Death and the Modern Imagination

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19 August 2014

Abstract This essay is an exercise in what might be called metaphysical sociology. Metaphysical sociology focusses on the meaning questions that confront all humans, questions about origins, about what to do with one's life, and about death. In particular, the essay examines the place of death in the modern secular psyche, given that interpretations of mortality have become clouded in uncertainty.
Keywords Meaning . Death . Hamlet . Nietzsche . Sopranos

Marilyn Monroe, in her last film The Misfits (1961), screams at the three men who have been clinging to her: 'You're three dead men!' In their different ways they are drawn by her vitality, by what one calls her magical capacity for life. They hope to gain the quality she embodies—that of being truly alive—by just spending time in her vicinity. They call it an honour to know her. But the hoped for osmosis never occurs. The three men remain uprooted, bewildered, and inwardly void. The Misfits screenplay was written by Arthur Miller, Marilyn's deeply suffering husband at the time, as an idealisation of her character; it continues the dead-man theme at the core of his seminal work, Death of a Salesman. Norman Mailer praised the script as possibly the best piece of prose Miller ever wrote.[1]

This essay is an exercise in what might be called metaphysical sociology. Metaphysical sociology focuses on the meaning questions that confront all humans—Where do I come from, What should I do with my life, and What happens to me when I die. It explores the ways different societies and times address them. Working in the tradition established by Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Weber, it is especially interested in the challenge faced in the modern secular West, where traditional religious answers have waned, and individuals are subject to the dispiriting possibility that the random and the absurd rule the human condition.

In particular, I want in this essay to examine the place of death in the modern secular psyche, given that interpretations of mortality have become clouded in uncertainty. On one level, the truth is that, thanks to modern comforts, human life has become so comparatively long, healthy, and full of diverse pastimes that death has departed from consciousness, until close to the end. But there is, equally, abundant evidence suggesting that the dread of death lurks under the everyday surface, and may do so more than in religious pre-modern times.

The modern era opens, metaphysically speaking, with Hamlet and Don Quixote. Hamlet's first significant encounter is with death, in the form of the ghost of his murdered father. His most powerful love scene takes place in the graveyard reminiscing tenderly to the skull of Yorick, the Court Jester who had played with him as a boy. His one 'felicity', as he calls it, is to die. Hamlet confronts us with the big modern question: 'To be or not to be?' However, his monologue on the subject, the most famous speech

[1] Norman Mailer, Marilyn, Grosset & Dunlap, New York, 1974, p. 204.

in the English language, has nothing to do with the nature of being—of self, or of identity. It is a long meditation on suicide, on whether Hamlet should kill himself.[2]

Hamlet is another dead man; but, in his case, there is no relief this side of the grave. The encounter with death, which has paralysed him, has also emptied him of any capacity for saving illusions. It is apposite that still images of him have tended to portray him pale of face, dressed in black, and holding a human skull. Hamlet illustrates Tolstoy's later dictum that if death becomes meaningless then so does life.

Don Quixote, who first appeared in public in 1604, two years after Hamlet, supplies an unwitting counter-pole. He imagines himself as a knight-errant riding around the world saving damsels in distress, righting wrong, and punishing criminals, and his imagination is so powerful that it drives his life. I believe, therefore I am! That his beliefs are delusional does not seem to matter: he takes thirty windmills to be thirty monstrous giants, and attacks them, only to be caught up in one of their sails. His quixotic exploits do not help anybody, and leave him battered and without reward, but undaunted.

Actually, he does help some, and here is the rub of his story. He helps the leisured aristocracy, who stand as proxy for the modern condition. They become fascinated by his adventures—and for the very quality in him that they lack, his capacity for life. Don Quixote is the only man who moves on the threshold of modernity, while the rest of the world looks on, lounging indolently by, cast in the role of decadent tourist. To use the terms of Don Quixote's leading twentiethcentury disciple, the great Gatsby, his redeeming quality is an enormous capacity for dreaming.

