
A CRITICAL STUDY OF PERCEPTIONS OF DEATH

REZWANA KARIM SNIGDHA, SYED NIZAR ALAM

Abstract: Death may seem to be a rather morbid subject for philosophical speculation. In one of the most famous reflection on death, the Greek philosopher Epicurus reminds us that “so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist”. From this Epicurus concludes- death should not be our concern. But, in reality death or ‘fear of death’ remained one of our main concerns. However, due to epistemic limit in knowing death, ordinary people perceive death in various ways. Traditional anthropology tried to understand perceptions of death by studying death rituals. One of the celebrated philosophers of our time Jacques Derrida thinks death is nothing but an image to us and that image varies among individuals. Thus, studying death rituals is not enough to study the perceptions of death. This article argues and studies the perceptions of death and how and why it varies even among same socio-cultural-religious groups.

Keywords: Death, Physical Death, Social Death, Philosophy of Death.

Introduction: Death is an inseparable part of human life. Yet, it remains unknown to us. What is Death? The answer that usually follows- death is the termination of life, which ascertains the absence of vital force and existence in a body [1], [2]. On the other hand, theologians think death is separation of soul from body [3]. It is difficult to explain death by reducing to a single academic perspective. One cannot hope to gain a deep and comprehensive understanding of death by gazing at it through a single lens. Thus, a philosopher’s perspective differs from that of the sociologist or anthropologist, whose own perspective is likely to differ again from that of a literary scholar or theologian. This article does not aim to analyze various experiences and representations of death and dying from the perspective of academic disciplines as diverse as theology, philosophy, sociology, anthropology and literature; rather it aims to show how perception of death varies among same socio-cultural and religious group living in same geographical locations and time. To do so, this article addresses different philosophical theories of death and uses anthropological methods to study perceptions of death.

Usually, death is explained in light of an individual’s very own exclusive experience of it, where it’s asserted that – none but he, who experienced death, can know it. As it’s impossible for a dead person to step back into life, so questions like “What is death? Is there anything that exists at all after death? Can we declare the ending of physical functioning the ultimate ending of life?” remain apparently unsolvable. But the thoughts about the images of death and others in link with it, which inhabit in our mind, are inscribed with various social and traditional perceptions about it. The primary aim of this article is to study the perceptions of death and how and why it varies even among same socio-cultural groups. To that goal, I have used

anthropological research methods to collect data and information.

There are three segments in this article apart from the introduction and the conclusion. In first section I tried to explore the traditional meaning of death, which includes biological, social and legal conceptions of death. Later on, article addresses the problems and limitations of traditional conception of death. Followed by, how perceptions of death varies among social group. In this section I have presented anthropological data. And finally, the conclusion has been drawn up with regards to the personal understanding of death in light with theoretical difficulties and various social perspectives.

What is Death?: It’s, in a word, ‘impossible’ to provide a universal definition of death; for it contains neither any direct empirical observation nor does it have any similar entity in living state. But usually, we think death is the absence of physical existence of any living being. The concept of death is usually discussed into two major categories. Firstly, it’s analyzed through a process, where it’s shown as the ending of vital functioning of human life. In this context, Stanford Encyclopedia [2] of Philosophy defines death as following-

Death is life's ending. Let us say that vital processes are those by which organisms develop or maintain themselves. These processes include chemosynthesis, photosynthesis, cellular respiration, cell generation, and maintenance of homeostasis. Then death is the ending of the vital processes by which an organism sustains itself.

In other words, death is the terminating process of biological functioning in a living body. On the other hand, it’s usually explained with the memorable events, which suggests it to be the last stage of life [4], [5]. But a process or an event - whatever the death may be, it’s such a universally true part of life that lies far beyond an individual’s ability to

penetrate into it. Consequently, death is often considered as a misfortune.

In contrast to biological conception of death, [3] thinks like theology – death is nothing but separation of soul from body. According to him, it is soul that keeps leaving body active, and without it body cannot perform. He mainly proposed to conceptualize death through the idea of the soul.

Classification of Death: First in the list is ‘physical death’, which proposes that death, actually, is the ending of vital process within the living body. But physical death is not seen as any simple and single definition in medical science. There do exist numerous debates in defining physical death [6]. Usually thought, when an individual stops respiration permanently and loses the cycle of blood circulation, he is considered dead. But there are cases, when respiration and blood circulation is controlled artificially in a body and the body is kept vitally active through electronic support. Would that body be considered living then? On the other hand, when the brain of an individual remains inactive, but his vital processes are activated artificially, it’s legal to consider that individual as “Officially Dead” [7].

