

PERCEPTIONS OF DEATH

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ABSTRACT

Death has been perceived differently in different eras. Philosophers who have studied this subject point out that the origins of different cultures were greatly shaped by their different approaches to the problem of death. Cultures and eras differed in how people perceived death, and whether they found the strength to oppose physical destruction. In some eras and cultures, the fear of death did not dominate as it did in ancient cultures.

Keywords: death, philosophy, culture, life

Introduction

Human mortality plays a major role in raising the problem of the meaning of life. The finiteness of life is a stimulus that compels a person to observe life, to analyze it, and to seek arguments for its justification. Unlike every living thing, only man realizes his mortality. Death, to some extent, appears as a constructive moment in the human worldview because it is through it that man thinks of life as its opposite and tries to determine its meaning.

Death, at first glance, seems to be a straightforward, obvious phenomenon from the very beginning. It does not seem to need complicated analysis, deep reflection. Indeed, what else is death but the natural end of all life, including man? The perception of death as the end of life, the reasoning and thinking on this topic, can mean only a being who has consciousness and judgment, that is, man. Death can be viewed in two ways: on the one hand, as the natural end of every living being, as one of the facts of the natural events, and, on the other hand, as a phenomenon having some relation to a specific rule of human existence as an essential component of his life.

Understanding the problem of death has a centuries-old philosophical and religious tradition. The attitude towards death had the most significant influence and conditioned the forms of various religious cults.

Philosophers who have studied this subject point out that the origins of different cultures were shaped by their different approaches to the problem of death. Cultures and eras differed in how people perceived death, whether they found the strength to oppose physical destruction. In some eras and cultures, the fear of death did not dominate at all, as it did in ancient culture, where they tried to overcome the horrors of absence by concentrating on the soul, stirring up hatred for death. On the contrary, in the Middle Ages, the thought of imminent death drove people mad. In the words of Johan Huizinga, "No other epoch has laid so much stress as the expiring Middle Ages on the thought of death" (Huizinga, 1924, p. 124).

It turns out that there was not the same approach to death in every era. Death was perceived differently in different eras. Man has not always been equally afraid of death. It is also possible that the hatred expressed towards death indicates the fear of him.

Many thinkers believe that man has an innate fear of death. This feeling is in the human essence, in the mystery of life. It is one of the initial feelings, and its roots are in the depths of the psyche. However, in different eras, in the prism of values with different minds, this fear takes different forms. This is reflected in various religious-philosophical provisions and concepts.

This feeling turns into a discussion of such critical philosophical problems as the meaning of life, duty, purpose, love, tragedy, heroism, etc.

In each era, different content filled these values. Each culture, therefore, develops a particular system of values by which the problem of death is understood.

People, of course, knew of the inevitability of death in every age and every culture. However, they tried to formulate views on the meaning of life as a means of refuting death based on symbols appropriate to their own cultures. One way to insuring oneself against death is to justify one's life. Filling a human life with meaning has become a means of his survival, of communion with eternity.

In most ancient cultures, the attitude towards death is epic, i.e., it is not perceived as a personal tragedy. Death is believed to be only the end of the life cycle.

The diverse and numerous notions of death formed in world cultures can be classified according to particular signs. Among them, first of all, are pre-Christian and Christian views. Eastern cultures, unlike Western ones, retained a belief in the power of cosmological, religious, and philosophical systems. Here death is not seen as the complete end of physical existence. Significant to them are conceptions of worldly existence in which death is not equated with the complete disappearance of the individual. As for Western thinking, such notions were not universal here. Christianity recognized the finiteness of individual existence. The massive resurrection from the dead was seen as an end to earthly history.

The feeling of death in cultures where the individual was not yet isolated from the community is different from the perception of this phenomenon where the personal idea (the idea of personality) prevailed. In societies in which the process of individualization was not brought to the fore, the end of individual existence was not considered a problem because a sense of individual existence was still poorly developed here. Death had not yet been experienced as a phenomenon radically different from life.

Death was perceived completely differently in cultures where the value, sovereignty, and uniqueness of the individual were realized. The finality of earthly existence was tragically experienced here. It permeated the whole subjectivity of man, the world of feelings, the inner being.

