§1

It is said that when Socrates was to be put to death, everyone present began to weep for the great man that the world would soon lose—not even the executioner could hold back tears. Yet when Socrates saw this, he sharply rebuked his friends: “What is this, you strange fellows. … I am told one should die in good omened silence. So keep quiet and control yourselves.” (117d-e). Reprimanded, they felt ashamed and quietly checked their tears.

Philosophers are legendary for having queer attitudes towards death, and this seems to be no exception. We are accustomed to think of death as a sorrowful fact, so why in the world did Socrates tell his friends not to grieve for him? What reasons did the pre-eminent man of reason have to rebuke them for their tears? In the conversations he has before taking his fatal quaff, Socrates seems to produce many arguments, all to support a single conclusion: do not mourn me, friends, because death is nothing fearful, and I will not be harmed by it.

_I will not be harmed by death_—a provocative claim, and one that we will examine in due time. But even if it is true, is this a _reason for my friends_ not to mourn my death? It
may be that I am not harmed by my death. But whether I am or not—what about them?
No matter what arguments we give concerning how death is for the person who dies, none of it tells us how it is for those who are left behind to mourn.

§2
Socrates was certainly not alone in this curious maneuver. More or less everyone will think, first and foremost, of their own deaths when the issue of mortality is raised. The simple fact is that I am a mortal being who dwells in a world for an uncertain span of days—my death looms before me as the most certain and final fact in the entire world. My death is also the most incomprehensible of mysteries—the complete extinction of my whole world. And finally, the pre-eminent fact of my mortality is part of the very essence of my life as a human being. The fact of my own eventual death is embedded in the fact of my dwelling in time, and without it, I simply could not live as a human in the world.

The philosophers, when discussing death, have largely limited themselves to questions of exactly this sort: death of the self, by the self, and for the self. This tendency was limiting enough in Socrates or in Epicurus—but we moderns, with our ethical starting points still mired in the dank fens of Hobbesian moral psychology, have elevated it from a bad tendency to a pervasive methodology. Even those of us who fiercely reject Hobbes’s vision of human being as the ruthless pursuit of the self’s narcissistic desires, still generally begin from considerations only of how it is with the
self and its desires. As a result, the modern meditations on mortality—such as those following the reflections of Heidegger or of Nagel—exist within a horizon of questions which is narrowed to the point of ethical solipsism.

Certainly, the problems relating to my death are important problems—and there is much fruitful work to be done within the horizons of such inquiries. Nevertheless, there are certainly other questions to be asked about death than what we have so far allowed. In particular, we may return to Socrates’ death. Whatever Socrates’s death would be for Socrates, what would it be for his friends? How should they feel and how should they react? The one great exception to philosophy’s silence on such questions are the Hellenistic and Roman Stoics, who wrote on mourning extensively, and whose arguments frequently decked out the Consolatio letters that became part of the literary fabric of life and death for aristocratic Romans. Let us follow their lead—in instead of obsessing about my death, let us think on other people’s deaths. This will take us into the generalized question of mourning:

1. **What will it mean for other people when I die, and what does it mean for me when other people die?**

2. **How should we deal with the death of other people?**

These are questions which are interesting and important in their own right—for all of us who live in a community with others will face the deaths of other people. In addition to this, however, they can also cast a surprising amount of light on our essential condition as mortals who dwell in the world. When I consider the nature of my mortality, the fact...
of my death is certainly a pre-eminent consideration. But even if I faced no death—if some god granted me world enough and time for an everlasting youth, I would still be confronted with another face of mortality: even if I live forever, everyone and everything that I will ever care for or value, will eventually decay and die. As Seneca eloquently frames it in his Ad Polybium:

For what that mortal hands have made is ever immortal? The seven wonders of the world and all the works, far more wonderful than these, that the ambition of later years has reared, will some day be seen levelled to the ground. So it is—nothing is everlasting, few things are even long-lasting; one thing perishes in one way, another in another, though the manner of their passing varies, yet whatever has a beginning also has an end.

