

Author: Vincent Barry

Human Nature as a Union of Opposites

On one hand, like all animals, we are finite, which shows the biological part of our nature. On the other hand, we, uniquely, have awareness of this fact, which shows our spiritual nature and is our differentiating characteristic. For Kierkegaard, then, we are animals with self-awareness. To be human is to know we will die.

Many others have shared Kierkegaard's basic view that we are a union of opposites. The existential theologian Paul Tillich (1886–1965), for example, called it "finite freedom," whereas the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971) preferred "nature" and "spirit." In *The Heart of Man* the neo-Freudian Erich Fromm (1900–1980) identified the essence of a human being as contradiction of animal, on the one hand, and active intelligence, on the other. Rollo May (1909–1994) spoke of the "human dilemma" as "the capacity of man to view himself as object and as subject." In *Psychology and the Human Dilemma*, the existential psychoanalyst writes:

It is not simply that man must learn to live with the paradox—the human being has *always* lived in this paradox or dilemma, from the time that he first became aware of the fact that *he* was the one who would die and coined a word for his own death. Illness, limitations of all sorts, and every aspect of our biological state... are aspects of the deterministic side of this dilemma—man is like the grass of the field, it withereth. The awareness of this, and the acting on this awareness, is the genius of man the subject.⁷

A comparable expression of human uniqueness comes from death expert Feifel:

Throughout man's history, the idea of death has posed the eternal mystery which is the core of our religious and philosophical systems of thought. And it is quite possible that this idea is also the prototype of human anxiety. Insecurity may well be a symbol of death. Any loss may represent total loss. One of man's most distinguishing characteristics, in contrast to other species, is his capacity to grasp the concept of a future—an inevitable death. In chemistry and physics, a "fact" is always determined by events which have preceded it; in human beings, present behavior is dependent not only on the past but even more potently, perhaps, by orientations toward *future* events. When we stop to consider the matter, the notion of the uniqueness and individuality of each one of us gathers full meaning only in realizing that we are finite. And it is in this same encounter with death that each of us discovers his hunger for immortality.⁸

Then there is the eminent mythologist and writer on religion Joseph Campbell (1904–1987), who writes in his popular *Myths to Live By*:

If a differentiating feature is to be named, separating human from animal psychology, it is surely this subordination in the human sphere of even

economics to mythology. And if one should ask *why* or *how* any such unsubstantial impulsion ever should have become dominant in the ordering of physical life the answer is that in this wonderful human brain of ours has dawned a realization unknown to the other primates. It is that of the individual, conscious of himself, and aware that he, and all that he cares for, will one day die.⁹

But amidst this constellation of like thought, Otto Rank merits special attention, since his view paralleled Kierkegaard's.

Briefly, for Rank we humans are part animal: controlled, driven, and limited by biological forces and urges. However, we are also part spiritual, as shown in our rationality, ethical activity, creation of goals and meaning, and religious consciousness. In contrast to Freud, for whom narcissism was the human's motivational mainpring, Rank saw humans as driven by a need for cosmic significance—a need to transcend their finiteness and attain some kind of immortality. We have a need to feel that life matters, that we are both special *and* a part of something larger and more encompassing. Traditionally, this need to feel "heroic" was met by religion. But with the fraying of traditional religious belief in the twentieth century, the human need for transcendence became problematic. Finding a solution to the question of immortality thus loomed large for Rank. In fact, he considered it one of our most important developmental tasks, a view anticipated by Kierkegaard as "the predicament of the existing individual."

"The Predicament of the Existing Individual"

According to Kierkegaard the awareness of our own mortality is the price we pay for being a self-conscious animal, for being human. It also gives rise to what he termed "the predicament of the existing individual."

Kierkegaard says that "the predicament of the existing individual" arises from our being a "synthesis of the temporal and the eternal situated in existence."¹⁰ In other words, we live between time and eternity. We are finite but crave to be infinite. Kierkegaard also terms this "a synthesis of the soulful and the bodily," by which he means a union of a sense of self and a body.

