

Death: The Ultimate Challenge

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Thomas A. Burns PhD.

Klamath Falls, Oregon

I have written on the topic of death in previous essays which can be found on my website: www.dynamic-humanism.com . There will be some repetition of positions taken in these previous essays in the following statement. As a research social scientist who has spent a career focused on artistic, religious and ritual insight and behavior, I have had considerable professional experience grappling with this subject. And as a 78 year old, who had a massive heart attack seventeen years ago that required three resuscitation efforts, I have been fortunate to survive for a long period during which there has been plenty of time to seriously consider what my own engagement with the grim reaper “means.” My personal view on this subject, together with its rationale, follows.

Stated Most Simply

I see humans as both material and spiritual phenomena 1) who emerge materially from the collective micro ingredients of an infinite reality, 2) who participate materially, socially and spiritually during their “lives” in a never ending process, and 3) who, at what we call “death,” continue to participate by recycling to become once again anything and everything “else.” It is a very simple cycle characteristic of all physical phenomena: dispersed, very simple material and energetic elements of an infinite origin come together, evolve/change [grow and decay], and then disperse to recycle in some manner in an infinite, ongoing process. It is the same cycle that applies to every molecule, or rock, or insect, or flower, or mammal, or planet, or galaxy, or universe. There is nothing special in this regard about humans as a singular species. In this view, there are No Gods or Saviors, no Heaven or Hell, no surviving soul or consciousness. Yes, there is “reincarnation,” but not in anything like a wholistic shift of identity from human to human or human to worm, etc.

Now, the above statement may appear to some as the position of an intellectual, existential, secular materialist. But, let’s dig a little deeper!

Language as a “Container”

As humans we are devoted to our languages, and we tend to assume that our languages “capture” reality. But language is just an abstraction from reality that is useful because it facilitates communication. Still, we are devoted to the simplistic dichotomies that our languages provide us: life and death, black and white, truth and falsehood, good and evil, etc. In fact all of our cozy dichotomies actually refer to continua – shades of gray, degrees of truth and goodness, stages of life. Reality is not an “either/or” phenomenon. When does Life begin,

or Death end – at conception or a last breath? These are just convenient markers on a continuum that potentially stretches way beyond these “moments.” And yet because we allow ourselves to depend so deeply on the dichotomies of our languages, we so easily get hung up in defining reality in terms of them! Whole philosophies and religions depend on our willingness to conceptualize and argue about the nature of reality from within this basic fallacy.

The Material/Physical – Spiritual/Energetic Continua

The View in Physics:

Prior to Einstein and Bohr with General Relativity and Quantum Mechanics, physics was a pretty materially grounded discipline devoted to defining the physical components that make up all of reality and the lawful/causal relations that exist among them. This view persists in the form of modern particle physics which continues to be very successful and productive.

An alternative perspective arose as physics explored the farther reaches of the very large [astrophysics and cosmology] and the very small [quanta and strings]. At these scales, energy arises as primary with material entities [the material world of particles and elements] appearing as later, secondary manifestations. Field and frequency become the focus of attention in a view where all material entities can be understood as concentrations of different forms of energy manifesting at different frequencies. And, most importantly, energy as an immaterial field phenomenon is infinitely interconnected and not possibly captured in terms of discrete entities. Moreover the rules that govern the relations across this infinite web of interrelated energy fields are not restricted to the limitations that apply in the perspective of classical particle physics.

Interestingly, in spite of their complementary nature, both perspectives in modern physics are fruitful and reveal “truths” about the nature of reality. Fully accounting for the ever enlarging scope of “revealed” reality requires considering any phenomenon from both points of view. The search for a unified “Theory of Everything” remains elusive.

The View of Dynamic Humanism from Within Social Science

For biological survival reasons, as humans we focus on the material/physical aspect of ourselves and our reality. Mostly in our “time out” periods – art, play, ritual – we allow ourselves to view and engage reality in an alternative – spiritual – manner. From within the material focus we discern a world of discreteness – separate entities causally and lawfully interrelated – as in the particle physics approach. But, by contrast, from within the spiritual focus we experience a vast web of connectedness to the point of discovering the unity and shared identity of

all “things” - sometimes referred to as the state of unification or “enlightenment.” The rules and relationships of the material perspective of separateness are no longer adequate – just as in quantum mechanics and string theory in physics.

