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THE BOOK OF DEAD
PHILOSOPHERS

SIMON CRITCHLEY

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**THE BOOK OF
DEAD PHILOSOPHERS**

“A provocative and engrossing invitation to think about the human condition and what philosophy can and can't do to illuminate it.”

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—David Shields, author of *The Thing About Life Is That One Day You'll Be Dead*

“[Critchley] brings the deaths of his predecessors to life in 190 or so energetic bursts.”

— *The Sunday Herald* (UK)

“Critchley gives the nonspecialist, the reader for pleasure, a point of access into complex material.”

— *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Australia)

“Simon Critchley's book looks death in the face and draws from the encounter the breath of life. No philosopher can pull a more welcome rabbit out of a more forbidding hat and Mr. Critchley does so in a prose style that is as deft as his intelligence.”

—Lewis Lapham, editor of *Lapham's Quarterly*



Simon Critchley

THE BOOK OF
DEAD PHILOSOPHERS

Simon Critchley is Professor and Chair of Philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York. He is the author of many books, most recently, *On Heidegger's Being and Time* and *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*. *The Book of Dead Philosophers* was written on a hill overlooking Los Angeles, where he was a scholar at the Getty Research Institute. He lives in Brooklyn.

On Heidegger's Being and Time
with Reiner Schürmann and Steven Levine

Infinitely Demanding:
Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance

On the Human Condition
with Dominique Janicaud

Things Merely Are:
Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens

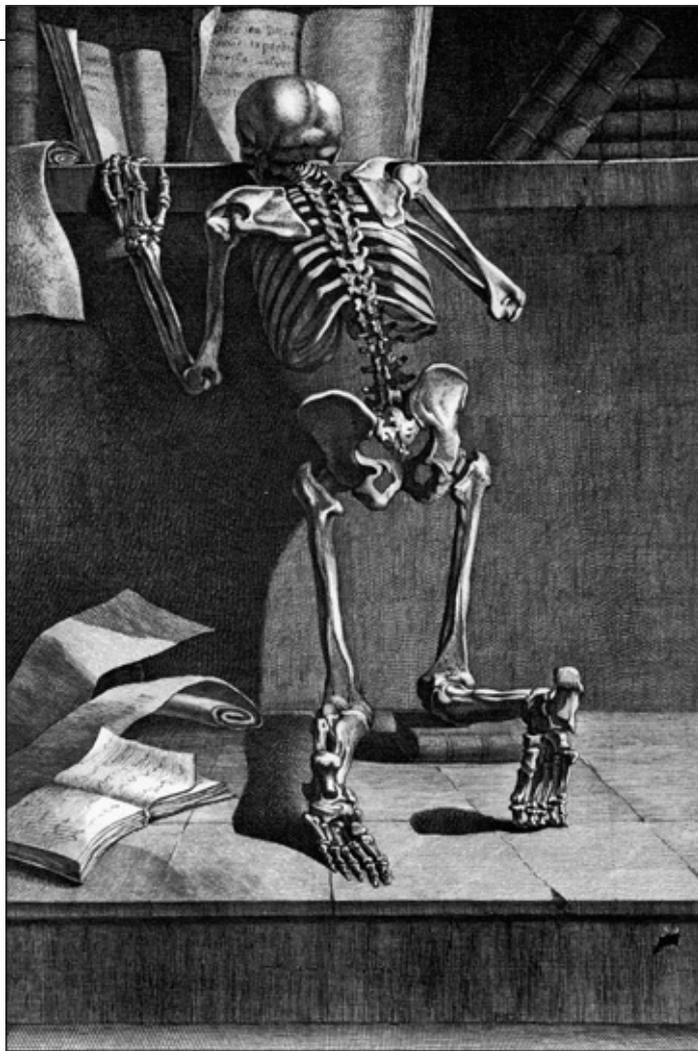
On Humor

Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction

Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity

Very Little, Almost Nothing

The Ethics of Deconstruction



The
BOOK
of
DEAD
PHILOSOPHERS

Simon Critchley



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If I were a maker of books, I would make a register, with comments, of various deaths. He who would teach men to die would teach them to live.

MONTAIGNE,

“That to Philosophize Is to Learn How to Die”

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INTRODUCTION

This book begins from a simple assumption: what defines human life in our corner of the planet at the present time is not just a fear of death, but an overwhelming *terror* of annihilation. This is a terror both of the inevitability of our demise with its future prospect of pain and possibly meaningless suffering, and the horror of what lies in the grave other than our body nailed into a box and lowered into the earth to become wormfood.

