

Introduction

Although it is widely discussed within the framework of bio- and medical ethics, sociology, history, and literature, at the dawn of the third millennium death is the subject of a taboo that has been epitomized by the expression “the pornography of death”.¹ Public practices and discourse pertaining to death are no longer connected to the “private” experiences and feelings of those who die or are in mourning.² After holding a prominent place for thousands of years at the very heart of human culture, death has vanished from everyday communications, and contemporary Western society even tends to suppress anything that calls it to mind. It has become rare to see someone die. People no longer die at home, but rather at the hospital; the dead are, in a way, excluded from the community of the living. As for burial, it has been disguised so as not to recall too explicitly the victory of death that awaits everyone, as though the important thing were to camouflage or mask that victory. Meditation on death is avoided like the plague, because we prefer to occupy ourselves with things that are less lugubrious and, one might add, less obscene. Death causes those who speak about it to shiver and to experience an uneasiness mingled with a fear of their own death or of the death of a loved one; it is mentioned only in cloaked terms; Montaigne noted that people “take fright at the mere mention of death, and [...]”

¹ See Geoffrey Gorer, “The Pornography of Death”; Herman Feifel, “Death”. In recent years, however, we have witnessed a slow, surreptitious renaissance of death. See Tony Walter, *The Revival of Death*.

² Changes in family ties and the separation of the public from the private sphere have likewise brought about a privatization of mourning in the Westernized world.

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cross themselves [...] as at the name of the devil”.³ Pascal emphasizes that “as men are not able to fight against death, misery, ignorance, they have taken it into their heads in order to be happy not to think of them at all”.⁴ Freud notes that “we [contemporary men and women] [have] showed an unmistakable tendency to put death to one side, to eliminate it from life. We have tried to hush it up”.⁵

Thus the human being is deprived of his death. We constantly lie to ourselves, saying that it is always someone else who dies, but never myself.⁶ The individual is content to live day by day in what Heidegger calls inauthenticity [*Uneigentlichkeit*], in a recognition that “one dies” that is never taken personally but is invariably perceived as someone else’s business. This notion that “one dies” dominates everyday life and expresses “an indefinite something which, above all, must duly arrive from somewhere or other, but which is proximally *not yet present-at-hand* for oneself, and is therefore no threat”.⁷ Such an attitude does not acknowledge death but tries to neutralize it by denying it. The death of a loved one, in particular, is seen – through a reaction of fear – as a mere happenstance, an accident, and is no longer viewed from the positive perspective as an existential shock that enables the survivor to transcend his everyday attitude of activity for activity’s sake and to open himself to reflecting upon the meaning of his existence, personally and communally. Contemporary philosophy on the subject of death, or “thanatology”, aims to awaken the human being from the drowsiness resulting from this negation or this rejection of death; it tries to bring the human being to face his own mortality. It also seeks to tame death somewhat by confronting it directly, by seeking to understand the typically human attitude toward it, and by questioning the rationality of the fears that it arouses.

³ Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, p. 58 [*Essais*, vol. I, chap. xx, p. 130: “on s’en signe, comme du nom du diable”].

⁴ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, no. 168, p. 60 [p. 119: “N’ayant pu guérir la mort”, les êtres humains “se sont avisés, pour se rendre heureux, de n’y point penser”]. See Georg Simmel, “Zur Metaphysik des Todes”, p. 32. It should be noted, however, that the flight from death expresses a human attitude that is quite natural and healthy; Max Scheler described it as a “metaphysical recklessness” [“*metaphysischen Leichtsinn*”] (*Tod und Fortleben*, p. 28). Such repression of death makes human action in the world possible, which otherwise would be paralyzed by the constant thought of death.

⁵ See Sigmund Freud, “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death”, p. 289 [p. 49].

⁶ An attitude exemplified by the Leo Tolstoy character Ivan Ilitch.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 297 [p. 253: “Ein unbestimmtes Etwas, das allererst irgendwoher eintreffen muss, zunächst aber für einen selbst noch nicht vorhanden und daher unbedrohlich ist”].

