

Ageing and Death

Breaking a Taboo

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Abstract: This position paper argues for addressing ‘good death’ as part of ‘well ageing’ in human life. Although in most societies death is protected through taboos, we have to provide solutions in helping citizens preparing for their own death. The Oedipus Trilogy is an ancient narrative to describe clearly the three phases in any human life, the unavoidability of those phase changes. We have to use the last phase of our life to prepare for the end. We will summarize the different philosophical positions regarding ‘meaning of life’, and – although addressing death is a mainly social issue – we describe the challenges for future ICT development in supporting the important last steps of preparing for a ‘good death’.

1 INTRODUCTION

This position paper is all about *human life* in general and the *end of life* in particular (Rauterberg, 2011) (Visser, Wang, Baha, Hu, and Rauterberg, 2012) (Irlandoust, 2013). The most common definition for life is "the period between birth and death" and "the quality which makes people, animals and plants different from objects, substances, and things which are dead" (Cambridge Dictionary, 1995). The main question which raises here is what the quality of life is; a quality which at first place distinguishes *living* humans from objects and secondly discriminates between human and animals or plants. A merely simplistic answer to this question can be given in a biological manner. However, answering this question from a sociological and humanistic point of view has concerned philosophers, social scientists, care givers and physicians for centuries, and defining the *meaning of life* has been one of the most profound questions of human existence. In this paper we will focus on the notion of a ‘good death’ as part of human life (Kehl, 2006) and how ICT could play a role in here. We are really in need of a new vision on life in general and healthcare in particular (Marzano, 2009).

2 EXISTENTIAL QUESTION

In the Western world religious beliefs become less and less influential to provide a framework for an-

swering this existential question about ‘meaning of life’. So far we assume that our life is limited and ends with death (Craig, 2008; Rauterberg, 2011). But given these two empirical facts, how can then death become a meaningful part of our life? In our modern societies most ageing people do not want to be confronted with their own death (Cappon, 1978), and most contemporary societies try to avoid death and dying (Todd, 2003). Young adults show fear of dying and death when they search for meaning in life (Cicirelli, 1998), but not if they show already presence of meaning in life (Lyke, 2013). In an international cross-cultural study “greater longevity was not considered one of the most important components of successful ageing” (Fernandez-Ballesteros et al., 2010, p. 52). Before we go into more details for our topic of ageing and death, we need some ontological framing. Philosophers have been trying to develop and evaluate principles which are meant to capture all the particular ways that a life could obtain *meaning*. The primary views on the *meaning of life* can be divided into (1) supernaturalism, (2) objective naturalism, (3) subjective naturalism and (4) nihilism (Metz, 2008).

2.1 Supernaturalism

The *supernaturalist view* in the monotheistic tradition is divided into God-centered and soul-centered views (Cottingham, 2003) (Craig, 2008) (Seachris, 2011). While God-centered views believe God's existence, along with "appropriately relating" to God,

is both necessary and sufficient for a meaningful life, soul-centered views suppose having a soul and putting it into a certain state makes life meaningful, even if God does not exist. In God-based views meaning in life is that one's existence is more significant, the better one fulfills a purpose God has assigned. Common idea is that God has a plan for the universe and that one's life is meaningful to the degree that one helps God realize this plan, perhaps in the particular way God wants one to do so. Fulfilling God's purpose (and doing so freely and intentionally) is the sole source of meaning, with the existence of an afterlife not necessary for it (Levine, 1987) (Cottingham, 2003). Life would be meaningless, if a person failed to do what God intends him to do with his life. Generally, soul-centered view considers that meaning in life comes from relating in a particular way to an immortal, spiritual substance that supervenes on one's body when it is alive and that will forever outlive its death. If one lacks a soul, or if one has a soul but relates to it in the wrong way, then one's life is meaningless (Adams, 2002).

2.2 Objective Naturalism

The *objective naturalism* view proposes a physical life without believing in presence of a supernatural reality (Hartshorne, 1996). According to this view, a meaningful life is possible and the meaning of life is connected with solid or intrinsic nature and is independent of mind-related matters. In other words, a meaningful life by objective naturalism is not constituted based on a person's choice or will, instead it is presented by inherently worthwhile or finally valuable conditions. Objective naturalism is distinguished from subjective naturalism by its emphasis on mind-independence. Morality and creativity are widely held instances of actions that give meaning to life. These actions are meaningful regardless of whether any autarchic agent (including God) believes them to be or seeks to engage in them. To obtain meaning in one's life, one ought to pursue these actions.

