Death and Desire in Contemporary Japan
Representing, Practicing, Performing
edited by Massimo Raveri and Andrea De Antoni

"Each Death is Unique"
Beyond Epistemic Transfiguration in Thanatology

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Abstract Death is an insurmountable problem for truth systems. This paper aims at discussing the relationship between death and truth, swaying from Western (Plato's *Phaedo*, Jankélévitch, Morin) to Buddhist sources (mainly Chan-Zen Biyanlu and Dōgen). These contributions are interpreted according to the distinction introduced here between epistemic-metaphysical transfiguration and semelfactive phenomenalism.

Keywords Death. Philosophy of Death. Plato. Vladimir Jankélévitch. Edgar Morin. Biyanlu. Dogen.

1 Death, Individual and Lògos

The title of this essay is directly inspired by a sentence from a short essay written by Jacques Derrida, as an oratory for his departed friend Gilles Deleuze. In his speech, Derrida binds together philosophy and personal remembrance, in a hardly distinguishable manner. He recalls so many non-shareable personal memories, that we readers are inevitably left at a certain distance: our understanding is necessarily deprived of the depth and first-hand knowledge of this relationship between two friends of long standing. It is natural for Derrida to reckon that "each death is unique, of course, and therefore unusual" (Derrida 2003, 193). This position by Derrida seems to go against some fundamental views of philosophical thinking, as old as philosophy itself. From Heraclitus on, theoretical thinking has generally been conceived in terms of an activity deriving from the exercise of common *Lògos* and the philosopher has to 'follow the common' (*hèpesthai tò ksunò*) and not one's own 'personal wisdom' (*phrònesis*)

Ca' Foscari Japanese Studies 6
DOI 10.14277/6969-151-5/CFJS-6-1 | Submission 2016-01-02 | Acceptance 2017-03-27
ISBN [ebook] 978-88-6969-151-5 | ISBN [print] 978-88-6969-150-8 |

(cf. DK B2).[1] How could there be philosophy – which speaks the universal tongue of reason – about death, which allegedly is a matter of unique, one-off singularity? Is thanatology still possible, or is it just an invalid application of some mental schemes and routines to an impossible object? How can we find a general, impersonal truth about death (but which death?), if the question is not death in general, or the category of death, but every single death? Stated differently, how much do we understand a person who has lost one of her/his relatives, if we look at such a situation from the point of view of general, impersonal death?

We could ask, however, to which objects those categories apply: can there be an explanation of death, if 'each death is unique'? Still, the distinction between death and life is fundamental for example in medical science and practice, which includes the debates around reversible and irreversible comatose states, palliative cures, pain therapy, and the like, with all their ethical, religious, deontological, political, legal problems they raise. How can we approach the problem, then, considering that our everyday life is the battlefield for such opposite approaches that sway from necessary but general universality to extremely dense but hard-to-communicate singularity?

Most of the philosophical inquiries about death toy with categorial distinctions that presuppose death as a universal category, like in the classical question 'what is death?', followed by 'what is life?' that invariably ends with: 'how do they relate to each other?'. However much these often-repeated formulations may appear as innocent and 'objective', they take for granted that death is a discrete, objective state, clearly distinguishable from another clearly objective state called life. Since they are 'concepts' – it is generally assumed – they must be clearly defined and have a certain universal content. There must be a general object called 'death', which of course must be always the same for everyone. Surely, most of the scholars who try to define death precisely are not simply playing with words: there is, as a matter of fact a direct and practical interest in these definitions. It is certainly useful and important to find objective criteria to distinguish death from life, especially in modern medical treatment. Then, why casting doubts on this approach? Because such definitions are far from being universally accepted among different cultures, social classes and even in cultural and scientific community (Steila 2009). And of course the evidence that the definitions of death have greatly changed in the course of history and in various areas of the world is concrete (Ariès 1975; Vovelle 1983; De Ceglia 2014). Moreover, nowadays technological advancements, such as life support system, are decisive in redefining the boundaries between life and death, as well as transplant

1 This reference follows the standard system Diels-Kranz (DK) numbering. See URL `http://www.iep.utm.edu/diels-kr/` (2017-05-18).

technology became fundamental in producing the need of defining the end of life state in a precise, clear manner (Cestari 2014). All these variations on the theme of death make it a tricky one, able to easily provoke too strong reactions, including the current ones of charging the opposing disputants of 'supporting euthanasia' on one side, and of 'being obscurantist' on the other. Despite (or probably exactly because of) its inner simplicity, death is still an embarrassing theme in our culture, probably one of the few only real taboos left in our apparently emancipated and uninhibited society. Approaching this strange silence should therefore be one main task of the philosophers, who nonetheless have recently been relatively silent on this issue.[2]

This paper does not count among its tasks that of discussing these definitions in details. Neither does it aim at finding immediately usable operative principles, although these principles may derive from the following discussion. On the contrary, it attempts to explore the chances of assuming a certain attitude toward death (and life), which derives from reassessing some implicit habits of thought. This approach has not only ethical, but also ontological overtones. For example, death is generally considered as a disvalue *in itself*, whereas life, being its opposite, *must* be positive. This value judgment is taken for granted, being based on common sense. However, should we really be satisfied with this approach? In particular, the act of drawing a clear distinction between life and death is important in many practical and fundamental situations. Still, the problem addressed here does not lay in an immediately practical distinction, which is important in everyday life, but in the ethical and theoretical (and only *then* practical) consequences out of this very act of establishing such a difference. Does our act of defining a divide between life and death transform our attitude towards them, so that they *become* objects with certain characteristics to which we grasp tightly (a value) or which we reject entirely (a disvalue)? Death should be considered a *relational* phenomenon, which greatly varies according to our social and individual involvement. Hence, social and cultural definitions interact with (and at times replace) our individual relationship with life and death. Still, Edgar Morin affirms that, unlike other animals that know death through instincts and social patterns, in our species it is the individual, not the species or society that knows death (Morin 2002, 65-73). If each death (and each life) are to be considered as unique and depending on individuals, their knowledge cannot become matter for incontrovertible definitions or clear and distinct concepts, but only of *phrònesis*, or 'practical knowledge', that largely depends on the case-to-case application of general principles and guidelines.

2 For example, in Italy important philosophers such as Remo Bodei, Giovanni Reale, Emanuele Severino, or theologians like Vito Mancuso have expressed their ideas on death in Monti 2010. However, with the exception of Severino, who extensively published on the argument, the overall result should be counted more as a philosophical editorial about recent news items, than a deep theoretical reflection on death.

2 Questioning Death

In Western philosophy, death has been generally defined according to two main ideas: as purely natural fact, a decease, which has no special significance for human beings; or as having relationship with human existence. Examples of the first tendency are Epicurus, Feuerbach, Sartre and Wittgenstein, who generally share the same vision of death as a contingent fact: "death is a pure fact, as is birth. It comes to us from the outside and transforms us into the outside. At bottom, it is in no way distinguished from birth and it is the identity of birth and death that we call facticity" (Sartre 1956, 697). Death is considered as insignificant, as it has nothing to do with existence.

In the second tendency, death is thought as having relationship with human existence, as the end of individual life (Hegel) or as its real beginning (in Plato or Christianity), or as existential opportunity, such as in Heidegger or Kierkegaard. Whereas the first conception of death generally places stress upon death as an event or a state resulting from this event, the second tendency considers death as a process in close relationship with life. The distinction between the two seems to mimic the difference between nature and culture, body and existence,which is so important in many Euro-American philosophical approaches, in some aspects of abrahamitic religions, as well as in modern cultures. Other dialectical conceptions of death are present in other religious-philosophical traditions including, but not being exclusive, East-Asian ones. Among these dialectical approaches, Daoism and Buddhism should be counted, but the level of dialectics appears to include, and not exclude, what previously has been defined as 'insignificant', i.e. the 'facticity' of death.

A clear-cut distinction between death and life could be interpreted as deriving from thinking at their relationship as external, their definitions being built separately, as if they were uninfluential on their respective inner definitions. On the contrary, a dialectical relationship between life and death may reflect the idea of an inner link between them and their consequent overlapping.[3] What is at issue here is not a question of arid and abstract definitions, but something that has very practical consequences and that sheds a totally different light on, for instance, ethical, medical, political and religious distinctions between life and death.

The debate on internal or external relationship in thanatology may involve the definition of human being: does death come 'from outside of us' and human species has 'originally' nothing to do with it? This is what certain passages of the Bible seems to suggest, affirming that death is

3 On the definition between external and internal relationship, see Kasulis 2002.

a consequence of human sin.[4] Or rather, is death essential to our constitution? For example, some biological theories suggest that death is essential to multicellular organisms. Whereas unicellular life forms are not planned to die by their own, death on the contrary seems to be 'planned in advance' in the physiology of multicellular beings, since these species are dependent on the process of replacing cells, defined in the process of their birth-and-death. Moreover, sexual reproduction and death count for strategies of variations, which have the advantage of making species more adaptive to the environment changes, thus ensuring genetic diversity and crossing over.

Adopting the idea of death 'from outside' or 'from inside' has dramatic consequences on our everyday expectations and, consequently, for example, on medical research plans: are we constitutionally mortals? Or constitutionally immortals and accidentally mortals? Is our death, as we (still?) experience today, an unavoidable destiny? Or in a near or far future, as imagined by a number of science fiction writers, can we hope to infinitely delay or even defeat death, becoming virtually or practically immortals? And granted that such a technology would be, or even simply *could* be, realised, would life and death remain the same as we experience today? Would we still be humans, altogether?[5] These questions often imply taking for granted the epistemological and metaphysical dominion of technology upon life and death, and implicitly turn possibility into necessity, as if technological advancements were unavoidable. Or could we imagine different courses in the development of technology? The historical contingency of technology is actually extremely important in the discussion of death's definition, and further increases the complexity of death's definition, binding it to historical uncertainty and contingency. If we define ourselves as "immortals by means of technology", how can we ethically think our consequent awareness of death? Perhaps as a selfish thought determined by our hopes and expectations of avoiding death and living forever? From such a perspective, technology itself appears as one of the remedies to our fear of death.[6]

In this essay, I will mainly consider the relationship between death and truth at the point of junction between ethics and ontology. From this perspective, it is my conviction that death may function as a kind of litmus test that enables us to verify the theoretical and ethical characteristics

4 See, for example, the following passage from the *Book of Wisdom* (1: 13-4): "For God made not death, neither hath he pleasure in the destruction of the living. For he created all things that they might be: and he made the nations of the earth for health: and there is no poison of destruction in them, nor kingdom of hell upon the earth".

5 See e.g. the interview to Schiavone in Monti 2010, 3-20.

6 The idea of technology as a remedy to our fear of annihilation is developed in the entire work of Emanuele Severino, See e.g. the interview to the philosopher in Monti 2010, 135-64.

of our philosophical systems and acquire awareness of their limits. These limits are consistent with the practical and ethical decisions that privilege different if not opposite needs, which at the same time display the type of truth for which we are searching. Such opposing needs are, for example, the search for truth about death on the one hand – which generally represents a deep psychological trauma – and the need of consoling the bereaved, on the other. In Buddhist words, we could read this in terms of the oxymoronic exchange between wisdom and compassion. How to say the truth and at the same time being compassionate? Is telling the truth (but which truth?) always the right thing to do? Consequently, does philosophical truth have anything to share with sociality in human existence, or is it necessarily detached from it? Ancient Greek philosophy was very much in tune with the task of teaching how to live and die in proper manner. Yet, such a philosophy has shown the tendency to transform death into something different from what is phenomenally lived and perceived, as in Plato. Is it then inevitable that our senses and life be destined to be denied by our reason? I would neither venture to discuss in details the ethical problems of dealing with the bereaved, nor define the right thing to do or say in similar situations. I would limit to reflect upon some consequences of the problem of truth, deriving from the theoretical and practical question of death.

