

A Philosophy of Death to Inform the Christian Martyr

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Abstract

This article presents a brief overview of death, outlining how it should inform the thinking of the Christian in general and the Martyr in particular. Several important questions are outlined while exploring both the secular and biblical definitions of death as specific phenomena. These foundations derive a metaphysical framework from the concept of consciousness driven experience. A differentiation made between the animal and human mind, distinctives are drawn among reductionist and dualistic worldviews, painting with broad strokes a fundamental reality as exhibited in Jesus' own views on death as exemplified in Luke 16 and elsewhere. The human trichotomic constitution (body, soul, spirit) is clearly in view, as analysis is proffered of the Intermediate State and the final promise of celestial afterlife. Lastly, connection between a proper philosophy of death and the mental positioning of the one who suffers for Christ is firmly established in the cost factor that has yet to be levied on the American Church.

Keywords: Philosophy of Death, Metaphysics, Martyr, Consciousness, Experience, Existence, Trichotomic, Body, Soul, Spirit, Luke 16, Persecution, Afterlife

It is a topic not discussed in polite company in American Culture, or between family members, nor addressed in primary or secondary education or any kind of social normalization. In fact, there are entire industries created in the United States to stand between the death of an individual and the rest of society. Whether it be the nursing home, the mortuary or hospice care, the process and reality of death is avoided at nearly all costs in the West.¹ But, despite this cultural phobia, there remain several important issues surrounding death that need to be addressed, especially for the Christian who finds themselves under persecution or in a society that is increasingly hostile to their profession of faith.

Popular culture wonders if a person can survive their own death. There are even pop-cultic books on the subject in all kinds of variety, wondering if there is an afterlife, if there are ghosts and how we can contact them. Unfortunately, though, few people ever get around to asking less superficial questions like: what is death exactly? Are there different kinds of death? What does it mean to say someone or something is dying or has died?

The sequestration of death from modern society has left the Church prone to fear, to anxiety, and to outright avoidance of their own mortality and the mortality of their loved ones. This will need to change for the American Christian if he or she is to stand for Christ amidst persecution in the future. The reality is, although entirely ubiquitous to life, death is not even clearly defined. The modern, humanist world would have us believe death is biological alone, as a natural process and consequence of living. As

¹ Mims, Cedric. *When We Die: The Science, Culture, and Rituals of Death*. St. Martin's Press, 2014, 560-561.

mentioned in *Confrontations with the Reaper*, “death is the annihilation of a functioning biological organism...the disintegration of a living organism.”²

Unfortunately, this view is, although prominent in the modern, scientific worldview, not at all logical or conclusive. While death appears, at least biologically, inextricably interconnected to cell division, or lack thereof, with the human cell capable of division only about sixty times before death,³ the biological definition in no way addresses many of the questions that need to be answered.

Metaphysics pertaining to death generally grapples with the non-tangibles of death, most specifically those variables that cannot be satisfied by mere biology alone. This predominately resides in consciousness, in the “I” identity that persists from birth to death in what we would define as the “individual” inhabiting or expressing itself through the manipulation of the physical body. This includes and is grouped into a collective, the function of the mind, the recording, storing, processing, and recalling of memories both short and long-term, the emotions and the experience of those emotions along with all other experiential phenomena pertaining to the other senses (tactile, audible, visual).

As J.P. Moreland describes it, “All knowledge starts from experience. The world, our reality, it is perceived solely and wholly from our senses, from our conscious awareness of it, and is filtered by our senses, our emotions, our mind.”⁴ To be conscious then is to experience and to experience is to exist. This requirement for existence (to experience consciousness or to consciously experience) opens the door to a multitude of other definitions of death.

