

IS THERE DEATH AFTER LIFE?

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INTRODUCTION

The title of this essay is somewhat puzzling, not because it is a question but because it is a question that one does not expect. It reverses another question, one with which we are much more familiar: is there life after death? This question is so familiar to us that it even seems to push its way in front of the one in my title and block it from view. I think about all those who, after having seen the poster that announced what was originally a lecture, asked me if I had not made a mistake, or who, a bit more cautiously, wondered if the reversal was the work of the evil spirit of the misprint. This reaction is part of the problem I am trying to address—it tells us something about what death and life mean in our current society! We only live once, people say, so enjoy it. In other words: there is only this life, and then there's death. Dead is dead, there's nothing more to be said. The striking thing is that one here, apparently without realizing, gives an affirmative answer to the question I am raising. Everyone knows this answer. We have heard it so often that we no longer even realize that it involves an answer, let alone an answer to the question that I tried to formulate in my title. We are so familiar with the answer that we do not even recognize the question.

But let us return to that other question: is there life after death? Here we have a question we all recognize. The one who gives a positive answer to it is called a believer, someone who believes that death is not the end. The non-believer denies this—for her, life ends with death. Such an expression of disbelief is, of course, also a sort of *belief*: the belief that there is nothing after death. How could one *know* something like that? Death is not an object of knowledge. All we know is *that* there is something like death, not *what* it is. As Jacques Lacan once put it: "Death belongs to the province of faith." Lacan continues: "Naturally, you are correct to believe that you are going to die. That belief keeps you going. Yet it is just that: an act of faith." Loosely translated: are we really dead when we're dead? *Is there death after life?* It is no coincidence, Lacan seems to suggest, that this question confuses us. It deprives us of the certainty we need in order to live: "Should we not believe that we were going to die, would we be able to bear the life that we live?... Imagine that we would have an infinite number of lives following one after the other, endlessly. Could we bear that?"¹

With this comment, Lacan throws the rather banal conclusion that there is (only) death after life into unexpected relief. It apparently has not so much to do with a factual assessment, but rather with a belief that gives death a content with which we can live. The statement that one makes about death does something to death. It is what Austin called a performative, it does what it says. By speaking “about” death, it fixes death, gives it a place. And the opposite assertion, which says there is indeed life after death, is no less performative. Take, for example, the idea of reincarnation in Hinduism: after death there would be another life, and then another and another...This belief does not contradict what Lacan suggests in his last sentence, for Hinduism is precisely an attempt to deal with this endless return, to do something about it. The one who lives properly can escape from the cycle! In other words, the cycle of rebirth can be stopped, it is not endless. That idea keeps the Hindu going. Like all belief, Hinduism is a belief that gives death a content with which one can live. To be sure, this content is not the same as in the case of the non-believer: death in this case is not the end of this one life that we have, but a transition to another life, which in its turn will be a transition to...But the return is not eternal. It can be brought to an end. There is, ultimately, something similar to what death is for the (non-)believer: a kind of release.

We will see that what philosophy is actually doing with death is not all that different from these two forms of belief which already seem to be engaged in a kind of dialogue with one another: “Is there death after life? No, because there is life after death”; “Is there life after death? No, because there is death after life.” Philosophy has not only tried to get a grip on death by assigning it a place, but has also wondered whether one *can* indeed give it a place, and what one is actually doing when one attempts to do this. By asking these questions, philosophy is involved differently in the question of death than the two beliefs already encountered; it does not operate with two positions, but with four, as is shown by the following diagram:

		Is there Death after Life?	
		<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>
Is there Life after Death?	<i>yes</i>	?	(2)
	<i>no</i>	(1)	(3)

We are already familiar with the first two positions: (1) stands for those who believe that there is nothing after death; (2) stands for those who see in death a transition. Both positions alternate a *yes* and a *no*. They are one another's logical counterpart. As the diagram clearly indicates, however, there are still two other positions. These seem less evident. How can one both affirm (or deny) that there is life after death and that there is death after life? This is what we are going to try to understand.

My plan is as follows: first, I will provide an illustration of the first and the second position from the history of philosophy. I will then contrast these positions with the way in which one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century broke with a long tradition of thinking about death by occupying the third position. Heidegger, for I am thinking of the author of *Being and Time*, had an intuition as ingenious as it was simple: he stumbled over the little word "after" in both questions, and replaced it with the equally inconspicuous word "in," to which he gave a very particular interpretation. That leaves us with the fourth position (the double *yes*). Let me, for the time being, only state that I know of no philosopher who, on purely philosophical grounds, would have claimed it as his or her own. But perhaps the critique of Heidegger's attempt to place death "in" life, and in this manner to internalize it, will help us to understand why philosophy *qua* philosophy is incapable of occupying that fourth position. But let us first address two examples from the tradition with which Heidegger tried to break.

