



CONCEPT OF DEATH IN SUFI THOUGHT*

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ABSTRACT

Death is a fact that creates unknown and deep anxieties for most people. If death did not exist, much of what people create artistically might not exist, either, representing as it sometimes does what lies in the artist's soul. The fear of not existing leads people to take steps towards being existent, constant, and permanent, such as the creation of works. Existential psychology shares the same opinion with Islamic mysticism about finding death important, but the respective reasons are very different. Existential theories state that it is not possible to understand life without accepting the fact of death, that death is the most important fact that makes life meaningful, and that it is not possible to leave death only to those who are dying (Yalom, 2001). In this way of finding death important, it can be said that Islamic mysticism has similarities with existential theorists. Existentialists state that confronting death—meaning coming across the fact of death and accepting the truth—is important to create a meaningful life, and they evaluate death as a meaningful fact for life. A similar view that links life and the meaningfulness of death arises from different rationales between the two philosophies. To understand the main difference between these two views is to understand the value of life for each opinion. The value of life for Sufis may not be the same as for existentialists. To know how death has different meanings for different cultures and beliefs is important. It is valuable to give as an example how Sufis experience this perception and how death does not always create anxiety.

Key Words: Death, Sufism

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SUFİ DÜŞÜNÇESİNDE ÖLÜM KAVRAMI

ÖZET

Ölüm çoğu insan için bilinmeyen ve derin kaygılar yaratan bir gerçektir. Eğer ölüm olmasaydı, insanların yarattığı sanat eserlerinin çoğu ya da bunların altında yatan sanatçı ruh ortaya konmayabilirdi. Varolmama korkusu insanları, varolmak için kalıcı eserler üretmek adına adım atmaya yöneltir. Varoluşçu psikoloji, ölümü önemli bulma konusunda İslam mistisizmi ile aynı görüşü paylaşmaktadır, ancak bu iki görüşün ölüm kavramını anlamlı bulma konusundaki nedensel açıklamaları birbirlerinden çok farklıdır. Varoluşçu kuram ölümün yaşamı anlamlı kılan en önemli gerçek olduğunu, ölüm gerçeğini kabul etmeden hayatı anlamamanın ve ölümü sadece ölmekte olanlara bırakmanın mümkün olmadığını ifade eder (Yalom, 2001). Ölümü bu şekilde önemli bulma konusunda, İslam tasavvufu ve varoluşçu kuramcılar arasında benzerlikler olduğu söylenebilir. Varoluşçu kuramcılar ölüm gerçeğiyle yüzleşmenin- yani ölüm gerçeğiyle karşılaşma ve gerçeği kabul etme- anlamlı bir yaşam yaratmak için önemli olduğunu ve ölümün yaşam için anlamlı bir olgu olduğunu belirtirler. Bu iki görüşün yaşam ve ölümün anlamı konusundaki benzerliği farklı nedensel açıklamalara dayanır. İki bakış açısı arasındaki temel farkı anlamak için her birinin hayata yüklediği değeri anlamak gerekir. Yaşamın anlamı Sufiler için varoluşçularla aynı olmayabilir. Ölümün farklı kültürlerde ve inançlarda farklı anlamları olduğunu bilmek önemlidir. Sufilerin bunu nasıl algıladığını ve ölümün nasıl her zaman kaygı yaratmadığını bir örnek olarak sunmak bu açıdan değerli bulunmuştur.

Anahtar kelimeler: Ölüm, Sufizm

Death, an existential dilemma

The fact of death creates unknown, scary, cold, complicated, and deep anxieties for most people. If death did not exist, much of what people create artistically might not exist, either, representing as it sometimes does what lies in the artist's soul. In the context of the evolutionary stages of humanity, in the sense of the spiritual journey (Seyr-i Suluk) of the soul in Islamic mysticism, most people cannot pass to the second stage, described in terms of a city metaphor in Sadık Efendi's pamphlet, (http://dosyalar.semazen.net/Seyh_Sadik_Efendi_Risalesi.pdf) in which the populations of cities decrease as the spiritual journey advances. Such an advancement in a spiritual journey could conceivably be identified as maturation, but it should be understood that the sense is not the maturation that humanist therapy theorists employ; rather, it is the level a soul reaches in its journey towards its core. The concept of stages of existence differs between Western psychology theorists and Sufi terminology. For Sufis, maturity is not accepting nothingness because there is persuasion and logic involved in that process, as well; rather, it is sensing nothingness. This discussion, however, is the subject of a different study and is not detailed further here. If Sadık Efendi's pamphlet and every mystic source addressing spiritual evolution are accurate, though, a common population that is both at the beginning of spiritual evolution and immature is a subject for both some personality theorists and therapy theorists. This commonality unites and verifies personality theorists at the starting point. When examined from this point, the concept of death (Ökten, 2010), which has been covered in numerous historical and intellectual

