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Mortals, Money, and Masters of Thought

Collected Philosophical Essays
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Mortals, Money, and Masters of Thought

Introduction

Thanks to the interest of Northwest Passage Books, I combine together in this volume my past articles and book chapters on the subject of mortality and death, in order to bring the little wisdom that I may have gathered as a philosopher to the public outside academia; that is, in addition to the readers of the scholarly journals and academic books in which the articles and chapters were published in the first place. Although revised to ensure consistency, avoid redundancies, update some references, explain a handful of lesser-known Latin and foreign phrases, and eliminate the occasional linguistic oddity, misprint or plain error that survived prior editorial reviews, my older articles and book chapters form, together, the near totality of the conceptual, critical and bibliographic material presented in this volume. As a general rule, I have tried to keep the modifications to a minimum, despite the temptation of revising thoroughly my older texts which, sometimes many years after their original publication, no longer satisfy my own scholarly standards and preferred lines of argument. However, being too thorough in this sense would have meant writing entirely new essays, which is not the aim of the present book. Consequently, the essays collected here reflect the time and circumstances under which they were written.¹ Still, their theoretical core and main thrust are, in my view, as good (or as bad) now as they were then—indeed, as the economic considerations presented in the second part are concerned, they proved largely correct.

I reissue here ten book chapters written between 2003 and 2017 for as many volumes in the series entitled *Death and Anti-Death* (i.e. 1, 3–10 and the forthcoming 14), published by Ria University Press in the United States of America [hereafter USA] and edited by Charles Tandy. Also, I redraft here my 2005 “Notes on Pessimism”, which appeared originally in issue 5(3) of the British Personalist Forum’s journal *Appraisal*, plus a short 2013 paper entitled “Cruelty and Austerity. Philip Hallie’s Categories of Ethical Thought and Today’s Greek Tragedy”, prepared for a 2012 symposium held by the research group number three of the Nordic Summer University and published in issue 8(3) of the Icelandic scholarly journal of Nordic and Mediterranean studies, *Nordicum-Mediterraneum*. Finally, I make use of the contents of a 2001 article entitled “Montaigne and Nietzsche: Ancient and Future Wisdom”, published in issue 6(1) of the Canadian Society for Continental Philosophy’s scholarly journal *Symposium*. All this material is organised in the present book’s three parts, each of which comprises three (Part I) to four short chapters (Parts II and III).

¹ For instance, some critical remarks may now seem too harsh: The International Monetary Fund [hereafter IMF] is singled out in chapter 4 as a major proponent of so-called “free-market reforms” or “neoliberalism”, which have had disastrous effects in terms of protection and enhancement of life-support systems. As of the 2010s, perhaps because of the collapse of international finance in 2007–8 and the ensuing unsuccessful austerity measures advised onto many governments (e.g. the Greek one), the IMF can no longer be depicted as die-hard neoliberal. Far too stark and startling is the self-criticism contained in recent self-evaluations by their own research department, e.g. Jonathan D. Ostry, Prakash Loungani, and Davide Furceri, “Neoliberalism: Oversold?”, *Finance & Development*, June 2016, <<https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2016/06/pdf/ostry.pdf>>. Thirty-five years later, after much avoidable damage worldwide, the critics of Reagonomics and the Washington Consensus have been vindicated by one of their main foes.

The first part, which I have called “Mortals”, offers a broad set of reflections on death and mortality as experiences functioning *qua* potential intellectual *cum* emotional means, by which we can better grasp the fundamental structures of value and meaning of human life. Specifically, I offer a synoptic account of positive appraisals of death and mortality in the history of Western philosophy, plus some references to Eastern thought too, as well as of representative cases of philosophical pessimism in general, and highlight how a more fundamental philosophy of life can emerge thereof (chapter 1). A related study of the original split in ancient philosophy between the world of everyday experience and a seemingly deeper, truer world revealed by reason alone is then offered, so as to cast further light on some of the most influential forms of just such positive appraisals, i.e. Socrates’ and Plato’s (chapter 2). Additionally, I tackle the philosophical assumptions of the modern scientific worldview, born with Descartes and Galileo in the 17th century, and flesh out their bearings upon the notions of death, mortality and, once more, life (chapter 3). Theoretically crucial in all three chapters is the work of Canadian philosopher John McMurtry, and in particular his deep and articulate theory of value, known by contemporary philosophers as *life-value onto-axiology*. McMurtry’s theory of value is present in all of his major public addresses² and books, including both editions of his celebrated *Cancer Stage of Capitalism*.³ However, his life-value onto-axiology is developed to its fullest extent in his entries for the encyclopaedia of philosophy entitled *Philosophy and World Problems*, volumes I-III.⁴ These three large volumes are themselves part of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s [hereafter UNESCO] monumental *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems*, which is to date the largest repository of scientific and scholarly information on sustainable development, and for which McMurtry worked as honorary theme editor for several years.⁵

The second part, “Money”, comprises reflections on the most powerful and widespread cause of *avoidable* death in the world today, namely the misconceived and misdirected structure of value operating at the very heart of the global economy. In this connection, much of the text expounded in the second part is based upon prolonged exchanges that I had with Valerio Lintner, professor of economics at London’s Hult Business School, leading to co-authored contributions to the 2009 and 2010 volumes of the *Death and Anti-Death* book series of Ria University Press. Precisely, I begin by continuing the reflections on modern science’s fundamentally *lifeless* worldview begun in chapter 3 and apply them to the modern social science of economics (chapter 4). An imaginary dialogue follows between Athena B., a philosopher, and Hermes L., an

² Cf. McMurtry’s extensive interviews in Peter Joseph’s popular 2011 documentary movie *Zeitgeist: Moving Forward* (<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Z9WVZddH9w>>). On 11th August 2016, the film uploaded on this major website by TZMOfficialChannel alone had been viewed by more than 23 million internet users, to whose number one should add at least three more million netizens who viewed it in translated and/or subtitled versions, plus the other English-language versions posted by other users. Few living philosophers have reached as wide an audience as McMurtry has reached by this medium.

³ John McMurtry, *The Cancer Stage of Capitalism*, London: Pluto Press, 1999 (1st ed.) & 2013 (2nd ed.); the revised second edition includes a revealing subtitle, absent in the former: *From Crisis to Cure*.

⁴ *Philosophy and World Problems*, vols. I-III, edited by John McMurtry, Oxford & Paris: Eolss, 2011.

⁵ UNESCO, *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems*, Oxford & Paris: Eolss, 2002–16, <<http://www.eolss.net>> (free access available only in developing countries).

economist, in order to highlight, in a lighter tone, the core problems with contemporary economics and, above all, with the world's economies, so as to make the lifelessness discussed in the previous chapter more tangible in its everyday but nonetheless deadly character (chapter 5). Born as a simple dialogue between Prof. Lintner and me, it is the essay that required the most substantial reworking. Additional reflections on contemporary economic woes and their lethal aspects ensue, suggesting remedies and showing implicitly how philosophy can function as a lifeline of fundamental criteria (e.g. good and bad) for other disciplines' self-assessment and amelioration (chapter 6). In essence, philosophy is the unique and uniquely valuable discipline that can allow the specialists of all the other disciplines to pause and ponder upon why they are doing whatever they may be doing, and whether it may be wise to keep doing it or, instead, refrain from it and redirect their efforts. After all, while the focus of the other disciplines is firmly and valiantly set upon knowledge as such, philosophy's traditional and peculiar focus is wisdom. Being knowledgeable is not the same thing as being wise. This non-identity has been amply and frequently exemplified in human affairs. There have been talented physicists and hardworking engineers designing newer and deadlier weapons of mass destruction. Top-notch psychologists and gifted marketing experts concocting effective new ways to sell more fat- and sugar-laden addictive junk food to children and teenagers. Committed managers and capable software programmers who have been replacing human beings with machines that accrue to shareholder value and yet make high unemployment rates unswerving. Not to mention high finance's 'best and brightest' bringing about yet another economic collapse by means of mathematically complex tokens of highly paid technical wizardry and wildly celebrated financial genius, adding then, on top of it all, the wrong expert advice for recovery, as tragically and cruelly exemplified by the recent case of Greek austerity (chapter 7).

The third and last part, "Masters of Thought", contains explorations of past reflections on mortality and death by five great minds in the philosophical canon of the West: Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592), Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), Michael Polanyi (1891–1976) and Cornelius Castoriadis (1922–1997). All of them have been five masters of philosophical thought, from five different European countries of origin (i.e. France, Italy, Germany, Hungary and Greece), who wrote in remarkably different styles (e.g. first-person memoirs and essays, lengthy treatises, collected aphorisms, scholarly articles, books and interviews) in different historical periods (i.e. the Renaissance, the early Enlightenment, the peak of European imperialism, the two World Wars and the Cold War) and personal contexts. For example, Vico led a private existence as a minor Neapolitan academic and a provincial tutor for patrician youngsters, fighting against severe bouts of depression throughout his life. Conversely, Castoriadis was an energetic and self-confident man, who fought as a Trotskyist partisan in the 1940s, worked until 1970 as an economist for the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [hereafter OECD], and then started practicing as a psychoanalyst in 1973. Yet, jointly, these five thinkers show how philosophy can be the place where our questions about mortality and death are verily taken seriously and pursued most thoroughly, whatever the results may be, and whether we agree or disagree upon such results. In particular, Montaigne and Nietzsche are compared and contrasted in their deeply personal, self-centred, this-worldly philosophical understanding of human mortality (chapter 8). Then, in chronological order, further insights on the same subject are retrieved and discussed *vis-à-vis* the philosophies of Vico

(chapter 9), Castoriadis (chapter 10) and Polanyi (chapter 11). All three of them cast light on the existentially pivotal given of mortality, yet *via* conspicuously different areas of emphasis and cultural entry points, which are, respectively, literature and anthropology for Vico, politics and psychoanalysis for Castoriadis, and epistemology and religion for Polanyi. Taken together with the other thinkers cited and discussed in the preceding chapters of this volume, albeit to inevitably uneven degrees of depth and breadth, the concluding four chapters allow this book to offer itself as a fairly comprehensive account of the many philosophies of death and mortality available in the history of, primarily, Western thought. As such, this book should be of interest to any reader who wishes to explore this history and/or the topics of death and mortality under the perspective of intellectual history. Above all, this book should extend an opportunity for meditating upon such topics, in the hope of helping the reader to cope with our quintessential finitude.