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Despite the opinion of Schulz and Scherer,⁸ who insist that death does not constitute a relevant theme in contemporary philosophy, or, in contrast, that of Gray and Wyschogrod that during the twentieth century it was “rediscovered as a philosophical idea and problem”,⁹ for my own part I maintain that contemporary philosophers, on the contrary, have taken to heart the importance of the theme of death, which nevertheless is the subject of many very pertinent reflections by philosophers from the past. Contemporary philosophy has treated death on the theoretical level (on which the present analysis is chiefly situated) as well as on the ethical level. We can distinguish two main periods: on the one hand, the thanatological debate in the first half of the twentieth century, chiefly among adherents to the philosophy of life (“vitalism”), phenomenology, or existentialism; on the other hand, the recent controversy in analytical philosophy, which is marked by a disregard for the arguments set forth during the first period. Indeed, it is not uncommon that the analytical philosophers propose, without any citation whatsoever, theses and arguments that strangely resemble those developed by the phenomenologists and existentialists; in other cases, the citation refers the reader to works of secondary literature, which do not always interpret the primary sources exactly.

Contrary to Schulz’s suggestion that they are definitively a thing of the past,¹⁰ metaphysical questions about an eventual afterlife have certainly not been rejected so readily by contemporary philosophy; nor do I think that the classical metaphysics of death are of nothing more than *antiquarian interest* today, as Hügli claims,¹¹ or at best of existential interest to the contemporary philosopher. Furthermore it is incorrect to describe contemporary philosophical reflection in terms of what Ebeling calls an irreversible “thanatological inversion”,¹² that is to say, a

⁸ See Georg Scherer, “Philosophie des Todes und moderne Rationalität”, p. 507.

⁹ J. Glenn Gray, “The Idea of Death in Existentialism”, p. 114: “The question of death has occupied a surprisingly small place in modern thought. [...] In the twentieth century, death was rediscovered as a philosophical idea and problem”. See Edith Wyschogrod, “Death and Some Philosophies of Language”, p. 255; Otto Friedrich Bollnow, “Der Tod des andern Menschen”, p. 1257.

¹⁰ See Walter Schulz, “Wandlungen der Einstellung zum Tode”, pp. 99, 104; “Zum Problem des Todes”, pp. 313, 324; *Subjektivität im nachmetaphysischen Zeitalter*, p. 143.

¹¹ See Anton Hügli, “Zur Geschichte der Todesdeutung”, pp. 2–3.

¹² Hans Ebeling, ed., *Der Tod in der Moderne*, p. 12. “Before Heidegger, philosophical thanatology had still maintained the hope for a sort of immortality. With Heidegger, that hope was abandoned. And since Heidegger it has no longer been possible to restore it by means of philosophy” [“Vor Heidegger hatte auch die philosophische Thanatologie die Hoffnung auf eine Unsterblichkeit noch bewahrt. Mit Heidegger ist sie preisgegeben. Und

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systematic bracketing off of questions concerning immortality and metaphysics, questions that are deprived of meaning for a post-Heideggerian philosophy and that should be relegated from now on, according to Fuchs, to the realm of magic, the archaic, the primitive, and religion: in a word, to the domain of the irrational.¹³ I distance myself from such an assessment of the situation of contemporary philosophical thanatology, which is only partially and not entirely postmetaphysical. Furthermore, inquiry into the possibility of an afterlife did not cease with Scheler;¹⁴ far from being outmoded, it is currently the subject of very interesting speculative philosophical reflections.¹⁵

Even so, in the present study I will not address the metaphysical questions concerning an eventual afterlife. I will focus my attention instead on three problems: the problem of the nature of human personal death in the context of the biomedical debate, the problem of the knowledge of (my) mortality and of human death as such, and finally the problem of determining whether death is nothing to us or, on the contrary, whether it can be regarded as an evil. In order to do this, I limit myself to a careful reading of the classical texts of contemporary philosophy from the two periods just mentioned, while referring to the ancient philosophers as well, and especially to Epicurus and his provocative thesis of the “nothingness of death”. I have opted for a dialogue and a critical integration of the various positions rather than for a historical and chronological presentation of the thanatologists of contemporary philosophy.

It seemed to me necessary to begin by discussing in Part One of this study the definition of human personal death, which has important

seit Heidegger ist sie mit Mitteln der Philosophie nicht mehr zu restaurieren”, p. 11]. See also *Rüstung und Selbsterhaltung*, pp. 84–5. See Walter Schulz, “Zum Problem des Todes”, pp. 313 f.; *Subjektivität im nachmetaphysischen Zeitalter*, pp. 125 f.

¹³ See Werner Fuchs, *Todesbilder in der modernen Gesellschaft*, pp. 50 f.

