

# 'MAKING SENSE OF DEATH' IN CHRISTIANITY AND BUDDHISM:

*Towards a 'Pragmasemantic' Analysis of 1 Thess 4:13—5:11  
and Sutta-Nipāta III, 8 ("The Dart Sutta")\**

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*For my father, Francis William May,*

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The task of bridge-building between religions and cultures is most likely to succeed when important issues are at stake. This was one reason for my becoming interested in radically different religious approaches to what is perhaps the most intractable human problem of all: that of '*making sense of death*'. In this essay I should like to bring elements of anthropology and linguistics to bear on two authoritative texts from the Buddhist and Christian traditions. In particular, I shall be referring to the relationship between the semantics and pragmatics of such texts as a possible key to separating what is irreconcilable in them from what they have in common; hence my tentative and slightly idiosyncratic subtitle. I shall place this analysis in the general context of an approach to the genesis of meaning in culture and society.

I should thus like to talk about how we talk about death. I begin with the assumption that talking about death has itself become a problem in Western societies; paradoxically, the recent spate of popular literature on the subject is probably a symptom of this deep-seated inability to face death as part of life. A better indication of where the problem lies is that the work of ELIZABETH KÜBLER-ROSS, after initial resistance, was acknowledged to be not only necessary but pioneering.<sup>1</sup> This suggests that the heart of the problem is the loss of ancient skills in facing up to and preparing for one's own death and the deaths of those near to one. In the absence of generally accepted rituals and symbols, which once 'made sense' of death in a way which enabled people to treat what was then a frequent and highly visible event as a public, communal affair, it has become difficult if not impossible for many people today to raise the subject at all when it touches them personally. Talking about death has become as much a problem for

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<sup>1</sup> E. KÜBLER-ROSS, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969).



us as talking about sex was in the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> As ARIÈS shows, there have been many changes in the ways in which Europeans thought of and prepared for death, from the ancient Christian idea of death as a transitional slumber in expectation of the resurrection to the fearsome last judgement of the late medieval macabre period or the idealised reunion with those one loved at the time of romanticism. At all times, however, death was something that one accepted consciously and underwent publicly, surrounded by family and dependents. Only in the nineteenth century did there appear the charitable lie, the embarrassed refusal to speak about death in the presence of the dying. The outcome was the virtual elimination of the very thought of death from the health-and-healing ethos of modern, technicised medicine.<sup>3</sup> I would see these two examples of large-scale cultural repression as not merely analogous, but continuous. Both the inability to live comfortably with sexuality and the refusal to accept mortality are expressions of an alienation from our bodiliness in all its transient, contingent and vulnerable reality.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper I should like to examine some of the presuppositions of our being able to talk about death in the context of a merely rational culture which has largely eliminated mythology and religion, the cultural media for communication about such 'existential' topics as death. I shall begin with two short sections which will attempt to determine (1) what death 'is' from the point of view of nature and (2) what death 'means' from the point of view of culture. I shall then discuss (3) some work arising from the psychology and sociology of language which will enable us to construct a framework for (4) the analysis of two traditional religious texts on death, one Christian, the other Buddhist, in the hope that they may provide us with paradigms of how we might talk about

<sup>2</sup> This comparison is worth following up. Because of an unfortunate concatenation of causes such as the advent of syphilis, sex, in the small, tightly organised and highly moral households of the bourgeoisie around the middle of the eighteenth century, had become literally 'unspeakable'; cf. J. VAN USSEL, *Sexualunterdrückung. Geschichte der Sexualfeindschaft* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1970) 34–93. Similarly, about the middle of the nineteenth century death quite suddenly 'went under' as a subject of public and private conversation, so that the French historian of culture PHILIPPE ARIÈS could entitle the last part of his monumental study *L'homme devant la mort* (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 1977) "La mort inversée".

<sup>3</sup> This would appear to be a case of collective repression, the 'desymbolisation' of a central human concern by withdrawing it from public circulation and relegating it to the limbo of clichés and circumlocutions, as described by ALFRED LORENZER, *Sprachzerstörung und Rekonstruktion. Vorarbeiten zu einer Metatheorie der Psychoanalyse* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973) 120ff. In popular parlance: death, like sex, had become 'taboo'.

<sup>4</sup> This is a central thesis of ERNEST BECKER, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973), which he offers as a corrective to FREUDS typically nineteenth century preoccupation with sex, and which I do not think was effectively refuted by DONALD EVANS in *Religious Studies Review* 5 (1979) 25–34.



death. Finally (5), I shall try to draw some conclusions about how the study of religions could make further contributions towards solving our public and private problems in talking about death. In order for all this to be possible, however, we must have a method capable of establishing what different religions have in common. This essay is intended as a preliminary sketch of such a method.

### *1. Death from the Point of View of Nature*

The very possibility of death might be called a by-product of evolution. Protozoa do not 'die', they simply divide. They thus achieve an unrivalled consistency in the maintenance of their species throughout immense periods of time, though even these primitive species represent a quite advanced stage of evolution from inorganic matter. But the theory of evolution, understood as the continual multiplication of possibilities of development, suggests that further stages of complexity were latent in this advance. In the logic of evolution, development is only possible beyond a certain point if the possibility is created of 'experimenting' with different combinations of genetic material. This implies the existence of a genetic pool which assures consistency of species while multiplying possibilities of adaptation to environment. Nature's 'solution' to this problem was to 'invent' sexual reproduction.