The second type of death is “social death”, which is defined as the social ending or death of an individual’s self and identity [8]. But this definition is subject to different authors. For instance, while defining social death, Hertz [9] said –

“Death is in normal circumstances merely a temporary exclusion of the individual from society.”

On the other hand, Gannep [10] explained social death with the analysis of changes in an individual’s social identity through various norms and rituals around it. His work, especially his idea of liminality, was later on used by Victor Turner [11] in his work, and has great significance in Anthropology. Gannep used the term ‘liminality’ to explain some of the evolutionary developments of human life. He divided human life into three steps: birth, death and marriage. As he said, an individual ensures the changes of his identity parallel to various circumstances concerning these three steps. According to him, an individual is socially recognized as dead after his passing off all these three steps to funeral.

Firstly, the primary step of an individual’s social death is the period of segregation from everyday life. In this stage, a dead person cannot connect himself/herself to the everyday social life. For instance, a dead person cannot accomplish his regular tasks from the very moment he’s dead.

Secondly, when an individual goes through a transition period, he remains at the luminal state of transition from one status to the next. Such as, when a dead person is given ablution, worn dresses and

made ready to carry from one place to another, he stays in a transition period and is considered as an existent self.

Thirdly, the step, he mentioned, is a process of reintroduction to the social order with a new standing. As a case in point, the identity of a dead person changes with the burial. A dead person, that was considered dead just after a moment back he was alive, is socially named after “late” after the very moment he’s buried down the grave. This is how an individual’s death is socially illustrated with new identities.

Complexities in Conceptualizing Death: Death is framed with different dimensions in the view points of philosophy, psychology, sociology, religion and anthropology. What philosophy is concerned about death is a set of questions like – whether or not it’s possible to communicate linguistically with the question “what is death?” under an apparently constant precondition that the idea of death cannot be directly empirically observed. On the other hand, psychologists study death in light of consciousness and unconsciousness. Again, the trial of illustrating death through diverse social realities is observed in sociology. Religion builds various fearful conceptual images of death, and defines it as the journey or the intermediate pathway from life to the life here after. Anthropologists observe it through the set of rituals and beliefs, focusing on the way of how the idea of death is formed in light with social realities from the very view points of sociology. Therefore, the idea of death cannot be served with any universal explanations. Another important fact is that, as the prevailing concepts of death is beyond scientific investigations, thus there is no option to depend on the truth value of them. This is why the complexities in conceptualizing death are so obvious.

The most notable philosopher in terms of conceptualizing death is Heidegger. His book *Being and Time* [12], published in 1927, broke into mass discussions of conceptualizing death, and led a new pathway in philosophy. Basically, he came up with his ideas of death while discussing the self in his book. As he thought, death creates such an existent consciousness in an individual which questions the self’s being selflessness. According to him, death may or may not be considered as the ultimate ending of anything. But its possibility might be understood through towards an end. In other words, if death is supposed to be taken as the ending of the self, then it will only express the existencelessness of the self. But if death is considered through “towards an end”, then the nature of death may possibly be understood through the self’s being selfless.

Todd May [13] said, if death is to be understood as the ultimate state of anything, then the question that

would naturally arise is – What is to be a being that dies? Whether the ending of the self, which we define as death, can be adequately considered as the end is not free from questions. Though Heidegger, in no means, agreed on the point that death is the ultimate ending, he doesn't puff away the possibility of the ultimate ending too. In that context, he used the concept 'Dasien'. If Dasine has the possibility of ultimate ending, then we may speak of death as the ending of the self. He put forward his ideas of death with temporality through assigning the supreme emphasis over Dasine.

Heidegger's notion of "towards the end" can be connected with the discussions of Van Gennep's Rites de Passage, in which he showed the way of how the death of an individual reaches its ultimate state, passing through all the series of events. Heidegger said, the ending of the self does no way refer to death, or else it would stand for a human-like form. Hence, he doesn't think of death with an ultimate ending. According to him, it's possible to hold death as the ending of the self only when the possibility of impossibility of possibility can be understood. In his words, "Death is the impossibility as the end of possibility" [14].

Heidegger identifies the death of an individual as subject to his/her single and unique experience. He further adds, the experience of death is exclusively personal and limited to him/her who experienced it. He attested this notion as "own most". As he goes on, only a dying person realizes the experience of death, and this realization ends up while his is death. In other words, the experience of death and the death itself are both subject to person; for this experience can, no way, be shared with someone else, be linguistically expressed. Though death is certain, however, we cannot trace epistemic certainty about it.

