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# Atheism and the Gift of Death

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**Abstract:** Richard Beardsmore once argued that, although it is possible for atheists and religious believers alike to regard life as a gift, the regarding of one's own *death* as a gift is open only to the (Christian) believer. I discuss this interesting contention, and argue that, notwithstanding some important differences between the attitudinal possibilities available to atheists and believers in God, there are at least three senses in which an atheist could regard death as a gift. Two of these involve death's being conceived as serving some particular purpose, whereas the third derives from a more pervasive affirmatory attitude to life as a whole.

Death is the most precious thing that has been given to man. (Simone Weil (2004), 103)

In a paper entitled 'Atheism and Morality' (1996), Richard Beardsmore (1944–1997), who identified himself as an atheist, argues that there is nothing necessarily incoherent about an atheist's regarding life as a gift and expressing gratitude for it. Against this claim, some might argue that the very concept of a gift is inextricably connected to the concept of a giver, and hence that, to regard life as a gift is, *eo ipso*, to regard it as having been given by someone, namely God. Beardsmore's response is to argue that this connection – between the

concepts of gift and giver – is not a necessary one. He maintains that, when we look at actual instances in which gratitude for the gift of life has been expressed by someone who is not a believer in God, we see that these expressions can be perfectly intelligible without our needing to attribute an implicitly theistic attitude to the person in question. Beardsmore does not, however, want to deny that there are differences between the ways in which a believer in God and an atheist are liable to use the notions of gift and gratitude. In particular, he claims that the possibility of regarding one's own *death* as a gift is open to the believer in God – or, more specifically, the Christian believer – in a way that is precluded for the atheist. This is a profoundly interesting suggestion; indeed, the whole idea of regarding one's own death as a gift is, to me at least, both deep and deeply intriguing. Disappointingly, Beardsmore touched on this topic only briefly towards the end of his paper. It is my aim to give it closer attention.

### **Regarding life as a gift 'whatever evils it may bring'**

My starting point for this inquiry will be to say a little more about the primary difference that Beardsmore sees between the respective possibilities open to an atheist and a Christian *a propos* of perceiving something as a gift. On Beardsmore's view, while it is natural for an atheist to react to a piece of good fortune with gratitude, and to perceive it as a gift, it is equally natural to react to bad fortune – to certain forms of suffering, in particular – with cursing and resentment or, in some instances, with resignation. 'In an atheistic morality,' writes Beardsmore, 'these reactions simply coexist' (1996, 248). He contrasts this with Christian morality, wherein 'the response of gratitude is extended to both good and bad fortune' (*ibid.*); and to illustrate this point, he quotes from a letter written by a Catholic chaplain named Hermann Lange to Lange's parents. The letter, dated 11th July 1943, was written in a German prison, where Lange was awaiting execution by beheading. The passage reads:

For, after all, death means homecoming. The gift we thereupon receive is so unimaginably great that all human joys pale beside it, and the bitterness of death as such – however sinister it may appear to our human nature – is completely conquered by it. (Hermann Lange, in Gollwitzer *et al.* (1958), 88; quoted by Beardsmore (1996), 248)

Following this quotation, Beardsmore writes: ‘Clearly the conception of life, *whatever evils it may bring*, as a gift is a conception for which there is no counterpart in an atheistic morality. And nothing that I have said should be taken to deny that there exist such differences between religion and atheism’ (Beardsmore, *ibid.*). Beardsmore says nothing more about the passage than this, and nothing more about the notion of regarding one’s own death as a gift.

Beardsmore’s few remarks on this matter raise a number of questions that are worthy of further consideration. Central among these is the question why he thinks that a conception of life as a gift, irrespective of the evils it brings, is available to the Christian but not to the atheist. Evidently, if he is right that, for atheists, the regarding of something as a gift is dependent upon its being perceived as fortuitous and beneficial in some way, then he would at least have strong grounds for denying that the atheist is capable of regarding absolutely anything as a gift. But Beardsmore doesn’t quite put it this way. Rather, he denies that the atheist will be able to conceive *life* as a gift if it contains certain kinds of evils. It is not obvious, however, why this should be so. Perhaps what Beardsmore has in mind is an attitude to life such that, at any waking moment, if one were asked whether what one is undergoing is a gift for which one is grateful, one would be strongly inclined to say ‘Yes’, even in a situation as extreme as awaiting one’s own execution. *This* attitude, Beardsmore seems to think, is precluded for the atheist, but not for the Christian.

