

Facing the finality – Death and Adjustment Hypotheses

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Encouraged by Dr Peter Fenwick's review of my book *Human Immortality: Death and Adjustment Hypotheses Elaborated* in Newsletter 27, I would like to share more of my thinking with the Spirituality SIG membership and this short article is a modest attempt to do so.

Seeking the meaning of life is a universal criterion of humanity (Wong, 2000). Meaning is important when understanding its purpose. Both our 'origin' and 'destination' are related to the meaning we give to life. Civilized human society has shown enormous interest in our origins, with evolutionary theory exploring many aspects of human origin. However, the strange fact is that we express so little interest in our destination.

Every life on earth must end with death and yet this fact is rarely analysed methodologically. Even if death is the absolute end, we still require some methodological approach for its optimum accommodation, yet practically speaking, there is no such approach. This has never seemed normal to me.

My personal fears about death used to bother me a lot. When my first son 'Seeyam' died in my arms, all the unasked questions about death came flooding into consciousness. I was blind with pain for the first two or three days after losing him. Then I felt a need to analyse the phenomenon of death in order to answer these questions.

When I started working on my Death and Adjustment Hypotheses, the first thing that I reflected on was my faith in the positivity of Nature. I have always believed that humans have the ability to adjust to every natural phenomenon in life. Therefore, I was unwilling to accept death as something too terrifying for us to think about. I began by identifying the most painful or unacceptable aspect of death. It was much easier to evaluate this for myself than for others, but I am confident my experience extrapolates to a wider sample. It is the finality of death that seemed to be the most painful and unacceptable criterion for me, and I think for many others too (Wong, 2000).

What I understand by the finality of death is that bodily death means the permanent cessation of our existence. Though it might seem obsessive on my part, I wanted to be sure of this absolute ending of existence through death. Nevertheless, the problem that prevented me from exploring this 'finality' is the lack of any empirical study supporting or opposing it. This further opened the door to a new thought – that according to empirical science, the finality of death would be no more than a 50/50 chance. In that case, and since my religious beliefs in an afterlife go against such finality, surely the phenomenon of death should have been more tolerable for me after losing my son? The same should be true for all people belonging to the major religions that describe an afterlife.

On the one hand 'no absolute cessation of existence through death' would seem more natural when religious beliefs are taken into account, yet on the other hand, though most of us claim to believe in the afterlife as pronounced by the world religions, religious beliefs appear to have had little practical impact of on our attitude towards death. This situation reminded me of what I had learned from epistemology, especially Hamlyn's theories (Hamlyn 1970), which I had learned about when writing my PhD. Therefore, I applied the four theories of Hamlyn (that help to identify an acceptable knowledge or truth) to the criterion of 'finality'. The result was that absolute cessation through death is something mismatching or unacceptable according to those four theories. So, I was supported in my view that to hold a fixed view about 'finality' is, in fact, thoroughly unscientific.

A good place to start is by studying the history of evolution of the belief systems of society. However, this is a complex area, since there are so many societies have had different religious traditions since the birth of human civilization. Therefore, I chose to focus on the history of the most advanced part of the world today, that is, western society.

Among others, the historian Philippe Aries has paid special attention to the evolution of beliefs in relation to religion and death during the last 1500 years of western society (Aries, 1965).

The researches of Aries showed me that for a time, religious thinking that included real consideration of death was a practical part of human life. However, there was a gradual shift away from the practical side towards myths and fantasies. The result: while I knew, as a Muslim, that I believed in life after death, I could not take comfort in my son Seeyam's death with thoughts of the afterlife. It felt that I had lost my son forever.

What undermines people's belief and confidence in the afterlife? The evidence from the history, as shown by Aries, as well as drawing on contemporary life, show that 'judgment after death' - a common feature of most major religions - can be a terrifying factor. Where there is immorality in daily life, the afterlife is a powerful reminder of possible judgment, and punishment. Yet much of modern society is based on disregard for morality, along with unrestrained materialism. Could it be that this global pursuit of materialism leads to a denial of death, and of the judgment that may await in the life hereafter?

I don't see this mass denial as being a conscious process but the result of psychological defence mechanisms. Put simply, when one acknowledges the presence of afterlife and the judgment of self that it entails, it powerfully challenges the materialist worldview. A person who is committed to materialism will unconsciously defend themselves against the prospect of an afterlife.

I felt more confident still about my findings when I saw that the natural steps of adjustment described by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross for the terminally ill or dying (Kubler-Ross 1997) resemble the steps of changes in western society found in

Aries's historical description, *but in the reverse order*. While according to Kubler-Ross a dying person proceeds towards adjustment to death, western society has drifted away from any such reconciliation with death. It is a sad matter that this relationship should exist, since the implication is that no matter how much adjustment we individually may be making to the fact of death, materialistic society, lacking in deeper values, seems to be unable to face death as part of life on account of the moral meaning it holds.

In both my books on Death and Adjustment Hypotheses (Hossain 2007 and 2008), as outlined very briefly here, I assume the following:

- 1) In the absence of empirical evidence from science, to regard bodily death not to be our absolute end seems natural and is an epistemologically sound point of view.
- 2) Religious beliefs and practices that fail to confront materialism and its associated lack of moral values will never be able to address the social denial of death.

Only a moral life can give us the clearest perception of death. As a potential remedy to many of the prevailing problems we face, including those in the sphere of mental health, we need to speak out against the rising materialism of modern society. Then can we contemplate without fear our true finality, whatever that is to be.

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