2.3 Subjective Naturalism

Similar to objective naturalism, subjective naturalism posits a meaningful life without believing in existence of a supernatural reality, however the current view proposes that life is a function of what a person wants or chooses. Therefore meaning of life varies among different people, as mental status of one person varies from another. Common views are one's life is more meaningful if, the more one gets what one happens to want strongly, the more one achieves

one's highly ranked goals, or the more one does what one believes to be really important. "Lately, an influential subjectivist has asserted that the relevant mental state is caring or loving, so that life is meaningful just to the extent that one cares about or loves something (Frankfurt, 1988).

Even though objective and subjective naturalism disagree on the conditions for meaningfulness, both are united in their rejection of supernaturalism and necessity of God in order to secure a meaningful life. In this way, both forms of naturalism can be thought of as optimistic naturalisms, which agree that meaningful life is possible in a godless universe.

2.4 Nihilism

Despite above mentioned views, which believe in presence of a meaningful life, nihilism or pessimistic naturalism denies existence of a meaningful life at all. As some forms of nihilism is related to boredom or dissatisfaction of human in life; in general, nihilism argues that life is without objective meaning, purpose, or intrinsic value, and if there would be a value, there is no base for that. Most commonly, Friedrich Nietzsche is the most often cited philosopher associated with this life view (Hartshorne, 1996). The idea shared among many nihilists is that there is something inherent to the human condition that prevents meaning from arising, even if God would exist. For instance, some nihilists make the Schopenhauerian claim that our lives lack meaning because we are invariably dissatisfied; either we have not yet obtained what we seek, or we have obtained it and are bored (Martin, 1993).

All these reading disclosed how drastically opinions varied on the 'meaning of life'. A question that has a quite simple formulation has disputed complex opinions; opinions which contradict or even counteract each other. So, when talking about a society and designing (designs which target cultural issues; (Rauterberg, Hu, and Langereis, 2010)) for a society means considering all these opinions (Vissers et al., 2012).

3 POSSIBLE ANSWER(S)

Every human being walks a unique path through this life. What happens in the life, regardless of being religious or non-religious, is in essence the salvation history of that person (Girolimon, 1994). Probably all people on this planet have this in common. In many cultures and religions there was and still is the conception that life happens in distinctive phases,

each with a specific content, which were thresholds for the next entrance (Rauterberg, 2011). Therefore, it still is important to cross these phases consciously and with the right effort. "When the time was right the community prepared together with that person, symbolized the transition often with a rite and celebrated the moment. This partition of life was an attempt to procure conscious life" (Vissers et al., 2012). In contemporary societies, little is left from the earlier union of rites; however, the perception of phases and transitions is still present in religious and nonreligious people (Bax, 2009). These phases can also be considered as ongoing processes of learning and discovering that life is not all about ego, enjoyment and achievement, but it is about living; living with love, receptiveness and thus becoming a mild, responsible and peaceful human being. A truly free human being who knows what resignation is.

We can identify three main phases during each individual life that are mostly common among different cultures: (1) childhood, (2) adulthood, and (3) retirement. Of course we have also to consider the phase before life (by coming into life through birth), and the phase 'after life' leaving life through death. In case of the supernaturalism we have to deal with five different phases; for all the other four ontological positions we can focus on the central three phases only.

What is noticeable is that our lives are rich with combinations of three major concerns in each of those phases: *love* in (1), *power* in (2) and *death* in (3) (Salem and Rauterberg, 2005). It seems that power is the most attractive concern with utilizing on death, and love the most desired means used to overcome selfish and egoistic power (Gandhi's doctrine of non-violent protest and civil disobedience to achieve societal transformation has been hugely influential worldwide (Fischer, 1983)).

