

Thinking about Death as a Wax Apple

by ERIC J. CASSELL

Thinking Clearly About Death. By Jay F. Rosenberg. Englewood, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983. 235 pp. \$11.95, paper.

In recent years, cognition has fallen from favor and the star of affect has risen. Witness the frequent question, "How do you feel about that?" instead of, "What do you think about that?" Perhaps people write books like *Thinking Clearly About* . . . merely to help stem the tide of antirationalism that rose in the 1960s and remains in force.

The revolt against reason shares the same mistake as the object of its rebellion: it confuses rationality—thinking straight—with the information on which reason works. Many, like Jay Rosenberg, appear to believe that one can reason only with hard, stubborn, objective facts, and that feelings and other information in the domain of the subjective are beyond rescue (as they might put it) by rationality. This book founders on that error.

The introduction clearly lays out the goal of the work. The author proposes "to take the topic of death and the question of survival as case studies for the fruitfulness and relevance of today's analytic philosophy," in order to dispel the impression of its sterility and irrelevance. Instead, readers will come away thinking that his methods are irrelevant to fundamental issues. If he did not succeed in his goal, it is not for lack of ability. He writes clearly and, for the most part, simply—avoiding jargon and unnecessary convolutions. He uses many examples, and they are good, to the point, and even sometimes amusing.

The central chapters—Six, Seven, and Eight—which are concerned with euthanasia, artificial prolongation of life, and rational suicide, are first-rate discussions. I found them clear, concise, and helpful—particularly Chapter Seven on the moral irrelevance of the difference between start-

ing and stopping life-prolonging technologies in the soon-to-die. Three good chapters out of ten is not bad—especially if 30 percent is passing.

In part, these chapters are good precisely because analytic philosophers are skilled in analyzing language. When their tools are relevant, they are dynamite.

Rosenberg wants us to know something about the tools of his trade, so he devotes Chapter Zero to a discussion of language and its relation to thought—the cornerstone(s) of analytic philosophy. He points out that analytic philosophy "addresses itself to the conditions of thinking sensibly about the world." And further, "The conditions of thinking sensibly are identical to the conditions of speaking sensibly"; consequently (to abbreviate) an analysis of terms in language will reveal much about the world. It is no surprise, then, that the basic difficulty with this book has to do with problems of language and thinking.

Tunnel Vision, Not Arrogance

That Rosenberg's virtues as an expositor on death come in part from a cloistered existence is hinted at by the title, *Thinking Clearly About Death*, which seems somewhat arrogant. But tunnel vision, not arrogance, is the problem. Unlike others, he is not only thinking *clearly* about death, he is *thinking* about death. If you have given death some attention, you may be surprised to discover that from Rosenberg's perspective, you have been neither *thinking*, nor thinking about death.

Let me, very briefly, lay out the argument. In Chapter One, "Life After Death: In Search of the Question," he examines the statement "My Aunt Ethel died last week and we're burying her tomorrow," and finds it a logical mess. A person cannot die, he explains, and then be buried because what is buried is not the person but the dead body. Methodically, over the course of several chapters, he examines the concepts of person and death. He comes up with concrete, objective criteria for persons and for dead bodies, which nail

down and finish off any possibility that a person's history can continue after the person's death.

As the chapters go (slowly) in this pursuit, the promised intellectual feast on the occasion of an important subject becomes increasingly spare. The concept of death that gradually unfolds relates more to what happens in a discarded tissue culture dish than to what has concerned humankind through the ages. In the two-page Epilogue, Rosenberg acknowledges the problem: "I would not be surprised to be informed by some thoughtful reader . . . (that) I have lost sight of the seriousness of death. What may surprise such a reflective reader is that . . . I agree with him."

Acknowledging that he has put aside "the hard and poignant reality," the "emotional power" and the "sorrow and grief," he tells us that his project has been "thinking clearly about death" and those other things—indeed, virtually all of death's force—are in the realm of feeling, not thinking. I felt as if I had been tricked. Who would buy a book whose jacket proclaimed that death would be considered, but without "the hard and poignant reality," "emotional power," and "sorrow and grief"? Buy your coconut husks here. The subject of death stripped of these other considerations is not what troubles people, because when these are gone, so is death—except in its biological sense.

