

With What Must Philosophy Begin?

A little over two years ago my daughter was killed in a boating accident on the harbor in Copenhagen. It was the final weekend of her study abroad program, and so Leah and some of her friends planned for a day that would mark and celebrate their time spent together. This day and date will now, unfortunately, forever mark a tragedy. The days following this event were and remain largely a blur, but some things stand out. In particular, I found it very difficult to find the words to describe how I was doing. I could say, "I'm doing ok," or "about as well as could be expected," or flat out say "no, I'm struggling," but whatever words seemed appropriate at the time still failed to capture and describe the sense of how things stood. I could not, in short, make sense of how things stood. Similarly, when I have found myself expressing sympathy to others who have suffered loss, and who has not, I have found that in these situations I have also felt both the necessity to say something and yet the inadequacy of whatever was said, an awareness that my words were not equal to the occasion, not able to truly capture and makes sense of how things were going. I had the feeling many others felt the same way when they offered their condolences in the wake of Leah's death. Many of their comments and expressions of sympathy were as one would expect, but a few times I was told that it was probably helpful to be a philosopher. Initially I was skeptical about this, thinking that if this is true it is because philosophers are too abstracted from their feelings and real world events to be affected by what is going on around them. But the philosophies that may encourage such an approach are precisely the philosophies I have resisted - in fact, I would argue that it is not really philosophy unless it takes on precisely the real experiences that fill our daily lives. And this brings me to the theme of this panel: with what must philosophy begin? Or, with what must the philosophy I embrace, rather than resist, begin? There are two things that I think philosophy begins with, though there are probably more, and they are closely related to the tragic event with which I began. First, there is our awareness of the inevitability of death and loss, an awareness that has led many philosophers to claim that an essential task of philosophy is to help us to come to terms with our mortality. As Socrates says in the *Phaedo*, 'the true philosophers practice dying, and death is less terrible to them than to any other men' (67e). Secondly, and relatedly, philosophy begins with an encounter with that which provokes and

forces us, against our will, to think and yet which resists our very efforts to think it.

Philosophy begins, I'll argue, with both loss and a loss for words.

Socrates' famous claim, in both the *Apology* and in the *Phaedo*, that death is nothing to fear, and that philosophy in particular best prepares one to recognize this fact, was to become a motif throughout much of Ancient philosophy. Socrates elaborates on this point in the *Phaedo*, where he claims that death is nothing but the 'release and separation [of the soul] from the body,' and 'true philosophers and they alone,' Socrates adds, 'are always most eager to release the soul, and just this—this release and separation of the soul from the body—is their study, is it not?' To which Simmias replies, 'Obviously.' It is for this reason that philosophers, by doing what they do—that is, seeking to grasp the truths of a soul that is separable from the body—are engaged in a practice that is no less than the practice of dying. When death arrives, therefore, it would be 'very foolish,' Socrates claims, 'if they should be frightened and troubled,' for the true philosophers have been embracing this moment all along.

The Epicureans and Stoics will follow in Socrates' footsteps, but for different reasons. As materialists, the Epicureans rejected the Platonic appeal to an immortal soul that is separable from the body, and yet they nonetheless were agreed that death is nothing to fear. In a famous quote that is attributed to Epicurus, Epicurus claims that 'Death is nothing to us. When we exist, death is not; and when death exists, we are not. All sensation and consciousness ends with death and therefore in death there is neither pleasure nor pain.' Hence Epicurus' conclusion: if there is neither pleasure nor pain, there is nothing to fear. The more we understand our nature, therefore, as material beings, or the more we learn from philosophy, then the less we have to fear death. Despite their avowed rejection of much of Epicureanism, the Stoics will also argue that the key is to come to recognize and live in accordance with our nature. As Seneca puts it, 'I follow the guidance of Nature—a doctrine upon which all Stoics are agreed. Not to stray from Nature and to mold ourselves according to her law and pattern—this is true wisdom.' (*On the Happy Life* 3.3). Moreover, such molding in accordance with Nature entails, for Seneca, a withdrawal from social customs and expectations and involves

turning within instead, a turning to one's self that also enables us to live well in the face of loss:

Most of all, the mind must be withdrawn from external interests into itself. Let it have confidence in itself, rejoice in itself, let it admire its own things, let it retire as far as possible from the things of others and devote itself to itself, let it not feel losses, let it interpret kindly even adversities. Zeno, our master, when he received news of a shipwreck and heard that all his property had been sunk, said: "Fortune bids me to follow philosophy with fewer encumbrances" (*Tranquility of Mind* 14.2-3)

