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## Co-wondering Death

**Abstract:** In this paper, two anthropologists explore what it means to “co-wonder” as an ethnographic and philosophical method, exemplifying what this might mean through an open-ended dialogue about a subject they hold in common—the study of death. As the “last wonder,” death brings home how the puzzle of our embodiment is both the source and the means for human speculation at its farthest limits.

**Shannon:** Thinking about death may be the one activity that makes everyone a philosopher. In order to introduce our method of “co-wondering,” it seems appropriate to start with the death *of* a philosopher, Socrates. I also have in mind the recent death of a close friend of mine, a philosopher named Rob, whose disposition towards the ultimate question has been troubling me. I’ll turn to his story later on. In that way, our own dialogue can be framed by the deaths of two philosophers who can help us think about both method and substance.

To begin, Zak, do you think what we are doing here is Socratic? I also find myself wondering whether Socrates feared his own death.

**Zak:** For Hannah Arendt, the event of Socrates’ death in the history of philosophy introduced a gap between the domains of politics and philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Between the forms of speech of persuasion, directed at the masses and hence conventional for

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<sup>1</sup> H. Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” *Social Research* 57 [1] (1990) [1954], pp. 73–103.

political practice, and of the dialogic, directed at “the two,” in the sense that one can work something out with another as a traditionally philosophical mode. It was Socrates’ commitment to the dialogic form as a mode of speech in his own trial, rather than resort to the tools of political persuasion, that was ultimately what led him to his public, political death. So, from the vantage of the state, philosophical dialogue seems first to appear in opposition to the functioning and life of the polis, while the death of the philosopher seems both to confirm and secure politics to the domain of opinion. Yet, for Socrates, both the dialogue form and the form of his own death are bound to philosophy’s “ultimate questions”: those questions stretching beyond the limits of empirical science and from which the empirical sciences emerge, that rise from the feeling of wonder to which the philosopher is thrown—in body and in mind. That feeling, as has been said, that is both the beginning and end of the philosopher’s life. As a condition of possibility for philosophy’s beginning, wonder’s affect rests in the philosopher’s ability to endure this state in body and in thought. As an end(ing), wonder’s thrust in the philosopher’s life suggests both a realization, an aim, or a goal as well as a terminus—as in a disappearance or a death. Perhaps this is where our own dialogue stays with a practice that might be called Socratic: in enduring wonder as both beginning and end. What would it mean to dialogue-death in a state of wonder? To engage wonder as an end in itself and to confront the possibility of wonder’s end?

Being receptive to the world, its possibilities, as the text *Stirred by Your Presence* (Bendik-Keymer, this volume) suggests, allowing for a space of lostness to open in the presence of another is what makes the work of wonder flicker in and between us. It means that an activity that can be called wonder might emerge between beings as a kind of intimacy that is both about knowledge and about that which is just beyond what comes to be knowable. A remainder that might be seen as the gap in my knowledge of anyone whose presence I share, but a gap in-presence that always allows for the possibility of there being more.<sup>2</sup> It is from this sense of shared presence that I wanted to ask about this practice of co-wondering. Wondering together. What we’re engaged in right now. How did it come up in your work? Do you think of it as an embodied practice?

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<sup>2</sup> Some strands of psychoanalysis connect with this idea of the aporia or the irreducible gap between oneself and others that is propulsive of one’s desire (to know more about the other). Yet, in Phillips and Bersani’s own dialogue concerning intimacy, the desire to know, to gather knowledge of self and other, is something that might work better when suspended. They suggest that the distance between oneself and another, this space of unknowing that opens up the very capacity for wonder, might be the better site for a kind of intimacy that rests in acknowledging and honoring the unreachable parts of ourselves, rather than one of aiming to bridge this gap between selves through an unending attempt to unearth knowledge of others. Though their dialogue doesn’t deploy the concept of wonder, perhaps this could be thought of as an ethics for a non-paranoid relating of bodies in speech that might be said to allow for a co-created space of wonder (L. Bersani, A. Phillips, *Intimacies*, Chicago 2008; see also E. Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” [in:] E. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, Durham 2002, Ch. 4, on paranoid positions of reading and relating).