In Eastern cultures, the person was not perceived as a certain generality, and the personalist idea was not yet matured. Nevertheless, deep meditation is observed here, with the maximum concentration of attention on the problems of death. Some Eastern religions did not draw the line between earthly and worldly existence. For example, in ancient Chinese consciousness, death was not given much importance

because it was believed that it is true that a person has died, but he still remains among the living, but in the form of the dead. The dead do not leave the living. They move to another form of existence only and do not go to another place. That is why in this culture, death was not experienced as a great tragedy. The dead join the people who have died before, but they go nowhere. From here arose the ancestral cult, which is characteristic not only of this but also of many other cultures of the world.

Thus, in some cultures, there was no division: life is good, death is evil. Both were perceived as equally valuable, although there was a difference between them.

Similar to the Chinese view, the Japanese also believed that after death a person continues to exist in his living offspring and only perishes when there are no more offspring. Gradually death is experienced not so much as the death of ancestors, but - already as one's own death. Ancestor cult is no longer based on a living feeling. It becomes a part of tradition.

One of the best attempts to explain the phenomenon of death and to overcome the fear of it was the teaching of Socrates and his personal example. According to Plato, Socrates believed that "the one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death" (Plato, 1997, 64a).

Plato developed Socrates' basic thesis that death is the separation of the soul from the body, the liberation of the soul from the "dilemma" in which it lived. This doctrine reflects the notion of death as the liberation of the soul – which is very much like the divine, immortal, monotonous, miraculous in mind, unobstructed, eternally immutable, and self-existent – from the body, which is "human, mortal, multiform, unintelligible, soluble and never consistently the same" (Plato, 1997, p. 80b).

The soul and the body originally belonged to two different worlds. The soul originates from the world of eternal and unchanging ideas, to which it returns after death, and the body becomes ashes and remnants of what it was from the beginning. Therefore, the dialogue of Socrates in "Phaedo" formulates his opinion on the meaning and purpose of life. He argues that many are excellent, but few are chosen. In his opinion, only a group of true philosophers make up this small group of chosen ones. He says that he did his best not to lag behind them in anything. That was the purpose of his life:

"Those concerned with the mysteries say, many who carry the thyrsus but the Bacchantes are few. These latter are, in my opinion, no other than those who have practiced philosophy in the right way. I have in my life left nothing undone in order to be counted among these as far as possible,

as I have been eager to be in every way. Whether my eagerness was right and we accomplished anything we shall, I think, know for certain in a short time, god willing, on arriving yonder” (Plato, 1997, p. 69c).

The teachings of Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates on the immortality of the soul alleviate the tragedy of death. Later this doctrine, though transformed, was assimilated by Christianity and for a long time (to the present day) became the defining tradition of the European spiritual life.

A different understanding of death is formed with Epicurus. The subject of his discussion is the same as with Socrates: the liberation of people from the fear of death. In one of his letters, Epicurus writes:

“Become accustomed to the belief that death is nothing to us. For all, good and evil consists in sensation, but death is deprivation of sensation. And therefore, a right understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not because it adds to it an infinite period, but because it takes away the craving for immortality. There is nothing terrible in life for the man who has truly comprehended that there is nothing terrible in not living. So that the man speaks but idly who says that he fears death not because it will be painful when it comes, but because it is painful in anticipation. That which gives no trouble when it comes is but an empty pain in anticipation. So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist. It does not then concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more” (Epicurus, 2016, p. 3 (46)).

Thus, Epicurus points to the universality and naturalness of death as a country. All things have an end, and it is just as natural that there is nothing dangerous here anymore.

Although the Socratic-Platonic and Epicurean doctrines are contradictory in their content, they combine the specific Greek rationalism in the approach to death, which is related to the understanding of the cosmos as an eternally identical phenomenon. The latter is either unchanged, as it is the doctrine of Plato, or changes cyclically with a certain eternal rhythm (Heraclitus, the Stoics). That is why Greek philosophy seeks the basis of man at death, either in eternity, including the eternity of the rotation of existence itself (this is the theory of the immortality of the soul and its transference) or in the realization of the necessity of death.

