



AFRL-AFOSR-JP-TR-2017-0021

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## Death as Existence: Symbols and Metaphors in the Islamic Promotion of Martyrdom

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02/16/2017  
Final Report

DISTRIBUTION A: Distribution approved for public release.

Air Force Research Laboratory  
AF Office Of Scientific Research (AFOSR)/ IOA  
Arlington, Virginia 22203  
Air Force Materiel Command

<b>REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE</b>				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
<p>The public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing the burden, to Department of Defense, Executive Services, Directorate (0704-0188). Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.</p> <p>PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ORGANIZATION.</p>					
1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 06-03-2017		2. REPORT TYPE Final		3. DATES COVERED (From - To) 05 Aug 2015 to 04 Aug 2016	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Death as Existence: Symbols and Metaphors in the Islamic Promotion of Martyrdom				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER FA2386-15-1-4076	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER 61102F	
6. AUTHOR(S) Irm Haleem				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY 50 NANYANG AVENUE SINGAPORE, 639798 SG				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) AOARD UNIT 45002 APO AP 96338-5002				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) AFRL/AFOSR IOA	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S) AFRL-AFOSR-JP-TR-2017-0021	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT A DISTRIBUTION UNLIMITED: PB Public Release					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
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15. SUBJECT TERMS suicide martyrdom, Islamic martyrdom, AOARD					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 9	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON AHLERS, KRISTOPHER
a. REPORT Unclassified	b. ABSTRACT Unclassified	c. THIS PAGE Unclassified			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code) 315-227-7009

**Final Report**  
**AOARD Grant FA2386-15-1-4076**

***Death as Existence***

*How death comes to symbolize existence and what that means for suicide missions*

**02/16/2017**

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**Period of Performance:** 08/05/2015 – 12/01/2016

**Abstract:**

Existing studies on radical Islamist suicide missions tend to explain this phenomenon either as a desperate measure of the weak or as something unique to the Islamic context. Suicide missions, however, are hardly unique to the Islamic context. The example of World War II Japanese Kamikaze pilots comes to mind immediately. But self-destruction, too, even when it only targets the self and not others along with the self, is not unique to the Islamic context. The example of Buddhist self-immolation (through burning) comes to mind immediately; or, for that matter, that of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia, who set himself on fire in December 2010, catalyzing the Arab Spring in various Arab states the following year and onwards. It is the consistent and, indeed, timeless theme of self-destruction in human history that motivated this study.

My central aim in this study was to interrogate the meaning of death and existence, broadly speaking, in order to understand an individual's choice to take his or her own life. Through drawing upon philosophical discussions on the matter, particularly in terms of the assumed unequivocalty of the dread of our own death and the debates surrounding the meaning of (human) existence, I argue that self-destruction actually symbolizes existence in its essence. This essence, I maintain, is human agency: namely, autonomy and sovereignty over our own thoughts and actions. In order to establish the universal importance of the human desire for agency, this book draws upon temporally and contextually varied examples of self-destruction, from prisoners in Nazi death camps, to those with a political agenda, and still others in the name of love. In all these cases, the individuals concerned made a critical distinction between an authentic existence (existence with agency) and an inauthentic existence (existence without agency and one marked by passivity and conformity). And in all these cases, these individuals relegated an inauthentic existence to a metaphorical death, choosing instead an authentic existence (agency) even if that meant death. This, I argue, has critical implications for current counterterrorism policies that are premised on the elimination of individuals considered to be a threat. Contrary to its aims, these policies might actually play into the very symbolization that is sought by individuals who engage in suicide missions in the first place. And this symbolization maybe understood as defiance unto death, as the starkest manifestation of agency and thus an authentic existence.

**Introduction:**

What is death? Is it merely a physical demise? Can you be breathing and yet be dead? Are certain states of being alive actually a metaphorical death? And what might such a metaphorical death look like? Is passivity and conformity a metaphorical death? Does a

thoughtless succumbing to cruelty, whether in its acceptance or in its unleashing unto others, a metaphorical death? If so, might there be a moral component to an authentic existence? If we can talk about death in metaphorical terms, and existence in moral terms, then does that point to an essence of existence beyond its mere physicality or even its temporality? If simply being here in the physical sense does not qualify for an authentic existence, then is agency (autonomy, sovereignty, critical thinking, conscious action) a qualifier for an authentic existence? Might agency, then, be the very essence of existence? If so, how might the decision to invite one's own death, in the pursuit of such agency, be viewed? In other words, if death is a consequence of agency manifesting itself in the rejection of oppression, terror and dehumanization, might such death not symbolize the very essence of existence? What of death when agency manifests itself in the pursuit of a forbidden love against all odds? Might that symbolize the very essence of existence, too? If so, is love (its desire and pursuit) more fundamental to feeling truly alive than it is credited to be? And if so, what is the connection between love and death? Finally, and once again, is death really the worst thing that can happen to us? Or does the inevitability of death actually give meaning to our existence? Is the Grim Reaper really our friend? In lurking around every corner, does the Grim Reaper nudge us to live a fuller life?

