

PERVERSION AND DEATH

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Abstract:

When philosophers recommend an attitude to death, no less than when they recommend the correct attitude to sex, we presume such advice to be grounded in rational considerations about what is *natural and proper*. Two things must follow: first, that there will be room for *perverted* attitudes to death; second, that some objective facts about death can be found to justify such an evaluation. I explore a parallel between the duality of psychological and biological approaches to erotic desire, regarded as the paradigm of all desire, and a similar duality in the fear of death, regarded as the paradigm of all aversion. Each invokes an objective teleological fact about their respective objects, and a consequent norm of correctness in our attitudes towards them. The exploration of these two related ideas requires that we yield as generously as possible to the temptation to believe them. Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilych* can be read as a meditation that makes the temptation vivid. None of this succeeds in vindicating a concept of perversion. Rather, it throws into relief both the attraction and absurdity of countenancing any notion of perversion.

This is a special way of being afraid
No trick dispels. Religion used to try,
That vast moth-eaten musical brocade
Created to pretend we never die,
And specious stuff that says *No rational being
Can fear a thing it will not feel*, not seeing
That this is what we fear—no sight, no sound,
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
Nothing to love or link with,
The anaesthetic from which none come round.
(Philip Larkin, “Aubade”)

1. The Correct Attitude Toward Death.

Philosophers like to warn against *fools' paradises*: not places where fools can safely cavort, but rather conditions in which fools mistakenly think themselves happy. The warning presupposes that real and merely apparent happiness can be told apart. Of course that claim is not altogether disinterested, since philosophers have a professional investment in the distinction. Thus they have endorsed this or that attitude to death, holding up promises of ultimate comfort or threats of excruciating regret, to be dispensed at the last hour, just when the money-back guarantee expires.

Is the philosopher's counsel any better than the threats and comforts of religion, Larkin's “old moth-eaten musical brocade/ created to pretend we never die”? At least the philosophical provenance of the advice should entitle us to expect some grounding in reasoned standards of rationality. But what sort of rationality? There are three broad strands. Practical rationality aims at success in action and the promotion of happiness. Epistemic rationality aims at maximizing correct beliefs. Axiological rationality aims at something that partakes of both but is reducible to neither: appropriateness of emotional attitudes. Before heeding a philosopher's advice, we might wish to know whether the rational standard in question is practical, epistemic, or axiological. Does it regard one form of rationality as trumping all

others? Does it, for example, like Pascal's bet, demand that we sacrifice truth for comfort? Insofar as practical advice aims at securing concrete outcomes rather than truth, it needs to take account of contingent circumstances from which an epistemic or axiological perspective are permitted to abstract. Conversely, insofar as its aim is to promote comfort, practical rationality can ignore uncomfortable facts that axiological or epistemic rationality must face. Yet the different strands of rationality are not independent. Practical rationality aims at providing means to the attainment of well-being or comfort, and so needs to assess what counts as well-being or true comfort, which belongs to axiological rationality. The relevant truths—the domain of epistemic rationality—partly concern the way we shall *feel* at the moment of death as well as in the rest of life. Those truths therefore ground both axiological assessments and the assessment of well-being that justify the practical advice. Truths about how we should feel rest upon truths about death. Both will be the focus of my concern.

2 Terminology

If there is a correct attitude to death, does the wrong attitude merit being called a perversion? The OED defines 'perversion' first as a “turning aside from truth or right; diversion to an improper use.” But as commonly used, the term is typically taken to connote something not merely undesirable, but *immoral*. I will here take it for granted, however, that Nagel (1979) and Priest (1997) have definitively demolished the notion, grounded in one or another moralistic version of Aristotelian teleology, that moral opprobrium must attach to perversion. Still, for the purposes of the following discussion I retain the idea that the word 'perversion' may have a use to refer to some sort of emotional deviation from truth or right response, particularly from a response that owes its rightness to the fact that it *accords with nature*. While such deviations, if they can be pinned down, will not automatically constitute moral failings in the usual sense, they may be thought to be of ethical significance on the broadest understanding of the scope of the ethical. I take this to include anything that promotes or impedes thriving.¹ On this view there is no

¹ The best hope for a viable notion of perversion is Freud's *developmental* theory, of which I gave a detailed discussion and a qualified defense in (de Sousa 1982). I now have less confidence than I did in the possibility of discovering developmental facts sufficiently general to provide universally applicable normative concepts. Hence I am now inclined to agree with Graham Priest that the notion of perversion, in the light of modern biology shorn of extraneous metaphysical baggage, is an “*inapplicable concept*” (Priest 1997, 371). The present paper constitutes

line between ethics and aesthetics. Nor are there “purely aesthetic” considerations, for everything that affects well-being is ipso-facto ethically significant. It should go without saying that ethical significance in this broad sense can never alone provide sufficient warrant for legislation, sanction, or punishment.

The word 'death' too calls for a comment. Pollsters tell us that 55% of Americans believe in “life after death”. (Bishop 1999) Since that seems to commit 55% of Americans to believing a contradiction in terms, it's not obvious just what they mean. The belief is sensible enough if it refers to the fact that when dead I may, if suitably located, help to feed the daisies: so certainly there will be life after my death. But it won't be *my* life. Many people, however, seem to expect a continuation of some sort of individual consciousness after biological death. For those people, death is a sort of emigration, and the fear of death is fear of the unknown, or of risks that cannot be assessed. Nothing I say here relates to death as emigration, but only to death taken seriously. To take death seriously, in this sense, is to see it as the annihilation of individual life in all its aspects.

