

Living Death, Dying Life: A Sociological Journey Through Mortality

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Introduction

Amidst life's complexities lies a fundamental question: what defines our existence and how do we navigate the unclear line between life and death? Tucker Farris' lecture, "What Is Death?" he dives into the intricate nature of death, exploring its multifaceted meanings. While commonly perceived as the end of the biological, or a medical death – Farris highlights broader criteria to consider such as spiritual and metaphysical definitions of death (Farris, 2023).

Metaphysical death pertains to the philosophical and abstract aspects of death – it is beyond the tangible and questions the meaning and mortality of death itself (Farris, 2023). On the other hand, spiritual death transcends the physical realm, focusing on the essence of the individual beyond the biological – it involves the separation of the soul from the body and may signify a transition into another plane of existence after death.

Furthermore, I am researching: with the intersections of societal structures, individual beliefs, and cultural narratives, how does this perception of life and death challenge traditional boundaries and definitions? Thus, I aim to explore the paradox of experiencing death whilst living, diving into diverse perspectives on death and contemplating the morality of death in relation to my own mortality.

Experiencing Death While Living

The concept of death while living displays the intricate contradiction of feeling alive yet emotionally or existentially drained due to societal pressures and burdens, capitalism being one of them. C. Wright Mills' sociological imagination highlights the vital correlation between personal troubles and larger historical and societal issues (Mills, 1959). This resonates deeply with the concept of experiencing life and death simultaneously, using the sociological

imagination to understand how society's understanding of death is related to broader societal issues. Within this framework, the concept of death extends beyond the individual experience, encapsulating how our societal systems, such as healthcare, shape our perceptions of when death occurs. Furthermore, looking at this with my sociological imagination, living in a capitalist society creates pressures that induce feelings that could be considered those of death.

Reflecting on C. Wright Mills' sociological imagination, I realize how societal pressures, particularly those driven by neoliberal capitalism (individualism, materialism, the never-ending pressure to work harder), can induce feelings that mimic aspects of death. Since death can manifest in so many forms (metaphysical, biological, spiritual), I believe that it is possible to be living and experience death. Furthermore, this can range from the system we are living in exploiting us, to the death of who you once were as you grow into someone new. Personally, I have experienced moments where societal demands impacted my sense of vitality and connection to life. As a queer person, I have experienced the "death" of who I once was before I found my identity, and in some ways, that involves mourning and grieving who you once were and growing from that.

Interconnectedness of Death and Life

Kim Tallbear eloquently navigates her concept of the apocalyptic present, intertwining it with insights into death and its perception within Indigenous cultures. Within this framework, she emphasizes the ongoing apocalypse as an enduring state of crisis perpetuated by colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity (Tallbear, 2020). Tallbear's reflections on death diverge from Western norms, unveiling Indigenous perspectives that integrate spiritual aspects of death. For example, she shows how Indigenous practices honor the transition from life to death,

viewing it as a celebratory moment, a return to the ancestral world surrounded by community and love (Tallbear, 2020). This is a stark contrast to the Western interpretation of death which focuses on biological death and upholding death whilst living through capitalism and exploitation. Tallbear emphasizes the interconnectedness of life and death, where individuals exist in a continuous cycle of living and dying, and she says “Life is Death is Life” which illustrates how existence persists beyond physicality through spiritual continuation, memory, and legacy. In essence, Tallbear’s perspectives on death within the context of the apocalyptic present serve as a profound critique of Western norms. She invites contemplation on the interconnectedness of life and death, encouraging a shift that values communal celebration and spiritual continuity, offering an alternative to the prevalent anxieties and disconnectedness in the West.

Tallbear’s perspective on death as a celebratory tradition challenges the Western idea of death. Personally, this notion of celebrating death contrasts with how I was raised to not speak about death and deal with the anxieties about mortality. I have come to realize how this societal approach deeply influenced my perceptions and anxieties surrounding death. The contrast between this and Tallbear’s depiction of death as a celebratory transition between their family and loved ones challenges me to reconsider the norms that have shaped my understanding. This contemplation urges a reevaluation of societal attitudes towards mortality and prompts a personal examination of how embracing the idea of celebrating both life and death can profoundly impact our relationship with every moment we live. It invites a deeper understanding of the continuum, emphasizing the importance of spiritual continuity and communal celebration.

