

Death: Between Ontological Presence and Metaphysical Void

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Abstract

Death is explored as a central existential phenomenon that intersects language, anthropology, biology, metaphysics, and religion. Through linguistic and cultural analysis, it reveals shared symbolic structures linking death with life, divinity, and absence, while also manifesting in individual, collective, and cultural forms shaped by history and power relations. Biological and philosophical approaches present life as a system of resistance to death, yet remain limited in fully explaining its nature. Metaphysically, death appears as a paradoxical presence–absence that escapes complete conceptual grasp. Ultimately, death emerges as an open and multidimensional horizon of meaning.

Keywords: Death; ontology; metaphysics; anthropology; life; philosophy of existence.

Introduction

What? Why? How? These are the interrogative tools that disturb the soul in its inclination toward stillness and its tendency to seek stability away from all ontological anxiety. For, questioning is intrinsic to human nature; it is not a transient condition that affects a person in fleeting moments, but rather an identity-defining feature, a fundamental structure in the formation of human identity, the nature independent of the perceiving self, or what is termed the external world, was the first field encompassed by human questioning, according to the Western reading of history which takes the study of physics as the starting point of philosophical inquiry and the gateway to classical metaphysics. Additionally, the historical formation of the concept confirms this with Andronicus of Rhodes in the first century BCE, and the origin of this concern with natural existence goes back to a natural need embedded in the structural composition of human nature, characterized by deprivation and the desire to possess what is lacking something from which one cannot dispense.

Concerning the second field that drew human attention in inquiry and reflection is the human being itself. Considering that human facts were transformed into a phenomenon that began with understanding, passed through interpretation, and moved toward the aspiration for codification. Notwithstanding, the history of science has recorded for this trajectory conceptual, methodological, and theoretical tremors and setbacks. Besides, the multiplicity of methodological approaches in dealing with the phenomenon attests to the difficulty of the birth of a social theory that approaches the laws governing human phenomena, and if we consider the current state of the human sciences in contemporary research, we find that they still occupy

lower ranks in the classification of sciences, as the materialist perspective on knowledge and science remains strongly present in the human imagination.

In this study, we aim to examine an issue we believe to be the starting point of all cognitive inquiry and a primary passage through which knowledge has progressed and developed namely, death. We find that it has not received its due in research commensurate with its importance and ontological gravity. For, if existence is a determination and realization that seeks being, survival, and continuity in being, then death, ontologically, constitutes the central core of this existence in terms of motivation beforehand and purpose afterward. At the prior level, it has driven and stimulated efforts to meet the requirements of the instincts of existence; humanity has operated only under the threat of the idea of death. At the subsequent level, the pursuit of self-elevation and the development of one's capacities makes death a passage for the examination of the self in the post-existence stage, that moment in which death becomes an entry point and a vessel of transition to the world of witnessing, which was previously unseen. The study will begin with a foundational pause at the multiple significations of death, which reflect a fragmentation in human understanding, even though the common meaning in most linguistic and terminological contexts is that of ending and transition. Then we will briefly consider the material world on the basis of sensibility, which dominates this research reality concerning the issue of death from the heartbeat suspend to the death of neural cells to the results opened up by experimental research in the field of complex organismal structures, which have stood challenging that illusory pride built upon a reason that has not yet grasped anything about its own nature and reality. After the world of matter, we will proceed to swim in the space of the abstract, engaging with the ontology of death as an ontological existence and as a cognitive system that transcends all conceptual determination, defying any ideological reading, whether derived from religion or from popular social cultures.

Unity in Fragmentation:

Death: Mort. Mors. Mortis

Language is a reference document for capturing the meanings of the concept whose significance we seek to examine and clarify it is also a historical basis for tracing the trajectory of the concept at two levels: the horizontal, synchronic level and the vertical, diachronic level. At the first level, language reflects the cultures of nations that is, what has been produced by the collective hand and mind, as expressed by sociologists in their approach to both material and immaterial cultural production. For, within words and symbols, the human being is concealed; the individual and collective outlook on the universe is articulated through language.

In dictionaries and lexicons, death is regarded as the opposite of life; it is the loss of life in that which possesses the faculty of living (Manzur, pp. 90-91).

