

## PHILOSOPHY AND ETHICS OF DEATH AND DYING

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### ABSTRACT

Life and death are two sides of one coin. The fact that we are born is to some extent coincidental, but the certainty is that we die once. They are two milestones that define the beginning and the end of our existence. Death and dying, in my opinion, have meaning only in relation to life. Therefore, their exploration cannot be realized in philosophy and ethics in a different way than in relation to life. That is, as a challenge to life, so that we can formulate the right conclusion from the fact of the existence of death and awareness of dying, that is, as a challenge to life. It means to strive to live a good life, to be able to carry out the art of living in the form of flourishing and meaningful life in relation to themselves but also to other people in the near or wider social community of which we are members, or in relation to humanity as a whole.

*Keywords: life, death, philosophy, ethics, human dignity*

### INTRODUCTION

I agree with Jack London who wrote: “Life is a strange thing. Much have I thought on it, and pondered long, yet daily the strangeness of it grows not less, but more. Why this longing for Life? It is a game in which no man wins. To live is to toil hard, and to suffer sore, till Old Age creeps heavily upon us and we throw down our hands on the cold ashes of dead fires. It is hard to live. In pain the babe sucks his first breath, in pain the old man gasps his last, and all his days are full of trouble and sorrow; yet he goes down to the open arms of Death, stumbling, falling, with head turned backward, fighting to the last. And Death is kind. It is only Life, and the things of Life that hurt. Yet we love Life, and we hate Death. It is very strange” [1].

### PHILOSOPHY AND ETHICS OF LIFE AND DEATH

Life and death are like two sides of one and the same coin. The fact that we will come to this world, that is, to be born, is to some extent coincidental, but the certainty is that we will certainly die once. They are two milestones that define the beginning and end of our existence. What matters is how we fill the time period between the two milestones, that is, between birth and death. This is most important in order to tell us to what extent we have not only lived through our existence, stay in this world, but have actually lived it, so filled with meaningful values and acts accordingly. What is important is that if we were only human beings living their lives in this world, or were also moral beings who sought to fulfil their lives by doing good, by trying to make our lives prevail over evil, not

only to create good, but they also spread it among their closest ones, but also in the wider social environment of the community we are members of, but also in society, possibly also for humanity as a whole. Death is a sad event of our lives, it may even be tragic when a young man with power and energy leaves his life, with plenty of plans, goals, and intentions that have not been given the opportunity to realize and fulfil them. On the other hand, death can also be a meaningful culmination of a lifelong effort for happiness, joy, peace and success in both personal and professional efforts, to realize values that help make man and the world around him more meaningful.

It is very questionable to what extent we admit the fact of death when formulating the meaning of life, although we should. However, since death is a denial of life, we usually perceive it as a counterbalance to life, so we do not think of death, but of life, even though we should. However, death should not be what paralyzes us in our lives, which weakens our strengths and abilities, the determination to live the life we want, to realize the goals and intentions we consider worthy of our lifelong efforts. On the contrary, death should be the motive for our actions to live in such a way that, at the moment of dying and approaching death, we can say that we have lived a life that has been considered a life in which good has prevailed over evil, that we have brought to our loved ones, but also to people in the wider social environment, joy, peace, happiness, values by which we have helped enrich their lives. The awareness of death or mortality should be an impulse to live an active and meaningful life, to strive to be better than we were before to create life, not just to be dragged through life.

### **HUMAN DIGNITY**

The concept of human dignity is, according to Juraj Čáp, Marián Palenčár & Radka Kuručová, more problematic. It is either empty or meaningless for logical or empirical reasons. For logical reasons, it is because of its internal contradiction and ambiguity, and from empirical because it does not have its own cognitive content. They recall, for example, Macklin's view that the concept of human dignity presupposes religious origin and content, and ultimately the notion of human dignity is also ontically unjustified [2]. As I have shown in my previous works, the notion of human dignity does not have any mystical or transcendental origin or content, depending on how we set the starting point, or the premise of understanding dignity, including human dignity. In my opinion, the basis for the attribution of dignity is the existence of life and, in the case of human dignity, the existence of human life. This biological, but also ontical and ontological fact is sufficient to justify dignity, including human dignity, but this does not mean its absolutization, since it is primarily an expression of a functional relationship to life, including human life, which is relative in nature, depending on the development of individual forms of life, possibly in relation to human beings also in terms of quality of life.

