UNIT 2 PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH

Contents

2.0 OBJECTIVES

- To explore some of the philosophical issues related to understanding of death of person.
- To appreciate how various thinkers and traditions have approached the question death and of our bodily changes.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, in order to have a philosophical understanding of death, we first deal with the scholastic view of the human person. Then we take up what some philosophers hold on death. This leads us to take up the phenomenology of death.

2.2 SCHOLASTIC VIEW ON PERSON

Let us now try to work out a more precise philosophical definition of a supposite. In the first place, "supposite" is a barbarous word in English. Scholastics have traditionally assembled four necessary qualities for a being to be ranked as an authentic "supposite" or individual being. If an entity doesn't possess all four of these qualities, it is to be classed as a "principle of being".

Conditions for being a "supposite":

a) **Subsistence**: It must exist "in itself" and not derive its existence by "inherence in another" (like an accident or additive, as we prefer to say). This of course, does not rule out the possibility of having received its proper act of existence from another (i.e. God), participating in Him (not inhering in Him: it's not that God and the creature share the same act of existence among themselves).

b) **Distinctness**: By this we mean that it is not identical with another being nor even a part of it. Creatures are supposites, for their participation in God does not render them identical with God or parts of God – unless we uphold some kind of pantheistic conception of reality. Again I may be "similar to"

other human beings, I may even be "the spitting image" of my twin brother, such that strangers might not be able to tell us apart, but I am not my brother for all that: we are two distinct realities.

c) **Wholeness**: In other words, a certain completeness in the development of the being is necessary. A grown, physically mature adult human being is a "whole" man or woman. This, of course, does not mean that there cannot be further scope for dynamic development. The man or woman in question can grow in wisdom or the capacity to love. But the arms or legs of the individual concerned are not "whole beings": they are part of the wholeness of the person in question.

d) **A certain nature**: A supposite must have a certain basic unity in its properties and actions and this must flow from within, not something that results from construction and programming from outside, as in the case of a computer (which, as we shall see, is in reality only an aggregate). If this nature is rational we call the supposite a person.

Following this line of thought, the traditional scholastic definition of the person: a rational supposite. More in detail, a person is whole, distinct, subsistent of a rational nature. This is how scholastics in general, and Thomists in particular, define the person. But let us take a brief glance at how this definition evolved.

Etymologically, person comes from the Latin *per-sona* (literally, one through which sounds are made), a mask. The Greek equivalent was *prospon*. In the classical days of Latin and Greek drama, the characters, instead of make-up, wore type masks, called *personae*. Thus there was the mask of the old man, the hero, the heroine, the villain and so on. In course of time, the word was applied to the character depicted by the one who wore the mask. Eventually it was referred to the actor or actress.

It was Boethius, the 4th century forerunner of scholasticism, who gave us the definition of person as "an individual substance of a rational nature." Aquinas slightly revised this and put it down as "distinct subsistence of a rational nature." The reason why he sought to link up person with subsistence, rather than substance, was because he wanted to use the related (but not identical) concepts of substance and person to throw light on the mystery of the Trinity. The Gospels and Epistles tell us that God is somehow one and somehow three: of course, it would be totally against the principle of identity and contradiction, if we to interpret this to mean that God is one and three at the same time and under the same aspect. So he held that God, in His/Her most basic and underlying aspect (as substance) is one and from a less basic dimension, that of subsistence, He/She is three and each of these is a person, a personal being, among other things, an ultimate centre of attribution (i.e. it is the person who acts, who is responsible for what is done, not his/her faculties or organs). Thus in God, there are three distinct agents, as it were: it is the Second Person who became incarnate and died for us, rising again and leading us to the Father. It is not the Father or the Spirit who did these things: they are different persons and are responsible for other salvific acts.