Our trilogy of emotional concerns – love, power, death - has been developed by looking at several elements of human history, culture and religions e.g. remarkable events, lasting buildings and work of art that have a certain historical or cultural value. Indeed historical events are all reported within the perspective of one of the three concerns (e.g. king legends, wars and love stories). It is cross cultural and cross centuries (Mahabharata 5BC – 2AD, Shakespeare works such as Macbeth 1605-1606 AD, and Romeo and Juliet 1594-1595 AD) (Salem and Rauterberg, 2005).

The three phases of life and the necessary transformation between those is fully captured in the ancient occidental *Oedipus trilogy* (Sophocles, 2000), first in 429 BC publicly performed in the polis of

Athens to educate and prepare all citizens for their life divided in three parts (Higgins and Higgins, 2011). The whole tragedy in the Oedipus trilogy is outlined in three separate books emphasizing different aspects of human life and fate (Sophocles, 2000). The life of Oedipus is described in three parts:

Part-1 in which - triggered by a special prophecy - *Oedipus* as a baby was sentenced to death by his own parents *Laius* and *Jocasta* (king and queen of Thebes), but survived through the mercy of the executioner; Oedipus grew up at *Polybus'* neighbouring kingdom, and become finally king of *Thebes* as the oracle *Creon* predicted already after his birth.

Part-2 in which king *Oedipus* ruled *Thebes* and had four children with *Jocasta*: *Antigone* and *Ismene* (daughters) and *Eteocles* and *Polynices* (sons); when he was forced to find out that he had unintentionally killed his father *Laius* and had married his mother *Jocasta*, he felt deeply ashamed.

In the final *part-3* *Oedipus* was so shocked about what he had done that he wanted to do penance by blinding himself and searching for a way into the *Hades* to become dead. His two daughters helping him preparing for death accompanied him on this last journey.

All three transitions from (1) being born into childhood, (2) childhood to adulthood, and (3) adulthood to retirement are inherently in a tragic manner unavoidable to the character Oedipus; this was and still is the main message to all citizens: Life contains and requires these necessary and unavoidable transformations from one phase to the other!

The final and most challenging fourth transformation is *death*. As long as humans are mortal, any normative concepts prolonging life at any costs seems highly questionable (Cosco, Stephan, and Brayne, 2013). Of course, humans can live longer in the future than today (WikiPedia, 2014); however they still will be mortal. Instead of avoiding facing death, effective preparation for this ultimate transformation is preferable and therefore recommendable (Levine, 1987). Any culture and society neglecting this can be considered incomplete and bound to become inhumane (Leighton and Hughes, 1955) (Platt, 1963) (Sankar, 1991) (Martinedale, 1998) (Lamb, 2014).

3.1 The 'Good Death'

Through the enlightenment period in the West most of the rituals and other mystical ingredients seem not at all or at least hardly applicable in Western cultures although any healthy society seems to have a fundamental need for intergenerational communica-

tion supported by rituals (Rappaport, 1999). The disappearance of rituals in our contemporary societies seems to be influenced amongst others by urbanization (Bax, 2009), and urbanization has a negative effect on the mental health of citizens (Lederbogen et al., 2011). Busselle, Ryabovolova and Wilson (2004) argues that content (i.e. norms, values, beliefs) with the potential to transport culture is very important to cultivation effects, in particular when the citizen is actively involved in the acquisition of the cultural content.

The ending of life' might be a process wherein life is gradually extinguished, or a momentary event. The momentary event can be understood in three different ways (Luper, 2009a): (1) *Denouement death*, the ending of the dying process; (2) *threshold death*, the point in the dying process when extinction is definite; and (3) *integration death*, when the physiological systems of the body irreversibly stop to function as an integrated whole.

There are also three main philosophical views on death concerned with the reality of human being: (1) *animalism* (Olson, 2007), (2) *personism* (Luper, 2009b), and (3) *mindism* (Olson, 2007). The *animalism* view suggests that we as human beings persist our existence to remain the same 'animal'. In this view death is an irreversible end to all critical processes, which maintain such existence. The *personism* view says that we have self-awareness, it is mostly involved with our psychological characteristics, and loss of such characteristics results in death. The *mindism* view indicates that regardless of having self-awareness, we are minds and persist to remain the same mind. In this philosophy death is an irreversible end to the processes that maintain existence of our minds.

