

Religion and Philosophy

The Value of Human Death: The Moral Perspective

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Abstract:

Death has a bitter feeling, nobody wants to die. Every human person runs away from death even when faced with the most ugliest situation of life, yet people want to live and not die – death is the most Enigmatic phenomenon of life, but quiet unveiling and revealing. What most people feels is dreaded, unacceptable and not wanted by any is naturally an inevitable attribute of life, some though believe that it is a necessary end while some believe that it is a process of transition from a lower level to a higher place of call yet, others hold that death is the ‘bridge’, in between home call and earthly existence. Is there really life-after death? Why do humans have to die? When death comes where do the components of the human person go? What constitutes man as man? Does death has value? These and many more questions are what this paper rise through the moral lane of death.

General Introduction:

Man is a ‘thinking being’ always engross in thought about ‘his being’, mediate and immediate environment man is capable of evaluating his actions on daily basis in order that he does not miss a set pattern of life for the realization and actualization of set goals within his ‘life span’.

The careful nature of man is being ‘minded’ about his activities of life is his reflection on life-after death – hence the persistent desire for perfection. Yes man has an in-built urge for happiness, which is responsible for man’s desire for perfection knowing fully well that if he lives a good life now he will be rewarded in the life-after-death.

This is a pointer to the believe of man’s quest for immortality – man most basic and strongest desire. It is an irresistible natural desire and everything man does in life is ultimately with a view to satisfying this deepest urge. The thirst for immortality is so strong in man as a result of his deep instinct of self-preservation. It is the desire for self preservation that is (continuation in existence without extinction) that manifest itself in function of self perfection in man’s actions in order to continue himself even after death i.e. (morality is for self perpetuation of man).

If self-perpetuation of man necessitates morally good life unto perfection, therefore death which is not a necessary end but a transition unto higher calling has values in human community. Therefore this research paper is aimed at discovering the African conception of death and using the Kantian moral argument to portray the value of human death in human society.

Conceptual Analysis

The concept of death has been a philosophic debate over the years. Human death has constituted basic problems mythological difficulty to philosophers in an attempt to clarify some questions connected to death. The concept of death normally attracts some basic quest as what is death? And why does death matters? In order for us to answer these questions adequately we most look out for the conceptual break down of death.

What is death? There is always need to provide solution or clarification to a problem that is not known. Philosophers through the ages had given a working definition of 'death' as a concept. The common man's view is that "death" is the end of life, or at least our earthly life¹. The definition is too narrow to answer or solve the big question which 'Death' poses.

In countering the common sensical view Celestina Isiramen writes that: man encounter death because he has not been able to realize that death is not the end of life.² Socrates gave an hint of the conception of death during his life course when he said "The hour of departure has arrived, and we go on our ways, I know me and you To live: which is better, only God know³."

Socrates conception about death shows that death is a liberation to the world of the gods. This means that death is not an evil thing as many would tend to profess. But death is a dreamless sleep which is plainly good or at least a process when the soul migrates to another world⁴. And "in another world death does not put a man in 'hock' for asking questions! Assuredly not, for besides being happier than we are they will be immortal⁵. In support of Socrates, Plato teaches that " Death is the separation of soul and body⁶. This detachment or separation is a form of liberation for the soul, which goes on to live eternally but in contrast to Plato position, Aristotle describes death as the perishing of both body and soul⁷".

While making a discourse on the same subject epicures teaches that: There ought not to be any bothering about death. Since only a living person has sensation and after death, there is no sensation⁸. This Epicures statement was given precise formulation by Lucretius who wrote that; where we are death is not yet and where death is, we are no more. It should therefore trouble neither the living nor the dead. For it is not found with the living and the dead exists no longer⁹.

Having carved his philosophic insight in atomic materialism form democritus, Epicurus believed that the Comos is composed of atoms which are in constant motion in space and that all things are constituent elements of these atoms. And that in so far as the soul is composed of atoms like every other things, death is the dissolution of the soul- therefore to Epicurus there are nothing like immortality¹⁰.

