

109-1 佛家哲學研究 week 7

批判所謂的「生命尊嚴」與「尊嚴死」

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本週閱讀材料

- **Yao-ming Tsai, “A Critique of the so-called ‘Dignity of Life’ and ‘Death with Dignity’ from the Perspective of Temporality.”**



ABSTRACT

- This study critically investigates “dignity of life” and “death with dignity” from the perspective of temporality. The analysis starts by defining and clarifying some key concepts such as dignity, life, and death. This is followed by a critical examination of the appropriateness of connecting dignity either with life or with death. A point that should be emphasized is that although the concept of dignity can play a significant role in the social and cultural categories experienced in a temporal context, it encounters enormous difficulties in the category of the process of life-and-death devoid of temporality.

ABSTRACT

- If the phrases “dignity of life” and “death with dignity” are taken for granted, then the fallacy of misplaced categories of terminological application can be committed, and therefore the correlated discourses of bioethics or thanatology may be deceptive or misleading. I argue that the process of life-and-death is, first and foremost, neither about dignity nor about indignity, but about entrapped suffering and the cessation of the entrapped suffering. The critical insight of this study may not only be able to open the mind of the students of philosophy to tackle difficult situations in life-and-death, but also serve as a guideline in the future studies related to philosophy of life-and-death.

Four concepts need to be defined and clarified

- **Dignity:** “In its most general form, we can understand the concept of dignity to be a respect-worthy status or standing.” According to such a definition, dignity is a status-term and is related to a certain group or community. Besides, as worthy of respect by others, dignity can function as a tool for elevating or degrading one’s status in a certain group or community.
- **Life:** In terms of phenomenal world, life is regarded as the process of life throughout various moments of birth, growth, aging, and death. Concerning individual entities, life is referred to as living individuals. As regards the reality of sentient beings, life is understood as “a coherent base, mechanism, or principle which manifests living as such a process of life.”

Four concepts need to be defined and clarified

- **Death:** Since the notion of break-up and disintegration of the constitutive elements of the psycho-physical individual characterizes death, “death is the irreversible loss of integrated organic functioning.” The traditional Buddhist criteria that distinguish a living body from a dead body include life/vitality- faculty (āyu), heat (usmā), and consciousness (viññāṇa).

Four concepts need to be defined and clarified

- **Temporality:** The two most common definitions of the word “temporality” are either “of or relating to time rather than eternity,” or “of or relating to secular life as distinguished from what pertains to the sacred.” In this paper, temporality is introduced to highlight the temporal character of the actual world, namely, that whatever we experience, we experience as impermanent: Everything changes over time, and everyone dies. In other words, everything is in a state of flux, and nothing lasts forever.

How Appropriate Is the Phrase “Dignity of Life:” A Philosophical Concept in its Own Right or A Belief Enmeshed with Political Correctness?

- The phrase “dignity of life,” or “human dignity,” often “forms a foundational concept for the international legal order of human rights.” Largely due to the widespread influence of contemporary political and legal movements associated with the idea of human rights, the phrase “human dignity” gains positive recognition with fashion. In the same vein, the phrase “dignity of life” is not so much an appropriate representation of the reality as a dogmatic expression of beliefs and enforced conformity of thoughts. However, if an idea is accepted predominantly through enforced conformity and political correctness, this is tantamount to the death of philosophy therein.

Dignity is Mainly A Temporal and Social Construct; How About Life?

- Since dignity means that people are to be treated with respect, it is temporal, social and cultural in nature.
- Being social means performing social actions. However, people do various kinds of things, and a large part of which are really bad and even cruel or evil, which, by definition, do not deserve respect. Therefore, as time goes by, the same person might earn other people's respect as a dignified person, but later might be disgraced or an embarrassment to society for whatever reason.

Dignity is Mainly A Temporal and Social Construct; How About Life?

- Since the phrase “dignity of life” universally and permanently applies to all the forms of sentient beings, at least to all human beings, it is hard to imagine how this phrase can make any sense while applying to those who carry out bad or even evil things.
- Furthermore, if the living are already dignified creatures in their essential nature, how can they become dignified again by way of earning the respect of others?

Where Does the Dignity of Life Come From?

