



(Die beiden Siegeressays wurden nach dem Wettbewerb auf sprachliche Fehler hin durchgesehen.)

1. Platz:

Jakob Gomolka, Leibniz-Gymnasium, 45894 Gelsenkirchen (Jhg. Q1)

A free man thinks of death least of all things; and his wisdom is a meditation not of death but of life.

- Spinoza: Ethics, transl. by R. H. M. Elwes. Prop. LXVLL

Death has always been the greatest object of human curiosity, no matter it being - or maybe because of it being – unattainable. Death is the great question mark ending all human beings' life, or according to some religious and spirituals only a comma, to begin a new stage, the eternal life in heaven or hell. And as such, the end of human life, the final failure of the human body, has always been the battleground between religious and atheistic thinkers. For who won supremacy in the question of death, the final question, would dominate all religious debates to come, would be able to crush the others' beliefs. No (or barely a) religion could hold together once it has been proven there is neither a life after death nor reincarnation; but on the other side of the coin, the atheistic worldview without any God in it would cease to exist once there would be empirical proof for a life after death.

And being a question of such importance, countless numbers of humans, monks and religious thinkers, just as scientists and philosophers, have devoted their lives to find the answer. Or one could say: Spent their lives; wasted their lives. For none of them has succeeded yet, and now all of them are – dead, or soon bound to die.

If there was a God, he would be sitting in his heavenly residence laughing until his stomach hurts. Aren't we fools, knowing that our existence (or at least the material existence on this planet) will end, far too soon, for everyone? And yet we argue about death in a more or less philosophical way. The fitting mental image to this situation would be a group of cavemen, seeing a carnivore – say, a lion – coming closer. But instead of running away, for they cannot defend themselves, the men stay where they are, and start to argue what to do.

Foolish behaviour indeed, and we are all guilty of this stupidity, for we ourselves are in this very moment thinking about death rather than living our lives. Now, think of Spinoza's words. 'The free man', who does not spend his life thinking about death, would be the one to run away in our imaginary situation. But for he is only human, the lion would come and get him, too, sooner or later. One cannot escape death – at least no one managed to do so yet – one can only delay it. But isn't running away absurd then?

For an analytical distinction of Spinoza's thoughts, expressed in the quotation at hand, a closer look at his choice of words is needed. A 'free man thinks of death least of all things', and so the 'unfree man' would probably be the one to be caught in his thinking about death. It is to note that Spinoza does not distinguish between 'wise' and 'foolish'. The grade of freedom decides whether you think about death or not, and not possibly your intellect, your experience or your wit. (There have surely been many intelligent men who thought about death, but it is arguable if they were also wise.) Spinoza does not divide mankind into 'wise' and 'foolish', he rather speaks of the abstract concept of a 'free man' (who has wisdom, according to Spinoza, though). Without further knowledge of his other works, Spinoza's words can be interpreted in different ways. As we all know there are human beings who think about death, and are thus 'unfree', – and we are among them, writing and reading this essay – then there are either humans who overcame this obsession, and thus became free, or the concept of a free man is a completely abstract one, not for human beings to reach.

For Spinoza himself wrote down these very words, possibly giving advice to his fellow human beings on earth, I am going to assume he is no complete pessimist. Spinoza gives us an ideal to follow, so he might see a small chance of mankind becoming free.

But now we must consider if a life ignoring death is what we truly want? I will try to overcome my subjectivity, and look at the problem from different angles.

Take the religious man: Isn't his whole life devoted to death, for he lives only to live better *after* death? For him, death is only the gateway he is heading for, he might enjoy his way to this gateway, through the garden of life, but he is still heading straight for the gateway. One can assume that he has to be considered an unfree man, a prisoner to death, according to Spinoza, or at least according to these particular words by Spinoza.

On the other hand: The atheist searching his well-being in the schools of philosophy. He also is an unfree man, probably, because he will spend his days on earth doubting, maybe he is afraid of this gateway in front of him – or is it no gateway at all? His fear of death makes him unfree in his thinking, too.

Now, is the whole humanity a race of unfree animals? Sartre would be shocked. Is there no hope, no single soul not entranced by this curse?

One might hear the arrogance of the so-called intellectuals in these words. Must we only consider the great thinkers?

Only he who lives his life to the fullest, every single day, without giving a single thought about death, is truly free. Being taught about philosophy, I always wondered how some of my fellow students could not be intrigued by these existential questions. I must admit, there always was a hint of contempt in my incomprehension I could not quite restrain. Instead of reading about the important questions of death and life, they would prefer to have small talk about seemingly unimportant matters. But now I find myself asking who the real fool is. Those students, according to Spinoza, are the free ones, for they do not worry about death. But if one follows this train of thoughts, where does one end? Some say: The less you think the happier you are. Should the ideal of humanity be the animal, as it does not think at all?

