

## Nothing to be frightened of

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February 12-18, 2018

Nothing is of course Death. Death is nothing, and that is of course the very problem with it. Extinction, not to be. Not to be, what is the problem? You cannot think of not being, as Freud is supposed to have pointed out (but you hardly need Freud to think of that, but of course it gives more weight to refer to someone like Freud, rather than to yourself as a small child). Consciousness is more or less by definition incapable of imagining your own death. It can of course note that this will be the case, but mere knowledge is not the same as understanding. Certain things are by nature impossible to take in. The subconsciousness on the other hand cannot know that there is something such as death, and consequently believes in personal immortality, at least to the extent a subconsciousness can believe anything at all, (or a gene be selfish for that matter). Freud's assertion cannot be falsified, just as is the case with almost all assertions of psychoanalysis as Popper used to point out. But of course people deep down (subconsciously?) believe that they are immortal, that death is something that happens to other people and not themselves. After all we learn about countless deaths throughout our lives, but never of our own. I used to think that this observation of mine as to the contradictory attitude towards death, was original? But it is hard to come up with original thoughts, especially when death is concerned.

When do you become aware of death as something which at least potentially can concern you? Young children may for obvious reasons take a very cynical attitude towards death, after all adulthood is far away, and old age, the proper territory for the foraging of Death, lies even further away, far beyond the horizon. I recall references to great grandmothers who had recently died, but whom I did not remember. It was my mothers paternal grandmother Anna (1859-51) and my fathers maternal grandmother Sofia (1869-53), the only great grandparents whose lives intersected with mine<sup>1</sup>. As a child the only dead people I knew were historical ones, in particular those of Swedish kings. Of course over the years this would change drastically. At the age of four I imagined someone lying on his deathbed, while outside life was going on. How bitter it must be to pass away from life I thought, and how much he would envy those who were still up and about, with a vast future ahead. I did not imagine myself in the position of the dying man, but of course I was able to imagine the regret he would feel bound as he was to his bed. Later on I did of course dread death, of being accidentally cut down. Death was extinction, that was an early idea that occurred to me, how could it have been otherwise, I thought. Of course I was told about God, and I feared him dutifully, and I was frightened by the coming Last Judgment where I would risk being condemned to hell. Risk? Was it not a certainty? I

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<sup>1</sup> The identity of the father of my maternal grandmother was never disclosed, her mother died a few years before my birth, but the father was probably, according to legend, an older farmer taking advantage of a young girl.

have always been of a hypochondriac temperament. Until the dawn of the teens I used to worry about it, waking up early in the summer mornings, apprehensively looking out for any signs of the approaching tribunal, angels with trumpets etc. As I did not see any, I could relax, at least until the next morning. If the last judgment would come, the rational thing to do would of course to shoot yourself, as to escape inevitable divine punishment. There is a contradiction here, or at least a certain irony. My father brought up in a fairly strict religious home, exasperated by my fears dismissed them and the whole business of the last judgment as mere superstition. And did not the Swedish church abolish the Devil some time ago, and hence also Hell? As if Hell was just a legal fiction, to be annihilated by a mere pen stroke.

What was the surest way to go to Hell? What about combining the name of God with a curse? A blasphemy. I may have been nine or ten, when the thought occurred to me. It was a thought you were not supposed to think, because if you did so, you surely would go to Hell. I could not help formulate it in my mind, nevertheless, and I was a bit taken aback by having done so. But I guess I was basically a healthy child, and thought no more about it (although I still remember it) and went on in a carefree way. When I was eleven, I did it again, and then I was devastated, convinced I was doomed. Such things are supposed only to occur to children subjected to a strict religious upbringing, but I certainly had not. Yet it did not take too much to fire my imagination, had I really been subjected to religious strictures I might have been destroyed. As a child I was told I had too much imagination, and that clearly was a very bad thing for which I was ashamed. True, courage usually is much easier to uphold if you are lacking in imagination. Galileo needed only to be shown the instruments of torture, a man of less imagination, has to try them out before he gets the idea. 'Cowards die a thousand deaths, while the brave only die once' as you can read in Shakespeare's 'Julius Caesar'. Or words to that effect. The line I read fairly recently made me ashamed. But once again, imagination makes us cowards, and perhaps that is something to be proud of?

