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Section Two: Death

Humans are death-aware creatures; we know in advance that our current lives are unstable and ephemeral. We realize that terminating factors numerous and our lives are so fragile that it is miraculous that we linger in existence. While we observe life with the depths of our being, a small part of us also looks ahead to death. Our lives are worthwhile only if our deaths are worthwhile. We are immortality-loving creatures; however, we cannot attain unity and tranquility except through death. Yea, life and death must coexist in order for them both to have significance.

We realize that life and death are not under our control. Before we can take full advantage of the buffet that life has set before us, we are faced with the heralds of death—weakness and frailty. This infirmity increases every moment and saps our strength and vitality, but it does not decrease our thirst for life. Our dream is neither life with a finale nor life intermingled with death; we desire eternal life. There is no death in eternal life and an eternal human is one whose life surges from within and who is not shadowed by the notion of death. This is not possible save with the promise of life. Death guides us to the Life-provider, and true eternality can only be realized through this union.

Nature of Death

The issue of death can be studied through philosophical, psychological, and biological approaches. Due to the variety of these approaches, there are numerous interpretations of death. Whatever the nature of death may be, that which is certain is that it is contingent upon on the nature of life. If human life is interpreted in terms of biology, its death must also be interpreted through biology. If we regard life philosophically, such that life is predicated on the supernatural, so also is death. There is no contradiction between these various perspectives since each deals with the means, causes, and purposes of its respective field, and assesses and interprets phenomena within this framework.

As a consequence of these varying perspectives regarding human nature, our philosophic endeavors have resulted in varied expositions of death. The following are several of these views:

Those that identify humans with the material body and regard the human individual equatable and

restricted to the corporeal frame view death as the termination of life. This is because humans have no other reality that can protect them from deterioration and extermination. Death of the body equates with extinguishment of the individual. Death of the body truly severs off the thread of the person's existence. The question of whether or not the person shall later return to life is a separate issue that will be discussed later. In short, this perspective states that death is the termination of the human existence.

Some dualists believe that the body does not consist of the essence of the individual and that the human consciousness pertains to the soul. According to this viewpoint, death is not the end of the individual's life. Some advocates of this view believe that the soul is trapped within the body and that death is nothing but freedom from corporeal restrictions. During every moment of the soul's captivity, the body presents it with additional troubles. It continuously demands food, water, and other necessities and exploits the abilities of the self to satisfy its needs. Natural death ends this incarceration and returns the soul to its true station.[1]

Those who believe that the individual is a synthesis of body and soul regard death as the separation of the soul's intellectual link with its natural body and the world. Thereafter, it persists in union with a different body free of material qualities.

The common factors of the two prior theories are that human life is not discontinued at the time of death and that death is regarded as a transition from one existential state to another. Some advocates of the third view interpret death as follows:

Contingent beings are divided into incorporeal beings and material beings or rather, perfect entities and imperfect entities. Incorporeal entities are not characterized with movement and change, and they perpetuate exclusively through the maintenance of their efficient cause. However, material beings or beings that are linked with materiality essentially evolve, change, and strive towards their purpose. Because we are a part of the natural world, we too are evolving beings. Our development has an end and by arriving at it, we reach our deaths. Our end is not a place external to ourselves that we can reach by making effort; rather, it is like maturity for an adolescent. Maturity is not external to the adolescent's being; the adolescent gradually develops towards maturity. In other worlds, the human aim is evolution from absolute materiality towards incorporeality and the supernatural plane. Our life in the natural world is the span of this evolution. When we humans adequately develop our capacities through worldly life, we are ready to elevate to a higher plane where our material bodies are not necessary. Thus, we end our journey in this world by leaving behind our corporeal form.

An example that can better formulate this perspective in the mind is that for the duration that humans exist as a fetus, they continually evolve from faultiness towards perfection and the course and distance of this evolution is the time spent in the womb. During this transition, the fetus needs and belongs to the uterus; such that if for any reason its evolution terminates before reaching its perfection, it remains premature and faulty. However, when its course is fully traversed, it must be delivered outside the abdomen and birth is vital. At this point, the existence of the former fetus is so altered that it no longer

requires its embryonic receptacle.[2]

Consequently, it must be understood that death is not the annihilation and extinction of human individuals; rather, it is a transition from one existential plane to the next or in other words, it is the evolution of human beings from faultiness to a certain level of perfection.

