

# How Philosophers Die

**M**Y BRITISH ACADEMY postdoctoral research mainly tackled topics in nineteenth-century British intellectual history, a 'moral sciences' curriculum in mid-nineteenth-century Cambridge, and early-nineteenth century English responses to continental law. Yet I also began to collect, and try to write about, stories of how philosophers died.

My motivation was partly personal. One hope, all too short-lived, was to teach myself to write in less doggedly academic prose, without hiding behind footnotes. I soon realised my prose would never rise to the measured beauty of Sir Thomas Browne's *Urne-Buriall*. Yet perhaps I could take some of his quiet pleasure in contemplating human variety in death.

One problem I faced with these stories was that the variety sometimes seemed too rich in sheer incidental detail to contain. David Hume notoriously scandalised Christians like Boswell by facing death with irreligious serenity. Mary Wollstonecraft died in childbirth, with William Godwin, her lover and biographer, tragically driven to authorise, against her instructions, male doctors to attend her at the last. Jeremy Bentham left his body for public dissection and his head as auto-icon. Friedrich Nietzsche died maddened by tertiary syphilis, his reputation at the posthumous mercy of his sister (and a brother-in-law whose body may today even lie beneath the philosopher's headstone). Louis Couturat, pacifist and international language advocate, was killed by a truck carrying the military order to mobilise for the First World War. The logical positivist Moritz Schlick's 1936 murder by a deranged theology student was celebrated in disgusting fashion in the right-wing Austrian press. Michel Foucault died of AIDS-related illness at a time which lacked a public vocabulary for AIDS. Some philosophers took their own life: Walter Benjamin, on the border in 1940, his manuscript lost; Simone Weil, self-starving in solidarity with those suffering in France; Kurt Gödel, self-starving in the unhappy paranoid

delusion that Jews were poisoning him; Gilles Deleuze, after a long and debilitating illness, reading Seneca in his last days.

What relevance could these various stories have to philosophy? Surely philosophy is concerned with reasons and arguments which exist independently of philosophers' personal lives or deaths. This thought has particular force if one takes the history of philosophy as essentially the history of purely theoretical philosophy – say, cosmology, or logic. Yet practical philosophy – ethics, politics, or inquiry into how it is possible for humans to live – is also prominent in the philosophical tradition. Most major philosophers have developed some sort of position in practical philosophy. And – especially when a philosopher advocates ways of life and death regarded by others as not humanly possible – how they themselves live and die is relevant to the cognitive appraisal of their philosophy. In such circumstances, it matters whether there is a happy fit between word and deed, or only an unhappy mismatch.

Furthermore, stories about the death of one philosopher in particular – Socrates – have had huge, disruptive, effects on the history of Western philosophy. It is hard to imagine a counterfactual history of philosophy without

**Dr David Palfrey**, *British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow 2003-06*, examines some stories about the deaths of philosophers and asks whether, from a philosophical perspective, the manner of their death can tell us anything about the precepts they espoused.

Socrates' death. And stories about another big death have evidently affected the philosophical tradition. *Pace* George W. Bush, I'm not inclined to label Jesus Christ a philosopher. But theological interpretations of his death have evidently mattered for philosophy. Western philosophy began with the Greeks, became entangled with Christian theology, and is still today trying to disentangle itself. Paying attention to the different ways in which deaths of philosophers have been represented might yet help us think about that situation.

Socrates' trial and death provided the backdrop to four Platonic dialogues. In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates – tried on charges of impiety – inquires into what might constitute piety and impiety. In the *Apology*, Socrates faces trial before his Athenian peers; he conducts his defence in a spirit of such outrageous and intransigent provocation that he ends up being condemned to death. In the *Crito*, Socrates accepts his sentence with serenity, and explains why he won't act on Crito's suggestion to escape Athens. Finally in the *Phaedo* – generally held a later Platonic

*Jacques-Louis David, The Death of Socrates, 1787. By kind permission of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Collection, Wolfe Fund, 1931 (31.45). Image (c) The Metropolitan Museum of Art*



dialogue – Socrates actually meets his death, discoursing cheerfully on immortality before taking the hemlock.

Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, called Socrates ‘the vortex and turning-point of world history.’ For Nietzsche, Socrates created a new, radically disruptive, ideal, a sort of abstract knowledge which was both infinitely remote – Socrates claimed to know nothing – and infinitely worth pursuing, even towards death. Socrates pushed this paradox to its limit. His offensively unwearied skepticism was sufficiently disruptive of Athenian religious and political self-conceptions for Athens to execute him. But then, in turn, the very fact that Socrates *died* like this ultimately only intensified the disruptive effect. His serenity in the face of death only gave the Socratic ideal an additional charge. As Nietzsche put it, ‘The dying Socrates became the new, hitherto unknown ideal of noble Greek youth; more than any of them, it was the typical Hellenic youth, Plato, who threw himself down before this image with all the passionate devotion of his enthusiastic soul.’

