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Life, Death, and Immortality in the Anti-Covid Era

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Death is life's great challenge. Each mortal man must find ways to deal with the inevitability of his demise. Every society or civilization must find ways to deal with the inevitability of an unending series of individual ends. Christians believe and hope in the greatest of all possible remedies: the eternal triumph of life over the only temporary harsh reality of mortality.

The thinking, practices, disbeliefs, and resulting fears of modernity have gradually but by now almost completely eviscerated not only this Christian hope (even among many professing believers), but also all the other long-established responses to the contrast between current life and the always present possibility of death. The discrediting and decline of the old ways have largely been gradual, but the responses to the Covid pandemic provide a clear demonstration of the extent of the cumulative damage.

In speaking of responses, I am thinking of what I have called the “assault on humanity”—the stopping and reshaping of as much of ordinary life as possible for the sake of stopping a disease. In particular, I am thinking of the months of lockdowns and social distancing, the restrictions of worship, education, commerce, entertainment, etc., the sowing of fear, and the blind refusal to consider the dimensions of damage to what were traditionally considered the central axes of the good life. In effect, I am thinking of governments working against what would once—not that long ago—have been considered the common good. And I am thinking of the enthusiastic obedience and lack of profound regret about this cancelation of the fullness of life shown by most of the people, as well as by most of the various elites who are supposed to inform and guide them.

That is how most utilitarians think. They see more utility in even the barest life than in the noblest death.

It is almost irrelevant that this massive assault on the good of life was a failure on the terms that its promoters set. None of the non-pharmaceutical interventions delayed many deaths. (To speak of “saving lives” is a misuse of language, since no worldly action can do that.) The far greater failure is in nearly universal acceptance of those promoters’ terms. The thinking behind the assault demonstrated just how deeply contemporary society fails to face up to the definitional human challenge: living well in the anticipation of death.

I identify seven ways that anti-Covid demonstrated the regaining and sharpening of death’s sting.

First and perhaps foremost, there is the disappearance of the possibility of a noble death.

Start with the longstanding tradition of considering death in war to be sweet and fitting, *dulce et decorum*. It is hard to find much nobility in the deaths caused by the modern ways of war: slaughtering civilians, being a bombed civilian, guiding a drone or, heaven forbid, dropping a nuclear bomb. The nobility of dying for the fatherland (*pro patria mori*, to finish the Horace quotation) has dwindled to almost nothing. Secular modern governments are more service providers than repositories of deathless glory. Dying for them is, as Alasdair MacIntyre once wrote, like dying for the telephone company.

It was not only in war that the willingness to die for the good of others was considered noble. There were heroes of plague-care, great explorers, and defenders of the innocent against brigands. All these occupations have been de-risked—to make deaths “avoidable”—but the attitude underlying modern risk aversion is that life is too valuable to be sacrificed out of love of neighbor.

More generally, modern people try to avoid thinking about death as a spur to the good life. The key death-question that modern people are most likely to ask about their lives is not how to make the best, most spiritually uplifting use of the limited time left to us as living, thinking, and loving beings. Nor is it how to accept our mortality with grace and integrity.

Rather, the most common life-and-death question is how to stay alive for as long as possible. When illness arrives or is suspected, we generally embrace the inherently inhuman modern medical complex. To delay our deaths, we surrender ourselves to a processing system in which the patient is no more than a broken machine to be fixed, a body without a soul, and, often enough, a potential carrier of deadly infections to others. And if the machine is irreparable, it’s only good for the scrap heap.

The anti-Covid response was a flowering of all these marks of an ignoble understanding of death, and thus of life. An anti-Covid war was declared and promoted, but there can be no glory and little honor in fighting an invisible pathogen. What the anti-fullness policies actually accomplished was to extend the subjects of the medical kingdom from the ill to the currently healthy, and to make entry into that inhuman realm mandatory instead of optional. The logic was simple: the desire to delay death from Covid justified denying many manifestations of the fullness of life. A less noble mortal combat could hardly be imagined.

Second, there is the replacement of the old religion of life-after-death with the new religion of unhappy science.

For all premodern peoples, the response to death has generally included some working out of Wordsworth’s “intimations of immortality.” Certainly, Christianity is centred on life after death, and on living life before death well enough to merit this timeless fullness of life. However, modern Christianity is often more modern than Christian, and the modern spirit is

not very Christian. So, it was disappointing but not surprising that almost all Christian leaders enthusiastically endorsed the anti-Covid assault on humanity.