**Shannon:** Actually, your question makes me realize that while I was working on our film (*I Like Dirt*),<sup>3</sup> about changing death practices in California, there were a lot more presences in the co-wondering than just me and the person I was interviewing, although we might have thought of ourselves as the main actors. In addition to interviewing professionals and innovators in death care, we (note the “we”—the wonder team is rapidly expanding) did some person-on-the-street interviews at county fairs, at surf spots, after a marathon—in other words, interrupting people doing very life-affirming things. The two questions I always asked were: “What do you want done with your body after you die?” and “What do you think happens to us after we die?” I didn’t plan it out this way, but you could say that the entire ethnographic project became a form of co-wondering. Sometimes people had ready answers to both of these questions, but more often it was the first time anyone had asked them that, and they had to pause. But this co-wondering was never just a dyad – there were others in this pop-up lab of the ethnographic space. Our future selves, our body (both the living one and the anticipated corpse), and our dead selves. And ghosts often entered the conversation—loved ones whose deaths may have made us wonder in an earlier moment about the death-process of becoming. It was more plurilogue than dialogue. Thinking about death and what happens to humanness afterwards is the ultimate stimulus to wonder. It defines the limits of knowledge at the broadest frontier of metaphysics.

To be honest, one of the things I did not expect to happen through the project was my own philosophical development. I didn’t have answers myself to these questions when we started and I didn’t think I needed them. I was the observer and the questioner. I thought I could get away with a safe and passive role in the co-wondering. But my interlocutors, and especially my ever-curious friend and collaborator Daniel Zox, didn’t let me off the hook. They kept asking how I myself would answer. Eventually, I felt an ethical responsibility to participate in the vulnerability of theorizing something that no one can claim expertise about, at least no one we can talk to outside of a seance or a dream. I needed to reciprocate in the wondering, to not hold myself back in the position of the supposedly more-knowledgeable researcher. Death makes innocent fools of us all. But I did resist the embodiment of wonder in the filmed dialogue. I refused to enter the visual frame and later I edited out my voice—the questions I had asked in the co-wondering process. I told myself that I wanted people to speak for themselves. I wanted my own point of view to recede into the background—to let them have the floor. But in doing so I now realize that I was falsifying the truth about co-wondering. At the same time, I know that all film manipulates in this way, hides the methods of its making. That’s just what films of even the most honest kind have to do to distill some clarity in narration—to get across a question or a point that will then generate another, larger round of wondering in and among the viewers. Circles of co-wondering expand. Wonder is social, the anthropologist in me is delighted to realize!

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<sup>3</sup> *I Like Dirt* (dir. Daniel Zox and Shannon Lee Dawdy), Zox Films 2021, <https://vimeo.com/414171087>. See also S. Lee Dawdy, *American Afterlives: Reinventing Death in the Twenty-First Century*, Princeton 2021.

That said, in another way I did engage in a very embodied form of wonder in the filmmaking process when I volunteered to be wrapped in a shroud and placed at the bottom of a grave for several hours in a green cemetery. I was intensely curious about how it would feel to imitate the dead, to play-act my ending. Would I be overcome with fear and anxiety? Would I feel suffocated? Bored? Cold? Lonely? Uncomfortable? I learned from the experience that at least in that version of death, my body enjoyed a sense of deep relaxation and calm, and a kind of timelessness. It was soothing, in fact. I did not anticipate that. The experiment was reassuring and I often think back to it when anticipating my death or those of others. There was a feeling of “everything’s going to be OK.” Different but OK.

After finishing the film and the larger book project, I realized that my answer to the first question about the destiny of the body is that I want to be made into an archaeological site for fun discovery by someone in the future—no need to make it a sacred site though. And my answer to the second question about the afterlife went from drawing-a-blank to a kind of faith that death is a form of radical transformation, though not from being to nothingness, which is a cocky error that hard atheists make (perhaps Sartre did too, but I read his “nothingness” as more about the indeterminateness of human life). I learned through the co-wondering that whatever else one can say in speculation, our personhood (a catch-all for soul/spirit/personality) transforms into memories and traces among the living. And that the body transforms into matter that disperses, either rapidly or gradually, back into the earth system. Undeniably, your part within Gaia transforms upon your death, but it is not annihilated. Death is just one revolution in a wheel of transformation. It is not a finality. I no longer believe in final “ends.” Death is so much richer than an ending.

I am fairly certain that not all modes of ethnography involve co-wondering. You, though, are about to embark on an ethnographic journey—a wonder/wander as you have put it. How would you go about bringing co-wonder into your methods?

