

DEATH AND THE MEANING(S) OF LIFE-II

In a paper entitled "Death and the Meaning of Life"¹ I explored the question of the possible meaning(a) of our mortality. In this paper I shall briefly explore related facets of the question of individual mortality; *viz.* (1) the possible meaning, for the survivors, of a loved one's dying and death; (2) some conditions under which the survivors' lives would retain the meaning(s) their lives possessed; and (3) some ways in which the survivors may recover, or perhaps even add new meaning to their lives, after a loved one's death, and in that sense triumphing over death. In a fuller discussion, it would also be fruitful (4) to explore the possible meaning(s) of a historical figure's death for posterity as well as of contemporaneous individuals one knows about through books, theater, television, or films alone.)

II

I shall start with essentially the most difficult of the above three questions, *i.e.*, question (3); which, somewhat restated, is whether the dying and the death of a loved one can *ever make possible or even give the survivors' lives some new meaning or meanings*. The question may seem quite absurd, since it might seem utterly obvious that if the particular life and relationship meant *anything at all*—let alone a great deal— the dying/death would result not only in the *loss* of that meaning or value but may lead to lifelong grief, depression, and utter physical and mental disability. So how can that such an outcome be overcome, since under the circumstances, some of these physical, psychological and mental outcomes cannot be

totally avoided. Indeed, if we agree, as I do, with John Donne's famous view that we are not "an island but part of the main," the death of *any human being* "diminishes us." Donne's words are a poetic expression of the fundamental truth, stressed by communitarians² and feminist thinkers³ that, in certain ways, we are essentially selves-in-relation, or selves "embedded" in other selves; that as moral beings we are partially constituted by our important attachments, relationships and ends. But even if we limit ourselves here to the relationships between family members, where love is the norm, the loss of even one member would be devastating. Indeed, the loss of a child is almost invariably the worst calamity a parent can possibly experience or endure, or be unable to endure, since the parents' silent, ever-present grief—silent to shield the rest of the family, mercifully ends only with the parents' own demise⁴.

It is obvious I think that no single proper answer can be given to the foregoing questions; just as no single answer can be properly given regarding the meaning of the inevitability of one's

¹ For example, the contributors to the anthology, *Women and Moral Theory*, ed., Eva F. Kittay and Diana T. Meyers (Savage, MD, 1987).

² Frequently we have seen and heard bereaved parents on American television, particularly military couples, expressing great pride in their son's or daughter's sacrifice or his or her life in the service or defence of their country in time of war (in this case, the war in Afganistan). In these cases the memory of their child's supreme sacrifice for what they believed is a great cause, a great value, and their ever-green memory does perhaps give the parents' lives meaning that stays with them for the rest of their days. But the very opposite would happen if the bereaved parents either become disillusioned with the war itself or from the very start consider it to be morally or otherwise unjustified or wrong.

³ *ETHICS Selections from Classical and Contemporary Writers*, Fourth Edition, Oliver A. Johnson, ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart And Winston, 1978).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

own mortality to one's life. The proper answers to the question we are considering largely depend, I believe, on the *nature of the unique relationship* involved between the survivors and the deceased. There is an obvious sense in which one's happiness, which the death may rob one of a great source—sometimes, the greatest source—of the survivor's life, varying with the nature and strength of the relationship. However, happiness does not exhaust the meaning in or of a life, hence its temporary or permanent loss does not necessarily entail one's complete loss of meaning in or of one's life. Again, the death of a loved one though it may rob one of all meaning; and its effects may not always be that extreme. As the popular saying goes, time may gradually heal the wound, and one to go on with his or her life and perhaps recover a modicum of serenity and meaning. If time and circumstance fail to heal, if in the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl's graphic words, the "existential vacuum" in her soul persists, she would need what Frankl calls "logotherapy" to recover the meaning she had lost or to find new meaning in her life. Indeed, Frankl's book, *Man's Search for Meaning* as a whole is an eloquent expression of the author's conviction that suffering and death can have a meaning: both for the survivor and those confronting imminent death. In this case in a Nazi Concentration camp.

The death of a loved one can also have the opposite effects and consequences than those I have described. As exemplified by some well-known historical examples, it can become a beacon of light, a fountain of inspiration and creativity, and though prolonged or lasting unhappiness may be the result, there are many examples past and present of examples of creative and dedicated individuals have triumphed or triumph over their unhappiness. Although happiness is a value and a source of meaning, it is not its only source. For first, even great and lasting unhappiness can itself be a spring-board of creativity, often resulting in things of lasting value: artistic, scientific, philosophical, phi-

lanthropic, and so on; as we see in the lives of such great composers as Beethoven, Schubert and Brahms, philosophers such as Schopenhauer; and so on. Second, there is not dearth of historical and contemporary examples of the way loss of a close family member or close friend has inspired notable works "in memoriam." Examples are John Milton's "Lycidas," Alfred Lord Tennyson's "In Memoriam," Dylan Thomas' "Do not Go Gentle into that Good-night"-- written as the poet's father lay dying. In music, one may recall the moving, magnificent "Sinfonia Concertante," composed at Mozart's mother's death. Other notable examples of a more general, impersonal character are various Requiems, among them Brahms' "German Requiem," Benjamin Britten's "War Requiem," and Verdi's "Requiem." In fact, "Masses," "Requiems" and "Funeral Marches," "Elegies" and "Epitaphs" also serve as artistic ways of "immortalizing" their subjects—and added meaning to the creators' own lives. A deceased person's unpublished writings, works of art, photographs, personal letters, etc., may also provide surcease of pain to the survivors, while giving additional posthumous meaning to the deceased person. The publication of some of this material may also give new meaning to the survivors. Again, Institutes and Foundations, scientific, philanthropic, etc., established by survivors in the name of the deceased person can extend the meaning of the deceased' life and add meaning to the lives of the survivors who establish them in memoriam.