Now, in one sense, any death disrupts social life: the person in question undergoes rather radical discontinuity in social status – from being alive to being dead – and the social roles of those around them are also reassigned. Functionalist anthropologists since Arnold Van Gennep and Robert Hertz have argued that this helps explain the importance and structure of death ritual. The social function of such ritual is to keep social roles intact by easing the reassignment of individuals within those roles. As well as norms governing disposal of the dead, many societies elaborate norms of a ‘good death’. Historians of death since Philippe Ariès and Michelle Vovelle have shown that these ideals vary over time. But, for many societies, a ‘good death’ is a performance which helps sustain existing social structures.

What might it mean to die a ‘good death’ in ancient Athens? Greeks had long idealised the beautiful, courageous military hero. Poetry celebrated as immortal the beauty and courage of a youth who died fighting for his city. By comparison, sages and philosophers – said to die at rather extraordinary old age – appeared a radically new kind of Greek hero. Aged men were ugly (Socrates, notoriously,

more so than most). Yet philosophers were still in some respects comparable to military heroes. Both underwent a training which could be conceived as preparation for death, and this death was a focal point from which a whole life could be ethically surveyed. Virtue helped one face death without fear, and the reward for virtue was social recognition through fame.

There were also rather elaborately developed social expectations of a ‘good death’ for everyday Athenian citizens. There were extensive funeral rituals. The dead body was washed, anointed and wrapped; eyes were closed; the jaw bound to close the mouth; the head was garlanded. On the day after death, it was laid out for mourners to pay last respects. A funeral procession carried the body to the cemetery, accompanied by funeral singers and (despite various legal restrictions) evidently some general noisy weeping. A funeral meal and purification followed the burial. Mourning could last a month, with commemorative sacrifices on the third, ninth, and thirtieth days after the burial. A further funeral feast took place on the death’s anniversary.

Yet Socrates was a *criminal*, and criminals – in Athens as elsewhere – were explicitly denied ‘good death’. According to Danielle Allen’s recent study of punishment in democratic Athens, the routine method of executing criminals was a form of crucifixion (a circumstance which would have rather encouraged later assimilations of Socrates to Christ!). Bodies of criminals, denied sepulture and a funeral, were buried at night or thrown along the northern city walls. Socrates’ death, according to Allen, was not an everyday criminal death: several features assimilate it to suicide. In particular, hemlock – repeatedly associated with both suicide and philosophers – was a recent and expensive technology. Socrates’ rich friends would have needed to pay for it.

It may be misleading to speak too definitively of Athenian social expectations of death when Socrates died. Athens was then in social and political flux, giddied by conflict between oligarchs and democrats. Yet Socrates’ death itself was evidently more socially disruptive than either a ‘good death’ or a straightforward criminal death. It put everyday values and social roles into further

question. One striking feature of the *Phaedo* was Socrates’ indifference as to whether his body was buried: only purification of a soul mattered to him. Again, Socrates claimed the philosopher’s courage in the face of death to be qualitatively different from that of other men, who only managed to fear social dishonour more than death. Socrates’ self-exemption from everyday mortal preoccupations exemplified a philosophical life understood as preparation for immortality.

There is, of course, the old problem of determining what elements of the *Phaedo* are due to Plato rather than to Socrates. Plato – not present at Socrates’ death-scene – gave it definitive literary form for others. There’s a potential ambivalence in the pupil succeeding his master by superintending his posthumous reputation. Yet, as far as his death was concerned, Plato managed to transmit Socrates’ basic revaluation. Though Socrates died a criminal, his death was to be held noble. According to Diogenes Laertius, Athens soon repented of its action in killing Socrates: a memorial was built, and his accusers exiled.

From this point onwards, Socrates’ death – and that of philosophers in general – was a recurrent literary theme. Centuries later, the Roman Stoic Seneca took Socrates as an inspirational example of noble death. ‘Socrates discoursed in prison, and declined to flee when certain persons gave him the opportunity; he remained there in order to free mankind from the fear of two most grievous things, death and imprisonment.’ Seneca interpreted Socrates’ action as communicating a human possibility: by keeping this possibility before one’s mind, one could train oneself to follow its example. Seneca of course, famously managed to die an exemplary death himself – a death clearly intended as a model for others to follow.

