

Memento mori as Repetition of Finitude: Death beyond Heidegger and Levinas

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Abstract

Exemplified especially by Heidegger and Levinas, the phenomenology of death expresses first, the impossibility of the death experience, second, the authenticity of *Dasein* starting from the horizon opened by the possibility of death, and third, the relevance of the death of the other to the discovery of one's own death. This article tries to take a step further, showing the link between the authenticity of *Dasein* and the desire for immortality manifested in this authenticity. By overturning Heidegger's theses and by affirming both the necessity of an authentication of death itself—in accord with Socrates's death example—and the legitimacy of the meditation on death, this text links the need for immortality, which is phenomenologically visible, with the Christian faith in the resurrection, which is visible only for theology.

Keywords: *memento mori*, Phenomenology of Death, Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, Christian Revelation, Resurrection of Christ

The Threat of Forgotten Death

LIVING ONE'S EVERYDAY LIFE MEANS to forget death, an attitude only apparently similar to a phenomenological reduction that would effortlessly put into brackets the existence of the funeral event. It is a false reduction, because it does not seek to highlight the reduced phenomenon, as it happens with the Husserlian transcendental-phenomenological reduction. Intentionality avoids death and leads obsessively to life. We often live the equivalent of a life without death in this world, in existential ignorance, from which only suffering, as a finitude experienced in our own body or in our own soul, takes us out episodically. In the first instance, we lose our death, as we lose ourselves in the world. Without warnings of suffering, we are always too young to die.

Death does not concern us, said Epicurus, because as long as we exist there is no death, and when death comes, we no longer exist. To eliminate the fear of death that causes unhappiness, his materialism divided the entire human experience into a life without death and a death without life. When man does not forget death, he keeps it at a distance, at the greatest possible distance, that is, at the distance of the possible itself. This is a false distance, of course, because death can cover and suspend it in an instant. Heidegger teaches us that, from an existential point of view, "death must be grasped as the ownmost nonrelational, *certain* possibility not-to-be-bypassed."¹ But whenever it happens in the death of our neighbor, it shudders the order of life and occurs as a radical strangeness. Man had offered to death neither place nor time and had pushed it beyond the horizon of life; still death comes from nowhere and even announced, it comes from never, thus having the characteristics of nothingness. The nothingness of death has contradictory relations with the being, and no dialectical transition will undermine the radical difference between being and not being. The irreversibility of death is scandalous and unnatural.

Our own death is more than the artistic horizon of life that can give greatness to our acts and loves, and its discovery takes place with the death of our beloved. Any analogy between their death and my death remains imperfect, lost in the insurmountable fracture between being and non-being. The analogical *representation* of my death takes place on the firm ground of being still alive, so it does not really become an *experience* of my death. In fact, reducing death to an experience is a phenomenological impossibility², and it is not inappropriate to consider that we do not really experience our death in the death of the other: "We do not experience the dying of others in a genuine sense; we are at best always just 'there' too."³ "*No one can take the other's dying away from him.*"⁴

In the death of the loved one, we experience the horror of the decomposition of the remaining corpse, but also its absolute indifference that sometimes shows an unearthly serenity. Faced with their loss and definitive absence, we experience acute suffering and nonsense, if "death cannot be dominated by thought."⁵ Besides the ontological contradiction between being and nothing there is also the existential fact that it is not about death in general, but about one's own death.

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, ed. Dennis J. Schmidt, trans. Joan Stambaugh, SUNY Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 238 [258].

² Emmanuel Lévinas, *God, death, and time* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), 10.

³ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 222 [239].

⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 223 [240].

⁵ Françoise Dastur, *Moartea: eseu despre finitudine* [Death: An Essay on Finitude], trans. Sabin Borș (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2006), 9.

This detail reveals the anxiety in the face of one's own death, an anxiety that transfers death from the abstract being—nothingness relationship to an existential horizon.

Death, such as it appears, concerns and frightens and causes anxiety in the death of an other, is an annihilation that does not find its place in the logic of being and nothingness. It is an annihilation that is a scandal and to which moral notions such as responsibility do not come to be simply added on.⁶

Because now, faced with the lost one, the threat of the unbeatable has become visible, along with the danger in front of which one can do nothing. "In death I am exposed to absolute violence, to murder in the night."⁷ Like any revelation, the revelation of death is made without our will. We can always return to oblivion—and it often happens after the labor of mourning—but the dark light of a troubling truth that we did not consider before now continues to flicker in our soul. We are in a war that we have not chosen and that we will surely lose, in the face of an unpredictable and transcendent enemy about which we know absolutely nothing. At the disposal of the imminence, man is "the shortest way between life and death."⁸ Born on the battlefield, without the hope of peace, we can only practice our lives in an armistice.