Even if this claim were to be granted, however, it would leave open the question whether an atheist could conceive of her life, *taken as a whole*, as a gift to be grateful for, no matter

what evils it contained. Is it not conceivable, for example, that an atheist who has been condemned to death (whether by beheading or by any other method) could, in reflecting upon her life, regard it as a gift and express gratitude for it? I do not think this is difficult to imagine. Indeed, Friedrich Nietzsche might be cited as an interesting case in point. Although he was never condemned to death, in the legal sense, he certainly recognized the difficulties and struggles with which life presents us. And although his form of atheism was by no means straightforward, he strove to articulate an affirmation of values in the face of what he saw as the ongoing demise of the very possibility of believing in God.<sup>1</sup> As part of this affirmation, Nietzsche on several occasions expresses something that comes very close to an attitude of thankfulness for the whole of life even if he does not use precisely the terms ‘gift’ or ‘gratitude’. In *Ecce Homo*, for instance, Nietzsche declares his ‘formula for greatness in a human being’ to be ‘*amor fati*: that one wants to have nothing to be other than it is, not in the future, not in the past, not in all eternity. Not merely to endure that which happens of necessity, still less to dissemble it – all idealism is untruthfulness in the face of necessity – but to love it ...’ (Nietzsche (1979), ch. II, §10, p. 68). Commenting on this passage, Will Dudley writes of *amor fati*, ‘the love of fate’, that it is

the state of the great, tragic soul who has come to affirm the character of this world in both senses. Having acknowledged the necessity of destruction as a condition of creation, the tragic soul does not need to conceal this necessity from herself, does not need to be mendacious before it. And having come to approve of such destruction, out of an overfullness that cannot bear not to create, the tragic soul actively loves this necessity, loves everything about the world that makes it the kind of place in which she can unleash and give form to her superabundance. (Dudley (2002), 201)

It should, I hope, go without saying that there is an immense gulf between Nietzsche's talk of 'greatness in a human being' and the attitude of humility and self-renunciation promoted in Christianity. Yet there is an affinity of spirit in the notion of affirming everything that happens without exception. For Nietzsche, this affirmation is connected with an asseveration of one's own will (or 'the creative will' within oneself<sup>2</sup>) whereas for the Christian it is liable to be connected with a surrender to 'Thy will', the will of God. While the Christian aspiration is to recognize one's nothingness before God, the aspiration of Nietzsche's *Übermensch* seems to be to see all things under the aspect of his own will; to love fate, in Nietzsche's sense, is an act of appropriation more than it is an act of surrender. So Nietzsche is apt to use the language of seizing and possessing as opposed to supplicating and gratefully receiving.<sup>3</sup> Yet still, in Nietzsche's affirmation of life, there is an ethos of gratitude. For to aspire to love one's life, every moment of it – is this not, in a sense, to be grateful for it?

To push this analogy between Nietzsche and Christianity too far would be absurd, given that Nietzsche, above all else, explicitly rejected and despised Christianity (while also, precisely because of its undeniable success, admiring it in certain ways<sup>4</sup>). But I have brought Nietzsche into the discussion because even if we do not wish to describe his *amor fati* as a kind of gratitude for life *whatever evils it may bring*, I would contend that the distance between these two perspectives on life is not great, and hence that Nietzsche points towards the possibility of an atheism that embraces as a gift everything that life affords, including one's own death.