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scripts including the texts of the Pyramids, Gilgamiş Saga, Ilyada of Homeros, Çiçero, Farabi, Schopenhaur, and Heidegger, would have only a personal meaning. It would neither mean the end of being alive, as Heidegger said (2011), nor not dying because death does not exist, as Kierkegaard said (2010). It is either all of them, or none of them. In this perspective, death will not be fully understood because perception of the abstract differs from person to person. The concept of an abstract “witnessing death of others” (Heidegger, 2011, p. 253) would mean that watching death and that consciousness after death (for those who believe in life after death) are separated by and experienced with the senses and thus involve a consciousness state that is beyond existing reasoning. In other words, whether divine or not, regardless of the information available for the condition, how it is perceived relies on the individual experiencing it. If so, how is it possible to define death as a concept that worries people in general?

As described in Heidegger’s (2011) “existence and time”, being not alive anymore, not existing in the world is witnessed by others, and people are aware of a differentiation. They describe being not alive, not existing in the world, as death. Thus, the fear of not existing leads people to take steps towards being existent, constant, and permanent, such as the creation of works. When taken from this point, it is possible to think that existential psychology and religious terminology use similar terms and value death in similar ways. Indeed, most theological writings echo these sentiments. In existential psychology, knowing death would bring a current world of greater satisfaction; likewise, knowing death would bring a world that includes organization of this world’s life for a better afterlife. Both of these attitudes are against human nature. Similarly, though, both would provide a more content life. The reason for the co-existence of these two paradoxical features could be explained by the idea that a person seeking a content life in this world would not be in the appropriate mindset in the person–God relationship.

Existential psychology thus shares the same opinion with Islamic mysticism about the importance of death, but the reasons are very different. To understand approaches towards death, it makes sense to discuss how each approaches the concept of existence because death is actually the end of existence. According to Birgül (2012) in the thought of Sheikh Galip a well known sufi it is more important “to know what he is” than “being”. In Islamic mysticism, and of course in Islam, its basis, it could be understood from Islam’s Prophet that “People are asleep, and they wake up when they die”. In *The Ringstones of Wisdom (Fusus al-Hikam)*, Ibn Arabi give this quote of the Prophet Yusuf as “the word of Prophet Yusuf’s saying that God made his dreams come true is interpreted as a person’s commenting on his dreams come true is interpreted as another person’s commenting on his dream from which he is awakened, although he never knew he was a sleep and had never wakened” (Ibn Arabi, 2010, p. 75). This quote is a reference to the above-mentioned Hadith. Prophet Yusuf woke up and lived what he saw in his dream, and when he said that God made his dreams come true, he thought that he was awake, but dreaming is sleep, in sleep. The existence of humans in this world is the perception in the world of the senses. Rumi (2007, p. 525) stated this relationship in a metaphoric way. “Deem not the fat (the white of the eye) to be the cause of sight, O son; otherwise none would see (visible) forms in dream”. Even though the meaning here is that we cannot comprehend information beyond vision with senses and logic, another meaning is that because we see things in dream yet sleep without our eyes, how can we be sure that what we see in this world is real? Ibn Arabi’s perception of existence is about the relationship of humans with absolute existence and the transfiguration of the Creator by shining the mirror. But the one seen in the mirror is not the projected one (Ibn Arabi, 2010) and that is the clearest answer to criticisms about the union of existences.

