Research Article

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Rethinking Death's Sacredness: From Heraclitus's frag. DK B62 to Robert Gardner's *Dead Birds*

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Abstract: This article examines death's symbolic role *vis-à-vis* life in cross-cultural perspective. It surveys various ways of suppressing, nuancing, or minimising death's effects and different ways of assuming its non-impassé through a cross-disciplinary lens that combines ethnographic inquiry, philosophical conceptualisation, and a secular, religious studies approach to the sacred. Zoroastrian and pre-Rabbinic Jewish views on the resurrection of the body, Gnostic and Neo-Gnostic takes on the immortality of the soul, and ancient-Greek, Hindu, and medieval Peripatetic claims about the continuity of life beyond death are thus brought into discussion and confronted with the Epicurean dismissal of death's relevance for us. Additionally, drawing on Heraclitus's frag. DK B62 and Robert Gardner's fieldwork among the Dani of Papua New Guinea, I argue that assuming death as life's sacred and non-negotiable limit need not entail resignation before it, be it untroubled or despaired. For while life outlives us, life itself would be nothing determinate if our finitude were not to contain it, which shows that death is life's final condition of possibility; and when humans do not lose sight of their mortality, they tend to reaffirm their aliveness so as to stress life's sacredness before death's terrible presence, which proves that death is not only life's limit, but also life's antagonist. I conclude by making the point that differences as to the exact nature of death's role in life affect our understanding of what life is: momentary joy, boundless renewal, or tragic gift.

Keywords: afterlife, finitude, gods, immortality, mortals, resurrection

1 Introduction

Human responses to death, and more broadly human attitudes before death, vary notably from one culture to another.¹ My purpose in this article is to examine a number of them and offer a typology. More exactly, I aim at contrasting (1) those who tend to either cancel, nuance, or minimise death's effects by means of the resurrection of the body, the immortality of the soul, or some sort of impersonal continuity of life after death; (2) those who assume death's effects with untroubled or, alternatively, despaired resignation; and (3) those who, while assuming them, do not view death, though, as having the final say in human existence. What I mean by (3) shall – I hope – become clear in due course; for now, let it be there and remain encrypted as a kind of enigmatic guest whose presence, when revealed, will bring the picture to completion.

¹ See, for an overview, Moreman, *The Routledge Companion to Death and Dying*.

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2 Facing Nyx's darkest daughter

Concern with death is, to be sure, an anthropological invariant, in the sense that death, as an ineludible event that paves the way to a likewise inevitable yet unwanted condition, rarely leaves anyone indifferent.² In fact, death can be described as the utmost *difference* that, sooner or later, humans *qua* mortals³ must somehow (*how* is precisely the issue) face and cope with insofar as, once it draws close (to use an ergative metaphor), they feel compelled to turn what may or may not have been an ongoing preoccupation in their lifetime⁴ into an inexorably troublesome affair, if not a riddle.⁵ But then again, many are the ways to position oneself before the darkest of Nyx's daughters.⁶

An immediate typology thus comes to one's mind – a structural board, as it were, on which two major positions that prove to be cross-culturally recurrent can be reciprocally situated: on the one hand, it is possible to cancel, nuance, or minimise death's effects; on the other hand, it is likewise possible to assume death's impasse without excuse. For clarity's sake, let's assign numbers to such positions; thus, hereinafter, I will refer to them as (1) and (2), respectively.

Consider now (1). I have associated three different verbs with it (to “cancel,” to “nuance,” or to “minimise” death's effects). Accordingly, it is to be divided into three distinct options. I will examine all three in Section 3 and then provide multiple contrasting examples of them in Sections 4–6.

As for (2) – whose analysis is beyond the purpose of this article – it generally entails resignation, be it untroubled or despaired, Epicurean or existentialist. For to assume frontally (or, as I have formerly written, to accept without excuse), death's impasse seems to leave room for nothing else. And *yet* [...]

It is precisely around this paradoxical *yet*, which points *beyond* (2) without falling *back* onto (1), that my argument will revolve in Sections 7–9. Finally, in Section 10, I make the point that, from different attitudes towards death, different understandings of death's sacredness, and thereby different views of what life ultimately is, may be deduced as well.

3 Cancelling, nuancing, and minimising death's effects

As I have underlined, denying death's grasp (=1) usually takes three distinct forms:

- (1.1) The hope – and eventually the belief – that life as it is will be *restored* after death, and hence that each *individual* (or at least those who may deserve so) will *continue* living as they live now. In this case, the effects of death upon life are overtly *cancelled*.

² Epicureanism is often seen as an exception thereof. Epicurus's words in his *Letter to Menoeceus*, §125, are well known in this respect: “death, the most frightening of bad things, is nothing to us; since when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist” (Inwood and Gerson, *The Epicurus Reader*, 29; cf. Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, 29a: “To fear death ... is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know,” as per Grube's translation [in Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. G. M. A. Cooper, p. 27]). Notice, however, that Epicurus does not deny – quite the opposite, he takes for granted – death's “frightening” and “evil” nature (cf. Homer's expression in *Iliad* 3.173: κακὸς θάνατος, “evil death,” which Green unnecessarily softens by rendering κακός as “sorry”), the *fear* of which his teachings actually *aim* at correcting. Cf. Spinoza, *Ethics*, 4.1 (“Nothing positive which a false idea has is removed by the presence of the true insofar as it is true,” hereinafter Curley's translation) and 4.14 (“No effect can be restrained by the true knowledge of good and evil insofar as it is true, but only insofar as it is considered as an affect”).