We are led, on the one hand, to deny the fact of death and to run headlong into the waters of pleasures of forgetfulness, intoxication and the mindless accumulation of money and possessions. On the other hand, the terror of annihilation leads us blindly into a belief in the magical forms of salvation and promises of immortality offered by certain varieties of traditional religion and many New Age (and some rather older age) sophistries. What we seem to seek is either the transitory consolation of momentary oblivion or a miraculous redemption in the afterlife.

It is in stark contrast to our drunken desire for evasion and escape that the ideal of the philosophical death has such sobering power. As Cicero writes, and this sentiment was axiomatic for most ancient philosophy and echoes down the ages, “To philosophize is to learn how to die.” The main task of philosophy, in this view, is to prepare us for death, to provide a kind of training for death, the cultivation of an attitude towards our finitude that faces—and faces down—the terror of annihilation without offering promises of an afterlife. Montaigne writes of the custom of the Egyptians who, during their elaborate feasts, caused a great image of death—often a human skeleton—to be brought into the banquet hall accompanied by a man who called out to them, “Drink and be merry, for when you are dead you will be like this.”

Montaigne derives the following moral from his Egyptian anecdote: “So I have formed the habit of having death continually present, not merely in my imagination, but in my mouth.”

To philosophize, then, is to learn to have death in your mouth, in the words you speak, the food you eat and the drink that you imbibe. It is in this way that we might begin to confront the terror of annihilation, for it is, finally, the fear of death that enslaves us and leads us towards either temporary oblivion or the longing for immortality. As Montaigne writes, “He who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave.” This is an astonishing conclusion: the premeditation of death is nothing less than the forethinking of freedom. Seeking to escape death, then, is to remain unfree and run away from ourselves. The denial of death is self-hatred.

It was a commonplace in antiquity that philosophy provides the wisdom necessary to confront death. That is, the philosopher looks death in the face and has the strength to say that it is nothing. The original exemplar for such a philosophical death is Socrates, to whom I will return in detail below. In the *Phaedo* he insists that the philosopher should be cheerful in the face of death. Indeed, he goes further and says that “true philosophers make dying their profession.” If one has learnt to die philosophically, then the fact of our demise can be faced with self-control, serenity and courage.

This Socratic wisdom finds even more radical expression several centuries later in the Stoicism of Seneca, who writes that “He will live badly who does not know how to die well.”

The philosopher, for him, enjoys a long life because he doesn't worry over its shortness. What Stoicism tries to teach is “something great and supreme and nearly divine,” namely tranquillity and calm in the face of death.

Seneca knew whereof he spoke, having been all but condemned to death by Caligula in AD 39 and banished by Claudius on a charge of adultery with the emperor's niece in 41. Eventually, when he was the most important intellectual figure in the Roman world and one of its most powerful administrators, he was forced to commit suicide by Nero in 65. He writes, prophetically,

I did know in what riotous company Nature had enclosed me. Often has the crash of a falling building echoed beside me. Many who were linked to me through the forum and the senate and everyday conversation have been carried off in a night, which has severed the hands once joined in friendship. Should it surprise me if the perils which have always roamed around me should some day reach me?

Now, although the actual manner of philosophers' deaths is not always as noble as Socrates and the vile circumstances of Seneca's botched suicide will be described below, I want to defend the ideal of the philosophical death. In a world where the only metaphysics in which people believe is either money or medical science and where longevity is prized as an unquestioned good, I do not deny that this is a difficult ideal to defend. Yet, it is my belief that philosophy can teach a readiness for death without which any conception of contentment, let alone happiness, is illusory. Strange as it might sound, my constant concern in these seemingly morbid pages is the meaning and possibility of happiness.

Very simply stated, this is a book about how philosophers have died and what we can learn from philosophy about the appropriate attitude to death and dying. My hope, to echo the epigraph from Montaigne, is “to make a register, with comments, of various deaths.” My wager is that in learning how to die we might also be taught how to live.

