

If the Stoics Had Been Right

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (February 2021)



Twilight in Père Lachaise Cemetery, Paris France, Gav Banns, 2016

If the Stoics had been right—that death is nothing to be feared—surely Mankind would have lost its fear of it by now, but I see no sign of this, perhaps rather the reverse; for as belief or confidence in an afterlife declines, it—Mankind—clings more than ever to the only life that it has, or believes that it has.

But what does it mean in this context to say that the Stoics were right? That their arguments were sound? That, as a matter of historical fact, they persuaded some or many people into loss of fear of death? Or were the Stoics merely whistling in the wind, as it were, and expecting of Mankind something that it could not (except in rare cases) deliver, namely serenity in the face of personal extinction? Does not Mankind, by and large, cling to life because it is endowed by nature, by biology, with an instinct of self-preservation, that declines or disappears only if pain or something else makes life intolerable, and hence nothingness preferable?

If death is nothing to fear, is it also nothing to lament? I remember the lines of Gerard Manley Hopkins:

*Margaret, are you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?*

...

*It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.*

Is this true? When we mourn the passing of those whom we have loved, do we mourn because we sympathise with them for their loss of what they valued, namely life, or because we will miss them? Or is it, that by dying, they have confronted us, à la Margaret, with our own mortality?

Recently, I was at the bedside of someone close to me for many years when she died. One could not truly call a death at her advanced age a tragedy, and yet sorrow at death is not

something that can be measured on a linear scale, as health economists might try to do with their *Quality Assured Life Years*, QALYs for short, by which they try to decide whether, from the economic-efficiency point of view, one treatment is more worth undertaking than another. Life and death are not like that.

I don't know what percentage of the population has witnessed someone die. Doctors have seen people die, of course, perhaps many people die, but I am not sure that they have sat by a deathbed not in order to perform some technical duty or procedure on a dying person but simply to be there while the person died: probably it is no greater a percentage than that of the general population.

I cannot speak for others, but for myself I can only say that watching someone die results in a swirl of questions and emotions, guilt among them: for once it is clear that death must supervene, one wants it to come quickly, not to spare the dying person more suffering, for towards the end suffering has usually ceased, but to spare oneself the discomfort or pain of seeing the end of life.

One also feels guilty at one's impotence. To know that death is inevitable, both in general and in this particular instance, is one thing, but to accept it emotionally is another. So long as there is life one feels that there must be something one can do to prolong it, and that failure to do it is a grave fault.

There is, as someone once said to me, a *je ne sais quoi* about death, which—try as we might—we find difficult to accept as merely a natural process consequent on the fact of life itself. Even a person clearly on the point of death is infinitely different from a person who has died. Although I do not believe, except metaphorically, in souls, that is to say an immaterial essence of a living being that for a time inhabits a physical body, yet I can easily comprehend why this

idea came about. When a person dies, it is as if something had left him or her, flown as a caged bird might, leaving the cage behind. Oddly enough, a person who has died seems immediately to have become heavier: the expression *a dead weight* has its origin in this phenomenon.

And yet no so, as Richard II says in his soliloquy concerning the death of kings: for even after the death of someone, you feel that it ought not to be final, that there is something you might do to bring the person back to life. And furthermore, you behave and speak as if the person who has died could still see and hear you. You behave with reverence towards the person and say only those things that might please him or her, and certainly not offend. I suppose that a strict rationalist would say that this sensitivity was absurd: there is no one there any longer to be pleased or offended. So much the worse for rationalism, then (though not for rationality, with which it is often confused).

Not very long after the person died at whose vigil I had been, I heard a police-car with its siren blaring go by in the street below—it was in a city. How lacking in respect were the police! How lacking, in fact, were all the people walking in the street below as if nothing momentous had happened, blithely continuing their lives as before. Of course, there were no bells to toll them to awareness that someone had died, but even if there had been, they would have continued thoughtlessly on their way, as if exempted from death, as if those who died must have done something wrong to come to this pass, as the homeless young people on the streets in prosperous countries must have done something to come to their pass.

Quite often now, as I go about my business (at least as my business was before the Covid-19 epidemic restricted it considerably, and emptied the streets of much of their life), I reflect that all this activity around me will continue precisely as before, not merely *after* I die, but even as I

die: the baker will bake bread, the publican will serve beer, the butcher will sell meat (that is, until everyone has become vegetarian, if not outright vegan), the traffic warden will continue to issue tickets, and so on and so forth.