³ It must not be overlooked that βροτοί (“mortals,” from PIE **mr-tō-*, “dead, mortal;” Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, 242–3 [art. βροτός]) and θνητοί (idem, from PIE **dʰ(u)enh₂-*, to “die” <to “disappear?”>; ibid., 533–4 [art. θάνατος]) are by far the earliest and preferred (cf. e.g. Homer, Heraclitus, Aeschylus, Pindar) ancient-Greek terms for “men”/“humans” (ἄνθρωποι, from PIE **ṛp-ōp-*, “with manly face”; ibid., 106 [art. ἄνθρωπος], 356 [art. δρώψ]).

⁴ Cf. once more Spinoza, *Ethics*, 4.67: “A free man thinks of nothing less than of death.”

⁵ Cf. Freud's words in *The Future of an Illusion* (21): against the “painful riddle of death ... no [true] medicine has yet been found,” which Guthrie quotes in *Faces in the Clouds*, 73.

⁶ Hesiod, *Theogony*, 212, 154–5.

- (1.2) The hope – and again eventually the belief – that all *individual* life will undergo some kind of *transformation* (e.g. into a soul or some kind of immaterial entity) that shall grant it overall *subsistence*. In this case, the effects of death upon life are acknowledged but also *nuanced*.
- (1.3) The hope – and again eventually the belief, but based this time on a physical evidence from which more-than-physical implications might be deduced – that all *individual* life will *dissolve* into the *impersonal* life that sustains it and *resurge* therein *transformed* into something *else*. Such transformed continuity can be construed (a) in *physical* terms (“I will not continue living as such but my biological life will take new life forms such as worms, bacteria, etc. that assure life’s continuity despite the loss of its provisional determinations”), (b) in *spiritual* terms (as the affective communion of one’s true essence with life’s universal essence), or (c) in *intellectual* terms (as the intellectual union of one’s mind with the universal mind of whose thoughts everything would be the product). In all these cases, the effects of death upon life are both acknowledged and *minimised*.

For reasons that shall become clear later on, I am willing to group these first options under the rubric of the “thinkable,” in the sense that they all point, if in contrasting ways, to the limits of what almost everyone in the West – and perforce too by now almost everywhere else as a result of what is euphemistically called “globalisation” – would assume to be *thinkable in order to either assume it or contest it*.

4 Some cross-cultural examples of the renewal of the body

Restorative hopes are quite widespread, and although there does not seem to be a common historical denominator for them, the oldest one we know of is connected to the Zoroastrian division of reality into two states of being: *mēnōg* (Avestic: *mainyava*) and *gētīg* (*gaēthya*). As Gherardo Gnoli underlines, while it has become customary to translate *mēnōg* as “spiritual” and *gētīg* as “corporeal,” it is paramount to realise that this is an approximative translation which does not pay justice to the original meaning of these terms: the former alludes to that which is transcendent, invisible, intangible, mental; the latter to that which is phenomenical, visible, tangible, but also alive.⁷ Pure light, Ahura Mazdā, the supreme Zoroastrian god, produces all visible, tangible, and living reality by transferring everything from its *mēnōg* state into its *gētīg* state, behind which the former one subsists as its *fravarti* (Avestic: *fravaši*)⁸ or “shining principle”; only the powers of darkness lack such creativity and hence are unable to produce anything, for which reason they aim at assaulting and darkening all there is by weakening its *gētīg* dimension with deceit, illness, and death. Here, like in ancient Greece,⁹ everything becomes present in the domain of the living through its shining forth as such or such¹⁰ according to each thing’s thinkable *cum* singable determination.¹¹ The difference with Greece, however, is that Zoroastrianism expected men to celebrate the *gētīg* with *the hope that their fight for it against the powers of darkness would help everything become one day immortal*,

⁷ Gnoli, “L’Iran Antico e lo Zoroastrismo,” 119.

⁸ From *fra-vaxš*, to “grow forth?” (Bailey, *Zoroastrian Problems in the Ninth-Century Books*, 109), and thus from PIE **bhā-*¹ (Pokorny, *Proto-Indo-European Etymological Dictionary*, 326), like the Greek verb φύω and, thereby, the noun φύσις? It may be interesting to recall here Wilhelm von Humboldt’s view that languages condense and reflect in symbolic and conceptual terms *sensible* perceptions of the world: *bhØ-* in this case, which expresses in onomatopoeic terms the springing up and shining forth of things, and whose empty position (Ø) is susceptible of being filled by any auxiliary or vocalic sound.

⁹ For an overview of common Greco-Iranian themes, see Burkert, *Da Omero ai Magi*.

¹⁰ Cf. Otto, *Theophanie*.

¹¹ The thought of which is precisely the Platonic εἶδος (Martínez Marzoa, *Ser y Diálogo*, 11–46). Cf. too Heidegger’s rereading (in *Parmenides*, 97–9) of Plato’s distinction between ἐνθάδε (“here”) and ἐχῆ (“there”) in *Rep.* 614b2. On the thinkable and the singable, which is already the characteristic note of the Homeric epos, see Martínez Marzoa, *El decir griego*, 13–50; Míguez Barciela, *Mortal y Fúnebre*, 23–46; Segovia, “εἶδος\Utupē;” Gevorkyan and Segovia, “An Anthropological and Meta-philosophical Critique of Hilan Bensusan’s *Indexicalism*,” n31, n32).

i.e. *totally free of evil and death*¹² – a hope that, from a Greek standpoint, would prove at best the sign of a naively wishful ὕβρις.¹³

Pre-Rabbinic Judaism supplies a variant of this expectation. Take *1 Enoch*, i.e. the core document (or rather the core corpus) of Second-Temple apocalyptic literature.¹⁴ In its earliest strata, God commissions Michael not only to imprison the fallen angels who have brought evil to the earth by means of their own moral defilement and the corruption of men, but also to *renovate* the earth:

Go, Michael, [...]
 [...]