This sense of self—call it "spirit" or "soul"—is uniquely human. Lacking such a symbolic inner identity, other animals don't experience the anxiety or dread that we self-aware humans do. We know we will die, they don't. They're innocent, whereas we worry and fear. Dread or anxiety is the inevitable price we pay for our self-awareness. It is our existential situation. We "cannot live heedless of [our] fate, nor can [we] take sure control over that fate and triumph over it by being outside the human condition."¹¹ That's our predicament. We live, as it were, within the "gap" between the opposites, variously termed: nature and spirit, the finite and the free, the temporal and the eternal. Where, then, does this leave us finite, temporal beings, who aspire to be infinite and eternal? Intensely conflicted, according to Kierkegaard. The resulting anxiety and dread he terms, epigrammatically, "the dizziness of freedom."

"The Dizziness of Freedom"

Decades before Freud formalized various ways we use to ward off psychic harm and threat—so-called defense mechanisms, such as denial—Kierkegaard recognized their presence in how we relate to the ever-present dread of our own mortality.

In life, in making decisions, we can live "authentically" or "inauthentically," to use the terminology of later existentialists such as Sartre. We live authentically, according to Kierkegaard, when we face the anxiety of human existence, and allow it to propel us to greater self-awareness, growth, and responsible action; to deeper, more meaningful and moral relations with others; and ultimately to a relationship with the Infinite, the Divine, or God.

By this account, anxiety is not necessarily limiting and diminishing, but potentially liberating and enlarging. It can be the way to unlimited possibility, what Kierkegaard cryptically terms "the reality of freedom as possibility anterior to possibility."¹² Interpreting, existentialist scholar Walter Kaufmann (1921–1980) writes: "[T]he self is essentially intangible and must be understood in terms of possibilities, dread and decisions. When I behold my possibilities, I experience the dread which is 'the dizziness of freedom,' and my choice is made in fear and trembling."¹³ It is this "dizziness of freedom," according to Kierkegaard, that triggers a dialectical process—a forced change through the conflict of opposing forces—that provides the ongoing, growing element that constitutes our true existence. This dialectical process whereby we reconcile the opposed elements of our nature largely governs our relationship to the world and other people. It determines whether we arrive at the experience of unity and oneness with them, or disunity and separation.

The resulting dread or anxiety from the freedom and, ironically, the necessity of having to choose—the "dizziness of freedom"—is basic to what being human means. But we often shrink from the dread, as when we deny the truth of our human condition—the truth that we are finite, temporal beings aspiring to be infinite and eternal. The result is neurotic anxiety or what Kierkegaard calls "shut-upness."

"Shut-upness"

Neurotic anxiety is basically being afraid without knowing why. In contrast to realistic anxiety, where the danger is known, in neurotic anxiety the danger is unknown, yet to be discovered. In the state Kierkegaard terms shut-upness, we are neurotically anxious. The undiscovered danger is our own mortality, which we are running from in terror. The faster we run, the more we deny, and the more neurotically anxious we get and inauthentically we live.

There are many ways that we are socialized to "shut-up," that is, to become neurotically anxious by denying death. Starting early in life we internalize the seemingly all-powerful, death-defying qualities of our parents. We borrow from them a sense of immortality. Later we immerse ourselves in the business of life—raising families, doing jobs, developing talents, practicing religions. Outwardly worthy, these projects may, though not necessarily, anesthetize us to death by providing an ersatz immortality. They can make us feel immortal because they survive us. Some scholars say that this can happen when we strongly identify with

a larger, "world historical process." In other words, we derive our sense of self-worth and significance largely from what we do. Since the project or cause outlives us, we live on through it. Also, since it is larger than any single individual, our death is nothing special, just one among others.¹⁴

Notice that such thinking tends to intellectualize death. It transforms one's death, which is always particular and personal, into something general and impersonal. It makes death a universal occurrence, a shared destiny, an event that befalls all forms of life. Death is that, of course. But it's also biographical. Death doesn't just happen to anyone; it happens to a particular person, to me.

Intellectualizing death appears to "tame" it, to recall Aries's term. But that's a self-delusion, and a dangerous one at that. For Kierkegaard, this self-delusion consists specifically in thinking that human existence involves objective thinking, whereas it involves subjective thinking. Unless confronted on the subjective level, death is not tamed but denied.

Once we deny death, we set ourselves up for neurotic-anxiety that can interfere with living and block us from developing our potential, including wholesome relationships. Cut off from what makes us human, we are "shut-up." For Kierkegaard, then there is a tight connection between "shut-upness" and how we think about our life and death, whether objectively or subjectively.