This situation could be described in terms of shadows. It is possible to say that shadow is an existence that can be seen, but it is only an existence dependent on other existence; it is not independent. Shadow is related to other existence, and in our metaphor, this is a projection of

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divine radiance of God according to Ibn Arabi. Ibn Arabi (2012, p. 22), one of the most important thinkers in Islamic mysticism, transferred the Hadith of the Prophet, which helps with understanding human existence: “God existed and nothing else existed with him—it is still likewise”. Human kind, described as the God’s art and a part of God’s science in Turkish poets (Büyükyıldırım, 2009). In sufism being human is a visual existence but like every other thing, it is a transfiguration of Divine Radiance. The existence of it in this world is not from itself to itself but from another to itself. The direction of the relationship between God and individual is also from God to individual in theological view (Taşdelen, 2013).

The Hadith of the Prophet mentioned above not only points to death before death but also describes a view on the concept of existence. Heidegger (2011), when saying that existence notices itself in nonexistence and this fact of nonexistence causes stress, says that this awareness creates the feeling of nothingness. If so, existentialists do not affirm death; they say that accepting its presence means union, and it may make life meaningful.

Comprehension of death in existential therapy

When Yalom (2001) relates the fact of death, he references the advice of Adolph Meyer to his students about not talking about death to patients if they do not experience the fear of death, and he talks about how the human attitude towards death affects their lives. Like every other existentialist, he states that denial of a fact that exists and creates anxieties does not make anxiety disappear. According to Yalom (2001), our attitude towards death is efficient and decisive for our life styles, and he mentions two important hypotheses, as follows: (1) Life and death are one within the other inconsequential and dependent processes; and (2) the first reason for anxiety is death.

Existential theory states that it is not possible to understand life without accepting the fact of death, that death is the most important fact that makes life meaningful, and that is not possible to leave death only to those who are dying (Yalom, 2001). From this angle, it is accepted that embracing the fact of death makes life more valuable. Thinking about existence forms the basis for discussing what lies beyond existence and thus helps in confronting death. Existentialists state that confronting death—meaning coming across the fact of death and accepting the truth—is important to create a meaningful life, and they evaluate death as a meaningful fact for life.

Yalom (2001), when stating that a positive individual advancement arises suddenly in people who will be facing death soon, described the following list of changes: rearranging priorities in life, changing the places of concepts labeled as important and not important before; reaching freedom, finding courage to make desired things in life real; giving up on postponing life; realizing important facts of life; being able to create deeper relationships with loved ones than before this life crisis; and experiencing less fear or anxiety than before, having the courage to take more risks.

Knowing that you will soon face the experience of death is a meaningful fact that leads to living a life that is deeper, spontaneous, and free of previous fears and anxieties and to experiencing more intense relationships with others. The result is that individuals live more satisfying life experiences. Similarly for those who will not face death soon, accepting and understanding death helps them live a more spontaneous life (Yalom, 2001). In existential therapy, however, the fact that the meaning of this concept would be formed by the meaning of “life” is not expressed enough. For death to make life meaningful, individuals should perceive life as a more meaningful and valuable concept than death itself. Can a person who experiences poverty and deprivation make the same evaluation? Or would that person think that peace could be found as this life that barely continues reaches its end? If life is limited to the time during which we breathe, how could the despair which Kierkegaard references as terminal illness be removed in these situations?

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He explained this situation comparatively with Christian theology and stated that death does not create despair; in fact, despair itself is a terminal illness.

But for the Christian, death is neither the end of everything, not a simple story lost, in truth only endless life! And death contains more hope than life, which is full of death, health, and power. This way, for the Christian, even death is not a “terminal disease” and temporary pains are not terminal diseases, either: pains, diseases, misery, distress, hostility, tortures of soul or body, sorrow and mourning. Even though it is difficult for people, at least people who suffer, even though it makes them say “death is not the worst”, even if it is not a disease, in this destiny that looks similar to diseases, for a Christian, there is not a terminal disease (Kierkegaard, 2010, p. 18).

Kierkegaard sees death as passing way for a Christian. He notices the importance of the concept of death as a threat for leading people to expect things from life.

... because for the Christian, even death is a passing way to life. When it is thought of like this, none of the body-related diseases could be a “terminal disease” for an individual. Death ends diseases, but it is not an ending in itself When life is taken as the biggest danger in life, people expect things from life, but when eternity of other danger is realized, there will be hope for death. And when death is taken as hope, when danger grows, despair is being not able to die (Kierkegaard, 2010, p. 26).

