



THE SPRINGFIELDER

July 1974
Volume 38, Number 3

Whitehead et al. vs. Human Death

(A puzzled query by a concerned counsellor)

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INTRODUCTION

"In this world nothing is certain but death and taxes." Ben Franklin, the coiner of the above immortal phrase, was only partially correct. The very rich and the very poor are now finding it possible to avoid taxation, but it seems that all of us are still becoming objects of the undertaker's art.

I am engaged in counselling my fellow human beings as they pass through the trials and vicissitudes of this life. One of those trials is the death of a loved one. Another is the imminent approach of one's own death. Therefore, when the opportunity recently presented itself, I was interested to see what Alfred North Whitehead, as well as those process theologians who claim (perhaps with varying degrees of justification) to be followers of Whitehead, had to say on the subject of death. Far from answering any of my questions concerning how the counsellor might best deal with the experience of human death, a study of the works of these men raised questions concerning the whole idea of counselling the dying and the bereaved, its validity, and even its necessity. Thus, the reader must not expect this article to be a learned dissertation; on the contrary, it is precisely what the subtitle indicates it to be, the written ruminations of a head-scratching (as opposed to a head-shrinking) counsellor, seeking to come to better grips with the problem of death so that he may better assist those who are in its presence.

HUMAN DEATH IN PROCESS THOUGHT

As with so many things, it seems best here for us to start at the beginning and then work toward the end. Thus, it seems better to discuss what Whitehead's idea of life is, before we attempt to explain the idea of death in his writings or the writings of his (alleged) disciples.

If we are to start at the beginning, then it is necessary to give a very brief outline of a portion of Whitehead's metaphysical thought. For Whitehead, reality is composed of actual entities, or moments of experience. An actual entity is a brief moment of experience in which data is prehended by the subject.¹ All actual entities, with the single exception of God (who is the eternal actual entity) arise, endure for a brief moment, and then perish. However, in the act of perishing, an actual entity makes available data for all subsequent actual entities toprehend. When a group of actual entities is related by the immanence in all but the first of data made available by the first, such a group or chain of actual entities is called a nexus. A society of actual entities is a more complex chain of actual entities, all manifesting a common eternal object. (An eternal object corresponds roughly to a universal or to a Platonic form; the manner in which Whitehead

makes use of eternal objects is far different from the manner in which Plato used his forms.) Man, as an enduring percipient, is a personal society of actual entities.² Thus, a living person is a chain of actual entities, a long line of moments of experience, each of which has perished except the present one.³

Traditionally, the living person has been considered to be composed of a mind and a body. There has been a great deal of debate concerning the relationship between the two. For Whitehead, this debate is by and large a fraud. He considers the body and the mind to be closely related, the body being the mind's link to the outside world. Thus, the individual is a unity composed of two distinguishable aspects, body and mind. To try to divide the two is a fool's errand.⁴

Whitehead has very little to say about human death. He speaks of perishing and of objective immortality. With the single exception of God, each actual entity perishes. In perishing, it provides data for other actual entities. This data can be provided only by perishing. Actual entities achieve objective immortality in that the data they provide is prehended by other actual entities, especially by God. Thus, while actual entities are of a very short duration, much of the data which they provide is immortal, having been prehended by the eternal God.⁵ It is well to emphasize that what lives forever is *not* the actual entity. It must perish before it can provide data for any other actual entity, including God.⁶

When Whitehead deals with the subject of human death, his treatment is not so complete as we should like it to be. In *Religion in the Making*, written in 1926, he says, ". . . at present it is generally held that a purely spiritual being is necessarily immortal. The doctrine here developed gives no warrant for such a belief. It is entirely neutral on the question of immortality, or on the existence of purely spiritual beings other than God."⁷ Later, in *Adventures of Ideas*, (in 1933) he writes,

This personal society is the man defined as a person. It is the soul of which Plato speaks.

How far this soul finds a support for its existence beyond this body is:—another question. The everlasting nature of God, which in a sense is non-temporal and in another sense is temporal, may establish with the soul a peculiarly intense relationship of mutual immanence. Thus in some important sense the existence of the soul may be freed from its complete dependence upon the bodily organization.⁸

Now, if we add these statements together, what do we get? It would seem that this particular sum is, at least in part, dependent on who does the adding.