Blasphemy was not enough, I soon thought of a more radical way. A few years earlier I had been told that suicide was as sinful as murder. I was taken aback, it seemed absurd. Then at thirteen it struck me that I needed not to have murderous intentions to be doomed, those could be directed against myself. When bicycling did I not veer towards the traffic? Could that not count as a suicidal attempt? I was horrified and seized with a great fear. Over the years the problems deepened. I became aware of the true magnitude of extinction, and willing your own extinction, was a desire so frightening, as it must be even more frightening than extinction itself. To harbor within you such an abyss was truly terrifying. I descended into depression which may have required clinical assistance had I not after all been functioning well at school nevertheless. It was, wisely I would say, attributable to the onset of puberty. And indeed I changed, the cruelty of the mind of a child being replaced by an awareness of the misery and tragedy of life, and thus an ability for empathy which I might not have entirely lacked, but could easily suppress as a child<sup>2</sup> emerged. It was as if I gained a 'soul', while shedding my infantile religious beliefs which I apparently had never deeply held, only believed that I had believed. The crisis

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<sup>2</sup> The Polish journalist Kapucinsky, speaks about child-soldiers as the worst They have no sense of fear, or even worse, no empathy. So much for the innocence of children.

lasted for about three years and became more and more philosophical and meta-physical. As I was sixteen ruminating on the phenomenon of sight, I realized that everything I saw might be an illusion, and consequently that the external world was but an illusion, and nothing really existed outside myself. Some years later, I think in reading the memoirs of Somerset Maugham, I came across the terminology conventionally applied, namely that of 'solipsism'. It is hard to be original when it comes to philosophical thoughts. When I had them, I was terrified, and naturally I felt a loneliness which by its nature would be incurable. I looked upon other people with envy, just as the dying man in my childhood imagination looked upon the living outside; after all they all existed in my imagination and I would love to join them there, instead of being the imaginarian, for ever separated from his creations. Was I going mad? The thought was a comfort, madness, which I had started to dread, was infinitely preferable to this state in which I was the only thing which truly existed <sup>3</sup>. Thinking about it in retrospect, it reminds you of the predicament of an omnipotent God alone in the universe with his creation. Must he not feel lonely, not to say panicky?

As with the obsession with suicidal thoughts, of a nature very different from those you normally associate those with, I grew out of the solipsistic mood <sup>4</sup>, dismissing it as an expression of my loneliness, which psychologically was no doubt very accurate. The result was that I escaped from philosophy, or rather meta-physical brooding, to mathematics. No wonder that Bertrand Russell became a hero and a role model to me at that time, when I first encountered him, probably through the anthology 'The World of Mathematics'.

I guess it was by this time I started to encounter this awareness of death as extinction, just not cessation but obliteration. Not only would your life stop and you would never learn the continuation of the story, which if you think about it is mainly a source of frustration<sup>5</sup>, but all your memories would be erased as well. You would not know any longer that you had ever existed. That was really scary, much scarier indeed than mere cessation.

Vertigo is a normal feeling, although some people seem to lack it altogether, which is a bit dangerous. Standing by an abyss, or high up, say in a cathedral, and looking

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<sup>3</sup> One could of course extend it to a solipsism of time, when only one moment existed, and memories were only phantoms in your imaginations, just like dreams, or rather the recollections of them, can be created at the moment of awakening, as Freud once indicated.

<sup>4</sup> Just as one may claim that everybody believes themselves to be immortal, one may also claim that they deep down are solipsists. And indeed the fundamental way, on the level of qualia, we experience the outside world cannot be compared to that of anyone else, as noted, among others, by Frege.

<sup>5</sup> How can you in a finite time length still experience the total future of the universe. For a mathematician that is easy, you envision the rest of your life divided into an infinite number of decreasing time spans, such as always halving what is left, like making a cake last for ever, and each of them postponed a certain amount of time. You reserve a week or two to spend time with your great grand-children, and maybe some of their descendants, would they be interesting enough. After you get bored with that, you move on to the next Ice Age (at the time I had that fantasy, there was no talk about Global Warming, only the specter of an Ice Age to descend on us). Then after that you take on a more cosmological perspective. You may spend an hour watching the sun a red giant, later on a minute to experience the deterioration of matter, and in the final end, never reached, your own extinction in time will coincide with that of the universe as a whole.

