

P A R T II

Chapter VI

IDEAS OF LIFE, SUFFERING AND DEATH

In this part of the project we shall be concerned with the ideas of life, suffering and death. These notions varied in conotation in different cultural and religious context.

After having noted these diversities we shall pass on to a considering (a) the concept of death and then (b) the meaning of life.

Humanity is reflected by the society and the societal values it adopts. However much there by pressures on these values, the basic concepts remain beyond change. Quality of life which is infinite and beyond measures, is portrayed through humility, care, concern, compassion and cure to problems associated with life, suffering and death.

The message of enduring human behaviour and human response is all pervasive in our culture and lives to accept, adopt and practice ethics and to value human relationship to preserve sanctity of life and its quality on a universal basis.

The rapid pace of scientific and technological developments including the new developments in biology and

medicine are exerting a profound influence on social, ethical and moral value systems of societies. These in turn extend into major way on Health Policy issues such as, optimising the social uses of medical knowledge and technology, how human values influence goals, priorities and strategies and how ethics serves as a bridge between policies and values.

Life, suffering and death is a long marathon - a never ending journey. It is only the quality of life that determines the guiding principle to bear pain, to alleviate pain, but never to inflict pain. Care, concern, compassion and cure are the keystone of truthful ethics and human values. Such values have to be cultivated since they impinge in every walk of life, at every stage and in every action.

There is a stress on developing a deeper understanding of human values themselves based on cultural, social and religious traditions which yielded ethical value systems. Ethics is the bridge between policy and human values. The economic and social history of a country, its cultural and intellectual heritage, its political system are reflected in the formulation and execution of health policy. The mechanistic technological intrusions into medical care should be carefully balanced by the moral values of medicine. The ethical institutions have to keep pace with rapidly advancing fields in science and technology.

The relief of suffering is one of the primary ends of medicine. Such a concept acquires the rejection of the historical dualism of mind and body. In some theologies, suffering has been seen as bringing one closer to God as ennobling. Suffering also has a temporal element in that it influences the person's perception of future events. Suffering threatens the intactness of the person as a complex social and psychological entity. The relief of suffering and the cure of disease must be seen as twin obligations of the medical profession that is truly dedicated to the care of the sick. Physician's failures to understand the nature of suffering case result in medical interventions that, though technically adequate, not only fail to relieve suffering but become a source of suffering.

The Meaning Given to Life, Suffering and Death

Mankind's most fundamental beliefs are those that concern life, suffering and death - what different societies hold and teach about the origin of man, the purpose of life, the significance of death and life after death.

Death means different things to different societies and cultures and at different times of life. For some it is the end of all life, for others the entrance to another life. In some societies the death of young children is commonplace,

in others it is tragic. Whether death should be delayed at all costs is an ethical issue in today's technological societies. Obviously the religious significance of death, for individuals and societies, must play a large part in policy decisions about allocating resources for technological means of avoiding death.

In modern times of course religious world views have given way to secular humanism. Secular humanism is a view point that places human welfare at the centre of the moral universe, and looks empirically to the way the world works in order to determine what is right and what is wrong. It is a doctrine of reason, compassion, respect, charity, and tolerance, not because these values are divinely inspired, but because these are the values that work best. In advocating them, it keeps company with much of what is central in many of the world's religious traditions, which, while they are not secular, are often humane.

The Concept of Death

Although most of the great philosophers have touched on the problem of death, few have dealt with it systematically or in detail. Frequently, as in the case of Spinoza, an author's views on the subject are known to us from a single sentence and almost all stages in Western history we are likely to discover more about the topic in the writings of men of letters than in

those of technical philosophers. Schopenhauer, who was the first of the major philosophers to deal extensively with the subject, declared that death is the muse of philosophy. And the existentialist philosophers from Kierkegaard to the present have more or less consistently endorsed Schopenhauer's contention.

The primary concern of most philosophers who have dealt with the question of death has been to discover ways in which men may mitigate or overcome the fear it tends to inspire.

The clearest and simplest answer to the first of these questions was given by Voltaire, who stated, "The human species is the only one which knows it will die, and it knows this through experience" (Dictionnaire philosophique). The interesting question is how man knows he will die. The view that experience alone gives knowledge of death derives support from the ignorance of death displayed by many children and from anthropological data indicating that many primitive peoples refuse even as adults to regard death as necessary or universal. However, a number of twentieth century philosophers have contested this view, especially Max Scheler and Heidegger, who argue that the awareness of death is an immanent, a priori structure of human consciousness.