It must be admitted this is a very hedonistic interpretation of Spinoza's quotation. Spinoza only judges thinking about death, but philosophy does not mean thinking about death necessarily.

Philosophy is so much more, for it means to think about life, to think about morals and ethics. And this is what is meant with 'meditation [...] of life'. The fact that the obsession with death makes the human mind prisoner of death does not justify that we have to live in a nihilistic hedonism to escape the idea of death.

But isn't all human thinking linked to death, one way or another? Morals and ethics are limited by death; they are only rules of what to do and what not to do during our short time of living between two infinities. Jean-Paul Sartre as the founder of existentialism called death a 'caesura', just as birth, something we cannot quite comprehend. It is just a fact, our mind is created out of flesh, and somehow the electric signals in it form something like a personality, maybe even a soul. And then the body grows old, we die, and the mind stops working. God knows what happens with our 'soul', if there is one at all. We can never understand death, for maybe there is nothing to understand. And yet we search understanding, driven by greed for knowledge.

Thirst for knowledge is normally considered something good, for it is part of seeking understanding. But it must be considered if death is really to be ignored. Must man compulsively try to avoid thinking about death? Only this notion takes away his freedom, for it limits him.

Let us go back to our image. The humans are the cavemen again, faced with a lion able to kill any of them. Having a closer look at the given quotation, we can say that it is not about running or staying at all. You only have the choice to turn around, to ignore the lion sitting right behind you, or to face him, eye to eye, and await the inevitable. The lion, death, might not kill you now; maybe he enjoys seeing the fear in your eyes, and wants to enjoy it a bit longer.

Now we are at the very core of the question. Man has never been really free, for he has no choice to escape the system he is in; he is caught between birth and death. His only freedom is to decide how he wants to die. Awaiting it, or ignoring it?

Our pride tells us to look our murderer in the face. Man should die with dignity, knowing and accepting his fate, and not being unaware of death like a simpleminded pig to be slaughtered in one of those farms of ours.

Spinoza's idea is another. In our picture, he chooses to turn around, ignoring the lion sitting behind him. He will continue to live until the lion grabs him. Having lived with joy instead of fear seems alluring, too.

And isn't there some kind of dignity in it, too? Having the choice to be aware of death, yet choosing life, for life matters while death is meaningless. To spend a life looking the lion in the eye, awaiting death, means not to live at all.

The question how to die equals the question how to live. This is the true and well known dilemma we are caught in. We are free to decide, but our choice does not matter at all.

It all comes down to personal values. Do humans value personal joy more than honour, dignity and braveness? Braveness to face death, or even more braveness to turn around and ignore it?

The problem has always been there. Already the Romans wrote "Memento Mori" – Remember you must die. There have always been two ways to understand this famous saying, and our problem, too, amounts to these. Remember death: So live like it is your last day, enjoy your life and ignore death? Or remember death: Death is coming closer, be aware of it, and face death.

The saying might be more than two thousand years old, but the problem has obviously not been solved. Even worse, it seems like most people do not remember death at all.

When wandering through the endless streets of modern towns, nowadays a symbol of civilisation, one will barely find one single human being who stops with the daily routine to think about 'the great questions'. Most humans tend to ignore death, some with hints of fear in them – making every effort to stay alive – while others show nothing but pure ignorance. Only when a family member or friend dies, we pause to think: In our metaphor, the cavemen sitting in a circle, collectively ignoring the danger, carefully turn around – only for seconds – once they hear the lion grabbing one of them. Only when directly confronted with death we bother to think about it, even if only for a short moment, merely a breath in our life.

This behaviour truly lacks dignity, for it is nothing but avoiding the problem rather than searching for a solution. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' answer to how one wants to handle death, but one has to do something with it, one way or another.

The human race's only notable characteristic is its mind. No matter what the decision is, if we decide not to use our mind at all, we are nothing more than animals. Maybe it is *human* to die doubting.

Whether somebody chooses to ignore death or not might give information about his wisdom, but not about his freedom. Spinoza's words might thus be considered wrong, for they contain a value judgement. He who chose to confront himself with the idea of death chose freely, too. The question is not whether to think about life or death, but whether to think about the question itself. Only those who do not think about the question of death are unfree, for they are still caught in their animal instincts.