1. DEATH IS (SORT OF) AN END: EPICURUS, SOCRATES

The first position is one familiar to the reader. It comes from Epicurus. One should not let death spoil life, Epicurus writes, for when death is there, you are no longer; and when you are there, death is not. Thus there is no reason to be afraid of death, for death is literally nothing. It does not concern us. Not if we are alive (for then it is not there), and not if we are dead (for then we cannot suffer from it). This insight that death is nothing that concerns us, Epicurus concludes, turns life into something one can enjoy, "not by adding an infinite duration to life, but by doing away with our desire for immortality."²

For Epicurus, the problem of death rests on an unreasonable anxiety and an unreasonable desire. His simple logical argumentation (either there is life, or there is death) implies a sort of ethic in which one lives according to the insight reason provides—consequently, one should renounce this anxiety and that desire, for they turn death into *something*, while in fact it is nothing.

The other position is familiar to the reader as well. Plato attributes it to Socrates when he, after being convicted for moral corruption, is waiting in prison for the poisoned chalice that he, according to the verdict, must empty. His friends mourn, Apollodorus weeps. But Socrates reprimands them. There is no reason to mourn, he teaches, for upon death the soul is freed from

an obstacle. Socrates is talking about the soul of the philosopher, of the one who strives for true knowledge, true wisdom. For such a person the body is an obstacle, a hindrance: “It fills us with wants, desires, fears, all sorts of illusions and much nonsense, so that, as it is said, in truth and in fact no thought of any kind ever comes to us from the body.”³ The body keeps us occupied in various ways so that we fail to be concerned with that which we really want to be concerned with—the desire for true knowledge. But this is not all: “Worst of all, if we do get some respite from it and turn to some investigation, everywhere in our investigations the body is present and makes for confusion and fear, so that it prevents us from seeing the truth” (*Phaedo*, 66 d).

The philosopher is therefore better off without the body. On the condition, of course, that death only deprives him or her of the body and not of the soul. In the rest of the *Phaedo* (the dialogue is named after the one present at Socrates’ death, the account of which he tells to a certain Echecrates), Socrates tries to show his students that this is indeed the case. Commentators have since, with some exaggeration, referred to Socrates’ *proofs* of the soul’s immortality, one of the problems being whether Plato himself—who wrote the dialogue, yet has *Phaedo* mention at the beginning that Plato was absent from the scene because he was ill—believes what the dialogue attributes to Socrates.⁴ But for our present purpose, one expression that Plato puts in Socrates’ mouth is of crucial importance: philosophy, Socrates says, is *learning how to die*. With this he means that the true philosopher already in this life tries to let himself be influenced as little as possible by the body. Thus we can find here, as in Epicurus, an ethic that issues from and coheres with a certain reasoning about death. The immortality of the soul that Socrates is talking about is not so much an objective fact—as if the soul by definition (in “essence”) is immortal. It must “earn” its immortality, hence the importance of “learning to die,” of liberating oneself from “the chains of the body.” One who does not do that is not a *philosophos* but a *philosomatos*, someone in love with the body rather than with wisdom. Such a person’s soul becomes so “attached” to the body, so “permeated by the physical” that after death it is “dragged back” into the visible world. Such souls “wander until their longing for that which accompanies them, the physical, again imprisons them in a body” (*Phaedo*, 81 d-e). They wander around among tombs and graves, Socrates says (but does he mean it?), because they are not fully liberated, but still partake in the visible, which explains why they can be seen as shadowy phantoms, as images. In the end they return in the form they deserve: the gluttonous as asses, the unjust as wolves, and the tyrannous as hawks. It is better not to return; it is better to be a philosopher.

Naturally, Socrates is here alluding to the Eastern doctrines of wisdom that, via various traditions, were influential in the Greece of his day (the scene with the poisoned chalice takes place in 399 B.C.). But he subjects these reincarnation-, rebirth- or salvation doctrines to the authority of philosophy. And in the same move Socrates appropriates the meaning of his own death: he forbids his friends to weep because these tears point to an attachment to his bodily person; he

washes his own body, while the custom in Athens was for the body to be washed after death by women; and he tells Crito that he does not care how they bury him. Socrates “laughs gently” at such an unphilosophical concern, and with this laughter places himself above the customs and norms of the city.

In a much more complicated manner than I am able to show here, Plato takes *revenge* on the polis that had sentenced his teacher to death.⁵ One usually calls this “irony.” But one may wonder whether we are not dealing with *hubris* here: with the *hubris* of philosophy that thinks it can give death a place, and by doing so claims an authority by which to contest what ordinary people normally do (that is, be afraid like Epicurus, weep, wash, lay out, bury, mourn), and to reform their customs. Heidegger is by no means an exception to this tendency of philosophers to have death empower them—he too wanted to “revolutionize human being,” an enterprise for which he laid the foundation in *Being and Time*. But what is truly revolutionary about his views on death is that they only added one letter to what the tradition had said about death, a letter that completely changed the picture. According to *Being and Time*, death is not an end, but a bend. It is not to be thought as the point at which the line of time breaks off (the last moment), for time is not linear. As we will see, death is rather to be understood in terms of the curvature that gives authentic time its true, human face.

