

# WE MORTALS

Alphonso Lingis

One is born with forces that one did not contrive. One lives by giving form to those forces. Forms that one picks up from others. One takes one's place in a place another has vacated. One sits in chairs, opens doors, rides a tricycle, giving the form to one's posture and limbs that one picks up from the others. Chairs, doors, tricycles themselves require and indicate certain postures and movements of one's limbs. For they are not made for one's body in particular, but for anyone of a certain age and a certain general size. One makes oneself someone, another one, by taking on the posture and movement they require. Taking a seat in the library, working out the theorems of geometry as they have been worked out by generations of students in this library, one makes oneself a student, another student. Buying another car from the assembly line, paying for it with a check, driving to the supermarket and the disco, one makes oneself a modern Westerner. Buying jeans and a business suit, walking in a stride, throwing the baseball with the full thrust of one's torso, sprawling when sitting, one makes one's originally polymorphously perverse infantile body male; buying a dress and lipstick, waving one's fingers, sitting without crossing one's legs, throwing the baseball with only one's arm and not the full torso, one makes one's originally polymorphously perverse infantile body female. One gives one's experiences form by identifying things with the names with which everyone calls them, by seeing the paths and the obstacles others see, by envisioning the goals others are turned to. One says, about the weather, about the boring town and the exciting big city, about the communists, about the foot-

ball game, about the new album, what one says, what others say. To learn to think is to learn what others think, about physics, about astronomy, about molecular biology, about keeping up one's car and about managing a business. One learns to see things by following the eyes and gestures of others; one learns to feel solid and flexible and liquid and textured things by manipulating and palpating things as others do. One gives the confusion of sensations and drives in one's head form by feeling about the concert as others feel, by feeling about one's wedding and about funerals as one feels about weddings and funerals, by feeling as one feels, as anyone feels, indignation about social slights and boredom over operas and disgust over snakes or pigs.

One makes oneself someone by giving oneself form, one acquires an identity, a gender, a function, a solidity, one overcomes the malaise and feeling of impotence that accompanies the confused stirring of one's forces and impulses. One makes oneself someone, another one of a series. The forms of one's movements and postures, of one's gaits and gestures, of one's conversations and one's thoughts and one's feelings and one's perceptions one picks up from others, passes on to others. One feels oneself a wave on a sea of life that comes indefinitely from the past and extends indefinitely into the future. What one is, one's formed identity, subsists, is there intact every morning after the dissolution of sleep, is there intact every day after years on the job. One feels the consolation of feeling that as the days and the months and the years pass, one's identity does not pass. There is a kind of fear of death that is the undercurrent in all this expenditure

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of energy to acquire form, a seeking of consolation in the recognition that after years on the job one can still do it as well as the 20-year-old they just hired, that after so many years have passed one can still manage one's tasks that recur each day as years ago, that after so many years in the classroom confined to a certain material one can answer the questions each generation of students ask.

In these forms one confines the excesses of force and feeling that well up, sometimes, in one. One arranges one's home and one's situation and one's workday in such a way that those once-in-a-lifetime situations, which would require all of one's forces, and which may prove wanting, do not occur. One retains, behind the forms of one's routine, a reserve of force, for the tasks that will recur the next day. One retains, behind the forms of one's thought and speech, a reserve of unused mental energy; one settles into an occupation that presents only mental tasks that one has already contracted the mental skills for. One avoids confronting issues that would require all of one's mental agility, and which may prove wanting, one avoids once-in-a-lifetime enigmas and problems, problems at the farthest limits of mathematics or physics or politics, for which no solution has ever been formulated by thinkers, and for which one's own mind may prove wanting. One retains, behind the coded forms of one's feelings, one's pleasures and one's angers, one's affections and one's annoyances, a reserve of force, so that one will be able to respond emotionally to like events and like situations that recur. One arranges one's zone of activities and one's travels in such a way as to avoid once-in-a-lifetime situations that would require all one's passion, and which might prove wanting. One avoids going to places utterly unlike any other, and which would leave one wholly astonished, with an astonishment that could never recur again. One immediately compares each city and