Objective vs. Subjective Thinking

According to philosopher Robert Solomon, objective thought is always externalized. This means that it is directed away from one's own existence toward something else. At times, this is appropriate, as in doing mathematics or science, where objective thought yields objective truth. Objective truth is truth for anyone.

But there's also subjective truth. Subjective truth is personal. It is not truth for anyone but truth for an individual. It is attainable not through objective but subjective thought. In contrast to externalized objective thought, subjective thought is internalized. It's characterized by reflective inwardness.¹⁵ When we turn inward, according to Kierkegaard, we are reminded that we are finite and temporal and must face the prospect of our own death.

What Kierkegaard terms "shut-upness," then, is denying death by only objectively thinking about it. An example of this is when we show no more concern for our own death than for the death of others. In so doing we reduce death to something like a mathematical or scientific truth.

Consider, as an example, the intellectual denial of a patient when asked how he feels about having terminal cancer. Instead of expressing what he feels, he says what he thinks. "Lots of people get cancer," he points out. "I'm no different than anyone else. Everyone has to die of something." Yes, death certainly has this objective status. But it's also profoundly personal. That's what Kierkegaard is driving at and the patient is avoiding. Kierkegaard urges us to turn inward. He is saying: "Be concerned about your own death. Don't deny it by objectivizing it." For Kierkegaard facing death in subjective thought is the hallmark of the mature personality.

As another example of denying death through objective thought, recall the aforementioned world-historical living, as with the career-driven Ivan Ilyich. And what is the result of this? It is a life lived in a state of denial, with the

dying, others have.^{16,17} The idea is that the obsessive endeavor symbolizes social immortality. At the same time, it turns our thought outward in the direction of the obsessive project. Thus, whatever the all-consuming pursuit—his legal career for Ilyich—it keeps us from thinking *subjectively* about our own biological death by conferring a sense of (social) immortality. In this way, it allows us to deny death, to run from what Becker terms: "the terror to have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression—and with all this yet to die."¹⁸

Psychoanalyst Rank, writer Tolstoy, and philosopher Kierkegaard would agree with anthropologist Becker. All say that, confronted by the overwhelming terror of death, we strive to keep it unconscious. This includes erecting elaborate systems of "heroic projects" or "world-historical" living for transcending death. All of this "character armor" allows us to feel safe and in control, a necessary delusion, perhaps, but nonetheless a basic dishonesty about our whole situation. (Becker further believed that, driven to deny our mortality and achieve a heroic status, we collectively create surplus evil, such as warfare, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. In this view, he is hardly alone.)^{19,20,21}

Relation with the Infinite

Like Socrates, both Kierkegaard and Becker endorse "death rehearsal" as an antidote to the delusion of immortality. Cultivating awareness of our death, they agree, leads to disillusionment.

For Kierkegaard practicing to die means being taught by it. Only by facing our death are we led to the faith necessary to express in existence whatever is essentially human, including the infinite and eternal, and thereby have our "anxiety transformed into joy." As he writes in his journals:

Only by an infinite relationship to God [can] doubt be calmed, only by an infinitely free relationship to God [can] anxiety be transformed into joy. [A man] is in an infinite relationship to God when he recognizes that God is always in the right, in an infinitely free relationship to God when he recognizes that he himself is always in the wrong. In this way, therefore, doubt is checked, for the movement of doubt consists precisely in the fact that at one instance he might be in the right, at another in the wrong; to a certain degree in the right, to a certain degree in the wrong.... So whenever doubt would... teach him that he suffers too much, that he is tried beyond his powers, he thereupon forgets the finite in the infinite thought that he is always in the wrong. Whenever the affliction of doubt would make him sad, he thereupon raises himself above the finite into the infinite; for the thought that he is always in the wrong is the wing whereby he soars above finitude, it is the longing wherewith he seeks God, it is the love wherein he finds God.²²

Psychologically, then, the fear of death is for Kierkegaard the catalyst of growth. Ontologically, it is the way we actualize our essential self. And theologically, it is a means to a personal relationship with God. To understand this nexus of psychology,

ontology, and theology requires a thorough study of Kierkegaard. Absent that here, let's settle on the following distillate, which we'll relate to Ivan Ilyich:

For Kierkegaard, consciousness of death really matters. It is vital because it creates the necessary anxiety for propelling us up a hierarchy of being or consciousness itself—from the sensory and unreflective to the reflective and moral, ultimately to the religious, where selfhood and "true existence" are achieved through a relation with the infinite.

