

## Theories of Death with a Special Reference to Indian Philosophy

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### Abstract

Most of the philosophers deal with the quality of life, assuming a long span covering all phases. Therefore it is a commonly idealized life. But during the course the life as we advance, there are numerous riddles of self and the universe we live in it to encounter. Certain questions that have not only puzzled the common man but also the intellectuals had been like, Is there any meaning behind every happening? How ought we to live? Is there any life after death? Is death as such is the true end of all activities and so on. However, when the subject of death comes the answers through theories or philosophies have not been very convincing or suitable to all the rungs of the society. This could be mostly due to our evading the very subject of death much owing to the general uneasiness, fear and a sort of psychological insecurity, while dealing with it. Therefore it is always easy to raise philosophical questions than to answer them. There are almost two dozen theories in vogue which have certain basic assumptions but somehow they do not fall in the domain of truly scientific inquiry. They are to be accepted as an outcome of religious sentiments or wishful thinking. This paper highlights the salient features of Indian philosophical viewpoint with regard to death.

**Keywords:** Riddles of self, Psychological insecurity and Scientific inquiry.

### Introduction

The very subject of death even in general discussion often leads to gloom and despondency. In fact it is one of those rare subjects on which honestly speaking none can claim knowledge with absolute veracity. Therefore, most of the times views presented are borrowed from scriptures which needless to say have typically religious overtones or they must have been handed over from one generation to another without any impartial scrutiny. It is an undeniable fact that the majority of our society believes in the handiwork of unseen higher force, usually referred to the Almighty, with power to pervade as Omnipotent, Omniscient and Omnipresent. Therefore there is a total unflinching trust in the justice too. Until there is no substitute for this dependence this trend is bound to continue and truly it has genuinely become a psychological need, as most of the philosophers of pragmatism assert. Death at least on the physical plane is clearly the terminating point from life and no one knows where exactly it merges into. Humanity as a whole with rare exceptions definitely fears it. It is however unfortunate that under uncontrolled enthusiasm and with spirited outlook filled with fanaticism the scientific analysis is not only overlooked but even unjustifiably and ruthlessly condemned. Instead of taking on purely philosophical approaches that are filled with academic fervent it would be wise to take on a common-man's viewpoint and subsequently the problems he has to encounter. A common man is hardly interested in theories or philosophies of any concrete subject as such. All that he harps after is solace. Neither he wants to enter into the scientific realm to understand the basic principles of all natural phenomena nor get involved in the serious philosophical particularly metaphysical sketches. He pretty well knows his own cultivated restricted and well defined arena. For him at any rate death is an existing reality witnessed by one and all for every living being. No one can escape it or even postpone when it is due. However he definitely wants to know the possible and much publicized life after death. Rather all that he desires is a calm and hassle-free termination when it cannot be halted. He is as much obsessed with the questions related to life as those after life. No theory has been successful to date to provide complacency in true sense.

### Scientific Viewpoint

In science every phenomenon has a cause and therefore can be explained on the basis of laws. Sometimes it is quite easy to answer back how than why. With the development of science in various branches, as centuries have rolled down there had been always attempts to make living as much comfortable as possible. However, no law or theory could come to the

rescue of people when death would signal. Death is an open reality and remains invincible. It is a fact of life. With the principle of Conservation of energy there is definitely a guidance for us and furthermore little consolation too. The various forms of energy are interconvertible and therefore, theoretically there is never a loss in true sense. Since we are accustomed to a particular form or format, we are not ready to accept or accommodate any new or altered version of the same. Much owing to this kind of sustained ignorance we are dragged into the domain of depression either periodically or continually. The Thermodynamic laws clearly emphasize on the transformations due to which nothing can be claimed by us as a self-creation or even taking credit for the destruction is absolutely unacceptable. In fact, it is the invisible form that we do not accept and more so despite the fact that there are six states of matter viz. solid, liquid, Gas, Plasma, Bose-Einstein and Fermion, we rely only on the first three for explaining all Natural phenomena. Absence or Invisibility is wrongly concluded as or equated to destruction on a permanent basis. With the energy transformation, life and death can be looked upon as separate phases but essentially interlinked. It has been placed on record that about 20% of patients who recover after sustaining cardiac arrest have reported clearly a near death experience. They have also described some kind of awareness, while being resuscitated. With this background life death may be considered as a reversible process which might occur or show such symptoms at a specific moment but only after severe illness. This means that although it is a common or routine feature of almost all religions and also philosophies to entertain such conjectures about life after death, science too on the basis of neuroscience in particular finds and acknowledges the agreeable evidence furnished.

Earlier the historical approach which lasted for a fairly long time described Death as merely stopping of the breathing process or heartbeat only. But with the development of science these two could be restarted in the early stage with the help of life-support devices. That is why in the modern world certain new Medical terminologies have been used to describe partial and complete or clinically proved death.

### **Philosophical Approach**

Philosophers with an existential outlook had been concerned more with the complicated design of life. They however met with a thorough disappointment when they confronted with the changing facts of reality. Human nature as such indicates insecurity and deficiency in most of the situations. In the beginning philosophers paid little attention to death and got engaged with life to such an extent that whole of humanity took pride in solving Nature-mysteries. Later many philosophers with an optimistic approach tried to convince that this is probably one of the best patterns of life gifted to humanity and this ought to be the handiwork of a supremely intelligent agency. Unfortunately most of such emotionally and hurriedly drawn conclusion ended up with lukewarm response. Most of the theories appeared to be result of wistful thinking or lopsided arguments with doubtful pre-suppositions. Whether theistic or atheistic existential approach that dealt with life hinted at the futile nature of the various shades of life which further surfaced with meaninglessness and nothingness. It is quite possible that philosophers of existentialism apparently at least engaged themselves more in highlighting the negative aspects of life and they were indeed very true and convincing. Despite this fact the escape from such a situation or harsh reality somehow did not equally appeal to all the rungs of the society.

