

Etymology of Death from ancient, Modern and Islamic Perspectives

Dr Ayesha sabeen

PhD (Islamic Studies) Institute of Islamic Studies,

University of the Punjab, Lahore

Abstract

Death has become a strangely popular subject during the latter half of the 20th century. Before that time, perhaps rather surprisingly, it was a theme largely eschewed in serious scientific, and to a lesser extent, philosophical speculation. It was neglected in biological research, and being beyond the physician's ministrations, was deemed largely irrelevant by medical practice. In modern times, however, the study of death has become a central concern in all these disciplines and in many others. So, death is defined in various perspectives.

Keywords: *Death studies, 20th-century research, philosophical perspectives, medical practice, biological research*

Etymology Of Death

- **The Literal Meaning of Death**

The literal meanings of death are described as below:

According to the Collins Cobuild English Dictionary:

“Death is the permanent end of the life of a person or animal. 2. A particular kind of death is a particular way of dying. 3. The death of something is the permanent end of it. 4. someone is at death's door means they are very ill indeed.”¹

According to Robert Kestenbaum and Ruth Aisenberg:

“D-e-a-t-h. This sequence of five letters is fixed and familiar. It is easy to assume that the meaning of this term is also fixed and familiar. Furthermore, one is tempted to assume that d-e-a-t-h refers to a “real something”(or a real nothing) out there. Terms such as “dying,” “dead,” and “death” generally are

Etymology of Death from ancient, Modern and Islamic Perspectives

intended by us to refer to phenomenon that are outside of or beyond our minds.”²

Chambers’ English Dictionary defines death:

*Death means “State of being dead”. “Extinction or cessation of life”: “manner of dying”: “mortality”: “A deadly plague”: “spiritual lifelessness”: “the killing of the animal in hunting”*³

A 1913 edition of *Webster’s Dictionary* defined death as

“The cessation of all vital phenomena without the capability of resuscitation, either in animals or plants.”⁴

Death is clearly a part of life—every day. And yet, the word defies simple definition, because there are many aspects to death and so many perspectives.

- **The Terminal Meanings of Death**

There are many approaches towards the terminal meanings and the definitions of death that are described as below:

- i. Biomedical Approaches to the Definition of Death**

Death is certified thousands of times every day by physicians. Death can be viewed as a transition, a separation of spirit and body, or some other altered state of being. To the physician, “dead means the body no longer supports or can support life processes. For many people, however, death implies something that continues or begins when the last breath is released.”⁵

But even the most confident certification of death, however, does not necessarily represent a complete definition. This means that after the biomedical approach has been explored, some of the major philosophical, religious, and social conceptions of death also must be considered.

- ii. Death as a sleep**

In many contemporary societies, people replace the word “*death* or *dead* with *sleep* as a more gentle, less threatening way of speaking”⁶

- iii. Clinical Death**

Unless death is defined, at least in outline, the decision that a person is “dead” cannot be verified by any amount of scientific investigation. Technical data can never answer purely conceptual questions. If one seeks to marry conceptions of death prevalent in the oldest cultures with the most up – to- date observations from intensive care units, one might think of human death as:

“The irreversible loss of the capacity for consciousness is combined with the irreversible loss of the capacity to breathe. The anatomical basis for such a concept of human death resides in the loss of brain-stem function.”⁷

According to the World Book Encyclopedia:

“Death occurs at the moment when life ends. Men usually die because the heart stops, and blood no longer circulates and brings nourishment to the cells of the body. But all the cells of the human body do not die at the same time. If the cells of the brain are completely deprived of oxygen for five or ten minutes, they can no longer completely regain their ability to function. The cells of the part of the brain called the *medulla oblongata* usually die next. Then the cells of the body’s glands and the cells in the muscles that move the bones of the skeleton die.”⁸

iv. The sociological viewpoint on the definition of death

Death is marked by the cessation of life, and medically, this is viewed in terms of brain death. The criteria by which brain death is established are of importance since these are used as the basis for the discontinuance of remedial effort. Of greater significance from a social welfare viewpoint are attitudes towards and social provision for death, and the fact that:

