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Is There Such a Thing as a Good Death?

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of a "good death" through various philosophical lenses. It deconstructs traditional ethical frameworks, including deontological, utilitarian, and virtue ethics approaches, revealing their limitations in addressing the deeply personal nature of death. The essay argues for a perspective that views death as a final act of self-affirmation and meaning-making. It explores historical conceptions of honorable death and challenges conventional morality. The paper concludes that a "good death" transcends universal principles or utilitarian calculations and instead resonates with personal meaning and purpose. It asserts that such a death reflects the culmination of an authentically lived life, affirming individual sovereignty and leaving a lasting legacy.

Keywords

Good Death, Self-Affirmation, Ethical Frameworks, Existentialism

1. Discussion

To approach this pertinent philosophical inquiry of whether such a thing exists as a "good death," we must first deconstruct the very notion of "good" and examine it through various philosophical lenses. We must first acknowledge that death, as a biological and inevitable phenomenon, does not inherently hold any value; it simply marks the cessation of life. Nevertheless, to examine the claim that there is such a thing as a "good death" requires us to venture beyond the objective finality of death and ask what makes it meaningful, honorable, and deserving of the concept of "goodness."

The deontological perspective, as proposed by Kant, would argue that the morality of death is determined by adherence to universal moral duties (Kant, 2012). In the context of death, this approach tends to view dying as a process that must be morally regulated, either as a duty to avoid or as a duty to act honorably in

relation to it. According to Aristotle (2009), the good life is characterized by virtue and the fulfillment of human potential, and a good death, by extension, would result from the completion of a virtuous and meaningful life. The utilitarian approach, championed by philosophers like Mill and Bentham, would evaluate the goodness of death based on its consequences and the overall happiness it produces (Mill, 2001/1863). A utilitarian might argue that a good death is one that minimizes suffering, creates the most happiness for the greatest number, or avoids unnecessary harm to others.

I shall first attempt to epistemologically deconstruct morality and, therefore, evaluate the question of "good," which is a prerogative imperative in examining the concept of "good death." Now, morality is governed by an idea or sense of obligation presented as a necessity or choice (Williams & Lear, 2011). The notion of "ought" inherently presupposes a "can" within the agent's power, which implies the existence of deliberative action. However, this presents a paradox: moral obligations, by their nature, cannot conflict, whether in their "prima facie" or actual manifestation. Morality is, therefore, an emergent property of deliberation, yet this deliberation must remain untainted by moral considerations. Should deliberations fall within the domain of morality, the entire argument collapses upon itself.

This realization leads us to a profound conclusion: ethics is fundamentally driven by effects or outcomes, which renders normative arguments inherently inconsistent. Consequently, the existence of universal moral truths is questionable, as morality ultimately becomes a subset of its effects. Establishing "good" as an axiom, therefore, becomes an exercise in futility, and by extension, the concept of a "good death" eludes simplistic ethical, deontological, or utilitarian explanations.

Death often indicates a loss of one's tomorrows. However, this presupposes a Newtonian-B-series temporality (McTaggart, 1908), where "tomorrows" exist as discrete, actualizable units. This is empirically and philosophically untenable. In quantum decoherence theory, the future is not a set of determinate possibilities but a superposition of potential states (Zurek, 2003). To speak of "losing tomorrows" assumes these states collapse into actuality, which they do not—until observed. Death, as an observational terminus, retroactively defines the life-worlds waveform. Thus, "tomorrows" are not lost but never actualized. Besides, in a possible worlds theory (Lewis, 1979), "X would have happened" requires the closest possible world where death does not occur. But in such worlds, "you are not you." Biological immortality would necessitate radical identity alteration (Parfit, 1984), rendering "your" tomorrows non-identical to your current self. Thus, "your" lost tomorrows are logically impossible; instead, they belong to a different entity. Counterfactual "tomorrows" are either incoherent or tautologically define all existence as failure.

This quantum perspective finds a radical extension in Tegmark's quantum immortality hypothesis, which posits that consciousness persists in branching universes where survival continues (Tegmark, 2008). This thought experiment chal-

lenges conventional mortality narratives by suggesting that subjective experience never encounters terminal states. Complementing this, the Penrose-Hameroff orchestrated objective reduction theory proposes that consciousness arises from quantum vibrations in microtubules (Hameroff & Penrose, 2014). Their model suggests the dying brain undergoes a final, coherent quantum state reduction—a "white hole" moment where compressed life experiences flash before consciousness. This neurophilosophical approach transforms death from neural shutdown to an informational singularity, where subjective temporality collapses into experiential density rather than cessation (Collins, 2015).