This book addresses these questions through the prism of notions of mortality, fantasies of immortality, the imperative of love and passion as forms of transcendence from the drudgery of existence, and the human tendency to want to believe in some form of an afterlife to either deny the futility of existence that ends in death anyway, or to value agency above all. The central premise of this book is that the very essence of existence is agency, and that anything that obstructs that agency thus violates the very essence of existence. Both death and existence, then, are presented in this book as states of being, above and beyond their physicality. In other words, both death and existence are treated in this book in metaphorical and symbolic terms. The analysis in this book casts a light on how the decision to take one's own life marks the starkest, if paradoxical, demarcation of agency itself.

My central argument in this book is premised on the view that the essence of existence is agency. I argue, therefore, that self-destruction that is based on agency is a symbolization of existence, in essence. In other words, death, when based on agency, comes to symbolize existence. This leads to my related proposition, that notions of existence influence perspectives on death. If existence is understood only in its limited physical sense (of simply being here), then death is likely to be dreaded as it marks the end of such physicality. In such a view, death is the end of everything. But if existence is understood in terms of its essence, as agency, then anything that symbolizes agency then also symbolizes existence. Such a nuanced understanding of existence, therefore, calls into question the universal dread of death. However, the opposite is also true: an existence without agency is a metaphorical death. Such death, conceivably, does not mark the end of everything, as this 'everything' had already 'died' anyway, but instead a mere formalization of a metaphorical death.

Beyond a focus on the centrality of agency for an authentic existence, the dread of physical death can also be neutralized through broadening the aperture of the definition of existence, to include the collective body (of ethnic group, for example) that the individual belonged to. In such a collective understanding of existence, the sense of doom over the prospect of one's own death is somewhat neutralized as existence is understood to continue after one's own death. There are a few variations of this view, which I discuss in this book, that also underscore my argument that notions of existence influence perspectives on death.

#### DEFINING DEATH: *Criteria versus Concept*

In analyzing the meaning of death, this book distinguishes between the 'criteria' of death and the 'concept' of death. This difference can be summarized as thus: while the criteria of death focuses on the traditional physical indications of death, the concept of death concerns itself

with the philosophical and metaphorical elements of death. John Martin Fischer outlines two main criteria of death: “the traditional ‘heart-lung death’ criterion and the ‘brain-death’ criterion.”<sup>1</sup> In the former criterion, death is considered “permanent and irreversible” given the cessation of heart and lung functions.<sup>2</sup> Due to advancements in medical technology, Fischer notes that the cessation of heart and lungs can now be artificially and temporally reversed through mechanical aids. In such a case, death would be understood as the “cessation of unaided heart and lung functioning.”<sup>3</sup>

The availability of such technology leads to the second criterion of death: brain death. This describes a situation where the heart and lungs of an individual are kept functioning through mechanical aids, but where there is no longer is brain activity. In such a case, a person maybe breathing through artificial aids but for all practical purposes is dead. But here again, a distinction is made between a brain-dead criterion, where all functions of brain are dead and breathing needs to take place through artificial aids, and a criterion where only the part of the brain responsible for cognition is dead but where breathing can take place unassisted. The latter criterion is commonly referred to as a “vegetative state”.<sup>4</sup>

Understanding death as a concept, however, requires an engagement with the abstract and subjective discussions of death, beyond its common understanding of a physical demise. In other words, an analysis of death as a concept is an analysis of the metaphorical components of death. Consider, for example, the case of continuing existence through mechanical aids (such as a respirator). From the perspective of the concept of death, we might ask if such a prolongation of existence through mechanical means really qualifies as existence? In other words, might such an assisted existence not be a death of sorts? Similarly, if we understand death as a concept, then an oppressed state of being really is also a death of sorts.

