REVIEW ARTICLE

People die when they decide to toward an epistemology of death

Carlos Eduardo Maldonado*

Maldonado CE. People die when they decide to toward an epistemology of death. Curr Res Integr Med 2025;10(1):1-4.

ABSTRACT

This paper claims that people die when they decide to, which means that death is an intricate matter of freedom. In other words, death is not a fate of any kind, or something that supervenes each individual. Instead, everyone decides when to die. Two major venues can be distinguished, thus: People decide when to die either because they feel relieved and have the sensation that they have accomplished what they could or planned, somehow; or else, they die because they must give up and need a gate of scape. Briefly said, death is not a choice, but a decision. The rationale for the claim lies in epigenetics. Epigenetics points out to the fact that nature and culture are one and the same thing. The election for death is, after all, it appears, a matter of freedom.

Keywords: Death; Life; Determinism and indeterminism; Complexity theory; Freedom; Epigenetics

INTRODUCTION

Spinoza makes a good point, thus: "Homo liber de nulla re minus de morte cogitate, et plus sapientiae non mortis, sed vitae meditation est" (Spinoza, IV, Propositio LXVII). A free human being does not think about anything, even less about death and his/her wisdom is a meditation not about death, but about life. I would like to roughly translate or paraphrase the idea in a sharp and conspicuous, namely: There is only life; death does not exist.

This paper aims at showing that the standard understanding of death which is a deterministic stance, is wrong. Indeed, in normal medicine, health sciences, biology and culture, death appears as an inescapable fatum upon which nobody can do anything. At its best, death is grounded on genes, *i.e.*, genetic determinism.

Death happens as a dual phenomenon: Either as an abrupt event that no one expected, or as a process, to some degree, expectable. In the first case, we talk about accidents, which take place in the world, indeed. At the cellular level, this form of accident consists in necrosis, which is the death of a cell or group of cells due to eventful circumstances; for instance, by falling down, burning or many other. Additionally, death happens due to diseases or illness. I shall leave aside here the importance of accidents in life and focus on the latter case. My take here is that death is a ctonic decision. This paper explores the depths of such a ctonic dimension and argues that it is not a conscious or reflective choice, but a decision taken in the complexity of life, far beneath or behind what it is generally assumed.

The acceptance of death is a consolation for those remaining behind that certainly brings relief to them, but leaves the understanding of death uncovered. Three arguments support the claim mentioned above. The first one assesses that death is the outcome of a complex swaying between nature and culture. It is such complexity that must be careful studied in order to both understand the kind of life some has been leading or also the type of death that occurs. The second argument says that death is not a deterministic fate in any sense of the word. Instead, it has its roots in the depths of freedom which is one of the names for life. Thus, the third argument sets out that life is a fundamentally free system so much free that death is indeed chosen or decided. It is not an event. At the end some conclusions are drawn. At the end, this paper finishes with two colophons-particular remarks that help clarify this article.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Death swinging between nature and culture

According to Atlan, biology in the 20th century has known two main revolutions, thus: In the 1960's, molecular genetics and at the end of the century, epigenetics and biocomplexity. At the beginning of the 21st century, biology has witnessed additionally the revolution of cognitive neurosciences. Molecular genetics, important as it is, was a reductionist paradigm that has recently been superseded by another technology, namely Crisps [1]. Epigenetics, and biocomplexity are, so to speak, two sides of one and the same token. Biocomplexity refers to what classically was named as "the new biology" represented in the works by people like S. Kauffman, R. Solé, B. Goodwin, L. Margulis, H. Maturana y F. Varela, S. J. Gould, J. Lovelock, to name just a few authors. The cognitive neurosciences have undertaken the study of the organic unity of the mind and the brain without any hierarchy. It can be illustrated by the works by R. Sapolsky, A. Damasio, N. Castellanos and many others. Such is, roughly speaking the theoretical frame of this paper. This, however, is not a state-of-the art or review paper.

On this basis, this paper aims at showing that death is a choice, namely a free choice that is rooted deep in the most fundamental layers of everyone's existence. The crux of the argument is that if death is a personal decision, death is not an end-road or a dead-end phenomenon, but just a turning point.