This complicated system seems enormously vulnerable at first glance, but its strength lies in its flexibility and the scope it provides for differentiation within existing species and development of new ones. As an agent of evolution, in fact, sexual reproduction has only been superseded by human culture. It rests on the creation of 'carriers' for separate, matching strands of the genetic code, differentiated by sex and — almost incidentally — characterised by individuality. Such 'individuals', creatures with a definite life history and a certain identity, must be capable of sustaining themselves in difficult environments long enough to pass on the genetic information vital to the continuance of their species. But with equal necessity they must then disappear from the scene. Only 'individuals' in this sense can die, and in the logic of evolution they must die in order to make way for new life — which in this context means exact reproduction of their species, always allowing for the continual infinitesimal modifications necessary for adaption to environment. For evolution, in essence, is change, and its logic is a logic of change, over which the maintenance of species represents a series of temporary victories. Strictly according to this logic, the act of reproduction renders us superfluous as individuals. As if to symbolise this for us, the black widow spider consumes her mate during the act of intercourse.<sup>4a</sup>

<sup>4a</sup> Cf. C. F. VON WEIZSÄCKER, *Der Garten des Menschlichen. Beiträge zur geschichtlichen Anthropologie* (München, Hanser, 1977) 146—154. This seems to imply that there is a sense in which it is our nature to 'be' information, i. e. embodiments or carriers of the genetic code which alone is capable of un-



It is an important first step in our argument to have separated clearly individual and species, and to have seen that the dialectic between them in the logic of evolution must form the empirical basis of any discussion of death. Our cultural responses to the problem of death have deep roots in our animal nature, and it is this continuity between nature and culture that I wish to stress in what follows.

## 2. *Death from the Point of View of Culture*

Man — alone among the animals, as far as we know — is aware that he exists in time. The high degree of organisation of human memory permits us to integrate the experiential data stored there into a comprehensive picture of our progress through the stages of life in concert with the never-ending flux of cessation and becoming in nature. Combined with our awareness of ourselves as individuals this knowledge places us in a situation which, when faced, is surely unbearable. Particularly in Western cultures, moral values and religious symbols rest on the assumption of our individual worth and destiny; yet it is precisely because we are individuals that after fulfilling our allotted span we return to the oblivion from which we came — and, to a greater or lesser extent, we are aware that this is our fate. No wonder the symbolic ‘systems of meaning’ provided by mythology and religion have been called ‘necessary illusions’, for they have shielded mankind from the encroaching void. They have enabled men and women to go about their daily tasks undisturbed by an oppressive uncertainty about their final destiny, which, if dwelt upon, might well rob them of their sanity (we will be able to reassess the status of such symbolic systems in section 5). Only in this

locking the potentiality of new life from the elements of nature. A number of scientists have recently pursued this logic of evolution in a rather crassly one-sided way, thus partially obscuring the invaluable contribution their research could make towards re-establishing the lost continuity in our conceptions of man, beast and nature. I refer to the school of thought now generally known as ‘sociobiology’; cf. E. O. WILSON, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1975); R. DAWKINS, *The Selfish Gene* (London: Oxford UP, 1976). A necessary corrective is the beautifully reasoned book by the British moral philosopher MARY MIDGLEY, *Beast and Man. The Roots of Human Nature* (Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978), in which she reminds us that the discovery of some mechanisms of evolution need not coincide with discovering “the point of the whole thing” (93). She argues that, as it has turned out, the scheme of things leaves ample scope, indeed an indispensable role, for the interplay of motives and feelings between individuals in achieving this result — in animals just as much as in human beings (cf. 51—82, 85—103, 105—115). A not dissimilar thesis — that both nature and culture are involved in carrying the evolutionary process forward — is argued vigorously by EDGAR MORIN, *Le paradigme perdu: La nature humaine* (Paris: Édition du Seuil, 1973).



framework of myth and ritual could death be faced and undergone with equanimity.<sup>5</sup>

According to the French anthropologist EDGAR MORIN,<sup>6</sup> all the cultural systems of meaning which have been devised in order to 'make sense' of death may be reduced to two and only two basic symbolic structures or models, a third category being reserved for those who deny the need of any such constructs. It is not without interest in view of what we have seen in section 1 that these two basic types are closely parallel to the two broad classes of reproductive mechanism found in nature.

1) *The 'duplication' model*: biologically, this model corresponds to the process of cell division characteristic of the protozoa. The dead are thought of as 'doubles' or 'replicas' of the living in the form of spirits or ghosts. They lead a disembodied existence, and they must be propitiated if they are not to return to haunt those responsible for their well-being, perhaps by appropriating and reanimating the corpses of others. This model forms the basis of various forms of animism, and it has been perpetuated in the current resurgence of spiritism and occultism, especially in America.<sup>7</sup> Philosophically, it has led to the formulation of such notions as *ātman*, *psychē*, *anima*, soul, self etc. A variant of it was known to the early Buddhists as the heresy of *sassatavāda* or 'eternalism'.

2) *The 'fecundation' model*: the biological basis of this model is sexual reproduction, which ensures new life (of the species) despite death (of the individual). It has two main variants:

<sup>5</sup> Even FREUD, towards the end of his life, felt compelled to postulate a *Todestrieb* to account for human aggressiveness, cf. *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1953, orig. 1930) 108—110. Only against the dark background of Thanatos and Ananké, the powers of inexorable destruction, does Eros, the driving force behind sexual love, take on its full significance as the defier of death; cf. PAUL RICOEUR, *De l'interprétation. Essai sur Freud* (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 1965) 286—7, 296, 303. As we have seen, there are good empirical grounds for this rather speculative psychological hypothesis. What FREUD failed to see — or refused to admit — was that sexual traumata in early childhood are the expressions rather than the substance of the repressed anxieties which result in neurosis. The reason they leave such a deep impression on our psyche is not that they happen to involve sex — in previous ages, if not in *fin de siècle* Vienna, this was nothing unusual! — but that they are our first encounter with bodiliness, which thus becomes the primary symbol of the transitoriness of our nature; cf. BECKER, *Denial*, 25—46, 93—124, and H. MÜLLER-POZZI, *Psychologie des Glaubens. Versuch einer Verhältnisbestimmung von Theologie und Psychologie* (München—Mainz: Kaiser-Grünwald, 1975) 86—105. In a culture that was substituting technology for the bodily powers and abstract ideas for concrete symbols, it is not surprising that this led to a widespread alienation from the body and a consequent inability to come to terms with the reality of death.