The stoics hold that death is an event that cannot escape and man should only adjust and submit himself to the reality of death. Spinoza one of the foremost existentialist posit that " A free man thinks of nothing less than death and his wisdom is not a meditation upon life¹¹. According to some existentialist, a proper assessment of and the right attitude towards death, one's own death, is not only a "sine qua non" of genuine experience, but also gaining any illumination about the nature of the world¹²".

According to Heidegger, death is that which makes us aware of our not being, it makes us experience the contingency of man's being. That we are after all finite and will sooner or later come to an end.¹³. Closely followed Heidegger profound submission is Karl Jasper's

write up on death that death is a limit or boundary to existence and such experience of the boundary of death forces us to admit the non-fulfillment of existence in the world and thus to transcend or despair¹⁴. Kierkegaard defines death as “The greatest happiness” and goes on to clarify this by holding that “Reality is entirely pastness without finality of fulfillment and that which is past without being perfected is dead, therefore, reality aesthetically conceived is death”¹⁵. In the consideration of what death is all above we have been able to show case series of postulations for people to explore in order to have a better grasp of death as a philosophic concept. Part of it was to see whether death is something good Socrates posits or a loss to the human person and the society at large.

Theoretical Framework

The discourse on whether death is of value to human society has been thought of during the ancient period through the medieval and even in the present as far as people of religious and philosophical minds are concerned. It is widely believed especially in philosophic circles that our conducts in this world will to a very great extent determine our end, and thus man finds a meaning to death in this life as it has a purpose or end, which is in union with God. This in our desire to create a theory that will serve as a background of study on this paper we are left with no other option than the Kantian moral argument for the immortality of the soul.

The concept of the immortality of the soul remains paramount in the issue of ‘Death’ because of the wide spectrum of beliefs surrounding the conception of death! Some believe that death is the cessation of both the body and soul while others believe that the body dissolves at death while the soul is an immortal substance that continues to live even after death. Meaning that there is life after death. The soul of man has a driving force for perfect happiness which is realized by the possession of the highest-good-the moral good life (conduct) which the soul is naturally capable of possessing. This means that the soul is capable of possessing God and this further shows that the soul is likened to God as it has the various attributes of God. God is immaterial, spiritual and eternal being (i.e. immortal). However, the immortality of the soul with which the concept and relevance of death is adduced cannot be substantiated by mere speculative or metaphysical argument but rather by a rational endeavour based on the practical reason (morality). Thus, Kant’s moral argument of the immortality of the soul is a better theoretical background for explaining the relevance or value of death in human society.

Meanwhile, what is this Kant’s moral argument? Kant maintains that the immortality of the soul is explained by a moral argument. This argument is based on man’s obligation to obey the moral law. Accordingly, man has an obligation to obey the moral law and by extension conform his ‘will’ completely with the moral law, such complete conformity would be perfection in ‘good act’ a will that is completely in conformity with the moral law is a ‘perfect will’. When an individual has a ‘perfect will’ he cannot do wrong.

If ‘perfect will’ cannot be attained here and now then the concept of the good life which the soul drives at to attain will be attained through the soul’s reflection of what will life be in the after death. If it is agreed that the soul of man is capable of grasping abstract knowledge of the good especially from the conception of the life-after-death than death which most people hate, disdains has value to the human society based on this Kantian theoretical understanding of the immortality of the soul.

The African Conception of Death

Death though has universal meanings with some variation of ideas based on the different school of thoughts and orientations. The African's have quietly a different traditional believes about death as against the westerners. African traditional belief system has it that: Death is the highest stage of life process, this is with the exception of the death of people who have not given birth to their own children. So death to an African man is accepted as part of the natural rhythm of life but yet with some mix feelings. Death stands between the world of human beings and the world of the spirits between the visible and the invisible. Death in African perception is something that concerns everybody, partly because sooner or later everyone personally faces it and partly because it brings with it loss and sorrows to every family and community. This form the reason while elaborate rituals and ceremonies go with it.

