

"As if" we did not die. The cognitive-affective scheme of hope

The paradox of the future: the place of both the beginnings and the ending

One of the man's paramount concerns, according to Immanuel Kant, is the answer to the question "what am I allowed to hope for?" It is the last, the third question, following the questions: "what can I know?" and "what should I do?". Indeed, hope proves to be a difficult test for the mythology, the religion, the philosophy and the science, for the answer to the Kantian question is deeply related to how we conceive and experience time and man is an eminently temporal being; man is perhaps the only being who he really lives in time: he makes plans, has regrets, he wants to keep his memories and he believes in the possibility of the revival and the return. Likewise, he is a being who is aware of death and he is overwhelmed by anxiety in the face of death.

In other words, the paradox makes the future¹ to be both the place of hope and the source of the greatest despair: the fatality of death. The passage of time – as the second principle of thermodynamics tells us – means consumption, exhaustion and entropy. And then, what – and above all – how can we hope? Do we experience hope until we die? Do we do it in spite of dying? What does the phrase "hope springs eternal" mean? How is *the consciousness of death* reconciled with the fact that man is a hopeful being? Does hope cancel out this awareness of the death – or at least does it interrupt it – so that the individual can remain functional, gainful and vital? Is hope the antidote to the consciousness of death? And what does this consciousness mean? Are we permanently aware of death or only occasionally?

In the Christian theology, the three cardinal virtues include, in addition to the hope, the faith and the love. Does this mean that without believing – even unconsciously – in an indefinite extension of life, beyond death, the hope itself – and with it this earthly life – could not survive? Does the belief in immortality substantiates and legitimizes the hope? Can hope only occur in this ground freed beforehand from the fact and even the possibility of death?² In

¹ In the ability to anticipate, to plan, to project with its specific modes, such as waiting, postponing, giving up – one can detect the very origin of human temporality. It is hard to imagine that a subjective temporality can be constituted in the absence of such a capacity. Once time is constituted, the temporal ecstasy corresponding to this capacity, the dimension that best expresses it is the future, therefore, even if it is an "anachronism", we can rightly say that the origin of time is the future.

² Friedrich Nietzsche could imagine the possibility of a life that is all the more complete and authentic as it is no longer built on the assumption of an "other world" which, if accepted, only diminishes or even obscures the value of this world. Consequently, Nietzsche is a detractor of hope and a worshiper of necessity, of fatality. However, we cannot help but see in the "eternal return of the Identical" – with all the contradictions and ambiguities it brings - a fundamental symbol of the temporality instituted by the hope.

a secular version, the same concept is found in Freud's theory of the unconscious belief in one's own immortality.³ According to the father of psychoanalysis, nobody thinks, in his unconscious, that he or she will die.⁴

And yet not only the religious people hope, as they are convinced of the immortality of their souls, the atheists also hope, the agnostics hope as well; hope is a much more everyday, more usual, more spontaneous fact than the exceptional state of grace assumed by faith.

It would be much more reasonable to start from a description of the facts and not from a prior theory. However, experience shows us that there is a behavior of *ignoring death*, of neglecting its importance and its significance for the ordinary life. The evidence that this behavior is a social habit is provided by the typical reaction of parents when they receive questions about death from their children. They try to divert their children's attention, to "minimize" the importance of the issue; the parents may tell their children that "it's too early for you to worry about such a thing" or that "with your whole life ahead of you, there's no point in thinking about death right now." No parent encourages their children's preoccupation with the issue of death.

And if it is true that, at least in its essential aspects, the family microgroup reflects and repeats the commandments of the social macrogroup, it can be assumed that diverting the child's attention away from this *information* about death is an inherited behavior, transmitted from one generation to another, and that thus, an implicit, universal social "norm" is observed, as, in general, the norms of politeness or common sense are, all the more effective as they are not subject to questioning. We can assume that the intention of this "ban", of this censorship of the preoccupation with death is to eliminate the above-mentioned paradox: that the future is both the place of hope and death.

The hope and the death seem to be interpreted by the human mind as mutually incompatible, so that *the decision* in favor of hope implies the elimination, the amputation of the preoccupation with death, in other words it prevents *the realization* of this information.

Although man turns the consciousness of death into a title of glory⁵, in reality man is only virtually and intermittently aware of death. Because man is the being endowed with the

³ For a detailed discussion see JL Elmore „Freud's Theories of Unconscious Immortality and the Death Instinct.“ *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 26(4), 1972, p. 594.