We can return to the entertainment and drunkenness of living or even invent a philosophy of laughter, following the discovery of death;⁹ but we cannot ignore forever the certainty of our own end, the fact that we are "toward death" (*Sein zum Tode*)¹⁰, that "The only future that is *necessarily* mine is my death."¹¹ Hegel's words—that the life of the Spirit must be truly gained precisely by dwelling in absolute rupture, enduring death and yet being preserved without destruction—are valid for a God-man, therefore inconsolable at this moment.¹² For in our case, in the death of our neighbor, a declaration of war was addressed to us, which does not disappear with its ignorance. The definitive absence of the other has revealed the inescapable presence of one's own end which, possibility and certainty alike, raises, between the instinctual desire of extinction and the anxiety of the future adjudicated by death, the decisive question on the meaning of one's own life. Recognized or not, this question engages the search for immortality.

⁶ Lévinas, *God, death, and time*, 78.

⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), 233.

⁸ Emil Cioran, *Amurgul gândurilor* [The Twilight of Thoughts] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1991), 77.

⁹ See for such a philosophy Dastur, *Death: An Essay on Finitude*.

¹⁰ Being toward death is analyzed by Heidegger in *Being and Time*, chapters 46–53.

¹¹ Jean-Yves Lacoste, *Note sur le temps: Essai sur les raisons de la mémoire et de l'espérance* (Paris: PUF, 1990), chap. 12.

¹² See G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 19 (par. 32).

In Search of Immortality: Authenticity, Vanity, Love

We will interpret Heidegger by setting out from the idea that the authenticity that *Dasein* acquires starting from its own possibility coming from the future is precisely a form of *immortality*. The constant unfulfillment that defines the human being forbids its understanding as an integrity without rest. On this side of his death, man remains engaged in his future, self-projected “before-himself.” The existential concept of death shows that *Dasein* is a being-toward-death, thus open to this possibility:

First of all, we must characterize being-toward-death as a being *toward a possibility*, toward an eminent possibility of *Da-sein* itself. Being toward a possibility, that is, toward something possible, can mean to be out for something possible, as in taking care of its actualization.¹³

Heidegger says that actualization does not mean trying to actualize one’s own death by provoking it or by the constant thought of death. The latter, which interests us here, loses sight of the very possibility of death as such:

Brooding over death does not completely take away from it its character of possibility. It is always brooded over as something coming, but we weaken it by calculating how to have it at our disposal.¹⁴

But death is possibility of no longer being, “*the possibility of the impossibility of existence in general*”.¹⁵ In its light, man can be himself authentically, that is, he can try to actualize his life project, evading the “They” (*das Man*).

Heidegger does not link the authenticity of *Dasein* with immortality. Conditioned by the freedom that the consciousness of the possibility of death brings, the authenticity is to the measure of each man; it is his life project unaffected by the impersonal opinions that society conveys. But this freedom is not exercised in an absent context, it is not given *without a world*, without the possibility for another to recognize this authenticity. As Pascal had already written, vanity motivates our noblest and, we might add, most authentic acts. Although Heidegger excludes others from the work of my authenticity, as if it were only me and my death in question, the fame that — discreetly or visibly, excluded or insistently sought — accompanies the exercises of authenticity offers a first form of *immortality*. There is no sufficient

¹³ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 241 [261].

¹⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 241 [261].

¹⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 242 [262].

reason to consider authenticity as free from vanity. To be authentic means to be authentic for another consciousness, at least one, real or imagined, for a minimal gallery contemporary to me or imagined as posterity. Even just as a spectator, the other motivates the work of being myself. Escaping from the captivity of the "They," it is no less true that Dasein searches for another "They," delivering itself to a more intelligent posterity, to a loving or at least understanding otherness.

Or this self-giving means self-phenomenalization and bestows a form of my immortality in the consciousness of the other. By exercising his authenticity, man is not only caught in his magnificent freedom offered by the consciousness of death. The sphere of the ego explodes in search of a self-delivery to an otherness.

I am only if I am for someone. *Esse est percipi*, as Berkeley said, a principle that, reformulated, would now sound: to be authentic means to be perceived as authentic. "Relative immortality"¹⁶ is part of Dasein's existential project and has only one need: the other.