“Death is a social process involving the termination of membership of different social groups. The historical provision of the pauper’s funeral indicates one way in which loss membership can be symbolically reinforced. Societies differ in the way the process of death is defined and managed, but recently welfare interest has been awakened in a number of aspects, including the taboo character of death in contemporary Britain.”⁹

v. The Roman Catholic Church’s view point on defining death

The Roman Catholic Church advances the thought that death is the “complete and final separation of the soul from the body.”¹⁰ The church, however, concedes that the diagnosis of death is a subject for medicine, not the church.

vi. Physiological Standpoint

From a physiological standpoint, “somatic death—the death of the organism as a whole—usually precedes the death of individual organs, cells or parts of cells. The precise time of somatic death is sometimes difficult to determine because transient states, such as coma, fainting, and trance, can closely resemble the signs of death. Several changes in the body that occur after

Etymology of Death from ancient, Modern and Islamic Perspectives

somatic death are used to determine the time of death and circumstances surrounding it. The cooling of the body, called *rigormortis*, begins five to ten hours after death and ends in three to four days. The reddish-blue discoloration that occurs on the underside of the body, called *liver mortis*, is the result of blood clotting beginning, along with autolysis, which is the death of the cells. The decomposition of the body that follows, called putrefaction, is the result of the action of enzymes and bacteria.”¹¹

vii. Defining Death in Scripture

Death may be simply defined as the termination of life. It is represented in a variety of aspects in scripture:

- “The dust shall return to the earth as it was.”¹²
- “Thou takest away their breath, they die.”¹³
- “It is the dissolution of our earthly house of this tabernacle.”¹⁴
- “Being unclothed.”¹⁵
- “Falling on sleep.”¹⁶

Defining Death in Islam

Death is the term used to express the actual concept of death in Arabic, whereas synonyms such as *maniyya* and its variant *manun*, *radd*, *halak*, *hayn* and *bild* convey particular connotations and are less commonly used, regarded as more literary. “The term *wafat*, which means “accomplishment, fulfillment, i.e. of a man’s term of life,” is in origin KurDanic, and stems from *tawaffa* which describes how God brings to its close a man’s foreordained period of life and gathers the man to Himself; hence the use of the passive form of this verb *tuwuffiya* “his term was brought to an end (by God)”= “he died.” The idea behind the use of this verb is closely connected with the use in the Kurgan of other verbs like *kaddara* and *kadd*, which carry the sense of God’s predetermining a man’s lifespan or executing His decree concerning a man’s term of life. In modern Arabic, *Wafat* has a more delicate and euphemistic sense than the stark word *mawt*, something like Eng. “demise, decease” and Fr. “deces,” with *al- mutawaffa* therefore meaning “the deceased.”¹⁷

In the Quran, Death is referred to as “the certainty”. “Muslims believe that death should be contemplated throughout life as the most critical stage in the soul’s progress.”¹⁸

When a man becomes familiar with *dhikr* (invocation of the Divine Name), he separates himself (inwardly) from all other things. Now, at death, “is separated from all that is not God... What remains is the invocation alone. If this

invocation is familiar to him, he finds his pleasure in it and rejoices that the obstacles which kept him from it have been removed, so that he finds himself alone with his Beloved.”¹⁹

Death is like a gate between the probationary life on the earth and the permanent spiritual world of the Hereafter... The Holy Qur'an terms death as an act of creation like life. Thus, it is not “equivalent to nothingness, but a created state as revealed in the following verses:

- i. *“How can you reject the faith in Allah? Seeing that you were dead, He gave you life, then He will cause you to die, and will again bring you to life, and again to Him you will return.”*²⁰
- ii. *“They will say: O' Lord! Twice thou gave us death, and twice you gave us life; now we have confessed our sins, is there any way-out?”*²¹
- iii. *“He who created death and life that he may try which of you is best in deeds.”*²²
- iv. *Death is thus a state of existence before we are born to live in this world on the Earth, and is a state of existence after we pass away from this world to the world of graves.*²³

In the words of Dr. A Rashid Seyal:

“Death is the mystery of nature where, when the Devine Bestowal of Efflux is removed from the earthy pot, which is then left to the Earth to consume it once again for its congruity and consonance, and the soul, then leaving the body, passes into another existence, which is perfect.”²⁴

After death, souls are brought back to their heavenly abode, from the place where they had left to join the body. We came from Allah and go back to Allah. This is said in the following ayaat.

- i. *Every Soul Shall have a taste of death, and we try you with evil and with good, by way of trial, and unto Us you will be returned.*²⁵
- ii. *Say (Prophet!) the angel of death, put in charge of you, will (duly) take your souls; then you shall be brought back to your Lord.*²⁶

Death as an event

“Death is sometimes treated as though an event—that is, something that occurs in a specific way and at a specific time and place. When it is death as an event that concerns us, it is often possible to be factual and precise.”²⁷

DEATH AS A PROCESS

In nearly all circumstances, human death is a process rather than an event.

Etymology of Death from ancient, Modern and Islamic Perspectives

According to The New Encyclopaedia Britannica:

“Unless caught up in nuclear explosions, people do not die suddenly, like the bursting of a bubble. A quiet, “classical” death provides perhaps the best illustration of death as a process. Several minutes after the heart has stopped beating, a mini-electrocardiogram may be recorded, if one probes for signals from within the cardiac activity. Three hours later, the pupils still respond to pilocarpine drops by contracting, and muscles repeatedly tapped may still mechanically shorten. A viable skin graft may be obtained from the diseased 24 hours after the heart has stopped, a viable bone graft 48 hours later, and a viable arterial graft as late as 72 hours after the onset of irreversible systole. Cells clearly differ widely in their ability to withstand the deprivation of oxygen supply that follows arrest of the circulation. Similar problems arise but on a vastly larger scale, when the brain is dead but the heart and other organs are kept going artificially. Under such circumstances, it can be argued, the organism as a whole may be deemed dead, although the majority of its cells are still alive. At the clinical level, the irreversible cessation of circulation has for centuries been considered a point of no return. It has provided a practical and valid criterion for irreversible loss of function of the organism as a whole. What is new is the dawning awareness that circulatory arrest is a mechanism of death and not in itself a philosophical concept of death; that cessation of the heartbeat is only lethal if it lasts long enough to cause critical centers in the brain stem to die; and that this is so because the brain stem is irreplaceable in a way the cardiac pump is not. The cardiac pump is not. These are not so much new facts as new ways of looking at old ones.”²⁸

A TABOO ON DEATH

In contemporary American society, death has, until recently, been reviewed as a taboo topic, by the early 1960s, however, a national survey reported that the great majority of Americans are quite realistic and consider it important to “try to make some plans about death and to talk about it with those closest to them. Recent studies have shown that bereavement practices, once highly socially structured, are becoming increasingly varied and individually therapeutic; dying is feared primarily because it eliminates the opportunities for self-fulfillment; and active adaptations to death increase as one approaches the end of the life course.”²⁹