**Zak:** Co-wondering-as-method. Thank you for this. It strikes me that part of anthropology’s project works through modes of familiarization and estrangement to approach the epistemological gap the discipline takes as fundamental to its project: difference, cultural difference. It is curious to me that the historical position of anthropology’s project is one that rests upon a kind of wonder about difference opened up from the affordances of colonial contact, violent forms of imperial extension and extraction that also generated globalizing discourses on figures of racialized otherness. Wonder towards the gap of cultural difference as a disciplinary aim, and terror (of difference) to be overcome, as a project of knowledge production that also rests on histories of colonial terror. I think it is an ethical question regarding the stakes of making something that seems strange familiar (ostensibly through knowledge) and to make the familiar strange by approximating cultural difference. From this, might anthropology be a discipline that speaks to the apparent tensions between wonder and horror more than others? In any case, it seems important to consider the historical position of anthropology when crafting a method of ethnographic practice that grounds itself in wonder and co-presence, because this history

is in part what allows me to speak, act, and ask from the position that I have and take in the world.

In addition to this, I feel compelled to think about what it means for me to do the kind of work and practice we call ethnography. In my own sense of this, ethnography grounds itself as a practice in a kind of co-presence motivated by questions in one's encounter with a world. A kind of practice grounded in the ways in which we ourselves are constituted as question-asking beings. Perhaps in this way it can be thought of as an engagement with the world pulled along by the propulsive wonder of the questions we are asking of it, of our interlocutors. Within this, though, there is the requirement that we open ourselves to surprise—surprise in the way we come to feel or think in brushing up against a world; surprise in the ways our interlocutors—those we speak with and learn from—respond to our questions; surprise in the way those responses pull out of us yet more questions—unexpected questions we didn't know or couldn't have known to ask before. We move along this unfolding path “in the field,” a kind of wandering movement spurred by this feeling of wonder. It is an inherently collaborative process.

I was struck by your take on co-wondering as a more-than-dyadic practice in your work; that there is not simply a one-to-one encounter between the dialogic two in this death wondering. Future selves, the body and its potentialities (the living and the corpse-to-be), the dead self, ghosts. There is this sense of a manifold set of relations and entities between what seems to be two bodies interacting. There is perhaps always a more, a horizon, something contained or lived (even as potential) beyond what can be seen or made visible in the moment that is both what we are, and how we relate, in wonder together. This sense of the manifold, that we hold in our bodies more than we seem to be in a single moment but also what we might become I suppose is in part what makes the body irreducible to itself as a thing, even as corpse, or corpse-to-be. It also opens up the question of who, and perhaps what, participates in co-wondering? Who and what gets to have a voice in this practice?

In my own work, I look at practices concerned with dying and death. People who are using psychotropics such as psychedelics to transform their, and others', relationship to dying and death, who can also be said to be working on death/dying by shaping it, using the intimacies between themselves, medicines, and other people to develop sensibilities concerning death and dying that seem also to point to possible conceptions of an afterlife. One of the things that grounds wonder as a concept, and that propels wondering as a verb or practice, is this feeling that inspires those kinds of questions that cannot be answered, whose answers the truth of which cannot be verified.

**Shannon:** Have you yourself spent much time wondering about your own end?

**Zak:** I'm reminded of a series of episodes in my life beginning when I was quite young, about the age of eleven. I began having seizures that, symptomatically, ended up pointing to the existence of a brain tumor growing in the right hemisphere of my brain. A scan of my head revealed a mass that shouldn't have been there pressing itself against my skull, displacing the matter inside my head. A kind of life-within

whose cells' division and persistence, their inability to die the death necessary for the organism's continuity (the ability of the cell to die for the sake of the organism's continuity of life, what the biologists have come to call "apoptosis"), came to threaten the life of the remainder of my organism. It was presented to me as part of me, my body, but also as distinct; an invading bundle of living cells, a threat cultivated by and emerging from the life that I am and that I take myself to be, yet a threat whose composition seemed to be altogether foreign, somehow of me but outside of me. Something, ultimately, to be extracted, removed, separated from me, then annihilated. It was made of the stuff that I am, but contradictory to what I believe I hold within me, what I possess as me: my own life and living. The presentation of tumoral existence as well as the prospect and process of the tumor's removal certainly thrust me into a wondering. Not arising from the abstract position that I know I will die, eventually, but that there, then, emerged a relation that offered up to my own thinking a sense of the shape of my own ending as a possibility—from this specific set of emergences; from the particular genre of crisis prompting medical scrutiny; from the risk involved in separating the tumor from my body. Symptom. Scan. Surgery. Secure survival... perhaps a kind of wonder initiated from this specific set of encounters, a kind of wonder turned towards worry, this anxious mode of moving through what one wonder's about.