The problem of death (the fact that death becomes a problem) is essentially the problem of our attitude toward death, which very often implies the more or less conscious attempt to soften or embellish – if not bluntly deny – its reality. When approached in philosophical or religious contexts, death is very often transfigured, or at least provided with meaning. Death 'as such', in its facticity, is rarely taken from a purely phenomenal point of view. It is very rare that human beings may find the strength of looking squarely at 'death's gaze'. Philosophy too is often dominated by the urgency of searching for a remedy to such a fear. This is understandable. We human beings are searching for assistance in order to face our inevitable fate without falling into desperation. Hence, philosophers have often assumed the task of delivering us from the fear of death: Epicurus, the Stoics and almost all ancient philosophers were actively engaged in accomplishing such an enterprise. This philosophical task is all but disappeared in modern thought: Spinoza and Leibniz, through their search for explaining death in logical terms, often used rational theorizations of death as a kind of solution. Transfigured death, and even explained death, is a remedy in itself. Many philosophers, scientists and religious men 'find' the meaning of death, its essence, its role within a rational scheme, bringing it back to the reassuring horizon of wisdom and, thus, re-determining the meaning of our being in the world. However, this philosophical agenda requires a metaphysical and epistemic (from the Greek *epì* 'over' and *hìstamai* 'stay') approach to death, that is the attitude of moving to a level above

the events, from which it is possible to discover the 'superior truth' or the foundation of death, of which a certain, incontrovertible knowledge is searched.[7] This approach is not priceless and is only apparently objective. It is rather under the undeclared influence of different motivations and desires, such as fear and the consequent need of finding solace, the search for extending control over life, etc. The search for the truth about death, if accomplished by such an epistemic and remedial perspective, betrays some non-rational presuppositions behind the rationality of the concepts used. It can also betray certain non-ethical attitudes, lurking behind the act of promoting those 'ethics of death' that are based on 'serenity' or 'hope for afterlife', which for example may even end with commercially bargaining over paradise promises with various 'good deeds', as Vladimir Jankélévitch has remarked, which makes explicit the thinker's selfishness behind.

In such a context, ethical responsibility and search for truth are closely intertwined: there is a double implication of theoretical and ethical characters. The search for truth, far from being an objective act, devoid of any practical consequences, should be more accurately considered as having ethical resonance, and the specific act of theoretical search is no exception. Truth has an ethical conjugation: we modify our ethical attitude toward the world, according to our theoretical choices, as it should be clear from various philosophical perspectives on death described in this essay.

At the beginning of this paper, I would clarify two fundamental and opposite definitional attitudes toward death: what could be called 'epistemic transfigurativism' and the opposite 'semelfactive phenomenalism'. These two orientations concerning almost every definitional practice are important to investigate the point of juncture between theoretical speculation and ethics as indicated before, providing some important critical elements to interpret the history of thanatology.

I will start by discussing death in Plato's *Phaedo*, which is particularly useful in clarifying the metaphysical, death-transfigurative philosophical approach and its deep relationship with the question of truth. I will explain how Plato's anthropology (and especially his conception of death) is determined by the transcendent character of truth aimed at by the philosopher. Then, I will illustrate Edgar Morin's conception of "death as loss of individuality", showing that, although from a completely different perspective, his approach still contains important traces of transfigurative orientation. Afterwards, I will deal with Vladimir Jankélévitch's thanatology, with its emphasis on the semelfactivity of existence and death. Then, after a brief

7 Of course, this use of the term *epistéme* has nothing to do with Foucault's idea of *epistéme* as the historical *a priori* upon which certain ideas have been developed. Rather, it is similar to the use of the term in ancient Greek philosophy and recently used by Popper and other thinkers to mean a kind of knowing endowed with incontrovertible truth value and opposite to the uncertain knowing of opinion (*dòxa*).

analysis of the concept of death in some ancient Buddhist texts, I will deepen the cases of one Chan *gong'an* (ja. *kōan*)[8] from the *Record of Blue Cliff* (ch. *Biyanlu*, ja. *Hekiganroku*) and the Japanese Zen master Dōgen (1200-1252), whose vision of life-death is in deep relationship with the notion of Buddha-nature (ja. *busshō*).

This list is not defined by chance. On the one hand, it should draw attention to the fact that, due to the deep levels involved, transfigurative or phenomenal approaches to death are not specific to any historical condition or culture. Despite the fact that some tendencies impose themselves in certain periods or cultural areas, epistemic transfigurativism and semelfactive phenomenalism can be found in different cultures and times: they emerge in many countries all over the world and heavily influence many definitional practices from theology, to philosophy and scientific theories. They look like orientations and habits that cannot be limited to a conceptual sphere, but inspire deep, practical attitudes. On the other hand, the cases of Jankélévitch and Chan-Zen Buddhist texts can help to inspire a-foundational interpretations of the world that may fruitfully reorient our manner of facing death.

3 Epistemic Transfiguration vs Semelfactive Phenomenalism in Thanatology

As explained before, death has been defined in many and various manners: as the event of cessation of vital functions in an organism, or as the process of dissolution, culminating in a radical and irreversible disappearance of a life form. These definitions of death in turn depend on the type of opposition to life, conceived for instance as contradictory or correlative. Still, a definitional approach to death that consists in clarifying it as a discrete object does not solve many problems, as indicated, and in particular does not consider its existential meaning. If the main focus of thanatology turns to be this meaning, limiting oneself to discuss death's definition is somehow out of target, however useful or relevant it may be in a limited number of borderline cases. The philosophical inquiry should rather be focused on our everyday relationship to death and our attitude towards it, which deals with human beings in their everyday life, avoiding focusing on exceptional conditions. Another change of focus should frame our starting question as: 'how to think of death?', instead of: 'what is death?'. As Kasulis (2009, 223-4) and Ames (1993) have indicated, the difference between 'what' and 'how' lays respectively in the transcendent or immanent awareness of the epistemological relationship with the

8 The abbrevations between brackets stand for Japanese (ja.), Chinese (ch.) and Pali (pali).

world. This change in our manner of questioning death requires that we choose whether we are directly engaged (immanent approach) or not engaged (transcendent approach) in the problem considered. This urges us to reflect on our reactions and limitations while facing death. Much more than about death itself – which may be defined as a true, unsolvable question mark – this reflexive attitude speaks about ourselves: more than defining what is true or false about death 'in itself', it has to do with our attitude to conceal it or our will to face it. This very will of ours influences what we define as true and false about death. This search is focused on the theoretical reverberation of such a practical standpoint, both ontically and ethically considered.

Many religious and philosophical definitional practices about death all over the world and in all epochs could be approached according to a distinction between what I would call 'epistemic transfiguration' and 'semelfactive phenomenalism'. Following transfigurativism, the interpreter feels justified or urged, for one reason or another, to transfigure death according to a superior perspective, or to explain its higher or inner meaning, adding (allegedly 'finding') characteristics that – although judged truer than the phenomenal order of events, or able to explain the truth of those events – are not directly and phenomenally evident in the specific event of death, but must be inferred, believed or hypothesized. From the perspective adopted in this essay, epistemic transfiguration of death is not limited to beliefs in afterlife, immortality of the soul and so on, but more radically includes *the very assumption of possessing the hermeneutical keys* to identify the essence of death. These hermeneutical keys are generally provided by a *universal* and *superior* perspective (the metaphysical and epistemic approach) thanks to which a comprehensive, rational or sentimental understanding of death is intended to explain its inner meaning. From this perspective, rationalistic or scientistic definitions of death do not radically differ from religious ones. They only diverge in means, their aim being the search for meaning. Let us consider the following hypothetical (but realistic) sentences:

a. "Death together with sexual reproduction is essential in multicellular organisms, in order to make the renewal and the adaptation of species possible".
b. "Death is a passage that brings the deceased to a better world".

The two sentences are very different in their presuppositions and scopes. Sentence a) is based on a rational reconstruction of the world from the perspective of a kind of immanent teleologism based upon scientific hypotheses. Sentence b), presupposing the existence of a reality beyond this world, is based upon some myths, or hopes, or tenets developed in a more or less religious (although generic) environment. In both cases, a

transcendent sense that overcomes and explains the level of phenomenal and existential death is found Accordingly, a truth outside of this world grounds the death's truth in a higher plane of existence, be it rational or fideistic. Still, from the perspective of individual death, they both end with shifting the attention of the subject away from the present awareness of death in its being here and now. If consolation is clearly sought after in sentence b), sentence a) too has a somehow similar effect, although in an immanent and rational sense, since it defines the sense of the otherwise mysterious and dramatic event of death. Avoiding this existential enigma, we believe we have the strength and the right to control events, or at least to understand them. If the consolatory path of any faith is not considered viable, as with rationalism, it is easy that a kind of scientific hypothesis about death may become an epistemological, merely intellectual surrogate of afterlife. Although without any faith, we can at least count on *meaning*. Since epistemic approach often sprouts from the need of controlling the course of events, it provides human beings with meaning, as necessary not to sink into despair. Whatever *idea on death* makes us conceptualise it. This grants us a meaning, through which we try to exert a kind of possession and control over the events, closing the eyes to the fact that about death nothing can be either affirmed or negated. We do not know anything about it. In front of this event, we experience a lack of any foundation, the impossibility to find such a foundation. This is utterly unacceptable to our rational spirit. Used to find meaning for everything, we think that there must be a meaning even for death. From such a perspective, acceptation or rejection of death are almost deriving from the same urge of *solving* this phenomenon once and for all. What is problematic is not such an urge *per se*, but the sclerotic and compulsive character of this urge, which does not let space enough for anything else than this truth.

On the opposite side, the other approach, named here 'semelfactive',[9] is antithetic to the epistemic one in many respects. In semelfactive phenomenalism, the interpreter considers it essential to avoid adding or changing attributes to the phenomenon of each single death encountered and faces each death on its very plane, carefully avoiding any way out, as well as easy solutions 'from outside'. From such a perspective, death should be faced for what it appears at the point of junction of physical and social-relational levels. Only from such a perspective, it would be possible to become more aware of this event and of our practical engagement with it, being con-

9 'Semelfactivity' derives from the Latin words *semel* (once) and *facio* (I do) and indicates what appears only once and does not constitute a class, a concept. It is a synonym of the Greek *hápax* (*legómenon*), or "(word) said only once" in a certain text. These words here are directly taken from Jankélévitch, who used both of them without limiting their value to linguistics, but through a definitely metaphysical orientation. They express the haecceity of the individual, its quality of 'being unique' in the entire history.

scious of the dangers deriving from the illusory appeal of both materialism and spiritualism. This approach implies to acknowledge that death cannot be defined according to foundationalist habits,[10] which urge us to find the transcendent or immanent meaning for everything, as a kind of mechanic application of a routine of thought, which often blinds our eyes and numbs our perceptions. Examples of this semelfactive orientation to death may be appreciated in many authors, such as for example the Buddhist Amida follower Shinran (1173-1263) and the nativist Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) in Japanese thought. In this essay, this approach will be represented by some of its most lucid interpreters: Vladimir Jankélévitch (1903-1985) and Dōgen (1200-1253).

Epistemic transfigurativism ends with both rejecting or accepting death, hating or desiring it. Its viewpoint is intended to solve the mystery of death, interpreting it as 'totally other' and thus constituting it as 'an object'. As Jankélévitch often says, in death, there are no elements to affirm or negate anything, either rational or irrational, spiritualistic or materialistic, immanent or transcendent. Death drives us to a condition of complete theoretical uncertainty, a constant oscillation that cannot fix on any determinate thesis. Death can become a really impossible object. Semelfactive phenomenalism tries to keep death in its being a true mystery, which derives from the fact that nobody has returned from the 'other shore' to explain how it is and any past experience of it is definitely excluded. Phenomenalism resists the temptation to solve this opaqueness. Following this perspective, we do justice to death's truth only if in our philosophical inquiry we recognise this fundamental inability of ours to find any evidence of sort and acknowledge the death's status of a-foundational dimension: neither sense (scientism, spiritualism), nor non-sense (nihilism, absurdism) can lighten such a darkness. Following the phenomenalist perspective, we can correctly face death only if we realise that death is truly enigmatic and impenetrable, or as Dōgen puts it, only if life and death are faced in their being simply 'so'.