Chapter 1: Death and Anti-Anti-Death. A Cultural Exploration

Throughout the history of Western thought and cultures, there have existed a number of religious and philosophical lines of thought, all of which share the notion that death is, can, or even ought to be a positive given of human existence. I do not mean an experiential given for the individual with regard to himself, of course, but an experiential given of the individual with regard to other selves.⁶ In this sense, death can be a *desideratum* [something desired], or even a *desiderandum* [something to be desired], and not, as it is commonly heard, a hopeless doom, an unavoidable tragedy, or, more rarely, a fact of no actual importance. As a consequence, I exclude *ab initio* [from the beginning] all the positions that bring forth a variously formulated denial of death, either as a nightmare to be kept as far-off as possible, or as a condition of which nothing is known, and *ergo* [therefore] about which nothing has to be done. An instance of the former kind of denial is the cult of Isis, which was extremely common throughout the Roman Empire at the dawn of the Christian age, and which centred upon the regular performance of rituals aimed at insuring good health, sexual power, and, above all, longevity. An instance of the latter kind of denial is the Epicurean tetrapharmakos or “four-part cure”, namely the doctrine teaching how not to worry about the gods, the ills of life, unfulfilled desire, and, above all, about death. As a late Epicurean put it concisely: “Don’t fear god, don’t worry about death; what’s good is easy to get, and what’s terrible is easy to endure.”⁷

In what follows, I arrange my sources in two quadripartite sets or, as I refer to them henceforward, in two tetralogies of death.

The first tetralogy of death is meant to give structure to the material I cite. As such, this first tetralogy is undoubtedly arbitrary, uncompromisingly concise, and historically incomplete—a systematic thinker like Kant would probably call it “rhapsodic”. Still, just as rhapsodists did utilise meters and other lyrical arrangements in order to compose understandable expressions of poetical insight, so do I benefit from the employment of an expository classification in order to present the bearings of the broad cultural exploration opening this book. The final goal of my exploration is to individuate the ground of value that makes this particular approach possible. It is my hope to be able to identify a shared pattern of understanding lurking behind the cultural phenomena gathered under the four ‘pigeonholes’ of my first tetralogy.

The second tetralogy of death comprises a fourfold comparative scrutiny of the material presented in the first tetralogy. The first form of scrutiny is analytical, i.e. aimed at furnishing a few relevant conceptual distinctions. The second form is axiological, i.e. aimed at probing the most significant dominions of value related to death. The third form is ontological, i.e. aimed at configuring the modes of connectedness with death. The fourth form is existential, i.e. aimed at

⁶ As Martin Heidegger stressed in his most famous philosophical work, *Sein und Zeit*, each person’s—i.e. the *Dasein*’s—first encounter with death is always and obviously somebody else’s death (cf. *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, San Francisco: Harper, 1962[1927]).

⁷ Philodemus of Gadara, Herculaneum Papyrus no. 1005, column W, line 1014, 1st century B.C., as cited in Marcello Gigante, *Il libro degli epigrammi di Filodemo*, Naples: Bibliopolis, 2002 (translation mine).

evaluating the relevance of death for the individual's life. Though logically distinct from one another, all four forms of scrutiny are mutually intertwined.

The First Tetralogy of Death

[I] *Contemptus mundi*..⁸ If “death is annihilation, and the dead has no consciousness of anything... I call it gain”, says Socrates:

*If there is no consciousness but only a dreamless sleep, death must be a marvellous gain. I suppose that if anyone were told to pick out a night on which he slept so soundly as not even to dream, and then to compare it with all the other nights and days of his life, and then were told to say, after due consideration, how many better and happier days and nights than this he had spent in the course of his life – well, I think that the Great King himself, to say nothing of any private person, would find these days and nights easy to count in comparison with the rest.*⁹

This passage highlights the first of two possible conceptions of death that Socrates discussed before the Athenian jury in his *Apology*: life is a valley of tears. Pain, misfortunes and sorrows are the daily bread of the human being. Or, at least, such seems to be the destiny of most human beings, to whom death represents actual liberation from their painful existence. Consistently with this realisation, the universe in which we are condemned to live deserves mere contempt. Representatively, Michel de Montaigne quotes from the Greek gnomic poets, first among many a voice in the millenary history of anthropological pessimism: “*Either a painless life, or else a happy death. / To die is good for those whom life brings misery. / 'Tis better not to live than live in wretchedness.*”¹⁰ Since most human beings dwell in a condition of “wretchedness”, then death is highly desirable. Only death can rescue them from their miserable existence and bring about eternal peace and the relief that “it is all over”.¹¹

⁸ The Latin expression “*contemptus mundi*” [despise of the world] is still well-known among educated people. It carries an exquisite sense of aversion to the mundane, as characteristic of much of the original Christian asceticism and monasticism (whose initial goal in the early Middle Ages was the most thorough *fuga mundi*, i.e. escape from the world). For the sake of linguistic and aesthetic consistency, and in order to take advantage of the tacit dimension of historical significance accompanying it, I use Latin phrases to denominate the remaining three pigeonholes of the first tetralogy of death: “*immortalis eris*” [you will be immortal]; “*bona mors*” [happy death]; and “*intra vitam*” [during life].

⁹ Plato, *The Apology*, 40c-e, in *The Last Days of Socrates*, translated by Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant, London: Penguin, 1993[ca. 399 B.C.]. Given the great variety of editions of Plato's dialogues, I do not refer to page numbers and use the standard scholarly referencing system instead, i.e. the so-called “Stephanus” system (from Renaissance French scholar Henri Estienne, who published in Geneva in 1578 the collected works of Plato in both the original Greek and the Latin translation).

¹⁰ Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, I, 33, translated by Donald Frame, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998[1580]. Given the great variety of editions of Montaigne's essays, I do not refer to page numbers and use the standard scholarly system instead, i.e. book and essay number.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, I, 20.

[II] *Immortalis eris*.¹² If death is “a change, a migration of the soul from this place to another”, says Socrates:

*If... death is the removal from here to some other place, and if what we are told is true, that all the dead are there, what greater blessing could there be than this...? [H]ow much would one of you give to meet Orpheus and Musaeus, Hesiod and Homer? I am willing to die ten times over if this account is true... [I]t would be a wonderful personal experience to join them there, to meet Palamedes and Ajax the son of Telamon and any other heroes of the old days.*¹³

This passage highlights the second of Socrates’ possible conceptions of death. Death could be just a moment of transition. Death could be a dramatic and startling gate to be crossed in order to attain further life, as in the doctrines entailing the notion of metempsychosis (e.g. Pythagoras and Hinduism); or a completely different life, possibly a blessed life of eternal joy, as in the doctrines contemplating the existence of heaven (e.g. the Christian and Muslim creeds). Maybe this process involves a cycle of reincarnations, and therefore a sequence of several births and deaths (e.g. the Buddhist doctrine of *samsara*). Maybe it involves a period of unconscious rest (e.g. the condition of the dead awaiting the *dies irae* [the Day of Wrath] in Saint Paul’s *First Letter to the Thessalonians*). Or maybe it involves a period of harsh penitence (e.g. Dante’s *anime purganti* [expiating souls] in his *Comedy*). Still, *intermezzi* [interludes] apart, the eventual outcome is going to be a better life. Death, consequently, becomes desirable, since it can lead to a superior form of fulfilment. Life, in spite of death, or better, through death, continues and, if possible, improves.¹⁴

[III] *Bona mors*.¹⁵ Death may be an accomplishment in at least three major senses (respectively [IIIa], [IIIb] and [IIIc]).

[IIIa] There are many ways in which to die. Not all of them are alike and, more importantly, not all of them are equally commendable. Some ways can be pathetic—the final painful agony of

¹² Significantly, the motto of the University of Rome *La Sapienza* recites: *immortalis eris, si sapias, iuvenis* [you will be immortal, young fellow, if you have knowledge].

¹³ Plato, *The Apology*, 40c–41b.

¹⁴ The outcome of one’s death can be eternal damnation in Dante’s *Inferno* or re-birth as an insignificant bug, neither of which appears to be very desirable. However, the task of the Christian religion, as well as of the Hindu and of most religions in general, is to warn humankind about this risk and to teach us how to prevent its occurrence. In this sense, *immortalis eris, si sapias, iuvenis, bonam mortem obtinere* [you will be immortal, young fellow, if you have knowledge about achieving a happy death].

¹⁵ Achieving a good or happy death can be a demanding task. This truth was recognised by Father Vincenzo Carrafa, seventh General of the Society of Jesus, who established in 1648 the *Bona Mors* Confraternity (its actual title being Confraternity of “Our Lord Jesus Christ dying on the Cross, and of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, his sorrowful Mother”), aimed at preparing its members to die happily by means of prayer and good deeds; cf. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (edited by Charles G. Herbermann, Edward A. Pace, Conde B. Fallen, Thomas J. Shahan and John J. Wynne, New York: Robert Appleton, 1907–12), s.v. “The Bona Mors Confraternity”, <<http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=2002>>.

death after the long, callous torture of old age, about which Egill Skallagrímsson, the dubious hero of the homonymous saga by Snorri Sturluson, sighs miserably: “*My bald pats bobs and blunders / I hang it when I fall; / My cock’s gone soft and clammy / And I can’t hear when they call.*”¹⁶ Some others can be glorious—a warrior’s end to be celebrated as the most honourable victory, like the death of the valiant Gunnar of Hildarendi in the saga of *Njál the Burnt*, of whom Thorkel sang proudly:

*We have heard from the south
How Gunnar, warrior of many seas,
Passionate in battle,
Wielded his mighty alberd.
Waves of foemen broke
On the cliffs of his defence;
He wounded sixteen men
And killed two others.*¹⁷

Some other ways can be horrendous—dying alone and in exile, like the death that Ugo Foscolo feared and that he did die as an Italian expatriate in the cold, foggy streets of London, far away from his Hellenic “*amate sponde*” [beloved shores].¹⁸ Some others can be more simply appropriate—a serene passing away, as natural as falling asleep, like those deaths praised by Turgenev, Tolstoy and Solzhenitsyn with reference to the stoical, resilient *muzhiki* [peasants] of Russia: “[M]y death has come, that’s that.”¹⁹ Death can be desirable, then: it can be an accomplishment, it can crown one’s life; and it can be a ‘good death’ for the individual who dies. In a variety of appraisals and circumstances, honour, dignity, remembrance, fame, love, harmony, or reconciliation can still come to pass at the moment of death, if not especially at the moment of death. The social web within which all human beings are generated, nourished, raised and evaluated determines the method to encounter a proper death and, conversely, to avoid an improper one. A “good death”, as Robert C. Solomon writes, may be dictated by “petty selfishness wrapped up in enigma”, as in “one of favourite forms of male suicide[:] a pistol or

¹⁶ Snorri Sturluson, *Egil’s Saga*, translated by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, London: Penguin, 1976[ca. 1240], chapter 85. Given the great variety of editions of the Icelandic sagas, I do not refer to page numbers and use the chapter numbers instead. The same is done in this book with regard to thinkers and other authors, whose works are typically organised in numbered books, paragraphs, sections, etc.

