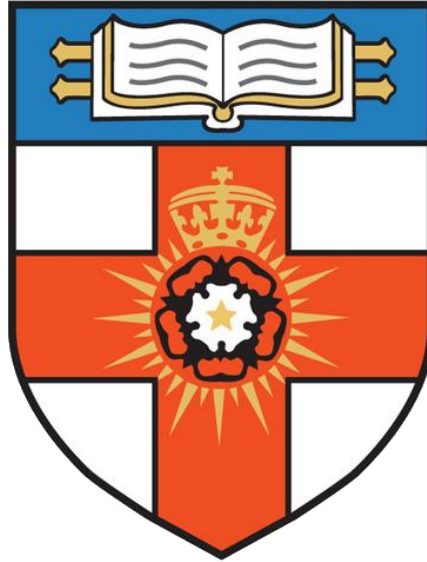


# The Eternal Who Dies

A Study in the Philosophy of Existence. In Conversation with Ernst Bloch, Martin  
Heidegger, and Emanuele Severino



by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Institute of Languages, Cultures and Societies at the School of Advanced Study,  
University of London

In Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)

May 2025

I, Antimo Lucarelli, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

In memory of Attorney Piero Di Lauro

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«מַה־אֲנוֹשׁ כִּי־תִזְכְּרֶנּוּ וּבֶן־אָדָם כִּי תִפְקְדֶנּוּ:»

«what is man that you are mindful of him and the son of man that you care for him?»

*(Psalmi 8:5)*



## INTRODUCTION

In an epoch when the enigma of death is widely thought to be scientifically resolved, the question of mortality and of the human relationship with it becomes of the highest importance. Philosophy becomes of the highest importance. That is even more evident if one considers that, along with death, *human finitude itself* seems to be scientifically proven. As if that were not enough, this «proof» nowadays appears as the particular instance of a broader principle: *that reality is finite through and through*, including human beings. However, against the contemporary finitisation of reality some thinkers have spoken. Arguably, the greatest of them was Emanuele Severino, the philosopher of the eternity of all things. In this work, my aim is to add my own voice to his critique of the nihilism of contemporary age (and of Western culture in general). Nonetheless, unlike Severino, I do not entirely reject the claims made by the finite age in which one lives today. Apparently, the thought that human existence is infinite sounds as unacceptable to the contemporary age as the thought that human nature is finite sounded unacceptable to Severino. Reconciling these two opposite – and reductionist – standpoints into a unified conception of the human being as *an eternal who dies* is the task I have intended to accomplish in this study.

The present work is a philosophical investigation whose objective is to explore the human relationship with finitude and infinitude with respect to its essential aspects and epistemological dimensions. It is carried out in dialogue with three great thinkers of the last century: Ernst Bloch, Martin Heidegger, and Emanuele Severino. However, the present study does not aim to contribute to the expansion of the secondary literature on these thinkers, but rather to critically engage with their thought and the existing scholarship. Therefore, this work consists, on the one hand, in the interpretation of their texts and doctrines concerning the issues of death and eternity. Specifically, Heidegger and Bloch are consulted regarding death and its obscurity, while Severino is engaged with on the theme of eternity. On the other hand, this investigation follows its own theoretical path and cannot be reduced to an exegetical study. For this reason, I chose the phrase «in conversation with» as its title, intending it to convey both the inheritance of certain notions from those thinkers and their critical appreciation and further development.

The method of the entire investigation is an «existential» one in the broadest sense: It is a method concerned with human existence. This method has largely been inherited from *Being and Time* and consists of a re-elaboration of Heidegger's understanding of the «ontic» («ontisch») and the «ontological» («ontologisch») – a re-elaboration necessitated by the acknowledgement that Heidegger's understanding of the «ontological» is at times itself ontic, as will be demonstrated.

The first part of the present work addresses the ontological problem of the essence of death from an epistemological perspective, that is focusing on how this essence is understood by humans (be they right or not in thinking that there is such an essence). The first chapter investigates the meaning of the obscurity of death as a future event and contends that this is to be understood as death's phenomenological essence. This is accomplished, firstly, by introducing the reader to two crucial historical-philosophical standpoints on death:

those of Socrates and Epicurus. After extracting the notion of an ontological-phenomenological understanding of death from Socrates' claim that death is «obscure» («ἄδηλος»), Epicurus' renowned thesis that death is «absence of sensation» («στέρησις αἰσθήσεως») is recognised to be ontic and not phenomenological in kind. However, Socrates' merely embryonic considerations on death's obscurity lead the study to consult another thinker, namely, Ernst Bloch, as one of the great metaphysicians of obscurity of the last century. Particularly, his 1969 dialogue with Siegfried Unseld, at that time publisher of the Suhrkamp Verlag, on *Death, Immortality, Perpetuation* («Tod, Unsterblichkeit, Fortdauer») is taken into consideration.<sup>1</sup> The interpretation of this dialogue leads the chapter to acknowledge that, even being crucially explicit on the phenomenological analogy between «Nichterscheinungen» («non-appearances») and human death, Bloch and Unseld's conversation does not go as deeply as it could into obscurity. For they distinguish «Nichterscheinungen» from «Erscheinungen» («appearances») in a Kantian way. Thus, taking advantage of a more radical notion of «appearance», that is Edmund Husserl's, the chapter claims that even Kantian «appearances» reveal themselves as «non-appearances», since they are always given through «adumbrations» («Abschattungen»), and death therefore emerges as phenomenologically obscure in a far more radical sense.

In the second chapter, the study then concretises its phenomenological ontology of death through a critical analysis of «existential nihilism», here understood as the belief that death is a definitive farewell to life. This definition is meant to provide the current understanding of existential nihilism as «the feeling of emptiness and pointlessness that follows from the judgment: “Life has no meaning”» with its thanatological ground.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, one of the fundamental reasons why human life may be felt as meaningless nowadays is that it is thought to shatter against death, grasped as the absolute end of life. However, this recent thanatological stance is to be analysed for the contemporary «feeling of emptiness and pointlessness» to be adequately understood. For this reason, existential nihilism is deconstructed, in the second chapter, into three of its defining components: Firstly, the absoluteness of its notion of death; secondly, its irreversibility; thirdly, its one-sidedness. This deconstruction enables the study to unearth the underpinnings of existential nihilism and to criticise its claim to be the only possible or legitimate conception of death.

After the concrete analysis provided in the second chapter, the third chapter resumes the problem of a fundamental human relationship with death addressed in the first chapter and expressly introduces the question of whether the essential human anticipatory understanding of death as an obscure event can be considered as the most fundamental relationship with death. To this end, Martin Heidegger's conception of «Sein zum Tode» («being-towards-death») is analysed with regards to the degree of its fundamentality. The discussion of Heidegger's «existential analytic» also enables the study to investigate one further element belonging to the essence of death overlooked by Heidegger, that is human «worldliness». This notion does not coincide with, but is implicit in the Heideggerian notion of «in-der-Welt-sein» («being-in-the-world»), understood as the

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<sup>1</sup> For a reference, cf. Chapter 1, section 5.

<sup>2</sup> Karen L. Carr. *The Banalization of Nihilism: Twentieth-Century Responses to Meaninglessness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 18.

fundamental feature of existence. Particularly, this study's notion of «worldliness» indicates all that, belonging to human nature, could not possibly survive death.

In the fourth chapter, the presuppositions of the phenomenological ontology of death previously conducted are examined and the conditions under which humans can be said to be mortal, and to relate to the fact that they are, are examined. The chapter offers both a radicalisation and critical examination of the analyses previously developed. In particular, the central claim of the first chapter – according to which death is obscure as it is a future event – is challenged through explicitly considering the possibility of a relationship with death as a future yet manifest event, exemplified by the divine case of Jesus Christ, at least according to Catholic Christology. As a response to this criticism, the investigation is further radicalised by the discovery that any possible relationship with death, including a divine one, is ontologically grounded in a more fundamental relation than the Heideggerian «being-towards-death», here termed «belonging-to-death». Subsequently, the investigation undergoes a second critique, prompted by the recognition that humans might, in fact, lack any relationship to death, as illustrated by the case of newborns and young children, and yet be mortal even so. This leads the study towards an anti-Heideggerian process of de-existentialisation, aimed at uncovering the most fundamental dimension of mortality. Consequently, death emerges as independent from its being known or unknown to humans. However, finally, even this fundamental dimension is questioned and brought to its own «death», thanks to the acknowledgement of the ultimate contingency of mortality for humans. This acknowledgement is prompted by the recognition that death might, in the future, be defeated by biotechnological progress and that, in general, a death-free human existence is logically conceivable. This prepares the ground for the second half of the study.

The second half, made up of a single chapter, addresses the problem of eternity and its relationship with human life, therefore resuming the existential method abandoned over the course of the fourth chapter. This theoretical task is accomplished through an examination, so far lacking in the secondary literature, of the several senses according to which eternity is thought to belong to, or surround, human existence – whether through the eternal, supratemporal present of reality as a whole, or through the sempiternity of the horizon within which human life unfolds – within the most significant philosophy of eternity of recent times, that is Emanuele Severino's. Far from embracing (or rejecting) Severinian philosophy, the fifth chapter of this study demonstrates that, despite affirming the eternity of all beings, this philosophy has not identified the specific kind of eternity of the «eternal who dies». This consists in a peculiar eternal present, which can be manifestly experienced in life and does not merely pertain to its eternal background or surround it as an all-embracing reality.

At this stage, let me offer some clarifications on how this investigation should not be interpreted. Firstly, this study is not an attempt to philosophically neutralise death. Any denial of human finitude lies outside both the truth and the goals of my investigation. Nevertheless, that does not imply that eternity and mortality shape human essence in the very same fashion. The discrepancy between the two – phenomenological in kind – is due to the very nature of existence, not to the theoretical bias of the present study. I analyse this tension in the two last chapters.

Secondly, my understanding of the «eternal who dies» has nothing to do with Severino's understanding of the human being. That is because, for him, mortality is the product of the alienated worldview of the West and of historical humanity in general. For me, human mortality is not an illusion but a reality. That is precisely why this study can attempt to grasp the human being as *an eternal who dies*. In fact, it is in an entirely different sense that, within Severino's doctrine, «mortality» can be rethought and regained and humans be defined as «eternal who die».

Thirdly, this work – especially the first half – should be considered as a theoretical journey in a literal sense, similarly to Descartes' *Meditationes de prima philosophia*. If this processual character of my study is not taken into account and one single portion of it is isolated from the others, criticisms that would not be valid come to be such. For instance, if what is stated in the first three chapters with regards to the phenomenological essence of death is not seen in connection with the criticisms of this notion made in the fourth chapter, the study becomes a purely «ontological» one, and therefore, any criticism of this ontological character – such as the observation that death is a sociological construct which varies depending on the culture, epoch, etc. – become fatal.

This work is my doctoral thesis. In my Bachelor's dissertation, I pursued an elucidation of the various meanings of Severino's metaphysical notion of «the Whole» («l'Intero»)<sup>3</sup>. In my Master's thesis, I pursued a phenomenological clarification of the conditions under which epistemic truth is possible.<sup>4</sup> Against that research background, the present work appears as an «existential» work, in many respects building upon the more general and epistemic foundations laid in my Master's thesis.<sup>5</sup> However, as mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, the present work can be defined as «existential», not in the narrow, existentialist sense, but in the wider sense of a study *in the philosophy of existence*. According to this broader notion, the existentialist approach – being essentially concerned with how humans relate to their existence and to the world, rather than with existence and the world as such, that is, independently of how or whether humans relate to them – is simply one possible way of investigating human existence.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> On this notion, cf. Chapter 2, section 3.2 and subsections.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Antimo Lucarelli. *Per un nuovo concetto di fenomeno: Muovendo da Heidegger e Severino* (Soveria Mannelli, Italy: Rubbettino 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Chapter 5, section 7 and subsections.

<sup>6</sup> On this distinction, cf. Chapter 5, section 3.3.1.

## **PART 1: ON DEATH**

## **CHAPTER 1: ON THE ESSENTIAL OBSCURITY OF HUMAN DEATH. IN CONVERSATION WITH ERNST BLOCH**

This chapter investigates the meaning of «obscurity», understood as the essence of human death. The method of the chapter, as of the entire investigation, is an «existential» one in the broadest sense: It is a method concerned with human existence. Especially, this method has been inherited from *Being and Time* by Martin Heidegger and consists of a re-elaboration of Heidegger's understanding of the «ontic» («ontisch») and the «ontological» («ontologisch»). The historical-philosophical reference of the chapter is the 1969 dialogue between Ernst Bloch (a thinker of obscurity) and Siegfried Unseld, at that time publisher of the Suhrkamp Verlag. The theme of the dialogue is *Death, Immortality, Perpetuation* («Tod, Unsterblichkeit, Fortdauer»). The interpretation of this dialogue leads the chapter to discover two general dimensions to obscurity: The «obscurity» of what is partly obscure to humans and the «obscurity» of what is fully obscure to humans. In that context, human death appears to be marked by a full obscurity. Thus, the distinction between full and partial obscurity enables the investigation to grasp obscurity's fundamental dimension, understood as the very core of all obscurities. Lastly, the chapter investigates the complexity of the human awareness of death's obscurity and addresses the question of whether the awareness of something fully obscure can itself not be obscure. Overall, the present chapter should not be regarded as a contribution expanding Ernst Bloch and Martin Heidegger's philosophies of death or the relevant secondary literature, but as an autonomous investigation in conversation with these.

### **1. Ernst Bloch and His Positioning in the Epochal Decline, in Europe, of the Christian Faith in Immortality**

Over the last two centuries, one of the most perturbing phenomena in Europe has been the decline of Christianity. Predictably, a consequence (or a part) of that process has been the twilight of the thousand-year-old belief in immortality. This is evident both from the secularisation of European societies and, as for the present study, it is evident from the ideas of certain thinkers who are symptomatic of the recent times. In stating this, I am not joining the socio-religious debate on whether modern societies in Europe (and beyond) abandoned religion *as such*. In other words, I am not taking any stance on *how* secularisation occurred.<sup>7</sup> After all, abandoning Christian faith does not involve renouncing every kind of religion (or religious practice). Nonetheless, *secularisation has certainly been a de-Christianisation*. In fact, it would seem historically hasty to argue that over the past two centuries nothing changed in the cultural supremacy that Christian religion had in Europe. Undoubtedly, given the surprising increase of population in Europe from the 18<sup>th</sup> century until today, the «decline» of Christianity might even not be a matter of absolute numbers. If anything, this decline concerns the changed proportion of Christianity's presence in societies.<sup>8</sup> As a matter of fact, the gradual decline

<sup>7</sup> On this debate, cf. the entry on «secularisation» in Oxford Bibliographies [online], < <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199756384/obo-9780199756384-0073.xml> > [accessed 18<sup>th</sup> March 2023].

<sup>8</sup> On the development of Europe's population, cf. Angus Maddison. *Contours of the World Economy 1-2030 AD: Essays in Macro-Economic History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

of Christianity might even have undergone trend inversions; but even if this were shown, the comparison between 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe and the contemporary one would produce the same result: Things have changed. Let me also note that by «Europe» I do not *directly* refer to the inhabitants of specific countries with their current geographical and political borders. More fundamentally, I refer to a *European cultural area* whose proportions have decreased over the past two centuries. This area is *cross-cutting* across all «European countries», as these are understood from a strictly geographical point of view. It is cross-cutting across «Western European», «Central European», «Southern European», «Eastern European», and «Northern European» countries.

In this epochal context, I believe the considerations made by Ernst Bloch in *the philosophy of death* lay the foundations of a new perturbing shift in the European thinking of death. That was Bloch's opinion too. Nevertheless, as every *philosophical*-thanatological shift, this shift concerns the very foundations of the human relationship with death and could therefore have an impact further beyond the boundaries of European societies.

Born in 1885, Ernst Bloch was a German-Jewish thinker of last century, who fled Nazi Germany in 1933 and moved to the United States in 1938. In 1948, he returned to Germany (East Germany), which he fled after more than a decade to eventually settle in West Germany (Tübingen), where he died in 1977. As is shown by the titles themselves of his biographies, one central element of Bloch's meditation has been the political element.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Bloch is presumably best known for his Marxist philosophy and for his philosophy of hope and utopia.<sup>10</sup>

Without criticising this common perception regarding Bloch's meditation, in this study I wish to contend that another central element of Ernst Bloch's philosophy is the *existentialist element*. As for the present study, this element becomes relevant when it concerns *death as an existential theme of investigation*. That is to say that Bloch's philosophy of death – here certainly inspired by Martin Heidegger's – is concerned with the *fundamental relationships* that human life has with death.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For Blochian biographies, cf. Arno Münster. *Ernst Bloch: Eine politische Biographie*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Hamburg: CEP Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 2012), as well as Wayne Hudson. *The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1982). Cf. also Sylvia Markun. *Ernst Bloch: in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten dargestellt* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1977) and Peter Zudeick. *Der Hintern des Teufels: Ernst Bloch, Leben und Werk* (Zürich: Elster Verlag, 1985).

<sup>10</sup> Bloch's major work is widely considered to be *The Principle of Hope*, written during the American exile (Ernst Bloch. *The Principle of Hope*, 3 vols., trans. by N. Plaice, S. and P. Knight, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996)). For the German original, cf. Ernst Bloch. *Gesamtausgabe*, 16 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), *Bände 5, 6 und 7: Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 3 vols (1985a).

<sup>11</sup> For further references on the context and sources of Blochian thought, cf. the following articles by Lucien Pelletier: (1) "Ernst Bloch's Ontological Realism Considered from Its Sources", in *Bloch-Almanach*, 37 (2018), pp. 29–48; (2) "Les Sources de la philosophie de l'histoire d'Ernst Bloch", in *Revue internationale de philosophie*, 289, no. 3 (2019), pp. 261–77; (3) "Hermann Cohen Dans La Formation de La Pensée d'Ernst Bloch", in *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review*, 52, no. 2 (2013), pp. 305–340; (4) "La formation de la philosophie d'Ernst Bloch à partir de la mystique de Maître Eckhart", in *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 71, no. 1 (2015), pp. 97–132.

## **2. On This Study's Method: The Distinction between an «Ontology of Death» and an «Ontics of Death». Starting from Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time***

The thanatological shift mentioned is no shift in how a given culture *understands* death. It is not about re-arranging, say, the cultural interpretation of death as a final farewell to life. In fact, what is *interpreted* about death can be seen as *death's «ontic» element*, to say this with Martin Heidegger. «Ontic» (translation of the German «ontisch») is a term used by Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time* for a very ancient philosophical concept.<sup>12</sup> It refers to what is *not* essential to something, to what is *not* part of the «definition» of something, as Aristotle would say. A book, for example, is not *by definition* good or bad: There are bad books and good books. Similarly, *what death can be interpreted to be* – the «ontic» element of death – is not what death necessarily is – the «ontological» element of death. For instance, believing in immortality is a determinate way of *interpreting* death. By definition, any *content of interpretation* is alternative to *other contents of (other) interpretations*.<sup>13</sup>

Interpreting death is the same as embodying an «ontics» of death. The word «ontics» (translation of the German «Ontik») alludes to the *ineliminable human relationship with the «ontic» elements of reality*. This word is an ὄνταξ in *Being and Time*: It only occurs in a personal note in Heidegger's own manuscript, in the third chapter of the second section.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the note is not reported in Macquarrie and Robinson's translation of the text nor in Stambaugh's translation.<sup>15</sup> Heidegger would then use the term «Ontik» – here also, one single time – in his last Marburg lecture course in the summer semester of 1928, when speaking of a «metaphysical ontics» («metaphysische Ontik»)<sup>16</sup> In his translation of the *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Logik*, Michael Heim translates «Ontik» with «ontic». However, doing that here would make «ontic», as a noun, indistinguishable from «ontic», as an adjective. Therefore, for the sake of unambiguousness, I have chosen to translate «Ontik» with «ontics», constructed following the structure of English words such as «ethics».<sup>17</sup> At any rate, notwithstanding its rare use, the notion of a human «ontics» is part of the very method of Heidegger's philosophy, in *Being and Time* and afterwards. This notion will be inherited by this study.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger. *Gesamtausgabe*, ed. by F.W. Von Hermann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1975-), *I. Abteilung: Veröffentlichte Schriften 1914-1970: Band 2: Sein und Zeit* (1977).

<sup>13</sup> For an introduction to the Heideggerian notions of «ontology», «constitution» (that is, «ontological constitution»), and «ontic», cf. the respective entries in *The Cambridge Heidegger Lexicon*, ed. by Mark A. Wrathall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Heidegger 1977, p. 412.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*, trans. by J. Macquarrie and E. S. Robinson, 7<sup>th</sup> edn. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985) and Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein Und Zeit*, trans. by J. Stambaugh (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1996). Let me note that I will mainly refer to Macquarrie and Robinson's translation when quoting passages from *Being and Time*. This choice is due to the fact that their translation has become the standard English version, not least because it was the first translation ever published and remained the only one available for more than thirty years.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger. *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, trans. by M. Heim (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 158. (For the German edition cf. Heidegger 1975- , *II. Abteilung: Vorlesungen 1919-1944, Band 26: Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Logik im Ausgang von Leibniz*, ed. by K. Held (1978), p. 201).

<sup>17</sup> I owe all these considerations regarding the occurrence of the word «Ontik» in Martin Heidegger's *œuvre* to Franco Volpi (cf. his *Glossary* in Martin Heidegger. *Essere e tempo*, trans. by P. Chiodi, ed. by F. Volpi, 12<sup>th</sup> edn. (Milan: Longanesi, 2005), p. 852)).



In this context, I want to argue that all possible interpretations of death's nature are just forms of the *human ontics of death*. For example, death understood as the absolute end of life – a widespread idea in the present time, as will be shown in Chapter 2 – is the product of a certain thanatological ontics. Now, the very concern of an ontics of death is not what death is «*ontologically*» («*ontologisch*»): A thanatological ontics is not concerned with the «*essence*» of death. Indeed, such a thing as the «*essence*» of human death is to be found where *all thanatological interpretations overlap* and find themselves curiously agreeing, so to speak. As anticipated, also the idea of an «ontology of death» (of an «ontological relationship» with death) is here derived from Martin Heidegger's discourse (and, in a broader sense, from the whole philosophical tradition). Yet, Heidegger's distinction between the «*ontisch*» and the «*ontologisch*» does not fully coincide with my distinction in the present study. Let me explain.

According to *Being and Time*, even the particular way in which human beings exist in their everyday lives, that is «proximally and for the most part» («*zunächst und zumeist*»), may be defined «*ontological*». Heidegger expresses this by defining the everyday modality of human life as an «*existentiale*» («*Existenzial*»), that is as an «*ontological structure*» («*ontologische Struktur*») of human life:

«Das "Sein bei" der Welt, in dem noch näher auszulegenden Sinne des Aufgehens in der Welt, ist ein im In-Sein fundiertes Existenzial».<sup>18</sup>

(«"Being alongside" the world in the sense of being absorbed in the world (a sense which calls for still closer interpretation) is an *existentiale* founded upon Being-in»).<sup>19</sup>

From the perspective of *Being and Time*, the things-oriented oblivion of oneself – what Heidegger calls «*Verfallen*» («*falling*» or «*falling prey*») – marks the most part of human life and is therefore one of its «*ontological structures*».<sup>20</sup> In more technical Heideggerian terms, «*Verfallen*» is an «*Existenzial*» of «*Dasein*»: It is an essential modality of human life, understood as «*Being-There*» («*Da-sein*»).<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, in considering the *usual* modality of human existence as «*ontological*», Heidegger takes advantage of an *onticised* understanding of the ontological. I mean to say that it is only from an *ontic* perspective that a *merely usual* modality of existence can appear as *essential* to human life. Indeed, even conceding that *no life* can avoid existing in an everyday manner, and that *in this sense*, «*everydayness*» («*Alltäglichkeit*») is essential to human existence, no life can *always* exist in an everyday manner. That belongs to the very definition of «*everydayness*». However, that is to say that «*everydayness*» is an *ontic modality of existence*. It is not genuinely universal. That is why, in this study, Heidegger's methodological notions of «*ontic*» and «*ontological*» will not simply be *inherited* but rethought, with the aim of *re-universalising* the «*ontological*».

<sup>18</sup> Heidegger 1977, p. 73.

<sup>19</sup> Heidegger 1985, pp. 80-81 (translators' emphasis).

<sup>20</sup> The Heideggerian reader will notice that I have simplified the concept of «*Verfallen*» in this context. I apologise for this, but my purposes do not require me to go into detail.

<sup>21</sup> For Heidegger's concept of an «*existentiale*» («*Existenzial*»), cf. Heidegger 1985, section 4, pp. 15-20. Let me notice that while Macquarrie and Robinson (Heidegger 1985) translate «*Dasein*» with «*Being-There*», Stambaugh (Heidegger 1996) decided not to translate it (he simply adds a dash: «*Da-sein*»).

In my opinion, the motivation that led Heidegger to onticise his method of investigation is the will to escape the abstractness of philosophy's universal thinking. However, I believe that whenever philosophy perceives its essence as a flaw, philosophy is already lost. This is not to deny that *on the other hand*, Heidegger also understood the «ontological», in *Being and Time*, in a genuine universal way. It is to say that a part of the method chosen by Heidegger is *ontic*, and that this choice is not shared by the present study. Here, the «ontological» will always be understood *stricto sensu*.

In a further sense, Heidegger's notion of the ontological will not be inherited here in an orthodox fashion. In fact, Heidegger understood the «ontological» in another, renowned sense, which is by the way fundamentally different from the first sense outlined. These senses are in a hierarchical relationship. In the sense already outlined, an «ontological investigation» investigates the *fundamental characters of something in particular*. In Heidegger's case, the investigated is human existence, whereas in this study's case, it is human death. In the second sense, an «ontological investigation» investigates the *fundamental characters of something in general*. In Heidegger's terms, it investigates the «Being of beings» («Sein der Seienden»)<sup>22</sup> Now, this ontological-metaphysical sense of the «ontological», utterly essential in *Being and Time*, will be left aside in this investigation, which will therefore be a pure «existential» investigation.<sup>23</sup>

At this point, the Heideggerian reader will have noticed that this study will investigate the human being and its death *in terms of «essence» rather than «existence» («Existenz»)*. Let me note that in one sense, this is simply a *terminological disagreement* with Heidegger. Indeed, this study will not *misunderstand* the human being by «reifying» it («verdinglichen»), as if human life were comparable to the subsistence of a stone and human death to the fading of a fire. To say this with Heidegger, *Dasein* will not be looked at as something «Vorhandenes». This notion indicates an «objectively present» entity (or, more literally, an entity which is «present-at-hand»)<sup>24</sup> Yet *in another sense*, the use of the term «essence» by this study does not simply represent a terminological disagreement with Heidegger. That happens because *in Heidegger's opinion*, an intrinsic «reification» hides behind the traditional philosophical concept of essence, which is for him inadequate for investigating human existence.<sup>25</sup> On the contrary, *it is this study's opinion* that the Western philosophical notion of essence is *multifaceted*, and often much more *universal* than Heidegger thinks. Therefore, it is not reduceable to any «reification». That is why I will employ a traditional terminology, starting from the «essence of human existence». After all, Heidegger's simplification (and even onticisation) of the traditional concept of essence has already been highlighted.<sup>26</sup> For that matter, on certain occasions, it is *Heidegger himself* who takes advantage of the traditional philosophical terminology, allowing for the possibility that this might surpass its expressive limits:

<sup>22</sup> For an introduction to the Heideggerian notion of «Being», cf. the respective entries in Wrathall 2021.

<sup>23</sup> On the meaning of «existential» in the present study, not reduceable to its existentialist version, I cannot but focus at a later stage of the investigation.

<sup>24</sup> The first translation of the term is by Stambaugh (cf. Heidegger 1996, p. 52) and the second by Macquarrie and Robinson (cf. Heidegger 1985, p. 81).

<sup>25</sup> I will further discuss this in section 5.2.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Emanuele Severino. *Heidegger e la metafisica* (Milan: Adelphi, 1994), pp. 133-134.

«Dass Seiendes von der Seinsart des Daseins nicht aus Realität und Substantialität begriffen werden kann, haben wir durch die These ausgedrückt: *die Substanz des Menschen ist die Existenz*».<sup>27</sup>

(«Entities with Dasein's kind of Being cannot be conceived in terms of Reality and substantiality; we have expressed this by the thesis that *the substance of man is existence*»).<sup>28</sup>

Let me conclude the reflection on this study's method. I mentioned that a *universal, that is «ontological»* investigation of death will here be conducted. Let me now clarify that this will be a «thematic» study on death. In other words, this study will not be distracted by any issue which is simply *related* to the issue of death. I will not investigate death's relationship with sexuality, religion, culture, etc.<sup>29</sup> In other words, this investigation will deal with *death itself*. That might seem superfluous to say, and even obvious, but let me note that *in most cases, that is not obvious*. Often, thanatological investigations *do not focus on death itself*, if not superficially. That is to say that they are non-thematic investigations of death.

Such an observation should not be interpreted as expressing an ageless arrogance of philosophers, identifying an essential flaw in any non-thematic approach to things. It should rather be considered as expressing the condition of possibility for determining the contribution that non-thematic investigations of death offer to thanatology as a whole. Indeed, the nature, the extent and the depth of any contribution to thanatology can only be established by a *thematic* study on death. Even the distinction between ontological-thanatological considerations and ontic-thanatological remarks can only be drawn by a *thematic* study on death. For outside a thematic approach, that is in a superficial investigation of death, one lacks even the tools, the criteria with which to draw that distinction.

That said, let me prove that my statements conceal no theoretical arrogance, but simply express a distinction of roles. As a matter of fact, the perspicacity and breadth that non-thematic studies on death can reach is surprising: That is not under discussion here. Such studies often shed light on unnoticed appearances of death, only apparently paradoxical, in human cultures. A perfect example is Sigmund Freud's notion of the «death drive» («Todestrieb»)<sup>30</sup> Besides, the discrepancy between thematic and non-thematic investigations on death cannot be understood rigidly. A thematic study on death can rarely be an *exclusively* thematic study, and vice versa. In fact, in the majority of cases, thematic studies are essentially blended with non-thematic

<sup>27</sup> Heidegger 1977, p. 281 (Heidegger's emphasis).

<sup>28</sup> Heidegger 1985, p. 255 (Heidegger's emphasis).

<sup>29</sup> For a broad account of the contextual appearances of death, cf. Jonathan Dollimore. *Death, Desire, and Loss in Western Culture* (New York; Abingdon: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Sigmund Freud. "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", in Sigmund Freud. *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., ed. by J. Strachey, A. Strachey and A. Tyson, collab. A. Freud (London: The Hogarth Press Limited; Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co. LTD, 1953-1974), *Volume XVIII: Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works*, 10<sup>th</sup> edn. (1981), pp. 7-64. For a German edition, cf. Sigmund Freud. "Jenseits des Lustprinzips", in Sigmund Freud. *Gesammelte Werke: Chronologisch geordnet*, 18 vols., ed. by A. Freud, E. Bibring, W. Hoffer, E. Kris and O. Isakower, collab. M. Bonaparte (London: Imago Publishing Co., Ltd.; Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1940-1952), *Band 13: Jenseits des Lustprinzips. Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse. Das Ich und das Es*, ed. by A. Richards, 5<sup>th</sup> edn. (1967), pp. 3-72).

considerations. For this reason, the line of demarcation I am focusing on seems to pass between *systematically* thematic studies on death and *systematically* non-thematic ones.

It is now time to conclude my methodological reflections. However, let me note that further remarks on this study's method will come as the study proceeds.

### **3. Obscurity Is an Element of Death's Essence**

I can now go back to the claim presented in the first section and ask: What kind of shift does Ernst Bloch's philosophy of death produce? This chapter will be dedicated to answering this question.

I have already clarified that this could not be a shift in how people *interpret* death. Indeed, what is *essential* in Bloch's thanatology is not that he suggests a different way to understand death (although he also does that, which is normal for most thanatologists). More fundamentally, the shift may transform one's everyday awareness of death into the *lucid realisation of death's essence*. One would then stop struggling to understand «what death is». Firstly, realising the essence of death means: *Acknowledging the obscurity of death*. In Bloch's own view, that would be a much deeper revolution in how one experiences death: Deeper than any shocking insight on death, such as the discovery of Plato's «invention of pure spirit» («Erfindung vom reinen Geiste»);<sup>31</sup> As a criticism of Plato's invention of the soul and as a consequent denial that a survival is possible after death, this «discovery» by Nietzsche boils down to an *ontic re-arrangement* of the human interpretation of death. However, when it comes to grasping *the essence* of death, no change of perspective is needed. Simply an *internal insight* in one's perspective is needed.

Yet, my claim that the essence of human death (that is, obscurity) is not the content of an interpretation, for it inhabits all possible interpretations of death, might present some difficulties. That is due to the fact that, in a sense, literally everything in human life seems to be the content of an interpretation. In this context, I do not wish to take any stance on that. I simply wish to note that my claim does not entail that, *from a wider perspective*, the essence of human death might not itself be considered as the content of a human interpretation. Nonetheless, this will be discussed at a more advanced stage of the study.

### **4. A Historical-Philosophical Introduction: Death's Obscurity in Ancient Greek Thought. Socrates and Epicurus**

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<sup>31</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche. *Nietzsche Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. by G. Colli and M. Montinari (founders), V. Gerhardt, N. Miller, W. Müller-Lauter and K. Pestalozzi (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1967- ), *Abteilung VI: Band 2: Jenseits von Gut und Böse: Vorspiel einer Philosophie der Zukunft – Zur Genealogie der Moral (1886-1887)*, (1968), p. 4. (For an English edition, cf. *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. by E. Behler and B. Magnus (founders), A. D. Schrift and D. Large (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995- ), *Volume 8: Beyond Good and Evil / On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. and aftwd. by A. Del Caro (2014), p. 2).

#### **4.1 Socrates' Considerations on Death in Plato's *Apology*: the Obscure Alternative and the «οἶμαι οὐκ εἰδέναι»**

Before sourcing the very meaning of death's obscurity from Bloch, let me introduce this problem by taking into consideration a renowned passage from Plato's *Apology*. As I will show, *Socrates was certainly one of the first representatives of the philosophical tradition who clearly stated the obscurity of death*.<sup>32</sup> Yet on the other hand, even Socrates' *ontological-thanatological* discourse will turn out to be incomplete. For an in-depth analysis of the obscurity of death it will then become necessary to specifically consult Ernst Bloch. *Indeed, the conceptuality needed for an in-depth analysis of obscurity seem to have been developed at a later stage in the history of philosophy: Particularly, by modern philosophy*. Despite this, an examination of the *Apology* will help the study approach this core element of death.

In the context of the *Apology*, the question of death is extremely urgent to Socrates, maybe as urgent as it can ever be: Socrates has been condemned to death. Now, *what* is one condemned *to* if one is condemned to die?

It is well-known that Socrates' own view (Socrates' interpretation!) of death in the *Apology* is a *sceptical* one: What death is, is simply *uncertain*. Not having been warned by the usual «σημεῖον» («sign») that always warned him before committing or approaching something bad, Socrates welcomes his tough destiny in a calm spirit:

«ἐγὼ ὑμῖν ἐρῶ: κινδυνεύει γάρ μοι τὸ συμβεβηκὸς τοῦτο ἀγαθὸν γεγονέναι, καὶ οὐκ ἔσθ' ὅπως ἡμεῖς ὀρθῶς ὑπολαμβάνομεν, ὅσοι οἰόμεθα κακὸν εἶναι τὸ τεθνάναι. μέγα μοι τεκμήριον τούτου γέγονεν: οὐ γὰρ ἔσθ' ὅπως οὐκ ἦν αντιώθη ἂν μοι τὸ εἰωθὸς σημεῖον, εἰ μὴ τι ἔμελλον ἐγὼ ἀγαθὸν πράξειν».<sup>33</sup>

(«I will tell you. It is an intimation that what has happened to me is a good, and that those of us who think that death is an evil are in error. For the customary sign would surely have opposed me had I been going to evil and not to good»).<sup>34</sup>

I believe it is not just because of the absence of the «σημεῖον» that Socrates is a thanatological sceptic. Explaining Socrates' thanatological stance in that way would be simplistic – although it is Socrates himself who may seem to give this explanation, according to a superficial reading of the *Apology*. On the contrary, *it is the absence of the sign* that needs to be explained. In the first place, Socrates argues that death may also conceal something good for humans. In doing so, he *questions a certain ontic interpretation* of death, according to which death is «bad» («κακὸν»). Necessarily, he also questions that death is «good» («ἀγαθόν»). Thus, life has an *open ending* for Socrates and death swings between «κακὸν» and «ἀγαθόν».

Precisely, Socrates posits an alternative: «either death is a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness» («ἢ γὰρ [οἶον] μηδὲν εἶναι μηδὲ αἰσθησιν μηδεμίαν μηδενὸς ἔχειν τὸν τεθνεῶτα», *Apologia*, 40c) or death is «a change and migration of the soul from this world to another» («ἢ κατὰ τὰ λεγόμενα μεταβολή τις τυγχάνει

<sup>32</sup> For broader accounts of death in Western culture, cf. Michel Vovelle. *La Mort et l'Occident: de 1300 à nos jours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983); Edgar Morin. *L'Homme et la Mort* (Paris: Éditions Corrèa, 1951); Jacques Choron. *Death and Western Thought* (New York City: The Macmillan Company; Toronto: Collier-Macmillan, 1963); and Dollimore 1998.

<sup>33</sup> Plato. *Apologia*, 40 b-c.

<sup>34</sup> Plato. *The Dialogues of Plato*, 4 vols, trans. by B. Jowett, 4<sup>th</sup> edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), I, p. 365.

οὐσα καὶ μετοίκησις τῇ ψυχῇ τοῦ τόπου τοῦ ἐνθένδε εἰς ἄλλον τόπον», 40c).<sup>35</sup> In this context, let me note that if «αἴσθησις» were not to be translated with «consciousness», that would jeopardise the very alternative which Socrates is positing. For if death were simply the absence of «sensation» and could preserve some form of consciousness, what would be alternative here to the «migration of the soul from this world to another»? Would not, at this point, the absence of «sensation» itself entail some form of «change» where the soul is somehow preserved? And why, if that is the case, does Socrates not offer any detail on this alternative scenario where the soul survives too? Why does he offer details on the «migration» and not on the other scenario?

I will not focus on Socrates' cultural conditionings in conceiving of such an alternative. After all, nobody believes in Hades anymore (although one may believe in what other cultures have substituted for Hades, such as the otherworldly realms of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven). Rather, let me ask this question: If the reason why the σημεῖον does not stop Socrates is that death's nature swings between the possibilities of immortality and full annihilation, *what is the reason why death swings?* Why should one *not* take death's nature for granted, instead of being sceptical? An analysis of Socrates' scepticism around death should not stop before that question.

Here, I wish to claim that *the reason for Socrates' sceptical attitude towards death is the awareness of death's obscurity*. That is to say: *Socrates' thanatological ontics is grounded in the ontology of death*. Nevertheless, that is not to say that the ontology of death is *necessarily* to be accompanied by a Socratic, sceptical attitude towards death. In effect, that is an *ontic* matter. This will become clear in what follows.

When uttering his last words to the Athenians, Socrates uses the adjective «ἄδηλος» in regard to death: «The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways – I to die, and you to live. Which is better God only knows» («ἀλλὰ γὰρ ἤδη ὥρα ἀπιέναι, ἐμοὶ μὲν ἀποθανομένῳ, ὑμῖν δὲ βιωσομένοις · ὁπότεροι δὲ ἡμῶν ἔρχονται ἐπὶ ἄμεινον πρᾶγμα, ἄδηλον παντὶ πλὴν ἢ τῷ θεῷ», *Apologia*, 42a).<sup>36</sup> The adjective «ἄδηλος» is made up of an alpha privative and of the term «δῆλος». The latter means «visible», «conspicuous», «manifest».<sup>37</sup> «Ἄδηλος» therefore means «unseen», «invisible». It can also mean «secret».<sup>38</sup> In other words, «ἄδηλος» means *obscure*. Let me anticipate that this should be regarded as a phenomenological statement concerning the modality in which death «manifests» itself to humans. Now, although they are merely introductory to the issue of obscurity, one can collect an invaluable clue from Socrates' words in the *Apology*: First and foremost, *death is obscure*. Thus, Plato's *Apology* is not simply the story of how Socrates was condemned to death. The *Apology* is a philosophical meditation *on* death.

<sup>35</sup> The English translations are taken from Plato 1953, I, p. 365.

<sup>36</sup> Plato 1953, I, p. 366.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Liddell, Scott, Jones *Ancient Greek Lexicon* [online], <  
<https://lsj.gr/wiki/%CE%B4%E1%BF%86%CE%BB%CE%BF%CF%82>> [accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2025].

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, <  
[https://lsj.gr/index.php?title=%E1%BC%84%CE%B4%CE%B7%CE%BB%CE%BF%CF%82&mobileaction=toggle\\_v\\_iew\\_desktop](https://lsj.gr/index.php?title=%E1%BC%84%CE%B4%CE%B7%CE%BB%CE%BF%CF%82&mobileaction=toggle_v_iew_desktop)> [accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2025].

In conclusion, let me note that one main historical-thanatological claim that will be advanced by this study is the following: *Very few problems have been overlooked, in Western thanatology, as the problem of the meaning itself of death's «obscurity»*. No aspect of death seems to have been so deeply taken for granted. That can be easily perceived in the estrangement which most would experience if, after asking: «what is death?», they were answered: «first and foremost, death is obscure!». After centuries of ontic exasperation of the problem of *what* death is, thanatological questioning does not even recognise ontological answers.

In what follows, the interpretation of the *Apology* given above will be further corroborated. However, before that, let me clarify how the realisation of death's obscurity may explain Socrates' sceptical attitude towards death. Here, I wish to argue that this might just be a matter of *commonsense*, according to Socrates' own perception of it. Indeed, if obscurity is the *essence* of death, then *any particular* idea on death – no matter how convincing, scientifically grounded, or religiously assured – must *lack clarity* about death. It must be a «leap in the dark», *literally speaking*. Now, how can one be *certain* about something which is obscure? From the very darkness of death, Socrates draws a consequence which a commonsensical principle would require many to draw, at least in certain cultures: No one can be certain about something which is obscure.

However, I contend that this is just *Socrates' own way to take a leap in the dark*. As a matter of fact, from the *obscurity* of something it does not always follow that its nature is *uncertain*. Yet this followed for Socrates (whether it follows *necessarily* is not central here). On the other hand, it is not because Socrates regarded death's nature as uncertain that he was able to *acknowledge* not to know death. On the contrary, *obscurity has no preference for uncertainty*. Indeed, one can be *sure* about something which is helplessly obscure to them. For example, one might have faith in the existence of God. That can happen because «obscurity» (as it is understood here) is a *phenomenological modality of presence*: It is the *obscure way* in which certain things are experienced by humans, be these things *believed* or *doubted*. In the example, that is to say that *agnostics have no better clue on God than believers*. Whether God exists or not does not become clearer because one is sceptical about it. Perhaps, it becomes even *less clear* in that case – assuming that something can be clear (or obscure) *in varying degrees*. Which thing will be denied in this study.

Therefore, thinking that obscure facts cannot be certain is just a prejudice. Yet I am not insinuating that this was *Socrates' prejudice*. His thanatological scepticism in the *Apology* rather sounds as his own way of «digesting» the obscurity of death. What I am claiming is that commonsense may account for Socrates' self-aware hermeneutics of death. In this context, by referring to commonsense, I mean that thanatological scepticism would perhaps prove «reasonable for all», *given* that a thanatological meditation were started. Indeed, *if* a dominant attitude towards death truly exists, this attitude might well consist in the *opposite* of scepticism, that is in *taking for granted this or that idea on death*. As a matter of fact, thanatological scepticism is rare and it would be reasonable to suppose that even Socrates did not stick to it, if not for a limited time over his lifetime.

Let me now return to my point. How can one further establish the interpretation of Socrates' words as pointing at obscurity?

Predictably, Socrates' awareness of the essence of death can be best detected in his renowned saying: «οἶμαι οὐκ εἰδέναι» (*Apologia*, 21d). The «οὐκ εἰδέναι» can be interpreted to refer to *the attitude of not-knowing*. In the case relevant here, the not-known is human death. That means: To human beings, death is «known» as an unknown. Let me clarify that there is no contradiction in this statement. It is simply an oxymoronic expression. Death is not «known» and «unknown» *in the same respect*. Nevertheless, translating Socrates' «οἶμαι οὐκ εἰδέναι» in a paradoxical way may risk diverting the interpretation to the point of frustrating obscurity itself. Indeed, one may still wonder how the fact could be clear that something is obscure. *Yet this is precisely what Socrates does not say*: Socrates *does not* say «I know I do not know» («οἶδα οὐκ εἰδέναι»), *but rather* «I believe I do not know» («οἶμαι οὐκ εἰδέναι»). As argued by C. C. W. Taylor, «the paradoxical formulation is a clear misreading of Plato».<sup>39</sup> And of Socrates. The misinterpretation of these renowned words settled a long time ago and is also evident in the Latin translation «scio me nescire» (or «scio me nihil scire»).

In the choice of his very words, Socrates showed respect for death's obscurity (and for obscurity as such). This respect is equally evident from Socrates' disdain for those who believe – not «*know*» – they know what they do not know (cf. *Apologia*, 28e–29a). His emphasis is not on the fact that one should acknowledge *to know* that one does not know: If that were the case, the first of the two «*knowledges*» would need a clarification. Indeed, how can ignorance be known? I will reflect on that in what follows, and I can say that this is the central issue of the entire chapter. In this context, let me say that Socrates' emphasis concerns the fact that one should not *think* that one knows what one does not. That is in fact a kind of «ὕβρις» («insolence»): It is the impious form of mistakenness consisting in pretending to know what cannot be known.<sup>40</sup> And for Socrates, this impiety given by the human desire to become God and know what only gods can know depends, in turn, on the «ἀμαθία», that is «ignorance» or «philosophical illiteracy». For him, those who think they know what they do not know simply lack a philosophical education.

#### **4.2 Epicurus' Oblivion of the Essence of Death in His Static and Nihilistic Understanding of It (Epistula ad Menoeceum 124-127)**

After showing Socrates' embryonic understanding of death's obscurity, I am in a position to compare his *ontological* stance – represented by the very acknowledgement of death's obscurity – with an opposite attitude, forgetful of the essence of death. After that, I will move on to a deeper phenomenological analysis of death's obscurity.

The stance to be examined is a renowned thanatological stance, where death's obscurity, primordially grasped by Socrates, has already fallen outside the scope. Yet it is a stance by an Ancient Greek philosopher not far in time from Socrates. Examining this new stance will help me better clarify the distinction between an *ontics* and an *ontology* of death, which was introduced in the second section of the chapter.

<sup>39</sup> C. C. W. Taylor. *Socrates: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 46.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Liddell, Scott, Jones *Ancient Greek Lexicon* [online], <<https://lsj.gr/wiki/%E1%BD%95%CE%B2%CF%81%CE%B9%CF%82>> [accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2025].



I am referring about Epicurus' *Letter to Menoeceus*. According to one first reading, even commonsensical to a certain extent, the Hellenistic philosopher denounces in this letter the obscurity of death. Recently, a renowned representative of this interpretation was the German philosopher Walter Schulz.<sup>41</sup> In this section, I will argue against this reading by contending that Epicurus does *in no way* assert that humans cannot know anything about death. This will show how, less than a century after the death of Socrates, thanatological thinking – in one of its most renowned representatives – had already fallen into the ontic diatribe on «what» death is.

In the *Letter to Menoeceus*, the first words Epicurus spends on death read: «Συνέθιζε δὲ ἐν τῷ νομίζειν μηδὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς εἶναι τὸν θάνατον», «Take the habit of thinking that death is nothing for us».<sup>42</sup> Now, given that people usually fear death, speak of death, and even observe death happening to others, one could certainly be surprised by Epicurus' resolute statement. What does his counterintuitive assertion mean?

The reason why, according to Epicurus, death does not touch humans is extremely well-known and reads:

«τὸ φορικωδέστατον οὖν τῶν κακῶν ὁ θάνατος οὐθὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς, ἐπειδὴ περ ὅταν μὲν ἡμεῖς ὦμεν, ὁ θάνατος οὐ πάρεστιν· ὅταν δ' ὁ θάνατος παρῇ, τότε ἡμεῖς οὐκ ἐσμέν».

(«So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist»).<sup>43</sup>

Let me say that undoubtedly, *when* (ὅταν) humans are not alive anymore, death does not regard humans. How could it? For that matter, even *when* (ὅταν) humans are alive, death does not regard them. However, are these the last words to be pronounced on death? Is it just all? Or is Epicurus *constraining* death within arbitrary boundaries, and perhaps even justifying indifference to it?

Here, I wish to contend that the ground on which Epicurus argues for this distance from death is simply an arbitrary static conception of death (and life). As a matter of fact, only if «death» is grasped as *the state of being dead*, death may not touch nor regard humans. Similarly, only if «life» is conceived of as *the state of being alive*, life cannot be touched by death. In using the notion of «state», I am not offering an anachronistic interpretation of Epicurus, though. That is evident from the fact that an Ancient Greek thinker prior to Epicurus as Aristotle had already elaborated the notion of the distinction between the initial («ἐκ τινος») and final phase («εἰς τι») of any form of becoming, and becoming («μεταβολή») itself. Now, the final phase of the form of becoming in which human death consists is what is here being called the «state of being dead».<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Walter Schulz. "Wandlungen der Einstellung zum Tode", in: Walter Schulz. *Prüfendes Denken: Essays zur Wiederbelebung der Philosophie* (Tübingen: Klöpfer & Meyer, 2002), pp. 73-94.

<sup>42</sup> Epicurus. *Epistula ad Menoeceum* 124. For an English translation, cf. Epicurus. "Letter to Menoeceus", in Epicurus. *The Extant Remains*, trans. and notes by C. Bailey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), pp. 82-94.

<sup>43</sup> Epicurus. *Epistula ad Menoeceum* 125 (English: Epicurus 1926, p. 85).

<sup>44</sup> «πᾶσα μεταβολή ἐστὶν ἐκ τινος εἰς τι» (Aristotle. *Physica*, 225 a), «All change is from something to something» (Aristotle. *Physics*, ed. by D. Bostock, trans. by R. Waterfield (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 120. For a wider discussion of this notion, cf. Chapter 2, section 3.5.

Let me note that speaking of the «state of being alive» does not involve denying that life is a *process*, a μεταβολή. On the contrary, it means to recognise that *since* life is a process, its being a process is a *state* of life: A state that is not *itself* involved in the process (at least insofar as one is still – or already – alive).

Let me now go back to Epicurus. How can he recognise that *both* the *state* of being alive and the *state* of being dead exist, without acknowledging that a *transition* from one to the other also exists? How could death become real *after* life, if not *through* a transition from life to death?

In fact, Epicurus' discourse does not stop at this Parmenidean stage concerned with mere states. According to Epicurus' own words, as well as to the thought of every Ancient Greek, human life is a mortal life. «Τὸ τῆς ζωῆς θνητόν» is a phrase used by Epicurus, which literally means «the mortal [nature] of life». And in the very sentence where Epicurus says: «So death is neither the living nor the dead, since it has nothing to do with the former and the latter are not» («οὔτε οὖν πρὸς τοὺς ζῶντάς ἐστιν οὔτε πρὸς τοὺς τετελευτηκότας, ἐπειδὴ περ περὶ οὓς μὲν οὐκ ἔστιν, οἱ δ' οὐκέτι εἰσὶν»), he uses the adverb «οὐκέτι»: «anymore». For Epicurus, the dead do not exist «anymore», «οὐκέτι» (albeit this adverb is not translated in the translation I am quoting). Does this not mean that *those* who are by now dead were *the ones* who were once alive? And does that not mean that a process – not a state – from life to death has occurred?

It seems that *on one hand* Epicurus denies, in a Parmenidean fashion, the processual nature of death (and life), reducing them to mere states (which they *also* are, certainly), whereas *on the other hand*, Epicurus seems to admit the obvious evidence that human beings – alive human beings – sooner or later die.<sup>45</sup> In this context, one could also quote a contemporary thinker, who argues something very similar, even though he does not reduce death (and life) to their static nature. I am thinking of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Indeed, the proposition 6.4311 of the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* is a perfect example of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Epicureanism. In that proposition, Wittgenstein argues for the «eternity» («Ewigkeit») of life, grounding it precisely in the essential distance from death in which human life – for him and for Epicurus – consists:

«Death is not an event in life. We do not live to experience death. If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present. Our life has no end in just the way in which our visual field has no limits».<sup>46</sup>

(«Der Tod ist kein Ereignis des Lebens. Den Tod erlebt man nicht. Wenn man unter Ewigkeit nicht unendliche Zeitdauer, sondern Unzeitlichkeit versteht, dann lebt der ewig, der in der Gegenwart lebt. Unser Leben ist ebenso endlos, wie unser Gesichtsfeld grenzenlos ist»)<sup>47</sup>

Certainly, *until* the state of being alive endures, death «is not an event of life». Said otherwise, insofar as «life» is grasped as *the state of being alive*, death cannot *in principle* be experienced (nor, *a fortiori ratione*, can it

<sup>45</sup> Not that I take this evidence for granted. On this, cf. the following course of the study.

<sup>46</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, trans. by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness, intro. by B. Russell (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; New York: The Humanities Press, 1961), p. 147.

<sup>47</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Werkausgabe*, 8 vols. (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1984-2022), *Band 1: Tractatus logico-philosophicus / Tagebücher 1914-1916 / Philosophische Untersuchungen*, ed. by J. Schulte (1984), pp. 9-83 (p. 81).

happen, which is Epicurus' radical stance – a stance to which Wittgenstein is not willing to advance, albeit he subscribes to one of its less radical forms). Nonetheless, just as assuming «my surviving for ever» («dass ich ewig fortlebe») does not solve any «riddle» («Rätsel») of human existence, as Wittgenstein claims in proposition 6.4312, neither solves any «riddle» the Epicurean-Wittgensteinian realisation of humans' essential distance, *as statically alive beings*, from death.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, it is simply because of their reductionist static understanding of death that life becomes «eternal». That is true even for Epicurus, though in another sense: In the sense of «temporal immortality» («zeitliche Unsterblichkeit»), as Wittgenstein calls it. For interestingly, if one *drew its logical consequence* from the Parmenidean element present in Epicurus' ambiguous stance, according to which alive people can only be alive (as death never touches life) and dead people can only be dead (as life never touches death), one should *conclude* that alive people are *forever alive*. That is, they are *immortal*, eternal: They have always been, and will always be, alive, *for death never touches life* (just as dead people would have always been, and would forever remain, dead). That would strangely lead Epicurus to Emanuele Severino's thought.<sup>49</sup>

*On the contrary, this study considers death (and life) in their fuller meaning.* That is, it considers death both as the state of being dead and as the process which people think they will go through at the very time of death. *That time* is where death and life touch and death eventually comes to regard life, with all due respect to Epicurus. Here, let me say that I will justify my statements on the paradoxical «time» of death at a later stage of the investigation.

All of this sheds an ambiguous light on Epicurus' famous endorsement for indifference towards death. The reason why people would like to be immortal, he argues, is that people are afraid of death. That is, people are afraid *of encountering* death. What is death for Epicurus, though? Death is a *fully annihilating* event: «στέρησις αἰσθήσεως» («absence of sensation», *Epistula ad Menoeceum* 124). That is both how Epicurus thinks of death and how he thinks people think of it. On its part, immortality would prevent humans from encountering this annihilation. That is why immortality is desired by humans, for Epicurus. Yet, since humans are never to encounter death, it makes no sense to fear it and therefore, it makes no sense to desire to be immortal.

Now, given what I argued on the involuntary consequence of the Epicurean stance, what does Epicurus mean if not that people should not *desire* to be immortal, because they actually *are* immortal? After all, arguing that desiring to be immortal is pointless as people will never encounter death, *is to argue* that desiring to be immortal is pointless because people will live forever. What other meaning could be ascribed to Epicurus' thesis of the *impossibility to encounter death*? Epicurus' principle ends up rebelling against itself. And it does not matter whether this unexpected immortality is to be grasped as a «temporal immortality» or as

<sup>48</sup> Both the German and the English translation of proposition 6.4312 are, respectively, *ibidem*.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Chapter 5 of this study.

«timelessness» (as is Wittgenstein's thesis). What matters is that death is grasped in such a way, a static way, that any encounter between life and death becomes *impossible*.

Therefore, let me say that *unlike Socrates, Epicurus is predominantly concerned with what death is*. That is, *his thanatology is mainly an ontics of death*: For him, death is an absolute annihilation of life. This peculiar stance makes Epicurus an «*existential nihilist*», in the words of this study. This phrase can be justified by its literalness: «Existential nihilism» consists in living one's life thinking that human existence is nothing, or better, that it will fully end into nothingness: «abisso orrido, immenso, / ov'ei precipitando, il tutto obblia» («Terrible, immense abyss / into which he falls, forgetting everything»)<sup>50</sup> That means that it is simply *at an ontic level* that Epicurus can be said to disagree with Socrates, who is uncertain about the annihilating nature of death (provided that Epicurus does not simply *take a stance* on what Socrates is sceptical about, but he also, ambiguously, states that death will never be faced).

*Not that Epicurus did not have, as a human being (and as a great philosopher, which is here less relevant though), any understanding of the obscure essence of death*. Simply, he did not clearly show it in the *Letter to Menoeceus*. In conclusion, I should mention that I am aware that only three letters by Epicurus have fully survived among Epicurus' works. It is with this in my mind that I argued what I argued, without willing to extend the validity of my interpretations beyond the available textual evidence on which any interpretation of Epicurus needs to ground itself, as of today.

## **5. A Phenomenological Interpretation of Ernst Bloch's 1969 Conversation with Siegfried Unseld: Death as a «Nichterscheinung» («Non-Appearance»)**

Let me now come to the question that has been kept pending so far: The question of the obscurity of death. In this section, I will investigate what can be meant by «obscurity» when it comes to death. I will especially take advantage of the Kantian-Blochian notion of «Nichterscheinung» («non-appearance») and argue that human death is a «non-appearance». This will help me clarify the meaning of the *ontological-thanatological shift* announced at the beginning of the chapter.

In order to penetrate what is meant by «obscurity» (an element, as claimed, of the essence of human death), I will examine Ernst Bloch's 1969 conversation with Siegfried Unseld, at that time publisher of the Suhrkamp Verlag in Berlin.<sup>51</sup> As Blochian scholars know, death is a «not-yet» («Noch-nicht») of human life and, as every not-yet, it is *obscure*. That means that a reference to the obscurity of death is implicit in every text or speech Bloch gives on death. Nevertheless, that does not mean that the reference is always made explicit by Bloch. Yet in his dialogue with Siegfried Unseld, Bloch explicitly makes and peculiarly develops a phenomenological discourse on the meaning of obscurity, and he so that in a conversation devoted to *Death, Immortality*,

<sup>50</sup> Giacomo Leopardi. "Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia" ("Night Song Of A Wandering Shepherd In Asia"), in Giacomo Leopardi. *Canti / Poems: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. by J. Galassi (New York City: St. Martins Press-3PL, 2012), pp. 321-322.

<sup>51</sup> Ernst Bloch. "Über Tod, Unsterblichkeit, Fortdauer: ein Gespräch mit Siegfried Unseld", in Bloch 1985, *Ergänzungsband: Tendenz, Latenz, Utopie*, pp. 308-336.

*Perpetuation*. For these reasons, examining this conversation will here be of particular help. Before starting, let me note that in the absence of an English translation of the conversation, the translations of its passages will be mine.

### **5.1 An Example: Quantum Reality as a «Nichterscheinung»**

As anticipated, Bloch and Unseld discuss the concept of «Nichterscheinung» («non-appearance»). Therefore, let me first approach this concept, and especially its reference to «things».

In a brilliant fashion, Unseld and Bloch mention *quantum reality* as an example of a «Nichterscheinung». This reality is seen by them as «not appearing» to humans. That is to say, it is not a content of human experience. Notoriously, quantum reality is the microcosmic reality inferred by quantum mechanics. This reality is believed to be inhabited by atoms and subatomic particles, which, according to the principle of wave-particle duality, are to be understood as «microcosmic waves» at once.<sup>52</sup>

Nowadays, the belief in the existence and influence of these microcosmic entities on the human mesocosmic reality is certainly part of a *Weltanschauung* that does not exclusively belong to quantum physicians (just as philosophical theories are not only in the mind of philosophers). In fact, who does not believe, today, in *atomic bombs*? As is known, these are called «atomic» because of the microcosmic process of nuclear fission of the nucleus of the atom. It is this microcosmic, unexperienced process that is believed to cause the «atomic explosion» in the mesocosmic, experienced world. In this context, it can be peculiarly reassuring to remind that the «atom» is definitely not an invention of quantum mechanics, but of Ancient Greek philosophers. As examples, one can mention Democritus and Leucippus. Born in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C, respectively, they already understood «atoms» as microcosmic entities having influences on human reality.<sup>53</sup>

Now, no matter whether it is understood à la Democritus or à la Einstein, quantum reality is a clear example of something that is *not manifest to humans*, it «does not appear» («erscheint nicht»). In Bloch and Unseld's words, quantum reality is a «*non-appearance*» («Nichterscheinung»). That is not to say that humans are not able to relate to quantum reality, to speak of it, and to believe to be influenced by it, as Bertrand Russell happened to confidently think:

«That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins – all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Walter Greiner. *Quantum Mechanics: An Introduction* (New York City: Springer, 2001).

<sup>53</sup> Cf. *Texts of Early Greek Philosophy: The Complete Fragments and Selected Testimonies of the Major Presocratics*, 2 vols., ed. by D. W. Graham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), *Part I*, pp. 516-686 (Democritus' fragments), pp. 516-630 (Leucippus' fragments).

which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built».<sup>54</sup>

I will not comment on this passage. I will only say that it is certainly an emblematic example of how the scientific worldview has taken roots in recent times. Let me go back to «non-appearances». Moving from the general version of this notion, Unseld and Bloch also regard inaudible sounds, such as radio waves, as «Nichterscheinungen». In their conversation, they also admit the possibility that the technological progress of humanity will enhance human organs (and therefore, human senses) and allow human beings to perceive what they cannot currently perceive. Let me then come to the question: What does it mean that things such as radio waves and quantum reality are «obscure» to humans? And how does their obscurity regard human death?

Let me answer *e contrario*. What does it mean «to appear»? What would it mean, for radio waves and quantum reality, to «appear»? As a matter of fact, if radio waves were to «appear» («erscheinen»), then human beings would be able to «hear them directly» («unmittelbar hören», as Bloch says): Just as people hear the sound of cars running through the streets.<sup>55</sup> That should certainly be the case. Moreover, it is not fatal for Bloch and Unseld's argument what a Husserlian would clarify about the «direct hearing» of the sound of cars running through the streets: That is, that what is really directly perceived in such cases is auditory «data of sensations» («Empfindungsdaten»), which humans «apprehend» («auffassen») and thus *interpret* as «the sound of cars running through the streets». The reason why this Husserlian clarification would not be fatal is that *in both cases*, the Blochian-Unseldian and the Husserlian one, *a distinction is kept* between «direct» and «indirect perception». After all, no matter *where* one draws this distinction, the modality in which the things of human experience «appear» will always be deemed different from the modality in which non-experienceable things, such as radio waves and quantum reality, themselves «appear». Indeed, the latter things «appear» *as* «non-appearances». In this context, I am of course slightly re-adjusting Bloch and Unseld's understanding of «appearing» and making it more universal than it is.

Further reflecting on this distinction would take me too far, here. So, I will postpone this discussion. Let me only add that my considerations on the meaning of «appearing» and «not-appearing» should not be confused with the denial of Heidegger's claim, perfectly correct in my opinion, according to which «What we “first” hear is never noises or complexes of sounds, but the creaking waggon, the motor-cycle» («“Zunächst” hören wir nie und nimmer Geräusche und Lautkomplexe, sondern den knarrenden Wagen, das Motorrad»)).<sup>56</sup> Yet Heidegger can state that because he is taking advantage of *a different notion* of «directness»: His emphasis is on the fact that it is only in a philosophical meditation on human perception that one becomes aware of the difference between «direct» and «indirect perception». Certainly, though, Heidegger does not mean to say that in one's concrete life, everything is experienced in the same manner.

<sup>54</sup> Bertrand Russell. *Mysticism and Logic: Including a Free Man's Worship*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1986), p. 10.

<sup>55</sup> The expression «unmittelbar hören» occurs in Bloch 1985c, p. 333.

<sup>56</sup> Heidegger 1985, p. 207. (German: Heidegger 1977, p. 217).

## **5.2. Kant, «Erscheinung» («Appearance»), and «Nichterscheinung» («Non-Appearance»)**

Thus, «obscurity» means «nichterscheinen», «*not-to-appear*». Now, in the emphasis on «Nichterscheinungen» by Bloch and Unseld it is not difficult to see the influence of Kant's discourse on «Erscheinungen» in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, although it is to be acknowledged that there is no occurrence of the words «Nichterscheinung» and «nichterscheinen» in the Kantian *Critique*. Let me come to a closer analysis of this Kantian concept.

