Humanism, Death and Transcendence

Dying as the experience of a transcendent reality

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In 'Humanism, death and transcendence' I proceed on the assumption that the human experience of finiteness and death is the source of the various visions on life. The vision on death and the vision on life are inseparably connected to each other. A few examples will illustrate the diversity of visions. The experience of death can deeply influence our consciousness, and forms the actual litmus test of the authenticity of our values. Humanism acknowledges an immanent-immanent and an immanent-transcendent interpretation of death and life. I present the idea that the experience of death is the door to the experience of a transcendent reality.

Introduction

You don't even understand life. How then can you understand death? (Confucius)

Confucius and every other person with a comparable statement show more wisdom than I who should have rejected the request for a treatise concerning a humanist vision - de facto visions - on death. However, my 'Japanese' feeling for style forbids me to use the word 'no'. I have accepted the request for a contribution. Fortunately not altogether without a reason. Through interviews I have discovered that sometimes people are more inclined to articulate their vision on death than their vision on life. It seems easier to say something about 'the other side' than about the meaning of life here and now. Our conceptions of death and everything that is connected with it are a mirror of our conceptions of life. The fact that we literally grope in the dark when death is concerned strengthens the interaction between life and death. We have no choice in the face of death other than to make a quantum leap or to keep utterly silent. The humanist Anton Constandse told me during a conversation that not for one moment did he wish to reflect on death, since reflecting on it is a sheer waste of time. To my question 'Why a waste of time?', he replied: 'The end is the end'.

My attitude towards death is the opposite to Constandse's attitude. For years I have been preoccupied by the phenomenon of death. I still cannot conceive the idea that you have to bid a farewell to light and colour, wind and music, food and bodies. If I try to let the absolute finiteness of my existence penetrate my mind, the effect is sometimes frightening, sometimes liberating, but always intriguing. With his conviction Constandse belongs to the tradition of the Stoa, viz. Epicurus: 'Life holds no terrors for the one who has thoroughly understood that for him there are no terrors in life's end.' As a consequence of the lack of fear for death all attention is drawn to life here-and-now: death makes each day more alive.

How we experience and interpret the here-and-now is open to discussion. An African animist, an Indian Hindu, an Arab Muslim or an American humanist all give their own

interpretation of the here-and-now. For the animist the here-and-now is embedded in a visible and invisible dimension in which the ancestors are present at a distance. For the Hindu the here-and-now is part of a string of incarnations in which nothing is lost. For the Muslim the accent lies on a future paradise and for the humanist it lies on self-realisation in the here-and-now. The only thing we can conclude so far is that no questions and answers concerning the meaning of death are possible, separate from the timeless questions concerning immanence and transcendence, determinism and freedom. Our answers to the question as to the sense of existence determine how we think about the sense of death.

A philosophy of life implies a philosophy of death.

My Chair at the University for Humanist Studies has as its brief 'The theory of worldviews with particular reference to systematic humanism'. It took some years before it dawned on me that worldviews and philosophies of life probably found their origin in the reflections on death. All human cultures take dying and death into account. The conscious confrontation with the 'end' or with death is a pre-eminently human artefact. It is probably even the quintessence of a creative and dignified existence. Self-awareness, including awareness of the fear of death, proves that humans can look across the limits of the moment. The human spirit can be made aware of the time circuit of the body: a living link in the endless succession of human generations. How we react to the awareness of the finiteness of our existence can be traced in the various *life* philosophies, rituals, thoughts and artefacts. Especially poetry appears like a self-created space-time cosmos where the tension between flowing time, aging, the irreversible process of love, the unimaginable (of no longer being there) comes alive:

The chance we live.
Rarer than death.

In these lines the Dutch poet, Christiaan van Geel, refers to an understanding of the intimate relationship between life and death, infinity and finiteness, comparable to the understanding of Zen master Bunan:

She who dies before she dies
does not die when she dies.

At one time Gustavo Corcao put it as follows: 'If there is one thing that strives with intensity towards its terminal end, it is Art. The poet is not just the person who would die not writing, as Rilke teaches us. The poet is that person who wishes to arrive at the end, who longs to die with his poem, to give everything, to submit completely, to sink with his ghostship. I say about the poet what Rilke says about man in general: *C'est quelqu'un qui s'en va.* He is someone who takes his leave, who bids good-bye with each whole and entirely complete thing he materialises , like a wondrous fruit. Indeed, in poetry the idea of finishing something and the idea of death are finding each other. Each poem is a just departure, a new testament, an all conquering battle upon life and death.'1.