⁴ However, this solution complicates things even more, since the same unconscious hides, according to the same father of psychoanalysis, a death instinct. Another difficulty is represented by the fact that the contents of the unconscious are constituted in relation to the conscious, as the "effects" of repression, censorship and repression that do not allow them to surface into the conscious.

highest degree of consciousness, and since death is the negation of life – an intense and continuous consciousness of death would depress his primary motivational system. In cases of severe depression the idea of death becomes obsessive.

How hope works: “as if we did not die”

One of the objectives of this text is to clarify *the working scheme* of this everyday, non-religious hope, unconnected with the belief in immortality and produced by the same thinking which, at certain times, is a consciousness of death. By *at certain times* we mean that the simultaneity is, as much as we would like to believe otherwise, a reconstruction of our memory. The raw material of the mind – like our vision – is disparate sequences, static frames that are set into motion, unfolded like a motion picture thanks to the memory and to the “speed” of the neural activity. So, fundamentally, the “time” of our mind is discrete, not continuous.

Therefore, no matter how beautiful a sentence from Albert Camus might sound that praises the living of *the absurd* man, delighted by the beauty of the world and *also*, terrified by the reality of death, no matter how sublime the words of Saint Siluan would be: “keep thy mind in hell and despair not”⁶, no matter how wonderfully presented by Bergson the flow and vital energy would be – the neuroscience has shown us that simultaneity and continuity are reconstructed from fragmentary images, from bits and pieces, from sequences glued together by the speed of the neural activity.⁷

Also, an exceptional contribution to the understanding of the phenomenon of consciousness through a theory of the scheme of attention is made by Michael S.A. Graziano, in *Rethinking Consciousness: A Scientific Theory of Subjective Experience*.⁸

⁵ In this respect, see the famous fragment from Blaise Pascal's *Thoughts*: "Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed. There is no need for the whole universe to take up arms to crush him: a vapour, a drop of water is enough to kill him. but even if the universe were to crush him, man would still be nobler than his slayer, because he knows that he is dying and the advantage the universe has over him. The universe knows none of this" (Blaise Pascal, Cugetări, translated by Maria and Cezar Ivănescu, full text, Aion Publishing House, 1998, Section VI "Philosophy", fr. 247, p. 296)

⁶ I thank my colleague Mircea Toboşaru for pointing out this expression to me. For a thorough analysis of its theological meanings see the volume "Keep Your Mind in Hell and Do Not Despair!" The spirituality of Saint Siluan the Athonite. Theological interpretations, trans. by Maria- Cornelia and deacon. Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis publishing house, Sibiu, 2000

⁷ See Oliver Saks, *Fluxul conştiinţei*, translation by Florin Oprina, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2020

⁸ Michael S.A. Graziano, *Conştiinţa. Dintr-o nouă perspectivă. O teorie ştiinţifică a experienţei subiective*, translation from English by Vlad Vedeanu, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2021

Very briefly, Graziano's theory of the attention scheme goes as follows: we can receive information, even respond to stimuli, without being aware of the presence thereof, which proves that the phenomenon of consciousness is an additional information attached to the primary information – and which it barely gives it the status of conscious information. The relevance of Graziano's theory to the subject under discussion is this: man can receive information about death without being aware of it or only vaguely aware, as in the “hemispatial neglect syndrome” described by the author⁹.

We can use this syndrome as an extraordinarily apt metaphor for ordinary human behavior toward death, for what else is ignoring, neglecting the presence of death if not a self-induced hemispatial neglect syndrome? If we look at life as a whole, as a space that includes the obvious contradictions of life and death, of birth and disappearance, of growth and decay, as a space that affirms the undeniable connection between the two dimensions of existence, then we behave as if we suffer from this hemispatial neglect syndrome because we live looking only at the “full” half of the glass, learning to stop looking at it and eventually not seeing the “empty” half of the same glass.

We cut out the death half from life, the parents who give birth to children think with one half of the brain, the one that “sees” only the birth and the growth, not the decay and the death. The hemispatial neglect syndrome causes them to automatically cut out the information about death or, more precisely, to receive it without being aware of it or to behave like those who, to use the inspired evangelical expression, “because seeing, they see not, and hearing, they hear not, neither do they understand.” (Mark 13:13)

Intermezzo: Pandora – a symbol of the idea of “birth – the origin of all evil, the origin of death”