 Destroy all perversity from the face of the earth,
 and let every wicked deed be gone;
 And let the plant of righteousness and truth appear, and it will become a blessing,
 (and) the deeds of righteousness and truth will be planted forever with joy.
 And yet in something we come close to the immortals,
 and they will live until they beget thousands,
 and all the days of their youth and their old age will be completed in peace.
 Then all the earth will be tilled in righteousness,
 and all of it will be planted with trees and filled with blessing;
 and all the trees of joy will be planted on it.
 They will plant vines on it,
 and every vine that will be planted on it will yield a thousand jugs of wine,
 and of every seed that is sown on it, each measure will yield a thousand measures,
 and each measure of olives will yield ten baths of oil.
 Cleanse the earth from all impurity and from all wrong and from all lawlessness and from all sin,
 and godlessness and all impurities that have come upon the earth, remove.
 And all the sons of men will become righteous,
 and all the peoples will worship (me),
 and all will bless me and prostrate themselves.
 And all the earth will be cleansed from all defilement and from all uncleanness,
 and I shall not again send upon them any wrath or scourge for all the generations of eternity.
 Then I shall open the storehouses of blessing that are in heaven,
 and make them descend upon the earth, upon the works and the labor of the sons of men.
 And then truth and peace will be united together
 for all the days of eternity and for all the generations of humanity. (10.11–11.2)¹⁵

It is certainly difficult to draw a line between the physical and moral in this passage. Is the physical a metaphor for the moral, or an extension of it? We cannot know. If, as it has been argued, the encrypted subtext of this passage is the moral defilement of a group of priests in the political turmoil following the return from the Babylonian exile,¹⁶ it could be that the moral aspects have the final word. But then, how to interpret the explicit reference to the physically imperturbable life of the righteous that we find elsewhere: “they will rejoice greatly and be glad/[...]/and they will live a long life on the earth/[...]/and torments and plagues and suffering will not touch them” (v. 25.6).¹⁷ On the other hand, even if death is not exactly ruled out here (notice the allusion to “all the [future] generations of humanity” in v. 11.2), suffering is (v. 25.6), and it is difficult to conciliate both things. Plus a supplementary reference in vv. 28.1–32.6 to the regained earthly paradise of the righteous leads one to the impression that logical consequence was for the authors of

¹² Gnoli, “L’Iran Antico e lo Zoroastrismo,” 119, 126–9.

¹³ Cf. once more Otto, *Theophanie*.

¹⁴ Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 43–84.

¹⁵ Nickelsburg and VanderKam, *1 Enoch*, 29–31.

¹⁶ Boccaccini, *Roots of Rabbinic Judaism*, 89–102; Himmelfarb, “Temple and Priests in the Book of the Watchers, the Animal Apocalypse, and the Apocalypse of Weeks.”

¹⁷ Nickelsburg and VanderKam, *1 Enoch*, 45.

the early Enochic texts of lesser importance than the conveying of a particular hope, to wit, *the hope that, at some point, the lives of the (morally) righteous would overcome suffering of any kind*.

On their part, Jewish and Christian eschatology oscillate between proclaiming the soul's immortality and announcing the restoration of the flesh,¹⁸ whereas Islamic eschatology reemphasises the latter without losing sight of the former.¹⁹

A particularly interesting example of the hope in the body's renewal is supplied by Pierre Clastres's ethnography on the Guaraní.²⁰ Clastres reports the existence of a Guaraní group who wanted to leave this "imperfect earth" (*ymy mba'emegua*) for a "land without evil" (*ywy mara-eý*), out of the conviction that "they were not created for misfortune."²¹ They felt "impelled ... to search for another space where they might know the happiness of an existence healed of its essential wound,"²² that is free of the finitude (in their own words, of the "singleness" or "oneness")²³ characteristic of all things; and "they imagined it in the direction of the rising sun."²⁴ But "having arrived on the beaches, at the edges of the evil world, almost in sight of their goal, they were halted by the same ruse of the gods, the same grief, the same failure: the obstacle to eternity, *la mer allée avec le soleil*."²⁵

In these cases, therefore, *death's effects are variously cancelled or denied* (in one way or another, the body is allowed to escape its constitutive finitude).

5 The soul's various types of immortality

Upon cross-cultural examination, the belief in the immortality of the soul proves to be more uniform than that of the renewal of the body: at the moment of one's death, or shortly afterwards, one's individuating principle – whatever the names assigned to it, which naturally differ from one culture to another – enters a new dimension, thus acquiring full independence from the body.

Yet a rather-intriguing variant of such belief holds that the soul is immortal only if it is properly cared for. This idea is first documented in Simon Magus,²⁶ but it regained vogue in the twentieth century in the work of the Henry Corbin, who explored its Zoroastrian roots and legacy in Shī'ite Iran.²⁷ Furthermore, Corbin aimed to counter the description of man as a "being-towards-death" in Heidegger's early writings,²⁸ of which he was the earliest French translator.²⁹ There is on the one hand, says Corbin, "the apparent body of each one of us, the one that we can see, touch, weigh, recognize ... an *accidental* and perishable formation, a compound of sublunar *physical elements*";³⁰ but there is also, less in organic than volumetric terms, our "essential subtle body, archetypal, eternal and imperishable ... [from which] the spirit is never separated ... for it is what constitutes [our] eternal individuality. One can say of it that it is the *corpus*

18 Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism and Early Christianity*; Setzer, *Resurrection of the Body in Early Judaism and Early Christianity*; Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?*; Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336*; Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*.