In order to measure our own authenticity from the perspective of the other's gaze, we will discuss only the maximum situation in which the other is the loved one. Certainly, the other does not change or interfere with the horizon opened by the possibility of my own death; but they constitute the necessary gallery in front of which I exercise my authenticity, even if the details of this exercise are unknown to them. However, it is not an exceptional fact that love captures death and changes the course of authenticity, transforming it into an authenticity of love. Putting your own life at stake to win the love of another is not uncommon, because love "is as strong as death" (Song of Songs 8: 6). Death gives authenticity to love, by certifying it; death takes on less radical forms at first, such as self-denial, advancement, love unconditioned by the reciprocity of the answer,¹⁷ but it can reach the ultimate sacrifice, giving love the immortality that, incomprehensibly, love seems to hold anyway. This sketch reveals the force with which death authenticates love, and the most eloquent example is that of the crucifixion of the Son of God out of love for men. Even if theology sees here a gift, through death, of the resurrection itself, philosophy can notice that the relationship between death and love, as announced in the Gospels, is at the same time one of authentication.

¹⁶ Peter Sloterdijk differentiates the "relative immortality" of moderns from both the immortality of the Egyptian pharaoh and the Christian immortality of all who believe. See Peter Sloterdijk, *Derrida, an Egyptian. On the Problem of the Jewish Pyramid*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 66.

¹⁷ See the phenomenology of love in Jean-Luc Marion, *Le phénomène érotique* (Paris: Grasset, 2003); a comment can be found in Nicolae Turcan, *Apologia după sfârșitul metafizicii. Teologie și fenomenologie la Jean-Luc Marion* [Apology after the End of Metaphysics: Theology and Phenomenology in Jean-Luc Marion], (Bucharest: Eikon, 2016), 319–38.

The Meditation on Death and the Theology of the Resurrection

We should ask ourselves if there is an authenticity of death, and not just one of *Dasein*. According to Heidegger, the authentic existence becomes possible in the horizon opened by the possibility of one's own death. But is death itself devoid of relief and nobility, or in other words, can it be *anyway*? Isn't the authenticity of living also considering an authenticity of one's own death? Isn't something of the inaccessible possible still imagined by meditation, letting itself be caught in the work of authenticity? "The platonic doctrine of the superiority of philosophy over death"¹⁸ provides the answer, as follows from the example of Socrates: in *Phaido*, the pre-occupation with philosophy is a "training for dying,"¹⁹ as if the work of authenticity extended to include death. Not only does the horizon of death give authenticity to life, but also the life lived in the horizon of philosophy (or theology, we might add) gives authenticity to death. One could object that Socrates built his arguments already having in the background the belief in immortality, faith in the absence of which his arguments would be unconvincing. But how do the relative immortality of vanity, gained in the eyes of posterity—which may never take place for various reasons—and religious immortality differ phenomenologically? Both have to do with the invisible and—when the legitimacy of religious faith is not taken into account—with the illusion, even if posterity seems to have more justified chances of actualization, if we discuss only on the horizon of this world. But both have the power to project in the present, through the possibility of death, the free decision for the labor of authenticity. Therefore, Socrates prepares his *authentic* death by his philosophical life, doubled by the faith in a future life—although *Phaidon* does not separate them. Thinking of immortality as a basis, death itself gains authenticity through the nobility of its acceptance. We will therefore have to overturn Heidegger's view of the purest possibility and the refusal of the thought of death into an *imperfectly* actualized possibility through meditation. *Memento mori* is a way to give authenticity not only to life but also to one's own death.

It is not a novelty: the thought of death does not change the status of the possibility of death, but it realizes its inevitability and certainty. It is no less an *experience* of an absent phenomenon, an experience of absence. Although meditation on death does not offer death itself, we must concede that it still offers the only imaginable form of our own death. Imagining the ultimate loss of self, announced by the significant losses from our life

¹⁸ Paul Louis Landsberg, *The Experience of Death and the Moral Problem of Suicide*, trans. Edouard d'Arraille (London: Living Time Press, 2008), 36.

¹⁹ Plato, *Phaedo*, in *Complete Works*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, ed. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 67 e.

or by asceticism, is close enough to death as to deliver us to an experience of anguish or reconciliation. We can make an analogy between the thought of death and death without claiming to annihilate the unknown and the strangeness of death itself. The more intensely one practices this experience of meditation on death, the closer this pure and certain possibility comes to consciousness, without canceling the ever-present distance between oneself and one's empirical death. The experience of dying through meditation on death can be an experience of debilitating life and its projects; but it can also be one of understanding one's own finitude, one of wisdom.

Meditation on one's own death offers an imagined phenomenon that, through the absolute incomprehension and absurdity it puts into play, contradicts life.