⁹ “In the clinical world of brain injury there is a particularly serious condition called hemispatial neglect syndrome that has been studied for nearly a hundred years. (...) The neglect is not the blindness. In blindness, objects disappear from your field of vision, but you still know they are there. (...) In the case of the neglect syndrome, objects simply disappear from consciousness when they reach the wrong part of space. A touch on the left side of the body is not registered. A sound coming from the left is either wrongly attributed to the right or it is ignored altogether. In the worst cases, the patient does not even realize that there is a left side. A patient suffering from hemispatial neglect may shave only one side of the face, dress only one half of the body, and eat food from one half of the plate. If you rotate the plate, he won't know where the extra food came from. If you ask him to draw, he will only do the right side of the drawing and he won't notice that he missed half of the drawing. If you ask him to draw a clock, he will usually draw a complete circle, perhaps because he retains a motor memory of the circular hand movement. But then he'll cram the numbers 1 through 12 into the right side of the circle and think he's drawn correctly.” (Michael S.A. Graziano *Conștiința. Dintr-o nouă perspectivă. O teorie științifică a experienței subiective*, translated from English by Vlad Vedeanu, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2021, pp. 107-108)

The dissociation of the two halves, of life and death, became a kind of mental automatism. It is proved by the fact that the images that connect them are extremely rare and usually encrypted, as if this secret knowledge, would break a taboo and it would only be addressed to only some initiates.¹⁰

One of these is the very image of Pandora (the all-giving or all-gifted) around which the ancient Greek myth of the creation of humans revolves. Or, the symbol immediately associated with Pandora is the box or the bowl¹¹, a transparent symbol of the vagina, therefore of birth. The box/basket/container/container-vagina correspondence is, from a symbolic viewpoint, indisputable. A famous term in the history and philosophy of religion is *cista mystica*, the sacred box, a box from which a snake comes out or enters (what other more obvious symbol of fecundity?). The symbol is present on some Roman coins and it is associated with Isis, with the Eastern mysteries, but also with the cup of Hygieia - a symbol of the pharmacy to this day.¹²

We find the association between birth and death even in the biblical myth of the Fall, where the serpent stands, through a process called metonymy, as a symbol of the depths in which it usually lives, of the hole (“snake hole”) and of the depths. The serpent is, in the myth of the Fall, not a phallic symbol, as it has been thought, but a symbol of the vagina, of the feminine, and therefore of fertility. The reproduction and the sexuality are connected, in the myth of the Fall, to the curse of death, but the affirmation of this connection stops at a still symbolic and allusive level, without highlighting this facet of the birth-death connection – either because it is a reminiscence of a different cultural horizon, or because of the transcultural “ban” of the utterance thereof.

¹⁰ I covered this topic in an article titled „Two Soteriological Models: the Resurrection of the Dead and Killing of the Infants” publicat în *The Proceedings of the International Conference Globalization, Intercultural Dialogue and National Identity*, Volume no 9, 2022, <http://asociatia-alpha.ro/gidni/09-2022/GIDNI-09-Socs-b.pdf>, pg. 130-140, ISBN: 978-606-93691-3-5

¹¹ See the explanations given, in this very issue, by Alexandru Popp to the word *pithos* – πίθος : https://anthropos.ro/alexandru-popp-luminata-de-la-capatul-tunelului/#_ftn2

¹² Kistē means box or basket, but also bladder (hence the word for the inflammation that the fairer sex complain about from time to time: the cystitis). According to the *etymonline* website the root would be Indo-European: *kista, braided basket). Well, in Latin we find it in the form *cista*, from which comes *cistern*; the English word “chest” derives from the same origin, as does the Romanian word “chist”. It is very likely that the Romanian slang term for the female genital organ has a direct connection with this *kista where the original lesson remained only regional, the group of letters “chi” being replaced by “pi”, for literary reasons. As we can see in other examples, in Romanian, “chi” is interchangeable with “pi”: meatball becomes *piftea*, *picior* - *chicior* / *chișior*, *chisa* – *pisa* etc.

What we mean – and this will become much clearer hereafter – is that, usually, in the daily life, hope acts as *a switch* which turns off the consciousness of death, that whenever we hope – the consciousness of death is suspended, it is bracketed, we behave towards death *as if* it does not exist. This phrase – “*as if*” – is key in the matter of hope, and we owe it to Hans Vaihinger¹³ – the analysis of how the life can be built on this single vocable. Although seemingly simple, the mechanism of the “switch” turning off the death consciousness involves psychological, neurophysiological and cultural adjustments of extraordinary finesse, on the rigor of which the maintenance of life at an optimal level ultimately depends. How are they realized, what exactly do they depend on, how can the thought of death not become obsessive, a fixed idea and not occupy the whole future (as it happens in cases of severe depression or in panic attacks) – these are questions we try to approach and, as far as possible, give them an answer below. We can notice, from the very beginning, that in philosophies that reject hope or value it negatively – such as the Stoicism – the idea, the consciousness of death is predominant, it is *crucial*. Conversely, those philosophies in which hope is valued positively, the idea of death is minimized, marginalized or downright abolished.