Is Death Bad?

Combining insights from Nagel's philosophical exploration of death, CrashCourse's overview of varied perspectives on death, and Jerrigrace Lyons' discussion on embracing death as a natural part of life through home funerals, it is evident that the concept of death transcends the end of the biological. Nagel discusses the perspective that death is evil because it brings an end to all the goods and experiences in life (Nagel, 1970). However, he acknowledges that certain aspects of life, such as perception, desire, and thought, are considered valuable despite their potential for both happiness and misery (Nagel, 1970). Overall, he considers that death is not necessarily an unfortunate state and challenges assumptions about the fear of death arising from trying to imagine being dead, pointing out the temporal nature of goods and evils, and the uncertainty in assigning death as a misfortune (Nagel, 1970). Building on Nagel's arguments, CrashCourse broadens the material, presenting philosophical stances on death and each offering a distinct lens through which we can contemplate mortality. For example, some viewpoints are Socrates' calm acceptance, Epicurus' detachment from fear, Nagel's focus on missed experiences, and Zhuangzi's alignment with natural cycles all display humanity's varied responses to the idea of death (CrashCourse, 2016). As we can see, it all depends on the individual's spiritual beliefs, culture, values, and the time in which they were in to see their perspectives on death. Considering Jerrigrace Lyon's discussion, Lyon highlights embracing death as a natural part of life and comforting death head-on (Lyon, 2022). The conversation regarding home funerals and the integration of death as a natural facet of existence highlights the intricate rituals encompassed within home funeral practices. Primarily, this involvement extends from painting caskets to adding personal imprints, photographs, and designs, fostering an intimate, personalized tribute (Lyon, 2022). These rituals seek to reshape societal perceptions of

death from taboo to a more embracing, natural progression. Thus, this portrayal of death emphasizes the significance of family involvement in end-of-life rituals and aims to reframe societal perspectives on death toward acceptance, love, and celebration.

Personal Reflections

Contemplating mortality has led me down unexpected paths. Societal pressures have at times felt suffocating, mimicking the feelings of death, but I have also encountered moments of profound growth, reflection, and transformation. Understanding the concept of death and mortality from a non-medicalized lens has helped me transcend the idea that death is always terrible and taboo to talk about. The “death” of myself which started with my finding my own identity has opened doors to self-discovery and an authentic sense of self. However, at times I can mourn the image of who I once was, I also celebrate who I am today and the community I have found. It is intriguing how this is similar to Tallbear’s notion of death as a celebration transition surrounded by loved ones, and how this transition does not always mean a medical death but is so much more meaningful when surrounded by community.

Exploring various perspectives on death, as presented by CrashCourse, Jerrigrace Lyons, and Nagel, has broadened my understanding of mortality. It is intriguing to witness how different philosophical and cultural outlooks frame the concept of death. For some, death signifies a loss of experience, while for others, it is an acceptance of natural cycles. Personally, I have found myself embracing the flow of life’s cycles and appreciating every moment and every experience I have. Thus, my analysis of death and dying has allowed me to view death from a new, non-linear perspective.

Conclusion

In the exploration of death's multifaceted nature, one undeniable truth has emerged – death transcends the mere end of the biological. The perception of death is a concept woven intricately into the fabric of societal structures, cultural narratives, and individual identities. The lens through which we view death is shaped by our experiences, societal norms, and beliefs.

Farris' examination of the metaphysical and spiritual death, Tallbear's critique of the systems we live in and her non-linear understanding of death, Lyon's embrace of death as part of life's continuum, and philosophical interpretations of death all continue to explore different avenues for contemplation around death and life.

Exploring this concept is extremely important because death's complexity enriches our appreciation for life's beauty, fostering mindful living and gratitude for every moment. Understanding diverse perspectives on mortality allows us to transcend the Western perspective on death and reflect on our own mortality. Embracing discussions about death not only guides personal growth but also shapes compassionate societal approaches to end-of-life care and grief support. In summary, the objective of this exploration has been to dive into the intricate paradox of encountering elements of death during life, examining varied viewpoints on death, and reflecting on the ethical dimensions of mortality concerning my own existence. In essence, this journal through the complexities of mortality illuminates not just the profound interdependence between life and death but also allows us to embrace a deeper appreciation for existence itself.

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