In grappling with death as a concept, I draw upon the works of Nietzsche and Heidegger, as well as more contemporary thinkers, such as Hannah Arendt, to elucidate the meaning of death, and by extension, the meaning of existence. A common theme in the writings of the aforementioned thinkers is a normative analysis of what existence should be, an analysis based on the presence or absence of features and characteristics of existence. For example, Nietzsche and Heidegger, in their different ways, argue that passivity and thoughtless conformity violates an authentic existence. While Nietzsche formulates this idea through his hypothetical notion of eternal recurrence and the death of God, Heidegger articulates this idea through his notion of being-towards-death and authentic versus inauthentic existence.

Arendt, on the other hand, refers to the behavior of the majority of prisoners in the Nazi death camps, as well as the general absence of mass opposition to Hitler’s regime, as manifestations of a metaphorical death. Furthermore, in her seminal work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt points to the human tendency towards compliance and complicity not only in cases where one is overpowered but also in cases when one is in positions of power. In the latter case, acts of the most extreme brutality and monstrosity then become the norm under conditions of extreme terror. Extreme terror, she argues, functions not only to subdue dissent but also to reshape the very psyche of a person such that they become pliable in the hands of the oppressive state, regardless of the positions of power or powerlessness that they occupy. In such a scenario, actions that were once considered unthinkable and monstrous now become accepted as ‘normal’ and even moral, a phenomenon she refers to as the ‘banality of evil’. Such banality, or pliability, necessities that an individual shut down their critical thinking and accept, as the absolute truth, the narratives that are being weaved for them to justify policies and actions (whether of state or non-state entities). Such

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<sup>1</sup> John Martin Fischer, “Introduction”, in *The Metaphysics of Death*, eds. John Martin Fischer (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Fischer, “Introduction”, p.5.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Fischer, “Introduction”, p. 5.

individuals, she argues, transform from ‘human beings’ to ‘inanimate beings’: beings that are no longer self-governed but are mere puppets in the hands of the powerful entities. In this book, I present such a phenomenon as a metaphorical death since it is behavior that is the opposite of agency in existence. Paradoxically, such behavior is often motivated by the fear of your own (physical) death, but ends up yielding your metaphorical death.

## CHAPTER LAYOUT

Chapter one establishes that the essence of existence is human agency. The chapter is based on the school of thought that ‘real’ or authentic existence entails agency: an active engagement with the environment around us, even if such engagement might threaten one’s physical being. Anything short of that is thus considered inauthentic existence, where one is neither fully alive, nor is one physically dead. In addition to defining the meaning and importance of agency, this chapter also describes what agency looks like in the absence of freedom. My central argument in this chapter is that while freedom implies agency, agency need not imply freedom. This assertion has a particular relevance for understanding the essence of self-destruction, whether in the form of one deciding to take one’s own life in response to dire situations (as in self-immolation), or in the form of one deciding to take one’s own life alongside the lives of others (as in contemporary radical Islamic suicide missions). I argue that these acts of self-destruction are neither about suicide, nor about death. They are instead about a demarcation of agency, and thus are a symbolization of existence itself. This chapter therefore forms an important backdrop to subsequent chapters as it establishes the desire for agency as being central to situations where death becomes dearer than life itself.

Chapter two defines the meaning of a metaphorical death. It argues that a metaphorical death is different from a physical death in that it is in fact a state of being (alive), marked by passivity and conformity, one where an individual is alive but yet does not exist authentically. In a metaphorical death, an individual continues to exist physically, but dies metaphorically. With reference to the raw memoirs from survivors of Nazi death camps, as well as third-person narratives of their states of being, and narratives from more contemporary times of persons living under situations of oppression and terror, this chapter sketches the meaning of a metaphorical death. In distinguishing between a metaphorical death and a physical death, the chapter establishes, once again, the centrality of agency for an authentic existence, and thus calls into question the fear and dread of (physical) death.

Chapter three examines the relationship between love, passion and death. With reference to literary characters of Romeo and Juliet, a story of a love affair in the Nazi death camp, portrayals of love and passion in medieval Shia martyrdom poetry, as well as references to love and death in contemporary radical Islamic narratives of self-destruction, this chapter argues that the pursuit of love is a manifestation of agency. And to the extent that agency is the essence of existence, death in the pursuit of such love (agency) is then a symbolization of existence itself. In so doing, the chapter casts a light on the centrality of love and passion for a meaningful existence. And in so doing, too, the chapter defines love in all its many different manifestations: romantic love, love for a cause (such as freedom), love for God (such as manifested in religiosity).

