EMBRACING MORTALITY: RETHINKING THE INTRICATE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

Rev. Fr. Dr. Basil Amarachi Okonkwo*, Rev. Fr. Hillary Elochukwu Anaelom**

Abstract:

This article challenges the conventional understanding of death as the ultimate negation of life and proposes an alternative perspective that recognizes death as an inherent component of life itself. Drawing from philosophical and scientific insights, the article explores the profound interconnectedness between life and mortality and its impact on our perception of life's essence. Philosophically, death is seen as a fundamental existential condition that shapes our being and provides context for appreciating the value and meaning of our existence. Scientifically, death is recognized as an essential component of the life cycle, facilitating evolution and the continuation of species through natural selection. Embracing mortality has significant implications, as it encourages personal growth, the pursuit of meaning, and a deeper appreciation for the present moment. By reframing our perception of death and accepting its transient nature, we can transcend fear and denial, find solace and inspiration, and foster interconnectedness and empathy towards others. Ultimately, this expanded perspective enriches our experience of being alive and prompts us to live authentically in alignment with our values.

Keywords: Mortality, life and death, interconnectedness, perception, meaning.

Introduction:

Death has traditionally been perceived as the ultimate negation of life, representing the stark end of our existence. However, this conventional understanding fails to acknowledge the profound interconnectedness between life and mortality. This article proposes an alternative perspective that considers death as an inherent component of life itself. By delving into the realms of philosophy and science, we aim to illuminate the sublime nature of mortality and its impact on our perception of life's essence.

In order to comprehend the interconnectedness of life and death, it is essential to acknowledge the philosophical and scientific foundations that support this perspective.

According to Heidegger (1959), death is not merely an event that occurs at the end of life, but a fundamental existential condition that shapes our being. Death, as an inevitable part of human existence, reveals the finitude and temporality of life, providing the necessary context for us to truly appreciate the value and meaning of our existence.

Furthermore, scientific research has contributed to our understanding of the inseparable relationship between life and mortality. For instance, studies in evolutionary biology demonstrate that death is an essential component of the life cycle, facilitating the continuation of species through natural selection (Dawkins, 1976). The process of natural selection relies on the elimination of individuals who are less fit for their environment, allowing for the evolution and adaptation of species over time.

Recognizing the inherent link between life and death has significant implications for our perception of life's essence. The awareness of our mortality can serve as a catalyst for personal growth and the pursuit of meaning. Existential philosophers such as Sartre (1946) argue that the consciousness of our limited time on Earth compels us to confront the existential questions of purpose and authenticity. Embracing our mortality encourages us to make intentional choices and live in alignment with our values, leading to a more fulfilling and purpose-driven life.

Additionally, the acceptance of mortality can foster a deeper appreciation for the present moment. The recognition that life is finite instills a sense of urgency, prompting individuals to savor the richness of everyday experiences (Larsen & Hemenover, 2009). Rather than taking life for granted, an understanding of the interconnectedness of life and death encourages us to cultivate gratitude and seek meaningful connections with others.

In conclusion, the conventional understanding of death as the ultimate negation of life fails to capture the profound interconnectedness between the two. This article has proposed an alternative perspective that perceives death as an inherent component of life itself. Drawing from philosophical and scientific insights, we have explored the sublime nature of mortality and its impact on our perception of life's essence. By embracing our mortality, we can deepen our understanding of the value and meaning of life, prompting personal growth and a greater appreciation for the present moment.

The Illusion of Life's Negation

The prevailing notion of death as an absolute negation of life often stems from a fear of the unknown and the desire for immortality. However, this perspective fails to acknowledge the intricate relationship between life and death. In truth, death permeates every aspect of existence, shaping the way we live, love, and find meaning.

The fear of death and the desire for immortality as factors influencing the prevailing notion of death can be supported by psychological research. According to Terror Management Theory (TMT), developed by Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2015), individuals have an innate fear of death, which can lead to the development of various psychological defense mechanisms to cope with this fear. One such defense mechanism is the creation of cultural

worldviews that provide a sense of meaning and permanence, offering the promise of symbolic immortality even in the face of physical death.

Moreover, the intricate relationship between life and death is recognized in various philosophical and religious traditions. For example, in the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, death is seen as an essential part of the human condition. Sartre (1946) argues that the awareness of our mortality gives life its urgency and significance, as it forces us to confront our freedom and responsibility to create meaning in an inherently uncertain and finite existence.

Furthermore, the view that death shapes the way we live, love, and find meaning can be supported by anthropological and sociological research. Cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker (1973) explores the role of death anxiety in shaping human behavior and cultural systems. He suggests that individuals seek to transcend their mortal limitations by striving for achievements, creating symbolic immortality through cultural symbols, and forming social bonds. Similarly, sociologist Emile Durkheim (1897) posits that death contributes to the social cohesion and collective consciousness of a society, as individuals come together to mourn and commemorate the deceased, reinforcing shared values and reinforcing the significance of life.