To take one last example, an argument can be made that Spinoza's philosophy begins with the effort to think in a way that brings contentment and joy to a life that involves death and loss. In his early, never to be completed work, *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, Spinoza begins by claiming that experience had taught him 'that all the things which regularly occur in ordinary life are empty and futile.' (TdIE ii/5). In particular, Spinoza lists 'wealth, honor, and sensual pleasure' (ibid. ii/6) as among the motivations in life that are 'empty and futile' in that the objects which satisfy these motivations ultimately perish and thus become a source of sorrow and distress. More importantly, it is the love we have for these objects that becomes, in the end, the cause of our sorrow. As Spinoza puts it, 'all happiness or unhappiness was placed in the quality of the object to which we cling with love. For strife will never arise on account of what is not loved, nor will there be sadness if it perishes, nor envy if it is possessed by another, nor fear, nor hatred—in a word, no disturbances of the mind. Indeed, all these happen only in the love of those things that can perish, as all the things we have just spoken of can do.' What Spinoza thus sets out to do, therefore, or that with which his philosophy begins we might say, is to think through the possibility of a love that is not attached to a perishable object. 'But love toward the eternal and infinite thing,' Spinoza claims, 'feeds the mind with a joy entirely exempt from sadness. This is greatly to be desired, and to be sought with all our strength.' (CWI 9). There is speculation about why Spinoza left this *Treatise* unfinished, but I would argue (though I lack the time to do so today) that it was precisely because he was dissatisfied with his approach to thinking the nature of this 'love toward the eternal and infinite thing' that he decided to start the process again, this time successfully, with his *Ethics*.

A common theme in all these approaches to developing a philosophy that allows us to confront death without fear and sorrow, is the move from a finite, mortal, embodied self that perishes to a philosophical perspective that thinks, and loves, the eternal, infinite, and unperishing reality that knows no death. This approach has never appealed to me, and it is not where I began in philosophy. I began, a good number of years ago, when I took my first philosophy course— a course on existentialism. For writers such as Nietzsche, Sartre, Heidegger, and Camus, among others, appealing to an infinite, eternal reality to appease our anxiety regarding death, our being-toward-death as Heidegger puts it, just did not do the job. For Heidegger, for instance, appealing to an objective reality simply eclipses the true nature of our being-toward-death. When we think of death in the abstract, as an objective event that befalls everyone (which is a common Stoic strategy), we in the end do not encounter that which is unique to the reality of death. As Heidegger puts it, ‘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.’ (BT 297) The “they,” Heidegger claims, is the world of everydayness, a world that ‘is constituted by the way things have been publicly interpreted, which expresses itself in idle talk.’ (BT 296). If the “they” helps us to confront death, it is through denial, or by turning away from the distinctive reality that is our being-toward-death. The “they,” Heidegger concludes, ‘*provides a constant tranquilization about death.*’ (BT 298).

But there is more to the story than simply appealing to an eternal, deathless reality to overcome our anxiety and suffering in the face of loss and death. This brings me to the second thing with which I think philosophy must begin—namely, an encounter with a reality that provokes and calls us to think but is not, itself, capable of being thought. This is a key theme in Deleuze’s work, and he is quite forthright in claiming that if thought is to get started then there must be ‘an original violence inflicted upon thought; the claws of a strangeness or an enmity which alone would awaken thought from its natural stupor...’ And a few lines later he adds, ‘Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter.’ (DR 139).

On this theme, however, there is also an important precursor to Deleuze, as Deleuze well knew—namely, Plato. In Book VII of the *Republic*, as Socrates and Glaucon are setting out to determine the best way to educate the guardians of the city, or more precisely how to draw their souls ‘from becoming to being,’ (521d) they decide they need a study that will naturally conduce to the awakening of thought’ (523b). Such a study, they claim, will involve experiences that are to be contrasted with ‘The experiences that do not provoke thought...[meaning] those that do not at the same time issue in contradictory perception.’ (523b). If one looks at the fingers of one’s own hand, to use the example Socrates offers, then ‘Each one of them [i.e., fingers] appears equally a finger, and in this respect it makes no difference whether it is observed as intermediate or at either extreme, whether it is white or black, thick or thin, or of any quality of this kind...the faculty of sight never signifies to it at the same time that the finger is the opposite of a finger.’ In other words, regardless of the context in which the finger is observed, whether close up or at a distance, or even with the potentially contradictory qualities that may be attributed to them—thick or thin, black or white, long or short, etc.—the perception of a finger is simply the perception of a finger and does not involve its opposite. Such perceptions and experiences, Plato is arguing, ‘do not provoke thought.’ The perceptions of qualities that entail their contradictory opposite, however, do provoke thought. For example, the perception of something that is ‘hard is of necessity related also to the soft, and it reports to the soul that the same thing is both hard and soft to its perception.’ (524a). The same is true for other qualities such as ‘the bigness and the smallness’ of objects, the hot or cold temperature of something, etc., for they too involve an experience that necessarily entails its opposite—one cannot experience hot without it being contrasted with cold, big without small, and hard without soft; or stated differently, the subject of the experience necessarily entails what it is not.