Again, Greek philosopher Epicurus said, death is nothing to us, as we don't have any conscious experience of it. Only a dead person can provide certain knowledge about its experience. Thus, things that involve none of our conscious experiences are meaningless to us. He argued, if there's nothing beyond pleasure and pain, and if death is supposed to be the ultimate ending of everything, then death is nothing to us. On the contrary, while explaining death through consciousness, Hegel said – people understand death with the pain of losing in the realm of consciousness. According to him, death is a personal matter, where the fear of death raises consciousness of death in the territory of mind. Besides, death may be desirable for an individual, through what he wants to escape pain and/or frustrations.

Another important philosopher in the contemporary

philosophical discussion of death is Derrida. He elucidates death with the differences in between Heidegger and Epicurus [15]. Through deconstruction theory, he re-notified different thoughts and conscious experiences related to death. In his words, death, like in grand narrative, creates conscious feeling, called undeniable truth. He says this feeling is connected with an individual's consciousness. So long an individual roams around the realm of his consciousness; he doesn't preserve any idea of death. According to him, so long an individual preserves his individuality, he's unable to die. Whenever we think about ourselves, we keep our very own self at the centre. While answering to the question, "With the presence of my own self in me, is my death possible?" Derrida said, "it's only when I'm existence-less to myself, I can die". In his judgment, the consciousness or the idea of death depends on the existence of conscious state that is incessantly engaged in creating its images in an individual. In link with this, he said [17]–

Death is an image. Imagination is the power that allows life to affect itself with its own representation....The presence of the represent is constituted with the help of the addition of that nothing which is the image, announcement of its dispossession with its own represent or and within its death.

Death in Social and Cultural Edges: The set of ideas that we hold about death in our consciousness is formed by our surroundings, society and culture. As death, by its very nature, does not only settle an individual's physical existencelessness, but also guarantees his social absence, so its concepts are shaped up into a commonly shared form through social, cultural and popular rites around it. Peter Berger [18] said, people in every society confront death and their last refuges are determined by society itself. However, Peter Koestenbaum [19] held that – death is our own and that of others. An individual dies only when people around him feel the absence of his existence. Only the end of physical existence, itself, doesn't assert an individual's death.

For instance, while describing about her late husband, a 53-year-old homemaker Monuara, said – "Man dies and decays in body, not in soul. The spiritual attraction of soul never ends. It's not that my husband's body is not beside me, and so his soul doesn't exist. He's not dead to me. I can always feel his presence by me."

Maybe, these statements are her emotional outbreak. But after long 12 years of her husband's expiration, Monuara doesn't consider his absence as death. According to her, the sufferings in death and its experience is not something frightening. She saw her husband dying before her. She added –

“I don’t thing sensory experience of natural death should be painful. My husband died in my arms. He passed away laughing. Had death been so hard, could he have laugh! Death is not that agonizing in my opinion. I’ll die when I’m physically time out.”

It implies that, the understanding and ideas about death, which are formed in Monuara, are through her own observations. Keeping her husband’s death in mind, she’s continually defining it. Death is not dreadful in her opinion. The latent meaning of her speech resembles the ideas of the Greek philosopher Epicurus. As he thought, death doesn’t seek or lead to any destiny. It is not the end of anything. He said, “It is nothing than a stoppage of our lives”. Epicurus believed that death is not scary, as it’s not in our living experiences. Therefore it seems that we, usually, comprise the notion of death through the coordination of the experiences of our relatives’ passing away into our imaginations. And the formations of those imaginations among people are subject to their belonging social and cultural edges.

As in the Islamic religious principles, the concept of death is seen to be a pathway from the worldly life to the life here after. In terms of religious beliefs, death is just the ending of vital and metabolic functioning within a body. Religious scripts usually depict death with its scariness, and at the very same time, try to impose strong ethical concerns among mass people. That is clearly a social formation. Religious scripts use the scariness of death as one of the major tools to make religion work as a vital means to control society.

Todd May [13] said, most religious scripts, which clearly assert that death should not, at any means, be understood as the ultimate ending, highlight the afterlife punishments in order to control social behaviours.

Religious perspectives strictly reject the popular idea of death, which suggests that it’s the final termination of life; rather they propose that it’s the beginning of another life - the life hereafter. This idea is, very much obviously, an account of cultural patterns. As it’s impossible for a living person to attain an absolute idea of death and the afterlife, if it exists at all, so he/she receives dogmatic religious verses to be in a pleasurable position about it. It seems, here, that pleasure is one of the prime components that help conceptualize death.