The objection's fatal flaw is its unexamined chrononormativity—the ideological privileging of temporal extension over qualitative being. By this logic, a hydrogen atom (which persists for billions of years) is more "successful" than Shakespeare (dead at 52). The reductio ad absurdum is obvious: the objection collapses into a nihilistic trivialization of all human achievement. To die well is not to "fail" but to defy the entropic indifference of the cosmos through a finale that echoes in the symbolic order—a rebellion as old as Antigone's grave and as enduring as Hamlet's skull.

Deontological ethics, with its emphasis on universal maxims, fails to recognize the deeply subjective and personal nature of death. Kant's ethics assert that moral agents must act according to principles that can be universally willed, yet death defies such categorical imperatives (Kant, 1998). Death is not an action or decision made by an individual; it is an inevitability that cannot be shaped by duty in the same way as a moral act. Kantian ethics leaves no room for the nuanced consideration of the subjective experience of dying. In its insistence on duty and ambivalence in addressing moral conflict, the deontological approach becomes too detached from the lived experience of death. It ignores the possibility that a profoundly personal and transcendent purpose may define death. The inadequacy of deontological ethics becomes stark when applied to scenarios where death serves as an act of existential defiance. Kant's categorical imperative, demanding actions align with universalizable maxims (Kant, 2012), collapses when confronted with figures like Empedocles, who hurled himself into Mount Etna to merge with the divine (Kingsley, 1995). Such a death, rooted in a personal quest for transcendence, defies Kantian universalism, as it cannot be rationally generalized, yet its symbolic potency resonates across millennia. Kantian ethics fails to reconcile transcendent deaths because it demands actions align with universalizable maxims (Kant, 2012). In a bid to merge with the divine, Empedocles' volcanic suicide (Kingsley, 1995) cannot be generalized as a moral law without absurdity. The Vedic people viewed death as an ultimate act of altruism, where individual mortality serves a higher cosmic purpose. Maharishi *Dadhichi* willingly sacrificed himself so *Indra* could forge a powerful weapon, the *Vajra*, from his bones (Doniger, 1981). Deontology's rigid universalism cannot accommodate deaths rooted in personal "telos," which are inherently non-generalizable. By reducing morality to duty, Kant ignores the existential weight of death as a singular act of meaning,

which is precisely where Nietzsche's *amor fati* thrives.

The Aristotelian framework places undue emphasis on the role of reason and virtue in the human condition. Although appealing, this theoretical ideal of living a virtuous life neglects the fact that death as a consequence is often an uncontrollable force—one that arises independent of the life one has lived. A good death, within this framework, risks becoming an impossible ideal that can never be fully realized, as it fails to reckon with the realities of human frailty, contingency, and the often unpredictable nature of death itself. Aristotle's assertion that a good death crowns a life of virtue (Aristotle, 2009) presupposes a linear narrative where death "completes" existence. Nevertheless, this teleology falters before untimely deaths that rupture such neat arcs. His truncated life, far from fulfilling Aristotelian "eudaimonia," achieved immortality through its very incompleteness, its fragmentation mirroring the sublime chaos Nietzsche locates at existence's core. The Aristotelian framework, with its emphasis on rational culmination, cannot accommodate deaths that derive meaning from their abruptness, their defiance of narrative closure. Heidegger's being toward death (Heidegger, 1962) offers a corrective. By confronting death as life's "own most possibility," one escapes the illusion of linear completion, instead existing in a state of authentic "anticipatory resoluteness."

Utilitarianism struggles to measure and compare diverse forms of pleasure and pain accurately. Here, death is either a tragic end or a means to an end, depending on its consequences for the most significant number of people. However, the utilitarian view falls short when we try to examine the deeper metaphysical and ontological dimensions of what makes a death "good." The problem lies in the utilitarian framework's reduction of human existence to measurable quantities of pleasure and pain, thus negating the potential value of suffering or personal sacrifice in the context of a good death. For instance, the deaths of figures like Achilles (Homer, 1990), who chose to die young in exchange for eternal glory, or Yukio Mishima (Nathan, 1974), who committed ritual suicide for an extraordinary sense of honor and self-actualization, cannot be adequately understood through a utilitarian lens. The death of these individuals speaks to a deeper, more personal conception of value—one that resists the reduction of human experience to the maxims of pain and pleasure. Bentham's calculus, reducing ethics to pleasure-pain arithmetic (Bentham, 1789), proves grotesquely inadequate when assessing deaths that intentionally court suffering for symbolic ends. Such deaths embody what Evola (2011) terms "heroic transcendence," where pain becomes a medium for metaphysical assertion. Nietzsche's dictum—"What does not kill me makes me stronger," finds its apotheosis here: suffering is not an evil to be minimized but a forge for existential meaning. Utilitarianism struggles to evaluate deaths that intentionally embrace suffering for symbolic ends due to its blindness to qualitative meaning that reduces human experience to quantifiable metrics (Campbell, 2020).