As can be understood from Kierkegaard’s (2010) own words, death is not an end for a Christian. Kierkegaard, an existentialist philosopher, approaches death with both existential philosophy and Christian belief and concludes that life after death makes death a fact that should not be feared.

In this way of finding death important, it is said that Islamic mysticism has similarities with existential theorists. But it is not possible for every individual working on Islamic mysticism to find death meaningful to the same extent. For example, existential theorists who find death important for making life meaningful do not differ that much from Islamic mysticism students who find the love of God meaningful for making life important. This is exactly the view of that students searching peace in Islam. How do those who believe so find this peace? The answer to the question asking how a person can find peace apart from a loved one could be given as being unable to give up on love, enjoying it at some level but also in the meantime experiencing the discomforts and pangs of love. If this state of feeling is not experienced, the one demanding love is on the level of demanding, does not have a lover, and does not have pangs of love. Leaning love of God to make life meaningful is a consolation, a benefit. Lovers do not console, they cannot console already, they console as much as the “ever since I was parted from the reed-bed, my lament has caused man and woman to moan” (Rumi, p.10, 2007). This separation here does not mean the separation in which “ego” still exists; this separation is caused by being apart from self, home country, being apart from the absolute existence of God, which means love.

If love is desired for consolation on earth, then the person stays at the first step in the categories identified as the progression of spiritual evolution described in Islamic mysticism. The joy of love is something, but searching for love for its joy is something else. In the former, there is joy, a happiness as a result of love caused by knowing God. In the latter, there is a will to lean to love in the cessation of the search for joy, and ego and its requests still exist. The individual wants love for the self. All of these are also reasons to talk about different ego levels. Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi described deep pain caused by separation from God, which is absolute existence, when he

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related why the reed that was cut from reed-bed suffering in the first lines of Mathnawî. Tahirül Mevlevî gives this in his couplets as follows:

“Kez neyistan ta mera bübrideend// Ez nefirem merd ü zen nalideend”

[“My lament since they cut me from reed-bed made men and women moan.//Since human left the origin of its existence and came to the world, and experienced pain, words coming out of the heart make listeners regret greatly”] (Volume I, p. 54).

These statements highlight that coming to earth itself is taken as separation. In this case, death is the end of separation. It seems that Sufis made death meaningful, and at the same time, they valued death not as a fact increasing the importance of life but instead as stops on a journey.

When Rumi wrote about death in *Diwan-ı Kabir* (Can, 2000, pp. 9–10) he said that, “... Actually death is away from lovers of God! They neither die, nor disappear! I told these words as, ‘If they die, they die like this!’” Even though these lines seem to be interchanged, contrasting statements, conversely they evaluate life as non-ending, continuing from the beginning (since the order of *Kün*). As Ibn-i Arabî (2007, p.159) states in reference to the Prophet’s Hadith in *Futuhât-ı Mekkiyye*, they evaluate life as a bridge, and it is not possible to identify the post bridge as an ending. Furthermore, Rumi states that death is not a valid fact for lovers of God.

Sufis see death as an ending of separation; on the other hand, existentialists see it as a fact that leads to separation (from life and its offerings). Sufis choose the path of Islamic mysticism not to avoid the pains of life but to reach the Creator and, on the other hand, think about what should be done to make life more satisfying. These two perspectives are hard to compare in their sources. It is understood that it is not possible for every individual to share the same psychological view about death to avoid anxiety, and people from different cultures and belief systems give different meanings to the same concept.

To understand the main difference between these two views is to understand the value of life for each opinion. The value of life for Sufis may not be the same as for existentialists. The decisive component here is the level of ego. The reason for Rumi to take death as a wedding night is that he has been together with God while he was alive. To reach God after death, one should be together with God while alive. Thus, the final stop on the journey of a Sufi is about being in love to the utmost that it is possible to experience.