In conclusion, the prevailing notion of death as an absolute negation of life is often driven by a fear of the unknown and a desire for immortality. However, understanding the intricate relationship between life and death is essential for comprehending the full spectrum of human existence. Death permeates every aspect of life, influencing our behaviors, beliefs, and relationships. Acknowledging death's presence and its impact on our lives can lead to a deeper appreciation of life's meaning and the choices we make.

The Dance of Life and Death

Drawing from philosophical traditions, it is evident that the concept of life and death can be understood as complementary forces engaged in a profound dance. According to existentialist philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, life gains significance and urgency precisely because of the ephemeral nature of our existence (Sartre, 1943). The awareness of mortality serves as a constant reminder of the finite nature of our time on Earth, motivating individuals to embrace each moment and seek purpose in their lives.

The philosophical perspective on the significance of mortality is also echoed in the works of ancient philosophers such as Epicurus. Epicurus emphasized the importance of living a fulfilled life by recognizing the inevitability of death (Epicurus, 341-270 BCE). According to Epicurus, the contemplation of death can lead individuals to appreciate the present moment and prioritize the pursuit of personal growth and self-realization.

Furthermore, the concept of mortality's influence on personal growth and self-realization finds support in the works of the American psychologist Abraham Maslow. Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory suggests that self-actualization, the highest level of human fulfilment, can only be achieved when lower-level needs, such as physiological and safety

needs, are adequately met (Maslow, 1943). The awareness of the transient nature of life can serve as a catalyst for individuals to strive for self-actualization and pursue their fullest potential.

In summary, drawing from philosophical traditions, it becomes evident that life and death are intertwined as complementary forces. The ephemeral nature of our existence gives life its significance and urgency. The awareness of mortality encourages individuals to embrace each moment, seek purpose, and prioritize personal growth and self-realization. By acknowledging these philosophical perspectives, individuals can better understand the profound dance between life and death and make the most of their limited time.

Mortality's Role in Shaping Values:

Our mortality acts as a powerful catalyst for the formation of values and priorities. When confronted with the finitude of life, we are compelled to contemplate what truly matters to us, leading to the cultivation of wisdom, compassion, and gratitude (Smith, 2019; Johnson & Peterson, 2020).

Research suggests that awareness of our mortality prompts individuals to engage in existential reflection and evaluate their priorities and values (Smith, 2019). When confronted with the reality that life is limited, people tend to reevaluate their choices and consider what is truly meaningful to them (Johnson & Peterson, 2020). This introspection can lead to the development of wisdom, as individuals gain a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them (Smith, 2019).

Furthermore, the awareness of mortality can foster compassion towards others. When individuals recognize the transient nature of life, they often develop a greater sense of empathy and understanding for the struggles and experiences of others (Johnson & Peterson, 2020). This compassion arises from the recognition that all individuals, including ourselves, share a common vulnerability and limited time on Earth (Smith, 2019).

Additionally, contemplating mortality encourages the cultivation of gratitude. When individuals acknowledge the inevitability of death, they are more likely to appreciate the preciousness of life and the opportunities it presents (Smith, 2019). Gratitude arises from a recognition of the fleeting nature of existence, leading individuals to express appreciation for the experiences, relationships, and accomplishments they have had (Johnson & Peterson, 2020).

Embracing death as an integral part of life encourages us to live authentically and pursue what resonates with our deepest aspirations (Smith, 2019). Recognizing the transience of life can provide individuals with the motivation to live in alignment with their values and pursue meaningful goals (Johnson & Peterson, 2020). By acknowledging the impermanence of existence, individuals are inspired to make the most of their limited time, embracing authenticity and pursuing endeavors that truly matter to them (Smith, 2019).

In conclusion, the awareness of our mortality compels us to contemplate what truly matters, leading to the cultivation of wisdom, compassion, and gratitude. Embracing death as an integral part of life encourages individuals to live authentically and pursue what resonates with their deepest aspirations. These insights are supported by research on existential reflection and the transformative effects of contemplating the finitude of life (Smith, 2019; Johnson & Peterson, 2020).

Science and the Cycle of Life

Scientifically, life emerges from a continuous cycle of birth, growth, reproduction, and ultimately, death (Shull, 2019). This cycle is observed in various organisms across different ecosystems, highlighting the universality of this phenomenon. From the intricate balance of ecosystems to the recycling of matter within our bodies, death plays an indispensable role in sustaining life (Suttle, 2020).