¹⁷ Anonymous, *Njál’s Saga*, translated by Hermann Pálsson and Magnus Magnusson, London: Penguin, 1960[13th century], chapter 77.

¹⁸ Ugo Foscolo, “A Zacinto”, in *Poesie*, edited by Giuseppe Chiarini, Livorno: Raffaello Giusti, 1904[1803], stanza I, verse 1 (hereafter abbreviated with “s.” and “v.”). The Italian Romantic poet was born in a now Greek island that, for centuries, belonged to the Republic of Venice.

¹⁹ Ivan Turgenev describes acutely the stoicism of the peasant Maxim’s death in “Death”, in *Sketches from a Hunter’s Notebook*, translated by Richard Freeborn, London: Penguin, 1990[1852]. Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s and Leo Tolstoy’s views on the exemplary acceptance of mortality among the Russian peasantry are discussed in Philippe Ariès, *Storia della morte in Occidente*, translated by Simona Vigezzi, Milan: BUR, 1997[1975], 20 & 25 (translation mine).

shotgun barrel in the mouth, blowing out the brains but leaving the face untouched.” In other words: “The pain is negligible, but the threat to one’s vanity is overwhelming.” What counts, then, is dying in a proper manner, as determined by “the social dimension of death... When I worry about how I will die, bravely or badly, it is for others that I am concerned.”²⁰

[IIIb] Conversely, not only the dying individual may benefit from a “good death”, but so may do a household, a community, or a whole country. They all may be materially aided, or taught an important lesson, or paid more respect by their neighbours, by means of a member’s “good death”. Martyrs, patriots, brave firemen, policemen and doctors have exhibited most clearly this possibility. Moreover, also ‘bad deaths’ can be beneficial, as they can become an instrument to promote more life within the very same social web in which they take place. A ‘fool’s death’, however that may be accomplished, can be a true blessing to a community or a country that is sick of her foolishness (e.g. King Carlo Felice’s death in 1831, which meant the end of reactionary conservatism in the Kingdom of Sardinia).²¹ In brief, from a social point of view, individual deaths can be desirable: they represent a way in which a life’s end is turned into a step towards the improvement of other lives. A “good” or “happy death” is possible there too.²²

[IIIc] Recognising one’s own mortality can be a crucial moment in a person’s process of self-understanding. In Heidegger’s philosophy, for instance, the realisation of one’s “being-towards-death” is a fundamental moment in the *Dasein*’s itinerary towards authenticity.²³ Four centuries before him, Montaigne had written: “[P]remeditation of death is premeditation of freedom... He who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave. Knowing how to die frees us from all subjection and constraint.”²⁴ Death can be desirable, then: the awareness of its presence can enhance a wiser attitude towards life. Maybe death cannot be good *in se* [in itself], but it can be good *per se* [for itself], as it opens the gates to a better life, which is enriched by a deeper comprehension of oneself and possibly lived more richly by the more self-aware individual. Heidegger and Montaigne are not the only philosophers who regarded death as a source of enlightenment and wisdom. In the West, Epicurus, Lucretius, Seneca, and Pascal, just to mention a few, shared analogous views, and so did in the East Dogen, Shosan, Tagore, and Nishitani. It is interesting to notice that for all these authors, and for several others that could be added, the

²⁰ Robert C. Solomon, “Death Fetishism, Morbid Solipsism”, in *Death and Philosophy*, edited by Jeff Malpas and Robert C. Solomon, London: Routledge, 1998, 172 & 175.

²¹ Carlo Felice’s death implied his succession by Carlo Alberto, who was acclaimed as a liberator by his subjects, who, for the most part, seemed to dislike Carlo Felice’s domestic policy. Carlo Alberto would later promulgate the first liberal constitution in the history of the Kingdom of Sardinia, which would then become the Kingdom of Italy in 1861.

²² Wishing somebody else’s death is a rather common desire amongst human beings. The reason for such an expression of hatred (or of extreme love, as it may be in the case of a loved one who is agonising in a hospital bed) does not need to be highly moral. There exists not solely the citizen’s hope that the tyrant’s death may bring about a better time for the country; there is also the siblings’ longing for the old parents’ demise, so that they may get their hands on the inheritance.

²³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 293.

²⁴ Michel de Montaigne, as cited in Graham Parkes, “Death and Detachment: Montaigne, Zen, Heidegger and the Rest”, in *Death and Philosophy*, edited by Jeff Malpas and Robert C. Solomon, 93–4. I analyse this essay in finer detail in chapter 8.

illumination provided by reflecting upon our mortality implied an austere acceptance of life and a flight from its vain pleasures. Nonetheless, this is not the only response that can be logically inferred from the increased awareness of one's finitude. Lorenzo de Medici, for instance, sang a very different song, namely the song of hedonism:

*Questa soma, che vien drieto
sopra l'asino, è Sileno:
così vecchio è ebbro e lieto,
già di carne e d'anni pieno;
se non può star ritto, almeno
ride e gode tuttavia
Chi vuol esser lieto, sia:
di doman non c'è certezza.*²⁵

[IV] *Intra vitam*

Death may not be what it seems. Many religions and philosophies tend to place life and death in sharp contrast with each other. However, not everybody agrees on the actuality of this division. Several authors describe life and death under a different light: as deeply intertwined; as correlated to each other; even as undistinguishable from each other. Such are the cases of Chuang-Tsu's and Lao-Tsu's Taoist doctrines, for instance, which agreed upon the following point: "life and death are human distinctions made by those who do not understand the unity of all things in the Tao."²⁶ What we regard as death and life are actually accidental changes within the same substance, distinguishable but not separate modes of being of the same nature, "condensing and expanding" moments of the "field of psycho-physical energy" constituting the whole cosmos (or *qi*).²⁷ That which we call "death" has to be welcomed, according to these authors, since it perpetuates the ecstatic flux of continuous "transformation of things" (or *wuhua*) that permeates all realities.²⁸

On the other hand, in the case one did not share such a positive interpretation of temporality, which is exemplified by Taoism in Asia and, in Europe, by philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche and Gilles Deleuze, a slightly different perspective is offered by a number of philosophies and

²⁵ "This large burden, follows then / on the donkey comes Silen / aged but drunk and jubilant / he's of flesh and of years plump / he can't well and upright stand / yet he laughs and has great fun / He who wants it merry be / for tomorrow can't foresee" (Lorenzo il Magnifico, "Canzona di Bacco", s. VII, vv. 29-36, in *Opera omnia*, 2007–16[1490], <<http://ilmagnifico.letteraturaoperaomnia.org/index.html>>; translation mine).

²⁶ Douglas T. Overmeyer, "China", in *Death and Eastern Thought*, edited by Frederick H. Holck, New York: Abingdon, 1974, 206.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Roger T. Ames, "Death and Transformation in Classical Daoism", in *Death and Philosophy*, edited by Jeff Malpas and Robert C. Solomon, 61–2. I disregard hereby the distinction between *si* and *sheng*, namely between 'natural' and 'violent' death, as certain Taoists saw the latter as a dramatic interference with the harmony of the *wuhua*.

mystical doctrines.²⁹ Among these, several Buddhist schools provide a significant instance by considering the death of the individual as an encouraging event. This occurs because, first of all, such a ‘breaking down’ of the individual is likely to activate a new individual somewhere else, consistently with the belief in the reincarnation of the soul. Life, in other words, is being transmitted and not dispersed. Secondly, were this activation not the case, then that would mean that an even better result was attained, namely that the individual soul succeeded in escaping from the cycle of *samsara*. The state of ‘unestablished consciousness’ (or *nirvana*) would have been reached. Life would have realised its potential for utmost perfection.³⁰ Death, once more, becomes desirable, as it is revealed as a ripple on the surface of the vast ocean of being, or as a splendid moment of transformation or, in a less Heraclitean way, as a gate to enter, or to re-join, the permanent state of perfection, with which the living had lost touch. Indeed, under the latter respect, i.e. that of permanent perfection, Buddhism (and Hinduism) echoes the blissful Christian and Muslim heaven discussed in [II].

The Second Tetralogy of Death

(1) The analytical dimension of death: To die, to be dying, and to be dead.

The first moment of this second tetralogy intends to outline a brief conceptual analysis aimed at showing a few relevant distinctions, which are often neglected in the scholarly and non-scholarly treatment of the issue of death. I proceed by comparing [I]-[IV] with one another, in order to work out these distinctions. However, before I move on and comply with this task, I wish to resume the four major positions outlined in the first tetralogy of mine:³¹

- [I] *Contemptus mundi* (contempt for the universe)
- [II] *Immortalis eris* (continuation or perfection of life)
- [IIIa] *Bona mors* 1 (individual accomplishment)
- [IIIb] *Bona mors* 2 (collective accomplishment)
- [IIIc] *Bona mors* 3 (wisdom or better sense of life’s worth)
- [IV] *Intra vitam* (transformation within the whole)

²⁹ Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, translated by Walter Kaufmann and M.J. Hollingdale, New York: Random House, 1968[1901], §§580 & 1067; and Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, translated by Paul Patton, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994[1968], 259. With particular regard to the latter, it is interesting to notice that he interprets Freud’s *eros* and *thanatos* as the two faces of the same energy-flow permeating the whole universe. This line of thought is remarkably close to the Taoist and Zen teaching of life and death as the two faces of the same *qi*.