For a Christian philosopher, Blessed Augustine, confession is an intimate conver-

sation with God. We can not attribute this work only to the autobiographical genre. It would be fitting to call it the principled position through which a person gains true spirituality. The self-obsessed gaze reveals the mystery of human existence and with particular intensity, the mystery of death.

In the fourth part of the “Confession,” Augustine conveys in a very impressive way his spiritual state, which was aroused in him by the death of his childhood friend:

“My heart was utterly darkened by this sorrow and everywhere I looked I saw death. My native place was a torture room to me and my father’s house a strange unhappiness. And all the things I had done with him--now that he was gone--became a frightful torment. My eyes sought him everywhere, but they did not see him” (Augustine, Confessions, 2010, p. 94).

Faced with death, Augustine recognized in him the “fiercest enemy” who was ready to defeat every human being, and the death of a friend painfully left him with the possibility of his own end. He felt the breath of death as not only horrible but also as a pointless, unjustified phenomenon at the highest level.

Later, the already Christianized Augustine looked at the death of a friend from the standpoint of God and eternity. Death has already lost in his eyes the meaning of a kind of demarcation line that separated worldly life from the underworld. The infinity and infinity of eternal existence filled the Holy Father of the Church with sorrow compared to the rapidly passing earthly life of man. He understood the origins of worldly life, the short life that sank in the river of time, and turned:

“And you, O Lord, art my comfort, my eternal Father. But I have been torn between the times, the order of which I do not know, and my thoughts, even the inmost and deepest places of my soul, are mangled by various commotions until I shall flow together into you, purged and molten in the fire of your love” Augustine, Confessions, 2010, p. 452.

Augustine sees the tragedy of existence in the fact that man realizes his mortality, but can not accept it or get used to it. He seeks the highest meaning and cannot find it in his earthly existence. He, therefore, appeals to God’s saving faith as a guarantee of immortality, as a solid foundation for an unsustainable earthly existence. The analysis of death as a mystery, an inaccessible phenomenon, becomes an integral part of post-Augustine Christianity.

If in Augustine’s concept the emphasis on the salvation of the believer was shifted to the grace of God, then in later Christianity, the salvation of the soul could not be guaranteed by any faith or prayer-blessing.

According to the French philosopher and Catholic theologian Blaise Pascal:

“Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed. There is no need for the whole universe to take up arms to crush him: a vapour, a drop of water is enough to kill him. but even if the universe were to crush him, man would still be nobler than his slayer, because he knows that he is dying and the advantage the universe has over him. The universe knows none of this” (The Collected Works of Blaise Pascal, 2020, p. 347).

Man is great in his opinion, but this opinion, if it corresponds to the true state of things, testifies to the emptiness and non-existence of his earthly condition.

“Let us imagine a number of men in chains and all condemned to death, where some are killed each day in the sight of the others, and those who remain see their own fate in that of their fellows and wait their turn, looking at each other sorrowfully and without hope. It is an image of the condition of man” (The Collected Works of Blaise Pascal, 2020, p. 417).

If such a picture of human destiny is a guide to moral endurance and spiritual strength for the stoic consciousness, it is a guide to anxiety, suffering, and alarm for Blaise Pascal's religious consciousness. According to this author, a person should not only remember death, but also cause it in his thoughts, should experience death in every action and intention.

Of course, not every person can endure the constant moral torture of his mortality. Even Pascal, who for many years endured moral and physical trials, did not complain once about his inability to bear spiritual struggles, a tormented soul demanding peace with a tired body. Nevertheless, the French thinker rejected the “quiet bay of faith.” He believed that faith alleviates moral suffering and that it is not able to dispel the existential drama of human existence. However, Pascal did not even acknowledge the disbelief that fears death that makes such a thing seem non-existent. Pascal is undoubtedly right here: such an approach to the meaning of human life, to vital orientation, is reprehensible.

Many people, faced with imminent death, are looking for a variety of escapes to at least temporarily forget, to postpone what awaits everyone: “Death is easier to bear without the thought of it, than is the thought of death without danger” (Blaise Pascal, 1995, p. 170).