### **Belief in an afterlife**

One reason why someone might think that the positive attitude to death expressed by Christians such as Lange is not available to the atheist is that the Christian, but not the atheist, believes in an afterlife. Although Beardsmore does not say enough to clarify whether this is

the case, it is possible that his reason for saying that *clearly* the attitude evinced by Lange has ‘no counterpart in an atheistic morality’ was that he considered the belief in an afterlife to make all the difference. As an interpretation of Beardsmore this is possible but, I think, unlikely. It is unlikely because, although the hope of an afterlife might contribute towards the willingness of some Christians to not merely accept but positively welcome their own death, it would not obviously account for the welcoming as a gift of everything that happens *within* one’s life. It would not, for example, account for a Christian’s regarding as a gift her own pain and suffering, and it is in part this kind of attitude to suffering that Beardsmore wants – or appears to want – to acknowledge when he describes the Christian as being capable of conceiving life, whatever evils it may bring, as a gift.

Perhaps it could be argued that the belief in an afterlife is crucial because, for the Christian, it provides the hope that, whatever evils may afflict one’s present life, there will be compensation in the next, whereas there can be no such hope for the atheist. But we should be cautious before assuming that the notion of compensation has an unequivocal role in this context. For what is being considered is an attitude towards life according to which pain and suffering are to be regarded as gifts, or as at least partially constitutive of the gift of life, and a gift is hardly the sort of thing for which one would hope to be compensated. A hope for compensation is spawned by the thought that what one is enduring is an affliction for which some recompense is required in order for a balance to be restored. To perceive something as a gift, by contrast, is to perceive it as gratuitous and positive, not as something that needs to be made up for later on, either in part or in whole. So it is difficult to see what role there could be here for the belief in an afterlife, at least if the afterlife in question is construed in temporal terms – as a renewed or extended life persisting through time subsequent to one’s ordinary finite existence.

If we return to the quotation from Lange, however, we might wonder what could be meant by the claim that ‘death means homecoming’ if it does not mean that, subsequent to death, the believer in God will find herself in a pleasant location, some kind of heavenly abode wherein one experiences the presence of God. Even if it remains unclear how this conception of an afterlife could transform all one’s pains and sufferings into gifts, it surely explains how *death* can be looked upon as such. No doubt, the conception of death’s facilitating a return to God – the meeting of one’s Maker – does play a significant part in transforming the believer’s attitude to death from one of, say, desperate terror to one of calm anticipation. But it may not be immediately clear what is meant by ‘a return to God’. While some may have vague expectations of meeting a kindly old man with a grey beard in a dreamlike world accompanied by one’s family and friends, others will want to resist the thought that expressions such as ‘life after death’, ‘eternal life’, and ‘immortality of the soul’ need imply any further existence beyond our present lives at all. For theologians such as Nicholas Lash, for example, eternal life can be spoken of in terms of our eternal relationship with God, our eternal life *in God*, or our ‘participation in God’s eternity’ (Lash (1978), 281, 284). From this perspective, death is of enormous significance in so far as it constitutes the moment at which one’s life becomes complete, and one’s whole biographical existence stands in relation to God; but its significance does not consist in its enabling one to ‘jump the tracks’ (to borrow a phrase from Feuerbach<sup>5</sup>) and to thereby continue adding more and more days to one’s biographical narrative.

Lash argues that the belief in a temporally extended afterlife is ethically and religiously damaging, since it is liable to distract attention from the urgent task of fulfilling one’s Christian duty in the present life. If the life that each of us is presently living is viewed as a mere ‘antechamber’ to some future, post-mortem existence that stretches on forever, Christians may be less likely to treat the events of their present life as *matter*ing in the way

that Lash sees as ethically and spiritually required; what the Christian life demands is to take ‘each moment, each relationship, each person, with utmost seriousness’ (*ibid.*, 282). It is precisely this seriousness that Lash fears is undermined by the idea, however vague or inchoate, that death is not really the temporal limit of one’s life.<sup>6</sup> So, at the very least, we should not assume that sense can be given to the notion of death as a homecoming or a return to God only in the context of an expectation of a temporal afterlife. Such an expectation may in fact represent a relatively shallow conception of eternal life in comparison with the kind of non-temporal conception articulated within certain theological traditions, of which Lash is exemplary.