John B. Cobb argues for the possibility of life after death in the form of an immortal soul which has a memory continuous with that of the memory which that person had in life. He admits that, in so arguing, he has gone beyond the limits of what Whitehead has said in his writings.⁹ However, he feels that his entire theological structure is based on the thought of Whitehead.¹⁰

On the other hand, Norman Pittenger argues, "We all die; and

all of us dies."¹¹ In Pittenger's thought, death is the final end of each person, and all people come to that final end. Thus, because we pass this way but once, it behooves us to live lives filled with love in order that we may fulfill those lives which we lead.¹²

Charles Hartshorne feels that the question of existence after death has been posed in an illegitimate "either—or" manner. Either I stop being when I die or I go on living in some sort of heaven or some sort of hell. Hartshorne points out that because we are continually in process, I am now but a tiny fraction of my total existence. Thus, at death, I do not perish, but rather far, far less than one percent of me perishes, for all of the rest of me has perished already.¹³ In this final act of perishing, I, as in all of my other acts of perishing, leave available data which is gathered into God. By being gathered into God, this data achieves immortality.

Three men have added up the statements of Whitehead and have arrived at three different sums. Just what are we to make of that? On the face of it, the two statements quoted by Whitehead concerning death do not seem to support at all the traditional idea of the "immortality of the soul." Whitehead seems to say that such a thing is a possibility, but that there is no evidence (except what he calls special evidence) to support such a theory. Thus, before we investigate the special evidence, we should exhaust the possibilities of general evidence, that data made available by the multitude of human experiences in this world.

Assuming that this is a correct interpretation of Whitehead's thought, then John B. Cobb is very correct in being so very cautious in trying to establish the possibility of the "immortality of the soul" on the basis of Whitehead's writings. In fact, if the two passages from Whitehead *supra* are read carefully, it can be seen that from them alone an argument of at least equal strength may be derived for the non-existence of an immortal life for the soul. Actually, of course, the two statements are by themselves inconclusive. They merely state the possibility of such a route of being and may hint at Whitehead's doubt that such a route exists.

Pittenger and Hartshorne seem to be capable of being brought into agreement with one another on this subject without pressing either of them beyond the limits of their arguments. Furthermore, their views may be somewhat more in accord with the overall pattern of Whitehead's metaphysical thought. It can be seen that when Pittenger says that we die completely, he is not in disagreement with Hartshorne. We die, and all of us dies; we leave behind data from that last moment of perishing, just as we have made data available in all of the other moments of our existence. That data, or at least a portion of it, has achieved objective immortality in God.

Yet, if we are to accept Hartshorne and Pittenger, we are still not being absolutely true to the thought of Whitehead. By their position, Hartshorne and Pittenger rule out the immortality of the soul; what achieves immortality is the data made available by the person, not the person himself. And this idea goes beyond the point where Whitehead stopped—stopped, I think, because he had no further data. Thus, while their position is closer to the general trend of

Whiteheadian thought, it is not a part of that thought, but rather an extrapolation built upon it, just as is the position of Cobb. There seems to be a bit more justification for the Hartshorne-Pittenger extrapolation than for the Cobb extrapolation, but extrapolations they both are, and subject to the faults of extrapolations they both remain.

A FEW PUZZLED QUERIES

Now where does all this leave the counsellor? And if the reader is about to say that he does not really see the problem, then I invite him to come and walk in my moccasins a mile or two. The counsellor is placed in the unenviable position of trying to explain death, not just death the phenomenon, death the eternal object, but the death of a real person, death as it is prehended and actualized in a moment or a nexus of moments of human experience.

Death in the abstract is one thing. One's own death is quite another. Death in the abstract is perhaps a morbid subject for discussion, but it may be discussed without a great weight of emotional pressure, at least by most people. Death as exemplified in the death of a friend is another thing. The death of a close loved one is yet another. And one's own death—the most important death in one's life—is still another. As the instances of death increase in importance they also become increasingly difficult to contemplate or discuss until they force contemplation and discussion upon a person by coming to pass. Even when an important death is experienced, the fact of experiencing it does not necessarily facilitate the ease with which it may be discussed by the experiencing subject.

Slide your feet a little further into my moccasins and feel a few of the spots where they become uncomfortable. I am called upon to comfort the bereaved. These occasions are seldom pleasant. They are often attended by distraught, weeping, even hysterical people. Seldom do these people consider the death which has occurred as insignificant. For the overwhelming majority of mourners whom I have met, it is true that they are mourners, not only in name, but also in fact. They are mourning the fact of the death of a loved one. Because of the way in which I conduct my ministry, I have had, on more than one occasion, one or the other (or both) of my lapels completely sodden with the tears of a bereft widow or daughter. On more than one occasion I have put my arm around a bereft widower or son. And, on many of these occasions, I have shed tears of my own.