To this end, they invent a variety of entertainments: games and entertainment, parties and gatherings, hunting and wars. All this is called the pleasure of life. According to Pascal, they are the means of dispelling the boredom of existence. Various entertainments fill a person's existence with a thousand trifles, not allowing him

to think deeply about the meaning of his own life. If not for fun, Pascal writes, we would have such unbearable melancholy that we would inevitably start looking for a solution, only with a better solution. Fun makes us forget and we approach death insensitively.

“The only good thing for men therefore is to be diverted from thinking of what they are, either by some occupation which takes their mind off it, or by some novel and agreeable passion which keeps them busy, like gambling, hunting, some absorbing show, in short by what is called diversion... Without [diversion] we would be in a state of weariness, and this weariness would spur us on to seek a more solid means of escaping from it. But diversion amuses us, and leads us unconsciously to death” (Blaise Pascal, 1995, p. 105).

An indifferent attitude towards death, which is inadequate in its meaning, leads a person to everyday coincidences. This greed for death pushes from consciousness all kinds of worries and sufferings, thereby substantially reducing the moral tone of life. The selfish pursuit of entertainment prevents a person from correctly understanding the meaning of his own life, distorts its depth and true scale.

“All that I know is, that I am soon to die; but what I am most ignorant of is, that very death which I am unable to avoid... In the same way that I do not know where I came from, neither do I know where I am going, and I know only that on leaving this world I either fall into nothingness for ever, or into the hands of an angry God, without knowing which of these two states will be my condition in eternity. Such is my state, full of weakness and uncertainty. And I conclude from all this that I must spend every day of my life without thinking of enquiring into what will happen to me. I could perhaps find some enlightenment among my doubts, but I do not want to take the trouble to do so, nor take one step to look for it. And afterwards, sneering at those who are struggling with the task, I will go without forethought or fear to face the great venture, and allow myself to be carried tamely to my death, uncertain as to the eternity of my future state” (The Collected Works of Blaise Pascal, 2020, p. 1130).

The realization of the severity of existential problems pushes the French philosopher towards the religious path of their solution. He believes that man's sincere acknowledgment of his miserable condition, his acknowledgment that man is doomed to misery and imminent death, is the beginning of the search for a way out of this impasse, which Pascal calls “the search for sorrow.” Only a law-abiding view of the inevitability of earthly things can awaken faith in God and the hope of immortality.

Pascal, of course, realized that Christian truth and the dogmas of common sense were difficult to compare. In his view, it is the fear of death that is primary. It is presupposed in any discussion of immortality, while the belief in the death of the body is aggravated in the soul's life by jealousy, and eternal skepticism. Hence it is secondary, derived from the thought of death.

Such a search for personal salvation is accompanied by moral suffering in God's bosom, and God shows man the way to the belief in immortality through fear of death. Pascal acknowledges that the paradoxes of the Christian religion are difficult to resolve. Moral relativism itself is unacceptable to him, but his conception of the immortality of God and the soul leans in this direction. Man believes in God with all his being, but he is never fully convinced of the divine choice at the end that is good for him: God will show him grace if he sends him to hell. Human destiny is shrouded in darkness. The only thing he has is hope. However, even that is not obvious and unquestionable, but rather doubtful.

Finally, Pascal forms the vital credo of man: Man must live according to one of two permissible, two probable beginnings:

1. that its existence is eternal;
2. that its existence is rapid.

In terms of human life, Pascal considered himself, his Creator, and his end:

“There are but three classes of persons: those who having found God, serve him; those who not having found him, diligently seek him; those who not having found him, live without seeking him. The first are happy and wise, the last are unhappy and fools, those between are unhappy, but they are wise” (Blaise Pascal, 1995, p. 417).

Nevertheless, Pascal makes optimistic conclusions:

“The goodness of this worldly existence is conditioned only by the hope of a future existence, that people are happy only insofar as they are inspired by that hope, and that if calamity is alien to those who do not doubt eternal existence, happiness is also inaccessible to them. The light of faith does not shine on the soul either.”