As far as the question of temporality is concerned, we can state that since our species is not yet extinct, we are still making babies and *we ignore* the gloomy predictions of physicists and cosmologists about the cooling of the universe and the transformation of our sun into a killer supernova, the human time is *still* a time of hope, a time based on hope. As irrational as it may seem – the hope interrupts and suspends the judgment about death, *we simply decide* not to think about death, or more precisely, we decide to pretend that the fatality of death – ours, others' and the universe's – *is unimportant*. Surely, we are forced to acknowledge the fatality of death from the first years of our lives – but our behavior is configured around the transformation of death into a secondary or residual aspect of existence and not into a key dimension thereof.

However, our mind often tries to bring together the moments when the fact of death appears with an impossible to conceal evidence with the other moments – the majority – in which “the death” is suspended by hope, so that in a Camusian or Siluan perspective – the face and the reverse, the beauty of a summer's day and the graveyard, the hell and the hope –

¹³ Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of “As If”*, translated in Romanian by: Cristina Dumitru, Rares Moldovan and Octavian More; Translations from the Greek and Latin languages by: Andrei Gotia; revision of the translation, comments and notes by: Liviu Cotrau, Nemira Publishing House, 2001

can be “brought together”. This is a simultaneity, as we have seen, which is illusory, intellectual and mediated.¹⁴ We must emphasize that the concern to bring together, to reconcile the “consciousness of death” with the “consciousness of life”, to integrate these antinomian experiences into a synthetic consciousness, superior to either of them separately, is philosophical or religious and by no means common. On a daily basis, we proceed in the sense of the learned behavior: by ignoring the information about death, by activating the consciousness of life (and therefore the hope) at the expense of the consciousness of death. At the end of this paper, we will give in to the temptation to propose a unifying and synthetic consciousness of the two incompatible consciousnesses: “the consciousness of life” and “the consciousness of death”. We will propose the adoption of another “as if” that would allow us a dignified existence under the conditions of *not ignoring* the fact of dying.

As we shall see, this other “as if” is not entirely new – on the contrary, we also encounter it in archaic modes of existence – but it has manifested itself much less frequently than the competing one. This is an *as if* that establishes another way of enjoying life, different from the one represented by hope. But before that, the analysis of the cognitive-affective scheme of hope and its presuppositions is required.

Biological time versus physical time

It is inevitable, when we speak of the temporality instituted by hope, let us ask ourselves what is the “belief” or the assumption, the substratum of this temporality. This term is more general than the belief in a life after death – because we also meet it in secular, non-religious versions with a psychological and biological support. In other words, by simply “forgetting” or by “interrupting” the consciousness of death (the imperative “don’t think about death!”) – although it is very important for the operation of the mechanism of hope – is

¹⁴ Let us not forget, however, that for Camus – for whom the idea of death is central, hope is valued negatively, as considered to be a form of cheap escapism in the face of the tragedy of existence. Through this, Camus confirms the model proposed above: the philosophies according to which the idea and consciousness of death predominate, hope is valued negatively. From my viewpoint, however, the “beauty of life”, the “joy” of Sisyphus descending the mountain are – to use Blaga’s words – the results of a split within the same concept, another way of stating hope, a hope, it is true, that is directed rather to the present than to the future; and yet hope, in the fullness of its meaning, as long as to hope is to affirm life and deny death. Camus believes that it is not about hope because Sisyphus’ joy is the present time and not the future, but as we will see – hope can be directed, in despair, even towards the past, not only towards the present – precisely because the future is the quintessential place of death. Camus is forced to accept *the absurd* as the way of life that “reconciles” the two incompatible consciousnesses – the consciousness of life and the consciousness of death, the beauty of living and the horror of dying.

not enough: we are temporal beings, endowed with a prodigious memory and, at the time of performing an action, though latent, the memory of death is still there. I remember that there were moments when I thought about death, when the fatality of death appeared to me as inexorable and contradictory to all activity, thus to all hope. So what is the medium through which I manage to unite the two moments – the moment of action and the moment of discouragement, the moment of hope and the moment of despair?