3 Perversion

The OED definition quoted above would not lead us to expect that '*sexual perversion*' should be something of a pleonasm. In fact, though, perversion is almost always associated with sex. (Note that the same doesn't hold for the concept of the *perverse*. It's easy to imagine saying that someone has a perverse attitude to death, more difficult to see what it might mean to say that someone's attitude to death is perverted.) When death and perversion are linked, therefore, it is natural to assume that we are talking about taking sexual pleasure in some aspect of death, in killing, perhaps, or in the contemplation of death, or in fantasies of necrophilia. This is not, I surmise, a mere accident of usage, comparable to the principle enunciated by an anonymous would-be neo-Fowler that ethics is about money and morals about sex. What might be the deeper connection?

In his classic paper, Nagel (1979) noted that the Catholic Church counts contraception as a perversion. On the basis of Aquinas's assumption that the emission of semen is for “the profit of

one last attempt to apply it anyway, motivated perhaps by a repetition compulsion symptomatic of a death-wish. For its upshot, I fear, is a reductio.

generation, to which the union of the sexes is directed” (Thomas 1995-2000, Bk III:122), this fits the OED definition, though it would take an only mildly heretical believer to point out that God allowed the invention of contraceptive devices: what would constitute a proper use of those, if doing what they were designed to do doesn't count? This may be why only the method of periodic abstinence is Papally condoned. Since the body's rhythms are, unlike medical artifacts, *directly* designed by God, it's less obvious what would count as a misuse of them. Some Catholics, however, think that taking advantage of infertile days is a forbidden exploitation of physiological stages necessary to the procreative process. Anscombe (1972) invokes a subtle distinction between the intrinsic intentionality of an act and the intentions with which it is undertaken to justify the claim that contraception, by subverting the intrinsic intentionality of the sexual act, is a “sin against nature”.

The notion of sin against nature, if it could be transposed out of its original theological key, would serve as a starting slogan to characterize perversion. Let me expand a little on this slogan and comment briefly on what more is needed. This will also provide a preview of the line of argument to be developed in the present paper.

At a bare minimum, the idea of perversion presupposes teleology. But as Nagel (1979, 39) rightly notes, the Church position just mentioned is particularly implausible in that it omits the mental element of *inclination*. And while there is no longer anything mysterious about the attribution of genuine teleology in the absence of design (Millikan 1984, 1993), there is no requirement that the biological *function* of a mental process should be represented in any corresponding mental *content*. Hence the existence of a biological function is not enough to raise the possibility of perversion. A biological process that goes astray in such a way as to defeat its own ascertainable goal is not a perversion: we speak, for example, of autoimmune disease, not of a perversion of the immune system. Before a biological function can be perverted in desire, it must first be somehow *represented* in desire. To be represented in desire, in turn, requires more than that there be some mechanism by which desire effects the required result. An analogy may clarify this. Suppose Mr. Ivanov sends Miss Keeler off to pry War Office secrets from Mr. Profumo. From the point of view of Mr. Ivanov, the function of Miss Keeler's

activities with Mr. Profumo is to produce information about War Office secrets. But the success of the enterprise in no way depends on there being any awareness of that goal on the part of Mr. Profumo himself. On the contrary, desires of an entirely different sort can best be relied on to secure the desired result. Now under certain conditions, the phenomenological content of desire might well be no less alien to the biological purpose which it serves than Ivanov's designs were from the desires of Profumo. And under such conditions the question of whether the latter actually served the former would be entirely separate from the question of whether, from any point of view other than that of Ivanov, it would be a good thing for them to do so.

Now substitute God for Ivanov in the analogy. The point is that from the point of view of my own will, which is, after all, theologically warranted free, whether God's designs are a good idea is always open to question. One further step away, if we substitute Nature for God, the distance between the two aims—Nature's and mine—is even greater, and we must conclude that there is no possibility of building a coherent notion of perversion.

Chief among the assumptions required to make sense of perversion, then, is the idea that a *proper function* of an organ or type of behaviour is there to be discovered. And prior to that, in turn, is the assumption that the relevant facts of the matter can be discerned. But in the case of sex as of death, what are those facts? A threat of circularity lurks when we ask this question, since we must be concerned not with just any facts (there are plenty of facts about sexuality and death that presumably would not be thought by either side of the dispute to cast any light on the propriety of this or that emotional attitude), but only the *relevant* facts. But the difficulty lies precisely in articulating what sort of facts might be relevant to the appropriateness of emotional attitudes. So I shall need to address the question of whether it is possible to discern relevant facts about death. First, however, in the hope of exploiting the analogy, I shall explore the association of perversion with sex.

Sexual desire isn't just one inclination among others. It is emblematic of the very notion of desire itself. Three features help to explain the centrality of the erotic in the concepts of desire and perversion: its phenomenological salience, its polymorphism, and an inherent ambiguity between the phenomenological and biological levels at which it may be described.

(i) Phenomenological salience. It has been a recurrent trope, from Plato to Freud, that the erotic is of the essence of desire even when the desire does not aim at reproduction or even at genital satisfaction. Phenomenologically, sexual desire is a paradigm of desire. We may see evidence for this in the fact that intrigues of love form the core of most story plots; but that is not always true, and the exceptions to that generalization are equally instructive. Darnton (1984) shows that the pursuit of food, not sex, is the single most important driving motivation in most of the folk stories collected by Charles Perrault in 18th Century France. We may infer that when food is chronically lacking, its pursuit becomes more important than the pursuit of sex. Even then, however, the quest for food does not acquire the paradigmatic status of the erotic. The evidence for this fact, I suggest, lies precisely in the fact that the quest for food does not appear to give rise to any perversions. Nagel observed that one might work to construct a notion of gastronomical perversion. But the result is somewhat forced and corresponds to no common notion. Why should this be?