<sup>6</sup> E. MORIN, *L'homme et la mort* (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 1970).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. ARIÈS, *L'homme devant la mort*, 447ff.



i) The 'cosmic' variant, illustrated by the Buddhist doctrine of *karman-samsāra*. One's deeds predetermine the nature of one's rebirth, and salvation is conceived as total liberation from the processes of nature, even to the extent of denying the individual personality altogether. A text exemplifying this is *Udāna* VIII, 4:

For him who clings there is wavering; for him who clings not there is no wavering. Wavering not being, there is calm; calm being, there is no bending (*nati*; or, on a more probable reading, *rati*, longing). Bending not being, there is no coming-and-going (to birth); coming-and-going not being, there is no decease-and-rebirth. Decease-and-rebirth not being, there is no 'here' or 'yonder' nor anything between the two. This indeed is the end of Ill (*anto dukkhassa*). (PTS ed., p. 81)

Here one could almost speak of a preoccupation with the inevitability of death and its complement, rebirth, so extreme as to motivate the drastic solution of *anattā*, the denial of self altogether in order to bring out how total the liberation from change necessary for salvation must be.

ii) The 'eschatological' variant, illustrated by the Christian doctrines of new birth in the waters of baptism, which symbolise both death and maternity, and the resurrection of the body, according to which salvation includes a totally new relationship to nature, but beyond time in the glory of God. A typical text is *John 12:20, 23—25*, which, as an answer to a question put by Greeks, may contain a reference to the fertility cults characteristic of Mediterranean countries:

Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks . . . And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life." (RSV)

'Glorification' is St John's cipher for the resurrection-within-the-passion, the 'eschata-in-death'.<sup>8</sup> The Johannine notion of 'eternal life' was to provide a basis for combining the doctrine of resurrection with that of the immortality of the soul in later theology (i. e. a fusion of the duplication and fecundation models).

3) *The 'annihilation' model*: though developed with some sophistication by the Epicureans and Stoics, for whom death was 'less than nothing' because it can be actually experienced neither by the living nor by the dead,<sup>9</sup> this approach has usually been combatted and repressed as impious by those with an interest in maintaining religious ideology (though it

<sup>8</sup> Cf. G. LOHFINK, "Zur Möglichkeit christlicher Naherwartung", G. LOHFINK and G. GRESHAKE, eds., *Naherwartung — Auferstehung — Unsterblichkeit. Untersuchungen zur christlichen Eschatologie* (Freiburg—Basel—Wien: Herder), 59—81.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. MORIN, *L'homme et la mort*, 271—273.



made a brief, perhaps premonitory appearance in the literature and inscriptions of the Baroque period).<sup>10</sup> Since the Enlightenment and the respectability of atheism this model has had free rein, thought it has usually found explicit expression in intellectual movements such as Existentialism rather than in popular mythology. The early Buddhists referred to a variant of it disapprovingly as *ucchedavāda*, the doctrine of 'annihilationism', and it probably played a part in the ancient Indian materialist philosophy known as *lokāyata*.

In the present situation as outlined in the introduction we may say that none of these models nor any variant of them can claim the ascendancy in the sense that there is any likelihood of its being accepted as the basis of a general consensus about the true nature of death. Though the annihilation model may seem the logical corollary of the scientific world-view, the other two models seem quite able to co-exist within the ever-changing amalgam of popular culture and religion in pluralist societies. These models, based no doubt on a primary symbolic perception of our animal nature, are in fact no more than 'ideal types', and in order to understand how they function in the cultural matrix of real societies we must equip ourselves with some notions touching the sociological, psychological and linguistic make-up of social life.

### 3. *Making Sense of Life*

In what follows I do not proceed on the common assumption that it is religions which provide the answer to the question, "What 'makes sense of' or 'gives meaning to' life — and death?" Nor do I assume that religion may be defined in terms of solving specific 'limiting' problems such as death, though this is not to deny that death plays a prominent part in the ritual and symbolism of most religions.<sup>11</sup>

Religions, I shall argue, do not give meaning to life for the simple reason that meaning is already there. More precisely, the 'construction' of meaning must be presupposed in order to conceive of social life, let alone live it out in practice. I owe this crisp formulation of the matter to a remark by NIKLAS LUHMANN, the German sociologist, in the course of a lecture at the *Franz-Hitze-Haus*, Münster. Though I have not found it in so many words in his writings, it sums up the whole thrust of his attempt to build a sociology on the concept 'meaning'.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Cf. ARIÈS, *L'homme devant la mort*, 336—340.

<sup>11</sup> For a survey of the factors involved in defining religion see I. MÖRTH, *Die gesellschaftliche Wirklichkeit von Religion. Grundlegung einer allgemeinen Religionstheorie* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1978) 19—24.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. N. LUHMANN, *Funktion der Religion* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977) 21ff., in which he shows that it is by presupposing the concept of meaning that we 'constitute the world', so much so that even the production of 'non-sense' (*Un-sinn*) implies an affirmation of 'sense' (*Sinn*) which makes any social activity whatsoever possible. One consequence of this view, drawn among others by THOMAS LUCKMANN, is to identify religion and society, though LUHMANN



There is a certain congruence between his views and those of Max Weber, who distinguished 'social activity' (*soziales Handeln*) from mere 'behaviour' (*menschliches Verhalten*) on the criterion of 'subjectively intended meaning' (*subjektiv gemeinter Sinn*), which accrues only to the former<sup>13</sup>. Intentional actions are thus the presupposition of any form of social life whatsoever. The emergence of social meanings is both coincident and coextensive with (a) the emergence of 'subjects' who 'intend' these meanings and (b) the emergence of 'media' which 'communicate' these meanings. To assume that activity with which I am confronted may be communicative is to assume (a) that such activity is not merely the effect of some observable external cause but originates in an autonomous centre of activity (a 'subject') and (b) that it represents a certain selection from a possible range or set of activities and by this very fact expresses some communicative purpose (an 'intention')<sup>14</sup>. Put more concretely: when the traffic policeman blows his whistle, an appropriate response on my part is "Do you mean me?" or "Do you mean I shouldn't be here?"