This environment, this unconscious "faith" that nurtures and sustains hope is not at all simple. It presupposes at least two other mental actions or, if preferred, two reasonings. A first mental action involved in the formation of the "faith" that feeds hope consists in affirming *the difference between the physical and the biological time*, one governed by the second principle of thermodynamics, the second governed by the first principle of thermodynamics. *The idea* that there is a logic of life – with a chronology of reversibility, of return, of regeneration, as opposed to the logic of the nonliving – with its irreversible, consuming, exhaustible chronology, crosses the time, from the primitive to the most developed epochs.

The idea of a (re)generative time, as opposed to a de-generative time belongs to an ancestral experience, rooted in the observations that man has made and that he continues to make. Thus, on the one hand we notice that a stone fallen from a mountain cannot turn back, but that a sick man or animal often recovers from illness; we are often under the impression that people are rejuvenating instead of aging or that they are rejuvenating after a while it seemed to us that they started to age. The plants dry out, but next spring they reappear as alive as last year. It often happens to it to bloom once more during the same year, just when we expected it to go into hibernation.

The second mental action, idea or reasoning, is the transference of this "logic of life" onto the physical time. The primitive man, with his magical thinking, (and we all remain primitive to a certain extent) tends to deny the physical time, more precisely to subdue it to the biological time; he tends to consider the entropy and the exhaustion to be merely apparent, while the regeneration, the return and the refreshment as the true essence of time. Mircea Eliade analyzes this type of conception of temporality by the homo religiosus in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*.

Before he can conceptualize the difference between a physical time and a biological time, between entropy and anti-entropy, man tends to project the principle of regeneration by which, as a living being, he feels himself governed – upon the entire universe and to subdue the physical time by which, no doubt, he took note from the very start. The sun and the moon

decline, their light diminishes, the weather grows colder – this would be the physical, entropic time that man faces and he was obliged to take that into account since the earliest ages, as this is the time of depression and discouragement – the hopeless time.

But the same sun which reaches the maximum point of its decay during the winter solstice, regains, from the same point, new forces – sometimes helped by the infusions and transfusions of fresh blood of human sacrifices...

The time measuring instruments have an obvious symbolic force: clocks, calendars, sandglasses, convey, as explicitly as possible, man's will to impose the biological time on the physical time. The law of physical time, the entropy - has been guessed by man since the ancient times and it has been rendered through various mythological images in which death is present. The physical time advances, even for the primitive man, towards dissolution and disappearance, towards death and exhaustion. Except that this is ultimately subsumed by the biological time, in mythological scenarios where the death and the destruction are but *a moment*, followed by *a new creation*. In the physical time, the phenomena of nature are indeed manifested by repetition, but this is a repetition without return, an advance without return.

The fact that the difference between the physical time and the biological time is accessible to the primitive man, that – thousands of years before the theories of the current cosmology – he guessed that although it rises and it sets and it rises again and it sets again, the sun loses, with each new repetition, a part of its strength, that his light weakens irreversibly, that it repeats itself without returning, that therefore the return is, as far as it is concerned, a mere appearance, an illusion; this fact is proved by the conception of the New Year as an absolute creation. The old world cannot be revived or repaired; it is completely destroyed, annihilated and a whole new world surfaces.

The fact that all New Year scenarios assume the need for a new creation shows that the idea of the irreversibility of the physical time has always been accessible to the human being.

So the time of hope is born from the belief in the possibility of transforming this apparent and mechanical repetition into an essential and living repetition. The human time of hope is born from the will to reverse the entropy, to turn back time, *to turn back the clock*, to turn the sandglass upside down, to reborn the whole world, the whole time with each new year celebration.¹⁵ *The turning* gesture specific to any time-measuring instrument symbolizes

¹⁵ "The creation of the world is thus reproduced every year. This eternal repetition of the cosmogonic act, which transforms each New Year into the inauguration of an Era, enables the return of the dead to life and it sustains the hope of the faithful in the resurrection of the body. (...) Let us note from now on that, almost

the will from which human time is born: the will to advance towards the spring and not towards the waterfall.¹⁶

It is about the will of repetition-refreshment and not the repetition-consumption. Aristotle recognizes the two aspects of time, one time consuming and the other time generating, only that he attributes the second to the action, so it belongs to time only by accident, while the first belongs to time in an essential way, in itself and and through itself, because "a thing, even when it stands still, can be destroyed."¹⁷

Hoping – an acquired behavior?