The acknowledgement of death's enigma (or uniqueness) cannot lead in any case to reject smugly death's transfiguration as ingenuous, irrelevant, or merely superstitious. There are at least four arguments against such an attitude. The first is theoretical: thinking cannot claim to ultimately judge anything, without becoming dangerously ideological. This is particularly valid in the case of death: being a kind of power, ideology and knowledge are generally meant to – and from the political perspective, must – rapidly

10 Foundationalism is an approach that is rather common among many philosophical systems to rest upon a secure foundation of certainty as a preliminary basis for the development of a truth system. Although the term is mainly used in epistemology, here I would like to underline mainly the ethical and existential consequences of such an approach and its influence on our attitude toward the world, which results in a specific set of habits, both intellectual and practical.

occupy any vacant place in representational order. A-foundational phenomenalist should limit to resist such a luring temptation, within the scope of truth and ethical discourse. The second reason to avoid simple rejection of transfiguration derives from an anthropological reflection on the first argument: transfiguration of death is a powerful force of human self-affirmation beyond death, as Edgar Morin has pointed out. Hence, it has an extraordinary weight in social, political and religious dimensions and would be ingenuous to even think of simply abolishing it. The third argument is existential: searching for a world after death tells how dramatic death is and how feeble our defences are against it. The fourth and final argument is ethical: we have no right of knocking anyone off her/his own psychological balance, especially if this touches an open wound. We should respect any belief in our destiny after death, if only this belief is in turn respectful toward the others. As a matter of fact, discriminating between transfigurative and phenomenalist approaches should not be simply equated to the distinction between delusion and truth. Or better, applying the hermeneutic possibilities offered by the Buddhist conception of twofold truth (conventional and ultimate truths), the relationship between the two is deeper than one could think from an abstract point of view. A pure affirmation of phenomenalism that does not take into account the transfigurative inclination deriving from psychological trauma and/or social demands risks to be ideologically blind, childishly utopian and practically inhuman, especially when facing people who have recently suffered for a loss. The transfigurative approach too (which could roughly be included into Buddhist conventional truth) has a practical, anthropological, social and psychological meaning, motivated by the need of reassuring the shocked person and of healing one's wounds after the traumatic experience of losing one's beloved. Philosophy of death could not and *should not* overlook its practical applications and educational (or self-educational) potential.

At the same time, however, the instrumental character of the transfiguration of death can all too easily go against, if not cover, the awareness of death's enigma. As a consequence, the meaning and implications of death are too often changed according to unconfessed agendas (for example, the aim of simply chasing fear away, or of finding the meaning of life). Hence, although from the perspective of compassion transfigurative approach can be extremely important under certain circumstances, from the viewpoint of 'ultimate truth' it does not help us in any sense to come near to whatever may be the phenomenon of death. Transfiguration can be helpful as a path to overcome the sorrow and the fear of the last hours; it can work as a remedy or a compensation. Still, epistemic truth about death is not theoretically valid from the perspective of individual death. It can define generic death, 'everyone's death', but it is hardly effective in individualised death.

According to Lisciani Petrini, life and death should not be conceived following univocal definitions, like transcendental vs immanentist; meta-

physical vs biologist; personal vs impersonal, etc. Rather, a 'double sight' should be adopted that may allow facing their paradoxical and insolvable ambiguity (Lisciani Petrini 2009, xxviii). Such a remark is particularly significant since this 'double sight', or 'paradoxology' in Jankélévitch's terms, is the way through which the unrepeatability and haecceity of things (and human beings) is affirmed and taken care of, away from the potentially dangerous rhetoric of authenticity, so decisive in Heidegger.

Semelfactive phenomenalism affirms the singularity of things, whereas epistemic transfigurativism perceives singularity as a problem, in need of being emendated through religious, philosophical, scientific and political procedures. This emendation requires the absorption of the individual's uniqueness and the subsequent standardisation of one's own ideas on (and even perceptions of) life and death. It is no surprise that the modern state has exerted a strong pressure and conditioning over individuals through the so called 'biopolitics', as Foucault widely pointed out in his works. This process of emendation often implies an intervention over the individual's body, which is disquieting from the perspective of knowledge/power because of its ambiguous stance, difficult to be framed inside biopolitical schemes. Biopolitics creates a homogeneous political space in which individuality, emendated of its ambiguity and unique character, finds an unambiguous, clear definition. This happens in the case of death too, because it is always an individualised body that dies and only individuals realise death. Plato's case is very instructive in this respect, since he could be said to have built, ahead of its times, one of the first biopolitical ideologies in the history of Western civilisation that, rejecting the ambiguity of the transient body, imposes death's meaning as the ideal condition to reach the transcendent truth.

4 Plato's Truth as Enemy of the Body

Plato's approach resolutely submits human beings to metaphysical and epistemological needs and particularly to the idea of imperishable truth. His anthropology goes so far as to reverse the commonsensical interpretation of life and death: according to Plato, true life can be reached only after death and, while we are living, actually we are dead. Probably, this idea derives from orphism, but the core of the problem lays elsewhere, namely in his conception of truth. Plato's truth is imperishable and perfect. Being unmoving, it can only be reached in *hyperuranium*, the realm of archetypal ideas, which human beings can achieve solely once the soul is delivered from this mortal, ever-changing coil. Philosophy becomes an exercise of death (i.e. a preparation for true life after death) and biological life is declared to be incompatible with truth. The radical character of Plato's epistemology has important consequences on metaphysics, religion

and anthropology and influences the entire (especially higher) ancient European culture. Nowadays we probably do not perceive the revolutionary impact of his anthropological conception, but at that time, it had to be quite impressive, as it appears from the changes in the use of some key words introduced by Plato. The words indicating 'body' (*sôma*) and 'soul' (*psyché*) before Plato had the meaning of 'corpse' and 'last breath' respectively, as in Homeric culture (Galimberti 2006, 41-56). As a matter of fact, ancient Greeks had no words to indicate the entire, purely physical body, or the total emotional and thinking activity. Homer never reduced human being to abstract totality, focusing instead on its chances, of which the names of limbs were metonymic descriptions. On the other hand, dichotomy in Plato was essential for human beings to approach an imperishable truth. Since human world is subdued to transitoriness and change, Plato had to choose between two possibilities: declare this truth unreachable to us, or minimise the importance of transiency for humankind. He chose the second path, affirming that the only true dimension for human beings consists in the perfect world of pure, imperishable ideas, which at the same time is a world of death, as in the following quotation:

> While we are in the body, and while *the soul is mingled with this mass of evil*, our desire will not be satisfied, and our desire is of the truth. For the body […] is liable to diseases which overtake and impede us in the search after truth. If there is time and an inclination toward philosophy, yet *the body introduces a turmoil and confusion and fear into the course of speculation, and hinders us from seeing the truth*. […] In this present life, I reckon that we make the nearest approach to knowledge when we have *the least possible concern or interest in the body*, and are not saturated with the bodily nature, but remain pure until the hour when [the] God himself is pleased to release us. And then *the foolishness of the body will be cleared away* and we shall be pure and hold converse with other pure souls, and know of ourselves the clear light everywhere; and this is surely the light of truth. (Plato 2007, 43-4; emphasis added)

This passage is very rich of important indications about the relationship between truth and death. Platonic truth itself is deadly. It requires eternity and immobility, whilst life implies change, conflict and movement. It demands time and space, whereas Platonic truth is outside or beyond this world and due to its purity it must be kept apart from any changing factor. The body, in particular, is the epitome of such an allegedly despicable instability. It is considered the place of diseases and its irrationality and opaqueness obstruct our pursuit of truth. The body is the source of turmoil and confusion, so much so that it is considered as patently 'foolish'. It is interesting to note that Plato identifies in the body the cause of the present impossibility of reaching perfect truth. Even what today we could

call 'psychological negative states' in platonic explanation are ascribed to the body and would not exist if only the body would cease its influence on us.[11] It should be noted however that Plato's 'soul' is not the exact equivalent of our modern conception of 'mind'. We generally use this term to indicate a psychological state, which is unstable and changing, depending on emotions. This was not Plato's idea of soul, which on the contrary *had to be* unchangeable and eternal, akin to the very idea of eternal truth. As a matter of fact, only imperishable and unchanging souls can enter the reign of imperishable truth.[12]

Still, Plato's conception of truth is not only enemy of the body, but of individuality as well. If our soul is inherently mathematical, it is blind to *my* individuality to which my death belongs. In fact, it does not clarify what is me and only me. It can only see death in general, not what makes death mine and only mine, as it longs for the realm of imperishable, but necessarily impersonal truth.

5 Death vs Impermanence, or the Question of Undecidability

It is also interesting to note that in Plato the search for an imperishable truth and the contempt for the body have the same origin. His desire of truth becomes a desire of death, and this truth requires that the human being be purged of the entire bodily dimension, considered as unreliable because of its ever-changing status. The desire of truth requires the body's death, not the soul's: the impermanent body is a hindrance that must be swept away. This dualistic distinction explains why Plato is careful in distinguishing between death and impermanence. His desire is directed

11 Incidentally, I note that in ancient Buddhism the individual is considered transient both in its bodily and mental aspects, being formed by aggregates (pali *khandha*, sa. *skhanda*, ch. *wuyun*, ja. *goun*) that are not only 'physical', but also 'mental'. This setting of the problem prevents considering the body as the only cause of suffering. On the contrary, the process of 'co-dependent origination' (sa. *pratītyasamutpāda*) lists greed, ignorance and lust as *mental* causes of the unending process of suffering, together with other physical reasons of *saṃsāra* (Gethin 1998, 68 ff.). In other words, the negative conditions from which humans strive to be delivered in Buddhism are not only physical, but also mental. Moreover, due to the inter-relational nature of causes in Buddhism, the theoretical possibility of distinguishing between an 'always good soul' and an 'always evil body' is clearly excluded from the very first. In Buddhism, especially in Mahāyāna, the difference between *nirvāṇa* (positive state, to be pursued) and *saṃsāra* (negative state, to be avoided) is more a matter of mental and subjective attitude than of physical corruption of objects.

12 From such a perspective, Plato was laying the foundations for modern scientific laws. If Plato's truth is mathematical, so must be human souls. Mathematical and scientific truth, in general, derive from this thinking, although in Plato science does not stand apart from theology. Descartes and modern philosophical thinking would take a step forward the mathematical interpretation of the subject. See for example Galimberti 2006, 69 ff.

toward the former in order to put an end to the latter. Impermanence must be expunged due to its incompatibility with permanent truth.

Why does Plato desire death and not impermanence or becoming? Why is impermanence a big hindrance for the truth-seeker? In order to find an answer to this question, we should move away from philosophy and advance an anthropological hypothesis, based on what Mary Douglas in her famous book *Purity and Danger* stated about danger as a cultural classification. What is defined as "dirty and filthy" is actually what is perceived as disrespectful of the socially established cultural categories that ground social, epistemic and cultural order. Hence, dirt is perceived as dangerous, because it calls into question the order established by commonly accepted classifications (Douglas 2003). On the contrary, what is defined as 'pure' follows the established cultural distinctions and helps to strengthen social and cultural order. It is irresistibly tempting to interpret Plato's opposition between impermanent body and permanent soul as congruent with Douglas' distinction between 'dangerous' (impure) and 'safe' (pure). Due to its transient nature, the body does not follow the established cultural categories, but with its "turmoil and confusion and fear" disturbs the search for a clearly defined truth. Hence, impermanence is identified with the biggest hindrance to the discovery of truth. This requires the human body to be eliminated, in order to radically get rid of the main source of transitoriness and, thus, assure the soul a path toward an imperishable truth. Due to its stable and eternal character, death is a clearly defined state and can serve as an excellent dimension of truth, whilst the transient living body cannot, since it cannot be clearly defined once and for all.

Plato draws a distinction between death (acceptable and even desirable) and transitoriness (treacherous and to be recoiled). The former is a definite, perfect state; the latter is a breach in the categorical taxonomy. The former is the realm of pure soul, set free from the body; the latter is the ambiguous dominion of the body, which shackles the soul. Thus, Plato is transfiguring death out of his epistemic purposes. Death in Plato is a definite, perfect state of purity, whereas impermanence is undecidable and hence dangerous. This is why Plato thinks that eternal, unchangeable truth cannot be found in transiency. For this very reason, conversely, in East Asian Buddhism truth is *not* unchangeable and eternal and the question of drawing clear distinction between truth and error is defined in very different terms, as it appears in the Japanese Buddhist use of the image of Ōno no Komachi: Buddhist truth cannot be conceived without impermanence.[13]

13 Particularly significant is Kan'ami's (1333-1384) Noh playwright *Sotoba no Komachi* (Komachi of the *stūpa*), where the once famous beauty Komachi, presented as old and near death, is sitting on a *stūpa* (i.e. a Buddhist monument containing Buddha's relics) having a discussion with a monk. He rebukes her for dishonoring the symbol of Buddha's body: her female, corrupted body is in sharp contrast with the Buddha's perfect body. Still, after a

Plato's *Phaedo* could be considered as the epitome of transfigurative approach in philosophy. Death is not considered in itself, but only from the perspective of absolute truth, which in turn is gained only through death. Apparently, this approach to death brings hope to human beings, but at high cost: actually, human condition (and especially the body in its transitory complexion) is sacrificed to the realm of essence.