Thinking Versus Feeling

How does a smart man make such an error (shared in its general outlines by others of his persuasion)? There are (at least) two reasons. The first is the problem of thinking versus feeling, and the second is confusing the shared explicit meaning of words with human meanings as expressed through language. Both issues are related to the question of meaning and language.

It is popular to separate the cognitive and affective functions of the mind. It is, however, so difficult (if not impossible) to achieve pristine pure cognition or pristine pure feeling on any concept much more personally complex than a dodecahedron

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or a chocolate truffle, that the distinction should be given up for humanly important topics. In one view of the matter, thinking is an active (logical) function of the mind that is liable to contamination by feeling. Feeling is, in the same view, not an active function or operation of the mind, but a passive, receptive, reactive state. In some psychotherapeutic settings, feelings are considered the gold standard, and thinking the contaminant.

According to both these views one *trains* one's thinking processes, but *allows* one's feelings to have their say. What nonsense! Both cognition and emotion are active (and generally interactive) processes, which produce new premises or conclusions in response to information. One does not have to enter the disputes about the nature of reason to realize that what is thought or felt can follow appropriately or inappropriately from information received, and that training can sharpen the acuity of both. Unfortunately, many people have confused the values and disvalues placed on thought and feelings in our culture (and expressed three sentences above) with the way the mind works. Thus they neither think nor feel with much effectiveness because it is as difficult to be clear about what one thinks as about what one feels.

Rosenberg is similarly ethnocentric in his apparent pride in thinking about death devoid of any feelings. But his pride is like pride in the perfection of a wax apple—an abstraction so far removed from the real thing that it gives us no insight into smell, savor, texture, or heft, without which we know nothing important about apples.

The view of the mental life revealed in this book is based on an article of faith—it seems to be close to an ideology—that everything volitional or sensible (available to understanding) takes place in consciousness. Reasoning beings like Rosenberg worship consciousness and do not subscribe to the possibility that much of the thinking going on in the mind is happening below awareness—a suggestion supported by the everyday experience of where our ideas come from and how decisions are reached.

The Meanings of Written Words

The second problem is the belief that human thought can be fully known by the shared explicit meanings of the written language. I believe that I can say things that are contradictory and ambiguous, and that

are nonetheless true. Analytic philosophers do not acknowledge that a statement can be true and contradictory. Words have meanings that are not only cognitive, but also affective and spiritual—they even have somatic meanings. (Words can send shivers down your spine, produce a knot in the stomach, or arouse sexual sensations.) These various levels of meaning may even be contradictory.

However, words must have shared meanings or they could not function in communication. The shared meanings may be confined to "language communities" of any size, from the inner parts of the self (words that we use in our thoughts because of meanings that have become particular to each of us), to entire nations that speak the same language, or to any subgroup—from airline pilots to poets.

Formal written language is different in important ways from spoken language. Perhaps the biggest difference is that the range of meanings that written words convey is often narrower because writers do not have the array of devices that are available to speakers—such as redundancy, listener feedback, nonverbal cues, and the like—to ensure that their meaning has been conveyed. In fact, for some ideas and

meanings we may not even have words, or we may not choose to employ direct language because the culture does not accept the ideas. Think of the continued intimate connection with the newly dead that the behavior of the recently bereaved suggests—hallucinations of their presence, for example. There, metaphors and the language of indirection will be employed.

"We're burying Aunt Ethel tomorrow" is such an expression. Because it is from the spoken, not the written, language and because it is metaphorical in the sense that it means vastly different things to listeners depending upon their relation to Aunt Ethel, to subject it to examination in the style of analytic philosophy can only lead to a sterile outcome.

It is easy to poke fun at analytic philosophers for their apparent belief in their *haute pensée*. But the problem of sterile reductionism in analytic philosophy, which this book illustrates, is no different from the difficulties of reductionism in science or reductionism in ethics. Too many discussions of autonomy, a concept dear to ethics, have an equally impoverished view of the nature of thought, relationships between people, and their respective influence on freedom of choice.