19 Idelman Smith and Yazbeck Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection*.

20 Clastres, *Society Against the State*, 169–75.

21 Ibid., 171.

22 Ibid., 171–2.

23 Ibid., 171–3.

24 Ibid., 174.

25 Ibid., 174. The concluding phrase ("the sea together with the sun") is Rimbaud's (*Poésies*, 109).

26 Lacarriere, *The Gnostics*, 49.

27 Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*.

28 Corbin, "De Heidegger à Sohrevardi," 31.

29 Heidegger, *Qu'est-ce Que la Métaphysique?*. Cf. The note in François Vezin's 1986 French translation of *Sein und Zeit* (Heidegger, *Être et Temps*, 8): "La présente traduction est l'aboutissement d'un long travail qui a été effectué en plusieurs phases et dont l'initiateur a été Henri [sic] Corbin (1938)." See further Janicaud, *Heidegger in France*.

30 Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, 91 (emphasis original).

supracoeleste in man”;³¹ and in between the two there is, as their “isthmus” or *barzaḥ*, our soul with its own “imaginal” body, whose lower side looks downwards to the perishable body, while its upper side looks upwards to our subtle body, and whose task is to lead the former towards the latter by producing its own imaginal body, which is also our eschatological body, i.e. our “body of resurrection.” In short, as Jeffrey Kripal comments, “Corbin understood the imaginal to be [both] a[n] ... organ that accessed a real dimension of reality ... shaped by what he called the ‘creative imagination’ ([a term] which he borrowed from Jung, who in turn borrowed it from Théodore Flournoy)”³² and the “place” where the inner “visions” of the soul occur and where the body is “resurrected.”³³

In these cases, therefore, *death's effects are half nuanced* (it is the soul rather than the body, in other words, an immaterial rather than an intrinsically corruptible organ, that survives death), *half avoided, or cancelled* (as a result, a new body is produced all the same).

6 Impersonal afterlives

That all composite biological life will dissolve into the impersonal force that sustains it and resurge transformed into something else is an atavistic notion.

The “vision” (ἐποπτεία)³⁴ that a single “vitality” (ζωή) takes different “life forms” (βίαι) – and thus the view that life is one despite being multiple, as well as continuous notwithstanding the loss of its provisional determinations – was what the ancient Greeks aimed at obtaining at the Eleusinian mysteries, which revolved around the myth of Demeter and Persephone as it is recounted in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*.³⁵ Upon discovering that, while gathering flowers, her daughter, Persephone, has been seized by Hades and carried by the latter to the underworld, Demeter (i.e. the earth viewed through the lens of its fertility) causes a terrible draught seeking to coerce Zeus to allow the return of her daughter; Zeus agrees on the condition that Persephone does not taste the food of the underworld; yet tricked by Hades, who gives her a bunch of pomegranate seeds, she eats of what she should have abstained from; for this reason, she is obliged to spend a third of each year (the winter months) in the underworld and permitted to reunite with her mother and to spend with her on earth the remaining part of the year. A child called Plutus (Πλοῦτος, “wealth”) is born from Persephone after her abduction³⁶ by Hades.³⁷ Like Persephone, then, the initiates at Eleusis would symbolically descend to the underworld, i.e. to the “invisible” (ἀιδέος) domain of Hades (Ἅιδης);³⁸ they would therein reach a “vision” that, we are told, opened for them³⁹ the “joyful knowledge of life’s beginning and end,” in Pindar’s words;⁴⁰ and then they would return to the earth like newborn children – like Plutus or Dionysus,⁴¹ one of whose many names was Διμήτωρ (notice the phonetic affinity with Δημήτηρ), the “twice-born.” What kind of *knowledge* did they have during the corresponding rituals? The knowledge, as I have anticipated, that “life” *qua* ζωή is immortal, that new living forms shine forth from the

31 Ibid., 91–2.

32 Kripal, *Secret Body*, 233. Théodore Flournoy (1854–1920) was a Swiss psychiatrist and Jung’s mentor; he specialised in the study of synaesthesia, glossolalia, somnambulism, and the psychology of occultism.

33 Ibid., 233.

34 Colli, *La Sapienza Greca*, 106, 108.

35 On which, see Foley, *The Homeric “Hymn to Demeter.”*

36 For a mortal cannot go into the house of the death but violently *pace* recent attempts on the part of a number of feminist authors to “restore agency” to Persephone by turning her abduction into a self-approved “romance,” on which, see Schiano, “The Rape of Persephone in Children’s Media.”

37 Kerényi, *Eleusis*, 31.

38 Cf. Plato’s etymological word play in *Cratylus*, 403a–b.

39 Possibly by means of the ingestion of an entheogenic substance, but see for discussion, Cosmopoulos, *Bronze Age Eleusis and the Origins of the Eleusinian Mysteries*, 19–21.