down on the floor far below. You would feel the paralyzing fear, as well as the impulse to throw yourself down. Just imagine that at one time in your life you would be left on a narrow ledge, and falling down would be invariable. You would not like to be put in such a predicament, regardless how far into the future it would be postponed. Ten years, a hundred years, a million years, name any figure, and the unpleasantness would not be diminished. The same with death. It does not matter when it will happen, the moment will be as horrible no matter what. The realization that you will eventually encounter that abyss that leads to extinction is so terrifying that you can only stand it a few moments (if even that), then you are forced to suppress it, the concerns of your everyday life enabling you to do so (but when you no longer can?). A similar moment of terror occurs when you realize that you exist, that existence itself is as terrifying as extinction. The first I have encountered innumerable times in the literature, while never the second. Maybe it is possible to have not only original philosophical thoughts but experiences as well? The two sensations have much in common in the panic they both engender, although they seem to be antipodal in their concern. In Arthur Schnitzler's autobiography he writes about an irrational terror that struck him as a child and made him scream aloud. Maybe the feeling it may resemble is the feeling of being entrapped in your own 'I' without any possibility of escape. And in fact when you encounter the terror of extinction you become extremely aware of your own existence, that you are imprisoned, that you exist along with your impending extinction, and you cannot escape your predicament. In fact your very painfully palpable sense of existence is tied up with its imminent demise. Are we all solipsists at heart <sup>6</sup>, and only at the moment when we encounter our extinction do we realize that there is indeed an external world, and it does not care a bit for us, it is not there for our own amusement and distraction, only there to extinguish us. Cosmology, with its vast distances and emptiness, may induce similar feelings, although I lost that ability early on as I got more engrossed in the mathematics of astronomy, but the vertigo of astronomical numbers can be greatly enhanced in more subtle ways and still terrify<sup>7</sup>.

The author addresses the issue of the fear of extinction, which I would characterize as meta-physical and existential, and which should be kept apart from another fear that comes later in life, when you no longer can double your age, and death becomes less of an exotic possibility than something you have to plan for in your daily life. Existential Angst, especially if it concerns something that will happen in a million years can with some effort of will be suppressed, but when your friends start to die around you, what makes you think that you are immune<sup>8</sup>? Usually you do, but once in a while, the protective screen is ripped. To die in your sixties is not unheard of, but is usually thought of as untimely

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<sup>6</sup> as noted in an earlier footnote

<sup>7</sup> Call a number to be of order one if its number of digits is astronomical, of order two if its number of digits is of order one, and so on. Then think of numbers of astronomical order, of order of order one etc, one may then think of numbers of order of order of order one, or of order of order of order of order, with an astronomical number of orders, in the description. And so on. We have hardly started, infinity is very big much bigger than you can imagine. Infinity and extinction are intimately connected, as extinction is supposed to last for ever.

<sup>8</sup> In one of the early Indian epics, as to what is the greatest mystery, one is referred to the fact that people see people all around them die as in a battle, but still believe that they will not die themselves.

and a source for regret, if relatively mild. When you get to your seventies it is considered normal, and in your eighties expected, and of course in the nineties it is overdue<sup>9</sup>. Not everyone has the fear of death. My father claimed he did not have it <sup>10</sup>, especially after he had his first heart attack at the age of 54, the brother of the author claims that as well. In both cases it is surely a consequence of rational deliberation, but fear is not rational, and even the great Goethe, supposedly was seized with terror during his last moments gasping for breath. The point of the book is to refer to many literary and artistic examples where the thought of death induced a prevailing terror the awareness of which only increased the closer to actual death they came. Just as with Barnes himself, finding companionship among dead strangers, not among alive relatives. To claim that you are not afraid of death is that simply a case of a defective imagination (we who fear death would like to think so), or is the fear of death just a matter of self-centeredness combined with plain cowardice?