Ivan Ilyich models this process. Having lived a thoroughly self-centered and unreflective life, he becomes thoughtful and *moral* in the throes of a fatal illness. This occurs precisely when he stops thinking about himself and grieves for his child and wife. "He felt sorry for them," Tolstoy tells us, "he had to do something to keep from hurting them." This concern for the other unsettles his self-absorption. He is suddenly thinking less about himself, more about them; less in terms of "my death," more in terms of their welfare. He feels responsible for them. From this unfamiliar moral highground of empathy, care, and love, Ivan Ilyich leaps or is transported to a relation with the infinite. He discovers a spiritual place of no suffering either for him or them. Thus, in one of the story's most moving passages, Tolstoy writes of Ilyich's epiphany:

He searched for his accustomed fear of death and could not find it. Where was death? What death? There was no fear because there was no death. Instead of death there was light. "So that's it!" he exclaimed. "What bliss!"

The face-to-face encounter with the other, it seems, allowed Ivan Ilyich to face his own death and put his life in perspective.

Crucial to this metamorphosis is the courage to engage the anxiety of death and move through it. That's Tolstoy's point, and Kierkegaard's. This means that running from death—blocking consciousness of it—is really running from oneself. It is self-alienating. Embracing the anxiety, on the other hand, triggers the dialectical process by which we ultimately attain self-realization through a faith relationship with God. For Kierkegaard this relationship is the highest level of consciousness, choice, and living for a finite and temporal being aspiring to be infinite and eternal. It is Kierkegaard's answer to Rank's question of immortality. Fundamental to this development is a relation with others. For Kierkegaard and Tolstoy, even more so later for philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995), this means hearing the ethical call of others and responding with love. In caring for the other, we care for ourselves. Their pain and suffering, like our own, is inherent in mortality. Facing them allows us to face our own death and become fully human.

HEIDEGGER

Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* contains, perhaps, existentialism's central statement of how human beings relate to death.²³ Heidegger's single chapter of *Being and Time*,²⁴ on the other hand, accounts for why existentialism is widely associated with death.²⁵

Unlike Kierkegaard, the hermit-like Heidegger did not enjoy the luxury of religious faith, preferring instead, from his days as a student, Nietzsche's dictum "God is dead."²⁶ Nor did he feature the role of the other in helping one face one's own death, as both Kierkegaard and Tolstoy seem to have done. For Heidegger, we face death alone.

Central to understanding Heidegger on death is what this most abstruse of philosophers views as uniquely human: awareness of one's being (and, indeed, of Being itself).

Awareness of One's Being

For Heidegger, to be aware of one's being means more than awareness of the naked *fact* of one's existence. In that sense tools, objects, and other such things have a kind of being—they exist. But a human being isn't a chair or a hammer. Heidegger says that unlike such things a human being "always has to be (i.e., realize) his being as his own." This means that only human beings are aware of themselves with a future, with possibility. In this respect metaphors such as "project" or "work in progress" apply. Human beings uniquely are aware of themselves as in the process of becoming something of their own making. Success at this "project" of self-creation depends entirely on one's own choices among the possibilities one faces. And it's in the awareness of choice and possibility—and of ultimately succeeding or failing—that one becomes fully conscious of one's own being (and of being itself).

Heidegger didn't believe, however, that we are completely free in our choice making. Each of us is born to particular parents, at a particular time and place. Over these and many other life circumstances we have no influence. We are, as it were, willy-nilly "thrown into the world." In our "thrownness," this "basic perilousness of our existence," we are driven by the anxiety and dread of realizing that all our ambitious projects—including the realization of self—will end in death.

"Thrownness" and "Angst"

For Heidegger, death is the most distinctive instance of "thrownness."²⁷ It not only limits all possibilities, it ends them. Death means we are finite. But our finitude isn't merely biological (as a member of a species) or psychological (as an individual). It is part of our being because death is always with us. We are finite because our being is penetrated with non-being or nothingness. This mind-boggling notion can only be comprehended in the mood of anxiety that Heidegger terms "angst."

