Developmental Value of Fear of Death

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Confrontation with death is defined to include not only literal physical death but also the small psychological "deaths" that occur when one fails in controlling events or has one's values contradicted by events. The central problem considered is the conditions under which confrontations with death spur development of a positive philosophy of life that lends meaning and direction to activities, rather than dread and a negative philosophy of life. Courage is postulated as a major condition and its developmental course in parent/child interactions is proposed.

In some persons the confrontation with death spurs the development of a positive philosophy of life that then lends meaning and direction to their future activities. But in other persons confrontations with death arrest rather than spur development, resulting in dread and self-protection, a denial of finitude, and a negative philosophy of life. How and why these differences occur needs to be better understood.

In attempting to conceptualize these matters, I will be elaborating and extending an existential theory of personality presented elsewhere (Maddi, 1967, 1970, 1972, 1973). Existential theorizing, my own and that of others, has suffered from an absence of specificity concerning development and individual differences. It is these two topics in particular that will be elaborated upon in the following attempt to understand the effects of fear of death.

Early Development of a Philosophy of Life

Let us start by indicating what is meant by a philosophy of life. I am referring to an explicit and coherent set of beliefs defining oneself, the human species, society, and their interrelationships. This set of beliefs incorporates what are commonly called expectations, preferences, and values. Once formed, the beliefs have an organizing and directing effect upon behavior. But one's philosophy may also change as a function of experiences. Some persons never develop any explicit and coherent philosophy of life. Others adopt the conventional beliefs they are taught in childhood. Still others transcend these conventions and emerge with a differentiated, personally-relevant philosophy. Another way in which

philosophies can differ is whether they are positive or negative.

Most personality theorists who recognize the utility for the person of developing a philosophy of life have regarded this phenomenon as occurring in middle or late adulthood. Erikson (1950), for example, considers *ego integrity versus despair* to be the last of the eight ages of development. And Allport (1955), though less explicit regarding the age span involved, suggests that philosophy of life is the last of the *dimensions of maturity* to develop. It is my view that philosophy of life can develop early, and that its value is enhanced if it does so. Whereas Erikson and Allport emphasize looking backward with the wisdom of hindsight, I emphasize looking forward with a guide to further experience.

It is easy to understand why many theorists relegate considerations of life's meaning to the waning years, because it is at that time that death looms large. The person's failing physical and mental powers, the encroachments of disease and decrepitude, and the death of significant others, all underscore the approach of his own death. Later life is certainly a time for deciding what life is all about, if one has not already done so. But, through active contemplation of death earlier in life, one could find the challenge for developing a philosophy of life that can serve as a guide for the future.

Defining the Confrontation with Death

It is time now to scrutinize just what constitutes a confrontation with death. The clearest instance of this takes place when there is serious illness, accident, or attack, and the mental experience is fear. Often the fear is of physical pain, but just as commonly, to judge from interview data (e.g., Kubler-Ross, 1970), the experience is *the existential fear of loss of control, and meaninglessness.* But extreme events such as illness and attack are infrequent and sometimes regrettably terminal. As such, their developmental value is necessarily limited. The contemplation of the *possibility* of illness or attack can have some developmental effect, but if there is not actuality to back up contemplation, the act of imagination necessary to produce a sufficiently vivid experience is too enormous for most persons. Fortunately there are other frequent events in life which, though milder than illness and attack, nonetheless constitute confrontations with death, if properly understood. It is these milder events that can have developmental value early in life.

A small confrontation with death occurs whenever *something ends that you did not want to end* (e.g., someone stops loving you while you still love them), or whenever you are overwhelmed by the *insufficiency of time and energy to do all that you sincerely wish to do* (e.g., an academic trying to research, write, teach, and be an active member of a community and family), or whenever *events are monotonous* (e.g., some valued goal requires instrumental behavior more repetitive than you would normally tolerate). The mental experience in these events is fear, however mild,

that things are beyond your control and do not necessarily conform to your wishes. Another small confrontation with death that is important occurs whenever your *conventional values are contradicted by events*. This happens when virtue is not rewarded (e.g., a valued colleague who has made a sincere commitment to teaching does not receive tenure), when a situation turns out not to be what it seemed (e.g., it becomes apparent that you are loved for your money, not your personality), and when your ideals are not embodied in persons or events important to you (e.g., a President acts in an unAmerican fashion). The mental experience involved is the fear that life is meaningless.