Aquinas stressed the role of reason or the intellect in personhood, giving pride of place to that spiritual faculty in the Scholastic perspective. Hence the "intellectualism of Thomas". However, other scholastics, notably his mentor

Albert (revered as "the Great") preferred to underscore the priority of the will in all things: he is called a "voluntarist" or a "volitionist". Not that there is any real contradiction in their views. The one emphasises the initially perfective act of the person (the intellect), the other the completive dimension of personhood (love, the act of the will). If Aquinas sees the beatific vision as primarily an act of the intellect and Albert as essentially an act of the will, they are reminding us of the scholastic adage that they both uphold, "The will follows the intellect." Aquinas is underscoring the spiritual faculty that leads and Albert is pointing out that the one that follows bringing full flowering to the activity initiated by the former. After all, you can't love someone whom you don't know, but, in a personal relationship, knowledge is fundamentally a drive which is meant to end in love.

Modern thinkers more inclined to go along with Albert than Thomas and define the person as a being capable of loving and of being loved. Of course, such a person would have to be an intellectual supposite – that is implied by the very definition itself, for there can be no love of what is totally unknown (hence, a person must be capable of knowing): the will and its acts follow the intellect. Inasmuch as the will is blind, there must be a precedent intellectual act to stir it to action. They would rather put the emphasis on loving, rather than knowledge as the latter approach is more consonant with Greek thinking and the former is more in keeping with the biblical viewpoint. If Aristotle defined God as *neoesis noeseos* (literally, "thought thinking about itself"), St. John called God love. Thought is essentially an inward movement, *intussusceptation* (drawing things into oneself and making things what one is). Hence the traditional synonym for God as the Absolute (literally, the one cut off from), the unrelated. To call God love is an extremely radical, revolutionary idea: love, by definition is just the opposite of the absolute, unrelated, self-withdrawn reality.

By its very nature, love is turned to others, is related, is a movement away from self. Thus a person is fully a person not when he or she is cogitating in isolation and making things one with itself through the intellect, but when, Godlike, he/she is reaching out to others, entering into their lives and beings through love. This is what the incarnation is all about and we human persons would do well to remember that. Our perfection is not in withdrawal. If we wish to be God like, we have to be outgoing, community persons and not cold "Absolutes", unmoved and locked up in ourselves. May be Aquinas' approach is not really opposed to all this but it is far easier to misunderstand this way and end up in precisely that conception of the person.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) What is 'wholeness' which is one of the conditions for being a 'supposite'?

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2) Show the complementary nature of the understanding of 'person' according to Aquinas and Albert.

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2.3 PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS

After having understood the scholastic notion of person, we are in a better position to reflect on death philosophically. In the contemporary times, Herbert Marcuse says that we have the right to be scandalized by all repressive forms of death and according to whom we should neither glorify death nor fear it. The false triumphal of *homo technologicus* led some people to believe that technology can overcoming death. When this claim failed, scholars began to come to terms with death. The path of death should lead us further on the path of life and the latter should lead us deeper into the former. Life and death are inseparably related to one another. Death belongs to life. So the act of dying is the act of the living, as Michel de *Montaigne* has hinted that to philosophize is to learn to die (Irudaydason 2010).

According to Jean-Paul Sartre, human freedom has no control over death that escapes him/her and can never give meaning to life. The very fact I am condemned to die makes my life absurd. If it is possible for me to find meaning in life, it is not because I am being-unto-death, but because I can exercise freedom when I exist. Thus Sartre considers death as a reality outside existence. With a little imagination, I can represent my corpse while I exist, but once I am dead, it is others who know my death, make funeral rites and cherish me in their memory. It is then absurd to say my death is my own.

For Albert Camus too, life is absurd because it leads to death. Even if life is meaningless, it is worth living. I have no right to resign myself to the absurdity of life. Valuing life and revolting against its absurdity are related imperatives. The preciousness of life depends on the variety of experiences and challenges encountered. Camus places himself in the tradition of Kierkegaard* and Nietzsche. The former values life by virtue of its precariousness and vulnerability and the latter by his affirmation that one cannot say yes to joy without saying yes to sorrow. *Amor Fati*, this strange love of fate, is what makes humans want to live a dangerous life in a boat on a rough sea, leading nowhere. Freud holds a view similar to that of Friedrich Nietzsche. On the one hand life is dominated by the tendency to seek pleasure, life instinct, *eros*, but it is counterbalanced by the death drive, *thanatos* (Irudaydason 2010).