This interpretation of the nature of death reveals it as a part of humanity's existence. In fact, death is an upholder of our existence not its eliminator. More precisely, we humans die and come to life every moment, in the sense that we cross over from our previous states to reach new ones. The condition for reaching the next state is traversing our previous more flawed state. Hence, death shall expire in the world of perfection and perpetuity where our actions shall become manifest.

Jalīl ad-Dīn Mawlavī has versified this interpretation using a beautiful analogy:

This world is like a tree, O Bountiful;

And we, like green fruit.

The unripe hold fast to the branch

For in their immaturity, they not suitable for a palace.

When they ripen and become lip-stingingly sweet;

Their hold on the branch weakens.

When a mouth is sweetened by its fate;

To the person, the world becomes cold.[3]

Death as stated by the Qur'an and Hadith

﴿الله يتوفى الانفس حين موتها و التي لم تمت في منامها فيمسك التي قضى عليها الموت و يرسل الاخرى الى اجل مسمى﴾

"Allah completely retracts souls at the time of their deaths and also retracts those that have not died, while they sleep. So, He holds souls upon which He has decreed death and returns the rest until an appointed end."[4]

In this verse, death is represented with the term tawaffa an-nafs (complete retraction of the soul). Tawaffī happens at death and in sleep. During each phenomenon the soul's connection with the body—and thus the natural world—is severed is some way. During each phenomenon, the soul is withdrawn; however, one is temporary and partial and the other is permanent and complete. At the

moment of death, our essence or soul, which is the body's sustaining agent, is completely retracted.

Thus, the soul completely abandons the natural world and enters an invisible quarter of existence. Sleep provides us with a muted perception of the experience of death. As long as the soul is linked to the corporeal body, it may remain asleep; but if this link is severed, death occurs. As a result, death is not annihilation; rather, it is the launch of a new state of human existence, different from life in this world. Consequently, the soul discards its corporeal body, which belongs to the natural world.

﴿الى ربّك يومئذ المساق﴾

"That is the day of propelling towards your Lord."[5]

This type of verse indicates a deeper facet of death. The day of death is the day of return to God. God is the master of existence and whatever enters His presence is protected from inexistence. At the Lord's command, the soul leaves the natural world at the time of death and enters an alternate world, which is its original residence and exempt from time and space. Death shreds all veils and reveals to us the reality of existence. Even though we might not have volitionally observed this reality in life, in death we are compelled to notice all truths.

Accordingly, death is a passageway on which we travel from one facet of existence (the Manifest) to the other (the Invisible). On one side it is an exit and on the other it is an entrance. Im□m 'Al□ ('a) has stated:

"So, surely the world has not been created for you as a place of permanent stay; rather, it has been created for you as a passageway so that you send forth your actions as provisions for the abode of permanence."[6]

﴿...ما كان لنفس ان تموت الا باذن الله كتابا مؤجلا﴾

"No soul dies save by the leave of Allah, at an appointed time."[7]

Death, like life, occurs by the hand of God. No person comes to life by their own efforts and no one retrieves their own soul. The agent that gives and takes life is not the self because life and death are not volitional phenomena.

The soul cannot pass into the next world until an appointed time, just as it could not enter this world at will.

﴿كل نفس ذائقة الموت﴾

"All souls shall taste death."[8]

The general law of death has no exceptions. Immortality in this world is nothing but a dream—nature cannot endlessly sustain the human individual. In order to overcome a law of nature one must make use of an alternate natural law. There is no law in nature that can prevail against the law of death. Humanity cannot violate the laws of nature. All we can do is to resort to a different natural law through scientific endeavors. However, there is no law in nature that can free us of death. This is because death is one of our existential conditions—it is not exterior to our nature. Therefore, we cannot create in an impregnable fortress against death in which to hide. Death is a reality that emanates from our beings; thus, escape from death can only result in a checkmate.

﴿اينما تكونوا يدرككم الموت و لو كنتم في بروج مشيّدة﴾

"Wherever you may be, death will find you; though you be in secure towers."[9]

Fear of Death

Fear is one of the most common feelings that dominate us. It is an experience that no person enjoys; one that everyone attempts to circumvent. Due to its variable sources, the nature of this phenomenon is not constant, even though we indicate it with a single term. Fear of poverty, fear of disease, fear of loosing one's reputation, fear of other people, fear of disasters and natural phenomena, etc. each have their own conditions and effects. However, among the various factors that cause terror and dread, none is more dreadful than death. The mention of death quivers hearts and turns pleasure to mourning. Nowadays, many intellectuals have abandoned study of the reality of death due to inability to gather empirical data and have therefore inclined towards study of the psychological and physiological aspects of death instead. They endeavor to present us with methods of delaying or prevailing over death. Some common ideas regarding fear of death include:

Death alters life into oblivion.