Should hoping be an acquired, educated behavior, instilled by the human society in its youngest members? If indeed hope is linked to the denial of death, then we must find that, since the ancient times, the protection of the ability to hope in the young offspring is indeed linked to a behavior of concealing or minimizing death. The child learns from his parents and grandparents, from the other members of the group, to ignore death, to play the comedy of immortality, to pretend that death is of no importance.

For a being who is aware of death and for a temporal being (who lives in time) – such a decision is absolutely essential for the continuation of his or her existence because the effects

universally spread, the beliefs according to which the dead return to their families (and often return as "living dead") around the New Year (in the twelve days that separate Epiphany from Christmas) denotes the hope that the abolition of time is possible in that mythical moment when the world is annihilated and recreated. Then the dead will be able to return, for all the barriers between the living and the dead are shattered and the primordial chaos is re-actualized) and they will return because at that moment, paradoxically, time will be suspended and so they will once again be contemporaries to the living. Moreover, as a new Creation is being prepared, they can hope for a return to life, lasting and concrete." Mircea Eliade, *The myth of the eternal return*, translation by Maria Ivănescu and Cezar Ivănescu, Encyclopedic Universe Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999, p. 65

¹⁶ "At its source, humble or proud/No stream ever can return/ Other than like cloud. / At its source, straight or inclined,/ No road ever can return/ Other than in mind. / Road and stream or cloud and mind,/ Maybe someday I'll return/ And what will I find?/ Will I be a cloud, a mind?" (Cântecul obârșiei/Song of the Source – Lucian Blaga)

¹⁷ "In time all things come into being and pass away; for which reason some called it the wisest of all things, but the Pythagorean Paron called it the most stupid, because in it we also forget; and his was the truer view. It is clear then that it must be in itself, as we said before, the condition of destruction rather than of coming into being (for change, in itself, makes things depart from their former condition), and only incidentally of coming into being, and of being. A sufficient evidence of this is that nothing comes into being without itself moving somehow and acting, but a thing can be destroyed even if it does not move at all. And this is what, as a rule, we chiefly mean by a thing's being destroyed by time. Still, time does not work even this change; even this sort of change takes place incidentally in time." *Aristotle's Physics*, IV, 13, 222 b, Scientific Publishing House, Bucharest, 1966, translation and notes by N.I. Beard, p. 116

produced by the consciousness of death can only be paralyzing, inhibitory for action, for any existential project. Even when Martin Heidegger claims that it is precisely the consciousness of death that makes us take action, because if we were immortal we would take no action whatsoever, by indefinitely postponing any implementation; he also notes that the term *deadline* is linked to the term *deathtime* and he discusses only one aspect of death, in a certain respect the most unimportant aspect thereof: the death of the individual.

For death in its full meaning is the total disappearance, not only of the individual and his achievements, but of civilizations and societies, of the humanity and the life itself. But for Heidegger – who is a believer of the Being, the question of such a dissolution does not even come to mind.¹⁸

The radical consciousness of death necessarily involves the thwarting of all human effort (*vantias vanitatum*). On the contrary, man, precisely because he is aware of death, has also found the way to continue to take action, to cope with it: if the idea of death implies the futility of any effort, then I can *cancel* the effects of this idea by adopting the convention, by signing the social contract of ignoring the death; I can see it – it is next to me, it is inside of me, but I *pretend* I don't see it, I pretend it doesn't exist.

The (Renaissance) pictorial motif of the young girl looking in the mirror *without seeing* death or the hideous old age that looks at her (awaits for her) from behind, but also from the front, is simultaneously before her and behind her – it must also be considered in a different light than the ordinary (youth makes her blind to the irremediable end implied by the passage of time).

This invisibility of death is the result of a convention, of “signing” a social contract by which we oblige ourselves that we will behave *as if* we do not know that the death is the end of life, that the death is, by its inexorable fatality, even in the present moment and in every moment, that *it looks us* straight in the eye whenever we look at each other and that, as a result, in order to live it is essential to avoid its gaze, not to look back at it, to look at it out of the corner of our eyes, knowing that it is there, somewhere, but ignoring it, acting like it does not exist...

That is the reason why the literature in which the inevitable consequences of the consciousness of death are revealed with relentless lucidity (Ecclesiastes, Job, Omar Khayam,

¹⁸ An exceptional analysis of the problem of death in Heidegger can be found in Cristian Ciocan's "*Moribundus sum. Heidegger si problema morții*", *Academica* collection, Humanitas Publishing House, 2007, 400 p. I will mention this philosopher at the end of this text because the way he conceives death seems very close to the "solution" I propose to the problem of hope.