For Martin Heidegger, who revives the Pre-Socratic tradition, human person is "being-towards-death." Death does not lie at the end of life; it pervades the entire life. As soon as I am born, I enter into the flow of time spanning from birth to death. Death is the final condition, the end of my being-thrown. Death is my way of being-in-the-world. This is the finitude that characterizes all human experience. However, death is unique and singular to everyone. If there is something that is

not shared, it is my death; it is my own, but it remains non-representable. It always escapes me when even when I will be dead, I do not possess it. Death is a part of my everything, which escapes me.

As a reaction to Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas affirms that the identification of death to nothingness suits the death of the Other in murder. But this nothingness presents itself also as a kind of impossibility. Outside of my conscience, the Other does not appear as the Other and his/her face is an expression my moral impossibility of annihilation. This is not a pure and simple impossibility that presupposes the possibility precisely challenged by the face of the other, but the challenge is already housed in this very possibility. This challenge comes from my neighbour whose face alone tells me that I am responsible for his/her death. It is in the death of the other that I am responsible to the extent of including me in death. I am responsible for the other because he is mortal. Death of the other therefore comes first. It uncovers the face of the Other, which is an expression of the commandment, "Thou shall not kill" (Irudaydason 2010).

The later writings of Jacques Derrida deal extensively with death along with other related themes such as survival (*sur-vie*) and mourning. With his usual play of words, he deconstructs Heidegger's claim of death as the own most possibility only of *Dasein*. Heidegger makes a crucial distinction between dying and perishing; only humans die, animals perish. This distinction is not linguistic but drawn from language. Thanks to language humans can imagine and represent death. Thus Heidegger's distinction between properly dying and merely perishing hinges on this. Death, for Heidegger, is therefore the impossibility of *Dasein*'s existence. But this impossibility is the possibility most proper to *Dasein*. Derrida evokes the image of border to represent death in terms of the impossibility as possible. It involves a certain step (*pas*) to cross over the border. The French word "pas" can also be translated as "not," thus bringing out the impossibility of crossing over. Death is figure both of passage and non-passage. Thus the question of the possibility of death is a paradox. (Irudaydason 2010).

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) What is Sartre's notion of death?

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2) How does Levinas understand the commandment "Thou shall not kill"?

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2.4 PHENOMENOLOGY OF DEATH

Getting Our Sights Straight

T. S. Eliot, in one of these intuitively lucid moments that so often come a poet's way, once made a most significant prayer. "Save me from him who knows to ask the right question." he cried. No mean cry for liberation, that. For most of our questions, innocent information-seeking feelers though they seem, conceal a prejudice. They don't merely "beg the question" (which would be bad enough); they insinuate a questionable world view, a dogmatically assumed theory as a background into which the unwary questioner must fit in his/her response. And very often the latter falls haplessly into a vicious trap whereby he/she gives a response in terms of a particular interpretation of reality which he/she, on deeper reflection, would realise is one to which he/she does not subscribe at all.

Why do We Die at all?

Put this way, the question has been stripped of most, if not all, its vitiating prejudices and dogmatism. Unfortunately, the question is hardly ever posed like that in everyday life. When a loved one is struck down by death or some terminal illness (particularly if he/she had been relatively young or had dependents who would hardly be able to fend for themselves), the invariable form the anguished question would take is, "why has God done this to us?" The implicit assumption is that we die because God has so decided. God is taken to be the immediate cause to death. Her/his "inscrutable will" has worked it out, has pre-planned the exact time and place and manner of our dying and when "your time comes" there's nothing you can do about it. On the other hand, "If your time has not yet come", you can have hair-raising, breath-taking "close calls" and come out of it unscathed.