Death is both a natural and a cultural happening. Reducing life to just its physical connotation is a risk of reductionism that seriously impedes understanding death. Such is indeed the case by the medical or forensic judgment that consists in naming someone dead based on his/her cerebral death. Death takes place in a manifold of ways and levels, but I will not go into such a topic in this paper. It remains the subject of a future article.

Rightly understood, there are not two things: Nature and nurture, they are one and the same thing. Such unity was indeed the merit of epigenetics, already since 2005 [2]. We both inherit and transmit genes and experiences. Epigenetics has been tested and proved in humans, animals and plants. In 2005 it was established that such heredity-transmission took place for three generations. By the end of 2020 it was assessed that epigenetics takes place along up to eight generations [3].

The interplay, certainly a dynamical and non-linear one, between nature and culture makes up the complexity of life, at large. It is such interplay that constitutes life as well as death. Thus, the distinction between the natural sciences son the one hand and the humanities, inclusion the human and

Department of Life Science, School of Medicine, Cali, Colombia

Correspondence: *Carlos Eduardo Maldonado, Department of Life Science, School of Medicine, Cali, Colombia; E-mail: maldonadocarlos@unbosque.edu.co*

***Received:** 22-Jul-2024, Manuscript No. PULCRIM-24-7121; **Editor assigned:** 25-Jul-2024, PreQC No. PULCRIM-24-7121 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 08-Aug-2024, QC No. PULCRIM-24-7121; **Revised:** 11-Jan-2025, Manuscript No. PULCRIM-24-7121 (R); **Published:** 18-Jan-2025, DOI: 10.37532.2529-797X.10(1).1-4*

social sciences on the other side is at the same time dangerous and untenable.

Nonetheless, the organism is the down to Earth pole of that interplay or also the scenario where they exist and interact. The organism is the living unity of both the mind and the body or any other name one wishes to give to them. Moreover, there are not two things: On the one hand the mind and on the other side the body. Science has come to discover the neuroscience of the body, which clearly shows that the belief about the centrality of the brain over the body is simple wrong [4-7].

The human organism is the space where culture and nature coincide as well as are differentiated. It is, though, a living space, susceptible hence after to both internal and external circumstances, ups and downs, dynamics and contingencies. Life is, by and large, the most complex system imaginable. To date, there are more than one hundred definitions of life and none is correct. Neither the genetic, nor the molecular, the biochemical or the physico-chemical, the social or the evolutionary, the developmental or the historical definitions. It appears all are incorrect just because they are always partial. That means, we do not have the slightest idea of what life is. I would like to highlight that this is a motive for optimism from the standpoint of research and thinking.

Life is a complex weave of unceasing learning and adaptation. We try to learn and adapt as best as we can, for there is never any warranty for anything. Moreover, learning and adaptation take place locally and therefore non-teleologically. From the point of view of complexity theory, we continuously live in rugged fitness landscapes.

Now, from an external point of view, it appears that death suddenly happens, eventually. It may occur as a consequence of a disease, but the disease may happen in a variety of ways or forms. According to the health sciences, about 98% of all diseases are epigenetic, which means that they are the complex intertwining of, briefly said, organic and cultural and psychological causes. "Cause" has here just a denotative meaning aiming at some sort of explanation. In other words, it is just an operative concept.

Accordingly, only about 2% of all diseases have a genetic reason. I shall leave aside here, for space reasons, that 2%. Now, if, say, 98% of all illnesses are epigenetic that points out to a particular circumstance, namely, nearly all diseases are triggered by emotional, affective or sensitive conditions. All in all, disease happens because of an emotional, sentimental or affective situation [8,9]. Sometimes indeed, many times, a disease is just a gate that, generally speaking, eventually leads to death.

G. Canguilhem argues that sometimes we fall sick in order not to die. This means that a disease is an alarm that the organism yields calling for attention when something does not go well. The trouble, though, is that most of time people do not pay enough attention, if at all, to that screaming. In principle, nothing serious happens. Nonetheless, as time flows, such an alarm is to be linked with another one, usually in a tone and framework quite different. The body normally speaks three languages. These are: Silence the body must not ache in any sense or regard; pleasure and pain. The body speaks to the mind, but the mind is most of time busy turning around with things in the world. According to phenomenology, the nature of mind consists in intentionality, which means that normally the mind is beyond itself focused on something else.

