

Nicolae Sfetcu

DEATH

cultural, philosophical and religious aspects

MultiMedia Publishing



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Death



(The graveyard from Poiana Mare, Romania)

Death is a concept for the state of a biological organism having ceased to live (although this term is also used figuratively for the degeneration of a star, or a language that has lost its last speakers). This state is characterized by a definite break in the consistency of vital processes (nutrition, respiration ...) necessary for homeostatic maintenance of the organism, that distinguishes the death of a temporary alteration as in the case of hibernation or some freezing.

At the cellular level, death means the cessation of the basic functions of a cell. In multicellular communities, this may be accidental death (necrosis) or controlled or programmed death (apoptosis). However, there are sometimes disorder that challenge this common death: the cell is then said to be immortal because it can be split into daughter cells an unlimited number of times. Unicellular organisms that reproduce by fission are only immortal principle, although after marking it appears that these cells are also aging, which alters their homeostatic and reproductive capacities. In multicellular organisms, sexual cells, called germ, are potentially immortal, unlike their somatic cell envelope eventually die hopelessly

under the influence of external pathogenic factors, or because of the phenomenon of aging. Somatic envelope then form what is called a corpse, which then decomposes under the action of oxidation, bacteria and various scavengers and organizations contributing to the recycling of organic and inorganic material.

At the organism level, death can be seen as the end of life as opposed to birth, or as the absence of life. In the first case, the fact that the heart may stop beating for a while before being revived rises the question of the boundary or transition between life and death. Addressing this issue, the World Organisation for Animal Health considers death as “the irreversible loss of highlighted by the loss of brainstem reflexes brain activity” and it adopts a definition of death as that brain death, as distinguished from a simple cardio- circulatory stop, condition called “clinical death”.

At a broader, historical and biological spatiotemporal scale, if the individual disappears as a single entity at the time of death, part of his genetic heritage persists in its progeny (if it exists) and the life of the species and ecosystems in which it integrates continues while evolving.

Philosophy of death



The Triumph of Death, painting of Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1562)

In paleontology, the discovery of funeral rites is an important factor in determining the degree of social awakening of a hominid.

This awareness of death is an engine of social cohesion (uniting to resist disasters and enemies) and action (to do something to leave a trace). It is an important element of metaphysical reflection. This is also what gives the symbolic power to acts such as homicide and suicide.

The Enlightenment in Europe, prompting the mastery of nature, suggests the emergence of a rule of the degradation of the body of man.

According to Plato, death is the separation of soul and body. Finally freed from his fleshly prison, the immortal soul can freely reach the sky of Ideas, Eternity, the domain of philosophers. (cf. *Phaedo*)

According to Epicurus, death is nothing because "as we exist death is not, and when death is we are not. Death is, therefore, no relation either to the living or to the dead, given that it is nothing for the former, and the latter are not." (*Letter to Menoeceus*).

Jankélévitch, in *Death*, itself offers a reflection on the death from a grammatical point of view: "Death in the third person is the death - in - general, abstract and anonymous death" (this is the impersonal death), "the first person is certainly a source of anxiety [...] In first person, death is a mystery for me and my very intimately, that is to say, in my nothingness" (the death of the "I"), "there is the intermediate and special case of the second person; between the death of another, which is far and indéfférente, and death-esteem, which is even our being, there is a proximité of the death of close"(this is the death of "you").

Religions

Animism

In animism, death is seen as a continuation to the point that we can say that there is not really dead in the animistic language and that the dialogue of "dead" and living continues without interruption.

A famous poem entitled *Breaths*, by Birago Diop, summarizes this view:

"Those who are dead are never gone / They are in the Shadow (...) / The dead are not under the earth: / They are in the Wood (...) / in the Water (...) / in the Crowd (...) / The Dead are not dead."

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Funerals



Bundesarchiv, Bild 1011-121-0005-06
Foto: o. Ang. | September 1939

(Jewish funeral procession in Poland, 1939, Source: Bundesarchiv, Bild 1011-121-0005-06 / CC-BY-SA 3.0, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bundesarchiv_Bild_1011-121-0005-06,_Polen,_Juden_beim_Sargtragen.jpg, CC Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Germany license)

The funeral ritual is a set of gestures and words and in some countries dances, accompanying the agony and death of a human being.