Still, the idea of death in *Phaedo* should not be considered as typifying 'Western' approach to life and death. From the perspective of transfiguration, this conception seems at least comparable, if not clearly convergent, for example with the tendencies to aestheticize death in many artistic and literary Japanese products, that inspired for example the ideal of the failing hero in classical Japanese literature (Morris 1975). Aetheticization of death in militaristic Japan during the Pacific war was also important as a rhetoric and ideological device to persuade young people to sacrifice their own lives to the emperor (Ohnuki-Tierney 2002).[14] Although the overall sense is obviously different and in need to be contextualized, there are some similarities in that all these approaches transfigure death, transforming it into something positive as an aesthetic motif (Japanese aestheticism) or as the ideally suited condition for accessing truth (Plato's *Phaedo*), or as a propaganda tool for the modern national warfare (Japanese and non-Japanese *kamikaze*).

6 Edgar Morin and the Returning Myths of Immortality

Among epistemic approaches, Plato's anti-somatic metaphysics is not the only possible. Edgar Morin's thanatology is particularly significant because transfiguration is allegedly involuntary in his case. After having provided an interesting interpretation of death in anthropological terms, he admittedly ends up with falling victim of the theories he has previously identified, using scientific hypothesis to find an alleged viable solution to the problem of death.

According to Morin, the appearance of tools and burial rites identifies the human development from the state of nature. The two practices could not be more different: the former is part of the adaptation process to the material world and its laws; the latter seems to revolt against the

long discussion, the monk admits that "What we call passions too" and Komachi continues "becomes awakening" (Chin 1998, 302-3). The idea of "passions-as immediately-awakening" (*bonnō soku bodai*) was very popular in the period and was associated to the idea that a female rotten body could liberate the monk from illusions (Chin 1998, 308).

14 By the way, similar ideological approaches to death can be found in many modern uses of the classical Horace's line, originally in *Odes* (3, 2, 13), stating, "It is sweet and proper to die for one's country" (Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori).

impositions of biology. Still, there is something in common: "death, as much as the tool, is an act of individual affirmation, which continues its presence in time, whereas the tool extends human presence in space" (Morin 2002, 34). Since the practices of burial can be found in every human group, even the most archaic ones, they are said to be quintessential to human cultures no less than tools. Death is interpreted as a continuation of this life. This however does not mean that archaic cultures are unaware of the difference between death and life. On the contrary, ritual consciousness draws a clear distinction between the living and the dead. Still, according to Morin, while affirming and recognising the event of death, archaic cultures negate death's annihilation (Morin 2002, 35-6).

Why must death be such a difficult matter for human beings? Could not we simply accept the idea of fading away? Morin's answer is no. He ascribes the complexity of death as a social phenomenon to the deeply shocking emotion – the 'death trauma' – that runs parallel to the consciousness of the void, which lays at the bottom of the individual. Morin calls the link between emotional trauma, consciousness of death and belief in immortality "the threefold anthropological datum". These three reactions to death (emotion, consciousness and belief) are always bound together and imply each other. For instance, what makes our emotions so intense in the presence of death is the perception of the distance between consciousness of death and affirmation of immortality. Such a distance hinders the belief in immortality. Consciousness of death starts from death trauma. Hence, it demands an affirmation able to overcome death (Morin 2002, 44).

Death generates strong reactions due to the loss of individuality implicit in it. We strongly react to the consciousness that an individual has become a carrion. Such a violent trauma needs to be balanced by an equally powerful affirmation of individuality after death. This belief in immortality is universally spread and originally coexistent with the other phenomena. There is an important relationship between death consciousness and individual affirmation. Death – or rather, the time immediately previous to death – is the moment in which the individual affirms itself in the most intense manner, not necessarily as an 'I' but also as a 'you', an 'ideal' or a 'value'. Such a final affirmation is considered to be stronger than the I, and strong enough to confront death. Thanks to this affirmation, an individual can find the courage to face death, or to risk its life (Morin 2002, 46-7).

In Morin's interpretation the loss of individuality is the red thread that links phenomena that are apparently unrelated, such as "the sorrow of funerals, the terror of the corpse's decomposition, the obsession of death" and lies at the center of the "threefold anthropological datum". Sorrow is particularly painful if we know the departed well, that is if her/his individuality "was present and recognised". The closer the dead was to us – that is, the more 'unique' was for us – the more intense is our grief for her/

his departure. In the same vein, terror for decomposition is explained by the fear of losing individuality. Likewise, human beings become obsessed with death especially because they are worried about saving their own individuality after death (Morin 2002, 42).

Morin's anthropological interpretation of death presupposes the purely physical idea of the cessation of vital functions, but it is not confined to purely biological dimension. It encompasses the basic human reactions to death as well, especially from the standpoint of the individual's loss. As a matter of fact, as stated in the first introduction to the work dated 1951, death should be read through a kind of 'Copernican revolution', to paraphrase Kant: instead of death, it would be essential to reflect upon human being itself, of which death is an image. Only after that would it be possible to look at death in its purely biological meaning (Morin 2002, 29-30). The specificity of human death lies in the fact that among human beings death is recognised as such not by species – which in the case of *homo sapiens* is extremely de-specialised and deprived of instinctual complement, especially if compared to animals – but by individuals. On the contrary, among animals it is the species and not the individuals that recognises death. Still, the reason for this is not strictly biological. In fact, 'individualised animals', such as pets, understand the individual's death (for example, their master's death) in a quite acute manner. Human societies work as a kind of species, at least under certain specific historical conditions like warfare, thus reducing the terror of death through social customs and practices, habits and ideologies, as well as interpersonal connections.

This approach of Morin is certainly a sort of anthropological and sociological 'explanation' of the phenomenon of death. However, does explanation necessarily mean transfiguration? The boundaries between the two are actually very thin and easy to overcome. Still, if explanation is defined according to its etymological sense of 'unfolding something' that is too dense (or crumpled) to be appreciated as such, 'unfolding death' does not necessarily mean to transfigure it. It could mean to realise the various aspects that occur in this event, consciously keeping one's viewpoint at the same level of the phenomenon considered. Thus, it does not necessarily mean 'understanding' in the sense of searching for its foundations or aims. Then we could ask whether Morin is searching for a transfiguring death. Does he aim at defining it from a superior standpoint, in order to impose a meaning to this phenomenon, or even to solve it? Following Morin's own interpretation, the desperate need of finding the meaning of death could be traced back to the concomitant action of the threefold anthropological data: our strong emotion in presence of death, our bitter consciousness of the decease and our invincible belief in immortality. Still, something paradoxical emerges from Morin's position: on the one hand, he traces many old and new cultural approaches to death back to their original myths of death-rebirth through transmigration and death-survival of the double

(Morin 2002, 119 ff.). On the other hand, he himself frankly admits to be caught by these same myths, "being induced to write – hidden by the mask of science – the last chapter of the myths of death" (Morin 2002, 341). This is the case, when at the end of the book he seems not to consider the problem of death from the individual, phenomenal perspective, but prefers to discuss its possible solutions through technology, realising only much later that a technical solution to death is nothing else than a modern variation of the myth of immortality. The author himself in his new conclusions dated 1970 and in the afterword of 1975 is finally quite self-critical about his own conclusions written in 1951, since he admittedly was "trying to find a way out of the tragedy of death", "ending with being prey to the very mythological forces I highlighted" (Morin 2002, 341).

However, despite this self-criticism and self-ironic stance towards what the author himself defines as the "Morinian myth of a-mortality", in the following edition of 1976 we can bear witness to another resurgence of those very myths: the quasi-Hegelian conclusion that death represents the 'intentional' strategy of living organisms that reorganise and renew themselves through disorder. Hence, through death, living beings can transform themselves and perpetuate species. Therefore, the process of disorganisation and degeneration are a part of the process of reorganisation and regeneration (Morin 2002, 17-8). Very sketchily stated, such an explanation produces the psychological effect of making death more comprehensible and even rationally acceptable. Moreover, although focusing on the relationship between death and the individual, Morin does seem to have radically shaped his own perspective according to this hermeneutical key. He has not changed his own point of view, limiting to the level of the sole 'content' of the discourse. He seems to have not completely modified his own critical perspective. Death and the individual become generic concepts and can be attributes of everyone (and no one at the same time). They remain objects of an epistemic knowledge.

Still, this is in no way a problem for the sole Morin. His frank admission, and his difficulties in coming to grips with individual death even *after* such an admission, should make us aware of the relative frailty of conscious thinking in presence of death. On the one hand, philosophical thinking is influenced 'from outside' by social and cultural constructions that tend to tame this event, in order to reduce its potentially devastating effects on society; on the other, thinking is exposed 'from inside' to emotions, especially the fear of losing individuality. Thus, death never ceases to be a 'dangerous matter' for philosophy.

7 Vladimir Jankélévitch and Perspectival Phenomenalism in Thanatology

A completely different approach to truth and death is that of the Russo-French-Jewish philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch (1903-1985), who takes an uncompromising stance against any transfiguration of death. In his premise to the book *La mort*, Jankélévitch's phenomenalist thanatology takes the shape of a strongly perspectival phenomenology of death. According to the Russo-French philosopher, our approach to death can vary depending on whether it is considered in the first, the second or the third person. Death in the third person (or *their death*) is death in general. It is the anonymous and general fact of the end of existence, noted down at the registry office as a pure datum in statistics. This death does not involve us in any particular form and we can keep it at a distance with relative ease. There is no tragedy from this perspective, only external phenomena (Jankélévitch 1977, 24-5). If the third person death determines indifference or serenity, if not relief (at the bottom of our heart, we could admit: "fortunately, it is not me!"), and can be engendered by ignorance or will to avoid it, death in the first person (*my death*) is the supreme source of anxiety. It is the tragedy of 'my entire being', which proves to be exposed to nothingness. From this death I cannot keep any distance, since it is my death that it is dealt with. I have no way out, no hope of escaping. At the most, I can choose to delude myself that this would never happen to me. Moreover, this death, in the same vein as birth, cannot be shared, but only faced alone. Finally, Jankélévitch considers *your death* as the death of people whom we personally know and love. "Between the anonymity of the third person and the tragic subjectivity of the first person […]; between the death of the other, which is far away and indifferent, and one's own death, that touches our own being, there is the nearness of the near" (29). This death is particularly touching: it is almost as painful as our own death. It is nearly like my death. Still, it is *not* my death.

My death and your death have to do with the 'haecceity' or the 'suchness' of the persons lost: they entail the 'semelfactivity' of the individuals, one of the *leitmotif* in Jankélévitch's philosophy and pivotal even in his discourse about death.

Jankélévitch consciously refers to death from the perspective of 'philosophy of partiality' (25). This approach admittedly underlines the insurmountable distinction and distance between individuals, who stay apart as radically singular: I cannot completely understand what the other is thinking and feeling and the same is true also for the other. This is also why Jankélévitch considers *our death* as a kind of paradox, a formula being defined not through "analogical induction, but lived sympathetically and intuitively in one's intimate experience" (27). Although death is a com-

mon destiny, this commonality keeps an exclusive, intimate and personal character, concerning only *that* person.

> This unrelated universality – Jankélévitch writes – is reducible to neither physical solidarity, nor to abstract community, nor to cosmological kinship; it expresses neither the individuals' inclusion in a common gender, nor their participation to a sole essence, nor their original affinity. In this case, in fact, persons would be monads, that is impersonal third persons. (27)

Both religions and rationalism fear death's solitude. Still, the supreme instant does not entail companions (28-9). From the point of view of the third person, death is a relative event. From the perspective of the first person, it is a unique and absolute occurrence. Hence, death is a kind of Georg Simmel's 'individual law'.

Jankélévitch's main analysis explores death from the temporal perspective of past, present and future: my death can only be conceived of as a future event (the death 'from this shore'), whereas yours and theirs can also be past (the death 'from the other shore') and present (the 'mortal instant') (37-8). The main characteristic of truth discourse about death in Jankélévitch lies in that it is an (almost) impossible object: contrary to Plato's idea of death as the highway to truth, Jankélévitch thinks that death is the greatest obstacle to truth, at least to its truth.