³⁰ I use “West”, “East”, “Western”, etc. to give a sense of the geographical origins of a certain school of thought or doctrine. As such, these categories serve my purpose and possess no deeper cultural or philosophical meaning. For a detailed exposition of the diverse Buddhist positions on *samsara* and death, cf. Roy C. Amore, “The Heterodox Philosophical Systems”, in *Death and Eastern Thought*, edited by Frederick H. Holck, Nashville: Abingdon, 1975, 114–63. There are several, diverse interpretations of *nirvana*; still, all Buddhist schools, with no exception at all, teach that death has not to be feared and that, if it is capable of bringing forth *nirvana*, then it ought to be praised.

³¹ I expect that the reader to keep in mind the types of conception of death corresponding to [I]–[IV] while reading the following pages of this chapter.

The first distinction is between to die (or the event of death) and dying.

[I], [II], [IIIa–b], and [IV] seem to deal mostly with the event of death; while [IIIc] deals mostly with the consciousness of mortality or, more broadly, with the process of dying. I do not mean to say that the process of dying is excluded by [I]–[IIIb] and by [IV]. Rather, I intend to highlight the fact that their emphasis is placed on the event of death, rather than on the ongoing dying of the subject that accompanies her living throughout: “Death is the condition of your creation, it is part of you... The constant work of your life is to build death. You are in death while you are in life... During life you are dying.”³²

[I] emphasises the event of death by stressing the liberating function of the self’s annihilation, which, incidentally, does not necessarily coincide with death. In truth, if we identify the self as the capacity of reacting to stimuli or with retaining certain mental faculties, then patients in permanent vegetative state or unrecoverable alcoholics may be hardly attributed any tenable principle of selfhood: they may be (and, indeed, sometimes are) regarded as tantamount to dead persons.³³

[II] operates analogously to [I], but *via* several forms of *memento mori* [reminders of mortality], all of which underline the importance of reaching the fatal moment with an active balance on one’s *liber vitae* [book of life]. It is only with a clean, good record—whatever “good” may mean in a doctrine’s lexicon—that one can happily commute from this world to the next (and join the cherubs or the Valkyries).

[III] teaches a similar approach in [a], by insisting on the nobility, beauty, and on the goodness of determinate types of death. In [b], instead, it concentrates its scope on the usefulness of death. Still, in both [IIIa] and [b], the stress is placed upon the moment of death as an individual act or opportunity. This is done in connection with possible positive outcomes, such as enduring social memory, sincere mourning, or collective gain. [III] differs in [c], which does not orbit around death as such, but around the notions of mortality, finitude, or “being-towards-death”. This type of *memento mori* is not concerned with the final event and with the mystical or social transmutation of the individual. On the contrary, the accent is posited on the *hic et nunc* [here and now], i.e. on the present mundane life of the individual, and on how the awareness of one’s temporality should pave the road towards true wisdom for this life.³⁴

³² Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, I, 20.

³³ I do not discuss this issue further, which is nowadays widely debated in bioethics. Euthanasia, palliative care, medical experimentation on humans, live organ transplants, clinical and juridical definitions of death are all cases related to this topic. It is quite evident, in fact, that the line distinguishing between the human person (or the self) and the mere human being (or the individual body) is also the line determining the recognition or the withdrawal of specific legal rights.

³⁴ Quite rarely is the full, ‘philosophical’ awareness of mortality held responsible for a degeneration of the individual’s morality, that is to say, to be responsible for ‘darkness’ rather than for ‘enlightenment’. It may be of interest to recall Dostoyevsky’s case, though. In some of his novels, he analyses in fine detail (although disapprovingly) the psychology of such cases of anti-wisdom, or of ‘black’ hedonism. Some individuals deduce from the consciousness of human frailty the deepest contempt for themselves and for their fellows, e.g. anti-heroes such as Svidrigailov in 1866 *Crime and Punishment*, the young Verkhovensky in 1871–2 *Demons*, and Andrei Versilov in 1875 *The Adolescent* (cf. final bibliography for full bibliographic references).

[IV], finally, seems to prioritise death on dying, insofar as it stresses the ways in which the self may dissolve and join the underlying texture of the universe. In several cases (e.g. Japanese Zen, Madhyamika Buddhism) the process of dying is translated into the very fatal moment of death, which just presents itself at every moment of that which we call “life”. Every exhaling, every diastole, every subsiding thought, every night of sleep, every day passing by are seen, in fact, as a little death: “[T]he alternating current of life appears to flow on, oscillating over the abyss, and flowing off continually”.³⁵

The second distinction is between death as the last event in life and death as a permanent condition, i.e. the status of being dead.

[I] and, more modestly, [IV] focus on the permanent state of selflessness following the event of death. [II] and [III] deal mainly with the very last moment of one’s life. [I] promises peace and release at the highest degree. Its point of strength is the total dissolution of the conscious self, the bearer of all the pain, to which, apparently, the existence of the human being pertains:

*Or poserai per sempre,
Stanco mio cor. Però l’inganno estremo,
Ch’eterno io mi credei. Però. Ben sento,
In noi di cari inganni,
Non che la speme, il desiderio è spento.
Posa per sempre. Assai
Palpitasti. Non val cosa nessuna
I moti tuoi, nè di sospiri è degna
La terra. Amaro e noia
La vita, altro mai nulla; e fango è il mondo.
T’acqueta omai. Dispera
L’ultima volta. Al gener nostro il fato
Non donò che il morire. Omai disprezza
Te, la natura, il brutto
Poter che, ascoso, a comun danno impera,
E l’infinita vanità del tutto.*³⁶

[II] and [IIIa–b] privilege the perspective of death as an event, i.e. as the last moment of a life and, consequently, as the most significant moment of an individual’s entire existence, if not even the true climax. They teach to the individual or to the community about how to make the most of this event, either by gaining an afterlife, or dignity, or whatever positive gain may come out of

³⁵ Graham Parkes, “Death and Detachment: Montaigne, Zen, Heidegger and the Rest”, 88.

³⁶ “Forever will you rest from now, / my weary heart. The great pretence did die, / which I believed immortal. It died. I do feel, / in us for dear deceits / or hope, that the desire is gone. / Rest forever. Much / you did beat. No value have / your motions, nor it’s worth lamenting for / the earth. Bitterness and boredom / nothing else life ever gave; and grime’s the universe. / Calm yourself now. Despair / for the last time. To our species fate / granted nothing but death. Now loathe / yourself, nature, the evil / power that, hidden, rules for the ruin of all / and the infinite futility of all” (Giacomo Leopardi, “A se stesso”, in *Canti*, 1835, <<http://digilander.libero.it/bepi/biblio3a/indice8.html>>; translation mine).

death. [IIIc] does nearly the same as [II] and [IIIa-b], but in a more intellectual fashion. In this case, in fact, the stress is placed upon the awareness that one day, inevitably, death shall come. Thus, by keeping this very notion firm in one's own mind, the person may return to her life serenely and ready to enjoy it more maturely and more inclusively. As Montaigne wrote: "[A]ll the wisdom and reasoning in the world boils down finally to this point: to teach us not to be afraid to die."³⁷

[IV] constitutes a rather ambiguous case. Death as an event is in fact dissolved or treated as poorly relevant. Death as a permanent state seems to disappear as well, at least insofar as the gaze is directed on the eternal flux of being which underlies all phenomena, and which is generally described in terms of boundless consciousness or energy. The self is gone, but something quasi-living or quasi-thinking persists. In this sense, exceptional are those Indian schools embracing a radical materialist ontology (e.g. the Carvakas of the 7th century B.C.), which anticipate the de-humanization of the human being that we encounter in much of modern and post-modern Western philosophy (e.g. Friedrich Nietzsche or Gilles Deleuze). In these cases, the whole to which the dead returns is that of nature in its inorganic and organic components, rather than a quasi-mystical realm of non-spatial consciousness or energy.³⁸

(2) The axiological dimension of death: The value of death

The second moment of this second tetralogy of death is intended to individuate briefly the major elements of value connected with the accounts of death considered in the first tetralogy. As a general consideration, the phenomenon of death appears to be culturally laden with negative and/or positive implications of value, both as a reason for taking it into consideration, and as an outcome of having taken it into consideration. However, I do not spend many words on this second moment, since this chapter is axiologically biased *ab origine* [from the start]. As mentioned in the introductory remarks, I have chosen only positions that deem death to be desirable, even if for different reasons and under different circumstances.

[I] is probably the most radical case in terms of its approval of death. Death is a blessing, a fortune, or a goal to be eager of. Some thinkers (e.g. Arthur Schopenhauer) did even preach for absolute chastity in view of the extinction of the human race. After all, if one looks at life as a disvalue, what else could be more valuable than its total annihilation?

[II] and [III], whether dealing with death as the final step, or with death as dying, still regard both cases as valuable.³⁹ The difference between the two approaches concerns the modality in which they do it. [II] considers death as a crucial moment in human life, so that much of its teaching is directed to providing the human being with an adequate structure of understanding, in

³⁷ Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, I, 20.

³⁸ It could be objected that, in the West at least, several voices have expressed such a dry, dramatic form of materialism (e.g. Leucippus, Lucretius, Hobbes, Condorcet). I do not have strong objections to adding further names to those of Nietzsche and Deleuze. Also, Greek and Roman atomism did not exclude completely the idea of a *logos* regulating the flux of atoms in space, and some materialists and sensists of the French Enlightenment did not deny the presence of a Mind behind the cosmos.

³⁹ Interestingly, many anthropologists have claimed that religions arose in order to provide answers to the mystery of death.

order for her to be able to cope with it. [IIIc] is often equally emphatic about death, as with Heidegger's insistence on the epiphany of Being *via* death-induced "*Angst*" [(existential) anxiety], or with the Zen's *Leitmotiv* [recurring theme] of living having let go of life.⁴⁰

[IIIa–b], instead, are far more context-dependent. In fact, not always one can choose how to die, and therefore make the most of death; nor can or may a community benefit always from a member's death. Plausibly, the only thing that may be done nearly always is the creation of those conditions that allow for the maximisation of the number of good or useful deaths. Education, myth-making, and social pressure on the one hand, testaments, ritual cannibalism, and funeral business on the other, are all forms in which this kind of preparatory, good-death-enhancing settings can be instituted and maintained.