The author brings up the existence of God. But do people who claim that they believe in God have no fear of death at all? Are they convinced of eternal life, and if it is spent in Hell, it is to be thought as preferable to extinction? Is not after all the fear of death far more elemental than that of religious conviction? Is the latter, as many claim, just a desperate stratagem to suppress the fear? The religious issue is really peripheral to the fear of death, and in fact religion is not just about eternal blissful life, which is just a rather vulgar aspect, but that would to some extent fall outside the theme. The heart of the matter is the invariance of the 'I' over time. The person that encounters death is the very same person who is alive today. Without a belief in the solidity of the 'I' there is no need for fear of death because when there will be dying, you already are no longer. There is the idea that our conception of our 'I' will slowly but inexorably change, so Woody Allen's wish, as expressed in the movie 'Love and Death', that he did not mind death as long as he did not have to be there when it happened, may be true. Maybe when you are about to die, you are no longer afraid of death, so in a sense your real dying occurs when you lose your fear, and that kind of transition does not appear as frightening as the final one <sup>11</sup>. Dying means losing everything, but all through your life you lose things, which can be thought of little dyings, as in the case of forgetting. Thus it is tempting to think of dementia as a blessing in disguise, because it will soften death, changing it from being abrupt to gradual, a piecemeal descent into blissful oblivion. Just as with every stratagem to conquer the fear of death, it does not hold water, but tends to dissolve upon closer inspection. What if the core of your personality is centered at the fear of death, that

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<sup>9</sup> It is noteworthy that people in the nineties are often in better shape than those in their eighties, and when they die, death is sudden and (ironically) unexpected. It does not take much to kill. A barrel only holds as much water as its lowest board, in old people the lowest board is left as tall as possible, meaning that almost all the boards are very low, and it does not take much to lower at least one of them.

<sup>10</sup> He used to say that he only feared the pain which might be connected with it, I thought of pain as a welcome distraction from the meta-physical angst. Is that a sign that I have been lucky enough never to have experienced real pain?

<sup>11</sup> This reminds you of a short story by the Swedish writer Hjalmar Sderberg, called *Drmmen om evigheten* (the dream of eternity), in which after each death, you will wake up in another better world out of which you would die, and so on indefinitely.

dementia only will leave you even more exposed<sup>12</sup>. And dementia is really a disgraceful way to go, and a large part of the book dwells on the indignity it imposed on the author's parents, something I can well understand as my mother succumbed to it, as did her sister, and it was very sad <sup>13</sup>, how much more heroic is it not to enter that night with all your mental capacities intact, swiftly. The sudden death appeals to us all compared to the slow excruciating one. But if so we often forget its brutality. To fall from a great height, or be shot in the neck, or be decapitated. The heart attack is supposed to be clean. But how do we know?

Why should we be afraid of the darkness ahead of us, when we are not of the one behind us? The answer is the direction of time, one of the fundamental ontological aspects of the universe. We survived the first by being born, but we will not survive the second by our death. More seriously this comforting image is seriously flawed. The idea being that we somehow exist from the beginning of time to the end of time, although most of it we are either biding our time to step into life, and once we have made the decision to be born, we are doomed to die shortly after. If we have no free will, if the universe is deterministic, there is no time; everything, as Laplace noted, is determined by the initial conditions, i.e. the position of velocities of all particles in the universe. This is materialism *par excellence*, but being so abstract it does not provoke the imagination of most people. Evolution and modern genetics is different, to that people can relate, if often reluctantly and with distaste. Yet people are not determined by their genes, this is a vulgarization, not only in the French sense. So many more things enter not only in the embryological development. Even if you can recapture the DNA of extinct animals you cannot resurrect them. More is needed, genes are just one thing, be it the most important, that is transmitted between generations. And it is of course not true, that there is a gene for each property. There are too many properties, and too few genes. Properties emerge from combinations of genes, which makes the Dawkian vision of the 'selfish' gene misleading. It is true that there is a huge number <sup>14</sup> of potential gene combinations of human beings, only a tiniest fraction of which can be realized, just as in Borges library of Babel, books that will ever be written and read only make up a vanishing fraction of all the possible combinations of letters on pages<sup>15</sup>. In what sense do all possible books already exist? A book will simply be encoded by a number, expressed by the arrangement of characters in it. As pure numbers they exist, but as books? A coded book only becomes a book when it is decoded, i.e. read and pondered. Before it is inert and dead, but when read it comes to life. Before it is just a meaningless string of characters, afterwards those assume meaning, meaning that, to use

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<sup>12</sup> Is the fear of death just another way of getting in touch with your innermost being, which is nothing but elemental fear.