¹⁴ As Walter Schulz interprets him in “Zum Problem des Todes”, p. 324; *Subjektivität im nachmetaphysischen Zeitalter*, pp. 125 f.

¹⁵ Within the framework of the phenomenological, existential, and neo-Thomistic debate, as well as in the discussion of the Anglo-Saxon analytical tradition concerning personal identity and the various sorts of afterlife (personal immortality, reincarnation, etc.). See John Donnelly, ed., *Language, Metaphysics, and Death*; Fred Feldman, *Confrontations with the Reaper*; John Martin Fischer, ed., *The Metaphysics of Death*; Anthony Flew, *The Logic of Mortality*; Peter Geach, *God and the Soul*; Hywel D. Lewis, *The Self and Immortality*; Ronald W. K. Paterson, *Philosophy and the Belief in a Life after Death*; Terence Penelhum, *Survival and Disembodied Existence*; Roy W. Perrett, *Death and Immortality*; Ted Peters, John Russell, and Michael Welker, eds., *Resurrection*; Josef Pieper, *Death and Immortality*; Jay F. Rosenberg, *Thinking Clearly about Death*.

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ethical repercussions. Unlike the establishment of functional criteria and tests for determining the death of a human being, such a definition is situated at the level of a philosophical anthropology that serves as the starting point for an ethical discussion about the end of life. The definition of human personal death ultimately refers to the definition of the person. In order to do this, I analyze, first, against the background of the distinction between “human being” and “person”, those theories that situate death exclusively on the biological level or, on the contrary, solely on the personal level, that is, without any reference to the human body. I will then address the proposal to shift the question of defining human personal death to the ethical level and investigate whether a living human being who is irreversibly deprived of the exercise of the so-called personal properties, such as self-consciousness, could be considered as dead. I propose to examine critically these different definitions of death in connection with the definitions of person and to show the weakness of the dualist position that distinguishes “human death” and “personal death”.

Part Two of this study is devoted to a reflection on the knowledge of (my) mortality and of human personal death. In attempting to grasp the specific difference between the human being and other living beings – more specifically, animals – with regard to their relations to (their) death, thinkers have cited the human abilities to abstract and to form concepts; to laugh; to construct a language; to invent, fabricate, and use a tool, as well as the human capacity for self-consciousness, which makes possible a knowledge of death and mortality, both universal and personal. Only the human being who has attained a certain level of mental development would be aware of his mortality and of death, which would imply that a child below a certain stage of maturity lacks this ability.¹⁶ Thus, for Heidegger,¹⁷ the spokesman for an entire tradition, an animal that is, in his opinion, devoid of consciousness and language can merely perish; only a human being is conscious that he *must* and *can* die; humans are likewise characterized by their relation to the dead, which

¹⁶ See Susan Carey, *Conceptual Change in Childhood*.

¹⁷ See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 291 [p. 247]. In *On the Way to Language*, p. 107, Heidegger appears to connect the ability to relate to death with language, thus distinguishing between man and the animals: “Mortals are they who can experience death as death. Animals cannot do so. The essential relation between death and language flashes up before us, but still remains unthought” [p. 215: “Die Sterblichen sind jene, die den Tod als Tod erfahren können. Das Tier vermag dies nicht. Das Wesensverhältnis zwischen Tod und Sprache blitzt auf, ist aber noch ungedacht”].

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is evident in their various beliefs in an afterlife, in funeral rituals, as well as in their rebellion against death. It would appear, then, that the awareness and knowledge of death and of mortality express, to use Gadamer's phrase, "the ontological honor"¹⁸ proper to the human being.

This "honor" that is expressed in the *cogitatio mortis* is the source of a paradox that Pascal summarizes as follows: "All I know is that I must soon die; but what I know least is this very death which I cannot escape".¹⁹ The first statement raises the question about the origin of our knowledge and awareness of our mortal condition, as well as the question of its degree of certitude. How does one have an awareness of it? Whence does such knowledge spring? Is it acquired, or already present in the unconscious mind and thus the object of a Platonic reminiscence? Is it a matter of foreknowledge, an intuitive knowledge, or is it, on the contrary, the result of experiencing the death of someone else? How does one arrive at the declaration that death is "the only certainty"²⁰ or that "my death", as Heidegger puts it, is the basis for my very certitude that I exist?