When we examine human mental capabilities, we discover that our intellectual faculty supports the material/physical perspective while the intuitive faculty supports the spiritual/energetic point of view. Both perspectives are essential for full understanding and responsible engagement in social and material reality. As humans, we must be successful when we engage in different tasks, and these different tasks require a different mix of inputs from these two mental faculties. Most of our tasks necessitate that both faculties – together with the input of emotion – are active – just to different degrees. We slide along this mental faculty continuum as we perceive the situation before us and determine what constitutes appropriate behavior.

If we understand the fundamental dynamic of our mental operations and the different perspectives on ourselves and reality that they provide, we can avoid getting wrapped up in and totally defined by either of the singular, and potentially extreme, points of view that can otherwise dominate. We are both discrete, separate entities/individuals in pursuit of our competitive self-interests, and we share identity with all other “things” to the point of total unification obliging us to respect the existence of all “others” and to act cooperatively/responsibly/morally. If we get these aspects of ourselves and our societies in proper balance, then we fulfill what I refer to as the ideal condition within Dynamic Humanism [for this much larger view, see my website: www.dynamic-humanism.com]. Trying to define ourselves or our reality from just one of these perspectives or from a significant imbalance of these perspectives invites social, economic, political, and ecological difficulties, even calamities.

So, I suggest that there exists an interesting and direct parallel between the perspective dynamic that exists within modern physics and the perspective dynamic that I identify in Dynamic Humanism from within social science.

Human Material Insignificance

If modern science has taken us to one really significant revelation it is that humans even as a species are totally insignificant in material/physical reality. The days of viewing Earth as the center of the universe and humans as the pinnacle species on Earth created and favored by God are GONE. The utterly vast scope of the now known physical universe renders humans as so small a component as to be virtually undetectable. And the notion of individual humans being judged by God at some reckoning event at their individual deaths is beyond preposterous, even for an “infinite” deity. Moreover, this view of our

insignificance arises without considering that the physically known component of our universe is just 4% of all of what is now held to compose that reality – not to mention the implications that arise from the likelihood of multiple universes.

From the material/physical perspective, discrete humans as a species, much less as “living” or “dead” individuals, amount to virtually nothing. Seen at the full scale of reality, alive or dead humans are essentially meaningless.

But, we put such emphasis on the value of our individual lives and deaths, and we struggle to counter these modern implications of the material/physical perspective on our existence. Ignorance of the facts and denial of the implications are two “solutions.” Or we can grab one of our 12th century codified religions in a last ditch effort to reclaim significance and “Just Believe on Faith!”

So, what do we DO? Is there any responsible alternative to the conclusion that we live and die in a meaningless existence – as a species and as individuals? I think the answer is “Yes.” Because the material/physical perspective of secular materialism is not the only option.

The Existential Social and Ecological Option

Humans can assert that regardless of the dire implications of the material/physical perspective at the vast scale of the universe, we can achieve significance if we act responsibly at the limited scale of our social relations as members of families, communities, states and nations. If we do not just act in exclusive pursuit of our self interests, but instead cooperate in behalf of the benefit of others and/or contribute to the sustainability of the ecology of our planet, our contribution to the quality of life for others renders our life meaningful/of value. This is an existential point of view: we do what we can socially and ecologically “under the circumstances.”

The Spiritual/Energetic Option

As already noted, the human intuitive faculty offers a very different perspective on self and reality from the intellectual/rational faculty. Instead of a world of discrete, separate entities ever in competition with one another as they pursue their self interests, the spiritual perspective – to which the intuitive faculty provides access – reveals the vast web of interconnections that unite all “things” into an ever inclusive energetic domain of shared identity. From this perspective, greater or lesser scale is of little consequence. In fact, the greater the scale, the greater the extent of one’s participation in that unified identity. The individual who is otherwise insignificant in his or her material separateness expands to experience an infinite sense of self and belonging.