Maybe Spinoza thought of something else when he called the one thinking about death unfree. He who thinks about death made a free decision to do so, but now he might be caught in his fearful obsession: Staring into the lion's eyes and not being able to look away.

As long as there is fear in our minds, we are still slaves to death. No matter if you face death, or turn away to await your fate, if you fear what is to come, you cannot live at all. And this is what Spinoza does not mean, but should mean. Personal freedom does not depend on what you think, but rather if you can think it. Mankind has to overcome its fear to live happily, even with death at their doorstep.

Only the fear of death makes us unfree. He who is prepared for death and does not fear it is truly free.

Spinoza's 'free man' is no role model in his ignorance. It is not enough to not think about death. You need to think about death and overcome your fear; you need to beat the idea of death to live. Only then 'meditation of life' is possible. When just ignoring death, its shadow will still lie upon you, darkening your life and all your works and thoughts. The true enemy of life is not death, but the fear of death.

2. Platz:

Vanessa Hirneis, Georg-Forster Gymnasium Kamp-Lintfort (Jhg. Q2)

*A free man thinks of death least of all things;
and his wisdom is a meditation not of death but of life.*

The Grim Reaper - that evil man!

Life and death: two words that can trigger so many different emotions in the human being, even though they are just words written on paper after all. At least at first glance. The heaviness that goes to our stomachs and fills our lungs, just trying to grasp the true meaning of those 'words', already signifies what huge and significant role the topic of life and death plays within our human lives. There is nothing that is more relevant to us at any time, constantly having to face that we are getting older, weaker, possibly sick. We love the idea of life, while we hate the idea of death. We are afraid that death could take something away from us that is ours. Like stubborn children, we refuse to believe that death is not a person that purposely means us harm. No, death is evil! Death is mean! Death steals our loved ones away from us. Death is the reason we cannot do everything we want to do in life.

So what if death did not exist? What if that which bullies us all our lives, that scares us, that makes us feel bad about everything we do, suddenly vanished and could not harm us anymore? What if freedom meant not having to be afraid of the unknown, not having to face or to consciously think about death? How sweet life would be!

But really?

In the following, I am going to examine Spinoza's quote. I will illustrate what true freedom means and how one can achieve this state. Meanwhile, I am going to take a stand on life and death, namely what role both *should* play in our lives.

Free is he, to whom death has no face. Since we really do personify death, to me this statement seems to be an adequate alternative. Once death is no longer something that penetrates us with its mist of insecurity and fear, we can live; then we shall be free. But is it not rather amusing that mankind, superior animals ruling the world by the means of their intelligence, consciousness and rationality, can only gain individual freedom, when each and every one of us starts to stop thinking about the existence of something so perfectly natural? How can something natural have such a big influence on us and how can the absence of something natural be a criterion for a happy and free life? It astonishes me, how our associations with death have become so badly. As a child, I used to hate Hades from Walt Disney's Hercules, because he made people lose the colour of their skin and enjoyed sucking the life out of them. Granted, I still do,

but in a wider context, since I realized that it was more than just a movie. Of course, I do not want to die. I am afraid.

As the only creatures walking on earth with the ability to consciously think about their very own death, we have given it so many different names, images and bodies. Yet, it is the unthinkable, something that pushes us out of our comfort zone. Even if we really do try to understand what death means, how it might be, what might come after, it gives us goose bumps. It is and probably will always be a very delicate matter, which is not easy to talk about. On the other hand, life is fascinating, good, joyful, sweet. However, what seems to be a contradiction, what *seems to be* mutually exclusive, could not be more closely related to each other. Where there is life – there is death. Where there is death – there consequently is life, as well. One could even call them two equal stages we go through, with one simply being a bit more certain than the other – since we do not know what is waiting for us on “the other side”. But we do not. We cannot accept life and death as being anywhere near to equal.

Spinoza states that wisdom means “[...] *a meditation not of death but of life*”. Wisdom that will bless us with freedom in the end. Dealing with our mortality, in fact, could be something that might lead us to a nihilistic view on life. Vanitas – Life’s transitoriness: everything I do is going to leave with me. Nothing is everlasting, not even my narcissistic self. That hurts. It lies within human nature not to feel comfortable with this. But that being said, I question if this reaction really is natural or if it is rather something we started to believe due to our ignorance and our incapability to see the entitlement to exist in things that do not visibly wear it on the outside. Kübler-Ross, a female scientist and psychologist dealing with death, believes to have discovered that there are five different psychological stages we go through when we die. Summarized, there are stages of disbelief (That cannot be), stages of rejection (I will not die!) and stages of acceptance (I will die). This last state of acceptance, however, only seems to kick in, once we realize that there really is nothing we can do to prevent our own death. I really wonder if that used to be the same in times where there were no ways of interrupting this process. Therefore, it is arguable whether our stand on death is natural, or if we just have become victims to our superiority that we have taken for granted for too long. How can we accept something that does not underlie our management, meaning, something “above” us?

