

A PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE ON DEATH AS A RELIEF FROM THE PROBLEMS OF LIFE

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Abstract

This study is a philosophical thinking about the relevance of life and death and about the relevance of death to life. It begins with a discussion of the concept of death and the beliefs, attitudes and dispositions which people have about it. It examined why people consider death as horror and argues that it is the horrible conceptions that partly make people fear death. Thereafter, it presents the attempts made by some thinkers to relieve people from this fear. It presents some views which consider death as gain and as a prelude to a better life. This study also inquires critically whether death is a panacea to the problems of life, imbues meaning on life or removes meaning from it. It concludes that based on what is evident before us in the present state of existence, life does not appear affable; but this does not imply that death is a panacea to it.

Keywords: **Fear of death, Nature of life, The human condition, Relevance of death, Life after death.**

Introduction

According to Douglas Soccio, authentic individuals know that they are “there” in the world, without any say in the matter. They understand and accept the existential fact that they are going to die. According to him, among all other entities, only human beings know that their specific existence will inevitably come to an end. He puts it that “our existence has a beginning; ...we are inauthentic to the extent that we deny and suppress the fact that we are going to die.”¹ Shelly Kagan has a similar view. According to him, “there is one thing I can be sure of: I am going to die. But what am I to make of that fact?”² A number of issues arise once we begin to reflect on our mortality. We would want to know if death is the end of the human person or whether we are in some sense, immortal. Among others, we would ask the following questions in order to know or look for answers: Would immortality be desirable? What does it mean to die? What attitudes do people have toward death? Is death an evil? How should the knowledge which people have that they will surely die affect the way they live their lives? The exact answers to some of these questions may be difficult to fathom.

Since death is inevitable, a critical view of life makes some people to ask whether it has any meaning. And given the pain of death, the belief which people

have about death and the attitude they exhibit at death, the same enquiring mind would wonder whether death has any relevance as well. The simple questions then are: Has life any meaning? Has death any relevance? This study engages in discussing the concept of death, and the beliefs, attitudes and dispositions that different people have about it to enable us infer whether death is a relief or not. In doing this, we do not claim any competence of a complete treatment of the subject. Nevertheless, we shall attempt a detailed treatment such that from what is presented some reliable inferences can be made.

Death is believed by many to be a phenomenon which translates the individual from one realm of existence to another. Many have thought of it as either evil or good, as a relief from the problem of life, as removing meaning from life or as imbuing meaning on life, and litanies of other conceptions. Has death any meaning? To make any reasonable inquiry in this regard is to begin with the nature of death.

The Nature of Death

Different thinkers have different views about what death is. For many, it means the end of life or the termination of the earthly existence of man.³ According to Emmanuel Guanah, death affects only the material or the corruptible part of the human body and not the soul.

The body of man cannot always continue to live on but must decay and corrupt.... Therefore there must come a time when the physical body in its corruption becomes disorganised and can no longer contain the soul essence. A change then takes place which is incorrectly called death but which is merely a transition.... What we call death here on earth is birth in another world.⁴

Death has also been conceived as a permanent physical separation of an individual from the living.⁵ According to A.O. Orubu, when “considered from the physiological angle, death is not a painless phenomenon. The harsh truth is that death is an odious and agonizing experience. Vedic literature describes the death process as a bitter experience.”⁶ In the struggle against death, the individual faces uncomfortable experience like a quake. He dies in great pain without recognizing his or her surroundings. Despite this agonizing pain, death is inevitable for everybody. This is partly why some people fear death. No matter how brave a person may be, the sight of a corpse, particularly that of a dear one generates fear. It is believed that the deceased possesses extraordinary psychic power. Since man is a pain-avoiding animal, he fears death as a source of pain just as he fears other sources of pain. But he fears death more because unlike some other sources of pain, death is unavoidable. Besides, when he sees or hears other people die in this manner, and he is aware that he and his loved ones will also undergo the same process, and probably a more terrible one, then he continues to fear death *per se* and entertains the fear of the pain of death. But

some others may not fear death *per se*, but the pain that may lead to it or bring it about.

Like Orubu, Michael Shallo conceives death as a cessation. Shallo writes that:

By *death* is meant the cessation of life in living things. Such cessation of life might conceivably be brought about in either of two ways: *annihilation* of the living being or *corruption* of its vital principles. *Annihilation* means the reduction of an object into absolute nothingness. A being is, strictly speaking, *annihilated* only when it so ceases to be that nothing of it remains. An object is said to be *incorruptible* when it is incapable of perishing either by dissolution into the constituent parts or elements which may compose it, or by the *destruction* of the *subject* in which it inheres or upon which it depends for its existence.⁷

An object is thus corruptible when its vital principles are capable of perishing either by dissolution into its constituent parts or by the destruction of the subject upon which it depends for its existence.