But even in the case of Don Quixote, consciousness of death would cast the meaning of the preceding life into radical doubt. On his deathbed, the famous knight-errant returns to his normal self, and recants his belief in chivalry. Now that he has regained his sanity, he refers to his former adventures as mad—dependent on a delusional state of mind for which he is deeply embarrassed.

The answer to the Hamlet question relates somehow to the need for a saving presence, or saviour. In the West, we always seem to return to Jesus. The traditional religious model of redemption mimics Quixote, holding that the individual depends upon faith or belief—and belief in something outside— in order to be saved. The Judaeo-Christian God is unambiguously separated, distant, and essentially unknowable. The fact that religious belief is in something higher, or beyond, in a supernatural entity or God, does not change the metaphysical orientation from that of the Spanish dreamer, who believes unquestioningly in a transcendental ideal. Joseph Conrad's Marlow put it that the crux is to be able to bow down before something external; otherwise, the unmoored individual, with nothing either above or below, will inevitably kick the very earth to pieces.[3]

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[2] G. Wilson Knight, 'The Embassy of Death', The Wheel of Fire, Methuen, London, 1949, ch. 2; John Carroll, The Wreck of Western Culture, Humanism Revisited, Scribe, Melbourne, 2004, ch. 3.

[3] Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness, Heritage Press, New York, 1969, p. 100.

In the twentieth century, Waiting for Godot provided a secular midrash, with two nihilistic tramps aimlessly passing the time in droll buffoonery. They live on a death precipice, with their talk of suicide occasionally qualified by the hope that a mysterious stranger named Godot may be about to arrive, and inject meaning into their lives.

The Misfits takes a different tack to I believe,therefore I am. It echoes Mark's Life of Jesus, in centring on the quality of individual being. And, as if in reciprocity, in the archetypal story from two thousand years ago, those who move in the vicinity of the charismatic Master find that the only transformation they undergo is into confusion and dread, like the three dead men—this is notably the case for the twelve chosen followers or disciples. There are a few exceptions in Mark's narrative, odd individuals who happen across Jesus' path, the path of the one who has what matters. They find themselves metamorphosed, becoming 'insiders'. All of these exceptional cases had hitherto been afflicted by some kind of imbalance— flawed character, or their life path wrong, in general suffering from things being skewed or out of joint. In his presence, all enigmatically becomes right.[4]

Henri Bergson supplied a modern secular variant, in his fin-de-siècle notion of élan vital, the popular belief held by intellectuals at the time that the key to human fulfilment was the possession of a type of vibrant inner energy.[5] In the wake of Nietzsche's declaration of the 'death of God', belief in any higher order framing the human condition had dissipated, leaving individuals on their mortal own, at best driven by a Nietzschean will-to-power; or, in the more benign version, a vital élan such as later possessed by misfit Marilyn.

Akira Kurosawa's 1952 film Ikiru moves through the same territory. A public servant with thirty years of service is flattened by the news that he is dying of stomach cancer—his whole life, past, present, and future is, on the instant, emptied of sense. In a desperate final move to experience the life he fears he has missed, he attaches himself to an effervescent younger woman. He feels that being with her may give him the capacity for living he lacks. However, she makes him see the futility of what is in effect the Misfits tactic, and in response he changes mode, devoting his final weeks to relentless campaigning to turn a disease-infested piece of urban wasteland into a children's playground. He succeeds, and dies a happy man, spending his last night swinging in the playground, singing the haunting gondola song, 'Life is Brief'.

What of more recent times? As much as the temper of an age may be read through the most insightful works of the imagination that it produces, and it can to a significant degree be so read, then the last two decades may come to be typified by The Sopranos. Over six cable television series (a total of 86 episodes running from 1999 to 2007), the lead character, Tony Soprano, wrestles on the death precipice, and loses.

At the outset, in the first episode, Tony is suffering from panic attacks. He collapses unconscious—in a symbolic rehearsal of death. The first attack occurs after a family of

[4] John Carroll, The Existential Jesus, Scribe, Melbourne, 2007.