<sup>13</sup> and how many of the symptoms cannot be shared, such as believing that old relatives are still alive although it would be absurd. It is like you are dreaming, but not realizing that you are, because in your dreams you may hold strange conceptions, and not be surprised by the absurd.

<sup>14</sup> Astronomical of order one, cf footnote above

<sup>15</sup> One can be very mathematical precise, if we say a hundred different characters, to allow for funny letters and symbols, if we restrict a book to one of five hundred pages say, with so and so much space for characters per line, and so and so many lines to page, it would take two such books to write down the number of books in the library.

a provocative metaphor, that they have acquired a 'soul'. There is no problem assigning meaning in a relative sense, it is only when you pose it in the absolute sense, such as the meaning of life or the universe, it becomes meta-physical. It is the same old story, between a text and its meta text, when the meta text comments on the text and its meaning. When the text becomes everything it must contain its own meta text which leads to all kinds of logical absurdities. Or in its simplest form the notion of the set of all sets, with the concomitant Russell paradox, an immediate consequence of Cantor's diagonal trick, the epitome of the free will<sup>16</sup>.

Eternity is a long time. People who imagine the bliss of eternal life are truly deficient in imagination. How can you fill all that time with meaningful activities? How can you keep in memory all that has happened to you. When you live so long, so it takes several pages of your letter simply to put down the date. And that is only the beginning mind you. The only way we can imagine an endless procession is to think of it cyclically. The circle is both endless and finite. One may imagine a life with no cessation but with obliteration. Everything you experience will be forgotten. One may think of a man who every morning wakes up having forgotten everything from the day before (at least as to episodes, other memories may be intact but constant). Or it can be done continuously, thus never any facing of extinction, although it would be done continuously retroactively.

Before you were born you did not as an individual, as opposed to a genetic encoding, exist. As you unfolded as a human being, your consciousness emerged. It was as a phenomenon in the universe, and you arrived on the scene, not because you were waken up from non-existence but created in real time. You will die, and other conscia will emerge, and all of those will marvel at their own existence. As a conscious being you cannot experience the conscia of others, because your own is in the way, but when your consciousness no longer is, 'you' can. This is not a kind of migration of souls, although any expression of it, becomes very close to one, but just a confirmation that when dead you become totally transparent. Other conscia will develop and experience, and that will be a phenomenon of the universe, indistinguishable in principle and sense from the one you experienced. There will be, mind you, no direct connection between them, because this would be a migration superstition. Is this a comfort? Hardly, because who knows what horrors new conscia will experience. We do get an inkling of it when we have empathy with other sentient beings, and shudder at what levels of sufferings they may have to endure. Could it be that the essence of consciousness is not intelligence but suffering? We have empathy, but no direct experience, as that is impossible through our own conscia, but when those are no longer there, they can be experienced. Thus all conscia are related by sympathy, and to every

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<sup>16</sup> Time travel is impossible, because if it was you could go back in time and undercut the very notion of you going back in time, say by killing your mother when she was a young girl, thereby making your own existence impossible, and thus your action of going back and killing your mother. This is a typical application of the diagonal trick, used in all subtle applications of logic and rational thinking, as most famously in Gdel's incompleteness theorem. In a deterministic universe this would not happen because your actions are restricted. The diagonal trick means lifting yourself in the hair by an intentional act, and thus defying determinism. In a deterministic universe time travel is possible because there is no real sense of time anymore, everything is contained in a moment. This is pure Parmenides as Popper frustratingly commented to Einstein when he contemplated Relativity theory.

sympathetic effort there is an actual thing. The whole thing may be a bit confusing. An analogy may be helpful. If your consciousness would split into several, as in certain physical models made to illustrate the choices you have resulting in alternate realities, in which one would you choose to remain? In all? If so we would have different conscia sharing a common history. You cannot decide which career step to take, or what woman to marry, and would prefer to have it both ways. Thus you divide yourself in two, but which one is you? If that goes on at every instant so to speak, you will multiply exponentially, and there will always be some part that is not yet dead. Where are you? You cannot tell, everywhere and nowhere. Wherever you are, you are there by chance, although from a logical point of view, it is clearly explained by the history that led you there. Those steps you took were by free will, what else could it be, although it is all embedded in a deterministic super-structure. From this point of view, what means the terror of death and extinction, what meaning does it have? From an elevated philosophical stand-point it all dissolves. One of your alternate deaths die, but others are still alive, and could not care less. There is no consciousness of any particular death, the only conscia involved are with those still alive. Those who are still alive will not feel any death. There will never be any deaths. But we are creatures living here and now, not all over the place. The here and the now may just be a matter of chance, but that is what is given.

