

PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS (PART 4 OF 5)

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Description: This series of articles provide a conceptual framework for answering the 'big questions' related to our existence. Part 4 reminds us that thinking about death is the driving force behind reflecting on the questions that really matter and begins the discussion on the thought process that should be employed to reach the right conclusions.

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By: Hamza Andreas Tzortzis

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Death

“Every soul is certain to taste death.” (Quran 21:35)

“Death will overtake you no matter where you may be” (Quran 4:78)

Death is something we as living beings do not enjoy thinking about. It creates the realisation within us that all of the attachments we have built in this world are no longer going to be. Significantly, it awakens us to the brutal fact that we will no longer exist on the planet. There have been many philosophies on death, for example thinkers discussed that death is an interruption to life, like sleep or a disease, only permanent. Others explained that death is to be considered as part of life, something which every person has to come to terms with in order to live well; part of what is involved in accepting our finitude. Some thinkers claimed death is to be considered as a transition from this life to an afterlife, the eternal life of bliss or pain.

Whatever our views on death are, one thing we can all agree on is that it is something that we do not think about enough. This may sound morbid but there is a profound value of reflecting on death, it brings about the actualisation that we are all human beings with a short life. Our egos will no longer seem that important, our attachments and desires to the material world are put into perspective, and our lives are questioned; all of which is a source of great benefit, as the 11th century Theologian and Philosopher al-Ghazali said, "...in the recollection of death there is reward and merit." Contemplating about death provokes thought and give us that window in our lives to really reflect on the ephemeral nature of our existence.

In light of death, how should we view life? What does it tell us about the importance we attach to things, and how does it deliver meaning to our existence? If we view life through the lenses of death we seem to be in an emotional and intellectual space where we can really assess our situation on this planet. How did I come to be? What should I

be doing here? Where am I going? Death is the driving force behind these critical questions, because the moment we recognise that this life is short and that we will breathe our last one day, it puts everything into perspective.

So let us reflect on death; imagine you are here one minute and the next you are no more. You have probably experienced loved ones that have passed away; how did you feel? Was there not a sense of loneliness, emptiness and lack of attachment to the things we used to take so seriously? Now if you were to taste death right now, as every human being will, what would that mean to you? What would you want to have done differently if you were given the chance to go back? What thoughts and ideas would you take more seriously? And what would your outlook be if you could re-live your life once experiencing the tragic reality of death?

The sad thing about death is that we can't go back to change our perspectives, or to think about life, or to challenge our outlook and detach ourselves from the empty nature of worldly life. The good thing though, something that we can begin to do is to take the brave step to deeply reflect on death, and best of all we could make all of these changes now, right this minute.

Thinking

“...for those who reflect.” (Quran 10:24)
“...and he taught Adam the names of everything...” (Quran 2:31)
“Do they not use their minds?” (Quran 6:32)
“Do they not reflect within themselves?” (Quran 30:8)

How should we think? How can we understand the world around us? What methods should we use to gain a true understanding of the world? These questions have puzzled the minds of many great thinkers throughout history. Our human tradition is full of debates and discussions trying to find answers. The likes of Locke, Hume and Kant, and many others have tried to provide answers to shed light on the perennial debate concerning our understanding of the world. Some of these thinkers, such as Locke, claimed that our knowledge of the world is limited to our perceptions only, in other words knowledge is dependent on our sense experience, also known as a posteriori in epistemology, which forms the empiricist tradition in philosophy.

Locke argued that our minds were a blank sheet, a tabula rasa, waiting to be written on by experience. Other thinkers like Leibniz argued, in his 'Nouveaux Essais sur l'entendement humain', that as human beings we have innate concepts and ideas that are necessary to understand the world around us, known as a priori in epistemology, which means that knowledge can be gained independent of sense experience, and forms the rationalist tradition in philosophy. Leibniz's view seems to be a stronger position as it makes more sense, however some philosophers and scientists deny this and claim that you can't think of examples of things we can know independent of our sense experience. This is not true; take the following examples into consideration:

- Circles have no corners.
- $4+4 = 8$.
- Time is irreversible.
- Everything that begins to exist has a cause.
- The whole is greater than its half (just eat half an apple!)
- Causality

Let's take causality as an example to illustrate that we can't just rely on sense experience. Causality can be known without experience because we bring it to all our experience, rather than our experience bringing it to us. It is like wearing yellow-tinted glasses, everything looks yellow not because of anything out there in the world, but because of the glasses through which we are looking at everything. The contention that this is just an assumption is not true because without causality we would not be able to have the concept of the real world, and we would not understand our sense experience. Take the following example into consideration; imagine you are looking at the White House in Washington DC. Your eyes may wander to the door, across the pillars, then to the roof and finally over to the front lawn. Now contrast this to another experience, you are on the river Thames in London and you see a boat floating past. What dictates the order in which you had these experiences? When you looked at the White House you had a choice to see the door first and then the pillars and so on. However with the boat you had no choice as the front of the boat was the first to appear.

The point to take here is that you would not have been able to make the distinction that some experiences are ordered by yourself and others are ordered independently, unless we had the innate idea of causality. In absence of causality our experience would be very different from the way it is. It would be a single sequence of experiences only: one thing after another.

So it seems that the correct way of forming conclusions is by using our innate ideas and the experiences of the world around us, in other words using rational thought or what some people call reason. Just relying on our experience of the material world would not be sufficient as a method of thinking as it would not be able to confirm political truths, moral truths, mathematical truths, logical truths, and let's not forget to mention a fundamental truth like causality.

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