[IV], once again, is the most ambiguous case. Its denial of the actuality of death would seem to lead towards indifference to both life and death. Yet, as Mahayana Buddhism exemplifies, the concern about life and death is present, for the fact itself of teaching about life and death implies an axiological investiture of the two.⁴¹ Similarly, Taoism, Jainism, and Hinduism, in all of their forms, do want to teach us how to avoid suffering and, *a fortiori*, how to live and how to die. The same can be said about the Western voices mentioned in my work: death may be proclaimed not to exist, not to be real, not to be much at all; still, it remains something to be explained, understood, accepted and, in certain cases, enjoyed (e.g. Nietzsche's principle of *amor fati* [love of destiny] or Montaigne's belief that "to philosophise is to learn to die").⁴²

(3) The ontological dimension of death: Who dies?

A complex structure of ontological presuppositions lurks behind the various positions on death as a *desideratum* (or *desiderandum*) we have encountered. In order for a *desideratum* to be, in fact, there must be an individual or collective *desiderans* [somebody who desires], one or more actual or virtual *desiderabilia* [possible objects of desire], and an origin or a cause of such *desiderabilia*'s becoming *desiderata/desideranda* [objects of desire/objects to be desired], which I call *ratio desiderii* [the ground for desiring].

[I] comprises a clear *desiderans*: the self. It is the individual, in fact, who sets death as a positive end, i.e. as a *desideratum*. She sets it so axiologically, for she evaluates it positively. It may even set it so ontologically, for she may commit suicide: this, because there are no other or no better *desiderabilia*. Virtually, or hypothetically, there would be only the very opposite of death i.e. life—a life without pain, without suffering, without all those defects that make it unbearable. Yet, a painless life is a mere dream—a tragic, frustrating, unattainable *desideratum*.

⁴⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 310.

⁴¹ The act of teaching presupposes an attribution of value to life, even when a comprehensive meaning of life is denied (e.g. Sartre's existentialism): at least, being aware of life's ultimate meaninglessness makes living worthier (or less worthless) than persevering in the ignorance of this truth (more on the tacit axiological dimension of life-approbation can be read in Richard T. Allen's 1991 article "The Meaning of Life and Education", *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 25(1), 47–57).

⁴² Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, I, 20. More on both Nietzsche and Montaigne follows in chapter 8.

The *ratio desiderii* is the sorrowful realisation of this disturbing truth: this valley of tears shall never be dry—may the self dwell in it no more.

[II] comprises more or less the same *desiderans* as [I]. The self is the one who has to gain access to the further- or after-life. Depending on the doctrine, a certain part of the self, variously called “soul”, “spirit”, “pneuma”, etc., is often the protagonist of this longing for death. The individual body may break down, but the real self (i.e. its *principium individuationis* [principle of individuation]) does not. Instead, it persists and moves on to a new form of being. The *desiderabilia* of this afterlife are variously depicted among the diverse human creeds, mythologies, and doctrines that [II] comprehends. Socrates, for instance, proposed an eternity of intellectual contemplation; Teresa of Avila a perpetual state of ecstatic bliss; Mohammed and the Vikings agreed upon a hyperbolic multiplication of mundane pleasures (whereas the former spoke mainly of food and virgin sexual partners, the latter focused on good ales and fighting). The *desideranda* can vary in a surprising manner. Still, a common *ratio desiderii* may be individuated in the appreciation of the goods that this life may give only in a limited way. That which shall come after this life, if properly earned, is an unlimited and ameliorated version of them. It could be objected that, in a number of doctrines, the body, as opposed to the soul, aims at different forms of fulfilment, which may be denied in the afterlife. This may appear to be true if one takes an external point of observation with respect to the doctrines. From an internal point of observation, in fact, this dismissal is absolutely consistent, since the body is not the true self, and its cravings are erroneous and ill-directed.

[III] extends the understanding of death to the social dimensions attached to it. In [a], and even more evidently in [c], it is still the self that plays the major role as *desiderans*. However, his looking at death as a *desideratum* is heavily dependent upon what the community in which she lives, or the exclusive judgment in which she trusts, regards as *desiderabilia*. It is up to the context in which she dies to transform such possible achievements into *desideranda*. In [b] it is the social body that takes over the part as *desiderans*, making it explicit how the self is more than a physical entity and more than a natural creature: it is a social being. Yet, all three sub-cases of [III] seem to offer the same *ratio desiderii*: life may grant us a few positive things, even with respect to the element of death that it necessarily entails. [c] elects wisdom and its correlated fullness of life as the most precious gain possible. [a] and [b] vary quite a lot, instead, but they do agree on the fact that death does bring forth some good whenever it enhances life, whether this is understood in terms of immortality, survival, fruitful legacy, exemplarity, enduring heritage, etc.

[IV] shifts too the attention from the self to the whole. The self is here discarded as a fictitious cluster of matter and laws thereof, or of instances of consciousness and laws thereof, according to the basic ontology endorsed by the various different doctrines. Death is a *desideratum* just because it destroys this temporary cluster and allows the whole to proceed further. Somehow, the *desiderans* is the self, who is taught to appreciate the idea that she shall die and re-join the totality in which she is already immersed and without which she would have never been. *Desiderabilia* are the ontological stages of collapse of the self’s isolation, which enlarge her horizon and manifest the interdependence of all the manifestations of being. The *ratio desiderii* seems to be rather unselfish, hence difficult to connote as a gain for the self. The states of boundless consciousness or of vital energy-flow, of chaotic flux of matter inside which she is bound to vanish, are most selfless. Life, nevertheless, seems to persist in spite of all, or

better, as all that which is there, i.e. as the whole of being embracing the particular beings as the ocean embraces its drops (interestingly, *nirvana* is often described as an *oceanic* field of boundless consciousness).

(4) The existential dimension of death: Who does really care?

Various existential attitudes can be derived from the previous three elements of the tetralogy. Once again, my analysis is brief, since I have delimited my field of analysis to a precise set of possible reactions to the *datum* [given] of death, namely those involving a positive response.⁴³

[I] suggests that death should be sought after by all means. Existence is horrible; hence we should try to get rid of it. Whether by very direct means, such as suicide, or indirect ones, such as asceticism, we must flee from the world's cage.

[II] is somehow similar to [I], in the sense that the sooner one crosses the final threshold (in the appropriate manner), the sooner one crosses from the domain of imperfection into that of perfection. Once again, the modalities in which this can be done are diverse, but the underlying logic is one and the same. [I] and [II] entail several ways in which somebody can rush towards death: committing suicide, engaging in mortal fights, leading a Byronesque lifestyle (an *ante-litteram* [before the word was coined] Romantic version of the motto "sex, drugs, and rock'n roll"), or leading a Pachomian monastic life-style (inclusive of self-deprivation).

[IIIa–b] espouse a more moderate approach. Death has not to be longed for under all circumstances. It is only when death is appropriate that it is to be sought after. Death must be faced in the right way—with the sword or the pen in one's hand. If it is not right, it is wrong—indeed a reason for scorn, shame, or oblivion. [IIIc] invites the sage to "familiarize with death", so that the day death comes she will not be unprepared.⁴⁴ In this perspective, [IIIc] is a variation along the lines of [IIIa–b]. The right death is one to which the sage arrives *qua* sage, and not as a timorous, doubtful, unprepared commoner, who has wasted or not enjoyed the opportunity of leading an enlightened, authentic existence.

[IV] calls for a similarly enlightened, serene acceptance of death. Death is hardly anything, in fact, for our own life is hardly anything as well. All that dwells in the contingent is nothing but a fleeting construction, an illusion, an epiphenomenon, a temporary concretion of a more fundamental energy, which survives unscathed. Such an approach cannot but reduce the weight and the meaningfulness of the individual *qua* individual and, *a fortiori*, the traumatic impact of her death. Under this perspective, Nietzsche represents an *unicum* [unique case] in the history of Western thought, as far as [IV] is concerned. In spite of his recognition of the inhuman nature of the human being (e.g. our constitutive, utter and inescapable cruelty), in spite of his Schopenhauerian background regarding the overwhelming power of blind instincts and natural drives, in spite of his pulverization of any superior meaning of life following the recognition of the universal power of chance in the endless recurrence of the same, Nietzsche still wants us to

⁴³ *Pace* Heidegger, death is not the only fixed *datum* in human existence: there are birth, biological functions, inter-subjectivity, and, as Benjamin Franklin would add, taxes. Perhaps all of them, in their own special way, can assist us in reaching authenticity.

⁴⁴ Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, I, 20.

accept reality as it is and to rejoice in it. The individual is almost nothing, but she is also all that she can be. Turning the French mystic Blaise Pascal upside-down, Nietzsche dives into infinite contingency, ready to play with all that is to come along, sorrow included. Under this respect, his key notions of the *Übermensch* (or “superman”) and of the “revaluation of all values” become extremely significant: only an utterly new human being can say “Yes” to life (and to death) under such conditions, thus becoming the creator of her unique (yet recursive) life-path ⁴⁵

The Complexity of the Ontology of Death

It is important to reflect further on the implications of the ontological dimension of death explored in (3) and, by means of it, on the mutual interconnectedness of (1)–(4). It is important to realise the number of ontological levels at which the human beings spend their existence, often in a state of complete unawareness. Language, chemistry, cellular activity, electric exchanges with the environment are, ontologically speaking, as truly part of ‘us’ as will, desire, and parental functions. Life and death can be consequently read at several different levels, and they do not necessarily coincide with the body’s disintegration. In truth, humans are given many a form of immortality, and as many of mortality. If we consider just the level of the body, for example, then we must notice that the individual’s death liberates energies from the temporary form or concretion inside which they had been trapped, i.e. inside the individual herself. The same consideration applies to inorganic matter, which, from a physical point of view, is equivalent to energy. Thus, if the universe is going to exist after our death—if energy will keep flowing—part of the merit goes to the dying ones.

At a different level, such as the biological one, the death of an individual does not imply the destruction of her unique genetic information. The individual may have had children, in fact, who are likely to carry a relevant amount of that information for at least another generation. And still at the biological level, the individual’s death may often involve the growth and flourishing of other forms of life, such as earthworms and fungi that are going to take care of the individual’s process of decomposition: the individual does not abandon the food chain till her corpse is completely vanished, as this is slowly metabolised in the *apparatus* of snails, microbes, and of other life-forms.

