Postmodernism and View of Death

People don’t like to talk about death. In fact, death is one of the most avoided subjects in Western society, regardless of generation or personality. People talk about movies, religion, fashion, and pretty much anything else, but death is treated like a taboo word. Even when someone dies, people use polite euphemisms like “passing away,” “going home,” “going to a better place,” or another socially acceptable term. While no one can deny that they will die someday, people constantly seek to pretend death away in practice in a variety of ways—from using those polite substitute words to embracing much more essential mindsets and practices. Reasoning away death is seen in many places, including media, culture, literature, and art, which all point to the fact that today’s postmodern ideals allow society to reason away the reality and seriousness of death.

A Climate of Indifference

Despite the way Western culture seeks to ignore death, it’s hard to deny that sometimes it can feel very close to home. When someone loses a loved one, death feels real, personal, and near. Grief is all around, and in times of grief, it’s difficult to be indifferent toward death. But the vast majority of the time, death is not so close by. Death occurs in far off places as a result of natural disasters or wars in third-world countries. Reports of deaths make their way back to comfortable living rooms and offices, and while readers, viewers, and listeners might feel compassion toward those who are grieving, it doesn’t shake them the way “nearby” deaths do. It’s easy for society to become indifferent to death and feel safe from it because it usually happens far away.
For instance, in the recent earthquake and tsunami in Japan, over 15,000 people died or went missing (Kurtzleben). What does that number mean to people? Is it simply a number, or do people respond with genuine compassion and deep understanding that each of those 15,000 were fellow human beings? Yes, numerous organizations have helped Japan in valuable ways and that shouldn’t be discounted or ignored, but when the average person sitting on the couch watching the news comes into contact with the horrific stories of death, does it startle them? Does it make them contemplate their own future death? Usually not. Usually they respond with compassion, but then they forget. The distance can make death seem less serious. Other notable disasters can have a similar effect. While it would seem like events such as 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, the Haiti earthquake, and the Japan quake and tsunami would be a wake-up call about the imminence of death, has that been the case? While these events have been highly publicized and have most definitely caught the attention of Western society, have people seen them as true warnings? Have these trying times in recent world events brought people to a realization of their own finiteness? It does not seem like people have responded to these disasters by considering the fact that one day, they will die too, whether it be through a natural disaster or “natural causes.” Even though there have been some sobering, worldwide wake-up calls, the overall effect does not seem to be a significant shift in perspective on death but a more confirmed tendency among Westerners to become indifferent toward death.

Yet indifference toward death is no new phenomenon, and it’s not limited to the way people view death statistics and worldwide disasters. It is expressed in literature as well—and perhaps, these works of literature serve as a warning or prediction of what is happening in real life. 

*Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury is one poignant example. During one scene, a character named
Clarisse talks about the way her friends kill each other senselessly, implying her friends’ obvious oblivion toward the seriousness of their killing sprees. She says, “I’m afraid of children my own age. They kill each other. Did it always use to be that way? My uncle says no. Six of my friends have been shot in the last year alone. Ten of them died in car wrecks. I’m afraid of them and they don’t like me because I’m afraid” (Bradbury 30). It’s easy for people to hear about Clarisse’s friends and think “that could never be me.” Perhaps people today aren’t as indifferent as the society in *Fahrenheit 451*, but the indifference that today’s Western society shows signals a progression not entirely different from the one in the novel.

One 21st-century example of this type of indifference is cyberbullying, which simply means malice and bullying that occurs over the internet, especially on social networking websites. This issue has gained increasing press lately, and has been discussed as a possible cause of several teen suicide cases. Just three examples are the cases of Phoebe Prince, who committed suicide after being severely bullied by her new classmates; Megan Meier, who killed herself as a result of being bullied online by a neighbor with a false identity; and Alexis Pilkington, whose suicide may have resulted partially from bullying on a social networking site called Formspring. While, in these cases, teens are not outright “killing each other” as Clarisse’s friends do, it is nevertheless an example of the malice of teens resulting in hurt and even death. This highlights in particular the way indifference toward death is becoming more prominent and publicized in the younger generation (Kennedy; Steinhauer; Yaniv).