Shakespeare) is borderline, in which the fiction of life – constructed *as if we did not die* – is abolished by the indiscreet revelation of the fact of death. The revelations of death – reveal the fiction upon which life is built (that *as if* of the amortality which may or may not involve the immortality).

All of a sudden, the sets and the actors' masks fall, and the *deus ex machina* that sets the whole mechanism of life in motion is unraveled: it is the very contract we signed almost as soon as we were born, to pretend that we do not know that we will die, to not take death very seriously, to treat it as if it did not exist or *as if* it were not so important, because otherwise the game of life would simply not be possible.

Shakespeare often makes use of this indiscreet “revelation”, the revelations of death – to show us the phantasm, the fiction that substantiates our whole life. His vision of life as a theater, as a stage is related to the fundamental understanding that the “convention”, the “contract” that social beings sign is precisely the ignorance of death. The tragic hero, the dethroned king shows everyone this secret of Polichinelle the moment he can no longer follow the convention on which the whole game of life was based and continues to be based. For life is a game possible only as long as we ignore the fatal, ultimate, definitive and irreversible power of death.

A possible alternative to the scheme of hope

Whether it is denounced as a fraud or as an appearance by some ancient or modern philosophers, whether it is recommended as a cardinal virtue by the Christian teaching, alongside another that conditions thereof: the belief in the immortality, in the resurrection, or whether it is supported by that vague and universal (and probably original) “belief” according to which the biological time can subdue or break free from the physical time, it is increasingly obvious that none of these “three ways” can be followed by man today, who is even more acutely aware of death (thanks also to the fact that the discoveries in physics and the cosmological theories state, beyond doubt, the “bleak” future of the planet, the solar system and the universe – have become commonplace, because of their massive popularization by means of the print, the media and the internet).

It is increasingly difficult for man nowadays to accept the belief in immortality, and also, he is also alien to the solutions of the ancient philosophers who recommended the abolition of hope in order to have a happy life. Although it is very likely that it still subsists, being rooted in the neurophysiology of our consciousness, even that original, irrational

“belief” that the affirmation of hope implies the affirmation of the triumph of the biological time or the biologization of the physical time has lost its force.

The man of this day and age has reached a level of lucidity which makes it impossible for him to ignore the existence of death in its radical meaning, of the total disappearance – not only the individual disappearance, but also of the existence in general – the consciousness of death has nowadays acquired cosmic dimensions, as long as the death of the universe is a generally accepted as a scientific truth. Or, under these conditions, what else can one hope for?

The behavior of denying death – vital for the existence of hope – needs a certain protocol of ignoring, which – even in cases of force majeure where the fact of death knows an overexposure, such as great epidemics or wars – involves concealing its meaning of total disappearance and absolute annihilation (heroes will be eternally remembered, the dead will find peace in heaven or, in the secular version, their death is a “sacrifice” for the well-being and progress of the human society).

The contemporary man, however, is faced with the radical, ultimate, impossible to sweeten meaning of death – the thermal death of the universe – which throws every human effort into the abyss of the absolute futility, including and especially the effort to hoping...

This oppressive consciousness of death (where the Being, God gives way to the dark matter) is not alien to the obviously increase of man’s depression. We live, it has been said, in an age of depression; a depression that begins at younger and younger ages, and the antidepressants have entered, in a more or less medicinal form, the diet of the common man.

The joy of living, beyond hope and despair. As if we were dead...

So what is left for the man – for whom the behavior of ignoring, that *as if* he did not die which was true for so many millennia – can no longer bear fruit? How can we enjoy life when, behold, the consciousness of death has become so present, so acute and so universal that we can no longer ignore it in any way – neither through social, learned behavior, nor through elaborate religious belief?

Thus, I would propose a solution that takes into account man's current situation, his extreme lucidity. He should still utilize the *as-if* mechanism – which Vaihinger demonstrated to be fundamental to all human existence.

Since the death – in its radical and universal meaning – can no longer be ignored, I therefore propose to use the mechanism of *as if* in an inverted sense, to enjoy life – not

through hope, ignoring death or as if we were immortal, but *as if we had already died* (for, in the broad perspective, everything that will happen in a fatal way is *as if* it had already happened).

So, let us live *as if we had died*, as if we had miraculously returned to life, as if, freshly returned from our graves, we had been given one more chance to live. Let us live as if our life were a reliving, a coming back to life, a rebirth. Let us experience, in a present sense, the joys of the promised resurrection. Let us act like we were reborn, like already resurrected people!