Even though death is inevitable, its time is unspecified. Thus, we are continually fearful and distraught regarding death.

Death is an unidentified phenomenon and we have no experience regarding it. In fact, it seems that death is the end of experiences. Thus, we do not know what happens to us at that moment, and if we have continuity, what will happen after it.

Each person has to face death alone. If we could experience it with others, it would not be so fearsome and horrendous.

By reaching death, all our hopes and wishes are lost and thus, we are severed from all our desires.

There is a great gap between those who support individual immortality to overcome their fear of death and those who seek to alleviate this fear by regarding humans mortally perishable and introducing death as the finale of the individual's existence. Socrates is of the first group:

"A man who has grown grey in the love of wisdom must be cheerful at the approach of death, because he can promise himself the greatest happiness after it… If this is the case, what an absurdity would it be if he, who points all his efforts here on earth at one single object, were to feel affliction, when the long-wished-for aim was at last accomplished."[10]

However, materialists such as Epicurus attempt to banish fear of death by denying life after death and introducing death as the termination of awareness and absolute painlessness. These ideologists neglect the fact that our fear of death is not because we regard it painful; rather, it is love for life that makes the taste of death bitter to our tongues. How can one soothe people by declaring that death is the end of their lives? Regarding fear of death, Spinoza states:

"A free man thinks of death least of all things; and his wisdom is a meditation not of death but of life."[11]

This statement signifies that humans can alleviate fear of death merely by not thinking about it. Spinoza neglects that remembrance and fear of death is not a volitional feeling that one can evade. To say, "do not think of death" is not enough. It has to be explained how one can not think of death and whether not thinking about death is truly wise or ideal.

Religion and Fear of Death

One of the ethical aims of religion is purifying our being of all internal conflicts and saving us from bitter and costly psychological experiences such as grief, fear, and anxiety. Religious education evolves us existentially by propelling us, and all our aspects and states, toward our Creator whereby transforming all our interactive states. For example, a believer in God fears Him. However, this fear is essentially different from fear of beings other than God. God is an entity that the faithful are fearful of in their hearts; even so, they still seek refuge with Him. Besides God, nothing can simultaneously be an agent of fear and an agent of security and trust. If fear of anything except God penetrates into one's soul, it will continuously grow and ultimately imbue one's being. However, fear of God sears the roots of all fears within one's being. Hence, fear of God is a human perfection and fear of created things is a fault. Courageous persons are those who fear nothing besides God while the memory of God imbues their hearts with humility, modesty, and fear—a fear that suffuses them with felicity and joy.

L takhf[12] is the offering of the fearful;

It is worthy of those who are fearful of Him.

Whoever fears is made safe and secure;

Thus, all quaking hearts are made calm.

Those who shed their fear when it is said: ‘Fear not!’

Whether you teach them or not, they need no lesson.[13]

Therefore, the only solution for fear is based on the main pillar of Islam, which is Tawhīd or belief in the One God. No one can escape the fear of death, nor can they convey themselves from a state of unrest to the harborage of tranquility, save by having faith in God and surrendering to Him. This is why religion does not ask that we forget death; rather, it constantly asks us to contemplate death and remember always the boundaries of our current lives. It does not tolerate neglect of this fact and regards this negligence a cause of squandering the opportunities of life. Islam teaches us to live objectively. It describes the stages of life and encourages us to recognize them all. Ultimately, Islam fashions humans into loving beings, not fearful ones because it interprets death as the point of acceleration towards our Creator and the encounter of the limited with the Infinite.

The main lines that divine religions present for confronting fear of death are briefly described below:

1. Divine religions introduce humans as immortal and eternal beings and regard the desire for eternality rational and with cause. Fear of death cannot be eradicated by regarding death as complete annihilation and nihility of the self because our love of perpetuance is incompatible with this approach. It causes internal conflict within the human soul and adds to our pain instead of relieving it. While revering life, divine religions remind us that this world is transitory and that a person who regards death as the end becomes dominated by intense attachment to this world and fear of death. This sort of person unduly lauds this ephemeral life. Religious teachings emphasize the negligibility of this life compared with otherworldly life. These teachings consider it unbefitting for humans to lower themselves by sufficing themselves with this world.