One reason is that the sort of variation to which our tastes in food are subject differs from the sorts of variation possible in sex. There seem to be two key differences. One is that our interest in food, unlike our erotic desires, does not involve a complex process of development, of which only a relatively late stage actually provides nutrition. It follows that there are fewer opportunities for arrested development, changes in behavioural aims, and vagaries in the target objects selected.² For that reason our attitudes to food do not often involve emotions. Passionately held food taboos are, of course, the exceptions that prove the rule, since in those cases the moralistic attitudes that confront transgressions are much closer to those that tend to be opposed to sexual “deviance”. A second reason is that the link between the biological function of hunger and its phenomenal character is direct, whereas the link between the ostensible object of erotic desire and its biological teleology can remain entirely hidden from view. When I am hungry, what I want is nourishment; and my desire for

² Nagel suggest as an examples of gastronomical perversion a form of fetishism that would consist in a desire to eat pictures of food, "or if when hungry he sought satisfaction by fondling a napkin or ashtray from his favorite restaurant." (1969, p. 41). A closer parallel to some of Freud's own examples would be an exclusive taste for thin sweet milk, marking a fixation at an early stage of the development of taste.

nourishment is precisely the means selected by nature to procure it. When I experience erotic desire, on the other hand, I may well have no thought whatever of the goal for which nature has instilled that particular desire in me. As will shortly become clear, this last fact will play a crucial role in the present argument.

(ii) Polymorphism. The fact that psychoanalysis accords a privileged position to erotic desire in our mental economy might be viewed in a deflationary spirit. Grant that the erotic is a powerful *example* of desire, and allow that free association leads unerringly from any non-sexual or “sublimated” desire to sexual thoughts. The inference that apparently unrelated desires are somehow *really* sexual may be just an illusion. It could simply be that since sexual desires are among most people's salient preoccupations, free association leads naturally to those thoughts from virtually any starting point. It's not that free association is the Royal Road to the Unconscious where sexual fantasies lie hidden by repression; rather, it's that sexual fantasies lie all over the place, so that any random walk will find them.

Illusory or not, the central role of erotic desire in mental economy can be interpreted in two ways. In the narrowly Freudian interpretation, “sublimated” desires retain their essential erotic nature. Their ostensible objects are for non-sexual aims, typically for achievements of an aesthetic, social, business or moral nature, thus manifesting transformations of the ostensible nature of desire; but the essential erotic energy that provides their driving force remains unchanged. On the contrasting view, associated with Jung, a determinable original desire underlies both the erotic and the other modes of desire. The sexual form of desire does not constitute a more basic, original or authentic form of desire, but is merely one specific form among others.³

From the phenomenological point of view, there is little to choose between these two views. They can be distinguished only when regarded from a different perspective, where what is salient is not the

³ Some light may be thrown on the difference by comparing it with the contrast between two ways in which two Pre-Socratic philosophers thought of the relation between the variety of determinate phenomena and the underlying reality.. Anaximander thought of it as arising from an essentially *indeterminate* but determinable root, the *apeiron*. Anaximenes, by contrast, thought of the basic stuff as being fully determinate in nature but admitting of transformations in observable form, leaving its essence intact—it is always *air*—while modifying its appearance. For Anaximenes, different observable material substances are just states of air in different degrees of concentration and rarefaction. Jung's view is akin to Anaximander's, Freud's to that of Anaximenes.

phenomenology of desire but the biology that underlies it. From this biological point of view, Freud's conception makes sense, while Jung's is seen to be nothing but metaphysical fancy. On the other hand, a Jungian—or an existentialist—could charge that moving to the biological point of view simply amounts to changing the subject.

(iii) The Biological and the Phenomenological The conflict between the Freudian and the Jungian view of desire stems from the fact that psychological states may be viewed under two aspects: in terms of what is *phenomenologically intrinsic*, or in terms of what is *biologically instrumental*. Actually there are two contrasts here. Like all our “natural” desires, the aims of sexual desire are arranged hierarchically: when regarded as causes or explanations, they can be *remote* or *proximate*. In relation to one another, psychological explanations are typically proximate and biological explanations typically remote. But this contrast doesn't exhaust the ambiguity, for while there is a sense in which biology aims to provide remote explanations, an aim can also be more or less proximal or remote either at the phenomenological level or at the biological level. To illustrate the former, consider Robert Solomon's claim that all emotions share a higher-level aim: “self-esteem is the goal of every passion” (Solomon 1984, 97). In the same phenomenological vein, one might claim, at a naïve first approximation, that the aim of sexual desire is pleasure. Or more inventively, one could find with Nagel that the essence of sexual desire lies in an elaborate game of mutual recognition, attributing to desire something like the structure that for Grice (1967) defined linguistic intercourse. The problem with all of these suggestions is that their very variety underscores their arbitrariness.⁴

The distinction between proximate and remote causes can also be made on the biological side alone. Proximate causes, however—the physiological mechanisms targeted by Viagra, say—need not concern us here. Proximate mechanisms underlying sexual desire as a functional unit must in turn be explained by their remote goal of reproduction, which in some sense they share with all other basic desires. But how is this remote biological aim related to the phenomenological content of desire? Can sexual desire really be seen as a desire *for reproduction*?