Famous German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer values life as a phenomenon that would not have been better at all. Earthly existence, in his view, is purely coincidental.

“As far as you are an individual, death will be the end of you. But your individuality is not your true and inmost being: it is only the outward

manifestation of it. It is not the thing-in-itself, but only the phenomenon presented in the form of time; and therefore with a beginning and an end. But your real being knows neither time, nor beginning, nor end, nor yet the limits of any given individual. It is everywhere present in every individual; and no individual can exist apart from it. So when death comes, on the one hand you are annihilated as an individual; on the other, you are and remain everything. That is what I meant when I said that after your death you would be all and nothing” (The Collected Works of Blaise Pascal, 2020, p. 417).

According to Schopenhauer, the development of the cosmic cycle caused many troubles. Man is committed to understanding the catastrophe of this process in order to assess the humility of earthly existence properly. The German philosopher argues that underdeveloped creatures are in a better condition than humans, because of their lack of consciousness. They do not know that the universe is filthy and destructive. Where did Dante get the material to describe hell? - Schopenhauer asks, - Of course, our surroundings are from reality. Even when this writer was faced with the need to describe heavenly bliss, he found himself in the most difficult situation precisely because the universe did not provide any material for it.

An animal is afraid of death only instinctively, unconsciously. He can not imagine a clear picture of physical destruction. Man not only realizes and thinks about his future end, but the pre-existing feeling intensifies his suffering. Schopenhauer, therefore, believes that it is impossible for happiness to be for the goal of human existence.

The author calls the assumption that a person can achieve happiness a “disastrous mistake.” Therefore, in his view, it is impossible to draw a logical picture of the universe. It will be full of contradictions. However, it is enough to take a stand against this view to see the meaning of our lives, suffering, which solves any paradox. Man’s existence shows that his true destiny is suffering. Life is inseparable from suffering and sorrow. We are born crying in this world. Human existence is tragic in its essence, but the most tragic is still its end: death.

In search of a solution, Schopenhauer concludes that we should look at death as the ultimate goal. His ghost lingers all his life. At the moment of death, every problem that has accumulated throughout life is solved. Thus, the expectation of death and its predestination is the essential distinguishing mark of the human animal. Only the human will can deny life, show its back to it.

In terms of life, Schopenhauer considers the denial of the will to life, which is manifests in his doctrine of asceticism.

Asceticism is the highest human condition. It is an abomination to the will of life. The ascetic must suppress in his head everything that connects him with the needs of life: it is sexual desire, the need for wealth, the satisfaction of one's desires.

Before asceticism, a person goes through suffering. He gradually realizes that the suffering of life is in vain. Everything vital is not valuable. When a person clearly realizes the futility of life, he falls into despair and also perceives the suffering of the world on the ground of his own suffering. The only way a person can choose to be a real being is to give up the will to live. In this way a person rises above himself, reaches his destination, is freed from suffering and gains spiritual peace. According to Schopenhauer, this is true bliss.

The philosopher believes that denial of life does not mean suicide. In his view, suicide is precisely the acceptance of life and not the denial. The ascetic does not commit suicide. He only denies the will of life, thus achieving salvation, his destiny.

Unlike the preachers of Christianity, Schopenhauer resolutely rejects the idea of personal immortality. In his view, the idea of immortality, belief, is false. Instead, each individual is just a "private error," a "wrong step," a "random concentration," or a phenomenon that, in his words, would have been better had it not been at all.

Thus Schopenhauer's pessimism is evident:

"Still, I cannot hold back from declaring here that optimism, where it is not just the thoughtless talk of someone with only words in his flat head, strikes me as not only an absurd but even a truly wicked way of thinking, a bitter mockery of the unspeakable sufferings of humanity" (The Essays of Arthur Schopenhauer, 2005, p. 28).

In the end, Schopenhauer characterizes the task of human life as follows: the peace which enables him to enjoy life not only in the present but in life in general, and which is the basis of human happiness.

Conclusion

Death is a force that reveals what we love and like and what is a priority for us. It is about getting to know ourselves better and understanding what we do not want to lose or what we would take with us (if we could) in the world where immortality lives.

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