'Meaning', far from being a metaphysical mystery, is something we do, quite effortlessly, every day. We are continually reading meanings off the intentional actions of others, whether these be speech acts, ritual performances or spontaneous gestures, and we find ourselves able to respond in kind, expecting to be understood by others as 'meaning' or 'intending' something by our own communicative activity. Every single utterance, in order to be communicatively viable, must signal the possibility of its being able to be included in what we might call a consistent, shared 'background' of meaning before we can take it to signify anything in particular<sup>15</sup>. We are dealing here with two senses of 'meaning' which must be carefully distinguished. I propose to call the first 'social' meaning and the second 'utterance' meaning.

The linguistic structure of utterance encodes, as it were, constant — though often oblique — indications of how what we say is 'meant to be taken' by placing it against this consistent background of social meaning. By saying "I went to the hospital first, because my father is sick" instead of "Dad's sick! So I went to the hospital first" or "Get to hell out of here!" instead of "I'd like to be left alone now, if you

seems to locate religious experience in a sharpening of individuality and solitude (31—32).

<sup>13</sup> MAX WEBER, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriß der verstehenden Soziologie* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 5th rev. ed. 1976, orig. 1921) 1.

<sup>14</sup> My use of concepts such as 'subject' and 'intention' may suggest that I am invoking metaphysical entities, but as used here these are perfectly good descriptive categories. It is by virtue of making the assumptions which underlie these concepts — and not by 'introspection' or 'intuition'! — that we arrive at the notion of ourselves as autonomous subjects; cf. G. H. MEAD, *Mind, Self and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1934) 75ff., 173ff.



don't mind", I am issuing what one linguist has called 'semantic instructions'<sup>16</sup> about how what I am saying is 'meant' or 'intended' to be understood by choosing among various socially sanctioned ways of saying essentially the same thing. Intonation and gesture have similar functions.

We might explicate further this daily achievement of meaning and understanding through the medium of language by conceiving it as resting on a twofold consensus, which though largely tacit and implicit can be described hypothetically<sup>17</sup>. Firstly, at the level of 'social' meaning, there is a *consensus about intentional actions*, which tells us what counts as such in a given society and what expectations we may entertain in their regard. On greeting a European friend we do not normally expect to have to respond to a *salaam*, nor is it wise to embrace an Englishman and kiss him on both cheeks. But at the level of 'utterance' meaning there is also a *consensus about the structure and function of language* which tends to preselect those utterances that are likely to be regarded as 'relevant' or 'interesting' or even 'valid' and 'true' in a given social context<sup>18</sup>. The existence of these mutually interacting consenses may be inferred indirectly from the fact — well known to those who have lived abroad! — that they not only vary from one society to another, but vary independently (an aspect which will be of interest in section 4): both acceptable ways of acting and the presuppositions of meaningful utterance have to be learned, in varying combinations, together with each foreign language.

<sup>15</sup> In this connection the German psychologist of language HANS HÖRMANN, *Meinen und Verstehen. Grundzüge einer psychologischen Semantik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978) 179—212, identifies a phenomenon he calls *Sinnkonstanz*, the ability to interpret successive utterances in a constant context of meaning, which he regards as the indispensable precondition of both linguistic theory and communicative practice.

<sup>16</sup> The *Instruktionsemantik* proposed by S. J. SCHMIDT, *Texttheorie. Probleme einer Linguistik der sprachlichen Kommunikation* (München: Fink, 1973) 56, is a case in point; for further detailed work along these lines see T. A. VAN DIJK, *Text and Context. Explorations in the Semantics and Pragmatics of Discourse* (London: Longman, 1977).

<sup>17</sup> I have attempted this much more elaborately than is possible here in two exploratory papers: J. MAY, "Consensus in Religion. An Essay in Fundamental Ecumenics", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 17 (1980) Nb. 3; and, together with my colleague HEINZ-GÜNTHER STOBBE, "Übereinstimmung und Handlungsfähigkeit. Zur Grundlage ökumenischer Konsensbildung und Wahrheitsfindung", PETER LENGSELD, ed., *Ökumenische Theologie. Ein Arbeitsbuch* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1980) 301—337.

<sup>18</sup> Some idea of what is involved here can be gleaned from the detailed phenomenological analyses of our 'everyday world' made by ALFRED SCHÜTZ, who spoke of socially sedimented 'typifications' of reality upon which we depend in order to determine 'relevance', cf. A. SCHÜTZ and T. LUCKMANN, *Strukturen der Lebenswelt* (Neuwied—Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1975) 186—240.



Other, perhaps surprising implications of this line of thought for our purposes in this essay have been sketched in a remarkable book by RAMCHANDRA GANDHI<sup>19</sup>. On the analogy of everyday, forensic or scientific uses of language we are accustomed to speak of the 'contents' of ethical and religious language as if these referred to some kind of ideal objects which existed in their own right. This may be acceptable as long as one remains within one's own cultural system of meaning, but it is a habit of mind which creates enormous difficulties in a situation of cultural pluralism. We are led to pit one religious claim against another, certain that only some of them — usually our own! — may legitimately be accepted as 'true'. Alternatively, we are tempted to abandon religious discourse altogether as irrational. GANDHI suggests that the supposed content of many religious, ethical and metaphysical concepts can be reconstructed by adverting to the communicative practices on which their meaning depends. The notion of the soul, for example, is already implicit in our use of the personal pronouns: "The ground of application of our idea of a soul is an act of addressing."<sup>20</sup> 'I' and 'you' do not merely refer like ordinary nouns; rather, their use signals the fulfilment of the conditions for interpersonal communication. Even in Buddhist texts expounding the doctrine of *anattā*, the use of the personal pronouns implies the assumption of individual persons exercising acts of initiative and will. GANDHI's attempt to reconstruct concepts such as 'immortality', 'God', 'good' and 'miracle' in the same way may leave him open to the charge of offering a projectionist account of religion in the sense criticised by FEUERBACH and FREUD, and I would prefer to leave open the question of whether what he thus accounts for pragmatically is not in fact the substantial soul or immortal *ātman* of traditional metaphysical systems but rather the socially constituted 'self' of modern behaviourism, but his original essay gives us a valuable hint which is worth following up.