⁴ For two alternatives to Nagel's proposal about the phenomenological essence of sex, see Solomon (1974) and

Although ‘sexual reproduction’ is a standard phrase, it glosses over the fact that there is, in fact, no such thing as *reproduction* among sexual animals. All so-called reproduction might better be called ‘production’ of a novel individual. Even if conservative politicians were persuaded to approve human cloning, the true replication of a complex human being is not a possibility. There is therefore no point in my desiring to reproduce *myself*.⁵

What we call reproduction, is in fact just the production of another bearer of some of one's genes. That outcome is not impossible to want; but wanting it presupposes knowledge and concepts that most humans never had—let alone our pre-human ancestors. It lies on the far side of a gulf between the biological and the phenomenological which Freud starkly described:

Biology teaches that ... two views, seemingly equally well-founded, may be taken of the relation between the ego and sexuality. On one view, the individual is the principal thing, sexuality is one of its activities, and satisfaction one of its needs; while on the other view the individual is a temporary and transient appendage to the quasi-immortal germ plasm, which is entrusted to him by the process of generation. (Freud 1915, 123)

But again, what exactly would the relation between these “two views” need to be like to be relevant to the question of perversion? How, if at all, does the biological teleology of sexuality enter into the phenomenology of individual desire?

The short answer to this last question is probably *not at all*. For natural selection neither *needs* to build, nor *could* it possibly have built, any correlative of the biological function of sex into the phenomenology of desire. Natural selection does not need to program any representation of reproduction into desire, providing that the actual content of individual desires leads on the whole to creatures behaving in such a way as to promote the biological end of reproduction. And from the

Moulton (1976)

⁵ All this is neatly summed up in Woody Allen's quip: “I don't want to achieve immortality through my work [or, he might have added, through cloning or children]: I want to achieve immortality through *not dying*.”

biological point of view that is just as well, for it could not succeed if it needed to. The reason is that for a creature even to contemplate the propagation of genetic material of which they are the vehicle as a *possible* target of desire, they would have to be language-users equipped with a good deal of scientific knowledge and philosophical reflectiveness.

Before there was desire, nature had to make do with *tropisms*: the effectiveness of mechanisms inducing reproductive behaviour could hardly afford to wait for articulate desire. Instead, we can suppose that the propensity to do whatever would lead to reproduction was cobbled together from more elementary tendencies, instincts, and desires. Freud's story of the gradual integration of "component instincts", originally relating to different parts of the body and embodying their own specific aims (Freud 1905), while speculative and unlikely to be correct in detail, undoubtedly fits the sort of way that the "tinkering" of natural selection operates. Even when sexual desire is as articulate as it can be, and fully integrated into what Freud regarded as the culminating phase of "genitality", there remains a sense in which the *content* of our desires may never perfectly match the biological teleology that underlies them. And in the very consciousness of our explicit human desires it is perhaps not fanciful to suppose an obscure awareness of the serendipitous relation between the content of our desires and the ultimate energy that enables the attainment of their object.⁶

Given the cleavage between the ostensible object of my desire and the biological functions which it serves, there is no justification for looking to the underlying biology, any more than to God, for a principle of distinction between normal and perverted desire.

The gap between the aim of phenomenological desire the biological aim that underlies it implies not only a divergence but a potential conflict between the goals properly attributable to the individual as such and those attributable to "the species", or better no one in particular.⁷ There is no contradiction in maintaining both that natural selection didn't need to select for a desire to reproduce members of the

⁶ See (de Sousa 1998) for an exploration of some of the ways in which we never quite get what we want.

⁷ This is noted by a character in G.B. Shaw's *Back to Methuselah*, who protests that entrusting sex to the whims of individual attraction is no more reasonable than a general would be who refused to kill anyone whom he didn't personally hate.

species as such, and that the individual desires it did foster might conflict with the biological goal of doing so. But lest it might seem to be the case, it should suffice to recall that the environment that shaped us is no longer ours. Moreover, where such conflict arises between individual goals and remote biological teleology, the latter can make no claim, worthy of being regarded as legitimate from the point of view of the individual, to trump the aims defined by individual desire.

4. Death

Fascination with death takes the form both of dread and of longing. For each, some more or less implausible biological roots have been postulated. If there is a correct emotion in the face of death, it might therefore be sought in either or both of two antagonistic attitudes.

The less obvious is *desire* for death, erected by (Freud 1920) as Thanatos, a Death Instinct symmetrical and counterpoised with Eros. The inspiration for its alleged discovery lay in his observation of *repetition compulsions*, particularly in soldiers re-living war traumata. These plainly lay “beyond the pleasure principle”, and seemed equally inexplicable in terms of the “reality principle” which represented the mature transform of the pleasure principle. Freud leapt to the conclusion that they were governed by an equally goal-directed principle the aim of which was a return to a previous condition. Since the ultimate previous condition of life is non-existence, Freud concluded that “the aim of all life is death” (Freud 1920, 38).