The author is a writer, in fact a novelist by choice and habit, and the book is structured as a auto-biography of sorts, with special emphasis on his immediate family, older brother, noted philosopher, and his parents, presented, maybe unfairly, as maddeningly ordinary and unexceptional, and their travails when aging and dying, with a few flash-backs to grand parents. But being a literary novelist, there are also references to literary figures of the past, Montaigne, Stendhal, Flaubert (of course), Renard, the Goncourt brothers, Zola as well as non-French ones such as Turgenev, Goethe (but briefly), and Larkin not to forget, the poet of the ordinary and the unexceptional. While family and friends are typically not mentioned by name, but in the case of friends with initials, those in the public domain so to speak need no protection through anonymity. The celebrities of the past form a charmed circle, which, in contrast to most charmed circles which are private and to one of which at least we all want some connection as being social creatures, is put on a stage for everyone to view. They are not forgotten, they live on, if not for ever, well beyond the span of most of us. Goethe will in about thirty years time turn 300 years old and will be celebrated. How many people will be remembered, let alone celebrated, after they have been dead much longer than they have been alive. How many people living today will be remembered two hundred and fifty years from now? With some notable exceptions, politicians do not survive in public memory very long, in contrast to certain, admittedly exceptional, scientists, artists, writers. But, the author muses, every writer will have a last reader, in general not an appreciative one, otherwise the works will be passed on, and after that a writer is definitely dead. This of course applies only to the very successful writers in general, many writers will physically survive their brief reputations, most scientific articles are forgotten after a few years (it is rather different with mathematics).

And memory as such is notoriously unreliable. Especially the episodic kind, which is the one we usually associate with memory, and also the first to go in dementia (when other kinds of memories start to fail, the body will no longer function, and death will ensue). He

and his brother have conflicting memories of what happened in the family. When Stendhal writes from memory his account differs markedly from what he wrote in his diary fifteen years earlier, which of course was written from memory as well, be it a more short term one. Collingwood claims that you cannot write your autobiography from memories alone, you need written accounts, such as letters and diaries, because, I suspect he means, that every document has to be examined and interpreted, and memories change subtly by every recalling. The truly intact memory, translated from the past into the present, is a fiction, as such most famously envisioned by Proust, whose long cycle can be seen as a futile quest in believing that the past, if only in tiny fragments, can survive. The author puts it less poetically. Our memories are not like left luggage to be picked up at our convenience.

Another stratagem to deal with the fear of death is to believe that we are already dead. That everything is dead just mechanical contraptions. There is no 'I' in the brain, just a bundle of exciting nerves <sup>17</sup>, the conception of a person, susceptible to extinction, being an illusion. There is nothing beyond the mechanics, there is no mystery. To assume so is to fall prey to wishful, sentimental, religiosity. But is it? As I never tire of repeating, Collingwood famously pronounced that anyone who rejects meta-physics, thereby makes a meta-physical stand. If we are all deterministically created, along with our thoughts and beliefs, including those of determinism, what guarantee do we have that our convictions correspond to reality, to truth, and not just something that is convenient to believe in? The Truth which has the courage to state itself with a capital 'T'. If we replace the string that makes up 'God' with 'Truth' it starts to make such sense. The admonishment to seek the Truth, to love it, and especially not to deny it? Why is Dawkins so upset with religion if it is not a false truth, a false God, we have to grow up and face Truth, any evasion of it is deplorable. Does not Dawkins act with the conviction of an Old Testament prophet warning us of our false ways? Truth of course has meaning, something that transcends. The truth of a statement cannot be determined by itself, it is not part of it<sup>18</sup>. Thus if a statement cries out 'I am true' there is no reason to believe it, in fact there are plenty of reasons to disbelieve it. Likewise with a system of axioms which claim that it can prove its own consistency. Mathematical logic is medieval scholasticism in the modern world. Who can derive any comfort, let alone consolation as to death, from the God of an Aristotle, or a Thomas of Aquinas, or from logical, ontological, truth itself? Yet we seek it. This can be said to be a religious quest, if not in the manner most people would think of it as.