Not only were there almost no calls for civil disobedience to the specific rules, even to the banning of shared worship. There was almost no recognition that these anti-Covid rules were not in accord with Christian charity, but only with the secular orthodoxy of favoring the prolongation of life over the living of good lives. For Catholics, the abdication was particularly appalling. The shepherds hardly seemed to hesitate about depriving their flock of the sacraments, which they supposedly believe offer the reality of true, that is eternal, life.

In my judgment, the enthusiastic Christian collaboration with the assault on the fullness of life can only be understood as an endorsement of the secular world's unconditional fear of death. When elderly priests refused to leave their rooms so as to avoid the disease—as I have heard happened—these supposedly spiritual men behaved as anti-martyrs. They feared death far more than they loved the fullness of life. With such an attitude, it is hardly surprising that almost no priests or pastors used the increased threat of death as an opportunity to lead the faithful to reflect on the “four last things.” Death was treated as the one last thing, a thing to be delayed at all costs.

In obeying the antisocial dictates of the medical authorities, Christians are not exactly abandoning religion. They, like the apostate Israel of the Old Testament, are turning towards an idol. The Baal of modernity is the deity of Scientific Expertise. This strange god offers its own cure to mortality—the delaying of death, which is euphemistically renamed “saving lives.” Non-believers in the Religion of Science may not be impressed with this cure, since death still comes to all. However, a longer life seems to be the best offer available for practical atheists, the people who live as if God does not exist.

Third, there is the incomprehension of dying for the sake of having lived a fuller and better life. Among the noblest deaths in war are those offered up willingly to keep comrades alive, at least for a little longer. Willingly dying for the truth of religious faith was also always considered noble. In a somewhat less religious sphere, the tale of Socrates's brave and willing acceptance of an unjust death was inspirational for many centuries. It is always a “far, far better thing,” as Charles Dickens put it, to allow others to kill you than to attempt to eke out a few more cowardly years or decades of living without honor.

The modern world still offers some praise for the acceptance, or even the courting, of death that promotes or protects some higher good. Death-defying rescues and death-accepting soldiers are well memorialized. However, the validation of life through death has been fading away for decades.

Shūsaku Endō's 1960s book *Silence*, and even more the 2016 film based on it, are good examples of the shift. The actual Christians of 17th-century Japan almost all accepted horrible and painful deaths rather than forsake their faith. Almost none of them were tempted by promises of kind treatment, either for themselves or for their leaders or families. In the fictional account, they behave quite differently, and the preservation of life is presented as a better way than the perseverance in faith.

The disdain for death is almost incomprehensible in the current era of health, safety, and the most mundane understanding of happiness. From the perspective of the safety-culture, martyrdom looks imprudent, since if there is a God, he will surely understand that our faith is not compromised by avoiding it. Modern people are far more likely to sacrifice freedom from regulations than to risk their lives for any higher principle.

If there were doubts about that preference, the popular response to Covid should have dispelled them. When the danger of the disease was still unclear, almost no one who could reduce the risk was willing to “take their chances” in order to keep normal life going, or even in order to protect people who were more vulnerable than themselves. Medical professionals often shunned patients, while social workers, teachers, and psychologists barricaded themselves behind screens and masks.

The preference for yielding to the fear of death over the willingness to die for a good cause was so strong that it restrained the labors of care long after it should have been clear that they carried almost no risk. Even now, parting friends now ritually enjoin each other to “stay safe.”

Fourth, there is the disappearance of the art of dying well. It was not just philosophers and religious teachers who used to hope that their terminal declines would be long and lingering. Most Christians, and indeed many pagans, wished for the opportunity to say farewell to family and friends, to put their own affairs, both practical and spiritual, in order to appreciate, or not, the care of those who surrounded them, and perhaps to speed their way to heaven by suffering in expiation of their sins before, rather than after, death. Family members were often grateful for the opportunity to offer support and to part from their loved ones in the peace of a “holy death.”

Secular people can barely understand most of these desires. At most, they might prefer palliative care at home to ever-more-intrusive and impersonal treatment in a hospital. The greater desire, though, is usually for a sudden death, so abrupt that there is not enough time for pain or terror. Expiatory suffering is generally dismissed as “medieval.” Indeed, when dying is deemed too painful or death be too slow in coming, the preferred response is increasingly to search out the modern parody of a holy death, the “good death” (euthanasia) of medically supervised life-elimination.