What really matters, then, in order to have any kind of bodily survival at all, is that something related to the body survives the threshold-event that we call “death”. All this may seem obvious, if not even trivial; still, it is most relevant. It is relevant in order to get a picture of how complex the human being’s ontology is. In other terms, we are much more than the ‘we’ we think of being in our ordinary experience. Perhaps, it is hardly relevant for the dead, at least after the event of death. It could be of some relevance, or consolation, to the not-yet-dead (the living, or to-be-dead aka *moriturus*), since she would know that, after death, she can return to nature a good deal of that which nature had given to her (quarks, oxygen, water, or whatever we may pick as an instance). However, after death, does this really mean anything to the dead?

⁴⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Also Sprach Zarathustra: Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen*, Zürich: Manesse, 2001[1883–91] (translation mine). Further remarks will be presented in chapter 8.

This is the kind of problem that is bound to accompany any philosophy of death: understanding death is an issue for the dying individual, i.e. everybody who is alive; while for the dead, as far as we can know, nothing is seemingly an issue any longer. Yet, this line of argument is based on a series of evaluative assumptions (e.g. understanding may help to deal with issues, issues may be relevant, new meanings may change attitudes, annihilation may be a source of anxiety or of relief, etc.), as well as a number of ontological assumptions (e.g. the non-existence of a soul, the persistence of a person's consciousness in another material structure, etc.). These assumptions do not solely show the interconnectedness of (1)–(4), but also how much the third perspective of my first tetralogy (*bona mors*) may be presupposed fairly easily in the secular scholarly context of the 21st century. Until a few generations ago, many a supporter of [II] or [IV] would have regarded these views as short-sighted reductions of the complex reality in which we live to the level of physical reality alone. Perhaps, such views would have been discarded as naïve and poorly supported by either evidence or authority or both. Such views might even be right: this issue is not something that I can resolve hereby. What matters here, instead, is to highlight how varied, comprehensive, and inexhaustible is the ontology related to the body's death.

Analogous considerations can be developed with regard to the level of consciousness as well, i.e. the level at which evaluations and ontological assumptions take place *qua* evaluations and assumptions (and at which issues of identity and existence are most commonly addressed). With regard to consciousness, in fact, the individual's thoughts, words, and experiences are not necessarily bound to disappear when the body ends. Her recorded memories, even as a mere name on a gravestone, are left to those who will have access to them. In addition, one's legacy (moral, artistic, educational, criminal, etc.) does not vanish with the end of the possibility for the individual's consciousness to have access to her own products. In truth, the importance of these legacies is made evident by the individual's interest in them during her own lifetime, i.e. prior to her own death. People want to be remembered as models of virtue, skilfulness, integrity, capacity, etc. They want their work—their poems, paintings, companies, collections, etc.—to survive after their death. The poet Ugo Foscolo saw his sonnets as the road toward immortality. The millionaire chemist Alfred Bader saw philanthropy as an alternative way to obtain the same result, as seven centuries before him did the Scrovegni family, who commissioned to Giotto the decoration of the famous Scrovegni chapel in Padua. Even murder, if well-designed and visibly accomplished, may guarantee similar results, whilst others become blunders—Jack the Ripper *docet* [teaches]. What really matters, in terms of survival of the fruits of one's consciousness, is that at least others may survive and preserve these fruits from extinction (naturally, it can be hard to imagine that one may be concerned with this kind of problem after her death).

Once we see how many forms of immortality we are granted, one may then conclude: “well, then my death is not such a big deal, for I shall live on in so many other ways!”. On the other side, one could reply as well: “yes, but where do I, Jacques Bonhomme, have a place in these forms of immortality?” [I], [II], and [IIIc] would represent most plausible places for this latter type of question to arise. [IIIb] and [IV], instead, would seem to favour the former type of consideration. The crucial point does not seem to be merely a choice between life and death, but rather between an understanding of both life and death as affecting an eminently individualised or interrelated reality. We partake of both spheres, why should we reject one or the other? It is

true that most of the bodily, conscious, and variously extra-individual, process-related determinations that have discussed under [IIIb] and [IV] are generally indifferent to life and death. In effect, they are present during both the life and the death of the individual. Instead, interrelatedness persists and insists *post mortem* [after death]. It is the individual *quid* [quintessence], though, that which seems to make the difference. Even if some part of a particular individual may persist, in fact, another part of her is annihilated—her original identity is annihilated. The value that we place on it is that which seems to make certain perspectives on death more or less appealing. However, this appeal may be explained in terms of cultural habits, which turn certain deaths into ‘good deaths’, and others into ‘bad deaths’. The doctrines mentioned in [IV] (with the notable exception of Friedrich Nietzsche’s) seem to suggest that our cultural obsession with individuality is at the origin of many an existential problem, some of which may even lead to the tragic conclusions mentioned in [I]. Who is right? Can anybody be right? Or is there any way in which these two questions can be harmonised together?

I have not provided here a criterion to select one stance rather than another: this is not the goal of my work. I leave it to the reader to decide where to leap with her faith—or where to follow her reason, if reason can guide one that far. Certainly, I hope to contribute to the reasons one may have for reflecting about these issues. In fact, I believe that it is possible to encompass both sides of the problem, i.e. individual and interrelated, without denying the correctness of the insights that come from both of them. Specifically, we can accept our living and dying in many ways and times throughout our individual existence. Nonetheless, why should we underestimate the impact that death has at these various levels, hence also (if not mainly) at the personal level? I do not intend to deny that the end of that process that we call one’s life has a dramatic side. I do not reject individual will, desires, hopes, achievements, as mere illusions, which is what part of the doctrines mentioned in [IV] does. This refusal to reduce the individual experience to an underlying ‘real’ form of reality, to which we are re-joined by death, is that which allows us to place value on what we call one’s “own” life. Still, the acceptance of the perspicuous identity of different, although interrelated, ontological levels is that which can make sense of any determination of value pertaining to anything that be other than the individuating substratum’s; hence also of the recognition of the importance in one’s “own” life of the opinion of our peers, of the proper upbringing of one’s children, and of the well-being of the future generations (human and non-human), etc. In truth, one is likely to be able to be preoccupied with her *post-mortem* approval, fame, success, etc. only whilst she is still alive, as it seems plausible that one can do something about it only whilst she is still alive. Yet, once again, this is a plausible option if we take for granted that [III] depicts the reality of things, which, as I stated before, is something that has not been assessed for certain. As I said, I do not intend to solve this issue hereby. Rather, what matters to my end, is to reflect upon the interconnectedness of the various levels I have just presented separately in my two tetralogies.

The possibility itself of building one’s legacy or one’s fruits whatsoever *intra vitam* is dependent upon a number of other concomitant conditions: the presence of other human beings, for instance. Nobody was ever born by herself, as well as nobody was ever granted any form of approval, success, etc. without some kind of interaction with other humans. More generally, no value, or even no language, meaning, or self-understanding seems possible without the concomitant presence of other human beings (or medium-sized social mammals, at the very

least). And the interactions with such other creatures must be organised in some way: there must be cultural patterns, regularities, and standards. In other terms, nobody lives outside a *polis* of some kind, at least until she decides to abandon it. Quite often, one does not leave it at all, no matter for how long she may have abandoned it: in Scotland, they still take flowers to William Wallace's grave. In brief, several interconnected dimensions of being can be inferred from the scrutiny of the death of consciousness. The social sphere is one (especially with [IIIa–b]). The political is another, as it can be inferred from the given of the mortality of one's consciousness, since no society can survive without some form of distribution of competence and power amongst the consciousness of the citizens (see again [IIIa–b]). Analogously, the linguistic sphere can be deduced, since there must be some form of communication in such a society—and so on with whatever super-subjective sphere one may desire to think of. As it was the case with the death of the body, so it is with the death of the consciousness: it relates to a varied, comprehensive, inexhaustible catalogue of determinations of being. So vast and diverse is the catalogue of these determinations, that one may even conclude by stating that death is a monad, as it contains the universe within itself (but what amidst the existing beings is not, after all, a monad related to all there is?).⁴⁶

Speaking *à la* Leibniz, then, death is a perspective on the whole. All possible dimensions of being seem to be related to it, whether directly or indirectly. All possible dimensions of value do seem to impinge upon it, as do the existential ones. Whether it is riches, wisdom, love, or respect that we want, either individually or collectively, we want them before and/or after our death (depending on our ontological presuppositions), and we are ready to spend our whole life trying to get that which we want. Whatever that which we want is, our wanting is possible because, ontologically, there are the 'we', the desires, the capacity of having them, the reality within which we try to fulfil them, etc. Whether some of these dimensions are more basic than others, it is a problem that I do not intend to discuss here: my work intends to be a cultural exploration and not an assessment on the many positions available in the field of philosophical ontology. Still, I hope to have expressed and exemplified sufficiently the complexity of the themes that an investigation in the phenomenon of the desirable death may evince. In effect, it would seem that the whole universe can be shown through this particular monad.

The Dialectic of Life and Death

As for the focus of our monad, however, something more specific seems to come out of the exploration that I have led. The perspective on the whole that death represents, in fact, seems to be pointing toward a particular ground of value. Throughout this brief scrutiny of the main trends in the positive approaches to the phenomenon of death, death seems to be of some relevance for life itself. Montaigne and Nietzsche had already suggested that to be able to face the issue of death is a way to cast some light on life itself (cf. [IIIc]). Along those lines, what I am suggesting hereby is that every philosophy of death that regards death as a positive reality is, ultimately, a

⁴⁶ According to Leibniz's 1714 *Monadology* (translated by Jonathan Bennett, 2007, <<http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/leibniz1714b.pdf>>), monads are the "the true *atoms* of Nature", i.e. any existing substance, which can be legitimately considered as the centre of the universe, for all entities relate, no matter how indirectly, to all others, past, present and future (§3).

philosophy of life, the most articulate contemporary token of which is offered by the Canadian philosopher John McMurtry who, in his life-value onto-axiology, claims that life constitutes the most fundamental value (or source of value) across individuals, cultures, and epochs. By arguing in this direction, McMurtry moves daringly against the dominating post-modern trend spreading value-relativism in all disciplinary fields, and especially in the humanities. He endorses the idea according to which, by carefully analysing Western as well as Eastern religions, the declared goals of left- as well as of right-wing political ideologies, the justifications of conservative as well as of progressive social programmes, the appreciation as well as the condemnation of novel artistic creations, we can individuate a common ground of value. This ground of value can be cast as a “Primary Axiom of Value” or “value of all values” that is expressed as follows:

X is value if and only if, and to the extent that, x consists in or enables a more coherently inclusive range of thought/feeling/action than without it.