Allow me a caveat and a word on the form of *The Book of Dead Philosophers*. The book comprises short, sometimes very short, entries on various philosophers, cataloguing the manner of their demise and often linking this to their central ideas. The entries run from a sentence or two up to a short essay in the case of philosophers of great importance or whom I particularly value. For example, the reader will find more extensive and recurring discussions of figures like Socrates, Diogenes, Epicurus, Lucretius, Zhuangzi, Seneca, Augustine, Aquinas, Montaigne, Descartes, Locke, Spinoza, Hume, Rousseau, Hegel, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. I have also given a lot of attention to twentieth-century thinkers like Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Ayer, Foucault and Derrida. The entries are listed chronologically from Thales in the sixth century BC up to the present. They are divided into a series of chapters that reflect the major epochs in the history of philosophy. However, my chronology will not be exact and the philosophers will not be treated in a strict temporal succession, particularly when it suits my purposes to do otherwise.

I have not attempted to describe how *every* significant philosopher died. The learned eye will see some gaps and will doubtless disagree with many of my choices. Some philosophers have been omitted either because I could find nothing particularly interesting to say about their deaths—such as Frege, Gilbert Ryle or J. L. Austin—or because their deaths felt to

close—such as Richard Rorty, who died on 8 June, 2007, as I was finishing this book. Simply stated, I have focused on the philosophers who appeal to me. But that's already quite a few around 190.

As well as trying to cover many major and minor figures in the history of Western philosophy, including a hopefully surprising number of women philosophers, the reader will find a smattering of saints, classical Chinese philosophers and medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers, some of whom held fascinating views on death (and a few of whom died spectacularly).

The entries can be read either from beginning to end or by dipping in and out. I have no objection to the book being used as a miscellany, but my hope is that, if read from beginning to end, a cumulative series of themes will emerge that add up to a specific argument about how philosophy might teach one how to die and, by implication, how to live.

Matisse was once asked if he believed in God. He answered, "I do when I'm working." Let's just say that this book has been a lot of work. Although my research has involved marshalling a vast array of literary sources, I have decided not to clutter the text with footnotes. The reader will have to trust me. Those who want to follow up my sources and discover more for themselves can use the annotated bibliography at the end. Those seeking a little more context and a few more signposts on the history of philosophy and philosophers are encouraged to look at the final pages of this introduction.

Learning How to Die—Socrates

Philosophy is conventionally considered to begin with the trial and death of Socrates, who was condemned to death on the trumped-up charges of Meletus, Anytus and Lycon. There were two charges levelled against him: corrupting the youth of Athens and failing to reverence the city's gods. In Plato's account, there is also a third charge, namely that Socrates introduced his own "new" gods. Whatever the truth of the latter accusation, Socrates always claimed to follow his own *daimon*, what Cicero called a "divine something": a personal god or spirit, what we might be inclined to think of as conscience. However, Socrates' *daimon* was not some "inner voice," but an external sign or command that would suddenly cause him to stop in his tracks.

Socrates' death is sometimes seen as the political show trial and execution of an innocent dissident at the hands of a tyrannical state. However, it should not be forgotten that Socrates counted some pretty reactionary characters among his followers. Socrates' pupil Critias was leader of the Thirty Tyrants' anti-democratic reign of terror in 404–3 BC. It should also be remembered that, according to Xenophon, the only time that Socrates advised one of his disciples to enter politics, the recipient was a reluctant Charmides, another of the Thirty Tyrants who died on the battlefield alongside Critias. Finally, Alcibiades, the handsome, charismatic and dissolute aristocrat who bursts drunk into Plato's *Symposium*, defected from Athens to the enemy on two occasions: once to the Spartans and once again to the Persians. Socrates, especially in the version given by Plato in *The Republic*, is hardly a fan of

democracy, and his teaching could justifiably be seen as fomenting disillusion with democracy among right-wing aristocrats.

Socrates' death is a tragedy in many acts. Indeed, Hegel writes that Socrates' trial is the moment when tragedy leaves the stage and fully enters political life, becoming the tragedy of the decay and collapse of Athens itself.

Plato devotes no fewer than four dialogues to the events surrounding Socrates' trial and death (*Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito* and *Phaedo*), and in addition we have the *Memorabilia* and *Apology* of Xenophon. In the *Phaedo*, which is commonly seen as the latest of Plato's four dialogues, Socrates' words become suffused with Plato's Pythagorean belief in the immortality of the soul. But the earlier *Apology* gives a rather different view of the matter. Socrates says that death is not at all an evil, but on the contrary a good thing. That said, death is one of two possibilities:

Either it is annihilation, and the dead have no consciousness of anything; or, as we are told, it is really a change: a migration of the soul from this place to another.