In *Lisan al-‘Arab*, a distinction is made between the words *mayyit* and *mā’it*, in which we can discern a differentiation between death as an event and death as a condition or impending state: “*al-mā’it* is one who has not yet died. *Al-Jawharī* reports from *al-Farrā’*: it is said of one who has not yet died that he is *mā’it* soon, and *mayyit*; but they do not say of one who has died: this is *mā’it*.” (Manzur, p. 91)

The meanings of death expand further from a separation from the body (the material dimension) to a refinement of the soul and an elevation of the spirit, and this is what we will examine within the metaphysical and gnostic context of the phenomenon of death. Therefore, any preliminary definition of death in dictionaries begins with the notion of the severing of the connection with the organism as a mechanism of life; it is “an existential attribute created as the opposite of life.” (Al-Jurjani, 1983, p. 304)

In Phoenician civilization, death was granted an ontological presence in which it stands in opposition to the god of life and fertility (Baal): “The Phoenicians’ doctrinal system was based on a clear duality between death and life. Inasmuch as, Baal is the god of life and fertility, he is opposed by Mot, the god of the underworld, the god of drought and barrenness, and the place in which he dwells beneath the earth is called Ḥamrī, meaning the red hell, and it is filled with embers and fire. This god is regarded as a greedy, predatory creature whose appetite is never satisfied.” (Ahmed, 2008, p. 42)

If we examine African perspectives in their interpretations of the phenomenon of death, we find intersections with other human societies in viewing it as both a natural and an unnatural occurrence at the same time. This duality gives death its problematic dimension, whether in terms of its meanings or the necessary preconditions for it that is, the fact that we must die which is similar to what we observed in the Arabic language, where linguists distinguished between the mayyit (one who has actually died) and the mā’it (one who is dying or approaching death). As the African thinker John S. Mbiti states: “...the African accepts death as part of the natural rhythm of life; yet each instance of death is also thought to have external causes, making it both natural and unnatural at once... It is generally attributed to magic, sorcery, and the work of diviners, which exist in every African society, though to varying degrees.” (John S, 2023, p. 223)

To understand the nature of death among Africans, sociologists have turned to analyzing the everyday expressions used in African tribes, expressions which indicate that death is regarded as a transition to another world, different in its structural composition from the one in which we live. The following text illustrates this: “...Among the Basoga, it is said of the deceased that he has breathed his last, that he has been made still, that he has gone and gone down into the grave. If he is an elderly man, they say: he is complete, he has died, he has eaten enough. If the death is that of a murderer or a witch, they say: let him go, his function has ended, another mouth has gone far away...” (John S, 2023, p. 244) Here we notice a similarity in the meanings of expressions used in Arab societies when referring to the death of individuals, depending on the status and role they played in society. For, the death of a scholar is not regarded in the same way as the demise of an oppressor or a corrupt person; the former is seen as a breach or a gap in the social structure, while the latter is considered a relief and the end of corruption.

The manifestations of death are multiple due to the cultural and symbolic weight carried by humanity. For, it takes on shifting, elusive symbolic meanings, which makes it difficult to establish a fixed classification of its types. We will therefore attempt to present some of these forms, considering their gravity and their importance in social symbolism.

Collective Death:

War:

If individual death is a natural occurrence even when its causes differ, whether due to a bodily ailment or a dysfunction in the functional system of organs, then collective death stands as an exception within nature, given the social nature of its causes and motivations. Considering that, collective death is that which befalls a human group and the annihilation practiced by the Zionist movement in occupied Palestine, in which no humanitarian or international norms have been observed, is one example. For, wars are nothing but a manifestation of death or rather, they are death itself. Besides, what concerns us here is the issue of the decision to wage war, which pays no regard to the opinions and aspirations of peoples, reflecting a Machiavellian vision in international politics. Furthermore, if we examine wars historically, we find that their causes rarely extend beyond personal or ethnic spheres, and in the modern era, groups of experts plan such wars or collective death based on purely political and economic considerations. As Louis-Vincent Thomas expresses it, “war is an extremely deadly social institution, managed by distinct social bodies seeking to achieve multiple aims, whose primary face may be the destruction of the demographic heritage: a sudden rise in the number of deaths, a reduction in birth rates, and the selective removal of men in the prime of their activity, thereby altering the labor structure in favor of the elderly and women.” (Louis, 2012, p. 13) In view of the fact that war, as collective death, raises both prior and subsequent questions. The former concern the motives of war and their relation to human nature: is it a spontaneous product of human selfishness, making war a “war of all against all,” as argued by Thomas Hobbes? Or is war the true relation between states, as suggested by Greek philosophers?

The death of cultures and ethnicities:

In the past, war was imposed on vulnerable societies and peoples as part of colonial policies, driven by economic ambitions and the exploitation of these populations as labor or as slaves, although slavery itself is fundamentally a social phenomenon produced by several factors, foremost among them wars. Furthermore, racial discrimination in America represents one manifestation of diminishment and enslavement, strongly present in American social relations and in the political outlook that shapes its foreign policies. The extermination of Indigenous peoples is, in effect, the eradication of a nation with its own culture. We may cite one example among many: “The Indians of Brazil once numbered in the millions, yet today their number does not exceed one hundred thousand. Over the past twenty years, they have undergone a true process of ethnic killing, carried out with the complicity of the Indian Protection Service. We have encountered, almost beyond belief, policies of extermination such as those practiced, for instance, against the Cintas Largas tribe living near the Aripuanã River, their village center was bombed on the day of the Quarup, a festival of the living and the dead featuring performances drawn from myth. Hired killers were used, whose leader was a deranged, sadistic, and sexually obsessed individual (Louis, 2012, p. 16).