Pascal's second statement accentuates the enigmatic character of death as such, as opposed to dying. What do we know about death, which cannot be experienced? Can we think about it and measure it? Is it not, rather, inconceivable? Wouldn't rational thanatological discourse be devoid of meaning and doomed to failure? Despite the fact that death cannot be grasped intentionally (by means of rational cognition) and that it is not a phenomenon, can we nevertheless delve somewhat into this enigma by approaching death from the perspective of the passivity of its occurrence and with the help of the concept of frontier? Would the thesis of death *in* life, as a part of life, make it possible to experience death and to grasp it better? Or is it not in fact completely beyond the realm of life? Are we not faced with a no man's land? Is a phenomenology of death possible, starting from the premise that the states of life and death are mutually exclusive, as Epicurus and Wittgenstein have noted? Does the predication "my death" have any meaning? Is it possible to speak of death "in" life?

Part Three of our study deals with the axiological question of thanatology: is death nothing to us – as Epicurus admirably maintained – or,

¹⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "La mort comme question", p. 21: "*l'honneur ontologique*".

¹⁹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, fragment 194, p. 68 [pp. 125–6: "*tout ce que je connais est que je dois bientôt mourir; mais ce que j'ignore le plus est cette mort même que je ne saurais éviter*".]

²⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, "At a Graveside", p. 91.

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on the contrary, can it be regarded as an evil? It is not a matter of knowing whether death is an evil for the survivors, especially for those who loved the departed person, but of determining whether it is an evil for the subject himself, not while he is still living (that is, dying), but as of that moment when he is deceased, when he “finds himself” in the state of death. The question becomes all the more interesting for philosophy if one introduces – from the methodological perspective, so as to take the same point of departure as Epicurus – an *a priori* that consists of identifying death, and hence the state of being dead, with the absence of an afterlife. Assuming, then, that there is no life after death, how can it be maintained that evil or a wrong has been done to a deceased party who no longer exists? Death appears instead to be nothing to me, since as long as I am alive, my death is not, and when I am dead, I no longer am. My death, therefore, is nothing to fear. This is the challenging argument crafted by Epicurus.

For the sake of clarification, I would like to point out the fact that death is evaluated in several ways in philosophy: as something indifferent, as a good (in itself or depending on the circumstances), or finally as an evil (in itself or depending on the circumstances).

1. First, death can be understood, following Epicurus, as *indifferent*: for the dead person it would be neither a good nor an evil. This position is based on the premise that there is no such thing as a personal afterlife, and that in order for a state of affairs to be considered as a good or an evil, it is necessary for the subject to experience it.
2. The second possibility is to regard death as a *good in itself*. Here we find two trains of thought, all of which are located on a different level from the ideas associated with evolution or the death instinct. (a) The first way of thinking about death as a good in itself is illustrated by those who maintain that it is better not to be than to be and who understand existence as a curse and consider it as something that ought not to be. When King Midas asked what is the best thing in the world, the wise man Silenus replied that it “is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is – to die soon”.²¹ In a

²¹ Quoted in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, §3, p. 42 [p. 35: “Das Allerbeste ist für Dich gänzlich unerreichbar: nicht geboren zu sein, nicht zu sein, nichts zu sein. Das Zweitbeste aber ist für dich bald zu sterben”]. See Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, book I, xlvi (p. 139); Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, § 126–127 (p. 31); Lucius Mestrius

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less pessimistic way, yet likewise emphasizing the agreeable side of a dreamless sleep, Socrates, in the *Apology*,²² conceives of death as a “gain”. Other thinkers acknowledge it as a good or as “the highest good”,²³ and several anecdotes are also enlightening in this regard: the one, for example, about Cleobis and Biton, sons of an Argive priestess who asked the goddess to grant them the greatest good that a god can give to a human being and were discovered dead the next day. Plutarch adopts this idea: death is a good, because it delivers the human being from the evils and servitude of life and rewards piety.²⁴ The idea that life is a punishment and death is a gain is of Orphic-Pythagorean origin. These writers, however, do not offer counterarguments to the provocative thesis of Epicurus, who identifies death with nonbeing and declares that the dead man is not capable of feeling or experiencing anything. How could the dead man experience his state as something good, when he no longer exists? (b) A second line of argument proclaiming death to be a good can be found among the proponents of a metaphysics of being who affirm the personal afterlife of the subject, to whom it is given to contemplate the perfect and absolute good, that is, God, if he is judged worthy on the basis of good actions performed during his life. Ambrose of Milan,²⁵ for example, maintains that death is a good for the Christian, because it delivers him from life’s calamities, from evils (a favorite theme of the Stoics), and leads him to the true life. Nevertheless Ambrose does not address the Epicurean challenge per se. The neo-Platonists and the pseudo-Platonists²⁶ likewise belong to this category.