§3

Our ordinary intuition is that the death of someone you love—as Socrates was loved by Phaedo and Crito—is a terrible evil, and one which merits a great deal of grief. Why, then, is it an evil for Phaedo and Crito that Socrates has died?

There are two ways which immediately suggest themselves. First, Socrates provides a great many pleasures and rewards to Phaedo and Crito, and death permanently deprives them of these pleasures. Every friendship that I have with someone I love brings its own attendant rewards—whether this means conversations, caresses, learning, companionship, steadfast support, gifts, or anything else. The exact character of the rewards depends on the exact character of the friendship, but if I truly loved the deceased, there will always be some benefits that I had enjoyed while she was
alive—and these are now gone, forever. And the loss of good things is certainly a reason for grief.

The immediate harm to the friends helps explain a bit of the intense suffering that surrounds the death of a loved one. But it is far from enough on its own. If it were only a matter of satisfying narcissistic satisfactions, then the suffering could easily be assuaged simply by aggressively seeking out new friends to provide these pleasures. But if I simply ceased to care about my dead friend as soon as I had found a new friend who provided just as many rewards, surely I would be acting viciously. The loss of Socrates is not merely a frustration to his followers—but also a terrible evil to befall Socrates himself. And Phaedo loves Socrates, then Socrates’ well-being is a constitutive part of the good life for Phaedo, and surely Phaedo am harmed wherever and whenever Socrates is harmed—just because he is harmed. When Socrates dies, those who are left behind mourn his passing, because death is a terrible thing for him, and it so it is a terrible thing for them too.

At this point, of course, we have veered back into the egocentric way of discussing death. How is it that we can say that death is an evil for the person who dies, when it seems that when a person dies there is no-one left to suffer the evil? This is the objection famously made by Epicurus, and repeated by Stoics such as Cicero. If death is the definitive and permanent end of a person’s existence—at least, her existence as a human being—then there is no person who can be said to be suffering an evil when she
is dead. As Epicurus writes, *Where we are, death is not; and where death is, we are not.* And if we are not there, then the attempt to attribute some harm from death to the dead person, inevitably fails.

In response to Epicurus and Cicero, we may appeal to the account given by Thomas Nagel in “Death.” When a person dies, there is indeed nothing left to suffer an evil—a dead person is no more a person than a counterfeit diamond is a diamond. Nevertheless, a dead person *was* a person. And from this we can say that there *was* something which suffers death. We can say, then, that although Socrates suffered death *after* he was alive, there is nothing that existed *after* he alive which suffered it—rather, *he* suffers it, safe at home in his own duration of the past. The only trouble this raises is that there are some truths about a thing that exists at a time *t*, without them being truths about what goes on at *t*. But this should not be surprising: although death is an evil, it is not an evil of which Socrates has suffered more than Shakespeare; rather, death is a property which reaches forward from the moment of death into eternity all at once, rather then being stretched out over specific whens.

However, while this move allows us to say that death is bad, it also allows us—just as easily—to argue that death is good. What arguments will decide the way here? Socrates himself offered a famous argument that “Death Is One of Two Things,” and either of them would be good. Since death is the separation of the soul from the body, one of two things happens: either the soul dissipates into nothing, or else it migrates
elsewhere while remaining intact. If it migrates to the halls of the dead, we will have the opportunity to meet with all the great heroes of world history—perhaps even to continue conversations about the nature of things for all eternity. And what greater blessing could there be than this? And if death is nothingness, then it would be pure oblivion—like a dreamless sleep for all eternity. And what would be a more pleasant way to spend eternity than in undisturbed slumber? In both cases, death will be good. And if death is good for the person who dies, then her friends may have other reasons to mourn the loss they suffer when she dies, but they have no reasons to mourn on behalf of the dying person herself.