Sufis value death first of all because it is His order. The wish to come together with a lover after death is a level that only souls who accept death unconditionally just because it is His order could reach. The statement that says that they welcome death therefore is insufficient even though it is appropriate because it does not include reason. The answer to the question of why they come together explains everything. Lovers are at a point at which they give up their existences, something a person who is not at this level of love could not do. It is also not a healthy situation because individuals who are not ready to give up on something feel deprivation when they do so. In this way, both conditions are related and arranged as though they would embrace each other. In *Makalat* (2009), Şams-i Tebrizî describes unevolved souls as those who are left as soil. These individuals will not be given goods by God after death because they are left at the first stage of desire. This “good” means being with God after death for lovers of God.

If lovers found death meaningful to reach new life, they would be attached to existence with or without a body. They want to be together with God by giving up their entire ego. They would follow God’s order by knowing God voluntarily, without expectations and unconditionally. But the will to reach a new life would lead to being attached rigidly to life and its offerings. In fact, for those who are at the top level of love, even if life after death would not exist, even if they had

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the lifespan of a butterfly, death would not be scary because they are not the ones who are close to God but the ones who are together with God. In case of being close to God, ego still exists, but in the case of being together with God, ego is lost. How can a lost thing be separated and disappear from the thing in which it is lost? It already never existed.

For Sufis, death makes life meaningful in only one way. It is to live life in a way to make yourself welcome death smilingly. Life is meaningful only if it makes death meaningful, or else, everything in life is temporary. Everything in life is meaningful by pointing at God. So, for a Sufi, it is not possible to find life alone and separate from death as meaningful with its ingredients and offerings because it is described as a cage associated with separation.

If in Rumi's love, existence ended with death, then death would be a night of thankfulness because the night of death is described as the night of a wedding, meaning the night of a reunion with a lover. It is meaningful because the reunited one is the lover and love is the one giving meaning to it. So, if the reason is love, everything will have same sensation. Thus, love is what makes the reunion meaningful; otherwise, it would not be called love or the presence of love, and it would be welcomed however God wanted. Even if death ended existence, love would continue on earth so that it would still exist, and because it existed because He wanted it so, death would still be meaningful.

Rumi would not call it a wedding night perhaps, but he would call it a night of thankfulness, instead. For this reason, love does not depend on give and take; it depends on acceptance and knowing. Reunion is not the reason why death is meaningful; it is the love that makes it a reunion. The reunion means the disappearance of existence, which means nothing by itself, by taking off the cloth of the body with the help of the existence into which the individual would disappear. The concept of reunion can be told only as getting free of ego. To call reunion a reunion, there should be a lover and a beloved. If so, with reunion, love is implied. Otherwise, the wish for existence, even for love, would continue and is not appropriate for the concept of nothingness in Islamic mysticism.

Conclusion

Existentialist theorists and therapists have called the anxieties caused by the end of human life 'existential anxieties'. Even though Sufis share this view of anxiety, because there are differences between existence perceptions, it could be described as, "If I have existence, even if it is a shadow, and since only reunion makes this existence meaningful, if I live a life in which I cannot unite, or if I cannot please, this would not be pleasant". Actually, the perspective of Kierkegaard arguing that death is not scary because our existence continues is meaningless in Sufi literature. Because Sufis are interested in being existent with God instead of continuing their existence, they think that the anxiety people are experiencing is because of separation and that unconscious anxiety in life is also because of separation. For this reason, it is not possible for people to find life meaningful if they know that there is death. With only this perspective, death is meaningful and desired, but again a desired experience in a way God wishes and desires. Nevertheless, one should live life meaningfully because life after death is desired.

In Islamic mysticism, one thus does not have an anxiety about death but has a separation anxiety. Separation anxiety is not about death but an existential anxiety and is not shared at a conscious level by everybody; it is an anxiety experienced only by lovers. As a result, it could be said that these similar views in terms of linking life and the meaningfulness of death differ in their rationales between Sufi mystics and existentialists. Sufis do not see death as an end; they find it meaningful for reunion, and they find life important as a path to making a meaningful death. An inevitable ending accompanying the existence of a person on earth, even though it does not mean

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the same for existentialists and Sufis, still means the end of existence on earth. But this fact and the anxiety it causes are not the same for everybody and have different meanings for different cultures and beliefs. In this context, it is valuable to give as an example how Sufis experience this perception and how death does not always create anxiety and is a non-scary concept told in natural and almost poetic way.

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