Where these three ultimate fields of value are defined as:

thought = internal image and concept (T)

feeling = the felt side of being (F) / senses, desires, emotions, moods

action = animate movement (A) across species and organizations

Conversely:

x is disvalue if and only if, and to the extent that, x reduces/disables any range of thought/experience/action.

Symbolically expressed:

$+V = > LR +$ and $-V = < LR$

where $L = \text{Range of T-F-A}$

and $/ = \text{and/or}^{47}$

The triplet comprising thought, feeling (aka experience) and action indicates what McMurtry understands life to be like. According to his theory, in fact, life encompasses three planes of being: [1] The plane of the organism’s biological capacity for movement (e.g. being capable of moving freely one’s limbs, or of breathing while asleep); [2] the plane of felt being, feeling, or awareness (e.g. being capable of feeling enlightened by this chapter, seeing it, or of being more vividly receptive); and [3] the plane of cognitive abstraction, or self-awareness (e.g. being capable of any mental representation whatsoever: from the simplest image-thoughts to the most abstract forms of mathematical demonstration). Thus, according to McMurtry, anything has value in proportion to the ranges of further biological movement, awareness, and self-awareness that it enhances. Food, emotions, education, taxation, or its reduction, are valuable—good—if and

⁴⁷ John McMurtry, *Philosophy and World Problems*, s.v. “The Primary Axiom and the Life-Value Compass”, §6.1.

only if, and insofar as, they guarantee the attainment of a deeper and/or broader scope for action, felt being, and thought. Not only does McMurtry's theory of value suggest that actions, events, intentions, or phenomena have value insofar as they promote wider ranges of life, but also that valueless ones, i.e. life-destructive actions, events, intentions, or phenomena, can be mistaken for, or misrepresented as, life-promoting ones: one thing is to claim that x is value, another is that x is, in fact, value.⁴⁸

All of the cases mentioned under [I]–[IV] address life in at least one of its constitutive dimensions. By referring to at least one of such planes, not only do they describe, or even prescribe, what life is or should be with respect to death; more deeply, they describe, or even prescribe, death as function of life: life is that which makes death desirable.

In [I], for instance, death is desirable because it may rescue a person from a life that she despises—since she would like to have another life so powerfully, that its denial makes her opt for no life at all. Life, as the thought of a fulfilling existence and as the realisation of its impossibility, is the actual engine of the person's preference for death. It may not surprise that Montaigne, faithful to the tradition of Stoicism, regarded suicide as a sensible way to escape from life, which is to be employed whenever life should become too hard to bear. Arthur Schopenhauer will provide an analogous account of suicide three centuries later, yet not to justify suicide, but to condemn it. Killing oneself because of life's harshness, in fact, was seen by Schopenhauer as an extreme act of affirmation of life itself, namely as a further and most dramatic expression of the universal, eternal, uncreated, undirected *Wille zum Leben* [will to live], which blindly guides most, if not all, individual existences, in the guise of the unconscious spring of desire.⁴⁹ With suicide, for Schopenhauer, the life-directed *voluntas* [will] of the individual does not negate life: the subject commits suicide since she cannot get the kind of fulfilment she would like to be enjoying. Life should be denied, instead, *qua* life, i.e. because of its being the source of all human sorrows, for life affirms itself each and every time the individual desires something. Suicide is not the negation of life, then, because it is performed *in nomine vitae* [in the name of life] and not *in nomine mortis* [in the name of death]: it is performed in order to fulfil a desire. Aesthetic contemplation, *pietas* [piety, compassion, humanity] and asceticism, on the contrary, are the right ways to demonstrate proper *noluntas* [unwill], i.e. to deny life's domain over oneself, for they abstract the individual from the realm of desire (more is to be said on Schopenhauer and philosophical pessimism in the pages to follow).

In [II], [IIIa] and [IIIc], instead, death is desirable because it may bring forth more life to the one who dies—since it grants access to a never-ending life (e.g. the Valhalla), or to a somewhat more modest form of immortality (e.g. fame), or to a superior form of life (e.g. the examined life of the sage). In [IIIb], death is desirable because it may bring forth more life as such—the extinction of the individual may be a necessary sacrifice in order to increase the quality and/or the quantity of life around her (e.g. the patriot's self-sacrifice for the good of the community). In [IV], death is desirable because it may be just a misunderstood face of life—nature, the universe,

⁴⁸ Further references to and explanations of life-value onto-axiology are found in chapters 2–4.

⁴⁹ Cf. Arthur Schopenhauer, "On Suicide", in *Studies in Pessimism*, translated by T. Bailey Saunders, Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2014[1851], <<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/schopenhauer/arthur/pessimism/contents.html>>.

the oceanic field of consciousness that flows eternally; what we regard as individual lives and deaths are just ripples on the perpetual flux of a deeper form of life through the eons of time.

It could be easily replied that death, as, perhaps, any other concept, entails its own opposite, i.e., in this case, life. The dialectic between death and life hereby individuated would be, in other words, mere conceptual blatancy. The problem with this reply, however, is that it focuses only on the logical (or semantic) aspect of their interrelation, which is only one of the many possible approaches one can take (as exemplified by my four approaches [I]–[IV]). In truth, this assertion condemns this dialectical insight to a lower status of philosophical complexity just because it does not dare to look at other possible dimensions of inquiry, such as the axiological, the ontological, and the existential. Besides, it should be stressed that death, as very few other issues, appears to be an eminently axiological and existential issue, even before it may be reduced to a specimen for intellectual scrutiny. All societies, since the very dawn of humankind, have always shown a particular reverence towards this phenomenon, long before they ever started formulating philosophical or religious hypotheses in any codified fashion. Most humans, in addition, seem equally concerned with such a given of their existence, insofar as they tend to deal with it in a non-trivial manner, both in the case in which they try to avoid it as a threat, and in the case in which they call it upon themselves as a blessing or as a last resource (as seen with [I]). The reason for which death is regarded in such a non-trivial manner is because of its capacity of making the difference in one's life (or in the life of a family, of a tribe, of a community, as seen with [IIIb]). Whether death interrupts 'prematurely' a life, or does come 'at the right time', or is not actually the end, the evaluation of its in-/opportunity is always made in view of life itself (if, at least, my rendering of life *via* life-value onto-axiology is granted some plausibility).

Specifically, for the cases that I have been discussing (for all of which death is desirable), it seems appropriate to state that the key-element determining the desirability of death is exactly its capacity of affecting life in life's own terms. As my cultural exploration can help us realise, the more one investigates into the mystery of death, the more one finds out remarks, reflections, insights, perspectives on life. Death is a mirror: the more one looks at it, the more one sees herself; the more one looks at its features, the more one sees her own looking eyes. If one desires death, in one or more of the forms discussed in this succinct account of mine, then she actually desires a different life—a painless life, a happier life, a brighter life, a truer life, etc. Life shines most brightly in death's mirror—Medieval Christianity spoke, for one, of the *speculum mortis*: “the mirror of death”.

Notes on Pessimism

This game of mirrors applies most emblematically to philosophical pessimism, namely the stance that would seem to pose the strongest challenge to life-value onto-axiology.

I do not intend to explain in further detail or criticise the triplet of dimensions that, for McMurtry, define life. I find it sufficiently clear and compatible with our notions of common sense about life; hence, I take it as valid. Rather, I intend to tackle the more basic issue of life being actually such a fundamental value (or source of value). Too many, in fact, are the voices that, from time immemorial, have utterly deprecated life. As early as in the sixth century B.C., the Greek poet Theognis of Megara wrote: “The best lot of all for man is never to have been born

nor sees the beams of the burning Sun; this failing, to pass the gates of Hades as soon as one may, and lie under a goodly heap of earth.”⁵⁰ And in his *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Sophocles echoed: “we must call no mortal happy until he has crossed life’s border free from pain.”⁵¹

With respect to the history of thought, this negative attitude towards life took probably its most dramatic form in the 19th-century constitution of philosophical pessimism as a legitimate speculative current, the distinctive feature of which was the open negation of life as a value. Here, I make use of two famous, representative 19th-century pessimist thinkers in order to test the validity of John McMurtry’s thesis, and to assess whether life can be consistently denied as a value (or as a source of value); or whether, as McMurtry’s thesis implies, life cannot but be the axiological basis for all discriminations of value—even for those of the pessimist itself. Before proceeding, it is important to note that the philosophical and religious positions that I am bringing about are *explicitly* criticising a positive consideration of life. They are not denying life as a value because they are forgetting about it. A forgetfulness or oblivion of life is revisable, for example, in the case of the scientific-technological *Weltanschauung* [worldview] that, according to Martin Heidegger, has been dominating the 20th century, or in the case of the liberal market-economy paradigm, which, according to John McMurtry, can only deal with reality by reducing it to a collection of predictable, invariant series of phenomena that are assumed to behave like the inanimate objects of physics. Both cases represent two life-blind value-programmes, whose conceptual-methodological endorsement of a late Newtonian mechanistic epistemology rules out *a priori* life as a possible variable in their calculations, as I explain in chapters 3 and 4.

The first representative author that I wish to consider is the Italian poet and philosopher Giacomo Leopardi, whom I have already quoted in this chapter. Encyclopaedically familiar with classical literature at a very early age, he knew extremely well the tragic streak that, from Sophocles to Lucretius, had depicted life as a miserable, dreadful journey through valleys of tears, hells of pain, seas of sorrows, labyrinths of incomprehensible riddles. “Pleasure is the son of suffering”,⁵² for pleasure can occur if and only if we find momentary respite from unhappiness; for instance when “you sleep without dreaming, or have fainted, or somehow have the use of your senses interrupted”,⁵³ namely when you are enjoying “anticipation of death”.⁵⁴ In one of his most famous *Operette morali*, Leopardi describes “our common mother” Nature as “an immense female shape, sitting on the ground with her torso erect, leaning on the side of a mountain... with a face partly beautiful and partly frightening, and with the darkest eyes and

⁵⁰ Theognis of Megara, “The Elegiac Poems of Theognis”, in *Elegy and Iambus, Vol. I*, translated and edited by J.M. Edmonds, Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Library, 1931[6th century B.C.], vv. 425-8.