40 Pindar, fr. 137, quoted in Colli, *La Sapienza Greca*, 92.

41 Cf. their shared taumorphic features, on which, see Dietrich, *The Origins of Greek Religion*, 172–3.

earth when others relapse into it, and that the impersonal life that flows through our veins flows through everything like the sap does through the leaves of the vine, Dionysus's plant. In short, the newcomers were initiated into the knowledge of that which lacks any visible "aspect" and recognisable "form" (εἶδος), that is into the "invisible" ἄ-ιδέξ realm of Hades where all things remain mixed and concealed in their mere possibility. Hence, Heraclitus's otherwise surprising statement that "Hades and Dionysus are one and the same."⁴²

In turn, India – whose extraordinary cultural variety should have prevented William Jones from speaking of Hinduism in the singular: there is a bunch of Hinduism-s even more distant from one another in both practice and belief than, say, New Zealand pentecostalism and Jesuit catholicism – is home to many spiritual variants of this substantialist hope in life's continuity after death. The best known one, roughly shared by the Advaita Vedanta school of Hinduism and most Buddhist schools, relates to the union of one's "inner essence" (Sanskrit: *ātman*) with the immaterial, unchanging "universal consciousness" (*brahman*) that underlies all things, an union by means of which one is delivered from the "cycle of birth, life, death, and reincarnation" (*saṃsāra*) to which all living beings are subjected and from the "illusion" (*māyā*) of finitude. There is a mental dimension to such union, but its practitioners prefer to refer to it in terms of an "experience," hence of something non-intellectual or, at least, non-conceptual.⁴³

A curious combination of these two hopes, the physical and the spiritual, in life's impersonal continuity can be found in Georges Bataille's "low materialist" (the expression is Bataille's own)⁴⁴ aspiration to dissolve all organic life (especially human organic life) into life's boundless pre-organic course.⁴⁵ Bataille identifies such a goal – which he wrongly takes to be an anthropological invariant⁴⁶ – with the recovery of the deepest human "truth"⁴⁷ and with the retrieval of the "sacred" itself.⁴⁸ Inspired in this by Nietzsche, whose thought he was one of the first to dissociate from its unduly Nazi appropriation, Bataille has – as Michel Foucault famously stressed⁴⁹ – largely influenced today's spirit of revolt against any presumed ontological determination, a spirit epitomised in Derridean deconstructionism⁵⁰ which Gilbert Durand equated as early as the 1970s with the willingness to oppose ὕβρις to λόγος, "madness" to "bureaucracy,"⁵¹ as though it were necessary to opt for chaos or order (for either Dionysus or Apollo, that is) at the expense of their twin-ness; as though being itself were not always-already "modulation of consistency" (to borrow from Félix Guattari)⁵² between possibility and determination, or "elicitation" and "containment" as Roy Wagner has it,⁵³ or "exposure" and "attunement" as Tim Ingold says in turn.⁵⁴

Finally, if much-less commonly, the union of the particular and the universal has been conceived in purely intellectual terms, e.g. as the union of one's own intellect with the universal intellect (Arabic: *al-'aql al-fa'āl*,

⁴² Heraclitus, DK B15: "[...] ὅτι τὸ δὲ Ἄϊδος καὶ Διόνυσος [...]." Heraclitus's fragments are available in Kirk et al., *The Presocratic Philosophers*.

⁴³ Rambachan, *The Advaita Worldview*, 47–66; Panjvani, *Buddhism*, 12. Cf. the thinkability of being in early-Greek thought, on which, see Severino, *Il Giogo*, 104.

⁴⁴ See Macherey, "Georges Bataille et le Renversement Matérialiste."

⁴⁵ Cf. Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 25–86; Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 17–25.

⁴⁶ Through a colossal misreading of Mauss's famous 1925 study on the *potlatch* (as per its Chinook denomination) among Northwest American, Melanesian, and Papuan tribes, in which the apparently idle ritual destruction of goods after their conspicuous consumption, rather than being, as Bataille wrongly interpreted, a symptom of an anti-utilitarian impulse to engage in excess by dismantling social realia and hence social norms, serves the purpose of enhancing social reciprocity between two clans, thus contributing to maintain their social bond, by establishing an agonistic competition between them: the more one can give to the other, the more the other will feel compelled to give it in turn. See further Mauss, *The Gift*, 7–9, 20–1, 52–3, 93–5; Mauss, *Manuel D'ethnographie*, 187–8; Leveratto, "Georges Bataille et L'anthropologie du Don."

⁴⁷ Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 14.

⁴⁸ Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 27–61.

⁴⁹ Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression."

⁵⁰ On Derrida and Bataille and the latter Nietzschean and Hegelian sources, see Mansfield, *The God Who Deconstructs Himself*, 85–134, 185–226; Foshay, "Tarrying with the Negative."

⁵¹ Durand, *Sciences de L'homme et Tradition*, 233–4.

⁵² Guattari, *Schizoanalytic Cartographies*, 107.

⁵³ Wagner, *Asiwinarong*, xiv.

⁵⁴ Ingold, *The Life of Lines*, 141. I have myself written on it Segovia, "From World of Possibles to Possible Worlds."