Consciousness of death and self-reflection

I regard the concern for death as a specifically human characteristic which finds its origin in the human capacity for self-reflection. Man is the only creature whose consciousness does not simply converge with his physical existence. Consciousness that reflects upon one's own finiteness is the same consciousness that makes music, cultivates plants and produces weapons.

In the old Egyptian culture the attraction of death was so great that pyramids and the Egyptian Book of the Dead had to ward off the provocation of death. Cultures mutually differentiate themselves by the answers they give to the collective and individual experiences of death. Sometimes the differences appear slight, as is the case when one compares the animistic worldviews of the different continents. Sometimes they appear fundamental, as between Christianity and Islam on the one hand, and Buddhism and Hinduism on the other.

Christianity, Zen Buddhism, Hinduism.

A contemplation of death from the point of Christianity cannot get around the traditional question concerning the soul. A classical Christian answer is that the soul is created by God and, thanks to God's intervention, is part of God's immortality. The ontological status of the soul has a beginning but no end:

'It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.' (Paul 1 Cor. 15,44)

The Christian convictions concerning life and death are part of another religious and philosophical cosmos than the ideas of Zen Buddhism or Hinduism concerning life and death. To the question put by a pupil to his Zen master 'Why do people actually die?' comes a short, convincing answer. 'Where there is a beginning there is an end!' The pupil puts the question to his master again, after he had accidentally broken the master's teacup. To the question: 'Why do people actually die?' comes again the answer: 'Where there is a beginning there is an end!' After having heard the answer the pupil opens up his hands holding the shards of the cup and tells his master: 'Then this is the end of your teacup.' The pupil has sufficiently understood the most difficult question man can ask himself: the 'why question of life and death.' The question can only be meaningfully answered if the answer forms part of a cosmic-ontological worldview in which man does not prioritise himself in a unique position, whether through God or not. To be sure, a child can understand that a beginning presupposes an end. This applies not only within the logic of the words 'beginning' and 'end' which resort in the category of the so-called relational or polar terms like the words 'parents' and 'child' or 'creator' and 'creation', but is also valid ontologically. By this I mean that in the totality of cosmic existence there must be decay as there is growth in equal measure, as the law of energy indicates. There is constant transformation of energy, but there is no loss of energy.

The Hindus are familiar with the ontological thought of 'beginning' and 'end' as an indivisible circular movement. They honour Shiva in the divine trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, not only as Destroyer but also as Creator and Guardian. In his book *Dialogue with Death, A Journey through Consciousness* Eknath Easwaran writes:

Today, in my eighties, death holds no fear for me. For today I know - not merely believe but know, as each of us can know that death is only a door, and dying no more than a change of rooms. And I look on death as a friend, for it has taught me to live completely in the present, full of faith and free from fear.2

In this text of Easwaran many Hindus will recognise themselves. Christianity, Zen Buddhism and Hinduism hold a different view on the relation between man and cosmos and, parallel to that, to the relation between immanence and transcendence, determinism and freedom. All questions and possible answers pertaining to the meaning of death in human existence can be reduced to questions and answers on the arc of tension between immanence and transcendence in human existence. I do not know of a world view or a philosophy of life, religious or not, which forms an exception to this 'rule' - and consequently neither does humanism.

Humanism, an existential analysis

Now the question arises as to how contemporary humanism thinks about life and death. No single answer can be given to this question. Humanism in the year 2000 is even less able to do so than Christianity in the year 2000. The question can only be answered by setting out the contours of the humanist philosophy of life from the different historical and philosophical schools of thought. Humanism does not acknowledge a revelation, neither founder, nor intermediary or messiah and no organised authority. However humanism does acknowledge a number of central values of which perhaps the core value should be called self-respect.

Self-respect without arrogance, self-respect as self-questioning, the art to live, including the art to die. Self-respect implies the acceptance of certain values which have to satisfy two conditions. The first condition is that I accept certain values from an inner conviction and for my own responsibility. I do not have to construct these values or to discover them, but I need no other authority to accept them except for the intuitive realization of the 'goodness' and/or 'accuracy/truth' of those values. The second condition is that I am aware that each value which I accept has a universal tendency below the surface. The statement 'This is my house, so I decide who can enter' is a statement for example which in principle is pertaining to all people. Here 'universal' means: embracing all people. There are no values which do not touch directly or indirectly on all people. For example, a value such as the right for euthanasia as practiced in the Netherlands leaves everyone free in principle to choose for or against, but it does not exclude anyone, wherever in this world, from this choice. A value which bestows special privileges or rights to a certain people, that is nationalistic, or group bound religious values, appears to violate the principle of universality. The category of selective, group-bound values is indeed basically an attack on humanity, for example by proclaiming the interests of one's own people to be of the highest importance to the neglect of the rest of human kind. In fact, this is every day practice. If however we ask ourselves whom the American, Chinese or Israeli president or premier address when they violate the rights of people on the grounds of national interest, it appears to be everyone outside the own group.