It is important to recognize that unwanted endings, insufficiency of time and energy, monotony, and disproved ideals, though milder than the direct physical threat of death, are similar to it in demonstrating the real fact of our limited control over events, and the naivete of the conventional values we are educated to trust and follow so readily. In view of this, such events are legitimate reminders of physical death because they directly threaten *psychological death*, that chronic state of meaninglessness and powerlessness that I have elsewhere called *existential sickness* (Maddi, 1967; 1970; 1972).

Small confrontations with death are common enough that each person must reach some sort of conclusion about his life as a result of experiencing them. Such conclusions are the stuff of philosophies of life. In the existential view, it is believed that frequent experience of small (and for that matter actual) threats of death can have positive developmental value. This may seem difficult to comprehend because the negative developmental value is so obvious. For development to be adversely effected, all we have to do is overgeneralize pessimistically. We do this by concluding that we are completely powerless when events disclose our limited control, and that life is completely meaningless when events show our conventional values to be naive. Then we need only succumb to dread and self-protection when events remind us of the imminence of actual physical death, and the damage is complete. If we allow undue pessimism to take hold, we may end with *no coherent philosophy of life,* retreating into a denial of finitude and clinging rigidly to a conventional way of life that we dare not reflect upon. Or we will develop a *negative philosophy of life*, revelling in the conclusion that life is meaningless and we powerless, and parading our depression as evidence of sophistication. But we will betray our inconsistency and inauthenticity by taking good care of ourselves anyway, and not having to commit suicide because our supposed wisdom somehow justifies our existence even though we are psychological zombies. In any case, these negative reactions to the confrontation with death will arrest development.

But the experience of these same events, the sense of limited control and the naivete of conventional values, can be transformed into something with positive developmental value, if we will only be careful not to overgeneralize. Recognition that physical death may be imminent can

alert us to the importance of using every moment to the fullest extent in pursuing what is personally important. Recognition that our time and energy is insufficient can lead us to think hierarchically, to determine the relative importance of various things that could be done, and to spend the greatest time and effort on those things highest in the hierarchy. Recognition that conventional values are naive can lead us to imagination in developing personally-relevant, differentiated values.

These positive reactions to confrontations with death will have the effect of spurring development. The person will perceive life as challenging, and find satisfaction in being equal to the task rather than bemoaning the realization that there is no easy comfort. The person will be continuously striving to determine what is within one's own control, and to develop a clearer and more precise sense of what is important. One will have an ever-more individualistic, differentiated ethic rather than passively deploring the inappropriateness of all values merely because conventional ones are naive. And he or she will experience the vivid excitement of using one's own capabilities to the fullest in pursuing personally-meaningful goals rather than being bogged down in dread, insecurity, and incessant precautions. In short, the individual will have a personally-relevant, *positive philosophy of live.*

Not only will the life led according to a positive philosophy be productive and satisfying, it will also add gracefulness to the inevitable process of aging and decline. In later adulthood, the person with a positive philosophy will be able, in retrospect, to see this life as the one he or she was uniquely suited to lead. In contrast, the person with a negative philosophy will, as the process of aging advances, become increasingly more fearful, self-protective, rigid, and despairing. At this point, my presentation sounds Eriksonian. But I hope it is evident in all else I have said and will say that there is quite a different conceptualization operating than his.

Determinants of Positive and Negative Philosophies of Life

Existentialists tend to structure the positive and negative philosophies of life I have sketched as "choices" that the person makes. This is perhaps an understandable approach for philosophers, who are not particularly concerned with understanding individual differences. For them, the positive choice expresses virtue and the negative vice. It is a proper task for psychology to understand the characteristics of personality — the individual differences that determine the likelihood of positive and negative philosophies of life. But I am afraid we will not get much help from existential psychologists, who have by and large been too poetic, too enamored of mysteries, and too preoccupied with the pragmatics of psychotherapy, to provide systematic theorizing concerning individual differences and their development. Nonetheless such theorizing is extremely important, and I shall try to make a start on it.