But Socrates insists that, regardless of which of these possibilities is true, death is not something to be feared. If it is annihilation, then it is a long, dreamless sleep, and what could be more pleasant than that? If it is a passage to another place, namely Hades, then that is also something to be wished as we will meet old friends and Greek heroes and be able to converse with Homer, Hesiod and the rest of the immortal company.

There is another story told of Socrates, that when a man told him, "The Thirty Tyrants have condemned you to death," he replied, "And nature them." Socrates likewise turns the table on his accusers and jury, asserting that they should face death with confidence. Having been condemned to death, Socrates concludes his speech with the following extraordinary words: Now it is time that we were going, I to die and you to live; but which of us has the happier prospect is unknown to anyone but God.

These words encapsulate the classical philosophical attitude towards death: it is nothing to be feared. On the contrary, it is that in relation to which life must be lived. Socrates' enigmatic last words—"Crito, we ought to offer a cock to Asclepius"—articulate the view that death is the cure for life. Asclepius was the god of healing, and the offering of a sacrifice was something that people suffering from an ailment would offer before sleep in the hope of waking up cured. Thus, death is a curative slumber.

What must be emphasized in Socrates' attitude towards death in the *Apology* is that although death might be either of the two possibilities discussed, we do not *know* which one is right. That is, philosophy is learning how to die, but that which is learnt is not *knowledge*. This is an essential point. What philosophy teaches is not some quantifiable sum of knowledge that can be bought or sold like a commodity in the marketplace. Such is the business of the Sophists—Gorgias, Prodicus, Protagoras, Hippias and the rest—whose view Socrates relentlessly dismantles in Plato's dialogues. Although Socrates is himself described as a Sophist by the lampooning Aristophanes in *The Clouds*, the Sophists were a class of professional educators that appeared in the fifth century BC and who offered instruction to young men and public displays of eloquence in return for a fee. The Sophists were masters of

eloquence, “honey-tongued,” as Philostratus writes, who travelled from city to city, offering knowledge in exchange for money.

In opposition to the charismatic and often colourfully dressed Sophists who come promising knowledge, the poorly attired and rather ugly Socrates only seems to embody a weak paradox. On the one hand, Socrates is declared the wisest man in Greece by the Oracle at Delphi. On the other hand, Socrates always insists that he knows nothing. How therefore can the wisest man in the world know nothing? This seeming paradox evaporates when we learn to distinguish wisdom from knowledge and become lovers of wisdom, in other words philosophers.

For example, in *The Republic*, the object of inquiry is justice. “What is justice?” asks Socrates and various more or less conventional views of justice are discussed, dismantled and dismissed. But in the central books of *The Republic*, Socrates does not give his interlocutors an answer to the question of justice or some theory of justice. Instead, we are given a series of stories—most famously the myth of the cave—that indicate to us *indirectly* the matter at hand. The path to justice, we are told, is only to be followed by orienting the soul toward the Good, which is precisely not a matter of knowledge but a work of love. Philosophy begins, then, with the questioning of certainties in the realm of knowledge and the cultivation of a love of wisdom. Philosophy is erotic, not just epistemic.

There has never been a more important time to emphasize this distinction between philosophy and sophistry. We are surrounded by countless new sophistries. Televangelists offer authoritative knowledge of the true word of God and perform miraculous cures in exchange for appropriate donations to the cause. An entire New Age industry has arisen where Knowledge (capital K) of something called Self (capital S) is traded in expensive brightly coloured wrappings. I am writing these lines on West Sunset Boulevard, Los Angeles, not far from the palatial “Self-Realization Center,” complete with lavish gardens, a lake, a shrine, Hindu kitsch architecture and expensive programmes for improving spiritual self-knowledge and communion with God.

I think it is fair to say that Western societies, and not just Western societies, are experiencing a deep meaning gap that risks broadening into an abyss. This gap is being filled by various forms of obscurantism that conspire to promote the belief that, first, such a thing as self-knowledge is attainable; second, it comes with a price tag; and third, it is completely consistent with the pursuit of wealth, pleasure and personal salvation. By contrast, Socrates never claimed to know, never promised knowledge to others and, crucially, never accepted a fee.