In fact, an explicit yet indirect reference to Kant's conception of «Erscheinung» is made by Bloch in the conversation.<sup>57</sup> In that context, Bloch quotes a Kantian passage from a private letter to Fräulein von Knobloch (the year is 1763). In this letter, Kant admits beyond «*allem erdenklichen Zweifel*» («all possibility of doubt») the possibility of communicating with the dead. Even, the dead are expressly defined by Kant as «*Nichterscheinungen*», along with the various means of communication which the dead may use to speak to the living. In this context, it is not relevant – but it is worth mentioning – that according to the letter, the dead may *not* be «*Nichterscheinungen*» for certain extraordinary individuals, such as the renowned Swedish medium of Kant's times Emanuel Swedenborg. The «*extraordinary gift*» («*außerordentliche Gabe*») of these people consists precisely in being able to perceive the dead in a direct way: For them, the dead are normal «*Erscheinungen*».<sup>58</sup>

Here, it is interesting to note that Bloch – perhaps confusing this letter with Kant's reconsideration of his stance in *Träume eines Geistersehers* – states that there is no definitive proof, according to Kant, of an «*Erscheinung der Verstorbenen*» (an «*appearance of the dead*»), as this is always «*auf ein Hörensagen gegründet*» («*grounded on hearsay*»).

<sup>59</sup> On the contrary, even though Kant will later officially change his mind in *Träume eines Geistersehers*, Kant writes in this letter that from a former incredulity he was brought to believe in some people's capacity to perceive the dead by two extraordinary events concerning the life of Emanuel Swedenborg that Kant was aware of. As quoted, he deemed the proofs he had collected beyond «*allem erdenklichen Zweifel*» («*all possibility of doubt*»).

<sup>60</sup>

Let me say that I am not implying that according to Kant's letter, the human survival after death had been *generally* proven, given that only what «*appears*» («*erscheint*») to all humans should be considered «*generally*

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<sup>57</sup> Cf. Bloch 1985c, p. 319.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Immanuel Kant. “An Fräulein Charlotte von Knobloch”, 10<sup>th</sup> August 1763, in Immanuel Kant. *Gesammelte Schriften*, 29 vols., ed. by Königlich Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Bd. 1-22), Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin (Bd. 23), Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen (Bd. 24-29) (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1900-1922; Berlin and Leipzig: De Gruyter, 1922- ), *Abteilung II: Band 10: Briefe, 1747–1788, Nr. 001–342*, ed. by P. Menzer (1969), pp. 40-45, (p. 44). For the English translation, cf. Immanuel Kant. “To Charlotte von Knobloch”, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, 16 vols., ed. by P. Guyer and A. W. Woods, adv. brd. H. Allison, R. Brandt, R. Meerbote, C.D. Parsons, H. Robinson, J.B. Schneewind (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992-2016), *Correspondence*, ed. by A. Zweig (1999), pp. 70-76, (p. 73).

<sup>59</sup> Bloch 1985c, p. 319.

<sup>60</sup> As to Kant's own reconsideration of this stance, cf. Immanuel Kant. “Träume eines Geistersehers: erläutert durch Träume der Metaphysik”, in Kant 1900- , *Abteilung I: Band 2: Vorkritische Schriften II. 1757–1777*, ed. by P. Gedan, K. Lasswitz, P. Menzer, M. Frischeisen-Köhler, and E. Adickes (1905), pp. 329-390. For the English translation, cf. Immanuel Kant. “Dreams of a Spirit-Seer: Elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics”, in Kant 1992-2016, *Theoretical Philosophy 1755-1770*, trans. by David Walford and Ralf Meerbote (1992), pp. 305-359.

proven». Neither am I implying that one should necessarily take a private letter by Kant seriously. As other thinkers (such as Edmund Husserl), Kant might have perceived private writings as a separate sphere of his work in which to take stances that he would have not taken in an «official» context. And with regards to Kant's «official» perspective, Bloch is perfectly right. Yet it is interesting to note that for Kant, one same object of experience – the dead – can be an «Erscheinung» for some people, and a «Nichterscheinung» for some other people. Let me now consider Kant's notion of «Erscheinung».

In the conversation, it is not only Bloch but Unseld himself who refers to «Nichterscheinungen» in a perfectly Kantian style. Unlike Bloch, Unseld even gives a definition of them: «Nichterscheinungen» are «Erscheinungen, die wir noch nicht erkennen können» («appearances, which we cannot know yet»)<sup>61</sup> They are, one might say, «Nochnichterscheinungen» («not-yet-appearances»). With regards to this concept, some elucidations may be helpful for better circumscribing *what* will be inherited from Kant's notion of «Erscheinung» in this chapter.

In his first *Critique*, Kant famously paired the «Erscheinung» with the «Ding an sich selbst» («thing in itself»). The things which humans experience are «appearances», insofar as they are not, but refer to, «things in themselves». Such a reference is undoubtedly essential within Kant's *Denkweg* and for its interpretation. However, the reference of the things of human experience to «things in themselves» is not relevant for the purposes of this study. Indeed, it is not crucial to decide, in the present context, whether what «appears» to humans is to be considered as the *semblance* of a world in itself. That is the first sense in which Kant's conception of the «appearance» will here be de-Kantianised.

There is also a second de-Kantianisation that I wish to highlight. Yet this is an actual «de-Kantianisation» only if Heidegger's interpretation of Kant's «Erscheinung» is correct. Heidegger's thesis is that the Kantian understanding of «appearances» exclusively refers to *things*, as distinguished from spiritual entities such as the human «subject» («Subjekt»). For Heidegger, according to Kant's conception of «appearance», only entities such as tables, mountains, stars (and so on) can «appear». That is to say that the human mind cannot «appear». In the *Introduction to Being and time*, Heidegger states that

«the positive outcome of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* lies in what it has contributed towards the working out of what belongs to any Nature whatsoever, not in a “theory of knowledge”. His transcendental logic is an a priori logic for the subject-matter of that area of Being called “Nature”».<sup>62</sup>

(«So beruht denn auch der positive Ertrag von Kants *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* im Ansatz zu einer Herausarbeitung dessen, was zu einer Natur überhaupt gehört, und nicht in einer “Theorie” der Erkenntnis. Seine transzendente Logik ist apriorische Sachlogik des Seinsgebietes Natur.»)<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Bloch 1985c, p. 334.

<sup>62</sup> Heidegger 1985, p. 31.

<sup>63</sup> Heidegger 1977, p. 14.



If Heidegger is right, then a second de-Kantianisation of the notion of «appearance» needs to be performed. That means I will let «appearance» refer to *all that can possibly «appear» to human consciousness*: Things as well as minds, objects as well as thoughts. Yet for my part, the *universal nature* of the «appearance» is already present in Kant and the passage quoted is another instance of Heidegger's onticising tendency when it comes to interpreting the Western philosophical tradition. That is not to say that this study's concept of «appearance» is the same as Kant's: Essential elements such as the reference to the «thing in itself» have already been left aside. Moreover, later in the chapter, I will have the occasion to say more about other elements which differentiate Kant's notion of «appearance» from this study's notion.

In conclusion, let me provide my anti-Heideggerian claim with textual evidence. In the following passage, Kant refers to *the human subject itself* as an «Erscheinung», that is, as the semblance of a subject in itself, a «Subjekt an sich», as Kant might have called it, although he never used this phrase in the first *Critique*. Let one listen to Kant, then:

«Everything that is represented through a sense is to that extent always appearance, and an inner sense must therefore either not be admitted at all or else the subject, which is the object of this sense, can only be represented by its means as appearance, not as it would judge of itself if its intuition were mere self-activity, i.e., intellectual. [...] there it then intuits itself not as it would immediately self-actively represent itself, but in accordance with the way in which it is affected from within, consequently as it appears to itself, not as it is».<sup>64</sup>

(«Alles, was durch einen Sinn vorgestellt wird, ist so fern jederzeit Erscheinung, und ein innerer Sinn würde also entweder gar nicht eingeräumt werden müssen, oder das Subjekt, welches der Gegenstand desselben ist, würde durch denselben nur als Erscheinung vorgestellt werden können, nicht wie es von sich selbst urteilen würde, wenn seine Anschauung bloße Selbsttätigkeit, d.i. intellektuell, wäre. [...] da es denn sich selbst anschauet, nicht wie es sich unmittelbar selbsttätig vorstellen würde, sondern nach der Art, wie es von innen affiziert wird, folglich wie es sich erscheint, nicht wie es ist»)<sup>65</sup>

Now that the preliminary observations on Kant's «Erscheinung» have been made, it is time to ask: What does it mean «to appear»? That will provide the study with the answer of what it means «not to appear», that is «to be obscure». In turn, this will make the study able to meaningfully reflect on the essential obscurity of death.

A first answer would be that «erscheinen» means «being directly perceived». Nonetheless, as I have started showing, that does not seem to be the case. Indeed, entities such as mountains, stars, and tables are *not* directly perceived by humans. Yet these are full-fledged «Erscheinungen» for Kant, and even for Unseld and Bloch, given that stars, mountains, and tables are for them the counterpart of quantum reality and radio waves, which on their part are «Nichterscheinungen». Now, the fact that the *things* – not the mind – of human experience are never directly perceived and that only their «data of sensations» are has been famously argued and analysed by Edmund Husserl, whom I have already mentioned. More precisely, Husserl claimed that every *thing* is

<sup>64</sup> Immanuel Kant. “General Remarks on the Transcendental Aesthetic”, in Kant 1992-2016, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. by P. Guyer and E. Matthews (1999), pp. 185-192, (p. 189).

<sup>65</sup> Immanuel Kant. “Allgemeine Anmerkungen zur transzendentalen Ästhetik”, in Kant 1900-, *Abteilung I: Band 3: Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 2. Aufl., 1787, ed. by B. Erdmann (1904), pp. 40-45, (p. 44).

manifest to humans through different «sides» («Profilen»), and given that what is actually manifest is always *one side* of things (for example, one side of a mountain), things *as such* are not manifest.

The consequence to be drawn from this is that *the Kantian «appearance» does not «appear»*, if «appearing» means «being directly perceived». If anything, the «appearance» is *partly* directly perceived. But that is equivalent to being *not* directly perceived. For example, if only one side of a mountain is perceived, *the mountain* is not perceived. The Husserl of the *Logical Investigations* would call the part of the mountain which is directly perceived the «actual content» of «experience» («tatsächlicher Inhalt» of the «Erlebnis»), and he would call the mountain itself the «intentional object» of «experience» («intentionaler Gegenstand» of the «Erlebnis»).<sup>66</sup>

What does Kant's «*not to appear*» mean, then? What is a «*Nichterscheinung*»? An answer can be given *e contrario*, by reflecting on what the *opposite* of «appearing» is: If «appearing» means «being partly directly perceived», as is the case for a mountain, «not-appearing» will mean «not being perceived directly, *not even partly*». That is the case with radio waves and quantum reality: They do not «appear» *at all*, not even partly. *That is the meaning of their being «Nichterscheinungen».*

Eventually, the meaning of «not-appearing» has been gained. That means the study will now be able to utilise this novel understanding for thinking through the obscurity of death, taking the cue from Bloch and Unseld's conversation. Before that, however, let me address an objection. Against what was said, one could in fact object that after questioning the Heideggerian interpretation of Kant's «Erscheinung» as exclusively referred to things, I have taken advantage of *examples concerning things* in order to prove that «erscheinen» does not mean, in the context of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, «being directly perceived». After all, are tables, mountains and stars not *things*? And is it not *because of their being things* that they cannot be directly perceived? What if, instead of mountains, I had used *the human mind* as an example? Is the mind not an «appearance» *in the sense that it can be directly perceived*? And does not that prove that there exists an *internal difference* in Kant's understanding of the «Erscheinung», such that one is not entitled to argue that the *opposite* of an «Erscheinung» is what is not directly perceived *at all*?

Before answering, let me provide a clarification. I am not claiming that in the *Critique of Pure Reason* there exists one single meaning of «erscheinen», nor am I claiming the opposite. Rather, all my observations should be referred to *that* meaning of «erscheinen», which is the one that Unseld and Bloch indirectly refer to speaking of «Nichterscheinungen».

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<sup>66</sup> Cf. the *Fünfte logische Untersuchung* (Fifth Logical Investigation), particularly §17. *Der intentionale Inhalt im Sinn des intentionalen Gegenstandes* (The intentional content in the sense of the intentional object), in Edmund Husserl. *Husserliana: Gesammelte Werke*, ed. by H.L. Van Breda (founder), R. Bernet and U. Melle (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1950-1970; Amsterdam: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1970-2015; Dordrecht: Springer, 2015- ), *Band XIX/1: Logische Untersuchungen: Zweiter Band, Erster Teil: Untersuchungen Zur Phänomenologie Und Theorie Der Erkenntnis: Text der 1. und der 2. Auflage ergänzt durch Annotationen und Beiblätter aus dem Handexemplar*, ed. by U. Panzer (1984), pp. 414-416). For the English translation, cf. Edmund Husserl. *Logical Investigations*, 2 vols., trans. by J. N. Findlay, intro. by D. Moran, pref. by M. Dummett (New York City: Routledge, 2001), *Volume II*, pp. 113-115.

Now, the account that the objection gives of what has been done in this section is beyond criticism: I have used *thingly* «Nichterscheinungen» as examples. Nevertheless, using *thingly* examples to argue that Kant's «erscheinen» does not mean «being directly perceived» *does not in any way involve* limiting one's discourse to *thingly* «Nichterscheinungen». On the contrary, I believe the human mind is itself an «Erscheinung», that is, not even the human mind can be said to be «directly perceived» for Kant. In contending that, I do not mean to state the gnoseological fact that the human mind, *understood as a mind «in itself»*, is not an «Erscheinung». The fact that for Kant «things in themselves» are not «Erscheinungen», but rather their opposite, has already been pointed out. I do not even mean to advance the claim that *even in its being a semblance*, the human mind does not «appear»: That seems indeed to be implied by the fact that the «mind in itself», *of which the mind experienced is a semblance*, does not «appear» *by definition*, such that its semblance cannot «appear» *qua* semblance.

Rather, when stating that, for Kant, even the human mind is not directly perceived (and is therefore an «Erscheinung»), I mean that *there are «sides» of the human mind which are not experienced*, just as the hidden side of a mountain. After all, upon the *ineliminable opacity* of humans to humans themselves many 20<sup>th</sup>-century thinkers have reflected, and Kant anticipated them. Those thinkers have often taken their cue from Heidegger, against Husserl (or perhaps complementing him). Two examples are Emmanuel Lévinas and Jacques Derrida.<sup>67</sup> The fact that Kant has anticipated these thinkers can be seen from his understanding of «time» («Zeit») as the «form» («Form») of the «inner sense» («innerer Sinn»). The «inner sense» is the «sense» through which the human subject perceives itself. For Kant, this perceiving happens *in time*, that is in a temporal succession. Now, does not that entail that the subject is never able to perceive itself directly, given that its mental states are never *compresent*? And are these states, successive to one another, not the *temporal «sides»* of the subject, of which only *one at a time* can be perceived? These questions show that just as external things, *the human subject itself is an «Erscheinung»*. Indeed, since there is always a «side» of the subject which is not directly perceived, *the subject as such* cannot be directly perceived: Just as the hidden side of the mountain makes the mountain, as such, not directly perceivable.

In this section, I have interpreted the Kantian notions of «appearance» and «non-appearance» and compared them to the Husserlian notion of «direct perception». In doing so, I have showed that the term «appearing» can both be grasped in the Kantian sense and in the non-Kantian one. Yet within that frame, how should the obscurity of death be grasped?

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. Jacques Derrida. *La Voix et le phénomène* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967) and Emmanuel Lévinas. *Théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique Vrin, 2000). For an English translation, cf. Jacques Derrida. *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. by D. B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973) and Emmanuel Lévinas. *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, trans. by A. Orianne, fwd. by R. A. Cohen (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995). Let me note that I owe these references to Richard A. Cohen (cf. his *Foreword to the Second Edition* in Lévinas 1995, pp. XXXIII-L).

### 5.3 Death as a «Nichterscheinung»

At this stage, my discourse on «Nichterscheinungen» enables me to state, with Bloch and Unseld, that *just as quantum reality does not «appear», so human death does not «appear»*: It is a «Nichterscheinung». In Husserlian terms, that is to say that death is not directly perceived *at all*: Not even partly. As Bloch would argue, «was noch nicht ist, lässt sich überhaupt noch gar nicht beweisen und vor Augen bringen» («what is not yet, cannot in principle be proved nor brought before eyes»).<sup>68</sup> This claim – the Blochian-Unseldian claim that death is a «Nichterscheinung» – should be understood as limited to *one's own* death: *Death is obscure to the one who has to die*. In that respect, the claim that death is a «Nichterscheinung» can be considered a development of Martin Heidegger's embryonic reference, in *Being and Time*, to the «Dunkelheit» of one's «Wohin» («darkness of the whither»).<sup>69</sup> Here, let me note that Heidegger's considerations on the human relationship with death, by him called «Sein zum Tode» («being-towards-death»), will be taken into consideration by this study at a later stage. In fact, they have proved to be the most renowned philosophical considerations on death of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and could hardly be ignored. I will now move on to a deeper analysis of the obscurity of death. But first, let me provide a clarification.

As Socrates' embryonic understanding has confirmed, death's obscurity should not be looked at as a conquest that only a «philosophical technician» may accomplish. Some of the most valuable philosophical insights may already be found in pre-philosophical consciousness. By «pre-philosophical», I do not mean «non-philosophical», but rather «proto-philosophical»: Proto-philosophy is the philosophy *all people do* without necessarily being philosophers. Indeed, Socrates himself, far away from pausing and conducting *an analysis* of death's obscurity (given the obviously impeding circumstance of his death sentence), simply *indicated* the obscurity of death.

Let me note that this distinction between a *pre-technical* philosophy and a *technical* one should not be conflated with the Husserlian distinction, sharply criticised by Heidegger, between ordinary people and philosophers as «Funktionäre» («functionaries»).<sup>70</sup> After all, it must be conceded to Heidegger that Husserl reduced philosophy to a *profession*. For him, philosophy was not a fundamental human activity, unconsciously performed even by non-philosophers. It was just a «profession» among others. An example of this devaluing understanding is given by Husserl's method of the «eidetic variation» («eidetische Variation»), especially when performed through imagination. In Husserl's view, the «eidetic variation» may consist in the fiction performed by the imagination of any conscious being to detect the essential (that is, «eidetic») aspects of a given entity. For instance, when thinking of a cube, I might ask myself whether it would still be a cube if it did not have six

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<sup>68</sup> Bloch 1985c, p. 319.

<sup>69</sup> Heidegger 1985, p. 173. (German: Heidegger 1977, pp. 179). As to Heidegger's conception of «being-towards-death», cf. Heidegger 1985, sections 45-53 (pp. 231-311).

<sup>70</sup> The renowned expression «Funktionäre der Menschheit» («functionaries of humanity») occurs in Husserl's *Crisis* (Husserl 1950-, *Band VI: Die Krisis der Europäischen Wissenschaften und die Transzendente Phänomenologie: Eine Einleitung in die Phänomenologische Philosophie*, ed. by W. Biemel, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (1976)). For an English translation, cf. Edmund Husserl. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. by D. Carr, bilingual edition (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

faces. Depending on the answer, I can then determine whether having six faces is an essential property of a cube or not.<sup>71</sup>

Now, it is clear that this «eidetic variation» is an *utterly contingent human operation*. It should let the «essences» of things appear, but these «essences» are just the products of the imaginative philosophical activity. That is to say that one might also *not* perform this activity, as is the case with non-philosophers, and find oneself in a world without «essences». On the contrary, for Heidegger, philosophy is an «operation» which is *always ongoing* in the human being (and not in the deflationary sense that one has the *constant possibility* to become a philosopher). That differentiates Husserl's method of the «eidetische Variation» from Heidegger's «ontological» method. Indeed, «ontology» is just the *explicit philosophical instantiation* of an operation that humans are always performing (according to Heidegger, at least). First and foremost, this operation is given by *understanding «Being»*.<sup>72</sup> And in the case of the present study, the activity humans are always performing is *relating to their death in its obscurity*. Let me note that while agreeing with Heidegger's criticism of *this* Husserlian understanding of philosophy, I am in no way excluding that another, different understanding of philosophy is also present in Husserl's philosophical discourse.

Let me now go back to the obscurity of death as a «proto-philosophical» object. What I mean with that certainly presupposes a Heideggerian understanding of philosophy, as outlined hereabove. Nonetheless, when stating that death's obscurity is a «proto-philosophical» object, I mean to express something more than the fact that every human unconsciously «knows» that death is obscure. I mean to say that a first realisation of this fundamental fact can happen *outside philosophy*. That is to say that even those who do not cultivate philosophy have philosophical intuitions, even if they never develop them. That is precisely the case with Socrates. Not that he did not cultivate philosophy at all, of course. However, in the *Apology*, the claim that human death is obscure stays undeveloped. In other words, it is a «proto-philosophical» claim.

Let me address an objection that I have been postponing so far. This is an objection which a Heideggerian would perhaps raise. In effect, against the way in which Socrates' philosophy of death has been interpreted, one might object that it is far too hasty to consider the Kantian-Blochian notion of «Nichterscheinung» as a further stage of development of Socrates' proto-philosophical notion of death's obscurity. After all, the Kantian-Blochian notion is clearly a modern-philosophical notion. But how could Socrates, an Ancient Greek philosopher, have anticipated that notion? Have I not interpreted him with postiche categories?

In the first place, let me remind that considering something an incorrect interpretation (and that includes anachronistic interpretations, against which Heidegger has been particularly persistent) is *itself grounded* on interpretation. One can judge that an interpretation of Socrates is anachronistic because one *interprets* that

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<sup>71</sup> On Husserl's concept of «eidetische Variation», cf. for instance Edmund Husserl. *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. by D. Cairns (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), section 34, pp. 69-72.

<sup>72</sup> For Heidegger's concept – never truly abandoned – of a preliminary and constant «Seinsverständnis» («comprehension of Being») as core feature of the human being (*Dasein*), cf. Heidegger 1985, section 4, pp. 32-35.

Ancient Greek philosophers should not be interpreted as, say, modern philosophers are interpreted.<sup>73</sup> Now, much more than a «fair» interpretation of the history of philosophy, *this interpretive tendency is simply the sign of a determinate understanding of philosophy and its history*: The understanding according to which it is *the differences* between historical-philosophical epochs that need to be underscored, rather than the analogies. In other words, that simply tells about Heidegger's own conception of philosophy.

No matter how refreshing and convincing a timely interpretation may appear, *nobody knows what Socrates meant to say* with the discourse that Plato has reported in the *Apology*. Furthermore, even admitting (interpreting) that Socrates did not say what only a modern philosopher could, *he was nevertheless a human being*, that is, *someone whose death is obscure to themselves*. Therefore, rather than Socrates' modernity, Socrates' *humanity* might well ground my interpretation of him as initially indicating the obscurity of death.

Previously, the Kantian-Blochian notion of «Nichterscheinung» was interpreted as the very meaning of death's obscurity. This consists in an *utter* obscurity: The obscurity of what cannot be directly perceived, not even partly. Yet as can be seen from this definition, so far I have concentrated on death's obscurity *from a negative perspective*: Obscurity has been defined as the character of «*not* being directly perceived, *in any way*». In turn, the negativity of this definition was due to the fact that Bloch and Unseld themselves refer, in their conversation, to «*Nichterscheinungen*», «*non-appearances*». As quoted, Unseld defines them as «*Erscheinungen, die wir noch nicht erkennen können*» («appearances, which we cannot know yet»<sup>74</sup>).

Let me use this occasion to make some terminological considerations on the language used by Unseld and Bloch to speak of obscurity. The most significant word is of course «Nichterscheinung», which is a philosophical word not generally used in German. On the other hand, the verb «nichterscheinen» is not a technical verb only employed in philosophical German, but it is used in contemporary German and indicates «das Nicht-in-Erscheinung-Treten, das Fernbleiben». That is literally translatable as «the state of not-appearing, of staying away».<sup>75</sup> Other negative terms referring to obscurity, such as «das Ungekannte» («the unknown»), may also be found in Bloch's works.<sup>76</sup> One may even ask whether there is, in Bloch's language, a conscious usage of a negative terminology to allude more vaguely, but for this very reason more powerfully, to obscurity. Indeed, substantivisations such as «das Ungekannte» seem to enhance this effect, giving the notion to be expressed a determinate contour, but nevertheless leaving its concrete meaning unclear. However,

<sup>73</sup> Cf. as an example this Heideggerian passage from *On the Essence and Concept of Physis in Aristotle's Physics* B, I: «For all its erudition, this book has the single fault of thinking through Aristotle's philosophy in the modern Scholastic neo-Kantian manner that is entirely *foreign to Greek thought*» (Martin Heidegger. *Pathmarks*. trans. By W. McNeil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 186 (Heidegger's emphasis)). Slightly different from McNeil's translation, the German original reads: «Dieses Buch hat bei aller Gelehrsamkeit den einzigen Mangel, dass es die Philosophie des Aristoteles ganz *ungriechisch*, scholastisch neuzeitlich und neukantisch denkt» (Heidegger 1975- , I. *Abteilung: Veröffentlichte Schriften 1914-1970, Band 9: Wegmarken* (1976), p. 242 (Heidegger's emphasis)).

<sup>74</sup> Bloch 1985c, p. 334.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. «Nichterscheinen», in *Duden Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* [online], < <https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Nichterscheinen> > [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> March 2023]. Cf. also the *Collins Dictionary*, which defines «Nichterscheinen» as «non-appearance, failure to appear» (*Collins Unabridged German to English and English to German Dictionary* [online], < <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/german-english/nichterscheinen> > [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> March 2023]).

<sup>76</sup> Just as one possible reference, cf. Bloch 1996 (German: Bloch 1985a).

let me note that vagueness in expressing obscurity has nothing to do with the kind of «vagueness» in which obscurity itself consists. This kind of «vagueness» can, and will, be brought to «clarity» in this investigation.

Yet how could «obscurity» be thought *positively*, if all the words that have been used so far are negative? A first answer is that one is not *forced* to interpret negative expressions as carrying a negative meaning. For example, «Nichterscheinung» does not necessarily allude to the negative semantic element of «obscurity» as a *non-appearance*. After all, even the phrase «lack of daylight» may allude to the night *in its positive essence*, that is in its *darkness*. In other cases, «lack of daylight» might also express the *fuller, positive-negative essence* of the night, understood as what is, at once, darkness and lack of daylight.

*It is in this positive-negative sense that «obscurity» is understood in the present investigation.* To accomplish that more fully, I will now further my analysis of death's obscurity, continuing my interpretation of Unseld and Bloch. For that purpose, I will take advantage of positive phrases on obscurity utilised by Bloch and Unseld, although that is not the only path to get to the positivity of obscurity.

In his dialogue with Unseld, Bloch says that even though «what is not yet cannot in principle be proved nor brought before eyes» («was noch nicht ist, lässt sich überhaupt noch gar nicht beweisen und vor Augen bringen»), «this needs to be understood through the unique, fully scientific degree of reality of what is possible» («dies muss gefasst werden mit dem eigentümlichen, durchaus wissenschaftlichen Realitätsgrad des Möglichen»)<sup>77</sup> As I will show, Bloch is establishing *a link* between «what is not yet» (namely, «what is possible»), *and death*. What makes them analogous is obscurity itself. Let me quote the entire passage:

«Was noch nicht ist, lässt sich überhaupt noch gar nicht beweisen und vor Augen bringen. Doch die Richtung darauf bleibt immerhin – dies muss gefasst werden mit dem eigentümlichen, durchaus wissenschaftlichen Realitätsgrad des Möglichen, des “grand peut-être”, das du gestern zitiert hast».<sup>78</sup>

(«What is not yet cannot in principle be proved nor brought before eyes. Yet the direction toward it nonetheless remains – this needs to be understood through the unique, fully scientific degree of reality of what is possible, of the “grand peut-être” that you quoted yesterday»).

Led by Bloch's sentence construction, one may be tempted to link the neuter pronoun «dies» («this») to the «direction» («Richtung») that Bloch mentions just before: The «Richtung» towards what «lässt sich überhaupt noch gar nicht beweisen und vor Augen bringen» («cannot in principle be proved nor brought before eyes»). In that case, in this passage Bloch would be stating that the «Richtung auf das Mögliche», *that is the human consciousness of «what is not yet»*, has a peculiar, undoubted «Realitätsgrad»: The «Realitätsgrad des Möglichen», «the reality degree of what is possible». Let me note that in such a context, the phrases «what is not yet» and «what is possible» have the same meaning.

That cannot be the case, though. For I will demonstrate that Bloch, as all Descartes' followers (among whom are also Husserl, Heidegger and Severino), is convicted that *the human orientation* towards «what is possible»,

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<sup>77</sup> Bloch 1985c, p. 319.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibidem*.

unlike «what is possible» itself, is *actually* «vor Augen» («before eyes») and *can* therefore be «bewiesen» («proved»)<sup>79</sup>. In other words, such an orientation is deemed *immediately perceivable* by Bloch. On the other hand, according to him (as well as to all Descartes' followers), the same thing cannot be said with regards to *that, towards which* the human «direction» directs itself, i.e. «what is possible».

*Mutatis mutandis*, the Descartes of the first two meditations would have said the same thing: It is the existence of the thinking activity of the «ego cogito» («I think») which is «certissimam» («most certain», *Meditatio Secunda*), not the «cogitata» («objects of thought»). With regards to the Blochian passage, the «thinking activity» is represented by the «direction» («Richtung») of human consciousness towards «what is possible», and the «object of thought» («cogitatum») is «what is possible» itself. This is what I mean when establishing a comparison between Descartes and Bloch. Said otherwise, I mean to say that both philosophers *privilege* the thinking activity of consciousness at the expense of the object which is thought in it: They consider the *epistemological status* of the object as fundamentally different from the status of the activity.

Similarly, in another passages, for instance when referring to the utopian «intention» («Intention») as distinguished from utopia itself as the correlate of the «intention», Bloch states that the «intention» is «so empirically present as this pipe» («so empirisch da wie diese Pfeife»)<sup>80</sup>. So much so that he deems the intention «einwandfrei vorhanden» («incontrovertibly present»)<sup>81</sup>. And Unseld himself agrees: «also fest steht, es gibt die Intention» («so, what is certain is that there is the intention»)<sup>82</sup>. I should note that in these passages, Unseld and Bloch seem to cross the line into philosophy as «ἐπιστήμη» («science»), understood as the *philosophical knowledge* of incontrovertible truths.

My last considerations prove that the first interpretation of the Blochian passage quoted at the beginning of the present section is incorrect: Bloch cannot be saying that the «direction» towards «what is possible» has the *same* «reality degree» of «what is possible». If that were the case, he would not be privileging the epistemological status of the «direction» anymore. That is why in my opinion, the pronoun «dies» in Bloch's sentence should be regarded as referring to «what is possible», not to the «direction» towards it. Let me quote the passage again:

«Was noch nicht ist, lässt sich überhaupt noch gar nicht beweisen und vor Augen bringen. Doch die Richtung darauf bleibt immerhin – dies muss gefasst werden mit dem eigentümlichen, durchaus wissenschaftlichen Realitätsgrad des Möglichen, des “grand pout-être”, das du gestern zitiert hast».<sup>83</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Predictably, my main reference here are Descartes' *Meditationes de prima philosophia* (René Descartes. *Oeuvres Completes*, 12 vols., ed. by C. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris: Léopold Cerf, 1897-1913), *Tome VII: Meditationes de Prima Philosophia* (1904)). For an English translation, cf. René Descartes. *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Writings Of Descartes*, 3 vols., trans. by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985-1991), II (1984), pp. 1-62).

<sup>80</sup> Bloch 1985c, p. 335. Here, the strong coincidence between Kant's concept of «Erscheinung» (as referred to things) and Bloch's concept of the «empirical presence» of a pipe should be noticed.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibidem*.



(«What is not yet cannot in principle be proved nor brought before eyes. But the direction towards it remains anyway – this needs to be understood through the unique, fully scientific degree of reality of what is possible, of the “grand peut-être” that you quoted yesterday»).

Let me now address an objection against my interpretation. One might indeed observe that in his conversation, Bloch *also* states that the «contents» («Inhalte») of the utopian «intention», that is *utopias*, are «present as well» («derart auch da»), just as the «intention».<sup>84</sup> Does this not show that Bloch does not privilege the «intention» at the expense of its «contents»? After all, he states they are *both* «present» («da»). My answer to the objection is that in saying this, Bloch *seems to be shifting* from his *narrow* understanding of «presence» («da sein», «being-there») as «*empirical presence*» («empirische Vorhandenheit») to the *general* understanding of «presence». But the general «presence» of something to human consciousness is other and broader than its «empirical presence».

As a matter of fact, according to the general meaning of «presence», both what is «before eyes» and «the possible» are «*present*». For example, both one's hope for a survival after death and the survival itself are «present». Indeed, they are both «contents» of human consciousness, even though they are very different from each other. That is why I believe that the meaning of «presence», in Bloch's statement that both the utopian «intention» and its «contents» are «present», is *general*: I believe Bloch alludes here to something analogous to Heidegger's conception of «Gelichtetheit» («clearedness»), which indicates the sphere of what is «gelichtet» («cleared») by *Dasein*, which in itself is for Heidegger a «Lichtung» («clearing»)<sup>85</sup>. After all, Bloch *must* be switching to another sense of «presence». Otherwise, he would be contradicting himself by stating that both the utopian «intention» and its «contents» are «empirically present», which is something he has excluded just before in the conversation.

Now, if my interpretation of Bloch's stance in the conversation is right, the next question to be asked is: What does the «reality degree of what is possible» *consist in*? How is a «possible» *real*? Given that human death is for Bloch just one of the «possibles» which are «not yet», answering that question will enable the study to grasp the positive meaning of death's obscurity.

I believe the response to how a «possible» can be real is contained in Bloch and Unseld's conversation: The «degree of reality» of «what is possible» lies indeed in its «*presence*», no matter whether *the thing* which is «present» is a «possible» or Bloch's pipe. In other words, the «degree of reality» has not to do with *what* is «present»: It rather has to do with *the fact itself* that this is «present». That is confirmed by the fact that Bloch never offers in his conversation any clarification of the notion of «reality degree» *with regards to the content*. He rather gives a formal clarification, by referring to the *mode of «presence»* of what is «real». Let me further explain.

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>85</sup> For an occurrence of this term, cf. Heidegger 1985, p. 401. Stambaugh (Heidegger 1996) chooses the same word for his translation (cf. Heidegger 1996, p. 321).

At first glance, Bloch's choice of the word «Grad» («degree») may lead to confusions. In fact, the term «degree of reality» («Realitätsgrad») might suggest that Bloch is here alluding to his theory of the «degrees of being» («Grade des Seins»)<sup>86</sup>. In that case, Bloch would be referring to the fact that the «possible» and what is «empirically present» differentiate from each other *by a major or minor degree of reality*. Yet I believe that the term «degree of reality» is here used *polemically* by Bloch. He is using it against an understanding, *in terms of degrees of being*, of what are rather «degrees of presence». That does not involve denying Bloch's theory of the «degrees of being», but only that he is employing it here. Let me give an example.

During the conversation, Bloch claims that «Utopisches ist nicht nichts» («the utopian is not nothing»)<sup>87</sup>. By «utopian», Bloch refers to utopias themselves: They are indeed the utopian content of the utopian «intention». What Bloch means with that sentence, in my opinion, is that the «utopian» is «real» *in that* one relates to it, by *hoping* for its realisation. (Let me note that «utopian» does not mean «unrealisable» for Bloch). This is to say that, in this conversation, «to be real» means «to be a content of human consciousness», that is «*to be present*». Given this reference to consciousness, I can call this a «phenomenological» interpretation of Bloch's conversation.

Let me now draw the consequence which is relevant for my purposes. If it is true that the «reality degree» of something is its degree of «presence», and if it is in different ways that the human awareness of things and things themselves are «present», that means that the «possible» is real *due to its own modality of «presence»*. That is, due to the peculiar way in which one relates to it, such as by *hoping* for it. Now, *I contend that the modality of «presence» of the «possible» is obscurity itself*. And that therefore, it is here that the *positive essence* of death's obscurity lies: In the peculiar «presence» of the «possible» to human consciousness. After all, as per Bloch's understanding, *human death is just one of the «possibles» to which human beings essentially relate over their lives*.

Before concluding, let me say that differently from Bloch's take on death in his conversation, I will not link death to «possibility». Death may well be understood as a «*certainty*», not simply in the sense that it is certain that every human will die, but in the sense that what death is may well be certain, if it is *taken* for certain, as happens with existential nihilism, whose belief is that death is an annihilation of life. That is substantially different from thinking, as Bloch does, that death is a «*possible*», whose determinate nature is not clear yet. Nonetheless, it is Bloch's merit to have acknowledged *the essential obscurity of the «possible»*. Yet this is a more general theme than the one investigated by this study, and will be therefore left aside. In conclusion, let me ask the following question: How far does Bloch go in analysing death's obscurity – understood in its full, positive-negative essence?

Let me briefly summarise what has been said so far. To positively determine the peculiar mode of «presence» of obscure contents of consciousness, Bloch uses the word «Richtung». I do not believe that this word is used

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Ernst Bloch. «Grade des Seins, materielle Realitätsverteilung», in Bloch 1985b, *Band 13: Tübinger Einleitung in die Philosophie*, ed. by B. Schmidt, pp. 285-296.

<sup>87</sup> Bloch 1985c, p. 335.

by chance. For Bloch, human beings «orient» («richten») themselves «towards» («auf») «the possible» («das Mögliche»), instead of having it «before eyes» («vor Augen»). The way in which humans relate to obscurity has not to do with «Augen», but with «Richtungen».

On the other hand, Bloch's approach to obscurity in his conversation with Unseld seems to be comparable to Socrates'. Indeed, even being crucially explicit on the discrepancy between the «empirical presence» and the «reality degree of what is possible», as well as on the analogy between «Nichterscheinungen» and death, the Blochian analysis does not go as deeply as it could into obscurity. Therefore, multiple elements of death's obscurity remain *themselves obscure*, although in a different sense. I will now briefly remind what these elements are.

A first forgotten aspect is the character itself of «*not being directly perceivable*», which is a fundamental negative element of obscurity. I am not alluding to the character, typical of «Nichterscheinungen», of «*being not even partly perceived*», which I positively expressed as «*being fully obscure*». Indeed, this aspect has been highlighted by Unseld and Bloch themselves. Rather, I am alluding to «*not being directly perceivable*» *as such*: Positively said, obscurity *as such*. Let me explain.

Speaking of «Nichterscheinungen», such as quantum reality, radio waves and human death, the modality of phenomenological obscurity that has been mainly referred to is *utter* obscurity: That kind of obscurity is the opposite of the partial obscurity which is typical of «Erscheinungen». Here, it might be interesting to note that even though the notion of «Erscheinung» has been de-Kantianised in this chapter, what I stated about the fact that «Erscheinungen» are defined by their partial direct perceivability could be repeated, *mutatis mutandis*, even with respect to the full-fledged Kantian «Erscheinungen». Only, these would need to be deemed obscure *in one more way* than de-Kantianised «Erscheinungen», which is given by the fact that they are *semblances* of «things in themselves».

Therefore, what I mean by saying that the character itself of «*not being directly perceivable*» has been forgotten by Bloch and Unseld is that obscurity, *in its fundamental dimension*, has been forgotten. The fundamental, that is «ontological» dimension of obscurity is shared by utter and partial obscurity. Indeed, *both* «Nichterscheinungen» and «Erscheinungen» are obscure. Certainly, that can more easily be seen with regards to «Nichterscheinungen», but as I argued, even what is partly directly perceivable, such as the human subject, should be considered as *not* directly perceivable, for partial perceivability is but a form of imperceptibility. That means that according to this study, *death and all* «Nichterscheinungen» *should be considered* «obscure» *in two senses*: They are *peculiarly* obscure as they are fully obscure (differently from «Erscheinungen»), and they are *generally* obscure because *every* obscure phenomenon, no matter whether partly or fully obscure, is in fact obscure. Obscurity *as such* is the core of all obscurities.

Though being explicit about the utter obscurity of «Nichterscheinungen», Unseld and Bloch *distinguish* them from «Erscheinungen» *in a Kantian way*: They would never agree that even «appearances» do not «appear», for the definition of «appearances», for them and for Kant, is of course *to appear*. That is why even their

understanding of «Nichterscheinungen» as utterly obscure should be considered different from my understanding of utter obscurity in this study. For them, «being utterly obscure» means the opposite of «being an appearance», *but this «appearance» is understood in a Kantian way*, that is as what «appears». On the contrary, taking advantage of Husserl's doctrine, I have claimed that even Kantian «appearances» do not «appear». Therefore, it is the «not appearing» of «appearances» which I have distinguished from the «not appearing» of «non-appearances». But that is perfectly unacceptable, from a Kantian perspective. Not that Kant would have denied that, but he simply did not think «appearing» and «not appearing» in this way. That has also a second consequence on Bloch and Unseld. Indeed, not grasping the difference between «appearances» and «non-appearances» in a non-Kantian way, even ontological obscurity as such had to stay concealed in the unspoken of their conversation.

This puts me in a position to argue that this study's overall distinction between «utter obscurity», «partial obscurity» and «ontological obscurity» is *absent* from Unseld and Bloch's conversation. That is to say that this distinction is an original thanatological contribution of the present study. However, that appears less surprising than it could. As a matter of fact, even Heidegger is content to note, in *Being and Time*, that death is obscure, and he says nothing more. Indeed, it is certainly not because of his considerations on obscurity that Heidegger's meditation on death is perhaps the most renowned of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet following Bloch and Unseld *focussed* approach on obscurity, this chapter has had an analytical approach to its theme.

As further evidence of this, let me recall some other results of this chapter's investigation. Over the course of the investigation, I have drawn the distinction between the positive and the negative essence of death's obscurity, and I have drawn the distinction between this distinction and the distinction between utter and partial obscurity. In fact, these two obscurities have their own peculiar positive-negative essence. That is a clear example of the *in-depth* analysis that has been conducted in this chapter. This analysis could even be further developed, but I deem it sufficient, in this context, to answer the question of the meaning of the obscurity of death.

## **6. On the Human Awareness of Death's Obscurity: Ignorance Cannot Be Known (or Socratism Is Yet To Be Achieved)**

The task of the chapter so far was to indicate and analyse, as deeply as possible here, the obscurity of death. Nonetheless, once that task has been completed, a question remains on how the obscurity of death has been grasped, *with regards to its being a «content» of human consciousness*. In fact, what does «content» mean in that case? Leaving the question unanswered would make this study's understanding of death's obscurity ambiguous. Yet answering that question requires a broader phenomenological meditation on *the human awareness* of death and its obscurity. After all, it is always *within such an awareness* that death's obscurity «manifests» itself. Said otherwise, it is the obscuring power of human consciousness that *makes* death obscure.

Moreover, a second question results from the first one. In fact, can a philosophical investigation skip over the issue of the ground of its statements? I have claimed that death is obscure, and I have done so on the ground –

phenomenological in kind – of death's obscurity itself. In other words, it is *as an obscure content of assertion* that death's obscurity has been affirmed. But on what grounds can the existence of *an awareness and an assertion* of obscurity be claimed? I have already touched on that issue when examining Bloch's idea that while «non-appearances» *do not* «appear», the human awareness of them «appears». Yet what is the connection, which I seem to be making here, between the validity of a philosophical analysis and the phenomenological mode of presence of what is analysed?

That provides this chapter with its last task. Let me start. Although this issue will be thoroughly discussed later on in the study, one preliminary thing to be noticed is that my considerations here assume *that humans are always aware of their death, in each moment of their lives*. Other than puzzling exceptions, such as newborns, who are presumably not yet aware of their death (and, *a fortiori ratione*, of its obscurity), every human being seems to «belong» to their death for the whole duration of their life. That is a central claim of *Being and Time* and I am inheriting it in the present study. Nonetheless, let me note that it is not because of its Heideggerian origin that I am myself advancing this claim. Heidegger is not an argument.

An argument is, I believe, the following consideration. As a human, nobody would ever be surprised to hear from another person that one day they are going to die. That happens because, *consciously or not*, everybody knows they will die. Even when they deny it. In this context, one can notice why philosophical truths, as is the truth of death, cannot in principle «make news». In fact, it is not relevant whether one writes a doctoral dissertation on death or never speaks of it (assuming that this is truly possible): One simply knows, *obscurely* knows that one is going to die.

As mentioned, there may well be a moment of the early stage of one's life when the news that people die, and that *one* will die as well, reaches one. That is indeed the first and last news which one will ever receive on death. And it is because of that *definitive knowledge* that all «*memento mori*» can *remind* people, over the course of their lives, that they are going to die. The *ontological «memory»* of death is the condition for the *ontic reminders* about it.

A second preliminary thing to be noticed is that the human awareness of death is *aware of itself*. That is, it is self-awareness. Not in the sense that one's death has *its own awareness*, but in the sense that *one's* awareness is the awareness *of one's* death. If that were not the case, not only would all the analyses so far conducted in this study become impossible, but it would become impossible for a human to talk about death *as something that humans can talk about*. In fact, talking requires the talked-upon to be an object of consciousness. *A fortiori ratione*, if the awareness of death were not self-aware, death could not be obscure to anybody, for obscurity is the way in which death is «known» by consciousness: It is a consensual fact about death.

On a more essential level, such a principle that human consciousness is self-consciousness is asserted by Heidegger in *Being and Time*. What he claims is that «Dasein's fleeing» («die Flucht des Daseins») *from*

*Dasein* «is a fleeing in the face of itself» («Flucht vor ihm selbst ist»)<sup>88</sup> By «fleeing» («die Flucht»), Heidegger means «Verfallen» («falling» or «falling prey»)<sup>89</sup>.

It is not just a matter of *conscious* self-awareness. Humans are self-aware of their death (and of themselves, in general) *constantly*. If that were not the case, not even different ways of perceiving would be possible. For example, nobody could perceive the difference between the «presence» *hic et nunc* of the sun in the sky and the «presence» *illic et tunc* of a content of their memory. Yet one lives with similar perceptions and could not live without them, not even for a second. Mostly, the perception of these differences is unconscious, but that is no argument against the claim that they constantly take place. Therefore, with Heidegger, I contend that humans are aware of themselves *through* their death, consciously or not. Yet death is obscure, as has been argued. *Thence, in being aware of one's death and of its obscurity, one is aware of oneself as aware of this obscurity.*

The self-aware nature of the awareness of one's death makes it legitimate to ask: *How* is the awareness of oneself «present» *to itself*? Death has turned out to be an obscure «presence» in one's life. Yet how is *one's awareness* of this obscure «presence» *present*? Answering that question will not only help clarify on what grounds *the existence of the awareness of one's death* is affirmed by this study, but it will also give the study a clue on how to answer the other question posited above, which concerns what it means for death's obscurity to be a «content» of consciousness. Indeed, it will be shown that it is upon this latter question that the answer to the former depends.

Now, what is the modality of «presence» *of the awareness* of one's death? What is the way in which one's own relationship with death is *experienced* by one? Let me note that whichever the answer, this modality is going to be another ineliminable element of one's life, constantly there.

As argued, the way in which one's death «manifests» itself to oneself is a fully obscure way: One has no direct perception of death, not even of one of its elements. Nonetheless, it may well be the case, as it is for Bloch and Unseld, that one can *directly perceive* that one *cannot directly perceive* death. If that were the case, death's obscurity would be captured in clarity: It would be the prisoner of a clarity jail.

In order to answer the question, it is useful to provide a further clarification of its terms. I will do that by taking advantage of the many senses of phenomenological «obscurity» identified and distinguished over the chapter. In the first place, let me clarify that what I am asking is *not* whether the awareness of death's obscurity is *an «Erscheinung» or a «Nichterscheinung»* (grasping these terms in their de-Kantianised version). In effect, this question is posited *in Kantian terms* (even though de-Kantianised). That makes it a rhetorical question, for the answer is already contained in the question. Indeed, given that both the «Erscheinung» and the «Nichterscheinung» are *not* directly perceivable *as such*, that is they are *obscure*, the answer would be that the awareness of one's death is obscure. Yet this happens simply because it has already been presupposed, *in the*

<sup>88</sup> Heidegger 1985, pp. 229 (Heidegger's emphasis). (German: Heidegger 1977, p. 245).

<sup>89</sup> For a general reference to Heidegger's notion of «Verfallen», cf. the second section of this chapter.

*terms of the question*, that the awareness is either partly or fully obscure. But that is precisely what I am *asking*: Is the awareness clear or obscure?

Let me start answering by stating that something, *within the awareness of death's obscurity*, seems to be directly perceived. I am thinking of one's «ego», understood as the one *who* is aware of their death. That is what Descartes would have said. Yet unlike Descartes, in this context, I am not grasping the «ego» in its performative nature. I am not stating that it is only when one explicitly thinks of oneself that one is directly perceived by oneself. On the contrary, auto-perception (that is, «apperception») is itself a constant element of one's life.

Nonetheless, the awareness one has of one's death is not simply «made up» of oneself. Therefore, the question has not been answered yet. Indeed, one's awareness of death is given by the *overall fact* of one's awareness of death. One is not simply aware of oneself, but of their death as well. Yet death is obscure: It is not directly perceived by one. Therefore, there seem to be *two elements* forming the human self-awareness of death: One of these elements is directly perceived (namely, oneself), whereas the other is not (namely, death).

Contrary to the opinion of great philosophers in the Western tradition, such as Descartes, Husserl, Heidegger, Bloch, Severino, my claim in this study is that one *does not know* that one *does not know* death. It is *not* a direct content of perception that death is not a direct content of perception. In other words, *ignorance cannot be known*. Let me explain.<sup>90</sup>

As reconstructed, there is two elements forming one's self-awareness of one's death. That is, oneself *and* death. This means that the question of whether one's self-awareness of death is obscure concerns the *unity* of the two elements: It concerns their relationship. Now, *provided that one of the elements of this relationship is obscure*, how could the *overall self-awareness* of death not be obscure? After all, if this overall fact were directly perceived by one, one should be able to directly perceive *both* oneself and death. Let me give an example.

Let one think of Mars. For those who are currently not on Mars, that is all human beings, this planet is *not* directly perceivable. That is to say that the existence of Mars, with all its giant volcanoes and enormous canyons, is *obscure*. That does not mean that Mars does not exist. Rather, it means that it obscurely does. On the other hand, other objects are directly perceived by one. For example, I can see the white of the screen on which I am writing these remarks (what would be called a «visual sense data»). Insofar as the screen is currently seen, the screen is *not* obscure but directly perceived. Now, let me ask: Do I directly perceive *the unity* formed by this screen and Mars, both belonging to the field of my experience? Said otherwise, do I directly perceive Mars as coexisting with this screen? The answer to that question is negative.

Let me now address an objection. Certainly, it may seem odd to speak about the «relationship» between Mars and the white of the screen of my laptop. After all, does that «relationship» really exist? How could its terms

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<sup>90</sup> In a different theoretical context, I have more fully developed this principle and its consequences. Cf. Lucarelli 2021, especially pp. 138-143.

ever relate to each other? Let me answer that albeit in *different ways*, and most importantly in an unconscious fashion, *both Mars and the white of the screen of my laptop are «experienced» by me in this moment*. In fact, I would not be surprised by receiving the «news» that Mars exists, and that means this «knowledge» belongs to me, even if merely unconsciously. Therefore, speaking of a «relationship» or «coexistence» between Mars and the white of this screen is no illegitimate move. After all, this experienced «coexistence» appears to be complex enough for me to know that there is even a spatial relationship between Mars and the white of my screen. For example, I would say that they are «quite far» from each other. In this context, the adverb «quite» does not indicate that my experience is not capable of *determining* the coexistence between Mars and the screen in a concrete way. Rather, it means that the way in which my experience *determines* the relationship is a *vague* way. And that concretely shows that I do perceive *a determinate relationship* between my screen and Mars.

Let me now draw my conclusion from this example, going back to death and to the obscurity of one's self-awareness of it. In effect, if one replaces Mars *with death*, and the white of the screen of my laptop *with oneself as consciousness*, the conclusion to be drawn is that *the self-awareness of death is not directly perceivable by humans*. That is to say that the so-called «knowledge» of one's death is no «knowledge» at all: It is an obscure understanding. *Ignorance cannot be known*. This is, after all, Socrates' deep and yet mostly unheard teaching.

Before moving on, let me provide some further clarifications on the example used. In fact, one might object that Mars and death are *absolutely incomparable* and that my example was far too hasty. To a certain extent, that is indisputable. Indeed, Mars is an entity *existing in the present*, whereas one's death is a future event (as long as one is not dying). Moreover, Mars is a physical entity, a planet, whereas death is a human event: It is the death of a human. In this context, let me say that even though these remarks are correct, they in no way rule out the validity of my example and comparison. In fact, death and Mars *stay comparable in that they are obscure contents of experience*. Let me move on to the next consideration.

In the previous considerations, I explicitly alluded to a connection between the validity of my analysis of the human self-awareness of death and the modality of «presence» of such self-awareness. That is to say that I have alluded to a connection between philosophy and phenomenology, understood as the ground of philosophy. However, in the present study, this issue cannot be systematically addressed as was done elsewhere.<sup>91</sup> What I am going to say, though, to avoid seeming arbitrary, is that one of the ways in which the «ground» of philosophical stances has been historically understood is the *phenomenological* way. That is to say that a certain philosophical idea is «grounded» in its way of being «present» to human consciousness (as long as philosophy is performed by human beings). In this context, I cannot argue what was argued in *Per un Nuovo Concetto di Fenomeno*, that is that the only true «ground» of philosophical stances is the phenomenological ground, understood in a quite specific fashion.

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<sup>91</sup> Cf. Lucarelli 2021.



Yet what I can do is recall what is at stake here. Backed up by one strand of the Western philosophical tradition, I maintain that a philosophical investigation should not take its objects for granted. Their «existence» should rather be called into question to see whether they are legitimate objects of investigation or not. Doing that implies asking the question of whether a stable «ground» of philosophy exists. It is only after answering that question that the validity of a philosophical analysis can be judged, including the validity of my analyses of death's obscurity.

Now, I contend that the only ground of philosophy lies in the way in which philosophy can «show» what it argues. That is, I contend that the ground in philosophy is phenomenological. From this perspective, the *different modalities* in which something can be a content of human experience are crucial *in an epistemological sense*. In fact, it is not that any content of experience can be considered trustworthy. For example, most people would never consider a «hallucination» true. Yet what *guarantees* that death is really obscure and that one is really self-aware of this obscurity? Can the *obscurity* of death, as a peculiar phenomenological mode of «presence», vouch for itself?

I will leave those questions open. I simply aimed at highlighting that something relevant is at stake in the investigation of death, and that this fact cannot simply be ignored. Here, I can say that for Unseld and Bloch, the answer to the question is positive. For them, the utopian «intention» (an analogous of one's awareness of death's obscurity) is «einwandfrei vorhanden» («incontrovertibly present»). Interestingly, that seems to depend for them on the fact that they believe the utopian «intention» to be «so empirisch da wie diese Pfeife» («so empirically present as this pipe»). That means that even for them, a certain relationship exists between how something is «present» to consciousness and whether this can be trusted or not.

Previously, I have argued that Unseld and Bloch are wrong in thinking that the utopian «intention» is «empirically present». Yet due to methodological reasons, what I cannot say is whether that has an impact on the epistemological status of the «intention», just as I cannot exhibit the possibility to ground my criticism of Unseld and Bloch in an irrefutable manner. I will leave that question open. Let me now move on to the conclusion of the chapter.

The chapter is close to its end. After answering the question on how the human «knowledge» of death is «known» by humans, let me come to the question of how death's obscurity, as a «content» of consciousness, is being grasped in this study. That will prevent the notion of death's obscurity from being ambiguous.

The question of where the threshold is that separates one's awareness *from the object of the awareness* is of utter importance not only for understanding what has been claimed on death so far in this study. In fact, this question is relevant *in general*, that is whenever one's investigation deals with the concept of «consciousness» and that of «object».<sup>92</sup> In the case of the present investigation, this general relevance can be seen in the fact that even the meaning of self-consciousness *depends* on how *the terms* of this are grasped: Who one is depends on

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<sup>92</sup> Cf. Lucarelli 2021, pp. 143-146.

how one is grasped with respect to the consciousness one has of oneself. Is one simply oneself or is one the consciousness of oneself? And what must one be for oneself to be, at once, the subject and the object of oneself?

In addressing the question of the obscurity of one's self-awareness of death, I referred to death and to one's awareness as two different «*elements*» of the «overall fact» of one's self-awareness. Here, let me note that such a way of understanding one's self-awareness of death entails that death is not a *part*, but a *correlate* of one's awareness. Another thing to be noticed is that *in other contexts*, the term «self-awareness» (or, more elliptically, «awareness») is understood as referring to *the whole of one's consciousness and what this consciousness is consciousness of*. In those cases, the so-called «object» is in fact an «*element*» of human consciousness. For example, assuming that the scenario to be analysed is one's experience of a landscape, one's «awareness» of the landscape would accordingly be conceived as the *unity* of the awareness and the landscape. Let me offer a historical-philosophical reference.

One renowned example of the understanding of the «object» of consciousness as an element of it is given by Edmund Husserl's concept of «intentional quality» («*intentionale Qualität*») in the *Logische Untersuchungen*.<sup>93</sup> Just as many other Husserlian notions, this notion has been extremely influential. Part of the reason why it has been so influential is that it has touched on an almost un-renounceable object of philosophical investigation: *Consciousness* (with all due respect to metaphysics, epistemology, aesthetics, ethics, and the other philosophical subjects).

The Husserlian notion has been influential to the point that even Husserl's disciple Martin Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, seems to understand *Dasein* in such a way that the «objects» of its consciousness are in fact «*elements*» of it, though he actually *oscillates* between at least two acceptations of «*Dasein*». In one sense, the term refers to the human awareness *as distinguished* from its objects. That is the case whenever Heidegger speaks of what regards humans *as such*: For instance, when he states that humans are defined by their «*Befindlichkeit*» («*state-of-mind*»).<sup>94</sup> In a second sense, the term *Dasein* indicates human awareness *as including* its objects (that is, as including its objects as elements). That is the case of Heidegger's famous concept of «*being-in-the-world*» («*In-der-Welt-sein*»). Indeed, *within* that «structure» (as Heidegger calls it), *the «world» itself is contained*, and that is to say that it is not an *exclusively human* «structure».<sup>95</sup> Heidegger himself expresses this by referring to *Dasein* as a «*Between*»: «*Dasein is the Being of this 'between'*» («*Zwischen*»).<sup>96</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Cf. the 5<sup>th</sup> *Logical Investigation*, particularly the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter, *The matter of the act and its underlying presentation* (Husserl 2001, pp. 128-145). The German reads: *Die Materie des Aktes und die zugrunde liegende Vorstellung* (Husserl 1984, pp. 441-473).

<sup>94</sup> Cf. Heidegger 1985, pp. 172-179.

<sup>95</sup> For a first elucidation of «*being-in-the-world*», which is for Heidegger the very essence of the human being, cf. the second chapter of Part I of *Being and Time: Being-in-the-world in general as the basic state of Dasein* (Heidegger 1985, pp. 78-90). The German reads: *Das In-der-Welt-sein überhaupt als Grundverfassung des Daseins* (Heidegger 1977, pp. 71-84).

<sup>96</sup> Heidegger 1985, p. 170 (Heidegger's emphasis). The German reads: «*das Dasein ist das Sein dieses „Zwischen“*» (Heidegger 1977, p. 176).

Let me go back to Husserl. According to his understanding, what Bloch and Unseld defined a utopian «intention» is an «intentional quality». On the other hand, its object (utopia) is to be considered an «intentional matter» («intentionale Materie»). Going back to the example of one's experience of a landscape, one should Husserliantly analyse such an experience by identifying the landscape with the «intentional matter» and one's sight (of the landscape) with the «intentional quality». More generally, for Husserl, an immense variety of attitudes of consciousness can be subsumed under the genus of «intentional quality»: He mentions judgments («Urteile»), desires («Wünschen»), hopes («Hoffnungen»), doubts («Zweifeln»).<sup>97</sup>

Here, I wish to claim that Husserl's distinction between «intentional quality» and «intentional matter» encompasses a perhaps *too* immense variety of attitudes of consciousness and becomes therefore ambiguous. As an example, let me take the phenomenon of doubting. I will show how the «doubted» is grasped according to Husserl's distinction. In the first place, let me note that as many similar verbs, the verb «to doubt» might be deceptive when analysing consciousness and its structures. Indeed, just as one says that one «doubts» something, which is therefore a «doubted», one also says that one directly perceives something, which is therefore a «direct object of perception». For example, one can doubt Heidegger's interpretation of the Western metaphysical tradition and can, at the same time, directly perceive the white of the laptop screen where one is reading Heidegger's interpretation. *According to the grammar*, nothing really changes: The «doubted» is the object of the «doubting», the «directly perceived» is the object of «direct perception». Yet I contend something crucial changes *beyond the grammar*. Indeed, *while «direct perception» is an attitude of consciousness distinguished from the «directly perceived» as from its correlate, «doubting» is an attitude of consciousness encompassing the «doubted» as its element*. Let me explain.

When one «doubts» something, the something is already included in the «doubting». In fact, «doubting» already means *«being aware of something doubted»*. On the other hand, if one had to express what one's consciousness, *in and of itself*, is doing when one «doubts», one should say that one's consciousness simply *relates*. That is to say that consciousness *becomes* «doubtful» because what it relates to is *something in doubt*. It is not *consciousness* which doubts: It is *the object of consciousness* which is in doubt. That could be seen as the more concealed explanation of why English differentiates being «in doubt» from being «doubtful». Properly speaking, consciousness can be «doubtful» simply because its object is «doubted», but that can only be acknowledged because, already, consciousness has been put in relation to its object as «doubted».

Therefore, *«doubting» is not similar to «direct perception»*. That is the second point I wish to make. Let me go back to one's experience of a landscape. In that context, if one had to express what one's consciousness, *in and of itself*, does when one looks at the blue of the sky, one should say *not simply* that one's consciousness *relates*, but that it *perceives directly*. That happens because, differently from «doubting», direct perception is a mode of consciousness *itself*. That is, it is an «intentional quality», strictly conceived: An «intentional» modality of consciousness. Let me note that a similar thing can be said about *«indirect perception»*, which

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<sup>97</sup> Husserl 2001, pp. 128-145. (German: Husserl 1984, pp. 441-473).

could also be called «*obscuring perception*»: «Richtung», in Ernst Bloch's terms. Indeed, that is the peculiar attitude of consciousness that makes one able to *indirectly relate*. This eventually shows why «direct perception» and «indirect perception» have here been understood as *opposites*. In fact, Aristotelianly, «opposite» things are the ones that are furthest from each other *yet belonging to the same genus*.

That is the end of my argument. Nevertheless, let me use this occasion to provide some further clarifications, address some objections, and clearly state where my disagreement with Husserl lies. Firstly, let me note that in identifying those modalities of consciousness that are modalities of consciousness *in and of itself*, without any reference to the correlate of consciousness, I have not implied that consciousness can exist without a correlate. I simply meant to distinguish two different acceptations of the term «consciousness». In fact, just as consciousness, *as including* its «object», cannot exist without it, also consciousness, *as distinguished* from its «object», cannot exist without it. Therefore, the main aim of my last remarks has been to prevent my discourse on death's obscurity as an «object» (or «content») of consciousness from being ambiguous. Nonetheless, let me note that *at all times*, consciousness can both be grasped as *including* and as *distinguished* from its «object». That happens because these two senses of «consciousness» correspond to the *twofold nature* of consciousness. Let me explain.

Let me go back to one's experience of the blue of the sky. Now, if *the blue of the sky* is already included in one's notion of the direct perception of the blue of the sky, one will need to conclude that *even «direct perception» includes its «object» as an element*, rather than relating to it. That happens because if «direct perception» is grasped more fully, that is as including its reference to a correlate, *the correlate transforms into an «element» of it*. In that case, «direct perception» and «doubting», which I have previously differentiated, *become the same*. And in a specular fashion, if «doubting» is grasped less fully, it becomes itself a modality of consciousness *in and of itself*. That happens if «doubting» is grasped as *a mere relating*. This happens very rarely, though, for no one would call *a mere relating* «doubting», given that *as such*, it would have no longer a reference to *something which is in doubt*. That explains why I have chosen «doubting» as an example of an attitude of consciousness that includes its «object» as an element, rather than relating to it as a correlate.

In that it oscillates between the two senses of «consciousness» just distinguished, I believe Husserl's notion of «intentional quality» is ambiguous. This becomes evident when discovering *how different* the attitudes of consciousness are that can be subsumed, for Husserl, under the couple «intentional quality»-«intentional matter». Above, I have had the occasion to mention some of them: Judgments («Urteile»), desires («Wünschen»), hopes («Hoffnungen»), doubts («Zweifeln»).