**A Society that Lives for Today**

Indifference is not the only way that society attempts to reason away death. This tendency is
The desire to look young and beautiful has, in some cases, become so distorted that it seems to ignore the reality of death. One obvious way this is seen is in the area of plastic surgery. Even though this medical practice has been around a long time, it seems to have gained special popularity recently with the advent of techniques such as Botox. While it’s understandable that someone would get plastic surgery to fix wrinkles and other effects of aging, this whole mindset raises a question: if everyone is going to die one day, does it really matter whether they always appear young? It is impossible to be young forever, so the drive to appear as though one were seems deceived. Everyone ages, and ultimately, everyone will face death. Trying to put off these realities by using plastic surgery could correspond easily with living in denial. But even if someone is not denying death, the huge prominence of plastic surgery in society shows a preoccupation with the present—and how people look in the present. In 2010 alone, over 13 million people had plastic surgeries by personal choice. Additionally, there seems to be a trend causing younger women to have anti-aging treatments before they’ve truly begun to experience the effects of aging. *US News and World Report* states: “According to the latest statistics from the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery...people ages 19 to 34—the vast majority of them women—had more than 208,000 wrinkle-filling injections of hyaluronic acid...in 2007, compared with barely 23,000 in 2003” (Bouchez). This dramatic increase in the number of younger women in particular who are seeking anti-aging procedures shows a far-reaching obsession with the present. While some may seek plastic surgery treatments for reasons besides
preventing aging, avoiding the effects of age is clearly one objective. There appears to be an increasing herd of people, especially women, who are placing undue emphasis on their present appearance in a way that seems to ignore or at least try to hide the reality of death. Why do they do this? Perhaps because they fear the future: they don’t want to look old one day. But even though this would point to an awareness of aging and death, their response to the fear is not facing it, but evading it and trying to ignore the reality that old age (and death) are coming (Haupt; Bouchez).

By and large, the world today is content just walking along in its present-only bubble—a deceptive bubble that can reason away the reality of death. This happens most notably because being concerned with the present means that people are not concerned with other things. One consequence of the present-only mindset is the way people view death: they simply don’t think about it or see it as important when they are completely wrapped up in the present. This is seen clearly in the way Americans spend their money. One survey said that 45% of college students have credit card debt, and the average amount of credit card debt is $3,000 (“Financial Literacy Statistics”). Most college students are 18-22 years old, and already, nearly half of them have credit card debt, not to mention other debts they could have such as auto or student loans. Even young people are making decisions based on the present without considering the future—much less the reality of death.

What Is a Person?
Perhaps the most philosophical and nuanced way that society’s view of death is seen is in the dualistic view of personhood which has ramifications for multiple moral and social issues that
are related to view of death. This philosophy is also called “Cartesian dualism,” named for Rene Descartes. His view basically states that the body and the mind are two separate “stories” of existence. In visual format, there is the body on the bottom half of a horizontal line, and the soul and “person” on top. On the surface, Descartes’s philosophy seems pleasant and whimsical. He describes it as follows:

[O]n the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing [that is, a mind], and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it. (qtd. in Skirry “Mind-Body”)

But what is Descartes really saying? He is saying that the human person is not one individual, but a combination of two distinct parts: the mind and the body (Skirry “Overview”; Pearcey 49, 51).

While this might seem like philosophical jargon, it has dangerous implications for life and for society’s view of death. If the mind and body are separate, what is done with the body has no impact on the soul or true “personhood.” Roger Lundin states that, in the dualistic view of personhood, nature and the body have been turned into “essential amoral mechanisms to be used to whatever private ends we have” (qtd. in Pearcey 52). This is the philosophy behind many controversial issues today, including homosexuality, transgender issues, the hook-up culture (which promotes sex apart from love or commitment), euthanasia, and most notably, abortion. In each of these diverse issues, someone is subjecting their body or someone else’s to harm because the body has been devalued by viewing human existence dualistically. So clearly, this is not a
nice, harmless concept but a dangerous and twisted untruth (Pearcey 47-66).

One way this untruth is expressed is in the issue of abortion, one of the most controversial issues in society, and is particularly important to political conservatives. While some people view abortion as simply a political issue, it ties in directly with view of death. Although the debate about whether or not abortion is wrong has been going on ever since *Roe v. Wade*, the focus has shifted in recent times from challenging the fact that unborn fetuses are human, which is generally accepted, to arguing whether they are in fact people. This distinction is made possible through Cartesian dualism: according to this view, what is human is not necessarily a person. This is where the connection to our culture’s view of death comes into play. If, for example, a human fetus is not a person, then there is no problem condoning abortion. Additionally, if a mere body has no impact on a soul, an abortion should also have no psychological ramifications on the mother. In light of the dualistic personhood theory, this view makes sense (Pearcey 53).

