



Corey Anton, professor of communication studies at Grand Valley State University

By Mohammad Memarian*

Humans have been thinking about death since time immemorial because it seems to be the most concrete fact of life. Moreover, many of our current intellectual engagements with it have had parallels throughout history because it seems to be the most consistent fact of life. However, new angles for looking at it have always been found and advanced, especially in times when death, in one global move, reminds us all of its omnipresence.

"COVID-19 made us recognize that death can happen at any time to anyone," said Corey Anton, professor of communication studies at Grand Valley State University, in an exclusive talk with Iran Daily. He is the author of a thought provoking book, 'How Non-being Haunts Being: On Possibilities, Morality, and Death Acceptance', published by Fairleigh Dickinson University Press in 2020, in which he draws upon ideas of many notable thinkers to formulate a vision of good life under the inescapable shadow of death. In our short exchange which covered a range of subjects from vampires to communicational roots of transcendence, he seemed to be most concerned with the question that how we can "become adequately thankful for all that we have experienced" during our life.

*Mohammad Memarian is a staff writer at Iran Daily.

HOW NON-BEING HAUNTS BEING

COREY ANTON

ON POSSIBILITIES, MORALITY, AND DEATH ACCEPTANCE

EXCLUSIVE

Immortality would produce its own set of problems

What's so urgent about talking about death? Why does it seem that death-awareness is on the rise, globally?

I think it is mainly because of the pandemic. COVID-19 brings a kind of pervasive mortality salience to everyone. COVID-19 serves as a loud knell heard by all of those people, ever growing in numbers in the modern western world, who otherwise have been able to hide from death or at least allow its toll to seem so distant as to be inaudible. Having to deal with COVID-19 has not only forced upon people the fact that death will happen eventually, but it carries along a deeper recognition as well: Death can happen at any time to anyone.

What if death was not a function of biological events, like in the sci-fi movie 'In Time' (2011) which in its criticism of alternative forms of class-based capitalism, establishes a non-linear time frame for death?

I am unfamiliar with this film, so I cannot speak about it. But from the vantage of my book, I would just quickly add that fictions, in all forms, are fascinating exemplars of non-being haunting being, that is, of things not being as they appear. This also means that "fictions" and "pretend" and "make-believe" are all actually part of nature. We, humans, simply happen to be that part of nature that can meaningfully entertain what is not that case.

You also noted that "we humans are able to know that we are going to die." Animals seem to know that they 'may' die, but I'm curious to know if they (or some of them) are aware of the certainty of death at one point in their lives?

I think that full and complete death awareness is a human phenomenon, though certainly other animals do have some awareness of death, especially the death/loss of others. Elephants do have weeping grounds and some primates, with their sophisticated nervous systems, are able to represent absences, losses, etc. The difference though seems considerable. This issue is put into suggestive light both painfully and humorously in the "Onion" Youtube video titled 'Scientists Successfully Teach Gorilla It Will Die Someday'.

My only addendum to that would be to return to the issue of COVID-19. We all die someday, but any of us could die at any moment. Keeping that in mind, it seems most logical to ask: How can we become adequately thankful for all that we have experienced, known, loved, for the relationship we have, and further, how we can, individually and collectively, make the most of our limited time?

One might expect that such a book be written by a professor of philosophy, psychology, theology, or even history. Why would a professor of communication write about the interaction of being and non-being? Is there a significant communicational side to death discourse?

Well, I'm not sure how to respond as there is much to say. First, I myself have various degrees, including a degree in psychology, and my PhD was half in communication theory and half in continental philosophy. That said, as death affects all people, anyone and everyone should have spent some time thinking about it. Many different scholars from countless different fields have written about it, and I have tried to learn as much as I could from many of them. If there is something unique about the view that I am bringing, I think it is the fact that I am not an atheist and do not really understand atheism, but I do not believe in life after death. However, I don't think that accepting death as the end point of life automatically amounts to atheism or nihilism. In fact, I strongly beg to differ: Life, especially as it includes death awareness, is the miracle; it is the "good news" and it itself is cause for unrelenting gratitude.