What the human person brings in the face of the possibility of death, beyond the achievements of authenticity, is also the feeling of its *impossibility* in the horizon of life. The death of the neighbor gives itself as a phenomenon on a stage, in the distance of intentionality. But the life that inhabits me with its richness forbids death until the last moment. My love for someone forbids death forever. A phenomenology of life, as Michel Henry built, insists on its distance from the phenomenology of intentionality and of the world.²⁰

From the perspective of such a phenomenology of life, the sentiment of its *de jure* impossibility accompanies the nonsense of death. And there is no need to contend with Henry the identity between our life and God's life in us. Even remaining on the horizon of non-religious life, the absurdity of death does not mean the removal of the attempt to find a solution. It is *as if* man were an immortal being, before a life accident that should not or could not annihilate life. In this *as if*—understood as the experience of the wholeness of life—man builds his religions²¹ and his forms of immortality. Once a “preparation for death”, philosophy, with a few notable exceptions, no longer has a grasp on the funeral phenomenon, always remaining *outside of it*. But rejecting the meditation on death means to disregard what man has always known, that *memento mori* leads to perfection, no matter how this perfection is understood: as the authenticity of *Dasein*, as wisdom, or as holiness.

The thought of death is a repetition of finitude, in order to open to infinity, be it just a desire for the absolute. Man's need for the absolute remains insatiable, abysmal and has a contiguity with death that must be taken into account. With death one can enter philosophy, but one can just as well get out of it, towards theology, understood as a religious life. The search for the

²⁰ See the first chapter about overturning phenomenology in Michel Henry, *Incarnation. Une philosophie de la chair* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), §1–§15.

²¹ In his book *Against Religion*, Christos Yannaras states that except for Christianity, which is revealed by God, other religions are creations of the religiosity of man, of the instinctive need to survive. Christos Yannaras, *Against Religion. The Alienation of the Ecclesial Event*, trans. Norman Russel (Brookline, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2013), 1–20.

absolute can lead to the creation of gods more or less paradoxical, more or less close to the image of the revealed God.²² Theoretical answers, always deficient here, do not satisfy this search in front of death; only a perfect life could respond to such nonsense, and only a call from God could account for the desperate measure of our calls. Yet, the only plausible answer to the nonsense of death is faith in eternal life and resurrection, but it already belongs to revealed religion and theology.

Theology is the only one that can speak meaningfully about resurrection, it is “the only one that knows positively, and states equally, that death has no and is not the last word.”²³ Its approach engages God’s revelation and faith in what one cannot yet see. It responds to us through a leap into God, like a leap into the void, which transcends death, our world, and biological life alike. Theology teaches us that our form is the absolute, that our openness is the absolute. Faced with death, Christian revelation affirms the joy of being more than beings on the horizon of this world. Let’s face it: it is not at all inappropriate with our deepest feelings, our need for immortality. Eternal life, brought by Christ through His resurrection, is to man more natural, less absurd, infinitely less strange than death. If death is transcendent to life, it is no less true that we can think of faith as transcendent to death. Faith “passes not only beyond but also on this side of death”;²⁴ it makes the contact between life and life, between life here and eternal life, with death as the medium term. Through faith, the meditation on death no longer weakens, but rejoices in the light that comes from the afterlife. Eschatological hope not only weakens death, but defeats it to a certain extent, as much as a possibility given by faith can defeat the phenomenological certitude of death. We are still in the world, and if death is still here despite faith, this situation emphasizes the exceptional gravity of this life. Death offers the horizon of our authenticity and, through its transcendence, demands the opening to an eschatological future. Phenomenology and theology. Why should we be surprised? The need for immortality that accompanies us even in our daily acts, often loaded with an absolute unsuitable to them, accompanied by the thought of death and the belief in the resurrection of the Son of God offers a religious experience that transcends death. Of course, we are no longer in phenomenology. But the repetition of finitude represented by *memento mori* teaches us that the experience of absence has a say. Even if less rigorous than the word of philosophy, this word of faith offers an opening to the authenticity of death, an authenticity synonymous with overcoming it.

²² See, for example, the paradoxical God of E. Cioran, in Nicolae Turcan, “Cioran et le Dieu des paradoxes,” trans. Mihaela-Gențiana Stănișor, *Alkemie. Revue semestrielle de littérature et philosophie*, no. 6 (2010).

²³ Lacoste, *Note sur le temps*, chap. 31.

²⁴ Mihail Turcan, “Ca și cum Dumnezeu nu ar exista. Despre transfigurarea prin credință la Pascal” [As if God did not exist. About transfiguration through faith in Pascal], *Tabor XV*, no. 1 (2021): 83.

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