This dilemma will not be treated at length here; suffice it to make two comments. First, Socrates alleges that annihilation would be the best way to spend eternity, since it would be like a dreamless sleep. And it probably is the best way to spend eternity—but what about the next five minutes? Or five years? Or any finite period of time you care to select? There are myriad goods just in existing and being aware of the world, which are far superior to being oblivious for a long period of time. Socrates’ preference for annihilation over activity in the world may be evidence for Nietzsche’s allegations of decadence. Second: death is not one of two things. Death is the undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveller returns. We do not and cannot know whether the soul dissipates, migrates to heaven, migrates to hell, lingers as a ghost, or what have you.
The important thing, however, is that there is one thing which we are certain that death is: death is the permanent and definitive end of human life among mortals in the world. No matter what happens when we die, it will mean leaving behind everything we have ever known or cared about and permanent withdrawal from everyone we love. Even if it turns out that our reward for abandoning them is complete blessedness in heaven, this will still only justify bittersweet feelings towards death, not unmixed joy. And this, I believe, is a good prima facie reason to consider death a terrible evil to the person who dies—and thus a terrible evil for those who are left behind who loved the deceased.

§4
If Phaedo and Crito have good prima facie reasons to see the death of Socrates as a bad thing—because of the frustrations for them and the harm to Socrates—then it seems that these are good reasons to mourn Socrates’ death.

I have said that the Stoics have gone before us in writing on the topic of mourning; unfortunately they have written badly on it. We have asked what another person’s death is to us, and we have concluded that there are prima facie reasons for regarding it as a bad thing. The Stoics, for their part, disagree. We may, then, ask: is it rational to mourn other people’s deaths?
The constant refrain that we find in Cicero, Epictetus, Seneca, and other Stoic writers on consolation is a claim that mourning is irrational because to mourn is to place an irrational demand on the natural order—to wish that we could be free from effects that befall us with absolute necessity. Epictetus alleges that a person who grieves for dead loved is “foolish if you want your children and wife to live forever, since you are wanting things that are not up to you, and things to be yours that are not yours.” Since all that lives must die, it is a foolish act of impertinence to ask that your loved ones not die. Instead, you should cherish the goods they bring while they are with you, and you should reflect on the universality and necessity of death in order to understand that you have not lost anything that you should have desired to have.

The core of this argument, however, lies in a modal fallacy. It is necessary that all things are mortal. And it is necessary that there was some time at which Socrates would die. It would be irrational to ask of the universe that Socrates live on into eternity. But to leave the matter at this is to be confused about just what we mourn when we mourn the death of Socrates. The evil is not that Socrates is mortal—for all men are mortal. The evil is that he died when he did. Though there is necessarily some time at which Socrates would die, it was not necessary that he die at the time that he did: if he had not been sentenced to death, for example, he would have lived out a longer life. What would be the good in living out a longer life? Well, that much is simple: it would be good for
Socrates—who would still be alive—and it would be good for his friends—who would still have the benefit of his conversations.

This may seem a bit odd. Is it true that when we mourn a person’s death, we do not mourn their mortality as such, but only the fact that they didn’t die later? I think that we can say this without doing violence to our intuitions about mourning. Universal mortality is not a mournful fact—because without death there is no time, and without time there are no humans dwelling in the world. What is mournful are the contingent losses that the necessity of death imposes upon us. One such loss is the loss of Socrates. And Socrates’s death would not stop being an occasion for mourning, no matter how long he lived. There are no possible worlds in which Socrates lives forever, but for any given time that Socrates dies in one possible world, there is another possible world in which he lived a while longer—and therefore we have reason to mourn that he did not live out that possible length of time, even if he has lived for a hundred years so far. Death is always a closing off of possibilities for future good, no matter when a person dies, and so it is always an occasion for mourning.