I hope to have established the existence of what we might call a 'communicative milieu' in society, resting on a twofold consensus, coextensive with social life itself, about the range of intentional actions and their possible meanings when converted into linguistic utterance. Only those who participate in this milieu are capable of communicating at all. It is the indispensable matrix of all accounts of 'how the world is' or 'how we are to live', whether scientific or religious. Communication in this milieu has two main aspects, both of which are crucial to the analyses I shall shortly be attempting in section 4. The one we may call

<sup>19</sup> R. GANDHI, *The Availability of Religious Ideas* (London: Macmillan, 1976).

<sup>20</sup> GANDHI, *Ideas*, 5. In a closely argued paper delivered immediately after this one at the Sydney Conference and entitled "Can I Die? — An Essay in Religious Philosophy", Ian Kesarcodi-Watson of La Trobe University, Melbourne, also took up GANDHI's ideas and submitted them to a penetrating criticism which is reflected in the remarks which follow (now published in *Religions Studies* 16 [1980] 163—178).



'intention', the other 'reference' (which are not to be confused with CARNAPS purely semantic categories 'intension' and 'extension'; they are closer to, though not identical with, FREGES *Sinn und Bedeutung*). The first aspect has to do with the use of language in contexts involving situations and interpersonal relationships, and the discipline that studies it is known as 'pragmatics'. The second aspect, which depends on the first in order to produce 'meaning', has to do with the symbolic structure of signs and their possible relationships, and the discipline that studies it is known as 'semantics'. Together, these two aspects of communication explain how it is possible for us not only to refer successfully to states of affairs in immediate situations, for example in objecting to being unjustifiably booked by a traffic policeman, but to abstract the content of what was said from its original context of use, generalise it, and recommunicate it in other situations, for example in telling our family what happened on the way home. If I may be permitted to use these two pieces of linguistic shorthand from now on in the senses indicated, we may proceed to employ them in an analysis of two key religious texts about death. The argument of this section, though unavoidably rather abstract, will have served its purpose if it has warned us against taking the explicit and conflicting claims expressed in these texts too literally.

#### 4. *Making Sense of Death*

Having seen how we make sense of anything at all in the context of social life, and indeed how we allow ourselves to be convinced that there is any point in living on from day to day, it is now time to ask how we make sense of death. For death is a problem of a quite different order, a 'limiting' problem which threatens to demolish the whole social fabric of meaning we have just been considering. Whatever other factors may be involved in making sense of death, we are certainly thrown back upon the cultural traditions which have shaped our view of reality, and which we may expect to be based on some selection from or combination of the three models — duplication, fecundation and annihilation — discussed in section 2. Our hypothesis will be that these models somehow underlie the forms of speech and conduct by means of which men and women in different traditions come to terms with death, but that underlying them there may be even deeper sources of what we have called 'intentional action' which have more in common than the content of the various models might suggest.

The Christian and Buddhist traditions, as we saw, are widely divergent examples of uses to which the fecundation model has been put. Text (1) (*1 Thess 4:13 — 5:11*; see Appendix), probably written by St. Paul around 51 A.D. to his recently founded community in Thessalonica, is one of the earliest Christian texts. It has had a profound influence on Christian thinking about death through the ages. Though he later developed the teaching of this early letter in passages of greater theological density



(e. g. 2 *Thess* 1:6 — 2:12; 2 *Cor* 1:3—11, 4:7 — 5:10, 5:14—17; *Rom* 5:6 — 7:25 etc.), this early statement is of particular interest, for in the context of Paul's "afflictions" (3:3—5), suffered for the spread of the gospel, and the "instructions" (4:2) he had passed on to the young community, the central problem addressed here is that of the first deaths among Christians who fully expected the end of time to break in upon them at any moment. In an apocalyptic context such as this, with its overwrought eschatological expectancy, the occurrence of deaths required explanation, and in proceeding to give one — writing, it would seem, in some haste — Paul provides us with one of the first Christian accounts of death. It is significant for the pragmatics of the text that our interest in it cannot ignore its intensely historical frame of reference: in contrast to the Buddhist text we will shortly be considering, it was addressed to a very particular situation at a particular time.

Paul draws heavily not only on the already established teaching of faith about "the coming of the Lord" (4:15), through whom we "obtain salvation" (5:9), but also on the apocalyptic mythology prevalent at the time, with its bizarre but powerful imagery of the "trumpet of God" calling us to "meet the Lord in the air" (4:16—17). Paul's message, which is couched in quite vivid sets of contrasting metaphors (awake/asleep, day/night), is both insistent and closely argued. On closer inspection we see that the issue on which all turns is that of grief (4:13), the mention of which sets Paul's whole train of thought in motion and acts as a 'semantic instruction' indicating the problem which is going to set the immediate context for what follows.

The text is in fact one long exhortation "that you may not grieve" (4:13), and each of the two sections into which it naturally falls ends with a call to "comfort one another" (4:18) and "build one another up" (5:11). While a series of insistent imperatives leads up to the second exhortation ("let us keep awake", 5:6; "let us be sober", 5:8), the first is prefaced by an explicit utterance of Christian faith possessing what linguists call 'illocutionary force' because it commits Paul and his co-religionists to that faith, and from this basis he immediately constructs his argument: "For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep" (4:14). This argumentative structure is repeated as the conclusion of the second part of the text (5:9—10). This 'commissive' use of propositions about Jesus and God is the basis on which Paul proceeds to make a series of pronouncements on possible states of affairs whose occurrence he regards as absolutely certain (cf. the great number of verbs in the future tense, which in the jargon of speech act theory would express 'verdictives', because uttering judgements and predictions, though in this context they also include 'behabitives', expressing an underlying state of hoping), arguing tenaciously all the time (cf. the large number of particles in the syntax which signal argumentative intent: "since . . . even so", "through", "in", "therefore", "When . . .



then", "For . . . but, since . . .", "so that whether . . . or", etc.). Narrative structures, which serve as vehicles for the commitment of faith, are interwoven with argumentative structures which apply that faith to the problem at hand.