Latin: *intellectus agens*) that gives its forms to the matter of the sublunar world, as fancied by many medieval philosophers.⁵⁵ According to Ibn Ṭufayl, moreover, al-Fārābī, in his lost commentary to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, went as far as to deny on behalf of it the resurrection of the flesh and the immortality of the soul.⁵⁶

In these cases, therefore, *the effects of death upon life are acknowledged but minimised* (something in us, be it infra-individual or supra-individual, proves capable of eluding it).⁵⁷

7 Transition

But if all this can be deemed “thinkable,” there is nevertheless, as I have suggested, something beyond it: *something unthinkable or, at the very least, hardly thinkable for us today*. That is to say, there is another manner of relating to death compatible with what I have called the material continuity of biological life after death,⁵⁸ but incompatible with any claim regarding the resurrection of the body, the immortality of the soul, or life's impersonal spiritual or intellectual posterity; another manner of relating to death which, on the other hand, looks, too, beyond its untroubled or despaired acceptance. I should like to approach it, first, through the analysis of Heraclitus's frag. DK B62 – which Charles Kahn rightly describes as being “in point of form Heraclitus' masterpiece”;⁵⁹ and, next, through the analysis of Robert Gardner's 1964 ethnographic film *Dead Birds*. As we shall see, in both cases, *death is fully assumed as bringing a complete, i.e. non-negotiable, end to one's life*; put otherwise, its effects are neither nuanced nor minimised, let alone cancelled or denied. But, as we shall also see, instead of death being simply assumed as bringing an end to life, *death is envisaged in both cases as something sacred in its own right which makes life possible and confers it meaning*.

A brief disclaimer is in order here, concerning the comparison of ancient-Greek and extra-modern cultures: after Fränkel, Vernant, Detienne, Redfield, etc., there is little need to recall that the former ought to be approached in strict ethnographic terms, as it is anything but the antechamber of our own culture; its comparison with the culture of the extra-modern peoples of the highlands of Papua New Guinea and the Amazon basin is thus sufficiently justified.⁶⁰

8 Heraclitus's “immortal mortals”

Heraclitus's frag. DK B62 reads: “ἀθάνατοι θνητοί, θνητοὶ ἀθάνατοι, ζῶντες τὸν ἐκείνων θάνατον, τὸν δὲ ἐκείνων βίον τεθνεῶτες,” i.e. “immortal mortals, mortal immortals, living each other's death, dying each other's life.”⁶¹ Eugen Fink proposes the following interpretation:

⁵⁵ The Muslim peripatetics are to be credited for the construal of this notion; see Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect*.

⁵⁶ Goodman, *Avicenna*, 127.

⁵⁷ Which, obviously, is not the same as minimising death by removing it as a concern until it may come (or even then, on which, see n2 above).

⁵⁸ Ancient Greece provides an excellent example of it even if its inhabitants had, as a rule, their corpses cremated and thus annihilated out of repulsion *vis-à-vis* their decomposition, on which, see Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad*, 160–223. Incompatibility would exclusively arise if 1.3.1 were to be over-stressed against 2.1 or 2.2, but this would only be plausible by confusing 1.3.1 with 1.3.2.

⁵⁹ Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, 216. Ultimately, each of Heraclitus's fragments proves a masterpiece, if of a different kind; see my recent short piece on frag. DK B27 (“Impromptu: The Alien – Heraclitus's Cut”), as well as my forthcoming studies on frags. DK B30 (“Fire in Three Images”) and DKB 16 and DKB 62 (“Chiasms, Zigzags, Spheres, Mirrors: Heraclitus, Pindar, Parmenides, and Early-Greek Intertextuality and Meta-conceptuality”).

⁶⁰ See further Detienne, *Comparative Anthropology of Ancient Greece*; and, as a brilliant case study thereof, Schrempp, *Magical Arrows*. My own work gravitates around such comparison; see e.g. Gevorkyan and Segovia, “Earth and World(s).”

⁶¹ Hereinafter, all translations from the Greek are mine.

As immortals [the gods] must know themselves as the ones who win their self-understanding in the negation of dying. They know themselves as the beings ... who do not encounter death, the beings who observe the death of humans, and the beings who come to know their own permanence in the sight of the passing away of transient humans. [In tun] [t]he mortals are humans who know that they are delivered over to death in ... [contrast] to the gods who always are and are removed from death. [...]

[In other words] [t]he gods live in comparing themselves with mortal humans who experience death. They live the death of mortals in that, in their self-understanding ... they hold themselves over against the transience of humans [Hence] [t]he life of the immortals is the death of mortals. The gods live the death of the mortals, and the mortals die the life of the gods or become atrophied in reference to the life of the gods.⁶²

Fine. But Fink overlooks two important things. First, that the Greek gods are not exactly beings: they are rather the brightness and the shadows of everything that is, i.e. the ever-living forces of the earth, no matter whether positive, like love (Aphrodite) and the clear vision of things (Athena), or negative, like darkness (Nyx) and discord (Eris), which make and unmake the world, that is any world.⁶³ If they deserve to be approached with due “awe” (εὐσέβεια, which is often wrongly translated as “religion”) and “modesty” (αἰδώς), it is because humans, in their quality as mortals, cannot measure themselves against them, even if both gods and mortals are the earth’s children, as Pindar says in *Nemean* 6.1–7:

One is the race of men and gods,
as from one mother we both draw our breath.
But our different powers set us aside,
for we are nothing, while the bronzed heaven remains ever secure in place.
And yet in something we come close to the immortals,
to wit, in the greatness of our thought, and in our shining forth;
although we ignore by day or night which is our lot,
what finishing line we are running towards.⁶⁴

Fink is therefore right in that the gods experience their own permanence *vis-à-vis* the passing away of mortals, whereas these, conversely, die their death before the everlasting life of the gods. Yet, by merely stating this relation between them, he overlooks that *the fragment’s structure is that of a double, rather than single, chiasmus*, or, as Wagner puts it, “a chiasmus reflected again within itself.”⁶⁵ In a nutshell: Heraclitus does not just say that the gods live before the death of the mortals and that the mortals die before the life of the gods; he says that *they live each other’s death and die each other’s life*, which means that the gods die the life of the mortals and the mortals live the death of the gods, as well. Kahn notices it perfectly and qualifies as “weak” any reading that would limit itself to reconstitute the “traditional dichotomy between mortals and immortals.”⁶⁶

Kahn himself acknowledges, though, the difficulty to grasp what Heraclitus originally intended to say by affirming that the gods die the life of the mortals and the mortals live the death of the gods.⁶⁷ Yet, he adds

⁶² Heidegger and Fink, *Heraclitus Seminar 1966/67*, 98, 100. We do not have Heidegger’s interpretation, though, as, due to a trip he had to make (as per Fink’s report on p. 97), he missed the session dedicated to the analysis of Heraclitus’s frag. DK B62.