According to Čáp, Palenčár & Kurucová, Cicero is one of the first to be most strongly involved in formulating and developing the content of the concept of dignity. The original ontological-axiological reflections on human nature (the objective aspect of dignity) also imply an obligation to act accordingly, i.e. a subjective aspect of dignity. Cicero used the term decorum to understand the behaviour appropriate to the original human dignity. Decorum is an ontological dignitas in action, that is dignity of action. Cicero's notion of dignity fulfils at least three basic functions: the relationship of man to outside, to other species; then it is inwardly human; the third function is linked to dignity, i.e. to decency [3]. On the one hand, I agree with the interpretation of Cicero's contribution to the understanding of human dignity. However, I am not sure if one can derive a relationship with other animal species from Cicero's understanding. I think that we can only very indirectly derive a relationship with other animal species with the ontological status of human dignity. In my opinion, a better starting point for formulating a relationship with other animal species can be life as a form of ontology, from which we can also conclude on the need for appropriately dignified behaviour in relation to other animal species.

As a consequence, Čáp, Palenčár & Kurucová tend to distinguish the internal (intrinsic) human dignity, which is an essential characteristic of the human race and the external (extrinsic) dignity, which is a random characteristic and can be acquired and lost by man. According to Čáp, Palenčár & Kurucová, it is quite legitimate to define the concept of dignity by means of autonomy [4]. They recall that anthropocentrism is a tax for the formulation of human dignity, but in Cicero it did not mean justification or justification of man's domination over nature, but especially for the benefit of man's rule over himself. The starting point may be, according to them, to understand the notion of human dignity as an expression of otherwise, that is, we are no more or less valuable than other creatures, but we are different, we are inconsistent [5]. If we remain only as an incoherence in the interpretation of human dignity, then we cannot justify our predatory relationship to other animal species. Then there is no reason to justify eating other living creatures. Incompatibility is not a sufficient argument for our relationship with other living nature. On the other hand, the understanding of human dignity in relation to the human species can indeed be a factor by which one can seek to rule over oneself, respectively. it may want to set itself the goal of achieving self-control, or rather of doing things that will confirm man as a moral being.

According to Čáp, Palenčár & Kurucová, the intrinsic dignity can also be called metaphysical, and most authors regard it as universal and valid for all people, with democracy and humanity as its hallmark. However, they wonder why the inner human dignity is internal, when the being of the human being comes from outside? [6]. Certainly an ontologically based understanding of human dignity can be considered democratic and humane. The problem is when the whole understanding of human dignity is reduced to its universality, democracy and humanity, while ignoring or not taking into account the differences in our behaviour and actions that can confirm or, on the other hand, discredit our

ontological status of human beings with rationality, free will and conscience. Also, following the doubt raised by Čáp, Palenčár & Kurucová about the extent to which we can talk about internal human dignity, when our being is externally given to us, the question arises whether it is necessary to use a concept other than internal human dignity. I think we can accept the naming of an ontological or metaphysical level of human dignity, thereby avoiding the origin-related or the emergence of our existence or our being.

Čáp, Palenčár & Kurucová recall Kateb's view that human dignity is primarily existential and then moral [7]. In its essence, it is anchored in the being of man, therefore it does not depend on the circumstances in which one is situated and therefore always has this form of human dignity as a potentiality. According to Čáp, Palenčár & Kurucová, human dignity and its need is associated with the fact of our mortality. In the confrontation with death and non-existence, our notion of the value, identity and validity of human existence is formed [8]. We can also consider such a perception of human dignity, i.e. primarily existential form and consequently moral. In my opinion, it is just a question of terms that name two forms of human dignity. I agree that the primordial form is merely the potential that we have on the basis of being born as human beings, but only on the second level, moral or axiological, does our real potential actually unfold, because we demonstrate through our behaviour and action we are truly a "crown of creation" possessing properties that justify us proudly wearing a name, a man as an expression of our humanity as moral qualities or features.

It may be argued that human existence, or human life is a permanent denial of our death and finality. I think that a much more important factor affecting our lives, behaviour and actions is the desire to validate ourselves as human and moral beings, regardless of our death and finality. In the vast majority of cases we are trying to live our lives as best we can, although we are not always successful. We are a scarce being, that is, a being with many shortcomings, which also includes our fallibility and the ability to make mistakes, sometimes fatal. However, I do not think that during our lifetime we would primarily think, decide and act with regard to our death and our finality. In our thinking, decision-making and action, the presence or near future predominate. The questions of death and finality are usually very remote presentations, so they do not have much weight, or a role in the process of our thinking, decision-making and action, especially in the time of the flow of strength and ability during health, which we mostly have in our young but also mature age full of productivity and full life.