In principle two mains circumstances may take place. Either there is an accumulation of minor diseases so much so that eventually a serious one erupts or also, a normal existence may have occurred that is rather stable and sound, but one day a very serious illness emerges that puts the entire organism in reaction and passivity, slowness and discomfort. My point is that a disease is a choice of the organism aiming at warning of a physical, emotional, affective or existential discomfort. Sometimes, though, that warning may take place too late.

Such a general picture encounters a good counter-argument. It is, namely, what happens when serious disease happens to children and young people, say teenagers? Before the discovery of epigenetics science was really at odds. Children, teenagers and adults inherit genes and experiences nature and culture, without them explicitly knowing it.

The existence is deeply rooted in some past that was traditionally ignored but was latently speaking and acting. That past, however is not inevitable; it can be modified along the life styles, habits, experiences and learnings that may take place. The past may refer either to a short or medium lapse or also to a long lapse. Either way, some part of the past is literally incarnated in the body or also in the unity mind-body.

Whereas as normal medicine and the normal health sciences distinguish between health namely, the health of the body, period and mental health, the truth is that experientially they are one and the same. Yet, if the mind has some prevalence over the body, most diseases have a mental origin. The prevalence can either be explained by religion, philosophy, neurocognitive sciences, psychiatrics or even poetry and literature.

The body is the final stance of expressions that originate in the mind, the soul or the heart three different modes to refer to the depths of feelings and sensations.

Death is not a deterministic fact in any sense of the word

Life is an open-ended process with as many possibilities and potentialities as can be ever imagined. The greatest invention of everybody is one self's and no one ever ends inventing or creating it. Life consists in the constant creation or invention of one's own self throughout as many ways as can be ever achieved. Culture is indeed an ersatz for life at large.

People die, *i.e.,* decide to die in two main situations. Firstly, when they consider that their life has achieved the goals, drams, desires or plans once conceived. In these cases, people die calmly and death happens in a most peaceful way. The popular saying goes that people die hence as if they were saints while sleeping, they went to bed last night and never woke up. Such a picture can be hold with a number of variants.

Another way in which people decide to die is because they produce a (serious) illness or disease that in a rather short period of time makes life fade away. The variety, number and names of such diseases is ample. However, it should be clear that in any case the decision to die is nearly never a conscious or reflective act. Instead, it is a decision whose roots are to be find deep in the complexities of the human heart or soul.

Meaningfully, most of deaths happen as a heart attack. Medicine doctors and general people take such heart attacks for granted, alas! Technically said, cardiovascular diseases are, by and large, the leading cause of death globally. Yet, the prevailing mechanicism of the health sciences assume heart attacks as supposed; in other words, the distinction and even the separation between mind and body does a very little favor to the understanding of death. At the end of the day, death is a fatalistic or deterministic happening.

I would like to suggest that, at the very bottom of the life the reason because people decide to die is because they lack a sense of love *i.e.,* a love that cannot be fully expressed or uttered, certainly not in the plain language of everyday life. Life is much more complex than thought or ever expected.

Being as it may be, death is not a deterministic fact in any sense of the word. Rather, it is a decision that brings to the fore that death is not a dead end, but a gate that opens up unknown other possibilities. Here is where the mystery truly begins. Nonetheless some literature exists about such possibilities or horizons far beyond one's own beliefs. Conspicuous examples of that literature are: The Bardo-Thödol or the Tibetan Book of the Dead; The Egyptian Book of the Dead, also known as the Book of Coming Forth by Day or also Book of Emerging Forth into the Light; the Ceramic Codex or the Mayan Book of the Dead from various cultures or civilizations.

It is not my contention here to assess about such books. Rather, the aim is pointing out to a phenomenology of the possibilities that presumably each dying person may encounter. The scope remains here the fact that death is an option, a choice, a gate or a decision that everyone selects in a non-conscious or reflective way. It is rather a sensation, a feeling that is rooted in the complex weave of life. "Phenomenology" is the philosophical and fancy name for stories and accounts.