My conclusion can be short. Even values which leave a large part of humanity out of consideration, cannot be formulated and executed without making a statement, implicitly

or explicitly, about the rest of humanity. The combination of both conditions, in this instance the inner conviction and the realization that each value is implicitly a statement of intent for all people, creates tension. This tension flows from an autonomous, anarchic life consciousness ánd the inevitable generalizing logic of value-statements. We cannot avoid to make statements about all humans constantly. Even when we are continuously busy trying to close ourselves off from other people, consciously and especially unconsciously so, we shall not succeed. The universal dimension of the human consciousness of values binds every person to all other people, however negatively we may experience this bond. A negative bind is stronger and less free than a voluntary bond. The latter can be broken - as can the first, although with considerably greater difficulty.

Why this analysis of the consciousness of values?
The two conditions, one of inner conviction and one of universality, lose any form of arbitrariness or subjectivity, as they play their purifying part in the process of dying on the border of being and not being. From the confrontation with death the first condition functions as a truth test. The test is whether you have lived your life according to your deepest aspirations. Existentialists use the word 'authentic' for this. A certain measure of authenticity is a necessary condition for the art of life. And the art of life is the art of maximising the experience of life, which is a process that renews itself continuously. This process can continue into old age, right up to the moment of death. The eyes of an aged person 'betray' the intensity of his or her consciousness. One extreme is the vegetating consciousness while the bobbin slowly unwinds until there is no thread left; the other extreme is an intense, mystical joy about the beauty of existence that can be compared with an intense musical experience. Dying transforms the current consciousness of values. All questions which we normally find important lose their matter-of-courseness and make way for questions concerning existence which do not touch upon 'having' but upon 'being'. Thanks to the 'deathbed' we enter another dimension. The realization of *not*-'being' of the dying person has the paradoxical result that the experience of being/Being manifests itself in the persons concerned with ever increasing power. It seems as if their consciousness becomes 'consciously being' again. Each form of falseness unmasks itself by fleeing from this intense ontological experience. Through this, death becomes a mirror to the whole of life. Now the first condition appears to turn into the question whether the dying person and the people around him are acting out of pure intentions towards themselves and each other. If so, the mirror can do its job without conjuring up shame and feelings of guilt. If not, then there is not only something wrong with the first condition, but also with the second.
The second condition implies that we are aware of the universal tendencies of our consciousness of values. This means that *humanity*, the symbol for all people, is constantly present in our consciousness of values in a latent, unconscious way. During the leave- taking from life or from the dying person, each form of self-interest comes necessarily and spontaneously to an end. As the beauty of existence presses upon (the surroundings of) the dying person with an intense force, the ethical consciousness on the level of duties and rights is transformed into another dimension. This is a dimension of an unlimited space in which, irresistibly and uncontrollably a play is acted out of endless connections and changes. Humanity appears to be a reality, but not a reality separate from

the cosmos or the 'to be/Being'. The second condition seems to be an abstraction in daily life, comparable to something like 'nought' or 'zero', until the deathbed frees the individual of all his rights and duties in order to return it to the space in which it originated and started to grow many years ago.

There is something else that death makes evident. If a person is not afraid of death, if he is able to confront this limitation, nothing or no one can make this person dependent or take away his (inner) freedom. Or as Spinoza says: 'A free person thinks of nothing less than death and his wisdom is not a meditation about death but about life.'