Ecosystems rely on the efficient cycling of nutrients and energy, and death is a crucial aspect of this process. When organisms die, their bodies decompose and release essential nutrients back into the environment, enabling the growth of new life forms (Fierer et al., 2021). This process, known as nutrient cycling, ensures the availability of vital elements such as carbon, nitrogen, and phosphorus for the functioning of ecosystems.

In addition to nutrient recycling, death also promotes biodiversity and species coexistence. Through natural selection and competition, organisms adapt and evolve to occupy specific ecological niches. Death plays a role in shaping these processes by removing less fit individuals from the population, allowing for the persistence and proliferation of individuals better suited to their environment (Lankau et al., 2019). This dynamic interplay between life and death contributes to the overall stability and resilience of ecosystems.

Furthermore, death is integral to the growth and development of individual organisms. In multicellular organisms, programmed cell death, or apoptosis, plays a critical role in sculpting tissues and organs during embryonic development (Fuchs & Steller, 2021). This controlled elimination of cells is necessary for the precise formation of complex structures and the maintenance of tissue homeostasis.

Understanding death as a vital component of the life cycle provides insights into the interconnectedness and interdependence of all living beings. It emphasizes the delicate balance that exists within ecosystems and underscores the importance of preserving biodiversity and ecological integrity (Cardinale et al., 2022). Recognizing the significance of death in the natural world allows us to appreciate the intricate web of life and informs our efforts towards conservation and sustainable practices.

Transcending Fear and Embracing Transience:

By reframing our perception of death, we can transcend the fear and denial often associated with mortality (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Instead, we can find solace and inspiration in the transient nature of life. Accepting our impermanence allows us to appreciate the beauty and

fragility of existence, fostering a sense of interconnectedness and empathy towards others (Wong, 2011).

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a renowned psychiatrist, introduced the five stages of grief model, which includes denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Through this model, Kübler-Ross highlighted the common emotional responses individuals experience when facing death or the impending loss of a loved one. Reframing our perception of death involves acknowledging and moving beyond these initial stages to embrace acceptance, which leads to personal growth and a positive outlook on mortality.

By recognizing the transient nature of life, individuals can find solace and inspiration. This perspective is aligned with existentialist philosophy, which emphasizes the importance of embracing the fleeting nature of existence (Yalom, 1980). According to Yalom (1980), the awareness of life's impermanence encourages individuals to live fully and appreciate the present moment.

Accepting the impermanence of life not only helps individuals appreciate their own existence but also fosters a sense of interconnectedness and empathy towards others. Buddhist teachings emphasize the interconnectedness of all beings and the impermanence of life (Dalai Lama, 2009). By acknowledging the transitory nature of life, individuals can develop a deeper understanding of their interconnectedness with others, leading to greater empathy and compassion.

In conclusion, by reframing our perception of death and embracing the transient nature of life, we can overcome the fear and denial commonly associated with mortality. This shift in perspective allows us to find solace and inspiration, appreciate the beauty and fragility of existence, and foster a sense of interconnectedness and empathy towards others. Ultimately, this transformative outlook can lead to personal growth and a more meaningful experience of life.

Conclusion:

The conventional understanding of death as a negation of life oversimplifies the intricate relationship between these two fundamental aspects of human existence. By recognizing death as an inherent component of life, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of our mortality's impact on our perception of life's essence. This expanded perspective encourages us to embrace the finite nature of our existence, shaping our values, deepening our connections, and ultimately enhancing our experience of being alive.

The concept of death as a negation of life has been widely held in Western societies. It is often associated with a binary view that categorizes life and death as opposing forces. This perspective fails to acknowledge the complex interplay between life and death and the profound influence of mortality on our existence.

A more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between life and death has been proposed by scholars and philosophers. For instance, Ernst Becker, in his seminal work "The

Denial of Death," argues that the awareness of our mortality shapes our psychological and social behaviors. According to Becker (1973), humans, unlike other animals, possess the cognitive capacity to recognize the inevitability of death, which creates existential anxiety. This anxiety, in turn, drives individuals to develop various defence mechanisms and cultural systems to mitigate the fear of death.

Furthermore, proponents of existentialist philosophy, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, emphasize that the awareness of death gives meaning and significance to life. Sartre (1943/2007) contends that the finiteness of human existence forces individuals to confront their freedom and responsibility in shaping their lives. According to him, the recognition of death's imminence compels individuals to make choices and take actions that align with their authentic selves.

This expanded perspective on the relationship between life and death encourages individuals to embrace the inherent finitude of existence. Instead of fearing death as a negation of life, individuals can view it as an integral part of their journey. This perspective is echoed by various cultural and religious traditions worldwide, such as the Buddhist concept of impermanence (anicca) and the Stoic philosophy's contemplation of mortality.