Once the assumption that religious expressions such as ‘eternal life’ and ‘life after death’ *must* denote a temporally extended posthumous existence has been renounced, then the possibility is afforded of seeing further similarities between a Christian and an atheist perspective on suffering and death. Of course, talk of participating in God’s eternity or partaking of the life of God will be unavailable to the atheist; but what will not be precluded is the sense of moral urgency prompted by a heightened awareness of one’s finitude, to which certain Christian thinkers have referred. Despite the atheist’s being unable to join the Christian in regarding death as a completion of that which stands in eternal relation to God, he may nevertheless concur that death constitutes the final moment of a finite whole, and thereby gives a determinate structure or shape to that life. To see death as a gift may be to regard it as that which completes and to some extent defines who one is. In advance of one’s actually dying, death’s ever-present possibility – so poignantly evoked in the thought of Heidegger, for example – imposes a limit upon our self-conception, forcing us to make choices with a sense of exigency.<sup>7</sup> When one’s death actually occurs, life becomes complete; in so far as one’s life as a whole is a gift, so is one’s death, for it is one of the conditions of having a recognizably human life at all.

## Meaning and endless existence

One way of continuing the thought that has just been expressed would be to explore the idea that an unending life might be not merely undesirable, but devoid of any conceivable meaning. This thought has been articulated by non-religious writers such as Bernard Williams (1973), and has been at least partially endorsed by certain Christian theologians such as Grace Jantzen (1984, 34–35).<sup>8</sup> After reflecting upon the fictional case of Elina Makropulos – who, having already lived for a little under three-and-a-half centuries, preferred to die rather than imbibe any more of an elixir of longevity – Williams concludes that her preference for death was not merely intelligible, but was a preference that anyone with a human character would probably share (see Williams (1973), esp. 90–91). ‘[A]n endless life’, argues Williams, ‘would be a meaningless one ... we could have no reason for living eternally a human life’ (89). Interestingly, Williams infers from this neither that death is something good nor that it is something towards which we should be indifferent. On the contrary, he maintains that, in most circumstances, where the individual concerned still has unfulfilled desires, death is an evil to be resisted. His point is that, from the fact that death as we usually encounter it is an evil, it does not follow that death is always and necessarily an evil; the idea of rational suicide makes sense, for when the desires that furnish a person’s life with meaning have been extinguished, there ceases to be any reason to live (85–86).<sup>9</sup>

One would not, however, need to stray very far from Williams’ position in order to use his argument to support the intelligibility of regarding death as a gift. What Williams is arguing could be expressed by saying that, although death is often not a desirable thing, there is indeed something desirable about *mortality* – about the fact that we will, at some time, die – for an immortal life would be intolerable and meaningless. Thus there is a sense in which mortality, our human finitude, is a gift which gives structure and purpose to our lives; and

provided we do not die too soon, before we can be said to have lived a flourishing life, then death itself may come as a gift. This way of seeing death as a gift certainly seems open to the atheist.

Nothing in the above discussion precludes there being instances in which death may be regarded as something dreadful – as something which, far from rounding off and completing a life, in fact mutilates and truncates it, cutting it short before it could really flourish. Consider for example the life of a child who, having been born in extreme poverty, lives for only a few painful disease-ridden months before dying slowly and agonizingly of starvation. Cases such as this are hard enough for the religious believer to make sense of, but how, we might wonder, can the atheist even begin to conceive of such a life, replete with such a death, as a gift for the child herself? At least the religious believer may have recourse to the idea that no one is ever truly lost or forgotten in the eyes of God; that God, even if he does not intervene to prevent the suffering and premature death either of the guilty or the innocent, does at least love us throughout our trials. From the atheist perspective, however, innumerable lives are lived out in misery before being curtailed without ever having been touched by love.

There is no denying that on this matter a rupture seems to open up between the respective attitudinal possibilities available to the atheist and the believer in God. While Nietzsche, speaking as an atheist, was able to invoke the Stoic nostrum that whatever ‘does not kill me makes me stronger’ (Nietzsche (1968), ch. 1, §8, p. 23),<sup>10</sup> this nostrum becomes an empty slogan when applied to those whose sufferings do eventually crush and kill them.<sup>11</sup> For such individuals, we may be inclined to say that death is a gift only because it brings an end to their torment, and this is very far away from the sense in which a religious believer such as Hermann Lange welcomes his imminent death.