Moving more directly to your question, I think that both communication studies and communication theory have a unique vantage into death acceptance, as any serious study of communication quickly reveals the kinds of transcendence that communication and language afford. It's that sense of transcendence, the one that comes from communication, which is the original taste of timelessness that people have in their mouths when they think and speak of a life beyond this one. Think of it this way: If I place a banana on the counter, it will age, turn brown, then black, and soon be inedible, but the word "banana" does not age in any of these ways. Likewise, a banana can be shared with a person or two, maybe three, but the word "banana" is not divided if more readers come to read it. If I say, "There is a banana shortage," that could be a fact of the matter, but if I were to say, "Don't use the word, 'banana,' as there is a shortage," I hope all recognize the insanity. Words, discourse, language are negentropic; they are vehicles by which we transcend the immediate here and now of our bodily reality, and this primarily, even though largely unconsciously, seems to be a main source of intelligibility to afterlife beliefs.

You observe that death makes human life particularly meaningful. With all due respect, vampires beg to differ; and there are a whole lot of dramas out there which establish the meaningfulness of their lives. (I personally like 'Only Lovers Left Alive' by Jim Jarmusch. But you choose your pick.) One wise vampire might argue that humans' dismissal of the good qualities of eternal life might be a reincarnation of the Aesopian fox who, upon finding out that he couldn't reach the grapes, said: "They were not that ripe, after all." What's your response to the community of vampires – or elves, for that matter?

I think that this is very interesting, and perhaps revealing in unconscious ways. First, there are no actual vampires out in the world. They are the fictional product of human imaginations, and they exemplify how human awareness of death makes life meaningful in certain ways. For example, my guess is that other organisms, those wholly unaware of their own mortality, do not fantasize about vampires and such. Vampires represent an unconscious register of why death denial is problematic. They reveal our suspicions that such beings, as undead yet somehow still alive, would need to feed upon the living for their sustenance. They are traditionally cast as evil and harmful, because we seem to know on an unconscious level, that people are not meant to live indefinitely, and that such an existence would be its own kind of parasitic horror.

Perhaps vampires seem especially relevant and salient to us as a return of the repressed: We in the US have allowed lifeless corporations to be legally classified as persons.

Somehow following the above question, what about those who had a near-death experience, or recovered from coma?

Questions regarding near death experience (NDEs) are interesting and relevant. I have no doubt that NDEs occur, just as psychedelic experiences or dreams happen. In all such circumstances, some people claim to have been on the "other side" of life and/or to have encountered people long since deceased. "Ego-death" experiences, which move an individual beyond or outside the parameters of normally everyday reality, are proof that our common-sense reality is not necessarily the only game in town. Just like returning home after a trip to a faraway place brings fresh eyes and new possibilities to one's home and life, people's NDEs provide the distance and then a return filled with new possibilities of living and of self-understanding. NDEs need not be taken as anything more than demonstrations of the wide diversity of possible experiences within life. Hence, these experiences are not to be denied as much as interpreted as experiences on the very fringes of life and which may help us in our self-understanding and social practices. Much could be said along similar lines for dreams, which prior to the work of Freud were taken to be something otherworldly. Historically, many people throughout the globe understood dreams to offer the possibility of "visitations," contacts with the dead. I'm not sure how many people today earnestly interpret and believe in their dreams in these ways (as I think most people in today's world believe their dreams to be the product of their personal and collective unconscious) but I can imagine a future world where people take NDEs as many today seem to understand dreams. Ultimately, all NDE reports are from the living to the living.

We have not achieved immortality yet; that much is granted. And in your arguments, you seem to presume that death is a biological fact which can never be beaten, especially when you argue that "birth is a death sentence." But there are people out there who are hopeful, however faintly, that technology may someday materialize that age-old dream. What do you have to tell them?