It is not easily refuted, the knowledge of death

depends not only upon experience but also upon a level of mental culture that makes it possible to interpret experience accurately.

Freud has thereby rendered credible the idea that knowledge of death may exist despite apparent ignorance, stated that the consciousness, not the apparent ignorance of death is merely superficial, the unconscious being firmly convinced of its immortality.

Is death a natural phenomenon? It should also be observed that if by a 'natural' phenomenon one means a fact that can be fully understood and explained by empirical inquiry, death is not a natural phenomenon for Heidegger or Scheler. This reluctance to explain death in terms of natural causes has an interesting parallel in the reluctance to explain life itself naturalistically, and the religious or metaphysical perspectives which give rise to nonnaturalistic interpretations of death.

Are there great variations in the awareness or fear of death from person to person, from epoch to epoch, from culture to culture? If so, how are these variations to be explained? Surprisingly, very little attention has been given to these questions.

For Schopenhauer the finite, empirical self is a manifestation of a cosmic will that has destined man to live out his life in suffering or painful striving. The only remedy is to achieve a state of indifference or pure willlessness - a state best known in moments of pure aesthetic contemplation but to which the awareness of death substantially contributes.

According to Nietzsche, the superior man will live constantly in the awareness of death, joyfully and proudly assuming death as the natural and proper terminus of life.

Heidegger and Sartre, like most existentialists, urge us to cultivate the awareness of death chiefly as a means of heightening our sense of life. The knowledge of death gives to life a sense of urgency that it would otherwise lack. The same point has been made by Freud, who compared life without the consciousness of death to a Platonic romance or to a game played without stakes.

Heidegger says, dying is the one thing no one can do for you, each of us must die alone. To shut out the consciousness of death is therefore to refuse one's individuality and to live inauthentically.

Let us now turn to the question whether life can nevertheless have any 'meaning' or 'significance'. Sometimes

when a person asks whether life has any meaning, what he wants to know is whether there is superhuman intelligence that fashioned human beings along with other objects in the world to serve some end - whether their role is perhaps analogous to the part of an instrument (or its player) in a symphony. When Macbeth explained that "life is a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury/signifying nothing". His point evidently was not that human life is part of any design.

(b) The Concept of the "meaning" of Life :

On the other hand, when we ask whether a particular person's life has or had any meaning, we are usually concerned not with cosmic issues but with the question whether certain purposes are to be found in his life. Thus, most of us would say without hesitation that a person's life had meaning if we knew that he devoted himself to a cause or we would at least be ready to say that it acquired meaning once he became sufficiently attached to his cause. Whether we approve of what they did or not, most of us would be ready to admit. We seem to mean two things in characterizing such lives as meaningful, we assert, first, that the life in question had some dominant, over-all goal or goals which gave direction to a great many of the individual's actions and, second, that these actions and possibly others not immediately related to the overriding goal were performed with a special zest that was not present before

the person became attached to his goal or that would not have been present if there had been no such goal in his life. It is not necessary, however, that a person should be devoted to a cause, in the sense just indicated, before we call his life meaningful. It is sufficient that he should have some attachments that are not too shallow.

Let us now turn to the question of whether life is ever worth living. It is easy to show that in at least two senses which seem to be of importance to many people, human lives frequently are worth living.

We seem to be making two assertions, first, that the person has some goals (other than merely to be dead or to have his pains eased) which do not seem to him to be trivial and second that there is some genuine possibility that he will attain these goals. These observations are confirmed by various systematic studies of people who contemplated suicide of others who unsuccessfully attempted suicide, and of situations in which people did commit suicide. When the subjects of these studies declared that their lives were no longer worth living they generally meant either that there was nothing left in their lives about which they seriously cared or that there was no real likelihood of attaining any of the goals that mattered to them. It should be noted that in this sense

an individual may well be mistaken in his assertion that his life is or is not worthwhile any longer : he may, for example, mistake a temporary indisposition for a more permanent loss of interest, or, more likely, he may falsely estimate his chances of achieving the ends he wishes to attain.