First, consider what a person needs to do in order to reach the positive philosophy of life. One needs to have clear recognition that certain events in one's experience are indeed confrontations with death and therefore extremely important to come to terms with, and one needs to be able to keep one's wits about oneself so as to deploy one's capabilities well in dealing with these serious encounters. The various personality characteristics implied by these needs are well summarized as *courage*, a very useful attribute in facing dire realities and turning them to advantage.

Negative philosophies are reached by persons who either fail to recognize the significance of certain events as confrontations with death, or who, having achieved such recognition, resign themselves to what appear overwhelming obstacles and insufficient personal capabilities. The various personality characteristics implied here are well summarized as *cowardice*, or the disorganizing and demoralizing effects of dread in the face of dire realities.

Components of Courage and Cowardice

Let me be more precise about the components of courage and cowardice. To be courageous, one thing a person needs is *self-confidence*, or the belief in one's own worth and capability for living. One also needs to be well exercized in the cognitive capabilities that create meaning: namely, *symbolization, imagination, and judgment* (Maddi, 1967; 1970; 1972). The more you exercise the function of symbolization, the greater the number and differentiation of the categories you have available with which to construe experience. The more you exercise imagination, the greater the number of ideas about change available to you in altering your environment. And the more you exercise judgment, the more personal values and preferences you develop. Hence, to symbolize, imagine, and judge is to create meaning. What I am saying is that, in confronting death, the person who has a predilection to symbolize, imagine, and judge vigorously, and who is amply supplied with self-confidence, will not panic and will be ingenious in transforming those events into a positive philosophy of life based on challenge, strenuousness, and a reliance on personally-constructed meaning.

In contrast, the cowardly person lacks self-confidence, being beset by doubt about self-worth and capability. In addition, he or she is not given to active and vigorous exercise of the cognitive functions of symbolization, imagination, and judgment, relying instead on the few conventional categories, ideas about change, and values and preferences taught by others (Maddi, 1967; 1970; 1972). Consequently, when such a person confronts death, he or she reacts with terror, is unable to manage ingenuity in the face of dire reality, and either shrinks from developing any philosophy of life, or develops a negative one which highlights despair and disappointment at what a bad lot life is.

Development of the Components of Courage and Cowardice

The major part of the story of how some persons become courageous and others cowardly is undoubtedly told in *parent-child interactions.* In considering the development of self-confidence, a characteristic hardly unique to existential thought, I am ready to endorse what is already known in psychology. Coopersmith's (1967) excellent program of research shows that three orientations are most common in the parents of self-confident children: (1) *acceptance* of the children, (2) the imposition on them of defined *limits,* and (3) *respect* for their initiative and freedom within the defined limits. Notice how far these orientations are from the wishy-washy unconditional positive regard of the Rogerians. The parents in Coopersmith's study manage acceptance and respect for the child while imposing standards of performance. Further scrutiny of the parents indicates how they manage this. They are themselves active, definite, involved persons, who esteem themselves and wish their children to be similarly active, definite, and involved. Presented with a clear picture of their parents' view of life and given some options to agree or disagree in defining their own lives, the children are low in anxiety and high in self-reliance.