Perhaps, however, even here the gap is not as wide as we might at first imagine. For it should be recalled that the question I have been asking is really that of whether it is possible

for an atheist to regard her *own* death as a gift. This is quite a different question from that of whether it is possible for an atheist to regard as a gift anyone else's death. And a positive answer to it would by no means entail our denying that, in the case of some lives and deaths, we cannot begin to imagine how those who are forced to endure them could come to regard them as gifts. With regard to questions about the value of someone else's life for that person, it is not clear that the options open to the atheist differ much from those of the religious believer. For although the believer might have something to say about God's love even for the most pitiable of lives, such talk would not amount to the claim that death is a gift for the starving child, or for a victim of murder, or for any number of individuals whose lives and deaths challenge any serious religious thinker's sense of hope. None of us is in a position to say of someone else's death that it is a gift for them; we can, at most, use this form of words in relation to the death that is our own. Of course, the Christian may say that Jesus' death on the cross was a gift to humanity – or, relatedly, a gift to God the Father which 'sanctifies mankind' (Schillebeeckx (1963), 21) – but that is a different matter. Even in this case, for someone other than Jesus to say that his death was a gift *to him* would be (religiously, ethically) out of place.

### ***When is death a gift?***

Against the claim for which I have been arguing – that it is possible for an atheist to regard her own death as a gift – an objection of the following sort might be raised:

‘Notwithstanding all that theologians such as Nicholas Lash have said against the idea of a temporal afterlife, such an idea at least makes it coherent for a Christian to regard her own death as a gift; for, if belief in a temporal afterlife is true, then there will be someone who *receives* the gift in question. From the point of view of someone who denies a temporal afterlife, meanwhile, and hence from the point of view of a typical atheist, it makes no sense

to think of there being anyone to receive the gift of death, since, from that point of view, death annihilates the person whose death it is. So, given that the notion of a gift entails the notion of a receiver of the gift, anyone, including a typical atheist, who rejects the idea of a temporal afterlife, cannot coherently regard death as a gift.’<sup>12</sup>

This objection trades on assumptions that are similar to those which underlie Epicurean denials that death can have any value for the person who dies. Roughly speaking, the Epicurean denies that death can be either good or bad, or neutral, for the person who dies, because, as Epicurus himself famously put it, ‘while we exist death is not present, and when death is present we no longer exist. It is therefore nothing either to the living or to the dead, since it is not present to the living, and the dead no longer are’ (Epicurus (1964), 54).<sup>13</sup> Epicureans adduce this argument in order to assuage the fear that death may be something terrible, yet the same considerations could undermine the suggestion that death is a gift for which one should be grateful. If death is ‘nothing either to the living or to the dead’, then *a fortiori* it cannot be something good, such as a gift.

There are various ways in which such an objection could be challenged. For one thing, it is not obvious that someone has to be alive in order to receive a gift (and hence for the gift to *be* something for them). There is nothing unusual about offering praise to the dead, dedicating books or buildings or other items to them, or laying flowers upon their graves. A dead soldier can be awarded a medal posthumously, and we can give thanks to our deceased ancestors for the sacrifices they made. Such acts are forms of giving, and their intelligibility does not require a belief that the dead are not ‘really’ dead. But, the objector might retort, these examples do not instantiate transactions of gift-giving in which there is both a giver and a receiver of the gift, and hence they are not examples of gift-giving in the full, paradigmatic sense. This may well be right. That is, it may be true to say that giving to the dead is not a ‘paradigmatic’, or primary, mode of giving a gift to someone. But it isn’t clear why this

