

The Final Enemy

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Human mortality has always fascinated the greatest creative minds—from Homer declaiming on the slayings of Patroclus and Hector, to Sigmund Freud speculating on death drives. Roger Scruton even locates the significance of artistic endeavor in the fact that we understand our existence to be finite. For Scruton, the prospect of immortality makes life dull and futile. All pleasures, if extended and repeated infinitely, become bland and tedious. It is only because life is finite that our experiences take on significance, as precious moments seized from the jaws of death.

Scruton is surely right that the reality of death casts a backward shadow on our present moment, but his analysis falls short. Most human beings want life to continue and will do a great deal to avoid its cessation. True, Roger Daltrey sang in 1965 that he hoped to die before he got old. But I saw The Who in concert in 2006 and again in 2016, and both times he still looked happy to be alive. Cicero was right: No man is so old that he does not think he can live another year. We accept our own mortality in theory, but we approach each day as if we expect to live for an indefinite time. Far from allowing death to heighten the significance of our experience, for the most part we work hard to keep it out of our minds.

And for many, death renders life not meaningful but meaningless. For Joseph K. as he faces execution for an unspecified crime, or for the protagonists of Beckett and Pinter plays, life is a confusing journey toward oblivion. This theme is not a modern monopoly. Ancient literature, too, sounds notes of futility. Euripides's tragedies evoke the nihilism that death brings, and Medea's infanticide and the death of Pentheus at the hands of a Bacchanalian mob render their lives meaningless.

Scruton's optimistic pessimism about death may work for those who practice the tradition of *memento mori*, reminding themselves every day that they will die. But for most people most of the time, the response is recoil, flight, and avoidance. We fear death, we fear that it makes life absurd, and we flee from it at every opportunity. Death imparts a bleak futility to life, as in Act V of [Macbeth](#):

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Death brings isolation, which is one reason we recoil from it. Ludwig Wittgenstein famously declared that death is not an event in life. Rather, it is a boundary, a frightful boundary that separates absolutely the living from the dead. As his illness proceeds, Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich is ever more isolated from others, except for the peasant servant Gerasim, who tends to his bodily needs—lack of control over which indicates Ivan's distance from polite society. Anyone who has witnessed the slow death from illness of a family member or a friend has observed this isolation. The dying person may still be alive, but the separation has already begun.

Death is thus both inevitable and terrible. It is a merciless foe. It deprives us of our loved ones and eventually will take us, too. Most of us respond to it with acts of denial—denial of the radical finality of death, of the inevitability of death, of the sovereignty of death.

We seek to erase the boundary between the living and the dead. Ancient Christians met for meals called *refrigerium* in *triclia*, buildings set in the midst of the tombs of the faithful departed. Thus, they refreshed themselves in the company of the dead. Augustine devoted book XXI of [The City of God](#) to refuting certain silly ideas of Christians—not pagans—concerning how the realms of the living and the dead interacted. Those silly ideas persisted: The rise of spiritualism in the nineteenth century and the contemporary popularity of mediums, clairvoyants, and reincarnation reveal our basic refusal to accept

that death is the end. These movements and practices try to bridge the chasm between the living and the dead. They seek to make the boundary permeable.

Our desire to attenuate death's boundary also has more benign expressions. Statuary and portraiture were once means by which the wealthy attempted to ensure that they would be remembered after they died. Technology democratizes these methods of keeping the dead present. Photographs of the dearly departed populate walls of living rooms across the world, allowing the living to feel the proximity of the dead.

We may also rebel against death by ignoring its claims. Dylan Thomas's poem "And death shall have no dominion" evokes the arrogance of youth, for whom death is but a distant possibility. Thomas strikes a different note in his later poem, "Do not go gentle into that good night." Anticipating the death of his father, Thomas remains defiant but acknowledges impending defeat. His progress bespeaks another truth about the human condition: As we age, death becomes more familiar to us, more obviously powerful, and more terrifying.

The most common response, especially in our era, is simply to ignore death. This is one reason why funerals are so difficult and involve conflicting emotions. We see the dead body before us; yet we manage to persuade ourselves that this is not our destiny, that somehow death, which comes for everyone, will never touch us. When Pyotr Ivanovich views the body of Ivan Ilyich, he is momentarily terrified, knowing that he beholds his own fate. Mere seconds later, he persuades himself that, no, this cannot happen to him, and he is immensely relieved. Only Gerasim speaks truth, while helping Pyotr into his carriage after the funeral. Pyotr remarks that the death of Ivan is sad, and the peasant responds, "It's God's will. We'll all be there."