On "Gods of Death"

Many religions have, understandably, a special presiding deity or set of deities – who are responsible for death and need to be placated from time to time, lest we be noticed as likely candidates for the next round. There is the image of the grim reaper who, with her/his relentless scythe, is ever mowing down a rich harvest of lives. Significantly, our male chauvinistically dominated world frequently assigns to a goddess or a group of female spirits such a mission. After all, aren't women as whimsical and unpredictable as death, cry the macho men in chorus?

The ancient Romans and Greeks often believed in the same gods and goddesses, but gave them different names. Thus they believed in three goddess sisters who rule human lives, jointly called *Parca* (plural *Parcae*) by the former and *Moira* (plural *Moirai*) by the latter. These formidable ladies kept themselves busy spinning and cutting the thread of life. *Clotho* (represented with a spindle of thread) was the spinner. *Lachesis* (armed with a measuring rod) decided the length of the thread and *Atropos* (who'd write final, never to be changed, decisions on a tablet) cut the thread. These stern and implacable females were offered rich sacrifices by people to escape death, but once their "fate" was decided, nothing could change the ladies' minds. *In Hinduism*, there is the Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva triad of creator, preserver, destroyer respectively. However, it is Shiva's wife who is more commonly associated with destruction under the name of Kali or Durga. Under the name of Parvati or Uma she is the goddess of motherhood. Feared

under the former aspect and loved under the latter, she typified the insight of Hinduism that time and matter constantly move from birth to death, from creation to destruction and back again (Pandikattu 2011).

Christianity – at least the popular variety – seems, in this matter, to have done nothing more than transfer the job of the Greek fates to God the Father, with one slight change. In place of the relentless, implacable and whimsical feminine will we now find ourselves facing the inscrutable, mysterious divine will. Of course, we are assured, it is not whimsy or foible that guides the divine decision making in this regard but love. S/he knows what is best for us and sees to it that the moment of our taking away, all things considered, is the optimum moment, our "prime time". I think this is but another instance where we have let dominant Greek patterns of thought, rather than the biblical vision, rule Christian thinking. This has ever been the bane of our Western Christian heritage. As Samuel Ryan so well points out in his monograph, *The Anger of God* much of Christian thinking is more faithful to Greek ontological presuppositions and prejudices than the Bible. And has not Paul Ricoeur rightly observed that Christianity, in practice, is nothing but "Platonism for the masses"?

Death, The Law of Matter

We mortal humans die for the same metaphysical reason that our shoes wear out, mountains erode and solid iron bars rust: all material things eventually fall back – or disintegrate – into that out of which they are made. Matter has final decomposition built into it and it couldn't be otherwise. Leave your table aside for a sufficient number of years and, left to itself, it will finally fall apart. The nails or screws will rust away and no longer be capable of holding it all together. The wood will begin to rot and finally it will collapse eventually without the help of the demolition crew. Matter, as even traditional metaphysics says, is characterised by the fact of having "parts outside of parts". Eventually there comes a time when these will fall apart. We call this disintegration, corruption or whatever. In the case of living being, we call this "death".

A human being, then, dies because of this inherent vulnerability, frailty or what have you. Either we trap some fatal "germ" which is our undoing, or there is some violent – intentional or accidental inroad from outside that crushes us, or "old age" or a "heart attack" bears us off. And what are these but acknowledgements that the organism eventually wears out or breaks down (if we may be excused from using a mechanistic metaphor – which doesn't necessarily imply that we subscribe to a "mechanistic view of life")? (Desbruslais 1997).

