny is and always has been "sharing the very life of God" through "love and . . . the gift of ourselves," then the passage even from the innocence of paradise to a superabundant end given to us would entail bridging a gulf so radical as to constitute a difference in orders. It is difficult to say how we should understand this transition, even setting aside the question of sin. As Guardini put it:

Even had man not sinned, his life would have come to an end, since life belongs to time. But this end would not have been human death as we know it. We are ignorant of the form it would have taken, since that form never became an actuality. All we can say is that there would have been an end which was at the same time a beginning, a passage, and a transformation.<sup>19</sup>

Henri de Lubac goes a bit further, saying "the passage to the supernatural order, even for an innocent and healthy nature, could never take place without some kind of death."<sup>20</sup> The infinite gulf between even the Garden and supernatural destiny could only be spanned by a deathlike readiness to be remade by God's gracious and utterly transforming gift. It would still be the passage from life "in time" to a "new life" in Triune love. As such it would require trust and a willingness to be vulnerable in dependency and love, just as the Creator had opened himself to the "risk" of creating another freedom. Sin, on the other hand, has transformed this original transition into the experience of death, a rending of soul from body that is experienced as a loss of personal wholeness.

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<sup>19</sup>Guardini, *The Last Things*, 20.

<sup>20</sup>Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1998, reprint from 1967), 28. De Lubac goes on to qualify this statement: "We must in this case distinguish between death as the necessary gate of entry to Life, and the form of death we know which is the consequence of sin" (*ibid.*, at 52).

## 3.

What then is the radical basis for and nature of death? Communion with God is the highest love for which the human person is made. But as the passage from *Evangelium Vitae* makes clear, this love is not fulfilled until it is given eschatologically, in “sharing the very life of God.” The fullness the passage speaks of is in fact simultaneously the fullness of life and of love. Following sin, our highest destiny can only be realized by passing through the radical alienation—both from God and from ourselves—that we understand the moment of death to be. Even Christ was not exempted from this experience (Mt 27:45–46). Decline toward death always imposes itself as the approach of oblivion. And yet, since Christ has himself undergone death for our sakes and in obedience to the Father, we are offered the opportunity in grace to prepare for death not as oblivion but as a supreme moment of filial trust and the purification of love.

These considerations make clear the basis for the encyclical’s relation of “sharing the very life of God” to the “perfection in love and . . . the gift of ourselves to God and to our brothers and sisters.” The movement of the creature into God can only be understood in terms of love. If it is true that even an unfallen nature would have had to experience “some kind of death,” does this also mean that there is “some kind of death” at the heart of love? This is precisely Ratzinger’s suggestion.

The discovery of life entails going beyond the I, leaving it behind. It happens only when one ventures along the path of self-abandonment, letting oneself fall into the hands of another. But if the mystery of life is in this sense identical with the mystery of love, it is, then, bound up with an event which we may call ‘death-like.’<sup>21</sup>

The very idea of punishment, as we have seen, suggests that love’s dangers, vulnerabilities, and sufferings point to something more primitive than sin, something just beyond our ken. There is a paradox, a certain necessary tension, in this death-like foundation for love. Man, created in the image of God and therefore possessing the mysterious depth and capacity, and therefore “desire,” for

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<sup>21</sup>*Eschatology*, 94.

communion with God, is incapable of attaining from his own resources this one and final, and therefore in a real sense “only,” fulfillment. The only act that can yield this fulfillment is the act of reception. Ratzinger tells us that death therefore forces a choice. It is the choice between the disposition of loving trust and that of trying in futility to take life and death into our own power.

If even an unfallen man would undergo “some kind of death,” it is because the basic movement of the creature into God can only be understood as the highest act of God’s love for his creature and as simultaneously the highest response of love for which the creature is made. The “death-like” character of love is found in the fact that what we finally desire is to give ourselves away. De Lubac expresses this paradox by telling us that what we really desire in “beatitude” is to serve, in “vision” to adore, in “freedom” to be dependent, in “possession” to be in “ecstasy.”<sup>22</sup> The basic act of letting be is both a loss and a regaining of self, both the fulfillment of longing beyond expectations and the turning of longing upside down. The seeming reversal of what we manifestly desire is necessitated by the infinite disproportion between the creature and his end, between creaturely desire and fulfillment. But this disproportion is not a rejection of the truth of desire. It is rather the realization of that truth. Service, adoration, dependency, and ecstasy really are fulfillments of the desire for beatitude, vision, freedom, and possession. Desire is both superabundantly exceeded and fulfilled. This paradoxical aspect of desire is not only a product of sin (which certainly magnifies its difficulty), but is part of the very structure of love itself, as quintessentially realized in the very movement of the creature toward his end. Love, as involving both fulfillment in and making space for the beloved, entails both emptying of self and self-possession. This is the “death-like” character of love.