## **ISSUES OF LIFE AND DEATH AS THE CARE FOR THE SELF**

Ultimately, it seems to me that the whole theme of death and dying, or the awareness of mortality can be interpreted as the care for the self, or taking care of the soul. It is a very interesting stimulus to consider and potentially pay attention to in the context of a good life in the art of life.

Death and mortality, in my opinion, have meaning only in relation to life. Therefore, even their exploration cannot be realized in philosophy and ethics in a different way than in relation to life, that is, as a call to life, so that we can formulate the right conclusion from the fact of the existence of death and awareness of mortality, that is, as a call to life they strive to live a good life, to be able to carry out, through their behaviour and action, the art of life in the form of a full-fledged and meaningful life in relation to themselves but also to other people in the near or wider social environment of which we are members, or in relation to humanity as a whole .

Unlike Čáp, Palenčár & Kurucová, I think that in the life of a man he has a time to claim “lie”, that is, to live as if he should never die, especially when it comes to childhood, youth and productive age. At that time, I do not think that a young or mature person is somehow impoverished by not thinking about death. On the contrary, it helps him to fully develop his powers and abilities because he feels that he can and he is able to do almost everything. Similarly, man has the right, in a sense, even an obligation to realize his mortality with ever-increasing age and a loss of physical strength, possibly mental abilities. As a result, there is also time for appreciation, or balancing your life, what has been achieved, or what has not been done, to think about how we have lived our lives. In this context, I would also criticize Rodriquez’s view of the extent to which he really means living a good life with the awareness of the mortality and finality of our existence [9]. I think that the functionality of incorporating mortality into the concept of good life depends largely on the age, physical and mental health of the individual. At certain stages of life, especially in old age or illness, this has an undeniable significance, but in a period of productive life and full health, it could be counterproductive to constantly remind one of its mortality and finality of existence. I do not think that at that time his life would be significantly deprived, rather the opposite.

I think that even in the context of thinking about care in relation to oneself and others, life has a value in itself, not just as a preparation for death. After all, by trying not only to Socrates, but starting with the Delphic Prophet, it was to know myself, that is, to pursue one’s own development, a good life based on self-development and self-improvement, so it does not seem quite meaningful to me that the philosopher’s life is preparing for death. Nevertheless, a good life is that one can help one’s country and its people, not just a life focused on one’s own life. The life of the ancient Greek was subordinated primarily to the interests of his polis, not to his own individual or even egoistic interest. Therefore, even Socrates ultimately accepted the death sentence, even though he disagreed with him because he considered the interest of the Athenian polis, obedience to the law of the polis more important for the future of Athens and its inhabitants than its own destiny and life.

It is important to note, in accordance with Cicero, that death is a natural part of our lives, [10] so think unnecessarily about whether it is good or evil. It is simply an integral part of our being in the world. And in the wake of that, we should strive to make the best of our lives so that, when the time comes from this

world, we can happily say that we have lived our lives fully and meaningfully. In the context of an ancient or Hellenistic society, it certainly meant surviving for the benefit of the contemporary society and the community that these people were part of. It is the honour and glory that an individual has attained by his life for the benefit of others should be what makes him and his life immortal even after he has passed away from this earthly world. The consciousness of mortality should be a challenge for us to live, that is, to live it best as we know and can, not just to live towards its finality in the form of death.

## CONCLUSION

Life undoubtedly brings with it various worries, sorrows, pains, but it certainly brings joy, happiness and pleasure, so I do not see Cicero's approach in which it only interprets life as suffering and death as a peace that will free us from all tribulation. I think that pain and affliction belong to life as well as joy and happiness, one cannot exist without the other. Life and death represent the two poles of the same, the being of man and the existence of the human species. They are like light and dark, like day and night, in their essence life and death are symbiosis of good and evil, not only as a whole, but also separately, because life is a manifestation of good and evil, because it brings joy and worry and also death is an expression of good and evil, because it also brings peace on one side and fear or uncertainty on the other, from what awaits us, or something awaits us at all.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The paper is the result of the project VEGA 1/0521/17 *A critique of contemporary debates on death and dying*.

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