2. HEIDEGGER’S REVOLUTION

For Socrates and Epicurus, death was an end. A final end (Epicurus) or a sort of passage, a gate or a sieve that frees one from useless silt. Both start with the question whether there is life after death. Epicurus answers “no,” and thereby gives a very literal meaning to this “after.” While for Socrates, death is, or can be, a sort of transition to the true life in which one not only strives for wisdom, but actually finds it. Here, as well, death is a sort of end: the soul returns to the element from which it came and in which it is truly at home.⁶

In both of these cases philosophy addresses something with which ordinary people are also familiar. Something clearly changes with death. Considering that we do not know what comes after it, it is understandable that we are both curious and afraid. Epicurus deals primarily with the latter: death is nothing and thus nothing to be afraid of. Socrates addresses our curiosity: by providing an answer to what comes after death, an answer that is the opposite of Epicurus’, he nonetheless comes to the same conclusion: there is no reason to be afraid.

Curiosity and fear are two characteristics of the normal approach to death for which Heidegger does not feel the least sympathy. They are, as he says in his technical language, im-proper (in-authentic). With this he means that they are two ways to avoid bringing death into relation with one’s own self. Death is something outside of me, something that happens to others, not to me.

Or death is something that has nothing to do with me here and now, something that will only happen to me later. Such death comes from hearsay (This one or that one died. From what? Did s/he have children? How old was s/he?). It is a novelty that only briefly concerns us. Life—*my* life—goes on, at least for the time being. Someday, of course, I too will die, but that someday concerns a future state of my life that does not relate to me now. First things first...

Epicurus' argument is, in other words, an example of what Heidegger dismisses as the inauthentic attitude toward death. It is built on what he calls a vulgar conception of time. Time is not, as Epicurus seems to hold, a series of now-moments that come one after another (the past a now that is no more, the future a now that is not yet) with somewhere, at the end, the last now-moment and then death. For Heidegger, the past is not behind us, not sealed. It is at work in the present. We "are" our past, that is to say, we are occupied with it and we are occupied with what we are now occupied from out of that past. And in the same manner we are already now our future. This future is always already coming toward us. One sits, for instance, in a lecture and one is already occupied with the question one is going to ask after the break because one has heard a similar story before but never with this conclusion, and so on. Present, future and past are interconnected and our lives would not be life as we know it if this connection should fail. One who has no future is either tangled up in the present or absorbed by the past. One who cannot bear the future (I cannot concentrate now because I still have to do this and that) lives in perpetual overdrive (I have to do *now* all those things that I still have to do, but the world refuses to cooperate: the bank is closed, the copier is broken, and so on). To live properly is to engage with something, to choose something out of an awareness that one cannot do everything at the same time, that doing one thing means that one cannot simultaneously do the other, and that whatever one does is carried by a past to which it gives new meaning (by connecting with it or breaking from it) and held by a future on which it can rely.⁷

Human life does not take place *in* time, but is pervaded with time through and through (it is time, Heidegger says). Death is therefore not just something outside of me. Death is not a state of affairs—the now being-dead of another, my future being-dead. Death "is" not at all, it is not a being, but a way of being. Or more accurately: it is *my* way of being. Every one of us is already related to our own death. He or she is dying; not sometime later, but always, constantly. The human being, Heidegger says, is a being-toward-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*). As soon as one is born, one is dying.

What Heidegger means with this is actually the following: to be human is to be mortal. This is not a limitation, but an excellence. Death—my death—is not something that deprives me of my time, but is what turns my time into human time. Death is a sort of beacon, it orients. Stated otherwise: death is not the point where my life ends but a horizon that gives my life's time a sort of

tense harmony (*palintropos harmoniè*).⁸ When Heidegger talks about a horizon, he thus does not mean a sort of neutral container in which my life is imprisoned. Horizon derives from the Greek *hōrizein*, to demarcate, to cut out, to limit. We tend to think of such a limit as a place or a line where something stops, thus, as an end. But, as Heidegger suggests elsewhere, we should think of it in analogy with the contours of a sculpture or the frame of a painting: as that out of which something appears, *comes into* existence. A painting does not end with its frame. The frame does not constrain it, but makes it possible. The limit (*peras*) is not an end, but a bend that curves our field of vision and enables us to see. The Greek for what is without such a limit is *a-peiron*. We would say: un-finished, end-less, measure-less. Because the finite is limited, it has an excellence that it would not have if the limit were not there. What is *a-peiron* is in-finite, but that which is not finite is not better than the finite. On the contrary: it lacks something. *Apeiron* is another word for chaos, disorder. To be concerned with death therefore does not mean for Heidegger that one is constantly thinking about it as something that will conclude my life. It is not so much about being prepared to die, as being prepared to live, being able to live. Death does not conclude life, but opens it up, articulates it, gives it rhythm and makes it possible. It is not an enemy, but a friend.⁹