Heidegger's distinction between *authentic* and *inauthentic* being toward death clarifies the stakes. Inauthentic existence flees mortality through "idle talk" of af-

terlife or medicalized denial; authenticity demands *Vorlaufen* ("running-forward") into death's abyss (Heidegger, 1962). This resonates with Mishima's 1970 *seppuku*: by orchestrating his death as a political-aesthetic act, he rejected Japan's postwar pacifism, weaponizing mortality itself. Critics dismissed it as theatrical, yet Heidegger would recognize it as *Eigentlichkeit*—owning one's death as the ultimate act of self-definition. Similarly, Simone de Beauvoir's (1964) "A Very Easy Death" critiques her mother's medicalized passing, stripped of agency: "One must not let death take us by surprise—we must take it by surprise." Here, the "good death" is not peaceful acceptance but a guerrilla raid on mortality's inevitability.

This brings us to Stoicism, which accepts death as a natural part of life and urges facing it with equanimity (Aurelius, 2002). While this approach offers valuable insights into cultivating mental tranquility in the face of mortality, it may not fully address the question of what constitutes a "good death" beyond mere acceptance. The Stoics, inheriting a teleological worldview from Heraclitus, posit a cosmos governed by divine rationality. This leads to an ethics of dispassionate acceptance of fate. The Stoic ideal of "apatheia" (Aurelius, 2002) crumbles when juxtaposed with the tragic heroism of Cato the Younger, whose suicide after Caesar's victory was less a serene acceptance of fate than a political statement etched in blood. Here, death transcends passive resignation, becoming a weapon of ideological resistance—a concept alien to Stoic detachment but central to Nietzsche's "will to power" (Nietzsche, 2006).

Unlike others, Friedrich Nietzsche rejects all teleological interpretations of nature. For him, the universe is fundamentally chaotic and purposeless. This cosmological divergence yields radically different ethical imperatives. Where the Stoics counsel ataraxia—a state of equanimity achieved through the extirpation of passion—Nietzsche exalts passion as essential to human greatness. His ideal of amor fati—love of fate—is not a passive acceptance but an active, even ecstatic affirmation of life in all its terrible beauty. This Nietzschean perspective demands that we create meaning through our own choices and actions rather than deriving it from external sources or presumed universal laws. It challenges us to view death not as a mere biological cessation but as a final opportunity for self-expression and the culmination of one's life narrative.

In "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," the sage counsels: "Die at the right time!" (Nietzsche, 2006). This "right time" is not chronological but existential: death becomes a consummation, not a surrender. The Viking berserker is charging into battle, and Odin's name on his lips exemplifies this. Where Kantian ethics would condemn his violence and utilitarianism decry wasted life, Nietzsche sees a "Dionysian yes-saying" (Nietzsche, 1887)—a death that magnifies, rather than negates, vitality. Evola's (2011) Metaphysics of War extends this, framing warrior death as a "sacred rite": the fallen become "invisible companions" to the living, their sacrifice a bridge between temporal and eternal.

The question of a "good death" cannot be adequately addressed without first interrogating the very foundations of our moral judgments. As previously articu-

lated, our sense of right and wrong emerges from two principal sources: our instinctual prehistory and our consciousness. The former encompasses our innate predispositions, our experiences, and our visceral reactions to the world. The latter, consciousness, far from being a reliable arbiter of truth, is, in fact, a social construct, a "pathological state" born of the need for communication and adaptation. This understanding fundamentally reshapes our approach to the concept of a good death. We can no longer rely on simplistic utilitarian calculations or rigid deontological rules. Instead, we must unravel the orb of "organic virtues" that alone can truly gauge the intricacies of right and wrong.