DISCUSSION

Thus, everyone's life is singular, a statement that goes without saying. Such, I would like to stress, is the merit of poetry and literature, opera and short stories, novels and theater, even music and painting. The arts, it appears have much larger and deeper understanding of life, in comparison with the sciences. This can safely lead to a different paper. I leave this aside for the time being, too.

An analogy is possible here, en passant. Craziness, much more than a disease, is an exit or escape gate when life becomes too hard to cope with. Indeed, given the unbearableness of the existence sometimes craziness is much more than a valid or legitimate biological solution. The entire literature about the Nazis concentration camps, for example, abounds with cases of prisoners becoming crazy (cfr, for instance, among a rich amount of books, P. Levi's books).

In any case, it should be clear that against all appearances death is the option most people choose when life is deeply at odds with itself or with the world or with the way things have turned or become. After all, in general, the living beings cannot control by any means their environment. Apparently when all other efforts have succumbed death is chosen as the best gate to exit from life.

There is certainly not scientific evidence about the claim in this paper. However, I would like to point out to two proofs. On the one hand the much unexplored phenomenology of the dying. Such a phenomenology is perfectly different to palliative care, important as it is. Most probably every reader could recall a set of experiences about close people dead.

The other proof is much subtler, for it consists in a vast fiction literature where we can encounter the main argument of this paper. The most important inferences, indeed, are never direct or immediate inferences, but indirect. Technically these are called uncertain inferences. In life as well as in science uncertain inferences largely prevail, even though they have been scarcely studied.

A most sensitive combination of science and the arts brings to the fore the fact that at the end of the day beauty is much more relevant than truth. This means, that truth can be important in a number of cases, but the experiences of life cannot be reduced to truth for there is also and most probably, mainly, beauty.

Thus, that people die when they decide they decide to is much more than a true statement, a most beautiful or both sensitive and sensible one. Life or death it appears are no always susceptible to be reduced to truth. People are sometime more than entitled to select, say craziness or death when they cannot cope with the harshness of existence. Life, very much like death, seem to be about softness, kindness and gentleness, to say the least.

Freedom, revisited

There is an apparently hidden layer of life, much deeper and much more sensitive and important than, say, rationality in any sense of the world. I would like to call such a layer as the ctonic dimension of the mind, the heart or the soul. The ctonic wingspan of life must not necessarily coincide with the Freudian unconscious or subconscious. It is a pre-predicative experience that cannot be fully expressed in a single language, but needs a complex intertwining of languages; for instance, the musical and the poetics, the musical or silence, the bodily or affectionate languages, among several others. (A language, different form a spoken or written form of language. Lenguaje, no lengua, in Spanish).

There are experiences that cannot be fully said or expressed spoken or written and certainly not in a propositional language; *i.e.,* in the form S is P. In most cases, most people are not entirely aware about such experiences. They are just lived and barely reflected upon.

When life was first discovered as a research program thanks to E. Schrödinger in 1944, it was conceived as a physical realm that cannot be reduced to physics, though. The term coined hence after was: Negentropy, meaning, literally, that living beings negate entropy. (In due time it was reckoned that science does not really know what physics consist of or is all about).

Accordingly, freedom is just a name for life in its depth and complexity. Therefore, freedom cannot be entirely grasped, for it would be then determined. Again, this what Spinoza was pointing at in his philosophy this mentioned just a theoretical hint. Death is, after all, a matter of freedom, definitely not a dead road. It is, namely a decision taken the way the most important decisions are usually taken: Not in rational, *i.e.*, argumentative manner but as an experience.

After all, being optimist or pessimist is not a rational fact. Nobody wakes up one day and decides to be optimist or pessimist. The reasons for such states lie deep in one's own heart or guts far beyond the encephalic system.

Death is indeed sought, wanted. Everybody really chooses when to accept the death's kiss or the deaths' hug.

Freedom is one of the strangest phenomenon in life. We are free to err and we are free to suffer, for instance. It appears, we are even free to die. Of course, we are also free to enjoy life, to love and be happy, among many other experiences and happenings in existence. Freedom has a wingspan that has been trivialized and manipulated *via* culture and many or its artifacts such as legal studies, politics, ethics and even philosophy, for instance. Most people just do not realize how wonderful and mysterious is freedom most probably the moist founding experience of life, *i.e.,* being alive.