Straight away we must tackle the concept that the permanent loss of consciousness is itself a form of death. Modern medical advancements have likewise brought about questions of the definition of death. Is an individual dead if their brain ceases to maintain any kind of activity for a prolonged period? What if an individual freezes to the point that their systems required to maintain biological life have ceased operation? Are they dead, even though some have been brought back to life?⁵

This kind of thinking has likewise brought about questions concerning the ramifications of death in the first place. Viewed as a natural process, death is often seen as unavoidable, coming for every individual who has ever lived. Yet, the medical world is rabid in its denial of what the Bible has to say about the subject. Modernity rejects outright the concept that death is a curse or at least the indirect consequence of a curse.

If that be the case, and death is as natural as birth or aging, then would not animals likewise have the same characteristics as humans do? Emotions? Sensations? Experiences? We know with certainty one major distinction between humans and all other living creatures on earth - humans are the only beings who commit suicide.⁶ How would that be the case if death is a natural process and humans are just as much animals as the rest of the creatures who walk about on four legs?

This is, of course, explained biblically. Romans 8:20 states, “the whole creation has been subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope, that the creation itself will also be set free.” Even Genesis 1-2 clearly illustrates a decisive distinction between human beings and the rest of creation.

² Feldman, Fred. *Confrontations with the Reaper: A Philosophical Study of the Nature and Value of Death*. Oxford UP, 1994, 74.

³ Mims, *When*, 171.

⁴ Moreland, J. P. "The Existence of the Soul - J. P. Moreland." Credo Courses, 18 July 2020, www.credocourses.com/product/200638, Audio 1-5 min.

⁵ Babakhan, Jen. "6 People Who Froze to Death—and Came Back to Life." Read. Dig., 8 Feb. 2019, www.rd.com/list/people-who-froze-came-back-to-life, Para. 1.

⁶ Mims, *When*, 256.

Thus, there is more needed than just a biological definition for the phenomenon of death. While death universally does, at least in most cases, include this definition within it, the physicalist definition cannot yield the comprehensive gravity of the situation. Most prominently, the biological definition of death does not in anyway - cannot - speak to the disposition of the experiential mechanism that previously resided within the body. Neither does it address the criminality component of death either.

A reductionist view of death abandons the individual, setting them adrift with no direction, no process by which to orient themselves. They would argue there is no purpose to life originally, and, likewise, no meaning to the cessation of life either. If the humanist view is correct in its assertion that there is nothing existent after death, in that death is merely the cessation of the function of life (when the body dies the individual ceases to exist), then nothing exists of the individual after death. There is, in fact, no self-knowledge of the individual, no persistence, no record perpetuated beyond the last conscious thought, the last draw of breath. In the modernist view, there is no recollection of being dead, no experience of death after the point of biological death, since death is simply the cessation of something rather than an independent state that is actively being experienced.

The biblical view is much different. Rather than rely on a monistic view (or any alternate view outright hostile to Christian thought), the Bible describes the makeup, the process, the underpinning reality as largely dualistic in nature. Beyond a simply biological definition of death and exacerbating ignorance by accrediting all causal conscious manifestations to brain function, the Bible clearly identifies, not by definition but by clear assumption, a body and mind distinction.

Early on, Moses defined life as “the life of all flesh is in its blood” (Lev 17:11) and so, by delineation we can see death defined as irreversibility, or any event that would cause the cessation of the circulatory system, which maintains the primary function of oxygenation of the entire body system, and only when one cannot return to that primary function. Cessation of circulation, then, by extension, is the cessation of respiration or the interruption of the process by which blood delivers its O₂ load to the necessary organs and tissues.⁷

Jesus also had a clearly defined view of death and what occurred after it, and what was possible concerning it. In Matthew 10:28, we see clearly how there is, at least in the mind of Christ (who is ultimately God incarnate), there is a distinct body, a distinct soul, and a distinct geospatial location where it is possible to “destroy both soul and body.” It is clear, Jesus would argue the body is certainly capable of being destroyed on earth (cease to maintain active function - definition of biological death) and it can be destroyed in various ways - by the hand of other individuals, by our own hand, by natural causes, by an accident, by illness or disease, etc. But, what he stresses, while the body can cease viability on earth, it is not possible for the soul to be likewise destroyed.⁸ The soul can only be destroyed in *Gehenna* (the Lake of Fire).