Am I pleased that life will continue exactly as before when I am gone? In truth, I am ambivalent. After all, what is a parking infringement to set against a death, particularly *my* death? I am so important to myself that I feel a certain outrage that my disappearance from the world will mean so little to others. How egotistical they all are! Do they care nothing for me? Let them watch out! They'll be next, and serve them right!

After the demise of the person whose death I witnessed, we felt that we could not leave her—that is to say her lifeless body—without someone by her, as if to do so were to abandon her to a terrible freezing loneliness. We remained by her until there were others who could take over; she could not stay by herself.

Again, a rationalist would deem this absurd. After all, we knew that she could not be lonely, and that even the greatest disrespect could not affect her. This was because there was no one there to be lonely or disrespected. Moreover, we also knew that this keeping her company could not last long, a day at most: and that she would not be more dead in a day's time than she was now. Therefore, as a rationalist might put it, all this ceremoniousness was pointless, a waste of time and emotion. We should have employed ourselves more usefully.

We are not, and cannot be (I hope), beings of the type that the rationalist might approve of. It has always been that disrespect shown towards the dead has appalled us. A human body is not just an object like any other, which is why mutilation after death strikes us as being of enormous symbolic significance. Warriors express their triumph, and

perhaps their relief at their own survival, by mutilating the bodies of their enemies; by mutilating the dead, they hope so to discourage and demoralise their enemy that it cannot rise again to take revenge. In some cases, they hope by mutilation to take possession of the dead man's power. But whatever the circumstances, mutilation of a human body can never be viewed in the same light as the destruction of an inanimate object. In most circumstances (I exclude autopsies for serious purposes), a profound malice is involved.

The desecration of tombs also strikes us as horrible, because tombs are inanimate proxies for human bodies. Deliberately to vandalise a tomb is a form (albeit mild by comparison) of mutilating a body; and surely it is not a coincidence that we use the word *desecration* in this context.

I write this in the proximity of what is probably the most famous cemetery in the world, the cemetery of Père Lachaise in Paris (it is certainly the most visited in the world). It is said there are 3,000,000 people are buried there, and it probably has the highest number of illustrious figures to be found anywhere in such circumstances.

Many of the tombs are neglected, of course, because the memories of most people do not extend beyond a generation or two at most, and families also die out. Time therefore works its effects, but in such a way that the tombs become more rather than less dignified. How beautiful lichen and moss are on stone! It would be a romantic exaggeration to say that I can contemplate them for hours at a time, but it is true that they give me endless pleasure. They seem to me to capture, in miniature, all the beauty of the world.

Alas, time is not the only thing to have worked its effects on the tombs, but the greed of Man also. With apparently greater frequency than ever, marble plaques and ornaments are stolen from the tombs, presumably for use as garden tables and other essential accoutrements of the good

life. The theft must presumably be committed with the complicity of staff of the cemetery (if it is not the staff themselves that commit it), for there is no easy way out of the cemetery except by the gates, and many of the plaques are of such a size and weight that they could not possibly be pilfered like goods from a supermarket shelf.

What would our rationalist say to this? He would say that on the scale of human crime the thefts from the cemetery do not come very high; that most of the plaques taken commemorate people long dead, possibly with no descendants, or at any rate descendants who have any knowledge of or care about the persons commemorated. At least the marble taken would now serve some current purpose rather than simply moulder on tombs unregarded and unmaintained.

Tomb robbery is perhaps the oldest profession, older even than that which is usually claimed as the oldest profession. It was known, after all in ancient Egypt, if not before, Our attitude to the supposedly oldest profession is now that of harm reduction, so that in order to be consistent, and since we know that tomb robbery has existed as long as have tombs (our rationalist might say), perhaps we should concentrate not on protecting the tombs but on protecting the tomb robbers, who after all will continue to exist whatever we do and run some risk of injury as they carry away the marble. The least we could do is provide them with face masks (against masonry dust), thick gloves against damaging their hands, and steel-capped boots to prevent injury to their feet should they drop heavy objects on their toes, all of which are cheaper than dealing with injuries. While we are at it, we should legalise tomb robbery, most of whose harms come from its illegality; if it were legal, tomb dismantlers (they would no longer suffer from the stigmatising effects of the word, *robbers*) could do their work openly and with greater care, thus substantially reducing the chance of occupational injury.

No; my disgust at those who rob the tombs of Père Lachaise would persuade me (even if I did not think so already) that there is indeed a *je ne said quoi* about death.

[Table of Contents](#)

Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are [The Terror of Existence: From Ecclesiastes to Theatre of the Absurd](#) (with Kenneth Francis) and [@NERIconoclast](#)<