

What lies ahead

The story is as old as philosophy itself. Socrates, found guilty of impiety and of corrupting the youth, is sentenced to death by an Athenian court. Given the chance to save himself, he refuses. In his *Phaedo*, Plato explains how, just a few hours before drinking the hemlock that kills him, Socrates proffers a novel redefinition of the philosopher: those who practise philosophy do so to prepare “themselves for dying and death”. With these words, and with the death that followed them, Socrates established a long-standing tradition where death is not simply another topic for philosophy but the very life-force driving it.

The following centuries saw further interventions: from the Stoics, Epicurus, Cicero and later from Michel de Montaigne, who, borrowing the line from Cicero, wrote an influential essay called “That to philosophize is to learn how to die”. These classical and Renaissance accounts tended to be therapeutic: in the face of death, philosophy’s task was reconciliatory.

Philosophy’s infatuation with death continued into the twentieth century, becoming a preoccupation first of all in Germany, through Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, and then in France, in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and the many others inspired by Heidegger’s work. Such reflections were not so concerned with rubbing balm on unsettling truths. Instead they were connected with the problem of nihilism: given the finality of death and the absence of

WILL REES

Costica Bradatan

DYING FOR IDEAS

The dangerous lives of the philosophers
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a transcendent arbiter of meaning, how can life bear any meaning at all?

Costica Bradatan’s *Dying for Ideas: The dangerous lives of the philosophers* is situated firmly within this “thanatological” vision of the tradition. Rather unfashionably, Bradatan sees philosophy as a form of therapy – as an “art of living” which, crucially, ought to be understood as an “art of dying”. In the opening pages he argues persuasively that death is not simply the opposite of life, but that it enters life and lends it urgency – that it can even “breathe new life into life”.

For Bradatan, there are two aspects to philosophy’s encounter with death. First, death is a topic for philosophy (perhaps *the* topic). Here, he provides brief summaries of the writings of Montaigne, Heidegger and Paul-Louis Landsberg. As sophisticated as these accounts are, however, Bradatan argues that they are also rather lifeless – that they are too detached from their object to speak about it with the urgency that it deserves.

Thus Bradatan turns to the second aspect, looking at Socrates, Hypatia, Thomas More,

Giordano Bruno and Jan Patočka: “martyr-philosophers” who did not simply have ideas about death, but who died for ideas. “Once the body has come into play . . . everything changes. Now death can no longer be a ‘topic’, there cannot be anything abstract about it.” Regardless of their philosophical colours, these thinkers are the ultimate empiricists, using their bodies as laboratories in which to test their ideas; by turning to them, Bradatan hopes to depart from the abstract terrain that characterizes philosophy’s purely textual brushes with death.

At one point, Bradatan writes that Heidegger uses the metaphor of ripening fruit to describe our relationship with death. The mistake is revealing. It is true that Heidegger employs this metaphor; but while he admits a limited comparison between the two things, he also sharply distinguishes them. Like an unripe fruit, human life seems to be characterized by an essence which lies ahead of it – by a “not yet” towards which it grows. But that is where the analogy ends. When a fruit becomes ripe, it reaches its fulfilment; when a person dies he or she “comes to naught”. Crucially, Bradatan ignores the distinction that Heidegger draws between death and demise, and this misreading seems to inform his entire book, which operates around a search for self-fulfilment through an “exemplary death” (or “demise” in Heidegger’s parlance).

With the exception of Bruno – who swore so foully as he approached the pyre that his

tongue was bound with a leather gag – all of the philosophers whom Bradatan considers to have “performed” exemplary deaths exercise complete control and mastery in their last moments: they die walking, talking, laughing and mocking the authorities that execute them. They remain themselves right to the end, dying deaths that are uniquely theirs. Doesn’t the appeal of this belie a certain anxiety, a fear of the loss of control and self that more commonly awaits us at the end of life?

After all, most of us do not face deaths such as these; indeed, for most of us death will not be a “performance” at all. One rarely dies on one’s feet, let alone like Socrates, heroically walking to meet death head on. Most of us will die in a bed, probably not our own, under heavy sedation which will ease us into unconsciousness before the “main event”. This will most likely take place after a rather extended stay in the unmapped cities that lie along the border between being and non-being, during which time we will become less – not more – like the selves we were. Philosophy has absolutely not been circumvented by medicine; however, to remain relevant it must explore the implications not only of *that* we die, but *how* we die.

In an atmosphere of abstraction, Bradatan hopes to be a dissenting voice. Ultimately, however, he rehearses that very abstraction itself. Because when confronted with the realities of the deaths we face, *Dying for Ideas* – with its (barely) repressed Prometheism and its abstract infatuation with mythic heroism – teaches us almost nothing about what lies ahead: a fact that would perhaps be easier to ignore if it weren’t for Costica Bradatan’s professed understanding of philosophy as a form of therapy.