⁵¹ Sophocles. *The Oedipus Tyrannus*, translated and edited by Richard Jebb, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1887[5th century B.C.], vv. 1529-30.

⁵² Giacomo Leopardi, “Il sabato del villaggio”, in *Canti*, 1835, <www.liberliber.it/biblio/L/Leopardi/canti.htm> (translation mine).

⁵³ Giacomo Leopardi, “Dialogo di Malambruno e Farfarello”, in *Operette Morali*, 1836, <http://www.leopardi.it/operette_morali.php> (translation mine).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, “Dialogo di Federico Ruysch e delle sue mummie”, (translation mine).

hair”.⁵⁵ An unfortunate Icelander, who was vainly trying to escape from her dominion, meets this sublime giantess accidentally in the African savannah, and is addressed by her with these words:

*Did you believe that the world had been created for you? You must know that in my makings, orders, and operations, and with very few exceptions, I have always had and still have intents that do not contemplate men’s happiness or unhappiness. Whenever I offend you in any way or fashion, I don’t realise it, if not in very rare cases; and usually, if I please or help you, I don’t know it; I didn’t do, as you believe, such things or actions to please you or to offer you aid. Indeed, if it happened that I make your entire species extinct, I would not be aware of it.*⁵⁶

According to Leopardi, nature does not care about human fortunes. Our suffering is of no point or interest to her. If there is any logic behind Mother Nature’s work, we will never know it. Most tellingly, just an instant before Nature reveals her plans to the Icelander, the poor man is assaulted by two lions or, according to another account, a sandstorm befalls upon him and mummifies his body. The ending of this parable shows how Leopardi was incapable of finding any meaning in human existence. Suicide might be a plausible solution, but one that, according to him, is almost impossible to select. Nature is a sadistic tyrant, in fact, and deprives most human beings of the strength of will that such an extreme action requires. For those who have some more strength than the average, though, the long wait for death called “life” is not the only alternative left on the scene. Our condition can be partially redeemed by one particular attitude: the stoical endurance of our cruel destiny. In the “Dialogue between Tristan and a Friend”, we read:

*If these convictions of mine originate from sickness, I don’t know; I know that, whether I be sick or in health, I detest men’s cowardice, I refuse any consolation or childish illusion, and I am brave enough to endure the absence of any hope, and to stare calmly at the desert of life, and not to lie to myself about men’s infelicity, and to accept all the consequences of a painful, but true, philosophy, which may be useful to nothing else but allowing the strong man to see, with stoical gratification, all of destiny’s cruel and hidden cloaks being stripped off.*⁵⁷

Still, it is at this point that doubts about the life-denying character of Leopardi’s pessimism arise. The stoical gratification just praised by Leopardi is, in fact, a clear case, however minimal, of increase of life-ranges, specifically in terms of felt being and thought.⁵⁸ Certainly self-indulgence

⁵⁵ Ibid., “Dialogo della natura e di un islandese”, (translation mine).

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., “Dialogo di Tristano e di un amico”, (translation mine).

⁵⁸ Increase of life-ranges applies also to the “ultraphilosophy” of consciously self-selected illusions that Leopardi also considered as a way to cope with life’s meaninglessness, as discussed in Geir Sigurðsson’s 2010 article “In Praise of Illusions: Giacomo Leopardi’s Ultraphilosophy”, *Nordicum-Mediterraneum*, 5(1), <<http://nome.unak.is/wordpress/05-1/articles51/in-praise-of-illusions-giacomo-leopardis-ultraphilosophy/>>.

is contained within it, as the hero Tristan derives satisfaction from the almost warrior-like strength of his own soul, which can stand up against the terrifying sight of the truth about human existence. Similarly, Leopardi admires Tristan's intellectual attitude insofar as it is capable of embracing just this tragic truth, rather than fleeing cowardly from it, seeking refuge in the "childish illusions" of religion, which tell the human being that the delights that are denied in this life will be enjoyed in another life to come.⁵⁹ To a deeper scrutiny, Leopardi's apology of death itself appears to contain a life-based ground of value. Paradoxically, death is praised, or even called upon oneself, in the name of life. Even if somebody succeeds in killing oneself, she does so on behalf of the kind of life that she would like to possess, but which is being denied to her. What makes this dreamt-of life desirable is its fullness in action, felt being, and thought. That which makes the actually-lived life unbearable is that it does not resemble the former in any respect. Life is, then, the ultimate ground for value-discrimination.

The other pessimist philosopher that I intend to examine, Arthur Schopenhauer, as seen in the preceding section of this chapter, had already moved a critical remark on suicide analogous to mine. He did not accept suicide as a justifiable escape from life, because he believed that the reasons that people have to kill themselves are always connected with their frustrated desires for a better life, rather than with the sincere recognition of the impossibility of any better life, for life, as he argued, cannot be good in itself. Schopenhauer described all biological life as the superficial–epiphenomenal–expression of a deeper, eternal, infinite, uncreated, irrational, metaphysical energy: the so-called "will to live". This root of all being perpetuates itself through the eons of time by making all individual life-forms strive for survival. More complex creatures crave for pleasure and most significantly for the illusory sexual pleasure, which is as fleeting as it is attractive. In effect, there is actually no pleasure to be had. In this cunning way, every biological species continues to exist, making the individual believe that she is going to serve her own particular interests, when she is actually serving the interests of the species alone:

*The ultimate aim of all love affairs, whether they are played in sock or cothurnus, is really more important than all other ends of human life, and is therefore quite worthy of the profound seriousness with which everyone pursues it. That which is decided by it is nothing less than the composition of the next generation. The dramatis personae who shall appear when we are withdrawn are here determined, both as regards their existence and their nature, by these frivolous love affairs. As the being, the existents, of these future persons is absolutely conditioned by our sexual impulse generally, so their nature, essentia, is determined by the individual selection in its satisfaction, i.e., by sexual love, and is in every respect irrevocably fixed by this.*⁶⁰

In reality, the individual's life oscillates always and only between *pain* and *boredom*. On the one hand, we desire, we need, we hope, we tend towards something else, something new, something that we miss, and the lack of which makes us dissatisfied. On the other hand, that very

⁵⁹ Cf. Giacomo Leopardi, "Dialogo della natura e di un islandese" and "Dialogo di Federico Ruisch e delle mummie", in *Operette morali*.

⁶⁰ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Metaphysics of the Love of the Sexes*, translated by T. Bailey Saunders, 2013[1819], <http://uncharted.org/frownland/books/Schopenhauer/Schopenhauer_Love_of_the_sexes.html>.

something else, for which we craved so much, once it has been reached, proves to be of no value whatsoever, for our contentment does not last, and, as long as we do not go back to desiring, needing, hoping, we are left with a sense of emptiness:

Human life must be some kind of mistake. The truth of this will be sufficiently obvious if we only remember that man is a compound of needs and necessities hard to satisfy; and that even when they are satisfied, all he obtains is a state of painlessness, where nothing remains to him but abandonment to boredom. This is direct proof that existence has no real value in itself; for what is boredom but the feeling of the emptiness of life? If life—the craving for which is the very essence of our being—were possessed of any positive intrinsic value, there would be no such thing as boredom at all: mere existence would satisfy us in itself, and we should want for nothing.⁶¹

All that we can hope for, according to Schopenhauer, is the interruption of this oscillation, which is not brought about by the satisfaction of any desire, but by the suppression of desire. Following the teachings of mainstream Buddhism, Schopenhauer strived for the creation of an articulated training directed towards the achievement of *nirvana*, namely the total annihilation of the will to live—the annihilation of desire. What matters most for my present study is that, by outlining exactly this will-suppressing training, Schopenhauer identified three specific ways out of the tragic fluctuation between boredom and dissatisfaction: art, humanity (aka piety, compassion) and asceticism—as outlined most notably in his famous book, *The World as Will and Representation*. At least two of these three specific ways out are, in fact, openly life-affirming:

[a] *Art*, which Schopenhauer intended as the aesthetic contemplation of the abstract forms of being, consists in nothing but the enhancement of wider ranges of thought and, in particular, of felt being. Music, poetry, beautiful architectures are capable of lifting our spirits up to a higher dimension of experience, where we forget about our miserable existence. We become capable of embracing the universal, as if transcending the particular, which is our ordinary mode of existence.

[b] *Humanity* (aka piety or compassion) too is an enhancement of wider ranges of thought, felt being, and action. Schopenhauer depicted this form of negation of the will to live as human agency aimed at relieving other people and/or living creatures from their suffering, rather than fighting against them in view of ultimately unattainable pleasures. Whether the agent's life-range benefits directly from it or not, i.e. whether she feels morally good in being humane or not, the recipient of humanity is necessarily going to experience an increase of her own life-ranges.

[c] Only asceticism, which Schopenhauer represented as solitary self-maceration and chastity, appears to be a real denial of life, although I suspect that an element of life-affirmation is contained within it as well. In the course of the practices of self-maceration, in fact, it is not unlikely that mystical experiences may take place. Even if not necessarily, asceticism seems to leave room to peculiarly powerful openings of the plane of felt being, as the individual may lose

⁶¹ Arthur Schopenhauer, "Sufferings of the World", in *Complete Essays*, translated by T. Bailey Saunders, New York: Willey, 1942[1851], 4–5.

her sense of selfhood and rejoice in that boundless field of consciousness which the nirvana, according to mainstream Buddhism, is supposed to be. Possibly, the entire project of Schopenhauer's negation of the will to live is merely an itinerary towards a higher, richer way of living.

Incidentally, there is another life-affirming point that can be seen as pertaining to Schopenhauer's case. His longevity and his love affairs—Schopenhauer was a notorious womanizer who never married and even cockled Lord Byron during a trip to Italy—suggest that he may have incurred into a performative contradiction, i.e. that he preached in favour of life-denial, when his own life was an extraordinary example of life-affirmation. In conclusion, my reflections lead towards the acceptance of McMurtry's life-value onto-axiology. Even the seemingly opposite theoretical position of philosophical pessimism appears to make use of this very same axiological basis. The two eminent pessimist philosophers hereby scrutinised did actually confirm McMurtry's main point.



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