Our ability to ignore our mortality is surely one of our species' most impressive features. In a.d. 410, the Eternal City fell to the Goths. When refugees began arriving in Hippo, Augustine observed that, even when faced with the reality of their own vulnerability, these people preferred to go to the theater rather than come to the church to hear the truth about life and death.

What Augustine observed, his later disciple, Blaise Pascal, made into a fundamental insight. In the [*Pensées*](#), Pascal states that "The last act is bloody, however fine the rest of the play. They throw earth over your head and it is finished forever." Death is unavoidable, yet avoidance of the thought of death defined the ethos of the seventeenth-century French court. In a series of aphorisms, Pascal reflects on why kings have jesters, why trivial entertainment so dominates the minds of human beings capable of much more significant pursuits, and why so much of life is consumed with pointless activity. We can bring his questions up to date by asking why the most trivial figures in our world—celebrities—are considered so important. Pascal's answer: These things divert us from what we fear most. We will do anything in our power, even engage in buffoonish entertainments, to avoid being on our own, in silence, contemplating the fact that we will die.

Pascal's analysis is persuasive. The role of entertainment in our lives is extreme in comparison to any other period of history. And death has been pushed to the margins. Once, churches stood next to graveyards and the weekly rituals of worship could not be attended without one's first passing by reminders of our mortality. Today, the death industry is kept at a safe distance except at funerals.

Our obsession with sex indicates another avenue of escape. As the Victorians put death on display and hid sex from view, we have done the opposite. The hedonistic reasons to fixate on sex do not explain its almost compulsive public display. Sex is front and center in part because it offers a means of denying the boundary of death. Analyzing the basic propulsive forces of human existence, Sigmund Freud opposed *thanatos* to *eros*, the death drive to the sex drive. The one pushes us toward a return to nonexistence, the other toward self-preservation and propagation. Freud saw sex as the means of defying death.

We can recast this in Pascalian terms: Sexual intercourse is the moment at which human beings are indeed most distracted from their own mortality and most convinced of their immortal, godlike qualities. Whether one follows Freud or Pascal, the public fixation on sex in a society where death has been thrust

to the margins makes perfect sense. The two trends reinforce each other, and they tell us a great deal about the deepest desires and fears of a society.

Sex is closely connected with the idealization of youth. The desire to remain forever young is not a recent phenomenon; myths and legends from many cultures play on this theme. But the modern West exhibits some odd tendencies. We sexualize childhood while lauding adults who behave like children, and we invest time and money into never having to grow up, emotionally or physically. Cosmetic surgery intended to recapture youth is a lucrative business. So-called youth culture and styles dominate a range of age cohorts, bringing us the gruesome sight of middle-aged men in skinny jeans. Sex, which should be the most adult of activities, is packaged as an infantile hedonism.

Whether trivia such as cosmetic surgery and skinny jeans have deep significance might be debated. But these are moral developments of undoubted consequence. We are increasingly engaged in an explicit, intentional, and total war against human nature. We advance under the illusion that we have powers greater than death.

An ideology of gender has separated biological sex from identity. If your brain tells you that you are gay, or that you are a woman trapped in a man's body, then the problem is with your body. What *you want to be* is considered the center of *who you really are*.

In addition to overturning any sensible ethical framework, radical voluntarism in the realm of sexual identity represents a metaphysical defiance of the limitations of human nature. To a striking degree, the embrace of gay and gender ideology represents a fight to overcome our very nature as if it were an imposition upon our true identity, a frustration of our true existence. If a facelift is an attempt to defy the aging process, a gender reassignment operation is an attempt to defy the authority of the human body. By engaging in these procedures (and in the latter case, insisting that the ability to do so is a basic right), we are making bids for the total sovereignty of the individual over nature.

Yet death remains sovereign. Like the knight in Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, we might be able to fool ourselves, for a time, that this is a chess game we can win. But ultimately, death will checkmate us. All the surgery in the world cannot defeat it.