Martin Heidegger must be invoked again, this time because his analysis of death seems to me the closest to this way of being. For, in the view of the German philosopher, death brings us in front of our very own possibility. Death does not belong, for Heidegger, to a future to which we should relate expectantly, but to an “original future”, to which the most authentic relation is pre-going to where death is understood as something that is “always already granted”.¹⁹

Let us note that this kind of *as if* – it's not even so unique. We discover it in the initiation techniques of the archaic man where the genuinely living man – was a man who had passed through an initiatory death, through the ritualistic scenario of death, he was resurrected, reborn – perhaps this was primitive man's intuitive form of assimilating his mortal condition, to “come to terms” with his own mortality. We discover it in the baptismal rites of Christians – where the baptized “dies” and “resurrects” in Christ. Or. in the ascetic practices of Christians where hermits present themselves as “dead to this world”.

Even without being theorized, this way of enjoying life by fully assuming your mortal condition is consistent with the very foundations of the biological time, of living time, that I talked about above. Acting as a resurrected, as a reborn, as a “returned from the dead” man would act *as if*, indeed, *in the act*; the time of life would have, at least for a time, overcome the time of the death. How joyful would the one who, coming out of the dark Hades, be once again to see the light of day!²⁰

¹⁹ "But if death is genuinely understood as a possibility, then in its case there is nothing left to wait for and the authentic relation to death takes the authentic form of pre-going. The two ecstasies of the original future are therefore the “expectation” (*Gewärtigen*; inauthentic ecstasy) and the “pre-going” (*Vorlaufen*; genuine ecstasy). But the fact of being in death does not belong exclusively to the future, because “from the moment he is born, man is old enough to die”, as the Bohemian plowman says. The *Dasein* is thrown into death, and this throwing belongs to the essential past of this being. It is about the fact that death constitutes from the beginning the state of throwing the *Dasein*, as such it is an “already *deja*”. (Cristian Ciocan, op. cit. pp. 217-218)

²⁰ "Nay, seek not to speak soothingly to me of death, glorious Odysseus. I should choose, so I might live on earth, to serve as the hireling of another, of some portionless man whose livelihood was but small, rather than to be lord over all the dead that have perished./ (Homer, *Odyssey*, translation in hexameters, with an

But here we could see the light of the sun through his eyes – if we appropriate this reversal of the mechanism of hope, from *as if* we were not dying to *as if* we were already dead. Ultimately, the very diachronic arrangement of our emergence helps us in such a restructuring of the way we think about death, for the infinity before our birth, the billions of years in which we will not have existed, can be perfectly compared to the billions of years in which we will not exist, with the infinity of death. In this respect, death truly precedes us, physically; if viewed in this way, birth is truly an exit from the “night of the non-being”.²¹

This reversal would fuse the energy of hope with the energy of nostalgia, the fuel of a sui-generis journey through time, during which we would advance as if we were returning, we would see as if we were having a *déjà vu*, we would know as if we remembered.²²

afterword, an essential Bibliography and indexes by Dan Slușanschi, Paideia Publishing House, Bucharest, 1997, Book XI, verses 388-491)

²¹ What if, overturning Freud's argument about the death instinct, we say that the fear of death is precisely the expression of an organic, visceral (or ... mineral? for our body is composed of minerals), subliminal "memory" of the register of non-existence? What if we fear death precisely because we somehow "know" what it's like not to exist? Certainly, everything is at the limit of the possibilities of language as always when non-being is (!) the object of discourse. But as reasonable as (not) is Freud's reasoning about the death drive, even stronger than it is this: we fear death precisely because we don't want *to not be alive* one more time, again... A fear of the iron, the calcium, the copper, the zinc in us who know very well what it means not to be alive... and find a way to tell us through a fear in our bones. A fear of our bone system, of our skeleton. Not by chance, one of the archetypal images of death is the Skeleton, the gourd - that is, the mineral within us; the origin of the fear of death must also be sought there, in our skeleton, in a " calcium failure".

²² The image of living as a regression – it's a pattern / model that experiences various versions. I remember only two literary achievements of it: "*The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*" by Scott Fitzgerald and the poem "Ar trebui" by Ana Blandiana; the latter can be read and listened to read by the author here: <https://www.romanianvoice.com/poezii/poezii/artrebui.php>. Moreover, this image of life as a return, as a practice of nostalgia for the origins constitutes the temporal paradigm of romanticism. We find the same paradigm – as I have shown on other occasions – in Gnosticism and Neoplatonism, with the specific differences of each.

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