This chapter also challenges the narratives that a forbidden love, particularly of the romantic sort, is an immoral love. Instead, the chapter reframes such forbidden love as the pursuit of an authentic existence. My aim here, once again, is to interrogate the different meaning and manifestations of agency, and hence the different forms that an authentic existence can take. Love, in all its different manifestations, is treated in this chapter as different avenues of transcendence from the drudgery of an inauthentic existence. And so, just as hunger strikes, self-immolation and suicide are seen as manifestations of agency in times of oppression, so too is the fearless pursuit of love under restrictions. In all cases, then, death becomes a symbolization of an authentic existence.

Chapter four examines the significance of the denial of death in pursuing an authentic existence. It does so by presenting the denial of death as another manifestation of agency. The denial of death may take many forms. It may take the form of denying that death can happen to you, which is fundamentally a denial of one's vulnerability that is grounded in one's mortality. Or it can take the form of denying that death is the end of everything. Denials of death may also be secular or religious. But in all its forms, this chapter shows how the denial of death encourages actions that flirt with death as a symbolization of agency and authentic existence. This chapter focuses on one specific form of the denial of death: the notion of a collective existence. This is a notion that existence continues after an individual's death in a way that, somehow, represents the continuation of the existence of the dead person. The chapter analyzes the notion of collective existence from a secular perspective, focusing on the significance of procreation in the denial of death. It introduces the Islamic notion of the 'ummah' – the notion of a transnational, collective and unified Muslim entity – as one that can also be understood in secular terms even when it forms the central theme of the radical Islamic promotions of self-destruction.

Chapter five offers some concluding remarks. It seeks to offer not only an overview of the arguments forwarded in this book, but also seeks to shed light on the question of whether an authentic existence requires a moral component or consciousness. In other words, is a thoughtless succumbing to cruelty, whether in its acceptance or in its unleashing unto others, a metaphorical death of sorts? In other words still, does an authentic existence require a resistance to conformity and passivity on moral grounds? Given that the writing of this book concluded during the first few months of President Trump's tenure, this chapter sheds light on the larger moral and existential significance of mass protests against Trump's 'Muslim ban' in several American cities.

### **Experiment:**

N/A. The study was conceptual in nature.

### **Results and Discussion:**

I have argued in this book that human agency symbolizes human existence in its essence. This means that existence should be understood not merely as a physical phenomenon but, more critically, as a symbolic phenomenon. And if *self*-destruction is a demarcation of agency, as I have maintained in this book, then self-destruction also symbolizes existence in its essence. Or, to put it simply, death, in such cases, symbolizes existence. This deductive logic may be understood simply as thus:

If agency (x) = existence (y)  
And self-destruction (s) = agency (x)  
Then self-destruction (s) = existence (y)  
Or death (s) = existence (y)

Logically, then, I have also maintained that an existence without agency is a metaphorical death: a 'death' that is not physical but symbolic. A metaphorical death can thus be understood as a tranquilized or sedated state of being, if you may, a being where a person succumbs and conforms to the societal or contextual requirements or expectations for fear of retribution.

Agency can manifest itself in several different ways. In this book, I have focused on self-destruction as a manifestation of agency. Self-destruction, too, takes several forms, where the context within which it takes place also varies. The forms and contexts that were outlined in this book include: self-immolation as a political statement against oppression;

suicide in the name of love (whether for a person, a cause or a Divine entity); and the infamous ‘suicide missions’ of the sort that have become the characteristic *modus operandi* of contemporary Jihadi (radical Islamist) groups and movements. I have also argued in this book that the denial of death, while it doesn’t lead to physical death, is also a manifestation of agency to the extent that it is a defiance, namely of the finality and inevitability of (physical) death. And, as with self-destruction, the denial of death comes in various forms, such as the allure for extreme sports or the desire for procreation. The form that has been of interest to me in this book, however, has been one that focuses on the phenomenon of continual existence in the form of the human species that lives on beyond our own death. This is different from procreation as here it is not one’s offspring that are seen as venues for one’s continual existence (consciously or subconsciously), but human beings quite unrelated (genetically) to the self. This form of the denial of death is particularly interesting as such logic is central to the radical Islamist promotions of suicide missions. In such promotional rhetoric, however, it is not the human species at large but the specific transnational Muslim community that is emphasized, namely the *ummah*.