With this move we can see that what truly provokes thought for Plato, the condition for thought that underlies the contradictory perceptions of qualities, is becoming. Becoming does indeed seem to entail a relationship of opposites, but in this case between “is” and “is not” rather than between a determinate quality and its necessarily related opposite (e.g., hard

and soft). As one who is young becomes old, one becomes what one “is not” now, and when one “is” old, or has become old, then one “is not” young anymore. Becoming, it seems, necessarily entails a relationship between “is” and “is not.” But this brings up a crucial problem for Plato, perhaps the guiding problem of his philosophy, for if becoming always necessarily entails both “is” and “is not,” then how will we ever come to have a thought of what is, the type of thought that does not provoke thought but is, so to say, the resolution of the problem that provoked thought in the first place? Plato notes this problem in the *Philebus* when Socrates asks, ‘How can we gain anything fixed whatsoever about things which have no fixedness whatsoever?’ (*Philebus* 59b). This problem is especially pressing since, as Plato puts it, the ‘fixed and pure and true and what we call unalloyed knowledge has to do with the things which are eternally the same without change or mixture, or with that which is most akin to them; and all other things are to be regarded as secondary.’ (ibid. 59c). How can that which has ‘no fixedness whatsoever’ come to be thought and acquire the fixedness that comes with knowledge; or, how can the contradictory nature of becoming which provokes thought become that which no longer provokes thought?

The problem encountered here is key. Moreover, if we take to heart Whitehead’s claim that ‘the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato’ (PR 39), then we could say that it is the fundamental problem of philosophy itself, or the problem with which philosophy begins. With this problem we also return to the other place with which philosophy starts, with loss. As noted earlier, a common approach to reconciling ourselves to our mortality is to appeal to a deathless reality to which we “all” belong in some way. There is thus an important tension between the universality of this reality, the universality of death, and the inexpressible singularity of death, an encounter that is outside any relationships. The problem then is how an encounter with a becoming that has provoked us to think can ever fully turn to that eternal reality we “all” share, ‘toward,’ to recall where Spinoza’s philosophy began, ‘the eternal and infinite thing [that] feeds the mind with a joy entirely exempt from sadness.’ To state the point

slightly differently, how can we ever come to embrace that which we can never think, that for which there are no words?

This was Heidegger's problem, too, and his most succinct discussion of authenticity confronts precisely the way in which we encounter the possibility of that which can never be present or ready to hand. For Heidegger, a consequence of our being-toward-death is anxiety, or 'the state-of-mind which can hold open the utter and constant threat to itself arising from Dasein's ownmost individualized Being' (BT 311). But rather than flee this anxious state of mind and get lost in the everyday, or the objective cultural patterns and expectations of 'the they-self' (BT 311), an 'authentic Being-towards-death' will become, instead, 'an impassioned freedom towards death—a freedom which has been released from the Illusions of the "they", and which is factual, certain of itself, and anxious.' (ibid.). For Heidegger, therefore, the proper way to confront the anxiety that comes with the awareness of death and loss, and more precisely the death and loss of the very being (namely, Dasein) that dies, is precisely to embrace, anxiety included, a realm of possibility to which nothing actual can or ever could correspond. Heidegger is crystal clear on this point. 'The closest closeness,' he argues, 'which one may have in Being towards death as a possibility, is as far as possible from anything actual.' (BT 307). An authentic embrace of our being as Being-towards-death will thus be one that embraces, in all anxiety, the problem that is our existence, but a problem with no possible solution. In the manner of the Stoics, an authentic Being-towards-death will entail an embrace of our nature, but for Heidegger this nature consists of our 'ownmost non-relational possibility,' or our nature as Dasein, as Being-towards-death, which entails the radical possibility of a reality to which no relations to anything actual is possible.

In closing let me return to where I began, the death of my daughter. Although words will never capture the meaning this event has had and will continue to have in my life, there is nonetheless a very real sense in which the violence and shock of this event, a violence that forced upon me a rethinking of so many things, and a rethinking that was accompanied with so many emotions and affects, was something I had encountered before. Although the

circumstances were much less tragic, it was nonetheless the case that my first encounter with philosophy brought with it a call to thinking that was equally involuntary and shot through with affects. There was no question of choosing a major at that point – the choice had been thrust upon me. This was not only the point where philosophy began in my life, it was the point where it had to begin.