

# *Speaking About Death*

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Note from the author: The present text emerged from a two-step study of death through phenomenology. This text constitutes the first step, and the second one has yet to be completed. The first step aims to demonstrate that, because of the limitations imposed to us by our virtue of being perspectival beings, we have no choice but to inquire into the conscious experience of the dead – since dead-objects are, contrarily to death, accessible to us. The conclusion, therefore, is that we shall engage into a phenomenology *of the dead* rather than a phenomenology of death as such. The second step was aimed to set the grounds for a phenomenological investigation of dead-objects.

Do we live to die? Asking this question supposes that the limitations of an experience (life and the ending of it) define its purpose. In this case, the purpose of life is to be over, as a nihilist might say. It cannot be right, for the reason alone that life's determination is not fixed. I could die anytime, and because I did not die now means that my life did not have the purpose to be over *right now*. My life's purpose is always pushed further, defeating the meaning of the *now* – of the complete experience *up to now*. It seems the lack of a definite timeline set for the end of my life contributes endlessly to the contradiction of its purpose. I have lived until now and yet I am not dead: What can I make of this fact in terms of sense and meaning? Moreover, death is never *yet*. How could I give purpose to something fictional that is never real in the *now*? I should then put death in the category of all the unsubstantiated things in terms of time: things that can be conceptualized but whose concepts cannot relate directly to their substantiality *as of now*. What is the purpose of things that do not exist in the *now yet*? It seems that their only purpose, in relation to their current ontological status, is to become *be-ing* (1), to manifest themselves from a now moment to another one. The purpose of death is to be, but it vanishes every time it brings itself into being. Death indefinitely tries to engage in the now but it cannot do so, and this is because the act of living fills the entirety of time. As Merleau-Ponty said, time is full of being. (2) Death is ungraspable because it has

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no possibility to give perspective. We represent death as an “other side” because it is so unrelated and impossible to locate within life. Living is perspectival: it is that which necessarily means to have perspective. The individual lives through the forms of a *givenness*: the temporal and the spatial. (3) Our understanding of objectivity and subjectivity requires spatiality because we think of perspective through space. One needs to be aware of a separation between a *here* and an *out there* to compose the difference between their eyes and someone else’s. In this sense, objectivity requires subjectivity in order to be known, and vice-versa, for without one we could not know the other. Apperception, which is thinking in its most essential form, is what allows Kant to say that there is a perspective other than his own, and apperception in itself is a perspective; it is a funnel directed towards one thing, or one thought, and moves from one to another. (4) Death can be neither objective nor subjective because it is devoid of spatiality, of time, and of tools for perception – including the possibility of perspective itself. We cannot perceive death because it does not provide anything to perceive, and death provides nothing to perceive because it has no access to being through time. To see a corpse being active and responding to stimuli, and suddenly it stops being as such and drops numb on the ground: this is probably the biggest problem that gave rise to thinking – or at least to thinking *of time*. We witness the unknown without itself. It is as if we were in a box seeing the sides being pushed in concavely from outside. Death pushes *on-to* Being to get inside of it, but this is to no avail. However, this analogy doesn’t quite grasp the reality of death because it rests on the notion of space – of which death does not have any. In fact there is no reality for death. Our reality is that sometimes, unpredictably, animals and humans stop moving for as long as we have yet to live. I say “yet” because we cannot say forever: who knows if my deceased grandfather will walk again when I am dead? A dead body has absolutely nothing. What do you mean “he’s dead”? He’s gone. But where? He’s gone nowhere. He’s gone nowhere because the notion of perspective is only unique to being *a-live*. Without space, and thus without perspective, there is nowhere else to go. As Bergson brilliantly explained in *Matter and Memory*, the soul cannot go anywhere else because if it did we would then be attributing it a spatial meaning, resulting in equating the soul to be a body – even though the entire mind-body problem is meant to consider the mind as non-corporeal object. (5) What is death then? It is the shocking call of a boundary that has yet to be now. Death is a limit unannounced. It escapes us as much, if not more, as the thought of our own nonexistence. I cannot dissociate the “I think” of Kant from my representations: hence imagining a life of others with me being dead is actually still including me in it and this imaginative act would be inaccurate. Language itself fails to grasp

what death is because death is not “out” of life nor is it inside of it – since, as we have seen, it cannot have any spatial feature. What about time? Yes, death is a boundary in time that does not exist *as of now*. The ending of my time is not even death itself. Death is the absence of my time, but the presence of my causation for others. Leaving an object unattended for someone else, posing a ticking bomb in a supermarket in the Middle-East, or the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 as an act of protest that is left to others to understand: these are manifestations of causes that supersede our living, and somehow other people see us through these. (6) As Bergson demonstrated in *Time and Free Will*, moments in time last through a process of *durée*, and somehow they stretch from a now to another, always by-passing other nows. We might then consider the real death to be the one that never existed in the first place. Those who are not remembered and whose keepsakes and effects upon the world have been lost forever, so much that we can even say they were never born in the first place: those are the real dead. But again, this is the sort of death that is manifested from the inside of a reality. What I can see, and what I can speculate about, is only from within my own time and my own *givenness*. I cannot know what comes after I have opened my eyes for the last time.