Some of the ceremonies or rituals done are partly a symbolic way of either 'reviving', summoning back', 'inviting back' the departed, and thus renewing constant contact with the dead in the next world; and partly declaring a formal resumption of life. To the African's death is not a final cessation but only a disruption of the rhythm of life because part of the rituals done are performed to conquer death. Africans also believe that death is only but a transition to a higher call-i.e home call. They believe that the departed is not dead but only gone to meet his ancestors: He is a living-dead, and can be contacted, invited back and drawn into the human circles. The new 'beat of the ancestors' symbolizes the continuing presence of the living-dead in the family and among his people, hence in Africa issues of libation, the braking of cola-but by the most eldest member of the family and the consultation of spirits during time of troubles. Death is acknowledged as having come into the world and then remains there without leaving ever since it came. Africans thought of death as something unnatural and something preventable on a personal level because it is believed to have been cause by an agent. If that person has not caused it, it would not have happened. This is the logic of the philosophy of the functioning of death among the Africans.

In Africa death is defined by considering the terms which are used to described the actual act or dying. These terms are employed to show the concepts which people have concerning death. When a person has died people say that 'he has breathed his last breath', he has kept quiet; he has gone; he has gone down to the grave; life was snatched away from him. For a person that dies and was probably hated because he was perhaps wicked, people will say. Death has stiffened him, ' death has sneezed him, dead has made lime go far away, 'death has cut him down' etc if the person that dies, died at a very old age and people want to make the death colourful they say: ' he has followed the company of his grandfathers; he has gone home; gone to meet with his ancestors' etc.

From all these terms, one would conclude that death to an African person is conceived of as a departure and not a complete annihilation of a person. He moved on to join the company of his departed, to which every human person with Sunday join part of; the difference only remains the change of the decay of the physical body, but the spirit moves to another state of existence. Life is only but a pilgrimage: the real home is the hereafter since no one depart from there. The cessation of the part of the human at death is the body, ' so that he sleeps and never to wake up again. Death to this end is really cruel it 'stiffens

the body' cut down the body: while the soul continuous to exist in the hereafter.

The Value of Death in Human Society: A Moral Perspective

When one looks at the cruelty of death as it takes our beloved ones away without our seeing them in life process again, 'one will concludes that death have not empirical value to human society, but a rational or philosophic look will unveil a lot of meanings, relevance – value of death in human society. Before we make concrete attempt on the societal value of death we need to know what is life itself and the meaningfulness and meaninglessness of life. The issue here is whether life has any significance or relevance. Does life add up to anything in the end? or is it pointless, senseless and empty¹⁶. The quest for the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of life is the same as asking of 'human life is worth the while'? This question is what philosophy can given an answer to, since the 'being of man' depends essentially on ontological enquiry to this end therefore, the non- philosophers turn to the philosophers for illumination and enlightenment¹⁷.

Philosophers who have given answers to the questions about the meaningfulness and meaningfulness of life unequivocally are broadly divided into two orientation. - The pessimists and the optimist. The pessimist viewed life as meaningless, purposeless and void. While the optimists considers life as, purposeless teleological with While the optimists considers life as purposeful, teleological, with a positive attitude towards life. It is note-worthy, that both belong to the school of existentialist philosophy who concern themselves with the existence of man in a changing and potentially dangerous word. We are faced with divergent views since proponents of the existentialist philosophy are not unanimous in their perception or understanding of human life.

Arthur schopenhaver – is one of the proponents of the pessimists in the philosophical consideration of the meaning of life. Arthur view about the meaning of life is found in his book page "parega and paraupomena"¹⁸. Here his article on the vanity of existence. He posits that:

This vanity (worthlessness, meaninglessness of life) finds expression in the whole way in which things exists, in the infinite nature of time and space, as opposed to the finite nature of time and space, as opposed to the finite nature of the individuals in both, in the ever passing moment as the only mode of actual existence in the interdependence and relativity of all things. In continual becoming with out ever being, in constant wishing and never being satisfied, in the long battle which forms the history of life, where every effort is checked by difficulty and stopped until they are overcome¹⁹.

To Schopenhaver, time is constant in which every participate (pass away) and it is in time that the 'will' to live reveals itself to us and expresses itself to us to show that all 'efforts made in life' are meaningless. It is worthy of note that the "will' in schopenhaver is different from the Kantian will, that of schopenhaver merely connotes the unconscious or irrational instinct in man"²⁰.