As far as we are alive, our discourse about death in the first person unavoidably speaks about life. We can try to imagine how it will be, but we are always destined to speak, think, imagine (and, therefore, *live*) without having experienced it. Hence, a discourse on death is impossible because it always speaks about something different, i.e. life, which is completely different from death. Here the dichotomous opposition of life and death ends with casting formidable doubts on the idea of truth and our chance to say something true. As a matter of fact, when we try to speak about the mortal instant, this infinitesimal moment is a 'nothing' (*rien*) or an 'almost-nothing' (*presque-rien*), ungraspable and useless in knowledge. It is just like trying to keep one's balance while standing on the point of a pin. It inevitably leads to discuss about the moment immediately before death (too early) or the moment immediately after (too late). Of course, a discourse after death is impossible, because it discusses an entirely unknowable object, which is completely beyond our possibilities (37-8).

Jankélévitch reckons that death and life are neither empirically, nor logically symmetric. Death is not what contradicts life: a dead being is not living *anymore*, not simply non-living. The very use of contradiction as a tool to illustrate the relationship between life and death does not reveal any characteristic of death, but only our manner of imagining what is beyond the mortal instant, the 'totally-other':

> It is not enough to reverse the positive aspects of life in order to obtain, as in a cliché, those of death! No! […] A mechanistic and simplistic reverse of this shore makes us depend on this shore. […] Contradiction, not more than contrary, does not make us glimpse at the totally-other; the back of the front is of same order than the front. (66)

Death is non-being, and yet it is not the nothingness full of potentiality, but the plain non-sense of sense, which constitutes the precariousness and inconsistency of every human thing (69). In Jankélévitch, dichotomous reasoning between death and life has no logical, symmetric nature, but indicates the consciousness that the existential relationship with the totally other is completely impossible.

7.1 Beyond Some Presuppositions in Jankélévitch's Position

However lucid may they be, these considerations by Jankélévitch originate from some undisputed, very basic assumptions. Relationship in general – for example between individuals, knower and known, life and death – is always considered as a 'third element' that stands between two different and, hitherto, unrelated objects. For instance, Jankélévitch thinks that the I is the I and cannot entirely communicate with the You and the relationship between us comes from outside of us, somehow after the I and the You have been defined as individuals. This implies isolation and impossible communication, which derives from what T. Kasulis defines as 'external relationship', or 'integrity' (Kasulis 2002). However, this is not the only possible conception of relationship. Some Japanese thinkers, such as Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945), have defined the I-Thou relationship according to an internal paradigm ("intimacy", in Kasulis' definition): I am not I without you, and vice versa. My relationship with you makes me what I am. I am myself thanks to you: my being is closely connected to you and cannot be set apart (Nishida 2003, 95). This would imply that *your death* has a direct effect upon me and shapes *my death*. In fact, there is a common field between you and me that goes beyond my very consciousness and that is neither yours nor mine.

Death in Jankélévitch is considered to be a punctual event, or a state resulting from an event. It is certainly much less considered as a process, as in many definitional practices, from Buddhism to some contemporary medical ethics (Steila 2009, 169 ff.; Cestari 2014). Moreover, death in Jankélévitch's approach is eminently, if not purely, a physical phenomenon. It is implicitly interpreted as the biological death of a human organism. This means that the extended (but very real) meaning of death, for instance the psychological or social one, is not considered in Jankélévitch's discourse. There are certainly some dangers in this reduction, since the

human being is identifiable neither with a biological organism nor with a physical object, as many contemporary philosophers have clearly pointed out.[15] Still, thanks to this focus limited on biological death and its effects on human beings, Jankélévitch avoids inappropriate usages of the idea of death, which all too easily softens its most unacceptable side. This aim would probably justify running the risk of reducing human death to a question of physicality. Yet, minimising the importance of the psychological and social death is strongly coherent with (and clearly strengthens) Jankélévitch's individualist approach, namely his inclination to stress the first person's approach to death.

As a matter of fact, his thought seems to be strongly dependent on the perspective of the speaking subject, the first person. In Jankélévitch's philosophy, all the perspectives on death seem to make sense only from this point of view. Coherently, its temporal dimension too is analysed from the standpoint of the 'I': future death is the non-sense of sense or the non-being of being; mortal instant is an 'outside-category' and past death is absolutely nothing. The 'I' can see and have only relative knowledge of another person's death and is supposed to know with a certain confidence only those events that happen to itself. At the same time, however, it is on the level of subjectivity that we experience the most crushing cognitive defeat. I cannot know my future death; my mortal instant is too rapid to be significant and finally my past death will be totally nothing for me, since I will be already dead (Jankélévitch 1977, 371-2). On the one hand, Jankélévitch grounds his argument of the unknowability of death from the particular perspective of the experiencing 'I'. On the other hand, this experience is severely limited: the subject experiences a true impossibility, so that a dark shadow is cast on the entire sense of human enterprise. This is certainly an interesting point of Jankélévitch, who shows his sensitiveness to the theme of cognitive finitude and finally ends with anti-subjectivist and anti-epistemic conclusions. Still, his approach starts from a perspective that is similar to the Cartesian subject, although his conclusions head to the diametrically opposite direction.

Jankélévitch's post-subjectivism reduces the possibilities of his own perspectivism, which betrays this limitation. The centrality of death in the first person is just the case. Residual subjectivism is clearly detectable in Jankélévitch's analysis, whenever the 'I' is said to lay at the foundations of every possible discourse on truth, including thanatology, although in a negative sense: I cannot know my death, which is radically incompatible with consciousness. At the basis of this idea, the presupposition of a clear

15 Two names among the others: Nishida Kitarō and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. A discussion on death implies a discussion about what Nishida calls the 'historical body' (*rekishiteki shintai*), which is not merely physical or biological, but includes a social-historical dimension. See Nishida 1998; Merleau-Ponty 1945.

and distinct knowledge is working, which can only occur if the subject clearly knows, as in Descartes, the object of cognition. Accordingly, since my knowledge of another person's experience is always hypothetical, another person's death would be unknowable. As a matter of fact, death in itself cannot be known by anyone. In Jankélévitch, death in first person is repeatedly indicated as a quite paradoxical object of thought, whose meaning is completely impossible to find: I am and will be completely ignorant about it. Epicurus stated the similar thesis that consciousness and death are incompatible, but his purposes were consolatory: the fear of death has no meaning whatsoever, because if death comes, I am not present, and if I am present, death is still to come. Jankélévitch re-interprets the same argument to underline a disquieting consequence: our impossibility to know anything about death. Nothing can be said about my death, whereas this 'nothing' has no relation with the ineffable silence of the mystics or the poets. My death points to the unspeakable silence of the complete nothing, the total lack of any relations. Here, meaning is completely obstructed and affirming or negating anything is impossible (cf. Jankélévitch 1977, 67-91). Death in first person is an objective limit to my heuristic strength.

On the other hand, death in the third person is little more than an abstract concept, a kind of indeterminate category and it is meaningful only in a very generic sense. It explains death according to rational, scientific, religious, mythical, or social explanations. Scientific theories and (generically) religious-philosophical answers can derive from such an impersonal death.

If *their death* is knowable only as an almost empty concept, and *my death* cannot be known in any case, there is a somehow intermediate death, which can be experienced. This is *your death*. Despite what Jankélévitch affirms, it could be possible to reckon that death in the second person is the most psychologically devastating dimension of death, which can affect the entire existence of the I. Its effects on my world are deep and durable, and underline the essentially *social* and *relational* character of death. In a hypothetical dialogue with him, Jankélévitch, who stresses the importance of *my death*, would reply that I cannot properly know what is death for you. According to him, death in any case imposes drastic limitations to the perspectival truth discourse: *my death* and *your death* are unknowable, although for different reasons (the first one because my very end coincides with the missed object of knowledge; the second one because I cannot become you). Still, such an approach is grounded on the assumption that real knowledge can only be clear and distinct and originate from the subject.

Away from this post-subjectivist perspective, *your death* could count as a crucial element to allow a *certain* knowledge of death. This knowledge would be human and finite, far from being the absolute one. Still, this would be the only manner for human beings to perceive death. *Your death* is my first real experience of death. I realise that what happened to you may happen (or better *will* happen, although I do not know when

and how) also to me. *My death* is destined to remain an undetermined state for me. On the contrary, *your death* is the only, limited possibility I have to come to grips with *my death*. You lie at the foundations of my heuristic strength about death, however much this strength be limited. I depend on you in considering *my death*. Thoroughly realising that I will die is generally impossible, until I do not feel, realise and live *your death* in a manner or another.

How to consider this death from the point of view of death's knowledge? This approach does not refer to death in first person and consequently has some hypothetical aspects, but it is far from the generic impersonal death of the third person as well. On the contrary, it is very personal, as in Derrida's mourning speech. This type of death does not exactly fall within a category, since "every death is unique", according to the personal link we had with the departed. The dominating element is emotional and singular in this context. This is neither the dominion of essence (of discourse), as with *their death*, nor the simple end of any discourse, as with *my death*. On the contrary, it is where meaning vacillates and hesitates. Far from being put into question in force of a rational counter-argument, it is jeopardised through some obscure, not entirely definable historical, emotional and physical set of factors. *Your death* is the place of penumbra and ambiguity. It is undoubtedly a kind of awareness, although far from being of a purely rational type and its limits are those of the subject's experience and perspective. As a matter of fact, it sprouts from the personal link with the departed and affirms their and my singularity, the semelfactivity of human bodies and souls. Since *your death* cannot be reduced to pure object of rational categorization, each death of people we knew well is to be considered apart and occupies a special place in our world. On the existential, affective and physical plane, I would never get used to any *your death*. Similarly, on the cognitive plane, such a knowledge is slippery and, so to say, it is ambiguous and different each time. It cannot be added to any previous knowledge, but always transforms, often drastically, such a knowledge. It cannot grant either any predictability or reliability that other types of knowledge can offer. Far from being *epistéme*, it is *phrònesis*, a case-by-case familiarity.

Jankélévitch often seems somehow rigid in stressing more the differences among the various perspectives on death than their possible connections. On the contrary, perspectivism in thanatology may not a priori exclude a certain flexible relationship among viewpoints. Actually, the boundaries between, for example, *their death* and *your death* are unstable and permeable. *They* can easily become *you*. Just a bit of acquaintance (some words exchanged with a perfect stranger) and a certain degree of personal involvement are sometimes enough to transform death in third person into death in second person. Hence, the difference between *my*, *your* or *their death* is more a question of level of acquaintance and of the

quality of relationship than of substance. As stated before, death in the first person can be imagined only through the experience of death in the second person. This reflects the eminently social and relational character of death. Since it can be realised, conceived and defined only within social relationships, there are no ultimate reasons that may grant special status to *my death*. Moreover, my 'being myself' does not rely on an ultimate and isolated identity, but is intertwined with other identities, so that I cannot completely control and know myself. Far from being a completely self-transparent and unified identity, this 'myself' is more akin to an open field in which different forces work according to different speeds, vectors and needs that may even conflict with each other. Not to mention that 'my experience', especially on the issue of death, has so many limits, failures and more or less deliberate 'adjustments', that it is impossible to consider it as the epitome of the trustworthy knowledge.

In this perspectival approach, there is probably enough space to add another perspective to death, which is not originally expressed in Jankélévitch: this is *our death*. With this, I refer to the cases in which a powerful death experience brings to collapse and merge *my death* with *your death*. Unlike *my death*, *our death* can be experienced, although in a perspectival manner. Still, unlike *your death*, I am so deeply involved that my subjectivity is overcome and overturned once and for all. This perspective could be considered as a kind of living death, because through a deep, traumatic and often repeated, or large-scaled, experience of *your death*, I realise something very similar to *my death*, although psychologically and emotionally connoted, while still physically being alive. 'I' transfer *your death* to 'myself' and my way of looking at reality dramatically changes. 'I' do experience death and, since then, death cannot be clearly distinguished from life. This mechanism is visible among survivors who passed through particularly dramatic and shocking events, such as natural catastrophes, war or other dramatic facts (Auschwitz or Hiroshima, for example). *Our death* is different from the experience of *your death*, however much painful this one may be. It is certainly a difference of scale (*your death* is generally singular and unrepeatable; *our death* is generalised and at most can be pervasive), but this extensiveness exerts a permanent and crucial influence on the subject and its manner of living in the world, so much so that the subject is never the same again. Such an experience creates a rift between those who experienced certain dramatic facts and those who were not there, and hence "after all cannot understand" (Yagi 2007, *passim*, 46-ff.). The experience of our death extends our perception of death from the restricted sphere of what I know (me, my acquaintances, my world) to the enlarged area of others (even unknown people), without losing the intense relationship typical of *your death*.