should be the crucial issue. It may also be the case that regarding one's own death as a gift is not a 'paradigmatic' mode of regarding something as a gift; yet this, in itself, would not preclude its being a *non*-paradigmatic case. The following analogy may help: One might say that describing a piece of music as 'sad' or 'melancholic' is not using 'sad' or 'melancholic' in its primary, paradigmatic sense. But it doesn't follow that one is using it illegitimately or 'merely metaphorically'. To quote Cora Diamond: 'If you know what it is to be sad, and you call some music sad, you mean precisely that' (1966–1967, 193). Asking for a 'literal' explanation would be out of place (because it *is* literal, in so far as 'literal' has any useful sense here). By contrast, when using a metaphor, such as 'lions led by donkeys', there is a sense in which one does not mean *precisely* that; one means it *metaphorically*, and someone's asking for a literal explanation would be perfectly in order. We could refer to the sense in which death, or life, is regarded as a gift, as a *secondary sense* of the term 'gift' without thereby needing to say that it involves using 'gift' as a mere metaphor.<sup>14</sup>

In any event, against someone who still maintains that death cannot (rationally) be regarded as a gift by one who believes that death brings annihilation, it might be contended that what is needed here is a broader perspective on one's life – an 'eternal perspective', or view *sub specie aeternitatis* – which enables one to conceive of one's life as a completed whole. To conceive of one's life in this way is to think of it as though one were outside it, as though one were already dead; and the adopting of such a perspective is not dependent upon accepting a belief in God. It is from this perspective that it is possible – if it is possible at all – to affirm or love (à la Nietzsche), and not merely to *endure*, everything that happens. So, too, is it from the perspective of contemplating one's life as a whole that one can regard death as that which furnishes one's life with a determinate shape and meaning. If one's mortality, and hence one's death, can be welcomed as a gift from this point of view, then Epicurean worries about the receiver's ceasing to exist at the moment when the alleged gift comes into play need

not remain problematic. It is by virtue of death's being regarded as necessary and beneficial to one's life as a whole that it is perceived as a gift, and not because of any putative benefit that one might have supposed it would bring *at the time of its coming*.<sup>15</sup>

### **What point is there in a mere possibility?**

A further objection that might be raised concerns the whole purpose of my inquiry. Someone could ask of me the following question: 'You have characterized your inquiry as a consideration of whether it is "possible" for an atheist to regard her own death as a gift – whether such an attitude is "open" or "available" to the atheist. But why should the result of such an inquiry be interesting or informative? After all, it could turn out to be the case that it is possible for an atheist to adopt this attitude to death, without its thereby being shown that such an attitude is sane or rational or in any way desirable.'<sup>16</sup> This is a fair point. It would indeed be rather inconsequential to demonstrate a mere possibility – a mere 'logical possibility', we might say – without saying anything about whether such a possibility has any appeal or viability. It might very well be *possible*, for example, for some peculiar person to regard the torturing of people and animals as a delightful form of entertainment, but this would not make it commendable.

Responding to this kind of objection is, however, no easy matter, for it is certainly not my aim in this paper to argue that anyone – whether she or he be an atheist or not – should, or ought to, regard her own death as a gift. And my reason for this not being my aim is not that I think there are good arguments for adopting an alternative attitude. Rather, my reason is that I am doubtful that reasons and arguments are relevant forms of persuasion in this context. To come to see one's life as a gift, and perhaps one's death as well, and to express gratitude for these things, is not a matter of assenting to the truth or plausibility of certain propositions whose normative force is available for unbiased assessment by everyone. It is more like

coming to see life, or the world, under a different aspect – coming to feel the compulsion of that way of looking at things. And that compulsion is unlikely to be generated by means of arguments, at least in any formal sense of ‘argument’.