Some existentialist philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger have divergent views on the relationship which death has with life. Generally, *existentialism* as a philosophical movement sees man as individual, unique and irreplaceable, having his own life to live and his own death to die singularly. It x-rayed the historical condition of human being from its sudden emergence to disappearance. It conceives human condition of *thrownness*, a thrust into the world as pitiable; pitiable because he has to face challenges of *facticity* or *fallenness*, a finitude which is not of his own making. He is subject to death and decay, sickness, disease, disappointment, sorrow, powerlessness, and so on, as human conditions of existence in the face of the forces of nature. But the future is his possibility. In the present he can remake his future by changing his uncongenial condition with his choice and actions. Since the future is his possibilities, his destiny is in his own hands; that is, he has an active role to play in forging his destiny. The existentialists believe that man is a being towards death and he is old enough to die the moment he is born. While Sartre conceived death negatively and believed that death removes meaning from life, Heidegger opines that death is a meaningful part of human existence. It confers uniqueness and meaning into human existence.⁸ But Albert Camus will not agree with Heidegger that death imbues meaning on life since *ab initio* for Camus life is meaningless and absurd.⁹ He will not also agree with Sartre either that it removes meaning from life for the same reason.

Having this idea in mind about death, now to know whether death is relevant to human life, whether it is a sanatorium to the problems of life, whether it is absurd and futile, whether it removes meaning from or imbues meaning on

life, whether it is an evil or good, is to first of all make an inquiry into the human condition.

The Human Condition

The existence of evil, discomfort, discomfiture and the uncongenial nature of life in the world cannot be reasonably doubted or denied. These characteristics traverse time and space. Philosophically speaking, it seems the prevailing state of affairs is not what should be expected from an ideal world.¹⁰ Hume puts the state of affairs this way: “The whole earth...is caused and polluted...The first entrance into life gives anguish to new born infants....Weakness, impotence, distress, attend each stage of that life, and it is at last, finished in agony and horror.”¹¹ This implies that life from the beginning to the end and the world in which it is lived holds nothing spectacular for human being.

The philosophical thinking of King Solomon also reflects this human condition. Compared to youthful stage, Solomon conceives old age and death as days and years of dismal. He captures this reality or predicament of old age in comparison to a time when the light of the sun, the moon, and the stars will grow dim, and the rain clouds will never pass away (Ecclesiastes 12: 1-2). According to Solomon, at that time

your arms, that have protected you will tremble and your legs now strong will grow weak. Your teeth will be too few to chew your food, and your eyes too dim to see clearly. Your ears will be deaf to the noise of the street. You will barely be able to hear the mill as it grinds or music as it plays, but even the song of a bird will wake you from sleep. You will be afraid of high places, and walking will be dangerous. Your hair will turn white; you will hardly be able to drag yourself along, and all your desire will be gone (Ecclesiastes 12: 3-5).

Then Solomon describes the tragic and the horrific conception of death this way. As one goes to his long home, his final resting place, that is: at death, “then there will be mourning in the streets. The silver chain will snap, and the golden lamp will fall and break; the rope at the well will break, and the water jar will be shattered. Our bodies will return to the dust of the earth and the breath of life will go back to God who gave it to us” (Ecclesiastes 12: 5-7). Ultimately these do not depict any meaning for Solomon. After all said and done Solomon concludes: all *is* vanity; it is all useless.

Buddha also perceives this problem which humans are faced with in life. Buddha states that life on earth right from birth to death is nothing but suffering and misery. Birth is suffering. Life is suffering. Death is suffering. Life is characterized by sorrow, pain, grief, dissatisfaction, insufficiency, and many other factors which induce suffering. In his conception man is characteristically

a suffering being. Sickness, old age and death are, according to Buddha, suffering and misery. Men are born only to suffer, grow old and die. Hence the preoccupation in his entire philosophy was on how to escape from the cyclical suffering and misery of birth, death and decay.¹² This is why the Buddhists “aimed at Nirvana or ‘end of misery’, deliverance from rebirth, the state or the abode of eternal peace which after death will be the lot of the saint, the Arhat.”¹³ For Buddha it is only detachment from material existence that can ensure this. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupāda also perceives this human condition.