7.2 The Dialectical Character of Death

In Jankélévitch, another trait typifies the relationship between death and life. This is their incommensurable character: he clearly states that they have nothing to do with each other (Jankélévitch 1977, 66 ff.). Still, their dialectical link cannot be easily dismissed as irrelevant, but vigorously emerges when, as in the case of *your death*, we stand in front of the corpse of someone we knew well.[16] Once again, the body, also when it is dead, is disquieting from the perspective of clear and distinct knowledge, as Plato immediately understood.

Interrupting the usual relationship between temporal moments, death's absence is not as if it were a purely logical, quantitative state, unrelated to past and future, but becomes a real presence, which refers to a still living, hurting past (memories) and to an impossible future (regrets). At the same time, the alien *presence* of the dead body boldly interrupts that temporal and affective links with the deceased. The corpse (and, in a fainter manner, the objects belonging to the deceased, her/his room, photographs, etc.) imposes its presence that tells the absence of the departed, in such a manner that it makes absence visible and present.[17] The corpse does not act on a purely logical and abstract level, but interacts with the expectations, habits and emotions of survivors. Hence, it is not simply an absence, but is 'presence– *and yet* –absence'.[18] The corpse makes such

16 The following considerations are directly inspired by the analysis of the episode "The Body" (ep. 16 of the fifth series) from the TV series *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*, directed by Joss Whedon.

17 From such a perspective, Bergson's position on death, who bluntly denied death in the name of a kind of impossibility of nothingness, appears inadequate and even naif. Bergson's rhetoric of positivity according to which everything is necessarily positive and death does not exist – because when a living being dies, something else occupies its vacant place –, completely misses the point at issue, since he believes that what occupies the place of a deceased is radically and irrevocably different from the one we search for (Subacchi 2002). Actually, Bergson falls into a quite common mistake: considering death from the perspective of abstract logic, as the sheer antonym of life. This mistake, already exposed by Jankélévitch, derives from an undue application of binary logical schemes to the distinction between life and death, which cannot be approached through the strict application of logical patterns. Although we could say what is life, we do not have the same knowledge about death. How then can we apply the same logical scheme to both? Moreover, from the viewpoint of our relationship with the dead, it is exactly the replacement of our friend or relative with an inanimate thing (the corpse) that causes the deepest trauma.

18 Here the expression 'presence – and yet – absence' follows the Japanese *soku* (即), frequently used by the philosophers of the Kyōto School, especially Nishida and Tanabe, meaning a paradoxical relationship of logical oppositions, which coexist in a dialectical structure. This coexistence could be judged as contradictory from a logical point of view, although it actually indicates the limitations of logical categories themselves, when depicting some complex objects. The case in question is an example of such a situation, as death brings out a conundrum of opposite feelings, in which absence and presence are inextricably bound.

an absence much more grievous, since its presence enhances the 'not-anymore' of the beloved.

The temporal sense of lack resulting from the 'anymore' is the result of such a hybrid relationship between absence and presence. A corpse of a relative or a friend has such a tremendous effect on human psyche exactly because of this interrelationship. Far from being the simple negation of presence, at the same time it imposes a lack of presence, in which what has become a purely physical body plays the biggest role. The remains of a departed continue to exert influence upon those who remain. Death's experience through the dead body increases the gap between existential/social negation (necessarily a correlative opposition) and logical/mathematical negation (which can also be contradictory). If death were to be considered only in accordance with a logical opposition between affirmation and negation, absence and presence, the bodily relationship with the dead would be incomprehensible. On the contrary, the body refuses such a definitive logical status: it allows a continuous exchange between living and dead. It affirms the link with *past* life, while at the same time denying any *future* relationship. If past and future are clearly defined in front of the dead body, being represented by the corpse itself, the present situation is ambiguous. It involves both life *and* death in a complex interrelation that is more dialectical than oppositional. It exhibits death in a manner that strongly speaks of life. It is a kind of inextricable mixture of death and life. From such an ambiguity, what emerges is the anthropological need, attested in all cultures, to draw a distinction and re-affirming the separation among dead and living.[19] However, separation is not a contradiction. The stronger this separation is accomplished, the deeper the former relationship is affirmed in its being negated. This occurs also in the Japanese myth of Izanagi who, being chased after by his dead spouse Izanami, puts an enormous boulder at the entrance of *yomi no kuni* (the land of darkness) in order to stop Izanami, once he has discovered her horrific shape.[20] The concern for distinguishing the land of the dead from the land of the living indirectly tells us about the strength of the existing relationship, which must be interrupted and defined as 'impossible and unnatural'.

8 Death in Buddhism. The case of *Biyan lu*

How is death defined in the Buddhist world? In ancient, pre-Mahayāna Buddhism, death appears in an inextricable combination with aging/dying (pali *jarāmaraṇa*), as the 'twelfth integrated cause' (pali *nidāna*) of 'conditioned

19 About the Japanese separation rites, see Raveri 2006.

20 An interesting reading of this myth can be found in Ōmine 1992, 15-8.

production' (pali *paṭiccasamuppāda*). Aging and dying are considered as integral parts of the process of the individual's decay. Such an inevitable destiny occurs to whoever is born. As it is stated in *Paṭiccasamuppāda vibhaṅga sutta*:

> Now what is *aging and death?* Whatever aging, decrepitude, brokenness, graying, wrinkling, decline of life-force, weakening of the faculties of the various beings in this or that group of beings, that is called aging. Whatever deceasing, passing away, breaking up, disappearance, dying, death, completion of time, break up of the aggregates, casting off of the body, interruption in the life faculty of the various beings in this or that group of beings, that is called death. (Thanissaro 2010b; italics in the original)

In this context, death is a source of suffering, as well as are birth and aging. Being part of the process of decay, which is inevitable for all living beings, it is subject to the 'wheel of becoming' (pali *bhava cakka*). This implies that death and life (or birth) are not considered as separated, but they form just one process, which inevitably causes suffering. Eliminating the causes of this suffering is the sense of the 'Buddhist path' (pali *magga*). There are some texts in Pali tradition that bluntly reject this process of decay, in a manner that appears to be very far from a fatalistic and sheer acceptation of destiny, which some orientalist interpretations often associates with 'Indian religions'. For example, in the small *Jara sutta* Buddha is reported to have said:

> I spit on you, old age – old age that makes for ugliness. The bodily image, so charming, is trampled by old age. Even those who live to a hundred are headed – all – to an end in death, which spares no one, which tramples all. (Thanissaro 2010a)

The question of this processual death in Buddhism is strictly interwoven with the problem of the self, since with death the self, considered as an 'aggregate' (pali *khandha*) of 'physical and mental elements' (pali *dhātu*), is disassembled, thus revealing the delusion of believing in eternal individual soul. However, death is the end of a certain mental and physical combination and does not put an end to the wheel of existence, since the entirely impersonal causal flux due to bad actions and attitudes gives rise to another existence, another individual combination, which produces other suffering.

What really counts in ancient Buddhism "is not so much the question of the existence or non-existence of the self, but that in seeking to answer the question of its existence the ordinary unawakened mind that is not free from grasping inevitably gets entangled in views and theories about the self" (Gethin 1998, 161). In *Nikāya*, Buddha did not answer to the questions posed by Vacchagotta the wayfarer about existence or non-existence

of the self, explaining to Ānanda that the reason for not answering was that, if he had replied, he would have further confused Vacchagotta. He would have induced him to embrace the extreme doctrines of eternalism or annihilationism. This ethical and theoretical approach could be applied to individual death as well. In fact, the questions about existence or non-existence of Tathāgata after death are parts of the so called 'ten undetermined questions' as explained in the *Cūḷamāluṅkyasutta* (The Little Discourse to Māluṅkyāputta), together with many others concerning the eternity or finitude of the world and the identity or difference of life and body (Gethin 1998, 66 ff.). All those questions are consciously left unanswered by Buddha because of the same ethical and theoretical reasons. Hence, these Buddhist texts drive the general sense of thanatology away from the concerns about persistence or non-persistence of individual soul after death. According to many Buddhist texts, discussing about these themes conceals a selfish attachment to oneself. The correct path requires selfless practice and the attainment of wisdom (pali *paññā*), which has nothing to do with judgments and objective knowledge, but is much more a spiritual and ethical awareness of one's present situation.

Such a wisdom needs that death and life (or birth) are not judged as oppositions. This would bring us to falsely consider life as positive and death as negative. On the contrary, they should be taken as two sides of the same coin, which is suffering. This dialectical link is so strong that the very Sanskrit word *saṃsāra* (the world of delusion) is translated into the Sino-Japanese writing system with the two characters for 'life' and 'death' (ch. *shengsi*, ja. *shōji*). Death and life are perceived together as one cause of suffering, whereas death is not only the event of dying, but is inextricably bound with the process of decay as with the Pali and Sanskrit word *jarāmaraṇa*.

However, from the perspective of the alternative between transfiguration and phenomenalism, in Buddhism too there are different attitudes towards death. Together with the phenomenalist orientation of some texts, it is not unusual among common Buddhist believers following clearly transfigurative discourses on death. A remarkable example of such a tendency, which was extremely influential in Japanese culture, was the famous *Ōjōyōshū* (Essentials for Rebirth in Pure Land, 985), written by the Japanese Tendai monk Genshin (942-1017). This book had an enormous impact on Japanese lay culture, especially due to its detailed descriptions of Buddhist hells and lands of bliss. Ōmine clarifies that Genshin's work was the very first in Japan to define the realm of death as an idealised 'other shore', while at the same time devaluating 'this world'. As a matter of fact, in pre-Buddhist ancient Japanese world-view the "country of darkness" (*yomi no kuni*) was juxtaposed to life as defiled and evil, whereas life was taken as good and pure. For example, many elegies in the *Man'yōshū* (A Collection of Ten Thousands Leaves, second half of the eight century) focus on the theme of

one's lover premature and tragic death. A *tanka* (short poetry) ascribed to the famous poet Kakinomoto no Hitomaro (662-710) is particularly touching: "In the autumn mountains | The yellow leaves are so thick. | Alas, how shall I seek my love | Who has wandered away? | I know not the mountain track" (*Man'yōshū*, 2, 208; see Ōmine 1992, 18).

On the contrary, the sense of death in the *Ōjōyōshū* may be well summarised by the phrase: "Renounce the defiled world and seek birth in the Pure Land" (Ōmine 1992, 21). Therefore, Genshin's attitude toward death is not very far from that of Plato's *Phaedo*. They both consider death as the pathway to another, perfect world – be it called Pure Land or *Hyperuránion* – that is to be preferred to our filthy this-worldly condition. This character suggests that the mechanisms of transfiguring death operate quite independently from other important assumptions (for example, the conceptions of life and death as contradictory vs correlative opposites), and seems to appear quite independently from cultural and religious-philosophical contexts.[21]

However, in East Asian Buddhist high culture, there are many cases in which death is not transfigured in any sense. In order to clarify this point, I will consider a *gong'an* (ja. *kōan* 公案) taken from the *Record of Blue Cliff* (ch. *Biyan lu*, ja. *Hekiganroku*), a famous Song dynasty Chan text (written in 1125, but variously arranged in the following years).