- The topic of the origin of life cannot be avoided if the dignity of life is to be applied and maintained universally and permanently. In other words, if one advocates the dignity of life in a universal and permanent manner, he/she has to explain why the life, or at least human life, has an inherent dignity in terms of how sentient beings, or at least human beings, came to be.
- No reason is really given for claiming the dignity of life other than resorting to theological clichés and simplifications. The process of the temporal life of the mind-body complex cannot be replaced with routinized clichés. Without pertinent observation of the temporal process of sentient beings, the idea of the dignity of life is nothing but a dogmatic view.

What Are the Appropriate and Consistent Criteria for Life to be Dignified?

- Dignity is a value-loaded concept, involving value judgment in terms of both quality and quantity and referring to something which is either more or less dignified than others.
- If most of the discourses on the dignity of life only reflect either the dominant social conventions, power structures, or personal tastes without appropriate and consistent criteria, such discourses, no matter how sophisticated they may appear to be, are not good enough to be accepted as philosophical knowledge in a rigorous sense.

Death with Dignity: The Connection of Dignity with Death

- As a side note, although the connection of dignity with life commonly underlies current political thoughts or legal theories, the connection of dignity with death is more often seen in bioethics, especially in its sub-category of euthanasia.
- It is exactly in such multivalent connections to various fields that, on the one hand, the meaning of dignity becomes vaguer, on the other hand, the reality of life-and-death becomes further clouded and distorted by conceptual vagueness and rival opinions.

Death with Dignity: The Connection of Dignity with Death

- I would like to emphasize once again that dignity basically means worthy, especially worthy of respect by others. One is worthy mainly because of what one does or how one does it.
- If worthy can be universally applied to anyone regardless of what or how one does things, this is tantamount to ruining worthy as a philosophical concept. Once the concept of worthy is ruined, the concomitant concept of dignity goes to ruin too.

Death with Dignity: The Connection of Dignity with Death

- In bioethics, most of the discourses on the “dignity of death,” “death with dignity,” or a “dignified death” take dignity as a given and therefore apply universally to the death of humans. The meaning of dignity in such discourses has thus been substantially changed and has become perhaps virtually undefinable -- a concept has evolved into a symbol which can easily be equated with “**physician assisted suicide**” or “**aid in dying.**”

Neither Dignity nor Indignity, but rather Suffering: A Buddhist Perspective on Life-and-Death in terms of Temporality

1. An Observation of the Impermanent Process of Life-and-death as the First Step in Reaching A Correct Understanding
2. From Entrapped Suffering to Mindfulness, Clear Comprehension, and Liberation

Bhikkhus, a bhikkhu should await his time mindful and clearly comprehending. This is our instruction to you.

--Saṃyutta-nikāya 36.7, the “Paṭhama-gelaṅṅa-sutta

Neither Dignity nor Indignity, but rather Suffering: A Buddhist Perspective on Life-and-Death in terms of Temporality

- Three key points can be highlighted:
 1. First, one should await his/her time
 2. Second, a basic practice for a person, even very sick or dying, to maintain a solid mindset is staying mindful
 3. Third, along the way of mindfulness, a practitioner will be able to further develop insight capability and dwell clearly comprehending

Conclusion

- I have argued that “dignity of life” and “death with dignity” are misplaced categories of terminological application in the discourses of philosophy of life-and-death. Without both pertinent observation of the impermanent process of life-and-death and rigorous training in meta-philosophy to guide our perception and thinking, it is easy to get trapped by the kinds of misplaced categories drawn from mainstream theories of bioethics, especially from those of thanatology. We have here the fallacy of misplaced categories where a concept pertaining to the category of social networking has been filtered through the category of the process of life-and-death.

Conclusion

- Such a fallacy, first, takes a wrong route to philosophy of life-and-death by way of such an unsuitable concept as dignity; second, promotes habitual clinging to life-and-death by associating dignity with life-and-death; and third, hinders an insight into the reality of life-and-death because the process of life-and-death is buried under simplifying dichotomous views of dignity and indignity.
- This paper proposes entrapped suffering as a more suitable category to unlock the reality of life-and-death and therefore to construct a philosophy of life-and-death. One of the major advantages of this perspective is that sentient beings are encouraged to delve beneath the surface of life-and-death and gaze beyond the world's suffering.

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