[5] Henri Bergson, Creative Evolution (1907), Modern Library, New York, 1944.

wild ducks, which has settled in his home swimming pool, flies away. He has welcomed the arrival of the ducks with wonder and elation. He even wades down into the pool in his dressing gown towards the ducks, the scene replaying baptism images from Renaissance painting. Tony is in search of rebirth, of some kind of metamorphosis that will bring enchantment into his life. The ducks represent a family that has grace—a freedom, innocence, and beauty that his own family lacks in his own eyes, although he occasionally claims his family is the one important thing. His psychoanalyst, Dr Melfi, interprets the panic at the departure of the ducks as a fear in Tony that he is going to lose his own family.

In rational, objective terms Tony should be mightily satisfied with his life, leaving aside that he is the local Mafia boss. He has a family, which he handsomely provides for, living in an opulent suburban mansion; he is the most powerful male around, one feared by everybody he encounters; he is a brilliant and very successful leader of his gang; he has made himself rich; and he is attractive to women, whom he seduces with careless abandon. But he is haunted by a pervasive sense that all these things are somehow tainted, and not as they should be, not right. They lack the special quality that he projects onto the ducks. What should be sacred in his world is mired under a profane fog.

He fantasizes that in previous generations the Mafia was glorious, guided by a chivalric code of honour, whereas today it has slumped into sordid and cowardly mediocrity. We see enough of Tony's father to know that the son's nostalgia is delusional; a conclusion that is reinforced when Tony visits Naples seeking his roots, only to find the Italian Mafia in an even more decadent state than its New Jersey offspring. On another occasion, sitting in the local Catholic church with his daughter, Tony rhapsodizes about the craftsmanship displayed in the stone carving, a care and capacity for quality that has been completely lost in contemporary America—the beauty has flown from the world.

In his quest for meaning, Tony also flirts with the little 'g' gods of Max Weber, the sociologist's least bad solution to the meaning problem in modernity.[6] At the finale of the first series, as Tony sits at dinner with his family, he tells them warmly that these intimate moments are the ones that matter, this is what life is all about. But the tenderness is forced, the cosy glow a Romanticized indulgence that is quickly forgotten. In the last episode of the last series, sitting in a diner, again with his family, a scene accompanied by strong signals to the viewer that he is about to be assassinated, his son has to remind him of what he said on the earlier occasion.

Tony does not yearn for a saviour. He has no interest in finding someone to show him the way. The one pale substitute is his analyst, and part mother confessor, but the program makes clear that she effects no reforming change in him, except for unwittingly providing him with some smart psychological tricks for better controlling others. The

[6] 'Science as a Vocation', in From Max Weber, ed. and trans. Max Weber, H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1948.

Sopranos is dismissive of the modern Socratic hope for salvation through knowledge, or more precisely the hope of becoming a better and happier person through gaining self-knowledge. Here is one marker of its contemporaneity.

Tony is only fully alive, in Misfits terms, in violence. When carried away in surges of rampaging aggression the blood flows, and he feels great. It is only then that he transcends the depressing demands of the day—for which Dr Melfi has him on Prozac. After flexing his Mafia muscles, which ultimately means committing murder, he finds he doesn't need his medication. His is a case of what Georges Sorel, in 1906, lauded as therapeutic violence.[7]

And, in a reprise of Don Quixote, it is precisely his capacity for action—decisive and violent action—that fascinates Dr Melfi and her other psychotherapist friends. Tony Soprano is the man who can move in a paralysed, tepid, overintellectualised world. Melfi, after she has been raped, fantasizes that Tony is the only man capable of avenging her. Her own husband is too civilised—code for emasculated.

The show hits a modern nerve here, for Melfi stands proxy for the viewer, who sees and judges Tony Soprano, in the main, through her eyes. The program taunts: perhaps you the viewer are drawn to Tony because of the very proclivities in him that have become too much denied in your own obsessively orderly, civilised, and comfortable life. Tony is the fantasy alter ego, compelling and horrifying, presenting an ultimate ambivalence—If only I could be him; but nothing would be worse.

Unlike Quixote, Tony does not need an extravagant fantasy to activate him. He is not seeking something to believe in. Nor does he feel he lacks drive from within—absence of passion is not his problem (he does not belong to the élan vital tradition). His quest is rather for a world that is enchanted, and right. The way the ducks live represents a quiet and calm order, exemplary of what is natural, and of how things ought to be. If only a magic wand could be waved over New Jersey.