From this episode in my own life I want to return to the event of a seizure (in this case connected to the emergence of something threatening the life of the organism, as symptomatic) as a kind of end that suggests something about wondering about death itself as perhaps the "last wonder," as D.H. Lawrence put it.<sup>4</sup>

In a sense, a seizure might be thought of as a little end in the life of a body, an end that both points to, and encapsulates, an end to the "me" that lives in or identifies with the body I take to be mine. As an event, the seizure is that which seems to sever me from my body, replacing my presence and bodily agency with movements and modes of attention (as negation of conscious attention) that I do not call my own. That which I take to be most familiar to me, my body, becomes strange. My body moves but I am not there to move it, to bear witness to the movements it makes. It is from this severing, being seized, held in separation from awareness of body and my being in and with this body, that I begin to wonder about this bodily relation (a relation of my body to myself, to my body in its environment, and my body's relation with itself) as a kind of end that contains within it intimations of other ends, one that realizes a halting of a body's own lively processes. The end that is seen so clearly as the cessation of its movements, toward a terminus, a resting place, one that conjoins notions of the soul's flight from the body, rather than, as in perhaps the seizure, the body's flight from the soul (it is from this distinction that a seizure's resonance with possession rings most clearly). This kind of possession highlights how relationality and embodiment situate wonder as a capacity. But it also underscores how terror and horror might be experienced when a body becomes strange to itself and to others. A kind of "dark wonder" (Onishi, this volume) emerges when "my" body loses its sense of "mineness," that which allows me

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<sup>4</sup> D.H. Lawrence, *The Ship of Death and Other Poems*, London 1947.

to sense myself as an agentive author of its gestures and movements (See also Holy-Luczaj, this volume).

Yet, it is the body's receptivity, its ability to be taken hold of, suspended, thrown, again and again—into this capacity for wonder—that delivers the philosopher to a recognition: that of knowing that one does not know. For the philosopher, this recognition is a state of return, a repetition, and one that is potentially unmooring, disturbing, that takes hold of one's faculties. It is through such an experience that Arendt references the philosophical shock of wonder, "those frequently reported traumatic states in which Socrates would suddenly, as though seized by a rapture, fall into complete motionlessness, just staring without seeing or hearing anything."<sup>5</sup> Wonder seems to hold this capacity to shock in the ways in which it, too, possesses the wonderer; where our figure of the philosopher "is for one fleeting moment confronted with the whole of the universe, as he will be confronted again only in the moment of his death."<sup>6</sup> Hence, Socrates' own seizures, those moments he was gripped in speechless motionlessness also explicates the irreducibility of the body's sensibilities in bearing-bodily what was considered for the philosopher a *pathos*, the pathos of wonder: to leave that which is suffered through one's being-possessed by the unknown open, unreconciled.

This openness can be uncomfortable, even devastating, as in some confrontations with certain conceptions of death (read: so-called "secular" death). That is, some form of separation from awareness is also something that some (notably the anthropologist Ernest Becker) have suggested is a result, or effect, of an intellectual understanding that humans are mortal beings—that we know of this coming end to a life, every human life. That is, the awareness of mortality, an awareness one comes to hold for oneself, while living, effects a kind of terror so profound that one seeks to displace awareness of this fact by innumerable means, through modes of distraction that aim to push confrontation with this awareness away from conscious, contemplative presence. This is at least the thesis known as the "death denial hypothesis."<sup>7</sup> Rather than critique this position, however, I am interested in the concepts of experience and consciousness (attention, nonattention; awareness, unawareness; presence, absence) that rest upon what it means to possess the capacity to wonder about one's own end in addition to dispositions that seek to cut off wondering precisely at life's end. Beyond this form of self-wondering, might we also think about a circuit of sense experience set up between bodies in dialogue that explains something about what it means to relate, to come to know, and to connect the ways we come to think and feel the world as a space of wondering together, even if what we ultimately come to know is our unknowing?

In your own work, you have spent time being and thinking-with bodies—bodies that are said to be living, bodies that are taken to be dead or in a process of

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<sup>5</sup> H. Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," p. 98.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 100.