But here we have a contrast between Socrates’ death and Seneca’s death. Whereas Socrates’ death was an utterly disruptive event, lacking a previous model, Seneca’s death showed a form of philosophical courage which lived up to rather than shattering previously existing conventional expectations. For Hellenistic Stoics, the philosophical way of life involved

meditation on such examples (as well as on other features of death: Marcus Aurelius, for example, meditated on bodily decomposition to put everyday concerns into perspective).

Clearly, for a philosopher's death to be held exemplary, there needed to be a fit between word and deed: the way the philosopher died needed to be consistent with his philosophy. On the other hand, a philosopher of a rival school might try to represent such a death as less than excellent, by highlighting some mismatch between word and deed, to show that the precepts of the philosopher in question failed them at the last. More radically – ever since Aristophanes wrote about Socrates – a comic tradition had ridiculed the pretensions of philosophers in general. Comedy accepted the enormous diversity and ultimate incoherence of human motivation. From this perspective, it was just funny that, for all their clever talk, philosophers died as senselessly as anyone else. (In Lucian, tempted by both perspectives, there was a wonderful tension between philosophy and comic satire.)

This argumentative context – in which a death story might be mobilised to support or to attack the views of a particular philosopher, or used critically to score comic hits at philosophers in general – helps to explain the proliferation, and the frankly bizarre nature, of death stories about ancient philosophers. Ancient biographers, creatively raiding philosophical texts for biographical clues, used traditional *topoi* to reconstruct a philosopher's life and death. Today the main surviving biographical source for ancient philosophers is the *Lives and Opinions of the Philosophers* of Diogenes Laertius. Compiled around the early third century AD, this used some much earlier sources – notably, for death stories, the biographer Hermippos. Diogenes Laertius liked death stories. He had deaths at the games, deaths in exile, deaths at parties and all sorts of philosopher-

suicides, from hemlock through self-starvation to death by holding one's breath. (This last sounds a remarkable accomplishment, showing the utmost rational control over a body recalcitrantly inclined to live.) Diogenes Laertius recounts some incredible stories for pre-Socratic philosophers. Thales (died c. 545 BC) 'held there was no difference between life and death', and maintained the soul's immortality. He met his death while star-gazing, 'forgetting where he was, as he gazed, he got to the edge of a steep slope, and fell over.' Pythagoras (died c. 500) taught reincarnation, claiming his soul retained memories from a chain of previous bodies, beginning with Hermes' son. Accounts of his death vary, but one represents it as a principled choice: out of reverence for non-human life, he refused to step on bean-fields even when pursued by enemies. Heraclitus (died c. 475), who taught that 'better deaths gain better portions', died after ill-advisedly smearing himself in cow-dung in order to draw off excess fluid from his body. In the grisliest version, the sun then baked the shit hard, trapping him to be eaten by scavenging dogs. Empedocles (died c. 430) was given several death narratives. In the most famous and dramatic version, he leapt into Mount Etna to prove he was a god. Only a bronze sandal remained.

I've said nothing yet about the death which came to divide ancients and moderns, that of Christ. Some scholars have tried to assimilate Christ's death to Hellenistic ideals of the noble death. One reason this seems mistaken to me is that Paul – author of the first Christian texts, foundational for later accounts of the significance of Christ's death – could hardly care less about how Christ practically faced his death. Paul emphasised Christ's death only so far as it made possible Christ's resurrection, and hence new human possibilities for others. Insofar as any ethical fact about Christ's death itself did matter for Paul, it was (as emphasised in the letter to the

Galatians) that Christ's death had been outrageous, a death cursed under Judaic law.

Indeed, in Galatians Paul began constructing a whole new theology of death from this starting-point. By following one who had died such a cursed death, Paul was similarly expelling himself from his community's law. To the extent that this expulsion from law was, metaphorically, a sort of social death, Paul could start to announce himself as co-crucified and resurrected with Christ. Over centuries, Paul's intricate theology of death became elaborated into doctrinal systematics; there came to be an enormous amount of subordinate theoretical work for Christian philosophers. But – as far as the *ethics* of death went – Christianity actually erased what had previously been a rather significant tradition of philosophers dying their own death in an excellent way. To put it crudely, only Christ's death really mattered.

Modern philosophy has tried to free itself from the imaginative hold of Christian theology. Yet post-Christian thought may be more Christian than it knows. Paul's abandonment of the ethical terrain of death may help explain why secular philosophies of death seem so practically impoverished even today. Some of the unhappy deaths of twentieth-century philosophers seem to invite treatment within narrative frames – tragic, comic, or picaresque – which are essentially anti-philosophical. This bothers me, trying to find philosophical ways to relate philosophers to their deaths. Perhaps it should bother us all: we will all have the chance to face death for ourselves.

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