In its manifestation as a struggle against oppression and servitude, I have argued that self-destruction – whether targeting only the self or others along with the self – becomes the language of the oppressed. It is a language that screams out (figuratively speaking) the centrality of agency for the individual who chooses death over a life of oppression, servitude and conformity. That is, it is a language that, through its self-destructive actions, confirms that an existence without agency is a metaphorical death. Physical death, in such cases of being oppressed, then only formalizes a metaphorical death. However, unlike the metaphorical death under states of terror and oppression, a physical death, chosen by the self, marks agency in a context where other forms of agency and resistance might not be physically possible. In such cases, physical death seeks to avoid a metaphorical death. In both kinds of death, existence ceases, either in its essence or in its physicality. However, in a metaphorical death, where existence ceases in essence, the individual continues to live on physically much like an animated robot: agency-less, passionless, and thoughtless. In such a case, a physical death is considered a better alternative than a metaphorical death. The stories of the prisoners in the Nazi death camps who chose to take their own lives in a place where death was imminent at every corner anyway, is a testimony to the preference of a physical death over a metaphorical death.

In its manifestation as the pursuit of love, agency takes on a distinctly resolved form. Particularly where the love sought is forbidden, pursuing such love defies all norms and goes against all odds of realization, making such a conviction a daring of stark manifestation. Indeed, contrary to the view that freedom and love form two separate avenues of transcendence from the drudgery of an insipid existence, I have argued that both the pursuits of freedom and love can be understood under the broader category of love itself, broadly defined. So what is sought in order to make existence meaningful is not only agency, but also the love of agency. And so I have argued that love in all its forms, as the agency that it symbolizes, becomes the marker of an authentic existence (existence with agency). It is love, then, in all its different manifestations (romantic love, love for freedom, love for country, love for one’s children, love for humanity, or love for God), which forms the fundamental avenue of transcendence from the mundanity of existence. And it is love, too, that can thus make us feel authentically alive.

My fundamental point is that when one manifestation of love is not available, or cannot be realized, another is sought. The choice entailed in the objects of our love, then, is the quintessential demarcation of agency. And it is the passion involved in all forms of love, I contend, that gives us the fullest sense of an authentic existence. It is also the passion involved in love, of all sorts, and the agency that it symbolizes, that allows for a daring flirtation with death itself, in a kind of an all-or-nothing mentality. The phrase ‘Live Free or Die’ captures this unequivocal devotion to agency perfectly. Consider, for example, the patriot or the nationalist who is willing to die for his or her country. Consider also, for



example, other such convictions based on love: the lover who is willing to die in the absence of his or her beloved, either in cases of an unrequited love or where the beloved dies. And, of course, there is the case of religious zealotry, where one chooses to engage in self-destruction in the name of the love of God. It is not surprising, then, that the promotional narratives of such self-destruction often refer interchangeably to love for freedom and love for God. The Sufi devotional *qawwali* songs, for example, whose common themes are martyrdom and love, or love for martyrdom, where martyrdom is very broadly defined as self-sacrifice in the name of devotion, go one step further and often blur the distinction between romantic love and love for God. And, not surprisingly again, the common narratives of the radical Islamist promotions of self-destruction (or suicide missions<sup>5</sup>) often refer interchangeably to love of freedom, God and death.

Finally, the third manifestation of agency that I examine in this book is that of the denial of death. In its secular version, it is a decision to take actions, fearlessly, despite the knowledge of our mortality and the fear of death that it ushers. In its religious form, of course, it is the belief in a life in the hereafter, such as (but not limited to) a belief in heaven, hell or reincarnation. It is the daring and the conviction implied in the denial of death (to not be shackled by fear of death) that serves as an antidote to passivity and conformity and to thus an inauthentic existence. And it is also the same conviction and daring that demarcates agency in its purest sense: if control cannot be gained over the inescapability and inevitability of death, then control is sought through defying the fear of death. And such agency, manifested in the daring, is not unlike the agency implied in self-destruction or the pursuit of love. The denial of death also forms the narratives of the promotion of self-destruction, so as to neutralize the finality of death implied in such missions and to thereby encourage recruits. The radical Islamist discourse on the centrality of the *ummah* (a transnational, collective Muslim entity), for example, forms a central theme in their promotions of suicide missions. Death, in such missions then, is fundamentally presented as a symbolization of existence, both in terms of a starkest manifestation of agency through death, as well as in terms of the denial of the finality of such death. The suicide bomber is thus presented as being both authentically alive as well as immortal.

### **List of Publications and Significant Collaborations that resulted from your AOARD supported project:**

This single-authored book manuscript is to be submitted to an academic publisher for review and publication. Publishers being considered: *Stanford University Press*, *Oxford University Press*, and *Verso*.

**DD882:** *Completed and signed (attached separately).*

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<sup>5</sup> As I've noted elsewhere in this book, the distinction I draw between 'self-destruction' and 'suicide missions' is that while in the former case one targets oneself only, in the latter case one targets oneself and others along with the self (the 'others' being typically individuals in the enemy's domain).