Once we have made this distinction, we see that the Stoic argument has committed a fallacy of distributed necessity—assuming that because it is necessary that some time was the time of Socrates’s death, therefore it must be necessary that he died at the specific time that he did. The argument then uses this spurious connexion to refer us back to meditation on the original premise—the universality of death—as a source of
consolation. But when we have seen how this goes wrong, we may begin to see that the Stoic advice is not just fallacious—it is sinful, and unjust to the deceased. Cicero praises a horrifying act of the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaxagoras, who, when he was told that his son had died, only said, calmly: “I knew my son was mortal.” Such an indifference to the death of one’s own son—from philosophical scruple or not—can only be considered depraved. Once the Stoic has referred us to the fact of universal suffering from contemplation, he has gotten us to abstract away from the particular fact that Socrates died today—and thus he has gotten us to ignore the very particularity that make it a terrible loss. Universal mortality is not mournful, but if Socrates died today, that is mournful, and to deny this is to deny the very particularity that makes Socrates a human being. The abstracted view of mortality sub specie aeternitatis removes us from everything we care for, and if we ignore the unique, irreducible, and inconsolable loss from Socrates dying when he died, then we have committed a crime against Socrates and against our own humanity.

§5

We may say, then, that it is rational to mourn for the dead. Indeed, the question that should arise to us now is not whether it is rational to start mourning, but rather: Is it ever rational to stop mourning the dead? In everyday practice, we take this for granted—there is a time and a place to stop mourning, and to re-enter life again. But will this kind of forgetting mean an injustice to the person who has died?
On Cicero’s account, this belief gives us a good argument against mournfulness. If Crito is consumed with sorrow a week after the death of Socrates, but a year later he does not feel so strongly, then surely the fact that we have come out of mourning cannot merely be the result of “the long lapse of time” — for Socrates is just as dead as he ever was, and “if the circumstances are the same, and the person is the same, how can there be any change in the grief felt?” Cicero, then, urges us that the cause for the eventual cessation of grief is a process of reflection. We are overwhelmed by irrational feelings when the death is directly upon us, but over time we are able to reflect in our minds on the fact of universal mortality — and eventually able to reconcile ourselves to the fact that it holds sway, even for those we love. And, indeed, it would follow — Cicero claims — that we ought to do everything we can to hasten the process of holding down our grief. And Crito’s comforters ought to do what they can to encourage him to appreciate how he will feel a year hence — and to begin feeling that way as soon as possible.

If Cicero appeals only to the future equilibrium state that we will settle in eventually, then the argument is farcical. After all, in the long run, we are all dead, but that doesn’t mean that Crito should hasten that outcome. Cicero’s argument will have to appeal to an intrinsic cognitive value to the suppression of mourning: subordination of mourning to contemplation of universal mortality is the right conclusion to hold, and if it will be the right conclusion to make a year from now, it will also be the right was also
the right conclusion to make now. But if what has gone before is right, then universal mortality is no proper consolation at all. If Cicero is right that coming out of grief always involves subordinating the particular death to the fact of universal mortality, then coming out of grief is a vicious process. Based on what has gone so far, since Socrates will not be any less dead a year hence, Crito has no right at all to ever move beyond the overwhelming bereavement he felt when Socrates first died.