Prabhupāda¹⁴ puts it that there are multifarious miseries in material existence. There are those that pertain to the body and the mind and there are those imposed by other living entities and those imposed by natural disturbances. The ordinary life is always full of anxieties and material tribulations. Everyone in the material world is suffering in some way or another. There is the pervasiveness of sicknesses and diseases and their consequent various palliative drugs. There are sufferings resulting from injuries and harms caused to man by other living entities. There is also the prevalence of natural disasters such as famine, pestilence, flood, excessive heat or excessive cold, earthquakes, and so on. Added to these miseries are those of birth, old age, disease and death. Suffering is a condition of the material body and because it is a human condition, it has to be tolerated. According to Bhaktivedanta Prabhupāda, happiness is an illusion in the material world. It is also an illusion to think that our position is very secure.

In addition to these natural factors and ontological evils which inseparably characterize human condition are those resulting from human errors and moral frailty. These range from rape, kidnapping, assassination, robbery, brutalization, oppression, exploitation, fraud, ritual practice, human sacrifices, human trafficking and all forms of injustices to accidents resulting from human recklessness, and so on, all gearing towards debasement of the sanctity of human life. There are distortion of values, and unfulfilled yearnings and aspirations. Now given these conditions, what else should we expect to happen to conclude that the state of material existence is far from being congenial or that it cannot be the most desirable?

Horror of Death

There is the deep fear within every man of being totally, irretrievably and irrevocably lost and of detachment from material existence. There is the threat of personal non fulfillment which expresses itself in a variety of ways. These fears make death a horror. Death makes a mockery of human life. The cutting short, for example, of a young man full of promise, of a mother of several little children, of a brilliant statesman in whom many people have placed their hope, and so on, exemplify the horror of death.¹⁵ Each such event reminds those of us who are alive that we too must die one day and that our hopes, our plans, our words, our works will come to an end.¹⁶ It renders all of our engagements, hopes

and aspirations absurd. “To reflect upon this, to see death as the final absurdity in a life that is naught but “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”, is to feel at least something of the horror of death. It is one of the ways that the threat of non-fulfillment expresses itself in human existence.”¹⁷ Orubu¹⁸ shares this horrible nature of death since he believes that death is not a painless phenomenon but an odious and agonizing experience whose process is bitter and uncomfortable.

Given the odious character of death, one philosophical issue arises. When it is clear that the sick person will die (if we can really be hundred percent sure), is it morally justifiable to disclose the information to him or her? Based on human frailty, and human nature and conceptions about death, not many people will have the courage of Socrates (to be discussed later) to bear this knowledge disclosure with calm, courage and fearlessness. Not disclosing the information may help to assuage fear and bear pain patiently with the hope, (though unrealistically), that he will recover some day; and disclosing it may not allay any fear, but may increase fear and tension which can speed up the death. Ernest Becker is mentioned by Andrew Jameton as arguing that “the fear of death is too powerfully terrifying to permit most people to accept it.”¹⁹ Because of the fear, worries, anxieties, tensions, and so on, which it creates, most people would prefer not to be informed; and would regret it if they are informed. In fact, the information that one will die is certainly a terrifying bad news for most people. It is worse when it is delivered coldly; since “sharing bad news involves timing and a commitment to continuing empathy, compassion, reassurance, and conversation.”²⁰ But some philosophers attempt to banish man from the horror and fear of death. For such philosophers such as Socrates, Epicurus and Chuang Tzū, coming to know the reality of life and death will make people to accept it as it comes with disinterested attitude.²¹ We shall discuss the positions of these philosophers later.

Now, how common is fear of death among people? The fear of death is one of the biggest fears facing humanity. One of the reasons death creates fear, sorrow and pain is that its source and mode of operation remain an unravelled mystery. Lisa Fritscher writes that *thanatophobia*, or fear of death, is relatively complicated and common among people. “Some people fear being dead, while others are afraid of the actual act of dying.”²² Sometimes, this fear is so prevalent as to affect people’s daily lives. Angela Morrow shares this view that the fear of death and dying is not uncommon among people. In their opinion, we are so scared of death for reasons such as:²³ fear of pain and suffering of death, fear of illness or loss of dignity, fear of the unknown, that is, of what happens afterward, fear of non-existence, that is, of ceasing to exist after death, fear of eternal punishment, fear of loss of control over death and fear of what will become of our loved ones.