In English, we associate "angst" with deep insecurity or intense emotional strife. Kierkegaard used it to refer to the fear of failing in one's responsibilities to God. For Heidegger angst is an ever-present condition of being that reveals its finite nature. More descriptive of anxiety than was Kierkegaard, Heidegger (in *Concept of Dread*) contrasts this kind of anxiety with fear, which always has an object (e.g., the feared storm, exam, robber). Angst, by contrast, refers to nothing in particular, which is precisely the point. Call it what you will—nothing, negation, the "not"—non-being penetrates the core of our existence, and angst reveals this. Angst shows the "worn at the core." By disclosing the threatening temporality of

the world, angst brings us haphazardly-thrown-into-the-world creatures face to face with our own finitude, with nothingness, with the fact that we are "beings-towards-death."

"Being-Towards-Death"

The "death" of Heidegger's "being-towards- (or unto) death" is not the biological termination that awaits us all at some indefinite time in the future. Rather, it is the ever-present certainty of the uncertainty of our existence. We always live with death, with the possibility of our own death. At any moment we can die. Maybe death has nothing to do with us now, but it is always with us nonetheless. And this awareness of our tenuous and tentative state of being interpenetrates our entire life experience. In other words, "It is precisely Nothingness that makes itself present and felt as the object of our dread."²⁸

At the same time, death is what gives life its existential urgency. It allows us to understand *our* existence, to measure ourselves in the light of finite possibilities, to make choices and take responsibility for them. Only by taking death into ourselves, then, is an authentic existence possible for us. Although this may be terrifying, it is also liberating, according to Heidegger. It opens us to projects and possibilities that otherwise might be swamped by life's petty concerns.

Accepting the imminence of our death may be liberating, but it isn't easy. It is something that must be won or achieved. For Heidegger, we must *become* mortal. Failing that—forgetting that death is one's own most possibility—we alienate ourselves from future possibilities and slip into the condition of "freedom-towards-death" or "resoluteness." Heidegger calls this loss of one's authentic character "fallenness," a concept similar to Kierkegaard's "shut-upness."

"Fallenness"

"Fallenness" or inauthentic existence occurs when we so lose ourselves in present activities and concerns that we block out thought of our death and anxiety. Idle chatter, juicy gossip, vain curiosity, vapid conversation, pointless activities, all function to divert and distract us from anticipating our death and, thus, from affirming ourselves. They are ways that death is denied, and therefore oneself as well.

The drift into inauthentic existence or fallenness can be subtly camouflaged in social custom. Like Ivan Ilyich I can live as I'm supposed to but not as I should. I can follow a social script instead of living my own life. For Heidegger this is precisely the human tendency: to collapse to social pressure and escape from oneself by finding refuge in what he calls the "every-day-state-of-mind."

This every-day-state-of-mind is an impersonal identity, represented linguistically by the "one." Thus, "one" does, says, or thinks this or that, never "I." In this inauthentic "public self," it is the "one" who is responsible for what happens to me since it is the "one" who has taken over all my decisions. Of course, that means there is no "one" in particular who is answerable for anything, certainly not the "I." That's the beauty of it. The "one" takes the "I" completely off the hook, especially regarding death.

The "I" doesn't have to face death because it is always "one," not "I," who dies. The "one" thereby allows the "I" to talk about death, seemingly free from anxiety, while, in fact, being anxious about it. As Heidegger puts it: "One *knows* about the certainty of death, and yet 'is' not authentically certain of one's own."³⁰ In this way, the public and impersonal "one" (and the "they") permits the "I" to "flee in the face of death," rather than to live in its light.

"Fleeing in the Face of Death" vs. "Living in the Light of Death"

"Falleness" is especially evident in "fleeing in the face of death." Fleeing in the face of death, says Heidegger, means "giving new explanations for it, understanding it inauthentically, concealing it."³¹ Recall our hypothetical cancer patient who objectivizes and externalizes death by treating it as something that befalls everyone in general but no one in particular. This gives him emotional cover. It allows him to retreat from death, to disown it, to delude himself. Such self-deceits always miss the fact that death in each case is mine, and therefore to conceive of it as a possibility is to conceive of it as *my* possibility.³² Death doesn't just happen, it happens to me. "I die," not "one must die."