In this context, let me note that predictably, even one's «obscuring consciousness» can be grasped more fully and become inclusive of its «object». That is, *of obscurity*. Or, more precisely, *of the obscurity of one's death*. However, let me say that in this study, I mainly refer to the obscurity of death as a *correlate* of one's obscuring consciousness, rather than an element of it. Therefore, understanding this means understanding *obscurity*, grasped as the essence of human death, as mentioned. It is the awareness of this essence, grasped in this way, that was touched on when mentioning the radical shift, in one's awareness of death, that a radical philosophy

of death may cause. In this chapter, I will not dedicate any space to all the consequences that my last remarks have on what I claimed previously. For example, I will not reflect on how the fact that the «obscuring perception» is an attitude of consciousness not inclusive of its «object» impacts on the two kinds of obscurities differentiated here: The utter obscurity of death and the partial obscurity of «Erscheinungen».

Before concluding the chapter, let me clarify that my discourse on human consciousness as «inclusive» of its objects had nothing to do with the gnoseological problem of whether the objects of human consciousness are «inside consciousness» or not. In fact, my considerations on the twofold nature of consciousness regarded consciousness *as such*: No matter whether this is thought to be capable of knowing reality as it is in itself or not. I had already made similar considerations when de-Kantianising Kant's notion of «Erscheinung», and I refer the reader to those considerations. Therefore, neutral with this kind of issues, let me move on to the next chapter.



What was gained with this chapter is the answer to three questions on death's obscurity. Firstly, I asked *what it means for death to be obscure*. The chapter was confronted with two dimensions to obscurity: The utter obscurity of «Nichterscheinungen» and the partial obscurity of «Erscheinungen». Only the first obscurity turned out to mark human death, and that helped acknowledge the overarching dimension of obscurity embedded in all possible kinds of obscurity: «Ontological» obscurity. Secondly, I asked *how one's awareness of death's obscurity*, which is always «running» in oneself, *is experienced by one*. The answer was a Socratic one: Ignorance cannot be known. Thirdly, I clarified *how one's awareness can be grasped* with regards to its reference to death's obscurity as its object. Thus, the analysis provided the chapter with two different answers grounded in the twofold nature of human consciousness: The awareness of death's obscurity can either be grasped as inclusive or as distinguished from its object.

## **CHAPTER 2: A CONTRIBUTION TO CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHICAL THANATOLOGY: ON «EXISTENTIAL NIHILISM» AND ITS UNDERPINNINGS**

In this chapter, the ontological-thanatological analysis conducted in the previous chapter becomes concrete. From the heights of obscurity as peculiar epistemological status of human death, the present chapter redescends to examine one contemporary, anti-Christian thanatological attitude: «Existential nihilism». Mostly unaware of death's obscurity, existential nihilism is the belief that nothing in the human being will survive death. In the chapter, this anti-Christian attitude is analysed in two ways. On one hand, it is investigated with regards to its ontological grounds and their epistemological consequences on the human «knowledge» of death, thus continuing the ontology of death started in the last chapter. Firstly, the hidden ontological-metaphysical layer of death will be analysed, which is given by death's nature as a general farewell to being. This analysis will be accomplished taking the cue from the historical-philosophical insights by Emanuele Severino, one of the greatest Italian philosophers of the last century. Secondly, death's nature will be investigated as a transformation of humans into mere corpses, essentially embedded in all particular notions of death, including the existential-nihilistic one. On the other hand, in this chapter existential nihilism is deconstructed into some of its own defining components: Firstly, the absoluteness of its notion of death, exemplified by Freudian psychoanalysis and by Darwinian biology; secondly, the irreversibility of death, curiously echoing a principle by Melissus of Samos; thirdly, the one-sidedness of existential nihilism, exemplified by Karl Marx and understood as the refusal of any other stance on death as possible or legitimate. As the previous one, the present chapter should not be regarded as a contribution expanding other philosophies of death, the relevant secondary literature, or other scientific investigations of death (psychoanalytical, biological, sociological). The chapter should rather be regarded as an independent investigation in conversation with these.

### **1. Philosophical-Thanatological Introduction: The Notion of the «Metaphysics of Death». Death as Lying «Outside the Boundaries of All Possible Experience»**

In this first section, I will introduce the notion of the «metaphysics of death». In a Kantian spirit, I wish to contend that death is «metaphysical» because it lies *beyond the boundaries of human possible experience*. I am using the term «experience» referring to what was called «direct perception» in the previous chapter (though the metaphysicality of death can be stated even using the de-Kantianised Kantian notion of the distinction between «appearing» and «not appearing»). Therefore, any investigation of death should be considered a «*metaphysical investigation*». In what follows, I will make a comparison between this notion of the «metaphysics of death» and two already existing notions.

The concept of the «metaphysics of death» emerges from what has been said so far in the study. Indeed, by definition, what is obscure to human life *until human life ends* is *essentially obscure* to human life. Such a *lifelong character* of death's obscurity is what may be called, in a Kantian spirit, the «*metaphysicality*» of

death. Human death is a «metaphysical object», if «metaphysical» means «beyond every possible experience». In this study, though, such a traditional notion has its own nuances.

In fact, in the previous chapter, I mentioned how this study's notion of direct perception differs from Kant's concept of «experience» («Erfahrung») understood as the experience of «Erscheinungen» («appearances»). Correspondingly, I mentioned how my conception of «Nichterscheinung» differs from the Kant-inspired notion elaborated by Unseld and Bloch in their conversation. Especially, my understanding of «direct perception» has been inherited by Edmund Husserl. In that connection, let me say that undoubtedly, using a Husserlian notion to formulate the concept of the «metaphysicality of death» amounts to making a Kantian use of Husserl. Kant's principal effort in the *Critique of Pure Reason* was in fact to determine the contour of the «the boundaries of all possible experience» («die Grenzen aller möglicher Erfahrung»). I do not think that this use is illegitimate, though. Rejecting every juxtaposition of different philosophies, as some historians of philosophy do, would be narrow-minded. Indeed, *in the present context*, I am not pursuing a faithful interpretation of all the differences between Kant and Husserl but rather using their philosophies to formulate this study's own philosophy of death. The legitimacy of this usage also puts me in a position to more fully indicate the philosophical-thanatological shift announced at the beginning of the first chapter. This consists in realising death's *metaphysical nature*.

Let me note that death's «metaphysicality» is rarely acknowledged in one's life. That is to say that mostly, one pays no attention to death's essential obscurity. On the other hand, *a conscious attitude towards the essence of death would involve an explicit realisation of death's indecipherable obscurity*. That is to say that *a conscious metaphysics of death* requires taking explicit ownership of death's metaphysical nature. It is in a conscious metaphysical attitude that this study will proceed in the current and in the following chapters. Particularly, in this chapter, the metaphysical awareness of death will be the pattern through which to investigate an understanding of death that is representative of the present epoch: «Existential nihilism».

### **1.1 On Two Further Acceptations of the «Metaphysics of Death»: the «Metaphysics of the Soul» and the «Reflection upon Death»**

After establishing the concept of death's metaphysicality, let me examine two already existing acceptations of the «metaphysics of death». These can both be found in Jonathan Dollimore's text on death. I am quoting this text because it has been of particular resonance and because it is representative of the recent tendency to offer broad accounts on death in Western culture.<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to analyse how a rather technical philosophical notion as the «metaphysics of death» is understood in such studies. In Dollimore's book, the phrase «metaphysics of death» is used in all its complexity when Dollimore speaks of Martin Heidegger. Dollimore states that Heidegger's meditation on death is «a powerful mutation» of «a Western metaphysics of death».<sup>2</sup> I believe this sentence contains two radically different notions of the «metaphysics of death»: One notion refers to Christian thanatology, against which, for instance, Nietzsche reacted; the other refers to Heidegger's own

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<sup>1</sup> Dollimore 1998.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*. Cf. p. XXX for the mention of Nietzsche and p. 170 for the mention of Heidegger.

thanatology, as a «mutation» of the «Western metaphysics of death». Before moving on, let me note that within both interpretations of Dollimore, no explicit realisation of death's metaphysical nature is traceable.

According to Dollimore's first notion, it is a «metaphysic of death» any «Geistesmetaphysik» («metaphysics of the soul»). This term draws upon a traditional understanding of metaphysics that is significantly distinguished from my understanding of it here and refers to any doctrine whose claim is that the human soul will survive death. In this context, I think it is worth mentioning that even Heidegger mentions this understanding when distinguishing it from his analyses in the «existential analytic» («esistenziale Analytik») of *Being and Time*:

Endlich steht außerhalb des Bezirks einer existenzialen Analyse des Todes, was unter dem Titel einer “Metaphysik des Todes” erörtert werden möchte. Die Fragen, wie und wann der Tod “in die Welt kam”, welchen “Sinn” er als Übel und Leiden im All des Seienden haben kann und soll, setzen notwendig ein Verständnis nicht nur des Seinscharakters des Todes voraus, sondern die Ontologie des Alls des Seienden im Ganzen und die ontologische Klärung von Übel und Negativität überhaupt im besonderen.».<sup>3</sup>

(«Finally, what might be discussed under the topic of a “metaphysic of death” lies outside the domain of an existential analysis of death. Questions of how and when death ‘came into the world’, what ‘meaning’ it can have and is to have as an evil and affliction in the aggregate of entities – these are questions which necessarily presuppose an understanding not only of the character of Being which belongs to death, but of the ontology of the aggregate of entities as a whole, and especially of the ontological clarification of evil and negativity in general.»).<sup>4</sup>

In the present context, let me say that it is not relevant whether thanatologists who speak about the «metaphysics of death» as «metaphysics of the soul» do that neutrally, as is Heidegger's case, or do that thinking that a deceptive «Erfindung vom reinen Geiste» («invention of pure spirit») is embedded in it, as is Nietzsche's case.<sup>5</sup> What matters here is that, usually, thanatologists who speak about the «metaphysics of the soul» do not consider *their own meditation on death as «metaphysical»*: That happens both with Heidegger and with Nietzsche. In fact, from this perspective, there is a hidden agreement between thinking that death is an absolute annihilation, as Nietzsche does, and that death should be regarded in its essence (that is, «before» any Christian or anti-Christian interpretation of it), as Heidegger does. Indeed, death hides *in both cases*, and it hides in a metaphysical way.

The consequence of this is that the notion of the metaphysics of death as «metaphysics of the soul» is *derivative*. In the words of this study, it is an «*ontic*» notion. That can also be seen from a *reductio ad absurdum*: If that notion were not «*ontic*», those who use it should acknowledge that *all kinds of meditations on death are «metaphysical»*, not simply some of them, not simply those who are not theirs. When it comes to human death, all stances that perceive metaphysics as «none of their business» have fallen into the trap of

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<sup>3</sup> Heidegger 1977, p. 330.

<sup>4</sup> Heidegger 1985, p.

<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche 1968, p. 4 (German); Nietzsche 2015, p. 2 (English).



metaphysics. Indeed, *metaphysics always buries its undertakers*. Just as philosophy does, according to Étienne Gilson.<sup>6</sup>

Dollimore's second acceptance of the «metaphysics of death» is a more general one. Indeed, if even Martin Heidegger's thanatology in *Being and Time* represents a «metaphysic of death», even though «mutated», as Dollimore says, then «metaphysics of death» appears to mean «reflection upon death». For as Dollimore acknowledges, Heidegger *as a philosopher* did not believe in the immortality of the soul nor in its opposite, as is particularly clear from a clarification he gives in *Being and Time*.<sup>7</sup> That entails that in order to understand Heidegger's thanatology as a «metaphysics of death», the term must be used *in a more general sense*, which I interpret here to be the «reflection upon death». What Dollimore means to say is that notwithstanding his neutrality with regards to the question of immortality and its opposite, Heidegger meditated on death and made it into a central object of his investigation. Let me use such an occasion to better explain the *philosophical nature* of Heidegger's thanatology.

Heidegger's distance from the traditional question of immortality does not mean he was *sceptical* about the nature of death. As argued in the first chapter, thanatological scepticism is just another ontic attitude towards death: It is just a third thanatological option further to its corresponding opposite beliefs. For this reason, Heidegger *as a philosopher* stops before opting for one of these options and simply *acknowledges the obscurity of death*: What he calls «the darkness of the whither», «die Dunkelheit des Wohin».<sup>8</sup> Yet that is not to say that Heidegger *investigates* obscurity, after acknowledging it, more than Bloch and Socrates did. He is rather interested in adding death's obscurity to the «pieces» («Stücke») of the «fundamental-ontological» («fundamental-ontologisch») sketch which his existential analytic «provides» («gibt».<sup>9</sup> Now, whether the «fundamental-ontological» nature of an investigation can justify its «Stückigkeit» («chunkiness») is of no relevance in the present context.

Undoubtedly, Heidegger himself, *as an individual*, that is as an «existenziell» («existentiell») human being, did have his own opinion on death: Just as anybody else.<sup>10</sup> Given Heidegger's scepticism about God, it seems likely that he was sceptical about the nature of death as well. It might well be that Heidegger, *just as Socrates*, drew a sceptical conclusion from his philosophical awareness that humans cannot have any real «knowledge» of certain issues. In that respect, scepticism might be one of the defining features of Heidegger's personal thought.

Let me take advantage of what has been said to state that *it is only in a philosophical sense that this study can be said to conduct «its own» thanatology*. In fact, one might have wondered whether with this study I am

<sup>6</sup> «Philosophy always buries its undertakers». Cf. Étienne Gilson. *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), p. 306. Original in English.

<sup>7</sup> Heidegger 1977, pp. 329-330 (German); Heidegger 1985, p. 292 (English).

<sup>8</sup> Heidegger 1985, pp. 172-179. For the German, cf. Heidegger 1977, pp. 178-186.

<sup>9</sup> Heidegger 1985, p. 38. For the German, cf. Heidegger 1977, p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> For Heidegger's distinction between «existenziell» and «existenzial», cf. Wrathall 2021, pp. 300-301 (writ. J. A. Escudero).

suggesting «my own» thanatology. However, if «conducting a thanatology» means adding one's own opinion on death to the other ones, or to endorse one of the other ones, that is not what I am doing: I am not supporting any particular stance, not Christian nor anti-Christian, on death. On the other hand, if «conducting a thanatology» means that I am «reflecting upon» death, and in more detail, that I am attempting to make an ontological reflection on the essence of death, then this is, in a way, all I aim at doing, as to the thanatological half of this study.

In conclusion, let me argue that Dollimore's second acceptance of the «metaphysics of death» as «reflection upon death» is to be considered a generic and faded acceptance. It is in effect a most immediately understandable one. And the question of why both the faded and the anti-Christian acceptance *happen to be called «metaphysical»* in Dollimore's book is a question that I will only address asking another question: Is this not due, in the last instance, *to the unconscious awareness of the metaphysicality of death?*

## **2. Historical-Philosophical Introduction: A Metaphysically Unconscious and Yet Widespread Attitude Towards Death**

After presenting the concept of the metaphysics of death, I will move onto the investigation of existential nihilism. Once again, I will start from Bloch and Unseld's 1969 conversation. That is because in that context, they also discussed the historical urgency of thinking such an anti-Christian attitude towards death. One further reason why I choose to go back to their conversation is that so far, this conversation has been the closest historical-philosophical reference of the study, and it is reasonable not to introduce further references for now. Let me start.

In his book on *The Banalization of Nihilism*, Karen L. Carr defines «existential nihilism» as «the feeling of emptiness and pointlessness that follows from the judgment: "Life has no meaning"». <sup>11</sup> Let me say that this definition, quite widespread nowadays and for good reasons, is not this study's definition of «existential nihilism», although they are manifestly related. Indeed, one of the fundamental reasons why human life may be felt as meaningless is that it shatters against death, *understood as the absolute end of life*. Yet in the present study, the notion of «existential nihilism» has been especially inspired by Emanuele Severino. In his philosophy, «nihilism» («nichilismo») is simply the «conviction that beings are nothing» («la convinzione che l'ente sia niente»). <sup>12</sup> Therefore, *as applied to human existence*, nihilism consists in believing that human existence is nothingness (or, which is the same, is destined to nothingness: cf. below). That is my understanding of «existential nihilism».

As will become clear, Severino has been perhaps the only 20<sup>th</sup>-century thinker who re-drew attention to the *ontological-metaphysical* aspect of death, even though he criticised it as an emblematic element of the

<sup>11</sup> Carr 1992. *The Banalization of Nihilism: Twentieth-Century Responses to Meaninglessness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> As a reference, cf. Emanuele Severino. *The Essence of Nihilism*, trans. by G. Donis, ed. by I. Testoni, A. Carrera (London: Verso, 2016), pp. 85-145.

«nihilism of the West» («nichilismo dell'Occidente»).<sup>13</sup> According to the Severinian diagnosis, in Western culture «dying» means, *in its essence*, «going into nothingness» («andare nel niente»). From an ontological-metaphysical perspective, it makes no difference whether it is a human that dies or another entity: «To die» simply means «to go into nothingness». In that sense, not only humans die, but *everything that ends* «dies». This acknowledgement has been explicitly present since Severino's first ample philosophical text, *La struttura originaria*, and stayed present until his last book, *Testimoniando il destino*, although Severino's philosophical judgement on Western culture has changed over time. I will talk about that in Chapter 5.<sup>14</sup>

Now, why dedicate a chapter to «existential nihilism»? Let me answer that this attitude towards death is of interest since it is one of the widespread thanatological attitudes of recent times: I will show that in this chapter. *Moreover, analysing it will give me the chance to concretely show that as every other stance on death, existential nihilism is usually unaware of death's metaphysical obscurity.* Here, let me note that rejecting this statement of mine would imply ascribing to the majority of existential nihilists the ontological awareness of death's obscurity, as was achieved in this study. That would be an implausible assumption. On the contrary, the lack of awareness of the metaphysical nature of death is a further confirmation of the ancestral perception of philosophers, according to which the essential dimensions of things are usually not visible to humans. Nonetheless, this lack of awareness will give me the chance to «*metaphysicise*» existential nihilism whilst analysing it.

At this point, one might object that my claim that in most cases existential nihilism is metaphysically unaware relies on merely plausible grounds. In fact, how to establish whether the majority of existential nihilists are unconscious of the essential obscurity of death? Let me note that the objection can be radicalised. Indeed, how to establish whether there are *any* existential nihilists further to *me, the writer of this study*, assuming that I really am? As already claimed multiple times in the history of philosophy, nobody can *read* the minds of the others. Therefore, *a fortiori ratione*, nobody can know whether anybody else is an existential nihilist who is aware of the obscurity of their death or not. That is why in this context, *I wish to acknowledge the merely plausible character* of my interpretation of the current thanatological state of affairs. That is not to say that my claim is perfectly groundless, though. On the contrary, I believe an indirect ground can be provided and that consists precisely in the ancestral philosophical perception that, in general, human beings are not concerned with their essence and therefore, they are not concerned with the essence of their death either.

After clarifying this study's understanding of existential nihilism, let me go back to Bloch and Unseld's conversation. As mentioned, they also reflect on existential nihilism (though they do not call it in that way) and do so in an emblematic fashion.

While thematising the «Wirksamkeit» («impactfulness») a person can have even after their death and how even this «Wirksamkeit» will disappear at some point, Bloch formulates this question: «Wozu? Wenn, was ich

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> Emanuele Severino. *La struttura originaria* (Milan: Adelphi 1981); Emanuele Severino. *Testimoniando il destino* (Milan: Adelphi 2019).

tue, den Weg alles Fleisches geht und auch zerfällt, wozu habe ich mich dann angestrengt?» («Why? If what I do goes the same way as all flesh and itself decays, why have I struggled?»).<sup>15</sup>

Bloch's question expresses in a crystal-clear fashion what existential nihilism is: The belief, according to which nothing survives the moment of death. He goes even beyond that and argues that no effect of the dead person survives, in the long run. One might even consider the ceasing of the effects, which the dead has had on reality, as a *second* death. That is because even the *traces*, which *perpetuate* the existence of the dead, will one day vanish. In that sense, when all Michelangelo's works will be destroyed, either because of time passing or because of an external intervention, Michelangelo will die a second time.

Unsel'd replies to Bloch that one can «sich für diese Welt ausschöpfen» («pour oneself into this world») and be at peace with one's being utterly «diesseitig» («of this world»).<sup>16</sup> Unlike Unsel'd, Bloch is convinced that there is no way of positively answering the «Wozu» question without *believing or hoping* for immortality. Bloch's opinion is revealing, as it is a proof of how deeply Christianity has influenced one's perspective on the meaningfulness of life. In fact, even in a post-Christian context, immortality continues to be desired by people. Yet *in other cases*, as expressed by Unsel'd, *Christian thanatology is substituted by the radically new opinion of a full extinction*. That is, by existential nihilism. Therefore, it is now time to study this phenomenon. Let me only note that from a historical perspective, this attitude is not entirely original. Indeed, I have categorised Epicurus' stance as a form of existential nihilism. Yet on the other hand, insofar as it is *as a post-Christian attitude* that existential nihilism recently emerged, it is certainly to be considered a historical novelty.

### **3. Grounds and Defining Components of Existential Nihilism**

That was the end of my brief historical and philosophical introduction to existential nihilism. With it, I have demonstrated the urgency of studying existential nihilism for contemporary philosophical thanatology. Therefore, let me move onto the investigation of existential nihilism itself. The rest of the chapter will be devoted to the discussion of the main components of the existential-nihilistic view, especially those which are specifically relevant for the general theme of this study. For each component, I will examine the thought of well-known authors by way of historical reference. Over the course of the chapter, I will also have the chance to investigate some of the *ontological grounds* of existential nihilism, which will enrich the ontology of death started in the last chapter. Indeed, obscurity is far from being the only element belonging to the essence of death: There are further, non-phenomenological elements.

#### **3.1 First Component of Existential Nihilism: Death as a «Sleep Without Dreams». The Absoluteness of Death**

Let me go back to Socrates' words in Plato's *Apology*. After declaring that death is either «a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness» or «a change and migration of the soul from this world to another»,

<sup>15</sup> Bloch 1985, p. 330.

<sup>16</sup> For Unsel'd's reply, cf. again Bloch 1985, p. 330.

Socrates spends some time in analysing the first side of this alternative.<sup>17</sup> Making a discourse that would have led Arthur Schopenhauer to interpret him as stating the superiority of not being to being, Socrates argues that if death were utter unconsciousness, it would hardly be comparable to one's best days and most pleasant nights. In fact, the «sleep of him who is undisturbed even by the sight of dreams» («ὕπνος ἐπειδάν τις καθεύδων μηδ' ὄναρ μηδὲν ὀρᾷ») is «an unspeakable gain» («θαυμάσιον κέρδος»):

«καὶ εἴτε δὴ μηδεμία αἴσθησις ἐστὶν ἀλλ' οἷον ὕπνος ἐπειδάν τις καθεύδων μηδ' ὄναρ μηδὲν ὀρᾷ, θαυμάσιον κέρδος ἂν εἴη ὁ θάνατος – ἐγὼ γὰρ ἂν οἶμαι, εἴ τινα ἐκλεξάμενον δεοὶ ταύτην τὴν νύκτα ἐν ᾗ οὕτω κατέδραθεν ὥστε μηδὲ ὄναρ ἰδεῖν, καὶ τὰς ἄλλας νύκτας τε καὶ ἡμέρας τὰς τοῦ βίου τοῦ ἑαυτοῦ ἀντιπαραθέντα ταύτῃ τῇ νυκτὶ δεοὶ σκεπτάμενον εἰπεῖν πόσας ἄμεινον καὶ ἥδιον ἡμέρας καὶ νύκτας ταύτης τῆς νυκτὸς βεβίωκεν ἐν τῇ ἑαυτοῦ βίῳ, οἶμαι ἂν μὴ ὅτι ἰδιώτην τινά, ἀλλὰ τὸν μέγαν βασιλέα εὐαριθμήτους ἂν εὐρεῖν αὐτὸν ταύτας πρὸς τὰς ἄλλας ἡμέρας καὶ νύκτας – εἰ οὖν τοιοῦτον ὁ θάνατός ἐστιν, κέρδος ἔγωγε λέγω: καὶ γὰρ οὐδὲν πλείων ὁ πᾶς χρόνος φαίνεται οὕτω δὴ εἶναι ἢ μία νύξ.»

(«Now if you suppose that there is no consciousness, but a sleep like the sleep of him who is undisturbed even by the sight of dreams, death will be an unspeakable gain. For if a person were to select the night in which his sleep was undisturbed even by dreams, and were to compare with this the other days and nights of his life, and then were to tell us how many days and nights he had passed in the course of his life better and more pleasantly than this one, I think that any man, I will not say a private man, but even the Great King, will not find many such days or nights, when compared with the others. Now if death is like this, I say that to die is gain; for eternity is then only a single night.»).<sup>18</sup>

As a matter of fact, even dreaming is an activity of consciousness: The one who dreams can be said to «see a dream» («ὄναρ εἰδέναι», 40d). That is, the one who dreams is still alive. On the contrary, *sleeping without dreaming is comparable to death* – provided that death is what existential nihilism interprets death to be: «μηδὲν εἶναι μηδὲ αἴσθησιν μηδεμίαν μηδενὸς ἔχειν τὸν τεθνεῶτα» («a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness»).<sup>19</sup> That is what I refer to with the term «absolute death». Now, this thanatological scenario, only admitted by Socrates as one of two possible, is what existential nihilism trusts as the undisputed nature of death.

In this context, let me note that it is not relevant whether death can truly be compared to a sleep without dreams. That is simply an example Socrates gives to be able to compare death to something which he thinks is closer to the listener. In fact, one might object against Socrates that people are alive even when sleeping without dreaming, and that this can be seen from the fact that, say, they wake up if they hear a noise. Yet not agreeing with the appropriateness of the Socratic comparison in no way entails not agreeing with existential nihilism. Therefore, the reader is here asked (just as the listener was then) to assume that the comparison is appropriate. Should it be not, this would be of no relevance for Socrates' argument.

Let me now raise an objection that needs to be addressed if the principle of the obscurity of death is to stand. Following Socrates, I have stated that for existential nihilism, dying is just as falling asleep – of a sleep without

<sup>17</sup> For the discussion of this passage, cf. Chapter 1, section 4.1.

<sup>18</sup> *Apologia*, 40 c-e.

<sup>19</sup> *Apologia*, 40 c. (English: Plato 1953, p. 365).

dreams. Yet at least once, everyone goes through a sleep without dreams in their life. That is, everybody dies before dying. Now, is this not to say that *humans already know what death is, given that they die every night or so*? And does that not jeopardise my claim of the darkness and in fact metaphysicality of death?

To answer the objection, I will recall one defining element of death discussed in the last chapter. This is the *futureness* of death. In the last chapter, this was called the «possibility» of death, following Bloch's terminology. This defining component means that death is a *future* human event and that therefore, nobody who is still «around» can ever go through death, not even in a sleep without dreams. *Indeed, even if one is willing to draw the un compelling conclusion, from their sleeps without dreams, that death will be the same as those sleeps, such a conclusion would be a leap into the vertiginous darkness of death.* No matter how perfect, no *analogy* between death and other phenomena can ever bring death closer and make it happen before its time. That is due to the fact that, by definition, all analogies are just analogies.

For the same reason, no thanatological conclusion (but an obscure one) can be drawn even from the so-called near-death experiences.<sup>20</sup> Such experiences are not *the experience of death itself*. I believe one can serenely admit that, when considering that the nearly dead person is eventually able to *tell* something about their «death». Among other things, death involves such a decay of the body which (still today) makes it impossible for the dead to come back (unlike the nearly dead). *And even if somebody could (or did) come back from death in a proper sense*, they would only be able to testify about what *their* death was like, leaving the obscurity of *one's* death utterly untouched.<sup>21</sup> After all, the very term «near-death experience» already presupposes a determinate thanatological lien: What happens during such peculiar experiences is the same as what happens with death.

### **3.1.1 A First Example: Freud's Existential Nihilism in *Civilisation and Its Discontents*: The Idea of the «Death Drive» («Todestrieb») and the Non-Neutrality of Psychoanalytical Sciences**

Although this is not the place to judge whether his thanatology was metaphysically aware or not, Freud's idea of a human «death drive» («Todestrieb») can be considered as a good example of an existential-nihilistic concept.<sup>22</sup> According to Freud's opinion, not only is death the absolute end of life, but humans are secretly driven towards death. The repression of this drive contributes to the «discontents» of humans' «civilised» life on earth. In that context, not only Freud's mention of Arthur Schopenhauer, but the interpretation of the «Todestrieb» as pushing to return to inorganic matter, are clear signposts of a nihilistic understanding of death (unless one wishes to think that Freud conceived of inorganic matter as secretly animated!).

<sup>20</sup> For an overall account, cf. Glenn Roberts, and John Owen. "The near-death experience", in *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 153, no. 5 (1988), pp. 607-617.

<sup>21</sup> I will say more about the ancestral presupposition that all humans die the very same death in Chapter 4, section 3.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Freud 1981 as well as Sigmund Freud. "Civilization and Its Discontents", in Freud 1953-1974, *Volume XXI: The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents, and Other Works (1927-1931)*, 8<sup>th</sup> edn. (1981), pp. 57-146. For the German edition, cf. Sigmund Freud. "Das Unbehagen in der Kultur", in Freud 1940-1952, *Band 14: Werke aus den Jahren 1925-1931* (1948), pp. 419-506.

It is true that the existence of a «death drive» has not been suggested by Freud until *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), and that he has never philosophically grounded the thesis that there exists a human «death drive», but only scientifically. In fact, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud himself calls his psychoanalytical reflection a «speculation upon life and death instincts»: «Spekulation über die Lebens- und Todestriebe».<sup>23</sup> That is because Freud expressly *abides by the hypothetical nature of modern science*: It is not *as an incontrovertible stance* that Freud offers his opinion on the existence of a «Todestrieb». That is what I meant by stating that he has not «philosophically» grounded his thesis.

Therefore, what matters here is Freud's *conviction* (or «speculation», as he calls it) of there being a «death drive», which he also appears to have become more convinced of in his following research, especially in *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (1930). In this context, it is clear that *far from being thanatologically neutral*, Freudian psychoanalysis is burdened with nihilistic thanatological underpinnings. That can also be observed with regards to other sciences, and I will prove that in the next section. For now, let me make some general observations on the scientific assumptions on the nature of death.

As a matter of fact, many different kinds of scientific knowledge conceal an amount of extra-scientific opinions, *including* extra-scientific opinions about death. For example, a *Handbook of Psychoanalysis* holding Freud's idea of the «death drive» to be true will contain a thanatological opinion which is, as such, *extra-psychoanalytical*. That is why any title such as *Handbook of Psychoanalysis* risks being simplistic. In fact, it often refers to something which is never simply a «Handbook of Psychoanalysis». And regardless of their title, the presence of extra-scientific assumptions can be detected even in texts that are not handbooks. One example are the Freudian works I have mentioned.

At this point, one might object that even philosophical texts (and handbooks) are often burdened with extra-philosophical presuppositions. I believe this objection is incorrect because it reduces philosophy to *a certain kind of knowledge*, thus making it indistinguishable from science. Yet it must be acknowledged that, to a limited extent, the objection is right. As an example, one can think of the philosophical subject of «metaphysics», which in fact represents a certain kind of knowledge, though a universal one: The knowledge of «Being». In that sense, even being radically different from sciences, which do not talk about «Being» (at least when they are rigorous), philosophy is a determinate «subject».

However, on the other hand, philosophy should be regarded not as a discipline but as *a peculiar mindset*: The one which is aware that there are often (if not always) *various contributions* to the discourse one is making, be one a philosopher or a scientist. These contributions are consciously appreciated and distinguished by philosophers to a much greater extent than by scientists. Let me also note that this mindset is embedded in the very global perspective that philosophy has always looked for. From *that kind* of perspective, very rarely (or just never) can something be a merely «scientific discourse», given that any discourse is often *integrated* with

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<sup>23</sup> Freud 1981, p. 60 (English); Freud 1967, p. 65 (German). In the quoted translation, «Trieb» is translated by «instinct» and not by «drive». The discussion of how appropriate such translations are does not fall under the jurisdiction of this study.

other discourses (be that consciously or unconsciously so). This also means that no matter how intense the increase *in the degree* of specialisation can become, no science and no human can ever «specialise» *in a radical sense*. One will always transcend their own «competence», even in their most «rigorous», «specialised», and «scientific» study.

Let me now go back to Freud. In fact, one could cast doubts on my criticism of his existential-nihilistic notion of «death drive». Particularly, one might wonder whether my criticism does not *itself spring* from a nihilistic attitude. After all, am I not repressing, as is *ancestrally human*, my awareness that I am absolutely mortal? And am I not using my philosophy to build a seemingly rigorous stance that contends that existential nihilism is *just one conception of death among the others*? Am I not hiding my awareness that death is the end?

My answer to the objection is that it is *only on the basis of an absolutisation* of existential nihilism that one can raise those criticisms. The absolutisation consists in existential nihilism's *hybris* of considering itself as the only true attitude towards death. *Yet this study contends that hybris is itself a defining component of existential nihilism*. In this context, let me anticipate that the more existential nihilism will be anatomised, the better its hybris will be exposed.

### **3.1.2 A Second Example: The Existential Nihilism of Darwinian Biology and the Non-Neutrality of Biological Sciences**

Another good example of an existential-nihilistic thanatology is Darwinian biology. Before going into more detail, let me note that as in the last section, I will be brief in the present one. That is because these sections are only meant to provide cultural references that confirm and further explain my understanding of existential nihilism. Firstly, let me mention that Charles Darwin himself never resolutely declared that there is no immortal soul in humans. After losing his initial Christian faith and its arguments for the immortality of the human soul, Darwin came to simple thanatological scepticism, as is evident from the following extract from the *Autobiography* he wrote in 1876:

«Formerly I was led by feelings such as those just referred to (although I do not think that the religious sentiment was ever strongly developed in me), to the firm conviction of the existence of God, and of the immortality of the soul. In my Journal I wrote that whilst standing in the midst of the grandeur of a Brazilian forest, "it is not possible to give an adequate idea of the higher feelings of wonder, admiration, and devotion, which fill and elevate the mind." I well remember my conviction that there is more in man than the mere breath of his body. But now the grandest scenes would not cause any such convictions and feelings to rise in my mind. It may be truly said that I am like a man who has become colour-blind, and the universal belief by men of the existence of redness makes my present loss of perception of not the least value as evidence.».<sup>24</sup>

Notwithstanding Charles Darwin's personal scepticism, *historical Darwinism* has drawn its own thanatological consequences from Darwin's anti-Christian theory of evolution, especially where this focuses on the evolution

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<sup>24</sup> Charles Robert Darwin. "The life and letters of Charles Darwin: Including an autobiographical chapter", 3 vols., ed by Francis Darwin (London: John Murray, 1887), vol. 1, pp. 311-312.



of human minds (or «souls»). In fact, if human mind is something «natural» and developed throughout the course of humans' biological history, it will also disappear with the decease of the human body, in company of which it has inextricably grown. According to Peter J. Bowler, whom I wish to quote as a general reference on this matter, the denial of the existence of the soul – i.e., existential nihilism – is already present in Darwin's own doctrine, where there was «no room», in Bowler's view, «for the traditional notion of a soul existing on a purely spiritual plane».<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, just as Freudian psychoanalysis, Darwinian biology is itself burdened with non-founded thanatological assumptions. These are «non-founded» in that it is *within their specific field of study* that these sciences think they are able to draw their thanatological conclusions. In this context, «non-founded» does not mean «unfounded». It rather means that it is not from their *pertinent* field of study that sciences draw their conclusions, which contradicts not only the specialised nature of science but also the rigour of their scientific method: As if a metaphysician speculated on the physical mechanisms underlying the phenomenon of rainbows.<sup>26</sup> On the contrary, according to the specialised nature of sciences, thanatological ideas should be drawn – so it seems – *from thanatology*. After all, every science has the same «good» grounds for drawing a certain thanatological conclusion. This discourse can of course be extended beyond thanatology and be made, for example, with regards to the metaphysical underpinnings of sciences.<sup>27</sup>

In conclusion, that shows the fundamental misunderstanding of all those contemporary philosophers, such as Walter Schulz, who believe that «Philosophische Aussagen über den Tod dürfen nicht [1] gegen oder [2] unabhängig von den Einsichten der Wissenschaft ausgestellt werden» («Philosophical statements about death must not be made [1] against or [2] independently of the insights of science»)<sup>28</sup>. In fact, it is simply because one does not acknowledge that philosophical assumptions of various kinds are already «inside» science that one can conceive of science and philosophy separately and argue that philosophy cannot contradict science. Contrary to what those philosophers think, the reason why philosophy cannot contradict science is that philosophy would then contradict itself. For science is a philosophical thing.

### **3.2 First Ground of Existential Nihilism: The «Ontological-Metaphysical» Dimension of Death as «Going into Nothingness» («andare nel niente»). Starting from Emanuele Severino's Doctrine**

The absolute-end component of existential nihilism's death, according to which death is a «sleep without dreams», has been exemplified and discussed in the previous sections. Nonetheless, the analysis is far from its end. In a way, the most essential word on the absoluteness of death still needs to be spoken. This will prove to be not only the most essential word on *death as absolute*, but on *death in general*, regardless of any existential-

<sup>25</sup> Peter J. Bowler. *Evolution: The History of an Idea*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2003), p. 163.

<sup>26</sup> Which is of course something that, *to a certain extent*, the metaphysician should also do, for «metaphysics», *differently from all sciences*, is the only «science» of all that is, including the physical mechanisms underlying a rainbow.

<sup>27</sup> For the discussion of the metaphysical underpinnings of science, particularly of political science, cf. Antimo Lucarelli. «Is metaphysics totalitarian? First remarks on politics and metaphysics in Emanuele Severino», in Carlo Salzani, Federico Dal Bo (ed. by). *Italian Thought* (New York: SUNY Press, 2025a), pp. 97-117.

<sup>28</sup> Schulz 2002, pp. 83-84. In the absence of an English translation of this text, the translations are mine.

nihilistic understanding of it. That will also make this chapter continue the ontology of death started in the last chapter.

To speak such a most essential word, I will take advantage of Emanuele Severino's analyses of what he considered the product of the «extreme folly» («*folia estrema*») of the West: The «*ontological meaning of dying*» («*significato ontologico della morte*»).<sup>29</sup> According to that meaning, not only humans but *everything* «dies». That is what, for Severino, Western culture has by now acknowledged. In this context, I will not delve into the complexity of this statement, nor into the twofold notion of «becoming» it conceals – one that Severino himself at times appears to overlook.<sup>30</sup> From Severino's remarks on the ontological meaning of dying, which should always be considered as a *diagnosis* of the «illness of the West» («*malattia dell'Occidente*»), I will simply draw the epistemological-thanatological conclusions that are relevant to this study. That will also give me the chance to take a stance on Severino's claim that death is an «illusion» («*illusione*»). Yet most importantly, I will take advantage of the descriptive part of his analysis. Before starting, let me note that by «epistemological-thanatological», I refer to the «knowledge» that humans have of death – an obscure knowledge, as was argued.

The Severinian considerations on the «ontological meaning» of dying should not be confused with the «ontological» considerations in the sense in which these have been understood them here, that is as concerning the «fundamental characters of something in particular».<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Severino's remarks represent the *other* kind of «ontological» remarks which I mentioned in the previous chapter, that is those regarding the «fundamental characters of something in general». In other words, these remarks regard «Being» itself.<sup>32</sup> That is why from now on I will call such remarks «*ontological-metaphysical*», drawing upon a reference to «metaphysics» as the «science of Being». That will hopefully make my language clear. This terminology will differentiate my language from Severino's, but it will prevent confusions with my notion of the «ontological» in this study. Moreover, as the reader will have anticipated, I cannot simply resort to the term «metaphysical» to allude to Severino's considerations, given that I have already employed it to refer to what lies «beyond the boundaries of possible experience».

Let me now recall that even considering it the «history of the folly» («*storia della follia*»), Severino has been one of the few thinkers of the last century who were able to revive perhaps the most radical meditation traditionally pursued by Western philosophy: The Ancient Greek meditation *on the meaning of «being» and «nothingness»*. By reviving it, Severino ended up criticising it and restarting it. That is why I believe I can argue that Severino was so deeply an Ancient Greek thinker that he ended up not being countable amongst

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Severino 2016, pp. 85-145.

<sup>30</sup> For the aspect of the two that is usually given more attention (namely, the one according to which the content of becoming is an absolute novelty with regards to any universal rule that might want to predetermine it), cf. Antimo Lucarelli. "In Technology We Trust: An Introduction to Emanuele Severino's Understanding of the Human Technological Era" (Lucarelli 2025c), in Severino, Emanuele. *The Fundamental Tendency of Our Time*, trans. by Antimo Lucarelli, ed. by Giulio Goggi, Damiano Sacco, and Ines Testoni (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025), pp. 1-23.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Chapter 1, section 2.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*.

Ancient Greek thinkers. Heidegger himself sensed that, as is evident from a note he wrote in one of his personal notebooks:

«In his *Returning to Parmenides*, here is a new beginning of foundational thought and an originary and deeply-rooted culture».

(«Nel suo *Ritornare a Parmenide*, ecco un nuovo inizio del pensiero fondativo e una cultura originaria radicata»).

<sup>33</sup>

Unfortunately, the German original of this personal note is not available because Heidegger's notebook has not been published. In the absence of the German, I have made a translation of Francesco Alfieri's Italian translation of Heidegger's words, as these were uttered by Alfieri in his speech at the international congress on *Heidegger nel Pensiero di Severino* («Heidegger in Severino's thought»), held in Brescia in 2019.<sup>34</sup> In 2016, Francesco Alfieri was appointed by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann as his private assistant. Von Herrmann was the last personal assistant of Heidegger and the one to whom Heidegger entrusted the editing of the *Gesamtausgabe* of his works. In his capacity as a private assistant of von Herrmann, Alfieri found three personal notes by Heidegger on Severino, one of which is the one quoted above.

Quoting Heidegger's judgement on Severino is no attempt to gain respect for Severino through Heidegger. Every great thinker is great by themselves. Now, with regards to Severino, one will find that his «Ancient Greek» meditation on «being» and «nothingness» has a peculiar impact on his interpretation of the Western understanding of death. For him, as anticipated above, there exists a *fundamental sense* in which, according to Western culture, things die. That is the «*ontological-metaphysical*» sense. Indeed, humans «die», planets «die», the universe «dies». This is especially true for what Severino deemed the «consistency of nihilism» («coerenza del nichilismo»).

<sup>35</sup> By this phrase, he alluded to an *immanent development* of Western culture: This has recently become aware, according to his interpretation, that believing in the ontological-metaphysical meaning of dying entails believing that *everything* dies, because any universal, that is eternal rule of Being would prevent things from being born *from nothingness* and from dying *into nothingness*. In fact, were there any eternal rule, things would need to coexist with it eternally in order to be eternally subject to it. Here, I will not go into more detail about Severino's interpretation, as this is not relevant for my purposes. Let me rather ask: What is «death» from an ontological-metaphysical perspective? What is it «to die», *in an ontological-metaphysical sense*?

As anticipated previously, the fundamental meaning of «dying» is «going into nothingness». To go into nothingness, something needs to step out of «the Whole» of reality («il Tutto»).

<sup>36</sup> In more technical philosophical terms, one could define «the Whole» as «the totality of being» («la totalità dell'essere»), which phrase Severino also uses. According to Severino (and to the author of this study, for how that can matter),

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *YouTube* [online], < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A8FpLiWuSwo> > [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> January 2025].

<sup>34</sup> The acts of the congress have been published but Alfieri's speech appears to be included in a much shorter version. Cf. *Heidegger nel Pensiero di Severino: Metafisica, Religione, Politica, Economia, Arte, Tecnica*, ed. by Ines Testoni, Giulio Goggi (Padua: Padua University Press, 2019).

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Emanuele Severino. *Destino della necessità. Katà tò χρεών* (Milan: Adelphi, 1980), pp. 43-64.

<sup>36</sup> By means of example, cf. Severino 2016, pp. 85-274.

nothing can «die» if, *in any way*, it continues to be part of «the Whole». In that sense, even the objects of memory *still exist*. Indeed, they *belong* to «the Whole» of reality as something past. Yet at the same time, what those objects were, before becoming objects of memory, *does not exist anymore, in any sense*: It is not part of «the Whole».

Of course, this is not the place to go into a fuller ontology of memory, with all related issues and paradoxes. Some of them might well have been provoked by my statements here on the distinction between what the objects of memory *were*, before passing, and what they *are*, after passing. Indeed, how can this distinction be drawn, if the objects of memory only exist, by now, as objects of memory? That is one criticism Severino himself makes of the Western understanding of memory.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, in this context, I simply wish to state that no matter how many paradoxes this may provoke, it must be acknowledged that if *nothing* had *gone into nothingness*, that is if *nothing* had *stepped out of «the Whole»*, one's memories would not be «memories» anymore. They would rather be «memories of the eternal» («ricordi dell'eterno», Severino) and they would still exist, *in the very same way* as they did before becoming objects of one's memory.<sup>38</sup>

Now, my claim here is that *the process through which something goes into nothingness cannot be directly experienced*, at least by humans. That is to say that the process *in which death fundamentally consists*, as «going into nothingness», is not directly experienceable. Indeed, for such a process to be directly observable, «the Whole» itself would need to be directly observable. Only then could *the fact that something is ceasing to belong to «the Whole»* be manifest. But that is just not the case, and it could not be the case.<sup>39</sup> This is the *epistemological consequence* to be drawn from the general fact that reality as a whole is obscure (in the very phenomenological sense in which also death is). This «ontological-metaphysical-phenomenological» obscurity, though not its epistemological consequence, has already been recognised by philosophers:

«Am Ende besteht ein wesenhafter Unterschied zwischen dem Erfassen des Ganzen des Seienden an sich und dem Sichbefinden inmitten des Seienden im Ganzen. Jenes ist grundsätzlich unmöglich. Dieses geschieht ständig in unserem Dasein. Freilich sieht es so aus, als hafteten wir gerade im alltäglichen Dahintreiben je nur an diesem oder jenem Seienden, als seien wir an diesen oder jenen Bezirk des Seienden verloren. So aufgesplittert der Alltag erscheinen mag, er behält immer noch das Seiende, wenngleich schattenhaft, in einer Einheit des „Ganzen“...».<sup>40</sup>

(«In the end an essential distinction prevails between comprehending the whole of beings in themselves and finding oneself in the midst of beings as a whole. The former is impossible in principle. The latter happens all the time in our Dasein. It does seem as though we cling to this or that particular being, precisely in our everyday preoccupations, as though we were completely lost in this or that region of beings. No matter how fragmented our everyday existence may appear to be, however, it always deals with beings in a unity of the "whole," if only in a shadowy way.»).<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Severino 1980, pp. 173-212.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>39</sup> On the intrinsic reason why direct perception is limited and cannot extend beyond itself, cf. Lucarelli 2021, pp. 109-113.

<sup>40</sup> Heidegger 1976, p. 110.

<sup>41</sup> Heidegger 1998, p. 87.

The ontological-metaphysical dimension of dying belongs to every death. That is to say that everything that dies goes into nothingness. Therefore, the unknowability of going into nothingness belongs to every death. That is to say that every particular death is unobservable. It is now time to draw the existential consequence of this, which is relevant for my purposes: *As a process where a human goes into nothingness, human death is itself an ontological-metaphysical process and is therefore obscure once again and for a more fundamental reason.* Let me provide an example.

In watching somebody die, what is directly watched is not the death of somebody. It is rather the decay of somebody's body. It is only due to an *interpretation of the hidden meaning* of what is directly perceived that the decay of somebody's body can be interpreted to be the death of somebody. At this point, Severino would argue that it is because of a *mistaken nihilistic interpretation* that the decay of somebody's body becomes the «death» of somebody. Nonetheless, as mentioned, I do not agree with Severino on this, and I simply wish to inherit the descriptive element of his analysis. In this context, let me mention that it is not relevant that the death of somebody is also hidden to oneself for further reasons than the ontological-metaphysical ones. Predictably, these further reasons are given by the fact that the others' minds are not directly observable. In the present context, what is relevant is that *no matter whether death has yet to come or is here right now*, death is obscure *by definition*. That is the consequence of the ontological-metaphysical nature of death as «going into nothingness».

This obscurity should be regarded as more fundamental than the obscurity discussed in the first chapter because it must belong to death even when death is no longer a not-yet. That is why I am going to introduce a specific adjective to define the obscurity of death as a not-yet: «*Ontic-metaphysical*». By this term, I mean everything which should be regarded «ontic» *from an ontological-metaphysical perspective*. In fact, it is not due to ontological-metaphysical reasons that death, as a not-yet, is obscure. Rather, this obscurity is due to temporal reasons: Death is obscure because it is a future event. Let me use this occasion to state that the «ontic-metaphysical» aspect of death and its «ontological-metaphysical» one are deemed inseparable in this study. That is because they are «relatives» («τὰ πρὸς τι»), to use Aristotle's term.

### **3.2.1 Emanuele Severino and the Discovery of the Impossible Manifestation of Death as «Going into Nothingness». On a More Fundamental, «Metontological» Understanding of This Impossibility**

I will now come to a more thorough examination of Severino's doctrine, especially his claim that human death and death in general, as an ontological-metaphysical process, cannot be directly perceived. I will show how the claim I just advanced differs from Severino's one. In order to do that, I will recall Heidegger's distinction between metaphysics and the «thinking of Being» («Seinsdenken»)<sup>42</sup> Here, I should mention that I have already developed the following considerations, albeit in a briefer form, in another context.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Cf. the „Brief über den Humanismus“ (in Heidegger 1976, pp. 313-364). (“Letter on Humanism”, in Heidegger 1998, pp. 239-276).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Lucarelli 2025a, sections 1-2.

In this study, I inherit the word «metontology» («Metontologie») from Martin Heidegger. With it, I refer to what Heidegger meant with «Seinsdenken» («thinking of Being»). Yet this is not Heidegger's understanding of this word.<sup>44</sup> The reason why I use a Heideggerian word to allude to what Heidegger meant with another word is to be found in my claim that Heidegger has interpreted the Western metaphysical tradition in a restrictive fashion. In the present section, I will demonstrate that «metontology» is not the theoretical horizon where Western metaphysics has been dwelling with no possibility to grasp «Being». On the contrary, I will claim that what Heidegger called «Seinsdenken» is itself included in Western metontology.<sup>45</sup> As is natural, this claim will also require a partial re-interpretation of what is meant with «Seinsdenken». At first, my interpretation of Heidegger might surprise Heideggerian readers, as I will interpret his philosophy using categories he explicitly rejected. However, this is not accidental; rather, it expresses the claim that what Heidegger believed could not be expressed through these categories can, in fact, be expressed through them. Before proceeding, let me note that my understanding of metontology does not always overlap with what is nowadays meant with this word.<sup>46</sup>

As is known, Western metaphysics is for Heidegger concerned with «Being» («Sein»), that is with the meaning of reality as a whole. Aristotle's doctrine of the «βεβαιωτάτη ἀρχή» («firmest principle», *Metaphysica* 1005b) is a good example of this. In fact, what was later called «principle of non-contradiction» is understood by Aristotle as the essence of reality as a whole: Nothing can be contradictory. Before his famous «Kehre» («turn»), Heidegger himself was a metaphysician and his attempt in his greatest work of that period, *Being and Time*, was to understand what enables humans to search for – and eventually detect – the «meaning of Being» («der Sinn vom Sein»)<sup>47</sup>. His answer was that it is a peculiar fundamental structure of *Dasein*, that is the «comprehension of Being» («Seinsverständnis»), which enables humans to have a relationship with the «meaning of Being». Here, let me briefly note that by «metaphysics», I mean what I should call «ontological metaphysics», according to the terms chosen in this study. Yet for the same reason, I should also say «metontological metaphysics» rather than «metontology». Nonetheless, to avoid further complications, in this section I will use a simpler terminology.

Let me recall that at a later stage of his philosophical career, after the «Kehre», Heidegger changed his mind and started conceiving of Western metaphysics as concerned with what is *inessential* about «Being». What interested metaphysicians was in fact *the meaning* of Being, not *Being* itself. In the words of the «second» Heidegger, what interested metaphysicians was «Seiendheit», «beingness». This is a term that Heidegger

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<sup>44</sup> On Heidegger's concept of «Metontologie», cf. Kelly Edward Mink. *Heidegger, Ontology, Metontology, and the Turn* (Loyola University Chicago, 1988), in Dissertations. 2561 [online] <[https://ecommons.luc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3560&context=luc\\_diss](https://ecommons.luc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3560&context=luc_diss)> [accessed 17<sup>th</sup> March 2024]; Steven Galt Crowell. "Metaphysics, Metontology, and the End of Being and Time", in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 60, no. 2 (2000), pp. 307-331; and William McNeill. "Metaphysics, Fundamental Ontology, Metontology", in *Heidegger Studies*, vol. 8 (1992), pp. 63-79.

<sup>45</sup> Heidegger's restrictive tendency of interpretation has already been mentioned in Chapter 1, section 2.

<sup>46</sup> For some recent investigations on metontology, cf. D. Chalmers, D. Manley, and R. Wasserman (ed. by). *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Heidegger 1985, *exergue* and *Introduction*. pp. 19-64.

coined when he did not deem himself prey to metaphysics anymore.<sup>48</sup> In Heidegger's view, metaphysics has traditionally searched for a *specific* unifying element in reality, such as the principle of non-contradiction, rather than the *ground* of every possible unifying element (in stating this, Heidegger of course assumes that there are many such elements through which reality as a whole can in principle be interpreted). In 1930s, Heidegger began to refer to this difference as the difference between «beingness» and «Beyng» («Seyn»).^49

For Heidegger, «Beyng» is that thanks to which every being – humans, plants, galaxies – is a «being». In that sense, «Beyng» is the structure of reality. However, throughout the history of Western metaphysics, the structure of reality has been interpreted in innumerable ways: It has been interpreted to be essentially non-contradictory, contradictory, contained in consciousness, etc. Each time, each of these ontological-metaphysical interpretations has *determined the meaning* of «Beyng». In that sense, these interpretations have reduced «Beyng» to one of its possible meanings. Nonetheless, for Heidegger, «Beyng» is irreducible to any of its particular meanings: So much so that Western metaphysics cannot help re-interpreting it. Now, the irreducibility of «Beyng» to any of its interpretations is what Heidegger famously called «ontological difference» («ontologische Differenz»): the difference between «Beyng» and «beings».<sup>50</sup> In Heidegger's view, Western metaphysics is the ever-failing attempt to eliminate this difference.

Starting from this acknowledgement, the «second» Heidegger has attempted to make a discourse on «Beyng» without eliminating the «ontological difference». For him, that meant making a discourse on the «essencing of Beyng» («das Wesen des Seyns»): It meant looking for what *essentially* belongs to «Beyng».<sup>51</sup> Now, the «essencing of Beyng» is to be found in the unconscious similarity between all ontological-metaphysical interpretations of the meaning of «Beyng». That is why the very first element of the «essencing of Beyng» is the «ontological difference» itself. In fact, it essentially belongs to «Beyng» that «Beyng» is not reducible to the particular interpretations of «Beyng». In this context, let me say that in the present study, anything belonging to the «essencing of Beyng» will be called «*metontological*». Therefore, «metontological» are to be considered all characters that Heidegger ascribes to «Beyng»: «Beyng» as «nothing» («Nichts»), «Beyng» as «abyss» («Abgrund»), «Beyng» as «Un-Concealment» («Un-Verborgenheit» or «ἀ-λήθεια»), «Beyng» as «event» («Ereignis»), etc.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>48</sup> For an occurrence of this term, cf. Heidegger 1976, *Vom Wesen und Begriff der Φύσις. Aristoteles, Physik B, 1*, pp. 239-302. (For the English, cf. Heidegger 1998, pp. 183-230). On «beingness», cf. also Richard Capobianco's entry in Wrathall 2021, pp. 116-118.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. for instance Heidegger (1975-), *II. Abteilung: Vorlesungen 1919-1944, Band 39: Hölderlins Hymnen „Germanien“ und „Der Rhein“*, ed. by S. Ziegler (1980b). For the English edition, cf. Martin Heidegger. *Hölderlin's Hymns "Germania" and "The Rhine"*, ed. by William McNeill and Julia Ireland (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014). On the word «Seyn» («beyng»), cf. the respective entry in Wrathall 2021, pp. 121-123 (writ. M. A. Wrathall).

<sup>50</sup> Cf. for instance Heidegger 1975-, *I. Abteilung: Veröffentlichte Schriften 1914-1970: Band 6.1, 6.2: Nietzsche*, ed. by Brigitte Schillbach (1996, 1997). (English edition: Martin Heidegger. *Nietzsche*, 2 vols., trans. by David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1980a). For the concept of «ontological difference», cf. the respective entry in Wrathall 2021, pp. 227-230 (writ. Daniel O. Dahlstrom).

<sup>51</sup> On the notion of «Wesen» («essencing»), cf. Richard Capobianco's entry in Wrathall 2021, pp. 291-292.

<sup>52</sup> By means of examples, cf. Heidegger 1975-, *III. Abteilung: Unveröffentlichte Abhandlungen / Vorträge – Gedachtes, Band 65: Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (1997b); Martin Heidegger.

At this stage, I can come to the relevance of the question of metontology for my existential ontology of death. As anticipated, I will offer a «metontological» argument for the obscurity of death, understood as «going into nothingness». To do that, let me rephrase what has been stated about Heidegger's philosophy. Especially, let me rephrase it according to the words of this study, which are not Heideggerian on this matter. In the words of this study, Western metaphysics has been looking for the essence of reality and it has always identified this essence with a specific «meaning» of reality. On the contrary, Heidegger's endeavour was to find the essence *of the essence* of reality. That is, the essence of all particular essences detected by Western metaphysics. In that respect, Heidegger's move is identical with the move of Western metaphysics itself: Only, while metaphysics has been looking for the essence of reality, Heidegger was looking for the essence of the essence of reality. That is the sense in which, in my opinion, Heidegger's idea of the «overcoming of metaphysics» («Überwindung der Metaphysik») expresses, at the same time, a distance from and a closeness to metaphysics.

As recalled previously, Heidegger would have not phrased his stance in the way I am doing it here because for him traditional notions, such as the notion of essence, are not capable of expressing «Beyng».<sup>53</sup> Nonetheless, this idea is due to Heidegger's tendency to interpret traditional philosophical notions in a restricted manner. For what Heidegger calls «Beyng» can be traditionally framed *as the essence of «Being»*. This is to say that metaphysics contains the tools to overcome metaphysics. In other words, one can go beyond metaphysics through metaphysics, utilising the more essential layers of its notions. Therefore, once again, it must be acknowledged that *metaphysics always buries its undertakers*. Heidegger himself knew this perfectly and sometimes escaped his own interpretive tendency.<sup>54</sup> However, ultimately speaking, one might argue that he let prevail in him the will to emphasise the limits of traditional metaphysics rather than its hidden potential.

One might wonder whether Heidegger's choice of a restricted interpretive tendency sprang out of Heidegger's personal perception that philosophy was overly burdened with its past, both terminologically and conceptually, and that philosophy's crisis could not be overcome through the hidden potential of what had produced the crisis. However, one might also wonder whether concealing philosophy's hidden potential to overcome its crisis is the right path to overcome the crisis. Might this aggravate the crisis instead? I will leave that question open.

After introducing my notion of metontology, let me draw the conclusion which is relevant for my purposes: *The obscurity of human death, understood as «going into nothingness», is a metontological necessity*. In other

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“Was ist Metaphysik?”, in Heidegger 1976, pp. 103-122; Martin Heidegger. “Zur Erörterung der Gelassenheit: Aus einem Feldweggespräch über das Denken”, in Heidegger 1983, pp. 37-74. Cf. also the “Brief über den Humanismus” (Heidegger 1976, pp. 313-364). For the English editions, cf. Martin Heidegger. *Contributions to Philosophy: Of the Event*, ed. by Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2012); Heidegger 1998, pp. 82-96; Martin Heidegger. *Discourse on thinking: a translation of Gelassenheit*, trans. by John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund; intr. by John M. Anderson (New York: Harper & Row, 1966); and Heidegger 1998, pp. 239-276. For the notions of «abyss», «alêtheia», «unconcealment», «Ereignis» (whose translation ranges from «event» to «appropriation» and «adaptation»), cf. the respective entries in Wrathall 2021, pp. 227-230 (writ. Daniel O. Dahlstrom), pp. 9-11 (writ. Mark A. Wrathall), pp. 34-36 (writ. Taylor Carman), pp. 789-792 (writ. Mark A. Wrathall and Taylor Carman), pp. 19-30 (writ. Mark A. Wrathall).

<sup>53</sup> Cf. the *Note* to Martin Heidegger. “On the essence of truth”. In: Heidegger 1998, pp. 136-155 (pp. 153-154).

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Chapter 1, section 2.



words, no matter how «Beyng» is interpreted, it is a *metontological fact* that the process through which something steps out of «the Whole» is an obscure process. I am now in a position to differentiate this claim from Severino's idea of the impossibility to experience death, understood as «going into nothingness», expressed for the first time in the *Postscript to Returning to Parmenides*.<sup>55</sup>

From an overall perspective, Severino offers two arguments why death in general, understood as a stepping out of «the Whole», should not be considered as a direct content of experience. He offers a «phenomenological» and a «logical» argument. Let me start from the «phenomenological» one. Firstly, let me note that in his writings, Severino understands the «phenomenological» sphere in different manners. In the present case, he does not mean what I meant so far in the study. In fact, he refers to a *specific* phenomenological mode of presence. This is the mode of presence typical of the things of human experience, such as the sky, the stars, and humans themselves. To this extent, «phenomenological» indicates for Severino the «appearance» («Erscheinung»), in the de-Kantianised sense of «appearance» elaborated in the previous chapter. That is to say that even Severino's understanding of the «appearance» relies on the notion of indirect perception. Indeed, as argued, humans, the stars, and the sky are not direct contents of experience in a strict sense.<sup>56</sup>

Severino's «phenomenological» argument is as simple as any phenomenological argument should be: The process of death as going into nothingness *is not a content of human experience*. For Severino, that is simply a «phenomenological» fact to be acknowledged. As such, there is no necessity attached to this fact: The *necessary* reason why death cannot be experienced will be provided by the «logical» argument, as I will demonstrate. Yet if, being a «phenomenological» argument, it cannot be demonstrated, it is nonetheless possible *to show* that the process of going into nothingness is not a content of experience.

In his lessons, Severino used the American bombardment of the city of Hiroshima on the 6<sup>th</sup> of August 1945 as an example. The example is deliberately disturbing, but that happens because Severino wants to show that the real «disturbing» element is one's belief in the possibility for things to go into nothingness. According to Severino, it is because of this belief that *it was possible* to destroy Hiroshima. In fact, after a bombardment, one says that something

«has been *destroyed* and that the result of this destruction is its now being a Nothing. But – here is the problem – *does this nothingness appear, or does nothing more of the object appear* (nothing, that is, of the mode of Being that distinguished it before it was burned)? In other words, does it *appear that* the object *is nothing*, or does the object *no longer appear?*».<sup>57</sup>

(«è andato *distrutto* e che il risultato di questa distruzione è il suo essere ormai un niente. Ma – ecco il problema – *questo esser niente appare, oppure di quell'oggetto non appare più niente* (niente del modo di essere che gli conveniva prima di andare bruciato)? *Appare che* l'oggetto *è niente*, o l'oggetto *non appare più?*»)<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Severino 2016, pp. 85-145.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Chapter 1, section 5.

<sup>57</sup> Severino 2016, p. 107-108 (Severino's emphasis).

<sup>58</sup> Severino, Emanuele. *Essenza del nichilismo* (Milan: Adelphi, 1995a), p. 85.

According to Severino, the «phenomenological» sphere of experience only shows a *chronological succession*: In the first stage, it shows Hiroshima as intact, whereas in the second, it shows Hiroshima as destroyed (leaving aside for now the intermediate phases of this process). But it never shows that *the intact Hiroshima has gone into nothingness*. Yet only if the «phenomenological» sphere showed *this*, one could argue that the *destruction* of Hiroshima has been experienced.

For the sake of argument, let me not ask whether this Severinian account of what is experienced in the «phenomenological» sphere is valid. Let me assume that it is. Yet as Severino himself states, his «phenomenological» argument is not an argument for the *impossibility* of the manifestation of death. Said otherwise, it simply *occurs* that the process through which things go into nothingness and thus cease to be is not a content of experience. However (and therefore), that does not rule out the *logical possibility* that one day the process of ontological death will become a content of experience.

To fill this essential gap in the «phenomenological» argument, Severino has a «logical» argument. As he used to say in his lectures, unlike the dark side of the moon, which can in principle become a content of experience, there is no «dark side» of death, understood as going into nothingness, that could ever be experienced. As anticipated, *death as such* is an «illusion» for Severino. That happens because for him, just as for Parmenides, *dying is a contradiction*, especially when considered in its ontological-metaphysical sense. Only, nobody except for Parmenides has ever realised this (and even Parmenides has been a nihilist thinker for other reasons, in Severino's opinion).<sup>59</sup> The hidden contradiction of death – and of any process comparable to death, such as birth – lies in the fact that what «dies» *becomes* the nothingness into which it goes. And insofar as it is a form of becoming, death involves the «identity of *beings* and *nothingness*» («l'identità dell'essere e del niente»).

This principle is famously stated by Parmenides too, though he applies it to «τὸ εἶναι» («being», also translated with «what-is»), which should not be confused with «Being» as understood by Severino. Here is the Parmenidean passage (Fragment 8, 19-22):

«Πῶς δ' ἂν ἔπειτα πέλοιτ' ἑόν; πῶς δ' ἂν κε γένοιτο; εἰ γὰρ ἔγεντ', οὐκ ἔστι, οὐδ' εἴ ποτε μέλλει ἔσεσθαι. Τὼς γένεσις μὲν ἀπέσβεσται καὶ ἄπυστος ὄλεθρος.»