<sup>7</sup> Becker develops this thesis by asserting that death, and fear about death itself, is a primary, universal fear constituting the human psyche, one that is responded to both individually and collectively through modes of denial that attempt to displace confrontations with human mortality (E. Becker, *The Denial of Death*, New York 1973).

becoming dead. How have these encounters affected your own body—your corporeal body, but also the body of your work? In other words, how has this ethnographic mode of embodied being-with compelled you to consider, for instance, the role the dead play in pulling the living into ways of wondering?

**Shannon:** I had no idea how much I would open up by asking that very personal, impertinent question! I wish I could reciprocate with my own vulnerability in confronting a self-ending, but my experience has been more about the death of others. Still, those can affect one as a seizure, so maybe there is some common ground there, particularly in the sense of “to convulse involuntarily,” or to be “taken over.” When I experienced the sudden death of a beloved, my body felt suckerpunched and my psyche collapsed to the floor. I had no control over the movement of my chaotic emotions. We call these kinds of deaths “untimely” ones, meaning that they happen before the time of what we think of as a natural life course. But they are also untimely in that the shock and otherworldliness they incite stops normal time. Like a seizure, they are a violent pause to our everyday flow of routine and feeling.

When the body fails unexpectedly, it is a dramatic case of Heidegger’s hammer breaking—the fragility and temporality of life itself becomes “present-at-hand.” He is usually understood to mean that this type of shock to attention leads to analytical thinking, but there is an element of surprise and “whyness” that suggests to me that wonder is the more basic, underlying mode of perception.

The other thought I had is in reaction to your reflections on the out-of-control lifeforce of tumor cells which can, paradoxically, cause the death of their host body. So often when we think of wonder, we think of an experience of the sublime of nature (Kant’s starry sky), or about consciousness beholding itself (Hegel’s spirit) or, as I have learned from the contributors to this special issue, two human consciousnesses authentically experiencing the gap between their bodies and selves (and perhaps it is authenticity and vulnerability in this encounter that distinguishes it from Hegel’s Lord and Bondsman—that’s what *Stirred by Your Presence* had me thinking, among other things). Martha Nussbaum and Donna Haraway might include the encounter between a human and a dog as a possible relation of wonder, when the gap between radically different forms of sentience is felt.<sup>8</sup> And now I am thinking that if most wonder is, in fact, co-wonder—about a relationality between beings—then perhaps it is possible to say that wonder is the essence of the relationship between the living and the dead.

It also strikes me that a sense of wonder induced by something outside of human control—an earthquake, a sunset, a sudden death—happens in quite a different time zone than when an ethnographer (or other questioner) attempts to initiate a relation of wonder with another person or persons. Are certain forms of dialogue a means to artificially induce wonder? Perhaps that’s too vulgar a way to think about it, but the use of psychedelics seems to point to another way in which we humans attempt

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<sup>8</sup> D. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, Minneapolis, MN 2007; M. Nussbaum, *Justice for Animals: Our Collective Responsibility*, New York 2023.



to engineer a relation of wonder to the world. Wonder doesn't just happen to us. We seek it out, we make it happen.

**Zak:** The questions I am asking in ethnographic practice are altogether tethered to this peculiar and supposedly “primary feeling” of wonder. In some ways, the work I'm currently involved with can be thought of as emerging from wonder (perhaps my own) and as attending to the ways wonder can be a capacity to cultivate. In my study, the focus is on people whose relationships to their own deaths have been inflected through that prophetic mode of anticipation that the medical field denotes as prognosis. It is a mode of ushering bodies into a calculated estimation of their individual life chances. In the United States at least, such a space of living amidst anticipated death seems oftentimes to induce a state of profound worry (perhaps one side of wonder, wonder about the future negatively inflected, its cognate being anxiety).

Indeed, these therapies, known as psychedelic-assisted therapies for those facing end-of-life, are aimed at addressing this worry about death, often called “existential anxiety” in diagnostic terms. These therapies, curiously enough, aim to alleviate this particularly modern form of suffering by initiating the individual into a relation with psychedelics to induce, among other things, a state of what might be called spiritualized wonder. Practitioners recruit these substances to essentially instrumentalize their capacities to generate states of deep wonder—to wonder about one's own being, one's sense of what's real and possible, and sensory-aesthetic experiences that seem to allow those undergoing the drugs' effects to feel out what it might be like to die and be dead. It is precisely this transformation, this initiation into deep wonder one might say, that is thought to bring about relief from the shallower form of wonder that is existential worry/anxiety.