One could illustrate Heidegger's point by pointing to all those stories in which someone goes in search of the elixir of eternal life, as Gilgamesh did in the epic named after him, and especially to those stories in which the hero finds or receives the elixir only to be filled with endless remorse. One who is immortal gets old, sick and crippled, and watches what gave meaning to his or her life disappearing everywhere. One who was a bit smarter and acquired not only immortality, but also eternal youth, is no better off. Take Fosca for instance, the main character in Simone de Beauvoir's novel *Tous les hommes sont mortels* (*All Men are Mortal*) who, somewhere in 14th-century Italy, drinks an elixir through which he stays forever young. "The things I will be able to do!" But this motivation disappears quickly. For, finally, Fosca is no longer able to do anything. Actions ultimately lose their meaning when there is nothing at stake. And there is nothing at stake when one gets a second, a third, how ever many chances one needs for everything one does. Neither success nor failure is final—in the end, nothing is able to move Fosca, everything becomes indifferent because for him it makes no difference. He misses something that others have. He cannot die, and thus, for example, he cannot make a meaningful promise to someone to live his life with her "until death do us part." Everything becomes an eternal repetition of the same, every friendship ends with the death of the friend, every love by the deathbed of the lover who loses her unicity because she is the umpteenth one to die in that bed and is only for this moment the last one. Immortality is not a privilege, but a curse. The inability to die is a limitation. One can only live when one can die, when there is a horizon. Existence loses its humanity for one who has lost the horizon of time, it becomes unlimited and thereby meaningless.

4. BEYOND HEIDEGGER'S INTERIORIZATION OF DEATH

Despite all the differences, Heidegger is closer to Epicurus than Plato. He also views immortality as a foolish desire. It is better to be able to die. Not because of what comes after, but because of this life. Death does not threaten life, it makes it meaningful, gives it intensity. It is the salt of life. One should not want to defeat it, but to allow it to do its work. By closing off our existence, death opens it up, makes it non-indifferent. Death's place is not *after* life, but *in* it. It is not an end, but a bend that provides life with the horizon that it needs to be a human life. One who tries to make an end of this bend is not only running away from death, but also from life. Such a person does not live, but lets him- or herself be lived, as if s/he had all the time in the world. And like Ivan Ilych from Tolstoy's famous story, whom Heidegger uses as an example, at the moment his life is at an end he realizes that it has been a tragic mistake to turn away from that (b)end and to have lived as if death was of no concern. He is irritated by the lie that his life has been, just as he is irritated by the lies of those who, even at his deathbed, insist his condition is improving:

'You feel better, don't you?'

Without looking at her he said 'Yes.'

Her dress, her figure, the expression of her face, the tone of her voice, all revealed the same thing. 'This is wrong, it is not as it should be. All you have lived for and still live is falsehood and deception, hiding life and death from you.' And as soon as he admitted that thought, his hatred and his agonizing physical suffering again sprang up, and with that suffering a consciousness of the unavoidable, approaching end.¹⁰

One can read this citation in two ways: with Heidegger or against him. Out of concern for his spouse, Ivan tells her that he is feeling better. But he hates the deception (hers and his), and he hates her just as he hates his whole entourage who treat death as a sort of sickness from which one can be cured. This is Heideggerian: one should not hide death, banish it from life or regard it as something that threatens life from the outside. But philosophy after Heidegger has reproached him instead for having interiorized death. And indeed, when referring to Tolstoy, Heidegger does not pay any attention to Ivan's pain, nor does he elsewhere seem concerned with suffering, with "really" dying, with what the philosopher-psychiatrist von Gebattel calls "deadly death."¹¹ With Heidegger, death does not have, as it were, an exterior, an outside. His entire analysis is concerned with meaningful death, with a death, that is, which turns its face toward us and orients *our* (that is, *my*) life.

Death as we know it has something disorienting about it. A person in pain is attached to that pain, is dragged along with it, and feels afraid and powerless because one cannot endure real pain. At the limit, pain is not something one has. It is something that has *us*, which floods over *us*. It is not some content of consciousness, but something that one cannot bear. One cries out in pain, and one who is really *in* pain is afraid of even more pain: what is painful about pain is that there

seems to be no end to it. Not only can one not snatch oneself away from pain, but in pain there is the disquieting threat of always more pain, a premonition of something even more painful than the suffering now being endured, as if there is a depth in pain from which something descends on us that is much worse than the pain to which we are now exposed. Levinas, whom I am following here, calls this “something” that descends on us and boxes us in on all sides, *death*.¹²

It is clear that Levinas has in mind an entirely different type of death than the one we encountered with Heidegger. This death has it in for us; it is neither an end, nor a horizon; not a beacon that illuminates and orients our existence, but rather something that cannot be located, now here, now there, everywhere and nowhere, the absolute disorientation of something that overcomes us without us being able to do anything about it. There is no escape from what closes in on us menacingly. We are caught off guard, fall to our knees, as in the moment when we can no longer stand the pain and can only scream out our powerlessness, to the point of losing all our resistance and all our dignity. This is no longer about a pain that we can locate somewhere (“my tooth hurts”), of which we are conscious and over which we have a certain mastery. The death that here manifests itself deprives us of all self-control. It is about something we can neither grasp nor understand, about something against which I have no possible defense. This death gives me no mandate; it does not arm me for the life I have to live, but “grabs me without giving me the chance to combat it.” When this death is there, Levinas writes with a vicious nod toward Epicurus, “I am no longer there,” but not, as Epicurus thought, because I am nothing, but because death “gives me nothing to hold on to.” By giving us nothing to hold on to, death makes it impossible to anticipate its attack and prepare for it—we cannot foresee the blow that will hit us, and it is this inability that is so terrifying.