«And how would what-is be hereafter? How would it have come to be? For if it has come to be, it is not, and similarly if it is ever about to be. Thus coming to be is quenched and perishing unheard of.»<sup>60</sup>

According to Severino's philosophy, which I can now legitimately define «Neo-Parmenidean», any ontological-metaphysical process is an irredeemable contradiction.<sup>61</sup> The acknowledgement of this contradiction has been present since Severino's first ample text, *La struttura originaria*, although the

<sup>59</sup> Severino 2016, pp. 39-44.

<sup>60</sup> Graham 2010, p. 217.

<sup>61</sup> As an example, cf. Severino 2016, pp. 15-16. Let me note that the most significant contribution on the notion of «Neo-Parmenideanism», when referred to Severino, is Mauro Visentin's work on the topic. Cf. Mauro Visentin. *Il neoparmenidismo italiano: Le premesse storico filosofiche: Croce e Gentile* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 2007) and Mauro Visentin. *Il neoparmenidismo italiano: Dal neoidealismo al neoparmenidismo* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 2011). However, it is in a wholly different sense that I am understanding Severino's «Neo-Parmenideanism» here.

consequences he drew from it have changed. In fact, the «second Severino», often simply called «Severino», started thinking of this contradiction as «the impossible», «the absurd». The first text where this is stated is the *Postscript to Returning to Parmenides*, to be found in the collection of essays *The Essence of Nihilism*.<sup>62</sup> Let me briefly explain Severino's view.

To be able to be destroyed, Hiroshima had *to become* nothing. «If it had not become nothing (or if no aspect of Hiroshima had become a Nothing), we would not say that Hiroshima has been destroyed».<sup>63</sup> But to become nothing, Hiroshima had *to be* nothing:

«If we maintain that, when Being is-not, Being has become nothing, why do we continue to say “when Being is-not,” instead of saying “when *Nothing* is-not”? [...] “*Being that is-not*” when it is-not, is nothing other than *Being made identical to Nothing* [...]».<sup>64</sup>

Whenever something is destroyed, a contradictory identity between what it was and nothingness is implied. In fact, if Hiroshima's destruction did not entail any identity of Hiroshima with «Nothing», one would simply say: «Hiroshima was. After that, Nothing was». Now, provided that this contradiction (according to Severino) is «the absurd», «the impossible», how could it be experienced? It is clear that being the «absurd», the «impossible», it cannot *be* in general, and therefore, it cannot *be* a content of experience either. That is Severino's «logical» argument against the experienceability of death, understood as going into nothingness.<sup>65</sup>

As is evident, this is a «logical-metaphysical» argument: It is because a logical principle, i.e. the principle of non-contradiction, is given an ontological-metaphysical validity, that contradictions become impossible. In other words, it is because what is impossible *according to traditional logic* is seen as *absolutely impossible* that Severino's argument can be made. However, this is not the right context to argue against Severino on this matter. In fact, I have started doing so elsewhere, addressing the objections that a Severinian reader may raise.<sup>66</sup> Yet on the other hand, this is the right context to say that Severino's argument is stronger than it might seem at first glance, and that his absolutisation of the principle of non-contradiction is rooted in a real ontological-metaphysical validity of the principle, as firstly acknowledged by Aristotle in *Metaphysica Gamma*. Only, I believe that Severino has not acknowledged that exactly in being marked by a real ontological-metaphysical validity, the principle of non-contradiction *remains* a logical principle.

Let me conclude by saying that if one disagrees with Severino's logicistic metaphysics, according to which contradiction as such can never be real, the impossibility to experience death, understood as going into

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<sup>62</sup> Severino 2016, pp. 85-145.

<sup>63</sup> Severino 2016, p. 10. I am quoting from the *Introduction* Severino wrote for the English translation of *Essenza del Nichilismo*.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 38 (Severino's emphasis).

<sup>65</sup> That is also the *only* argument Severino has against the *possibility* to experience ontological-metaphysical processes, as I argued in Lucarelli 2025a, pp. 102-103.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Antimo Lucarelli. “La contraddizione come posizione filosofica fondamentale: Sulla metafora della «scala» («Leiter») nel pensiero di Ludwig Wittgenstein e Michael Della Rocca e sulla critica di Emanuele Severino”, in Teresa Agovino, Matteo Maselli, and Mariagrazia Staffieri (ed. by). *Figure Retoriche: Tradizioni, Discipline, Contesti* (Milan: Ledizioni, 2025b), pp. 1011-1028.

nothingness, falls apart. That happens because the Severinian argument is *not a metontological argument*, but one grounded in a *specific* metaphysics, that is Severino's Neo-Parmenidean metaphysics. This shows that *the truly essential argument* for the impossibility of experiencing death, as an ontological-metaphysical process, is the *metontological* argument I made in the previous sections. For such an argument does not draw upon any specific metaphysics but on the essence of metaphysics itself. That is, on metontology.

### **3.3 Second Ground of Existential Nihilism: The Mind-Body Problem and the Many Ontological-Metaphysical Deaths**

The discussion of the first ground of existential nihilism's understanding of death has come to an end. I have shown that an essential ontological-metaphysical layer is embedded in death, as understood by existential nihilism and by any other possible thanatology: Death is annihilation, that is, it is the event where a human steps out of reality. In this respect, it is not significant whether the entire human nature goes into nothingness, which is existential nihilism's view, or simply a part of it, which is Christianity's view, for example. Indeed, in both cases, death consists in going into nothingness. In the last section, I have also drawn the epistemological consequence of this: As an ontological-metaphysical process, death is obscure to humans for one more reason than the one mentioned in the previous chapter: a «metontological» reason. This lies in the fact that nobody can ever have a direct experience of death – be their death or somebody else's death – given that in order to die, one needs to say farewell to reality as a whole. Yet just as nobody can directly experience reality as a whole, nobody can experience their saying farewell to reality.

In the present section, I will mention another ground of the human understanding of death, but this will not be examined thoroughly. That is because I will have a chance to do so in the next chapter. As argued in the first chapter, one's understanding of one's death, no matter how one understands death, entails an understanding of those who die.<sup>67</sup> That is, it entails an understanding of oneself as a human being. In particular, an understanding of death as absolute, as existential nihilism suggests, entails an understanding of those who «absolutely» die. In that sense, it is clear that *to «absolutely» die, one needs to «absolutely» live*. In other words, the interpretation of death as absolute has a repercussion on (the understanding of) life. For if death is the end of the entirety of life, life can only be what it is before death comes. On the contrary, according to Christianity, life can be what it is, even though partly, also after death, for death is not an absolute farewell to life: It is just a passage to another life.

Now, such an «absoluteness» of life, as a complementary concept to the absoluteness of death, is to be clearly indicated for existential nihilism to be clearly investigated. That means that the study is confronted with the mind-body problem again. Indeed, the human bodily nature belongs to the «absoluteness» of life. One's body is part of the entirety of life that dies with death. Nonetheless, speaking of that now would lead the study too far, for it would involve an examination of the fuller essence of human existence, as this is interpreted by existential nihilism. I will devote the next chapter to such an endeavour, to the extent that is relevant for my

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. section 6.

purposes in this study. In this context, let me note that *until* I indicate my understanding of the essence of the human being (as this is understood by existential nihilism), it is not possible to make a criticism of it. However, if one wishes to make, here already, the classic anti-essentialist criticism, according to which there can be a priori no «essence» of the human being, I will respond that one might find out that my notion of essence is different, and that to a determinate extent, it is legitimate for philosophy to talk about the «essence» of the human being. On this, I refer the reader to the next chapter.

In this context, what I would like to say is that if death is *always* to be grasped as the process of going into nothingness, as demonstrated following Severino, this means that *in existential nihilism's specific view*, what goes into nothingness is *the entirety of human nature*. That is the deeper meaning of the «absoluteness» of human death. In fact, death's ontological-metaphysical character should not be confused with death's absoluteness. These are *two hierarchically different elements* of existential nihilism: The first has been identified as the *ground* of any human attitude towards death, while the second has been identified as a *specific component* of the existential-nihilistic idea of death. In the next chapter, I will investigate *how many deaths* one dies if one dies «absolutely», as well as *how many deaths* one dies independently of how death is interpreted. In other words, I will investigate the entirety of human nature and differentiate its constituents.

### **3.4 Second Component of Existential Nihilism: The Irreversibility of the «Sleep»: A Melissian Echo**

Existential nihilism is not satisfied with death being a general farewell to life. As a matter of fact, the existential nihilist believes this farewell to be *definitive*: There is no coming back. That might seem obvious and not worth analysing. However, if it is truly obvious, what does «definitive» mean in this context? Even the difference between the «definitiveness» and the «absoluteness» of death might seem obvious. Yet what is their relationship? Is there any particular reason why existential nihilism believes death to be final? Does that depend on the belief that one dies entirely? In the present section, I will focus on *irreversibility* as a component of existential nihilism's understanding of death.

In the existential-nihilistic view as understood in this study, death's irreversibility is *an inevitable consequence of death's absoluteness*. Before investigating why, let me note that it is possible to conceive of existential nihilism less narrowly. It is possible to identify as «nihilistic» any attitude whose conviction is that human death is an absolute event, no matter whether this is understood as irrevocable. Nonetheless, that is not the phenomenon I wish to investigate in the present study. For I believe that in the contemporary age existential nihilism is especially found in the form analysed in this study. The reason why this is the case is to be found in the fact that an absolute death seems to *entail* an irreversible death. I will devote this section to explaining why.

The idea that if death is an utter end of life, such an end must be irrevocable, curiously echoes a well-known stance by Melissus of Samos, Ancient Greek philosopher and follower of Parmenides:

«ἀεὶ ἦν ὃ τι ἦν καὶ ἀεὶ ἔσται. Εἰ γὰρ ἐγένετο, ἀναγκαῖόν ἐστι πρὶν γενέσθαι εἶναι μηδέν· εἰ τοίνυν μηδέν ἦν, οὐδαμὰ ἂν γένοιτο οὐδὲν ἐκ μηδενός».<sup>68</sup>

(«Whatever was always was and always will be. For if it came to be, it must have been nothing before it came to be. Now if it was nothing, in no way would anything come from nothing»).<sup>69</sup>

One might object that given the thanatological nature of this study, my reference to Melissus is inappropriate. Indeed, Melissus, as his master Parmenides, refers his discourse to «being» («τὸ ὄν») rather than death. That is because for him and for Parmenides, «τὸ ὄν» is the only thing that «is» («ἐστίν»).

I believe the objection is right, but I should note that it is not my intention to make a full-fledged comparison between Melissus' «ontological» discourse and my thanatological one. My intention is to underline a curious analogy and its impact on the existential-nihilistic notion of death. Therefore, I will firstly say that, despite the impression that nowadays one has nothing to do with Melissus, his principle that nothing can be born from nothing has been widely accepted in Western culture. One example is the Christian doctrine of creation. According to this doctrine, creatures could have not been born *from nothing*: They could have not created themselves. Rather, a divine cause was needed:

«Respondeo dicendum quod, sicut supra dictum est, non solum oportet considerare emanationem alicuius entis particularis ab aliquo particulari agente, sed etiam emanationem totius entis a causa universali, quae est Deus, et hanc quidem emanationem designamus nomine creationis. Quod autem procedit secundum emanationem particularem, non praesupponitur emanationi, sicut, si generatur homo, non fuit prius homo, sed homo fit ex non homine, et album ex non albo. Unde, si consideretur emanatio totius entis universalis a primo principio, impossibile est quod aliquod ens praesupponatur huic emanationi. Idem autem est nihil quod nullum ens. Sicut igitur generatio hominis est ex non ente quod est non homo, ita creatio, quae est emanatio totius esse, est ex non ente quod est nihil.».<sup>70</sup>

(«I answer that, as said above (Q. 44, A. 2), we must consider not only the emanation of a particular being from a particular agent, but also the emanation of all being from the universal cause, which is God; and this emanation we designate by the name of creation. Now what proceeds by particular emanation, is not presupposed to that emanation; as when a man is generated, he was not before, but man is made from not-man, and white from not-white. Hence if the emanation of the whole universal being from the first principle be considered, it is impossible that any being should be presupposed before this emanation. For nothing is the same as no being. Therefore as the generation of a man is from the not-being which is not-man, so creation, which is the emanation of all being, is from the not-being which is nothing.»).<sup>71</sup>

In this context, let me note that the «creatio» explained by Thomas Aquinas is a «birth from nothingness» in two senses. The first one is the Melissian sense just mentioned: God creates creatures from a previous state in which nothing existed. The second sense is the ontological-metaphysical sense investigated by Severino: God

<sup>68</sup> Fragment 1.

<sup>69</sup> Graham 2010, p. 471.

<sup>70</sup> Thomas Aquinas. *Summa theologiae*, I<sup>a</sup>, q. 45, a. 1, co.

<sup>71</sup> Thomas Aquinas. «Summa Theologiae», in Thomas Aquinas. *Opera Omnia (Latin-English Edition)*, 60 vols., ed. by Aquinas Institute (Oxford: Aquinas Institute, 2012- ), vol. 13, *Prima Pars, 1-49*, ed. and trans. by Fr. Laurence Shapcote OP (2018), pp. 459-460.

creates creatures from a previous state in which *the creatures* did not exist. That is the deeper meaning of the «creatio ex nihilo sui et subjecti». These two senses of the «birth from nothingness» are present in Melissus' principle too. In fact, what he rejects, in virtue of the absurdity of a birth without a cause, is the ontological-metaphysical birth of «τὸ ὄν»: A birth from *its* previous absolute non-existence.

Now, when suggesting that existential nihilism *has a Melissian nature*, I mean that resurrecting from nothingness is deemed *impossible* by existential nihilism *because of its absurdity*. Only, what is perceived as absurd in this case is not the birth from a previous state in which nothing existed, as in Melissus' case, but the resurrection itself from nothingness. Indeed, how could one come back *from nothingness*? The impossibility of this return is an ontological-metaphysical presupposition rooted in existential nihilism's thanatology.

Yet what would happen if one drew all its consequences from this presupposition? After all, if one thinks that returning from nothingness is absurd because nothing can arise from nothingness, that makes human birth absurd as well. However, existential nihilism does not perceive as absurd the fact that one has to *arise from nothingness* when one is born. That is a first issue with existential nihilism's notion that human death is irreversible.

There is more. In fact, even if my interpretation that existential nihilism is burdened with the general presupposition that nothing can arise from nothingness proved to be wrong, things would get worse. For if it is not grounded in a *general*, ontological-metaphysical presupposition, the absurdity of a human resurrection becomes itself absurd. Indeed, in that case, *not perceiving human birth as absurd*, existential nihilism would nevertheless perceive *human resurrection* as absurd. Now, what is the difference between birth and re-birth that can justify this unequal treatment?

There is even more. For even admitting the legitimacy to treat differently birth and re-birth, it must be acknowledged that the *consequentia*, which existential nihilism draws from the absoluteness of death, *non sequitur* – no matter how compelling it can seem, no matter how well motivated. It is simply by virtue of a biased judgement that existential nihilism links the absoluteness of death with its definitiveness. Predictably, this criticism holds for those who are open to see a possible alternative to drawing the «necessary» conclusion that death is irrevocable. In other words, the criticism of the *non-sequitur* kind requires a more open thanatological perspective as its ineliminable condition. In fact, *if* one does not open one's mind – not that this is necessarily a free and voluntary act – in order to see that definitiveness may not follow from absoluteness, one will *correctly judge* that absoluteness entails definitiveness. Nonetheless, a thanatological perspective that closes in on itself is not the philosophical one chosen for this study. From that perspective, I will demonstrate that close-mindedness is a feature itself of existential nihilism.

At this stage, it is interesting to recall that even the Socratic alternative between a thanatological sleep without dreams and the migration of the soul to another world *is dependent on a Melissian understanding* of death. Indeed, in assuming that death might consist in a sleep without dreams, Socrates posits that this sleep should

last forever: It should last an «eternity» («ὁ πᾶς χρόνος»)<sup>72</sup> Now, why does that appear so obvious? In this section, I have offered a possible answer to this question by elucidating the ontological-metaphysical presupposition of existential nihilism, according to which nothing can arise *from nothingness*. After all, even Christianity seems to perceive resurrection as a supernatural event, only achievable through the supernatural action of God.

The thought that death's absoluteness entails its irreversibility can sometimes become *confused* and melt the two features. This naturally strengthens the perception of a necessary implication. One reason why the confusion takes place might be found in language. Indeed, one might perceive the words «definitiveness» and «absoluteness» as interchangeable and expressing the same concept. Even in the present study, a constant effort is required to keep the two features distinct from a terminological point of view, at the cost of jeopardising the naturalness of the style of this investigation and its closeness to pre-philosophical thanatological consciousness.

Another effort made in the study consists in maintaining the distinction between the absoluteness, irreversibility, and ontological-metaphysical character of death, as constituents of existential nihilism. In this context, one can perhaps start feeling the *deconstructive effect* of the investigation conducted so far. A calm and lengthy examination sterilises existential nihilism's scariness: Anatomising is a way to destroy, as has been claimed (by Heidegger and Derrida, for instance). In that sense, philosophy can play a role in the psychological and psychoanalytical practice, when existential nihilism becomes the root of mental illnesses.

### **3.5 Third Ground of Existential Nihilism: The Manifestation of Death at the Time of One's Death. On «Dying»**

Let me move onto a further element of existential nihilism's notion of death. Departing from death's irreversibility, which belongs to the specific existential-nihilistic understanding of death, I will now focus on a third ground of the human understanding of death in general. To this end, let me briefly summarise what has been done so far. In the first chapter, I indicated the phenomenological meaning of the obscurity of death for humans. This obscurity has proved to be temporally dependent: It is because death is a future event that it is obscure. In the present chapter, I have stated that death is also obscure for a reason which is not temporal, but «ontological-metaphysical»: As a process of going into nothingness, death is obscure. It is obscure both for those who have not died and for those who are dying. That is because humans, as finite beings, have no direct access to reality as a whole (not that to be finite there needs to be infinite beings). Nonetheless, despite this vast amount of darkness, in the previous chapter I stated:

«Certainly, *until* the status of being alive endures, death “is not an event of life”. Said otherwise, insofar as “life” is grasped as *the status of being alive*, death cannot *in principle* be experienced (nor, *a fortiori ratione*, can it happen)».<sup>73</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Plato, *Apologia*, 40e. (English: Plato 1953, p. 365.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. section 4.2.



By saying this, have I not implied that death can be directly experienced? And does this statement not refute what I have claimed so far on death's metaphysical obscurity? In the current section, I will answer the first question positively, negatively the second. This will require, once again, examining Emanuele Severino's considerations on death as annihilation, especially in their descriptive aspect.

Before starting, let me say that similarly to the previous sections, I will investigate the third ground of the human relationship with death by focusing on a specific thanatological attitude, that is existential nihilism. Therefore, I will refer to the direct encounter that humans can have with death, *understood as an absolute death*. However, my statements will have a wider, ontological-thanatological relevance. Let me start.

In denying the possibility of death, as it is originally conceived by the nihilistic West, that is as going into nothingness, Severino has distinguished two dimensions to death: The «ontological» one, here called «ontological-metaphysical», and the non-ontological one, here called «ontic-metaphysical». Let me note that «ontic» is not a word used by Severino. Nonetheless, in the context of this study, it is useful to give this aspect of death a specific name, in order to distinguish it from death's «ontological-metaphysical» layer. As anticipated, the reason why Severino denied death is that death is a contradiction. Indeed, death entails the identity of beings with nothingness. That is embedded in the very fact that beings *become* nothingness, when they cease to exist.

In this section, I will examine *another contradiction* that is embedded in dying according to Severino, that is the *transformation* of the dying entity into *another entity*. For Severino, this process always accompanies the «ontological-metaphysical» process of death. That is to say that, when something dies, it always transforms into another entity. For example, when the day «dies» and goes into nothingness, it also transforms into the night. In that sense, the assertion «the sun sets» means that «the day goes into nothingness and transforms into the night». Severino developed these remarks on the twofold meaning of dying starting from *Oltre il linguaggio*.<sup>74</sup> In the present context, I will of course focus on human death, rather than death in general, and therefore, I will focus on what a human becomes when they die. As will be demonstrated, first and foremost, a human becomes a corpse. However, that should be understood as an ontological-thanatological statement. In what follows, I will explain what that means and what its impact is on the manifestation of death. Before starting, let me repeat that from a descriptive perspective, I fully agree with Severino (and Parmenides) that dying is a contradiction (a twofold contradiction). Let me also note that here, it is not relevant to elaborate what the limits are for such a statement to be safely grounded.<sup>75</sup>

To understand how death can manifest itself to humans, it is necessary to conduct a more thorough investigation of the «ontic-metaphysical» aspect of dying. That will also explain why I made a reference to

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<sup>74</sup> Emanuele Severino. *Oltre il linguaggio* (Milan: Adelphi, 1992).

<sup>75</sup> These limits are «phenomenological» in kind, in the sense of «phenomenology» that has been developed in Lucarelli 2021 (cf. Chapter 5, pp. 151-171). In that book, «phenomenology» is the science of entities that are directly perceived.

this Severinian notion. Particularly, it is necessary to examine *when exactly* the contradiction of death takes place. Therefore, let me ask: When is it that a human dies? When is it that one transforms into a corpse?

To answer this question, I will go back to what was called Epicurus' «static» understanding of death.<sup>76</sup> On that occasion, I used «static» to mean that in an implicit way, Epicurus denies death as a process: He only conceives of death as *the state of being dead*, and that is why he can assert that humans are never to encounter death. Indeed, once one is dead, one cannot encounter death. Let me remind that even if one agreed with Epicurus' reductionist conception, his principle of the impossibility to encounter death would only hold as long as one also agreed with Epicurus' idea that death is an absolute annihilation of life. For only if death is an absolute annihilation can one not experience one's being dead.

In the present section, I will understand less narrowly my notion of a static conception of death, though. Particularly, by «static», I will also refer to those approaches which, even not denying the processual nature of death, yet forget about this nature. As will be demonstrated, the oblivion of death's processual nature causes a further oblivion: If death is not conceived of as a process, a direct experience of it will be deemed impossible.

For the sake of clarity, let me observe that death's processual nature has nothing to do with the process of human agony. Agony is a continuation of life. Rather, the process of death concerns the event through which every human is to go at some point: The point where life and death will «touch». If that time were not deemed possible, the ancestral fear of facing death would become inexplicable. In this fear, not only can one identify the human conviction that death will come and «touch» life, but also that this touchpoint will be *faced*. That is why one is afraid of *encountering* death. One is afraid of encountering one's own nothingness. As claimed, following Heidegger (though it will soon become clear where I diverge from him), nobody is really unaware of this forthcoming event as the extremity of their future – be they afraid of it or not – except perhaps for newborns. Whether this awareness is conscious or unconscious is of no relevance for a fundamental investigation of death. It is also of no relevance whether one represses such an awareness, as Epicurus seems to do, or not.

These considerations give me a chance to explicate the *methodological ground* in virtue of which I reject, in this study, the Epicurean stance that death never comes to regard life. The ground of my stance might be called «epistemological». By this term, I mean that my study is not concerned with what death *truly is*, but with what *humans think* it is. In that respect, my method is the same as Heidegger's in *Being and Time*. In fact, to prevent Epicurus from being criticised, one could interpret him as if he were talking about what death truly is, rather than the human belief on death. In that case, the Epicurean stance that death does not truly exist cannot be experienced would not be contradictory to my stance that death, according to humans, exists can be experienced.

Now, even if that were the case, Epicurus' stance would then face a different kind of criticism, for it is not clear – at least from a philosophical perspective – on what ground one can assess what death «truly» is. Indeed,

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<sup>76</sup> Cf. Chapter 1, section 4.3.

is one not simply able to assess what death is, *according to oneself*? And after all, even about what one *thinks* about death, one can simply have an indirect certainty. That is what I meant to show in the last chapter, when arguing that even one's awareness that one will die is not a direct content of experience. Therefore, shielding Epicurus from criticism on the epistemological level would only subject him to even sharper criticism on the «ontological» level (in a sense that is different from all the senses that the «ontological» has had in this study).

However, I have no interest in criticising Epicurus as such. Thus, be that as it may, the processual nature of death, understood as an ontic-metaphysical process, is going to unfold as a fundamental character of human death (needless to say, from an «epistemological» point of view). As anticipated, demonstrating this will require detaching death's processual nature from its special reference to existential nihilism, as one particular attitude towards death.

Let me now come to the question of when exactly the processual contradiction of death takes place. In a peculiarly clear passage from *Il Tramonto della Politica* («The Twilight of Politics»), Severino clarifies that according to «mortals», «the process in which something becomes something else» («il processo in cui la cosa diventa altro») and «the process in which something else becomes the something» («il processo in cui l'altro diventa la cosa») are «*synchronic*» («sincronici»).<sup>77</sup> That should be regarded as a clarification of Severino's thesis, expressed in several texts and passages, that the «result of becoming» («risultato del divenire») is «the identity of something and its other» («l'identità di qualcosa e del suo altro»), at least when the process of becoming is conceived in an alienated fashion, as per the «mortal» opinion.<sup>78</sup>

My interpretation of Severino's view is that the contradiction of death lies *in its processual nature*. In other words, it is not when a human still has to die that the contradiction of death takes place, nor when a human is dead. Rather, it is *when one is dying* that the contradiction occurs. Nonetheless, Severino's view might be interpreted differently. In fact, in several passages, he seems to state that the contradiction of death lies in the *terminus ad quem* of the process. That is to say that the «identity between something and its other» would take place *once* one is dead. It would be *once* one had died that one would be identical with what one was, that is an alive person.

In this context, I do not wish to offer an in-depth interpretation of Severino on this matter. I will limit myself to saying that if the contradiction of death is interpreted as occurring after the process of death, a static phase of the process is made identical to the processual phase. Indeed, once one is dead, how can one be alive at the same time? On one hand, it is true that even if Severino were right in thinking this, that would simply represent his interpretation of the «alienated» worldview of «mortals». However, I believe that in reconstructing the «mortal» understanding of death, Severino does not overlook the fact that the contradiction of becoming cannot lie in a static phase, for these are not what makes one speak of «*becoming*». Rather, it is the *processual phase*

<sup>77</sup> My translations (Severino's emphasis). The book I am quoting from has not been translated (cf. Emanuele Severino. *Il tramonto della politica: Considerazioni sul futuro del mondo* (Milan: Rizzoli 2017), p. 263).

<sup>78</sup> By means of example, cf. Emanuele Severino. *Tautótēs* (Milan: Adelphi 1995b).

that makes one speak of «becoming»: The fact that something, *going through a process*, becomes something else.

Therefore, it is in a purely *processual sense* that «the process in which something becomes something else» and «the process in which something else becomes the something» should be understood. In fact, these are two aspects of the same process: The one in which the contradictory «synchrony» of these processes takes place.

These are considerations which the Severinian reader will be fully familiar with. Other readers, however, especially Aristotelian ones, may feel that such observations by Severino fully ignore Aristotle's efforts to conceive of the process of becoming in a non-contradictory fashion. In this context, let me say that Severino has been addressing the Aristotelian position for his entire life, attempting to show that Aristotle's efforts do not achieve their goals.<sup>79</sup> Let me provide an example. Two famous principles through which Aristotle attempts to eliminate the contradictoriness of his conception of becoming are the principle that *becoming happens in time*, and the principle that *the subject of becoming is a «substratum»*. Nonetheless, for Severino, these are but *confirmations* of the contradictoriness of becoming, and I perfectly agree with him. In effect, far from preventing the contradiction, the fact that *over time*, it is not «whiteness» («τὸ λευκὸν») which becomes «blackness» («τὸ μέλαν»), but a *white «substratum»* («ὑποκείμενον») which becomes black, *produces* the contradictory identity of the substratum, as white, with itself, as black.<sup>80</sup> In other words, *the process* through which the white substratum becomes black is the *fusion* between the substratum as white and the substratum as black.<sup>81</sup>

Previously, I clarified the temporal collocation of the contradiction of death, understood as the «ontic-metaphysical» process through which a human becomes a corpse. In what follows, I will draw the announced consequence of this on the experienceability of death. On this matter, my claim is that *it is as an ontic-metaphysical process of transformation that human death can be directly experienced*. That is because one's transformation into a corpse has nothing «ontological-metaphysical» *in itself*. It is *as a process of going into nothingness* that death cannot be directly experienced. Yet this «metontological» impossibility has nothing to do with the «ontic-metaphysical» experienceability of death.<sup>82</sup> In this context, let me note that even those who admit death's contradictory nature as well as the possibility for death to be experienced rarely explain that this is due to ontic-metaphysical reasons, as was done here.

<sup>79</sup> He started in *La Struttura Originaria*. Cf. Severino 1981, pp. 532-542.

<sup>80</sup> For the example I have used, cf. *Physica*, 189a-191a.

<sup>81</sup> On this issue, Severino has also had an emblematic *querelle* with his master Gustavo Bontadini, one of the major Neo-Scholastic thinkers of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Italy. Cf. Gustavo Bontadini. «Σωζειν τα φαινόμενα. A Emanuele Severino», in *Rivista di filosofia neo-scolastica*, 6 (1964), pp. 439-68; Gustavo Bontadini. «Postilla», in *Studia Patavina*, 1 (1968), pp. 73-80; Gustavo Bontadini. «Per Continuare un Dialogo», in *Rivista di filosofia neo-scolastica*, 1 (1983), pp. 110-118; Gustavo Bontadini. «Lettera a Severino», in *Spirali*, 7 (1980), pp. 30-34.

<sup>82</sup> I have already reflected on the conditions of experienceability of becoming in general in *Per un Nuovo Concetto di Fenomeno*. Cf. Lucarelli 2021, Chapter 5.

As mentioned, my claim should not be understood as a claim on what death will be, but on what humans expect death to be. In other words, what I am suggesting is that every human *expects to encounter death* at the time of their death. In this section, I aim at explaining this fact and justifying it on an analytical level.

For existential nihilism, the fact that death can be experienced means that the existential nihilist expects to meet *their own absolute nothingness*. «Nihil sui». Indeed, after death, what is left for an existential nihilist is simply one's corpse. Therefore, the contradiction embedded in a nihilistic death is given by one's identity with a *mere* corpse. On the other hand, for those who believe in a survival, death is the transformation of oneself into a pure soul.

Yet in both cases, the human conviction that death will be faced should not be confused with the conviction that one will be able *to realise* that one is dying. It is not that every human expects to «enter into death with open eyes» («entrer dans la mort les yeux ouverts»), as emperor Hadrian urges himself to do in Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoires d'Hadrien*.<sup>83</sup> Presumably, one expects to die without expecting that one will have the capacity to acknowledge that one is dying. .

I am now in a position to clarify why a static understanding of death ends up rendering the experience of death impossible (or unexplainable). Indeed, it is because one lacks a kinetic approach to death that this happens. The traditional idea of the impossibility of experiencing one's own death arises from a static understanding of the matter. In fact, this experience could never take place *after* one has died. Neither could it happen *before* one dies. Yet exactly because of that, this experience can take place *when* one dies.

Before moving on, let me note that only in the next chapter I will go into detail on the several «ontic-metaphysical» deaths that one dies. In fact, whenever one dies, it is *one's entire nature* that dies: Not in the sense that one necessarily dies in a nihilistic way, but in the sense that one's body, one's mind, and all that one is as a human, transforms into a corpse. That is why I talk about «several» ontic-metaphysical deaths.<sup>84</sup>

### **3.5.1 The Meaning of the Impossibility to Experience Death in *Being and Time*. Heidegger in between Epicureanism and Anti-Epicureanism**

In this section, I will provide an example of a static philosophy of death, intertwined with an «epistemological» method. I am talking about Heidegger's thanatology in *Being and Time*. Indeed, although Heidegger's stance should not be considered strictly Epicurean (since he does not deny the processual nature of death), his «existential analytic» should nonetheless be regarded as a static philosophy of death. This is because Heidegger simply never mentions death's processual nature when talking about death.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Marguerite Yourcenar. *Memoires d'Hadrien: Suivi Carnets de notes de Mémoires d'Hadrien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), p. 304. For the English edition, cf. Marguerite Yourcenar. *Memoirs of Hadrian* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1955), p. 301.

<sup>84</sup> Let me mention that this issue is analogous to the one mentioned in section 3.3 of this chapter, regarding the many «ontological-metaphysical» deaths embedded in death.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. Heidegger 1985, sections 45-62, pp. 231-358.

This negligence has already been acknowledged.<sup>86</sup> What is not clear is the reason for this negligence. According to Michael Watts, «one reason for the avoidance of any discussion of the actual or specific event of death itself is that Heidegger realized that the event of death is something we cannot experience. He shared the same attitude towards the event of death as the philosopher Epicurus, one of the chief proponents of materialism in antiquity [...].»<sup>87</sup>

In this context, I would like to refute this Epicurean interpretation of Heidegger by quoting a crystal-clear passage where Heidegger admits the possibility to «suffer» («erleiden») death:

«Je angemessener das Nichtmehrdasein des Verstorbenen phänomenal gefaßt wird, um so deutlicher zeigt sich, daß solches Mitsein mit dem Toten gerade nicht das eigentliche Zuendegekommenensein des Verstorbenen erfährt. Der Tod enthüllt sich zwar als Verlust, aber mehr als solcher, den die Verbleibenden erfahren. Im Erleiden des Verlustes wird jedoch nicht der Seinsverlust als solcher zugänglich, den der Sterbende „erleidet“. Wir erfahren nicht im genuinen Sinne das Sterben der Anderen, sondern sind höchstens immer nur „dabei“».<sup>88</sup>

«The greater the phenomenal appropriateness with which we take the no-longer-Dasein of the deceased, the more plainly is it shown that in such Being-with the dead, the authentic Being-come-to-an-end [Zuendegekommenensein] of the deceased is precisely the sort of thing which we do not experience. Death does indeed reveal itself as a loss, but a loss such as is experienced by those who remain. In suffering this loss, however, we have no way of access to the loss-of-Being as such which the dying man “suffers”. The dying of Others is not something which we experience in a genuine sense; at most we are always just “there alongside”».<sup>89</sup>

Leaving aside the context of this passage (where Heidegger states that one cannot experience the other’s death), there is a clear indication here that «the dying man “suffers”» a «loss-of-Being». What does it mean «to suffer», in such a context? Does it simply mean that when somebody dies, they lose their being?

In interpreting this passage, one might be deceived by Heidegger’s use of quotation marks when stating that the dying human «“suffers”» a loss of being. One might think that the reason why Heidegger employs them is that one cannot «suffer» death in a genuine sense, not even as a process. This interpretation of the Heideggerian passage has already been suggested, for example by Bernard N. Schumacher.<sup>90</sup> I will now raise two objections against this reading, one concerning the passage and a more general one, concerning Heidegger’s overall perspective in *Being and Time*.

In the passage quoted, Heidegger is drawing a *distinction* between the way in which the dying human «suffers» death and the way in which the observer «experiences» this death. That is indisputable. Yet, if Schumacher’s interpretation were correct, Heidegger would not be drawing any distinction here. For if Heidegger asserts that the dying human *does not* experience their death, then the dying human becomes *identical* with the observer,

<sup>86</sup> By means of example, cf. Michael Watts. *The Philosophy of Heidegger* (London: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>87</sup> Ibidem, p. 103.

<sup>88</sup> Heidegger 1977, p. 318.

<sup>89</sup> Heidegger 1985, p. 282.

<sup>90</sup> Bernard N. Schumacher. *Death and Mortality in Contemporary Philosophy*, trans. by Michael J. Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 68-72. For the German original, cf. Bernard N. Schumacher. *Der Tod in der Philosophie der Gegenwart* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2004).

who likewise does not experience this death. Contrary to Schumacher, I believe Heidegger is stating that the way in which the observer «experiences» the death of the dying human *is not the way* in which the dying human «experiences» it. However, that suggests that the dying human «*experiences*» their death. Or, as Heidegger says, «suffers» it. Let me now come to my second argument against Schumacher.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger conceives of human existence as constantly aware of itself. In the present study, I expressed agreement with this stance.<sup>91</sup> Now, how does that impact on Heidegger's understanding of death? Should one not conclude that *even while dying*, a human is «in the face» of themselves? Or is Heidegger making an exception for death? Yet, on what grounds would such an exception be made? Is there any mention, in *Being and Time*, that Heidegger sets aside his principle with regards to death?

In *Being and Time*, there is no Heideggerian mention that an exception can be made to the principle that *Dasein* is always «in the face» of itself. It is true that there is also no explicit mention that while dying, one is «in the face» of oneself. Yet this is exactly the point I wish to make in this section: Heidegger remained silent on this matter and did not expressly draw the consequence his thought urged him to draw. Why? Why does he use quotation marks when speaking of «suffering» death? In this section, I contend that the reason for Heidegger's quotation marks is that when one dies, one «suffers» *and does not «suffer»* death. That is embedded in the ambiguous, that is *contradictory* nature of death as a process. After all, one cannot «suffer» death as one «suffers» an illness, for one must be alive to be ill.

Though not willing to address this issue due to the difficulties that it brings, Heidegger was perfectly conscious of it. His decision not to discuss this certainly represents a disappointing element of *Being and Time*. On this matter, I will say more in the next chapter.

Presumably, Heidegger thought that discussing this issue would have proved speculative. Indeed, how can one talk about the nature of death without talking in vain? Is this not one of the mistakes made by the traditional philosophical meditations on death? Absolutely not. In fact, firstly, one can talk *even about this issue* in an epistemological fashion, that is without making any claims on what death is, but simply on what humans think it is. In that case, the question would be: How does one think of one's death? And secondly, *if* talking about death's nature is speculative, given that this is obscure, then any discourse on death is speculative, because death in general is obscure; and even investigating one's «being-towards-death» becomes speculative, for the relationship between oneself and death is itself obscure.<sup>92</sup> Once again, one can observe that Heidegger's refusal to address *philosophy's traditional issues* is not a sign of a radical supersession of them, but of lack of theoretical courage. I believe this feature of Heidegger's philosophy should be seriously meditated before giving a judgement of Heidegger as a philosopher.

Let me now go back to Heidegger's implicit admission that death can be experienced, even though in a contradictory fashion. It is my intention to clarify that this admission should be interpreted as regarding death

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<sup>91</sup> Cf. Chapter 1, section 6.

<sup>92</sup> Cf. Chapter 1, section 6.

in its processual nature. In fact, Heidegger was perfectly aware that *in another sense*, death cannot be experienced: One cannot experience *the state* of one's death (not even if one survives death, for in that case it is from an otherworldly perspective that one is able to experience one's death). This state comes after the process of death and the banal reason why it cannot be experienced is that one is dead. Now, even interpreting too widely Heidegger's statement of the impossibility to experience death, Schumacher recognised that there is a difference between death as a process and death as a state (a difference which Heidegger himself did not expressly recognise): «Heidegger maintains, along with Epicurus, that it is impossible to experience "my death" in the sense of "the state of death"». <sup>93</sup> In this context, it is not relevant that Schumacher interprets Epicurus differently from this study, and that for him even Epicurus meant to say that only as a state death cannot be experienced. As argued in the last chapter, I believe Epicurus' stance is far more radical (yet unrefined) than this.

What is relevant is addressing another kind of Heideggerian passages which might seem to confirm Schumacher's interpretation of a *general* impossibility to experience death. These are the passages where Heidegger explicitly talks about the «Übergang» («transition») from life to death and states, for example, that «the possibility of experiencing this transition [...] is denied to any particular Dasein»:

«Das Erreichen der Gänze des Daseins im Tode ist zugleich Verlust des Seins des Da. Der Übergang zum Nichtmehrdasein hebt das Dasein gerade aus der Möglichkeit, diesen Übergang zu erfahren und als erfahrenen zu verstehen. Dergleichen mag allerdings dem jeweiligen Dasein bezüglich seiner selbst versagt bleiben.». <sup>94</sup>

«When Dasein reaches its wholeness in death, it simultaneously loses the Being of its "there". By its transition to no-longer-Dasein [Nichtmehrdasein], it gets lifted right out of the possibility of experiencing this transition and of understanding it as something experienced. Surely this sort of thing is denied to any particular Dasein in relation to itself.». <sup>95</sup>

Similar passages on the «transition» («Übergang») from life to death seem to contradict what I claimed about Heidegger's negligence regarding the processual nature of death and its experienceability. My response to this impression is that, as far as I am concerned, what Heidegger means with «transition» is not what I mean with «process». With «transition», I believe Heidegger means the *overall event* of one's death. This event is made up of three (fundamental) phases: The one in which one is still alive (*terminus a quo*), the one in which one transitions to death, and the one in which one is dead (*terminus ad quem*). As an overall event made up of these three phases, death cannot be experienced (for the last of the phases cannot possibly be experienced). Nonetheless, as the very transition to death as a state, death *can* be experienced.

Therefore, it is simply with regards to death as a state, and thus, as the overall event of dying, that Heidegger denies the possibility of experiencing death. Here, it is essential to clarify that contrary to Schumacher's interpretation, *it is not because death is the complete annihilation of life that death as a state cannot be*

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<sup>93</sup> Schumacher 2010, p. 62.

<sup>94</sup> Heidegger 1977, p. 316.

<sup>95</sup> Heidegger 1985, p. 281.



*experienced for Heidegger*. As opposed to what some interpreters have claimed, Heidegger is not an existential nihilist (and therefore, once again, his stance cannot be compared to Epicurus').<sup>96</sup> Presumably, the reason why these interpreters have been led to interpret Heidegger as an existential nihilist is that *it seems that*, if the state of death cannot be experienced, then death must be the absolute end of life.<sup>97</sup> Schumacher states that this stance – i.e., existential nihilism – is something that «Heidegger presupposes as proven: Death means the total and irreversible disappearance of the subject, the return of the human Dasein to nothingness».<sup>98</sup> This leads him to interpret nihilistically the whole «existential analytic». For example, Heidegger's notion of «anxiety» («Angst») is interpreted by him as the «emotional disposition» whose «object» is the fact that «the existence of the human Dasein [...] is an accident between two abysses of nothingness, namely, preconception and death».<sup>99</sup>

Nevertheless, it is so far from clear that Heidegger was an existential nihilist, to the point that even those who interpret him in that way are forced to acknowledge that no express statement on this is found in *Being and Time*. This is evident from Schumacher's use of the verb «to presuppose» in the quoted passage and also, for instance, from Pattison's hypothesis that «in the light of the existential-ontological understanding of *Dasein*'s being towards death that Heidegger in fact arrives at, it is hard to imagine any way of affirming some kind of post-mortem existence that would not undermine the entire structure involved in such a being towards death».<sup>100</sup> In fact, even though «Heidegger does not expressly identify this “nothing” [the “nothing” into which *Dasein* is “thrown” according to Heidegger] with the annihilation of the self in death, [...] at this point, he doesn't need to».<sup>101</sup>

On the other hand, even these interpreters could not neglect the fact that Heidegger constantly repeats, in *Being and Time*, that his «existential analytic» does not take any ontic stance on death. This explains the caution in their readings. Nonetheless, I contend that on this matter they misunderstood Heidegger, though it must be acknowledged that it is legitimate to deem nihilistic a philosophy that argues for the impossibility to experience death as a state. Yet as I will demonstrate, there is nothing nihilistic in arguing that death as a state cannot be experienced. That is because it is *in this life* that one cannot experience one's death as a state.

With this, I do not mean to say that there is an afterlife. I mean to say that, *from a neutral perspective*, all that one can state is that *in this life* one cannot experience the fact that *this life* has ended. Thinking that this statement involves a hidden agreement with the opposite stance of existential nihilism means not being able to think ontologically, that is neutrally with regards to the ontic stances around death. Not even this incapacity

<sup>96</sup> As further examples, cf. George Pattison. *Heidegger on Death: A Critical Theological Essay* (Burlington (Vt.): Routledge, 2013) and Paul Edwards. “Heidegger and Death as ‘Possibility’”, in *Mind*, vol. 84, no. 336 (1975), pp. 548-566.

<sup>97</sup> Schumacher 2010, pp. 64-68.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 67.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>100</sup> Pattison 2013, p. 22.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 32-33.

should be surprising, though: It was Heidegger himself who warned about the ever-recurring tendency to misunderstand ontological reflections as ontic standpoints.

### **3.6 Third Component of Existential Nihilism. The Self-Proclaimed Truth of the Only Possible**

#### **Interpretation of Death. The One-Sidedness of Existential Nihilism**

In section 3.5, I explained in what sense humans expect to experience death at the end of their lives. In this section, I will analyse one last component of existential nihilism. Despite its widespread diffusion nowadays, the existential-nihilistic stance is merely one possible attitude towards death.<sup>102</sup> Nonetheless, it belongs to the very essence of existential nihilism that this *would never agree with this statement*. Indeed, this is how an external, ontological-thanatological perspective looks at existential nihilism. On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that *in existential nihilism's one-sided eyes*, the interpretation of death as absolute acquires an ontological significance. In fact, those who refuse to acknowledge any possible (or correct) interpretation beyond their own (and thus fail to recognise their stance as an interpretation) turn their interpretation into an ontological account of the essence of death. In the next section, I will examine an emblematic example of this tendency.

#### **3.6.1 «Religion [...] is the *Opium* of the People» («Die Religion [...] ist das *Opium* des Volkes»). The Emblematic, One-Sided Existential Nihilism of Karl Marx**

Over the course of the chapter, I have had more than one chance to notice how existential nihilism conceals itself, or overtly takes part, in the development of sciences.<sup>103</sup> What presents itself as the «psychoanalytical method», or as «biology's doctrine», is in fact the result of determinate ontic-thanatological presuppositions. These do not only shape the theory of biology and psychoanalysis, but their methods and practices too. They also shape the theory and practice of people who, not being psychoanalysts or biologists, are nevertheless influenced by psychoanalysis and biology.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the nihilistic thanatology underlying Marxist sociology shaped the propaganda of the Stalinist Soviet Union. Whether Marxism was genuinely embraced by Soviet apparatuses or served as a tool for cultural unification across the Union is irrelevant: Marxist blood ran through the veins of the USSR. This blood contained the thanatology of Karl Marx, who embraced a one-sided version of existential nihilism. In the famous exordium of the *Einleitung zu Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie*, he states:

«Das Fundament der irreligiösen Kritik ist: Der *Mensch macht die Religion*, die Religion macht nicht den Menschen. [...]. Aber der *Mensch*, [...] das ist die *Welt des Menschen*, Staat, Sozietät. Dieser Staat, diese Sozietät produzieren die Religion, ein *verkehrtes Weltbewußtsein*, weil sie eine *verkehrte Welt* sind. Die Religion ist [...] die *phantastische Verwirklichung* des menschlichen Wesens, weil das *menschliche Wesen* keine wahre Wirklichkeit besitzt. [...]

<sup>102</sup> Cf. Chapter 1, section 1.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. sections 3.1.1 and 3.1.2.

Das *religiöse* Elend ist in einem der *Ausdruck* des wirklichen Elendes und in einem die *Protestation* gegen das wirkliche Elend. Die Religion ist der Seufzer der bedrängten Kreatur, das Gemüt einer herzlosen Welt, wie sie der Geist geistloser Zustände ist. Sie ist das *Opium* des Volkes.

Die Aufhebung der Religion als des *illusorischen* Glücks des Volkes ist die Forderung seines *wirklichen* Glücks. Die Forderung, die Illusionen über seinen Zustand aufzugeben, ist die *Forderung, einen Zustand aufzugeben, der der Illusionen bedarf*.

[...] Es ist also die *Aufgabe der Geschichte*, nachdem das *Jenseits der Wahrheit* verschwunden ist, die *Wahrheit des Diesseits* zu etablieren.».<sup>104</sup>

(«The basis of irreligious criticism is: *Man makes religion*, religion does not make man. [...] But *man* [...] is *the world of man* – the state, society. This state, this society, produce religion, which is an *inverted world-consciousness*, because they are an *inverted world*. Religion is [...] the *fantastic realisation* of the human essence because the *human essence* has no true reality. [...]

*Religious* distress is at the same time the *expression* of real distress and also the *protest* against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people.

To abolish religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is to demand their *real* happiness. To demand to give up illusions about the existing state of affairs is the demand to *give up a state of affairs which needs illusions*.

[...]. The *task of history*, therefore, once the *world beyond the truth* [das *Jenseits der Wahrheit*] has disappeared, is to establish the *truth of this world*.»).<sup>105</sup>

This *Einleitung* is a text that Marx published during his lifetime (1844), unlike the posthumous *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie* (1927), which he had already finished writing but ended up not publishing due to the complexity of its revision.<sup>106</sup> Thus, one can be confident that the *Einleitung* faithfully expresses Marx's thought on religion – and on what religion thinks of death. However, in this context, it is not my intention to

<sup>104</sup> Karl Marx. "Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Einleitung". In: Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels. *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe (MEGA)*, 114 vols., ed. by Institutes of Marxism-Leninism and by Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bd. 1-44), Internationale Marx-Engels-Stiftung (Bd. 1- ) (republished) (Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag, 1975-1993; Berlin, Boston: Akademie Verlag, 1998- ), *Abteilung I: Werke, Artikel, Entwürfe, Band 2 Karl Marx: Werke, Artikel, Entwürfe. März 1843 bis August 1844*, ed. by Inge Taubert, Ileana Bauer, and Bernhard Dohm (2009), pp. 170-183 (pp. 170-171) (Marx's emphasis).

<sup>105</sup> Karl Marx. "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction". In: Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels. *Marx/Engels Collected Works (MECW)*, 50 vols., ed. by Institute of Marxism-Leninism (vols. 1-45) and various editors (vols. 46-50) (Moscow, London, New York City: Progress Publishers, Lawrence and Wishart, International Publishers, 1975-1991; Moscow, London, New York City: Progress Publishers, Lawrence and Wishart, International Publishers, 1991-2004), *Part 1: Philosophical, historical, political, economic and other works, in chronological order, Vol. 1, (Marx) March 1843-Aug 1844. (Engels) May 1843-June 1844*, ed. by Jack Cohen, Richard Dixon, Clemens Dutt, Alex Miller, Martin Milligan, Barbara Ruhemann, Dirk J. Struik, and Christopher Upward (1975), pp. 175-187 (pp. 175-176).

<sup>106</sup> Cf. Karl Marx. *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, ed., intr. and not. by Joseph O'Malley, trans. by Annette Jolin and Joseph O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. IX-LXIII. For the German, cf. Karl Marx. „Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie“, in *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (1975- ), *Abteilung I: Werke, Artikel, Entwürfe, Band 2 Karl Marx: Werke, Artikel, Entwürfe. März 1843 bis August 1844*, ed. by Inge Taubert, Ileana Bauer, and Bernhard Dohm (2009), pp. 3-138.

give a judgement of Marx's overall philosophy of religion.<sup>107</sup> On the contrary, it is my aim to assess whether any relevant aspects of Marx's understanding of religion in this *Introduction* indicate that he can be considered an existential nihilist – or, more precisely for the purpose of this section, a one-sided existential nihilist.

In the passage quoted, Marx mentions «das Jenseits der Wahrheit». Oddly, this phrase has been translated by Martin Milligan and Barbara Ruhemann with «the world beyond the truth», but in fact means «the other-world of truth», as Annette Jolin and Joseph O'Malley translate.<sup>108</sup> In Marx's phrase, the meaning of the substantivised preposition «jenseits» is clear. In German, «jenseits» means «beyond». Therefore, «das Jenseits» means «the Beyond», «the world beyond», «the other-world». Now, what is this «other-world» that Marx refers to? Is it not the «kingdom of heaven» («ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν»), which Jesus describes in the gospels?

According to Marx, «religion» is what persuades humans that there exists «das Jenseits der Wahrheit». This «Jenseits» is understood by him as a result of «das illusorische Glück des Volkes», «the illusory happiness of the people». The «Jenseits der Wahrheit» is not an ordinary, but a religious drug: It is the product of «the opium of the people» («das Opium des Volkes»). As is evident, Marx is endorsing existential nihilism. Yet, as if seduced by his own idea that religion is just a tool «made» by humans for power to be exerted over society (over the dominated classes in society), he himself fell into an illusion: That this entails the falsity of religion. For as paradoxical as it may seem, *the falsity of religion is in no way implied by the fact that humans «make» religion and use it to «oppress» each other*. One can think in that way only if one is *biased* against religion.

After all, is it not Christianity which teaches that from the greatest of the evils can come the highest of the goods? Is not the crucifixion of God also the redemption of mankind from its sins? One can serenely admit that religion is used as a means for subduing people, and yet at the same time accept that this is in fact the greatest gift to people, in spite of the malicious intentions of the dominant class in society. The tool can rebel against its user. Let me take this occasion to clarify that, given the context of an ontology of death, my statements here in no way constitute an endorsement of Christianity – nor, however, a disavowal of it.

From an external perspective, Marx's nihilistic stance appears as an *autonomous thanatological stance* that does *not* arise from a sociological reflection but simply expresses Marx's opinion on the nature of death. As in the case of Freudian psychoanalysis and biological Darwinism, thanatology is subdued by, and seen as a consequence of, a non-thanatological stance. Here is another confirmation that *thanatology struggles to establish itself as an autonomous «science»*.

In this context, it does no harm to my argument that, as recalled for example by John C. Raines, within the Marxist refusal of religion there resides the idea that religion, as «the *expression* of real distress» («der *Ausdruck* des wirklichen Elendes»), is at once «also the *protest* against real distress» («in einem

<sup>107</sup> For a selection of Marx's texts on religion, cf. John, Raines (ed. by). *Marx On Religion* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).

<sup>108</sup> Marx 1970, p. 132.

die *Protestation* gegen das wirkliche Elend»<sup>109</sup> For Marx, the religious «demand» («Forderung») for happiness is a quest for «real happiness» («wirkliches Glück»), but it results in the promise of a fake one. Religion is not to be entirely «abolished» («aufgehoben»).

On the other hand, it is clear that such an appreciation of religion can only thrive within the overall *disavowal* of religion. Despite its salvageable element, the miserable one makes religion *as such* something which needs to be, in Marx's term, «aufgehoben», «abolished».

Let me conclude. The aim of this section has been to demonstrate that the thanatological bias of existential nihilism can be observed in Marx's renowned stance on religion. It does not matter whether it is Christian religion or another one. Indeed, according to Marx, any religion talking about the «other-world of truth» is lying. As he has never retracted, every thanatology inspired by religious doctrines is not a legitimate alternative to his thanatology, but an illegitimate one. That indicates that *existential nihilism is an anti-hermeneutic thanatology*. That is true both when its opposite stance is seen as illusory (as in Marx's case) and when it is simply neglected.



In this chapter, I have concretised the fundamental analyses conducted in the first chapter through the investigation of existential nihilism as one considerably spread thanatology of recent times. In addition to the ontic analyses of this thanatological attitude, I have continued the ontological investigation of the essence of death started in the last chapter. This made me acknowledge the extent to which humans expect to directly experience death.

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<sup>109</sup> On the duality of religion for Marx, cf. Raines 2002, pp. 5-6.

### **CHAPTER 3: HEIDEGGER'S NOTION OF «SEIN ZUM TODE» AND THE QUESTION OF A FUNDAMENTAL RELATIONSHIP WITH DEATH. ON THE ONTOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF HUMAN «WORLDLINESS»**

The present chapter introduces the question – to be answered in the next chapter – of the fundamental human relationship with death. To this end, Martin Heidegger's conception of «Sein zum Tode» («being-towards-death») is examined with regards to the degree of its fundamentality. The discussion of Heidegger's «existential analytic» enables the study to analyse one further element belonging to the essence of human death, that is human «worldliness». This notion does not coincide but is implicit in the Heideggerian notion of «in-der-Welt-sein» («being-in-the-world»), understood as the fundamental feature of human life. In this study, «worldliness» is not understood as «earthliness», that is in its ontic-religious significance, but in its ontological meaning: «Worldliness» means all that, belonging to human nature, could not possibly survive death. Thus, the investigation turns into an examination of human bodiliness and of its relevance to thanatology. In this context, worldliness reveals itself as belonging not only to the essence of human death, but of human life as such. Therefore, at this stage, the existential ontology of death becomes a full-fledged ontology of human existence. The present chapter should not be interpreted as a contribution to the secondary literature on the Heideggerian notions of «being-towards-death» and «being-in-the-world», but as an autonomous thanatological investigation in conversation with Martin Heidegger and with the relevant literature.

#### **1. The Heideggerian Concept of «Being-Towards-Death» («Sein zum Tode») and the Question of a Fundamental Relationship with Death**

Heidegger's analyses of what he called the human «Sein zum Tode» («being-towards-death») are perhaps the most renowned thanatological analyses of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at least within the community of thanatologists, including scientists or scholars whose focus is not philosophical, such as anthropologists of death. With these analyses, Heidegger meant to utter an *ontological* word on death, that is the most fundamental word. More precisely, he meant to utter an *ontological-existential* word by bringing to light the fundamental way in which humans *relate* to their death. In what follows, keeping the promise made in the first chapter, I will thoroughly discuss the Heideggerian notion of «Sein zum Tode». Particularly, I will ask whether «being-towards-death» is *fundamental enough*, from an ontological point of view, for what an investigation of the human relationship with death can aspire to.

Before starting the discussion of «Sein zum Tode», I will make some considerations on the secondary literature. In fact, the conversation with the literature on Heidegger's «being-towards-death» started in the previous chapter. However, the most detailed conversation with the literature will take place in the present chapter. That is why I will now provide a bibliography on «Sein zum Tode». Let me note that I have no claim to be exhaustive, given that the literature on the topic is boundless. My aim is to give the reader an idea (and some examples) of the general features of the different strands of contributions on «being-towards-death». Consistent with the nature of this study as an independent investigation, in this chapter I will not aim to contribute to the expansion of the literature on «Sein zum Tode», but rather to engage with Heidegger and the

existing scholarship. Moreover, throughout the chapter, I will consider only those contributions, among those mentioned here, that are particularly relevant to this study.

The literature on «Sein zum Tode» can be divided into two strands. The first strand of the literature is made up of studies whose character is mainly recapitulatory or explanatory (or both).<sup>1</sup> These contributions are quoted in this study when it is necessary to introduce the reader to a Heideggerian notion that has not been discussed (or not yet). On the other hand, a second strand is made up of independent contributions that interpret Heidegger's perspective on death with an original or critical approach (or both).<sup>2</sup> These are the contributions with which the study engages.

### **1.1 Heidegger's Search for *Dasein*'s «Potentiality-For-Being-A-Whole» («Ganzseinkönnen») and the Search for Absolute Fundamentality in Thanatology**

Against what was stated at the beginning of the chapter, one might object that in *Being and Time* Heidegger's intention is not to reach the notion of the most fundamental human relationship with death. Indeed, following the Heideggerian text strictly, one might argue that Heidegger's goal is simply to «bring into view» («in den Blick bringen») the «whole» («das Ganze») of what humans are as *Dasein* («Being-There»).

<sup>3</sup>

According to this objection, death («der Tod») becomes an object of the «existential analytic» simply because death is the *exhaustion* of human existence, and therefore allows for an *exhaustive* comprehension of its structures. For how could any ontological character of existence be such if it did not apply to existence until its very end? Summing up what existence has been, death is the human possibility of «Ganzsein» («Being-a-whole»). This possibility, which is inherent in the very structure of existence, enables all existential

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Piotr Hoffman. «Death, Time, History: Division II of «Being and Time»», in Charles Guignon (ed. by). *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger* (Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 195- 214; Ullrich Haase. «The Question of Death in Heidegger's «Being and Time»», in Ullrich Haase and W. Large (ed. by). *Maurice Blanchot* (London-New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 45-50; Jean Greish. *Ontologie et temporalité: Esquisse d'une interprétation intégrale de Sein und Zeit* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France - PUF, 2002), pp. 263-304; Mario Lo Conte. *Esistenza e morte. Heidegger e Sartre*, pref. by Marco Ivaldo (Naples: La Scuola di Pitagora, 2019); Theodore Kisiel. *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Wolfgang Müller-Lauter. *Möglichkeit Und Wirklichkeit Bei Martin Heidegger* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1960), pp. 17-83; Stephen Mulhall. *The Routledge Guidebook to Heidegger's Being and Time* (London-New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Iain Thomson's entry on «death» in Wrathall 2021, pp. 210-220; Iain Thomson. «Death and Demise in Being and Time», in Mark A. Wrathall (ed. by). *The Cambridge Companion to Being and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 260-90; Wolfgang Kroug. «Das Sein zum Tode bei Heidegger und die Probleme des Könnens und der Liebe», in *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung*, VII (1953), pp. 392-415; «Heidegger's Being-Towards-Death», in Bernard N. Schumacher. *Death and Mortality in Contemporary Philosophy*, pp. 61-84 (Schumacher 2004); Maxine Sheets-Johnstone. «The Enigma of Being-Toward-Death», in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 29, no. 4 (2015), pp. 547-576; Adam Buben. «An Attempt at Clarifying Being-Towards-Death», in Hans Pedersen and Megan Altman. *Horizons of Authenticity in Phenomenology, Existentialism, and Moral Psychology: Essays in Honor of Charles Guignon* (Dordrecht-Heidelberg: Springer, 2015); Pattison 2013; Edwards 1975; Paul Edwards. «Heidegger and Death: A Deflationary Critique», in *The Monist*, vol. 59, no. 2 (1976), pp. 161-186; Dan Magurshak. «Heidegger and Edwards on «Sein-zum-Tode»», in *The Monist*, vol. 62, no. 1 (1979), pp. 107-118; Watts 2011; John Haugeland. «Truth and Finitude: Heidegger's Transcendental Existentialism», in Mark A. Wrathall and Jeff Malpas (ed. by). *Heidegger, Authenticity, and Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 43-78; Sylvie Avakian. «Being Towards Death»: Heidegger and the Orthodox Theology of the East (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2021); Carol J. White. 2005. *Time and Death: Heidegger's Analysis of Finitude*, ed. by Mark Ralkowski (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Taylor Carman. *Heidegger's Analytic: Interpretation, Discourse and Authenticity in Being and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Heidegger 1977, p. 310. (English: Heidegger 1985, p. 276).

investigations to grasp human existence ontologically, that is in its entirety. However, since the only way in which humans can grasp themselves as a «whole» before dying is *by relating to their end before it comes*, that is by «being-towards-death», *this form of relating* is what needs to be thematised by the «existential analytic». After all, Heidegger's «analytic» of death is «*existential*» because it investigates death *insofar as Dasein relates to it*.

### **1.2 A Wholer Wholeness. On the «Wozu» («Towards-Which») of «Sein Zum Tode»**

Even if the objection raised above were correct and Heidegger did not mean to grasp the *most* fundamental dimension of the human relationship with death, it is undeniable that Heidegger's discourse on death is a fundamental discourse. In fact, according to him, there is no time when human beings do not relate to their end. That is embedded in Heidegger's «analytic» of human existence, understood as the investigation of its fundamental structures.

Be that as it may, it must be acknowledged that *both in the pursuit of exhaustiveness and fundamentality*, Heidegger has not gone as far as possible. At least, not in *Being and Time*. Indeed, if conceiving of *Dasein* in an exhaustive way requires conceiving of *Dasein* in its «ending» («Enden»), that is, in its «Being-towards-the-end» («Sein zum Ende»), *this «ending» must itself be conceived in an exhaustive way*.<sup>4</sup> In what follows, I wish to show that Heidegger's examination of the «ending» of *Dasein* is insufficient. That is indicated by the fact that the «last moment» of *Dasein*, «towards» which *Dasein* exists, has not been fully investigated by him. Particularly, Heidegger has neglected *the processual encounter with death*, as I started showing in the last chapter.

The extreme time of *Dasein*, in which dying occurs, is in effect *the essential objectual counterpart* of *Dasein's* relationship with its end (no matter whether the counterpart is grasped as an element or a correlate). Without this counterpart, the «end» («Ende») to which *Dasein's* «ending» relates simply vanishes – just as human «finitude» («Endlichkeit») vanishes, as per Heidegger's existential notion that «finitude» (namely, mortality) lies in the fact itself that humans are aware of their finitude.

I mentioned above that, according to Heidegger, in order to grasp *Dasein* «wholly», one needs to grasp *Dasein* as «ending», that is as relating to its end. In this context, my objection to him is that *even the «end» of Dasein must be grasped wholly*, that is *without neglecting the processual character of Dasein's end*, to which *Dasein* also relates. Therefore, Heidegger's principle rebels against itself. To indulge the rebellion, it is necessary to delve deeper into the *fuller meaning* of *Dasein's* «ending». That will bring to light what *constitutes* the time of one's end, as this is understood by «being-towards-death».

At this point, one might object that, in his «existential analytic», Heidegger simply did not mean to analyse the towards-which of being-towards-death with respect to its processuality, and that this is confirmed by the fact that Heidegger never uses the substantivised preposition «Wozu» when speaking of death, but only in other

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<sup>4</sup> For the concept of «Sein zum Ende», cf. section 48, *That which is Still Outstanding; the End; Totality* (Heidegger 1985, pp. 285-290). (German: *Ausstand, Ende und Ganzheit* (Heidegger 1977, pp. 321-327)).



passages.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, this would not be a justification but a confession of the flaw in Heidegger's analyses. Moreover, Heidegger's very use of the phrase «Sein zum Tode» naturally allows for the use of «das Wozu» of «Sein zum Tode», as this phrase is formed according to Heideggerian rules for word and expression construction.