Hence the final, desperate ways in which we seek to manage death: preemptive strikes. If there is a hallmark of the moral inversions of our present age, it is surely the acceptability of assisted suicide and euthanasia.

Various rationales have been given for assisted suicide: to end the physical pain or mental distress of a progressive and incurable disease, or simply to end a life that the individual no longer wishes to live. Underlying these rationales is the notion that life is the property of the sovereign self. Those who assert a right to physician-assisted suicide claim to promote "death with dignity." They claim that we're not truly human unless we control death by choosing its time and manner. If sex-change surgery is to be called gender reassignment, then "death with dignity" is mortality reassignment.

This rhetoric of rights bespeaks a bid for sovereignty. I have the right to end my life on my own terms—the modern definition of "dignity." Faced with my own insignificance and powerlessness, I can fool myself into believing that I am in control. I can be the agent in my own destruction. I, not God, will decide when I will die. It is an act of great self-deception.

The bounds of euthanasia broaden to include the mentally ill, even the young. And, of course, there is abortion. Perhaps the assertion of sovereignty over our lives and those of others is a means of tricking ourselves into believing our own immortality. The killer does not stand at the grave of Ivan Ilyich and deny by force of will that he beholds his own fate. He asserts sovereignty over death by becoming its agent. To determine who lives and who dies makes us feel godlike. It is a feeling many tyrants have cultivated.

With human nature under attack, Christians may well wonder how we can still speak to the world. But death provides an opportunity. You can choose your sexuality, you can choose your gender, you can even

choose the time of your death. But you cannot choose whether or not to die. The problem of death persists and cries out for an answer, even if one claims that no answer can be given. As long as death exists, people will ask about the meaning of life. That is good news for Christians worried about their cultural relevance. As death approaches, the noise of affluence subsides. And people become more willing to listen.

But do we have the words the world needs to hear? Contemporary Christian attitudes to death are too much in accord with the age's strategies of distraction and denial. We often judge Christian accommodation to the world in terms of lax attitudes to sex and sexuality. But if our rebellion against nature is more fundamental, then attitudes to death may be a more significant measure of our worldliness. Take the creeping intrusion of "celebrations of life" into Christian churches as the default liturgy of death.

The transformation of funerals into celebrations is an attempt to deny death its due. The attempt is as futile as it is strange—for if you set out to underline the devastation wrought by a death, you could hardly do better than to recollect the joy and laughter the deceased brought to the lives of others. Dante's - Francesca da Rimini expresses it well in canto 5 of the *Inferno*: "Life brings no greater grief / Than happiness remembered in a time / Of Sorrow." And Dante was describing the Second Circle of Hell, not suggesting an appropriate liturgy for a Christian funeral service.

Why does death hurt? If it is as universal as birth, if it is the terminal point of every life, why should it provoke mourning? Why is the passing of a loved one not just as easy to accept as the falling of an autumn leaf? Death hurts because it is a privation of being. That which has existed has been torn away from us. An autumn leaf is not a unique, self-conscious being in dialogue with which one's own particular identity is forged. The death of a human being is the death of a person with a history, and the more that history has shaped who we are in the present—the closer we have been to the person who has died—the more the death deprives us of the future we had imagined for ourselves. A little piece of us has died with the death of another—whether a child who emerges stillborn, or a beloved grandparent full of years. We who remain are diminished; a wound is left in our souls. That is a privation of *our* being, painful and permanent.

Privations of being are not simply nothing. They are absences, but they are absences with a mystical presence. Dylan Thomas captures what this means in a draft of a poem found among his papers after his death. Speaking of the loss of his father, he writes: "Until I die he will not leave my side." His father is dead. Yet his very absence remains as an unwelcome presence in the poet's life. Anyone who has lost a loved one can testify that the loss is not temporary but stays with us forever. We do not "get over" the death of a parent or a sibling or a spouse or a child; we simply learn to live with the presence of the absence. Memories crowd in, we imagine the voices of the dear departed, we see them in our dreams—and all of this serves to press the ever-present absence upon us and break our hearts afresh.