each landscape and each building with cities and landscapes and buildings one has seen before and others one still sees, so that one can frame one's feeling in the forms and confines of feelings one can repeat indefinitely. One avoids situations and adventures in which one might be overwhelmed with a total and totally new joy, sensing that one could never know such a joy again. One avoids encounters in which one might fall into a total and exhaustive love; one seeks out rather people others might also fall in love with, and one loves one's partner as others love like partners, with a love that one could reactivate for another partner should one lose this one. For those once-in-a-lifetime situations and predicaments and adventures, which require all one's forces, all one's energies to improvise skills, all one's mental powers, all one's emotions and passion, which may be found wanting, are also situations in which one touches at the confines of death. The indefinite force of life, to find its identity and its form intact each day for the day's tasks, here may be found wanting. These are situations that could only be lived once; the one that expends all his forces on an adventure, that discharges all his mental powers on a problem, that empties out all the love in his heart and sensibility on a woman or a man unlike any other, dies with that adventure, that problem, that love. We sense that; we instinctively arrange our lives so that the tasks and the tools and the problems and the encounters will recur the same each day; we avoid the limits.

And yet, into this succession of days and tasks that recur each day, there come bad hours in which we sense that the forms we have given our lives are coffins that are empty. Hours when, for example, we can't sleep, and the darkness has blacked out the workplace and the tasks that await us, the costumes and the scenario of the social theater in which we are male or female, the

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marketplace or the office where we are a salesman or a junior executive. This kind of night can also occur in broad daylight, when the scene and the tracks and the channels seem to disconnect from us, when the very recurrence of the day and the day's work gives us the sense that nothing is being accomplished, that the kitchen each day has to be cleaned up all over again, the office desk cleared, the assembly line run through again. The paths ahead of one lose their urgency, the way from A to B begins to appear equivalent to that between B and A. The layout about one loses its relief; it extends and is indifferent to one, dull and oppressive. The landscape and its past drifts off, the future the world marked out in paths that invited one and tasks that summoned one darkens over. One begins to feel oneself drifting, disconnected from things which no longer support and sustain and demand one. Emptiness opens up between oneself and the world, one feels oneself suspended in this void. Anxiety is the sense of the emptiness, the nothingness.

The void that closed in isolates a me that feels itself trembling with anxiety. The anxiety is a premonition of dying, of the world being extinguished about one, of being cast into nothingness.

The anxiety is the sense that what death is closing in on is not me, but rather my identity, the form I took on and which was required by tasks and situations, the male or female identity that was demanded by females and males and by jobs and by children. But now this identity seems to have been nothing of my own. Should I die now, the chair in the library before the geometry books will be taken by another student equivalent to and interchangeable with me, the punch-press operator I was in the factory will be replaced by another punch-press operator, the sales pitch I had memorized and repeated from client to client will be spoken by another, the

male I made myself will be replaced by another body in blue jeans or a business suit, the wife I made myself will be replaced by another body spreading her legs to this man and cooking breakfast in this kitchen for these children. I sense death in my form and identity, nothingness claiming a me that never lived.

What feels anxiety is then a heat, a force of life that is potential, not actualized, that clings to itself, and wills to be. When the theater of the practical and social world fades off into indifference and distance, when the forms my forces have contracted disconnect from the layouts and the functions and the roles, this force of life is backed up against itself, and clings to itself, and feels the cold darkness of nothingness closing in. Isolated, singled out, it feels its own singularity, a force of life assembled in this frail composition of matter, drifting into the abyss, never to be assembled again. This one who had channelled the forces of life into contracting the form of a woman, spouse, mother, hairdresser in a beauty shop, now, in the desolate fields of her anxiety feels the inner throbbing of a pulse of life singularly her own, which has never shaped a form of its own, which is imminently threatened with dissolution, and which wills to be.

It is then nothingness that posits being, the blank revelation of nothingness closing in that singles out the singular force of a being utterly one's own, on its own. Clinging to itself, feeling itself in the strange and acute throbbing of anxiety that pervades its space and moment in the directionless expanses of the darkened universe, this force posits itself, makes itself its own.

And this singular force and heat of life of one's own finds still, in the drifting dissolution of the instrumental and social world, a substantial raft of earth under its feet. From the dissolving carpentry of the world the elemental rises up. Something solid, some-

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thing supporting, unnameable, that does not crystallize into the recognizable outlines of layouts and well worn paths that recur across the common and public world of the day. One's anxious gropings in the darkness encounter something that answers to them. Singular chances, singular potentialities of a singular reality that answer to and beckon to one's singular forces.