Two traditions in pagan humanism

Humanism as a philosophy starts with man, not with God, and does not accept insight or revelation from outside. However it will not be necessary for humanism to draw the last circle around itself. Should it do so then we speak of a suffocating anthropocentric vision which locks up man in a string of alphas without ever reaching the omega. Each philosophy, Christian, Tao or Humanist will be incomplete and inept as a philosophy if it has no vision concerning death. Such a world view ignores the most important question, which every human being is confronted with at some point.
Humanism is often reproached that is has no vision on death. To illustrate this reproach I quote from the Dutch *Reformatorisch Dagblad (Reformed Church Daily)* in its critical reaction to the Christmas message of Queen Beatrix in 1996. The theme of Beatrix' speech was death and mourning. I wrote an interpretation of her speech in the *NRC-Handelsblad (NRC Daily)* (7.1.1997) with the title: Queen Beatrix practices the conciously not-knowing'. I had taken up the reaction of the *Reformatorisch Dagblad* in my NRC-text:

A philosophy which Beatrix does not mention by name is Humanism. The *Reformatorisch Dagblad* has a splendid 'explanation' for this: At best the people who did not 'practise' anything (and today there very many) could feel left out in the cold. But viz à viz the big questions about death and eternity humanism has in fact no answer.' The *Reformatorisch Dagblad* is right about humanism not having an argued answer on the question about the meaning of death. Many humanists take an agnostic standpoint: consciously they do not make a statement concerning continued existence after death, because they do not know. Argued in this way Beatrix herself is a humanist when she says: ' Death is a mystery; no conviction for life can explain dying (...) and so every death signifies an incomprehensible end.' These quotations typify Beatrix as an agnostic who practices the conscious not-knowing about the possible significance of dying and death rather than as an orthodox Christian.'

I concluded my analysis of Beatrix' speech with the sentence: 'Humanism in the Netherlands has deep roots: the Christmas message demonstrates the agnostic-spiritual tradition of humanism without mentioning humanism by name.'

The challenge of not-being
In the chapter 'The challenge of not-being' in the book called *Concerning Life and Death,* I mention that the prominent years of philosophic-materialistic inspired humanism are over: 'this applies to its endeavour towards an exclusively scientific world vision as well as for the all-embracing, classless society, and in addition to its ideology of

individualising norms and values. It is now up to the philosophical-spiritual tradition of humanism, with its roots in ancient Greece and the hermetic gnosis of Alexandria, to pronounce on it. This ancient humanist tradition thinks differently and, in my opinion, with more nuance about death than its younger brother [philosophical-materialistic humanism]. It is the tradition of Pythagoras, Plato, the hermetic gnosis of Alexandria, the neoplatonism in the Renaissance, the cabala, the Rosicrucians, Free Masonry and all kinds of contemporary trends in feminism and ecology.3

From the standpoint of these values, humanism traditionally takes part in the debate about immanence and transcendence, the sacred and the profane, the latter usually referred to as secularism. In both traditions however, the spiritual as well as the secular, humanism stands in the breach for freedom of research and the radical freedom of the spoken and written word, for the separation of church and state, for the autonomy of human conscience, for the acknowledgement that there is such a thing as human nature, and for universal principles of justice which flow from the acceptance of a common human nature.

However, all these values and ideas do not specifically contribute to the question of mortality and immortality of man. The force by which in the Upanishads immortality is raised and observed is alien to Western humanism, with exceptions such as the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, who regarded the reading of the Upanishads as the comfort in his life and his death.

In *Concerning Life and Death* and *Humanism Toward the Third Millennium,* I position the two trends within pagan humanism.4

I use the term 'pagan' for two reasons. Firstly, in order to distinguish on the one side Christianity, Judaism or Islam and humanism on the other; secondly, to distinguish between a one-sided identification of humanism and secularism. The word 'pagan' conjures up an association with the pre-Christian Greek, Egyptian and Roman cultures. This pre-Christian culture is 'humanistic' because the 'anthropos', man, becomes subject as well as object in the research. The Greek- Egyptian- Roman tradition acknowledges within that ethos a philosophic-spiritual as well as a philosophic materialist interpretation of man and nature. The terms 'philosophic-materialistic' and 'philosophic-spiritual' may be interpreted in the context of this argument as immanent-immanent and immanent-transcendent. In the first approach we find ourselves in the company of Protagoras and Epicurus. In the second instance we find ourselves in the company of Pythagoras and Plotinus.

Both visions - the strictly immanent and the immanent-transcendent - are to be found outside the domain of provable or falsifiable statements, since they belong to the level of the all-embracing, ontological or metaphysical dimension.