We are right to be terrified! For the difference between anxiety and fear stems precisely from the fact that anxiety is, as is said, “without object.”¹³ Fear concerns something that threatens me, a danger I can assess, against which I can arm myself. Epicurus’ mistake is to understand our being afraid of death as a fear for death, an explanation which assumes that death is something, a being, a condition. Well then, Epicurus said: death is nothing; when it is there, we are not (still) there. This is precisely what Levinas contests. Certainly, death is not “something,” death “is” never there. It is not “now.” But it is approaching, it comes toward us, and therefore it is not just “nothing.” Because death is not something, there can be no fear of death. But there can be anxiety! Hence our loss of power, our regression, the infantile sobbing of the one who has lost all resistance and is prey to something whose grasp cannot be eluded. Human beings, one could say, are rightfully anxious about death—as people say: one is not afraid of death, but of dying. One hopes for a good death: a death that one does not even notice, which comes like a thief in the night, while sleeping, when one has shed one’s consciousness and is thus spared the terror of losing one’s consciousness to something that one no longer has, but which has us, invades us,

and takes our “us” away from us. The pain that rips apart and destroys the self leaves nothing behind but a pile of shocking misery; the trembling of a body that is no more than the flood of tears into which it slowly disappears.

5. GIVING ROOM TO DEATH

In the previous section I tried to describe what one could call *the outside of death*, the side not turned toward us, unconcerned with the meaning of our existence, indifferent to it, worse: unaware of it. In short, that side of death Heidegger did not consider when he intended to show that it is not so much a matter of something ending, as something beginning. What I referred to as an “interiorization” of death is precisely this idea that death, correctly understood, is *peras*, in the Greek sense. In light of our analysis of pain and anxiety, this now seems to be a typical philosophical determination of death, another attempt to define a role for death, to assign a place to death. But death qua *a-peiron* does not conform to any horizon.¹⁴ Instead of being a horizon or a bend, it is rather a narrowing; it is scary and horrifying because it closes in, as in Poe’s story where the four walls of a room approach us and from which there is no escape.¹⁵ Heidegger was certainly correct in his refusal to turn death into something after life. Death is indeed “in” life, but then more like a tapeworm that eats us up, that gnaws away from inside and cannot be destroyed.

This is also the image of death that we all recognize from our deepest anxieties: a child’s anxiety at the thought of walking through a graveyard in the dark, but also the anxiety of the elderly to end up in a hospital bed wired to machines that keep us “alive,” *without having the possibility of being able to give up this life*. Anxiety for death never concerns death as such, that is to say, never death as the antipode of life, as non-life. Our anxiety concerns a death that defies all logic, and thus also the logic of the either/or (either there is life, or there is no life, that is to say, death—the famous rule of the excluded third). Death does not let itself be defined so easily. It follows its own course. It is the laughing third that is excluded. This explains why our anxiety for death always assumes the form of an oxymoron, an in-between: the anxiety of being *buried alive*, the anxiety that the *dead are not dead* or might come back to life, as in the famous cult film, *The Night of the Living Dead*; the anxiety that one will become one of the *living dead* (*kept alive by machines*); and ultimately the anxiety that those we assumed *dead* still seem to be *alive* (the whole discussion about the correctness of the definition of brain death, and about the possibility that despite all diagnostic precautions mistakes can still occur).¹⁶

The reason why all these examples concern anxiety rather than fear is precisely because they concern something that defies the grasp of our categories. We are accustomed to distinguishing life from death, but when the dead begin to live, then, as they say, we lose our cool. One needs special training to be able to stand the sight of *squirming* maggots in a *corpse*, and the panic that overcomes the young doctor during his first dissection when the *dead* body suddenly *moves*

is entirely understandable. This is also the anxiety that horror films play upon (I am thinking of *The Thing* or *The Blob*): what inspires anxiety is always something that is not what it seems to be. “The Thing” is “something” that can assume any form of life, also that of a human. Then suddenly the “host” or “hostess” bursts open and one sees a suggestion of the formless projected on the screen: a bloody, quivering mass of tentacles with several heads, each of which in turn explodes. On the screen, we only flirt with anxiety, for what is shown here is obviously *not* the formless; this formless still has a form, it continually changes its form, it is not a-morphous, but poly-morphous. And the heroes of these films never give in. Shocked by what they do not understand insofar as it escapes their categories (what looks like a human is in fact something else: *The Thing*), they search for new criteria (they take blood, hold it to the fire, if it does not crawl away, is it a “real” human) that, at the height of suspense of course, will turn out not to be foolproof. But contrary to death, this cinematic “something,” which is, as it were, its *allegory*, finally surrenders. It is not radically unrecognizable, incomprehensible. We can ultimately understand it. Life ultimately succeeds in turning into an object that “something” which seemed to elude all attempts at objectification. We exit the theatre relieved: in the end, it was about *something*, albeit something unusual. Our horror was not anxiety, but fear.