What this desire for certainty betrays is a profound terror of death and an overwhelming anxiety to be quite sure that death is not the end, but the passage to the afterlife. True, if eternal life has an admission price, then who wouldn't be prepared to pay it? By way of contrast, it is striking to go back to Socrates and his scepticism. He does not simply give voice to an uncertainty with regard to life after death, but also raises the question of which is preferable: life or death. The philosopher is the lover of wisdom who does not claim to know but who expresses a radical doubt with regard to all things, even with regard to whether life or death is the better state. “Only God knoweth,” as a slightly more antique translation of

Socrates' final words at his trial runs. Indeed, Diogenes Laertius, author of the huge influential *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* from the third century AD, tells a fascinating story of Thales, usually considered the first philosopher.

He held there was no difference between life and death. "Why then," said one, "do you not die?" "Because," said he, "there is no difference."

To be a philosopher, then, is to learn how to die; it is to begin to cultivate the appropriate attitude towards death. As Marcus Aurelius writes, it is one of "the noblest functions of reason to know whether it is time to walk out of the world or not." Unknowing and uncertain, the philosopher walks.

To Die Laughing

The Book of Dead Philosophers is not a "Book of the Dead," whether Egyptian or Tibetan. The exquisite ancient writings carefully describe the rituals necessary to prepare with certainty for the afterlife. *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* comprises 189 spells to ensure that the soul passes to an astral or solar afterlife. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* describes the death rituals necessary to break the illusory cycles of existence and achieve the Enlightenment (capital E) that allegedly comes with the realization of Nirvana.

The influence of such approaches is vast, from the "Secret Doctrine" of Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society in the late nineteenth century, through Timothy Leary's psychedelic 1960s version of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* achieved with the help of LSD, to the contemporary obsession with "near-death" or "out-of-the-body" experiences spawned by Raymond Moody's *Life after Life*, from 1976.

Such is the position that Nietzsche called "European Buddhism," although there is a good deal of American Buddhism around as well. The crucial point is that in both the Egyptian and Tibetan Books of the Dead and their contemporary epigones, *death is an illusion*. Existence is a cycle of rebirth that is only broken by a final passage to Enlightenment. It is thus a question of gaining access to the right Knowledge (capital K, once again) that will strip away what Schopenhauer saw as the illusory veils of Maya and allow the soul to free itself.

This approach to death is encapsulated in the words of the influential Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, "Death is not extinguishing the light; it is putting out the lamp because the dawn has come." One can detect the influence of such approaches to death and dying in the still extremely widely read writings of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. She fostered a deep psychological approach to dying patients based on the famous five stages of dying (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance) which has been extremely influential in palliative care. In *On Death and Dying* (1969), each chapter begins with a citation from Tagore, and the revealingly entitled *Death: The Final Stage of Growth* (1974) pays a rather hyperbolic tribute to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

I do not want to deny the undoubtedly beneficial therapeutic effects of such approaches. My worry is that they cultivate the belief that death is an illusion to be overcome with the

right spiritual preparations. However, it is not an illusion, it is a *reality* that has to be accepted. I would go further and argue that it is in relation to the reality of death that our existence should be structured. Possibly the most pernicious feature of contemporary society is the unwillingness to accept this reality and willingness to flee the fact of death.

The Book of Dead Philosophers is, rather, a series of reminders of death or memento mori. Rather than being the clarion call of a new esoteric dogma, it is a book of 190 or so question marks that might begin to enable us to face the reality of our death.

So much for the good news. For the history of philosophers' deaths is also a tale of weirdness, madness, suicide, murder, bad luck, pathos, bathos and some dark humour. You will die laughing, I promise. Let me enumerate some examples to be discussed at greater leisure below:

- Pythagoras allowed himself to be slaughtered rather than cross a field of beans;
- Heracleitus suffocated in cow dung;
- Plato allegedly died of a lice infestation;
- Aristotle is reported to have killed himself with aconite;
- Empedocles plunged into Mount Etna in the hope of becoming a god, but one of his bronze slippers was spat out by the flames in confirmation of his mortality;
- Diogenes died by holding his breath;
- So did the great radical Zeno of Citium;
- Zeno of Elea died heroically by biting a tyrant's ear until he was stabbed to death;
- Lucretius is alleged to have killed himself after being driven mad by taking a love potion;
- Hypatia was killed by a mob of angry Christians and her skin was peeled off with oyster shells;
- Boethius was cruelly tortured before being bludgeoned to death on the orders of the Ostrogoth king Theodoric;
- John Scottus Eriugena, the great Irish philosopher, was allegedly stabbed to death by his English students;
- Avicenna died of an opium overdose after engaging much too vigorously in sexual activity;
- Aquinas died twenty-five miles from his birthplace after banging his head against the bough of a tree;
- Pico della Mirandola was poisoned by his secretary; Siger of Brabant was stabbed by his;