### **1.3 The Oblivion of Death's Processual Nature in Heidegger's Characterisation of Death. And against an Ontic Interpretation of Heidegger**

There is more to say. Indeed, Heidegger did mean to analyse the towards-which of being-towards-death. This is proved by his concentration on death as the «eigenst» («ownmost»), «unbezüglich» («non-relational»), «unüberholbar» («not to be outstripped»), and «ausgezeichnet» («distinctive») possibility of *Dasein*.<sup>6</sup> When discussing these characters, Heidegger is clearly referring them not to *Dasein*'s relationship with its death, but to death itself, as the «towards-which» of this relationship.

Let me note that I am alluding to the *ontological* characters of death mentioned by Heidegger. These are independent of the ontic characters assumed by death when *Dasein* relates to it through an «authentic» («eigentlich») or «inauthentic» («uneigentlich») being-towards-death.<sup>7</sup> In this context, let me remind that «authenticity» («Eigentlichkeit»), as opposed to «inauthenticity» («Uneigentlichkeit») or «falling prey» («Verfallen»), is for Heidegger the *existentiell* attitude in which *Dasein* does not «flee in the face of itself».<sup>8</sup> In German, «eigentlich» («authentic») is related to «eigen» («own»). One of the reasons why Heidegger chose the word «eigentlich» is that by becoming «authentic», a human being *appropriates* its own being, making it its *own*. In that sense, «Eigentlichkeit» refers to the fact that *Dasein*'s being becomes authentically «mine», «yours», «his», etc.

Yet Heidegger's renowned distinction between «authenticity» and «inauthenticity» is an *ontic distinction* and represents a product of the onticising tendency of the «existential analytic».<sup>9</sup> However, in the context of this study, the ontic aspects of Heidegger's investigation are not relevant (but to distinguish them from the ontological aspects). That is why I will not examine the secondary literature on *Dasein*'s «authenticity» («Eigentlichkeit») and «inauthenticity» («Uneigentlichkeit»). Nonetheless, I will examine the opinion of those who *onticise* Heidegger's concept of «Sein zum Tode» by conceiving of it as «*authentic*» *in and of itself*, sometimes without noticing it.

Two examples of this interpretive tendency are the studies by Bernard N. Schumacher and Sylvie Avakian.<sup>10</sup> These scholars ascribe to «Sein zum Tode» *in general* what should be ascribed to «Sein zum Tode» *in*

<sup>5</sup> Cf. for instance Heidegger 1977, p. 94 (English: Heidegger 1985, p. 99). Here, Heidegger talks about the «towards-which» of «the work to be produced» («das herzustellende Werk»).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Heidegger 1985, pp. 293-296.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 299-311.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 312-358.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Chapter 1, section 2.1.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Schumacher 2010 and Avakian 2021.

*particular*. In this way, Heidegger's *ontological* «analytic» is made into a moralistic, edifying treatise, dealing with a particular way in which *Dasein* can (or even should) live its existence.

Another example of this tendency, though referred to another Heideggerian notion, is an article by Paul Edwards.<sup>11</sup> According to this article, Heidegger's reference to death as the «ownmost» («eigenst», superlative form of «eigen», «own») possibility of *Dasein* means that death is «more mine», as a possibility, than the other possibilities of my existence.

That is of course problematic, given that all *Dasein*'s possibilities are equally its own. In fact, it is because of Edwards' ontic interpretation that the issue arises. For as explained by Dan Magurshak in his criticism of Edwards' interpretation, the «ownmost» character of death does not indicate that death is, as a possibility, «“more mine” than, for example, my desire to love and to be loved».<sup>12</sup> Rather, it alludes to the fact that «death is the possibility in which *its entire being* [scil. *Dasein*'s] “is at issue in an absolute way”».<sup>13</sup> Because of that, the «eigenst» character of death is an *ontological* character, independent of any ontic understanding of death as a possibility that is «more mine» than others.

It is precisely in the frame of an ontological interpretation of Heidegger's understanding of the characters of death that I argue that *a further ontological character is missing*, that is the *processual encounter with death*. Indeed, all the characters mentioned by Heidegger implicitly refer to this further aspect. That is shown by the fact that *what one expects to processually encounter*, at the time of one's death, is precisely one's «ownmost», «non-relational», «not to be outstripped», and thus «distinctive» possibility.

#### **1.4 The Most Fundamental Relationship with Death and the Problem of a Hierarchy of «Existentials» («Existenzialen») in *Being and Time***

Previously, I argued that in Heidegger's notion of death, understood as the «towards-which» of «being-towards-death», the notion of «dying» itself is implicit. In this study, I am understanding «dying» as the process through which one expects to encounter death. At this stage of the investigation, I will start examining the question of the most fundamental human relationship with death. As anticipated, it is ultimately not relevant whether Heidegger had a *supreme* ontological claim or not in advancing his concept of «being-towards-death». What is relevant is to understand whether an ontological-existential investigation of death can aspire to a more fundamental concept than Heidegger's. In what follows, I will show that this is possible, and that it is possible thanks to the analyses made on the processual nature of death as dying. It will become clear that Heidegger did not reach the most fundamental notion in this field because of his negligence of processuality.

To introduce this new stage of the study, I will return to Heidegger and examine whether there are textual grounds to argue that, in providing the notion of «being-towards-death», he intended to offer his readers a most fundamental concept. Before I start, let me recall that one could find evidence for this simply in the fact that

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Edwards 1976.

<sup>12</sup> Magurshak 1979, p. 115.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem* (Magurshak's emphasis).

«being-towards-death» was for Heidegger an «existential» («Existenzial»), that is a *supreme structure of human existence*.<sup>14</sup> Though correct *in principle*, I will show that this stance would be simplistic and ultimately incorrect.

As recalled in the first chapter, the «existentials» are *Dasein*'s «most universal structures» («allgemeinste Strukturen»)<sup>15</sup> The entire «existential analytic» of *Being and Time* is aimed at grasping these structures: That is fundamentally why Heidegger chose the Kantian term «analytic» («Analytik»). That is not to say that Heidegger's investigation can be reduced to this. As Heidegger himself states, there are also ethical and ontological-metaphysical dimensions to the investigation conducted in *Being and Time*. While I have already explained the ontological-metaphysical nature of Heidegger's text, here is a Heideggerian passage on its ethical significance:

«Is there not, however, a definite ontical way of taking authentic existence, a factual ideal of *Dasein*, underlying our ontological Interpretation of *Dasein*'s existence? That is so indeed.»<sup>16</sup>

(«Aber liegt der durchgeführten ontologischen Interpretation der Existenz des Daseins nicht eine bestimmte ontische Auffassung von eigentlicher Existenz, ein faktisches Ideal des Daseins zugrunde? Das ist in der Tat so.»)<sup>17</sup>

Yet despite the plurality of aspects of the investigation of *Being and Time*, there is a reason why Heidegger defined it as an «existential analytic» and not as an ethical treatise. Heidegger could have privileged the other aspects of his investigation and called it «existentiell analysis» («existentielle Analyse») or «ontological analytic» («ontologische Analytik»)<sup>18</sup> Yet he did not do this. And there is a reason for that: He believed the «existential» aspect to be the most significant for the thematic scope of his analyses. That also explains (and partly justifies) why his philosophy was interpreted as a form of existentialism.

Now, in subsuming «Sein zum Tode» under the label of an «Existenzial», did Heidegger not mean that «Sein zum Tode» is *the most universal human attitude towards death*? Alternatively, is there textual evidence against this, showing that Heidegger established a *hierarchy* of «existentials» and subsumed «Sein zum Tode» under some *less universal* «existentials»? *Mutatis mutandis*, that would be similar to the hierarchy of «ideas» («εἶδη») established by the «stranger from Elea» («τις ξένος τὸ μὲν γένος ἐξ Ἑλέας», 216 a) in Plato's *Sophist*. According to the Stranger, «ideas» are divided into «the principal ones» («τα μέγιστα», 254 c) and the ones «contained under one higher» («ὁπὸ μιᾶς ἑξῶθεν περιεχομένας», 253 d-e).<sup>19</sup>

Let me explain. My question here is not whether Heidegger in *Being and Time* established a hierarchy of different *thanatological* «existentials». In fact, «Sein zum Tode» is the only *thanatological* «existential» mentioned by Heidegger. That is why it would be hasty to take a stance on whether «being-towards-death»

<sup>14</sup> On Heidegger's notion of «Existenzial», cf. Chapter 1, section 2.

<sup>15</sup> Heidegger 1985, p. 315 (German: Heidegger 1977, p. 359).

<sup>16</sup> Heidegger 1985, p. 358.

<sup>17</sup> Heidegger 1977, p. 411.

<sup>18</sup> For the notion of «existentiell» («existenziell»), cf. Chapter 2, section 1.1.

<sup>19</sup> Plato. *Sophista*. (English: Jowett 1953, IV, p. 425; p. 470; pp. 471-472).

was regarded by him as the most fundamental thanatological «existential». On the other hand, what is clear is simply that «being-towards-death» is the most fundamental thanatological «existential» reached by Heidegger's thought. Therefore, in this section, my question is whether Heidegger established a *general* hierarchy of «existentials» where «being-towards-death» was considered as a *supreme* «existential», that is *more universal* than the others (in a sense that will be clarified shortly). In this context, let me note that I have not been able to find this interpretive problem posited in any contribution of the secondary literature quoted on «being-towards-death».

One might attempt to answer the question by recalling that on certain occasions, Heidegger *onticises* the meaning of the «existential»: Most representatively, when talking about *Dasein*'s «Verfallen», the «falling prey».<sup>20</sup> In that sense, Heidegger can in fact be said to establish a hierarchy of «existentials». Nonetheless, it is clear that this hierarchy forms because, *strictly speaking*, «Verfallen» and similar structures are not «existentials» at all. Indeed, *Dasein*'s «fleeing in the face of itself» is not a genuine «existential», for it is clear that one is not always fleeing in the face of oneself, as Heidegger himself acknowledged when admitting the possibility for *Dasein* to exist «authentically» («eigentlich»). That is to say that only from Heidegger's *onticised* perspective can all attitudes like «Verfallen» be considered as «existentials», and thus as the less universal ones in a hierarchy of «existentials». However, my question concerns the existence of a *genuine* hierarchy of «existentials».

Yet at this point, one might wonder how there could be a *hierarchy* between *equally universal* human attitudes. After all, by definition, all «existentials» are *fundamental* human attitudes. With «fundamental», I mean the same as «universal» and «ontological»: Whenever a human being exists, it exists *according to the existentials*, which are the structures themselves of being human. For instance, assuming that humans by definition «know» that they will die, there can be no situation where they forget about their mortality. Therefore, it seems that an «existential» could not be *more universal* than another one.

The following considerations will be devoted to showing that there is a sense in which an «existential» can be more universal than another one. That is due to the difference in the *internal degree of universality*. This difference produces an *internal hierarchy* among «existentials». Before moving on, let me note that my considerations here might look overly abstract. However, they will be concretised later in the chapter. Let me also anticipate that the general repercussions of these considerations go far beyond an ontology of death.

### **1.5 A Heideggerian Hierarchy of «Existentials»: «Temporality as the Ontological Meaning of Care» («Zeitlichkeit als die Ontologische Sinn der Sorge»)**

In section 65 of *Being and Time*, entitled «Die Zeitlichkeit als der ontologische Sinn der Sorge» («Temporality as the ontological meaning of care»), Heidegger asks about «*was ermöglicht die Ganzheit des gegliederten Strukturganzen der Sorge in der Einheit ihrer ausgefalteten Gliederung*» («*what makes possible the totality of*

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Chapter 1, section 2.

*the articulated structural whole of care, in the unity of its articulation as we have unfolded it»).*<sup>21</sup> In *Being and Time*, «Care» («Sorge») is the notion with which Heidegger answers the question of the «essence» of *Dasein* (leaving apart the essential lack of this definition, acknowledged by Heidegger himself, due to the persisting absence of an answer to the question of Being). Previously, I recalled that Heidegger would have not used the term «essence» here.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, in what follows, I will no longer put «essence» into quotation marks, for I will be using the *ontological* concept of essence which I discussed earlier, when criticising Heidegger.<sup>23</sup>

As per Heidegger's words, «Care» is made up of three «moments» («Momente»): It «comprises in itself facticity (thrownness), existence (projection), and falling» («befaßt in sich Faktizität (Geworfenheit), Existenz (Entwurf) und Verfallen».)<sup>24</sup> For my purposes in this context, it is not necessary to analyse these Heideggerian notions. What is relevant is that according to the following sections of *Being and Time*, the answer to the question posited in section 65 – the question of what makes possible «Care» – is *Dasein*'s «temporality» («Zeitlichkeit».)<sup>25</sup> In turn, this is made up of three «ecstases» («Ekstasen».)<sup>26</sup> Already in a conference held in July 1924, explicitly echoing Augustine of Hippo's analyses of time in the 11<sup>th</sup> book of the *Confessions*, Heidegger argued that «time», in his own acceptance of the term, is «us»:

«Welche Bewandnis hat es damit, daß menschliches Dasein sich eine Uhr angeschafft hat schon vor allen Taschen- und Sonnenuhren? [...] Bin ich selbst das Jetzt und mein Dasein die Zeit? Oder ist es am Ende die Zeit selbst, die sich in uns die Uhr anschafft? Augustinus hat im XI. Buch seiner „Confessiones“ die Frage bis hierher getrieben, ob der Geist selbst die Zeit sei. Und Augustinus hat die Frage hier stehen gelassen.»<sup>27</sup>

«What is involved in the fact that human existence has already procured a clock prior to all pocket-watches and sundials? [...] Am I myself the now and my existence time? Or is it ultimately time itself that procures for itself the clock in us? Augustine, in the Eleventh Book of his Confessions, pursued the question so far as to ask whether spirit itself is time. And Augustine left the question standing at this point.»<sup>28</sup>

Thus, according to Heidegger's perspective, the essence of the human being is represented by «die Sorge» («Care»). Yet what makes possible «die Sorge» is «Zeitlichkeit» («temporality»). Now, *how can both «Care» and «temporality» constitute the human essence, if «temporality», at once, «makes possible» («ermöglicht») «Care»?* Let me note that I am limiting my question to two «moments» of «Care», that is «facticity» («Faktizität») and «existence» («Existenz»). That is because Heidegger also inserted in his definition of «Care» the spurious «existentials» of «Verfallen».

<sup>21</sup> Heidegger 1977, p. 429 (German); Heidegger 1985, p. 371 (English). (Heidegger's emphasis).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Chapter 1, section 2.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Chapter 2, section 3.2.1.

<sup>24</sup> Heidegger 1985 (English), p. 329; Heidegger 1977, p. 377 (German). Cf. also the entry on «Care» in Wrathall 2021, pp. 137-144 (writ. by William Blattner).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Wrathall 2021, pp. 727-728 (writ. by William Blattner).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 265-267 (writ. by Richard Polt).

<sup>27</sup> Heidegger 1975-, III. Abteilung: Unveröffentlichte Abhandlungen / Vorträge – Gedachtes. Band 64: Der Begriff der Zeit, ed. by F.W. Von Hermann (2004), p. 111.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Heidegger. *The concept of time*, ed. by William McNeill (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992), pp. 5-6E.

In this section, I will contend that the apparently paradoxical relationship between «Care» and «temporality» is possible thanks to the fact that while both these structures constitute the human essence, *their internal degree of universality is different*. At this point, the Heideggerian scholar will perhaps object that the «ecstases» and the «items in the structure of care» («strukturelle Momente der Sorge») are simply the same for Heidegger. In that sense, they do not lie in a hierarchical relationship nor in any «relationship» at all.

My answer to the objection is that it neglects Heidegger's own statements on the more fundamental status of «Zeitlichkeit» («temporality») when compared to «Care» («Sorge»). This status is mentioned even in the title of section 65: «Die Zeitlichkeit als der ontologische Sinn der Sorge» («Temporality as the ontological meaning of care»). Of course, it is possible to interpret Heidegger's statements as merely emphatic, and to preserve the same universality for «temporality» and «Care». Nonetheless, that is a path I do not personally deem walkable, as Heidegger's statements seem unambiguous to me.

If anything, one may concede that the actual meaning of the hierarchical relationship between «Care» and «temporality» remains implicit in *Being and Time*. Here, «die Einheit der Ekstasen» («the unity of the ecstases») and the «strukturelle Momente der Sorge» do seem to coincide. Yet that is because they are both essential structures of the human being, that is they are both «existentialia». That holds even if Heidegger never refers in *Being and Time* to the «ecstases» as «existentialia». In fact, he uses adjectives, such as «existenzial-zeitlich» («existential-temporal»), which testify to his *distinguishing* what is «existenzial» from what is «ekstatisch» («ecstatic»). However, on other occasions, Heidegger employs the adjectives «temporal» and «existential» as interchangeable, which testifies to his acquaintance with the *most fundamental notion* of the «existentialia»: The one according to which *any* universal structure of the human being, including «temporal» ones, is an «existentialia» and therefore belongs to the *hierarchy of «existentialia»*.

Therefore, I contend that the *identity* between «die Einheit der Ekstasen» and the «strukturelle Momente der Sorge» is merely *apparent*. I also contend that the interpretation that there is no real difference between «temporality» and «Care» can be *explained* by the fact that *Heidegger himself does not concretely say what it means for «temporality» to ground «Care»*. Nevertheless, I do not think one is entitled to ignore Heidegger's words on the «ermöglichend» («making-possible») character of «ecstases» with regards to «Care» – *not even if Heidegger himself ignored them*. Indeed, the terminology used to establish «temporality» as the ground of «Care» is *systematically employed*, throughout *Being and Time*, to allude to foundational relationships. That is why I believe one should take Heidegger's words seriously here, just as one takes them seriously when they concern other topics.

At this point, I am in a position to ask: Did Heidegger subsume «Sein zum Tode» under *the more universal* «existentialia» or under *the less universal* ones? This chapter started by posing this question. Here, one might argue that *just as the three structural «moments» of «Care» are made possible by «temporality», «Sein zum Tode» itself is made possible by «temporality»*. Now, is there textual evidence where Heidegger *expressly* makes this connection?

In section 65 of *Being and Time*, Heidegger states:

«Wenn zum Sein des Daseins das eigentliche bzw. uneigentliche *Sein zum Tode* gehört, dann ist dieses nur möglich als *zukünftiges*».<sup>29</sup>

(«If either authentic or inauthentic *Being-towards-death* belongs to Dasein's Being, then such Being-towards-death is possible only as something *futural*».)<sup>30</sup>

From this passage, one gets a confirmation that Heidegger *did* establish a hierarchy of «existentials»: «Being-towards-death» is here said to be *dependent* on a more fundamental existential structure, which is the «future as coming towards» («Zukunft»)<sup>31</sup>. Therefore, Heidegger did subsume «Sein zum Tode» under a more universal existential structure (the «Zukunft»), but he did not subsume it under a more universal *thanatological* structure. This means that, in *Being and Time*, the most fundamental notion when it comes to how humans relate to death is «being-towards-death». For the higher «existential» represented by the «Zukunft» does not concern the relationship that humans have with their death, but with the «future as coming towards».

The discussion of Heidegger's analytic has served for reaching *the general concept of a supreme ontological-existential-thanatological structure*. This represents the end goal of an *existential* ontology of death, in the Heideggerian sense, and has not been reached by Heidegger's «*esistenziale Analytik*», as will be demonstrated in the next chapter. There, I will concretely show how an existential structure can be more universal than the others. However, before that, it is necessary to advance the investigation of death, understood as the existential correlate of the two fundamental kinds of relationship that humans can have with it, that is «being-towards-death» and «facing-death». Only when the degree of analysis achieved regarding these two «deaths» matches that achieved regarding their corresponding fundamental attitudes will the study be able to indicate the supreme human attitude towards death on solid foundations.

## **2. On the «Worldly» Character of Death (and of «Being-In-The-World», and «Towards-Death»)**

In this new part of the chapter, I will explore the «*worldliness*» of death, grasping this term in a pre-religious fashion. In analysing worldliness, the present investigation is going to overflow into a full-fledged analytic of human existence. That is to say that not simply the fundamental relationship with death, but the fundamental essence of human existence will be at stake. In fact, it will become clear that the worldliness of death «springs» from the worldliness of existence itself.

In its *essence*, human death must be said to be obscure.<sup>32</sup> For this very reason, the *essence* of death cannot be identified with existential nihilism's death or with any other particular interpretation of death.<sup>33</sup> *Now, what is*

<sup>29</sup> Heidegger 1977, pp. 430-431 (Heidegger's emphasis).

<sup>30</sup> Heidegger 1985, pp. 372-373 (Heidegger's emphasis).

<sup>31</sup> Heidegger 1985, p. 372. (German: Heidegger 1977, p. 430).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Chapter 1.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Chapter 2.

*the essence of the essence of death?* I will demonstrate that the answer to this question is worldliness itself. Nevertheless, before that, it is important to provide some clarifications.

In this context, I am *radicalising* the question of the first chapter and asking what the essence of *the essence* of death is. In other words, I am asking *what the essential layer is*, to which everyone relates in any possible «encounter» with death. From an ontological perspective, it is not relevant whether death is encountered as a not-yet, and thus obscurely, or as a present, and thus manifestly (to the extent to which one is manifest to oneself).<sup>34</sup> Indeed, as has been shown, what is encountered is always the same: death. No change of time can change the essence of the essence of death. This principle has already been demonstrated in this study when analysing the ontological-metaphysical dimension of death as «going into nothingness», according to Emanuele Severino's terminology. In fact, this component belongs to death as such, no matter whether it is lived as a present or expected as a future.

## **2.1 Worldliness as «Earthliness». The Ontic-Religious Notion of «vita terrena» («Earthly Life») in the Christian Worldview**

So far, the present study might have given the impression of being affected by the traditional Western neglect of the human body. Indeed, the body has been barely mentioned. And even when it has been mentioned, this was simply to push it away from actual examination. In what follows, I intend to fill this gap. Nonetheless, I will not do that out of a theoretical compassion for a neglected object of analysis. At this stage, that would be ill-timed. On the contrary, consistent with the study's thematic goal, I will examine the bodily nature of human existence *as an element of death's essence*.

At first glance, it might appear to be already clear why investigating the body has a deep thanatological significance. After all, is the issue of the body not linked to the alternative between an «earthly» death and a «spiritual» one? Is death not «earthly» when *only the body* dies? In the *Summa theologiae*, when quoting a passage from Hieronymus, Thomas Aquinas uses «earthly» («*terrenus*») with reference to human life:

«Hieronymus dicit in sermone Assumptionis [ep. 9 Ad Paulam et Eustoch.] “bene angelus ad Virginem mittitur, quia semper est angelis cognata virginitas. Profecto in carne praeter carnem vivere non terrena vita est, sed caelestis.”».<sup>35</sup>

(«Wherefore Jerome says in a sermon on the Assumption: “It is well that an angel be sent to the Virgin; because virginity is ever akin to the angelic nature. Surely to live in the flesh and not according to the flesh is not an earthly but a heavenly life.”»).

In the *Summa*, Aquinas' preferred terms for indicating the «vita terrena» («earthly life») are: «vita corporalis» («corporeal life»), «vita praesens» («the present life», «this life»), «carnis» («flesh»), «status praesentis vitae» («the present state of life»). On its part, in that work, the term «worldly» («*mundanus*») is never referred by Aquinas to human life, but rather often to the «res» («*res mundanae*», «things of the world»), and sometimes

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Chapter 1, section 6.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Aquinas. *Summa theologiae*, III<sup>a</sup> q. 30 a. 2 co.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Aquinas 2012-, vol. 19, *Tertia Pars*, 1-59, ed. and trans. by Fr. Laurence Shapcote OP (2023), p. 313.



to the «divitiae» («divitiae mundanae», «worldly riches»), the «negotia» («negotia mundana», «human affairs»).

Yet when examining *Whether Paul, when in rapture, saw the essence of God* («utrum Paulus in raptu viderit Dei essentiam»), Aquinas discusses the «supramundane vision» («visio supermundana»), which a human can have when raptured to heaven, and differentiates the kinds of this «vision» in «corporalis» («bodily»), «imaginaria» («imaginary»), and «intellectualis» («intellectual»).<sup>37</sup> Now, by elaborating the *opposite notion* of a «visio supermundana», one might ask what a «worldly vision» («visio mundana») would be. One might also further the question and ask, more broadly, what a «worldly life» would be: a «vita mundana».

As is evident, the human «vision» and «life» can become «supramundane» only because, in and of themselves, they are «mundane», they are «worldly». The converse is also true: Human life can be defined «worldly» only insofar as there is a «supramundane», or better, an «otherworldly» life: «vita caelestis» («heavenly life»), as per Hieronymus' words. In this context, I should note that there might be a difference between the notion of «supramundane» and the notion of «otherworldly». The former might refer to the provisional state of those who are raptured to heaven, whereas the latter might refer to the definitive state of those who died and are now in heaven. However, both these notions ultimately refer to *another* world, *another* life – one that can be accessed either temporarily during one's earthly existence, as in Paul's case, or definitively after death.

Now, it is clear that this is simply an ontic, religious acceptance of a «worldly life». That is evident from the examination of existential nihilism, which on its part denies the possibility of an otherworldly existence. In fact, existential nihilism also denies that human life can be defined «worldly». For only if an otherworldly life exists can this life be «worldly». At this stage of the investigation, the study is perfectly able to exclude that what can only subsist within a certain understanding of human existence, as is the worldliness of life according to Christianity, can ever belong to the essence of existence.

However, in analysing the derivative concept of worldliness, this section lost its reference to the question of the human body. To a certain extent, that is positive. Indeed, any reference to the body *in the context of a religious understanding of death* would prevent from grasping the *ontological* question here at stake. It is in an ontological spirit that, in what follows, I will reconcile the question of worldliness and that of the human body.

## **2.2 «Worldliness» as an Ontological-Existential Notion**

Human death is a «worldly» thing. In this context, this must be understood as an *ontological statement*, similar to Heidegger's statements on the «Weltlichkeit der Welt» («worldhood of the world»), where the Christian understanding of the «world» («mundus») is re-elaborated and made into a universal existential notion. That is not to say that this study's understanding of worldliness is the same as Heidegger's. Rather, by «worldly», I mean *everything, belonging to the human essence, which could not survive death*. In that sense, the «worldly»

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Aquinas. *Summa theologiae*, II<sup>a</sup>-II<sup>ae</sup>, q. 175 a. 3 ad 4. (English: Thomas Aquinas 2012, vol. 18.2, *Secunda Secundae*, 123-189, ed. and trans. by Fr. Laurence Shapcote OP (2023)), p. 660.

character of death can be defined as an element of death's essence and the ontic-religious concept of worldliness can be made into an ontological notion.

It is crucial to acknowledge that the notion of «what is lost with death» can be understood *from a Christian perspective*, according to which *just* the human body is destroyed with death, but it can also be understood *from an ontological perspective*. According to this perspective, what is lost with death is *at least* the human body. Therefore, the ontological perspective is not an *alternative* to the Christian one, but its core. Over the world's history, human death could *become* «worldly» in a religious sense, because it was already «worldly» *in itself*.

When death comes, *no matter whether this is interpreted as an absolute or a relative end of life*, the body is destroyed and transformed into a corpse. That makes *the destruction and transformation of the body* elements of the essence of death.<sup>38</sup> After all, nobody would be surprised in hearing that their body is destroyed and transformed with death. That means that these features of death are «known» to everybody, consciously or unconsciously. They are «known» to everybody even in the sense that, *when one dies*, one can be said to «know» that dying means the destruction and transformation of their body.

It is now possible to better clarify the notion of an «essence of the essence» of death. This phrase refers to the fact that there exist *different degrees* in ontologicality. That is something I have already focused on when discussing the possibility that universal structures may differ internally from each other. In this note, I wish to add that this has a deep methodological meaning for the present investigation. Indeed, admitting that a universal structure can be less universal than another means admitting that *the «ontological» can be «ontic»*. This is not a contradictory statement. For it is *in different respects* that the same universal structure can be «ontic» and «ontological» at once.

That can be observed, for example, with respect to what was called the «essence» of death. According to the results achieved in the first chapter, this «essence» lies in the fact that all the relationships a human can have with death as a future event deal with obscurity. Nonetheless, I have demonstrated that *from a more universal perspective*, the «essence» of death is represented by what is encountered by a human both when death has not come yet and when death is happening in the present. That is what was defined the «essence of the essence» of death. In this case, it is clear that the reason why obscurity has been defined the «essence» of death is *different* from the reason why obscurity can be downgraded as a particular instance of the «essence of the essence» of death. Therefore, at least in cases similar to this one, the notions of «ontic» and «ontological» are not grasped as *dichotomous* in this study. In other words, they are not grasped in absolute but in relative terms. Let me note that this also happens in *Being and Time*. As noted by Iain Thomson, «in Heidegger's terms, the “ontic” and the “ontological” [...] are never completely separable, let alone dichotomous.».<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> For the notions of «destruction» and «transformation», cf. Chapter 2, sections 3.2 and 3.2.1; and sections 3.5 and 3.5.1.

<sup>39</sup> Wrathall 2021, p. 212.

The reader will have noticed that, thus far, I have not clearly distinguished the worldliness of death from the worldliness of life. That was intentional. I aimed to show that they are inextricably linked to each other. In the following sections, I will argue that the worldliness of death is a *particular instance* of the worldliness of human existence. That will also explain why the present thanatology will overflow into a full-fledged existential analytic. In this context, I should note that, in a way, this overflow has been occurring from the very beginning. For as an *investigation of the essential human relationship with death*, this study is but an «existential analytic». On the other hand, the study has been no full-fledged existential analytic so far. That is because the relationship humans have with death is just *one possible* existential theme. As will be shown, there is no aspect of human life which is not «worldly». Yet there are aspects of life which do not concern death in and of themselves, such as the essential relationship one has with birth. Of course, that is not to deny that, in the concreteness of human existence, all aspects of one's life are linked with death and one's relationship with it. It is simply to say that human «worldliness» is more universal, internally speaking, than the human relationship with death.

According to some interpreters, such as Carol J. White, the word «death» in *Being and Time* does not mean what is usually meant with the word.<sup>40</sup> Another supporter of this interpretation is John Haugeland.<sup>41</sup> Here, I wish to contend that this reading prevents from understanding the fundamental methodological operation made by Heidegger in his work: the «*existentialisation*» («*Existentialisierung*»)<sup>42</sup> Indeed, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger re-signified the term «death» to make it mean the *human relationship* with death. As recognised by other scholars, such as Taylor Carman, even though «Heidegger does not mean quite what is commonly meant by the word», «neither is his existential conception of death wholly alien to our ordinary understanding».<sup>43</sup> That is Iain Thomson's opinion too.<sup>44</sup>

In referring to the existentialised notion of death, I am not supporting the idea that «death» is understood in one single way in *Being and Time*. On that matter, I side with the majority of Heideggerian interpreters.<sup>45</sup> Now, in *Being and Time*, the «*existentialisation*» of death is expressed by Heidegger's conception of «*Sein zum Tode*». In fact, it is because Heidegger re-signified «death» as the human relationship with it that he could state that «Death, in the widest sense, is a phenomenon of life» («*Der Tod im weitesten Sinne ist ein Phänomen des Lebens*»)<sup>46</sup> In this investigation, the reasons why Heidegger existentialised «death» (and all other phenomena of existence) are not relevant. What is relevant is the methodological difference between the «existential analytic» and this study – a difference that is important to underscore, especially since I have just drawn an analogy between Heidegger's method and my own. The difference lies in the fact that the present study has been gaining a more fundamental view on death than any «existentialised» one. That is suggested

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<sup>40</sup> White 2005, pp. 53-92

<sup>41</sup> Haugeland 2000.

<sup>42</sup> By means of example, cf. Schulz 2002.

<sup>43</sup> Both sentences in Carman 2009, p. 276.

<sup>44</sup> Wrathall 2021, p. 214.

<sup>45</sup> By means of example, cf. Magurshak 1979, pp. 112-113.

<sup>46</sup> Heidegger 1985, p. 290. (German: Heidegger 1977, p. 328).

by the greater attention here paid to *death as a «towards-which», that is as the objectual counterpart of «being-towards-death»*.

Here, I wish to clarify that this greater attention is due to the fact that the notion of death as «being-towards-death» is *essentially dependent on death as a «towards-which», but not vice versa*. Let me explain. The reason why Heidegger could conceive of death as «being-towards-death» is the fact that the «towards-which» of «being-towards-death» is *death. Death itself*. After all, one would never be able to existentialise «death» without a reference to *what* one is existentialising. *Yet the reverse does not hold*. Indeed, if one considers the *mere relational character* of human existence as a «being-towards», one will never be able to find any reference to *death* within it. This reference *takes place* – that is, «being-towards-death» takes place – because one’s «being-towards» *originally connects* with death as its *defining* «towards-which». That shows the dependence of «being-towards-death» on death itself. In that sense, against Heidegger’s opinion, the existentialised sense of «death» does not represent, but *conceals* the fundamental meaning of human death. Therefore, insofar as it puts the cart in front of the horse, I contend that Heidegger’s existentialising method must be rejected.

### **2.3 One’s Worldly Awareness «by» One’s Body, «of» One’s Body, «that» One’s Body. Thanatological Acquisition of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phénoménologie de la perception***

It is now time to thoroughly investigate human worldliness. That cannot be accomplished without dealing with human bodiliness. In effect, as long as one lives, one’s body is obviously there as well, and it is there as an alive body. This fact conceals an unpredictable complexity. In the rest of the chapter, I will address this complexity insofar as it is relevant to my thanatological purposes.

Firstly, let me clarify that I am not conceiving of the relationship between the human body and the human mind in a dualistic fashion. That is to say that I am not repeating Descartes’ mistake, as per Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s opinion, of radically distinguishing the body from the mind, granting no «intentionality» («intentionnalité») whatsoever to the body and exclusively attributing it to the mind («mens a corpore omnino diversa», *Meditatio Sexta*). In that sense, the present study is monistic, for it adheres to Merleau-Ponty’s teaching.<sup>47</sup> In fact, just as one’s consciousness, the human body has *its own awareness of things*, as shown for example by tactile experiences, where the «touching» is a *bodily* awareness of the touched.

On the other hand, if the «mind-body dualism» lies in asserting, as Descartes also did, the possible independence of the mind from the body, I should note that *this study is as little «dualistic» as it is «monistic»*.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, that concerns the ancient, ontic *querelle* between those who believe in a possible (or certain) survival after death and existential nihilists. As antimodern as it may sound, it must be acknowledged that even viewing

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty. “Phénoménologie de la perception” *Œuvres*, ed. by Claude Lefort (Paris: Gallimard, 2010). (English: Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Donald Landes, frwd. by e Taylor Carman (Abingdon, Oxford-New York: Routledge, 2013)).

<sup>48</sup> The reference is again to the *Meditatio Sexta* (Descartes 1897-1913, VII (1904), pp. 71-90. (English: Descartes 1985, II (1984), pp. 50-62).

human consciousness or «mind» as essentially «embodied» («incarnée»), and therefore as perishing with the death of the body, ultimately amounts to a *reformulation* of Descartes' stance. The only difference from Descartes is that in this reformulation Descartes' opinion is *capsized* into the belief that there is no possible survival.

Now, what are the *thanatological repercussions* of the monism here inherited by Merleau-Ponty? One first repercussion is that if the body is essentially conscious of things, then the death of the body *as a conscious being* belongs to the essence of death. As one dies, the body dies; but as the body dies, its «intentionality» dies as well. According to Merleau-Ponty's terminology, it is the whole «sujet percevant» («perceiving subject») that dies with death. Therefore, the question of the «intentionality» of the body is not simply a matter of *phenomenology of perception*, but it concerns human death. In what follows, I will call the awareness the body has of things «intentionality by one's body». That will help me distinguish it from other kinds of intentionalities that are otherwise linked to the body.

Let me move onto the second thanatological repercussion of this study's monism. In fact, another constant element of one's life is the awareness one has *of* the body. From a fundamental perspective, it makes no difference whether such an awareness is buried in implicitness by the ancestral Western neglect of the body or made into the theme of an «existential analytic» through an «objectification of the living body» («objectivation du corps vivant», in Merleau-Ponty's French). Indeed, in any case, one «knows» one «has» a body. That can be observed in many discourses on the body made by common sense, where the use of the verb «to have» indicates that one *distinguishes* oneself from the body. That can be done precisely because the body is being understood as something one is aware *of*.

In more technical terms, that is to say that one's body belongs to the *objectual field* – in its widest sense – of one's consciousness. And even the fact that the body is capable of perception (what has been called the awareness «by» one's body) is part of this objectual field. In other words, as one lives, one «knows» one has a body and that this body perceives things. However, these statements need an explanation. For *what* is aware of all this? Is it the bodily awareness previously mentioned? Is the body itself the one who is aware of itself and of its perceptive abilities?

My answer to these questions is negative. Indeed, the consciousness that «knows» it «has» a body is *another kind of consciousness*, whose nature is *fundamentally different* from the nature of one's bodily consciousness («intentionnalité corporelle», to use Merleau-Ponty's phrase). Unlike the body and its embodied awareness, this consciousness lies *outside* the spatial world, to say it paradoxically. It is a «nowhere» consciousness. In the *Meditatio Sexta*, Descartes famously called it «mens, sive animus, sive intellectus, sive ratio» («mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason»):

«Et quamvis fortasse (vel potius, ut postmodum dicam, pro certo) habeam corpus, quod mihi valde arcte conjunctum est, quia tamen ex una parte claram et distinctam habeo ideam mei ipsius, quatenus sum tantum res cogitans, non extensa, et

ex alia parte distinctam ideam corporis, quatenus est tantum res extensa, non cogitans, certum est me a corpore meo revera esse distinctum, et absque illo posse existere.».<sup>49</sup>

(«It is true that I may have (or, to anticipate, that I certainly have) a body that is very closely joined to me. But nevertheless, on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it.»).<sup>50</sup>

Let me draw from this the thanatological consequence relevant in this context. The fact that one's «non-extended» consciousness is aware of one's «extended» body involves that, at the time of one's death, this consciousness will die too, no matter how immaterial it can be. Nonetheless, this statement has nothing to do with existential nihilism. Indeed, it is *insofar as* human consciousness is consciousness *of the body* that this is expected to disappear with death. After all, the body is just *one* among the things of which human consciousness is aware while living.

The fact that one's awareness of the body dies with death makes it a *second element* of the essence of the essence of death. In other words, it makes it an essential element of human worldliness. That shows that «worldliness» *has not exclusively to do with the body*.

The investigation of worldliness is still far from its end. Indeed, *what else of oneself* dies with death? The question of worldliness will not be adequately answered until a fuller notion of what disappears with death is achieved. In what follows, a third element of human worldliness will be examined. This element is given by the «non-intentional» life of the body. This life is represented by the ever-present bodily sensations of warm and cold, of pleasure and pain, etc. It was Husserl who, in the *Logische Untersuchungen*, defined these feelings «non-intentional feelings» («nicht-intentionale Gefühle»), as opposed to «intentional feelings» («intentionale Gefühle»).<sup>51</sup>

Now, these «non-intentional feelings» can be said to feel «that» one is a body. This peculiar liveliness of the human body should not be confused with the consciousness «by» one's body, given that this is «intentional». That is, it *refers* to something. Let me give an example. A pleasurable feeling at one's neck simply «signals» that there is pleasure, but it does not *relate*, as such, to one's neck, to oneself, or to anything else. It is a mere «sensation», a *feeling* that occurs in one's body without an «intentional» reference to anything. On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that there is an analogy between such feelings and the «intentionnalité corporelle». That is due to the fact that they are both *spatial*. In fact, all feelings have a place in space. For example, they occur «along my neck», «in your shoulders», «on her hand», «around my head», etc.

<sup>49</sup> *Meditatio Sexta* (Descartes 1897-1913, VII (1904), p. 78). The passage quoted before the colon is from the *Meditatio Secunda* (Descartes 1897-1913, VII (1904), p. 27). (English: Descartes 1985, II (1984), p. 18).

<sup>50</sup> Descartes 1985, II (1984), p. 54.

<sup>51</sup> Husserl introduces this distinction in section 15 of the *Fifth Logical Investigation* (German: Husserl 1950- ), XIX/1 (1984), pp. 401-410). (English: Husserl 2011, II, pp. 106-112).

It will now be easy to predict the thanatological repercussion of this. Indeed, how is the «non-intentional» life of one's body supposed to persist after death? This question leads me to argue that the death of one's «non-intentional» life represents a *third element* of the worldly constitution of human existence.

Let me mention that it does no harm to my argument recalling that, on certain occasions, one can continue to feel something even when a part of their body has been destroyed, as in the case of phantom limbs. On that basis, one might wish to argue that even after the decay of one's entire body, one could in principle expect to be still able to feel pain, pleasure, etc. Nonetheless, I would reply that these feelings would not be «bodily» anymore, for there would be no longer a «body» in which they could take place. If anything, it is *in a different sense* that they might still be defined «bodily», but that would not regard the *human living* body and would therefore fall outside the scope of an existential-thanatological investigation.

In conclusion, let me note that I am not arguing that the three elements mentioned so far exhaust human worldliness. Yet I am not claiming that they are not exhaustive either. I leave the question open. On the other hand, I certainly claim exhaustiveness *at a more fundamental level*. For no matter how unexpected, any further dimension of worldliness yet to be identified is already «contained» under the *essence* of human worldliness. As previously said, this essence consists in what will not be able to survive one's death.

I will now reap the fruits of the analyses conducted so far and consider the core of human worldliness. This is represented by the human body itself. I have left the body for last because of its peculiar role among all elements of the worldliness of existence. In effect, the body is not simply one of the components of one's worldly nature. Rather, it is the center around which all features of worldliness revolve. That can be seen when considering that, firstly, it is *the body* that is conscious of things thanks to its «intentionnalité corporelle». Secondly, it is *of the body* that the human «mind» is aware. And thirdly, it is *in the body* that all sensations take place. All of this amounts to say that *the body is the inner core of the worldly natures of human existence*. That can also be proved by showing that the body is the *implicit element* of the definition of worldliness given at the beginning of the inquiry. Indeed, *what will not be able to survive death is simply everything which is body-dependent*, including the body itself. However, this new definition requires an explanation. That is because two notions of «body» are used in it.

I will now introduce the distinction between the «ontic» and the «ontological» body. In drawing this distinction, I am in no way halving the body. On the contrary, I am distinguishing the role of the body, *as one of the elements* of worldliness, from its role *as the fundamental element* of all human worldly natures. In the first sense, the «body» is one among the ontic worldly natures of existence, just as one's bodily intentionality, the awareness one has of one's body, and the sensations occurring in the body. In the second sense, the body is an ontological structure. In *that* sense, one can state that the body is the structure *of itself*. That is not to say that the «ontological» body is not the same as the «ontic» body. It is not that one has two bodies. On the contrary, the same body has two different roles. On one hand, it is one of the elements vanishing with death, whereas on the other, it is the element included in all elements, *even in itself*. In that sense, one can state that *the body is human worldliness itself*.

## **2.4 «Being-In-The-World» («In-der-Welt-Sein») and Human Worldliness. Heidegger and the Body**

In the last section, I have indicated some constitutive elements of the worldliness of existence. In this context, given the close engagement of this study with *Being and Time*, it might seem questionable not to address Heidegger's notion of «Being-in-the-world» («In-der-Welt-sein»), especially its relationship with the human body. After all, Heidegger identifies «Being-in-the-world» as the very «being» of human beings. Therefore, it is through an investigation of this notion that the problem of Heidegger's philosophy of the body should be addressed.

Let me start by stating that denying any presence, in the concept of «Being-in-the-world», of the acknowledgement that the human body is essential to human existence would be unfair. There are at least two fundamental features of the human being mentioned by Heidegger where the role of one's body is crucial. In this section, I am going to focus on one of them.

These two fundamental references to the body are *Dasein*'s «circumspective concern» («Besorgen») and *Dasein*'s «spatiality» («Räumlichkeit»);<sup>52</sup> I do not think that the «spatiality» of *Dasein* needs much clarification as to its reference to the body (given that only a spatial body could engage in spatial relationships with other things), while I do think that the reference to the body present in the «circumspective concern» needs an explanation. Certainly, the notion of «circumspective concern» has many senses in Heidegger's text, each of which has its own ontological rank in the hierarchy of «existentials». In this context, the sense I am interested in is the one according to which humans are «circumspectively concerned» with «ready-to-hand items of equipment» («zuhandene Zeugen») that they use. The totality of these «items» is «the world» («die Welt») where humans live. The concrete meaning of the usage of the «ready-to-hand» is suggested by Heidegger's terminological choice of «Zuhandenheit» («readiness-to-hand»). In this notion, there is a clear reference to human hands, and therefore, to the human body. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger distinguishes the «ready-to-hand» from its opposite, which he calls the «present-at-hand» («das Vorhandene»):

«Der je auf das Zeug zugeschnittene Umgang, darin es sich einzig genuin in seinem Sein zeigen kann, z. B. das Hämmern mit dem Hammer, *erfaßt* weder dieses Seiende thematisch als vorkommendes Ding, noch weiß etwa gar das Gebrauchen um die Zeugstruktur als solche. Das Hämmern hat nicht lediglich noch ein Wissen um den Zeugcharakter des Hammers, sondern es hat sich dieses Zeug so zugeeignet, wie es angemessener nicht möglich ist. [...]; je weniger das Hammerding nur begafft wird, je zugreifender es gebraucht wird, um so ursprünglicher wird das Verhältnis zu ihm, um so unverhüllter begegnet es als das, was es ist, als Zeug. Das Hämmern selbst entdeckt die spezifische „Handlichkeit“ des Hammers. Die Seinsart von Zeug, in der es sich von ihm selbst her offenbart, nennen wir die *Zuhandenheit*. Nur weil *Zeug* dieses »An-sich-sein« hat und nicht lediglich noch vorkommt, ist es handlich im weitesten Sinne und verfügbar. Das schärfste Nui-noch-*hinsehen* auf das so und so beschaffene »Aussehen« von Dingen vermag Zuhandenes nicht zu entdecken. Der nur „theoretisch“ hin-sehende Blick auf Dinge entbehrt des Verstehens von Zuhandenheit.».<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Heidegger 1985, pp. 95-123 and pp. 135-149.

<sup>53</sup> Heidegger 1977, p. 93 (Heidegger's emphasis).



(«Equipment can genuinely show itself only in dealings cut to its own measure (hammering with a hammer, for example); but in such dealing an entity of this kind is not *grasped* thematically as an occurring Thing, nor is the equipment-structure known as such even in the using. The hammering does not simply have knowledge about [um] the hammer's character as equipment, but it has appropriated this equipment in a way which could not possibly be more suitable. [...]; the less we just stare at the hammer-Thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more unveiledly is it encountered as that which it is-as equipment. The hammering itself uncovers the specific "manipulability" ["Handlichkeit"] of the hammer. The kind of Being which equipment possesses – in which it manifests itself in its own right – we call "*readiness-to-hand*" ["Zuhandenheit"]. Only because equipment has this 'Being-in-itself' and does not merely occur, is it manipulable in the broadest sense and at our disposal. No matter how sharply we just *look* [Nur-noch-hinsehen] at the 'outward appearance' ["Aussehen"] of Things in whatever form this takes, we cannot discover anything ready-to-hand. If we look at Things just 'theoretically', we can get along without understanding readiness-to-hand.»).<sup>54</sup>

As is evident from the example of the hammer, the notion of «*readiness-to-hand*» *contains* a reference to the sense of touch. That is not to say that this reference is *essential* to Heidegger's concept: He is not stating that it is «*ready-to-hand*» any «*equipment*» («*Zeug*») of which one has an actual (or possible) tactile grip. Indeed, in a different passage, he mentions the possibility to utilise the sun (which is surely not touched by humans) and particularly the sun's «*position*», as a «*ready-to-hand*»: «Wenn wir auf die Uhr sehen, machen wir unausdrücklich Gebrauch vom „Stand der Sonne“, darnach die amtliche astronomische Regelung der Zeitmessung ausgeführt wird.» («When we look at the clock, we tacitly make use of the 'sun's position', in accordance with which the measurement of time gets regulated in the official astronomical manner.»).<sup>55</sup>

That was meant to show that Heidegger did not forget about the human body in *Being and Time*. In fact, further to the references contained in *Dasein*'s «*spatiality*» and «*circumspective concern*», one might also find other references to the body, such as the one present in Heidegger's neutrality with regards to the ontic question of what death is. Though implicitly, this neutrality suggests that Heidegger is concerned with *this* life, namely, with the «*vita corporalis*», in Thomas Aquinas' words. However, it must be acknowledged that the Heideggerian remarks in the philosophy of the body are mostly *indirect*.

## **2.5 «Being-Towards-Death Is Bodiless». The Platonic Origin of the Oscillation between the Ontological Justification for the «Incorporeality» of the Body and the Ontic Forgetfulness of It**

In her article on *The enigma of being-towards-death*, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone claims that «being-towards-death is bodiless».<sup>56</sup> «Being-towards-death is outside any physical anchorage; it is metaphysical through and through; it traverses an ontological path through life at an abstract level, with no relation to being a body».<sup>57</sup> For Sheets-Johnstone that can be repeated, more fundamentally, with regards to «*Being-in-the-world*», understood as the most fundamental structure of human existence.

<sup>54</sup> Heidegger 1985, p. 98 (Heidegger's emphasis).

<sup>55</sup> Heidegger 1977, pp. 95-96. (English: Heidegger 1985, p. 101).

<sup>56</sup> Sheets-Johnstone 2015, p. 564.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 564-564.

In her invective against Heidegger's underestimation of the essential role of the human body, I believe Sheets-Johnstone is perfectly right. As stated, Heidegger has almost neglected the body and his references to it in the «existential analytic» are mostly indirect. Nonetheless, this is not due to the «abstractness» of Heidegger's investigation, for even Sheets-Johnstone's considerations on the human body, which are meant to fill the Heideggerian gap, «*traverse an ontological path through life at an abstract level*». Let me explain.

It is true that *a certain Platonism* – if one so interprets Plato – might be concealed in Heidegger's underestimation of the human body (not ignorance, as Sheets-Johnstone wants). Indeed, what is ontological for Plato, that is the «ιδέα», seems to have often to do with the «incorporeal» («τὸ ἀσώματον»). The same happens with Heidegger in *Being and Time*: His analyses concern an entity that can be identified with «the nowhere» («das Nirgends»), that is *Dasein*.<sup>58</sup>

However, it is also true that *all* the ontological structures of human life, no matter how concerned with the body, are «abstract» *by themselves*. In effect, just as one will never run into *horseness* on the street – for horseness is not a concrete thing –, so too one will never run into *bodiliness*. Certainly, one will run into *bodies* and *horses*. The reason why one cannot run into bodiliness is that *this is itself an «existential»*, that is an «abstract» structure existing in *that* realm which is not the realm of individual entities.

Contrary to Sheets-Johnstone's opinion, I do not believe that the term «ontological» (which for Sheets-Johnstone is interchangeable with «metaphysical» and even with «existential») is ambiguous *in itself*. I believe it *becomes* ambiguous when one confuses the «incorporeality» of *ontological structures* («ἀσώματα εἶδη», «incorporeal ideas», *Sophista*, 246b) with the «incorporeality» of *those entities* which are typically «incorporeal», such as the human «soul» («ἡ ψυχή») and all attitudes of consciousness, including «being-towards-death» and «Being-in-the-world».<sup>59</sup> The confusion arises because typically incorporeal entities, such as consciousness, are «incorporeal» *both in that* they have the peculiar nature of not being corporeal (as opposed to corporeal things) *and in that* their abstract structures are incorporeal. The fact that it is *in the very same sense* that an individual entity, such as consciousness, and an abstract one, such as the essence of consciousness, are incorporeal, is what can produce the confusion.

Therefore, Plato might well have deluded himself into thinking that, since «ideas» («εἶδη») are «incorporeal» («ἀσώματα»), they cannot be «ideas» *of «corporeal» entities* («σωματοειδέες»), but that is not due to an intrinsic flaw in ontology as the investigation of essences, but to a conceptual mistake. That is the same mistake that Sheets-Johnstone, in my view mistakenly, ascribes to Heidegger.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, in Plato's case the mistake might be due to the fact that philosophy was at its beginnings, and therefore still struggling to perspicuously conceive of its objects of investigation, as Hegel thought. However, Heidegger is not Plato. Nor is Heidegger an original follower of Plato, substituting the Platonic «incorporeality» of beauty for the «incorporeality» of *Dasein's* «existentials». On the contrary, Heidegger was in a perfect position to ontologically reflect on

<sup>58</sup> English: Heidegger 1985, p. 231. (German: Heidegger 1977, p. 248).

<sup>59</sup> The translation of Plato's phrase is taken from Jowett 1953, IV, p. 462.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2015, for instance p. 567.

human bodiliness, yet he did not take great advantage of this position. After all, that is exactly what surprises the reader of *Being and Time* and which therefore needs to be explained.

In denying that Heidegger's «existential analytic» can be read as a Platonic existentialism, I am not denying that *Being and Time* is a Platonic text. For like many other philosophers, Heidegger was aware that *a certain Platonism* is irrevocable for philosophy. That happens because (and if) philosophy is understood as the investigation of «essences» («εἶδη»).<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, in denying that Heidegger made a Platonic mistake, I am not stating that he made no mistake when dealing with the human body. In fact, his indirect references left the very ground of the worldly nature of existence aside. Yet this nature is the ground of his own analyses, and he recognised this precisely when investigating death and declaring that his investigation was not concerned with «the “other-worldly»» («das „Jenseits“») but remained «purely “this-worldly”» («rein „diesseitig“»).<sup>62</sup>

In that sense, human worldliness is the hidden ground of Heidegger's notion of «Being-in-the-world». Upon closer examination, that is not only evident but *necessary*. Indeed, a genuine concern for worldliness animates the whole «existential analytic» of *Being and Time*. Nonetheless, as Heidegger himself acknowledged in *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, an animating motif of a philosophical endeavour can remain subterranean and thus undeveloped. When this happens, it is suggested by Heidegger himself that the interpreter «uses violence» («Gewalt machen») against the text and that they do not limit themselves to «what the words say» («was die Worte sagen»).<sup>63</sup>

## **2.6 «Mind», «Body», and the «Mind-Body» Distinction Are Said in Many Ways**

I am now in a position to note that *when asking whether the human mind* («or intelligence, or intellect, or reason») *can exist independently from the body*, one should clarify *which mind one is asking about, and which body*. For example, in Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la perception*, the term «body» often alludes to the «intentionnalité corporelle», rather than the material body (and Merleau-Ponty was perfectly acquainted with this distinction).

Moreover, the manifold meanings of the human body and mind *necessarily result* in manifold interpretations of the difference between the two, that is, of the so-called «unity» between mind and body. Let me give an example. The *difference* between mind and body *does not even exist*, if the «mind» is the «intentionnalité corporelle». For in that respect, the body is *a certain kind of «mind»*, even though a corporeal one. In such a context, the problem of the difference between mind and body simply *vanishes*.

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. Heidegger 1985, p. 490.

<sup>62</sup> Heidegger 1985, pp. 329-330.

<sup>63</sup> Heidegger (1975- ), *Band 3: Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (1991), p. 202. For the English, cf. Martin Heidegger. *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics, Fifth Edition, Enlarged*, trans. by Richard Taft (Bloomington (Ind.): Indiana University Press, 1997a), p. 141).

### **2.7 An Objection Regarding the Limits of Validity of Philosophical Research**

According to what was claimed, humans are constantly aware of the totality of their worldly natures, either advertently or inadvertently. In this section, I will address an objection concerning the limits of validity of this claim. In fact, one might argue that it is hasty to maintain that one is constantly aware of the *analytical complexity* of one's worldly existence. One might argue that my claim instantiates the traditional mistake made by philosophy, and generally by all kinds of investigations, consisting in projecting the analytical outcomes of the research onto the pre-analytical understanding of existence which is typical of one's daily life. That is the mistake which Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty himself urge one not to make.

Now, if the objection were right, there would be times in life when one *would not recall* that one's death involves the death of one's body and of all kinds of consciousness and feelings that are linked to the body. My response to the objection is twofold. Firstly, I believe it is simply false that one can at times happen to ignore the complexity of one's own nature. This becomes evident when one imagines how impoverished life would be if one were suddenly to forget the distinction between one's body, one's mind, etc. In fact, this distinction might not always be clear (or even coherent) in one's mind. However, that is not evidence against my claim, but rather in its favour.

Secondly, even if it were true that one can have no understanding of the complexity of one's death, *this would not invalidate the results of the present study*. For just as a newborn may not know that one day they will die, and yet be mortal even so, so one may not know about the worldly complexity of existence and yet be worldly even so. This possibility is due to the presence of an observer who can «ascribe» to the newborn their mortality and to any human their worldly existence.

In conclusion, I should note that the last remark led the study to anticipate a future stage of the investigation. By claiming that my analysis holds valid even when one is unaware of this validity, I have moved beyond the scope of an «*existential*» investigation, as this has been understood thus far, following Heidegger. Nonetheless, it is not yet the time to introduce the idea that a «study in the philosophy of existence» might not be «*existential*».

### **2.8 When the Body Goes. A Thanatological Regressus in Indefinitum? Life, Death, and Dust**

In the context of the investigation of worldliness conducted in this chapter, one might wonder: *When is it exactly that the body dies?* This simple question might be fatal to the perspicuity of the notion of worldliness. In effect, one might wonder whether this notion conceals a *vague* element, given that it is not clear whether the body dies, for example, when the heart stops beating, when the body becomes immobile, or under some other condition.

Undoubtedly, if an ontology of death is not clear about when exactly one's body dies, it cannot be clear about the fact itself that one dies. That is due to the dependence of death in general on the death of the body, for which I argued previously. Here, let me note that the question to be addressed concerns the conditions under which one can be said to be dead *from the perspective of an existential ontology of death*. This entails that all

conditions of the kind of the previously mentioned, such as the immobility of the corpse, the interruption of the heart's beat, etc., fail to answer the question. That is because, from a fundamental perspective, it is simply *not possible* to establish *when exactly* the body dies, not even from the mere epistemological perspective of one's own understanding of death.

In fact, the question of the exact circumstances under which death occurs is an ontic-scientific question. That is because the answer to the question may vary from person to person, despite the scientific attempts to establish universal conditions for death. Ironically, this is evident from the variety itself of these attempts. For instance, biologists might argue that death happens *with brain death*. Yet this is a notion entirely foreign to people without biological expertise, who might think that death occurs when the heart stops beating. Both from an epistemological perspective and from an «ontological» one, it is simply not possible to universally establish when death takes place (unless one closes in on oneself, which is a philosophically illegitimate move). On the contrary, from a fundamental perspective, what matters is simply the fact that, at a given time, one's body will no longer be alive, and that one expects that to happen.

At this point, I will provide an example of a merely possible circumstance under which death can be interpreted to occur. This is not to deny what has just been said on the inevitable indeterminacy of this, but simply to prevent a potential criticism. This lies in objecting that, if no exact moment can be identified in which one dies, then death can be said not to exist.

Let me suppose that the time when death must have happened is the time by which the full disappearance of one's body has occurred, including the skeleton. In other words, one can expect to be dead when one has become dust. Now, I believe it is clear that it is not relevant which particular condition is the one identified with the actual occurrence of death, for any specific condition is but an instance of the general occurrence of death. The ambiguity of the specific time or condition under which death happens has nothing to do with the ambiguity of the fact itself that one dies.

At this juncture, one might object that even once the body has become dust, *some kind of life is still possible*. Indeed, there are no ultimately cogent reasons to exclude that dust itself «perceives». This new objection provides me with the opportunity to offer the refutation of the first mentioned. In effect, one can readily concede that even dust could perceive. However, in that case, the real issue would be the following: Would *the life of dust* be the same as *this bodily life which one is living*? The answer to this question is negative, which means that the objection is wrong. In fact, it is the mortality *of this life* that an ontology of death considers.

### **2.9 Neurological «Brain Death» as the Time When Humans Die and «Traumatic Brain Injuries» as Contemporary Neurological «Evidence» for Existential Nihilism**

I will now enrich the previous considerations by providing another example of when death can be interpreted to occur. This time, the example will be taken from one current scientific perspective, that is the neurological one. This will help me actualise my considerations on worldliness. Particularly, I will examine the guidelines

on *Understanding Brain Death* by one of the most prestigious hospitals in today's world: the Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston.<sup>64</sup>

According to the guidelines, death occurs with «*brain death*». This state is defined as the one in which «the brain has no oxygen or blood flow» and therefore «dies».<sup>65</sup> The guidelines state that «patients look asleep, but they are not. They do not hear or feel anything, including pain. This is because the parts of the brain that feel, sense, and respond to the world no longer work».<sup>66</sup> As is evident, these guidelines are charged with an existential-nihilistic understanding of death. However, that is not relevant here (see below). What is relevant is the implicit aspect of this, i.e. the fact that «brain death» is, *a fortiori ratione*, identified by the guidelines as the ontic phase where the human body can be considered *dead enough* not to «host» a worldly life anymore.

Undoubtedly, the spirit of the guidelines of the Brigham and Women's Hospital is not meant to be «epistemological». They are not meant to assess when one *expects* to die but, «ontologically», when one actually dies. Nonetheless, that is of no hurt for the point I wish to make here. Indeed, I wish to use this occasion to address an objection that might have become more urgent, given that, in this chapter, I started investigating the human body.

Nowadays, some among the strongest reasons for trusting existential nihilism are precisely *the neurological discourses on death*. That is especially evident when one examines the «evidence» gathered in studies on the so-called «traumatic brain injuries». This «evidence» might even seem to refute the fundamental thesis of an ontology of death, according to which no form of human knowledge, not even neurological knowledge, is entitled to utter the ultimate word on the nature of death. For when considering what sciences can gather on what happens *before* human death, as in the case of «brain injuries», one can have the impression that this (genuine!) evidence be fatal to the ontological certainty that existential nihilism is just one possible opinion on death, walking in the dark as all other opinions. The impression is due to the fact that the *experienceable consequences* of brain injuries on human life seem to confirm the existential-nihilistic perspective on death.

Among the symptoms of «mild traumatic brain injuries», the website of the top-ranked hospital in the United States, the Mayo Clinic, reports the «loss of consciousness for a few seconds to a few minutes», «memory or concentration problems», «feeling depressed or anxious».<sup>67</sup> On the other hand, among the symptoms of «moderate to severe traumatic brain injuries», the Mayo Clinic reports the «loss of consciousness from several minutes to hours», «coma and other disorders of consciousness».<sup>68</sup> In this context, one might wonder whether this should not be regarded as *genuine evidence* that damages to the brain *are* damages to consciousness. One might also wonder whether, given the *evident* mind-body parallelism, it is actually possible to go against this

<sup>64</sup> *Brigham and Women's Hospital: Boston Hospital & Medical Center* [online], < [https://www.brighamandwomens.org/assets/BWH/patients-and-families/pdfs/BWH\\_Brain\\_Death\\_Final\\_9\\_18\\_12\\_v2\\_for\\_Web.pdf](https://www.brighamandwomens.org/assets/BWH/patients-and-families/pdfs/BWH_Brain_Death_Final_9_18_12_v2_for_Web.pdf) > [accessed 16<sup>th</sup> October 2024].

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

<sup>67</sup> *Mayo Clinic* [online], < <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/traumatic-brain-injury/symptoms-causes/syc-20378557> > [accessed 16<sup>th</sup> October 2024].

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*.

evidence and refute its obvious thanatological consequence, i.e. the confirmation of existential nihilism's claim on the absoluteness of human death (as caused, in this instance, by the absoluteness of the death of the brain).

Yet what is this neurological evidence evidence *of*? Sure thing, there can be some «evidence» that when one's brain is seriously damaged, one's psychic faculties are damaged as well. Here, it is not my purpose to assess what kind of evidence this is, since doing so would fall outside the scope of this study's conception of evidence, as outlined in the first chapter. However, it is my intention to argue that the evidence one can gather of what happens *over the course of one's life* cannot confirm what is going to happen *with the end* of life. Mere analogies are not enough, despite the temptation to derive thanatological clues from non-thanatological evidence.



The third chapter has prepared the study for the concrete exhibition of the most fundamental way in which humans relate to death. The preparation has been pursued in two ways: a historical-philosophical one, by discussing Heidegger's *Being and Time* with regards to this fundamental issue; and a genuinely philosophical one, by examining the worldly nature of human death, which manifested itself as the very bodiliness of human life.

## **CHAPTER 4: ON THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE HUMAN RELATIONSHIP WITH DEATH. A CRITIQUE OF THE EXISTENTIAL ONTOLOGY OF DEATH**

The present chapter offers a radicalisation and critical examination of the analyses developed in the previous chapters. The existential ontology of death is first challenged through the express admission of the possibility of a relationship with death as a future yet manifest event, which is exemplified by the divine case of Jesus Christ, at least according to Catholic Christology. As a result of this criticism, the investigation is further radicalised by the discovery that any possible relationship with death is ontologically grounded in a more fundamental relation, here termed «belonging-to-death». Subsequently, the investigation undergoes a second critique, prompted by the recognition that humans might, in fact, lack any relationship to death, as illustrated by the case of newborns and young children. This leads the study towards a process of de-existentialisation, aimed at uncovering the most fundamental dimension of human mortality. Consequently, death emerges as independent from its being known to humans. Finally, even this fundamental dimension of death is questioned and ultimately brought to its own «death». This prepares the ground for the second half of the study: an investigation into the human relationship with eternity. As with the preceding chapters, the present one should not be understood as a contribution to the thanatological literature examined (whether in psychology, philosophy, or theology), but rather as an autonomous dialogue with it.