Such films show us, better than scholarly textbooks do, something about the place death receives in our society. It is not “gone,” as some still assert. Rather, it has been driven out, banished. But it returns, on the screen for instance, where one attempts to present the unrepresentable and get a grip on it. What returns here is, as Philippe Ariès has shown, something that our society, in which death has become something indecent, turns away from with all its might: not so much death, as the anxiety for death.¹⁷ Death is always somewhere in a society, writes Roland Barthes, who came to the original idea that with the arrival of photography, death was to be found in the click of the lens which freezes the living in photographic eternity.¹⁸ But one could also say that, in our western society, life is not so much absorbed into death (as in the photo) as death is absorbed into life: we think of death as part of the process of life and treat it as a sort of sickness, as a broken piece of machinery that can be repaired. Max Scheler calls this the “catastrophical death,” death as an unfortunate accident, as something that could have been prevented. This is precisely what the University of Cambridge must have been thinking when, according to a recent newspaper article, they offered a prize for the team that would succeed in finding a formula for the elixir of life. Four of the top academic research teams from the United States and a British team agreed to participate in the contest. And not without reasonable hope—my newspaper cites Aubrey de Grey from the genetics department of the university that proposed the initiative: “Researchers have succeeded in dramatically extending the lives of certain test animals, including mammals. Everything points to the same being possible with humans.” For instance, the lives of mice were extended by the equivalent of at least 200 human years. And doubling this extension appears within reach! Eternal youth is at hand.

One can anticipate what will then happen. Not everyone will be able to afford it. For the first time in history, and for (“ontological”) reasons of principle, there will no longer be what we now call “humanity.” Rather, there will be the mortal and the immortal. But will the immortal be those that do not *have to* die, or those who, like de Beauvoir’s Fosca, *cannot* die? John Boorman came up with a frightening answer to this question in his science fiction film *Zardoz*: it will not just be mankind that is divided, but also the immortals themselves. There will be those who love their immortality and those who will be bored to death! Even when “conquered,” death does not give up; it never stops doing its work. It is just that in our days, which do not so much aim for immortality as for a-mortality, this work has fundamentally changed.¹⁹ Previously we had the image of the dance of death, where high and low, rich and poor danced to the tune of a death that knew no distinction. Death brought democracy to a time when there was nothing like democracy: everyone was equal before death.²⁰ Today death is no longer the great equalizer, but rather the phantasmatic figure of that which festers in all of us and continues to divide us. Something of this—of the anxiety of falling apart—can be seen in films like Boorman’s, or in the horror films previously mentioned. What films such as these do is in-form the anxiety we encountered above. In this sense they are more honest than our newspapers and media in which death is turned into a banal, virtual reality. Consider your average police film where only the bad guys die while the hero, with whom the viewer of course identifies, is not only invulnerable to death but above all has no anxiety about it. The one who dies is ultimately a coward. It is only the courageous who can face death and understand its message.

This is what the modern media have retained from Heidegger: the difference between fear that runs away from death and anxiety that looks it straight in the eyes, assumes it and, by assuming it, comes to live authentically. If something else is shown, as in the better horror films, where the anxiety is more intense the less its “cause” is shown, then it still sends the message that if one tries, one can get a grip on what eludes our grasp.²¹ It is not death itself that is taboo, and perhaps not even the anxiety of death, but rather the flip-side of that anxiety, our power-lessness against it. All these images attribute a power to us that we ultimately do not have, because the death that causes us anxiety, is not a possibility but, as Levinas would say, an impossibility. It is not something that we are able to do (Heidegger’s ability to die/live) or that we are able to cope with, but something which forces us to our knees.

In this sense Max Scheler is not incorrect when, in his “Tod und Fortleben,” he makes the passing remark that our age is the first to be without an image of death (the man with the scythe, the skeleton, the grim reaper).²² In a certain sense our age has *too many* images of death (it is perhaps not by coincidence that Romero’s *The Night of the Living Dead* has so many sequels and that these, if I am to believe my video store, are some of the most frequently rented materials). But what we *do not have* is a *stable* image of death (precisely why our society is teeming

with images of death: death is indeed everywhere and nowhere). A stable image is more than an image. It is an image that comes with a story. Death receives a place in this story, a place that gives it its due. I am thinking of the famous lines which conclude the Dutch poem, “The Gardener and Death” by P. N. van Eyck: Smiling he answered: “ ‘t was no peril, / From which your gardener fled. I was startl’d, / When this morning I saw here still toiling / The one I had to collect in Ispahaan at the gloaming.”²³ Of course this is just a poem. But it does something that we have seen neither the media nor philosophy do. It comforts. Not by misrecognizing our powerlessness and pretending as if we know what or where death is, but by giving room to our powerlessness and our sorrow—and thereby to our death.²⁴ It is perhaps no coincidence that one finds, in every bookstore, a great many poetry collections about dying, sorrow and mourning, but very little philosophy, not even in the “better” bookstores.

