

A Philosophical Perspective on Death

(Perspective essay)

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Abstract:- This essay examines death from a preliminary Philosophical perspective by scrutinising the positive side of death. It infers that death is a cosmologically, socioeconomically and morally useful phenomenon. It also adduces to the fact that the most logical step to take in life is to accept death and prepare for it, instead of wallowing in endless fear. It is further deduced that death may not be the end of life if at all it is the case that humans are Hylemorphic beings. The essay limits itself to analysis, and part descriptions and prescriptions. The fact that death is an unavoidable but feared Phenomenon, this essay anticipates to open and motivate crucial discussions on the existential assimilation and serene embrace of death.

I. INTRODUCTION

Most human beings react when they hear the news of the death of someone they love, but only a hand full take time to think about death, to examine it and to assess its significance. Serious discussions on death are mostly limited to funerals and requiem services. Unfortunately, funerals usually are emotionally charged events, and they may not evoke rational inquiry into the death. After the funerals, mourners go retreat awaiting the next funeral, and it eventually becomes a routine, a weekly one or a monthly one. In the process, proper discourse on death is suffocated, and the logic of death is considered a taboo. Nonetheless, from a general perspective, death is considered an unavoidable evil that mauls the usual *modus operandi* in families and societies. In fact, in some communities, it is a taboo to utter the word Death because doing so would be tantamount to inviting it. However, not talking about death whenever the topic is brought forth, is a defence mechanism, escapism that is not fit for logical beings. We hold that in as much death is considered an evil, it can be philosophised and the more it is philosophised, the less mysterious it becomes. After all, the Problem of evil is one of the Problems in Philosophy, and so death is part of Philosophy. Some of the Philosophers known to have grappled with the concept of death include but limited to Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Bruch de Spinoza. Plato asserted that to fear death "...is to think you know what you don't know, to think yourself wise when you are not, yet this is a cardinal sin in philosophy". It is a kind of "conceited ignorance" in contrast to "Socratic ignorance" (Apology 21d). According to Leo Tolstoy, what tells a man how he should live his life is the thought that he must die one day. Further, it is opined that (Phaedo 67e-68a): "true philosophers make dying their profession, for they would be glad to set out for the place where there is a prospect of attaining the truth they have been seeking. As for the

Stoics, death is beyond our control and so fearing it is a logical absurdity. Existentialists advocate for Death Education in schools. However, most strikingly was Socrates of Athens who just before his death had to give a lengthy discourse on death, recorded in Plato's Apology. In the Apology, Socrates also notes that the fear of death is irrationality that is not worthy of a Philosopher.

II. METAPHYSICS OF DEATH AND EXISTENCE

One of the crucial Philosophical questions connected to the Phenomenon of death is whether death is the end of existence. From Metaphysical, Perspective Existence is the primary component of actuality. It is also the act in which a thing is present in mind (Mattei, 2007). It is closely related to its twin concept of Essence, which implies the mode or manner in which a thing is present in all realms of existence. From the existential nexus, actuality, as manifested in activity, is the criteria of existence. So to determine whether a dead person exists is to figure out the deceased's activities after death. Two important observations can be made: First that a dead person's body the (cadaver) in so far as its made of matter has atoms and particles that are indestructible and at the same time in constant motion even when it dissolves into the soil or otherwise. Matter cannot be destroyed, and by inference, the body cannot stop to act, and if the material body of a person X cannot stop to act then, the corporeal person X cannot cease to be existent even if he died hundreds of years ago. Secondly given that humans are also incorporeal, dead humans have merely changed the ontological location of their existence occasioned by fate rather than having stopped to exist. Furthermore, given that God is *purus actus* (Latin for *pure act*) whatever human soul that dissolves back to God cannot stop to act, or at least it will be compelled to act, and if it cannot stop to act then it exists, at least as per the definition of existence given herein. Perhaps a point of curiosity may arise: If deceased humans exist corporeally as atoms and incorporeally as Souls or spirits, separate from each other, are they still human beings? Which leads to the question; Who is a human being?; body parts? Atoms? Spirits? Alternatively, a combination of all these? A loose interpretation of the Aristotelians would infer that to the extent that the body is separated from the soul then it ceases to exist. The Platonists would infer that the soul is the principle that makes humans and in as far as the soul does not die, humans cannot die. I infer that a human being is a Substantial formal entity that manifests itself in the material world as embodied spirit but in its right spiritual world as a disembodied spirit. The intactness

of the Atoms that formerly held human body is only possible through the force of the universal spirit, the real source of human life. This view appeals to the Essence as a determining factor of existence, because there is no limit in modes of existence.

III. PRAGMATIC EXAMINATION OF THE USEFULNESS OF DEATH

Whether we talk of it or not, we must die, Whether we love it or hate it, death is our fate, and if it is our fate and inescapable, wisdom reminds us that we prepare for it, rehearse for it and embrace it with love. Part of preparation is accepting its usefulness, which can either be cosmological, sociological or religious.

Cosmological Usefulness of death

For the cosmos to sustain itself, composition and decomposition, death and life are inevitable balances. Failure to keep this kind of Ying-yang balance is not only logically absurd but also impossible for the simple reason that the cosmos, after all, does not depend on life or death to maintain itself. If for instance, human activities like urbanisation, overpopulation and industrialisation interfere with the earth's crusts and tectonic plates, the earth has no responsibility to ask humans whether it should adjust itself (or not). The earth being in need of balance will adjust in the form of an earthquake which in turn leads to the death of humans. The death of humans due to the earthquake has no correlation with the 'the happiness and comfort of the earth' just like a human being who experiences illness will look for drugs to kill the pathogen in their body; The pathogens in his body usually are not consulted before their brutal pharmacological murder.