When I think about wondering or co-wondering as method, my intuition is to stay with this horizon that stretches just beyond the knowable, to try and pull at the threads of these dimensions as people encounter them. One set of concepts that you have elaborated in your work, I think, speaks to some of these concerns. That is, the concepts of decomposition and decay. Both are processes that occur, say, to a dead body or a corpse. But you have also enacted a method of writing, engaging your own ethnographic findings, as a form of “decomposition,” or decompositional thought. In other dimensions of your work on the dead you have articulated “decay” as something you see happening to dimensions of American ontologies. Both decay and decomposition suggest processes of coming apart, perhaps a horizon of dissolution, disincorporation, maybe also an incorporation into something else (the body becoming worm food, becoming tree, becoming mushroom, etc.). Do you see these concepts as diagnostic of a present moment? Might these concepts also be useful for thinking about a way of wondering about lively processes that we are all presumably caught up in that could offer a possible alternative to ways we might live, and be, in the world?

**Shannon:** There isn't much that is starry sky about tumor cells, at least as a form of beauty, which was Kant's bias. And I presume not much sentient about

them. But in the moment that the body confronts the body as something less than united and whole—in fact, that it is composed of competing parts—another kind of wonder opens up. It is not about beauty, but about strangeness. Or rather, about realizing that our ideas of whole-bodies/self/identity are precious fictions. Fictions that crumble if we allow ourselves to see the parts rather than the whole—the cells rather than the body, the microbial colony and its host rather than the corpse. So, I am approaching your question about decomposition and decay as one that makes a circle with the cells that took over your young body for a while (I am so happy they didn't win against the other, calmer cells!). When I interviewed experts in at-home funerals and green burials, I learned that, in their view (with some biological justification), death is not an event, it is a process. The cells and the microorganisms that compose the temporary boundedness of our bodies die at different rates over about a three-day period. And the microorganisms that the living body supported (yeasts, gut bacteria, viruses, and the occasional complex parasite) are gradually replaced with a different constellation of small beings that prefer a colder, less active, less bounded organic host.

Ethnographically, yes, I feel that in the U.S. today, and perhaps elsewhere, there is a new kind of consciousness of our bodies as flowing assemblages of cells and other beings, and less of an attachment to a physical “wholeness” that fixes our sense of self. I was struck by the fact that my interlocutors who had visible and multiple body modifications such as piercings and tattoos were among those who seemed the least bothered by the idea of their bodies being eaten by worms after their heart stops beating. I have wondered whether the current fad for fermented foods (homebrews, kombucha, kimchi, yogurts, sourdoughs) isn't part of a new zeitgeist in which we recognize the seething unboundedness of life—and thus the partiality of any one “death.”

A return to psychedelics also seems to be very much part of the new zeitgeist in the West. Perhaps the boundary between chemical and biological life/agents is also dissolving? In some indigenous practices, I know that entheogens are thought to have a kind of life force, or be the vehicle for the life force of supernatural beings. I am very curious whether the clinical settings of your study preclude wondering about how the drugs work. There almost seems to be a pragmatism about the practice—that the mechanics of psychedelics do not need to be understood, so long as their effects are therapeutic. But how would we ever know whether in the final moments the fear of death is overcome? Further—is this necessarily a good thing? Isn't the fear of death the ultimate “positive anxiety” that keeps us caring for one another? So are these drug therapies enhancing wonder or deadening it? Perhaps we are moving from a “denial of death” to a “denial of fear.” I have an impulse to mistrust efforts to pathologize an emotion. Isn't fear itself a natural and inevitable experience in confronting death? Fear is on some level quite biological and embodied. It's an instinct that gets expressed through a flow of hormones (chemicals) of most complex animals. Perhaps we are just finding new ways to struggle towards a quixotic transcendence of biology...

**Zak:** Interestingly, boundaryless and boundlessness are core principles that seem to emerge from these psychedelic domains as well. For the ways these substances are being drawn into medical domains for “therapeutic” purposes, the capacity to dissolve boundaries, and to dissolve one’s sense of self, seems to merge psychedelic phenomenology with an ideal of almost romantic unitariness. For those facing a hastened death, who feel alienated in living out their illnesses, a sense of dissolving into union with all things can be reassuring, perhaps especially to those lonely individuals of modernity. You mentioned all the non-human actors that participate in the death of a single human body, the “partiality of any one ‘death.’” The philosopher Eugene Thacker suggests that human thought may largely emerge from the non-human.<sup>9</sup> He draws an analogy from all the non-human forms of life that make up what we call a single human body, arguing that essentially we are majority non-human entities from the perspective of the life of/on our “bodies”—we are only partially what we take ourselves to be. What about all that which is non-human that might participate in “one’s own” dying? In what ways might we come to think of one’s material and psychic undoing as a process such as this? Psychedelics seem to offer up relations that speak to ways of being-in-the-world that rest on transformative bodily processes such as these.