Another significant aspect of Paul's diction is the frequent use of the first and second personal pronouns. The text is an intensive dialogue between "we" (Paul and his fellow-Christians) and "you" (the wavering Thessalonican community). It is thus highly personalised, even strident, in tone. The pragmatics of the text are determined by the struggle of a powerful personality to stem the tide of extreme eschatological enthusiasm which is in danger of surging back towards its opposite, the despair of those "who have no hope" (4:13). This unambiguous expression of intention overlies a superficially less obvious but pragmatically more important attempt to shape an attitude towards death such as would obviate grief. The motivation proposed by Paul to support this attitude may be deduced from the semantics of the text, which are much less coherent than its pragmatics. Various levels of symbolism, each in itself highly diversified and complex, are mixed almost indiscriminately, to our more discerning eye at least: theological, mythological, metaphorical, factual. What I hope I will be pardoned for calling the 'pragmasemantic' unity of the text, which is instrumental in determining its 'meaning', stems from its unhesitating recourse to a particular death which is invested with transcendent significance, that of him "who died for us so that . . . we might live with him" (5:10), which banishes our ignorance "concerning those that are asleep" (4:13).

Turning now to text (2) (*Sutta-Nipāta* III,8; see Appendix), we enter a palpably different, almost ahistorical world. Though it may be fairly late as a compilation, the text contains sayings which echo the earliest Buddhist tradition. In order to appreciate the pragmatics involved it is important to realise that the teaching contained in the text is usually presented in the form of encounters in which the Buddha consoles the bereaved — if 'consolation' is the word for his stringent precepts! (cf. *Udāna* II, 7; VIII, 8; *Samy.* III, 3, 2; III, 2, 10; LV, 21; also *Ang.* III, 35 on age (*jara*), disease (*vyādhī*) and death (*maraṇa*) as the „messengers of the gods", i. e. signs pointing to the transitoriness of existence). Instead of St Paul's insistent appeals to believe and hope, however, we find a subtle combination of contrasting 'illocutionary' forces. Negative value judgements ('verdictives') along the lines of v. 574 ("How insignificant is man's lot here . . . fraught with ill!") or v. 585 ("Fruitless is woe!") are counterbalanced by v. 593 ("Who draws the dart wins calm of mind not based on trust", i. e. on 'clinging' to this life). But we also find universal statements ('constatives') about the inevitability of death, sometimes expressed by the negative prefix ("There is no means whereby man shall not die", v. 575), sometimes by the universal quantifier



("death is for all the common lot", v. 578; *sabbe*, 'all', occurs three times in vv. 577—578).

These syntactic attributes structure the logical framework within which the semantics of the text may be understood. Semantically, the text is constructed around an opposition between 'this life' (*idha jīvitam*, vv. 574, 589) and 'y o n world' (v. 579; these are known as 'deictic' or 'indexical' expressions). Far from trying to portray life beyond the grave as an attractive alternative to life here, the text concentrates on the unpleasant aspects of earthly life, assuming that release from this will bring "calm of mind" (vv. 584, 593), although no attempt is made to define the nature or content of such a state (cf. v. 582!). Within this syntactic-semantic framework of universal statements and clear alternatives, essential Buddhist teachings are brought to bear: the "ill" of existence in this world (*dukkha* in vv. 574, 584, 586); the futility of preoccupation with the "self" (*attano* in vv. 583, 585, 592); the claim that "men pass according to their deeds" (*kammā*, cf. v. 587). This subtle combination of a particular 'view' of the world with indubitable statements of universal fact motivates the text's invitation to "see" (*passa*, imperative) the evidence of human woe (vv. 580, 587, 588), which is gently rhetorical compared with the apodictic appeals of St Paul. The only explicit utterance in the text with 'exhortative' illocutionary force ("oust grief!", v. 590) is in fact couched in the optative (*vineyya paridevitaṃ*). Even more prominently than in *Thessalonians*, the problem addressed in the *Sallasutta* is that of grief; the text could fairly be described as a carefully reasoned antidote to mourning.

The implied use of the second person pronoun in these utterances is so indirect that it affects the pragmatics of the text: a quite different relationship between the 'speaker' and the 'listeners' is established from that created by St Paul's compelling personal style (we may imagine a *bhikkhu* 'preaching *dhamma*', i. e. reciting and commenting on the text for the edification of layfolk, as I was privileged to witness in Sri Lanka). The text is a restrained invitation to see matters in this world of experience and indubitable fact with respect to the self and death in the manner represented in its semantics, which reflect the main points of Buddhist teaching. The way to achieve this new point of view is delicately suggested by the neat paradox of v. 592: "Whoever seeks his own happiness, let him draw out the dart" (i. e. "laments, vain longings, and pains caused by self") "himself" (threefold use of *attano*).

We have now seen in some detail examples of two variants of the fecundation model for making sense of death. A more complete semantic analysis of these variants would have to show how the Christian approach — paradoxically, in view of its explicit morality — has drawn quite heavily on the basically 'sexual' symbolism of fertility, transposing it into the victory of life out of sacrificial and redemptive death in the eucharist and out of rebirth in the 'maternal' waters of baptism, which



symbolise death,<sup>21</sup> whereas the Buddhist framework of *karman-samsāra* (rebirth according to one's deeds into a new temporal existence) rests on a sort of 'cosmic' involvement in the process of birth-of-death in the natural order, from which we are to free ourselves radically and, as it were, empirically. As statements about the world, our existence in it and our destiny these two symbolic systems conflict irreconcilably.

But the pragmatic potential of these alternative versions of the fecundation model is not only highly suggestive; at a fundamental level, underlying differences related to communication in the respective contexts, it is also remarkably similar. Each model led to the development of what me might call therapeutic rituals for mastering the overwhelming experience of death, the one, for example, in the form of the medieval practices which issued in the *Artes moriendi* of the Baroque period, the other in Buddhist serenity in the face of death (even to the extent of condoning suicide in cases of proven holiness), an attitude reflected in the Bardo Thödol (roughly, 'Guide to the Intermediate State', i.e. between life and release) of Tibetan Buddhism. This suggestion, that the differences between the two variants, as evidenced in our texts, seem least important on the level of use, I should like to take up in a concluding summary of my argument.