One finds, in the dissolution of the general lines of the public world, unnamed possibilities. It is once one is backed up into oneself, reduced to the force and will to exist on its own, that is one's own, that one's groping forces find in the rising up of the elemental unnamed possibilities that answer to oneself alone. The woman finds in her heart and the singular synapses of her sensibility and nervous circuitry a song that is hers alone to sing, that the fields of the world have never heard, that if she does not sing will never be heard. The man finds in his bones and in the surface and deep cells of his body the excesses of a passion to love, kisses and caresses to squander upon strangers, upon animals and hills and clouds, such that have never before been felt in the heat of the whirling universe, and that if he does not pour forth this passion and this love no organism ever shall, of the five billion human beings presently on the planet and the countless billions that have come and gone and are on their way.

Out of anxiety, in anxiety, singled out within the unerring arms of death closing in, one finds one's own forces of existing, one finds a compass of elemental possibilities responding to oneself alone, awaiting immemorially for oneself alone.

This finding of being, one's own being, as a power and an exigency that lays claim on one, is conscience. Conscience is not first the order with which the organization of nature and of the practical and social field commands one. Conscience is first of all an imperative that calls one and orders one to be.

The response to this call of one's own being is the fundamental responsibility. To respond to the order and organization of the common world, the layout of the practical and social field is what made one someone, another one, what made one contract the form of others, interchangeable with others and replaceable by them. It is what made one make oneself another student, another junior business executive, another lawyer, another husband, mother, male, female. It is what makes one do, each day, what there is to be done, what makes one say, upon each encounter with another, what one says, what makes one feel, in the midst of each event, what one, what anyone, feels. It is what makes one another one, not on one's own, irresponsible.

One does not hear, and one does not expect to hear, any talk about conscience in our classrooms. The profession of professors, after all, consists, semester after semester until retirement, in recycling what has been thought and done and said by others, and passing it on to others. One does not find any cases of conscience in our public leaders, those media personalities whose elections and executive decrees are determined by human engineering experts who measure, test, and engineer the galvanic skin responses of consumers to sound bites and images of Willie Horton, the US flag, and Noriega. One does not find any cases of conscience in those who build cities and highways and fill shopping malls and high-rise apartment complexes with wealth. What they produce is determined by the pilot industry of modern capitalism, human engineering, which produces needs and wants in the imaginations of buyers, making them into consumers who consume what others consume, buying Kodak because they are triggered by the image of Bill Cosby buying Kodak and buying Estee Lauder because they are triggered by the image of Nancy Reagan buying Estee Lauder, chewing on pork rinds because George

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Bush chews on pork rinds because the media experts implanted in the circuitry of television viewers the image of Michael Dukakis nibbling wimpily on broccoli.

In our culture it is artists who understand conscience, and understand that it is everything, that without an artistic conscience one will only be an entertainer. Someone becomes a singer by saying to himself or herself: I have my song to sing, a song that can only come from my voice, my heart, my loneliest loneliness, my unrequited grief, my heart, my nerves and sensibility. It is a power one feels, quivering in all one's organs and glands. It is something one knows by instinct, and which can never be confirmed by anyone else, not by teachers, critics, or crowds. The crowds roared their approval, because it was the Joan Baez they had loved in their youth, and she smiles and is gracious to them, but alone in her heart she knows that this night she did not sing her own song of this night, she repeated herself, commercialized herself. She sleeps badly, with anxiety that the instinct, the power, has gone. The specific enemy and adversary of the artist is not the philistine: what can the tone deaf do to Beethoven? What could the praise, or the criticism, of those who cannot sing mean to Joan Baez? The specific enemy of the artist is the art teacher: the cheese-and-wine venom of seduction that infiltrates into the aridity of one's mute heart that induces one, just for a few hours a day, just to pay the bills, to spend one's time passing on the songs of others to others. Conscience is the sense that I do not have time to take the day off from my music to go on a picnic or the evening to watch an old favorite on television, do not have the time to pay my bills singing the songs of other to others. The acuteness of conscience is the sting of mortality.

These are the things that Heidegger has seen. The world into which we are born is already articulated in recurrent and recogniz-

able forms; the formless substance of our forces acquires shape by the words and gestures of others who point out to us the shapes that recur, who show us how to stand and how to eat at tables and how to sit in the places and before the tasks others have vacated, who prompt us to say the things one says and train us to feel the things one feels. Taking the places of others, we make ourselves someone, equivalent to and interchangeable with others. Acquiring the identity of a recurrent and general form, we gear ourselves into the carpentry of the public world, and know the consolation of feeling ourselves each day a pattern on a beginningless endless tide of functional existence. It is anxiety, the anticipated sense of being cast into nothingness, the death that approaches and singles me out, that singularizes me, that posits my being on its own, that delivers me over to the force of life that is singularly my own. It is the dark shadow of nothingness approaching that gives me the sense of the end, the end of the life that is singularly my own to live, that disconnects me from the general and recurrent fields of tasks that are for others. The black shadow of death closing in draws the line of demarcation between the possibilities and tasks that are recurrent, walling them off from me as possibilities and tasks that are for-others, and isolating the range of possibilities and tasks that are for-me. The sense of the end that anxiety contains, the sense of ending, is what assigns an end to every move, and to the whole trajectory of my life. It is what determines ends, ends that are for-me, and an ending for each of my moves. The irreversible direction that my own death assigns to me is what gives direction and directives to each move that is my own.