### **1. The Foundations of Human Death's Obscurity and of Thanatology in General. The Task of the Present Chapter**

In the second chapter, I argued that death is obscure *only insofar as* one is alive. Indeed, one expects death to reveal its nature when one is dying. In that sense, the obscurity of death proved to be *conditioned* by a determinate *existential positionality*: the state of being alive. This chapter will be devoted to examining whether there are *any further findings of the present investigation that, like the obscurity of death, are bound to a specific positionality*. In fact, have I not taken for granted certain «ontological» facts regarding death? Has Epicurus' denial that death exists been taken seriously? Have I not *kept still* thanatological facts which are *unstable*? How deep did the investigation actually go in investigating human mortality? Is there not a word on death which still needs to be spoken? And what is this word about?

In this chapter, I am going to cast doubts on the *underpinnings* of the analyses conducted thus far in the study. That will make human mortality appear in all its ineluctability and contingency at once. To achieve this, I will repeatedly radicalise my existential ontology of death by examining the foundations of the human relationship with death – until these foundations ultimately reveal themselves to be unfounded.

### **2. Kant and the Twofold Idea of «Critique» in This Chapter**

Before starting the discourse announced, let me make some considerations on the kind of «critique» to be made in this chapter. By «critique», I mean both the *discovery of the presuppositions* of an ontology of death in general and the *criticisms* which this discovery entails. As will be shown, those which have so far been



considered *foundational* presuppositions of the human relationship with death, and therefore of every ontology of death, will prove to be foundational *presuppositions*. Acknowledging this will require the study to overcome its own perspective to embrace a wider one, ample enough to see what had not been seen so far.

Given the twofold kind of «critique» that will be pursued, my aims can be defined «critical-philosophical», in the Kantian acceptance. For in investigating the fundamental structures of human faculties, Kant also outlined their «boundaries» («Grenzen»). These are given by the fact that the faculties are *human* faculties, that is they are not «everywhere» in force. As an example, one could recall the Kantian reference to the possibility of an «understanding, in which through self-consciousness all of the manifold would at the same time be given» («ein Verstand, in welchem durch das Selbstbewußtsein zugleich alles Mannigfaltige gegeben würde»)<sup>1</sup>. In fact, this would be a *divine* intellect, capable of «intuiting» («anschauen»), in which the finite structures *presupposed* by human intellect (and therefore by Kant's «critique» of it) would be overcome.

### **3. The Ontology of Death and Its Critique. Criticisms and Counter criticisms**

#### **3.1 First Criticism: The Possibility of a Prescience of Death and Its Repercussions on Death's Obscurity**

In this section, I will challenge the very first acquisition of this investigation, that is the obscurity of human death. My critical task in this context should not be confused with the non-critical task, which was pursued in the second chapter, where I relativised the fundamental character of obscurity by arguing that it is only insofar as death is a not-yet that it is obscure. Unlike the criticism I am going to make, my considerations in the second chapter were meant to *enrich* the analyses of the first chapter and required no *revision* of the ontology of death conducted that far.

According to all Christian confessions, Jesus «the Christ» («ὁ Χριστός») was «the Son of God» («ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ», *Marcus 3:11*)<sup>2</sup>. According to most Christian confessions, in being «the Son», Jesus Christ was God himself, as per the Trinitarian creed established by the First Council of Nicaea in 325, which declared the «ὁμοούσις» («consubstantiality») of «the Son» with «the Father» («ὁ Πατήρ»):

«We believe in one God the Father all powerful, maker of all things both seen and unseen. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten begotten from the Father, that is from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father, through whom all things came to be, both those in heaven and those in earth; for us humans and for our salvation he came down and became incarnate, became human, suffered and rose up on the third day, went up into the heavens, is coming to judge the living and the dead. And in the holy Spirit.»<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kant 1999, p. 248 (Kant's emphasis). (German: Kant, 1904, p. 145).

<sup>2</sup> *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Nestle-Aland, 28), *Evangelium secundum Marcum* [online], < <https://www.die-bibel.de/en/bible/NA28/MRK.3> > [accessed 12<sup>th</sup> July 2024].

(English translation: *The New American Bible, Gospel of Mark* [online], < <https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/PW5.HTM> > [accessed 12<sup>th</sup> July 2024]).

<sup>3</sup> «First Council of Nicaea – 325 A.D.», in Norman P. Tanner (ed. by), 2 vols. *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (London: Georgetown University Press, 1990), vol. 1: Nicaea I to Lateran V, p. 5.

(«Πιστεύομεν εἰς ἕνα Θεὸν Πατέρα παντοκράτορα, πάντων ὁρατῶν τε καὶ ἀοράτων ποιητὴν· καὶ εἰς ἕνα Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ, γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς [μονογενῆ, τοὔτέστιν ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ Πατρὸς, Θεὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ,] Φῶς ἐκ Φωτός, Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ, γεννηθέντα, οὐ ποιηθέντα, ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί, δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο, [τά τε ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ καὶ τὰ ἐν τῇ γῇ,] τὸν δι' ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καὶ διὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν σωτηρίαν κατελθόντα καὶ σαρκωθέντα καὶ ἐνανθρωπήσαντα, παθόντα, καὶ ἀναστάντα τῇ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ, ἀνελθόντα εἰς τοὺς οὐρανοὺς, ἐρχόμενον κρῖναι ζῶντας καὶ νεκρούς. Καὶ εἰς τὸ Ἅγιον Πνεῦμα.»).<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, according to the official Christological perspective of the Catholic Church, as expressed in its last *Catechism* (1992), to the divinity of the Christ belongs «to know all things» («πάντα ἐπίστατο», «[he] knew all things»), notwithstanding the Christ's humanity. On such an omniscience of «the Son», the Catholic *Catechism* displays a Latin translation of the following passage by Maximus the Confessor:

«εἰ οὖν ἐν τοῖς ἁγίοις προφήταις διεγινώσκετο τὰ πόρρω καὶ οὐκ ἐφ' ἡμῖν χάριτι, πῶς οὐχὶ μᾶλλον πάντα ἐπίστατο ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ διὰ τοῦτο τὸ ἀνθρώπινον, οὐ φύσει ἀλλ' ἐνώσει τῇ πρὸς τὸν λόγον;».<sup>5</sup>

(«And so, if, in the case of the holy prophets, they discerned by grace the things from far off and not dependant upon us, how much more did the Son of God not know all things and because of this, also his humanity [did not know], [that is] he did not [know] by nature but by union with the *Logos*?».)<sup>6</sup>

As one of the three «hypostases» or «Persons» («ὑποστάσεις»), as much divine as «the Father» and «the Holy Spirit» («τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ Ἅγιον»), the Christ himself possessed (he eternally possesses) the faculty of omniscience. As claimed in the passage by The Confessor, this faculty belonged to the Christ even during his lifetime on earth.

Let me now reflect on these passages. By definition, omniscience entails *prescience*, that is the faculty of foreknowing the future. «Praescientia», in the Latin of Thomas Aquinas. What I will say from now on will

<sup>4</sup> “First Council of Nicaea (325)”, in Giuseppe Alberigo, Alberto Melloni (ed. by), 7 vols., *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Generaliumque Decreta* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2006-2016), vol. 1: *From Nicaea I to Nicaea II (325-787)*, ed. by G. Alberigo, A. M. Ritter, L. Abramowski, E. Mühlenberg, P. Conte, H.-G. Thümmel, G. Nedungatt, S. Agrestini, E. Lamberz, J. B. Uphus (2006), p. 5).

<sup>5</sup> *Maximi Confessoris Opera*, 10 vols., ed. by E. Dekkers, M. Geerard, C. Laga, M. Pinnoy, A. Van Roey, G. Verbeke (Turnhout: Brepols; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1980-2018), vol. 10: *Quaestiones et dubia*, ed. by J. H. Declerck (1982), Qu. I, 67, p. 155.

In the *Catechism*, this question is quoted as an assertion (in Latin, as has been said), and in fact only from «πάντα ἐπίστατο» onwards. The first words by the Confessor on the comparison between the prophets and the Christ are missing. Yet this does not jeopardise the meaning of the passage, but it is worth noticing it. Here is the Latin passage, where also another sentence is quoted (slightly successive, in the Confessor's text, to the ones quoted in Greek and in English above in the text): «Dei Filius cuncta noverat; ac per Ipsum, quem Ille hominem induerat; non natura, sed qua Verbo unitus erat. [...] Humana natura, qua erat unita Verbo, cuncta noverat divinaque haec ac pro maiestate in Se exhibebat». (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part 1, Section 2, Chapter 2, Article 3, Paragraph 1, IV, 473 [online], < [https://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism\\_it/p122a3p1\\_it.htm#ARTICULUS%203%20IESUS%20CHRISTUS%20%C2%AB%20CONCEPTUS%20EST%20DE%20SPIRITU%20SANCTO,%20NATUS%20EX%20MARIA%20VIRGINE%20%C2%BB](https://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism_it/p122a3p1_it.htm#ARTICULUS%203%20IESUS%20CHRISTUS%20%C2%AB%20CONCEPTUS%20EST%20DE%20SPIRITU%20SANCTO,%20NATUS%20EX%20MARIA%20VIRGINE%20%C2%BB) > [accessed 8<sup>th</sup> January 2025]).

<sup>6</sup> Maximus the Confessor. *St. Maximus the Confessor's «Questions and Doubts»*, ed. and trans. by D. D. Prassas (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2021), p. 259 (emphasis in the text). I choose not to quote in the text the English translation of Maximus' passage found in the English version of the *Catechism*, as it seems to me that the meaning of the passage is lost: «The human nature of God's Son, not by itself but by its union with the Word, knew and showed forth in itself everything that pertains to God» (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part 1, Section 2, Chapter 2, Article 3, Paragraph 1, IV, 473 [online], < [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_P1J.HTM#\\$HP](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P1J.HTM#$HP) > [accessed 14<sup>th</sup> July 2024]).

concern the faculty of «praescientia» (for reasons that will soon become clear) but will be equally applicable to the more general faculty of omniscience. Firstly, let me note that when referred to the Christ, just as when referred to the Father and to the Holy Spirit, «prescience» does not indicate the *human* capacity to *predict* the future. The Christ did not «predict» things. Rather, he «foreknew» them. That is to say that the Christ cannot be compared to a human who is able to predict the future, not even infallibly. From his very incarnation, the Christ has been capable of seeing what the future would have been before the future came. That is promptly understandable even from an amateur Christological perspective.

Nonetheless, this could have an impact on the findings of the first chapter of this study. Indeed, *what if this study admitted the possibility of a «praescientia» of death? How would the fact that a human might possess this capacity impact on the paradigm of the obscurity of death?*

I will address this question shortly. Meanwhile, let me clarify that I acknowledge that the official Catholic doctrine on the divine prescience of the Christ, as is declared nowadays by the Roman Church, is not the only Christian doctrine on this matter. I also acknowledge that different answers have been given as to whether a fully divine knowledge on the part of the Christ, identical with the knowledge of the Father and of the Holy Spirit, would jeopardise the human nature of the Christ. In what follows, I will *instrumentally* admit the plausibility of Catholic Christology due to the consequences that can be drawn from it around the fundamental paradigm of death's obscurity.

By «instrumental», I do not mean that mine is an insincere theoretical operation. I mean that I will take advantage of an instrument to indicate that, from a philosophical perspective, *refutability* amounts to *actual refutation*. That is due to the fact that an investigation into how death is *essentially* understood by humans, as the present one is, cannot ignore the plausibility of any fact, even though this might be harmful for the fundamental claims of the investigation. The concrete meaning of these considerations will shortly become clear.

At this point, one might wish to raise a couple of objections against the underpinnings of my questions above. Particularly, one might challenge the peculiar notion of human essence that I used. On one hand, the Catholic believer could note that it is *because of his divine nature* that the Christ was able to foreknow his death (and resurrection). On the other hand, an atheist might object that in raising my questions, I have *contaminated a philosophical study with theological assumptions*, as is the admission of the possibility that a divine human as Jesus Christ has existed.

And yet oddly enough, the Catholic and the atheist would find themselves agreeing on the *merely human nature* of humans. That is, they would prove to have *the same understanding of human essence*. Indeed, the atheist-Catholic objection can only be raised if humans are understood as such that they cannot be *divine*. In other words, it is only *on the basis of a «humanising» conception of the human* that the criticism becomes possible. Nonetheless, reducing human nature to its «humanised» capacities is an ontic assumption that cannot be shared in the present study. In saying that, I am not implying that some kind of «superhuman» being is

possible, However, I am not implying this not because this is truly impossible, but because a human being could be considered «superhuman» *only if human essence were reduced to its «humanised» notion*, as is the case in all Christian confessions (even those denying the divinity of the Christ and yet distinguishing humans, as merely human beings, from God as their «Father»).

In the present study, the *humanising seizure* of human nature will be further investigated when it will come to evaluating the traditional denial of the «divinity» of humans, this time understood as their eternity, for which Christianity is undoubtedly one of the most responsible in recent human history. As a matter of fact, even when allowing humans to be divine, Christianity only allows it *with respect to the extraordinary case of Jesus Christ*.

I am now in a position to focus on another aspect of the objection raised in this section, particularly with regards to the atheist variant. I wish to reject the claim that I am contaminating a philosophical study with theological assumptions. My ground in rejecting this claim is that *admitting the possibility* of the truth of Catholic Christology, as I did, is different from *believing* it. On the other hand, as anticipated, *the mere possibility* that a divine human has existed is enough to challenge the paradigm of death's obscurity.

Let me also note that philosophy can appear to be an «anti-religion» only if it is grasped, as the atheist philosopher does, in a derivative fashion, similarly to human nature itself when it gets «humanised». Philosophy is not one of the fighters, the enemy of religion, but the architect of the battlefield (or rather, the discoverer of its architecture).

To show how even the mere possibility of a divine human prescience challenges the paradigm of death's obscurity, I will start by differentiating the Christ's prescience, as per the current official Catholic doctrine, from the prescience typical of «the Father» and from the terrestrial, predictive prescience of humans (or, better, of human humans).

When it comes to «the Father», «prescience» indicates that the Father sees all events at once: «Great is our Lord, vast in power, with wisdom beyond measure» («גָּדוֹל אֲדוֹנֵינוּ וְרַב-כֹּחַ ; לְתַבּוּנָתוֹ, אֵין מִסְפָּר», *Psalmi 147:5*).<sup>7</sup> In the «eyes» of the Father, there is no such thing as «the future», if not as what affects the nature of beings which are different to the Father, such as humans (until they access, if they do, the *visio beatifica* in Paradise). In other words, the Father does not need to await the future in order to know what the future will be like.

Nevertheless, that is not the case for the Christ. For he is «minor Patre secundum humanitatem», «inferior to the Father as touching his Manhood».<sup>8</sup> For insofar as «the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us» («ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν», *Johannes 1:14*), the «Son of God» became «the Son of

<sup>7</sup> *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS), *Psalmi 147:5* [online], < <https://www.die-bibel.de/en/bible/BHS/PSA.147> > [accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2024].

(English translation: The New American Bible, *Psalm 147:5* [online], < <https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/PJV.HTM> > [accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2024]).

<sup>8</sup> *Quicumque Vult*, 33 [online], < <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds2.iv.i.iv.html> > [accessed 24<sup>th</sup> July 2024]. Both the Latin and the English are on the quoted webpage.

Man».<sup>9</sup> As a *humanised God*, the Christ knew (he eternally knows) what it means to wait for the events to unfold, and understood (he eternally understands) what it means to «have a future». As is evident, that is different from the *entirely distant contemplation* of the future which is typical of his «Father». On the other hand, though, being himself God, the Christ does not need to wait for the future to come and can see it in advance, just as his Father can.<sup>10</sup>

The «consubstantiality» («ὁμοούσις») of the Christ with the «hypostases» of the Father and of the Holy Spirit is what makes it possible for the Christ to predict his own death multiple times in the New Testament (or, better, it is what makes *humans* speak of a «prediction» on the part of the Christ):

«Then he took the Twelve aside and said to them, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem and everything written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon; and after they have scourged him they will kill him, but on the third day he will rise."» (*Luca 18:31-33*).<sup>11</sup>

(«Παραλαβὼν δὲ τοὺς δώδεκα εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτούς· ἰδοὺ ἀναβαίνομεν εἰς Ἱερουσαλὴμ, καὶ τελεσθήσεται πάντα τὰ γεγραμμένα διὰ τῶν προφητῶν τῷ υἱῷ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου· παραδοθήσεται γὰρ τοῖς ἔθνεσιν καὶ ἐμπαιχθήσεται καὶ ὑβρισθήσεται καὶ ἐμπτυσθήσεται καὶ μαστιγώσαντες ἀποκτενοῦσιν αὐτόν, καὶ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ τρίτῃ ἀναστήσεται.»).<sup>12</sup>

Luke continues (*Luca 18:34*): «But they understood nothing of this; the word remained *hidden* from them and they failed to comprehend what he said» («καὶ αὐτοὶ οὐδὲν τούτων συνῆκαν καὶ ἦν τὸ ῥῆμα τοῦτο κεκρυμμένον ἀπ' αὐτῶν καὶ οὐκ ἐγίνωσκον τὰ λεγόμενα»).<sup>13</sup> Rather than expressing a simple lack of understanding on the part of the apostles, this addition by Luke can be considered to indicate the *opposition* between the Christ's divine clarity about his death and the «Twelve»'s obscurity about it.

Yet the prescience of «the Son» remains not perfectly comparable to the prescience of the Father. For there is no time, properly, when the Christ is not also human: There was no «Son of God» («ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ») before he was made into the «Son of Man» («ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου»). Otherwise, the integrity itself of one of the hypostases of the Trinity would be jeopardised. This is not simply to say that, from the perspective of the divinity of the Christ, *there was no time* when «ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ» had not been made yet into «ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου». Indeed, *even from the perspective of human finitude*, which grasps things in the succession of time, it is Christologically incorrect, from a Catholic perspective, to think that there has been a time when «the Son of God» was not «the Son of Man» yet. For it belongs to the very nature of «the Son of God» to be «the Son of Man», and to the very nature of «the Son of Man» to be «the Son of God».

<sup>9</sup> *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Nestle-Aland, 28), *Evangelium secundum Johannem* [online], < <https://www.die-bibel.de/en/bible/NA28/JHN.1> > [accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2024].

(English translation: *The New American Bible, Gospel of John* [online], < [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/\\_PX9.HTM#-3Q7](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/_PX9.HTM#-3Q7) > [accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2024]).

<sup>10</sup> This holds unless one is willing to deny the Trinitarian dogma established by the First Council of Nicaea, as mentioned.

<sup>11</sup> *The New American Bible, Gospel of Luke* [online], < [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/\\_PX1.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/_PX1.HTM) > [accessed 24<sup>th</sup> July 2024].

<sup>12</sup> *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Nestle-Aland, 28), *Evangelium secundum Lucam* [online], < <https://www.die-bibel.de/en/bible/NA28/LUK.18> > [accessed 24<sup>th</sup> July 2024].

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, my emphasis.

Conflating the two kinds of prescience, that of «the Son» and that of «the Father», would amount to conflating the Son with the Father. Of course, this is not to imply that the Christ's prescience can be compared to an extraordinary human capacity, as one might wish to ascribe, say, to an infallible meteorology. For no matter how extraordinary, such a capacity will always be «too human» (too humanly human) when compared to a divine one.

Now, what does the Christ's prescience consist in, more precisely? I will argue that «prescience» means that the Christ *perceived directly* his own *future* death as a *present*. That is to say that the Christ's *future*, and in this case the Christ's death, *was not obscure to the Christ*, as per his divine nature. Nonetheless, at the same time, since through the Christ ran the finite blood of human nature, he was destined to wait for the obscure time of his death to unfold. In this context, it is not my purpose to address whether this represents a contradiction at the heart of the Christ's nature. That is a Christological question which instantiates the traditional, more general question of how one of the «Persons» («Personae») of the «Trinity» («Trinitas») can be divine and human at once (or, better, divine and humanly human at once).

Nevertheless, I can provide an *instrumental* answer to that question, in the sense previously assigned to this term. After all, even the acceptance of the plausibility of Catholic Christology has been instrumental. The reason for that is the thanatological impact of this plausibility, which I am gradually clarifying. Therefore, let me state that if the being of the Christ did not, *in a contradictory fashion*, conflate divinity and humanity, it would be impossible to affirm that *Jesus the Christ was omniscient*, for «Jesus the Christ» would become the mere *juxtaposition* of two distinct beings: Jesus the human, and Christ the God. Consequently, Jesus could not be said to have predicted «his own» death, *but the Christ would have predicted Jesus' death*. On his part, Jesus would be left in the fullest obscurity of it. Presumably, it is because of the unwillingness to admit a contradiction at the heart of the Christ's being that the Roman Church speaks of «the mysterious union of the Incarnation», according to which, *on one hand*, Jesus Christ is not «the result of a confused mixture of the divine and the human», but *on the other hand*, he is not «part God and part man» either, so that the «event» of his «Incarnation» is «unique and altogether singular».<sup>14</sup>

It is now time to clearly indicate the thanatological impact of these considerations. In fact, assuming that in one same person, that is the «Person» of «the Christ», standard human knowledge and divine prescience can somehow be conflated, *the nature of death can be known to a human before death comes*. As mentioned, it is not relevant that the Christ, in order for his death to be manifest to him in advance, had to be *divine*, that is *non-human*. For that simply means that there is a *divine way* to be human.

Against the claim advanced, one might object that *from the perspective of his humanity*, no matter how conflated with his divinity, death was *not manifest* to the Christ. Therefore, the idea that death is essentially obscure to humans has not been really refuted. In what follows, I will demonstrate that, to a certain extent, this

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<sup>14</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part 1, Section 2, Chapter 2, Article 3, Paragraph 1 [online]. The first quoted passage is from IV, 470, while all the following are from III, 464 (< [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_P1J.HTM#\\$HP](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P1J.HTM#$HP) > [accessed 24<sup>th</sup> July 2024]).

is a *retouched* version of the humanising objection addressed earlier in the chapter. Nonetheless, this new version gives me the chance to better clarify that, to a determinate extent, the claim that death is essentially obscure is left untouched by my criticism of it.

Let me reflect on the notion of «refutation». If an idea is «refuted» when it is *entirely* refuted, one should not consider the paradigm of death's obscurity as truly refuted. Indeed, the Christ's *difference* from a *fully divine* being, as the Father is, *confirms* that the Christ could not foreknow his death, as every other human. However, from a fundamental perspective, one should consider as refuted even an idea that has been partly refuted. After all, it is evident that the notion of the obscurity of death cannot simply be left untouched by the admission of the possibility of a divine human. Thus, the idea that death is inevitably obscure can be considered to be refuted and not refuted by the plausible existence of a divine human.<sup>15</sup>

In the previous observations, I claimed that Jesus the Christ *could* represent a historical example of a human who foreknew his death. This has jeopardised the fundamental idea that death is obscure when it is regarded as a future. In what follows, I will show that the *hybrid character* of Christian thanatology, given by the fact that two kinds of death can be distinguished, the humanly human and the divinely human, proves wrong *another thanatological presupposition*, and therefore has a second impact on the investigation conducted thus far.

The presupposition I am talking about is as well-established as the humanising one discussed previously. It consists in the assumption that *death's nature must be the same for every human*. At this point, I will go back to existential nihilism. In the second chapter, I argued that the nihilistic conception of death is not the only one possible (nor right), despite the fact that existential nihilism thinks it that way. However, a second criticism can be made of existential nihilism and in fact of all thanatologies assuming that *every human death has the same nature*. With regards to existential nihilism, this assumption takes the form of the thought that *every human death must be an utter annihilation of life*. No exception is admitted.

This idea is typical of several (if not all) thanatologies. Nonetheless, it represents the result of a *biased* universalisation operated by those thanatologies with regards to their specific interpretation of death. In that sense, it is an *ontic* universalisation. In fact, it extends a determinate interpretation of death to *all possible individual deaths*, thus rendering it ontological.

Criticising this assumption is of the highest importance in thanatology. That is because this is presumably *one of the most rooted presuppositions in the history of the human relationship with death*. It represents the familiar thought that death is the same for everyone. In that sense, Christian thanatology challenges one of the most widespread thanatological attitudes of all times. That holds even though, at a less fundamental level, the final destiny of life is the same *for every human* even according to Christianity: The «soul» survives death and is transferred to another world. Nevertheless, as per the Christian doctrine of the post-mortem, this destiny is the

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<sup>15</sup> In a different context, when investigating the metaphysical statute of the principle of non-contradiction, I have examined a similar situation, where a principle is refuted and not refuted at the same time. Cf. Lucarelli 2025b.



same not for humans *as such*, but for *human humans* (even with some exceptions, such as the Virgin Mary, who did not die and was «assumed» alive into Heaven). Indeed, even being human, Jesus the Christ cannot be said to have died the same death as human humans. That is because, unlike them, he foreknew his death.

The assumption mentioned, which from a philosophical perspective reveals its bias, is so well-established that it is rarely even identified as such in thanatological investigations. Here, I can quote Martin Heidegger, who posits the problem of the nature of death, in *Being and Time*, clearly assuming that *even if no answer* can be given by the «existential analytic», *the answer exists, and it is a universal one*:

«Die ontologische Analyse des Seins zum Ende greift andererseits keiner existenziellen Stellungnahme zum Tode vor. Wenn der Tod als „Ende“ des Daseins, das heißt des In-der-Welt-seins bestimmt wird, dann fällt damit keine ontische Entscheidung darüber, ob „nach dem Tode“ noch ein anderes, höheres oder niedrigeres Sein möglich ist, ob das Dasein »fortlebt« oder gar, sich „überdauernd“, „unsterblich“ ist. [...] Mit Sinn und Recht kann überhaupt erst dann methodisch sicher auch nur *gefragt* werden, was *nach dem Tode sei*, wenn dieser in seinem vollen ontologischen Wesen begriffen ist.».<sup>16</sup>

«On the other hand, in the ontological analysis of Being-towards-the-end there is no anticipation of our taking any existential stand towards death. If “death” is defined as the “end” of Dasein—that is to say, of Being-in-the-world—this does not imply any ontical decision whether “after death” still another Being is possible, either higher or lower, or whether Dasein “lives on” or even “outlasts” itself and is “immortal”. [...]. Only when death is conceived in its full ontological essence can we have any methodological assurance in even *asking* what *may be after death*; only then can we do so with meaning and justification.».<sup>17</sup>

And also:

«Daß es „ewige Wahrheiten“ gibt, wird erst dann zureichend bewiesen sein, wenn der Nachweis gelungen ist, daß in alle Ewigkeit Dasein war und sein wird.».<sup>18</sup>

«That there are ‘eternal truths’ will not be adequately proved until someone has succeeded in demonstrating that Dasein has been and will be for all eternity.».<sup>19</sup>

In his endeavour for providing inessential discourses on the post-mortem with their ontological-existential ground, Heidegger fell into the trap of thinking according to the inessential assumptions made by such discourses. This proves that even philosophical investigations sometimes inherit assumptions from common sense. In this context, let me note that this is a risk especially inherent in every ontological endeavour whose task is set to be achieved *along the path of the ontological foundation of the ontic*, as in Heidegger’s case, rather than along a pure ontological path. Indeed, the central task of an ontological-thanatological enquiry should not consist in providing specific ontic discourses on death with their ontological foundation, for this

<sup>16</sup> Heidegger 1977, pp. 329-330 (Heidegger’s emphasis).

<sup>17</sup> Heidegger 1985, p. 292 (Heidegger’s emphasis).

<sup>18</sup> Heidegger 1977, p. 300.

<sup>19</sup> Heidegger 1985, pp. 269-270.



amounts to setting the ontological task according to ontic criteria. On the contrary, the ontological must be sought and attained *as ontological*, not as that which grounds ontic discourses.

### **3.2 First Countercriticism: On «Belonging-To-Death», or the Most Fundamental Human Relationship with Death. Beyond and Before «Sein zum Tode»**

As happens in the advanced stages of a philosophical investigation, what still needs to be said has, in fact, already been said, albeit only implicitly. One might argue that this is one of the signs of an advanced investigation: At that point, no true «exposition» is needed, but rather an explication. As will be demonstrated, this holds true for the most fundamental relationship that humans have with death, which, in this study, is termed «belonging-to-death».

The idea that a fundamental attitude towards death is concealed in any encounter with it has already been suggested in the last chapter, especially in the sections on human worldliness. In that context, the exhibition of the worldly nature of death required to show that, no matter whether it is faced or simply expected, death is a «worldly affair». In this context, I should note that this implies that death is *in any case encountered as «worldly»*. This very «encounter» is what will be investigated in what follows.

Let me begin with a reference to the previous section on Catholic Christology. As was recalled, it is plausible that «Jesus the Christ» has existed and that he could foreknow his death thanks to his divine nature. That led the study to acknowledge that death might be directly perceived even if it has not come yet. In this section, I wish to argue that despite the *extraordinary* way in which «Jesus the Christ» was aware of his death, even his divine «prescience» simply represents one ontic way to encounter death. Indeed, from a fundamental perspective, there is no difference between prescience and human foresight, because both of them are ways to *interact* with death. This fundamental interaction is what I will call «*belonging-to-death*».

At first glance, one might think that presenting this fundamental attitude called «belonging-to-death» is trivial. In fact, it is a trivial fact that human beings (including divine human beings), in their lives, relate to their death. Nonetheless, firstly, I should note that this is no surprise for a philosophical enquiry. For triviality is, to a limited extent, the genuine face of fundamentality. Secondly, the way philosophy engages with trivial facts is anything but trivial. Indeed, when comprehended in all its scope, the acknowledgement that *all possible human attitudes towards death constitute one fundamental attitude* is far from trivial.

In all its scope, «belonging to death» *does not simply mean* «relating to death». Otherwise, it would transform into an *empty thanatological form*. That is to say that «belonging-to-death» should be grasped *together* with all particular attitudes *of which* it is structure. In that respect, even emotional reactions to death, such as fear, anger, relief, wonder, should be regarded as mere instantiations. That is why I use the word «structure» rather than «form». It is meant to avoid any reference to *empty forms*, as is «relating to death».

That is where the distinction between *commonsensical philosophy* and *philosophy* can be interpreted to lie. In fact, within non-philosophical consciousness, one can detect the awareness that humans always «relate» to death, no matter how, no matter when. Nevertheless, one will never trace within commonsense the

acknowledgement that humans always «belong» to death, for this presupposes a *global, philosophical* grasp of the hierarchical relationships among human attitudes towards death.

In section 48 of *Being and Time*, devoted to «Ausstand, Ende und Ganzheit» («That which is Still Outstanding; the End; Totality»), Heidegger talks about *Dasein* and its essential «Noch-nicht» («not-yet»). He states:

«Das Dasein ist nicht erst zusammen, wenn sein Noch-nicht sich aufgefüllt hat, so wenig, daß es dann gerade nicht mehr ist.».<sup>20</sup>

«That Dasein should *be* together only when its "not-yet" has been filled up is so far from the case that it is precisely then that Dasein is no longer.».<sup>21</sup>

In this passage, Heidegger argues that when the not-yetness of a human being ceases to be, the human themselves ceases to be. In other words, when one is no longer able to be «not yet» something, for example, not yet happy or not yet dead, that means one is simply no longer. In what follows, I will investigate a peculiar thanatological repercussion of this feature of *Dasein*. That will enable me to claim that Heidegger's conception of «being-towards-death», grasped as a modality of the essential not-yetness of existence, is not entirely fundamental as Heidegger claims. I will then show that only «belonging-to-death» is genuinely fundamental.

According to Heidegger, it is only when one is dead that one is no longer «not yet». In the first chapter, I defined the «not being» of a human after their death as *the state* of being-dead. *Once* one is dead, one is no longer «not yet». In Heideggerian words, one «has no longer to be» («hat nicht mehr zu sein»). The structure of «having to be» («zu sein haben») is a clear example of Heidegger's brilliant investigation of the human being (especially made possible by Husserl's investigations on time, as is known). For Heidegger, humans never lose their finitude, which consists in the «lack of totality» («Unganzheit») coming from their inexhaustible «having to be». In fact, when they truly lose their finitude, humans lose themselves as well. They reach «perfection» («Ganzheit», my translation) once they are no more.

However, that means that *until* one is alive, *including the time of death itself*, one is still «not yet» what one can be. From a commonsensical perspective, that might seem weird. Indeed, how can one still «have to be» *when one is facing one's own death*? The answer lies in the paradox of death as a process, which was recalled in the second chapter and demonstrated to be implicit in Heidegger's notion of the «towards-which» in the third chapter. In effect, even though Heidegger never states this explicitly, it directly follows from his notion of «zu sein haben» that whenever one is not dead, be one alive or dying, one «has to be». I contend this is the meaning of Heidegger's famous definition of death as a contradiction given by «the possibility of the impossibility [...] of every way of existing» («die Möglichkeit der Unmöglichkeit [...] jedes Existierens»), with all due respect to the interpreters who think that this definition is «meaningless», such as Paul Edwards.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Heidegger 1977, p. 323 (Heidegger's emphasis).

<sup>21</sup> Heidegger 1985, p. 287 (Heidegger's emphasis).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Edwards 1975, p. 553. Heidegger's definition is in Heidegger 1985, p. 307 (German: Heidegger 1977, p. 348).

There is more. For given that among all its not-yets, the *extreme thing* that *Dasein* «has to be» is *dying*, it directly follows from Heidegger's notion that, *while one is dying*, one still «has to die». In other Heideggerian words, one still «is-towards-death», while one dies.

These considerations should not be taken as criticisms. I am in full agreement with Heidegger on this matter, and I am by no means reproaching him for any contradiction in his claim. It is, in fact, *human death itself* that is inherently contradictory. Up to this point, my remarks have been purely descriptive. However, I am now in a position to offer my criticism. This follows from the recognition that if, at the time of one's death, the only way in which one relates to death is by «being-towards» it, then «being-towards-death» cannot be fully justified as a structure of existence. Indeed, in that case, it is by *facing death* that one encounters it, first and foremost.

Not only did Heidegger not investigate *this* particular way of encountering death, but this prevented him from grasping the fundamental relationship that humans have with their death, that is «belonging-to-death», understood as the common root of «being-towards-death» and facing-death. As the common root of the two fundamental human attitudes toward death – in fact, any relationship to death occurs either in its absence or its presence –, «belonging-to-death» represents *the supreme* attitude towards death. As anticipated in the previous chapter, this primacy is grounded in the *internal degree of universality* inherent to «belonging-to-death».

One might turn my criticism of Heidegger back upon myself. Indeed, grasped as «the possibility of the impossibility» of existence, death leaves no room for any kind of «relationship» with anything. The «experience» one can have of death is precisely the experience of the impossibility of experiencing. This constitutes a second, more fundamental paradox at the heart of death's essence. In dying, not only can one *expect* nothing whatsoever, not even death, but also cannot properly «belong» to anything at all, not even to death.

Before replying to the objection, let me note that, as per the ontological nature of this study, when speaking of the «impossibility of experience», I am speaking of the impossibility *of a worldly experience*. In other words, death is here understood as the experience of the impossibility to experience things *in a worldly fashion*. Nonetheless, exactly because of that, dying involves *the impossibility to belong-to-death*, given that this is only possible as a worldly attitude of existence, that is, as an attitude of one's worldly existence. In this context, one can clearly see that the theme of this investigation is human existence *in its worldly nature*. In fact, no one could still belong-to-death after death, given that it is primarily in one's *worldly* life that one essentially *belongs* to one's worldly death, according to the notion of «belonging-to-death» in this study.

Now, the objection raised above is correct, but it is not an objection. Indeed, the reason why belonging-to-death is paradoxically present at the time of one's death is not that my notion is not fundamental enough and is not able to apply to one fundamental way in which one can encounter death (this is in fact the case with Heidegger's notion of «belonging-to-death»), but simply that death is, by nature, «the possibility of the

impossibility» of existence (or better, the possibility of the impossibility of a worldly existence). In effect, every fundamental attitude of human life is to be *compromised* when one dies.

The time is now mature to clarify the most universal meaning that the adjective «existential» can assume in an investigation into human death. In its absolute ontological sense, «existential-thanatological» refers to «*belonging-to-death*». The reason why I describe it as «absolute» is that as a supreme structure, «belonging-to-death» represents an «ontological» attitude *in absolute terms*. This means that, in comparison to it, any other attitude toward death reveals itself to be ontic, that is, less universal.

In the last chapter, when criticising Heidegger's «existentialising» method, I stated that «being-towards-death» is *dependent* on death as its «towards-which». For the same reason, in this context, I wish to argue that «belonging-to-death» is dependent on death as its *to-which*. Indeed, my notion is itself the product of an «existentialisation» of death, albeit a more radical one than Heidegger's. As I started recalling, it is thanks to its *objectual reference* to death that any attitude can «be-towards» or «belong-to» it. In fact, grasped in and of themselves, «being-towards-death» and «belonging-to-death» do not regard death. They are mere attitudes, in the sense established in the first chapter.

These remarks lead me to the next part of the investigation. For death, understood as the ultimate source of meaning of the most fundamental human relationship with death, is the *desideratum* of an existential ontology of death in general.

What is «death», then? The answer has been prepared by the preceding course of the investigation: *Human death appears as the essentially obscure, ontological-metaphysical process of annihilation of the human being in their worldly, that is ultimately bodily nature. This nature consists of the unified consciousness one has «of» one's body, «by» one's body, and «that» one is a body: The unifying factor is the body itself. It is precisely this worldly nature that, through death, undergoes an ontic-metaphysical transformation, which is partly manifest and partly obscure to the dying human, into a corpse.* That is the existential definition of death which every thanatology, that is every thanatological *ontics* and *ontology*, cannot but presuppose.

Though certainly not «exhaustive», if not in the ontological respect, this definition is the finest fruit of this investigation, thus far. It is not merely recapitulatory but conceals more than one might gather from what has been claimed. A first proof of this lies in the role that the body, according to the definition, appears to play in unifying the worldly nature of existence as a whole. Indeed, it is thanks to the body that even one's consciousness – I mean the immaterial consciousness – coheres around a single, individual life. A second proof is given by the reference, in the definition, to the general fact that one's transformation into a corpse is partly manifest and partly obscure. In fact, this does not merely allude to the idea that, even at the time of one's death, one remains obscure to oneself due to the temporal nature of consciousness. It also points to the fact that one is never in a position to directly perceive one's bodily nature as a whole. Thus, even one's bodily death is only manifest insofar as one's body is manifest to oneself, and specifically, in the form of bodily sensations, which are always directly perceived by consciousness.

That gives me the chance to clarify something and prevent a misunderstanding. Against the ontological claim of my definition of death, one might argue that it is only *when considered as a present event* that death is «partly manifest and partly obscure», and that therefore, the definition is derivative rather than fundamental. Let me answer by saying that this is no argument against the definition. Indeed, it is *as a partly manifest and partly obscure event* that death is *expected*. In other words, the partial manifestation of death does not need to be occurring *in the present* to define death as the «towards-which» of one's expectational relationship with it.

### **3.3 Second Criticism: Children Do Not Belong-To-Death. The Limits of an Existential Ontology of Death in General**

At this point, one can consider the *existential ontology of death* conducted in this study *finished*. However, there is more to be said on death. That is due to the essential lack of an *existential* ontology of death. Indeed, an ontology of death is «existential» in that it addresses the fundamental dimensions *of the human relationship* with death, as well as death itself *as the correlate* of those relationships. In other words, it explores the fact that humans belong-to-death, and death belongs-to-humans.

That said, it is now time to *overcome* the whole existential discourse made by this study on death, due to its insufficiency. At this stage, I plan to «*de-existentialise*» my discourse. This is not to say that the study will abandon what has been gained thus far. On the contrary, the «de-existentialisation» will consist in a *radicalisation* of what has been claimed from an existential perspective.

In what follows, I will develop a criticism of my notion of belonging-to-death. That will result in a criticism of all forms in which human beings belong to death, and death belongs to them. The criticism will be *ontological*. In other words, it will lead the study to supersede the existential perspective of the present ontology and to acknowledge that there are ways in which death *concerns* humans yet without *belonging* to them. After all, is it not «common knowledge» that humans can be mortal even without «knowing» anything about death?

One might object: Is the study not about to lose its character of a «*study in the philosophy of existence*»? I wish to answer this question negatively. That is because abandoning the *existential* perspective on human death in no way entails abandoning *every* perspective on human death. In this study, death will always be understood as such, even when it is not considered *from an existential perspective*. The stability of this thematic reference represents the reliable theoretical anchor of the thanatological half of the study.

The «de-existentialisation» to be accomplished is not an «anti-existentialisation»: It is not a matter of finding alternatives to the fundamental human relationship with death. It is a matter of detecting the non-existential grounds of this relationship. Predictably, these grounds will prove to be «*non-relational*». If humans are to be mortal *regardless* of their «knowledge» of mortality, this means they are going to be mortal *in and of themselves*, whether they know it or not. In that sense, the *ground* of a relational structure, as «belonging-to-death» is, cannot itself be a *relational ground*.

A recent article by the psychologist Virginia Slaughter provides a «brief overview» of «the last 50 years of [psychological] research on children's understanding of death».<sup>23</sup> The article spans the earliest psychoanalytic studies, Piagetian literature, and the recent research in developmental psychology. In that context, Slaughter recalls that no psychological research has ever ascribed an «adult-like» understanding of death to children under the age of four.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, she observes that even when such an understanding is gained by children, it is in its earliest stages. According to the strands of psychological research she mentions, it takes children at least four years to obtain a mature, and yet merely partial, notion of death. In what follows, I will use this «psychological evidence» to argue that there exist human beings who do not belong-to-death.

The fact I will be using this «evidence» does not mean I have forgotten about the essential presuppositions of sciences, including psychology. I will not forget that any investigation into the others' minds, be these adults or children, is groundless, provided that one does not read the other minds. I will not forget that the universal conclusions psychology draws from the non-universal results of its non-universal experiments are groundless as well. This is the case for Slaughter's conclusions too. Indeed, Slaughter takes the results of *a limited number of experiments* psychology has ever made on children to regard *every possible human child*.

In what follows, I will purify psychological research on children by removing the presuppositions embedded in scientific investigations. This will allow me to approach, in a purified manner, the fifty years of «evidence» mentioned by Slaughter and to argue that *some* children under the age of four might not relate to their death. As in the previous chapter, this mere possibility will be sufficient to question the notion of «belonging-to-death».

In Slaughter's article, it is recalled that even if children under four years old do not have an adult-like «concept» of death, they do have some understanding of it, no matter how «immature» this can be. This fact might seem to contradict the claim, which I wish to make here, that some children *might not belong to death in any way*. For given that, obviously, the studies and experiments recalled and made by Slaughter did not concern *dying children and their understanding of death*, the only way in which children might be found to belong to death is by *expecting* it.

Now, I will reject this possibility and argue that children under the age of four might have no awareness of death whatsoever. That can be demonstrated through a more thorough examination of the psychological evidence mentioned. Looking at Slaughter's experiments and her account of the research in the last fifty years, one realises that the kind of thanatological knowledge that children seem to have before they are four years old is *no knowledge of death at all*. Slaughter writes:

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<sup>23</sup> Virginia Slaughter. «Young children's understanding of death», in *Australian Psychologist*, 40, no. 3 (2005), pp. 179-186 (p. 179).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

«young children assimilate the notion of death to more familiar, relatively well-understood phenomena, including departure and sleep; so instead of framing death as a biological phenomenon, young children frame it as a psychological/behavioural phenomenon: going away (for good) and/or going to sleep (for good).».<sup>25</sup>

Does that not mean that *it is the psychologist* who links what children understand as «departure and sleep» to *death*? Not even the notion of a *mis-understanding* of death could help here, for death can only be said to be *mis-understood* by children *from the perspective of an adult who is aware of the meaning of death and therefore of the mortality of children*. For this reason, no actual «mis-understanding» can be said to take place *in children*.

According to psychological studies, children do not even seem to be capable of understanding that *other humans* die, such as the grandfather, the aunt, etc. And even if that were refuted (or, better, complemented) by new psychological evidence, it would still confirm the claim that «belonging-to-death» might simply be *absent* in children. That is due to the fact that the idea of «belonging-to-death», in this study, concerns the fundamental awareness one has of *one's own* death. That is also the case for the Heideggerian notion of «being-towards-death» and for my notion of «facing-death». In that regard, one might use less elliptic phrases, such as «being-towards-one's-death», «facing-one's-death», and «belonging-to-one's-death». Nonetheless, I have chosen to follow Heidegger's terminology on this matter, especially his notion of «Jemeinigkeit» («in each case mineness», according to Macquarrie and Robinson's translation; «always-being-my-own-being», according to Stambaugh) as a fundamental feature of existence.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, children under the age of four might not belong to death, howsoever. Of course, *if one attributes a different meaning to the word «death»*, as Slaughter herself does, one might state that immature children understand «death». Yet this would simply complement and not refute what has been claimed thus far in the study.

Let me conclude. While detecting the exact age when human beings do or do not have a mature understanding of death can be relevant for psychologists, not for philosophers, I have focused, in this section, on the more general fact that *there can be evidence* that some humans do not belong to their death. Yet as obvious as it may sound, they are human even so. That is enough to jeopardise the notion of the existential fundamentality of «belonging-to-death». After all, even without consulting psychologists on the matter, one could have asked: Is it reasonable to believe that a one-minute old newborn «knows» anything about their death? In the context of this study, it is not important *when* children can be said to be wholly unaware of death from a rigorously scientific point of view; rather, what is relevant is *that* some human beings might be wholly unaware in the thanatological respect. As mentioned, the mere possibility is enough here.

Therefore, the study is now pushed towards a new, more fundamental investigation of death: a de-existentialised ontology of death. This will account for the «obvious» fact that humans can be mortal even if

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 182.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Wrathall 2021, pp. 491-492 (writ. T. Kisiel).

they do not know they are. Before moving onto that, however, I will devote some brief considerations to Martin Heidegger's attitude towards the possibility, for humans, to *become* «Sein zum Tode» at a certain time in their life. That will help me clarify my stance through a philosophical reference familiar to this investigation.

In section 48 of *Being and Time*, a statement on death taken from *Der Ackermann aus Böhmen* by Johannes von Tepl is quoted.<sup>27</sup> Heidegger states:

«Der Tod ist eine Weise zu sein, die das Dasein übernimmt, sobald es ist. „Sobald ein Mensch zum Leben kommt, sogleich ist er alt genug zu sterben“...».<sup>28</sup>

(«Death is a way to be, which Dasein takes over as soon as it is. “As soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die”...»).<sup>29</sup>

Let me note that, according to his existentialised notion, by «death» Heidegger means «being-towards-death». Therefore, in this passage, he evidently denies what I just claimed on the fact that human beings might have no awareness of death whatsoever. Not that I wish any originality for my ontogenetic objection against Heidegger here. Several interpreters have made analogous criticisms of Heidegger's dismissal of the existential problem of children.<sup>30</sup> In fact, provided that the psychological evidence discussed might be valid, there is no way in which Heidegger could reply to this objection but the following: He could reply that *children under the age of four years are not yet Dasein*, and that therefore, they «are» not «towards-death». Nonetheless, this reply would turn against Heidegger himself, for the «existential analytic» is supposed to illuminate the ontological structures of *human existence as such*, including *child-like* existence. Yet if children are no *Dasein*, then *Being and Time* is not an ontological investigation of existence, but an ontic analysis of adult existence.

### **3.4 Second Countercriticism: Ignorantia Mortis Non Excusat**

Summarising what was argued in the preceding section, one could say that humans «become» mortal at a certain time in their life, that is when they start to belong-to-death. That is a consequence of the *existentialised* notion of death. Indeed, if «dying» means «belonging-to-death», then it is *as a supervening factor* that mortality occurs in human life.

The claim that humans *become* mortal must certainly look odd. One of the reasons why it looks odd lies in the commonsensical notion *that humans are mortal regardless of their awareness of it*. This can be expressed by saying that *ignorantia mortis non excusat*. Ignoring death cannot save somebody from death. In what follows, I will provide a philosophical account for this commonsensical principle. Nonetheless, in the present one, I will examine why, to a certain extent, common sense is wrong in thinking that neglecting death cannot save one from it.

<sup>27</sup> Johannes von Tepl. “Der Ackermann aus Böhmen”, ed. by A. Bernt und K. Burdach, in *Vom Mittelalter zur Reformation. Forschungen zur Geschichte der deutschen Bildung*, ed. by K. Burdach (Berlin: Weidmann, 1917), p. 46.

<sup>28</sup> Heidegger 1977, p. 326.

<sup>29</sup> Heidegger 1985, p. 289. The English translation of Johannes Von Tepl is by Macquarrie and Robinson themselves.

<sup>30</sup> By means of example, cf. Magurshak 1979 (especially p. 116) and Sheets-Johnstone 2015.



As odd as it may sound, *death does not exist*, from the perspective of those who do not know anything about it. This is not to say that they are mortal and that they are wrong in ignoring that they are. On the contrary, mine should be read as a *perspectival* statement. Indeed, no one can in general be mistaken, *from their own perspective*, in ignoring something. In that sense, a human «*knowing*» *nothing about death* is «*immortal*», *because they are not capable of «attributing» to themselves any kind of mortality*. From the perspective of those who do not «belong» to death in any way, death as the correlate of «belonging-to-death», that is as *their* death, simply does not exist. After all, that is the happy inconvenience of all «existentialisations» of death.

From a perspectival perspective, *ignoring an issue can serve as a genuine remedy against it*. Ignoring one's cancer is a way not to have a cancer. That explains why so many times the most urgent human issues are ignored by humans. It also explains why, from a philosophical standpoint, one's perspective and what holds true within it cannot be reduced to absolute nothingness nor to a mere mistake. However, as I will now demonstrate, it would be unfair to define the «*non-mortality*» of those unaware of death as a form of «*immortality*». That is because those who are unconscious of death, such as newborns, *also lack any «knowledge» of its opposite*.

It is now time to account for common sense and show that «*non-mortal*» beings, such as newborns and children under the age of four, are not «*immortal*» also in the sense that *they are mortal*. As is clear, this happens because «*mortality*» can be understood as *mortality «in itself»*. In that sense, death can *loom* over humans even when they have no concept of it. More precisely, death *can but loom* over humans, exactly because they have no concept of it. The acknowledgement of this «*mortality in itself*» is testified by several cultural works. An example is given by the *memento mori* paintings showing a child or baby who is *asleep on their mortality*, so to speak, as in this *Vanitas* by Luigi Miradori (known as «il Genovesino»):



*Vanitas with sleeping Cupid*, Collezione Koelliker, Milan, Italy<sup>31</sup>

For many art scholars and critics, the infant in the painting will not be an «infant», but a putto or a cupid, that is a non-human being. That seems to be confirmed by the title itself reported on the *Fondazione Federico Zeri* website. However, apart from the essential freedom of interpretation that every work of art takes «attached» to its own nature (unless one closes in on oneself), I will say that even from an artistic point of view, this painting by «Il Genovesino» has very few elements (if any) that demonstrate that this is a cupid (or a putto). Indeed, this «cupid» has no wings, no arch, no arrow. Therefore, I believe it can equally be interpreted to be a child who is asleep on their mortality.

However, against what seems to be the well-received principle confirmed by this painting – i.e., that humans are mortal even if they ignore it –, an *idealistic* objection could be raised. Indeed, one's mortality «in itself» seems not to be as hidden as the «in itself» might suggest. That can be observed with newborns. While these are unconscious of their death, there is always *someone else* who is aware of it and ascribes to them their «mortality in itself». *Mutatis mutandis*, it is *the observer* of the painting by «Il Genovesino» who sees that the child depicted is mortal.

My answer to the objection is that I have not denied the «idealistic» component of one's mortality in itself. That is evident from my notion that it is not from the perspective of those who are unconscious of their mortality that this presents itself as a «mortality in itself». What is hidden to somebody can certainly be «known» to somebody else. In effect, the objection represents a *positive* contribution given by the acknowledgement of the *condition* for humans unaware of death to be mortal even so. Whether this condition is a necessary one, that is whether somebody can be mortal even if their mortality is not «known» to *anybody*, is a genuine «idealistic» issue that will not be addressed, as it falls outside the thematic scope of my study.

The perspectival component of mortality in itself explains how a de-existentialised ontology of death can avoid abandoning the epistemological method. This method prescribes that any claim on death is advanced in virtue of what *humans themselves* think of it. Accordingly, the investigation of an unknown mortality is here anchored in *another human perspective*, rather than that of those who are unconscious of death. In other words, it is the thought of those aware of the mortality of those who ignore it that is investigated here.

### **3.5 Third Criticism: The Destruction of Death. The Bible and Biotechnology**

In this section, I will offer a criticism of the notion of «mortality in itself». This will be grounded in a radicalisation of the conception of human essence, similar to what I developed in the last chapter. At this stage of the investigation, one might observe that if a scenario can be imagined where death *neither belongs to nor looms over* humans, mortality simply vanishes. Indeed! This scenario will be the final one presented in this chapter. However, in order to come to that, the *most fundamental, non-existential* dimension of mortality will

<sup>31</sup> The Fondazione Federico Zeri website [online] reports that this painting has last been seen in 2017 in the Collezione Koelliker in Milan. (<  
<https://catalogo.fondazionezeri.unibo.it/scheda/opera/62046/Miradori%20Luigi%2C%20Cupido%20dormiente>>  
 [accessed 20<sup>th</sup> September 2024]).

need to be elucidated. This is because, for one to recognise that *no mortality would be left if death neither belonged nor loomed over humans*, the mortality underlying all kinds of mortality must be illuminated.

A renowned passage from the *Second Letter to Timothy*, which in the past used to be ascribed to Paul, refers to Jesus the Christ as «having destroyed death»: «καταργήσαντος μὲν τὸν θάνατον» (*Ad Timotheum Epistula Secunda*, 1:10).<sup>32</sup> The aorist participle in the text refers to the resurrection of the Christ. As is known, «resurrection» is a *revocation* of death. The Christ dies; *therefore*, the Christ resurrects. By resurrecting, the Christ gets his *worldly life* back. «Resurrection» means to revoke one's *worldly* death.

In this context, I acknowledge that the Christ's resurrection cannot be reduced to getting his worldly life back, and that the form in which he resurrects is a fully divine one, such that, for instance, he now possesses a divine human body:

«Christ's Resurrection was not a return to earthly life, as was the case with the raisings from the dead that he had performed before Easter [...]. These actions were miraculous events, but the persons miraculously raised returned by Jesus' power to ordinary earthly life. At some particular moment they would die again. Christ's Resurrection is essentially different. In his risen body he passes from the state of death to another life beyond time and space. At Jesus' Resurrection his body is filled with the power of the Holy Spirit: he shares the divine life in his glorious state, so that St. Paul can say that Christ is "the man of heaven" (*Ad Corinthios Epistula Prima*, 15:35-50).».<sup>33</sup>

Yet, it must be acknowledged that *some kind of worldliness* is still entailed in the Christ's regained life, for this is still constituted by having a body and presumably by the three bodily natures identified in the last chapter, even though «divinely readjusted». Therefore, it is legitimate to refer to the Christ's resurrection as a form of *getting back one's worldly life*.

Thus, the «destruction of death» accomplished by the Christ requires the *existence* of death, in the sense that death needs to happen for the Christ to resurrect. That is why this might be called a *weak* form of «destruction». The Christ defeated death after being defeated by it. Predictably, a *radical* form of «destruction» would imply that one should not even have to *resurrect* from death. This is what might be called «*worldly immortality*». This phrase refers to *the kind* of immortality that would negate *worldly mortality*: an «immortality» consisting of the full and eternal continuation of *this* life.

In that respect, all modern experiments and studies on how to stop the aging of animal cells, from the reversal of age-related impairments operated by young blood transfusion in mice to the lengthening of mice's telomeres, and to CRISPR-Cas9 genome editing, can be interpreted as signs of a potential biotechnological

<sup>32</sup> *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Nestle-Aland, 28), *Ad Timotheum Epistula II Sancti Pauli Apostoli* [online], < <https://www.die-bibel.de/en/bible/NA28/2TI.1> > [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> September 2024].

(English translation: *The New American Bible, Second Letter to Timothy* [online], < [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/\\_P116.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/_P116.HTM) > [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> September 2024]).

<sup>33</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part 1, Section 2, Chapter 2, Article 5, Paragraph 2, I, 646 [online], < [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_P1S.HTM#-T2](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P1S.HTM#-T2) > [accessed 19<sup>th</sup> September 2024].

destruction of death.<sup>34</sup> Now, in a potential world where death can be indefinitely prevented from happening, would people still belong to death? Would mortality still loom over those who have no notion of it? No matter how utopian (or dystopian) this scenario may seem, it is not possible to rule it out, unless one closes in on oneself, which is not a legitimate philosophical move.

Before exploring the consequence of the death-free scenario presented above, let me address a potential objection against its possibility. In effect, one might wonder whether humans would still be able to belong to death even when death will have been «destroyed» by the biotechnological progress. This possibility has been indirectly hinted at by Theodor Adorno in a broadcast debate he had with Ernst Bloch in 1964, afterwards published under the title *Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing* («Etwas fehlt... Über die Widersprüche der utopischen Sehnsucht: Ein Rundfunkgespräch mit Theodor W. Adorno»)<sup>35</sup> Referring to Heidegger's concept of «Sein zum Tode» («being-towards-death»), Adorno states:

«Moreover, it is very striking – you spoke about close-handedness (*Zurhandenheit*) before – it is very striking that Heidegger to a certain degree had already cast aspersions on the question about the *possibility* of an existence without death as a mere ontic question that concerns the end of existence (*Daseinsende*), and he was of the opinion that death, as it were, would retain its absolute, ontological, thus essential dignity only if death were ontically to disappear (that is, in the realm of the existing [im Bereich des Seienden]) – that this sanctification of death or making death an absolute in contemporary philosophy, which I at any rate regard as the absolute anti-utopia, is also the key category.»<sup>36</sup>

(«Es ist übrigens sehr bezeichnend – du hast vorhin von »Zurhandenheit" gesprochen – es ist sehr bezeichnend, daß Heidegger bereits die Fragestellung nach der *Möglichkeit* einer Existenz ohne Tod gewissermaßen abwertet als eine bloß ontische Fragestellung, die bloß das Daseinsende betrifft, und der Ansicht ist, daß der Tod gleichsam seine absolute ontologische, also wesenhafte Dignität auch dann behielte, wenn ontisch, also im Bereich des Seienden, der Tod verschwände – daß also diese Heiligung des Todes oder Verabsolutierung des Todes in der gegenwärtigen Philosophie, die ich jedenfalls als die schlechthin anti-utopische empfinde, auch die Schlüsselkategorie ist.»)<sup>37</sup>

It might seem that Adorno is here making a consideration on Heidegger's thesis that the existential analytic «remains purely "this-worldly" in so far as it interprets that phenomenon [i.e., the phenomenon of death] merely in the way in which it *enters into* any particular Dasein as a possibility of its Being» («bleibt aber

<sup>34</sup> For these three experimental references, cf. Saul A. Villeda, et al. "Young blood reverses age-related impairments in cognitive function and synaptic plasticity in mice", in *Nature Medicine* 20, no. 6 (2014), pp. 659-663; Miguel A. Muñoz-Lorente, et al. "Mice with hyper-long telomeres show less metabolic aging and longer lifespans", in *Nature Communications* 10, no. 1 (2019), no. 4723; "What are genome editing and CRISPR-Cas9?", in *Medline Plus* [online], <<https://medlineplus.gov/genetics/understanding/genomicresearch/genomeediting/>>.

<sup>35</sup> Ernst Bloch. "Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing", in Ernst Bloch. *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, ed. and trans. by J. Zipes and F. Mecklenburg (Cambridge (MA) and London: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 1-17. (German edition: Ernst Bloch, "Etwas fehlt... Über die Widersprüche der utopischen Sehnsucht: Ein Rundfunkgespräch mit Theodor W. Adorno, Gesprächsleiter: Horst Krüger, 1964", in Bloch 1985, *Ergänzungsband: Tendenz, Latenz, Utopie*, pp. 350-367).

<sup>36</sup> Bloch 1988, p. 8 (emphasis in the text).

<sup>37</sup> Bloch 1985, p. 358 (emphasis in the text). Let me note that, already in the German text, there is a little typo in reporting Heidegger's term «Zuhandenheit» (Macquarrie and Robinson: «readiness-to-hand»; Stambaugh: «handiness»), which in fact contains no «r» after the «Zu».

insofern rein „diesseitig“, als sie das Phänomen [of death] lediglich daraufhin interpretiert, wie es als Seinsmöglichkeit des jeweiligen Daseins *in dieses hereinsteht*).<sup>38</sup> In fact, before this passage, Heidegger had just clarified that «nor is anything decided ontically about the “other-worldly” and its possibility, any more than about the “this-worldly”; it is not as if norms and rules for comporting oneself towards death were to be proposed for “edification”» («über das „Jenseits“ und seine Möglichkeit wird ebensowenig ontisch entschieden wie über das „Diesseits“, als sollten Normen und Regeln des Verhaltens zum Tode zur „Erbauung“ vorgelegt werden»).<sup>39</sup> What does Heidegger mean with «diesseitig», though? What does «this-worldliness» consist in? And what does Adorno mean when he refers to the Heideggerian «sanctification of death» («Heiligung des Todes»)? Does he simply mean that the existential analytic has «sanctified» death in its ontological significance, therefore banning any «ontic question» around it, such as questions on the «this-worldly» and the «other-worldly»?

I contend that in these Heideggerian passages, parts of which have already been quoted in this study, the word «diesseitig» is understood in two different manners. And in fact, it would be patently inconsistent if, after denying any contamination of his existential analytic with the ontic questions concerning the afterlife and its opposite, Heidegger stated that the existential analytic «remains purely “this-worldly”». I believe this contradiction is only apparent. Indeed, the sense in which the existential analytic is «this-worldly» is given by its *methodological prudence*, that is by its neutrality with regards to any question about the ontic nature of death. Disagreeing with this interpretation would imply understanding «this-worldly» as *the opposite of «otherworldly»*, which would render the existential analytic ontically biased. That is why I contend that there is a difference between the *ontological sense* of the «this-worldly» (according to which the existential analytic «remains purely “this-worldly”») and its *ontic sense* (in virtue of which the existential analytic would lose its neutrality and convert to existential nihilism by claiming that *Dasein* is a «*this-worldly*» being).

Conversely, there also exists a distinction between the ontological sense of the «otherworldly» (in virtue of which any stance which crosses the line of the neutrality of the existential analytic is «otherworldly») and its ontic sense (according to which one can believe that *Dasein* has an «otherworldly soul»).

Therefore, I maintain that, by ascribing a «sanctification of death» to Heidegger, Adorno does not mean that Heidegger overlooked (by the way, intentionally) any non-ontological question around death. In that case, Adorno would be blaming Heidegger for being Heidegger (which is perfectly legitimate, but might at once be naïve). Moreover, in that case, there would be no way to account for Adorno’s mention that Heidegger «was of the opinion that death, as it were, would retain its absolute, ontological, thus essential dignity only if death were ontically to disappear (that is, in the realm of the existing)».

Rather, Adorno is pointing out to a deeper fact. Speaking about the «ontic disappearance» of death from the «realm of existing», Adorno is precisely referring to *a possible world in which the event of death does not exist*

<sup>38</sup> Heidegger 1977, pp. 329-330 (English: Heidegger 1985, p. 292). Stambaugh translates «diesseitig» with the same word as Macquarrie and Robinson: «thisworldly» (Heidegger’s emphasis).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*.

*anymore*. In fact, as harmless as it may seem, the mere possibility of this world makes the event of death «ontic», that is contingent. Now, it is *despite the «ontic disappearance» of death* that, according to Adorno's interpretation of Heidegger, death – as this is understood by Heidegger, that is as *being-towards-death*, defining every possible human existence – «would retain its absolute, ontological, thus essential dignity». That is to say that, according to Heidegger's notion, even a never-dying human would live *as if one day they had to die*. The existential structure of «being-towards-death», and thus belonging-to-death, *should persist, even if eternally frustrated* by the fact that humans would have «destroyed» death. That is the meaning of Heidegger's «absolutisation» of death.

Now, from a fundamental perspective, it is not relevant whether the destruction of death will (or, better, might) be accomplished through biotechnology or, say, the favourable encounter with an almighty God. What is relevant is the *existential* persistence of «death» as «being-towards-death» in such a death-free world. In conclusion, one can say that Heidegger framed his concept in such a way that even a world without death could have some room for death.