In Leo Tolstoy's great *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, we have a mastery portrayal of the central character, Ivan Ilych's slow and agonizing dying and death, and its effects on Ivan's family and colleagues-co-called friends. The work largely focuses on Ivan's progressive deterioration and physical and mental suffering, and his growing awareness of the hopelessness of his situation, culminating in his terrifying last days, including his growing awareness of the empty, meaningless life he had hitherto li-

ved, it also depicts the psychological effects of his illness and demise on his family, the butler's assistant Gerasim, and his supposed friends. Ivan's dying stretches over months, but leaves his wife's and daughter's everyday life essentially unchanged. His dying and his death mean practically nothing to them since whatever love they may have felt for him had long vanished. In fact his death frees them from the inconveniences and annoyances they had to put up with during his illness; including the way it cramped their daily round of pleasures. Only Ivan's young, timid son loves his father, acutely feels his dying and death, and suffers silently. In sharp contrast to Ivan's wife, daughter and colleagues, Gerasim's faithful ministrations to his ill and dying master's physical needs gives his life special meaning, and his constant solicitude helps break down the dying man's wall of loneliness and isolation.

III

I think it is clear that the psychic, particularly the lasting psychic effects of the dying and the death on loving survivors depend in good measure on the survivors' view(s) about death-leaving aside their belief or lack of belief in personal immortality. I shall therefore very briefly consider two different classical philosophies, Epicureanism and Stoicism, including the later Stoicism of Marcus Aurelius, which—despite the differences in their philosophical underpinnings, are interestingly similar in their views about human mortality.

(1) In *Epicurus to Menoecus*¹ 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. Therefore a right understanding of that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not because it adds to it an infinite span of time, but because it takes away the craving for immortality. For there is

nothing terrible in life for the man who has truly comprehended that there is nothing terrible in not living. ... So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since as long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist. It does not then concern the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more².

It is seen from the foregoing passage that Epicurus does not distinguish one's own death and another's death—particularly the death of a loved one—hence does not differentiate or address the question of the “right” or “proper” attitude(s) towards, hence the proper response(s) to a loved another's death. Consequently even if we adopt the attitude he advocates, that death is nothing to us so long as *we exist*, it does not follow that “death would (or should) be nothing to us” when someone we love dies, or is dead. Again, since pleasure and the absence of pain is the Epicurean's end in life, it follows that one should avoid feeling grief or sorrow for a loved one's final departure.

(2) Epictetus' *The Encheiridion*³ Epictetus begins his treatise thus:

Some things are under our control, while others are not under our control. ... [N]ot under our control are our body, our property, reputation, office, and, in a word, everything that is not our own doing. ... [T]he things not under our control are weak, servile, subject to hindrance, and not our own⁴.

* * *

Make it... your study... to say to every harsh external impression, “You are an external impression and not at all what you appear to be.” ... If it has to do with so\me one of the things not under

¹ Ibid., p. 102.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p. 103.

⁴ Ibid.

our control, have ready to hand the answer, 'It is nothing to me.'¹

* * *

If you try to avoid disease, or death, .. you will experience misfortune. Withdraw, therefore, your aversion from all the matters that are not under our control, and transfer it to what is unnatural among those which are under our control.

* * *

Never say about anything, "I have lost it," but only "I have given it up." Is your child dead? It has been given back. Is your wife dead? She has been given back. . . . But what concern is it of yours by whose instrumentality the Giver called for its return? So long as He gives it to you, take care of it as of a thing that is not your own, as travelers treat their inn.

* * *

If you make it your will that your children and your wife and your friends should live for ever, you are silly; for you are making it your will that things not under your control should be under your control, and that what is not your own should be your own.²

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It is seen from the foregoing passages that according to Epictetus's stoic philosophy equanimity hence serenity are bought at the price of love and caring, and the mental and emotional consequences for the survivors. Equanimity *is* rational with respect to merciful deaths; for example, whenever death thankfully ends interminable phy-

¹ Cf. David Hume's view, in "On Suicide" about the rightness of suicide when, essentially, life is, or becomes, meaningless. It is I think clear that on that view, assisted suicide would also be ethical. What immediate and especially lasting effects on members of the family and close friends would result from the assisted suicide or suicide would clearly vary, depending in part on their ethical views concerning these ways of ending one's life, and their "I-Thou relationship" to the deceased person. These are large questions that require separate treatment.