Anthropologists generally consider that the funeral rituals are one of the foundations of the transition to civilization.

These rites appear to be always religious, but the recognition in the contemporary world of an agnostic philosophy changes taking into account the last moments of life and / or to the emergence of a new type of rites and ceremonies.

The nature of the ritual varies with time, the social status of the deceased, the beliefs of a society, the conditions of death and, sometimes, the will of the deceased.

Retrospective study of funerary rituals by the clues in the tombs, crossed with other archaeological features, allows to define the geographical area and sometimes the history of extinct societies.

Similarly ethnology attaches great importance to the study of funerary rites, which enlightens the understanding of the relationship between individuals and the world as they see it.

Funeral and the collective mourning are also an opportunity to particular moments of sociability that mark the history of a group.

- A key moment - for an ordinary individual - is embalming (thanatopraxy), cremation (the term incineration is usually reserved for animals) or burial (funeral) and, more rarely, immersion in sea, cannibalism (real or symbolic, for example with the use of the ashes of burnt corpse) or the offering of the body (usually cut, as in the people of the Himalayas) to the vultures.
- Famous people sometimes are entitled to "exceptional" funeral. The nature of the ultimate and collective as well as the staging of the ceremony tribute, and the erection of a monument left to posterity, vary with times and periods. It happened sometimes that sacrifices the environment of the deceased to his death.

Behaviors suggestive of funeral rites were observed in animals such as elephants and hippos

The funeral ritual: a rite of passage

Worldwide, funeral rituals are varied but all correspond, according to the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, to a rite of passage in three stages (some more or less attenuated over time and civilizations): separation step materialized by the death, ritual of verification of the death, and the death announcement; liminality with the exposure of the deceased, the wake, the funeral procession, the masses for the dead, burial or cremation; aggregation step (meals funeral commemorations) that occurs after a longer or shorter depending on the period and religious affiliations mourning period.

Prehistory

For some scientists, the first known burial practices date back to the Lower Paleolithic (deposit of the Sima de los Huesos, Spain).

The burial of El Tabun, Israel, attributed to Neanderthals, date 120,000 years ago.

One of the oldest burials of prehistory is in the Qafzeh cave, Israel. There are about 100 000 years of men, 60,000 years older than the Cro-Magnon, attaching a particular attention to the remains of their dead. A grave is particularly remarkable: the child with the antlers.

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Afterlife

Afterlife (synonyms: "life after death", "post-mortem existence," "beyond the grave", "life in the hereafter," "eternal life") is the assumption of survival spirit, soul or consciousness of a living being after death. The concepts of mind and consciousness are subject of controversy and the majority scientific position is that there is no evidence for the existence of life after death.

Religious study of the fate of the soul after death is called "individual eschatology" (*Eschatos* (ἔσχατος) "last" and logos is "study" in Greek). Eschatology is the doctrine concerning the Last Things, the ultimate time, after the individual's death or after the humanity's extinction (human eschatology), or the world to its demise (cosmic eschatology).

History

There is a voluminous literature on this issue for centuries, mainly religious source. There are some ethnological studies and philosophical arguments. Different traditions and schools of thought are interested in this issue, as shamanism, Lamaism spiritualism, theosophy, or anthroposophy. There are also stories about popular demonstrations of dead or near death experiences.

Questions about death and immortality



(*"Guide to the afterlife for the guardian of the property of the goddess Mut Sesech." Papyrus Egyptian on life after death. Source: Keith Schengili-Roberts,*

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:GuideToTheAfterlife_CustodianForGoddessMut-AltessMuseum-Berlin.png, CC Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported)

All civilizations since prehistoric times have left traces of belief in a life after death, each with its own perception of the immortality of the spirit, of the compensation of the soul and the meaning of life. Thus, the belief in the survival of the soul, as far as respect for the dead, are the source of various funeral rites.

