

EPILOGUE

At the beginning of this treatise on man's conceptualization of the nature and implications of death and on his reactions to, and attitudes toward, it, I stated that "Death comes to all men irrespective of how they [interpret] its nature, meaning, significance, and [implications], and irrespective of their attitudes ... toward their own demise." However, I certainly didn't mean to imply by this statement that every way of conceptualizing the nature and implications of death, or that all reactions to it, are equally meritorious, inasmuch as irrespective of how we conceptualize or react to death, we all die anyway in the end. That we cannot, for example, alter the irreversibility and inevitability of death in our thinking or do not want to change our attitude toward its actual occurrence is one thing; but that we also can react to its inevitability either courageously, indifferently, cravenly, admirably, or deplorably is quite another.

Throughout this book, the seemingly insuperable difficulty of conceiving of one's own death (in contrast to the deaths of others) clearly emerges as the single most important causal and

explanatory hypothesis, largely elucidating why one's fear of death is relatively so mild in most persons (if and when it does occur), and why the inevitability of death (mortality) can be denied with impunity by certain individuals at the "gut-feeling" level of belief, despite the veritable mountain of incontrovertible evidence of fact and logic to the contrary. (The two principal causes [cognitive and narcissistic] of the apparently virtual impossibility of conceiving fully of one's own death have been reiterated many times in different contexts of this book and need not be reiterated here. In this context we are concerned with the consequences of this inability, not with its causes.)

This deplorable lack of informal awareness of how the negative implications of death affect us, coupled with our apparent sense of being invulnerable to its cosmological consequences, results in the apparent outcome that we neither fear death very much nor readily admit that sooner or later it must catch up with us. If we cannot conceive of our own deaths, then obviously our identities cannot serve as targets for its threats or be vulnerable to its shafts; and, hence, we cannot possibly accept either the inevitability of death or the

inescapable conclusion of the traditional syllogism that like the rest of mankind we are as mortal as Socrates was.

It seems, in other words, as if human beings cannot easily or naturally accept the inevitable occurrence of a phenomenon if they believe, rather, at a "gut-feeling" level that the latter phenomenon (one's own death) is inconceivable or impossible. This stance enables us to resist tenaciously and indefinitely acceptance of the threatening and distressing implications of our own death, or even to consider them at a fully deliberate and analytical level of cognitive functioning. Clearly it is not characteristically human to surrender to an inimical force and accept its terms when one is certain "deep down" that it cannot possibly occur.

The conclusion is, thus, inescapable that man's inability to conceive of his own death serves at least two very important self-protective functions, as our examination has demonstrated: (1) reducing fear and anxiety about death and (2) denying the inevitability of one's own death and also the necessity of accepting the reality of all of its attendant unpalatable and negative implications (e.g., partial or total obliteration of earthly identity; loss of one's body until Resurrection, and of

earthly relationships, involvements, and participation in the culture, etc. For example, one way (that we obviously don't advocate personally) in which the difficulty of conceiving of one's own death can be self-protective and adjustive is if we thoroughly minimize and discount the value and significance of the earthly values we must relinquish on dying (e.g., the continuous integrity of identity). Hence, if a believer really believes that by dying, he is giving up nothing of great importance, he can assume a somewhat nonchalant attitude on his deathbed and still mistakenly feel that he has genuinely accepted death.

Pulling together the threads of our argument thus far, the suggestion seems unavoidable that because man has important adjustive or defensive motives for not being able to conceive of his own death (namely, the fact that this difficulty reduces the anxiety of death as well as enables him to avoid accepting his death by denying its inevitability), it stands to reason that because of these motives he will endeavor to perpetuate rather than to overcome this inconceivability of his own death to himself.

What I am suggesting, in other words, is that due to the pressure of these significant motives and vested interests, the individual, in effect, consciously and/or unconsciously, "sabotages" acquisition of the ability to conceive of his own death in order to preserve its self-protective functions, thereby enabling him to live placidly for a lifetime (with the help of endorphins and of the defensive reactions) without significantly fearing death or admitting its inevitability. He is motivated not to want to learn, think about, reflect on, conceptualize, or truly grasp the negative implications of his own death. Thus, since it is in his own self-perceived (if mistaken) self-interest not to try too assiduously to be successful in overcoming this persistent difficulty, he consistently fails and, thus, is able to maintain the status quo with respect to this formidable inconceivability.

Believers versus Non-Believers

Inasmuch as believers probably have much less motivation to deny their own mortality, i.e., or to assert their immortality, and less fear of loss of identity than non-believers (since they are completely convinced that their identities will be preserved

until Resurrection occurs as disembodied spirits in an idyllic heaven, in face-to-face contact with God, the apostles, the saints, and angels, and that the mysteries of their religion will finally be definitively revealed to them), they are presumably less motivated than non-believers to preserve the self-protective inconceivability of their own deaths.

Believers, however, are much more vulnerable than non-believers in another respect. Since they naturally tend to idealize the heavenly aftermath of death, they correspondingly and unrealistically tend to minimize the serious losses they must face in dying (e.g., of a familiar body, relationships, involvements, surroundings, activities; of never participating in their culture again; of the actual, as opposed to the idealized minimal losses they must contemplate on dying, etc.). Thus, despite the compensations they foresee, death does not exactly constitute a thoroughly pleasant prospect to be anticipated with joy. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that although their compensatory beliefs are credible, feasible, and morally and socially constructive (even if empirically unproven), and although they minimize the earthly losses they face on death, like non-believers, many believers resort to

denial, repression, procrastination, passive resignation, and dying by default in order to avoid facing up to the very real negative implications of death, even if these are less distressing than they are to non-believers.

By not confronting the calamitous implications of death realistically and honestly, by not always being as fully aware as they should be of the actual losses they will incur when they die, both believers and non-believers reduce Todesangst (anxiety about death) temporarily and avoid coming to grips with its true meaning. These maneuvers, however, may be adjustive but they are certainly not adaptive in the long term. Nor are they consistent with human courage and dignity which require that we graciously accept the inevitable as well as the disadvantageous aspects of life that cannot be changed or evaded (or the will of God in His general plan for us, as the believer would say).

In my opinion, there is a better alternative for both believer and non-believer: not to take refuge in the temporary comfort and balm to one's narcissistic ego of not being able to conceive of one's own death and its implications, but rather to confront this difficulty head-on all one's life and to overcome it. Basically this is the chief problem of coming to grips with

the meaning of death. By doing so conscientiously and frequently and starting at an early age, we may perhaps be able after some years to conceive of our own deaths as easily as we can conceive of the deaths of others. This may temporarily cause a modest but not intolerable increase in the fear of death; but in the long run, by actively and realistically accepting death thoroughly, with the assistance of transcendental transfiguration (see above), this fear will be reduced even more completely.

The true and final measure of victory in life and death is not whether we win by defeating or evading the hard and uncompromising implications of death, but whether we face these implications honestly as an inescapable part of the human condition, with courage and dignity (or as believers would say, "with true submission to the will of God").