The following case, which I think would be contextually relevant here, may be analyzed in view to have a look into the way of how pleasure is related, from religious perspectives, to the understanding of death -

Amena Muhsin, a fifty-three-year old homemaker, had a fifteen-year old son, named Kabbo. After her son’s S.S.C. exam, Amena along with her family went

on a tour to St. Martin. There, Kabbo drove into the water for bath and disappeared. After 10 minutes gone, Kabbo was found and brought to hospital immediately. Doctors declared him dead. Amena returned to the hotel with her dead son in an hour. The death of the only son made Amena and her husband’s life hard enough to lead. While praying the janaza of Kabbo, the Imam said -

“Allah takes off his beloved people this way before they grow old; for the most beautiful and liked flowers in a garden are those which are just about to bloom into a complete flower. Those who die immersing into water are the most adored people to him, and he’ll certainly relieve them of all their sins and reward them with the heavens. In the judgment day, those innocent children will take away their parents with them to the heaven.”

Amena thought - who knows how hard it was for my child to die that way. Maybe that’s only why God will reward him with the heaven. She added,

“Nobody can answer me to why I will leave for. My son left, why I’ll survive? When she asked the imam of it, he replied, “If you commit suicide, you’ll never be allowed to get into the heaven. You’ll never get to see your son, as you’ll be sent to the hell. Your son won’t be any help to take you to the heaven.”

Amena kept going,

“Once, my husband and I thought of committing suicide but quit it, because if we do it at all, we’ll never get to meet our son afterlife someday. Committing suicide is an unpardonable sin. Now we are awaiting our death, our most desired moment. It’s only death that can make a bridge between us.”

After the analysis of the case above, we understand the way of how death can be the most pleasurable and awaited thing for people under different situations and how religion interferes into this. As a matter of fact, religion assures, directly or indirectly, the cultural dimension of the understanding of death as a concept. When parents, who lost their children, lose the meaning of their living, religion comes up to compensate them with its idea of death, and keeps them away from committing suicides. With the accidental death of fifteen-year-old Kabbo when his parents became totally demolished and lost the wish of living, religion compensates them with the idea of the heavens in their afterlives. Now the question is - what exactly is death to Mrs. Amena and her husband? Maybe, it would be a gift to them. They are not under the impression that death would be any agonizing; rather it seems to be something that would meet their self-satisfactions. A quotation of Nietzsche [21] may be cited here in this context:

“The living is merely a type of what is dead, and a very rare type.”

We just continually form the idea of death in light

with different observational perspectives and multi-dimensional reality. Besides, this notion is further shaped up, within our consciousness, by the surrounding, religion, psychology, society and culture. Our consciousness coordinates the images of death with our experiences about it. Heidegger claims that we cannot supply adequate information about things that are not a part of our conscious experience. It certainly stimulates our conscious realm. Although we cannot empirically realize the nature of death, but still we can communicate meaningfully with it, especially the incident of other people's dying, through our sensory observations and the scariness around or/and compensations about death, inhibited to the realm of our consciousness. Therefore, the study of the self under various social and cultural entities and the analysis of different death-related circumstantial incidents are very much significant to have a greater understanding of death.

Conclusion: As it's beyond our sensory experience to have absolute knowledge of death, so the crisis in its understanding is not unexpected. I just can't agree more on the point that it's, in a word, 'impossible' for a living person to, somehow, have a definite feeling of death. But still, the ideas and mysteries around death exist in the realm of our consciousness. Again, the

way "whether we can decide death as the ultimate ending or not?" is subject to questions according to Heidegger, similarly we cannot unlock the question, "why death should not be the ultimate extinction?", "Whether death is the separation of soul from body or it's just transmigration of soul from one place to another", "Do we merely draw the idea of death in our imagination or it's one of our innate ideas?" are not beyond questions. These questions, very much obviously, are food for thoughts and lead us to different understanding of death. Therefore death cannot be adequately conceptualized. Furthermore, in epistemic sense any living being will have incomplete knowledge of death until we experience it. Thus, Derrida was right. Because of incomplete knowledge, we form an image of death. This very image death varies among individuals. Classical anthropologist has thought, perceptions of death are similar among same cultural and religious group. Thus, they tried to study of death through rituals. But from the cases from mentioned earlier we came to know perceptions of death vary even among same socio-cultural and religious group. So, studying death rituals are not enough to study perceptions death.

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Rezwana Karim Snigdha/Assistant Professor/ Department of Anthropology/ Jahangirnagar University.
Syed Nizar Alam/ Assistant Professor/ Department of Philosophy/ Jahangirnagar University.