Heidegger identifies death, identifies it as nothingness. Life, living on one's own, living one's own life, he identifies as determination. To live is to enact determinate movements,

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not just discharges of the excess forces that a nucleus of life in an organism generates; it is to execute actions, to enact determinate movements, finalized or intentional movements in determined directions, that terminate at objectives. It is to build a dwelling, to care for determinate living things and to maintain constant monuments of immortal things. Heidegger has taken up the Spinozist formulation that *omnis determinatio est negatio*: every determination is a line fixed between what is and what is not, between what a being is and how far it goes, and from there on not-that-being, nothing. It is nothingness that delimits, determines, being. Then to posit being is to encounter nothingness. Ex-istence, the movement of force by which a being casts itself out of its present here-and-now position, is ex-perience. The most negative experience, the anticipated casting of oneself, with all one's own forces, into nothingness itself, is also the most positive, positing, experience, the movement that posits one's being on its own, that makes one exist on one's own, that makes the force of life in one one's own.

This Heideggerian vision, when embraced, when lived, reveals, it seems to me, the following obscurities.

First, is it really possible that dying, ending, is what gives direction and directive to our life? The oncoming of death, according to Heidegger, is what circumscribes, in the general field of possibilities that are possibilities for-anyone, the definite and determinate range of possibilities that are for-me. Death is to-come, it is the very region of futurity, and the anticipated projection of my powers over the range of possibilities open about me all the way to the end is what reveals the future that is open singularly to me. Anxiety which is the premonition of the nothingness to come, is the movement in every anticipation and every projection, is the sense of the possible in every anticipation

and in every fear, the apprehensiveness before the oncoming of nothingness is in every apprehension that grasps hold of the beings at hand.

But can death really function in this way? For death, which is certainly my future, is not in the future; it does not lie ahead of the field of possibilities open before me. Death is imminent at every moment, it is not a moment that lies ahead of the succession of moments before me; it is the imminence of an event immanent in every event, in every moment. The last moment may be the next moment. The contingency of the being that is promised in the moment is its possible impossibility. Death is everywhere in the world, every step I take may plunge into the abyss, every objective that offers itself to my reach may be the ambush from which there will be no advance and no return. The location and the approach of death cannot be surveyed across the line and distance of the future; anxiety feels it cold up against me, latent in the apparent tranquillity and assurance of the things at hand. Death which has no front lines cannot be confronted. Death is the circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference nowhere. It cannot fix a direction; the groping hand of life touches it everywhere, just beneath the apparent support of all surfaces that rest and that phosphoresce in their places.

And this Heidegger himself comes to, later in his book. He had begun by radically separating the observation of the dying of others from the inner certainty I have of being mortal. The observation of the dying of others, he wrote, observes the transformation of the self-moving organism of another into the rest and immobility of a corpse, which is essentially tranquillizing: nothing perceptible has been annihilated; the spectacle of being is as full as before. But my own sense of being mortal is anxiety; it is the sense of the possibility of the whole spectacle

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of reality about me dissolving into void and the onward and irreversible thrust of my own being into nothingness. But, later in his book, he says that death, nothingness, which has no dimensions, cannot fix a line of direction and impose a directive. It is, he writes, from the dying of others that I find inscribed on the world the direction and the directive that will actualize the forces that are my own. For everyone who sets out to blaze forth his own path with the powers that are singularly his own, also sketches out other paths that are open singularly to him. Each one who sets out to actualize the dancer, thinker, lover he alone can be also sketches out the painter, poet, man of action he also alone has the power to be. In resolutely setting out to realize the thinker he was born to be, he sketches out, and leaves for others, the dancer, lover, mystic he also was born to be. He leaves these paths traced out in the world and we who come upon them find on them the directives for a life singularly our own.