The Reality about Death

Mourning and the various rituals attached to death suggest that death is hellish. But Chin Shih diverges from this and instead repudiates weeping by people at the death of others. He remonstrated the people who were weeping over the death of Lao Tzu, his friend. When Chin Shih went to mourn his friend, he met “the old folk weeping as though they had lost a child; there were young people wailing as if for the loss of a mother.”²⁴ But for Shih, the deceased did not ask for weeping, wailing or tear. These acts are mere expressions of emotions and failing to recognize what must be. This failure is a violation of the principle of reality. But Chin Shih would remonstrate: “When the Master came, it was because he was due to be born. When he died, it was entirely natural. If you are prepared to accept this and flow with it, then sorrow and joy cannot touch you.”²⁵ We have either forgotten or neglected one reality that is both existential and ontological, and that is: “Death and birth are fixed. They are as certain as the dawn that comes after the night, established by the decree of Heaven. This is beyond the control of humanity; this is just how things are.”²⁶ “The cosmos gives me the burden of a physical form, makes life a struggle, gives me rest in old age and peace in death. What makes life good, therefore, also makes death good.”²⁷ From this it is clear that humans are at the mercy of the natural order of things and that whatever makes life good makes death good as well. Hence there is no need to fear death but to accept it as it comes.

Banishing the Fear of Death

In his ethics and metaphysics, Chuang Tzū²⁸ regarded fear of death as one of the principle sources of human unhappiness. Like Epicurus after him (to be discussed later) he attempted to banish men from the fear of death and to render it meaningless through his teaching. Chuang Tzū believes in enormous happiness for the dead. According to him, the happiness of the dead is greater than that of a king and life in the world is nothing but toils and troubles. The dead, if he has the opportunity to return back to earth will not oblige to come back since to be restored to life is like “casting away happiness greater than that of a king only to go back again to the toils and troubles of the living world...”²⁹ For Chuang Tzū, part of the ideal life is the state where a man “...will bury gold in the hillside and cast pearls into the sea. He will not struggle for wealth, nor for fame. He will not rejoice at long life, nor will he grieve over early death. He will not find pleasure in success, nor will he feel pain in failure.... His glory is to have the insight that all are one and that life and death are the same.”³⁰ Like Heraclitus, Chuang Tzū tells us that the universe is composed of pairs of opposite. All these opposites involve each other in a never-ceasing process. Thus in the process of evolution, every phenomenon cannot exclude its negation.³¹ This implies that life and death involve each other. But how can humans come to terms with this fact and accept what must be?

It is learning and detachment from worldly matters that can enhance one's ability to ignore external matters. This will make the individual to see everything with true clarity to be one, and then, could ignore both past and present. Having ignored both past and present, the individual is "able to enter where there is neither death nor birth". He is able to come to terms with the fact that the end of life is not death, and the coming to birth is not life and that it is the cosmos which "gives me form, brings me to birth, guides me into old age and settles me in death". Therefore, "if I think my life good, then I must think my death good"³² as well.

Epicurus was also concerned with how to dispel the fear of death. According to Vincent Barry, the various arguments furnished by philosophers to show that death is not or cannot be bad for those who die derive from one advanced in the ancient world by Epicurus.³³ Epicurus was influenced by the thought of Democritus. Democritus had philosophized that all that happened in the universe, the coming together and separation of anything are not by any plan or purpose but by mere chance. They are due to the coming together and separation of atom. This metaphysics of Democritus interests Epicurus and was subjected to his modification. Arising from this, Epicurus submitted that the birth and death of anything, including human beings is by mere chance. To banish man from fear of death and of the gods, therefore, Epicurus submitted that there is no life after death since the soul of man like any other thing else in reality, is composed of atoms and dissolve along with the body at death.³⁴

According to Epicurus, the gods are not interested in human affairs and do not interfere in human activities. They mind their own business. Hence, there is no need to be afraid of them or of punishment after death since there is no life after death. "The human soul perishes with the body at death, and that is the end of sensation and conscious existence."³⁵ Another reason which makes fear of death unwarranted is that man never encounters death. He does not encounter it when he lives, and when it comes, he is no longer there to encounter it. The fear of death therefore is vain since it is nothing to us. In contrast with Plato who did not only believe in the independent existence of body and soul as separate substance but also in the immortality of the soul, Aristotle believes that the body and soul form one inseparable substance, so knitted together that with the death of the body the soul also perishes with it. So far, the attempt in this session is to make the fear of death groundless.