More likely, I think, is that someone will come across the words of individuals who, either in life or in literature, express the attitude concerned, and will come, gradually or perhaps in some cases suddenly, to feel an affinity with those forms of words; will recognize that speaking of life and death, and many other things besides, as gifts expresses something with which she can identify. Beyond saying merely that something (whether it be life, death, or anything else) is, so to speak, a ‘good thing’, she may find that it is the term ‘gift’ that more adequately captures the sense of gratitude that she feels. In all of this, there may be no particular ‘reasons’ that can be pointed to in order to give rational support to the forms of words and the ways of living that cohere with them; and yet the forms of words, and the attitude to life and death that they articulate, may be rational nonetheless. Writing of certain kinds of religious beliefs, D. Z. Phillips remarks that, ‘To ask someone whether he thinks these beliefs are true is not to ask him to produce evidence for them, but rather to ask him whether he can live by them, whether he can digest them, whether they constitute food for him’ (Phillips (1970), 71). Something similar could be said of the belief that death, as well as life, is a gift, regardless of whether the one who holds this belief is an atheist or a believer in God. And putting it in these terms need have no bearing on whether it makes sense to regard the belief as *true*; it has a bearing merely on the form that ‘being true’ has in this context.

It follows from this that the question whether, as an atheist, regarding one’s own death as a gift can be more than a mere ‘logical possibility’ will not be answerable in abstraction from how particular atheists respond to it. My own view is that an atheist’s regarding death as a gift in such a way that this attitude, or belief, coheres with the network of attitudes and beliefs that

constitute the atheist's 'worldview' is entirely conceivable, and that we see indications of such a worldview in many of the pronouncements that Nietzsche makes.

### **Concluding remarks**

It is part of the spirit of Beardsmore's essay, and characteristic of his usual philosophical approach, to be wary of broad generalizations about what is, or is not, intelligible or rational. He typically urges us to be attentive to the nuances between different cases and to take contextual factors into account.<sup>17</sup> In this light, I think we should be more cautious than Beardsmore himself about pronouncing that an atheist cannot (rationally and coherently) regard her own death as a gift. There are many senses in which death could be conceived as a gift, some of which I have touched on in this paper. Perhaps the most obvious, about which I have not said a great deal, is that in which death might be seen as a welcome release from prolonged suffering – an escape from tragedy. Under such conditions, there seems no reason to deny that very similar attitudes to death are available to both a religious believer and an atheist. Although the religious believer might speak, for example, of death's delivering her into the arms of God, this need not imply an expectation of a temporal afterlife. The question of what it *does* imply cannot be satisfactorily answered independently of observing the role that expressions such as this play in the believer's life. The atheist, of course, will not use such expressions, and hence the character of an atheist's attitude to death as a release from suffering is liable to be different from that of a believer, yet there is no reason to presume that it may not retain the quality of regarding death as a gift.

Another sense in which death may be regarded as a gift is that in which it is conceived as a necessary condition of our lives having any coherent pattern or shape. To go on and on indefinitely, one might think, would rob life of any purpose; the feeling of urgency, of one's decisions' mattering, would be, at best, diluted. This has been argued from a religious

standpoint by Lash and Jantzen, as well as from a secular one by Bernard Williams. In this context, we might say that, for the atheist and the believer in God alike, temporal immortality would be more of a curse than a blessing, and in this sense mortality, finitude, and hence death can be seen as gifts.

What we see in each of these conceptions is death's being regarded as a gift that serves some purpose and provides some benefit: in the one case it brings cessation to pain and suffering by ending the life in which those torments are endured, and in the other case it facilitates life's having a structure and being imbued with motivating force. A further conception, which has been a more pervasive theme of this paper, is that according to which death is not understood to serve any particular function; rather, its acceptance – or, more than that, its affirmation – comes as part of a general attitude to life, an attitude that welcomes life in its entirety as though it were a kind of necessity. For an atheist such as Nietzsche, this necessity lacks the character of anything divine, whereas for the religious believer it issues from God's providential will; and hence, while the religious believer is liable to bow down and worship in humble obeisance, the Nietzschean atheist is liable to despise such acts of subordination. In Nietzsche's vision, the process of self-overcoming consists in sloughing off the old self in order to more fully actualize the powerful drives within one's constantly evolving being; in the life of a Christian, it is associated with emptying oneself of drives and desires in order to become a pure vehicle for the expression of God's love. For these reasons, I do not wish to claim that the embrace of death made possible by the Nietzschean *amor fati* is equivalent to the Christian's perception of death as a gift. Yet, as I have contended, if it could be detached from the rhetoric of power so emphatic in Nietzsche's philosophy, it reveals one way in which death could indeed be welcomed as a gift in the absence of a belief in God.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche did declare that, for him, atheism 'is obvious by instinct' (1979, ch. 2, §1, p. 51). However, the complexity of Nietzsche's atheism is well brought out in Fraser (2002).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Nietzsche (1969, 163): 'All "It was" is a fragment, a riddle, a dreadful chance – until the creative will says to it: "But I willed it thus!"'