In fact, the biblical writers throughout both the Old and New Testaments presented a trichotomic view of individual identity. A three-in-one representation of the whole, of body, soul, and spirit comprising the Genesis 2:7 defining term, “living being” or “*chay nephesh*.” This is the first mention of the concept of soul, and is most often translated into Greek “*psyche*,” which is the fundamental, irreducible unit of “I,” the rational immortal, the self.

Created upon conception in interplay between traducian and creative acts (created by the parents or created by God), the soul constitutes the bundle of mechanisms and attributes that make up the individual person. As already clearly illustrated from the previously provided Bible verses, without the soul the

⁷ Mims, *When*, 187.

personal “I” ceases to exist as a totality loss. The loss of the soul (which can only be destroyed in the Lake of Fire) is the loss of individualized experience; it is the loss of the collective memories that form the coherence and locus of distinctiveness, it is the loss of sensational and mental experientiality.

If Moreland is correct and all knowledge derives from experience, then all knowledge of we, all understanding of ourselves, all evidence of the self that originates from that act of experience is the sum-total of the self. This core identity of “I” exists outside of the bodily form and it would be possible to exist as assumed by Scripture. Though it would be difficult to argue for the “I” to be living without the body (or the Spirit which serves as the spark of life), one cannot argue against the soul’s existence disembodied.

To be a “living being” is to be the trichotomic body, soul, spirit collectively. But to live, to be alive, is separate from existing, to be existent. This, of course, would not be considered the optimal or natural state of the human soul - disembodiment. In fact, as already described, disembodiment and death itself are unnatural states experienced by the living (and all of Creation) as the consequence of the fall, which was brought about by deception and disobedience (commutatively, rebellion). It is an inheritance, like the rest of Creation, death a genetic infection because of sin.

The mind is theoretically the equivalent of the brain, though the mind is the individual because each soul has a mind and without a mind a soul cannot exist, though in no way proves or disproves bodily interchangeability.⁹ Consciousness is, by its very nature, unobservable,¹⁰ and no amount of analysis of the physical brain can reveal any kind of mental property or process or trait of the mind. Likewise, the soul is not interchangeable with the human spirit as an independent elemental definition, as many instances in the Bible illustrate (Matt 27:50; John 19:30; Luke 23:46; 24:37-39; Acts 5:5, 10; 12:23) but is the trichotomy which coalesces into a fluid whole of the compositive “living being.” The breath of life (which is the Spirit) was added to the body (the clay) and the soul of the created sparked to life (Gen 2:7). Upon the event of death (the disillusion of the tether that binds the body to the soul and the spirit to them both) the spirit is returned to God (Ps 146:4; Eccl 12:7a; Job 4:15), the body is returned to the earth from whence it came (Eccl 12:7b), and the soul is carried away to Paradise (*Hades*) by the angels (Luke 16:22), captive to death, awaiting the Resurrection of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42; Rev 20:13).

In the biblical view of death, which is contrary to the humanist worldview that has infected the American Church, the decoupling of soul from body is the distinction between the living and the dead. Held sway by the power of death (Rom 5:17), those who have died can never again be alive until death has been dispossessed. The dead still exist as a disembodied soul, still with all the capacities and traits and states and experiences as the living, yet absent of life or the life-giving spirit, and, of course, absent the physical body in which the human soul was designed to inhabit. This decoupling from the physical body not only precludes the individual’s ability to be alive, but it inhibits their ability to participate in the physical realm, the dimensionality of this physical creation. It is the spiritual realm that, apparently, is incorporeal in substance and in substrate. It and the beings that inhabit it are immaterial, other than physical flesh, or are of some unknown elemental form that is unknowable to those of the living.¹¹

Make no mistake. Death is temporary. It is a state in response to the penalty of sin, likened to an infection caused by a curse. Why this is the case is unclear since we do not know the fundamental constitution of either life itself or that which steals life from the living (death). We are not given the entire

⁸ Moreland, J. P. *The Soul: How We Know It's Real and Why It Matters*. Moody Publishers, 2014, 173.