Many philosophers and theologians have developed arguments to prove the existence of the soul and its immortality or its survival. Plato in the *Phaedo*, raised five evidence or reasoning: 1) opposite (69-72 "live born from the dead", so the soul exists after death), 2) reminiscence (72 -78: "our souls exist before you even get in a body," she learned in an earlier time when it was not in human form, and she can remember), 3) by affinity (78-84 "soul resembles the divine," or that which is divine is immortal, and secondly, after death, the soul goes to his neighbor, the divine, the immortal, the sensible) , 4) harmony (84-86: a body is alive only by

the well composed mixture of opposite properties, ie life, that is to say, the soul) 5) by essence (102-107: it is the nature of the soul to be immortal, indestructible, incorruptible).

Intellectual reasoning also consider analogies with natural events. Thus, death is like sleep (followed by reawakening), and winter (followed by the spring). The principle of the landfill body is reminiscent of either the seeds in agriculture.

Testimonials

Throughout history, contacts are alleged with the dead. Pliny the Younger left a famous ghost story. Victor Hugo described exhaustively - and even stamped - its dialogues with the afterlife in *Turntables of Jersey*. Bertrand Russell himself, whose skepticism intended to examine any case, notes the allegations, but said "this evidence may establish that we survive, but do not prove that we survive forever." The experiences can be classified into several categories:

Spiritualistic experiences

Since its birth in the nineteenth century, spiritualism had many followers. This doctrine asserts enable communication with the spirits of the dead. The method explained by the spirites works generally requires the participation of one or more mediums. Mediumship is however not universally recognized as a reality. Although little studied, practice of spiritism is currently very popular in Brazil.

Popular literature on the afterlife

Raymond Moody (*Life After Life*, 1975) reported the testimony of those who have suffered an apparent death and which, once revived, describe an experience that, from one subject to another, offers similarities. "The model experience," according to Moody, is as follows:

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Immortality

Immortality of the soul and religious traditions



Immortality is the fact for a living to escape death and stay alive for indefinite period of time, meaning to be eternal.

At least since the Egypt of the pharaohs, many religions consider a post-mortem life whose conditions depend on a divine judgment, and compensate the injustices committed or suffered during the earthly life. There is to date no scientific evidence to confirm or even to

assume the possibility of a living life after the destruction of the brain, except in the very particular sense, without idea of personal survival, life “in memory of his relatives.”

The order of presentation is chronological here:

Buddhism

Buddhism considers a cycle of birth, death and rebirth acting according to the actions of an individual. This cycle (samsara) is considered painful, boring and leading to nothing, the sage is to extract himself to reach nirvana, which is the state of non-need.

However, Dalai Lama explained simply in an interview with Le Figaro in 1990 that “if science were to prove that reincarnation is impossible,” then Buddhism simply abandon this belief.”

Christianity

Christianity introduced a different concept of life after death: the resurrection of the body in harmony also with Ezekiel’s vision of restoring men from their bones. Unlike Platonism, Christianity does not seem to pay special attention to a separate body soul: it is the reconstruction of the body that the doctrine promises its deserving believers, registered in the Creed, which summarizes the key points.

The post-mortem sequence is complex: the particular judgment, last judgment, heaven, hell, purgatory subsequently introduced into consideration venial sins that do not deserve eternal punishment, but must nevertheless be punished limbo for unbaptized children (Pelagius refuse to admit and will be excommunicated, Benedict XVI, however, remove the dogma), and finally resurrection.

Islam

The Islamic paradise is described as a pleasant place (3.15 “For the righteous there, with their Lord, gardens under which rivers flow, to dwell therein” 29.58 “those who believe and do good works, We certainly abode in the high places in gardens beneath which rivers flow, to abide therein Here is the image of Paradise promised to believers” 47.15 “there shall flow streams always pure and limpid water, streams of milk unalterable flavor, rivers of wine delicious to drink, rivers of honey pure and distilled”).

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Undead

Undead is, in popular culture, dead being that continue to act. Strictly speaking, the term refers to a reanimated corpse, usually by magic, like zombies and, extended sense, the spirits of dead people coming back as ghosts. The reanimated corpses still have the body, as opposed to the spirits, spooks and ghosts, which may be dead, but no longer have bodies, and are therefore perfectly intangible. There are undead of all types in most beliefs, which symbolic was taken to modern works. The undeads are also a popular theme novels and horror movies, and role playing. Vampires and zombies have seen a large body of literature and filmography devoted to them.