Freedom, indeed, is gratuitous it needs no rationale and cannot be exhausted in a body of sentences and principles. More radically, freedom just like life is non-algorithmic. In the realm of anthropology, M. Mauss has studied such gratuitousness better than in any other study: The gift. The most primitive societies did know about gratuity giving without expecting a compensation. Against the ongoing current culture, life does not consist in any cost-benefit relationship. We have become interested beings, losing, indeed, some freedom, some light, some candidness.

We do inherit and transmit both gens and experiences. However, epigenetics is by no means any sign of determinism. The inherited experiences can be modified by, again, new habits, new learnings, new food and drugs, new relationships and environments, which means that we can transmit brand new experiences than those we inherited. The merit of epigenetics that is to be highlighted in this context consists in uniting nature and culture, rather than in shedding some (wrong) light about the capabilities of freedom. In other words, we are very much attached to the past, much more than previously expected and the past does act upon each of us in much subtler ways than we thought. Nonetheless, the future is not determined by the past as such, by it can be generated in brand new bifurcations according to the learnings and adaptations that take place in the present.

Being as it may be, life is lived in the present and a wisdom about life is definitely a wisdom about the present not without the past or the future, but in many occasions in spite of them.

To be sure, the most ultimate act of freedom consists in deciding in most cases even in spite of those we love, when to die. It is the most intimate and personal of all possible decisions. As a speculation, it remains to know whether being born was also a decision marked by freedom.

CONCLUSION

I have spoken here about the soul, the mind or the heart. They are not necessarily synonyms or equivalents. Here they are used as landmarks that point to a much larger and deeper dimension than everyday life in its first glance, namely to the ctonic dimension of life, there were apparently reason has apparently never entered, so far.

The decision to die takes place in some layer or space quite different from reason and logic, at least in their standard and classical interpretations. When is it propitious to die seems to be the outcome of a most complex weave of sensations, emotions, feelings and thoughts which, nonetheless, remain afar form reflections or consciousness. It is a most striking happening that results from the complex intertwining between, loosely said, nature and culture.

Culture may refer to personal as well as familiar circumstances, or even social contrivances that point out to personal prestige or reputation. Now, nature can be taken as a set of biological and ecological situations that either cross transversally the organism or are rooted somehow in each individual organism.

The decision to die is a singularly personal one. Death leaves family, relatives and dear friends behind and in many cases, some of them may have an unfinished history. It is therefore a most radical decision, one that cannot be not taken. The crux of the argument lies in the moment people decide to go. All the jargon about non-linearity, self-organization, degrees of freedom or learning and adaptation are just shades of such a decision.

Life, it appears is entirely marked by an experience of light. Already when the zygote is formed once the egg decides to be fertilized by the spermatozoid, there is an explosion of light, according to recent research. An explosion of atoms of zinc is produced as if announcing that somehow a new life begins sparks are generated. Accordingly, the end of life consists in a magnificent revelation of a brightest light, if we are to believe all the Near-Death Experiences (NDE), about which there is a vast amount of literature not to mention the various books of the dead referred to above. Let us say that the (NDE) is a chapter of its own in both medicine clinical accounts and the philosophy of medicine, with a vast array of literature about it.

It seems that in-between these two magnificent experiences of light, the existence seems to go among mountains and valleys of darkness, semi-clarity and light, without any specific order. The wisdom of life consists in trying to follow lights whilst acknowledging that sometime clouds and storms may occur and that eventually they will pass by. Some people just seem not to realize this and many times they succumb under suffering, grieving and deep pain in the heart. As they say, many times people's heart are broken and people cannot resist the experience.

Astonishingly, the neurosciences have sufficiently shown that happiness and joy very much as having insights and eureka moments produce in the brain sparks and light, whereas depression and bad or wrong ideas literally obscure the brain. There is a vast array of literature about this.

I have considered the experience of death as an experience of election, decision. It is in this sense that, weird as it may appear, death is not a happening to falls on people from the outside as a sort of fate or unavoidable happening. Death is sought and wanted, in its own appropriate even if ctonic moment. Moreover, consciously unwillingly if allowed, people are open to death. Thus, the experience of death is an experience of openness or also of letting go (Gelassenheit, Offenheit). Aparently Pascal was right, namely the heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of. In other words, truth can be known not only by reason but also and most probably also by the heart.