At this point, I should note that unlike Adorno, I do not believe that Heidegger's «sanctification of death» presents a dichotomic instance where an ontological structure can autonomise from its ontic counterpart. I believe that «ontic» and «ontological» are used by Adorno with regards to different terms, perhaps unconsciously. In fact, *the event of human death* is not the ontic counterpart of «being-towards-death», but of the general, ontological fact that people die; and on the other hand, «being-towards-death» is not the ontological counterpart of the event of death, but of all the particular attitudes through which humans expect the arrival of death. These differ both from *Dasein* to *Dasein* and from time to time over the lifetime of a same *Dasein*. Therefore, the «sanctification of death» simply represents an instance where an *ontological-existential* structure, as is «being-towards-death», autonomises from an ontic and non-existential event, as is the event of death.

These remarks on a potential death-free world lead the study back to where it started. Along the path to «get rid» of death and let it fall, together with the ontology of human death in general, the investigation could find but more death, more «*deaths*». Now, from this proliferation of deaths, in which the study's efforts resulted, should one not draw the conclusion *that human death has an ineluctable component*? Is one «destined» to die, no matter in which form or time? Or is one «free» to die instead? Has the investigation been presented with a scenario where death is wholly absent – a true «death-free» scenario? If so, *who bears responsibility for keeping death «alive»*? In what follows, I am going to make the last, deadly criticism of the ontology of death in general, that is *of human death itself*. This will let death, understood in its most fundamental sense, appear and fall at once. The study will then be ready to move onto its second half, the half on human eternity.

### **3.6 The Most Fundamental Dimension of Human Mortality. Beyond and Before «Belonging-To-Death»**

As a matter of fact, a possible world where *there is no room for death*, neither for belonging-to-death nor for death-in-itself, has already been indicated, with all due respect for Heidegger's «sanctification of death». That means that *death in general* has already been delivered its «deathblow». In the present section, I will clarify this by indicating – and destroying – what appears to be the most fundamental death which humans can die.

If a supreme dimension of mortality exists, its notion must be embedded in all the analyses of this thanatological half of the study, from the first section of the first chapter to the last section of the present one. In fact, the investigation of death as the obscure correlate of expectational consciousness, the examination of what humans believe will happen at the time of death; the radicalisation of these two inquiries accomplished by illuminating their common reference to death as a worldly event, the characterisation of «belonging-to-death» as the most fundamental relationship with death; and lastly, the discovery of mortality in itself as the destiny looming over humans who are unconscious of death – all these analyses must already include a reference to the fundamental dimension of human mortality. What does it consist of, then?

*«Human death appears as the essentially obscure, ontological-metaphysical process of annihilation of the human being in their worldly, that is bodily nature. This nature consists of the unified consciousness one has «of» one's body, «by» one's body, and «that» one is a body: The unifying factor is the body itself. It is precisely this worldly nature that, through death, undergoes an ontic-metaphysical transformation, which is partly manifest and partly obscure to the dying human, into a corpse».*

The identity between this definition and the one given earlier in this chapter should not surprise. Indeed, though they may seem identical, this definition expresses a more fundamental fact. It does not simply express that humans belong to death and that death belongs to them, nor that humans are mortal even when they are not aware of it. More fundamentally, this definition expresses *the mortality of humans*, sic et simpliciter. In other words, it expresses that *humans are mortal in and of themselves*, whether they know it or not, whether they expect it or face it. That is the fundamental «relationship» between humans and death.

This definition should not only be looked at as a «philosophical achievement». That is because philosophy simply illuminates what is already illuminated by one's being. Indeed, beyond and before every «existentialisation», death has proved to be what on several occasions is meant with this word, that is a conscious or unconscious destiny of human beings. From this perspective, despite all the deficiencies and misunderstandings from which philosophy can help purify thanatology, the ancestral insight that philosophical truths reside within meanings already familiar to the human individual is confirmed in the present study. Death and its fundamental meaning are no exception.

### **3.7 The Condition of Possibility for Philosophical Essentialism: The Self-Production of Essences**

It is almost time to conclude the chapter. Before that, two tasks need to be accomplished. Firstly, I need to clarify why death, even in this fundamental dimension, is no truly ineluctable component of human existence.



Secondly, I need to address a fundamental objection against the essentialism underlying this philosophical investigation. Let me start from the second task.

At this stage of the study, one might ask how anyone who has not fallen into the trap of philosophical essentialism could ever believe that this «fundamental core» of death truly exists. Who would believe that death, whether looming over humans or belonging to them, retains all the components that the study has progressively distinguished from one another? Is this entire thanatological investigation not *a flop*, where philosophy has once again proven unable to overcome its essential flaw, namely, the self-production of «essences» which it then projects onto the pre-philosophical world?

Let me answer that it is no secret that philosophy has its own existential positionality, from the perspective of which all «essences» can be detected and investigated. That is not a criticism but rather the condition for philosophising. In fact, what is *actually* relevant is establishing whether philosophy is *the activity of philosophers* or *a fundamental attitude of humans*, which philosophers simply embrace and develop. That is an issue which was already mentioned in the first chapter, when discussing Heidegger's criticism of Husserl's notion of philosophers as «functionaries of humanity» («Funktionäre der Menschheit»).

In this context, it is possible to decide on this issue by recalling the analysis of existential nihilism made in the second chapter. As argued, the one-sidedness of existential nihilism leads it to believe that its own interpretation of death is the universal truth on it. That is no «mistake» which existential nihilism makes. On the contrary, it is the genuine way in which death, grasped as the absolute end of life, appears to a biased attitude towards death. In other words, from an existential-nihilistic perspective, the essence of death is its being an absolute end.

That implies that *it is only from a non-biased perspective* that the nihilistic death can appear as a «fake» essence of death. In this context, «fake» does not mean «false». It simply means that the nihilistic death can reveal itself as the essence of death only from a determinate existential positionality. Nonetheless, that is the case for philosophy too. Indeed, the nihilistic death could not appear as «fake» if not from a non-biased perspective. Therefore, even the genuine «essence» of death, understood as the common ground of any possible interpretation of death, including the nihilistic one, can appear as such only from a determinate existential positionality, that is the philosophical positionality.

I am now in a position to ask whether the philosophical positionality is a fundamental human positionality or just one among the others. That is the crucial question. I maintain that the truth lies in the middle. Indeed, it is not possible to deny that non-philosophical attitudes, whether towards death or not, actually exist. That is exemplified by existential nihilism itself. However, on the other hand, this does not imply that philosophy is the activity of philosophers, *sic et simpliciter*. Indeed, from a philosophical perspective, the non-philosophical ones appear to deal with the essences that are discovered by philosophy. For example, existential nihilism appears to deal with the essence of death, understood as a worldly event. Yet it is *only from a philosophical perspective* that the «essences» with which non-philosophical attitudes deal appear as «essences». That is, it is



*only from a philosophical perspective* that non-philosophical attitudes appear as inherently philosophical. That is why I maintain that the truth lies in the middle.

Moreover, even attitudes such as existential nihilism can in principle exceed their own limits and come to realise that humans have several legitimate opinions on death, and that these share some common elements. That is far from being a form of knowledge that exclusively belongs to philosophers. This too indicates that philosophy is not an invention of philosophers, but a fundamentally human attitude, although only in principle. For this reason, it is *far from impossible* that all the «deaths» analysed by this study are involved in one's everyday life.

### **3.8 Radical Epicureanism and the Death of Death. The End of the Thanatological Half of the Study**

Let me conclude the chapter. Let me come to the *death of death*. Over the course of this chapter, I have always tried to *save death*. To let it appear in all its ineluctability, I claimed that even if humans, in some cases, may not know anything about their mortality, mortality can be said to «loom over» them even so. In the same spirit, I claimed that if this «mortality in itself» will be destroyed one day, humans could nonetheless continue to be-towards death and therefore to belong-to-death. In this section, I will let these last two bastions fall, as required by the task of a «critique of the ontology of death». This section is death's *extrema hora*.

With all due respect to the «sanctification of death», what about the possibility of a world in which death, after being defeated by biotechnological progress, would be forgotten by humans? What about a world where even a frustrated «being-towards-death» no longer exists? How stable is the supposed ineluctability of death if a scenario can be imagined in which death itself is «out of the game»? In this context, I wish to argue that *in a fundamental sense*, one can affirm that death is «nothing to us»: «οὐθὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς», according to Epicurus' words. From the most fundamental perspective, the ineluctability of death unfolds as «eluctable». This deserves to be called the «*supreme Epicurean fact*» about death. This does in no way entail that death, along with all the several «deaths», simply vanishes and loses its fundamental ontological status. It rather means that *from the most fundamental perspective*, death in fact appears as «eluctable».

At this point, one might object that the alluded scenario of a death-free world is far from happening and will perhaps never happen. Let me set aside the arbitrariness of such an objection, to which one could easily counter with its opposite stance, as both positions would hold equal argumentative strength. Let me also set aside the fact that the *mere possibility* of a death-free world irreversibly invalidates the ontological ineluctability of death. Rather, let me give an example proving that a death-free scenario *could* already take place in the present times. As will soon become clear, I am not suggesting that one's worldly immortality has been made possible by technology.

Let me consider the following scenario. A woman is about to give birth to two twins in her house, and her ex-partner is not aware of these two children nor of her pregnancy. The woman gives a hidden birth to the twins in her place, but after a few hours has a panic attack and gets away from her house to then sadly be invested by a car, which kills her. The two newborns are there, on the woman's bed in the house. They have just been

born. As argued, it is reasonable to think that none of the newborns belongs to death. They are too young to «know» anything about mortality. Furthermore, nobody knows that these two children are alive, and therefore, nobody could «assign» to them their «mortality in itself». Mortality does not loom over these babies.

Now, this is certainly a saddest scenario. *Is it not also a death-free one, though?* Certainly, it may seem inappropriate to claim that two newborns, abandoned by their parents and clearly destined for death (from the perspective of those who know about their existence), are «death-free». However, this is just a hypothetical example I am providing to clarify my claim. In effect, where is death for these children? With regards to them, no death seems to exist. Indeed, they are completely unaware of it. Moreover, death cannot loom over them, for there is nobody who knows that they are alive. That makes this a *genuine death-free scenario*. And if one objected that *there is always me, the storyteller*, who knows about those children and can «assign» to them their mortality, I could reply that there is a chance that I myself will forget about them. Now, what will happen if I do forget about them? Who will be able to ascribe their mortality to them?

Such a scenario could well occur – it certainly occurs – nowadays. That means that in order to recognise the «eluctability» of death, there is no need to wait for a world where death has been destroyed. However, it must be acknowledged that to depict this scenario, I had to break my promise not to make any idealistic (nor anti-idealistic) claim in this study. Indeed, thinking that something, in this case the mortality of the twins, does not exist because nobody knows that it exists, is an idealistic way of thinking. Nonetheless, the break of my theoretical promise has been purely instrumental. It has been meant to show that *under certain conditions*, which require one to assume an idealistic stance, human death can be «killed». That is enough for my theoretical purposes.

Now, all this means human death has fallen. With the fall of death in its most fundamental significance, that is *with the death of death*, the first half of the study has come to an end. In fact, the central task of the present investigation was to detect the fundamental meaning of mortality and its ineluctability, that is essentiality for humans. Now that this has been found, and for this very reason lost, a new phase of the study will begin. For the first time in this investigation, the guiding question will be rearranged and *the counterpart of human mortality* will start to be investigated. This will reveal the fuller nature of this study as a «treatise on man», or, more neutrally (and thus preferably from a philosophical point of view), as a «study in the philosophy of existence».



In this chapter, the investigation of death has come to a conclusion. This conclusion was reached through a series of criticisms and counter-criticisms of all the central paradigms established throughout the thanatological half of the study.

## **PART 2: ON ETERNITY**

## **CHAPTER 5: THE MANIFESTATION OF ETERNITY. IN CONVERSATION WITH EMANUELE SEVERINO**

In this chapter, the investigation resumes the existential method abandoned at the end of the fourth chapter. That is because the nature of the human being as an «eternal who dies» can be experienced by humans themselves. To elucidate the eternity of existence and differentiate it from other kinds of eternity, the chapter undertakes an investigation, so far lacking in the secondary literature, into the various meanings of eternity found in the most significant philosophy of eternity of recent times, that is Emanuele Severino's philosophy. The present chapter demonstrates that, despite affirming the eternity of all beings, this philosophy has not identified the specific kind of eternity of the «eternal who dies». In this context, Severinian philosophy is not embraced by the study but is used to clarify an independent conception of eternity.

### **1. Mortality, Non-Mortality, and Eternity. A Revealing Embarrassment**

The first half of the study provided the investigation with the senses according to which human beings can be said to be «mortal», as well as with the senses according to which humans can be said to be «non-mortal». Now, the declared intention of the present investigation is to be a study in the philosophy of existence. That is, a study on the essence of existence. However, why should one investigate *eternity*? Would the investigation of eternity not impose an *external task* on the present investigation? *And incidentally*, what could it ever mean for a human to be «eternal»? In fact, if understood as «immortality», the eternity of human life has already been dismissed in this study. That is because, from an ontological perspective, both the idea that the soul will persist after death and the idea that human worldly life will never end can only be admitted as plausible, yet certainly not as essential features of existence. Therefore, *what kind* of eternity would the eternity of existence be? Is it not just a matter of metaphors, as happens, to a certain extent, with Wittgenstein's concept of «timelessness» («Unzeitlichkeit») in the *Tractatus*?<sup>1</sup>

Now, the impression that *there is not much to say about eternity*, especially about eternity and human existence, *is itself a phenomenon to be explained*. It is no coincidence that such an impression takes place. Indeed, *first and foremost*, this impression shows that *one simply does not know how to deal with eternity*. This will become evident in the analyses of the present chapter. The uneasiness about how to deal with eternity is part of why one can find oneself puzzled when thinking of eternity – not to mention the «black despair» that one might feel when attempting to think of eternity's relationship with human life.

In what follows, I will argue that nowadays one often lacks *even the words* to make a discourse on eternity. «Eternal», «everlasting», «indestructible», «immutable», «outside time», «perpetual»: These words are but problems. This is not to say that no one reflects on eternity anymore, nor that no one has reflected on it in the past. One could easily mention the investigations conducted by Christian theology into the eternity of God or human life in paradise. Yet in this context, *I am positing another question: the question of the eternity of human*

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<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein 1961, p. 147. The passage has already been examined in the first chapter, section 4.2.

«*earthly*» existence. This kind of eternity is widely discredited, especially by Christian theology. Moreover, from a more general perspective, today one lacks a *general study on the notion of eternity*. Not a study on the notion of eternity in Ancient Greek philosophy, in the Scholasticism, or in Eastern cultural traditions. Not even a study on the eternity of all things, as is the case for an «eternalist» doctrine, be this scientific or philosophical. Nowadays, what is missing is *a study on the meaning of eternity*.

In that context, another question without an answer is *which terminology should be used* by a study on eternity, particularly by a philosophical study, as distinguished from religious ones, for instance. Is there any word that comes to mind, if one is to refer to the «*science of eternity*»? It does not matter whether this is understood as a philosophical or a scientific «science». Is there any pertinent noun similar to «biology», «anthropology», etc.? If there is none, why is that the case? Does that depend on *the general impossibility of a science of eternity*? These questions leave the study with a task: to prepare adequate tools to deal with eternity, and to deal with it philosophically.

One might think that, over the Western philosophical tradition, it is precisely the word «metaphysics» that expressed *the science of the eternal*. Indeed, according to one form metaphysics has taken, the traditional one, the metaphysical element of reality cannot be but eternal, no matter how this «eternity» is to be grasped. Yet exactly for that reason, metaphysics has been *the science of the eternal* because it aimed to be *the science of the essential*, not the other way round. Furthermore, there exist less traditional forms of metaphysics which renounced the idea that there is anything eternal. This confirms that an *autonomous science of eternity* is far beyond reach.

And yet even Wittgenstein's renowned proposition 6.4311 in the *Tractatus*, albeit metaphorical, shows that the idea of *an eternal nature of human worldly life* was still alive in the last century, and in one of its most impactful philosophers. Therefore, *there is nothing ultimately absurd in positing the question of whether human «earthly» life is defined by eternity*. And *insofar* as an investigation into eternity is an investigation *into humanity*, this is not only «welcome» in a study in the philosophy of existence, but in fact required by it. That is what leads the study to the question of eternity.

## **2. The Philosophy of Emanuele Severino and the Task of the Present Chapter**

For over 60 years, until his death in 2019, Emanuele Severino has advanced the eternalist claim – allegedly incontrovertible – that «being *qua* being is eternal» («l'ente in quanto ente è eterno»). That is to say that all beings are eternal, *including human life*. In that sense, Severino is to be considered the *untimeliest thinker* of the Twentieth Century, given that this century advanced its refusal of all human discourses on eternity – discourses that the philosophical tradition, together with the religious one, had upheld for millennia. As a matter of fact, the entire Western tradition had believed in eternal truths. That is because religious and philosophical truths are not only in the minds of philosophers and theologians. Therefore, at least in certain regions of the world, the Twentieth Century was *a profane century*. That is why Emanuele Severino could be

defined as *the «minister» of the sacred*. His philosophy has had the virtue of restoring eternity to new philosophical dignity.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, *a study on eternity*, and especially, *a study on human eternity*, need certainly not agree with Emanuele Severino's doctrine in order to investigate the meaning of eternity moving from his philosophy. In effect, no contemporary thinker would be more adequate than Severino to conduct a study on eternity. For in affirming the «doctrine of the eternity of being *qua* being» («dottrina dell'eternità dell'essente in quanto essente»), Severino *had to conceive of «eternity» in various ways*. As will be shown, he had to *articulate*, whether implicitly or explicitly, *the complexity of eternity*, including both its derivative and fundamental forms. Perhaps, he even had to detect a *supreme kind of eternity*.

In what will follow, I will offer an original interpretation of the Severinian doctrine of eternity. The originality of the analysis is given by the fact that *the secondary literature has never pursued a similar endeavour in a systematic fashion*. No contribution has expressly raised or examined the question of how many senses of eternity exist in Severino's philosophy and how they are structured. This lack is a confirmation that, even when investigating the «doctrine of the eternity of being *qua* being», the general embarrassment about eternity can persist. After examining Severino's doctrine, the study will point the finger at *a kind of eternity forgotten by this doctrine*. This is the eternity which «passes through» human life, shaping its nature.

### **3. Preparing the Tools: «Aeonological» and «Non-Aeonological» Approaches to Eternity**

I should start by saying that *nothing seems to have been overlooked by Severino himself* as the senses according to which «eternity» is understood in his philosophy. That is a proper scandal of Severinian philosophy. On the other hand, it also shows that the *ontological-metaphysical* affirmation of the eternity of *all beings* has impacted negatively on Severino's problematisation of the consequences of this affirmation, especially with regards to all different kinds of «beings» whose «eternity» is affirmed by his philosophy. This is not to say that Severino has never been explicit about what he meant when uttering the word «eternal». Rather, it is to say that he never posited this *as a systematic problem within his philosophy*. There certainly are some considerations by Severino examining the difference between various *kinds* of eternity; nonetheless, these considerations are rare and often brief. They will be examined in what follows.

The lack of a systematic problematisation urges the investigator to prepare themselves the tools for the investigation. That is why I will now distinguish between an «*aeonological*» approach to eternity (from the Ancient Greek noun «αἰών», mostly used when the Ancient Greek needed to say: «eternity») and a «*non-aeonological*» one.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For some among the most exhaustive summaries of Severino's philosophical path, cf. Giulio Goggi. *Emanuele Severino* (Vatican City: Lateran University Press, 2015), and Nicoletta Cusano. *Emanuele Severino. Oltre il nichilismo*. Brescia: Morcelliana, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the entry «αἰών» in the *Liddell, Scott, Jones Ancient Greek Lexicon* [online], < <https://lsj.gr/wiki/αἰών> > [accessed 14<sup>th</sup> January 2025].

### **3.1 Severino's Ontological-Metaphysical Approach to Eternity as Non-Aeonological**

I will clarify this distinction by starting the analysis of the Severinian passages wherefrom the distinction can be «extracted». Among several that could be quoted, Severino states in the following passage what it means to be «eternal» according to the so-called «originary structure»: «struttura originaria», an expression Severino uses to refer to the «incontrovertible truth», «verità incontrovertibile», to which his philosophy «testifies» («testimonia»). Quoting this passage will also give me a chance to briefly recall why, according to the «destiny of necessity» («destino della necessità», interchangeable with «struttura originaria»), *everything must be said to be eternal*.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, let me say that Severino's *grounds* for the affirmation of the eternity of all things is no central theme for the present study. Therefore, it is also not relevant in this context to give a judgement of agreement or disagreement with him on this matter. Let Severino speak, then:

«Lo stesso si dica – e anzi dal punto di vista linguistico la cosa appare anche più chiaramente – per l'annullamento dell'essere, o per l'uscire dal nulla da parte dell'essere: in entrambi i casi è richiesto che l'essere non sia, ovvero che l'essere sia nulla. E questo, sia che l'annullamento o la sortita dal nulla sia dell'intero in quanto tale, quanto che sia dell'intero quanto a un suo momento o parte. Tutto ciò può essere *espresso* dicendo che l'essere è eterno, o, anche, che l'essere è atto puro: l'importante è intendere questi termini nel modo che si è qui sopra determinato.»<sup>5</sup>

(«The same can be said – and from a linguistic perspective, it becomes even clearer – about the annihilation of being or about being's emergence from nothingness: In both cases, it is required that being is not, that is, that being is nothing. This applies whether the annihilation or emergence from nothingness pertains to the whole as such, or only to a moment or part of the whole. All this can be *expressed* by saying that being is eternal, or, also, that being is pure act: The important thing is to understand these terms in the manner that has been specified above.»).<sup>6</sup>

The passage is taken from *La struttura originaria*, which is the first major philosophical work by Severino, published by La Scuola (Brescia) in 1958.<sup>7</sup> It was re-published by Adelphi in 1981 with some adjustments and a new substantial introduction. An English translation of *La struttura originaria* is not yet available, but it is going to be published soon within Bloomsbury Academic's series devoted to *The Works of Emanuele Severino*.<sup>8</sup> Let me note that whenever I quote *La Struttura Originaria*, I will be referring to the second edition. Let me also mention that all the passages that will be quoted have not undergone any adjustment in Severino's revision of 1981. It is important to mention this because the few Severinian discourses on the meaning of eternity began at that time and remained largely unchanged until Severino's death. In stating this, I am not suggesting that Severino has not changed his mind on essential issues over the course of his philosophical path, as he himself acknowledged and all Severinian scholars know. I am only suggesting that some Severinian

<sup>4</sup> I already had the occasion to mention this in Chapter 2, section 3.2.1.

<sup>5</sup> Severino 1981, p. 520.

<sup>6</sup> My translations. Cf. below in the text.

<sup>7</sup> Emanuele Severino. *La Struttura Originaria* (Brescia: La Scuola, 1958). This edition has been republished in 2014. Cf. Emanuele Severino. *La struttura originaria* (Brescia: La Scuola SEI, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> In this series, the following works have already been published: Emanuele Severino. *Beyond Language*, trans. by Damiano Sacco, ed. by Giulio Goggi, Damiano Sacco, and Ines Testoni (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023a); Emanuele Severino. *Law and Chance*, trans. by Damiano Sacco, ed. by Giulio Goggi, Damiano Sacco, and Ines Testoni (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023b); Emanuele Severino. *The Fundamental Tendency of Our Time*, trans. by Antimo Lucarelli, ed. by Giulio Goggi, Damiano Sacco, and Ines Testoni (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025).

discourses, such as the ones on the concept of eternity, have not arisen later, in Severino, than it has Severino's philosophical journey itself.

From an overall perspective on the evolution of his philosophy, in *La struttura originaria*, Severino has *not yet* affirmed the eternity of all beings, at least not in a consistent fashion. Indeed, he affirms such an eternity while *simultaneously* holding that «ontological becoming» («divenire ontologico») exists. As previously mentioned, this is understood by him as any process involving the «going into nothingness» («andare nel niente») or the «coming out of nothingness» («uscire dal niente») of beings.<sup>9</sup> In this early stage of his meditation, Severino tries to show how the *contradiction* between the eternity of all beings and the existence of «ontological becoming» can be *metaphysically reconciled* by affirming the existence of a *transcendent world* in which all the ephemeral beings (including individual beings) that appear in «this» world are *eternally preserved*. According to Severino, the transcendent world preserves the *eternal copies* of the ephemeral things of this world. In this context, one can easily see how much Platonic Severino's stance is at this stage, despite his significant disagreements with Plato.

As anticipated, my claim here is that *Severino's statements on the meaning of eternity have stayed the same* even after his retraction of the philosophy of *La struttura originaria* as self-contradictory. This retraction brought Severino to rigorise his philosophical stance, starting from the publication of the *Postscript* to *Returning to Parmenides* in 1965.<sup>10</sup> Given that it is after this rigorisation that the «doctrine of the eternity of all beings» becomes most interesting for my purposes, in what follows I will always refer to the second stage of Severino's philosophy. This will not prevent me from quoting texts belonging to the first stage, nor from using the Severinian language belonging to that stage, considering that certain Severinian claims stayed the same over his entire career.

Let me come to the passage quoted, Severino explains that since «the annihilation of being», as well as its «emergence from nothingness», require «that being is not, or rather, that being is nothing», then «being is eternal». In other words, since the emergence and the annihilation of beings *are contradictory*, it follows that «being is eternal», whether this refers to «the whole as such» (i.e., the Whole of reality) or to «a part of the whole», meaning any particular being. Now, for Severino, the *impossibility for any being not to be* «can be expressed by saying that being is eternal». Had one to express this impossibility in a positive fashion, that is as a *necessity*, one should state that «eternity» *simply means that being necessarily «is»*, rather than not being.

With regards to Severino's reference to Giovanni Gentile's concept of «pure act» («atto puro»), let me clarify that Severino is *not* claiming that since «the Whole» of reality can be considered «eternal», insofar as it includes the totality of time, then *every individual being*, as a «part of the Whole», is itself *eternal*. Severino is *not* arguing that «the Whole» *eternalises* individual things «in its own eternity» («nella sua eternità»), as Gentile does in the following passage:

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Chapter 2, section 3.2.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Severino 2016, pp. 85-145.



«Di guisa che, fissata che sia, come analiticamente si fa, la molteplicità, si esce dal seno dell'eterno, e ci si getta tutti nell'astratto e assurdo tempo, che è molteplicità caotica; ma, in quanto lo spirito non fissa la molteplicità, ma vive di essa, cioè dell'immanente sua posizione, esso non abbandona mai a sé la realtà empirica: anzi l'accoglie, la risolve eternamente in sé, e la eterna nella propria eternità».<sup>11</sup>

(«It is as though the multiplicity, fixed as it is, as we analytically make it, issued forth from the eternal to be flung into the abstract and self-contradictory time, which is chaotic multiplicity: but mind, in so far as it does not fix the multiplicity but lives in it, that is to say, from the immanent standpoint, never abandons the empirical reality to itself. It holds it, reconciles it eternally in itself, eternizes it in its own eternity.»).<sup>12</sup>

This passage gives me the chance to repeat that Severino is *not* affirming that everything is ephemeral but, *sub aeternitatis specie*, is at once eternal. However, that is not to imply that a certain kind of «eternisation» of all individual beings is not implicit in Severino's doctrine. Yet it is not to *this* «eternity» that he is alluding in the passage above. Indeed, from the Severinian perspective, *asserting that everything is eternal excludes any ephemerality of things*. That holds true even from the perspective of *La Struttura Originaria*, where Severino still considers ephemeral things to exist. In fact, in that text, he *already argues* that there is a contradiction between affirming the eternity of all things and, at the same time, the ephemerality of certain things. Only, he thinks it is possible to resolve this contradiction by postulating a transcendent world, as mentioned.

*On the contrary*, for Gentile, the ephemerality of things and the eternity of the «pure act» («the Whole», in Severino's words) can coexist. Indeed, ephemerality is *made possible* by the «pure act» and by its eternising nature. From Gentile's perspective, the eternity of all things does not prevent ephemerality. That is because this eternity is *sub aeternitatis specie*, to use Spinoza's words. In a nutshell, one could express the difference between Gentile and Severino on eternity by saying that things are eternal *in one more way* for Severino than they are for Gentile, *even* when Severino still believes in ephemerality. However, this should be understood as an «*aeonological*» statement, for it does not refer to the «eternity» mentioned in the Severinian passage, that is the necessity for being to be, nor to any other *non-aeonological* eternity. The meaning of these considerations will now become clear.

At this point, one is in a position to notice that Severino's definition of eternity in the passage quoted above is an *ontological-metaphysical* one, in the sense indicated in the second chapter of the study. For him, first and foremost, «eternity» is the pure necessity, for every being, to be. However, *this definition does not seem to contain any genuine reference to «eternity»*. Indeed, it has nothing to do with «*aeonological*» notions such as «sempiternity», «eternal presence», «timelessness» etc. That is why I will call this definition «*non-aeonological*». In Ancient Greek, one of the meanings of the masculine noun «αἰών» is «eternity» and its corresponding adjective is «αἰώνιος».<sup>13</sup> In coining the terms «*aeonological*» and «*non-aeonological*», I have

<sup>11</sup> Giovanni Gentile. «Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro», Gentile, Giovanni. *L'attualismo* (Milan: Bompiani, 2014), p. 210.

<sup>12</sup> Giovanni Gentile. *The Theory of Mind as Pure Act*, ed. and trans. by H. Wildon Carr (London: Macmillan and Co., 1922), pp. 149-150.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. the Liddell, Scott, Jones *Ancient Greek Lexicon* [online], <<https://lsj.gr/wiki/αἰώνιος>> [accessed 14<sup>th</sup> January 2025].

chosen to utilise «αἰώνιος» rather than «ἀίδιος», which also means «eternal», because «ἀίδιος» is less known among the Ancient Greek terms alluding to eternity.<sup>14</sup>

Whenever a notion of eternity *contains* a reference to one of the features mentioned («sempiternity», «timelessness», «eternal presence», etc.), I call it «*aeonological*». In this context, the reader will presumably be unsatisfied with such poor clarification, but this poorness is inevitably produced by the fact that *the root unifying all «aeonological» concepts of eternity* cannot be elucidated at this stage of the chapter. It will need to be indicated at a later stage, and in truth progressively, when the complexity of Severino's doctrine of eternity will have been fully articulated.

### **3.2 Severino and the Language of Eternity: «Immutability», «Necessity»**

It must be acknowledged that Severino only uses the word «eternal» (and paronyms) fifteen times in the first edition of *La Struttura Originaria*. On that ground, one may hypothesise that there are *other words* with which Severino refers to eternity, and that these words are not predominantly used in an ontological-metaphysical sense, but in a genuinely aeonological one. Nonetheless, this hypothesis proves false when one examines Severino's book. For even *another* traditional aeonological word, which is one of the most used in the Western tradition and is used hundreds of times in *La Struttura Originaria*, that is «*immutability*» («*immutabilità*»), is employed by Severino to indicate the necessity to be. Already in this text, Severino asserts that the proposition «l'essere è immutabile» («being is immutable») is *semantically equivalent* to the proposition «l'essere (l'intero) non diviene» («being (i.e. the whole) does not change»)<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, it will not surprise that, throughout his entire career, Severino expressly identified «immutability» with «eternity».<sup>16</sup>

In Severino's discourse, one can trace *many further terms* referring to eternity in a *non-aeonological sense*. Unlike «immutability», these terms do not always refer to the ontological-metaphysical dimension of truth, yet they still refer to *non-aeonological* notions. As an example, let me quote a passage (among many that could be quoted) taken from *Destino della Necessità* (literally, «Destiny of Necessity»), published in 1980. At least within the discourse presented in this context, Severino appears to identify «eternity» with «*necessity*». The passage is taken from the very first two pages of the *Preface* to the book:

«Ma lungo la storia dell'Occidente la necessità non è mai stata pensata. Tutte le parole che la nominano – “la necessità”, “l'inevitabile”, “il fato”, “il destino”, “l'incontrovertibile”, “l'immodificabile”, “l'eterno” – ne oscurano il senso. È l'oscurità abissale del sentiero lungo il quale l'Occidente cammina. Sono tutte parole malate.

Ma nel linguaggio che incomincia a testimoniare il *destino della verità* queste parole rispecchiano un senso inaudito, che tuttavia già da sempre si illumina al di fuori dei percorsi dell'Occidente.»<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Cf. the Liddell, Scott, Jones Ancient Greek Lexicon [online], < <https://www.lsj.gr/wiki/ἀίδιος> > [accessed 14<sup>th</sup> January 2025]. With regards to «αἰώνιος» and «ἀίδιος» as terms expressing eternity, cf. Ilaria L. E. Ramelli and David Konstan. *Terms for Eternity: Αἰώνιος and ἀίδιος in Classical and Christian Authors* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Severino 1981, p. 519.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. for example Severino 2016, p. 32 and Severino 1980, p. 226.

<sup>17</sup> Severino 1980, pp. 13-14 (Severino's emphasis).

(«But throughout the history of the West, necessity has never been thought. All the words that name it – “necessity”, “the inevitable”, “fate”, “destiny”, “the incontrovertible”, “the unchangeable”, “the eternal” – obscure its meaning. It is the abyssal obscurity of the path along which the West walks. These are all sick words.

Yet, in the language that begins to testify to the *destiny of truth*, these words reflect an unheard meaning, which, by the way, has always already shone outside the pathways of the West.»).<sup>18</sup>

Though refusing the meaning that «“necessity”, “the inevitable”, “fate”, “destiny”, “the incontrovertible”, “the unchangeable”, “the eternal”» had «throughout the history of the West», Severino proves to *welcome* the «unheard meaning» which those words «reflect» in the «destiny of truth» (or the «destiny of necessity», or «the originary structure»). That clearly testifies to the Severinian identification of «eternity» with «necessity».

This is not to imply that, *in rare Severinian passages*, the words here mentioned do not express something genuinely aeonological. In fact, this happens when Severino differentiates «necessity» from «eternity», for example when arguing that necessity *entails* eternity (cf. the next section). Therefore, in acknowledging Severino’s identification of «eternity» with «necessity», I simply mean to acknowledge that the *dominant* sense of «eternity» in Severino’s discourse is of an *ontological-metaphysical nature*.

### **3.3 Severino’s Aeonological Doctrine as a Consequence of His Ontological-Metaphysical Doctrine**

When affirming that Severino’s definition of eternity *does not deal with eternity*, I do not imply that Severino did not draw *any aeonological consequence* from his ontological-metaphysical definition. As mentioned, it is exactly because of the *necessity for beings to be* that, in an aeonological sense, beings must be said to be «eternal». For Severino, aeonological «eternity» has always been a *consequence* to be «deduced» («dedotta») from ontological-metaphysical «eternity», just as the Parmenidean «σήματα» («signs», «features») of «being» («τὸ ἓόν») are deduced from the very meaning of «being». The clearest example of this approach is given by the notion of «implicazione aurea» («golden implication»)<sup>19</sup> This expresses the fact that the «logical» dimension of «incontrovertible truth», that is the non-contradictoriness of «being», *implies* the eternity of all things.<sup>20</sup>

In this chapter, I wish to argue that *Severino’s entire aeonological doctrine* is represented by *all aeonological consequences* drawn from the ontological-metaphysical definition of eternity. Not that the only «incontrovertible truth» *concerning eternity*, within Severinian philosophy, is the ontological-metaphysical truth, which Severino also calls the «logical» truth. Later in the chapter, I will analyse the second «incontrovertible truth» to which Severino’s thought «testifies», that is the «phenomenological» truth, represented by the fact that there is a region of eternal beings that are manifest in a «*phenomenological*» fashion, according to Severino’s sense.<sup>21</sup> However, due to its very nature, it is always the ontological-metaphysical truth, namely, the necessity for all beings to be, that «prescribes» how every particular region of

<sup>18</sup> My translations. In this case too, Severino’s work has not been translated.

<sup>19</sup> Emanuele Severino. *Dike* (Milan: Adelphi, 2015), p. 95.

<sup>20</sup> Severino’s notion of «logical» truth has been discussed in Chapter 2, section 3.2.1.

<sup>21</sup> The notion of «phenomenological» truth has been discussed in Chapter 2, section 3.2.1.

eternal beings, as is the «phenomenological» region, must be. In this respect, any aeonological concept of «eternity» affirmed by Severino's philosophy is a *consequence*. It is something «deduced» from a higher – indeed, supreme – principle. I will return to this matter later in the chapter.

#### **4. Prospectus of the Interpretation of Severino's Doctrine of Eternity**

After provisionally introducing the distinction between aeonological and non-aeonological approaches to eternity, let me turn to the interpretation of Severino's doctrine. This will provide the study with a rich variety of concepts of eternity. These will be useful at a later stage, as they will be differentiated from the kind of eternity that is affirmed by this study. In what follows, I will first analyse all particular kinds of eternity to be found in the Severinian doctrine. Secondly, I will address the question of the *general aeonological* meaning of the Severinian assertions on the «eternity of being *qua* being». In other words, I will examine whether all particular notions of eternity ultimately refer to a fundamental notion.

##### **4.1 Preliminary Remarks: Non-Aeonological Criteria to Differentiate Eternities**

In this section, I will further clarify the kind of considerations to be made. That is necessary because even after gaining an aeonological approach to eternity, one might still investigate it *according to non-aeonological criteria*. Essentially, that is what has been done by Severino himself and by the secondary literature. An example is given by the possibility to distinguish between the eternity of «the Whole» of reality and the eternity of a part of it. This difference has already been examined previously. In this context, I wish to say that if this distinction is grasped as lying in *that which* is eternal, that is «the Whole» or a part of «the Whole», this represents a *non-aeonological way of thinking*. Indeed, the distinction between *the eternity* of «the Whole» and *the eternity* of a part of reality is not the same as the distinction between «the Whole» and a part of reality. Thinking that these are the same distinction would amount to differentiating between eternal entities *with regards to their non-aeonological features*. In what follows, this is what I will refrain from doing. That is to say that the task of this chapter is to differentiate eternities *according to aeonological criteria*.

Let me give another example. After denying the existence of ephemeral beings, that is starting from the *Postscript to Returning to Parmenides*, Severino repeatedly stated that there is an «infinite difference» («*diversità infinita*») between his notion of «eternity» and the concept of «eternity» affirmed throughout the history of Western culture – first and foremost, by Western philosophy. In fact, while Severino argues that *all beings* are eternal *as such*, traditional Western culture argues that *only certain, privileged beings* are eternal, such as «God», «the laws of nature», «ideas», etc. However, from the perspective of the present study, such an «infinite difference» must be considered *non-aeonological*, for it relies on the difference *in extent* between eternities.

## **5. Severinian Kinds of Eternity**

### **5.1 The Supra-Temporal Eternity of «the Whole» of Reality *qua* «Transcendental Appearing» («apparire trascendentale»)**

It is time to begin the investigation. Since one specific kind of eternity has already been mentioned, I will start from it: the eternity of «the Whole» of reality. This was certainly not discovered by Severino but represents an eternity often affirmed by one traditional strand of Western metaphysics. Hopefully, starting from that will also facilitate the reader who is not acquainted with Severinian philosophy.

Though already implicit in *La struttura originaria*, the «supra-temporal» eternity of «the Whole» of reality has been analysed more extensively by Severino in later works, such as *The Essence of Nihilism* (published in 1972), albeit always briefly. I am coining the term «supra-temporal» to indicate the *all-encompassing nature* of «the whole» («l'intero»). In effect, by its very definition, «the Whole» encompasses *all particular realities*. That entails that it also encompasses *time*, and in fact *all times*. Now, can that which *encompasses* all times exist *within* time? Can «the Whole» be temporal? According to Severino (and many others, such as Gentile), the unique, all-encompassing nature of «the Whole» places it *outside of time*. In that sense, «the Whole» can be defined «supra-temporal». On this matter, let me quote one of the most significant aeonological passages in Severino's *œuvre*. Let me note that the notion of «transcendental Appearing» («apparire trascendentale») should be understood as Severino's idealistic interpretation of the concept of «the Whole»:

«L'apparire attuale è l'evento trascendentale, che in sé raccoglie ogni cosa che appare e quindi anche ogni particolare apparire. Non è dunque un presente temporale, che stia tra un passato e un futuro, ma l'orizzonte che include la totalità del tempo. In duplice senso l'apparire non è nel tempo: perché, come ogni essere, è eterno, e perché non può apparire il sorgere e il tramontare dell'apparire (ma può solo apparire il sorgere e il tramontare dell'apparire di una determinazione particolare dell'essere). Nel tempo è ciò che compare e sparisce – ciò che prima non appariva e poi non appare più; ma l'apparire, come evento trascendentale, non può sopraggiungere e uscire da sé medesimo.»<sup>22</sup>

(«The actual Appearing is the transcendental event which contains within itself every thing that appears and thus also every particular Appearing. It is not, therefore, a temporal present, situated between past and future, but is the horizon that includes the totality of time. In a dual sense Appearing is not in time: for, like every Being, it is eternal, and secondly the rising and setting of Appearing itself cannot appear (instead, that which can appear is only the rising and setting of the appearing of a particular determination of Being). That which appears and disappears – that which at first did not appear and then no longer appears – is in time; but Appearing, as the transcendental event, cannot come into and out of itself.»)<sup>23</sup>

In this passage, Severino distinguishes the «actual Appearing», as a «transcendental event», from «every particular Appearing». The phrase «actual Appearing» indicates the «transcendental Appearing». This consists in the all-embracing perspective of the ego on «the Whole» of reality. It is a notion Severino drew from Gentile's fundamental doctrine: the so-called «attualismo», usually translated with «actual idealism» or simply

<sup>22</sup> Severino 1995a, p. 178.

<sup>23</sup> Severino 2016, pp. 187-188.

with «actualism». According to Gentile, even being an *element* of «the Whole», the consciousness of the ego *relates to «the Whole»* and thus produces the kind of *perspective on reality as a whole* in which the «transcendental Appearing» consists. In Gentile's words, this is the «pure act». The perspective of the «pure act» (or, Severinianly, the «transcendental Appearing») is all-encompassing. That is because, from the perspective of Gentile and Severino's idealism, nothing can escape the gaze of the ego: Even what has been forgotten by the ego (or simply never known by it) is «known» to the ego, in a fundamental sense, *qua* «forgotten» (or *qua* «never known»). That is why *everything* can be stated to «appear» within the «transcendental Appearing».

However, the last ones are no genuine «*aeonological*» remarks. In fact, where does the peculiar eternity of «the Whole» as «transcendental Appearing» lie, more precisely? Let me go back to the passage above. According to Severino, such an all-encompassing dimension is «eternal» in that it «knows» no *diachrony*, no *time* whatsoever. It is «*timeless*». Indeed, «*before*» the «transcendental Appearing» nothing is. It has no past, for it contains all pasts. Likewise, nothing is «*after*» the «transcendental Appearing». It has no future, for it contains all futures. The impossibility of situating it throughout time – whether as the unity of the three temporal ecstases or, more generally, as the diachronic relation between a «before» and an «after» – is what defines the «*supra-temporality*» of the «transcendental Appearing».

Now, that is a genuine «*aeonological*» remark. This is demonstrated especially by the fact that the prefix «supra» has an *aeonological meaning*. It does not indicate the all-inclusiveness of the «transcendental Appearing» (though that is certainly the peculiar *non-aeonological nature* defining the «transcendental Appearing»). Rather, it indicates *the inclusion of time in eternity*. In fact, the notion of time and the notion of eternity are *both of pure aeonological interest*. As will be progressively demonstrated, their relationship is anything but dichotomous, at least with regards to the Severinian doctrine and to the kind of eternity that will be affirmed by this investigation.

The aeonological discourse has just started, though. In effect, the Severinian passage affirms *two kinds* of eternity, both referred to the «transcendental Appearing». The passage states that «in a dual sense Appearing is not in time: for, like every Being, it is eternal, and secondly, the rising and setting of Appearing itself cannot appear». At this stage, one might object that «not-being-in-time» and «eternity» should not be identified as I am doing here. Indeed, is there any evidence that Severino considers them superimposable?

Let me concede that, with regards to the eternity which is *typical* of the «transcendental Appearing», Severino would rather speak of «never-settingness» («*intramontabilità*») than «eternity». Another term he would use for «never-setting» («*intramontabile*») is «*indivieniente*» («not coming-to-be»). Nonetheless, that happens because he keeps the term «eternity» for the kind of eternity that is to be affirmed *of all things*.

Moreover, it is just not relevant whether Severino calls «eternal» what is «not in time» or not. That is because, in a wider sense, «*not-being-in-time*» is *of course one possible form of eternity*. In what follows, I will refer to this form as «extra-temporality». After all, Severino himself confirms in the passage that there is a *common*

*nature* to the two «eternities» of the «transcendental Appearing». Only, he refers to their similarity as the character of «not-being-in-time» rather than «eternity». This character is *overarching*. It is the universal character thanks to which «every Being» is «not in time», and therefore also the «transcendental Appearing». This brings me once again to the question of whether a supreme aeonological kind of eternity can be identified within Severino's philosophical discourse. Nevertheless, it is not yet time to address this question.

Before moving on, let me note that in the Severinian universe, one can trace *another supra-temporal eternal «entity»*. This is the «infinite Appearing» («apparire infinito»)<sup>24</sup> This notion refers to the theological-philosophical dimension affirmed by Severino's philosophy, albeit Severino never defined it in this way. It consists in the horizon where «the Whole» is *directly experienced*, in contrast to the indirect experience constituting the «transcendental Appearing».<sup>25</sup> In other words, the «infinite Appearing» is the non-finite perspective on reality. Nonetheless, for Severino, the «infinite Appearing» is not another entity in addition to the «transcendental Appearing». On the contrary, it is the *hidden nature* of the «transcendental Appearing». The «transcendental Appearing» is the God it cannot know it is.

This is not the place to assess how – and whether – the existence of this Severinian theological-philosophical dimension necessarily follows from Severino's principles, as he thought. This is not the place to investigate the differences between the «infinite» and the «transcendental Appearing» either – a task that has already been extensively undertaken by Severino himself. In this context, these differences are not relevant because, as will be demonstrated, they are all *non-aeonological*. One clear non-aeonological difference is precisely the one between the kind of experience of «the Whole» which is realised in the «infinite appearing» and the one realised in the «transcendental Appearing».

Let me note that there exists a subtle difference between «*supra-temporality*» and «*extra-temporality*», though they are both full-fledged aeonological features. As mentioned, the former alludes to the inclusion of time in eternity, whereas the latter alludes to the externality in relation to time. In the case of the «transcendental Appearing» and of all supra-temporal entities, extra-temporality is implied by supra-temporality. That is because what includes all times cannot exist throughout time. It is «extra-temporal», that is «timeless». This is a genuine aeonological implication between aeonological features and should not be confused with the fact that the *ontological-metaphysical* all-inclusiveness of the «transcendental Appearing», as a non-aeonological character, entails its supra-temporality, which is an aeonological character (and which, in turn, aeonologically entails extra-temporality).

## **5.2 The Sempiternity of the «Never-Setting Background of Appearing» («intramontabile sfondo dell'apparire») as a Cross-Temporal Eternity**

In this section, I will examine a second kind of eternity present in Severino's doctrine: sempiternity. A notorious form of sempiternity has already been mentioned in the thanatological half of the study, namely,

<sup>24</sup> Severino 2016, pp. 183-186.

<sup>25</sup> On this notion, cf. Chapter 2, section 3.2.1.

«immortality». However, in this context, I should note that when considered according to most Christian believers, «immortality» appears as a *halved sempiternity*. Indeed, while one's «immortal soul» had a beginning in time, it will not have any end. Here, I should also mention that the official doctrine of several Christian confessions, such as the Catholic one, is entirely distant from the «unofficial» understanding held by most Christians. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, «immortality» consists in a *divinisation*, at least of those humans who access Paradise and are thus made similar to God:

«The Word became flesh to make us “partakers of the divine nature” [«θείας κοινωνοὶ φύσεως», *Epistula secunda Petri*, 1:4]. “For this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God” [«Propter hoc enim Verbum Dei homo; et qui Filius Dei est, filius hominis factus est, commixtus Verbo Dei, ut adoptionem percipiens fiat filius Dei», Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 3, 19, 1]. “For the Son of God became man so that we might become God” [«Αὐτός γάρ ἐνηνθρώπησεν, ἵνα ἡμεῖς θεοποιηθῶμεν», Athanasius of Alexandria, *De Incarnatione*, 54, 3]. “The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods.” [«Unigenitus siquidem Dei filius, suae divinitatis volens nos esse participes, nostram naturam assumpsit ut homines deos faceret factus homo», Thomas Aquinas. *Officium de festo corporis Christi, Ad Matutinas, In primo Nocturno, Lectio Prima*]].<sup>26</sup>

As it consists in becoming similar to God, the «immortality» of the souls dwelling in heaven (and of their bodies, after these have been rejoined with them with the Final Judgement) should not be compared to sempiternity in any way, for it represents a different aeonological kind, on which I will not focus in this study (if not indirectly, when I will elucidate a further aeonological feature of the «transcendental Appearing», which makes it analogous to the Christian God).

On the other hand, «immortality» is frequently understood by Christian believers as a *perpetual*, that is *sempiternal* continuation of life (in the form of a «soul» that is firstly separated from the body and later reunited with it). That happens because sempiternity *often represents the most natural concept of eternity*, much closer to the aeonological inexpert than all other forms of eternities, such as the supra-temporality of reality as a whole, which is undoubtedly better known to philosophers (including those who reject this notion). Let me take this opportunity to recall that in this chapter, I am not *endorsing* the existence of any ontological-metaphysical object, such as «the Whole» or «being» as the unifying principle of all beings. Rather, I am simply using it as an example of a supra-temporal eternal entity. Nonetheless, I am not following Kant either and refusing the «constitutive» («konstitutiv») nature of «the Whole». In other words, I am taking no stance on whether this ontological-metaphysical object is a «regulative» («regulativ») idea of human reason, a historical product of Western philosophers, or an essential metaphysical content of human consciousness in general. Let me now move on.

<sup>26</sup> The original passages in square brackets are my additions. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part 1, Section 2, Chapter 2, Article 3, Paragraph 1, I, 460 [online], < [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_PIJ.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_PIJ.HTM) > [accessed 16<sup>th</sup> January 2025].



In the passage quoted in section 5.1, Severino mentions that «that which appears and disappears – that which at first did not appear and then no longer appears – is in time; but Appearing, as the transcendental event, cannot come into and out of itself.». That is to say that it is *within* the spectacle of the ego's consciousness that beings can «appear» and «no longer appear». However, *the spectacle as such* cannot «rise» nor «set», for it is that *within which* every being, such as the noise of a car, a cloudy sky, or a feeling, can «appear» and «disappear». That is what makes the «transcendental Appearing» supra-temporal.

In what follows, I will investigate another kind of eternity, which is typical of the fundamental layer of the «transcendental Appearing», which Severino calls «the never-setting background of Appearing» («l'intramontabile sfondo dell'apparire»)<sup>27</sup> For him, the «background of Appearing» is made up of all those contents «that always and forever appear and without which nothing could appear» («che appaiono da sempre e per sempre, e senza di cui non potrebbe apparire nulla»)<sup>28</sup> For example, «among these things that eternally appear [...] we find [...] Being and Nothing [...]» («l'essere e il niente sono tra queste [cose], che eternamente appaiono»)<sup>29</sup> Indeed, nothing could ever appear without appearing as *being* what it is. That is to say that «Being» is one of the determinations belonging to the «background of Appearing».

By «background» («sfondo»), Severino means to indicate *that particular dimension* of the «transcendental Appearing» which *endures* throughout the variation of the particular contents that appear, which «come and go» («vengono e vanno»)<sup>30</sup> Let me give an example. The dawning sun starts to appear – in the «transcendental Appearing». Together with the sun, a variety of other contents appear, such as the sky, the window through which one is watching the dawn, etc. Until the dawning sun is not replaced by a new horizon of «Appearing», the sun and all other contents *form* the «transcendental Appearing». That is to say that the «transcendental Appearing» is not a purely formal dimension. It is *the totality* of what «appears», in the widest sense of «appearing», be this an indirect or a direct modality of appearing. However, *once* something else starts appearing and replaces the previous «scene», rendering it «a past» («un passato»), the «background of Appearing» *endures* as that «without which nothing could appear». For instance, when the midday sun replaces the dawning sun, *being* endures, as both the dawning and the midday sun *are*. That is, they are «beings».

At this point, it is crucial to note that the *way* in which the «background» of the «transcendental Appearing» *endures*, throughout the variation of the appearing contents, is *entirely different* from the way in which the «transcendental Appearing» can be said to «endure», despite Severino's reconstruction of the process. Indeed, rigorously speaking, the «transcendental Appearing» never *endures* but simply *is*. The impression that, when the midday sun replaces the dawning sun, the «transcendental Appearing» *endures* in that it *re-forms* by instantiating itself in a wider «scene» of Appearing is illusory. That is because the «transcendental Appearing» could not vary *while remaining* «transcendental»: A «transcendental Appearing» *not including something*, such as the «transcendental Appearing» not yet including the midday sun, *would simply not be* the

<sup>27</sup> Severino 2016, pp. 133-135 and 241-244. (Italian: Severino 1995a, pp. 105-107 and 224-226).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>30</sup> Severino 2016, pp. 133-134. (Italian: Severino 1995a, p. 106).

«transcendental Appearing». In other words, what *used to be* the «transcendental Appearing» *has never been*, for that very reason, the «transcendental Appearing».

In my opinion, Severino did not clearly detect this difference between the way in which the «background of Appearing» endures and the way in which the «transcendental Appearing» does. That might also be explained in an aeonological fashion, that is by arguing that it is because of the lack of a systematic aeonological approach that he did not detect the difference. Indeed, while acknowledging that the «transcendental Appearing» is the totality of what appears, Severino conceives of it as a substratum that can *endure* across the «process of the appearing and disappearing of the eternal» («processo dell'apparire e dello scomparire degli eterni»), thus making it identical to the «background of Appearing», which is but a particular dimension of the «transcendental Appearing». This is evident from several passages, such as the following:

«The succession [...] that leads from the totality of the blue sky to the totality of the dark sky is therefore (precisely insofar as it is an *exit* from and an *entry* into the circle of Appearing) a succession in which the blue sky is forgotten and the dark sky arrives unexpectedly. This means that this forgetting of the blue sky does not occur within the *actual* totality, but within a past totality. The actual totality is the very entirety of beings that appear – that is, that are within the circle of Appearing. It is within the totality of what appears that the blue sky *appears* as forgotten. Therefore, in the totality of what appears, it is not truly forgotten; it does not lie outside the totality of what appears. It is forgotten, rather, in a *past* totality of beings – that is, in what once appeared but no longer appears as the totality of what appears. [...]. A total content always appears, but the total content is always different. In this diversification, what once appeared as total content now appears, within the total content, as something past.».<sup>31</sup>

(«La successione [...] che porta dall'insieme del cielo azzurro all'insieme del cielo scuro è dunque (appunto in quanto è un *uscire* e un *entrare* nel cerchio dell'apparire) una successione dove il cielo azzurro viene dimenticato e il cielo scuro sopraggiunge inatteso. Ciò significa che questa dimenticanza del cielo azzurro non avviene nell'insieme *attuale*, ma in un insieme passato. L'insieme attuale è la stessa totalità degli enti che appaiono – ossia che si trovano nel cerchio dell'apparire. È all'interno della totalità di ciò che appare che il cielo azzurro *appare* come dimenticato. Esso, dunque, nella totalità di ciò che appare, non è dimenticato, non sta al di fuori della totalità di ciò che appare. Dimenticato esso lo è, invece, in un insieme *passato* di enti, ossia in ciò che appariva, ma non appare più come la totalità di ciò che appare. [...]. Appare sempre un contenuto totale, ma il contenuto totale è sempre diverso. In questa diversificazione, ciò che appariva come contenuto totale appare, nel contenuto totale, un passato»)).<sup>32</sup>

Let me quickly note that «circle of Appearing» is another Severinian phrase for «transcendental Appearing». In this passage, it is clearly stated that while the «totality of beings that appear» must be «actual» in order to be *the totality* of beings that appear, it is nevertheless possible that it «once appeared [...] as the totality of what appears». This is what I am criticising. For if the totality of what appears is grasped as *an ordinary substance that can endure across different times*, it ceases to be the totality of what appears. Indeed, since it belongs to its essence to be *the totality* of what appears, it is impossible for it *to have been* the totality of what

<sup>31</sup> My translation.

<sup>32</sup> Severino 1980, p. 176. (Severino's emphasis). This process is generally described by Severino in Chapter 6, especially section 1.

appears. The very fact that it is *in the past* that this *was* the totality of what appears makes it something *other* than the totality of what appears. It makes totality non-total.

On its part, the «background of Appearing» *can in principle* endure because it is not the totality of what appears (the «transcendental Appearing») but a part of it. It is the «background» made up of all those contents «that always and forever appear and without which nothing could appear». This fundamental difference between the «background» and the «transcendental Appearing» produces an *aeonological difference* between the two. That is the theme of the present section. In effect, it is not by chance that Severino defines the «background» as «*never-setting*» («*intramontabile*»). This word indicates that the «background» is the *sempiternal place* where all processes of appearing and disappearing *infinitely endure*. Therefore, «sempiternity» indicates the «eternity» *of what has always existed and will always exist*. If compared to supra-temporality, that is a different, *second* kind of «eternity».

At first glance, it might appear hasty to juxtapose time and eternity and state that sempiternity is marked by a *temporal* nature. *A fortiori ratione*, it might appear simply incorrect to juxtapose a temporal eternity and the «doctrine of the eternity of being *qua* being». Nevertheless, I have already demonstrated that there can be a deep connection between eternity and time. That is evident when one considers the aenological nature of the notion of reality as a whole. In what follows, I will elucidate another tie between time and eternity.

As mentioned, «sempiternity» means «to have always existed and to always exist». However, that would be impossible *without time*. «To have always existed» means «to have always existed *in the past*». Similarly, «to always exist» means «to always exist *in the future*». To clarify this, let me consider a potential objection that a Severinian reader might raise. In fact, according to Severino's doctrine, the traditional concept of time, as the unity of the three ecstases (past, present, and future), is the product of the «alienation of mortals» («*alienazione dei mortali*»).<sup>33</sup> That is because «time», for Severino, is «the time when things – i.e., that which is not a Nothing – are nothing».<sup>34</sup> «Time» is «the time of the absurd» («*il tempo dell'assurdo*»).<sup>35</sup> Therefore, no *temporal* eternity seems to be present in the Severinian doctrine.

To address the objection, let me take the ecstasis of the past as an example. As a matter of fact, even if «the past» cannot be understood, according to Severino, as «that which no longer is» («*ciò che non è più*»), it must be acknowledged that Severino himself re-signified the notion of «past». In his doctrine, the «past» is represented by «that which does not appear anymore» («*ciò che non appare più*»). In other words, there is no «past» *in terms of being*, but there exists a «past» *in terms of appearing*. That is what enables Severino to conceive of the «spectacle» of human experience as *the process of the appearing and disappearing of the eternal*s.

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Severino 1980.

<sup>34</sup> Severino 2016, p. 15. This passage is taken from Severino's introduction to the English edition.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 88. (Italian: Severino 1995a, p. 66).

That demonstrates that Severino did not renounce, but simply revisited the concept of «time», understood as the unity of the three ecstases. In so doing, he reformed the meaning itself of each ecstasis. That leads me back to the idea that sempiternity is a *temporal* kind of eternity. Indeed, it is *the time of appearing* which the «background of Appearing» *sempiternally crosses*. This «infinite crossing» is what makes the «background» *sempiternal*. It is also what leads me to define the sempiternity of the «never-setting background of Appearing» as «*cross-temporal*». That is the second genuinely aeonological remark of this chapter.

Before moving on, let me remind that in this context, it is not my intention to examine the validity of a renowned objection made by Gustavo Bontadini to his disciple Emanuele Severino, namely, that revisiting the notion of time is not enough to save things from nothingness, because the process of appearing and disappearing of the eternals involves the birth and the destruction *of the appearing* of beings. Likewise, it is not my intention to examine the validity of Severino's replies to this objection.<sup>36</sup>

Previously, I interpreted the «eternity» of the «background of Appearing» as a *sempiternity*. As per the Severinian doctrine, the «background of Appearing» has been understood as that which, in the sempiternal process of the variations of Appearing, *sempiternally endures*, thus rendering all variations possible. In what follows, I will draw a *phenomenological consequence* from this piece of Severino's doctrine. That will better prepare the study for the elucidation of another kind of eternity, which is manifest in a purer sense than any of the Severinian eternities.

As per the idealistic stance of Severino, *everything* appears in the «transcendental Appearing». Nothing can escape its all-embracing gaze. However, in a *narrower* sense of «appearing», which is used by Severino himself, *not everything* can be said to «appear». In that sense, only «direct» contents of experience can be said to appear. *Mutatis mutandis*, that is the sense of «appearing» which I investigated in the first chapter of the study and which was there called the *indirect* sense of «appearing». The reason why I defined it in this way is that, according to a purer notion of «appearing», not even what «appears» in a narrow sense can be said to «appear». For instance, a sunny sky is an *indirect* content of «appearing» because not all sides of the sun appear altogether. Nonetheless, according to Severino's notion, the sunny sky «appears» in a strict sense.

The existence of a difference between various notions of «appearing» within the Severinian universe explains the possibility of the «spectacle» of variation that is experienced in the «transcendental Appearing». The sun that «appeared» this morning has now set and does not «appear» anymore. In effect, that can only be experienced from the perspective of the *narrower* sense of «appearing». On the other hand, from the «*transcendental*» perspective of appearing (from the perspective of the «transcendental Appearing»), the sun simply *appears*, whether as a content of memory or perception.

Here, I wish to mention a *phenomenological consequence* to be drawn from the notion of the sempiternal appearing of the «background of Appearing». This consequence concerns the narrow sense of «appearing», according to the Severinian notion. Firstly, let me note that Severino never focuses on the «background of

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<sup>36</sup> For a bibliography on this debate, cf. the footnote on Severino and Bontadini to section 3.5 in Chapter 2.

Appearing» as something that can be said to «appear» in the narrow sense. Always, he investigates the «background» insofar as it «appears» in the «transcendental» sense of «appearing». And this is not without a reason. Indeed, being the «background» of *all* that can in principle appear, the «background of Appearing» cannot be said to appear in the narrow sense. By means of example, let me take «being», which is one of the determinations forming the «background of Appearing». As one of those determinations whose appearance is necessarily required by *all* that appears, «being» could never «appear» in a strict sense. For given that *everything* appears, as per Severino's idealism, «being» is the necessary condition for the appearing of *all things*. However, as the universal condition for the appearance of everything, «being» could never appear in the strict sense, because an immense variety of contents do not and cannot appear in that sense, such as the contents of memory. Therefore, if «being» were to appear in the strict sense, everything would appear in a strict sense and the «transcendental Appearing» would become the «infinite Appearing», where reality as a whole is directly experienced.

That leads me to the notion of a *reduced* «background of Appearing». In fact, understood as the *particular* condition for the appearance of certain things, that is those that appear in the narrow sense of «appearing», «being» can be directly experienced. For example, as the «being» of *this sunny sky*, «being» does appear in the strict sense. In this context, it is not relevant that, as the «being» of a particular thing, «being» is not «being» anymore (given that «being» is, by definition, the «being» of all beings). In other words, it is not relevant that «being» becomes a formal determination («essere formale», «formal Being», as Severino would call it).

Therefore, in a reduced sense, the «background of Appearing» can be said to «appear» in a strict sense. It is not relevant that, as the «background» of the appearing of *certain things* (that is, the things that «appear» in the narrow sense), the «background» becomes a formal determination. What is relevant is the phenomenological consequence of this notion, which is implicit in Severino's doctrine, even though he never explicitly addresses it. The consequence is that, grasped as the «background» of those contents that «appear» in the narrow sense, the reduced «background» can be said to be *manifest*. Yet as a sempiternal entity, the reduced «background» is manifest in the sense that it takes it *the whole eternity* to manifest itself. More precisely, it takes a sempiternity. That is because the totality of beings that «appear» in the narrow sense *varies sempiternally*, which means that, for this totality to appear, the whole eternity is required.

In the last observations, I provided a clear example of a *manifest eternity*. That is the kind of eternity I announced in section 3.3, when stating that not only ontological-metaphysical reasons, but also phenomenological ones compel the affirmation of eternity within Severino's doctrine. The notion of a manifest eternity will be useful later in the chapter, when I will differentiate the eternity affirmed in this study from Severino's notions.

At this stage, let me simply note that the way in which the eternity of the reduced «background of Appearing» manifests itself should not be confused with another possible way, typical of other formal determinations, such as «being» itself. In fact, the *manifestation of the sempiternity* of the reduced «background of Appearing» does

not consist in the *sempiternity of its manifestation*. That is because the reduced «background» *becomes* manifest sempiternally, rather than *being* sempiternally manifest. On the other hand, unlike the reduced «background», «being» as a formal determination can be said to *be* sempiternally manifest. For as a formal determination, for instance as the «being» of the sunny sky, «being» is *already* a direct content of appearing.

### **5.3 The Sempiternity of Entities that «Pass Through» («attraversano») the «Transcendental Appearing»**

The investigation of the meanings of eternity in the Severinian doctrine is not complete yet. That is because there is another kind of entities which, for Severino, are eternal. Nonetheless, from a pure aeonological perspective, the eternity of these entities is nothing new: It is a sempiternity. Yet it is necessary to investigate it in order to address the question of the fundamental meaning of eternity in Severino.