If we admit the term 'enlightenment' and then spiritual enlightenment as an extension then it is clear that the very fear of death is chiefly because of our metaphysical or spiritual ignorance. It could also be owing to the fallacy entertained by clutching or identifying the spirit with the body. So long as we continue to believe that soul and body are one and the same this dilemma is bound to continue by subjecting our mind to the fear of death. Once this is clarified, then we realize that our body is subject to the laws of nature and therefore, just as other living beings we too have to sportively accept the steady decline. "so in all religions the great spiritual essence of our being, the more we overcome the fear of death"<sup>1</sup>. Both Eastern and Western philosophers have seriously dealt with the subject of death equally. From the beginning it had been one of the major subjects of common concern for the humanity. Much owing to this there are many philosophical or other approaches, first to explain what death exactly means and then how to look at it. It is not possible to cover all philosophers for their individual contribution to this subject and therefore there may be a passing reference to select few.

In Phaedo, Socrates suggests an outlook to people which can reduce their fear of death and may even manage to become indifferent to it. Socrates had tremendous confidence in his conviction that fear surfaces only because of ignorance of the nature of soul. In other words he meant to grant the status of immortality to soul and disqualify body for it. However needless to say, it is the Thanaphobia which has not only widely spread but for centuries has humanity in its tight grip. The morbid fear of death may be taken lightly by the intellectuals or evolved beings and that too in debates but then with varying percentages it does remain or at any rate cannot be eradicated totally. As Socrates himself claims that, "if you see any one distressed at the prospect of dying, it will be proof enough that he is a lover not of wisdom but of the body."<sup>2</sup>

Heidegger's Philosophy of death is a way to be but not a way to end. Therefore there is, a need to distinguish between Being at an end and Being towards an end. Heidegger in no way suggests Being at an end. This is a proof that he also like many philosophers does not subscribe to the view that death ends us on a permanent basis or is a process of annihilation. For him death is a phenomenon of life itself such that finally human beings manage to exist and it could also be a meaningful possibility because it provides the sense of non-being also.

For Soren Kierkegaard the idea of death is a reflection of one's own understanding of the term Existence. He lays lot of emphasis on personal faith disregarding the attempts to catch hold of certainty through others viewpoints. For a common man death is the end in itself with no other deviation and that is why it could be an uncertain certainty."In Either/Or the response of Kierkegaard's aesthete to this situation is one of despair. He wants to view enjoyment as life's purpose but sees man as tragically at the mercy of fate, suffering and death robbing him of pleasure and happiness: no one asks if one wants to come in none when one wants to go out."<sup>3</sup>

### Indian Philosophy

The followers of Indian Philosophy do not feel death as a problem because they had been trained and periodically guided to look at life and death as complementary to each other. Therefore if an onlooker feels that there is a very little practical approach, still it is trusted that some mystic element governs death as a phase or shade of life only. Hinduism in fact invests willingly all its faith in not only the rebirth theory but also in the reincarnation of souls. As a matter of fact body is always given a secondary status while soul an exclusive and more so a spiritual position. Therefore souls are regarded by one and all with exception of atheists, as immortal and subsequently imperishable. The Conservation of Energy principle scientifically backs this outlook. However soul which is residing in the body on a temporary basis is needless to say is always independent and therefore can willingly transcend. The body however is subjected to the physical plane and therefore physical laws and so it has to pass through the stages to mature and then get ready to go into a newly transformed phase. It is always attacked by impurities brought forth by attachment, delusion and laws of Karma(action).

The consolatory part of this philosophy is that Death is never looked upon as any sort of calamity or end of everything but it is a natural process in the very existence of jiva(being) and nonetheless a separate entity. The Gita described two paths with highly illumined one and the other one with complete darkness, connected to Sun and Moon respectively. The brighter one is supposed to be a path of God and there is no retreat thereof. The latter one is equated to ignorance and therefore fails to negotiate the enlightened path and is ever stuck up. This is how one attains the state of Nirvana or Moksha. One of the major Upanishads viz. Katha Upanishad has the central theme Death only.

### Conclusion

From the salient features of Kathopanishad it is clear that human life has two aspirations. On one side there is an ardent desire to gain all worldly pleasures while after passing through variety experiences of life it may be concluded that the efforts invested in gathering all the prosperity not truly worthy. Life is full of miseries and no materialistic gain can appease our mind. As Schopenhauer puts it, "All willing arises from want, therefore from deficiency and therefore from suffering. The satisfaction of a wish ends it; yet for one wish that is satisfied there remain at least ten which are denied. Further the desire lasts long, the demands are infinite; the satisfaction is short and scantily measured out....No attained object can give lasting satisfaction."<sup>4</sup>. Therefore it is believed that man survives death and the soul releases itself to travel according to one's own righteous deeds and then accordingly he is reborn. Lastly one can have a realization through the recommended Yogic practices so as to be liberated in true sense from mortal miseries!

### References

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