Globalization, in itself, is a war against local cultures, and a Zionist-American culture seeks exclusion and the eradication of every civilizational distinction that enables nations to achieve revival and resistance. For, the war against resistance is not merely a military war; rather, it is an existential struggle between a nation that has become aware of the purposes of its existence and has recognized the obstacles of being, which appear in the economic and political alienation

practiced by the leading force of globalization the United States and its “spoiled child,” the Zionist state, in disciplining nations and societies. This process has not been limited to Arab countries but has extended even to Western countries as well, as their foreign policies demonstrate. Inasmuch as the elimination of cultures and ethnicities is among the top priorities of major powers, individual death, in comparison to collective death, becomes merely child’s play, because it involves the elimination of hundreds and thousands of human beings, and their enslavement physically, sexually, culturally, and historically. The colonial history of Western civilization is sufficient to demonstrate this type of death.

Death and organic resistance:

One of the main conclusions we have reached through the linguistic and anthropological approach, and through our review of classifications dealing with death as an existential phenomenon, is that death is the counterpart of life. Besides, the emergence of the question of life produced a distinct epistemic system known as the science of life or biology. In its early beginnings, biology was governed by the prevailing principle of explaining nature through causality in its physical manifestation, and teleology in its organic and vital manifestation, which we find in the Aristotelian expression: physical nature is governed by the principle of causality, while life is governed by the principle of teleology.

Biology, or the science of life, experienced a theoretical and methodological delay compared to the technological sciences, which is primarily due to the ambiguity surrounding the concept of life itself, to the extent that many scientists avoided entering into semantic debates, considering that the question of concepts belongs to the philosopher and not to the scientist. This has made philosophical approaches present in most biological studies, indicating the necessity of developing interdisciplinary research on the basis of the interpenetration that exists between all systems of knowledge.

By adopting the view that life is the set of functions that resist death, the functional activity that constitutes the organism is life, or a basic foundation of life. Considering that, entry into the world of life is achieved through the availability of a set of phenomena that grant the organism life and the capacity for continuity and development in existence. Life, thence, consists of independent phenomena, and in its structural composition it is a set of functions. For this reason, we will examine some scientific and natural approaches to individual death, which will reveal to us the degree of opacity surrounding the phenomenon of death, as the absence of explanatory causes makes scientific hypotheses mere theoretical constructs closer to metaphysics than to science.

In summary, we say that the vision adopted by the scientific approach is limited to the biological-mechanical conception inherited by biologists. Nevertheless, the Islamic perspective on the body differs significantly from the mechanical biological tendency. Living models, according to the Qur’anic perspective, indicate the existence of other dimensions in the human body, which help us understand the ontology of human existence after death, what is known as the world of barzakh.

God Almighty created human beings in four forms (Al-Sawy, 2024, p. 13): the first is the creation of Adam, peace be upon him, in which humans were created without male or female, and which Ibn Tufayl calls “natural generation,” meaning that Adam came into being according

to purely natural factors, in which the body returns to clay: “It is He Who created you from clay, then specified a span- a span determined by Him. Yet you doubt.” [Al-An‘am: 2]

Death and the Metaphysics of Absence:

The historical origin of the term metaphysics lies in the elevation of certain Aristotelian contents and treatises beyond the physical matters that possess ontological determination in the natural world. Moreover, death, as an event that occurs within natural and human phenomena, has a presence in both worlds; nonetheless, its direct perception or experiential grasp remains impossible. It is therefore a presence that is simultaneously absent. For, it resists articulation after being experienced, since it is a “present absence.” In this sense, it possesses a kind of equal yet transcendent ontological status that rises above all determination and evades full disclosure of truth. From this perspective, death becomes a real metaphysics, an absent witnessing. We will present the features of this metaphysics through the following sections:

- **Death as the Origin of Life:**

Professor al-Sawi refers to this stage as “death in the world of atoms” (Al-Sawy, 2024, p. 8), which signifies the existence of human beings in a realm prior to the world of life, in which the human being was already dead. This is evidenced by the saying of God Almighty: “How can you disbelieve in Allāh when you were lifeless and He brought you to life; then He will cause you to die, then He will bring you [back] to life, and then to Him you will be returned” [Al-Baqarah: 28].