The entities to be examined have already been mentioned several times. They are those entities that «pass through» («attraversano») the «transcendental Appearing», unlike the «background», which appears sempiternally. An example I provided is given by the succession between the dawning sun and the midday sun. These are entities that begin and then cease to appear in the strict sense of «appearing». In this context, what needs to be investigated is the sense according to which the entities «passing through the Appearing» are «eternal».

The midday sun is not «never-setting». In other words, it *does not belong* to the «background of Appearing». Rather, it «comes into and out of the Appearing» («entra ed esce dall'apparire»). For Severino, this process should not be confused with the process of the coming into and out of existence of the sun. According to him, that kind of process is prohibited by the metaphysical nature of things. Now, the consequence Severino draws from this is that *before* the midday sun «comes into the Appearing», and *after* the midday sun «comes out of the Appearing», the sun *is*. Said otherwise, it is eternal.

I argue that this eternity is a *sempiternity*. Indeed, it is the eternity of what already exists before coming into the «Appearing» and continues to exist after coming out of it. However, from a phenomenological perspective, this kind of eternity is different both from the sempiternity of the reduced «background of Appearing», which *becomes* manifest in a sempiternal progression, and from the sempiternity of formal determinations such as «being», which *is* manifest sempiternally. The difference lies in the fact that the sempiternity of the midday sun *cannot ever be manifest in a strict sense*. That is because it is always only *for a while* that it manifests itself, which means that, as such, this sempiternity *does not* manifest itself.

## **6. Fundamental Meanings of Eternity**

That was the end of the first phase of my interpretation of the Severinian doctrine of eternity, represented by the examination of the particular kinds of «eternity» affirmed by Severinian philosophy. In this new section, I will address the question of whether a supreme type of eternity can be traced in Severino's discourses, such that the supra-temporal eternity of the «transcendental Appearing» and the cross-temporal sempiternity of the

«background of Appearing» and of what «passes through» the Appearing can be *ontologically reconciled*. In that way, the study will do justice to the general assertions by Severino on the «eternity of all things».

### **6.1 The Eternal Present *Sub Specie Aeternitatis* as the First Fundamental Kind of Eternity in Severino's Doctrine**

The study is now in a position to address the question of the fundamental meaning of eternity for Severino. At this stage, it is not necessary to investigate further kinds of eternities that are present in his doctrine, assuming that there are. That is because it is from a non-aeonological perspective that those further kinds would be distinct from the ones already examined. In this context, the impression that the investigation is still incomplete and that not all kinds of eternities have been analysed springs from a non-aeonological mindset.

In section 3.1, I argued that, even within Severino's doctrine, the eternity of «the Whole» of reality, understood as a supra-temporal extra-temporality, is such that it «eternalises» *all particular things*. In other words, the eternity of «the Whole» eternalises *everything*. Now, does that not imply that the *fundamental meaning of eternity* in Severino has already been illuminated? Before answering this question, I will further investigate the eternalising nature of reality as a whole. That will help provide a more exhaustive answer to the question.

The *eternalising nature* of «the Whole» (or, in Gentile's words, «the pure act») has an effect that has not yet been investigated in this study, even though its aeonological significance is indisputable. This effect is mentioned by Gentile when meditating on his understanding of reality as «pure act» («atto puro»). According to him, the eternity of the «pure act» does not simply consist in including time while lying outside it, as demonstrated previously in this chapter. Quite the opposite,

«the "I" is not only a multiplication, the positing of its other and the opposing of itself to this other, it is also, and primarily, a unity, through which all the co-existents in space are embraced in one single survey in the subject, and all the events in time are compresent in a present which is the negation of time.»<sup>37</sup>

(«l'Io non è soltanto posizione dell'altro, e quindi opposizione di sé a quest'altro, e moltiplicazione. L'Io è anche, e prima di tutto, unità, per cui tutti i coesistenti dello spazio si abbracciano d'un solo sguardo nel soggetto, e tutti i successivi del tempo sono i compresenti in un presente che nega il tempo».)<sup>38</sup>

The pronoun «I» in the text is just another word for the «pure act». In this passage, the «pure act» is defined by Gentile as «a present which is the negation of time». That is no metaphor. Gentile means to say that it is *in the present*, it is *now* that the «pure act» dominates time while lying outside it. Such a «present» is of course no *temporal* present, for it is not «situated between the past and the future» («che stia tra un passato e un futuro»), to say this with Severino.<sup>39</sup> As a matter of fact, if due to its all-encompassing nature the «pure act» lies outside time, it could never exist *inside one of the ecstases of time*, that is inside the present. That is to say

<sup>37</sup> Gentile 1922, p. 142.

<sup>38</sup> Gentile 2014, p. 203.

<sup>39</sup> Severino 2016, pp. 187-188.

that the aeonological character of «extra-temporality» involves being *outside time as a whole*, that is outside all ecstases of time.

In this context, I wish to argue that what Gentile states about the «pure act» can be repeated with regards to the «transcendental Appearing» in Severino. In other words, it is *now* that, *outside* of time, the «transcendental Appearing» *embraces* the totality of times. Therefore, the «*present*» where the «transcendental Appearing» dwells is an *eternal present*. This is the present *in which everything is present*. That is the *third aeonological feature* of the eternity of the «transcendental Appearing». Let me note that this should not be confused with the notion of a *sempiternal present*. Indeed, despite the fact that a sempiternal present is not a «temporal present» in the sense that it never began and will never cease, it must be acknowledged that, as something cross-temporal, a sempiternal present is but the infinite duration *of a temporal present*, «situated between the past and the future».

At this point, one might argue that the eternal present of the «transcendental Appearing» is *indirectly affirmed* by Severino, for example in the passage already quoted: «The transcendental Appearing [...] is not, therefore, a temporal present, situated between past and future».<sup>40</sup> After all, there seems to be no reason to clarify that the «transcendental Appearing» is «not [...] a temporal present», if it were not *another kind of present*. Nonetheless, that is just speculation, for Severino never *explicitly* states this. This lack is partly due to his intention to distance his philosophy from the conception of «present» typical of nihilism, according to which the «present» is the time in between the nothingness of things. If anything, Severino presumably *hints* at the eternal present of reality on certain occasions. Another example is the following passage from *La struttura originaria*, where he refers to the all-encompassing entity represented by the theological-philosophical dimension of «the immutable» («l'immutabile»), later called «infinite Appearing» (according to the reconsideration belonging to the second phase of Severinian philosophy):

«Sì che il positivo, che si aggiunge o dilegua, è già o è ancora nel cerchio dell'intero immutabile, già da sempre carpito al futuro e per sempre trattenuto nel cerchio dell'essere.»<sup>41</sup>

(«Thus, the positive, which emerges or fades away, is already or still within the circle of the immutable whole, seized from the future since always and forever retained within the circle of being.»).<sup>42</sup>

Unlike the «transcendental Appearing», the «infinite Appearing» (that is, «the immutable») is the divine perspective on reality, where everything is luminously shown to consciousness. With regards to this all-embracing dimension, what does Severino mean when using the *temporal* adverb «*already*»? In what sense is everything «already [...] within the circle of the immutable whole», or «still» in that «circle»?

By using those *temporal* words, I believe Severino hints at the fact that it is *now* that «the positive [...] is already [...] within the circle of the immutable whole», just as it is *now* that «the positive [...] is [...] still»

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>41</sup> Severino 1981, p. 547.

<sup>42</sup> My translations.



within that «circle». In this context, «still» and «already» could not be ordinary temporal adverbs. For «the immutable» is the place where «everything [...] is [...] seized from the future since always and forever retained». In effect, how could the «now», *when* everything is, be a *temporal* «now»? How could it be a temporal present? It is my opinion that, by using temporal terms to refer to what cannot exist in a temporal fashion, Severino alludes to their *extra-temporal sense*. He alludes to the «now» represented by the eternal present of the «circle of being».

Thus, the present, in which the «transcendental Appearing» (or, *mutatis mutandis*, the «infinite Appearing») lies, is here defined «temporal» *in a different sense than the ecstatic-temporal one*. The present where everything is present is not an «ecstasis» among other ecstases of time, such as the future and the past. Only the so-called «temporal present» can be defined as an «ecstasis» forming the unity of the three ecstases of time. That said, it must be recognised that there is a *temporal analogy* between the ecstatic nature of the temporal present and the extra-ecstatic, supra-temporal nature of the eternal present of the «transcendental Appearing». This analogy, purely aeonological in kind, is also evident in Gentile's definition of the «I» as «a present which is the negation of time» («un presente che nega il tempo») and is due to the fact that there exists a *fundamental sense* of the «present» which defines both the ecstatic-temporal and the supra-temporal present.

The study is now in a position to understand *which kind of eternity* is the one of which the «transcendental Appearing» *eternalises* all realities. The *aeonological* sense – implicit in Severino's doctrine – according to which *everything is eternal* is given by the fact that *everything is co-eternal in the eternal present of the «transcendental Appearing»* (and in fact also of the «infinite Appearing»). To the extent, to which every particular being is just a *tessera* of the all-encompassing mosaic of reality, every particular being is *outside time*. That is to say that it exists *in the supra-temporal now* where all that exists, has existed, and will exist, *exists*. In the more traditional terms of Spinoza, everything is eternal *sub aeternitatis specie*.

The question of a fundamental aeonological kind in Severino's doctrine is far from being *exhaustively* answered, though. That is due to the fact that there is at least one more way, as will be demonstrated, according to which everything can be said to be eternal within the Severinian doctrine. This additional eternity will prove to be the original contribution of Severino to the historical-philosophical τόπος of the eternity of all things. The investigation of this will also conclude the interpretation of the Severinian doctrine of eternity.

## **6.2 Sempiternity *Sub Temporis Specie* as the Second Fundamental Kind of Eternity in Severino's Doctrine**

The eternal present of the «transcendental Appearing» is such that it *eternalises* all things and it *presentifies* every temporal present and in general all times. As is evident, this fundamental eternity concerns *both* the «transcendental Appearing», understood as «the Whole» of reality, and all particular realities forming «the Whole». In this section, I will demonstrate that there is another *fundamental kind* of eternity to be found in Severino's philosophy. Nonetheless, this does not *depend* on the fact that all particular realities belong to «the Whole» but concerns particular realities *as such*. Therefore, the eternity that will now be considered does not

concern «the Whole» itself, but simply all particular beings belonging to «the Whole». It is in *that* sense that the second fundamental eternity can be said to represent the «*eternity of all things*» (that is, of all things whose existence is admitted by Severinian philosophy).

To distinguish this *imperfect kind* of eternity from the eternity discussed in the last section, I will refer to it as an eternity *sub temporis specie*, coining an expression which is not found in Spinoza's *Ethica* and which is here taken to mean the *counterpart* of the eternity *sub aeternitatis specie*. At this stage of the investigation, the task of elucidating another fundamental meaning of eternity in Severino's philosophy simply requires the clarification of why *all fundamental Severinian genuses of being* are eternal, except for the «transcendental Appearing» (and, predictably, for the «infinite Appearing»). That amounts to say that there is an eternity which is common to the «never-setting background of Appearing» and to those beings which «pass through» the «transcendental Appearing».

On closer inspection, even this eternity has already been shown and consists in sempiternity itself. Indeed, both the «never-setting background of Appearing» and what «passes through» the «transcendental Appearing» exist *sempiternally*. In that sense, *all that is*, within the Severinian universe, is *eternal*. It exists *since forever and forever*. This fundamentally explains why Severino uses so frequently adverbs such as «da sempre» («since forever») and «per sempre» («forever»). However, these adverbs might also refer, on certain occasions, to other kinds of eternities. That is why the Severinian language of eternity is essentially ambiguous. In what follows, I will focus on this ambiguity.

The investigation of the Severinian senses of eternity and their fundamental roots enables me to explain a peculiar feature of Severino's discourses, that is their aeonological ambiguity. Firstly, let me say that this is not due to absence of clarity, but to manifoldness of meaning. That is to say that since it is *in several senses* that all beings are eternal according to Severino, then it is not surprising that his statements on the eternity of any and of all entities reveal a positive ambiguity, in the sense that they might be equally referring to *different kinds* of eternity.

In fact, the statement that everything (or anything) is eternal might either refer to its sempiternity or to its belonging to reality as a whole (whether Severino was aware of this eternity implicit in his doctrine or not). In this context, the fact that for Severino the notion of reality as a whole has two different forms, that is the «transcendental» and the «infinite Appearing», is no complication of the ambiguity mentioned. That is because, from an aeonological point of view, the «transcendental» and the «infinite Appearing» are eternal in the same sense: They are supra-temporal, in that they are the all-encompassing appearance of reality. Therefore, whenever Severino speaks of the finite dimension of appearing – the one where things begin and cease to appear – and states that the appearance of what still needs to appear is «eternally accomplished» («eternamente compiuta»), that is because, *sub specie aeternitatis*, everything is already accomplished (that is, everything already appears), whether from the perspective of the «transcendental» or the «infinite Appearing».<sup>43</sup> In that

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<sup>43</sup> Severino started to systematically use the phrase «eternamente compiuto» in Severino 1980.

sense, even sempiternal entities, such as the «never-setting background of Appearing», already *are* eternal because they belong to the supra-temporal present of reality. In other words, *sub specie aeternitatis*, even a sempiternal entity does not need the whole eternity to be eternal.

Predictably, the Severinian language of eternity is *not* ambiguous whenever Severino's statements concern reality as a whole (or any particular entity *insofar* as it belongs to reality as a whole), because this could not be «eternal» in the sense of «sempiternal». However, stating this implies interpreting Severinian philosophy as *consistent from an aeonological point of view*. That should not be taken for granted, though, and I simply wish to acknowledge, in this context, that Severino's aeonology might also be interpreted as inconsistent. That is evident, for example, from the passage I quoted in section 5.1 on the «dual sense» («duplice senso») in which the «transcendental Appearing» is «not in time» («non nel tempo»). That passage might be interpreted as referring to the fact that the «transcendental Appearing» is *peculiarly* eternal in being supra-temporal, and *normally* eternal in being sempiternal. Nonetheless, this would jeopardise its extra-temporal nature and would render Severino's aeonological remark inconsistent. Of course, it is also possible to interpret «normal eternity» differently, for instance in an ontological-metaphysical sense, as if Severino were stating that the «transcendental Appearing», as a supra-temporal entity, is *also* «eternal» in that it is and cannot not be.

It is now time to address the question of a possible deduction of a specific aeonological eternity from the ontological-metaphysical eternity discussed in section 3.1. In Severinian words, it is time to address the question of the «golden implication» («implicazione aurea»)<sup>44</sup>. In this context, I wish to argue that, *rigorously speaking*, no specific kind of eternity can be deduced from the fact that all beings are and cannot not be, except for the eternity *sub specie aeternitatis*. That is because the *other* kind of eternity that was demonstrated to be fundamental in Severino's doctrine, that is sempiternity, could not regard *all realities*, because reality *as a whole* cannot be sempiternal.

Therefore, deducing *sempiternity* from the necessity for beings to be would amount to deduce an inconsistency. Which perhaps Severino does, but as mentioned, this is just one possible way to interpret him. An example of this interpretation is found in *Di Fantasmi, Incantesimi e Destino* by Massimo Donà, a disciple of Severino, who states:

«The point is – and herein lies the radicality of the thesis that takes shape in the works of the philosopher from Brescia – that if being cannot not be, then being (that is, all beings) is eternal; that is, it is for eternity.»<sup>45</sup>

(«Il fatto è che – in ciò la radicalità della tesi che viene a disegnarsi nelle opere del bresciano –, se l'essere non può non essere, allora l'essere (ogni essente) “è” eterno; ossia è per l'eternità.»)<sup>46</sup>

Against my interpretation, one might argue that Donà is alluding to the sempiternity *of all particular beings*, and that this can consistently be deduced from the necessity for beings to be. Nonetheless, even if that were

<sup>44</sup> Cf. section 3.3.

<sup>45</sup> My translations.

<sup>46</sup> Massimo Donà. *Di Fantasmi, Incantesimi e Destino: Emanuele Severino, Ultimo Calligrafo della Verità* (Rome: Inschibboleth, 2023), p. 334.

the case and his sentence were not incorrect, it would still be incomplete, as it would exclude the supra-temporality of reality as a whole (as well as that of all particular realities as its parts). Moreover, the «deduction» would no longer be such in a strict sense, because if only the sempiternity of *certain beings* (namely, all particular beings) can be deduced from the necessity for beings to be, then it is not possible to deduce any specific kind of eternity, in a rigorous sense, from the necessity to be.

## **7. The Forgotten Eternity**

### **7.1 Prospectus: the Eternal Present of Human Life**

The investigation of Severino's doctrine of eternity has come to its conclusion. Its originality consisted in being the first *systematic aeonological investigation* of Severino's thought. As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, minor aeonological considerations may be found in the secondary literature, but they will always be different from a *systematic examination* of the Severinian doctrine. It is now time to address what is aeonologically relevant *in a study in the philosophy of existence*, that is the kind of eternity which regards human life. The aeonological examination of Severino's doctrine has been intended as an introduction to this issue.

That is not to say that the eternities affirmed by Severino do not regard humans. On the contrary, all eternities investigated somehow concern human existence. This is evident, for example, from the impact of the eternal present of reality on human life, which is itself an eternal tessera of the mosaic. In that sense, *the focus on human existence has never disappeared in the present chapter*, even though this is the impression that an articulated aeonological investigation might have given.

In the present section, I will depict *a novel aeonological kind of eternity*. I will contend that this eternity is *an essential belonging of human existence*, though often unnoticed, presumably due to its peculiar aeonological nature. However, I will refrain from providing the ground of the affirmation of such an eternity, for this would turn the present study into an *epistemic* philosophical study, which is not its theoretical intent. On the other hand, this ground has already been provided in *Per un nuovo concetto di fenomeno*, where an epistemic-phenomenological investigation has been conducted, one of whose results has been the affirmation of the eternity to be thematised in this chapter.<sup>47</sup> When compared to the investigation of *Per un nuovo concetto di fenomeno*, the analyses presented in this study constitute a *pure aeonological inquiry*, which appeared only in embryonic form in that earlier work of mine.

If compared to the overall design of this study, leaving aside its interpretive nature with regards to Blochian, Heideggerian, and Severinian philosophy, the analyses to be conducted here should be read as *complementary* to the ones conducted in the thanatological half of the study. As is evident from the table of contents, the inquiries of this section are going to be much shorter than those concerning human mortality. That is due to the incomparable level of difficulty in approaching eternity when compared to mortality.

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. Lucarelli 2021.

In the death half of the study, human existence has been regarded in its mortality *and in its «belonging» to it*. In this section, I wish to argue that human existence is eternal and that, just as it belongs to death, *it also belongs to eternity*. Only, it belongs to it *in an essentially closer and firmer way* than the way, ultimately «eluctable», in which human existence belongs to mortality.

## **7.2 An Eternal Present *Sub Temporis Specie*. The Experience of Eternity in Life**

Let one consider any horizon of presence which is experienced in human life. For example, let one think of this very moment, when I am sitting and writing this thesis. *How long does this moment last?* How long does *the present* last? Does it last *an instant*? How long is an instant? Is the «instant» an *unextended* time? If so, how come it is possible to experience that something *endures* in the present? Does «endurance» always refer to the *permanence* of an entity over time? Or could «endurance» mean that something *extends* in the present?

The sun is in the sky. Its manifestation *lasts* in the present. How long does this presence last? One could answer that, *since the manifestation of the sun in the sky has an end*, it lasts a *finite quantity* of time, and it lasts *through time*. Yet the question has not been answered. *Within the present*, how long does the manifestation last? The acknowledgement that the manifestation of the sun *at a certain time ceases* provides no answer whatsoever to the question of how long the manifestation lasts *in the present*. How long does the present last?

Let me use another example. In a placid and mild night, two lovers stare at each other. For the first time, they realise they love each other. In realising their love, they stare at each other and the moment has no end. The gaze where love opens for them «looks» eternal to them. *How long does the present last?* Does the gaze of the lovers look eternal to the lovers *in the sense that they will stare at each other for the whole eternity*? Is the palpable eternity of the gazes a *sempiternity*?

One need not fear stating that *the present which these lovers experience lasts a whole eternity*. It *expands* eternally. *Within the present*. The gazes «last» *an eternal present*. And the kiss, which the lovers then give each other, does in no way *revoke* the eternity they have lived. It is no refutation of their eternal love. Quite the opposite, the kiss *brings the eternity of the gazes to an end*. Yet the kiss lasts *for another eternity*, even though the lovers no longer pay attention to that and surrender to the explosion of their love. And so, *the entire life* of these two lovers is a *succession of eternities*. For «eternity» does not need to last *for ever*, nor *since ever*. Eternity is *the «ever»*.

This example will serve as the «raw material» for my aeonological investigation of the eternity of human existence. Let me start. Undoubtedly, the eternity that has been just mentioned is a *present eternity*, that is an *eternal present*. From a *general* aeonological perspective, this is no novelty for the present investigation. Indeed, the supra-temporal present-eternity of reality as a whole is of the same kind. Nevertheless, *from a fuller aeonological perspective*, the eternity of the lovers presents *an essential novelty*. That is to say that it is not different *in kind* from the eternal present of «the Whole» of reality, but it is a *different kind* of eternal present. This difference is of pure aeonological relevance.

In effect, the eternity of the lovers is no «*supra-temporal*» eternity. The present which the lovers experience as eternal is not the all-encompassing present of the «transcendental Appearing». If anything, it is *encompassed* by such a supra-temporal present. That is because, as all particular realities, the present experienced by the lovers is an entity among others: It is the present in which, only, their eyes meet. For this reason, the eternal present of the lovers, and of human life in general, is not «extra-temporal» but «*intra-temporal*». It is an eternity *occurring in time*. More precisely, it occurs *in a specific ecstasis of time*. In that sense, the «intra-temporal» eternity of existence might additionally be defined as «*intra-ecstatic*», and therefore, as «*intra-present*». That can also be expressed by saying that this eternity extends *vertically* rather than *horizontally*. It is not a cross-temporal eternity.

### **7.3 The Meaning of the «Experience» of Eternity. On the Eternal Who Dies**

Because the eternal present of existence occurs *in time*, it is also *experienceable* in time. To experience its *vertical infinity*, there is no need to await the whole eternity. Unlike the manifestation of the reduced «background of Appearing» in the Severinian universe, which can only be experienced *in a sempiternal progression*, there is no need here to wait forever. The eternity of existence does not need to be *sensed* either. Unlike the supra-temporal eternal present of reality as a whole, which cannot be a direct content of experience, the intra-temporal eternity of life is *manifest*. It is a *direct* content of experience, even more direct than the traditional notion of «direct experience» allows. Indeed, though I took advantage, in the last section, of the traditional notion, the eternity which exists here and now can be manifestly experienced *in the strictest sense*. It is in front of oneself in the purest sense of «experience». Therefore, this eternity is the *closest to human life* among all the forms of eternity investigated thus far within Severino's doctrine. It is human life's closest belonging. It is the indestructible, eternal «core» of life.

In the present context, it is not necessary to further investigate the analogies between the eternal present of life and the eternal present of reality as a whole. The example of the lovers suggested that *not only humans*, but *the entire horizon of presence* to which humans belong, is eternal: the gazes, the love, the night. In that sense, the eternity of the temporal present is just as the eternity of all things: It belongs to the entire context, which in the case of reality as a whole is the Context itself of all things. However, investigating this analogy further would jeopardise the thematic unity of this investigation as a study in the philosophy of existence. Here, only the eternity of human existence is of interest. In fact, it is the eternal present of life in time that enables me to speak of an «*eternal who dies*». That notion emerges as the outcome of this investigation, grasped as an inquiry into the essence of life. It expresses the fact that eternity *does not revoke mortality*, and that mortality *does not revoke eternity*.

### **7.4 The History of the Forgotten Eternity: The Humanising Seizure of Human Essence**

In section 3.1 of the fourth chapter, I spoke against the «humanising seizure of human essence» and argued that Christianity is «one of the most responsible in recent human history» for the «traditional denial of the divinity of humans», despite the fact that, according to most Christian confessions, there actually is a divine human, i.e. Jesus Christ. What I stated can now be fully explained. In fact, one might say that *few issues have*

*been as overlooked or denied, in the history of the reflection on human nature, as the issue of the divinity of human life.* That is due to the *humanising essence* of Western culture, whose origins date back to a time well before the fresh time of the «death of God». As a matter of fact, even Christianity should be considered part of such a humanising tendency. Indeed, to believe that only an *extraordinary* human can be *divine* is tantamount to believing that no human, *qua* human, can be divine.

Even the philosophy of Emanuele Severino should be regarded as *humanising*, despite its fundamental divergence from Christianity (and from «mortal» thinking). That is because, despite the several eternities affirmed by his doctrine, none of them is accessible to humans *in a direct way and straight away*: not even the ones that regard more closely human existence. In other words, the divinity of humans is kept separate from humans in that case too. That is the scandal itself of Severino's philosophy, considering that it presents itself as the doctrine of the eternity of being *qua* being. Indeed, this should rather be regarded as the doctrine *of the obscurity* of the eternity of being *qua* being. For even the sempiternity of the reduced «background of Appearing», which by the way is merely implicit in Severino's doctrine and can only be regarded as experienceable in an ultimately indirect sense of «experience», *becomes* manifest in a sempiternal progression. That is to say that it is not manifest *hic et nunc et semel* and cannot be. Not to mention that even the kind of sempiternity which does not *become* manifest in a sempiternal progression, but *is* manifest sempiternally, that is the eternity of the «formal determinations» belonging to the «background», is itself not manifest *hic et nunc et semel*, for its eternity manifests itself sempiternally, that is not all at once. In that sense, it is obscure.

Similarly to any promise of eternity, any destiny for eternity is but a *postponement of eternity*. That is why even Severinian philosophy, whose merits in restoring eternity to philosophical dignity are indisputable, should be considered as a rehash of the humanising seizure of human essence. They who need to wait the whole eternity to become or to be divine *are not divine*. For how can one be divine if their divinity takes an eternity to realise, or to manifest, itself? To be destined for divinity means being abandoned to humanity. Paradoxically, that makes those who claim that human beings are «too human» more credible, because they admit to the extreme what is disguisedly admitted by their opponents too.

#### **7.4.1 The Experience of Eternity in Time and the Ecstatic Vision of God in the Christian tradition: On the Ecstasy of Paul**

Against what was stated in the last section, one might argue that even within Christian culture the divinity of human life has not been entirely neglected, and that this is evident in the notion of «ecstatic vision». In the *Ad Corinthios Epistula Secunda* (12:2-4), Paul states

«οἶδα ἄνθρωπον ἐν Χριστῷ πρὸ ἐτῶν δεκατεσσάρων – εἴτε ἐν σώματι οὐκ οἶδα, εἴτε ἐκτὸς τοῦ σώματος οὐκ οἶδα, ὁ θεὸς οἶδεν – ἄρπαγέντα τὸν τοιοῦτον ἕως τρίτου οὐρανοῦ. καὶ οἶδα τὸν τοιοῦτον ἄνθρωπον – εἴτε ἐν σώματι εἴτε χωρὶς τοῦ

σώματος οὐκ οἶδα, ὁ θεὸς οἶδεν – ὅτι ἡρπάγη εἰς τὸν παράδεισον καὶ ἤκουσεν ἄρρητα ῥήματα ἃ οὐκ ἐξὸν ἀνθρώπῳ λαλῆσαι.». <sup>48</sup>

(«I know someone in Christ who, fourteen years ago (whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows), was caught up to the third heaven. And I know that this person (whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows) was caught up into Paradise and heard ineffable things, which no one may utter.»). <sup>49</sup>

In the *Liber Duodecimus* of the *De Genesi Ad Litteram Libri*, Augustine addresses the question of what it means that «someone in Christ», that is Paul himself, has been «caught up to the third heaven» («ἡρπαγέντα τὸν τοιοῦτον ἕως τρίτου οὐρανοῦ»). His answer is that this experience is but a certain kind of «visio» («vision»), and that as far as he is concerned, there exist «tria genera visionum» («three kinds of vision»): «unum per oculos, quibus ipsae litterae videntur; alterum per spiritum hominis quo proximus et absens cogitatur; tertium per contuitum mentis, quo ipsa dilectio intellecta conspicitur» («one with the eyes, when you see the actual letters; another with the human spirit, by which you think of your neighbor even though he is not there; a third with the attention of the mind, by which you understand and look at love itself»). <sup>50</sup> The «visio» of those who are «caught up to the third heaven», such as Paul, is a peculiar «visio intellectualis» («intellectual vision»):

«Porro autem, si quemadmodum raptus est a sensibus corporis, ut esset in istis similitudinibus corporum, quae spiritu videntur, ita et ab ipsis rapiatur, ut in illam quasi regionem intellectualium vel intellegibilium subvehatur, ubi sine ulla corporis similitudine perspicua veritas cernitur; nullis opinionum falsarum nebulis offuscatur [...]. Ibi enim beata vita in fonte suo bibitur, inde aspergitur aliquid huic humanae vitae, ut in tentationibus huius saeculi, temperanter, fortiter, iuste, prudenterque vivatur. [...] Ibi videtur claritas Domini, non per visionem significantem, sive corporalem, sicut visa est in monte Sina, sive spiritalem, sicut vidit Isaias, vel Ioannes in *Apocalypsi*: sed per speciem, non per aenigmata, quantum eam capere mens humana potest, secundum assumptis Dei gratiam, ut os ad os loquatur ei quem dignum tali Deus colloquio fecerit; non os corporis, sed mentis» (*Liber Duodecimus*, 54). <sup>51</sup>

(«Next, however, just as he has been rapt away from the senses of the body to find himself among these bodily likenesses which are seen in spirit, so too he may be rapt away from these to be carried up to that region, so to say, of things intellectual or intelligible. There, without any bodily likeness the pure transparent truth is perceived, overcast by no clouds of false opinions. [...] There, after all, the blessed life is to be drunk from its own fountain, from which something splashes over to this human life of ours, so that in the trials and temptations of this age we may live temperately, bravely, justly and prudently. [...] There the glory of the Lord is to be seen, not through some significant vision, whether of the bodily kind such as was seen on Mount Sinai, or the spiritual such as Isaiah saw or John in the Apocalypse, not in code but

<sup>48</sup> *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Nestle-Aland, 28), *Ad Corinthios Epistula Secunda* [online], < <https://www.die-bibel.de/bibel/NA28/2CO.12> > [accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2025].

<sup>49</sup> *The New American Bible, 2 Corinthians* [online], < [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/\\_PZY.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/_PZY.HTM) [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/\\_PW5.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/_PW5.HTM) > [accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2025].

<sup>50</sup> Augustine of Hippo. *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, vol. 28 (Part 1), *S. Aureli Augustini: De Genesi Ad Litteram Libri Duodecim, Eiusdem Libri Capitula, De Genesi ad Litteram Imperfectus Liber, Locutionum in Heptateuchum Libri Septem*, ed. by Joseph Zycha (Wien: Austrian Academy of Sciences, 2013), p. 387. For the English, cf. Augustine of Hippo. *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 49 vols., ed. by Boniface Ramsey (New York: New City Press, 1990- ), vol. I/13, *On Genesis*, ed. by Boniface Ramsey (2004), p. 494.

<sup>51</sup> Augustine of Hippo 2013, p. 419.



clearly, to the extent that the human mind can grasp it, depending on God's grace as he takes it up, so that God may speak mouth to mouth with any whom he has made worthy of such conversation – the mouth of the mind not the body, which is how I consider we have to understand what is written about Moses.»<sup>52</sup>

At this point, Augustine draws his consequences and answers the question of the meaning of the «third heaven»:

«Quapropter si hoc tertium visionis genus, quod superius est, non solum omni corporali, quo per corporis sensus corpora sentiuntur, verum etiam omni illo spiritali, quo similitudines corporum spiritu et non mente cernuntur, tertium coelum appellavit Apostolus; in hoc videtur claritas Dei, cui videndae corda mundantur, unde dictum est: *Beati mundicordes, quia ipsi Deum videbunt* (Matthaeus 5:8): non per aliquam corporaliter vel spiritaliter figuratam significationem tamquam *per speculum in aenigmate, sed facie ad faciem* (Ad Corinthios Epistula Prima, 13:12), quod de Moyse dictum est, *os ad os*; per speciem scilicet qua est Deus quidquid est, quantumcumque eum mens, quae non est quod ipse, etiam ab omni terrena labe mundata, et ab omni corpore et similitudine corporis alienata et abrepta capere potest: a quo peregrinamur mortali et corruptibili onere gravati, quamdiu *per fidem ambulamus, non per speciem* (Ad Corinthios Epistula Secunda, 5:6-7), et cum hic iuste vivimus. Cur autem non credamus, quod tanto Apostolo *doctori Gentium* (Ad Timotheum Epistula Prima, 2:7), rapto usque ad istam excellentissimam visionem, voluerit Deus demonstrare vitam, in qua post hanc vitam vivendum est in aeternum? Et cur non dicatur iste paradisos, excepto illo in quo corporaliter vixit Adam inter ligna nemorosa atque fructuosa?» (Liber Duodecimus, 56).<sup>53</sup>

(«Accordingly, if this third kind of vision, which is superior not only to every bodily vision by which bodies are perceived through the senses of the body, but also to every sort of that spiritual vision by which the likenesses of bodies are perceived with the spirit not the mind, if this is what the apostle called the third heaven, it is in this that the glory of God can be seen. It is for a sight of this that hearts are purified, as it says: *Blessed the heart-pure, because they shall see God* (Matthaeus 5:8), not through any figure signified in either bodily or spiritual vision, as *through a mirror in a code, but face to face* (Ad Corinthios Epistula Prima, 13:12), or as was said about Moses, *mouth to mouth*. That is to say, it will be through the very form by which God is whatever he is, however limited the extent to which he can so be grasped by the mind (which is not what he is), even when it has been cleansed of all earthly grime and alienated and rapt away from every sort of body and bodily likeness. But being weighed down by this mortal and perishable burden, we are strangers to this vision as long as *we are walking by faith and not by sight* (Ad Corinthios Epistula Secunda, 5:6-7), even when we are living just lives here. Why then should we not believe that God wished to demonstrate to such a great apostle, *the teacher of the nations* (Ad Timotheum Epistula Prima, 2:7), by snatching him up to this all-surpassing vision, the life in which we are to live forever after this life? And why should this not be called paradise, in addition to the one in which Adam lived in the body among shady groves of fruit-trees [...]?»).<sup>54</sup>

When Paul was «caught up to the third heaven», which did not only happen to him (it also happened to Moses, for example, albeit in a «bodily» manner), he was made «worthy» («dignum») of a «mouth to mouth» («os ad os») conversation with God. This statement by Augustine expressly refers to the same concept conveyed by Paul himself in the *Ad Corinthios Epistula Prima* (13:12), where he famously states that

<sup>52</sup> Augustine of Hippo 2004, pp. 494-495.

<sup>53</sup> Augustine of Hippo, 2013, pp. 422-423.

<sup>54</sup> Augustine of Hippo 2004, pp. 496-497.

«at present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, as I am fully known».<sup>55</sup>

(«βλέπομεν γὰρ ἄρτι δι' ἐσόπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι, τότε δὲ πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον· ἄρτι γινώσκω ἐκ μέρους, τότε δὲ ἐπιγνώσομαι καθὼς καὶ ἐπεγνώσθην»)<sup>56</sup>

At the time when one will see «face to face» («πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον»), that is, when one will be in Paradise, this «seeing» will not simply be an *external observation* of God and of what is experienced in Paradise. For in order *to be* in Paradise and *to «see»* God, *human nature must be overcome*. Therefore, in order to be «caught up to the third heaven», that is to Paradise (according to Augustine), Paul needs to overcome his *finite human nature*. In other words, it is not *because he is human* that Paul experiences his «extasis» («ecstasy») and enters Paradise. Rather, it is because he has been *divinised* that he is able to experience that – albeit his divinisation is temporary and even spurious (provided that its being «temporary» only appears to the re-humanised Paul). So much so that Augustine cannot help but remind the reader that, even in the «extasis», the «form by which God is whatever he is» («species qua est Deus quidquid est») is grasped to the extent «to which he can so be grasped by the mind (which is not what he is), even when it has been cleansed of all earthly grime and alienated and rapt away from every sort of body and bodily likeness» («quantulumcumque eum mens, quae non est quod ipse, etiam ab omni terrena labe mundata, et ab omni corpore et similitudine corporis alienata et abrepta capere potest»)<sup>57</sup> Indeed, while in Paradise «blessed life is to be drunk from its own fountain» («beata vita in fonte suo bibitur»), in the ecstatic experience «something splashes over to this human life of ours, so that in the trials and temptations of this age we may live temperately, bravely, justly and prudently» («aspergitur aliquid huic humanae vitae, ut in tentationibus huius saeculi, temperanter, fortiter, iuste, prudenterque vivatur»)<sup>58</sup>

From these passages by Augustine not only is it clear that *even when one is «caught up» in Paradise*, be they Paul or Moses, *human nature stays finite* because the time of the «ecstasy» is limited, in spite of the fact that finitude is abolished for a while. It is also clear that the kind of eternity that is experienced during the time of the divine capture is not a *temporal* eternity, like the one I analysed. That is because the heavenly place where one is brought is *outside time*, just as God is. In other words, Paradise is an extra-temporal place. The eternal present which Paul could experience in Paradise knows no past or future, no before or after. That is why I maintain that *even the Christian ecstatic experiences* presuppose a *humanised conception of the human* – one that the entire Christian tradition takes for granted and actively contributes to perpetuating. For Christianity, only if divinised, that is only if de-humanised is one able to directly experience eternity.

<sup>55</sup> *The New American Bible, 1 Corinthians* [online], < [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/\\_PZ1.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/_PZ1.HTM) [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/\\_PW5.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/_PW5.HTM) > [accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2025].

<sup>56</sup> *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Nestle-Aland, 28), *Ad Corinthios Epistula Prima* [online], < <https://www.die-bibel.de/bibel/NA28/1CO.13> > [accessed 16<sup>th</sup> April 2025].

<sup>57</sup> Augustine of Hippo, 2013, p. 422. For the English, cf. Augustine of Hippo 2004, pp. 496-497.

<sup>58</sup> Augustine of Hippo 2013, p. 419. For the English, cf. Augustine of Hippo 2004, pp. 494-495.

### **7.4.2 The Experience of Eternity in Time in the Secular Tradition: On Wisława Szymborska's Poem *On Death, Without Exaggeration* («O śmierci bez przesady»)**

Even the secular notion of ecstatic experiences can conceal a Christian element. That is evident from one of the perhaps most significant poems ever written on human eternity and death: the poem by Wisława Szymborska *O śmierci bez przesady* («On Death, Without Exaggeration»), whose conclusion reads:

«Nie ma takiego życia,

które by choć przez chwilę

nie było nieśmiertelne.

Śmierć

zawsze o tę chwilę przybywa spóźniona.».

(«There's no life

that couldn't be immortal

if only for a moment.

Death

always arrives by that very moment too late.»).<sup>59</sup>

According to Wisława Szymborska, it is «only for a moment» («choć przez chwilę») that every human life is «immortal» («nieśmiertelne»). In this context, clearly, «immortality» cannot be taken to mean the sempiternal survival of the soul after death, for it is Szymborska herself who clarifies that «death / always arrives by that very moment», that is the moment of «immortality», «too late» («śmierć / zawsze o tę chwilę przybywa spóźniona»). That holds true even if the last stanza of Szymborska's poem seems to allude to *another kind* of «immortality», against which «In vain» death «tugs at the knob / of the invisible door. / As far as you've come / can't be undone» («Na próżno szarpie klamkę / niewidzialnych drzwi. / Kto ile zdążył, / tego mu cofnąć nie może»)<sup>60</sup> Such a *second kind* of «immortality» is in fact a *sempiternity*. It is the eternal persistence over time of «as far as one has come». In that sense, for example, the efforts I made in writing this study will never be cancelled by death. Death has no *retroactive power*, according to Szymborska. Here, it is not my intention to give a judgement of this – very old and traditional – idea. I simply wish to say that this kind of «immortality» has no inseparable relationship with the first one.

Let me now go back to the «moment» («chwilę») to which Szymborska refers. Despite its greatness, even her poem conceals a *humanised understanding* of divine experiences in life. Let me mention that Szymborska was an atheist. Nonetheless, even from the secularised perspective of her poem, human life is taken to be divine

<sup>59</sup> Both languages in Wisława Szymborska. *People on a Bridge: Poems*, ed. by Adam Czerniawski (London: Forest Books, 1990), pp. 24-25.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*.

*not as such*, but simply *when divinised* during an extra-ordinary, ecstatic, irreligious «moment». In other words, *human existence is not enough to be eternal in and of itself*. In fact, a special condition is required for human beings to taste divinity. Therefore, one is destined for «splashes», as Augustine believed. One is destined for a divinity which is «splashed over to this human life» («aspergitur huic humanae vitae»). Whether this «splashing» has its source in the place where «blessed life is to be drunk from its own fountain» («beata vita in fonte suo bibitur»), as is Augustine's opinion, or whether the «splashing» has no source, as in Wisława Szymborska's poem, is not important.

And even if it must be acknowledged that the eternity alluded to by Szymborska is a worldly one and occurs within one's temporal life, what I am suggesting in this study is that *human life is eternal in every moment*, and thus *divine as such*. Its eternity is «splashed» *in fonte suo*, «from its own fountain». Such is the manifest eternity of existence, which extends infinitely in the present.

## **7.5 The Problems of Eternity**

At this point, the reader might be unsatisfied with my clarifications. After all, what was argued can only be regarded as an introduction to the *problem* of the eternity of human life. In fact, I am aware that many issues arise from my claim on eternity and from claims on eternity in general. In what follows, I will only mention some of them. In this study, the theoretical intent has simply been to sketch the twofold nature of human life, torn between finitude and infinity.

### **7.5.1 The Eternal Present of Reality and the Eternal Present of Existence: A Duplicate Eternity?**

One issue that arises from the affirmation of the eternity of human life is the following: Is this eternity not simply the way in which the eternity of reality as a whole reflects itself in life? Is the eternal present of life, and of all that is present, not just a peculiar instance of the supra-temporal eternity of reality? That could also explain the mysterious statement of Spinoza in the *Ethica*, according to which «nihilominus, sentimus experimurque nos aeternos esse» («But nevertheless we sense and experience that we are eternal», *Pars V, Propositio XXIII, Scholium*).<sup>61</sup>

That is a significant objection, but I do not wish to address it here. Let me only anticipate that even if the eternity of human life (and more generally, of the temporal present) were a *mere instance* of the eternity of reality, that would not jeopardise the essential novelty represented by an eternity happening in time. This is for three reasons, aeonological and phenomenological in kind: Firstly, unlike the eternity of reality as a whole, the eternity of human life can be *directly experienced*. That means that it is not *as* a peculiar instance of the supra-temporal eternity that the eternity of existence is manifestly experienced. Indeed, for any entity to be experienced *as* «eternalised» by the eternity of reality, reality itself must be experienced. However, that can only take place *in an indirect sense*. Secondly, the eternity of human life is *intra-temporal*. It exists *within a*

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<sup>61</sup> Baruch Spinoza. *Ethica: Ordine geometrico demonstrata et in quinque partes distincta* [online], <<https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/spinoza.ethica5.html>> [accessed 17<sup>th</sup> April 2025]. For the English, cf. Baruch Spinoza. *Ethics: Proved in Geometrical Order*, ed. by Matthew J. Kisner, trans. by Michael Silverthorne (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 238.

determinate ecstasis of time, that is the present time. For that reason, it is aeonologically incomparable to the *extra-temporal* eternity of reality. Thirdly, it is only *assuming* the existence of «reality as a whole», as an ontological-metaphysical entity, that the eternity of life can be grasped as the way in which reality reflects itself on existence.

Therefore, even if the objection were correct, one could reply that the eternity of human life *retains* its peculiar aeonological and phenomenological features, and that *in producing it*, the eternity of reality *differentiates it* from itself. In other words, both from a phenomenological and from an aeonological perspective, there exist irreducible differences between the eternity of reality and the eternity of human existence.

### **7.5.2 Eternity and Language: Is It Possible to Express Eternity?**

Another traditional issue with eternity is: How can one even speak of it? Even more so, if one considers an eternal present whose intra-ecstatic duration is *infinite*, but whose cross-ecstatic endurance can be as short as that of an «instant». Eternity can last an «instant». Yet language is a temporal entity. More precisely, it is cross-temporal: Its sounds follow one another and are not synchronic. Therefore, how can one *refer* to something which is infinite *hic et nunc* through language, *that is throughout time*? Is the eternal present, of which I speak, not already passed when one utters – whether aloud or in thought – a new linguistic sound? This objection too is significant. In this context, I wish to indicate a possible direction to reply to it, just as was done in the last section. In doing so, I will not refer to the historical debate on this issue because that would turn the section into an in-depth discussion of the problem, whereas my intention is merely to pose the question.

Firstly, let me say that even if it were true that the temporal nature of language prevents one from speaking of eternity, that would need to concern eternity *as a present*. That is to say that the eternal present *happening now* might not be able to be expressed, because expressing it makes it pass and makes a new eternal present come (which, in turn, cannot be expressed for the very same reason). Nonetheless, that means that *it is possible* to speak of an eternal present, but not of the one *happening right now*. Thus, the impossibility to express eternity might be harmful only if the eternal present one wishes to speak of is one that includes everything, such as the present of reality as a whole, which in principle cannot «pass» and, therefore, cannot be overcome by the utterance of new sounds.

Furthermore, even the impossibility to express an eternity occurring at the very time of one's expression holds only if one understands language as a temporal entity. In this study, I do not wish to criticise this way of conceiving of language. Nonetheless, it needs to be acknowledged that *every temporal entity contains intra-temporal entities*. With regards to language, that means that the complexity of a linguistic sound is made up of the simplicity of its constituent sounds. In this context, I do not wish to resort to the idea that *every* complexity is reducible to absolute simplicity and that, for that reason, the *atomic sounds* of language are the «signs» through which one can refer to eternity *even when this is happening at the very time of its expression*. I do not wish to make a *universal claim* on complex entities as such. On the other hand, I do not wish to make a counter-universal claim either. In other words, I do not wish to claim that the eternity of the present is *expressible in*

*real time* – nor do I wish to claim the opposite. Rather, I want to focus on the experience one has of eternity as happening in the present.

As a matter of fact, it may well be that language must be used as a tool whose usage needs to be interrupted at a certain point for one to be able to focus on what language is not able to speak of. It might even be that *alongside* language, albeit not *with* language, the inexpressible can be «indicated» or «signified». In that case, a certain way of dwelling in language – one that is concerned with what language says rather than what it reveals – might even be considered responsible for the oblivion of the eternity of human life.

Not to mention that, if one does not assume that contradictions in general are impossible or false, it could also be possible to speak of eternity *in time*. At any rate, what matters here is simply that *the experience of eternity is real*, just as the fact that language can allude to it, though perhaps never in real time. After all, why should the potential impossibility *to express* eternity have any power on the very being of eternity? What the issue is about is whether eternity *can be expressed in real time* and, if so, *how*.

### **8. The Question of the Meaning of Eternity in General. Starting from Severinus Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae***

In the previous sections, I indicated a kind of eternity that constantly accompanies human life. I analysed this eternity after providing an interpretation of Emanuele Severino's aeonological doctrine. This interpretation first examined the particular kinds of eternity affirmed by Severinian philosophy and has then underscored their fundamental aeonological kinds, that is those kinds thanks to which *everything* can be said to be «eternal».

In this section, I wish to note that *the many eternities elucidated, including my notion of eternity, have not been subsumed under a fundamental kind*. That is to say that from an aeonological point of view, the investigation has so far been *ontic*. Indeed, what does it mean that all the kinds of eternity investigated are kinds «*of eternity*»? Should the investigation not be *radicalised* to show whether it has the right to present itself as «an investigation *of eternity*», as an «*aeonological investigation*»? In what follows, I will re-consider the results of the inquiries conducted and address this question.

From a fundamental perspective, which is only possible to adopt after the analyses already conducted, one might start by asking whether the two fundamental eternities found to be the most universal in Severino's doctrine are *one same eternity*. Let me recall that these are *sempiternity*, on one hand, and the *eternal present*, on the other. Sempiternity has been shown to be typical of the «never-setting background of Appearing» («intramontabile sfondo dell'apparire») and of beings that «passe through» the «transcendental Appearing». On its part, the eternal present has been shown to define the «transcendental Appearing» itself, and therefore, all particular realities, which are «eternalised» and «presentified» by it. In this context, let me recall that even the eternity of human life, though forgotten by Severino, can be subsumed under the general kind of the eternal present. In effect, it is simply *from an ontic-aeonological perspective* that this can be considered a novelty when compared to the eternal present of reality. Thus, the question stays: Are sempiternity and the eternal present *one same eternity*?

The answer to the question is provided in one of the most renowned meditations on eternity in the history of Western thought, to be found in Severinus Boethius' *De consolazione philosophiae*. In the *Liber Quintus*, Boethius distinguishes the eternity of the Christian God from the eternity of the world according to Aristotle:

«Deum igitur aeternum esse cunctorum ratione degentium commune iudicium est. Quid sit igitur aeterni tus consideremus; haec enim nobis naturam pariter diuinam scientiamque patefacit. Aeternitas igitur est interminabilis uitae tota simul et perfecta possessio, quod ex collatione temporalium clarius liquet. Nam quidquid uiuit in tempore id praesens a praeteritis in futura procedit nihilque est in tempore constitutum quod totum uitae suae spatium pariter possit amplecti. Sed crastinum quidem nondum adprehendit, hesternum uero iam perdidit; in hodierna quoque uita non amplius uiuitis quam in illo mobili transitorioque momento. Quod igitur temporis patitur condicionem, licet illud, sicuti de mundo censuit Aristoteles, nec coeperit umquam esse nec desinat uitaeque eius cum temporis infinitate tendatur, nondum tamen tale est ut aeternum esse iure credatur. Non enim totum simul infinitae licet uitae spatium comprehendit atque complectitur, sed futura nondum transacta iam non habet. Quod igitur interminabilis uitae plenitudinem totam pariter comprehendit ac possidet, cui neque futuri quidquam absit nec praeteriti fluxerit, id aeternum esse iure perhibetur, idque necesse est et sui compos praesens sibi semper adistere et infinitatem mobilis temporis habere praesentem.».<sup>62</sup>

(«Wherefore it is the common judgment of all that live by reason that God is everlasting, and therefore let us consider what eternity is. For this declareth unto us both the divine nature and knowledge. Eternity therefore is a perfect possession altogether of an endless life, which is more manifest by the comparison of temporal things, for whatsoever liveth in time, that being present proceedeth from times past to times to come, and there is nothing placed in time which can embrace all the space of its life at once. But it hath not yet attained to-morrow and hath lost yesterday. And you live no more in this day's life than in that movable and transitory moment. Wherefore, whatsoever suffereth the condition of time, although, as Aristotle thought of the world, it never began nor were ever to end, and its life did endure with infinite time, yet it is not such that it ought to be called everlasting. For it doth not comprehend and embrace all the space of its life together, though that life be infinite, but it hath not the future time which is yet to come. That then which comprehendeth and possesseth the whole fulness of an endless life together, to which neither any part to come is absent, nor of that which is past hath escaped, is worthy to be accounted everlasting, and this is necessary, that being no possession in itself, it may always be present to itself, and have an infinity of movable time present to it»).

<sup>63</sup>

In the present context, it is not relevant to investigate the eternity of the Christian God, although that would perhaps enrich the aeonological spectrum of this study.<sup>64</sup> Here, what is of interest is the «comparison» («collatio») made by Boethius between «eternity» («aeternitas») and «temporal things» («temporalia»), especially «the world» («mundus») as understood by Aristotle. According to Boethius, even considering that it «never began nor were ever to end, and its life endured with infinite time» («nec coeperit umquam esse nec desinat uitaeque eius cum temporis infinitate tendatur»), the world should not be called «aeternum». Boethius states that, even though *infinite duration* is the common nature to an infinite temporal entity and a genuinely eternal entity, these two kinds of entities are incomparable. However, for that very reason, they *are comparable* in that they both «comprehend the space of an infinite life» («infinitae uitae spatium comprehendere»),

<sup>62</sup> Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius. *Theological Tractates: The Consolation of Philosophy*, ed. by H. F. Stewart, E. K. Rand, and S. J. Tester (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 400.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 401.

<sup>64</sup> I happened to mention this issue in section 7.4.2.

although God «comprehendeth and possesseth the whole fulness of an endless life together» («interminabilis uitae plenitudinem totam pariter comprehendit ac possidet»), whereas the world «being present proceedeth from times past to times to come» («praesens a praeteritis in futura procedit»).

*The fundamental meaning of «eternity» is given by the infinite duration.* That enables Boethius to compare such different eternities as the *temporal sempiternity of the world* and the *extra-temporal present-eternity* of God. In fact, has the eternal present not been defined by this investigation as a «vertical infinity»? That happened both when the study examined the eternal present of reality as a whole and when it examined the eternal present of human life. In turn, has sempiternity not been referred to as a «horizontal infinity»?

These remarks provide a clarification on the meaning of «aeonology» in general, as announced at the beginning of the chapter. As a matter of fact, «eternity» presents itself *as an eternal present* when its temporal infinity extends *within the present*, whereas it presents itself *as a sempiternity* when its infinity extends *across all ecstases of time*. That is generally true *inside and outside* the context of Severino's philosophy. With regards to this philosophy, I will not address the question of whether *infinite duration* is the «eternity» *deduced* by Severino from the necessity for being to be. Here, let me simply note that the fact that it is embedded in all «eternities» affirmed by Severino's philosophy does not entail that the infinite duration can be properly *deduced* from the ontological-metaphysical notion of «eternity». Though it is only at the present stage of the investigation that this issue could be addressed, I will leave it open.

With regards to the definition just given, let me note that when using the phrase «temporal infinity» to refer to the meaning itself of eternity, I am not employing the same concept of time as the one used when speaking about «temporal ecstases», «cross-temporal» sempiternities, «intra-temporal» present-eternities. Rather, I mean the *durational character* of eternity's infinity, which is not «spatial» but «temporal», in the sense recalled. Keeping in mind *this* «temporal» nature of eternity, one might wish to distinguish the eternal present from sempiternity by referring to them, respectively, as a «vertical» and as a «horizontal» infinity, as mentioned. Both are equally «eternal», though. One should not underestimate the notion of «vertical infinity» simply because it is less commonsensical than the «horizontal» one. In fact, the vertical infinity is *itself genuinely infinite*, with all due respect to the metaphorical statements by Wittgenstein in proposition 6.4311 of the *Tractatus*.

It is now time to conclude this study. Before doing that, let me clarify that the Boethian claim I advanced in this section should not be taken as excluding any other notion of «eternity». As has been shown, «eternity» might also simply mean «extra-temporality», or even «supra-temporality». In and of themselves, those acceptations are not identical with infinite duration. What matters, in the present context, is that all these features are grasped in their *pure aeonological nature*. Only then can a «science of eternity» hope to be born one day. Here, I wish to conclude by apologising to the reader for the difficulties encountered along the path: It was a new path, and it needed to be walked through difficulties. Yet there is still much to be investigated.





In this chapter, the investigation of the «eternal who dies» came to its end. The chapter started with a clarification of the distinction between genuine and non-genuine considerations on eternity («aeonological» and «non-aeonological», respectively). The chapter then concretised this distinction by interpreting Emanuele Severino's «doctrine of the eternity of being *qua* being». Within that frame, the study had the chance to elucidate a forgotten kind of eternity: the eternal present of human life, experienceable in time. Lastly, the analyses conducted were radicalised in order to elucidate the fundamental meaning of «eternity» with regard to all the «eternities» considered. That laid the foundations for conceiving of the human being as an «eternal who dies».

## CONCLUSION: ETERNITY AND DEATH

In conclusion, let me briefly recapitulate the outcomes of this study and its collocation within the wider field of the studies on death and eternity. As was mentioned in the introduction, this is not an exegetical work regarding the philosophies of Heidegger, Severino, and Bloch. In that sense, it should not be collocated within the sphere of the secondary literature, be this recapitulatory or explanatory (or both).<sup>1</sup> For the very same reason, it should not be compared to investigations that interpret these philosophers' perspectives with an original approach either. Even less should the present study be interpreted as a broad yet merely recapitulatory account of the concept of death or eternity in Western culture.<sup>2</sup> However, on the other hand, the present work naturally contains references to those thinkers and to the secondary literature. This is because even being independent with regards to its theoretical intentions, the study develops a conversation with both of them. To that extent, and given the fact that interpretations had to be elaborated to develop that conversation, this should also be considered as an exegetical study offering interpretations of Bloch, Severino, and Heidegger as well as of the relevant literature. For these reasons, the study can be compared to autonomous contemporary philosophical works in conversation with thinkers such as the ones mentioned. With regards to the philosophy of death, an example of this kind of works is Bernard Schumacher's *Der Tod in der Philosophie der Gegenwart*.<sup>3</sup>

Let me now recall the original contributions of this study. Firstly, its method itself has been original in that it has critically inherited Heidegger's existential-ontological approach by leaving aside all its derivative methodological notions, such as the notion of what defines human existence only «proximally and for the most part» («zunächst und zumeist»). This methodological choice was inspired by a criticism of Heidegger raised by Severino. This methodological disagreement with Heidegger has also had a wider impact on this work in that it led the study to question Heidegger's generally restrictive interpretation, over his philosophical career, of traditional philosophical concepts, such as those of «ontology» and «essence».

The first chapter has offered an original phenomenological interpretation of Bloch and Unsel'd's conversation on death in 1969. This was accomplished by reading the notion of «Nichterscheinung», as applied to death, through Husserlian lenses. This interpretive choice has resulted in the elaboration of this study's own notion of «Nichterscheinung» and to an original application of it to thanatology. In this way, even Heidegger's fundamental yet generic references in *Being and Time* to the «darkness of the whither» («Dunkelheit» of one's «Wohin») were given a concrete phenomenological meaning. On that ground, the chapter also provided an original interpretation of Socrates' «οἶσμαι οὐκ εἰδέναι» as opposed to the traditional interpretation and thought that ignorance – in the present case, one's ignorance of the nature of one's death – can be known.

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<sup>1</sup> By means of example, cf. Mulhall 2013 and Kisiel 1993 on Heidegger's perspective.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. for instance Dollimore 1998 on the notion of death.

<sup>3</sup> Schumacher 2004.

The second chapter's main innovative contribution has been to provide contemporary discourses on «existential nihilism» with their philosophical ground.<sup>4</sup> This was accomplished both by grounding this widespread thanatological attitude in its phenomenological-metaphysical obscurity and by deconstructing it into its main arguments and components. Moreover, this task has been pursued within the framework of an innovative understanding of thanatology as an autonomous discipline, in spite of all efforts – nowadays mostly scientific and religious, but at times even philosophical – to deduce thanatological opinions from extra-thanatological considerations.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the second chapter advanced a criticism of the Heideggerian dismissal of the problem of an experience of death. This was accomplished by demonstrating that even Heidegger's existential analytic contains references to the possibility – paradoxical in essence – to experience one's own death. The chapter has demonstrated that if an existential ontology is to be conducted into the universal human understanding of death, this should account, by means of example, for the human fear to encounter death; and that justifying one's dismissal of this fear and similar experiences by appealing to the necessity to abandon traditional philosophical-thanatological notions, such as the one that death can in principle be experienced and that such an experience can be theoretically investigated (before death comes), amounts to abandoning the existential method one has chosen. In other words, renouncing the traditional naivety of thinking that what death is can be incontrovertibly established in no way legitimates one to simply ban the notion of a possible encounter with death from thanatology. Quite the opposite, this notion can be investigated – and that fear and those experiences can be accounted for – within the existential boundaries of a method whose claim is not to discover what happens with death, but what humans think happens. This is the «third path», so to speak, chosen by this study, alternative both to traditional naïve approaches to death and to Heidegger's dismissal of them. Lastly, and notwithstanding that, the second chapter originally contributed to de-onticise the interpretation of the Heideggerian analytic as compromised with the ontic attitude of existential nihilism.<sup>6</sup> This did justice to the fundamental nature of Heidegger's claims.

The third chapter has posited the innovative problem of a hierarchy of thanatological «existentials» in *Being and Time*. In order to accomplish that, the chapter addressed the problem of human worldliness and the Heideggerian dismissal of several roles that the body plays in human existence. Thanks to the reference to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of perception, Heidegger's under-developed interest in the «this-worldliness» of existence was extracted from the depths in which it is buried in *Being and Time* and interpreted as the reason for Heidegger's dismissal of the existential role of the body. In a reciprocal fashion, Merleau-Ponty's tendency to set aside the existential problem of death was avoided by keeping alive the chapter's reference to Heidegger's notion of «being-towards-death». This also allowed the chapter to reject the interpretation of those who consider Heidegger's discourse on death metaphorical and not actually referred to what is commonly meant with the word.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Carr 1992.

<sup>5</sup> As an example, cf. Schulz 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. for instance Pattison 2013, Schumacher 2010, and Edwards 1975.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. White 2005, Haugeland 2000.

According to the processual character of the thanatological half of the study, the fourth chapter has contributed to criticise all forms of essentialism with regards to death, beginning with Heidegger and extending to all the scholars who followed him. The reason why this might not seem the case is precisely the processual character of the study.<sup>8</sup> Yet, claims such as the psychology-inspired one that newborns and young children have no understanding of death, as well as the Christological one that a divine human might not be ignorant of the nature of their death, and finally, the biotechnology-inspired acknowledgement that death might simply disappear from the world one day, testify to the original criticisms of the present work against itself and all forms of thanatological essentialism. Albeit of a philosophical nature, this critical contribution can be compared to the classic ethnographic and anthropological criticisms of essentialism, such as Robert Hertz's.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, the criticism of essentialism in this study should not be read simply as destructive of the claims previously advanced, but rather as merely delineating the limits within which those claims are valid. This is what is meant here when speaking of the «processual nature» of the present investigation.

The fifth chapter of this work was the first investigation on Severino to develop the notion of «aeonology» as the science of eternity and to use it to investigate his philosophy of the eternity of being *qua* being both with regards to the different notions of eternity present in it and to their fundamental dimensions. However, this exegetical part of the chapter has been meant to elaborate an original conception of eternity when compared to Severino's, represented by an eternal present here deemed to be experienceable in life. In turn, this made it possible for the study to advance the conception – original with regards to Severino, Heidegger, and the respective literatures – of the human being as an eternal who dies. Moreover, similarly to the second chapter, the study's original notion of eternity allowed to provide claims, such as the one of Wisława Szymborska's poem *On death, without exaggeration*, with a genuine philosophical ground.

I will now mention some potential implications of this work, both practical and theoretical. From a strictly philosophical standpoint, it is possible to extend the investigation of eternity and thereby of the Western understanding of it. Especially, a comparison between the eternity of God, as conceived in the Christian tradition, and the various notions of eternity explored in this study would be of crucial historical, religious, and philosophical relevance. On the other hand, the novel conception of the human developed here also opens the possibility of reinterpreting some of the major cultural phenomena of Western civilisation. In a merely analogous vein, Christian culture is already being reinterpreted through Severinian categories.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly to what was done in the second chapter, the findings of the study might be developed so as to investigate particularly relevant modalities in which death manifests itself nowadays. Especially, given the current geopolitical scenario, death as a violently inflected event might be thematised, particularly with regards

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<sup>8</sup> On this matter, cf. the Introduction.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Robert Hertz. "A Contribution to a Study of the Collective Representation of Death". In: Marcel Mauss et al. *Saints, Heroes, Myths, and Rites: Classical Durkheimian Studies of Religion and Society* (Routledge, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> A general overview of the cultural attempts to juxtapose or differentiate Severino's doctrine and Christianity can be found in Ines Testoni, Andrea Toniolo (ed. by). *Cristianesimo e Emanuele Severino: Quali possibilità di confronto? Approcci filosofici e teologici* (Padua: Padova University Press, 2021).

to the existential implications that the awareness of this violence – by now, widespread in the world – has on how death is approached by contemporary human beings, for whom the prospect of facing a violent rather than a «normal» death is becoming increasingly concerning. On the other hand, the elucidation of death's phenomenological darkness provides the ground for investigating other attitudes towards mortality that are particularly relevant in the present times, such as the various religious beliefs in an afterlife that persist in different parts of the world, not least the Christian belief itself, especially in regions like Africa and Latin America.

From a practical perspective, the clarification of the phenomenological meaning of the obscurity of death may provide a concrete basis for interreligious dialogue, as well as for conversations between religious believers and atheists. That is because death remains obscure to everybody, whether religious or atheist.

From an ethical perspective, it is clear that acknowledging that one's existence is as finite as it is infinite hardly leaves one indifferent. Nonetheless, any such transformation is but one instance of the ever-present possibility of deriving an *ethics* from a philosophical endeavour. In fact, all philosophical endeavours have the intrinsic possibility to have ethical implications because philosophy itself is a determinate ἦθος of existence.

Predictably, these are only a few of the potential implications of the research conducted here. Whether this will have any consequences – and, if so, what those consequences might be – can only ever be determined *a posteriori*.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I want to thank Professor Johan Siebers for the life-changing opportunity he gave me to continue to dream of a philosophical life.

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