Understanding death from these three point of views have different significances, for example dementia affects psychological characteristics (personism view), but not the mind (mindism view). It can be imagined that our mind can survive death, when the body is already gone (assuming that mind is not a part of the body). These examples show that the way mindists interpret and understand death is different from animalist. In conclusion, approaching death by different philosophical views has different implications. Nevertheless, almost all of us want to die in peace.

The phrase 'good death' as used in Kellehear (1984) refers to the preparations around the death scene initiated by the dying. It has little to do with the theory and philosophy of Euthanasia - a term often translated from its Greek sources as meaning 'good death'. Following Kellehear, the 'good death'

is set in motion by the dying person him or herself timely before the actual dying process. It is a set of culturally sanctioned and prescribed behaviours, designed to make death meaningful. "These behaviours range from preliminary discussions with physicians about life extending technologies, buying a grave plot or stone, making a will, to talking about death with family and other kin, making peace with God/s, and so on" (1984, p. 8). Although it is difficult to investigate such tabooed topic (Walter, 2008), many societies cross cultures and through time seem to have had and still have concepts of a 'good death'.

3.2 Possible ICT Support

According to Korhonen, Nordman and Eriksson (2014) technology as a concept has three implications: (1) technology is ICT based devices and products to provide different services; (2) technology refers to a process consisting of methods for helping people; and (3) technology as a service indicates the production of care by technology. Unfortunately, the ethics of technology has yet not been fully established as a guiding principle. In the overview by Korhonen et al. some studies excluded completely ethical reflections. Many studies in this overview "discussed the ethics of technology as benefits such as improved communication and symptoms management, and the simple use of e-health services whilst others remained critical presenting ethical problems such as unwillingness and the inability to use technology, or conflicts with human aspects or questions of inequality." These issue are of serious concerns for future research.

Now we will discuss the expressive possibilities provided by emerging technology and upcoming design frameworks for supporting the dying process ending with death (Corr and Corr, 2012). We can distinguish the use of ICT in the last life phase as (1) supporting the preparation for dying, (2) supporting the dying event as such, and (3) support for connecting with after-life.

(1) *Support the preparation for dying*: Possible support through ICT preparing for dying is any application easily accessible for elderly to take actions; such applications can provide getting an overview over life extending technologies [see for more at (WikiPedia, 2014)], organizing the dying event including funeral (WikiHow, 2014), support lack of social bonding (Davis, Hu, Feijs, and Owusu, 2015), providing internet based discussion forums around dying [e.g. see (Explore-Ideas, 2011)],

(2) *Support the dying process*: Tele-health was being used by a range of health professionals (e.g. in on-

cology care settings) that included specialist (i.e. palliative) care, hospices, primary care settings, nursing homes and hospitals as well as dying people (Kidd, Cayless, Johnston, and Wengstrom, 2010). The most common ICT based products and services are advice services for palliative care patients, out-of-hours telephone support, carers and health professionals, videoconferencing for interactive case discussions, consultations and assessments, and training and education of palliative care and other health-care staff. Kidd et al. suggest “that current technology is usable and acceptable to patients and health professionals in palliative care settings.” A major advantage of robotic-assisted dying is that the robot would always assist those dying persons that are genuinely eligible, and thus such persons would not be at the mercy of a willing care giver in order to have some control over the timing and manner of their death (van Rysewyk and Pontier, 2015).

(3) *Support to transcendent death*: Advanced technology can be used to establish a legacy through leaving a digital trace for next generations, etc. Today we can already talk to people from the past through appropriately designed conversational agents, e.g. Confucius chatbot (Wang and Nakatsu, 2013) (Wang, Khoo, Nakatsu, and Cheok, 2014). This technology could be used to build partner models as virtual communication agents to overcome the isolation of high aged elderly.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The first conclusion we can draw regarding ICT involvement support dying, is that we have to take the ontological position of our end users into account. Next to this, we need to know the local social setting for something close to ‘good death’. However, foremost we have to acknowledge that at the end of each individual life on earth is the death. Facing this, any society is well advised to prepare their ageing citizens for dying instead of ignoring it. ICT can play a mediating role in enabling ageing people to prepare for this last challenge. The problem addressed in this paper is mainly a societal challenge and not primarily a technological one. We need a social and ethical discussion how and when to prepare for and especially support dying, because death gives meaning to life!

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