On Freud's view, the death instinct is located at a deep biological level. Thanatos is at the heart of all desire for nothingness, whether for oneself, as manifested not only in a desire for death but in repetition-compulsions, or—in a sort of perverse altruism—for others, when turned outward and manifested as aggression. But its stratospheric level of generality strips Thanatos of any scrap of biological reality. It is ascribed to all living matter as such, all the way down to individual living cells which Freud fancied were seized with a longing for extinction. Freud sometimes writes bizarrely as if the whole of nature echoed Sonia's last words in Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*: “We shall rest, we shall rest.” As Jonathan Lear points out, Freud seems to have been so committed to his search for meaning in the apparently meaningless texture of life, that he “could not really grasp ... that some mental activity

occurs without a purpose. Freud cannot see this because all of his thinking and research is directed toward finding hidden and deeper purposes.” (Lear 2000, 80). Thus he entirely missed the possibility that not only in mentality but also in biology, some phenomena manifest a complete *absence* of teleology. Any mechanism may malfunction, and at least some malfunctions are wholly devoid of meaning. In terms of a now familiar metaphor unavailable to Freud, we might say that a computer malfunction due to a programming error could produce a *perversion of meaning*; but one due to a hardware failure may result in anomalies in output that are not usefully *interpreted* as having any kind of meaning at all. Breakdowns in the machinery produce not perversions of meaning, but absence of meaning.

Still, it might be suggested, even if we grant that the “compulsion to repeat” which Freud interprets as a desire for death actually has no meaning at the *individual* level, perhaps it has meaning at the other level, that of the “quasi-immortal germ plasm”. In this vein, popular accounts of evolution sometimes attempt to “explain” death as being necessitated to make room for natural selection to produce new forms. We can dismiss this notion as a naive application of pseudo-teleological thinking, of the sort that cannot be reconciled with the logic of natural selection. For the reproductive success of a *gene for self-extinction* would necessarily be inversely proportional to its effectiveness. The null hypothesis or default assumption about death requires not that there be a goal of function of death, but merely that no teleology justifies the cost of prolonging the lives of individuals. Maintaining organisms in a state of good repair takes resources, particularly in the form of redundancy of genetic information to protect the integrity of phenotypic copies from small copying errors in the genotype of somatic cells. Once their task of passing on their genetic heritage has likely been accomplished, the replication of somatic cells can safely be allowed to degenerate or cease, and individual organisms can be allowed to perish.

Nevertheless, there is in fact some reason to think that the null hypothesis is false: that individuals in metazoan lineages, as well as individual cells, are programmed to die, in a manner that results from selection. The segregation of somatic from sex cells promotes a division of labour, in which the former

specialize in looking after an expendable temporary vehicle for the latter to continue their unceasing replication. The somatic cells, and with them the individual, are therefore programmed to die and so prevented both from competing with the sexual line, to which endless replication is entrusted, and from degenerating to a cancerous condition that would impair the orderly transmission of the sexual line. (Clark 1996, de Sousa 2000b).

It seems clear that this process, while it might seem to give comfort to the notion of a Death Instinct, is unlikely to be reflected in the intentional object of any desire. The argument made earlier about the essential gap between the biological level and the level of phenomenal desire applies *a fortiori* to any teleology of self-destruction that might be read into the programmed mechanism of apoptosis, the orderly self-immolation of cells. What is programmed in the cell does not need to be echoed at the level of the consciousness or intentionality of the individual organism. Nor is it easy to conceive of a putative mechanism or even an abstract selection pressure that might lead to its being so represented. In any case, as I shall argue in a moment, there are further reasons for thinking that death cannot have been set up by natural selection as an object of either fear or desire.

Jonathan Lear has objected to the parallel between Eros and Thanatos in the following terms:

... herein lies a crucial difference between love and death: within the human realm love is itself a psychological force; death is not. Death remains a purely biological force from which psychological consequences, like aggression, are supposed to flow. For a worthy opponent to love, Freud should have chosen hate or strife; a force which in the human realm is psychological. (Lear 1990, 14)

This is right about death but wrong about love. By the time the death instinct makes its appearance in Freud's thought, Eros, perhaps precisely in order to preserve a symmetry with Thanatos, has lost its specificity to become a generalized life instinct, at the heart not only of sexual desire but of something like the Spinozistic/Nietzschean struggle to *continue in existence*. The radical disconnection between the underlying biological construct and the phenomenological reality of the corresponding attitude pertains no less to love than death. So Lear has failed to single out a difference between the two. His

diagnosis should not then deter us from pursuing the parallel: this I shall do, after a brief detour.

5. Amélie Rorty's Paradox

A striking paradox proffered by Amélie Rorty will bring us back to the question of the rationality of fearing death. The fear of death as annihilation, she has boldly argued, is *both rational and irrational*. (Rorty 1988).

First, for the reason Epicurus gave, it is indeed irrational to fear annihilation. For before I die, I do not experience death because I am alive. But when I am dead, no “I” is left to experience anything. So there is no such *experience* to be feared as death.

A standard objection is that Epicurus is simply begging the question. His argument presupposes that we cannot rationally care about a condition that one will never experience. But his conclusion entails this, and so can't reasonably rest on it. That is the basis of Larkin's complaint: the argument is “specious” because annihilation, the absence of all sentience, is precisely what we fear.