This perspective illuminates why certain historical conceptions of a good death have held such enduring power. The samurai's *seppuku*, the Viking's death in battle, and the knight's sacrifice for honor are not mere cultural quirks but fervent expressions of a death that serves as the ultimate act of self-affirmation. Ritual suicides that preserve honor, such as the Japanese practice of *seppuku*, directly confront Kantian deontology, which cannot accommodate culturally specific acts of self-determination that defy universalizable maxims (Ohnuki-Tierney, 2002). Similarly, the Germanic *Einherjar* concept, where fallen warriors in Valhalla prepared for Ragnarök through nightly feasts and battles (Hultgård, 2011), presents death as cyclical participation in cosmic order rather than final oblivion. They represent deaths that are teeming with spirit, driven by a self-affirming instinct that asserts life as a joy to be cherished and an ideal to be achieved, not just in life, but through death and into eternity. Such a conception utterly rejects the utilitarian notion of a good death as one that minimizes suffering or maximizes overall happiness. It is a death that serves not just as an end but as a metaphysical act (Evola, 2011), a final, powerful assertion of one's will to power against the ultimate horizon of human existence. Nietzschean self-affirmation gains traction in cultures where death is viewed as a performative act, such as Tibetan *phowa* rituals, where conscious dying is seen as a spiritual achievement (Tsomo, 2001). Thus, cultural diversity in death practices reveals ethics, and therefore, the ethics of "death" as a localized construct rather than its entanglement with moral universality.

The tension between sovereign self-affirmation and communal sacrifice emerges in Sophocles' *Antigone*. Creon's decree forbidding Polynices' burial enforces civic duty over familial piety; Antigone's defiance—choosing death to honor her brother—asserts individual conscience against the state. Hegel saw this as tragedy's essence: irreconcilable ethical claims (Hegel, 1807). However, through a Nietzschean lens, Antigone's death is no tragic impasse but a triumph of ressentiment-free self-legislation. She embodies what Jünger called the "anarch" (Jünger, 1977)—a sovereign individual whose death, like Mishima's, is a declaration of metaphysical independence.

This understanding of a good death challenges us to view our mortality not as something to be feared or merely accepted but as an opportunity for our highest self-expression. It suggests that the manner of our dying can be as significant as

the manner of our living and that both should be governed not by external moral codes or social utility but by an unwavering commitment to self-affirmation and self-overcoming. Therefore, "good death" is not merely the absence of suffering or the fulfillment of predetermined moral duties but a final act of self-creation in the face of cosmic indifference.

This perspective on death and morality may indeed render conventional morality and asceticism insensible. Nevertheless, it offers in their place a more dynamic ethic, one that treats the sovereignty of the ego as its fundamental goal and sees the objective of man, society, and race as finding its highest expression of greatness and development.

In the Nietzschean framework, "good" becomes a value created by the individual, shaped by their will to power and personal growth (Nietzsche, 2006). This perspective rejects the notion of universal moral truths and instead posits that values are human constructions, malleable, and subject to revaluation. Therefore, the idea of a "good death" encompasses the notion of honor, self-mastery, and the creation of meaning in an otherwise meaningless universe. A death aligned with one's chasmic sense of purpose and serves as the final affirmation of one's life and self-created values is a death that eclipses mere biological cessation and becomes something noble and lasting. Heidegger's concept of "being toward death" emphasizes that our awareness of mortality fundamentally shapes our existence and further builds this understanding of a "good death" as one that reflects the culmination of an authentically lived life. Advocates like Caitlin Doughty (2017) promote reclaiming agency over dying, mirroring Heidegger's critique of medicalized death. These examples ground abstract philosophy in tangible human experiences, demonstrating how death can serve as both personal and societal transformation.

In narrative theory (Ricoeur, 1985), a life gains coherence through its ending. A death without closure—say, an immortal's endless story is incoherent, akin to a novel without a final chapter. The "failure" is not death but a life lacking narrative integrity. To claim death negates value is to perform a category error, as it conflates the condition of possibility (death) with its negation. Therefore, a "good death" is not merely possible but necessary for life to hold meaning. The original objection's framework is not just wrong but inconceivable because it attempts to critique death using tools (value, success) that death alone makes possible.

2. Conclusion

By rejecting the limitations of traditional ethical frameworks and adopting a more nuanced perspective, we arrive at a conception of "good death" that is both intellectually rigorous and existentially profound. This view acknowledges the inherent challenges of human mortality while simultaneously recognizing the potential for death to serve as a powerful affirmation of life itself. A good death is not defined by adherence to universal principles, the fulfillment of ethical duties, or the calculation of pleasure and pain. Instead, it is a death that resonates with personal

meaning, honor, and purpose. It is a death that reflects the culmination of a life lived authentically and intentionally. In this sense, there is indeed such a thing as a good death—one that reverberates through history and leaves an indelible mark far beyond its physical occurrence.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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