⁶³ Cf. Kerényi’s remark (in “Theos und Mythos”) that, before the arrival of Christianity, the term θεός, which we habitually translate as “god,” was mostly used in Greece as an exclamation before the apparition (or shining forth) of something particularly impressive and thus striking; as well as Heidegger’s comments (in *Heraclitus*, 71) on Heraclitus’s own notion of “ever-living” (ἀειζών, in frag. B53) in connection to other similar terms in Homer and Pindar which he proposes to interpret in evenemential terms.

⁶⁴ Pindar, *Nemean Odes*, 60. Notice that Heraclitus’s chiasmatic form of expression (=X) is here reworked by Pindar in zig-zag terms instead (=Z). Cf. too *Pythian* 8.95–7: “Dependent on what, each day, the going is! What is one? What is he not?/A mere dream of a shadow is man./Yet whenever Zeus’s gleam reaches him,/a brilliant light shines upon man/and sweet becomes his vital time” (Pindar, *Olympian Odes. Pythian Odes*, 336).

⁶⁵ Wagner, *Coyote Anthropology*, 7; cf. the parallel reference to precise fragment of Heraclitus only two pages before, i.e. on p. 5.

⁶⁶ Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, 218.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 217.

nothing to the otherwise obvious view that, in ancient Greece, mortals could become gods while certain gods like Dionysus could die in turn.⁶⁸ Presumably, however, Heraclitus had something else in mind. But what exactly? Surely, he cannot have meant to say that if the gods were to be declared dead, humans would outlive them anyway; for the “flight of the gods” (to use Hölderlin’s and Heidegger’s formula)⁶⁹ and the “death of God” (to use Nietzsche’s)⁷⁰ are modern phenomena. More likely, he meant to say something like this: (i) that mortals are *cradled* by the inexhaustible living forces of the earth, which confer to the earth’s inherent *cum* manifold noise its distinctive tonalities (love, clarity of vision, etc.); and (ii) that it is to such forces to which mortals give *shape* through their lives, if provisionally; and hence (iii) that the gods die in the sense that their infinite productivity is *limited* or contained by us (and by all other things) while we live from their death; and vice versa: (iv) that the gods live through our death in the sense that they go on living while we die – but then again, they can only live eternally by dying, as otherwise nothing would succeed to contain them.⁷¹

9 Gardner’s (more than) “dead birds”

We die. It can hardly be minimised even if Dionysus reminder is a wise one indeed. It ought not to be nuanced, as tempting as nuancing it may be. And, above all, it cannot be denied.

During the opening seconds of Robert Gardner’s *Dead Birds*, the camera follows a bird flying swiftly over the bush; meanwhile Gardner’s voiceover says:

There is a fable told by a mountain people living in the ancient highlands of New Guinea about a race between a snake and a bird. It tells of a contest which decided if men would be like birds and die, or be like snakes which shed their skins and have eternal life. The bird won, and from that time, all men, like birds, must die.⁷²

The people in question are the Dani, whom Gardner and Karl Heider studied in the early 1960s. Above anything else, the Dani view themselves as warriors. Gardner and Heider stress, however, that they do not “fight in order to annex land or to dominate people,” but “because they want to and because it is necessary.”⁷³ In large measure, “their health, welfare and happiness depend on the pursuit of aggression against their traditional enemies.”⁷⁴ Accordingly, ritual warfare is “positively sanctioned as any major institution in [Dani] culture.”⁷⁵ There is, furthermore, a place for it: a no-man’s land located in between Dani territory and the territory of their enemies, whose warfare logic is akin to theirs. Whenever both parties agree upon it, they confront themselves on that spot. A single day-long battle ensues from noon to shortly before the sunset. Except those who are too young or too old to participate in it, and those who may be ill or injured for whatever reason, all men join the battle. They put on their best headdresses made of feathers; these are so important for them that a good many men will not hesitate to withdraw from the battlefield if it starts to rain, fearing that they may get spoiled. Not many men get killed, as their fight consists in that the warriors throw spears and shoot unfledged arrows to one another at some distance. Yet, a few men may end up injured more or less severely.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 219.

⁶⁹ Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 38.

⁷⁰ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science, with a Prelude of Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, 279–80.

⁷¹ Cf. Heraclitus, frag. DK B51: “οὐ ξυνιᾶσιν ὅκως διαφερόμενον ἔωσι τῷ ὁμολογεῖ· παλίντροπος ἁρμονίῃ ὅκωσπερ τόξου καὶ λύρης” (“they do not understand that what diverges coincides: back attunement, like that of the bow and the lyre”), as well as the wording in frag. DK B54: “ἁρμονίῃ ἀφανὴς” (“unapparent harmony”). The formula is patent: Συμφέρω:Διαφέρω\Διαφέρω:Συμφέρω, i.e. convergence:divergence\divergence:convergence.

⁷² Gardner, *Dead Birds*, 00:00:00–00:00:40.

⁷³ Gardner and Heider, *Gardens of War*, 135.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 136.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 135.