The case 55 of *Biyan lu* expresses the non-dual, radically non-transfigurative approach to death and life. In the story told in this *gong'an*, Daowu (ja. Dōgo) and his disciple Jianyuan (ja. Zengen) are paying a condolence visit to a family. Jianyuan, tapping on the coffin of the deceased, asks his master: "is it life? Is it death?". The master answers: "I don't say life, I don't say death". Then Jianyuan asks "why don't you say?" and Daowu answers "I don't say. I don't say". On the way back, the disciple, feeling the urge of the question, asks again and threatens his master: had he not answered, he would hit him. The master answers: "even if you beat me, I do not say". And Jianyuan hits his master. After a while, Daowu passes away and Jianyuan goes to speak with master Shishuang (ja. Sekisō) and asks him the same question about life and death, but he receives the same answer. Suddenly, Jianyuan awakens. One day, Jianyuan takes a hoe and walks in the Dharma-hall from east to west and from west to east. Shishuang asks him the reason of doing that and Jianyuan answers, "I am seeking the

21 Ōmine 1992 collects many classical Japanese examples of tendencies to transfiguration toward death (Genshin and partially Hōnen) or phenomenalism (the mythology of *Kojiki*, the tragic elegies of *Man'yōshū*, the thinking of Dōgen, Shinran and Motoori Norinaga). As an example of phenomenalist attitude, see this passage from Motoori Norinaga: "it is clear that both Confucianism and Buddhism are not the true path, for they try to argue in various ways how one should not be sorrowful about things which clearly make us sad and [...] fill us with sorrow" (Ōmine 1992, 28).

sacred bones of the late master". Shishuang continues: "giant waves vast and limitless; whitecaps overflow the heaven. What sacred bones of your late master do you search for?". Jianyuan answers: "exactly because of this, I really try hard". And Dayuan Fu comments: "the sacred bones of the late master are still there" (cf. T 48, 189 a01-a21).[22]

This *kōan* plays with two different manners of understanding Daowu's answer. It may appear that the master is unwilling of sharing his knowledge about the mysteries of death and life. Still, this is a very clear and effective reply to Jianyuan's question. Why is there such a misunderstanding? Because the disciple considers only the two possibilities of life or death and the answer *must* be comprised among this binary perspective. Hence, he does not consider what Daowu is really telling him. He is suspecting that his master is mocking him, or that he is jealously keeping a secret for himself. This is why his irritation reaches the point to hit his master on the way back. Actually, Jianyuan's question too is quite subtle and multilayered. On the one hand, he is worried for what must be done, what is the right thing to do, when facing the tragic fact of death. As Tanabe Hajime comments, if 'all that' is life, then there is no need to comfort the relatives and to practice mourning rites for people alive. If 'all that' is death, what is the sense of practicing mourning rites for the dead? (Tanabe 1959, 4) If all is life, then there is no death and therefore the funeral has no meaning. If all is death, then life has no meaning: we are bound to death and there is no sense in practicing. It is important to highlight that Jianyuan asks about a specific situation, while tapping on the coffin and asking: "is it life? Is it death?" This deictic and physical act is very important to understand the context in which the question is asked. He does not ask about generic concepts: "what is life? What is death?" or: "what kind of relationship is there among the two?" Tapping on the coffin, he simply asks: "life? Death?" In other words, he wants to solve the practical meaning of 'this' within a scheme of opposing values and definitions: life/death, good/evil, practice/attainment. Starting from these premises, it is natural that Daowu's answer does not satisfy Jianyuan. The words: "I do not say life. I do not say death" appears elusive to Jianyuan, who is frustrated and hits his master. Still, his master has answered. And not in an elusive manner, but in a very precise way. Or better, he answers obliquely, but without hiding anything. He just requires that Jianyuan goes one step further toward what he is saying, abandoning his binary logic. He does not refuse to answer, but only to give him an intellectual definition. Still, Jianyuan does not understand.

In order to clarify this point, we must return to Daowu's answer. With his oblique reply, he directs Jianyuan towards the true question and carefully

22 Hereinafter this kind of quotation system refers to Takakusu 1924-35.

avoids naming it 'life' or 'death'. This approach would define something and make us depend on an illusion. Daowu's negation is meant to help Jianyuan concentrating on the general inclination that urges the mind to search for definitions and concepts. Thus, the problem for Daowu is not 'life' or 'death', but 'saying' (ch. *dao* 道). In other words, the master is not concerned about physical or mental objects, but about the way of questioning (as it is known, *dao* in Chinese is also the 'way', the 'modality', the 'how' of something), which indicates our attitude toward the world. Daowu is actually warning his disciple not to think in terms of oppositions and discrete objects. In addition, he has indicated the orientation of this attitude: "I don't say. I don't say". What is he negating? Not language *per se*, but, rather, a certain use of language in which the search for abstract meaning (what in this essay has been defined as 'transfigurative' approach) is considered more important than 'this event' and its manifestation in front of us. Jianyuan, caught in the binary logic of essence, does not realise that 'this event' cannot be defined 'death' or 'life' without radically transforming its unique character and judging it as good or bad, desirable or hateful. This judgment radically transforms what we have in front of us into a case within a general theory. However, in doing so he does not watch at it, but only at his own hopes and fears. What really counts when facing death and life is that each death and life cannot be defined as simple 'life' or 'death'. Each life, each death does not fall into certain categories, but is 'wondrous' or, as we could say in modern philosophical words, each life and death are categories of their own. This could help to understand the sense of the dialogue between Shishuang and the awakened Jianyuan: Shishuang reminds Jianyuan of the vastness of the flowing universe, presumably admonishing him not to cling on any dead bones of any master and concentrating on present practice. Still, Jianyuan surprises the master with a different perspective: it is exactly because the universe is so vast and always flowing, that he is concentrating on his search of Daowu. A possible interpretation of such an answer could be that he is not interested in the general phenomena of the universe, no matter how vast and marvellous they may be. On the contrary, each single, tiny event really counts. This is the wondrous dimension of life-death *as* deliverance. Thus, he fully realises his master's words: no abstract, repeatable categories, valid for every death and life, but only unique events, each of which is a universe in itself.

9 Death in Dōgen's View

Another non-transfigurative Buddhist approach to death can be appreciated in the writings of Dōgen Kigen (1200-1253), founder of the Japanese branch of Chan Caodong (ja. Zen Sōtō) lineage. His attitude toward death is radically defined by the question of 'Buddha-nature' (sa. *buddhadhātu*,

ch. *foxing*, ja. *busshō*), conceived in terms of the possibility to awaken and become Buddha. From the perspective of ultimate truth, this possibility has often been defined as our eternal and true nature, which goes beyond our delusions and defilement. According to some ancient and recent interpreters, this idea of Buddha-nature is at risk of re-introducing a sort of substantiality in the otherwise anti-substantialist Buddhism.[23] Dōgen seems to side against the ambiguous approach of such alleged crypto-substantialists, but he does not identify the danger with a definite school or current or, even worse, with a cultural and geographic trait. On the contrary, he interprets it as the possibility of misunderstanding Buddha's teaching. This danger consists in thinking that Buddha-nature is a sort of permanent substance, a kind of trans-temporal and trans-phenomenal essence that survives death. In order to avoid such an erroneous interpretations, Dōgen straightforwardly defines Buddha-nature as 'impermanent' (ja. *mujō* 無常), as it appears in this passage from the "Shōji" chapter of the *Shōbōgenzō*:[24]

> To seek Buddha apart from birth-death [*shōji* or *saṃsāra*] is like pointing the thrills of a cart northward when you want to go south to Yuezhou, or facing south to see the northern Dipper; it only furthers the conditions of birth-death and deprives you all the more of the way of deliverance [*gedatsu* or *vimokṣa*]. (Abe, Waddell 2002, 106)[25]

One important aspect of Dōgen's view of death is already defined in this short passage: death is not contradictory to life, but is dialectically, organically linked to it. In fact, he does not speak of simple death, devoid of life, nor of life detached from death, but always of 'life-death' or 'birth-death' (ja. *shōji* 生死), which is the translation of the Sanskrit *saṃsāra*. They cannot be considered apart from one another. This relationship between life/birth and death is coincident with Nāgārjuna's affirmation of non-duality

23 This tension between two potentially opposite theses in Buddhism concerning individual persistence after death is one of the historical and theoretical reasons for the development of the contemporary movement of the so called Critical Buddhism (*hihan bukkyō*). This movement, however, is too drastic in defining as 'non-Buddhist' those approaches that depend on the idea of the *tathāgatagarbha* or the 'Womb of Buddha' (the potential Buddha Nature present in all beings).

24 Actually, the chapter "Shōji" is not included in the list of 95 chapters of standard *Shōbōgenzō* and there are some doubts about its authenticity: for example, it lacks a colophon and the date of composition. However, it is part of the Sōtō school's official Honzan version of the work and its verses are extremely important in the school's ceremonies. See Abe, Waddell 2002, 105.

25 All the quotes from Abe and Waddell used the Author's translation of the Japanese term *shoji* as 'birth-death' instead of Abe and Waddell's original "birth-and-death". Furthermore, the *pinyin* romanization system has been used to write the toponym.

between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*, so much so that life-death is immediately Buddha-nature (ja. *shōji soku busshō* 生死即佛性). This implies that Buddha-nature is not a kind of substance that survives death, or a dimension that exceeds this world and grants a form of afterlife. Buddha-nature is not different from this world and should not be considered apart from it, as it is written in the "Hosshō" chapter from the *Shōbōgenzō*:

> To learn, in speaking of nature, that there is no flowing for water and no growth and perishing for trees is heresy. Śākyamuni Buddha said: "Such is form, such is nature". Accordingly, flowers' opening and leaves' falling are the nature of their "being so". Nevertheless, the fools think that in the world of True Dharma no flower opens, no leaf falls. (Dōgen 1969-70, 1: 417)

And again in the "Busshō" chapter:

> that the grasses, trees, thickets and groves are impermanent is the Buddha nature; that humans and things, body and mind are impermanent – this is because they are the Buddha nature. That the lands, mountains, and rivers are impermanent – this is the Buddha nature. *Annuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi*, because it is the Buddha nature, is impermanent; the great *parinirvāṇa*, because it is impermanent, is the Buddha nature. All those with the small views of the two vehicles and the *tripiṭaka* master teachers of the *sūtras* and treatises should be "alarmed, dubious, and frightened" at these words of the Sixth Ancestor. If they are alarmed and dubious, they are grouped with Māra and the aliens. (Dōgen 2010, 12-3)

Here it is clearly stated that Buddha-nature is impermanent and Dōgen records the psychological reactions of those who believe in Buddha-nature's permanence. Their feelings of "alarm, doubt and fright" immediately define those who, being selfishly attached to their accommodating views about truth, afterlife, and death take up a defensive position and violently react to such a radical vision of impermanence. Such dualistic views are signs of delusional dispositions of mind. Hence, according to Dōgen, they vilify the Law of Buddha. According to Masao Abe, the very distinction between human beings and the other beings is one subtle, almost invisible form of dualism. Thus, a shift in Dōgen can be appreciated from the anthropocentric theme of life and death to the dimension of generation and extinction (typical of 'sentient beings', ja. *shujō* 衆生), to the cosmic level of appearing and disappearing, in which 'all beings' (ja. *shitsuu* 悉有) are considered in their "being-so". Only this perspective can properly face the problem of life and death, which is not different from that of appearance and disappearance of all things (Abe 1992, 42-4).

> We should realize that the 'being' that is here made [as] the 'entirety of being' by the Buddha-nature is not the being of being and non-being. The 'entirety of being' is the word of the Buddha, the tongue of the Buddha, the eyes of the Buddhas and ancestors, the nose of the patch-robed monk. Furthermore, the term 'entirety of being' is not initial being, not original being, not marvelous being; how much less is it conditioned being or deluded being. It has nothing to do with the likes of mind and object, nature and attribute. Therefore, the circumstantial and primary [recompense] of the 'entirety of being' of living beings is not by any means the generative power of karma, not deluded conditioned origination, not of its own accord, not the practice and verification of spiritual powers. (Dōgen 2010, 2)

Denouncing all forms of dualism in their being based upon delusional transfiguration of 'beings-as-they-are' into permanent substance, Dōgen overcomes every opposition between 'having Buddha-nature' (ja. *ubusshō* 有佛性) and 'not having Buddha-nature' (ja. *mubusshō* 無佛性), since they are both dichotomous visions that end in the 'eternalism' of the former or the 'annihilationism' of the latter. 'Buddha-nature as impermanence' (ja. *mujō busshō* 無常佛性) indicates a totally different perspective: it assumes beings in their 'being-so', without any transfiguration. Hence, death too, being dynamically related to life, 'is-so'. How can this idea be defined? I would focus my attention on the unspeakable and the unreachable character of beings. Both these negative characters are actually needed because of the (negative) relevance of the ego in the process of awakening. As a matter of fact, the ego tries to forcefully insert beings into a conceptual framework in order to exert control over them. Passions contaminate beings, perverting them from the perspectives of both ethics and theory. This contamination is the most subtle and difficult to sense, because we are used to it and the ego acts out of self-interest in making things appear as 'objective'. Still, the ego-contamination is the most crucial hindrance in the Way of Buddha, which consists in "forgetting the self and being awakened by all beings", as stated in the "Genjō kōan" chapter (Dōgen 1969-70, 1: 3).