The Cycle of Life And Death

We have had occasion to refer to the Hindu "Kali-Parvati" notion as an insight into the fact that matter is ever on the move form life to death and back to life. There is a scientific basis for this in the Law of Conservation of Matter in Chemistry. Accordingly we know that birth and death as we perceive them around us are not creation and annihilation (i.e. a coming into being from nothing and falling back of being into nothingness, respectively). There is a chemical change at work whereby one being's corruption is another being's (or group of beings') generation. What we call "death" or "corruption" is a breaking down of the being concerned into its elemental or molecular constituents and the recombining of

these into other beings or another being. Death is never annihilation, in no wise is it a reduction to utter zero. Is this "good news", a hint of "better things to come"? Whatever, there seems to be a latent message about the after-life in the phenomenon of human birth from the perspective of this life on earth as we know it was "death" from the point of view of the life of the foetus that we were on our mother's womb. The foetus, as foetus, had to "die"(that is, give up its foetus form of life) so that we could begin this human form of life. And I'm sure all of us, now that we know this life – whatever be its anxieties and anguishes – would agree that, compared to this, our foetus-life was not even fit to be called life. However, if it were possible to interview a foetus, no doubt it would be quite content with life as it knew it, would feel quite comfortable and warm and well-provided for and, not knowing what it was missing, would not want any change at all – in other words, wouldn't want "to die". And "birth" – as psychologists tell us – comes to it as a traumatic experience. It "dies" to its former life, is either ripped out or pushed out by forces beyond its control, from its cosy environment which it had grown to love, out into the blinding, noisy life "out here", has to learn to breathe (almost shifting from a fish to a human in a twinkling of an eye) and enters this world in a shuddering, gasping cry which is really its frightened attempts to learn how to inhale and exhale. Often the midwife or gynaecologist – or whoever – has to administer it a tight spank on the behind to make it cry out and thereby force the air into its lungs.

Isn't there a kind of dynamism in the whole process which invites us to wonder whether what we fear so much and call "death" from this point of view might not, in reality, prove to be but "birth" into an even yet higher form of existence? In spite of all our griping and whining. most of us would like to cling to this "life" and dream of staying here as long (even longer.) as possible. Who knows, may be this parallel experience will be known to us as we die to this life, that the foetus discovered when it died to its former life? This, of course, is no "proof" of life after life or life after death (whatever be your preferred vocabulary). But there is a strong invitation to believe (or interpret or guess) that such will be the case...

Life Before Death And Life After Death

"The human soul may be immortal," wrote Camilo Torres , the Colombian priest revolutionary. "But hunger is mortal." Hunger kills and is grimly at work on planet earth. "Marxism", says the Russian Philosopher, Nikolai Berdyaev , "bears witness to an unfinished task of Christianity." Unfortunately, millions of Christians down to ages (with many other religious folk), were so busy dreaming of "pie in the sky when they die", as the cynic put it, were so busy planning out their "lives after death" in heaven or wherever, that they neglected the beauty and the duty of this life. Millions of others were either ignored or given an occasional dole in their impoverished and dehumanised existence: after all, their resignation and suffering would be rewarded by life in heaven after death, wouldn't it? (Pandikattu 2011) It would be a sorry state of affairs if convictions or investigations about "life after death" were to make us pay scant attention to the social concerns to this present life *before* death. The Second Vatican Council has sought to remind us, more than once that, "a hope related to the end of time does not diminish the importance of intervening duties, but rather undergirds the acquittal of them with fresh incentives." The document goes on, "By contrast, when a divine structure and the hope of life eternal are wanting, man's dignity is

most grievously lacerated, as current events often attest." Whatever, I think that, to complete the picture, we must grant that current and past events also bear out that belief in, and concern for, the life after can also dull one's social conscience. Ultimately, it's not the life that is to blame but what we make of it (Desbruslais 1997).

2.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have dealt with a philosophical understanding of person and of death. This was followed by a phenomenological understanding of the process of dying.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) Who are the Greek gods of death?

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2) "Marxism bears witness to an unfinished task of Christianity." Comment.

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2.6 KEY WORDS

Neoesis noeseos **:** **(**literally, "thought thinking about itself"). This is the Aristotelian understanding of God.

Supposite **:** it is an individual being possess qualities of subsistence, distinctness, wholeness and a certain nature.

Thanatos **:** is the death drive according to Freud, in contrast to the sex drive present in humans.

2.7 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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