The response to Covid showed the typical modern unconcern for a good death. In the early days of the pandemic, many patients were quickly made unconscious so that they could be attached to “ventilators,” machines which proved to be medically harmful as well as spiritually deadening. Later, the fear of Covid led to the isolated deaths of many residents of institutions. The weak medical case for not allowing visits was very often considered more important than the rituals and comforts of dying well.

Fifth, there is the philosophical abdication of taking death seriously. Some modern philosophers still pay attention to the Socratic injunction to overcome the fear of death, but the profession has mostly moved on to other issues and endorsed other approaches to living and dying.

In particular, responding well to the prospect of death is of little interest to the utilitarians who have a disproportionate influence on public policy, including of the anti-Covid assault on the fullness of life. Philosophically, the attack and all the suffering and life-diminishing that it brought can only be justified within a happiness-seeking system if death is considered to be the greatest source of unhappiness. And that is how most utilitarians think. They see more utility in even the barest life than in the noblest death.

Among professional thinkers, it was not just utilitarian philosophers who endorsed the measures that damaged so many lives for the sake of “saving” some few from death. Almost none of the academic enthusiasts of Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, thinkers who recognized that the modern approach to death and life is often inhuman, stood up for the insights of their masters. Their philosophical attitude towards hypothetical deaths did not survive the perceived threat of actual death.

Sixth, there is the decline of reproduction, which had always been the leading social response to human mortality.

In Plato's *Symposium*, the wise Diotima points out that reproduction provides a sort of immortality of bodies and souls. Using more modern techniques of analysis, anthropologists have explored the central role of social reproduction in all premodern cultures. They found that one of the central concerns in these cultures was the passing on of life and living traditions from one generation to the next.

Production has increased massively in the industrial age, but attention to physical and cultural reproduction has steadily diminished. Culturally, the young are encouraged to make their own way and find their own ideas, rather than to see themselves as carriers of the past into the future. The cultural expectation has physical implications. Reproduction through procreation often seems less like noble duty than an obstacle to a fulfilling life. The results of this disregard for the next generation include lower birth rates and a hostile social attitude towards children.

The prevalence of this hostility was evident during the anti-Covid frenzy. Anti-child policies were instituted immediately almost everywhere. They continued, especially in the United States, long after it became clear that the disease posed no significant risk to children. Schools were closed for months or years, and intellectually and psychologically damaging facemasks were mandated. The priests of the Religion of Science unhesitatingly described children as potentially lethal vectors of disease, sometimes encouraging them to feel responsible for the deaths of their relatives. Unsurprisingly, birth rates in most countries declined after as well as during this assault on humanity's future.

Seventh and finally, there is the rise of a modern immortality: of corporations, bureaucracies, and other dehumanizing structures.

With God as good as dead, philosophy a dead end, and cultures without a future or a past, all that the modern world can muster in the fight to accept and transcend death are these collections of dreary and drab procedures. Such ways of dealing with life and death do not even reach the level of being dreadful, terrible, or awful, as all those adjectives carry an aura of grandeur and a whiff of the sacred.

Corporations are legally designed to last forever, although only in a worldly way and providing only a thin, legal continuity between past and future. Since corporations have no vital centre, they cannot really die. They are merely terminated by an unfrightening dissolution into their constituent parts. As for bureaucracy, the first rule is that the position is far more important and durable than the person who currently holds it.

Then there are the machine-centered structures of the technocracy. Factories, data centers, and healthcare facilities have life expectancies, but their lack of individual identity allows for endless easy resurrections, in new and often improved versions.

People being what they are—creatures who somehow crave a real, supernatural overcoming of death—these worldly modern creations are almost universally felt to be inadequate. It is almost impossible not to notice that they lack the wisdom and the symbolic resonance of the various premodern bridges from this world to the next. Even when pumped up by heavily advertised brands and all the gimmicks of modern public relations, they feel much more lifeless than deathless.

These quasi-immortal and often immoral corporate-regulatory-legal-university-technology organizations blossomed during the anti-Covid assault on humanity. Bureaucratic agencies set

pointless, supposedly life-saving rules and the panoply of other organizations rushed to enforce them. The results—grandparents banned from embracing or even seeing their grandchildren, restaurants and churches closed, etc.—were a triumph of bureaucratic technocracy, successfully separating both life and death from the fullness of life.

The seven death-ignoring sins of anti-Covid have a single lesson: While death is indeed the great challenge of life, our culture cannot live up to it.