Tony is driven spontaneously and impulsively from within—the most powerful impulse being anger, which erupts sporadically. Lust, and a yearning for enchantment also drive him. The cost is that once the blood cools he is back with his existential despair. In the opening episode, Tony's second panic attack occurs in a nursing home, collapsing at his psychopathic mother's words: 'people come here to die.'

Early on, Tony describes himself to Melfi as a sad clown, laughing on the outside. The clown's make-up is a variant on the death-mask. Here is a cue to the recent work of literary imagination that extends the Soprano meditation, the 2008 film Dark Knight.

'Dark Knight' refers, on the surface, to the film's hero, Batman, but the deeper reference is to the Joker, the character that commands the stage, and reduces all others in his presence to cardboard caricatures. Phenomenal, irrepressible vitality, zeal and relish, are now reborn in a devilish reincarnation of charisma. This dark knight, played with mesmeric effect by Heath Ledger, moves with satanic grace.

[7] Georges Sorel, Reflections on Violence, trans. T. E. Hulme and J. Roth, Collier, New York, 1950.

The figure of the Joker draws upon diverse archetypes: the clown, the harlequin, the trickster, the wicked imp, the malevolent naughty boy with intent, the cynic philosopher, and Mephistopheles. And it draws upon the jester too, so maybe Hamlet's intimate scene reminiscing with the skull of Yorick has more to it than childhood nostalgia, for it is the very vitality exemplified in the Joker that the Prince of Denmark yearns for.

The Joker shares the Soprano trait of coming to full life in violence, licking his lips and cackling with pleasure, but his violence comes with metaphysical accompaniment. He has authority. As with Nietzsche's superman, he takes a frank straight full-on look into the nihilistic abyss, where dwells the truth that human life is merely horrible or absurd. He tests the ideals of the time as with a tuning fork, again as Nietzsche recommended, in order to see how hollow they ring.[8]

The Joker relishes exposing hypocrisy, the saving lies or redeeming illusions that keep ordinary life going. Batman's illusion is his main target, that of the good hero who fights against evil in order to protect the people and enable them to live secure and decent lives. The Joker demonstrates to Batman that those people are hardly worth protecting, given that they will turn against the hero the moment they no longer need him. They will come to look on him with the same contempt with which they view the Joker himself.

The Joker has no fear of death. Indeed, he takes masochistic pleasure in death-defying stunts, and sadistic pleasure in waging explosive guerrilla war on the city, reducing it to terrified anarchy. He kicks the world to pieces. And, like the tragic hero, he is beyond normal human pleasures and ambitions. Yet he has a lot of fun. He despises the local mobster bosses whom he bamboozles as stupid, weak, and petty—subhuman. He sets up games to prove that human acts of selflessness are superficial, and that under the slightest pressure individuals shed their ideals—virtue eclipsed by fear and self-interest.

On one occasion, the humans do act altruistically, but the shrug of the shoulders with which he reacts is as if to say, Well, occasionally these pitiful creatures do rise above the swamp, but the achievement is minor, and changes nothing. Paradoxically, the Joker wins again, although in literal terms he has been proven wrong. Such is his charisma and his vitality—and it is in spite of the fact that he creates no new values to replace the old ones he destroys.

Again, we are moving through the territory charted by Nietzsche, whose ideal modern individual was one who destroyed all the morals and ideals of the time, and then proceeded to create new ones, from out of nothing. The Joker exposes the ludicrous unreality of Nietzsche's model—in this it elaborates a theme developed in a number of other key modern works, including Dostoevsky's Possessed, Conrad's Heart of Darkness, and Chuck Palahniuk's Fight Club. Nietzsche reads Hamlet as paralysed by hav-

[8] Friedrich Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols, Preface, included in The Portable Nietzsche, trans. Walter Kaufmann, Viking, New York, 1954.

ing seen the deepest truth, that behind the veils of illusion human existence is merely absurd or horrible.[9] In this he was mistaken too. Hamlet was rather paralysed by his encounter with death, in the form of his father's ghost, to whom he swore an oath. It was when death became meaningless for Hamlet, and as a result all-encompassing, that life became meaningless.