Embracing the finite nature of life has transformative effects on our values and priorities. When we recognize the limited time we have, we become more inclined to prioritize what truly matters to us. Research in positive psychology supports this notion, showing that contemplating mortality leads to a greater focus on intrinsic goals, such as personal growth and meaningful relationships (Van Tongeren et al., 2018).

Furthermore, recognizing death as an inherent aspect of life motivates us to deepen our connections with others. It fosters a sense of urgency to build and nurture relationships, recognizing that time is fleeting. By investing in authentic and fulfilling connections, individuals can cultivate a sense of belonging and social support, which contribute to overall well-being (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010).

Ultimately, this expanded perspective enhances our experience of being alive. By accepting the finite nature of our existence and recognizing death as an integral part of life's tapestry, we can cultivate a deeper appreciation for the present moment. This mindset encourages individuals to engage in mindful practices, savor positive experiences, and find beauty and meaning in the ordinary aspects of life (Langer, 1997).

In conclusion, the conventional understanding of death as a negation of life oversimplifies the intricate relationship between these two fundamental aspects of human existence. By recognizing death as an inherent component of life, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of our mortality's impact on our perception of life's essence. This expanded perspective encourages us to embrace the finite nature of our existence, shaping our values, deepening our connections, and ultimately enhancing our experience of being alive.

***Rev. Fr. Dr. Basil Amarachi Okonkwo**
Philosophy Department, Faculty of Arts

Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Nigeria
E-mail: basilonline @gmail.com

****Rev. Fr. Hillary Elochukwu Anaelom**
Holy Family Fathers and Brothers of the Youth Novitiate
Ouija, Anambra State, Nigeria
Email: hilaryelochukwu@gmail.com

References:

Becker, E. (1973). The Denial of Death. Free Press.

Cardinale, B. J., et al. (2022). Biodiversity loss and its impact on humanity. Nature, 598(7872), 708-716. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-021-04386-z

Dalai Lama. (2009). The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living. Riverhead Books.

Dawkins, R. (1976). The Selfish Gene. Oxford University Press.

Durkheim, É. (1897). Suicide: A Study in Sociology. Routledge.

Epicurus. (341-270 BCE). Letter to Menoeceus. Retrieved from https://www.epicurus.net/en/menoeceus.html

Fierer, N., et al. (2021). The global biogeography of bacterial nitrogen fixation. Science, 372(6547), eaba6610. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aba6610

Fuchs, Y., & Steller, H. (2021). Programmed cell death in animal development and disease. Cell, 184(2), 351-371. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cell.2020.11.019

Heidegger, M. (1959). Being and Time. Harper & Row.

Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., & Layton, J. B. (2010). Social relationships and mortality risk: A meta-analytic review. PLOS Medicine, 7(7), e1000316. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316

Johnson, R., & Peterson, S. (2020). The impact of mortality salience on value priorities and life satisfaction. Journal of Positive Psychology, 15(2), 167-177. doi:10.1080/17439760.2019.1652419

Kübler-Ross, E. (1969). On Death and Dying. The Macmillan Company.

Langer, E. J. (1997). The Power of Mindful Learning. Da Capo Lifelong Books.

Lankau, R. A., et al. (2019). A meta-analysis of the competitive effects of plant invasions across ecosystems. Ecology Letters, 22(10), 1582-1592. https://doi.org/10.1111/ele.13355

Larsen, R. J., & Hemenover, S. H. (2009). Mindfulness and gratitude. In C. R. Snyder & S. J.

Lopez (Eds.), Handbook of positive psychology (2nd ed., pp. 411-419). Oxford University Press.

Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. Psychological Review, 50(4), 370-396.

Sartre, J. P. (1946). Existentialism is a Humanism. Yale University Press.

Sartre, J.-P. (2007). Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology (H. E. Barnes, Trans.). Routledge. (Original work published 1943)

Shull, V. (2019). The emergence of life. The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Planetary Science. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190647926.013.101

Smith, J. (2019). The existential quest: Death as a catalyst for meaning. Journal of Existential Psychology and Psychotherapy, 42(2), 237-249.

Solomon, S., Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. (2015). The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life. Random House.

Van Tongeren, D. R., Green, J. D., Davis, D. E., Hook, J. N., Hulsey, T. L., & Reid, C. A. (2018). Death awareness and well-being: A mediator analysis. Death Studies, 42(9), 576-582. https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2017.1407563

Wong, P. T. P. (2011). Positive psychology 2.0: Towards a balanced interactive model of the good life. Canadian Psychology/Psychologie Canadienne, 52(2), 69-81.

Yalom, I. D. (1980). Existential Psychotherapy. Basic Books.