This book is not a suicide note”, Simon Crichtley reassures us at the start of *Notes on Suicide*. Instead he proposes to “look at suicide closely, carefully, and perhaps a little coldly”. Yet four pages later we are told that Crichtley’s interest in suicide isn’t “remotely” academic. For reasons “we don’t need to go into” (don’t we?), Crichtley’s life has “dissolved over the past year or so, like sugar in hot tea”. In 2013 Crichtley and his psychoanalyst wife Jamieson Webster published *The Hamlet Doctrine*, a meditation on the incapacity to love; they separated soon after. It isn’t made clear what this has to do with that, though we do learn that Webster once wrote a fake suicide note that read “Dear Simon, Break a leg, or all your legs”, which she signed “with all my love-hate, Jamieson”. Instead of a theoretical way into suicide, Crichtley says he wants to find a practical way out of it, to rid himself of “fantasies of self-destruction . . . motivated by self-pity, self-loathing and revenge”. He explains that the book is being written in a hotel room in East Anglia, where he came from New York to “meet the darkness in the darkness, at the end of the land . . . the vast, the unlimited”.

It is bad form to question the sincerity of someone’s suicidal ideation, but one cannot help it with Crichtley. His motivation might not be academic, but *Notes on Suicide* is more of a philosophical essay than a felt reckoning with the prospect of taking one’s own life. In this it feels like Descartes’s *Meditations*, the cold North Sea replacing Descartes’s warming fire, death replacing doubt: a crisis staged for the reader’s benefit, with nothing really hang-

This won’t hurt

AMIA SRINIVASAN

Simon Crichtley

NOTES ON SUICIDE

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ing in the balance. Surely no one who has seriously contemplated suicide could question whether there might be good reasons for killing oneself. Yet Crichtley begins his essay by making heavy weather of both arguments for and against suicide’s permissibility, claiming they all face insurmountable problems. We have a duty to God, some say, not to kill ourselves – or, in a more secular register, a duty to our families – but what if we’re miserable? We have the right to take our own lives, some say, but doesn’t this ignore the legitimate claims others have on us? Why not simply say: other people might have legitimate claims on our lives, but sometimes those claims are trumped by more pressing considerations: unbearable pain, indignity, a political cause? Like other drastic actions – quitting a job, ending a marriage – suicide isn’t a decision to be made lightly, but to ponder seriously whether it is ever reasonable is to forget what torture life (or work, or marriage) can be.

Crichtley is convinced this is a minority view, and that most of us remain in the grip of a Christian metaphysics that sees suicide as an

absolute wrong. Could he be right? Assisted suicide might remain controversial, but ordinary suicide is legal throughout Europe. (Criminalizing suicide raises the problem of how you punish a dead person; the neat solution of Sir William Blackstone, the eighteenth-century English jurist, was to ditch the corpse in the highway with a stake driven through it.) Even the recent debates in Parliament about the assisted dying bill did not refer much to the inviolable sanctity of life, but rather to the reasonable (if ultimately unconvincing) worry that the law would encourage vulnerable people to die for bad reasons. The bill failed, but that is at odds with the mood of the country; a 2010 survey suggests that 82 per cent of the British public supports medically assisted dying for terminally ill patients, and the number only drops to 71 per cent among religious people. Is Crichtley right that we abhor suicide? Or do we just mourn those who kill themselves when there was still succour to be found?

When Crichtley turns from abstraction to real cases of suicide he finds no dearth of understandable motivations: desperation, revenge, boredom, economics. Most interesting is the suicide that heeds Seneca’s dictum that the wise man “lives as long as he ought, not as long as he can”. George Eastman, founder of Eastman Kodak, shot himself in the heart, leaving behind the note: “To my friends: my work is done. Why wait?” Hunter S. Thompson apparently felt that late was better than never:

“67. 17 years past 50. 17 more than I needed or wanted. Boring . . . 67, you are getting greedy. Act your old age. Relax. This won’t hurt”. Crichtley admires this sort of end, sober and unentitled. But he is attracted most of all to suicide done for no apparent reason, as a leap into the absurd. He quotes approvingly from Edouard Levé’s novel *Suicide* (Levé turned in the manuscript ten days before hanging himself): “Your death was scandalously beautiful”.

Simon Crichtley’s ultimate refutation of the absurdist case for suicide is that suicide is too positive an act: if nothing means anything, then why do anything at all, let alone kill yourself? Why not meet the world, instead, with indifference – or love? But here the author betrays the casual nihilism he wishes to affect. Love isn’t something we might as well embrace because life is pointless, but one of the things that gives life, when it has one, its point. To think otherwise is to indulge an adolescent fantasy of suicide, one that not only obscures the real terrors that drive many people to it, but also the real goods they thereby, often knowingly, forsake. For Freud the mystery of suicide – how the self-loving ego could destroy itself – had its solution in hate: melancholics come to see themselves as a mere object of loathing; the self as subject is destroyed, almost incidentally, along the way. But many suicide notes are also love notes, as if the anticipation of acting out one’s self-hatred frees one to love more fully, finally. Kurt Cobain, in his suicide note, described how he had become “hateful toward all humans in general” before scrawling in large letters at the bottom of the page: “I LOVE YOU! I LOVE YOU!”