Death as Relief

Given the pessimistic view which people have about life due to its vicissitudes and despite the negative attitude which some people have about death, some thinkers still see death as something positive. Among these thinkers we shall reflect on the thought of Benson Idahosa, Kahlil Gibran and the personal life and attitude of Socrates toward death. The perspectives of some Islamic scholars will also be attended to.

Although Archbishop Benson Idahosa was a church leader, a trained theologian and a Christian, some of his thoughts were essentially philosophical. Idahosa³⁶ would see death as a respite. In his writing, he holds that to die is gain, and so people should not be afraid of death. He made analogy of this with human engagement in the daily business of life. According to him, “in our everyday life people are not afraid to make profit and do not cry when they make it. People do not cry when they are delivered from trouble and when they are healed from pain. When people are discharged and acquitted when facing trial in a court of law, they do not cry rather they rejoice. In the same way, since to die is gain, people should not be afraid of death.”³⁷ From this standpoint, it seems evident that for Idahosa life is about labour, vicissitudes, entrapping and tribulation from which death rescues human beings and offers them relief.

While using Benin City in Nigeria as an example, Idahosa³⁸ holds that the seeds of fear of death and the negative attitude toward death are sown by customs and traditions. These inherited beliefs are inculcated in children and they make them perceive death as pain, disaster and the like; and in consequence, they become afraid of death. These fears which now engulf them and become inseparable from them all through life inform their beliefs, attitudes, dispositions and actions about death, and they in turn continue to inculcate them in their children. Idahosa’s divergent belief from this inherited belief about death may have probably been spurred by his belief in the distinction between earthly life and eternal life. While earthly existence is temporal and transient, life after death, that is, the life given by God through Jesus Christ is eternal. According to Idahosa, life cannot be snuffed out by death; it does not come to an end when a man ceases to exist on this mundane terrain. Rather it is an everlasting life which cannot be extinguished. When we are fully conscious of what death is, or what awaits us after it, and if people are expecting it, death would be like a case of an ambassador reporting to headquarters.³⁹ From the point of view of immortality, Idahosa argued that death is gain since it leads us to a better place. This position could be appealing and soothing only to theists who believe in a blissful immortality. The view expressed by Kahlil Gibran resembles that of Idahosa just presented.

According to Gibran, you would not know or find the secret of death unless you seek it in the heart of life. It is in life that one can find or understand the meaning of death. “For life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one.”⁴⁰ Gibran compares the fear of death to the trembling of the shepherd who stands before the king who is to honour him. This shepherd is joyful beneath his trembling, that he shall wear the mark of the king. This means that death encompasses both fear and glory; despite the fear it generates, it ushers the dead into grandeur. Kahlil Gibran captures this idea this way:

For what is it to die but to stand naked in the wind and to melt into the sun? And what is it to cease breathing, but to free the breath from its restless tides that it may rise and expand and seek

God unencumbered? Only when you drink from the river of silence shall you indeed sing. And when you have reached the mountain top, then you shall begin to climb. And when the earth shall claim your limbs, then shall you truly dance.⁴¹

From this rationalization it is clear that Kahlil Gibran conceived death as a prelude to the fullness of life.

Socrates like Idahosa after him over three millennial later did not see death as a misfortune or extinction of life or as a regrettable phenomenon; rather he sees it as an event which leads to after life where there is no injustice and inhibition or infringement in divine assignment. With commitment to his teaching and, in reverence to constituted authority and personal conviction, and with his personal life and example, he demonstrated an unswerving attitude to death. Not only this, he teaches by practical demonstration with his life an unflinching attitude toward death. This unflinching and courageous acceptance of death for integrity, unconditional obedience to constituted authority and precept are recorded by Plato in some of his dialogues such as *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito* and *Phaedo*.

Crito is the book or dialogue where a conversation ensued between Socrates and Crito the person. In *Crito* (the dialogue),⁴² Crito attempts to beseech or persuade Socrates out of prison when he was sentenced to death for false accusation; but Socrates rejected all the offers. Crito was amazed at the tranquil he met Socrates very early in the morning (for he had met him sleeping peacefully) when he visited him in prison custody awaiting execution, and commended him for his usual disposition, and the unimagined ease and tranquil he bore the calamity of unjust sentence to execution by poisoning. He began to entreat Socrates to escape since Socrates' death would mean not only losing an irreplaceable friend; but more than that, a greater evil and disgrace, and that is that: he will be accused by the many of failure to redeem him from death and of valuing money more than a friend without knowing the efforts he put in. He told Socrates that his refusal would be unjustifiable in betraying his own life when he might save it, and thus playing into the hands of his enemies hurrying on his destruction. This would also mean deserting his children to remain uncared for.