It is in this light schopenhaver sees life as meaningless and worthless because to him man can never attain the height he is striving for. To support his view on the vanity

of existences, he made reference to Plato's assertion, holding convincing. "Continual becoming and never being is the sole form of existence".²¹ He goes further to argue that "human life must be some kind of mistake"²². This is so, because man is a compound of various needs and necessities which are hard to satisfy and more also if eventually they are satisfied the concomitant effect is 'painfulness' in man, this leave him with no other thing but 'abandonment' and 'boredom'!

Another existentialist who tolls the same line or view of schopenhaver are Richard Taylor and Albert Camus. Both hold the pessimist view of the meaninglessness of life just as schopenhaver did. To say the lest Albert Camus held his view of the meaningless of life thus:

... I hold certain facts from which I cannot separate what I know, what is certain, what I cannot deny, what I cannot reject – This is what counts. I cannot refute everything in this world surrounding me that offends or enraptures me, except this chaos, this sovereign chance, and this divine equivalence which springs from anarchy. I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that, I do not know that meaning and that is it impossible²³.

Contrary to these pessimist views is the optimist views of life meaninglessness or the worth of life. Here we shall be considering the view of Richard Taylor. He based his view of the meaningfulness of life on the ancient myth 'sisyphus' just as Camus did, he started by show-casing some factors that made Sisyphus "existence and actions meaningless which to him are the fact which lies in the rolling of stone up the hill, as one rolls it up, the stone continually to roll back which absolutely refuses to be redeemed."²⁴ "It is not even redeemed by death that, if it were to accomplish nothing more, would at least bring this idiotic cycle to an end"²⁵.

Taylor suggested that the easier interpretation of the 'stone myth' is that it showed man's continue or external struggle and unquenchable spirit to succeed. Taylor thereafter went forward to explain the meaning of life, "Activity, and even long, drawn-out and repetitive activity has a meaning, if it has some significant culmination, some more or less lasting end that can be considered to have been the direction and purpose of the activity."²⁶ Thus it is understood from the above that life becomes meaningful when it is lived, having direction, purposive and when it has finality. For us to hold that life is meaningless is when life is bereft of these above elements. So Taylor noted that for life to have meaning "Sisyphus" existence would have been meaningless as well if there were some values in his labour, that is if his efforts ever connect in some level occasion by fresh labors of some sort"²⁷.

Accordingly, the function which will make life meaningful is our own wills, or interest in what we find ourselves doing. Though our activity may resemble that of Sisyphus in lacking directions, purpose and commitments (i.e. lacking meaningfulness of infinite burden). Nevertheless the significance of life is that of an inner compulsion to do that which we are naturally predisposed to do out of 'our own will'. To this end we can say that one of the foremost significance of death or rather the value of death is the fact that

death is not the finality in the rhythm process of life; this is born out of the platonic assertion contrary follows contrary-as life follows death so also death follows closely life. (Immortality) the immortality of the soul goes to show that death is not the end of life but a transition to another world – A higher world, the world of the spirit; where the soul shares in the divinity not God but as gods. At this stage the dead person can be consulted by the living for solution to problems life e.g. soil fertility, fruitfulness of the womb, weather condition for human favour. Libation against earthly mishaps e.g. accident, human death and crops disruption in farm land, pestilence, sickness and plaque of served degree.

The second value of death is the area of ‘moral rectitude’ just as the Kantian moral argument for immortality of the soul as spotlighted – death creates moral restitution as the mind of most people are abreast with the moral obligation that the will of an actor should conform with the moral law. The moral law portrays the good and any individual actor whose ‘will’ is directed in conformity with the practical reason – the morally good act will surely come up with the good behaviour. So death from the Kantian argument for the immortality of the soul in a short sentence brew good behaviour. Which goes to create harmonious society free from unwanted chaos which most societies experience nowadays.