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<sup>22</sup>Henri de Lubac, *Surnaturel: Études historiques: nouvelle édition avec la traduction intégrale des citations latines et grecques* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1946, reprinted Desclée de Brouwer, 1991), 492: “. . . la béatitude est le service, la vision est adoration, la liberté est dépendance, la possession est extase.”

## 4.

It is not surprising, then, that the first and most tragic victims of the Fall are also this love's most visible and iconic representations—the relations of the family. The rupture of the first sin and its punishment in the alienation of death reach immediately into these most fundamental human relations. This is made clear by each of the “curses”: for the woman, an increase in the suffering of childbirth and a “longing” for her husband whose affections, it is implied, may grow cold or wander elsewhere; for the man, excruciating and often futile labors to provide for his family. The dependency of all the family members on each other entails vulnerability and risk in the face of the constant possibility of illness, accident or death. After the Fall, and as the natural consequences of its interior meaning, marital and familial love is fraught with these inevitable difficulties, dangers, and sufferings. Even if the filial and marital relations continue to be the primary analogy for the God-world relationship, the extreme fragility of these loves is exposed. From this point of view, it is not surprising that the first murder is fratricide or that, even if Eve continues to experience the birth of her child as a gift (Gn 4:1), the parent-child relation is burdened by its connection with the transmission of Original Sin.

The experience of death as alienation and the rending of personal wholeness has penetrated to the core of these fundamental human relations precisely because of their primacy. Nevertheless, Christ's birth and death have universally penetrated human love and its fruit. The very vulnerability of these loves, when lived in Christ, deepens the gift. Like the married state, the Christian possibility of consecrated virginity offers an objective form of ecclesial love. Both states of life are modalities of living the love that forms the Body and Bride of Christ. Both are ways of taking the form and wholeness—the “history”—of Christ's life and death to oneself. Indeed, consecration itself is considered an anticipation of our eschatological vocation, a dying to the flesh of this world for the sake of saving it. Sin means that those who see God must first pass through death, and it is likewise thus for those who persevere in true love, whether in the family or in the consecrated state. This is precisely the meaning of an ecclesial state of life. After the Fall,

these can only be the practice of death—the leveraging of death into the death-like loss of self that is love.

It is no wonder that the question of love is invariably implicated in debates over the technological domination of life and death. Love and death force a series of questions, even in the wake of domination. The questions take on a new urgency, however: Would you not accompany me to my very end? Or alternatively: Why must you go? Will you not stay with me as long as is given us? Can suffering and death be stronger than our love? Likewise, albeit less obviously, love is at stake in the drive toward technically achieved deathlessness. There are of course the demographic implications and the “simple” solution that procreation would have to be dramatically curtailed (again by technical means). But this “technical problem” points to a deeper anthropological problem. In reality, it has always been known that birth of a child signals both the coming of the child’s time and the passing of the parents’. Begetting requires the final generosity, a willingness to receive age as a lesson in love. Beyond the specifically demographic question, without the passing of generations there is no *anthropological* space for begetting. The boy can only become a man when he begins to take the place of his father; the girl becomes a woman when she begins to take the place of her mother. The child must mature and become the adult. Only the sight of one’s own twilight can coax the kind of detachment that begets wisdom. Without generations, there is no human space for *personal* growth. The problem of life and death is therefore anthropological and ethical, not technical and practical.

These considerations, therefore, point to the fundamental problem with the technical attempts to dominate life and death. The movement toward domination is not wrong for either its absolutizing or relativizing of life. Rather, it is wrong in turning these upside down. In effect, the technical management of life and death implies an avoidance of the necessity of love, or put better, it implies a kind of falsification of love and its fruit, a rejection of both childlikeness and fruitfulness, of the alternation between being given life and giving birth, of an openness to begetting and being gotten. It denies that there is anything “death-like” in love.



★★★★

Socrates in *Phaedo* famously tells his friends that a true philosopher must spend his life preparing for death, yet he also says that taking one's own life is shameful. This life that is preparation for death would seem to be, at least from one angle, life that is lived to be a whole—a readiness for death, but not a precipitous grasping at death. It is the idea that until a life is complete it cannot yet be seen as a whole and cannot be known as beautiful, noble, or good. But for Socrates the lifelong preparation for death means more than this completion of the wholeness of life. It also means a passing into something better. The wholeness that comes with the completion of this life lived in a certain way is the preparation for entry into another or further life. This is why even the simplest Christian is called to be a Socratic philosopher. It is the very root philosophy of Christianity that life is preparation for death, and that to prepare for the right kind of death is in fact to have really lived. □

**DAVID S. CRAWFORD** is associate professor of moral theology and family law at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at The Catholic University of America.