But if, in contrast, a person is not divided into body and soul separately, but is one, unified being in which the soul and the body both play essential roles, then abortion becomes murder because personhood, as well as humanity, begins at the time of conception, and because abortion kills both a body and a soul. While this debate is not one that is easily solved, it serves to raise questions about Cartesian dualism.

When considering a worldview or philosophy, there is a question that must be answered in order for the idea to be valid: can this philosophy be lived out? In the case of Cartesian dualism, the answer is a definite “no.” Our bodies cannot be separated from our feelings. What we do with
our bodies does indeed have an impact on our souls and how we think and feel. The evidence for
this can be found in something as simple as being sick with a common cold: it causes the body to
ail, and yet, that simple cold can have effects on feelings and make people feel sad or more self-
focused than usual because of a physical problem. This prototype goes right on up the ladder to
more serious examples (Smith; Pearcey 62-63).

Although Western society at large has not come to the place of viewing abortion as killing a
person, there is one facet of the abortion issue that is being more widely opposed, and that is sex-
selective abortion. This practice occurs most often in countries such as China and India which
favor sons more than daughters. This issue is yet another example of how other things (such as
cultural tradition in some countries) take precedence over viewing death seriously and valuing
human life. The response of the West to this issue includes opposition by a variety of groups,
including both liberals and conservatives. A survey conducted by a British health researcher and
two Chinese professors and summarized by an article on the National Right to Life
organization’s website discusses the acute gender imbalance in China, which is partially due to
sex-selective abortion. However, this issue is also discussed by a pro-choice organization called
Ipas. While the article on Ipas’ website evidences a point of view that is definitely pro-abortion,
at least they acknowledge that sex-selective abortion is a problem on some level. The article
states, “Fortunately, some countries are making broader efforts to attack the root of this problem
by making daughters more wanted” (“Finding the root causes of sex-selective abortion”). A
similar position is expressed in what Dr. Albert Mohler calls a “surprise” in an issue of the
feminist periodical Ms. magazine. This article focuses on the “missing” girls in India that results
from a pressure for sons. The article also mentions a government organization that supposedly
seeks to right this problem by seeking to create a cultural desire for girls. However, this position of seeking to encourage esteem for girls in cultures like India and China proves inadequate because it does not address the root issue that abortion destroys a human life. Standing up for oppressed girls is a noble goal, but it circumvents the real issue behind sex-selective abortion: just like in all other abortions, a person dies. Dr. Mohler succinctly says about the Ms. article: “[H]ow can Ms. muster any genuine outrage about sex-selection abortions in India when it has demanded unfettered abortion access in our own country? It cannot, and it does not.” So besides holding a position that beats around the bush, Ms., and also Ipas, have a statement that rings inconsistent because of the widespread affirmation of abortion in America. Hence, even though the Western response to sex-selection abortion seems to be one of overall opposition, many of the opponents of this issue are still supporting abortion in general, and thereby allowing for death (O’Bannon; Mohler).

Abortion and the dualistic view of personhood that backs it up are one of the most important examples of how Western society has sought to ignore and reason away death. There are unborn children being legally put to death all across the country, and do people stop, turn around, and oppose this evil? Some do, and they are doing a wonderful job speaking truth in spite of the way our culture tends to conform to the norm, whether it is right or not. However, far too many people try to justify or simply ignore this nearby and obvious symbol of the reality of death and the terror of murder.

**The Response**

Yes, death is something we don’t like to talk about, something that’s uncomfortable to think of
and discuss. But ultimately, ignoring death is futile and foolish. While the tendency to reason away death is seen in numerous facets of life and types of issues, from things that are seemingly minor like consumer habits, to essential moral issues like abortion, there is a twisted mindset all around us. Whether we encounter this tendency through the sphere of indifference, present-minded cultural norms, or a dualistic philosophy of personhood in moral issues, there is opportunity to go against the norm and to stand up for what is right and what is important.

But what does it mean to view death accurately, and to go against the way our culture reasons away death? It can mean many things, from being personally aware of mortality to standing up for injustices like cyberbullying and abortion. At its heart, however, viewing death accurately means thinking about it. It means not falling prey to our culture’s avoidance of the topic, but spending time in thought about what death really is and what it means—both for us personally, and for our culture.

**Works Cited**