Today, we even artificially elongate our lives to the utmost and play God to an extent that ethics and morals cannot provide satisfying answers anymore. I am certain that if, one day, we had the chance to cross ‘death’ out of our dictionaries, we would. That is how much this topic bothers us! But what value would life have? Is there any value in something that cannot be taken away? I vehemently oppose to this and I am afraid that would be a consequence if we failed to finally start accepting death as it is.

However, since I doubt Spinoza is trying to create a world in which death does not exist, this is another matter. I agree that fear is something that can really put us in chains and that prevents us from achieving our full potential. Someone, who does not care about death and therefore lives as if it did not exist, thinking “[...] of death least of all things”, cannot be threatened by it. This seems logical. But is that what true freedom really means? Or is it rather the illusion we have created to comfort ourselves? The character of the Savage in Aldous Huxley’s ‘Brave New World’ said that he did not want comfort. He wanted God, he wanted freedom, he wanted real danger, goodness and he wanted sin. He chose his right to be unhappy over being ‘perfectly fine’. Is this not what life is really about? Acknowledging and accepting the negatives as well? Accepting death as part of life? If fear and uncertainty were not natural why would they exist? Why should something natural be judged to be negative by, pardon me, something as meaningless as human beings. Who do we think we are? Why does it

necessarily have to be inconvenient to consciously attempt to come to terms with a problem we probably won't ever have the answers to?

Martin Luther King said "Life ends the day we become silent about the things that matter". Regardless, whether this quote is taken out of its historical context or not, it fits. Death matters and even though it bothers me and even though I do not feel comfortable I refuse to believe it would be wise to ignore it. Besides, I do not see the freedom my ignorance should provide me with. At the most, I use my so-called freedom to put myself in the position of the child that is ignoring his or her bully, hoping he or she will finally stop – when really we all know that is not going to happen. We cannot stop dealing with death without giving away a little bit of our reason and intellect, for death is too prevalent and, again, natural. We can only gain true freedom by acknowledging the facts of nature. We live, we die - and that is okay. That is how it should be. True freedom cannot be defined by the intellectual ignorance of death. True freedom means not being held back by anything in life. Death cannot do that, since *it is part of life*. Life and death are not describing opposites, like I said before. Human beings simply personify something, they do not understand, as evil, because we are afraid of everything we fail to explain to our satisfaction. Therefore, we are not scared of death itself, but of the things we associate with it. We are the ones holding us back. It is a vicious circle we cannot escape from without working on our attitude towards things we cannot change and also must not change. What we really need to do is, to start confronting ourselves with our fears, in order to overcome them.

Just like the Savage I do not care about this sort of comfort. The inhabitants living in the 'Brave New World' were just erased once they were of no use anymore. They did not grow old, they did not change. They felt no emotions with a negative connotation, such as pain or sorrow. That is no life. Even if it is natural for humans to be afraid of death, I want to remain that way. To me, the purpose of life is to live, like Casper sang, and many people before him thought. I want to live with all the human emotions I can possibly feel, but with the knowledge that death means no harm to me – the most natural way. Right now, I do admit that I am quite far away from this, but I want to think of death as another step on my journey. That is true wisdom and having that certainty I would gain true freedom: freedom of the soul, namely true freedom of the soul, no illusion. Only then am I invulnerable to anything.

Aristotle realized that the hardest victory is over oneself. I truly believe that the hardest path will make the wisest man and that to the wisest man everything is possible. We have everything, yet we are so afraid and I actually do not see why, since our reason could tell us that there is no need to be afraid of something, theoretically, so harmless. In Walt Disney's Lion's King, Mufasa speaks to his son Simba about the everlasting Circle of Life and how we are all one; how the lions eat antelopes, turn to grass when they die and are finally eaten by the antelopes. This was the most positive way of thinking about death I have ever heard and this should be our philosophy when we deal with death, as well. We should remain just as excited about life, as we are now, but we should not take it for granted and especially not as something that we possess. Everything is borrowed and eventually we have to give it back the way we got it: pure, full of positive energy and 'life', meaning excitement about what there is to come. Therefore, it would be more accurate to say:

***A free man thinks of death in the same way as all things;
and his wisdom is a meditation of both death and of life.***