6. THE OUTER SIDE OF SORROW

Let us try to conclude. When I gave this text the title “Is there Death after Life?” I had in mind a presentation of the 20th century discussion in the hope of finding an answer to a question that Roland Barthes suggests with the following: “Death, in a society, must be somewhere; if it is no longer (or is less) in the religious, then it must be somewhere else.” But I have gradually revised my plan. As the reader will have noticed, I have actually only managed to show where death is *not*. Recall the diagram with which we began—one slot, as you will remember, remained open. It is the one where both questions receive an affirmative answer—both the question whether there is life after death, and also the one whether there is death after life. One who is still somewhat aware of the tradition knows that this is the position of Christianity, where it is not a matter of immortality, but resurrection. Not continual *existence*, but hope against hope, an existence that goes through death and is *reborn* in and through God. According to Christian belief, the human being, writes Van der Leeuw (from whom I have learned a great deal), is not immortal, neither in body nor in soul, “on the contrary: it is prey to death. To death in various forms that steals its life away as soon as it begins; to death, also in its mysterious, but very real connection with sin” (death, according to the Bible, is the wages of sin: Rom 6:23 and Cor 15:56). This sounds rather old fashioned, especially the part about sin, and particularly for someone who does not know that sin has to do with a sort of “self-empowerment” (*Selbstbehauptung*). On the same page Van der Leeuw writes, as if he was our contemporary (this is a text from 1947!): “hope is deprived of its nature and degraded into a conviction concerning one’s own permanence, immortality, divinity. The reality of death is denied a priori. Eternal life becomes a life in continuation with one’s own life. Faith becomes not wanting to die.”²⁵

This is indeed what seems to happen, equally, with regard to faith. One quotation: “The traditional views about life after death—an eternal heaven or hell—say nothing to me. But imagining

absolutely nothing in the hereafter is an equally unattractive alternative. The doctrine of reincarnation offers a nice escape from this dilemma.²⁶ It is no coincidence that we are dealing here with reincarnation rather than rebirth. Reincarnation is in fact, as the specialists note, the wrong term for what happens in Hinduism: there is not even the guarantee that one will return as flesh, let alone as human.²⁷ But the way out of the dilemma expressed in the previous citation is not the Eastern, but the Western, “New Age” version of the return: the motivation behind the rapidly increasing interest in this (approximately 25% of the Dutch population believes in reincarnation) is that one life is not enough, that there is so much more to do; one wants to have, as it were, as many possible turns on the merry-go-round, like a child who does not want to leave the playground and go home. In the East, the cycle is the problem, and one looks for a way to escape it, while for us the problem is the end of the cycle (“death”). And as long as they have yet to find a solution in Cambridge, reincarnation is the answer. One could call this “selective acculturation.” Christianity calls it sin.²⁸ I have tried to understand why this type of interpretation leaves us “modern” people rather cold. As we have seen, the entire story of philosophy, from Socrates to Heidegger, finally collided with what I have called the exterior of death. Remember Socrates’ hubris: the double pretension to appropriate the meaning of his own death and, in connection with this, to put himself above the rituals, the customs and mores, and the faith of ordinary people. One finds the same mistake in Heidegger and Epicurus. It is absolutely no coincidence that one slot (*yes, yes*) has remained open in philosophy. For this slot refers to what one could call, to use a phrase from the Dutch philosopher Cornelis Verhoeven, *the outer side of sorrow*.

In his beautiful, though rather strange, confused and often self-contradictory text, Verhoeven discusses the moment where an individual finds a framework for one’s expressions, and he calls this framework the rite, which he defined as the transition from an impulse (anxiety, mourning, sorrow) to an institution. This framework, he wrote, “however cruel and incomprehensible, has something maternal about it. It frees one from oneself and one’s sorrow, whose place it tries to occupy as it were.”²⁹ One may wonder whether the fact that Christianity in our day apparently does not receive much consideration as a candidate to fulfil this function as a framework is not the result of a double resistance: I did not analyze the first, which springs from the suspicion that the external betrays the internal, and it betrays an expressivism that has led to a crisis of symbolization in our culture insofar as symbolization never just expresses (re-reflects) but, above all, im-presses itself on something (and thus in-forms it).³⁰ But I have tried to elucidate the other resistance: the pretension that death is without outside has as its corollary that one no longer feels the need for an outside of sorrow. One who feels no distress is not in need of help. One pulls oneself up by one’s own bootstraps. I have tried to oppose to this misguided autarky a different picture of death, one that seems more in line with the anxiety that it inspires in all of us. Hence a plea for a philosophy that does not obfuscate the distress of death, and does not pretend that it will solve its problem. Such a solution should, no doubt, come from elsewhere. Let us have a last look at the diagram:

		<u>Philosophy</u>		<u>Religion</u>		
		Is there death after life?		Is there death after life?		
		<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>	
Is there life after death?	<i>yes</i>	?	Socrates	<i>yes</i>	Christianity	rebirth
	<i>no</i>	Epicurus	Heidegger and after	<i>no</i>	(non-)belief	?

Both for philosophy and for religion, one slot remains open. One should find a way to link these two to one another. If there is still a task for contemporary theology, it is surely this one.