⁹ Goetz, S., & Taliaferro, C. *A Brief History of the Soul*. Wiley-Blackwell. (2011), 2.

¹⁰ McGinn, C. *The Problem of Consciousness: Essays toward a Resolution*. Oxford: Blackwell. 1991, 10-11.

¹¹ Goetz, *History*, 101.

story in detail but have only glimpses of information. Only two humans were present at the Garden when Eve took and ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. What this tree was or what purpose it served is unclear. How eating the fruit changed both Adam and Eve on a molecular level - or a spiritual level - is likewise unclear. Why the serpent was intent on deceiving the woman in the first place is just as unclear. How has the resultant curse altered the fundamental laws of reality, of the physical creation? Was entropy altered? Were there governing principles introduced? Removed?

Another confusion exists concerning the disposition of the soul once it has been disconnected from its physical body. Over the centuries this topic has run rife with all kinds of heretical ideologies, from theories of soul sleep to purgatory, and even reincarnation - and all these still within the Church. One of the greatest roadblocks to understanding the destination of the dead is a low view of Scripture. The main text describing this journey between death and the Resurrection is found in Luke 16:19-31 concerning the Rich Man and a beggar named Lazarus. This account is often dismissed as a parable, or an allegorical example, but it is an error to disregard it so quickly. The account describes the fate of two individuals: Lazarus and an unnamed Rich Man, and these few verses provide a wealth of information. First, the Rich Man is very wealthy and lives in luxury. Opposite this, Lazarus sits out by the Rich Man's gate, is terribly ill, and begs for scraps from the Rich Man. This is the total we are given of the lives of these two men while they were on earth. Next, Lazarus dies, and angels carry him to be in the presence of Abraham. There is no information about why this would be the case, where Abraham is, or what condition Lazarus is in.

Afterward, the Rich Man also dies, is buried, and immediately appears to the reader in *Hades*. He is in torment. He can look around. He can assess his situation at least to some extent. He can see Abraham (afar off) as well as Lazarus at Abraham's side. The Rich Man calls out to Abraham (apparently, the Rich Man is a Jew, since he addresses him as "father"), and begs Abraham to have Lazarus give him a drop of water to drink since the torment he is experiencing (some sort of sensation) is in some way related to, or at least is described by him as some kind of fire that has an intense heat component (he is asking for a cooling drink).

Abraham's response is telling, although quite enigmatic. He reminds the Rich Man that while he and Lazarus were alive, the Rich Man received good things while Lazarus received bad things. Now, after death, it is reversed. In addition, there is a "gulf fixed" between them so that no one can cross over to the other. Knowing from Abraham's response there is no help for him at all, the Rich Man then begs Abraham to send Lazarus to the Rich Man's family to warn them, so they will not end up in this place of torment (*Hades*).

Abraham's response is, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them." But the Rich Man begs, asking Abraham to send Lazarus to them from the grave, since someone coming back from the dead would certainly convince them to change their ways and move them to repent. But Abraham argues, "If they will not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

This account provides a great deal of information for us concerning what is now referred to as the Intermediate State. It also generates many more questions than there are answers. Though Abraham hints at the correlation, it is unclear why or how the Rich Man deserved torment in *Hades* while Lazarus deserved to be comforted. There are main distinctives drawn between them, especially the issue of money or wealth or more specifically the disproportionate distribution of welfare and comfort between the two. More to the point, though, this account explains several fundamental aspects of this transitional state of existence. The "fixed gulf" is pronounced to the point that even if someone wanted to cross over to render

aid, they would be unsuccessful. This defines the presence of the individual will in the Intermediate State since it would be impossible to “want” for anything if the individual were asleep or non-existent.

