

which abortion is generally prohibited. It won't have a firm metaphysical foundation, but perhaps, like the speed limit, it doesn't need one.

To return to the question of whether the foetus is a person, consider the event of a natural miscarriage. Nature is not particularly sparing with these; they are quite common early in pregnancy, and may be very common in the first few days, when they are not necessarily noticed. They can be very distressing, depending on the hopes that had been invested in the pregnancy. But they are not distressing in the same way as the death of a person. A parent who loses a child faces one of the worst experiences anyone can go through. There is someone to mourn, someone who had a life with hopes and dreams. But a prospective mother who suffers an early miscarriage does not have someone to mourn. She can mourn the loss of *what might have been*, and she can suffer for her own lost hopes and plans. But she has known no *actual* person who is lost (this may change late in pregnancy, when the child 'makes itself known'). For this reason, although she may deserve sympathy, she is not in the same category as the mother who loses a child. Hence, too, even cultures that forbid abortion do not insist on a full burial service for a dead foetus. The failure to get all the way to a birth in the family is not a death in the family.

Gradualism does not fit well with the deontological notions, which have an all-or-nothing flavour about them. Gradualism fits better with notions like things going more or less well, or people behaving more or less admirably, or more or less selfishly or callously. We might think it is better to work in terms of these notions. But when issues of life and death come into view, it is hard (for many people – but is their stance defensible?) to stay gradualist.

In any case, what's so bad about death?

## 9. Death

The Greek philosopher Epicurus had an argument that death should not be feared.

*Death is nothing to us, for that which is dissolved is without sensation; and that which lacks sensation is nothing to us.*

The Stoics had reinforcements for this rather bare argument. One is to compare our state of non-existence after we die with our state of non-existence before we were born – and there was nothing to fear about that, was there? Another is to insist on the vanishing of time: death is just the same for one who died yesterday as for those who died centuries ago. This is the only way to make sense of 'eternity': death has no duration at all, for the subject. The poet Andrew Marvell may have chivvied his reluctant mistress by reminding her that 'Yonder all before us lie / deserts of vast eternity', but these are not deserts anybody (ever) crosses. In other words, 'the state of being dead' is a misnomer. The fact that Kant is dead is not the fact that Kant is in some mysterious state and is going to be for a very, very long time. It is the fact that Kant no longer exists. Death is not the state of a person. It is 'nothing to us' because we no longer exist. It is not a kind of life: peaceful, reposed, reconciled, content, cold, lonely, dark, or anything else.

It is often felt that death is an enigma, perhaps the ultimate mystery (see Fig. 5). Why? Life is mysterious, insofar as it raises scientific questions. But then we have the life sciences to help us. The self-sustaining processes of life are reasonably understood. They are easily disrupted, and have finite duration. When the time comes, they cease, and what was once alive, be it a leaf or a rose or a person, dies. There is no mystery about that, beyond unravelling the chemistry and biology of it.

Death can only be thought of as mysterious when we try to understand it by *imagining* it. And then we will be imagining 'what