1. *Extraits de la conférence à l'Université Catholique de Louvain* [it was actually the K.U.Leuven!] filmed 18 October, 1972 by Françoise Wolff, Productions RTBF.
2. This quotation is from the famous "Letter to Menoeceus."
3. Plato, *Phaedo* in *Plato: Five Dialogues*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1981) 66c.
4. On this exaggeration, see the well known study by Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Die Unsterblichkeitsbeweise in Platos 'Phaidon'," in his *Gesammelte Werke. Band 6* (Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr, 1985), 187-200.
5. Nicole Loraux, "Donc Socrate est immortel," *Le Temps de la réflexion* III (1982): 19-46. Loraux makes a very convincing case concerning how Plato, also in his choice of words, is occupied with subordinating the old ideal of immortality in the polis to philosophy. Only one detail: in Greek, the poison that Socrates drank is called *aphrôn*, and its first effect is to impair the activity of the brain—while in Plato's version it first afflicts the toes!
6. Death is the end of the body; for the soul it is nothing more than a transition; thus, a sort of end.
7. "Eigentlich handeln die, die aus der Zukunft leben, diese können aus der Vergangenheit leben und die Gegenwart macht sich von selbst" (from the so-called *Kasseler Vorträge* of April 1925, in which Heidegger developed an initial sketch of *Sein und Zeit*; posthumously published in the *Dilthey-Jahrbücher* 8 (1992-1993).
8. Heraclitus, fragment 51, 2-3.
9. The mysterious "Stimme des Freundes den jedes Dasein bei sich trägt" from *Being and Time* (§ 34) could thus indeed be that of death. See my *Truth and Singularity* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999), 33 ff.
10. Leo Tolstoy, "The Death of Ivan Ilych" in *The Death of Ivan Ilych and Other Stories*, trans. Aylmer Maude (New York: Signet Classics, 2003), 150.
11. Viktor Emil Freiherr von Gebtsattel, "Aspekte des Todes," in *Prolegomena einer medizinischen Anthropologie. Ausgewählte Aufsätze* (Berlin: Springer Verlag, 1954), 389-412. Heidegger is of course aware of suffering, pain, and so on. (see *Being and Time* § 47, § 49), but he is of the opinion that these can only be understood from out of his (existential-ontological) definition of death. While the critics believe that this definition itself must be reconsidered.
12. A few important texts that have inspired what follows: Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the other and Additional Essays*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), primarily 55 ff.; *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1978), primarily 93-113. For a technical-philosophical explanation see my *Truth and Singularity*, 235-273.
13. Compare my text "Whistling in the Dark," *The Inhuman Condition: Looking for Difference After Heidegger and Levinas* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2004), 59-75.
14. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1994), 210.
15. I am referring to the torture chamber from *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1843). A similar motif is found in *The Cask of Amontillado* (1846) and, of course, in *The Premature Burial* (1844).
16. See the contributions in *Beyond Brain Death: The Case Against Brain Based Criteria for Human Death*, eds. Michael Potts, Paul Byrne, and Richard Nilges (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000).

17. Philippe Ariès, *L'homme devant la mort* (Paris: Seuil, 1977).
18. Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire. Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 1980), 144-145.
19. Edgar Morin, *L'homme et la mort* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), 363 ff.
20. In this connection, Heidegger is talking about “das Wie, in dem alles Was zerstäubt” in *The Concept of Time*, trans. William McNeill (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992), 27.
21. In *The Blair Witch Project*, for instance, one never gets to see what is threatening. It is therefore one of the few films that has really understood that what inspires anxiety has to do with something that, like death, is radically unrecognizable, and must remain unseen.
22. See Max Scheler, *Schriften aus dem Nachlass. Band I: Zur Ethik und Erkenntnislehre* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1957), 9-64.
23. The gardener in this poem, upon seeing death, borrowed a horse from his master and fled to Ispahaan.
24. Perhaps poetry achieves this not only via its content (i.e. dying, burying, and so on), but also by what it does with language. The language of a poem is incarnated to such an extent (no longer susceptible to change, as if it were a corpse) that it becomes something monumental, as if the poem is the place where the body of language is laid out. This “laying out” has to do with the content that makes the imitatio mortis bearable.
25. Gerardus Van Der Leeuw, *Onsterfelijkheid of opstanding* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1947), 35.
26. Henri Verbrugh, cited by Bernard Williams, in “Echt, er is leven na de dood,” *De Morgen*, 13 January 2001, 3.
27. Heinrich Von Stietencron, “Vom Tod im Leben und vom Leben im Tode: Bemerkungen zur hinduistischen Auffassung von Tod,” in *Der Mensch und sein Tod*, ed. Johannes Schwartländer (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976), 146-61.
28. Karl Rahner, *Zur Theologie des Todes* (Freiburg: Herder, 1958), 31-51.
29. Cornelis Verhoeven, *Rondom de leegte* (Best: Damon, 1998), 32-40 [My translation]. The confusion has to do with his determination of the rite as something rigid and a rigidification. Philosophers will recognize behind this the problematic of a philosophy of presence signaled by Derrida. This quotation is a kind of *Fremdkörper* in his article.
30. On the crisis of symbolization see my “Enfance, transcendance et mortalité des valeurs. Pour un républicanisme actuel,” in *Le pluralisme des valeurs. Entre particulier et universel*, ed. Anne-Marie Dillens (Brussel: F.U.S.L., 2003).