For humans, the death process begins at conception, and the sole purpose of living is to die. For there to be a balance in reproduction, a human male ejaculates millions of sperm cells, but only one fertilises the ovum. What happens to the rest? The little fellows die off, foreshadowing millions of death around the world. No one mourns their death, because we cannot fathom the idea that copulation is aloud announcement of death as it is a simple announcement of life. Sexual intercourse is also a moment of unconsciousness, where two people lose their rationality and 'die' during orgasm to create a new life. A good sexual activity leads to slumber, which can be explained biochemically but most importantly for us, the slumber communicates Jesus' position, that "No one loves his neighbour who is not ready to lay down his life" during sexual intercourse or otherwise.

Even when still living human organs degenerate and regenerate themselves through the blessing of wear and tear in preparation for the final tear. The skin itself as the biggest of human organs has tissues and cells that die off every day. As a means to balance the human body, sleep is necessary, yet sleep is a semiconscious rehearsal for death that nature has put as an obligatory activity, as part of life. Unfortunately few people take time to examine the *fatal* reason why sleep must

occur every day up to the grand final of the dreamless sleep of death or the sleep of obscurity.

Death as a Socio-economic blessing

For a well ordered and happy society, people must die. One of the problems that humans would be dealing with if no one ever died would be overpopulation and its effects like crime, overstretching of resources, consistent strife and untold eternal suffering. Let us say fate changed such that there is no more death; What would be the impact? Those working in death industry and death countering sectors like doctors, nurses, mortuary attendants, coffin makers, funeral service providers, professional mourners, Palliative Caregivers, religious leaders, Pharmaceutical companies would lose their jobs leading to more suffering of their respective families. In this case, therefore, death is a socio-economic blessing in disguise.

Moral and Religious Usefulness of Death

When at the age of sixty-two he was told that his death was imminent, Wittgenstein replied, "... my life has become burdensome to me, and ... the best thing to do with an unnecessary burden is to lay it down". While we can say of Ludwig Wittgenstein as having (psychologically) accepted death, his statement is a moral statement. It deals with what someone intelligent *ought to* do with the burden that life can sometimes become. Although when we die, we cannot know that we are dead, yet those alive who spend all resources to the knee of poverty despite having medically confirmed that we are going to die, commit logical errors that will impact negatively on those who still live. This logical error amounts to immorality.

On the other hand, a provider who dies communicates to the living dependents that dependency is immorality and that empowering dependents is a moral responsibility for all. So, in other words, some permanent lessons can be taught by death, both to the living and the dead. Perhaps the most crucial significance of death is the religious one. Without death, religion could not make sense. Religion styles itself as an antidote to death. It is either positing some reincarnation of the dead, Metempsychosis, paradise or Resurrection. For those who live ethically, Good life after death is assured, re-incarnation into better animals is promised, Milk and honey will be provided in plenty, sexual fulfilment with some number of virgins will be enjoyed, being at the right hand of the father is a given. According to Plato and Augustine, death has an Epistemological benefit. The release of the soul from the body leads to full knowledge which had otherwise been hindered by embodiment. For Christianity, death is incredibly paramount. Christian theology is a death theology in that its central dogma being resurrection makes sense only when there is death. Without death, no resurrection and no resurrection, no Christianity. Miracles performed by Jesus, the teachings of Jesus are centred on the Pivot of Resurrection from the dead.

IV. PHILOSOPHY OF DEATH EDUCATION

Education by nature regards itself as the process of the upbringing of the young ones. It fashions them into authentic and fully functional humans. In general, Education as so far practised is a life skills activity; meaning that whatever the learner is being trained in should lead to a good life here on earth. However, learning the theory and practice of good life without proper instructions on good death is to propagate a portrait of half-truth, which is more dangerous than lying. Educators need to prepare learners on the only sure thing, that is, Death. Education should demystify death and unpack it gradually especially at Secondary level of Education and in Higher Education. The gradual unpacking of death should involve instruction on the nature of human beings, the meaning of life and the meaning of death. Most importantly, the curriculum should orient the learner into preparation for death, which according to Plato involves contemplation or merely the search for dialectic knowledge and Wisdom, living according to virtues or reason and the search for unity with the universe, with God and with other humans.

V. CONCLUSION

As has been argued herein, although painful and 'apparently' evil, death is a blessing and a necessary phenomenon. Secondly, death being unknowable can only be feared analogically. The actual fear is the pain associated with death and so those who fear death, actually fear pain, not death per se. The pain of losing someone they were possibly

inordinately attached to or someone they depended on for economic, social and psychological relevance. The pain is the effect of not learning to detach oneself from significant others, not understanding the cosmological, moral religious and socioeconomic significance of death. To die well, therefore, is to die in happiness, without fear, which is a very tall order. It requires proper training in stoicism and the art of *apatheia*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I acknowledge the courage of my late Father David Nalo and all who have succumbed to cancer, for although they have metaphysically translocated themselves, their presence cannot be annihilated. I appreciate my colleague and friend, Mrs Janet Surum for timely review and proofreading of this Perspective article.

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