Provability or falsifiability does not exclude a possible claim to truth of such a vision since the domain of true statements is logically larger than the domain of provable statements. A provable statement is supposed to be true, but a true statement does not have to be provable. In order to say something meaningful about a possible relationship between the experience of death and the position of man in the cosmos we have to consult our experiences in relation to death. The possible influence of the experience of death on our consciousness of values I described above can be seen as an example of such a relationship. The experience of death confronts us with a void which - in whatever way

you look at it - is not identical to the absolute 'nothing'. We cannot reflect on the absolute 'nothing'. The experience of death is the experience of a 'nothing' from a fixed image. The experience of death destroys all existing empirical constructions: all forms of identification, mental formations and images present, suddenly manifest their two-faced head: they exist but exclusively for the moment and thanks to a certain perception. Through the forms of space-and-time an experience of spacelessness and timelessness breaks out, as if space- and timelessness are the backdrop of our awareness of space-and-time. The death agony of a dying person is the fear of having to let go of space-time images, while no will in the world can prevent this. The dying person looks into an abyss. Dependent on the phase and the specific condition of the mind this hole will be ink-black or radiate a clear white light. During dying the cosmic dimension of human consciousness, present in the DNA structure of each human being, repossesses its position of power in relation to the mental dimension of human consciousness. The cosmic consciousness of man carries him back to the 'space' from where he originated. *The cosmic dimension is the core of the transcendent experience.*

Based on the preceding analysis I wish to clarify in what way the humanist tradition, formulated schematically, takes up two positions. If human consciousness is interpreted as an epiphenomenon of the human body, neither more nor less, one must regard death, as does Anton Constandse, as a definitive end of any form of 'presence' or any form of human consciousness. If however one interprets human consciousness not just singularly but as a 'composite' i.e. as a manifestation of a cosmic-transcendent consciousness *and* as an organic- individual consciousness, a different situation occurs. In that case especially death enables the realization of the integral consciousness and therefore the opening towards what David Bohm calls the *implicate order.* The implicate order is permanently present in the *explicate order* which is the reality of our daily experience. In Bohm's view the implicit order generates permanently from 'second' to 'second' the reality that is partly visible, partly invisible for man. The *implicate order* is comparable with the role our consciousness plays in the construction of human identity. As long as the individual consciousness, memory function included, functions well, an individual accepts itself as a person, as an identity which can react meaningfully to its surroundings. The experience of identity however is of a temporary nature, viz. a constructive-creative mental act. There is a continuous individual consciousness activity needed in order to keep the brittle identity of a human being going.5
The psychiatric institutions are a painful illustration of the vulnerability of the human identity. The moment we proceed from the hypothesis that human consciousness participates intrinsically in the immanent and the transcendent dimensions of all reality, that is to say in the variety and the 'unity' within it, c.q. interdependence of all phenomena, death is the changeover of a specific form, i.e. my body, to a further unknown and unpronounceable reality. A humanist can accept this hypothesis in his lifetime or reject it resolutely. This is a choice which is only partly arguable. In any case none or both options are provable or arguable. The choice for the transcendent can be inspired by unique experiences in the domain of fine arts, music, nature, eroticism and sexuality. The choice can also be stimulated through the insight in the fundamental creativity of human consciousness; in the realization of the infinite and of the nature of

the concept of 'nought'. Within the context of this argument it is important to understand that an intuitive awareness and an experience of transcendence are not dependent of an idea of God. The monotheistic religions may accept the transcendence in the idea of God as autonomous starting point and end point, but the monotheistic version is a variant, a possible interpretation of transcendence. The acceptance of the transcendent and atheism go well together as, among other things, Buddhism shows us. Therefore it is not theism or atheism which makes transcendence possible but the experience of transcendence which makes atheism or pantheism thinkable.

Meditating on death, every suspension, every 'bracket' wants to be opened and an answer becomes imperative.6

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Notes

1. Gustavo Carcao, translated by Guido Logger. *Course for death,* Spectrum, Utrecht/Antwerp, 1951, pp. 42-43.

2. Eknath Eawaren, *Dialogue with Death. A Journey through consciousness.* Nilgiri Press. Tomales, 1992, p.11.

3. Fons Elders, in: Fons Elders Ed., *Concerning Life and Death. Visions of Death in Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Humanism, Islam, Judaism, Shintoism, Tibetan Book of the Dead,Six dialogues with Death.* VUB-Press, Brussels, 1997, pp 64-65.

4. Ibid. pp 62 c.v. Also see: Fons Elders Ed., *Humanism towards the Third Millenium,* VUB Press, Brussels 1993, pp. 10 c.v.

5. David Bohm, *Wholeness and the implicate order,* Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1980, passim.

6. Pasquale J. Simonelli (1998). 'Transcendence. The Universal Quest', in Fons Elders, ed., Mythological Europe Revisited, in *Humanism Toward the Third Millennium III.* VUB-Press. Brussels 2000. (To be published)