From this verse it becomes clear that the death we know and experience is not our first encounter with death, but rather a second occurrence. Notwithstanding, we are ignorant of that earlier stage and know nothing about it; it is, as Shaykh al-Sha‘rawi states: “a preceding and a subsequent stage, meaning that we were dead before coming into this worldly life. Then life begins, followed by death again.” (Al-Sha'rawi, p. 74)

Accordingly, death becomes the primary origin from which life emerges. Al-Sawi says: “The original state here, in terms of precedence, is death, because before this worldly life we existed as dead beings in the world of atoms, or in the world of death, as indicated by the fact that God addressed us, made us witness against ourselves, and took our covenant. This shows that death is not nonexistence, but rather a transition from one world with its own laws to another world governed by different laws. And this transition occurs only by the permission of God Almighty.” (Al-Sawy, 2024, p. 9)

- **Death as the End of Life:**

At this stage, death constitutes a source of anxiety and a preoccupation that provokes concern in human beings. Evidence of this can be found in a number of writings and letters left by philosophers, such as *The Treatise on the Principle and the Return* and *The Treatise on Dispelling Anxiety about Death* by the master Avicenna, and *The Treatise on the Art of Dispelling Sorrows* by al-Kindi. This subject was not monopolized by philosophers alone; it was also a central concern of psychologists, as anxiety about death became one of the main phenomena studied by various intellectual schools.

Human visions of death fall broadly into two categories: the first reflects the assumption that death is an end and an absolute nothingness of everything that expresses life; the second views death as a transitional stage toward another life that remains hypothetical. All nations have

expressed their understanding of death in their funerary rituals or written sources, such as the Book of the Dead, one of the oldest texts dealing with death, which falls under eschatology, i.e., the science of the afterlife. What concerns us in these rituals is the belief in another life, whereas interpretations of symbols and rituals remain, in our view, merely hypothetical. Further, according to Egyptology and the history of civilizations, ancient Egyptian society is among the earliest to have believed in the immortality of the soul, as Herodotus reports. In inscriptions on the pyramids dating back to the early dynasties, it is stated that souls are immortal and never die (Julius, 2008, p. 108).

Among the approaches that have conceptualized death is its comparison to sleep. The ancient Greeks depicted Hypnos, the god of sleep, as the twin brother of Thanatos (death). Correspondingly, some Jewish traditions express gratitude to God upon waking in the morning for having restored life to them once again. The Qur'an also portrays sleep as a form of temporary death, describing it as the first death experienced by human beings in life, though it is a temporary one (Ahmed M. A., 1987, p. 39).

- **After Death:**

The question of what comes after death begins when we experience the death of our loved ones, for the one who feels death is not the one seeking to know it, but rather the one who has moved from the state of the dying to that of the dead. For, the world after death is an unseen realm for the living. Besides, religious tradition has provided us with a conceptual framework expressed in the notion of the barzakh (intermediate realm). The Qur'anic verse clearly points to the existence of this realm: "Until, when death comes anyone of them, he will say: 'My Lord, send me back to the world, that I have left behind. I am likely to do good.' Nay, it is merely a word he is uttering; there is a barrier behind all of them (who are dead) until the Day when they will be raised up." [Al-Mu'minun: 99–100] Thus, the world of barzakh is an independent realm with its own laws and system.

Conclusion

Death is a state of feeling that can only be perceived by the one who has lived through the moment itself. Speaking about death is nothing but a journey through the world of words and symbols, and the horizon of death remains open to interpretation. For, everything that has been said and continues to be said about death falls within these intellectual domains: doctrinal (whether religious belief or religiosity), scientific, or social.

Doctrinal discourse is open to interpretation, and it is not permissible to make definitive or absolute claims regarding its truth. Giving to the fact that monotheistic beliefs or what are known as revealed religions, when viewed in the present, are historical religions that is, religions belonging to earlier times. On that account, the researcher must exercise precision in dealing with these texts. Thence, the differences found within a single religion are evidence of the necessity of deep textual investigation. For this reason, death in Islam is not presented within a single unified context. For, death as a phenomenon or existential state, for example in Salafi thought, evokes terror, anxiety, and fear of the other world, where one feels regret and sorrow for being in this life. Their writings reflect this, such as the horrors of the Day of Judgment, the punishment of the grave, and other conceptions that are closer to a discourse of fear than to

religious texts. In juxtaposition, in the texts of the School of Ahl al-Bayt (peace be upon them), there is a longing for death and a desire for it, based on textual evidence. The Husayni tradition, which records the martyrdom of Imam Husayn (peace be upon him) in Karbala, presents the highest lessons of sacrifice, where the true meanings of life are embodied in martyrdom or death within a symbolic framework.

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