Plutarch, *A Letter of Condolence to Apollonius*, 27, 115D ff. (pp. 179 f.); Theognis, *Elegies*, I, 425–428 (p. 111).

²² Plato, *Socrates’ Defense (Apology)*, 40c–e (pp. 24 f.).

²³ See Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, book I, xlvi, 110 (p. 133); xl, 95 f. (pp. 115 f.). These stories are recounted also by Lucius Mestrius Plutarch, *A Letter of Condolence to Apollonius*, 14 f., 108E f. (pp. 143 f.).

²⁴ See Lucius Mestrius Plutarch, *A Letter of Condolence to Apollonius*, 10 f., 106C f. (pp. 131 f.).

²⁵ See Ambrose of Milan, “On the Death of His Brother Satyrus”.

²⁶ See, for example, the remarks of Axiochus about death, after he has compared immortality to being set free from the prison in which the living body finds itself. “For no longer do I have a fear of death, but now I even have a longing for it” (Plato-pseudo, *Axiochos*, 370d–e [p. 45]); “I now feel love toward it [death]. [...] Now I despise life, since I am ready to move to a better home” (372b [pp. 49–51]).

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3. Third, death can be understood as *a good or an evil depending on the circumstances*,²⁷ which include the ability of the subject to complete his task, to accomplish projects or the plan for his life that he deems important. Often, from a utilitarian perspective that is sometimes accompanied by hedonism, there is an attempt to determine whether death is a good or an evil by means of a quantitative and qualitative calculus of the benefits and disadvantages that the subject would have experienced if he had continued to live. Given that mindset, death could easily be considered as a good in a case where it came to deliver the subject in some way from a catastrophic “quality of life”. “Life is the condition of all goods, but alas it is also the condition of all evils. When continued life promises only great evils unmixed with any compensating goods, our best bet may be death”.²⁸
4. Without necessarily being seen by the subject as the greatest evil,²⁹ death can be understood as *an evil in itself*.

I will present and analyze the famous Epicurean thesis of “the nothingness of death” against the background of his three presuppositions, which are materialism, hedonism, and experientialism. The last-mentioned, together with the requirement of a subject, will be the object of a painstaking inquiry: I will discuss two sets of examples, the purpose of which is to counter both experientialism and the question of posthumous states. Distancing myself from the Epicurean understanding of evil, I will propose a concept of the evil of death as a privation. But of what does it deprive a human being? Is death always an evil? Or, on the contrary, is it an evil only depending on the circumstances? If it is an evil of privation, is that not also the case with the nonexistence preceding conception?

Ironically, it seems appropriate to conclude this introduction by adding that this study is meant to be a beginning and at the same time

²⁷ Among other discussions, see Anthony L. Brueckner and John Martin Fischer, “Why Is Death Bad?”, p. 221; Peter C. Dalton, “Death and Evil”, p. 203; Fred Feldman, *Confrontations with the Reaper*, pp. 140, 144, 149–50, 226; Jeff McMahan, “Death and the Value of Life” and *The Ethics of Killing*; Mary Mothersill, “Death”, p. 92; Robert Nozick, “Dying”, pp. 20 ff., and *Philosophical Explanations*, pp. 580 f.; Leonard W. Sumner, “A Matter of Life and Death”; Bernard Williams, “The Makropolis Case”.

²⁸ Leonard W. Sumner, “A Matter of Life and Death”, pp. 161–2.

²⁹ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 6 (1115a 9 ff.) and I, 6 (1097b 33 ff.); Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, book I, v, 9 (pp. 11 f.); Augustine, *City of God*, XIII, 6 (pp. 306 f.); Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, pp. 1103 ff. [pp. 1297 ff.]; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 680 ff. [pp. 615 ff.]; Thomas Nagel, “Death”.

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a reference point for a much broader philosophical reflection. It is intended as a modest contribution to what I judge to be one of the most important philosophical inquiries, namely, the human being's relation to "his own death". To philosophize is nothing other than to get ready for death: "the whole life of the philosopher", as Plato again says, "is a preparation for death".³⁰

³⁰ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, book I, xxx, 74 (p. 87).