William of Ockham died of the Black Death;

Thomas More was beheaded and his head was stuck on a pike on London Bridge;

Giordano Bruno was gagged and burnt alive at the stake by the Inquisition;

Galileo narrowly escaped the same fate, but got away with life imprisonment;

Bacon died after stuffing a chicken with snow in the streets of London to assess the effects of refrigeration;

Descartes died of pneumonia as a consequence of giving early-morning tutorials in the Stockholm winter to the prodigious and cross-dressing Queen Christina of Sweden;

Spinoza died in his rented rooms at The Hague while everyone else was at church;

Leibniz, discredited as an atheist and forgotten as a public figure, died alone and was buried at night with only one friend in attendance;

The handsome and brilliant John Toland died in such dire poverty in London that no marker was placed at his burial spot;

Berkeley, a fervent critic of Toland and other so-called “freethinkers,” died one Sunday evening on a visit to Oxford while his wife read him a sermon;

Montesquieu died in the arms of his lover, leaving unfinished an essay on taste;

The atheist, materialist La Mettrie died of indigestion caused by eating a huge amount of truffle pâté;

Rousseau died of massive cerebral bleeding which was possibly caused by a violent collision with a Great Dane on the streets of Paris two years earlier;

Diderot choked to death on an apricot, presumably to show that pleasure could be had until the very last breath;

Condorcet was murdered by the Jacobins during the bloodiest years of the French Revolution;

Hume died peacefully in his bed after fending off the inquiries of Boswell as to the atheist's attitude to death;

Kant's last word was “*Sufficit*,” “it is enough;”

Hegel died in a cholera epidemic and his last words were “Only one man ever understood me ...and he didn't understand me” (presumably he was referring to himself);

Bentham had himself stuffed and sits on public view in a glass box at University College London in order to maximize the utility of his person;

Max Stirner was stung on the neck by a flying insect and died of the resulting fever;

Kierkegaard's gravestone rests against that of his father;

Nietzsche made a long, soft-brained and dribbling descent into oblivion after kissing a horse in Turin;

Moritz Schlick was murdered by a disturbed student who went on to join the Nazi Party;

Wittgenstein died the day after his birthday, for which his friend Mrs. Bevan gave him an electric blanket saying "Many happy returns;" Wittgenstein replied, staring at her, "There will be no returns;"

Simone Weil starved herself to death for the sake of solidarity with occupied France in the Second World War;

Edith Stein died in Auschwitz;

Giovanni Gentile was executed by anti-Fascist Italian partisans;

Sartre said, "Death? I don't think about it. It has no place in my life;" 50,000 people attended his funeral;

Merleau-Ponty was allegedly discovered dead in his office with his face in a book by Descartes;

Roland Barthes was hit by a dry cleaning van after a meeting with the future French minister for culture;

Freddie Ayer had a near-death experience where he reportedly met the masters of the universe after choking on a piece of salmon;

Gilles Deleuze defenestrated himself from his Paris apartment in order to escape the sufferings of emphysema;

Derrida died of pancreatic cancer at the same age as his father, who died of the same disease;

My teacher Dominique Janicaud died alone on a beach in August 2002 close to the foot of *le chemin Nietzsche* outside Nice in France after suffering a heart attack while swimming.

Death is close and getting closer all the time. Funny, isn't it?

My own view of death is closer to that of Epicurus and what is known as the four-part cure: don't fear God, don't worry about death, what is good is easy to get and what is terrible is easy to endure. He writes in the final of the four extant letters attributed to him, Get used to believing that death is nothing to us. For all good and bad consists in sense-experience, and death is the privation of sense-experience. Hence a correct knowledge of the fact of death makes the mortality of life a matter for contentment, not by adding a limitless time to live but by removing the longing for immortality.

The Epicurean view of death was hugely influential in antiquity, as can be seen :

Lucretius, and was rediscovered by philosophers like Pierre Gassendi in the seventeenth century. It represents a distinct and powerful sub-tradition in Western thought to which insufficient attention has been given: when death is, I am not; when I am, death is not. Therefore, it is useless to worry about death and the only way to attain tranquillity of soul is by removing the anxious longing for an afterlife.