##### 5. Conclusion: 'Making Sense of Death' as Communicative Practice

Generalising from our observations in section 4 on the basis of our reflections in section 3, we may conclude that in order to grasp what death is and what it is going to 'mean' to us, we not only need some particular symbolic schema (even an Existentialist like SARTRE has a quite explicit 'mythology'!) but, even more importantly, the assurance that this schema is firmly anchored in the cultural matrix of consensus in terms of which we 'give meaning to' the simplest actions of our daily lives. Being necessarily concrete, such schemata or symbol systems will be several in number and may thus be logically opposed to one another in what they 'state' about our final destiny: the one says 'resurrection of the body', later elaborated to imply 'in heaven or hell'; the other says 'rebirth in the cosmic round or *nirvāṇa* beyond individual personality'.<sup>22</sup>

I believe it follows from what we have seen in this paper that such conflicting symbolic schemata on the 'semantic' level are by no means

<sup>21</sup> Cf. MORIN, *L'homme et la mort*, 129—147.

<sup>22</sup> For a pioneering and surprisingly little noticed treatment of the logical issues involved see WILLIAM A. CHRISTIAN, *Oppositions of Religious Doctrines. A Study in the Logic of Dialogue Among Religions* (London: Macmillan, 1972). An attempt to mediate at a more semantic and text-analytical level between Buddhist denials of individuality and Christian assertions of *pneuma* as a principle of communality will be found in LYNN A. DE SILVA, *The Problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity* (London: Macmillan, 1979).



all that we need in order to come to terms with death, nor are they all that religions, great and small, have to offer us. The evidence we have seen for a 'pragmatic base' underlying the articulation of different views of man's final destiny in different contexts in the examples considered above would seem to suggest that, if more attention were paid to the *communicative practice* of attempts to 'make sense of death', new ground could be broken not only in the study of religions, but also in the development of psychologically responsible therapies designed to help even the citizens of Western societies face the primal fact of death. No doubt because of the ways in which our various disciplines are institutionalised in universities, we find scholars either opposing their own symbolic schema to those of others (in theology and its equivalents) or comparing the contents of several on the neutral ground of phenomenology (in religious studies).

Both pursuits are necessary. But if pragmatics were firmly established as a discipline within linguistics, and if techniques were thus available to the study of religion for concentrating on what we might call the 'communicative abilities' cultivated in religious communities and sedimented in the pragmatic 'deep structures' of traditional texts and practices, an enormous field of empirical investigation and experimentation might be opened up for religious anthropology. For the 'communicative practice' developed in one's relationships with others in the course of a lifetime, which is put to its final test in the face of the irrevocable breakdown of all communication at the hour of death, has always needed specifically religious environments in order to mature.<sup>23</sup> These include the archaic symbolic schemata, rooted in the evolutionary constitution of our nature, which have been handed down to us in the various religious traditions and on which we are inescapably thrown back when called upon to talk about death — our death, or that of those near to us or of those for whom we are responsible, which ultimately includes all mankind. In a quite fundamental sense these traditions are all we have: we cannot simply start from scratch and hope to develop effective 'thanatologies' and corresponding therapies *ab ovo*.

But we could look more closely at the ways in which, say, African societies live in and from an uninterrupted dialogue with their dead. The Swiss anthropologist JEAN ZIEGLER was able to study such societies, still intact despite the upheavals of transportation and slavery, under the conditions of their Brazilian exile.<sup>24</sup> He found a unity of symbolic schema and social practice, reflected in the African saying "Man is the medicine of man", which we have lost. We cannot regain it by returning to the past as a haven of refuge; but by using the tools of the human sciences in a way which does justice to the profound significance

<sup>23</sup> Not long after delivering this paper, I was privileged to be able to experience how such environments still survive residually while assisting at my father's death in a small country hospital in Australia.

<sup>24</sup> J. ZIEGLER, *Les vivants et la mort* (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 1975).



of religion for culture, we may be able to learn important lessons about how to shape a new communicative practice for life and death in the anonymous, impersonal wasteland created by our technological mentality behind the glittering façade of Western culture.

*Appendix: The Texts for Analysis*

*TEXT (1): 1 Thess 4:13 — 5:11 (RSV)*

- 4:13 But we would not have you ignorant<sup>1</sup>, brethren, concerning those who are asleep<sup>2</sup>, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.
- 14 For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again<sup>3</sup>, even so, through Jesus<sup>4</sup>, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.
- 15 For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming<sup>5</sup> of the Lord, shall not precede<sup>6</sup> those who have fallen asleep.
- 16 For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise<sup>7</sup> first;
- 17 then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord.<sup>8</sup>
- 18 Therefore comfort<sup>9</sup> one another with these words.
- 5:1 But as to the times and the seasons<sup>10</sup>, brethren, you have no need to have anything written to you.
- 2 For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.
- 3 When people say, "There is peace and security", then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape.
- 4 But you are not in darkness, brethren, for that day to surprise you like a thief.
- 5 For you are all sons of light and sons of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness.
- 6 So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.
- 7 For those who sleep sleep night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night.
- 8 But, since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *agnoein*

<sup>2</sup> *koimōnēnōn*, from *koimāō*, make to sleep; here 'die'. See vv. 14, 15; 1 Cor 15:6, 18

<sup>3</sup> *anéstē*, from *an-istamai*, rise again; used here only (see v. 16)

<sup>4</sup> *diá*, implying 'union with'

<sup>5</sup> *parousía*, presence, coming (of ruler)

<sup>6</sup> *phthásōmen*, from *phthánō*, forestall

<sup>7</sup> *anastēsontai*, will rise

<sup>8</sup> *sùn Kyríō esómetha*

<sup>9</sup> *parakaleite*

<sup>10</sup> *chrónoi, kairoi*; could mean 'appointed times'

<sup>11</sup> *písteōs kai agápēs kai perikephalaian elpída sōtērias*



- 9 For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,  
 10 who died for us so that whether<sup>12</sup> we wake<sup>13</sup> or sleep<sup>14</sup> we might live with him.  
 11 Therefore encourage<sup>15</sup> one another and build one another up<sup>16</sup>, just as you are doing.