Opposed to living inauthentically by "fleeing in the face of death" is living authentically in "the light of death." Living in the light of death is accepting death, realistically and fully. Once we do, then death doesn't just happen to us as a random, cruel, meaningless destruction of our best laid plans.³³

When we flee in the face of death, we treat death as an event, whereas when we live in its light, we treat death as an existential phenomenon. The distinction between death as an event and as an existential phenomenon is another important aspect of Heidegger's take on death, as well as Tolstoy's in *Ilyich*.

Death as an Event

Treating death as an event means making it an abstract, ordinary occurrence that happens to someone else, never to oneself. Psychologically, it's a convenient way to avoid confronting one's own death. Heidegger believed, again, that public language both reflects and encourages the tendency to avoid death by treating it as an event. Consider that throughout his ordeal Ivan Ilyich's family and friends variously downplay, deny, lie about, or coldly tolerate his condition. This idle, ambiguous death talk is the language of Heidegger's inauthentic, "public self." It is the in-guistic custom employed to keep death at bay by treating it as an impersonal event. As Heidegger writes:

In the publicness with which we are with one another in our everyday manner, death is "known" as a mishap which is constantly occurring—as a "case of death." Someone or other "dies," be he neighbour or stranger. People who are no acquaintances of ours are dying daily and hourly. "Death" is encountered as a well-known event occurring within-the-world. As such it remains in the inconspicuousness characteristic of what

is encountered in an everyday fashion. The "they" has already stowed away an interpretation for this event. It talks of it in a "fugitive" manner, either expressly or else in a way which is mostly inhibited, as if to say, "One of these days one will die too, in the end; but right now it has nothing to do with us."

In other words, in death talk expressions like "one dies" makes death something indefinite that will eventually come but is of no present threat. In this way:

The expression "one dies" spreads abroad the opinion that what gets reached, as it were by death, is the "they." In [the] public way of interpreting, it is said that "one dies" because everyone else and oneself can talk himself into saying that "in no case is it I myself", for this "one" is the "nobody."³⁴

Tolstoy makes the same point more simply when he writes of Ilyich's acquaintances: "'Well, isn't that something—he's dead, but I'm not,' was what each of them thought or felt."³⁵

Ilyich's friends have a false security about death. That's Heidegger's point. The public way of interpreting death as an event always creates a false certainty about it. True expressions such as "one dies" or "everyone dies" or "death is a natural part of life" allow us at once to admit the certainty of death intellectually and avoid facing it emotionally. But all this accomplishes, says Heidegger, is to "weaken that certainty by covering up dying still more... to alleviate [our] own throwiness into death."³⁶ In other words, all the death circumlocution merely feeds the temptation to cover up from oneself the inevitability of one's own death. As a result:

Dying, which is essentially mine in such a way that no one can be my representative, is perverted into an event of public occurrence, which the "they" encounters. In the way of talking which we have characterized, death is spoken of as a "case" which is constantly occurring. Death gets passed off as always something "actual"; its character as a possibility gets concealed...³⁷

Ultimately, this evasive concealment of death so dominates our interactions that "...[t]he 'neighbours' often still keep talking the 'dying person' into the belief that he will escape death and soon return to the tranquilized everydayness of the world of his concerns."³⁸

Such "solicitude," says Heidegger, is meant to console. It doesn't, of course. In Ilyich's case, it leaves him emotionally isolated and desperately confused. Expected to be indifferently tranquil to the fact that "one dies," Ilyich is not permitted the courage for anxiety in the face of death.³⁹ That's what Heidegger would say is alienating him from his distinctive potential for being and, thereby, preventing him from triumphing over death. And supporting this self-alienation is the "every-day-state-of-mind" that holds up death as an event that happens to "one"—"One" dies—as opposed to a phenomenon to be understood existentially—"I" die.

Death as an Existential Phenomenon

The Renaissance poet John Donne (1572–1631), who often wrote and preached on death and mortality, memorably says:

Perchance he for whom this bell tolls, may be so ill, as that he knows not it tolls for him; and perchance I may think myself so much better than I am, as that they who are about me . . . may have caused it to toll for me . . . and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee ("Meditation XVII").

Heidegger puts the same point philosophically: "Dying is not an event; it is a phenomenon to be understood existentially . . . By its very essence, death is in every case mine, in so far as it 'is' at all."⁴⁰ This is basically what Ivan Ilyich is grappling with.