This should be a clue that what has gone so far is not a complete accounting of how it is—and I submit that it is not. The discussion thus far has focused on two ways in which we can mourn for those who die—both of them quite important, but neither of them sufficient. Mourning the loss of personal satisfactions can explain part of Crito or Phaedo’s intense suffering at the death of Socrates, but it cannot explain the persistence of their mourning or the unique value that they assign to Socrates. Mourning the evil that has befallen Socrates can explain the lingering hurt that they feel simply because he has died, but it cannot explain why their mourning can eventually recede from the intensity it once had. But something else remains—neither on the first person side of the ledger, nor on the third person side of the ledger, but rather in a unique second person connexion between Socrates and his friends—a friendship—an I-Thou relationship between them. They live in community with one another in which they encounter each other and address each other as “You.” What is the nature of such a connexion, and how is it related to the question of mourning?
In space of I-Thou, we encounter each other and participate in a space of unfolding possibilities. Because the I-Thou relationship is defined by this unfolding space of possibilities, each relationship is utterly and irreducibly unique. There is no rule that unites all of them in one essential protocol; they are only linked by the common principle of genuine encounter. Each has its own language of intimacy—whether in idle talk, play, music, caresses, debate, or any of the other myriad ways of encounter. In the encounter of Socrates and Crito, they create between them, and actualize, new ways of being towards one another, and towards the world, through conversation, through learning, through stories. Together, they make possible the gracious acts they can perform, the discoveries they can have, the jokes and plays that they can share—through interaction, they unfold a space within which possible worlds become available to them—in which they make the possibilities for who each of them can be, what virtues they can manifest, what projects they can incorporate.

Here we can begin to see how the death of Socrates, for Crito, marks an utterly unique and inconsolable tragedy—something to be mourned. Socrates himself once contrasted reading a book to talking with a philosopher in person: the book can address the reader, but the reader cannot address it; the questions that you ask, it cannot hear—and so it cannot open up to the possibilities raised in your questions. And since death is the definitive and final closing of the space of possibilities for interaction, this means that it is a final closing of the relationship between Socrates and Crito. There are no
more continuing dialogues, no more questioning, no more interaction. Through memory, Crito can come back to be addressed by Socrates again, but when Crito addresses Socrates, Socrates cannot hear or respond. With the death of one partner, the possibilities for the unfolding between I and Thou are narrowed and fixed. With this deadening of possibilities, the relationship recedes into the It-world.

Now the essential character of entering I-Thou with the deceased Socrates becomes mournful. To try to address Socrates is to feel the presence of his absence. The obligations I have towards him become the obligations of the mourner—respect and care for his projects, remembrance, and a grief and quiet humility before the infinite gulf that has opened in the closing of the I-Thou. In the first days of overwhelming grief the immediacy of the death forces this present absence upon us—commands us to act mournfully and to feel grief—it forces us to relate to a dead man in the only way we can.

But now it also seems that the very fact that makes it rational for us to mourn in the I-Thou mode, is also the fact that makes it rational for us to eventually withdraw from mourning in the I-Thou mode. An I-Thou relationship which is closed by death recedes into the actuality of the It-world. The possibilities for encounter are narrowed—Socrates can no longer seek Crito out, and Crito can no longer find Socrates except in memories and traces of his past existence. Since mournfulness occurs as the mode of
encounter between Crito and the dead Socrates, the mournfulness also recedes as the relationship between them recedes.

This does not, however, mean that encounter and friendship—and thus mourning—ever completely die with the death of the friend. In idle moments, Crito will still find his mind turned towards Socrates through the infinite chaos that separates them. He may still come back time and again to encounter Socrates through his life—consulting Socrates’ wisdom, remembering his wit, carrying out his desires. Nevertheless, the complete presence of a relationship severed by death is simply not a possible way to live. Crito will live out most of his life relating to Socrates as a fixed actuality in the past, rather than as a closed encounter with a dead man. But when he does have call to return again to Socrates, he owes Socrates the same mourning that he has always owed him. Re-encountering Socrates always happens, so to speak, dressed in black.

Each of the three types of loss plays its role in our response to death and its meaning to us. For each of the three types of loss there is an appropriate way of mourning—none of which can be allayed by facile appeals to the fact of mortality. However, while we remain fixated on the division of the world into the self and the world of surrounding things—the first person and the third person—we will not discover the all-important ties that bind together beyond the momentary frustration of desire and the lingering ache of loss. When we recognize the importance of the space of
I and Thou, the question of mourning begins to take on the tone of oracular pronouncements, but the results, at least, somewhat preserve the *endoxa* with which we came to our investigation. So ask not for whom the bell tolls: it tolls for Me-and-Thee.