Conclusion

Many dictionaries define death as “the extinction or the cessation of life” or as ceasing to be.” As life itself is notoriously difficult to define—and as everyone tends to think of things in terms of what is known—the problem in defining death is immediately apparent. The most useful definitions of life are those that stress function, whether at the level of physiology, of molecular biology and biochemistry, or of genetic potential. Death should be thought of as the irreversible loss of such functions. Advances in life-supporting technologies in the 1960s spawned the growth of medical ethics as a distinct field, and a new definition for physiological death was needed. For centuries, death was indicated by the absence of a pulse or signs of breathing, but new technologies, including the respirator and heart–lung machine, made it possible for physicians to artificially maintain heart and lung function, blurring clear signs of an individual’s death. In the United States, many states have adopted legislation recognizing brain death- the loss of brain function, which controls breathing and heart beat- as the certificate of death. Canada, Australia and most of the nations of Europe and South America have broader definitions for death: either loss of all independent lungs and heart function, or the permanent, irreversible loss of all brain function.³⁰ However, the definition of death in Islam is the most comprehensive as compare to other definitions that is: “Death is the mystery of nature where, when the Devine Bestowal of Efflux is removed from the earthy pot, which is then left to the Earth to consume it once again to its congruity and consonance, and the soul then leaving the body passes into another existence, which is perfect.” This definition covers the both aspect of human beings i.e. the death of a person, and the life hereafter. It can also be concluded that the main focus of modern psychology is on human behavior.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

References

- ¹ Collins Cobuild English Dictionary, s.v “Death.”
- ² Robert Kestenbaum J, Ruth Aisenberg, *The Psychology Of Death*, (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1976) 3
- ³ Chambers English Dictionary S. V “Death”
- ⁴ Webster’s Dictionary, S.V, “Death”
- ⁵ , Robert Kestenbaum J, *Death, Society, and Human Experience* (London: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1986) 6b
- ⁶ Ibid, 24
- ⁷ *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed, s.v “Death”
- ⁸ *The World Book Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Death”
- ⁹ *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Sociology*, S.V “Death”
- ¹⁰ *New Dictionary of the history of Ideas*, S.V “Death”
- ¹¹ *New dictionary of the history of ideas*, s.v “Death”
- ¹² Eccl 12:7
- ¹³ Psalms 104:29
- ¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:1
- ¹⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:3, 2 Corinthian 5:4
- ¹⁶ Psalms 76:5
- ¹⁷ *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Second ed. S.v. “Mawt”
- ¹⁸ *The Oxford Dictionary Of Islam*, S.V, Death
- ¹⁹ *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Third ed. S.V. Death
- ²⁰ Al-Baqarah 2:28
- ²¹ Ghafir 40:11 (قَالُوا رَبَّنَا آمَنَّا أَتُؤْتِنَا أَثْمَنَتَيْنِ وَأُخْيَيْتَنَا أَثْمَنَتَيْنِ فَأَعْتَرَفْنَا بِذُنُوبِنَا فَهَلْ إِلَىٰ خُرُوجٍ مِّن سَبِيلٍ)
- ²² AlMulk 67:2 (الَّذِي خَلَقَ الْمَوْتَ وَالْحَيَاةَ لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ أَيُّكُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا ۚ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْغَفُورُ)
- ²³ Sultan Bashir Mahmood, *Doomsday&Life after Death*, 191192
- ²⁴ DR. A Rashid Seyal, *Devine Philosophy and Modern Day Science*, 68
- ²⁵ Al Anbiya 21:35 (كُلُّ نَفْسٍ ذَائِقَةُ الْمَوْتِ وَنَبَلُّوكُم بِالشَّرِّ وَالْخَيْرِ فِتْنَةً ۖ وَاللَّيْنَأْتُرْ جَعُونَ)
- ²⁶ AsSajdah 32:11 (قُلْ يَتُوفَّاكُم مَّلَكُ الْمَوْتِ الَّذِي وُكِّلَ بِكُمْ ثُمَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكُمْ تُرْجَعُونَ)
- ²⁷ Robert Kastenbaum, *Death Society and Human Experience*, 3rd ed.(Columbus, Toronto, London: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, N.D)13
- ²⁸ *The New EncyclopaediaBritanica*, s.v. Death
- ²⁹ *Encyclopedia of Sociology*, s.v. Death
- ³⁰ *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, S.V “Death”