But Socrates asked him not to care about the opinion of the many who are ignorant. He told Crito that he is always guided by reason and whatever reason appeared to him upon reflection to be the best even in the present circumstance, he cannot repudiate the principles he has hitherto revered; and unless they can find other better principles he will certainly not agree with him, not even if the power of the multitude could inflict many more imprisonments, confiscations, deaths, and frightening horrors. Socrates remarked that to act as Crito bid is to destroy and injure the inherent principle assumed to be improved by justice and deteriorated by injustice. For him, not life, but a good life is to be greatly valued. And a good life is equivalent to a just and honourable life. To do

as Crito bid again is to do wrong of retaliating evil for evil. But we ought not to retaliate evil for evil to anyone whatever evil we may have suffered from him. Neither injury nor retaliation nor warding off evil by evil is ever right. Since we ought to do what we admit to be right and not to betray it, then I need not to leave the prison against the wish of the Athenians for that would mean truancy, doing wrong to those I ought not to have wronged and deserting the principles which we acknowledged to be just. Socrates stated that he was born, brought up, educated and nurtured in Athens, and when he is punished by her in whatever way, such punishment is to be endured in silence, even if it will lead to death. To renege is a violation. And as an old man, it is a violation of the most sacred laws from a miserable desire of a little more life. Socrates therefore avowed that we should think not of life and children first, and of justice afterwards, but of justice first, that you may be justified before the princes of the world below. No one can be happier, holier or juster in this life, or happier in another, if he does what Crito proposes. Hence it is better for him to depart in innocence as a sufferer and not a doer of evil; a victim, not of the law, but of men. He was therefore ready to face death. *Phaedo* contains the narrative of the execution of Socrates.

Phaedo⁴³ is the person who provides the narrative of the death of Socrates to Echecrates of Philus at Philus upon request. *Phaedo* is the name of the dialogue or book in which this narrative ensued. Particularly of interest here is toward the end of the narration. Following the false indictment of Socrates by Meletus of corrupting the Athenian youth and of inventing new gods,⁴⁴ Socrates was sentenced to death by poisoning. While Socrates was awaiting execution on the appointed day, some of his friends who were with him, while Socrates was away from them for a time, were thinking about the topic of discourse—Socrates' execution, and the greatness of their sorrow, how Socrates now becomes to them like a father of whom they were being bereaved, and as they were about to pass the rest of their lives as orphans. At that moment of the day, when a good deal of time has passed, Socrates came back to sit with them. Soon the jailer who was the servant of the Eleven stood by Socrates and said that Socrates is the noblest, gentlest and best of all who come to that place. He entreated Socrates not to be like others who rage and swear at him, when, in obedience to the authorities he bid them drink poison, for others and not him, are to be blamed. He then fared Socrates well. After then, he burst into tears, turned, and went out. Socrates even at that moment which seems critical reciprocated his good wishes, and said of him to his friends that since he has been in prison, the man has been charming and good to him; he visited him and talked with him as much as possible and now he generously sorrowed on his account. Socrates was then ready to take the poison if it was prepared but if not to get it prepared. Crito attempted to cause delay. But Socrates thought that he would not gain anything by drinking the poison a little later. Rather it would only make him ridiculous to himself for sparing and saving a life which was already forfeited.

Upon being handed-over the cup of poison, and in the easiest and gentlest manner, and without the least fear or change of countenance, Socrates took the cup and requested for making a libation out of it to any god. But he was told that the poison was only prepared just as deemed enough. He therefore prayed to the gods to prosper his journey from this world to the other world. Then quite readily and cheerfully, he drank the poison. After he had finished drinking the poison, his friends started crying, weeping and wailing at the thought of their own calamity in having to part with such a friend. But Socrates alone retained his calmness. He rebuked them for such womanish behaviour, and told them to be quiet and be patient to allow him die in peace. His last utterance which was a request was for Crito to pay for a debt of a cock which he owed Asclepius. Then he died; and Phaedo remarked: ‘Such was the end, Echecrates, of our friend; concerning whom I may truly say, that of all the men of his time whom I have known, he was the wisest and justest and best’. And I think Phaedo should have added the bravest. Socrates remained calm where all men have dreaded and may dread without allowing the impending calamity to becloud his senses of reasoning and judgement. He was unperturbed by anything even of death which he accepted calmly and in good faith. And under this situation, he still remembered that he owed a debt; and he requested for payback from a friend Crito. What a mental serenity!