Heidegger identifies death. He identifies death with nothingness, dying with the passing from existing to nothingness. But this identification seems to me fraught with obscurities. For it seems to me that it belongs to the essence of death that it is radically ungraspable, inapprehensible, uncomprehensible. It is not only the moment and place of death that is unlocateable, it is that death, which is imminent in every moment and in every site, has no identity. Although it is certain that each of us is singled out by death, what it is that closes in upon us and singles us out is the unknown. Death is not the line over which we look to identify being and nothingness; it is rather the line between the determinable and the indeterminable. What we do know is that once we cross this line there will be no return. Death is the interminable. It is too much to try to say, to assert that we can identify that which has no identity as nothingness. The act of identification

seeks to apprehend something one and the same in the unutterably singular, singularizing death that closes in on each one. Each one dies with his own death; it is in the place singled out by death that each one of us is not equivalent to and interchangeable with another.

It is true that sometimes we know the proximity of the end. Its close presence is held in the focus of our will, is seen in the bottle of sleeping pills within our reach, in the alien will of another visible in his hostile eyes and revolver bracketed on us, in the inexorable progression of the terminal cancer. Indeed we sense it within in every illness, in every pain, in every fatigue and weariness. But between the last moment, the absolute cut in the line of time, and now, there extends the time of dying. Death, the absolutely other, inapprehensible, unlocateable, advances, of itself. But in the space of time before the end, there extends the time of dying. A time in which death is at work before it strikes, effacing already all possibilities; one finds oneself adrift in a now that prolongs itself, disconnected from the time of projects and tasks and possibilities, disconnected from the time and the tasks of the others who come to keep one company in this immobile, immobilizing movement. A time without possibilities, there is nothing one can do to elude the advance of death, nothing one can do to propel the thrust of the living. The now does not give way to the future, that is, to tasks and possibilities. The past is likewise disconnected; it is retained, recaptured, represented in the thrust of life that propels itself into possibilities and tasks with the momentum and the direction of the past. Now, in the time of dying, the lessons and the force of the past drift off into insignificance and inefficacy. The present pulse of life no longer gathers up what has come to pass in it to direct itself into what awaits it ahead. Coming from nowhere, going nowhere, drifting,

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the now prolongs itself without force or sense. There is nothing to do but suffer. A suffering that endures its prostration, its prostrate endurance. There is nothing to understand, for anything or for anyone. What closes in on one concerns oneself alone. Unable to parry and unable to flee and unable to retreat, life finds itself mired in itself. Not in a self that stands by itself and holds itself together, a self depersonalized that is reduced of function, role, form, identity, that does not take hold of its death but is taken in advance by death. Dying is this suffering, this transubstantiation from activity to passivity and prostration, this materialization. One dies from the world, one dies into the world.

And in this passage not from being into nothingness but from activity to passivity that comes to pass in illness, in pain, in fatigue and weariness, there is nonetheless an understanding and an accompaniment. For there is understanding in undergoing suffering. One suffers as one suffers, as anyone, everything that lives suffers, as all flesh suffers. In the endurance and the patience of this passivity, one draws near to everyone who suffers and that dies, to the famished and the tortured and the massacred, to the great elephants that die in the swamps and the sparrows that die in the cold, to the butterflies that die in the sun and the burrowing animals that die in the dark of the earth, to the lonely stars that die in the voids of the universe, to the Assyrian and African gods that die as the deserts grow and the Mayan gods that die as the rain forests burn.

Socrates, father of philosophy, claimed to know nothing, claimed no intellectual powers or pedagogical virtues, at his trial rather reminded his accusers of three occasions that they all knew in which he had shown his courage. Aristotle placed courage first on the list of virtues; it is not only first on the list of virtues, but the transcendental virtue, the virtue that makes the other virtues possible, for neither magnanimity nor friendship nor piety nor truthfulness nor even wit in conversation are possible without courage. Heidegger believed he was following Socrates and Aristotle by making the resolute confrontation of death the power, the virtue, that makes authenticity possible. But there is perhaps a still greater courage in the one who comes to accompany the other in his or her dying, the one who comes not to visit and help the sick one in the hospital but to stay when there is no longer anything to do and no help or consolation is possible, the one who comes to stay with the dying one until the end comes. The hand extended to the dying one communicates no information and brings no relief and knows no hope, is there only to accompany the other in his or her dying, to suffer and to die with him or her. And in this hand there is perhaps an understanding more profound than all apprehension and all comprehension, in this hand there is perhaps a force stronger than every efficacy and a compassion beyond and beneath every virtue. Hand extended to the starved child in Ethiopia and Calcutta, hand extended to the butterfly dying in the sun.

Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802

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