﴿قُل مَتاعُ الدُّنيا قَليلٌ و الأَخِرَةُ خَيرٌ لِّمَنِ اتَّقىٰ و لا تُظلَمونَ فَتيلاً﴾

“Say, ‘The goods and chattels of this world is little and the Hereafter is better for those who fear Allah and you shall not be wronged* [*even as much as*] *a single date-fiber.’”[14]

﴿وَ ما هٰذِهِ الحَياةَ الدُّنيآ إِلّا لَهوٌ و لَعِبٌ و إِنَّ الدّارَ الأَخِرَةَ لَهِىَ الحَيَوانُ﴾

“And this worldly life is naught but diversion and sport but surely the abode of the Hereafter is true life.”[15]

This sort of worldview mitigates our pains and hardships, and because of it, recalling death is a consolation.

2. If the first factor of fear regarding death is eliminated, unawareness of the time of one's death will become insignificant. In fact, it is not clear whether knowing the time of death would truly comfort us or not. Not knowing the time of death helps us utilize every moment of our lives in the best possible manner. It is important to remember death so that we may sustain a correct course in every moment of our lives and so that our lives do not fall into a monotone. Forgetting death results in forgetting eternal life and also causes self-neglect. Noble 'Al (ʻa) advised his followers thus:

"May God pardon your sins. Provide for the journey as you have been ordered insistently to march and regard your stay in this world as brief."16

مرا در منزل جانان چه امن عیش چون هر دم

جرس فریاد می دارد که بربندید محملها

How can I live securely in the abode of the living while every moment;

The bell continually cries, 'Hitch your supplies!'

3. The third factor causing fear is averted by those whose knowledge surpasses the boundaries of the limited—that is, the wellsprings of eternal knowledge. Divine legates and prophets have made us aware of this hidden abode and have revealed unto us the invisible countenance of existence. It was asked of Imam Jawd (ʻa), "Why does death distress some Moslems?" He replied, "It distresses them because they do not understand it. If they understood it and were friends of God, they would love death and they would know that the Hereafter is better for them than this world."17

4. Death is a stage in human existence and it is an upholder of our existence. Like all our existential aspects, death is a constituent of our self. We cannot make others partner in our experiences of sorrow and happiness, adolescence and maturity, sickness and health, or even our sleep and wakefulness. These affairs are not within the domain of common experience. People's death, like their birth, is unique to each person.

5. The mentioned states in the fifth fear factor of death are the conditions of the world of separation and schism [between humans and God]. It is not evident whether these states will endure with the continuance of our existence. Everything in this world is subject to change and vicissitude. There are no stable states in this world. Divine religions expound and explicate the circumstances of the natural world. They interpret them objectively and factually and thus free humanity from fallacious interpretations.

The trials and tribulations of the natural world induce the founts of perfections within humans to gush forth and they make our virtues shine. That which belongs to us will not be taken away and we shall enter the next world with all the true wealth that each of us has amassed in the course of this life.

Moreover, another fear factor for death is fear of the reckoning. The faithful believe in the reckoning and do not fear death in spite of it. However, the unfaithful fear death because of the reckoning. The divine religion guides humans by showing the way to prepare for their future and it frees humanity of this deadlock.

1. – See: Plato: Complete Works, Phaedrus (Phaedon).
2. – Mull□□adr□, Asf□r (Journeys), vol. 8, pp. 105, 106.
3. – Jalal ad-Din Mawlav□, Mathnav□-e Ma‘nav□ (Spititual Couplets), Book III, verses 1293-1296.
4. – S□rah Zumar 39:42.
5. – S□rah Qiy□mah 75:30.
6. – Nahj ul-Bal□ghah, Sermon 132.
7. – S□rah □li ‘Imr□n 3:145.
8. – S□rah □li ‘Imr□n 3:185.
9. – S□rah Nis□’ 4:78.
10. – Plato: Complete Works, Phaedrus (Phaedon).
11. – Spinoza, Ethics, prop. LXVII.
12. – L□ takh□f□, which means ‘fear not’, is a phrase from the Qur’an. [trans.]
13. – Jalal ad-Din Mawlav□, Mathav□-e Ma‘nav□, Book I, verses 1432-1434.
14. – S□rah Nis□’ 4:77.
15. – S□rah ‘Ankab□t 29:64.
16. – Nahj ul-Bal□ghah, Sermon 28. From the translation of Fayz ul-Islam.
17. – Sad□q, Ma‘□n□ ul-Akhb□r (Meanings of Narrations), p. 290.

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