

Notes and Comments

When Death Becomes Inhuman

We have been killing fellow members of our species again. This time it has been in the land where Eden is said to have been located, the land between the Tigris and Euphrates. It was no worse than the countless massacres of the last century. In fact, it was more restrained. And it was being done, so it was said, in order to prevent more killing later on. One thing is certain: deliberate killing of fellow members of the species, together with the deliberate killing of oneself, is a privilege reserved to man alone. It is a privilege due to the fact that man, as we have good reason to suppose, is the only being who has knowledge of death, both others' and his own.

The German poet Reiner Kunze says in one of his poems, "You're nothing special / It's just that you cling to beauty / Knowing you've got to leave it all."¹ The knowledge Kunze speaks of pervades every moment of our lives. Heidegger made knowledge of death the key to his hermeneutic of *Dasein*. It is only when we know about death that we start to discover what it means to live. And yet the fear of death, held in secret, isolates each man, for death is not a collective act. Everyone has to die alone, and whoever has realized

this can no longer look to society for the meaning of his existence. He knows that one day he is going to abandon society and society is going to abandon him.

This knowledge of death is curiously ambivalent. On the one hand, it tends to rob man's doings of any meaning: everything is ultimately pointless. On the other hand, the knowledge of finitude gives existence its precious value. If we never died, everything would lose its significance. Everything that we do today, we might just as well do tomorrow. For two people who establish a life together on the basis of love, sixty years is a short time. They can wake up on the morning of their golden anniversary wishing that they could finally really get started. But without end? That would immediately destroy the whole thing. The knowledge that there is an end is what first opens up for us the dimension of meaning, which is the condition for having anything like the feeling of meaninglessness in the first place.

"It's just that you cling to beauty": that is the other characteristic mark of the human in Kunze's poem. The experience of the beautiful is closely connected with the knowledge of death. It is the experience of something whose meaning does not come from its value for our biological self-preservation, or even from its utility for others, who, after all, must also die. We call something beautiful that has its point in itself. And among such beautiful things are also human gestures and actions, even when they prove to be useless or unwittingly wasted on the wrong people. The beautiful is resistant to the vortex of

¹"Wesen bist du unter Wesen / Nur daß du hängst am Schönen / Und weißt: du mußt davon."

absurdity which the knowledge of death threatens to suck us into. For the believer, and indeed already for Plato, it is an anticipated glimmer of something that survives death.

How does society deal with death and dying, which are the shipwreck of the totalitarianism of the social? At least when he dies, if not earlier, man ceases to be a member of a social whole. The state can threaten death, but no one is stronger—and, given the right circumstances, more dangerous—than someone who has conquered the fear of death. The threat of death is a powerful weapon. The need to make the threat a reality is a defeat.

The European tradition's ritualized culture of dying and burial was a dialectical phenomenon that enabled society to relativize itself. By embedding death in cultic forms, society integrated into itself the very thing that called it into question. This integration required a religious sense. The thing that relativized society also legitimated it. By acknowledging that it was not God, it was also able to understand its authority as divinely sanctioned. Faith in eternal life also relativized the opposition between life and death. There is an old executioner's axe in Münster that bears the words, "When I raise the axe I'm wishing eternity for a poor sinner." Because modernity is structurally atheistic, it has to conceive the opposition between life and death as if it were absolute. "I'll live on in my children."—What an empty phrase in the face of man's experience of him-

self as an individual person.

Society thus struggles doggedly to prolong life, only to be forced to capitulate in the end. It is unable to develop any authentic rituals to accompany the journey to this end because it lacks any horizon in which to relativize itself. The first result of this is a tendency to put death out of its mind. Death takes place with increasing frequency in some out-of-the-way holding room in a clinic.

The consequence: repressed and yet increased fear of death. Most people today face the prospect of their own death without ever having been present at another's. But then there is a further tendency simply to eliminate quietly those who can no longer be perceived as members of the social world. Holland has legalized euthanasia and yet it is by no means ejected from the international community. On the contrary: its doctors think they are in the avant garde when they kill. And all of a sudden it seems as if things cannot happen quickly enough. The new definition of death as "brain death" makes it possible to declare people dead while they are still breathing and to bypass the dying process in order to quarry spare parts for the living from the dying. Death no longer comes at the end of the dying process, but—by the *fiat* of a Harvard commission—at its beginning.

The Jewish-Christian custom of burial is increasingly replaced by the machine-like disposal of corpses through cremation without any public to look on. And more and more peo-

ple believe that they are doing something good for their children when they cut costs by having themselves anonymously stuck in the ground. The oldest distinguishing feature of *homo sapiens*, ritual burial of the dead, is disappearing.

My description of the current state of affairs has been a partisan one. But the official standard account is too. It consists of sheer euphemism. I am making no proposals. Every reflection on the foundations of humanity requires that we start out by taking stock of what is.—*Translated by Adrian J. Walker.* □

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A Writer's Witness

*Why I have written this book*¹

Modern societies have become abortion societies. Even artists have long come to regard it as proper etiquette to speak of abortion and “the self-determination of women” in the same breath. An artist who, like me, happens to be an opponent of abortion and, where necessary, an antiabortion “activist” to boot, is attacked, has to justify himself, and cannot expect the

agreement of his colleagues or the public at large. He garners no “laurels” like Günter Wallraff, who a few years ago wrapped himself up in chains in order to protest Greece’s military regime.

“Artists against animal experimentation,” “Artists for Greenpeace”—these sorts of initiatives have long since found a welcome in polite society. The “artists against abortion” have yet to organize; given the present climate, they would (still) have to worry about their reputations, and about the sales of their books, records, and works of art.

Abortion has never been a *solution* in the true sense of the word for women (and men) in need. Abortion is a terrible capitulation. It is “the murder of a woman’s conscience” and the killing of a pre-born child, as Mother Teresa once put it. Notice that Mother Teresa does not say that abortion is an act of murder perpetrated by a woman; she says that abortion involves *the murder of a woman’s conscience*. That is a very fine and important distinction. You, the reader of this brief against abortion, will see that it is not just an essay about the topic of abortion, but also an almost detective-like search for the *murderers* of woman’s conscience.

I know from bitter personal experience that both the man and the woman can “forget” that abortion is the killing of a child and the ruination of conscience, forget because, to take the example of the young woman I was, they can be blinded by the ideology of abortion as “psychosocially

¹Taken from Karin Struck, *Ich sehe mein Kind im Traum. Plädoyer gegen die Abtreibung* (1992) (Vienna: Verlag Fiat Domine, reprint edition, 1999). Published with permission.