(People do not get crazy because of a disarray of ideas. They get crazy because of a disarray of emotions and feelings, soit dit en passant).

There are possible understandings and explanations about when people decide to die. Without technicalities, this paper has worked out multimodal explanations. The technicalities can be enlarged in a different time and space. Multimodal logic is one of the non-classical logics, one of the sciences of complexity. It should be sufficient for the intentions of this paper to keep in mind that it is the complex weave of possibilities, contingencies, necessity and impossibility. In other words, it is all about the intricate weave of beliefs, knowledge, one's own assessments along with others' claims, both the linearity and nonlinearity of time together with obligations and expectations of nearly all kind.

In this paper I do not pretend to claim that death I not a mystery. The mystery remains as to what is "on the other side" and how it relates to our lifeworld. Rather, it is the dying which appears here at the focus, something that, to the best of my knowledge has not be previously seen.

The Western civilization was and has been adamantly logocentric or encephalocentric. In contrast, for example, the Egyptians were cardiocentric, which means that they trusted more on the heart that on reason. Wisdom, I would like to suggest, is born deep in the heart. If so, we can balance the brain and the heart, to say the least we may start trusting in our hunches and intuitions. Apparently, intuitions, hunches and eureka moments are cuddled and nurtured in the enteric system or also in the heart. Now, the heart is definitely anchored in the body, but talking about the importance of the body should by no means lead to the wrong conclusion of some sort of dualism again mind and body, mind or body.

The body contains a fantastic wisdom of its own. More exactly, the body does know things that either the mind does not know or that it takes some more time to learn and to be aware of. Without any doubt the wisdom of the body is certainly not different from the wisdom of nature. The soul, the heart, the mind are ways to refer to that dimension where the most striking decisions are taken: Death is but the most radical and personal one of all possible decisions.

In case the existence may be or may have been a burden, still death offers a gate to exit. Rather than being a closed end, it is a solution. A most complex one, if it were.

Colophon 1: There are of course, as it happens, some people upon who death is not a decision, barely a choice. They do not want to die; in some cases, they do die but never wanted to. Significantly, these are always gentle people. Many of us have known such gentle buddies.

Colophon 2: Human beings are made up with two truly three brains, thus: Firstly, the enteric system, then the encephalic system and finally the heart. The brain or encephalic system was discovered initially by Ramon y Cajal, at the beginning of the 20th Century. In 1987 the guts were identified as a brain and named thereafter as the enteric system. Finally, in 1991 the heart was identified as a brain, not just a muscle, not just a pump.

REFERENCES

1. Alshami AM. Pain: Is it all in the brain or the heart?. Curr Pain Headache Rep. 2019;23:1-4.
2. Duncan FE, Que EL, Zhang N, et al. The zinc spark is an inorganic signature of human egg activation. Sci Rep. 2016;6(1):24737.
3. Föhr T, Waller K, Viljanen A, et al. Does the epigenetic clock GrimAge predict mortality independent of genetic influences: an 18 year follow-up study in older female twin pairs. Clin Epigenetics. 2021;13:1-9.
4. Hillary RF, Stevenson AJ, Cox SR, et al. An epigenetic predictor of death captures multi-modal measures of brain health. Mol Psych. 2021;26(8):3806-16.
5. Jablonka E, Lamb MJ. The evolution of information in the major transitions. J Theor Biol. 2006;239(2):236-46.
6. Kanherkar RR, Bhatia-Dey N, Csoka AB. Epigenetics across the human lifespan. Front Cell Dev Biol. 2014;2:49.
7. Lund JB, Li S, Baumbach J, et al. DNA methylome profiling of all-cause mortality in comparison with age-associated methylation patterns. Clin Epigenetics. 2019;11:1-8.
8. Moosavi A, Ardekani AM. Role of epigenetics in biology and human diseases. Iran Biomed J. 2016;20(5):246.
9. Ericsson CD, Johnson PC, Dupont HL, et al. Ciprofloxacin or trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole as initial therapy for travelers' diarrhea: A placebo-controlled, randomized trial. Ann Intern Med. 1987;106(2):216-20.