<sup>3</sup> For discussion of Nietzsche's emphasis on seizing the moment, see Del Caro (2004), 380. Cf. Nietzsche's description of the knowledge-seeker as 'a self that ... wants to lose nothing it could possibly possess' (*The Gay Science* §249, translated by Babich in Babich (2006), 63).

<sup>4</sup> See Sadler (1995, 111–112) on Nietzsche's 'grudging admiration for Christianity'. See also Nietzsche (2007, II, §21) on 'Christianity's stroke of genius'; or, as quoted in Derrida (1996, 82 and 114, from Nietzsche 1913, 111), 'that stroke of genius called Christianity'. But compare Makarushka (1994, 34) on Nietzsche's alleged 'unmitigated rage against Christianity.'

<sup>5</sup> Cited by Lash (1978), 274–275.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Jantzen (1984, 36): ‘if death is a limit, this gives a significance and urgency to our choices which they would not otherwise have. ... if fulfilment is something which must be reached in this life if it is to be reached at all, we will be far less cavalier about the choices we make affecting our own fulfilment, and also, very importantly, in our relationships with others for whose fulfilment we are partly responsible.’ See also Weil (2004, 113): ‘Death forms the limit.’

<sup>7</sup> As Heidegger puts it at one point: ‘Once one has grasped the finitude of one’s existence, it snatches one back from the endless multiplicity of possibilities which offer themselves as closest to one – those of comfortableness, shirking, and taking things lightly ...’ (1962, 435). For Heidegger on death as an ever-present possibility – ‘*the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all*’ – see his (1962, 307 ff.).

<sup>8</sup> See also Berdyaev’s chiasmic pronouncement: ‘Life in this world has meaning just because there is death; if there were no death in our world, life would be meaningless’ (1937, 317).

<sup>9</sup> There have, of course, been many philosophers who have raised objections to Williams’ argument. For a useful overview of the debate, see Fischer (forthcoming). It is not my intention to rehearse the debate here. For some of my own views, see Burley (2009).

<sup>10</sup> See also Nietzsche (1979), ch. 1, §2, p. 41.

<sup>11</sup> Ironically, Nietzsche’s own life could be cited as one that was crushed *before* his death by the destructive force of mental illness, which brought it about that, though still alive, he was ‘no longer ... *there*’ (Staten (1990), 168).

<sup>12</sup> Thanks are due to Wes Skolits for raising, without necessarily endorsing, a point of this sort during discussion.

<sup>13</sup> I have slightly amended the punctuation of Geer’s translation.

<sup>14</sup> I freely admit that the distinction between a secondary sense and a metaphorical sense will not *always* be sharp. But the point I am making does not depend on there being a sharp dichotomy that is generalizable to all cases.

<sup>15</sup> There is a degree of parity between this thought – that death can be a gift without its needing to be a gift at some specific time – and the thought of those philosophers who have maintained, against Epicureans, that death is (or can be) an evil without its being an evil at (and only at) some specific time or during some specific period of time. See, e.g., Feldman (1991), Nagel (1970), and, for recent discussion, Luper (2009), 126–29, 136–38.

<sup>16</sup> Andrea Lechler helpfully prompted me to consider this point.

<sup>17</sup> This is especially evident in Beardsmore’s approach to moral philosophy, aesthetics, and epistemology. In the latter case, for example, he invites us to notice that there are more forms of knowledge than simply ‘knowing

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that' and 'knowing how' (see Beardsmore 1973); and in moral philosophy, he emphasizes 'The diversity of moral standards' (1969, ch. 4). For insightful discussion of Beardsmore on moral reasoning, see Whittaker (2009), esp. 205–210.

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