Thomas's father should exist and now does not. His nonexistence is more than a personal privation for the father; it is an interpersonal, relational privation for the son. The bereaved are reduced by the death of a loved one. They suffer the privation of being that lies at the heart of evil. The father who has lost his son is no longer the same person. He has not simply returned to his early state of not being a father. He no longer enjoys the relation of love with another particular, unique, and irreplaceable living creature that once he did. He has been made less, in a painful and unnatural way. The same applies to the child who has lost a parent, the sister who has lost a brother, the husband who has lost his wife, or the friend who has lost a companion. We have words that speak of the ongoing presence of such privations: orphan, widow, widower. And perhaps the fact that we have no word for the parent who has lost a child is itself a testimony to the unspeakable abiding horror and pain of such a circumstance.

Part of the Christian's witness is thus to be realistic in our acknowledgment of the power of death and the tangible reality of the abiding losses it inflicts upon those left behind. We might add that part of Christian witness is to point to the fragility of life. Thus, funerals that purport to be "celebrations of life" fail in yet another way. Not only do they deny the devastation death leaves in its wake, they ignore the vulnerability and mortality of those left behind.

Life is fragile, and death is devastating. These are two biblical truths, which we need to place at the heart of the Church's life. A moment's reflection on "celebrations of life" indicates that they can occur only in affluent and comfortable environments. They are an attempt to gloss life and death with the aesthetics of our affluence. Think of celebrating life at a funeral, and then listen to the burial rite from the [Book of Common Prayer](#):

Man, that is born of a woman, hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay.

In the midst of life we are in death: of whom may we seek for succour, but of thee, O Lord, who for our sins art justly displeased?

Yet, O Lord God most holy, O Lord most mighty, O holy and most merciful Saviour, deliver us not into the bitter pains of eternal death.

Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts; shut not thy merciful ears to our prayer; but spare us, Lord most holy, O God most mighty, O holy and merciful Saviour; thou most worthy judge eternal, suffer us not, at our last hour, for any pains of death, to fall from thee.

"Man, that is born of woman, hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery." These are hard words, but like the peasant Gerasim, they remind us all of the hold death has upon each and every one. The funeral and the graveside are not places to celebrate strength or to make ourselves the exception; they are places to acknowledge our weakness and our fragility and our common human mortality.

Of course, Christianity involves the hope of the resurrection. As Paul declares, if Christ has not been raised, then Christians are of all people most to be pitied. Yet herein lies a paradox: Christians grieve, too. Indeed, Christians grieve acutely. The hope for the resurrection has to be set within the context of the reality of death, yet that very hope perhaps intensifies the pain. Abraham, the recipient of the covenant promise, weeps for his beloved Sarah. And Jesus himself sheds tears at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, even as he declares himself the Resurrection. Why so? I suspect it is because the very framework of the covenant promise highlights the tragedy that is death. As he stands at the tomb in Bethany, Jesus sees the full horror of what sin has wrought, which only his death and Resurrection can overcome. He knows—he sees—that death is not some part of the natural life cycle. It is a powerful and evil incursion. Yes, we look to the resurrection, but Christians, of all people, should understand the pain and horror that make the resurrection necessary.

The coronavirus pandemic has brought us all a little closer to Bethany. Death, for the moment, is nearer to most of us than we like to think. It is no longer hidden away in hospices and care homes, or domesticated by the cartoonish violence of the movies. It is real. And in this climate, the Church has a moment to think about her priorities. Your best life now? Funerals as celebrations? Liturgies and praise songs that focus on the feelings of the congregants as they struggle with first-world problems? That is not biblical Christianity, and it is wholly inadequate to the current situation—and therefore to our ultimate fate. It is unfortunate that the sense of loss and longing the thought of death brings us should be better expressed in the poetry of Dylan Thomas or the films of Ingmar Bergman than in the contemporary liturgies of many Christian churches.

Can the Church be honest about death in an era addicted to the pleasure of the moment? That is the challenge we face, and it demands that we reorient our thinking from this world to the next, that we prepare ourselves not just to live as God's people but to die as God's people. Death should not be, but it is. Only the Church understands this, and only the Church can provide the answer through her preaching, her sacraments, her liturgy, and her pastoral care. But first, she must acknowledge the unfathomable and inevitable nature of the final enemy. COVID-19 poses the question in an acute and unavoidable form. It is doubtless severe, but in pressing the cruel reality of death upon us all, it is a severe mercy.

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