With this practical demonstration Socrates teaches that we should not fear death, but to embrace it with boldness. Besides, he teaches that death is not harmful, and it is not the end of life. What Kenneth S. Davis said in a biography of Dwight Eisenhower clearly depicts Socrates belief and demonstration, and the belief of the just in our time. It is that: “Any life truly lived is a risky business, and if one puts up too many fences against the risks one ends by shutting out life itself.”⁴⁵ One may also reason differently in allaying fear of death.

Part of the reason which makes death seems good and less grieved and which relieves people from fear of death and of extinction is the belief in the possibility of living a life similar to the present after death, and that of a gyratory life in two worlds. There is the belief in some cultures that the pattern of life in the hereafter is a replica or a replay or at least similar to what obtains in this world of matter. There is the belief that eating and drinking, marrying and being given in marriage, labour and rest, birth and death, among others are features of the two worlds. In these two worlds, birth and death are successive phenomena; they occur in turns. The death and birth in one domain lead respectively to birth and death in the other. For example, when there is rejoicing over new birth in one realm there is weeping over loss by death in the other, *vice versa*. Such belief makes death non-horrendous.

The Islamic perspective on death tends to encompass the divergent views on death in the sense that death heralds rewards and punishments for good and bad people respectively. In presenting this Islamic perspective, Michael Leming and George Dickinson write that life after death is an important focus within the

Islamic tradition. In Islam, earthly life and the realm of the dead are separated by a bridge. "After death, all peoples face a divine judgement. Then they are assigned eternal dwelling places where they will receive eternal rewards or punishments determined by the strength of their faith in God and the moral quality of their earthly lives."⁴⁶ Like the Jews and Christians, followers of Islam believe that God is fundamentally compassionate and just. Although Islamic religion believes that individuals are held accountable for moral integrity at the time of their death, Islamic theologians also stress that God's judgement is tempered with mercy, and that through the intercession of angel Gabriel those who are condemned to punishment will eventually be pardoned.⁴⁷ This may serve as a relief since it promises a better life. The orthodox Muslims would believe in this forgiveness of God. Their position is that Allah promises to forgive the petty sins of the believer if he keeps away from the grievous ones and admit him a place of great honour. As for grave sinners, the decision to punish or forgive lies with God because He does what He wish. Both Mohammad Ali and M.M. Sharif argue independently that evildoers will not be punished forever due to the love of God which includes His attributes of munificence, mercy and forgiveness.⁴⁸ We shall elaborate on this later. There is a contrary view to this. The Mu'tazilites⁴⁹ submit that God's justice makes it incumbent on Him to requite the obedient for their good deeds and punish the sinners for their misdeeds. They accepted totally the theory of indeterminism, that is, that man is the author of his own acts and can be held responsible for them. For the Mu'tazilites, since man decides upon and creates his acts, both good and evil, then he deserves reward or punishment in the next world for what he does. The justice of God makes it incumbent upon Him not to do anything contrary to justice and equity. From this they believed that a grave sinner will undoubtedly be punished in the hereafter. For the Mu'tazilites, there is no possibility or necessity for Allah to forgive freely without strict observance of His principles of justice. He will only forgive the evil doers who have repented sincerely in this world at an appropriate period. But inevitably, he will punish those who do not repent sincerely.

Among others, M.M. Sharif and Muhammad Ali used the idea of life after death to explain the Qur'an's teaching about reward and punishment in the hereafter.⁵⁰ The Qur'an teaches that "every soul experience that which it bargains for.... So, whoever is guided, is guided only for (the good of) his soul, and whoever goes astray, he himself bears the responsibility of his own wandering."⁵¹ Muslims believe that Allah is always just and that His law shows us what is morally good and evil. His justice demands that He takes true believers to Paradise and punishes evildoers. The Qur'an states: "as for the righteous, they will be in bliss. And the wicked, they will be in the fire."⁵² This implies that once the soul is separated from the body, the ones that have achieved perfection live in eternal bliss while those who could not live responsibly by striving at perfection will live in torment.