Nor can the reader beg off at this point by saying, "Frank, shame! You are turning what was philosophical discussion into a soap-opera. You have stopped dealing in facts and are wallowing in sheer emotionality." That response simply will not do. If we are going to be good philosophers, we must deal in that which really is. Moreover, if we are going to follow the guidance of Whitehead, we are going to attempt to deal in practical matters. Emotions are real. Studying them is practical, for we all have them and they affect the behavior of us all. Emotions are very real. The bereaved people whom I have met were experiencing, rightly or wrongly, *real pain*. They cried *real* tears. Some lost their appetites and lost *real*, measurable weight. Some became nauseated and vomited *real*, tangible vomit. Thus, to try to

shy away from emotions because they are in some sense unreal is simply not valid. If the reader examines his present moment of experience, he will discover that he is experiencing an emotional tone within it. The reader may not like all of them, but he does have emotions; so do I; so does everyone.

In dealing with a person who has a problem, I, as a counsellor, seek to do two things. First I seek to help the person to see clearly what the problem actually is. When the person has a clear idea of what he is confronting, I seek to bring him to apply the tools which he already has or to develop new tools so that he may cope with the problem. Notice that I did not say "solve the problem"; some problems are incapable of solution. Growing a new leg would solve the amputee's problem. However, he cannot grow a new leg, so he will have to develop some alternatives to cope with the problem rather than solve it.

Given that I counsel in this manner, how do I provide a bereaved person with data so that he may get a clear picture of what confronts him, using the information concerning human death provided by Whitehead, Cobb, Pittenger, and Hartshorne?

It would seem that, for all these philosophers, human death is the normal, expected conclusion to human life. In this sense, it is just as normal as human birth. Now, if that be true, why then do people mourn death? Why have people for centuries concocted ideas to refute this notion of the normality of death? And, even more curious, if death is so very normal, then why do we spend millions of dollars each year to prevent it? Why does the field of medicine, considered in the broadest sense, include therapeutics and preventative medicine instead of merely concentrating on analgesia? Why do we have seat belts in automobiles, laws against murder, and suicide prevention centers? If death really is as normal as birth—if it merely puts the period to the sentence of our lives—why then is it either outlawed or prevented whenever possible?

Viewing death as normal and life as precious, it is understandable to punish a man severely for damaging the quality of another man's life. But, under this view, how may we justify punishing a man for slaying another man? Has the slayer not merely put the period to the sentence of the deceased's life? (Can we, viewing these circumstances in this way, call the deceased a victim? I think not.) The slayer has in no way damaged the quality of that life; he has ended it, and the end of life is normal, what we may all look forward to, what we all must expect at some moment of our existence, at, in fact, the last moment of our existence.

It may be rejoined that when philosophers say that death is normal, they are not implying that *all* deaths are normal. Well said. However, if this be so, then on what criteria are we to judge that certain deaths are "abnormal" when we have already concluded that death *per se* is normal? Let us suppose that the alleged "victims" of Jack the Ripper died abnormally. Given that, in what sense may I describe to a bereaved teenage daughter whose father has just begun to understand her and respect her personhood that the death of her father by a sudden and massive coronary occlusion is "normal"? Is not

the death of her beloved father a far more abnormal thing than the deaths of a few whores? Just where are we to draw the line between "normal" and "abnormal" as far as deaths are concerned?

Will we argue that death is abnormal when it ends life prematurely? We might, but this strikes me as an impossible rule to apply in practice. Let us take the case of "A," an unattractive prostitute in nineteenth-century London, who is lured into a dark alleyway, lulled into a false sense of security, murdered, and subsequently mutilated by "B," a lunatic medical student. Can we show that "B" has shortened "A's" life? I rather think not. Let us also imagine "C," a drunken hansom driver, who would have run over "A," killing her at 10:00 p.m. if "B" had not commenced his luring and lulling at 9:45 p.m. and subsequently murdered "A" at 11:00 p.m. Can I prove that "C" would have killed "A" at 10:00 if "B" had not been already in the process of luring and lulling her to her end? Of course not. But neither can anyone else prove that "C" would not have killed her.

Is the case of "A," "B," and "C" an isolated one? Again, I rather think not. Certainly, counter-cases may be proposed that would tend to show that a murderer did shorten the deceased's life, but such evidence would be inconclusive, just as the case of "A," "B," and "C" is inconclusive. How are we to say how long a deceased would have lived had he not died when and in the manner that he died? On what evidence are we to base our conclusions? We have presumptions, to be sure, but often presumptions prove to be rather flimsy. Those who bet that Columbus would go over the edge and never be heard from again bet on the basis of the very strong presumptions which they held, and they also lost their money.

Following this line of reasoning, then, if I am to explain one death as normal, I am at a loss to see how I am to explain any death as abnormal. If death *per se* is normal, how may we classify any death as abnormal?

This may be perplexing, but far more perplexing is the consideration that, if death is as normal as birth, then how am I to account for its tragedy and the unique grief that it produces? If death is normal, then how can grief at death be anything else than abnormal? Certainly a portion of the grief of the bereaved is grief over relationships disrupted. But that grief is heightened and rendered unique by the fact that it is death that is the disrupter. Now, how am I to account for this particular form of grief in the face of what is said to be just another of life's many normal happenings?