The first request of the Rich Man illustrates an interesting reflection on the situation. The Rich Man still possesses his faculties. The account speaks of him having a tongue and of Lazarus having a finger. There is, apparently, water present somewhere within reach and the Rich Man was aware of it, though he seems unaware of the gulf between them and the gravity of his request. His second request is even more telling, as Abraham responds with what is apparently the already established process by which men are saved. Living people have been given the Word of God (Moses and the Prophets). They must listen to them. So, it is quite possible to receive salvation through just the Old Testament. Abraham makes the last point. If they will not accept the Old Testament message, then they will not accept the message of the New Testament either, which is the account of Christ who was raised from the dead. All of death seemingly culminates into what is known biblically and popularly as the Resurrection. It is spoken of in depth in both the Old (Job 19:25-27; Ps 73:26; Dan 12:2; Isa 26:14, 19; Ezek 37) and the New Testaments (Matt 22:23-30; Luke 14:14; John 5:28-29) and pervades End Times prophecy and the prophetic record. Despite the physicalist argument that after death we simply cease to exist, or the monist insistence on soul sleep or unconscious rest, the Bible makes a clear case for bodily resurrection. Plato and other ancient philosophers believed the soul to be eternal, and after death entered the Underworld, eventually being recycled back to the realm of the living through rebirth. Despite modern attempts to revise the record, it is established history that several Church Fathers believed in one form of reincarnation or the other.

Paul and John are the best New Testament authors referring to the Resurrection specifically. Paul stated, “We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality” (1 Cor 15:50-53) and “we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus, we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thess 4:17). John also describes the resurrection, “They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection” (Rev 20:15).

From a biblical view, in comparison to the secularist, a philosophy of death is approached much differently. Paul held a much different view of death than the common person of his day, “For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil 1:21). Further on in the letter Paul states, “I count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him...that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.” (Phil 3:8-11). It is not hard to see Paul’s alternate view. That which the world lives for he considers to be rubbish and seeks instead several things:

1. Knowledge of Christ Jesus
2. Gain Christ and be found in Him
3. Not have own righteousness but that which is through faith in Christ
4. Know Christ
5. Know the power of His resurrection
6. Fellowship in His sufferings
7. Be conformed to his death
8. Attain to the resurrection of the dead.

Paul placed a much higher value on Christ and death in Christ than he did on earthly endeavors or

material goods or even common comforts and rightly so. The value placed on death is a judgment by the observer, though many proponents within the philosophy of Death would argue there is a universality to life's value, there is also an argument for this value being subjective.¹² A serial killer holds no value for the lives he takes, often with extreme brutality, yet he is one and the same who would plead for mercy on death row. His value of life is subjective to his own circumstances, opinions, and thinking. He places higher value on his own life than he does on the lives of his victims.

This is the same as the case of the woman who aborts her child, weighing value of unborn life against her own convenience, against her own poor choices, against her own personal circumstances and how the life of the child will affect her own quality of life. But this is exactly the kind of opinion the majority of professing American Christians hold today. If put to the test, they would choose life over Christ even though they have been warned beforehand "Whoever finds his life will lose it and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it (Matt 10:39) and "Do not be surprised that the world hates you" (1 John 3:13).

American Christianity up to this point has had no cost associated with it. There is no downside to a profession of faith, and thus, the multitude has rushed in for all sorts of reasons other than genuine belief. But the times are changing, and a time will come now or in the future, where Americans will have to consider long and hard their position on death and what it means to be Christ-like. Value must be placed upon real and lasting sanctification rather than the particular social/spiritual/economic sub-culture we have attached to human-centric religion. Those who are called according to God's great purpose may, indeed, require an effective philosophy of death in the future to mark the way into what it means to truly share in the sufferings of Christ our King.

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¹² Feldman, *Reaper*, 174.