The crux of Epicurus's argument is this: “*Whatever causes no annoyance when it is present, causes only a groundless pain in the expectation.*”⁸ This is essentially an application of the *Philebus Principle*, which requires that *a pleasure of anticipation should be proportional to the anticipated pleasure to which it relates*. (de Sousa 2000a) This must be construed as a *normative* principle, not just as an observation about the relation of expectation to its object. One might rationalize the Philebus principle along pragmatic lines. If our annoyance or our pleasure in anticipation were uncorrelated with the annoyance or pleasure afforded by the event itself, our motivation would have an essentially random

⁸ The whole of Epicurus's famous argument in the *Letter to Menoecus* reads as follows: *Accustom yourself to believing that death is nothing to us, for good and evil imply the capacity for sensation, and death is the privation of all sentience; therefore a correct understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not by adding to life a limitless time, but by taking away the yearning after immortality. For life has no terrors for him who has thoroughly understood that there are no terrors for him in ceasing to live. Foolish, therefore, is the man who says that he fears death, not because it will pain when it comes, but because it pains in the prospect. Whatever causes no annoyance when it is present, causes only a groundless pain in the expectation. Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not. It is nothing, then, either to the living or to the dead, for with the living it is not and the dead exist no longer.*

effect on our planning. This consideration may constitute a plausible hypothesis about the biological origin of our endorsement of the *Philebus* principle and its function. But that doesn't mean it ever enters into the *content* of our anticipation, any more than the biological root of erotic desire enters into the intentional object of our desires. Nevertheless, it is not inconceivable that it might have a role in explicit deliberation. In that case, it would serve the individual's long-term interests rather than those of some remote biological function. In this respect the *Philebus* principle fares better than any of the teleological principles so far mentioned. But this would work only provided we had sufficient control of our experience of pleasure for it to make a difference. That possibility seems rather slim. Still, it provides an example of how a biological teleology might actually enter into the content of a desire or emotion.

Rorty's quarrel with Epicurus, however, appeals to a more fundamental biological perspective, stressing the fitness-enhancing function of the fear of death. She argues that the fear of death is an inevitable *concomitant* of the existence of dispositions to "functional fears," which are as biologically useful as pain. So, Rorty concludes, it is *both rational and irrational to fear death*, because "the two sides of the argument are not commensurable; they cannot be weighed and summarized in such a way as to allow us to determine what is, all things considered, the rational attitude towards death." (Rorty 2000, 210)

What exactly is the locus of incommensurability? One possibility derives from the way in which we may compute the rationality of our preferences. In Bayesian decision theory, all our choices can be construed as implementing preferences for gambles blending subjective probabilities and desirabilities. A finite number of explicit choices will suffice to ground the ascription to an agent of a unique preference ranking. (Jeffrey 1965) This can be used either descriptively, in order to predict a person's decision on a new question, or critically, in the ascription of an incoherence in the individual's preference rankings. So life choices can be assessed in terms of the desirabilities of various options, weighted by probabilities, constructed in the light of past choices.

But since death represents the end of projects (the end of time for me, one might say) my past choices provide no guidance. For most of us have previously made no choice amounting to the absence

of all experience, (as opposed to the choice between one sort of experience and another). In this sense, then, for Bayesian decision theory, death is an absolutely incomparable choice. It must then follow that a choice of death cannot be deemed either rational or irrational. No attitude toward death can be meaningfully described as correct even in the narrow sense of being consonant with all or most of my previous choices. Nor can any therefore be decried as perverted.

This way of looking at incommensurability has an important virtue. It refers the question of rationality to the individual subject, not to any general truth which then must fit each individual merely by virtue of their belonging to the species. Rorty goes further, however, and frames the argument in entirely general and quasi-Kantian terms:

[a] mind capable of certain kinds of causal reasoning cannot restrict the use of such reasoning ... Reifying the totality of experience, illicitly treating it as if it could itself be a possible object of experience, we ask questions that are appropriate only within experience Similarly we ask these questions about the simple unified soul, the subject of experience reified as what it cannot be: an object of possible experience. These questions are both inevitable and illicit: they are built into the operations of rational inference, and yet are improper and meaningless. (Rorty, *ibid.*)

In Rorty's view, then, incommensurability is traced to the fact that the reasons to fear and the reasons not to fear death belong to different perspectives, or indeed to different orders of explanation. They relate respectively to proximate-psychological and remote-biological facts, and thus return us to the parallel with the duality of Eros.

6. The fear of death: biology and phenomenology

If sexual desire is the paradigm of desire, it might be said that fear of death is the paradigm of aversion. If so, then we might wonder whether the features listed earlier might find an echo—reversing the valence—in our attitudes to death:

(i) Phenomenological salience. Phenomenologically, fear of death is the paradigm of fear. *While there's life, there's hope*, we say. Death is the ultimate threat. No wonder it figures as the *other* chief

engine of novel and movie plots, second only to sex. The interest aroused by stories featuring the menace of death does not need to be explained in terms of any special preoccupations of readers and moviegoers.

(ii) Polymorphism. It might further be held that the dread of death lies at the heart of our other fears, even when it does not seem to be so. Our awareness is not always the best guide here, so that we may not be immediately aware that our fear is not what it seems, just as we aren't always aware of—indeed, many insistently deny—the fact that the erotic might lurk behind other more “innocent” desires. Similarly, the anxiety that forms the aversive core of pain is usually assumed to be identical with the sensation of pain, and yet there is evidence that certain analgesics of the opiate family make it possible to feel a painful sensation without experiencing any intense aversion (Dennett 1978, 208).

Phenomenologically, the centrality of the fear of death relates to an awareness that if the threat of death did not lie behind other forms of harm, then those other harms could not be absolutely serious. When reprieve is certain, there can be no true tragedy. But here, as in the case of sexuality, we can again ask two questions. First, *is there an underlying biological level* which can account for the phenomenology of our attitude to death? Second, if there is, can we conceive of that biological level being represented in the phenomenology of our attitudes to death? Only if this second question can be answered in the affirmative, might we give meaning to possibility that some attitudes to death are *contrary to nature*, and hence perverted.