But we need to keep Hegel in mind: “Seeing the limit as limit means it has already been surpassed.” (7) Death, therefore, cannot be surpassed. The absence of time, for me, is unthinkable because it is the presence of time for others, one would argue. We then fall back into our problem of perspective: death is beyond subjectivity and objectivity. We only encounter a body being numb and heavy on the floor, and the deceased person remains forever in memory: his or her voice cannot be heard in a way that is given and forced upon us as it was in everyday life. This will never happen again. They no longer force themselves into my life, into my consciousness, and now I have to willfully recall “how” they sounded “like” in order to “hear” them again: What should I make of this factual difference in time? We may ask in times of grief: Where are they? I would be lying if I said they were in time, because time has no spatiality, and I am also forced to say they are not somewhere else. Furthermore, there has never been a case of a patient for which all the health settings were fine and yet they died anyway. Likewise for the opposite case: when something fails in the body, it will always stop being alive. If I could walk without a heart and if my grandfather could speak without a brain, our attachment to time, which is translated through our understanding of what is given to us, whether we are conscious of it or not, would be very different. Witnessing that he or she has no future in the realm of what is given to me is another traumatic shock caused from the strength and hardness of time itself. This is, in my opinion, where thinking originates: a progression of an increasing number of differences in

time appeared to us, and we somehow began to take notice of them. We then became increasingly aware of these differing appearances in time, and thoughts started to emerge as a result of this slow, progressive act of differentiating between the *now* and *then*.

How shall we speak of death, then, if it is not accessible through our perspectival apparatus of thinking? I would argue that we are simply left with a wonder that is unsolvable for the sake of other wonders. The one thing of which we cannot think about and speak about is what allows us to speak and think of everything else. (8) Death, as being a moment of unperceivable limiting absence, shock, and wonder, becomes the intellectual starting-point for thinking and for the Platonist use of *λόγος*. Heidegger's opening to ontology: "Why are there beings rather than nothing?" (9) Camus' worry about suicide, whether we should jump ship now instead of later, and, of course, Socrates' dramatic departure for the unspeakable, leaving us the unsolvable mystery of why he did so. These instances all show nothing more than the human attitude in its original form. (10) Bodies falling on the ground and parents who never wake up anymore: They remind us that we are perspectival beings and that every practice of philosophical thinking is in one way or another related to this reminder. Why is it easier to say "I know I will die" rather than "I think I will die"? What is Kierkegaard getting at when he notices that we do not instinctively think about our own death? These questions inevitably lead us to noticing that death escapes *λόγος* by nature – if only death had a nature! Death is not perspectival; death cannot be tied to the ground as Plato intended the act of *λόγος* to do. (11) I must conclude, for now, that to speak of death it should be necessary to know how *not* to address this "it" to which it is impossible to refer. If anything, perhaps we must die, when the moment is appropriate, as it has been shown that as definite and limited beings as we can be, we too can be full of perspective and that, perhaps, there is a limit to what objectivity and subjectivity permit. We will see the loved ones and the extras lying down in a coffin and we will turn their bodies into ashes or make them "one" with the earth in the act of burial. However, we must keep in mind that the meanings we give them as soon as they can no longer respond to pain and to us are nothing but a misattribution. We cannot speak of death properly, and we cannot give it meaning as a result of this. We must simply give ourselves over to time itself.

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(1) “De l’étant” in French

(2) Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phénoménologie de la perception*. p.471 : « Si le monde objectif est incapable de porter le temps, ce n’est pas qu’il soit en quelque sorte trop étroit, que nous ayons à y ajouter un pan de passé et un pan d’avenir. Le passé et l’avenir n’existent que trop dans le monde, ils existent au présent, et ce qui manque à l’être lui-même pour être temporel, c’est le non-être de l’ailleurs, de l’autrefois et du demain. Le monde objectif est trop plein pour qu’il y ait du temps. Le passé et l’avenir, d’eux-mêmes, se retirent de l’être et passent du côté de la subjectivité pour y chercher, non pas quelque support réel, mais, au contraire, une possibilité de non-être qui s’accorde avec leur nature. Si l’on détache le monde objectif des perspectives finies qui ouvrent sur lui et qu’on le pose en soi, on ne peut y trouver de toutes parts que des « mainteneants ».

(3) By “givenness” I mean the blending of subjectivity and objectivity which accounts for the total composition of the real world that is provided to the individual. What is given to me is the totality of reality (that unfolds as I make my way through it) within which my consciousness operates.

(4) We see here Husserl’s starting point for the notion of intentionality.

(5) Bergson, Henri. *Matière et mémoire*. Sections « Introduction » and « De la sélection des images pour la représentation. Le rôle du corps. »

(6) I am referring here to the matter of people feeling the presence of someone who died when they find objects that belonged to them. PTSD is another example of causation superseding an event.

(7) Luft, Sebastian. “Husserl’s Phenomenological Discovery of the Natural Attitude.” Published in *Subjectivity and Lifeworld in Transcendental Phenomenology*. p. 38

(8) For all we know there could be other things impossible to talk about, such as death, as absence of time, before birth. What language cannot define, it allows it to define other things.

(9) Heidegger, Martin. “Introduction to Metaphysics.” Trans. Gregory Fried & Richard Polt. *Yale University Press*.

(10) And perhaps this is the difference between humans and animals.

(11) See Plato’s *Meno* at 97d. Socrates suggests λόγος as an act of “tying down” a thought or a truth to the ground so that it would not escape the soul of whoever talks about it. To give account of something is to attach this something to a ground so that we do not have to search forever what it means.