Contrary to the view of the strict justice of God, some authoritative teachings in Islam and Islamic philosophy do not separate the love of God from His justice (judgement, punishment and reward) as part of the cardinal teachings of Islam. For example, M. M. Sharif, relying on the teachings of Quran and Islamic traditions writes that God is the best to judge and is never unjust. On the Day of Judgment, He will set up the scales of justice and even the smallest action will be taken into account. For those who refrain from wrong and do what is right there is great reward. But for the wicked there is divine punishment. Divine punishment may be less than evil done, but it is never more for, besides being most just, God is most loving, most merciful, and forgiver of all sins. But this is not the case with His reward. He is most munificent and bountiful and, therefore, multiplies rewards for good deeds manifold. Compared to life in Paradise, the life of this world is only a life of vainglory. Sharif argued that the bliss of Paradise and the agony of hell are not the final stage for the righteous and the unrighteous respectively. Every progress made whether in Paradise or in hell is a stage by stage towards the Lord. Those in hell shall be redeemed in the end.⁵³ From this position it is clear that ultimately, death is a relief since the blissful life which lies beyond present existence is incomparable and since ultimately, everyone will be entitled to this blissful life.

The view of Muhammad Ali has some similarities with that of Sharif just examined. Ali would see death as ultimately positive. According to him, death is not the end of man's life; it is a change of state of existence. It opens the door to a higher form of life. "Life after death... opens out for man a new world of advancement, before which the progress of this life sinks into insignificance."⁵⁴ According to him the basis of that life is laid in the present. He submits further that while heavenly life is for the good, hell is for the wicked. The blessings of Paradise which Allah have prepared for his righteous servants cannot be conceived of in this life. Just as the blessings of Paradise are manifestations of the hidden realities of this life, so are the depths, the fire and unfruitfulness of hell the manifestation of hidden realities.⁵⁵ But as to whether sinners will live forever in the torments of hell, Ali argued that hell is only remedial. It only represents the evil consequences of evil deeds; it is not a place merely for undergoing the consequences of what has been done; it is also a remedial plan. In other words, its chastisement is not for the purpose of torture but for purification; so that man, rid of the evil consequences which he has brought about with his own hands, may be made fit for spiritual advancement. He argued analogically that just as God brings down his punishment upon a sinning people in order that they may turn to him, that is, that they may be awakened to a higher life, the same must be the object of punishment in hell. It is by purification the sinner undergoes the ordeal of hell in order to obtain his lost opportunity. This purification is an attribute of God's Divine mercy. Ali corroborated this with the Islamic tradition which holds that those in hell are pardoned by Allah and none will remain in hell because the angels, the prophets and the faithful will intercede

for them and because of the mercy of God. Ali therefore inferred that abiding in hell will cease to be at a point and that hell must come to an end.⁵⁶ This view depicts death ultimately as gain.

Conclusion

This engagement was an excursion into a philosophical discourse on the relevance or otherwise of life and death. It appears that human condition is a deplorable one. Death therefore either serves to complicate this horrendous condition of mankind or relieve humans of it. The disbelief in immortality or life after death could be a measure to banish the fear of death, of punishment after death, and of the uncertainties which lay beyond present existence. This belief offers some reliefs and may tend to banish fear of death and make life more meaningful and worth living for those for whom fear of death makes life horrible. Paradoxically, belief in life after death is also one of the beliefs which make death look pleasant to many people. Since there is the possibility to live on, either by repeating such life elsewhere, or by coming back into this world or by alternating successively in two worlds, or by having a life better than the present elsewhere, people tend to be relieved from the fear of death.

But there is a double-edged dilemma. How do we know about after life and reincarnation or their negation? Can both beliefs constitute knowledge? Since the dead cannot come back after a time to tell what is attainable in the world beyond the present, what is the source of our knowledge claim about after life? And since no dead person has come back to tell about it, does that mean there is no life after death? To think in either way is to be susceptible to logical fallacies. Nevertheless ontologically, any of the beliefs seems to relieve some people of fear of death and of the unknown. It gives the atheist satisfaction in annihilation, which is a cessation of sensations and its aftermath pains and of punishment after death. For the theist, it gives the satisfaction in an eternal blissful life hereafter which is equally a cessation of sensations of pains.

Having critically examined the human condition, the nature, horror and fear of death and the uncertainties of hereafter in this investigation, it is logically potent to infer that life is absurd; death is absurd; and the fear of death is absurd; and as for the hereafter, the judgement is reserved for the individual until he gets there. Although some philosophers made various attempts to banish man from fear of death by holding that there is no life after death, unfortunately such attempts do not make any sense to, nor serve any sanatorium for most people who are ardent believers in life after death. After all the mental wrangling, and given the odious character of life, it seems passing judgement in epistemic uncertainty would favour death as a relief from uncongenial life than otherwise.

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