(iii) The Biological and the Phenomenological Why do we die? The question stems from the vestiges of an infantile or religious assumption that every causal question has a teleological answer. This assumption, which as we saw Freud is too ready to make, is biologically gratuitous. Still, as we saw, there may be a sense in which organisms are indeed programmed to die—rather than simply allowed to perish in accordance with the most plausible alternative hypothesis. Even then, however, an organism needs to be programmed to last long enough to do its job as a gene survival machine.⁹ A healthy fear of

⁹ The metaphor comes from (Dawkins 1976, 21)

specific dangers that might prematurely threaten the germ line's somatic vehicle therefore does need to be programmed in. It is difficult to see how natural selection could have had any direct influence on an emotion that has as its intentional object *death-as-the-annihilation-of-the-individual*. For that requires a conceptual base we cannot easily ascribe to non-language-using animals, including our pre-linguistic ancestors. For the following argument, I submit, establishes that pre-linguistic animals cannot fear their own annihilation:

1. An animal could not take something to be a cause that it cannot conceptualize.
2. The *individual's annihilation* could not be conceptualized by a being incapable of conceptualizing *itself as an individual that might not exist*.
3. A being incapable of language could not conceptualize itself as an individual that might cease to exist. We must distinguish the conception of one's possible extinction from the fear of present danger. Rorty's "functional fears" can be only of the latter sort, which can be and obviously are felt by other animals; the former, by contrast, requires one to hold in mind, as it were, a calendar of future and possible times, without any perceptible links to the present moment. And that calls the sorts of representational devices that allow us to refer to what is absent: broadly speaking, a capacity for language.
4. Therefore natural selection couldn't have detected dread of non-being as such in our pre-linguistic forebears. Instead, it will have selected for all kinds of dispositions to fear in the face of dangers, some of which would have been lethal in fact, but none of which could be apprehended as such.

Modern humans' capacity to conceive of annihilation makes it possible to dread it; but it doesn't suddenly make any more intelligible the awareness of annihilation as an *object* of dread. Once we do become capable of conceiving of non-being, the nameless atavistic dread selected as a response to danger is focused on the prospect of non-being, and the Epicurean consolation is dismissed as "spurious stuff".¹⁰ But that dismissal isn't necessarily rational.

There is another, closely related argument that suggests that annihilation can't be the true object of my fear.¹¹ The relevant sense of fear is one which amounts to more than merely having a negative attitude to a possible state of affairs. Fear demands that I apprehend its object from a subjective point of view, from my own standpoint. But in the case of death that means I can't really imagine what I allegedly fear. For nothing can count as imagining something from my own standpoint, if there can't be such a thing as my own standpoint in the situation I supposedly imagine.

It might be objected that I might fear something despite being unable to imagine it. But that does not do justice to the nature of fear, which is triggered not by abstract propositional conceptions but by perception or imagination. It is difficult to see how one might actually experience fear if one were unable in any way to imagine the feared prospect. But since there is nothing it is like to be dead, nothing can count as imagining myself being dead.

One last line of resistance is possible. It might be claimed that it is not after all impossible for a non-existent object to be the object of an emotion. For the object of an emotion can be identified in a rough and ready way as *what that subject takes to be its cause*. And since I may falsely take something that doesn't exist for a cause of my fear, I can imagine the impossible.

Even granting that, however, there seems to be a clear sense in which I am *mistaken* about the object of my fear in all such cases. I conclude that our fear of our own death is *always mistaken in its object*. Even if these arguments fail to carry conviction, the fear of annihilation cannot be a fear conditioned by natural selection. It is best thought of as “grafted” onto more atavistic fears directed at other more specific threats. So we can draw a conclusion that exactly parallels that drawn above about

¹⁰ Or is replaced with a consoling delusion. It seems to be an anthropological truism that our ancestors' accession to the status of *homo sapiens* was more or less simultaneous with the invention of religion. Very likely we became psychologically incapable of taking annihilation seriously precisely as we became intellectually capable of conceiving our own death. On the verge of conceiving of death, our ancestors sanitized it and reconceptualized it as a mere change of state (Burkert 1996).

¹¹ This argument was suggested to me by Patricia Greenspan, but I have recast it in terms that she may not agree with.

the necessary disconnection between the biology and the phenomenology of desire: *Natural selection did not need to build, and could not possibly have built, any correlative of the biological function of death into the phenomenology of the fear of death.*

7. Tolstoy and the Temptation of Objectivity

I have so far been mainly concerned with the question whether a biological level of teleology can be imported into the experience of desire. If it could, we might be able to justify labelling certain desires as perverted on the ground that they deviate from their proper nature as reflecting their distal biological end. The quest for a plausible case in point has so far been in vain. But the failure of that approach suggests that we might do better to tackle the phenomenology of death directly, emulating Nagel's approach to the phenomenology of erotic desire. This would require us to turn our back on biology and seek some phenomenological essence in the contemplation of death. Nagel's treatment of sexual perversion shows that such a quest is likely to be suggestive, but vulnerable: for any demurrals risk exposing its pronouncements as incurably arbitrary. The persuasiveness of a claim to have discovered the phenomenological essence of death will likely result from literary skill rather than argumentative cogency, but perhaps it is none the worse for that. For philosophers are not alone, of course, in urging certain attitudes towards death. So have poets and novelists. Tolstoy's story "The death of Ivan Ilych" is a brilliant example: a meditation on death designed to offer a lesson about the proper attitude to death. It can be read as a warning, an argument, intended to change the reader's attitudes, perhaps to change the reader's life. It works by building an emotional conviction about the true nature of death, and the correct attitude to death.