Many people seem to want to live forever, or at least have a life prolonged indefinitely. I understand, and some technologies hold the promise of radical life extension. A main problem, though, is even if humans could prolong life so that people could live to be 500 years old or maybe even 1,000+ years old, that would produce its own set of problems. Think of how much more tragic "a young death" would be. Someone who lives to be a mere 60 or 70 would seem to be have been deprived of that much more. But it is much more than that. Perhaps even more significantly, everyone on the planet cannot live to be 500 or 1,000. There are not sufficient resources, and who, exactly, would get to live in these ways? It is most likely that only wealthy ruling elites would have such luxury, and they could conceivably hold their reins of power for centuries. Take various commanding tyrants around the world and imagine that they are going to live for 1,000+ years. They could accumulate horrifying wealth and power. Social inequality would likely worsen and the divide between "the haves" and "the have nots" would grow much worse than it already is. In many ways death has always been and remains the great leveler and equalizer: It keeps various flows of power from coagulating.

So, my advice for people who have the age-old dream of living forever is to gain realistic perspective on who they are (finite animals), and to graciously accept their fate of intergenerational existence which demands, along other things, sharing and taking turns. People may have to look beyond their egos, discover how indebted to others they are, and how they, in fact, are only on loan to themselves. If people can discover who they really are, they may gain the wisdom and grace to accept death as the price for being born, with death acceptance as gratuity.

For the privileged, death looks like a distant event that most often occurs in old ages in a hospital setting. But in many parts of the world, especially in war torn communities, people live under the constant threat of death. They should have a different interpretation of living with the fact of death, right?

Yes, that is right. I think that people who are surrounded by the fact of death are more easily able to accept death – however brutal and unpleasant – as part of life. In contrast, the further removed from death people get, the more that they can imagine a life where death is not an essential part of it. Hence, even in countries that are not war-torn, people can be more or less familiar with death. Even in peaceful places, people can routinely witness the slaughter of the animals they eat and watch their relatives die in their homes, and here death becomes a deep reminder of how fleeting life is, how much is simply beyond our control and how humble is our lot. In contrast, as people no longer witness the killing of animals for their food and when they no longer face death of loved ones in their homes, they can slowly and imperceptibly start to imagine life separated off from death. Such imagination carries with it subtle ego-gratifying thoughts, very comforting and yet arrogant ones. Along the way, the ego can grow to dragon size proportions and come to dominate, and people lose perspective on who they really are.

You argue that life can't be looked at from without. That sounds true. But so is the consciousness, one might argue. Or the language. Or the emotional core of the human psyche. Or, as some scholars have argued, our body. What makes life specific in that regard?

Hmm, I guess I don't believe this is that controversial of a claim. And you are right that the logic applies to many other domains. Life can only be known, experienced, and talked about from within life. I personally find it miraculous that life only knows itself from this inside. I mean, think about it: We emerge to self-consciousness, realizing that we are here and alive only after having been alive for a significant time, and, on the other hand, as we approach death, we will experience it as, "I'm dying, I'm dying, I'm dying..." We will not be there to announce, "I now am dead." It will remain a task for others to determine. The mobius-like nature of life and the cosmos, the fact that it has no outside, or at the least can only be known from within itself is mysterious, amazing and awe-inspiring.

It is rather interesting to me that each person knows the world only from his or her own vantage, life-span, and limited basis of comparison. Each and every life, no matter the total length, from within its own terms is fully itself and whole. The sense that anyone has died prematurely, lived an incomplete life and been denied time, comes only from the death awareness of those still alive. We, the living, look upon the child who died and pronounce that the death was a tragedy and premature. But for that child, who has no basis or frame for comparison, they simply never knew any other life. At a different scale, this is partly why empathy can be difficult for some people: We know the world from our own vantage, and it takes imaginative work to put ourselves in the shoes of others.