Highly tempting as it is, the obvious problem with this position is that it fails to provide a cure for the aspect of death that is hardest to endure: not our own death, but the deaths of those we love. It is the deaths of those we are bound to in love that undo us, that unstitch our carefully tailored suit of the self, that unmake whatever meaning we have made. In my view, as odd as it may sound, it is only in grief that we become most truly ourselves. That is, what it means to be a self does not consist in some delusory self-knowledge, but in the acknowledgement of that part of ourselves that we have irretrievably lost. The entire difficulty here is imagining what sort of contentment or tranquillity might be possible in relation to the deaths of those we love. I cannot promise to resolve this issue, but the reader will find it taken up and developed in various of the entries below.

Writing about Dead Philosophers

Writing a book about how philosophers die is admittedly an odd way to spend one's time. Reading such a book is, perhaps, even odder. However, it does raise a couple of searching questions about how the history of philosophy is to be written and how the activity of philosophy is to be understood.

The initial and finally intractable difficulty with writing about the history of philosophy consists in knowing exactly where to begin. The earliest versions of the history of philosophy still extant are by a teacher and his student: Book Alpha of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and Theophrastus' *On Sensation*. In both texts, the philosophers develop their own views in relation to previous doctrines. On the one hand, Aristotle brilliantly reviews the doctrines of the pre-Socratic physical philosophers whom he calls the *physiologi*, like Thales, Anaxagoras, and Empedocles, and their views on the material cause of nature. On the other hand, he then turns a critical eye to his teacher, Plato, and the views of the Pythagoreans on the ideal cause of nature. In a way that becomes a standard pattern of philosophical argument, Aristotle dispatches and integrates both the materialist and idealist approaches before introducing his own notion of substance, which is the core of what a later tradition called "metaphysics."

The case of Theophrastus gives a particularly poignant example of the poverty of our situation with regard to philosophical antiquity. Theophrastus' "On the Opinions of the Physical Philosophers" ran to eighteen books and was the major source in antiquity for pre-Socratic thought. All that remains is a fragment, *On Sensation*, which gives but a tantalizing taste of the whole through discussions of the nature of the senses in Empedocles, Anaxagoras, Democritus and Plato.

Our situation with regard to the literary remains of antiquity is tragic. As we know, the archive of ancient texts was largely lost, for example when an angry mob of Christians

destroyed the greatest library of the classical world at Alexandria at the end of the third century AD. All we are left with are fragments of a rich totality the scale of which we can barely imagine. It is like trying to guess at the holdings of the British Library with a hundred or so Penguin Classics in one's hands.

My concern in this book is with what scholars of ancient philosophy call “doxography” that is, an account of the lives, opinions and tenets of philosophers, and sometimes the deaths. The word “doxa” can mean “opinion” in the common sense of the word, but it can also mean “reputation,” i.e., the opinion entertained about one by others. Because of the huge importance of reputation, especially posthumous reputation, in Greek culture, “doxa” develops the meaning of “great reputation” or even “glory.” The latter is a key concept for the Greeks and there was a widespread belief that one's immortality consisted in the glory of one's reputation, that is, in the stories recounted after one's death.

Understood in this expanded sense—which I confess is somewhat idiosyncratic—doxography can be seen as an account of the glorious reputations of philosophers, and doxographers were those who wrote the biographies of these exemplary figures. As such, the concept of doxography is a kissing cousin of hagiography. From Socrates to Spinoza and from Hume to Wittgenstein, it is interesting to see how closely the accounts of the lives of the philosophers resemble those of the saints. The crucial difference is that philosophers are exemplary not by their holiness, but by the way in which they show their weaknesses as well as their strengths. The lives of philosophers are often rather less than saintly and this is often what attracts us to them. It is in the odd details of philosophers' lives that they become accessible to us: Hobbes's predilection for playing tennis and singing in his bedroom, Kant's fondness for English cheese and horror of perspiration, and Marx's carbuncles.

My point in this book is to show that the history of philosophy can be approached as a history of philosophers that proceeds by examples remembered, often noble and virtuous, but sometimes base and comical. As we will see, the manner of the death of philosophers humanizes them and shows that, despite the lofty reach of their intellect, they have to cope with the hard life deals them like the rest of us.