Furthermore the author is a writer, a writer of fiction in fact. Thus it is inevitable that ruminating on his special craft will take up some part of the book, even if it strictly speaking has little to do about death per se. Much of the pleasure of the book consists in the rambling walk among the famous dead artists. As all bookish people he takes pleasure in the dead and in the fictional, maybe even more than in his friends. People who survive their deaths in collective memory become fictional, meaning that they inhabit a collective

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<sup>17</sup> bringing to mind Hume's 'bundle of perceptions'. When I encountered that saying in a philosophy lecture at school a year or so after my brush with solipsism, I felt a great relief, finally someone as radical as me when it came to interpret the external reality. After that Hume became a favorite of mine, be it on shaky grounds. He and 'Kant' make up to sympathetic four-lettered philosophers.

<sup>18</sup> Collingwood opposed the atomistic analysis of statements pursued by his colleagues, the truth of a statement depends on the question it is the answer to, he put it

imagination. In what sense does Socrates exist? As a character in the dialogues of Plato (actually also in the play 'the Clouds' where he is pictured as a sophist, although in Plato his anti-sophisticism, provides his *raison d'être*, but after all Plato is the supreme ironist, who, ironies of ironies, reached distinction among his contemporaries as a boxer). And Plato himself? It is up to everyone to have his idea of Plato, just as with any fictional figure. Thus the human beings that have been closest to immortality, have been so as fictional figures. Thus the charm in the author's rambling, admittedly often with repetitions, but as those are intentional, and not the consequence of slovenly writing and distraction, they instruct more than irritate. And is that not the forte of the writer, this walking along the thin line between fact and fiction? Fiction is of course nothing but a higher form of fact, more concerned in the Platonic tradition, with the form of experience than its accidental content.

At the end of a review you may do some nit-picking with the author. We have both read Russells autobiography. I did it in my late teens, as it had just arrived, and I was deeply influenced by it, In fact when I reread it, some thirty years later (my God that will soon be twenty years ago), I was amazed how much I remembered from it. Certainly I remember well the incident with Russell taking a bike trip and realizing that he no longer loved his wife. I was not aghast at it, maybe because I was younger and more innocent, than the author was when he read it. It made me realize both that important realizations may dawn upon you suddenly, from above so to speak, and also that you have to act upon them, as being life determining decisions. If you no longer love your wife you need to divorce yourself from her. It is a duty to Truth, not a mere act of egotism. In fact being married to someone you do not love is a sin, not only a convenience. Maybe it was a harsh lesson and one I prematurely took in, all out of innocence. After all the innocent are unforgiving, imaginatively inured to the complexities of life, as they have not yet been confronted with them.

As I want to make clear, there are two different fears of death, one existential, with which the author is mainly concerned, and one prosaic and hence more invasive. Old age is shadowed by death, even when you are in excellent health, because health has nothing to do with it. Death means the end, and when that is the only thing you can look forward to, you become painfully aware that your life is over, as far as opportunities and new beginnings are concerned. Your memories of your past become tingled with bitterness, as you no longer share their world, which you not so long ago took for granted. It is now remorse kicks in. Could remorse be worse than death? The author is puzzled, and cannot really understand, believing that only a very traumatic event in the past can generate one. That is not necessary, remorse is about loss. Irretrievable loss.

As we get older time passes more and more quickly, because each moment of time, becomes less and less significant compared to the accumulation of moments of the past. The mathematical way of looking at it is that real subjective time is the logarithm of real time. If you for convenience set 0 at the age of one, 1 at the age of two, 2 at the age of four etc. Most people reach and pass 6, no one gets to 7. The time span between 32 and 64 is felt as no longer as that between 16 and 32. Childhood takes on a very large chunk of your life. And of course if you want to go backwards to your birth, that will be placed at minus infinity. Thus you have in a certain sense lived infinitely long, corresponding to

your sense of always, somehow having existed, even if not conscious of the fact. Thus the cruel irony is that Fate has given us an infinite life, but one to cease finitely<sup>19</sup>.

Finally, as seen, you can write a lot about Nothing. And it is done all the time.

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<sup>19</sup> I worked out this logarithmic age for a popular article in the year book of the Swedish Science Council (NFR) for the year 2000.