Another value, is the social sphere which in effect is also a pointer to a moral parlance. The fact remains that death brings with it many rituals and ceremonies that are done not by the dead person’s families alone but the larger society; as such, ‘people who would not ordinary have predisposed themselves to the demands or will of the community where they live are some what being compelled without face to obey a natural call – This make people to become ‘responsive’ and ‘responsible’ to societal duties it becomes ‘duty’ bound for every members to be present at the burial rites and ceremonies that go with burial.

Besides making people responsive and responsible death is a coercive force that cohere people together for societal harmony. It is during burial or when an individual dies in a family, you beginning to see people showing sympathy, sharing pains, to the point of empathy: This tightened solidarity and oneness, brotherliness in the spirit of commonness as human species of the same kinds, it is on this ground that deep human feelings of life meaninglessness is expressed a world of constant struggles that ends suddenly, an empty world of nothingness’. People at this level of thought apprehend the very idea of life ----- one person cannot ‘possess this entire world! These atone the human mind to deep philosophic thought that bring people to full meaning of life life without greed, communal life, solidarity and empathy toward one another, at this point man is sharing in the divine.

Death helps to address issues of decadence, corruption and all other issues of vices – the reason being that when an individual reflects on death in a philosophic mode to realize that man is a bundle of vanity as life itself, than at this point there will not be good reason for amassing wealth especially through corrupt means for a life that is brute, short and nasty (vain) teleological. Then man will be apt to find the right purpose of life rather than the shadow which man is in constant pursue. The right purpose of life is what Taylor sported out his findings on the meaningfulness of life when he said “Activity, and even long, drawn-out and repetitive activity has a meaning if it has some significance culmination, some more or less lasting end that can be considered to have been the direction and purpose of the activity”²⁸. Meaning that the meaningfulness of life is based on the inner

compulsion to do just that which we are willing to do to eternity

This presupposes that whatever we do as consequences and if people apprehend this they are apt to live a good life – a morally worthy life. To this Clark believes that: “If we are asked to believe that all our striving is without final consequence, then life is meaningless and it scarcely matters how we live it all will end in the dust of death²⁹”. If people are aware that whatever done here on earth has reward hereafter then they will be justified by living a morally good life. This has effect of sanitizing the society and cleansing it from vices, which engross most modern societies.

More over, the knowledge of death makes an individual being’ complete. It is worthy of note that the concept of death which enables one to have knowledge about immortality of the soul has value which it create on people in tends of reward or punishment depending on the kind of moral life lived on earth by the individual such that every one endeavor to live morally, knowing well that the exact moment of death is not known thus, the promise of beatific or perfect happiness which is the goal of ethic cannot be attained unless one passes through death in order to make ones being complete.

Finally, Death serves as a moral guide and standard for eternal pleasure. According to the Epicureans, pleasure is the principle that determine what action is good or bad, one feels that man tends to act in particular way to satisfy his personal quest for pleasure, even when it is against the dictates or natural law thereby resulting in relativism. The durability of any pleasure is also to be taken into cognizance, such that a pleasure the last only a while should not be encourage rather a long lasting pleasure should be promoted.

To this end therefore, with the awareness that the pleasures of this earthly life are imperfect since they will be terminated at death, thus, there is need to seek such pleasures that may lead to eternal pleasure in case the stand of the ‘immortalist’ as suggested by Pascal braise. When he said “It is certain that the mortality or immortality of the soul Must take an entire difference to morality. And yet philosophers have constructed their ethics independently of this they discuss to pass an hour³⁰”. From this assertion of Blaise and the fact that it is not possible to talk of mortality or immortality without first talking about death, it becomes crystal clear that morality with the conception of death and its aftermath will be but a futile effort.

Conclusion

It is not very cleared that death which death which most people dread in human society has empirical values to humans as against the backdrop that death is meaningless of some sort for a philosophic discourse, rather this paper has proved that death has moral significance in human society and as such most not be looked at, with displeasure, disdain and all kinds of meaningless thought. This is granted on the basis of the Kantian argument of immortality of the soul which gives credence to the thought that the human soul crave for immortality on the basis of man’s obligation to obey the moral law. Man, Kant says has an obligation to conform his ‘will’ completely with the moral law. To this end death has role to play in human society especially in area of human conduct (morality).

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