The mystery about the Joker is the source of his irrepressible energy and vitality. Perhaps the 'death instinct' posited by Freud is at work, an innate human drive to self-destruction (a notion avoided in embarrassed incomprehension by all of Freud's followers).[10] Nietzsche too, the other master psychologist, posited a will in humans to nothingness, a will not to be, to be nothing.[11] Maybe the strength of the Joker derives from an uninhibited relationship to this dark inner force, one unchecked by conscience or shame. He is a kind of grotesque force of nature, dark rather than evil.

Modernity is metaphysically precarious. When the sacred forces of enchantment, joy, and love depart, then the emptiness is most compellingly filled by the satanic charisma of the Joker. His persona needs to be distinguished from that of the West's leading twentieth-century incarnation of the devil, Adolf Hitler. Hitler belonged rather to the age-old tradition of the psychopath dictator, driven by a mania for power, with the addition in his case of being guided by ideology—a paranoid millenarian one, splitting the world into the good— sacred Germany—opposed by the evil, in the form of a range of polluting peoples, led by the Jews. What Hitler did share with the Joker is the unleashing of a necrophiliac orgy of destruction. But the Joker spurns ideology, and he would have set upon Hitler and everything he stood for with mocking zest. As an intriguing postscript, the actors who played the Joker and Tony Soprano both died young—Heath Ledger aged twenty-nine, two months after filming ended, and James Gandolfini aged fifty-one, five years after The Sopranos was completed. Marilyn Monroe died aged thirty-six, a year after finishing The Misfits. In all three cases, it is as if the role for which they had been magnificently chosen consumed them.

So where does that leave us? Where has this excursion in metaphysical sociology taken us? In response to the Hamlet question, I have charted three moves. There is the quixotic discovery of something to believe in, held so powerfully as to direct the life, providing in effect an altar to bow down before, when there is a God, or equivalently an oath to obey, when there is an external code of honour or some other commanding universal.

There is, alternatively, that special quality of being, or inner vitality, which some individuals are blessed with. Maybe all humans draw on this quality to some degree—with the difference being the hugely varying intensity and brightness of it. Hamlet loses

[9] Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, section 7, included in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, trans. Walter Kaufmann, Modern Library, New York, 1966.

[10] Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents, trans. Joan Riviere, Hogarth, London, 1963, pp.74–8.

[11] Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, op. cit., section 3.

both ways, wanting in either belief or vitality. The Soprano variant yearns for a magic wand to be waved over the world, sprinkling fairy dust.

Chosenness tinges both modes. The inference to be drawn is that a given individual either has faith or doesn't; has an inner capacity for life or doesn't. As Luther, also standing on the threshold of modernity, put it, what matters is sola fide— faith alone, and by means of grace alone. Metaphysical qualities cannot be transferred, or willed into existence. Kierkegaard's 'leap of faith' is doomed. Tony Soprano is never reborn.

Mocking all of this is the third way of responding to the skull resting on Hamlet's open palm. The Joker is an unnerving presence in modernity. His message seems to be: if you are not Batman/Quixote, and I can expose the falsity of that role; if you are not Mark's Jesus or misfit Marilyn, then your best option is to be me. I have fun; I have boundless energy; I am the only free man in a world I move through with careless abandon; and it is me who directs the play of life. I may be hideous, and it is true I enjoy no human intimacy, build no lasting monuments, and do no good works—but I am alive. Tony Soprano is, in reality, a melancholy Joker, one aided by Prozac and some normal human dreams of enchantment.

Further, there is a lesson about the metaphysical questions confronting all humans, determining the quality of their lives as actually lived. In modernity, it is the death question—What happens to me when I die—that presides. Hamlet broods centre stage, pale as a ghost, dressed in black, in conversation with a skull. He seems to advise: answer the death question, and all will be well!

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Society (New York Journal) (2014) 51, 562–566. <doi.org10.1007/s12115-014-9823-9>
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