I agree that there seems to be a kind of pragmatism to the ways psychedelics are being taken up in medical contexts. What is emphasized is that these substances seem to be effective for various applications in the domain of mental healthcare, yet the potency of the phenomenologies described (i.e., mystical experiences, spiritual dissolution) seem to become mainly criteria for efficacy. They essentially become black-boxed with no emphasis on wondering how and why such experiences emerge from these relations. But the assertion that “fear” as well as a whole set of emotional concerns in human dying can be directly addressed through chemical intervention, the experiences these chemicals can engender, is a powerful one, one that seems to draw a line toward the limits of human agency up to the point of death.

I must say, though, I am somewhat suspicious of how this “fear of death” is naturalized as a universal fact (as in Becker’s work and the way his theories are used in the context of medicalized psychedelic therapies for end-of-life). What if this fear is perhaps partly a product of a particularly modern constellation of affective and emotional horizons? Or perhaps the texture of the fear, the way fearfulness becomes a particular fear, is also embedded in history as much as it can be pointed to chemically, hormonally. For instance, could it be that this fear of death emerges in its most forceful articulation from the introduction of increasingly technical interventions into the human organism, interventions that aim at intervening into the finite life of the individual body, the person, to enable it to keep on living (that is, in other words, practices that constitute forms of life extension)? Perhaps this characteristically modern development, this making of human life, its maintenance, into a technical operation results in something quite similar to Weber’s articulation

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<sup>9</sup> E. Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet: Horrors of Philosophy (Volume 1.)*, Winchester 2011.

of modern disenchantment.<sup>10</sup> For him, it was because people in the age of science know, or believe that they could know if they wanted to, how something like a piece of machinery works, or how a tree grows. That the world is disenchanted due to the replacement of mystery by possible knowability—technical know-how. There may indeed be some resonances between this Weberian assessment of modernity and the question of this “fear of death” as an orientation to failing, dying, modern bodies. That is, because life itself is seemingly open to being intervened upon through technical means,<sup>11</sup> what results is a sense that human life ought to be something that can be “fixed,” in a sense (and this recapitulates the association with “brokenness” from Heidegger’s example, a striking way in which a human body becomes likened to a broken piece of technology). Perhaps these spiritualized exercises<sup>12</sup> with psychedelics in the clinic are about a process of transcending limitations, climbing beyond ourselves through operations on and through bodies.<sup>13</sup> In this way, these practices concerning dying with psychedelics represent a limit horizon to human agency: an act of preparing oneself for the unpreparable, to use the body to cultivate a capacity to let go of it, to leave it behind.

Yet, if fear of death as medicalized pathology is a historical phenomenon, might the attending use of psychedelics to cultivate wonder in the face of death suggest that wonder, too, may very well be of, and in, history? It seems that if wonder is a capacity to be cultivated (the philosopher must choose to endure wonder to practice philosophy, one who is confronting death might take psychedelics to engender a sense of wonder in the face of death) it is not necessarily the case that this primary philosophical feeling is a given. Arendt suggested that wonder itself came under threat in her assessment of mid-century totalitarian political movements. In the overwhelming capture of opinion in the figure of the “masses,” one is unable to find the solitude necessary for self-dialogue, to find a moment within one’s interiority to endure the feeling of wonder, to allow wonder to work on and through one’s notions. More recently, Catherine Malabou has argued that the contemporary moment is characterized by one where the ability to experience wonder may be under threat.<sup>14</sup> For her, disaffection as a state of feeling, or non-feeling, forecloses the primary philosophical affect of wonder. Forms of globalized power in the contemporary “neurobiological age” directly threaten subjects’ capacity for feeling, affectivity,

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<sup>10</sup> M. Weber, *Science as a Vocation*, transl. R. Livingstone, 1917, on modernity, disenchantment, and instrumental reason.

<sup>11</sup> Extending an analysis of biopolitics from Michel Foucault, Rose argues that the range of political forms that seek to govern the biological life of humans has now become a form of governance over the sphere of biological life itself. Biotechnology, cell cultures, and a range of medical applications that make use of various forms of life that have come to render biological life as radically open to technical intervention represent this expanded sphere of contemporary biopolitics (N. Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself*, Princeton 2007).