Crudely exploited as argument, Tolstoy's story can thus be read as putting forward a number of theses.¹² These cluster around multiple kinds of "falsity": "*He was so surrounded and involved in a*

¹² Most of the intelligible points that can be extracted from Heidegger's turgid chapter on death in (Heidegger 1962) are to be found in Tolstoy's lucid and compelling story. Heidegger's chapter, though it may well be among the more powerful parts of his work and passes for one of the most important philosophical discussions of death, can therefore safely be ignored, except by those who are entranced by the aesthetic appeal of insights of middling quality, once swaddled into a weight of pompous and obscurantist convolutions.

mesh of falsity that it was hard to unravel anything.” (Tolstoy 1960, 139. All references are to this edition.) This falsity includes denial of his own death: *“The syllogism he had learnt from Kiezewetter’s Logic: ‘Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal,’ had always seemed to him correct as applied to Caius, but certainly not as applied to himself.... If I had to die like Caius I should have known it was so. An inner voice would have told me so, but there was nothing of the sort....”* (129); and denial of his death by others (*“he knew very well they were all lying and why they were lying.”* (138)). But most importantly it consists in inauthenticity in his attitudes to life and death: Ilych had been particularly proud of his gift for *“separating his official duties from his private life.”* (104); but now he asks: *“What if my whole life has really been wrong?”* (148). And again: *“In them he saw himself—all that for which he had lived—saw clearly that it was not real at all, but a terrible and huge deception which had hidden both life and death.”*(149).

Part of what constitutes this deception consists in the fact that he suppressed the knowledge of his own bad choices by submitting to social norms and conventions.

At school he had done things which had formerly seemed to him very horrid and made him feel disgusted with himself... but when later on he saw that such actions were done by people of good position and that they did not regard them as wrong, he was able not exactly to regard them as right, but to forget about them entirely or not be at all troubled at remembering them.” (103)

and again:

It occurred to him that his scarcely perceptible attempts to struggle against what was considered good by the most highly placed people, those scarcely noticeable impulses which he had immediately suppressed, might have been the real thing, and all the rest false.” (148-149)

Near death, and despite the isolating character of death, (124, 146) Ilych seems to lose his defining selfishness, and thereby finds a kind of joy: *“Suddenly it grew clear to him that what had*

been oppressing him and would not leave him was all dropping away.... He was sorry for them, he must act so as not to hurt them, release them....” (152)

This last passage raises a doubt: Is Tolstoy cheating? Is he refusing, in the end, to take death seriously in the sense earlier defined? (External evidence about Tolstoy's religion makes this probable.) But if we ignore that disqualifying possibility, we can focus on another element implicit in Tolstoy's ending. I refer to a tendency to believe that *the dying see life more clearly than the living*. This is a not uncommon prejudice, reflected in Samuel Johnson's famous remark that “when any man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.” But why should changes in attitude brought by the proximity of death be assumed to have any special authority? Should we espouse a maxim of *in morte veritas* with any more confidence than we endorse *in vino veritas*? Perhaps, in truth, our attitude to death when death is near is simply *akratic*: like the addict's reversal of long term preference as the fix approaches. We prefer not to believe that, no doubt, because the dying seldom get a second chance to revise their judgments and we incline to attribute disproportionate weight to final judgments. Perhaps we are obscurely aware that in our evaluation of any stretch of time, we allow the last moments to outweigh nearly all others in our assessment of the whole. (Kahneman 2000, 6). But after death there will be no retrospection, and it's not obvious why we should prefer to think we were right for a few minutes after being wrong our whole life long, rather than the other way around.

8. Conclusion

Affecting though it be, Tolstoy's moral carries conviction only as long as it is unexamined. We saw that Epicurus, in the end, fares no better. The power and simplicity of his argument diverts attention from its question-begging character. But that is just a characteristic that must probably be shared by just any meditation on death. Here, to recapitulate, is why.

Whether the favoured attitude is dread (Larkin), authenticity and selflessness (Tolstoy), longing (Freud) or Olympian equanimity (Epicurus), all these demand to be grounded in relevant facts about

what death *really* is. If one attitude is correct, another might be made out to be a perversion, stemming from a distortion of the true nature of death, and likely to impede our best chances of thriving. What is the right emotional attitude to some phenomenon depends on the objective truth of the phenomenon. But the converse also holds: our emotional reaction to it, when brought to the right level of intensity, and not dulled by social conformities, is itself partly constitutive of that objective reality. To what extent can a philosophical analysis like that of Epicurus or a meditation like Tolstoy's get us out of that circle? Can it actually form the basis of a criticism of an emotional attitude? If it can, it must be on the basis of some independent principle of rationality focusing not on any intrinsic quality of appropriateness-to-a-given-intentional-object, but on some transition or relation, something like an inferential principle which if violated will lead to some sort of absurdity. And it seems that any such putative principle of rationality is likely to fall between two stools. Either it will find roots in biology that cannot figure as contents of desire; or else it will rely on the flimsily cantilevered intuitions of free-floating phenomenology. Even a purely analytic meditation like that of Epicurus ends up being uneasily moralistic, as talk of perversions in regions closer to that concept's usual habitat are wont to be.

The totality of a given individual's attitudes may be more or less well integrated, more or less conducive to that individual's thriving, more or less in harmony with those of the individual's social environment. To label as perversions those attitudes and desires that lie at one end of any of those ranges of variation is not informative, and only risks misleading with its attendant remnants of moral connotations. For there is no court that is competent to pass judgment on our attitudes and emotions towards sex and death, other than the effort of bringing into reflective equilibrium, individually and collectively, the very attitudes and emotions we propose to assess.

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