“Doxography” is the neologism of the German scholar Hermann Diels, whose monumental synthesis of Greek philosophical biography was published in Latin in 1879 as *Doxographi Graeci, The Greek Doxographers*. However, for entirely contingent historical reasons, our major guide to the “doxo-graphical” approach to the history of philosophy, particularly with regard to philosophers' deaths, is Diogenes Laertius from the third century.

Sadly, however likeable and readable one may find his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, it can hardly be described as accurate, complete or philosophically acute. Diogenes gives us a rather chatty, anecdotal and highly syncretic ramble through antiquity. At times, it is terrific fun. His translator, Herbert Richards, rightly says “the man was foolish enough,” and Jonathan Barnes and Julia Annas describe his *Lives* as “chatty and unintelligent.” It is also true that he peppered his book with the most awful verses, as we will see. However, Richards goes on to say “the book is of extreme value for the history, especially the literary history, of Greek philosophy.” I find Diogenes Laertius very amenable company and I rather like the way in which he collates facts uncritically, particularly unreliable and scandalous ones. My approach has also tended towards the scandalous in places. He also has some unsurpassed stories about

philosophers' deaths.

Diogenes Laertius begins by considering the possibility that philosophy first arose among the “barbarians,” such as the Chaldeans of Babylon and Assyria, the Gymnosophists of India, the Druids who lived among the Celts and Gauls, the Thracians like Orpheus, the Zoroastrian in Persia and the Egyptians. However, he quickly moves on to assert that it was from the Greeks that philosophy took its rise and “its very name refuses to be translated into foreign or barbaric speech.” Philosophy speaks Greek, then, and its history begins with Greece and therefore with Europe. Such is what has become the standard account of the history of philosophy which reduces the non-Greek, non-European, “barbaric” sources to so-called “wisdom traditions,” but not philosophy proper. On this view, the idea of comparative philosophy is a non-starter, as there is nothing with which to compare Greek philosophy.

Diogenes Laertius' approach is entirely emulated by the itinerant Englishman Walter Burley or Gualteri Burlaei in his *Liber de vita et moribus philosophorum* (*The Book of Philosophers' Lives and Opinions or Habits*). The latter was possibly written in Italy or southern France in the 1340s and remained the standard history of philosophy for the next few centuries. John Passmore rightly describes Burley's account of the history of philosophy as “free and unreliable,” although it does include some curiosities. For example, one finds entries not only on figures like Hermes Trismegistus, Aesop and Zoroaster, but also on Euripides, Sophocles, Hippocrates, and later Roman writers like Plautus, Virgil and even Ovid. Also, Burley rather curiously notes the ethnic origin of most philosophers—“*Thales, asianus*” (“Thales, Asian”)—“*Hermes, egipcus*” (“Hermes, Egyptian”)—and which Hebrew king was on the throne during their lifetime.

The writing of the history of philosophy is continued by Thomas Stanley in 1687 in the impressively printed three-volume *History of Philosophy, containing the lives, opinions, actions and discourses of the philosophers of every sect, illustrated with effigies of divers of them*. Indeed the “effigies” are particularly handsome and the volumes are littered with large and heroic engravings of the dead ancients. Although Stanley's model for the history of philosophy is still very much based on Diogenes Laertius—he only deals with antiquity—there is much that is new. In particular, there is a long closing chapter on the “Chaldaick” philosophy, complete with text and commentary on the Oracles of Zoroaster, plus various remarks on Persian and Sabeian philosophers.

As Stanley makes clear in the dedicatory epistle of his *History*, “The Learned Gassendus was my precedent.” This refers to Pierre Gassendi's *De Vita et Moribus Epicuri* (*The Lives and Opinions or Habits of Epicurus*, 1647), which is a compelling and extended (it comprises eight books) defence of Epicurean philosophy against the infamies and distortions to which it has been submitted since Zeno, the Stoics, Cicero, Plutarch and right through to the Church Fathers. The question for Gassendi which I would like to echo is not so much “what is philosophy?” as “what is a philosopher?,” which is indistinguishable from the question “how does a philosopher die?”

According to one William Enfield of Norwich, Stanley's *History* is written in “an uncouth and obscure style.” Whatever the truth of the matter, there is no doubt that Stanley's work was totally eclipsed by the publication of Jakob Brucker's *Historia Critica Philosophiae* (*The Critical History of Philosophy*), published in Leipzig between 1742 and 1767, which was the princip

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