Up against all of his death denying objective thinking about death as an abstract event, Ilyich must now place the fact that it is he who is dying. How to reconcile the hypothetical, death-avoiding "*Everyone* must die" with the real, death facing "It is I who am dying"? Here's Tolstoy's account of Ilyich's dilemma:

The syllogism he [Ivan] had learned from Kiesewetter's logic—"Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal"—had always seemed to him correct as applied to Caius, but by no means to himself. That man Caius represented man in the abstract, and so the reasoning was perfectly sound, but he was not Caius, not an abstract man; he had always been a creature quite, quite distinct from all the others. . .

Caius really was mortal, and it was only right that he should die, but for him . . . Ivan Ilyich, with all his thoughts and feelings, it was something else again. And it simply was not possible that he should have to die. . .

"If I were destined to die like Caius, I would have known it; an inner voice would have told me. But I was never aware of any such thing and I and all my friends—we knew our situation was quite different from Caius's. Yet now look what's happened! It can't be. It just can't be, and yet it is. How is it possible? How is one to understand it?"

He could not understand it and tried to dismiss the thought as false, unsound, and morbid, to force it out of his mind with other thoughts that were sound and healthy. But the thought—not just the thought but, it seemed, the reality itself—kept coming back and confronting him.⁴¹

In this touching scene, Ivan Ilyich is struggling to absorb what is for Heidegger a great truth: The totality of our being must be understood in the light of death. Only then, by fully accepting his mortality, can Ivan Ilyich transform death and discover understanding and forgiveness. Only when "touched by the interior angel of death" can he finally cease to be Heidegger's "impersonal and social"⁴² and, thus, be free to be himself.

In death, Tolstoy tells us, there was "greater beauty—above all . . . greater significance" expressed in Ivan Ilyich's face than in life. "His expression," Tolstoy notes, "implied that what needed to be done had been done properly." At the same time, there was in the expression of the dead man "a reproach or reminder to the living." That warning concerns the critical importance of fully accepting one's

own death. In Heidegger's words, Ivan Ilyich is a cautionary tale about how "one fails to recognize this when one interposes the expedient of making the dying of Others a substitute theme for the analysis of [one's own death]."⁴³

CONCLUSIONS

Scholar Ronald Blythe properly describes Ivan Ilyich's death as "one of the most self-identifying deaths in all literature; his death in life, his death as transient flesh, they are still visibly exact reflections of our deathliness."⁴⁴ Blythe goes on to quote a contemporary of Heidegger, the Belgian poet and playwright Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949), who himself often decided the scant attention people give their own deaths:

We deliver death into the dim hands of instinct and we grant it not one hour of our intelligence. Is it surprising that the idea of death, which should be the most perfect and most luminous, remains the flimsiest of our ideas and the only one that is backward? How should we know the one power we never look in the face? To fathom its abysses we wait until the most enfeebled, the most disordered moments of our life arrive.⁴⁵

Certainly, this is true of Ivan Ilyich, and it's probably why Heidegger considered Tolstoy's powerful story so reflective of our own deathliness. For Heidegger, as well as Kierkegaard and many other philosophers, artists, and psychologists, refusing to face death is "the most certain way of shrinking our responses to everything else."⁴⁶

But Heidegger, at least, is saying something more controversial and disputable: Although facing death is a precondition for a fuller understanding of life, even acceptance of our mortality does not quell death anxiety. In other words, to the question "How does each of us live in the face of our own death?" Heidegger is responding: "always with anxiety"—*always*.

Over 2,000 years ago the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 BCE) offered an opposed view. As to the consciousness of death—the practical matter of living after (or while) looking into the abyss and seeing the annihilation or nothingness that awaits us—Epicurus said that we have no reason for fear or anxiety. Despite our feelings to the contrary, he assures us that death is nothing, since while we are alive, we are free of death and when death comes we won't be alive. To which Kierkegaard might reply: "So much objectivizing of death," and Heidegger, "Sheer intellectualizing as an event what can only be understood existentially." Still other philosophers would remind us that annihilation does not still death's mystery. "What, after all," they would ask, "is more unknown than nothingness?"⁴⁷

Still, Epicurus's famous aphorism nags: "When I am, death is not; and when death is, I am not." *Is he right? Is fear and anxiety concerning death irrational? Can we rid ourselves of them? Should we, as Epicurus believed, in order to get the most out of life? As we'll see in the next and final chapter on the nature of death, the Epicurean*