This spiritual or “sacred” awareness – realized through the intuitive faculty – is the root of all authentic artistic, religious and ritual experience. Humans access this experience and in it have an answer to the question of both what their life “means” and in what sense they can claim eternal life. Sharing in an infinite identity from this perspective, humans are never separate from their more expansive identity, and their physical death is merely a transition from one state of participation to another – no soul or savior or god required. They never were either merely alive or dead; they just are and continue to participate as one expression or another as part of an infinite reality.

Balance – the Essential Challenge

Humans are both competitive material beings led by their intellect and cooperative spiritual beings led by their intuition. In the modern context, the implications of the purely material rational perspective leave humans as infinitely small and separate beings who, when viewed at grand scale, lead utterly insignificant and meaningless lives and whose physical “death” is just “the end.” This is the extreme view of life and death as seen through one human faculty of mind. Some humans accept this conclusion. In response to this condition of modern scientific awareness, other materialists ignore the implications of the grand scale and find refuge and meaningfulness in having contributed to social and ecological responsibility and sustainability. Many modern humans are drawn to this position. At the other extreme are the spiritualists who deny the validity of the material view and place all value in the intuitive led experience of unification. They may combine this position with a commitment to absolute religious beliefs attributing all value to a form of eternal life after physical death.

Personally, I do not like either of the singular extreme perspectives or the intellectual compromise represented by the existentialist position. The one extreme is entirely defined by the material viewpoint while the other extreme is exclusively defined by the spiritual point of view. For me, both of these extremes overlook the complementary nature of human capability through which reality is perceived and experienced. As humans we are capable of assuming a material or spiritual perspective or some combination. Our challenge is to explore and develop both of these avenues to the fullest, utilize them in proper proportion for meeting the needs of different tasks, and understand both life and death from within this complement. Most importantly we do not have to deny either extreme perspective – just appreciate that it is probably appropriate to rely more on the spiritual perspective when dealing with the task of understanding an event like death. Moreover, combining the input from both of these perspectives to different degrees in most life tasks supports both the pursuit of self interest and social and ecological responsibility. So, the focus of the existentialist is included in this approach.

There Is No Final Answer

Assisted by modern technology, humans have sped through a number of theories about the nature of reality especially in the last 200 years. As both the micro and macro zones of reality have been penetrated ever more deeply, the scale of reality has expanded exponentially before us, and the constants upon which these successive theories depend have lost their solidity and been revealed as variables. Now, the speed of light is under “attack” as a constant in relativity theory. What this process exposes is the fundamental fact that with every discovery the unknown territory before us enlarges and the reliability of our understanding housed in our existing theories is diminished. The essential lesson: Uncertainty is Fundamental; the only constant is change!

And when modern humans avoid hubris, it becomes clear that as one species on the tiny planet Earth among the quadrillions of planets that are currently thought to populate the KNOWN physical universe, the perspective of humans is extraordinarily limited when it comes to even the potential for knowing it ALL! It is time to stop the nonsense about humans ever coming up with a sustainable “Theory of Everything.” Once again, Uncertainty is Fundamental, and it will most likely remain that way “forever.”

Even imagining humans developed to their maximum potential with respect to all of their capabilities and then including these humans employing the most advanced technology foreseeable, we will never have THE answer regarding the “meaning” of life and death for ourselves. Our only real option is to participate responsibly in the process of discovery, digest the results, and come to reasonable conclusions as we attempt to penetrate the infinite domain of existence. How reasonable the conclusions are that each of us and our groups develop depends on the range of the relevant facts that we consider and the quality of our discovery, “digestion,” and logical processes.

The statement above is my best effort at the present time to address the issue of Death – including how I regard my own eventual death, recognizing yet again that when it comes to core matters like this one “Uncertainty is Fundamental. I hope this statement reveals that my position on this issue is not one characterized as merely that of “an intellectual, existential, secular materialist.”

As humans, we never are or were simply either “alive” or “dead.” As material entities, we come from the infinitely dispersed star dust of an infinite universe/multiverse. And as spiritual “entities” we are always participating – hopefully in some responsible way – in the infinite expression of emerging and decaying matter and of ever changing concentrations of energy in the universe.