In outlining parent-child interactions suited to the development of vigorous symbolization, imagination, and judgment, it should be indicated at the outset that much of what builds self-confidence builds the capability of creating meaning as well. In order to be the active, definite, influential persons the parents mentioned earlier are, they would have to be vigorously exercising symbolization, imagination, and judgment in their own lives. Such parents provide effective models for their children to emulate — because their attitude toward the children is accepting and respectful. But merely presenting an appropriate model is probably not enough. The child must come to believe that the child also, not just the dazzling parents, is capable of influencing life's events and creating meaning through exercise of cognitive capabilities. Parents must provide consistent and affectionate reinforcement whenever the child follows their model and attempts to symbolize, imagine, and judge. The parents must do this even if the attempts are simple and childlike, an educational commitment many active and effective parents find difficult. If the child does not, through imitation, give instances of symbolization, imagination, and judgment that can be reinforced, then the parents should consider exercises, perhaps in the form of "games" that will stimulate these cognitive functions. How many ways can the child construe the same event (exercise for symbolization)? How many ideas can the child develop for changing some status quo (exercise for imagination)? How definite can the child become in stating preferences and values in a particular area (exercise for judgment)?

Parents can foster cowardliness by the opposite approach to that outlined above. They can build self-doubt in the child by having a

generally rejecting and disrespectful attitude toward the child's initiatives and by failing to define limits in a consistent fashion. Also, if they do not provide by model or positive reinforcement any stimulus to symbolization, imagination, and judgment, the child will not develop these resources. Even worse, parents may actually find symbolization, imagination, and judgment in their child sufficiently threatening to react with punishment. The result will be a child with self-doubt, mounting anxiety, and an inability to influence his or her own life.

Creative Endeavor

There is no better way to summarize the courageous way of life than to discuss creative endeavor (Maddi, 1973). But it must be clear that I am not using the term creative endeavor as a synonym for *any* professional, scholarly, or entreprenurial activity. Creative endeavor is the concerted attempt to produce things or ideas that are new and effective (Bruner, 1962). A thing or idea is new and effective if it (1) solves a previously vexing problem, or (2) structures existing ambiguity by pinpointing a problem to be solved. Creative endeavor involves not only enormous imaginativeness in attempting novelty, but also remarkably sound judgment in pinpointing or solving problems. As such, it is very difficult and strenous, and requires that simpler and more comfortable pursuits be relinquished. In addition, creative endeavor is often sociopolitically dangerous, as it tends to disrupt the status quo, something not many persons or institutions can accept gracefully, no matter how much lip service is paid to the value of creativity.

If this analysis is correct, it raises the question of why anyone would want to be dedicated to creative endeavor. My answer is predictable by now. First, you must emerge from early life with the personal resources of self-confidence and a predilection for symbolizing, imagining, and judging. Then there must also be at least small encounters with death. This is easy, as such dire realities are virtually unavoidable. In such a developmental mix, the person will very likely use the resources just mentioned to recognize the true significance of the dire realities, and react to this by constructing a positive philosophy of life. This philosophy will emphasize (1) the acceptance that one has only partial control over events and that conventional values are inapplicable, (2) the importance of creating one's own meaning in the form of values and preferences, (3) the necessity of identifying and pursuing those matters of special, personal importance, and (4) the view that life, properly led, is challenging and strenuous. Once this happens, you will very likely feel driven toward creative endeavor because its requirement of new and effective productions so completely fulfills your view of yourself and the nature of life. Each creative act is personally-constructed meaning representing the person's attempt to control the course of life through being effective. But it is also provisional, to be succeeded by the next

creative act, should changing events require this. And it goes without saying that sociopolitical danger would not be a deterrant, because it would be part of the expectation of strenuousness.

I have construed creative endeavor as a highly conscious, rational approach for coming to terms with life complicated by the inevitability and imminence of death. As such, my approach is radically different from prevailing orthodoxies in psychology. Creativity, for me, is not a massive welling up of unconscious material best encouraged by a relaxation of cognitive control, as suggested by the psychoanalytic tradition. Nor should my developmental emphasis on modeling and shaping be construed as a behavioristic view in anything except understanding *how* learning takes place. If behaviorists have any explicit view on *what* should be learned, they emphasize adjustment to existing social arrangements and pressures. It should be clear that my view of creativity and the strenuous life is quite opposite to this view of adjustment. Finally, the emphasis on easy comfort and the dangers of discipline in much of what is loosely labelled "humanism" these days, also diverges from my view. The existential view emerges as a distinct and different approach to understanding creativity and living.

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