Why, then, do the Dani fight? And, more generally – as the model is widespread – why are the extra-modern peoples of Papua Guinea and beyond so bellicose?

Gardner puts forward an explanation that adds to Clastres's theory that extra-modern societies fight one another to preserve their difference, i.e. to avoid assimilation.⁷⁶ Men, he suggests, *ought to confront death so as to empower themselves over and against it, if provisionally, precisely because they know they die; for such knowledge makes them more than birds, despite all:*

Soon, both men and birds will surrender to the night. They'll rest for the life and death of days to come. For each, both awaits, but with a difference that men, having foreknowledge of their doom, bring a special passion to their life. They will not simply wait for death nor will they bear it lightly when it comes. Instead, they'll try with measured violence to fashion fate themselves. They will kill to save their souls and perhaps to ease the burden of knowing what birds will never know and what they, as men, who have forever killed each other, cannot forget.⁷⁷

Put differently: knowing they will die, they decide not to wait for death to come, but to encounter it and defy it. *If they prove successful – if they do not die yet – they can boast of having fashioned, at least once, their own fate.* Warfare thus supplies the *scenario* in which death can be ritually confronted and, eventually, outwitted. Thus, one could argue, even if only the best warriors obtain κλέος (the “everlasting ‘fame’” which, according to Heraclitus, the best seek to achieve),⁷⁸ all those who survive the combat gain κύδος (immediate “fame” or “glory”) due to the *fact* that they provisionally escape death.⁷⁹ In this way, men, who are by definition *those who cannot give birth, oppose death by reaffirming their aliveness before death's terrible presence* – whereas women, it must be added, oppose death and vanquish it by transmitting life through their giving birth to new generations (of men and women alike); which implies that women are somehow superior to men, since they defeat death without having to defy it.⁸⁰

In 1989, Gardner returned to Papua New Guinea highlands to visit the Dani and made a second, shorter film (*Dead Birds Re-encountered*) on their transformed lives. They had been “pacified” by a modern state and they no longer engaged in warfare with their enemies. The small bamboo towers from which they used to surveil their enemies' movements had been demolished. As per their own confession, men now only cared about money and clothes. A tourist camp had been built nearby the village. The former warriors would now put their best headdresses for them and collect their tips, while some tourists would take pictures of themselves wearing Dani loincloths. It is inevitable to draw the impression from this that *death had lost for the Dani its inherent sacredness, and life as well as a result; for when death is what makes of humans what they are, i.e. mortals, it is viewed as something sacred in its own right – as sacred as life itself is out of being death's chiastic reverse.* Conversely, in all the other cases, *death presents no sacred features of its own:* if it can be deemed sacred, it is solely in *instrumental* terms, in its quality as a threshold between this life and the next.

⁷⁶ Clastres, *Archeology of Violence*, 237–78.

⁷⁷ Gardner, *Dead Birds*, 01:21:55–01:22:35. Cf. Clastres's analysis of the Aché notion of *bayja* (*Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians*, 15–59).

⁷⁸ Heraclitus, frag. DK B29: “αἰρεῦνται γὰρ ἐν ἀντὶ πάντων οἱ ἄριστοι, κλέος ἀένανον θνητῶν [...]” (“One thing alone do the ἄριστοι choose: the ever-lasting fame of mortals [...]).

⁷⁹ Cf. the treatment of κύδος in Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad*, 33–4.

⁸⁰ Cf. the research on which Clastres was working when he himself got killed in a car accident (*Archeology of Violence*, 279–324). It is easy to imagine, therefore, the initial incomprehensibility with which the Christian *kerygma*, with its emphasis in that men and women are equal before a God who awaits after death and that makes sense of it, was received among the indigenous peoples of Papua New Guinea (and beyond).

10 Afterword

In the previous sections, I have employed the term “sacred” drawing on Jack David Eller, who describes it (after Durkheim) as that *within* the mundane⁸¹ which one “dare not ... approach carelessly.”⁸² “Religion” may not be the best word to describe our way of relating to it, as the word “religion” ultimately denotes a modern abstraction.⁸³ Hence, it is doubtful whether the aforementioned human attitudes towards death could be brought together under such label. They display contrasting ideas about death’s symbolic role in diverse historical and cultural contexts. In some cases, death is seen as a mere hinge between two realities or forms of life. In other cases, it is seen as life’s outermost limit, and thus as that which defines life negatively. Differences as to the exact nature of its sacredness follow from both perspectives and affect the understanding of what life is: boundless renewal or tragic gift.⁸⁴

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⁸¹ Pace Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 9–10.

⁸² Eller, *Introducing Anthropology of Religion*, 21.

⁸³ Chidester, *Empire of Religion*; Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion*.

⁸⁴ Alternatively, it can be perceived to be momentary joy in Epicurean fashion, or as the substance of which our frustrations are made, in existentialist terms. A final note on life as a gift. In a private communication of September 27, 2021, Hilan Bensusan drew my attention to the fact that extra-modern ritual cannibalism enacts the idea that a person’s life is dedicated and given to others, and that immortality is thus portrayed as company and inheritance. I had overlooked this issue in my own study on extra-modern ritual exo-cannibalism (Segovia, “Tupi or Not Tupi”). Cf. Viveiros de Castro, *From the Enemy’s Point of View*, as well as Bensusan’s original approach to spectrology in “Cosmopolitics as a Taste for Cunning.” I should thus like to thank Hilan Bensusan for this suggestion and make my gratitude extensive to George Ossom Batsa for reading an early draft of this essay and sharing with me his impressions.

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