Most known novel is *The Un-Dead* by Bram Stoker, the original title of his novel *Dracula*, published in 1897.

The term undead refers to being immersed in an intermediate state between life and death, and still somehow in this precarious shape. The manifestation of the living dead can be through a physical body to a corpse, or that of an immaterial body, which is the case of ghosts and wraiths, which are persistent spirits of died people.

Same time, it is to differentiate two directions of undeads: some creatures are people previously living well, but fallen to the state of the undead after a particular event (vampires, liches, ghouls) while the others are dead people and then returned to life incompletely through magic (ghosts, mummies, skeletons). Note that the term zombie may designate a case as well as the other. However, strictly speaking, the definition applies only to resurrected dead (dead reverted partially live), immersed in a state of decay that makes them unaccountable for their actions. Living that are corrupt vampires and liches are more like demonic creatures because they have done a rite and made a pact with the occult powers knowingly.

The undeads do not feel pain, manifest supernatural powers (invulnerability to non- ritual attacks, insensitivity to fatigue), while their intentions are almost always hostile to the living. Vampires are well known to drink the blood of their victims to remain in a state of undead, the liche spread witchcraft, ghosts haunt the places of their past, and zombies eat human flesh .

Ghoul

Ghoul is from the Arabic and Persian folklore, it appears in the tales of the *Arabian Nights* and form a class of Jinn, like Ifrit for example, seen as spawn of the devil, Iblis. Ghouls change shape by taking often the looks of a hyena or a woman, but are recognizable by their cloven feet, the only constant element of their appearance. The *ghula*, feminization of the Arabic word, is the equivalent Arabic/Persian Lilith (*Lamia*). She loves cemeteries where she digs up corpses for food and other unfrequented places. Ghoul also haunts the desert under the guise of a young woman and she devours travelers succumb to his calls. Many terrifying

stories for children have as lead actor a ghula in Maghreb countries, she often plays the role of the Big Bad Wolf.

Lich

Lich is derived from the literature and fantasy games; it is a dead wizard who remains in a state of death-life with her magical powers. It's traditionally autonomous and above all, very powerful evil, highly intelligent creature. The transformation of a sorcerer lich can be for various reasons, not always evil. An important distinction is made between liches, will creatures, and simple zombies or undead skeletons who did not choose their fate, and who no longer have any free will. These are generally used as slaves or puppets, a necromancer who handles more or less conscious. They are invincible.

Mummy

A mummy is originally a corpse that has been preserved from destruction and decay due to natural causes or from human techniques. In popular culture, the mummies come alive, usually to punish the defilers of their graves.

Skeleton

A skeleton is an undead that has lost all its rotten flesh, bones are keeping by magic or other mystical phenomenon. By default, the term refers to a human skeleton. This creature is frequently found in stories related to horror, supernatural or fantasy adventure. They are especially common in the field of fantasy, where they are somewhat difficult to defeat nemeses. In general, they are skeletons of dead people who are led by necromancers.

Vampire

Vampires are from various folklore and popular superstitions, they feed on the blood of the living in order to draw a life force. The vampire legend has its origins in ancient mythological traditions and include legendary beings with vampiric characteristics in a variety of cultures around the world. The vampire was popularized in Europe in the early eighteenth century and emerged specifically in Eastern Europe, particularly in the Balkans, where they were portrayed as ghosts in that shroud, visiting their loved, causing death and destruction in the neighborhood. At the same time, the Benedictine Augustin Calmet Lorraine describes the vampire as a "returning in the body," as distinct of intangible ghosts such as ghosts or spirits.

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Death in art

Memento mori



(Vanitas Philippe, by Champaigne)

Memento mori is a Latin phrase meaning "remember you will die." It means a kind of artistic creations of all kinds, but all share the same goal, to remind men that they are mortal and the vanity of their activities or worldly interests. This phrase expresses the death both in his act of end of life but also in its absoluteness: death is everywhere, both beginning and end. Often associated with *carpe diem* pulled from Horace's poem, this Latin phrase is less in hedonism than in the profession of faith.