A deep appreciation of Dōgen's understanding of death can be possible only reflecting on death and its relationship with the 'so' of things.[26] In Dōgen, this 'so' is expressed at least with two words: *nyorai* 如来 and *inmo* 恁麼. The first one is the Sino-Japanese translation of the Sanskrit substantive *Tathāgata*, or 'the one who emerges' (lit.'comes emerging') from the 'true reality of things' (sa. *tathātā*, ja. *shinnyo* 真如) (cf. Ishida 1997, 850). It is an epithet of Buddha and Dōgen, who follows a Chan-Zen custom and

26 This word is often translated as 'being-so', 'thusness' or 'suchness', but they seem too close to the substance or substrate of things, in an Aristotelian sense.

often refers to it as a question in which the adverb-verb nuance prevails. Moreover, *inmo* is adverbial. In other words, in Dōgen the nominal value of this 'so' is relatively weak and this works to the advantage of its adverbial value. This suggests that the question of 'singularity' of things does not depend on substantial subject as in Aristotle's *hypokeìmenon*. As a matter of fact, the 'so' of things is not an unchanging and stable substance, but is permeated by (if not equated to) the transitoriness of things. Dōgen's perspective is fully aware that the Buddhist question of the 'so' of things has a deep relationship with the knowing (but also and more fundamentally desiring) subject. This is the deceitful subject, which while seeing things, distorts them on the basis of its cravings and passions. Therefore, instead of questioning things, Dōgen is concerned about our attitude toward the world. Here, ethical questions acquire theoretical and cognitive nuances.

At the beginning of the "Busshō"[27] chapter Dōgen, inquiring the meaning of the phrase "all are living beings, all are the Buddha nature", answers by means of another question: "what is it that comes this way?". 'Coming this way' is another term for the word *nyorai* or *Tathāgata*. Answering to a question with another question may appear curious. Still, this strengthens the non-definitional approach to things, as it also appears in the "Inmo" chapter of *Shōbōgenzō*. It indicates – more than explaining – things in their 'coming-this-way'. In other words, it does not refer to their 'beings', but to their radically qualitative existence. Here, with 'radically qualitative' I mean their being so dense and special that no concepts may fit to them, given that concepts and words presuppose the commonality of rational concepts. The 'coming-this-way' of all beings is not subject to common definitions, because something that exists only once cannot be described with repeatable words and concepts.

The true character of things (*tathātā*) does indicate neither substance, nor hidden part manifesting itself in transient world from outside. All beings (*shitsuu* – not only *human* or *sentient* beings), just as they are, are *Tathāgata*. There is no distinction between transcendence and immanence, but Buddha-nature neither absorbs nor explains individuality: things 'are-this way' and everything is manifested in its being itself. There is no definitive answer to the question: "what comes this way?" On the contrary, all beings are a "what?", to which the only possible answer is the indexicality of "this!".

Such an indexicality is marked by a bodily act of indicating (which

27 Here, Dōgen comments the following passage of *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (ja. *Dainehangyō* 大般涅槃經): "all sentient beings without exception have Buddha nature. The *Tathāgata* residing in them forever has no change" (T 374, 12, 522c24). About this passage, according to Abe's reconstruction, "Dōgen dares to read this passage as follows: 'all is sentient being, whole-being (all beings) is the Buddha-nature; Tathāgata is permanent, non-being, being and change'" (Abe 1992, 35). This interpretation is not universally accepted, as it seems to force the text. On the various renditions of Dōgen's passage, see Tollini 2004, 53-5.

appears also in Jianyuan's *kōan*). This act makes immediately clear the individuality to which it is referred, but is completely lost in a context-free approach. This implies that, in order to grasp the meaning, the interlocutor must be included within the same concrete, physical horizon of the speaker and of the spoken. If we are comprised in such a horizon, our understanding is intuitive and very determined, being inextricably linked to that singularity. In other words, indexicality is marked by a bodily act (of the speaker) and implies the same physical horizon (the context) and physicality of the interlocutor, who must be located in that specific context in order to understand the message. Indexicality directs to the centrality of the physical dimension of things, which are appreciated in their 'so' because their 'physical individuality' lies where words break, like ocean waves on a rocky shore. As in a previously reported passage: "the 'entirety of being' is the word of the Buddha, the tongue of the Buddha, the eyes of the Buddhas and ancestors, the nose of the patch-robed monk" (Dōgen 2010, 2). The extremely physical character of these images are not only metaphoric. They express the strongly bodily dimension of the 'so' of things, their Buddha-nature, and contrasts with Platonic anti-bodily truth.

In the same passage, Dōgen admonishes that the being of all beings has nothing to do with the *distinction* between being and non-being (Dōgen 2010, 2). It is their 'so', their 'coming-this-way'. It is the ostensive being, whose qualitative character is too dense to be reduced to abstract categories (being or non-being) that move the question of things on a different, transcendent plane. In such a context, the mechanism of transfiguration (death's transfiguration included) collapses, because any 'elsewhere', which may function as a basis for this mechanism to work (for example, the 'general equivalent' in economic theories), has no access to things in their 'so' (ja. *inmo* 恁麼).

This 'so' is indifferent to both *saṃsāra* (ja. *shōji*) and *nirvāṇa* categorizations and should be neither preferred nor rejected. No preference at all should be given to either life, or death. Accordingly, when life and death are considered, we should go beyond any mercantilist idea of 'debit and credit'. Even more radically, beyond comparison itself:

> When there is life, there is nothing at all apart from life. When there is death, there is nothing at all apart from death. Therefore, when life comes, you should just give yourself to life; when death comes, you should give yourself to death. You should neither desire them, nor hate them. Your present birth-death itself is the life of Buddha. If you attempt to reject it with aversion, you thereby lose the life of Buddha. If you abide in it, attaching to birth-death, you also lose the life of Buddha and are left with only its outward appearance. You attain the mind of Buddha only when there is no hating of birth-death and no desiring of *nirvana*. (Abe, Waddell 2002, 106)

These words remind of the second-century Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna, a leading figure of the Mādhyamaka school of Mahāyāna, who after having demolished the theories that establish death and/or birth as prior, simultaneous or posterior, concludes: "wherever such methods of (discriminating) […] do not arise, why be obsessed by such birth and such decay-death" (Kalupahana 1986, 209).

Everything in this world is not cause or means of anything else. It is simply itself. It is an ultimate value in itself, or no value-system can be applied to it. Hence, life is its ultimate meaning and so does death. The correct attitude is this manner of being intensely alive or dying, without any *further* desire or hate, having let the ego fall:

> Just understand that birth-death itself is *nirvana*, and you will neither hate one as birth-death, nor cherish the other as being *nirvana*. Only then can you be free of birth-death. […] You only attain the mind of Buddha when there is no hating of birth-death and no desiring of *nirvana*. But do not try to measure it with your mind or explain it with words. When you let go of both your body and mind, forget them both and throw yourself into the house of Buddha, […] then with no need for any expenditure of either physical or mental effort, you are freed from birth-death and become Buddha. Then there can be no obstacle in anyone's mind. (Abe, Waddell 2002, 106-7)

Dōgen is clearly stressing the importance of practicing life-death, which is the best manner of being delivered from *saṃsāra*. The focal point of this practice is "letting go of both body and mind" (*waga mi wo mo kokoro wo mo hanachiwasurete* わが身をも心をもはなちわすれて), which is directly reminiscent of the concept of *shinjin datsuraku* 身心脱落 or 'letting go body and mind' that appears in the "Genjō kōan" chapter of the *Shōbōgenzō* (Dōgen 1969-70, 1: 3). Only when the ego is not important anymore and is let go, can life and death be fully lived, in every single moment, for what they are.

10 Which End?

This essay was meant to discuss the distinction between two manners of interpreting the phenomenon of death: the transfigurative and the phenomenalist approaches. Although elaborated in different cultures and times, thanatology, if discussed accordingly, can reveal unsuspected similarities and differences. For example, Dōgen and Jankélévitch indicate two different manners of refusing death's transfiguration. They both affirm a-foundational haecceity or semelfactivity of life and death, although starting from respectively non-dual and dichotomous conceptions of life-and-death. The Japanese zen master considers them dialectically, whereas

the French philosopher reckons their total separation, which goes beyond even contradiction. The two are mostly distant in their stance toward the individual's relationship with death. In Jankélévitch, the individual and especially the first person is essential for knowledge. In Dōgen, that knowledge is delusional and the true world 'is so' when the self has been forgotten. Consequently, the relationship with death is radically different: Jankélévitch denies any possibility to know death, which remains the extreme limit of the ego (and therefore of knowledge). Dōgen's interest, more than in knowing death or life, lies in practicing death and life, as an indication of forgetting the self.

This comparison could pose an important question to philosophy: is renunciation the inevitable destiny of thanatology? Death appears as a mere limitation to the human will to know, like an existential thing-in-itself within Kantian limits. Differently stated, it seems impossible to conjugate both epistemic sense and existential involvement while dealing with death. Then, we are led to inevitably choose between two different and incompatible levels: generic but void knowledge of death in general, or dense but incommunicable awareness of one single individualised death. The epistemic perspective should remain confined to a general theory of death (and life), whose ethical consistence is all but proven. Although useful in generic contexts such as statistics and in some aspects of everyday life, any *speculation* about death should become a matter of individual choice, useful to the needs of those who are directly touched by this dramatic event. Still, in the penumbra of theoretical reason, ethical and practical commands should prevail over any other considerations, although considering the need for consolation. The existential dimension of death should not become an epistemic and metaphysical object, because its dense uniqueness would be stunned with generic, hollow indications.

However, this distinction between transfigurative and phenomenalist thanatology could prove to be not merely negative and may offer affirmative prospects in deepening each death's haecceity. Beyond Jankélévitch's thanatology, semelfactivity of death and life requires us to renounce to any superior meaning of death, but opens the path to an intense cognitive involvement, which is extremely physical and indexical, singular and affective. It demands to elect bodily life as a reference point of knowledge, overcoming any Platonic temptation. This phenomenalism apparently resembles Nietzsche's Zarathustra speech of "remaining faithful to the earth":

> Remain faithful to the earth, my brothers, with the power of your virtue! Let your bestowing love and your knowledge serve the meaning of the earth! Thus I beg and beseech you.
>
> Do not let it fly away from earthly things and beat against eternal walls with its wings. Oh, there has always been so much virtue that flew away!
>
> Like me, guide the virtue that has flown away back to the earth —yes,

> back to the body and life: so that it may give the earth its meaning, a human meaning. (Nietzsche 2006, 57)

Still, in comparison with Nietzsche, whose blunt exaltation of life should be approached with caution, if not with suspect (Lisciani Petrini 2009, xxiii), the centrality of meaning as it appears in Nietzschean philosophy should come to an end. In fact, as it is known, Zarathustra himself remembers that "the overman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: the overman *shall be* the meaning of the earth!" (Nietzsche 2006, 6). This link between overman and meaning discloses the subjective roots of the theoretical problem of meaning, as well as of Nietzsche's own response to the question of nihilism (Ruggenini 1983). Contrary to this close relation between meaning and subjectivism, it could be possible to explore the possibility of facing death in its ambiguous uniqueness. This ambiguity implies death's resistance to the very question of meaning (and thus of subject). Dōgen's a-foundational idea of the 'so' of things does not simply mean to renounce to thinking, but to penetrate (and in turn to be penetrated by) the singularity of each life-death. This singularity is neither a transcendent truth – an ultra-meaning built upon a sign from beyond – nor an immanent truth – a resigned acceptation of the existent. Rather, it could be interpreted as *a middle truth* that can be appreciated only case-by-case and does not have any *a priori*, formal content, but only a radically qualitative, singularized character. Thus, the turn from epistemic thinking does not necessarily imply the end of any theoretical enterprise, as Dōgen exemplifies. Still, this practical involvement can find theoretical implications, only through a radical acknowledgement of the qualitative character of each life and each death.

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