

## Atheism [and death]

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Atheism is the disbelief in the existence of a deity. Although atheism is often associated with agnosticism, it has its own distinct meaning. Whereas agnostics believe that it cannot be known whether there is a god, atheists explicitly reject the existence of such a being. This rejection especially manifests itself in periods of secularisation in which the immanent world becomes evermore important at the expense of the metaphysical constellation of god, world, and soul. This does not mean that representations of a transcendent world, such as god, heaven and afterlife, no longer exist - it means that people in a secularised society may reject these notions as part of their lived reality. Since many people live in a secularised society, atheism is relevant for understanding death from a non-religious point of view.

Atheism itself gives no meaning to death – it only rejects transcendent interpretations of death. From an atheistic perspective, meaning of death results just from an immanent analysis based upon the profane and worldly interpretation of reality. As a consequence, atheistic meanings of death are defined both by immanent meaning and by the disbelief in a deity. Although

immanent meanings of death can go together with a personal belief in god, this is not the case in atheism. In the following, immanent meanings of death are explored by first sketching the main sources for immanent meaning. From there, three immanent meanings of death are presented and future immanent meanings of death are shortly explored.

### **Immanent meanings of death**

The main sources for immanent meanings of death are nature and the human being. Nature-centred-meaning roots in the ancient thought of materialism – the doctrine that the reality has objective existence that consists of material particles - and have been further developed in the movement of naturalism from the early renaissance onwards. Generally speaking, these immanent meanings represent the idea that nature provides a strict physical understanding of reality, including the reality of death. Human-centred-meaning roots in the ancient thought of immanent idealism – the doctrine that human ideas make up the reality as we know it – and have been further developed in the renaissance movement of humanism. Generally speaking, these immanent meanings put mankind and its capacity to give meaning to reality, in the centre of the universe.

The lines of thought from materialism to naturalism and from immanent idealism to humanism, present different meanings of death. Natural-centred-meanings of death tend to reduce persons to their complex material bodies. In such a perspective, death does not mean the end of one's existence – persons

continue to exist as corpses for a while after they die, whereupon the body recycles into other forms of nature through physical decay. Although this gives meaning to a bodily death, it does not so for death as a psychological annihilation. Human-centred-meanings on death, on the other hand, tend to reduce living persons to their potential for self-realisation. For example, many humanists believe that people continue to exist in the contribution they made to create a better world. As such, individual pleasures, ideas and achievements may transcend death. Although this perspective provides meaning, it regards life rather than death. As a consequence, both nature- and human-centred-meanings of death remain limited in their analysis. However, there are exceptions to this limitation. Three of them will be explored in the next sections.

### **Death means nothing to us**

A first thoroughly elaborated immanent meaning of death is presented by Epicurus (341 – 270 BC). Although Epicurus believes in the gods, he sees them as entirely unconcerned about human beings. Epicurus' analysis on death is built on a strict materialism in which the human being has no metaphysical or transcendent meaning. He believes that objects exist only when they can be perceived or imagined as material objects. As a consequence, reality is exactly as it appears to our senses, assuming that our senses would function accurately. Everything not material is simply the absence of reality and thus non-existent.

According to Epicurus, there is no need to fear death. Moreover, he argues that death is not a misfortune for the one who dies. He presents an impressive proof for the irrationality of the misfortune of death. He claims that all good and bad consists in sense-experience. Since death is the privation of sense-experience, it does not exist. As a consequence, death, the most terrifying thing, cannot affect the living. We will never meet death, for when we live, death is not present, and when death is present, we do not live. Since we can never perceive death, death is of no concern to us and there is no reason to fear it - death means nothing to us.

The Epicurean perspective on death may not satisfy those who experience the shock of having to die. However, the therapeutic purpose of Epicurus' argument should not be underestimated. For Epicurus, knowledge is not an end in itself but a remedy for mental disquietude. Through meditating upon his line of argument, one's fear for death may be transformed into equanimity. The strength of this argument depends entirely upon the premise that all knowledge lies in sensation. When death cannot be perceived, its impact upon our emotional life must be illusionary. Thus, by excluding metaphysics, Epicurus nullifies death. Hence, a first immanent meaning of death is the exclusion of death from our experiential world.

