

Before the Beginning

The writing of the philosophy began 25 years ago, almost to the day, in a swimming pool. And it began with this:

Mark Fidrych, the pitcher, with bases loaded and the game in the balance, calmed his nerves with thoughts of universal death, in 10 or 20 billion years.

Shakespeare, and more clearly still Sakyamuni, discerned that, if all is time, and time is change, neither time nor change could be what they appear, could be anything at all. The world of the Western God, seen from on high, as of the Buddha, seen from anywhere, is a world without concepts. In such a world, from such a perspective, disease, old age, and death find resolution.

But this surely is our world too. And so the question returns: What is time?

Experiences such as John von Neumann's sustained the development. Von Neumann worked on the Manhattan Project; designed the ENIAC, the first electronic computer; created game theory; and screamed himself to death . . . not from the physical pain of the prostate cancer that would take his life—drugs, then as now, could control such pain—but from the mental anguish of the dying process.

Physicians say candidly that no one dies well. Dying is death by a thousand cuts, and this remains the most horrific of tortures—not, as commonly misunderstood, bleeding to death from a thousand nicks, but the progressive and inexorable disembodiment of the human personality. Officials cordoned off the wing of the hospital where John von Neumann lay dying, fearing that, in his anguish, he'd scream out national security secrets.

Von Neumann was a Catholic. Priests came to comfort him, but to no avail. And we shouldn't be surprised. Belief, faith, a point of view are not enough to address the extremity of human suffering. When Jesus on the cross cries out in despair, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?," Christianity had failed its most important test. The faith would have ended then and there, had there been something stronger.

The issue affects more than a moment of dying. As Siddhartha and the Greeks of classical antiquity knew, and as survivors of extreme torture have written—and there have not been many—the horrific is retroactive, and can undermine the entire previous reality of one's life, transmuting existence into pain, so that one will wish, with all of one's heart and soul, to have never been born.

Faith and belief are not strong enough. It has taken 2000 years of intellectual development to produce something that is.

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