² Rachane Kamtekar, "Marcus Aurelius," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2010.

sical pain, mental anguish and continual fear or terror, as with patients suffering from some incurable illness or disease, such as terminal cancer. Indeed, assisted suicide or even suicide, whenever it is possible or feasible, is in my view the ethically right way of quitting one's life in the circumstances.³

(3) Finally, a few brief quotations from Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*:

"...a Stoic life, according to which only virtue is good, only vice is bad, and the things which we busy ourselves with are all indifferent."

* * *

"...we are tiny and temporary fragments in the cosmos, that death takes us all in the end, but we ought to live purposively rather than like mechanical toys."

* * *

"Marcus puts Epicurus' view that at death our soul-atoms are dispersed and we cease to exist on all four with the Stoic view that Nature either extinguishes or transforms us at death... allegiance to philosophy involves rising above pain, and reputation..."

* * *

"The 'communal goal' is specified in terms of indifference (?) Rather than virtue..."

*

"...Marcus tells himself to regard other human beings as most his own... when thinking how to benefit them and how not to obstruct their plans."

* * *

Justice is "Acting for the sake of the Cosmic polis."

It is seen from the foregoing passages from Epictetus' early stoicism and Marcus Aurelius' later Stoicism that for both, equanimity is all. But stoic "equanimity and serenity" are not only easier said

³ The idea of this kind of active power has played an important role in the history of philosophy. See Pietarinen and Viljanen (2009). There is a chapter in this book on Spinoza's theory of active power.

than done. More importantly, the quest for these existential states or conditions often buys them at the price of the “milk of human kindness.” Equanimity-- if the survivors are able to attain it at all— would be the “right attitude” if and when death is a final release from unbearable physical and mental suffering that at the time medical science cannot cope with or end; and/or when no human know-

ledge at the time, or loving care, can decrease or end the critical patient’s mental agony. But Marcus Aurelius’ view that justice is “acting for the sake of the Cosmic polis”-- which naturally includes the human Polis-- is an important, valuable ethical and social-political advance over early Stoicism, and is more in line with an “ethic of caring” that the present write, for example, espouses.

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DEATH AND THE MEANING(S) OF LIFE

SUMMARY

The present paper is a sequel to an earlier paper entitled “Death and the Meaning of Life,” which explored the question of the possible meaning(s) of our own mortality. The present paper continued the exploration of the (1) possible meaning(s) of the mortality and the death of individuals one loves to the survivor or survivors. In relation to that question, it explores (2) some conditions under which the survivors’ lives would retain the mea-

ning(s) their lives possessed; and (3) some ways in which the survivors may recover, perhaps even add new meaning to their lives, after a loved one’s death. In the context of these questions the relevant views of Epicurus, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius are briefly critically discussed.

Key concepts: mortality, death, meaning(s) of life.

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ԱՄՓՈՓՈՒՄ

Տվյալ հոդվածը մեկ այլ՝ «Մահը և կյանքի իմաստը» վերնագրով հոդվածի շարունակությունն է, որն ուսումնասիրում էր մահկանացու լինելու հնարավոր իմաստ(ներ)ի հարցը: Այն շարունակում է հետևյալ հարցադրումների շուրջ սկսված փնտրտուքը՝ (1) մահկանացու լինելու հնարավոր իմաստ(ներ)ը և անհատների ապրած ու վերապրած մահվան ուսումնասիրությունը, (2) այն պայմանները, որոնցում մահ վերապրածների մոտ նախկինում ամրագրված կյանքի իմաստ(ներ)ը մնում է(են) նույնը, (3) որոշ ուղիներ, որոնցով հա-

րազատի (սիրելի մարդու) մահ վերապրածները վերագտնում են և, միգուցե, որոշ դեպքերում նույնիսկ ընդլայնում են կյանքին վերագրվող իմաստը կամ իմաստները: Հոդվածի մեջ այս հարցադրումների համատեքստում էպիկուրի, էպիկտետուսի և Մարկուս Ավրելիուսի համապատասխան տեսակետները ենթարկվում են հակիրճ քննադատական վերլուծության:

Հանգուցային հասկացություններ. մահկանացու, մահ, կյանքի իմաստ(ներ):

ХАЧАДУРЯН ГАЙК

СМЕРТЬ И СМЫСЛ(Ы) ЖИЗНИ

РЕЗЮМЕ

Данная статья является продолжением ранее опубликованной статьи «Смерть и смысл жизни», в котором исследовался вопрос о возможных смыслах смертности человека. Данная статья продолжает исследование (1) возможных смыслов смертности и смерти любимых индивидов для спасшегося или спасшихся. В отношении к этому вопросу исследуются (2) некоторые условия, при наличии которых жизнь спасшихся сохранит смысл(ы), обладали их жизни; и (3) не-

которые пути, которыми спасшиеся могут восстановить, и возможно добавить новые смыслы для своей жизни после смерти любимого или любимой. В контексте этих вопросов соответствующие взгляды Эпикура, Эпиктета и Марка Аврелия кратко обсуждены критически.

Ключевые понятия: смертность, смерть, смысл(ы) жизни