## **Being towards death**

A second thoroughly elaborated immanent meaning of death is presented by Heidegger (1889 – 1976). Heidegger's position is neither theistic nor atheistic. He breaks with metaphysics, which for him is the traditional way of thinking in which the question of being is ignored. Instead, Heidegger wants to do justice to the immanent reality of being as such. He does so by exploring what it means for the human being to be. Metaphysics cannot provide the answer, for Heidegger rejects any metaphysical presupposition concerning the essence of humans. However, since life can neither generate its own meaning, it still has to relate to something outside of life. Heidegger finds this immanent outside in the finitude of one's own being.

According to Heidegger, understanding the structure of being is achieved through understanding the meaning of non-being, which, for the human being, is death. However, one cannot understand one's own death from experience, for death by definition lies outside of experience. As a consequence, death can only be understood as a future event, which is the possibility of one's own death: death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of being-there. Since this possibility is one's own most, non-relational, and unrivalled possibility, it is distinctively impending. This means that one's being is structured by one's outlook on death – the human being is a being towards death.

By focussing on people as *finite* beings and on the *influence* death has on life, Heidegger overcomes the problems of both humanism, which focuses on human beings as potential beings, and naturalism, which places death outside of experience. Death can now be explored as a real phenomenon. It is the life-structuring event that guides all our choices and projects we make. As such, it is the background against which life is configured. Only when people think of their relationship to death as manifest in each aspect of life, can they be genuinely aware of what it means to live authentically. That is: to live as a human – and thus finite – being. Hence, a second immanent meaning of death is that it structures life within our experiential world.

### **The absurdity of death**

A third thoroughly elaborated immanent meaning of death is presented by Sartre (1905 – 1980). Sartre characterises his philosophy as an atheistic humanism. He profoundly disagrees with Heidegger's analysis of death and claims that death cannot be considered an outside that provides immanent meaning to life. Death cannot confer meaning, because meaning comes only from subjectivity. Any meaning of death is thus necessarily human. Death, as such, renders life useless and senseless for it deprives life of all meaning. Human problems remain unsolved and the meaning of these problems remains undetermined. As a consequence, awareness of finitude cannot provide an authentic mode of being.

According to Sartre, the meaninglessness of death prevents death to be a possibility. Instead, death is the end of all possibilities. This claim has important implications for the understanding of what it means to be a human being. When death is the nullification of all one's projects it escapes one by principle. One cannot discover one's own death, nor wait for it, nor take an attitude towards it. Death reveals itself as undiscoverable for it disarms all expectations. As such, nothing can happen to death from the 'inside', it is completely closed and impenetrable. As a consequence, death does not belong to the ontological structure of the self. Instead, death is the victory of what lies outside the self - for the self, death is an absurdity.

The triumph of the outside over oneself, however, does not imply that one cannot freely give meaning to life. The absurdity of death shows us that one is not constrained by death. Moreover, death reveals our freedom. Although one is not free to die, one is a free mortal. Death thus reveals that one's freedom remains total and infinite. This revelation of infinite freedom suggests that the human condition can be transcended. That is to say, through one's infinite freedom one may overcome situations in which one experiences one's mortal status. Hence, a third immanent meaning of death is that it reveals an infinite freedom towards our experiential world.

## **Overcoming death**

Future elaborations of immanent meanings of death may result from developments in trans-humanism. Trans-humanism aims for the enhancement of all limitations of the human condition, including death. Most trans-humanists are atheists with a materialistic perspective on life. They rely heavily on the promises of science and technology. For example, by understanding aging as a pure biological process on the level of molecules and cells they suppose that insight in these processes may lead to enormous life-extension. Aging can already be slowed down for small animals and some scientists claim that the process of aging may be reversed in the future. Since from a trans-humanist perspective death is to be postponed, and in the future even to be overcome, it is to be expected that these developments will have an effect upon the meaning of death.

The postponement and overcoming of death is less futuristic than it may seem. For example, in medical care the hope and belief in technology is often the last resort for saving lives. When both patients and doctors are unable to come to terms with death, treatment may be pushed extremely far at the end-of-life. Trans-humanism claims that if it becomes possible to overcome death, many people would opt for it. A first step towards immortality has already been made: with the help of cryonic preservation, cardiac dead people can 'wait' for new technologies that may cure their life-threatening illnesses. This may lead to new immanent meanings of death in which the materialist doctrine of continued

existence after death goes along with the humanistic promise of ultimate self-realisation. This may be threatening for most religious perspectives on death, for atheists it just reflects the justified human aspiration to live and not to die.

See also Philosophical perspectives on Death, Cryonics, Immortality.

### **Further readings**

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