Note however that "mori" is a present and not future (that would be "*moriturum esse*"). Which gives: "do not forget to die" and not "prepare to die." This can also illuminate the Christian view of death. That it would be less of a closing event (all the philosophical tradition to Heidegger) as "possible at all times, we might inadvertently missed."

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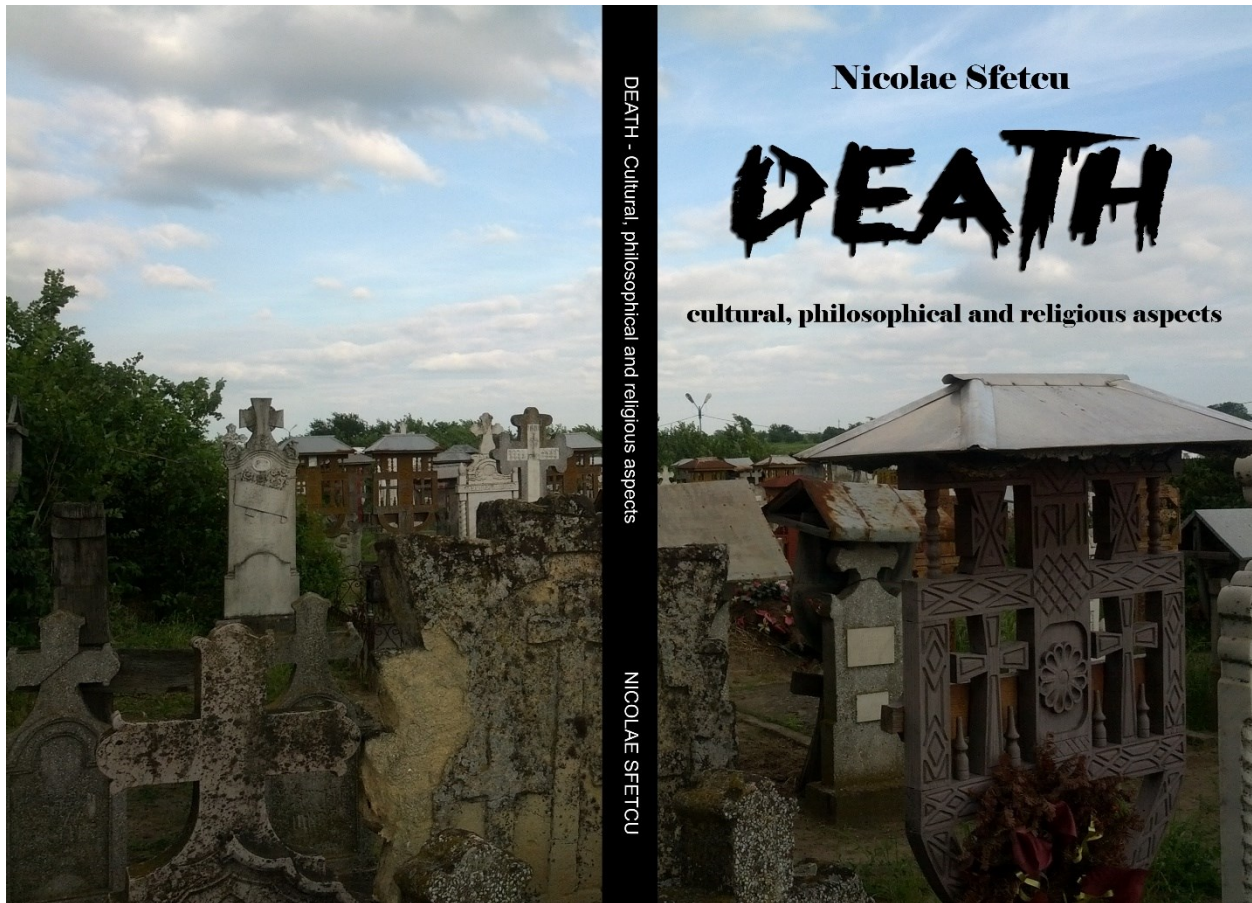
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Book



About death, grief, mourning, life after death and immortality. Why should we die like humans to survive as a species.

"No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because Death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is Life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new." (Steve Jobs)

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