<sup>12</sup> *ton apothanóntos perì hēmōn, hina eíte . . .*, for us, so that . . .

<sup>13</sup> *grēgorōmen*, vigilant

<sup>14</sup> *katheúdōmen*, asleep, here 'dead'

<sup>15</sup> *parakaleíte*

<sup>16</sup> *oikodomeíte*

TEXT (2): *Sutta-Nipāta III, 8 (Sallasutta, "The Dart Sutta") (PTS 112—114)*

- 574 How insignificant<sup>1</sup> is man's<sup>2</sup> lot here,  
 How brief, obscure, how troubled, fraught with ill!<sup>3</sup>  
 575 There is no means whereby man shall not die:  
 Death follows on decay: such is life's course.<sup>4</sup>  
 576 The early ripening fruit hazards<sup>5</sup> the fall:  
 Ever death's hazard<sup>5</sup> haunts the lives of men.  
 577 Just as the potter's earthen vessels end  
 In shards, so too man's life. Young and mature,  
 578 The fool and sage, come all within the power  
 Of death: death is for all the common lot;<sup>6</sup>  
 579 And of death's victims passing to yon world<sup>7</sup>  
 No father saves his son, no kith his kin.  
 580 See! while they crowd and gaze and weep, their kin  
 Are one by one, as ox to slaughter, borne.  
 581 Thus smitten is the world by eld and death,  
 The wise world-plight<sup>8</sup> discern, lamenting not.  
 582 Thou knowest not the 'whence' or 'whither' way  
 And, seeing neither course, grieve<sup>9</sup> in vain.  
 583 If one by grief and foolish self-affliction  
 Could ease<sup>10</sup> his pain, the wise would surely do't.  
 584 One wins not calm of mind by tears and grief;  
 Ill<sup>11</sup> grows the more; the body languishes  
 585 And lean and pale becomes; self hurts the self;  
 The dead are not helped thus: fruitless is woe!

<sup>1</sup> *animitta*, causeless, groundless

<sup>2</sup> *maccānaṃ* (Skt. *martya*), mortal, here and in ff. 'man'

<sup>3</sup> *dukkhena*

<sup>4</sup> *evaṃdhammā hi pāṇino*, lit. 'such is the nature of breathing things'

<sup>5</sup> *bhayaṃ*, fear, danger

<sup>6</sup> *sabbe maccu-parāyamā*, aim, refuge, resort, here: 'all men are destined for';  
*sabbe* repeated twice in vv. 577—578

<sup>7</sup> *paralokato*

<sup>8</sup> *loka-pariyāyam*, lit. turning, succession, here 'course of the world'; cf. v. 588

<sup>9</sup> *paridevasi*

<sup>10</sup> *ud-abbahe*, pull out; cf. v. 592, where the word is used of the dart

<sup>11</sup> *dukkhaṃ*



- 586 Who yields to grief the deeper sinks in ill:  
 Who wails the dead falls further in grief's power.  
 587 See how men pass according to their deeds;<sup>12</sup>  
 How, come within death's power, folk tremble here!  
 588 Men hope for this and that but other things  
 Befall: just thus is separation. See  
 589 The world's plight! For a hundred years or more  
 A man may live, but separation comes  
 From kith and kin: then he too leaves this life.  
 590 Since thou hast heard the man-of-worth,<sup>13</sup> oust grief;  
 Seeing one dead and gone, know him as lost!<sup>14</sup>  
 591 As fire of burning house by water's quenched,<sup>15</sup>  
 So seer-of-sooth, wise man, rapt, expert, swiftly  
 As wind-blown cotton seed, scatters grief's surge.  
 592 Who seeks self-happiness<sup>16</sup> from self draws out<sup>17</sup>  
 The dart: laments, vain longings, pains self-bred<sup>18</sup>.  
 593 Who draws the dart wins calm of mind not based  
 On trust,<sup>19</sup> and, grief o'ercome,<sup>20</sup> is griefless,<sup>21</sup> cool.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *yathakammūpage*

<sup>13</sup> *arahato sūtvā*

<sup>14</sup> 'na so labhā mayā', lit. 'he is no longer obtainable, accessible to me'

<sup>15</sup> *parinibbāye*

<sup>16</sup> *attano sukham esāno*

<sup>17</sup> *abbahe sallam*

<sup>18</sup> *attano*

<sup>19</sup> *a-sito*, lit. 'not bound'

<sup>20</sup> *sabbasokaṃ atikkanto*

<sup>21</sup> *asoko*

<sup>22</sup> *nibbuto*, blown out, released

### Zusammenfassung

Der Aufsatz geht von einem in westlichen Gesellschaften spürbaren Unvermögen aus, über den Tod — vor allem den eigenen — zu reden. Nach einigen Überlegungen zur Stellung des Todes im Prozeß der Evolution werden drei Modelle vorgestellt, die allen kulturellen Entwürfen zur symbolischen Bewältigung des Todes zugrundeliegen: „Verdoppelung“, „Befruchtung“ und „Vernichtung“. Auf dieser Grundlage wird das soziale „kommunikative Milieu“ untersucht, in dem wir in Form eines Konsenses auf mehreren Ebenen einen Lebenssinn gemeinsam „konstruieren“. Aber wie bezieht sich dieser auf die „Grenzfrage“ Tod? Beim Versuch, einer Antwort näherzukommen, werden je ein Text aus der frühen buddhistischen und christlichen Tradition nach semantischen und vor allem pragmatischen Gesichtspunkten analysiert. Als Ergebnis stellt sich heraus, daß diese Texte, obwohl die ihnen zugrundeliegenden symbolischen Entwürfe semantisch stark voneinander abweichen, Ähnlichkeiten aufweisen auf der Ebene einer „pragmatischen Tiefenstruktur“, die bei der Erarbeitung von zeitgemäßen Verhaltensweisen angesichts des Todes brauchbar sein dürften. Am Ende wird auf die Notwendigkeit einer dem Tode angemessenen „kommunikativen Praxis“ abgehoben.