To wedge the reader further into my tight moccasin, am I to tell the aforementioned bereaved teenager that the death of her father is just another of life's normal little happenings like the birth of her niece? I strongly think not! There might be a grain of truth in such a statement, but such a statement totally misses the point of the problem. What the teenager mourns is the end of her relationship with her father, a relationship which involved her as a person and her father as a person, a relationship uniquely and terribly ended by death. To describe that final disruption as just another of life's normal little

happenings denies the depth of the relationship and the depth of the personhood of the people involved.

To bring this particular aspect of my problem into clearer focus, let us imagine that the reader's doctor has told him that he has an incurable and inoperative brain tumor. The reader's condition is such that he will experience no pain, no lessening of mental acuity, no physical disability, no discomfort of any sort. On the other hand, within two weeks he will most assuredly die. Let us further imagine that he mentions this prognosis to me in my capacity as a pastoral counsellor. How should I respond on the basis that death is as normal a part of life as birth? If the reader's situation is as described above and if death is normal, I can see no reason to offer him either congratulations or condolences, comfort or rebuke. His death is just another of life's little occurrences, a moment of experience that is here for approximately .63 seconds and then is gone forever, just like all of the rest of the moments of his experience. What makes that one moment so important?

There, at last, we come to the biggest question, the biggest problem. The reader's death is important, important to the reader if to no one else. His death is important to him because he is important to him. But it would seem that in the thought of Hartshorne, quite possibly in the thought of Pittenger, and even, possibly, in the thought of Cobb, the reader's death has been reduced in importance to almost insignificant proportions. But if we detract from his death's importance, we likewise make him unimportant. If the utter end of him amounts to merely the last .63 seconds of his existence and nothing more nor anything less, then it would seem that we cannot assign much significance to his going out of existence. And yet, the end of him seems significant to him. It seems significant to him because he seems significant to him. It is the reader that is being brought to an end, then, not just some chain of events. Or is he simply a chain of events? How shall I answer that question?

INCONCLUSIVE CONCLUSIONS

From the preceding, it should be obvious that I am completely at a loss as to how to apply the thoughts of Cobb, Pittenger, and Hartshorne to the problem of human death. The final problem here adduced seems to be the most serious of all the problems raised. I am unable to see how we can get an adequate measure of the stature and dignity of man, of the possible quality of human life, and of the profound tragedy of human death unless man is something more than just a chain of events. In particular, if we suppose death to be merely the last link in that chain of moments of experience, then death is merely the last moment of experience and nothing more or less. In defining death in this fashion it becomes almost trite in its normality.

But experience indicates that, at least for the person doing the dying, death is *never* trite. If this experience possesses any validity, then Cobb, Hartshorne, and Pittenger need to do some rethinking. In their attempt to go beyond Whitehead and delve into the problem of human death, these men have turned up no information of practical value. It is interesting to peruse their work, but now I shall

cease scratching my head and go back to the concepts of human death I have been using and which seem to have a real, practical value to the counsellor. Those are the concepts found in the teachings of Jesus, the Christ, who said, "He who believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live."

FOOTNOTES

1. For a thorough, readable explanation of Whitehead's metaphysics, see A. H. Johnson, *Whitehead's Theory of Reality* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1962), especially pp. ix-57.
2. *Ibid.* p. 51.
3. *Ibid.* p. 75.
4. *Ibid.* p. 76.
5. *Ibid.* p. 77.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1960), p. 107.
8. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 208.
9. John B. Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1965), pp. 63-79.
10. The sub-title of his book reads, "Based on the thought of Alfred North Whitehead."
11. Norman Pittenger, *'The Last Things' in a Process Perspective* (London: Epworth Press, 1970) p. 35.
12. *Ibid.* p. 43f.
13. Charles Hartshorne, *Whitehead's Philosophy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), pp. 122f. Hartshorne may not have calculated just how little of a person dies at death very accurately, for his statement that "far more than 99 percent of my personal actuality has already perished" is a bit of an understatement. The author, using data established by Whitehead, determined the duration of a moment of experience empirically. This duration is approximately 0.63 seconds. For the sake of simplicity in calculation, without producing more than 5% error, this value was rounded off to 0.6 seconds. This author was born on October 11, 1938, at 6 p.m. Thus, at 10 a.m. on May 13, 1974, he was 18, 409, 820 minutes old. By the process of simple arithmetical calculation, had he died at that moment, then in line with Hartshorne's reasoning, only .00000054 percent (54 one hundred millionths of one percent) of his personal actuality would have perished. Thus Hartshorne could have been far more accurate had he stated that (at least for us over 35) "far more than 99.9999 percent of our personal actuality has already perished."