<sup>12</sup> P. Hadot, *The Selected Writings of Pierre Hadot: Philosophy as Practice*, transl. M. Sharpe, F. Testa, London 2020, on spiritual exercises.

<sup>13</sup> P. Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics*, transl. W. Hoban, Malden, MA 2013, on practices of self/human transcendence, spiritual practices.

<sup>14</sup> C. Malabou, “Emotional Life in a Neurobiological Age: On Wonder,” Talk Given at Cornell University 2013.

to experience wonder at all. She suggests that, “the neural subject is a potentially disaffected individual, a non-effected subject precisely deprived of all capacity to wonder.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, on one hand, a threat to wonder is a question of spatial relations to relations of speech and thought: one possibly loses the space to find one’s interiority, to make space for wonder as a component feeling of solitary contemplation. On the other, the neural correlates of affectivity are potentially attenuated when shocked by the traumatic force of contemporary forms of power. That wonder itself could be somehow under threat as conceived of through distinct historical, political contexts suggests that wonder itself may be a thoroughly historical affect. Wonder is indeed social. And its capacity seems bound to rather transient forms of sociality and power that condition a body’s malleable sensibilities, its receptivity and response to its relations and situatedness in place and time.

**Shannon:** I love this idea that death can enchant us. I wish that my friend Rob had been open to that enchantment earlier in his struggle with cancer. But I also know that such wishes are just a projection of my own fears and desires. Rob was braver than I. He sat with the horror side of death for most of his too-short life (he died at the age of 57 in October 2023). Rob had a PhD in philosophy and was also a skilled mathematician. He tended towards analytical philosophy. He was an avowed atheist with a love of neuroscience and a trust in technology. But still, he read voraciously (and repetitively) in continental and existential philosophy (his copies of Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and Nietzsche were well-worn). He was a complex guy. In our own dialogues, it became clear that he had a deep-seated fear of death and a persistent anxiety about his biological health that had long pre-dated his cancer diagnosis during the Covid-19 pandemic. I suspect that he read deeply into metaphysics because in part he hoped there to find a cure for his fears. As far as I can tell, it never really worked. Rob was terrified of death, but remarkably courageous and optimistic about the most harrowing medical interventions.

When medical life extension started to fail, Rob started looking very seriously into going the cryogenics route—he wanted his brain to be frozen, for his consciousness to have a fighting chance in the future. He believed in a technological fix for death. Everything I knew about cryogenics suggested that it was a scam.<sup>16</sup> Early in his treatment, we had a huge argument about it. Later on, his suffering—and especially his fear—was difficult to witness, but I also came to admire his remarkable will to live. In cryogenics, the embodied nature of our human-being is both embraced and denied. For some people, this ultimate intervention amounts to a Frankensteinian horror. But for Rob, it offered hope and possible salvation. I have been meditating a lot on Rob’s approach to death in the month that has transpired

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<sup>15</sup> In reference to such forms of power, Malabou figures both physical brain trauma, forms of political violence and environmental catastrophes that may result in forms of PTSD as consonant with this condition.

<sup>16</sup> Cryogenics presupposes a biologically reductive theory of consciousness, firmly on the physicalist side of the zombie debate in philosophy set off by David Chalmers in *The Conscious Mind* (New York 1996); see also S. Dawdy, “Zombies and a Decaying American Ontology,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 32 (2019), pp. 17–25.

between his last breath and the due date for our edits on this article. I like to think that he wouldn't mind me sharing these thoughts with you and with the readers of this journal. Under "employment" on his death certificate, it proudly reads "philosopher"—nothing more, nothing less. Rob has helped me realize that there are two general types of attempted cures for mortal fear: to open up the question with wonder, or to close it off with surety. That surety could come from religious literalism or from analytical thinking (both kinds of faith). But paradoxically, wonder—the opposite of surety—may be the best cure for the analytical atheist's fear: "I neither know nor think I know" (Plato, *Apology* 21d).

A few weeks before Rob passed what Socrates called the Styx, I wrote a letter to him that shared the recent death experience of another friend of mine (also an intensely intellectual guy) whose heart had stopped three times in one day. This friend told me that he had been transported to such an indescribably peaceful place—which was not a nothingness—that it has been difficult for him to return to embodied life. After his partner finished reading my letter aloud, Rob seemed to relax a little. She remembers him saying something like: "well, maybe I shouldn't miss out on whatever that is."

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