

# The paradox of distance. A reflection on the Impersonal Death

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**Summary:** 1. Introduction. 2. Death in first, second and third persons. 3. The impersonal death. 4. Conclusion. The paradox of distance.

**Abstract:** This paper aims to analyse the empirical manifestations that characterize the contemporary Western society's attitude towards death. The study's conclusion delves into the analysis of what we refer to as the «paradox of distance»: the distance can be seen as a condition for the conceivability of death itself, which contemporary society is trying to eliminate by resorting to a negative distance that isolates its empirical manifestations by erecting a physical-moral barrier. Contemporary society, thus paradoxically, through this type of negative distance, both physical and moral, seeks to eliminate the temporal and spatial distance through which death becomes conceivable by eliminating the thought and spectacle of death. This unresolved paradox of distance adds to the myriad causes of disorientation afflicting modern individuals, highlighting the futility of such efforts while underscoring the importance of incorporating death into pedagogy and striving to normalize it as an inherent facet of existence itself.

**Keywords:** *death, distance, removal, paradox, contemporary.*

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## 1. Introduction

A wealthy judge from Saint Petersburg, named Peter Ivanovic, smokes a cigarette to alleviate the discomfort in the refined living room of his old acquaintance Ivan Ilyich. Before him, a woman consumed by suffering tells him about a grievous loss and the pain that her husband experienced in his last hours of life. Tolstoy, from whom this scene is imagined, describes with these words the jurist's reaction to the neighbour's passing.

«The thought of the suffering of this man he had known so intimately, first as a merry little boy, then as a schoolmate, and later as a grown-up colleague, suddenly struck Peter Ivanovic with horror, despite an unpleasant consciousness of his own and this woman's dissimulation. [He] felt afraid for himself. 'Three days of frightful suffering and the death! Why, that might suddenly, at any time, happen to me,' he thought, and for a moment felt terrified. But — he did not himself know how — the customary reflection at once occurred to him that this had happened to Ivan Ilych and not to him, and that it should not and could not happen to him [...] After which reflection Peter Ivanovic felt reassured, and began to ask with interest about the details of Ivan Ilych's death, as though death was an accident natural to Ivan Ilych but certainly not to himself».<sup>2</sup>

This brief yet content-rich passage allows us to make fundamental observations to understand the theme of this work. Firstly, Peter, a cultured and respected man, reacts to the death of a man he knew by analogizing it to his own mortality. This transposition thus determines the appearance of the thought of his individual end in his present horizon of possibility, of which being «afraid for himself»<sup>3</sup> is a classic testimony. At the same time, as soon as he realizes the possibility of his own death, the wealthy judge is torn apart by the unbearable awareness of his own transience, and immediately tries to remove this thought from his experiential horizon, to hide it behind a barrier

2 L. N. Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Grand Rapids 2008, p. 6.

3 *Ivi*, p. 6.

of indifference that he creates between himself and the surrounding world with a protective purpose. After exchanging a few empty words with the widow, in fact, Peter gets up and approaches the corpse, which he cannot bear to look at. He decides to return to life, to the light of day, and leave behind those gloomy walls where the thought of death is confined. Thus, he leaves the house and decides to go to some friends to play cards.

In literary fiction, the character of Peter seems to embody what Morin calls «a veritable crisis of individuality in the face of death».<sup>4</sup> As will be further outlined, however, much has changed since the conception of death described by Tolstoy in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. First of all, as a result of the process of removing death, it is now rare to die at home rather than in a hospital. This removal, which is not unique to our time, as we will see, takes on peculiar and unprecedented characteristics in our century.<sup>5</sup> Death in the contemporary world is an interdicted discourse: some call it forbidden, domesticated,<sup>6</sup> the unthinkable,<sup>7</sup> whilst others speak of a taboo that has taken the place of that related to sex and pornography.<sup>8</sup> One thing is certain, however: we are no longer able to come to terms with it, and there is no longer a vocabulary capable of describing it without causing us great embarrassment. In this work,

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4 E. Morin, *L'Homme et la Mort*, Média-Participations, Paris 1961, p. 321.

5 See N. Elias, *The Loneliness of the Dying*, The Continuum, New York 1985, p. 34. «The repression and concealment of the finitude of individual human life is certainly not, as it is sometimes presented to be, a peculiarity of the twentieth century. It is probably as old as the consciousness of this finiteness, as the foreknowledge of personal death itself. In the course of biological evolution, we may suppose, there developed in human beings a kind of knowledge that enabled them to relate the end they knew in the case of other creatures — some of which served them as food — to themselves. Thanks to a power of imagination unique among living creatures, they gradually came to know this end in advance as the inevitable conclusion of every human life. But hand in hand with the anticipation of their own end there probably went from early days an attempt to suppress this unwelcome knowledge and overlay it with more satisfying notions».

6 See P. Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present*, Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd, London 1965.

7 See Z. Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1992.

8 See G. Gorer, *The Pornography of Death*. in G. Gorer (ed.), *Death, Grief, and Mourning*, Doubleday, New York 1955.

therefore, we will reflect on the contradictions inherent in this blindness to death, insisting on what we will call «the paradox of distance», with the help of the analytical categories that will be analysed in the next paragraph.

## 2. Death in first, second and third persons

In Epicurus' Letter to Menoeceus, he observes that «when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not. It is nothing, then, either to the living or to the dead, for with the living it is not, and the dead exist no longer».<sup>9</sup> However, this idea finds its limit in the existence of death in thought, as a projection and fear of it. According to Bauman, in fact, «thinking about death defies thought itself».<sup>10</sup> Death, from this perspective, can be defined as the defeat of thought, its ultimate and insurmountable limit, the non-being that thought is not and can never be, and yet is a present element in it and a possible object of never-ending reflection. Thus, a modern version of Epicurus' quote can be found in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, in the passage where the French philosopher argues that an individual can only perceive themselves as «already born» or «still alive», because «Neither my birth nor my death can appear to me as experiences of my own, since, if I thought of them thus, I should be assuming myself to be pre-existent to, or outliving, myself, in order to be able to experience them, and I should therefore not be genuinely thinking of my birth or my death».<sup>11</sup>

It is thus clear from the very start of this essay that death is a deeply challenging concept to investigate: it is a contradictory object, or rather a non-object, an omnipresent nothingness. In fact, citing an interesting work by Irena Artemenko: «Death is beyond this world, it is entirely other than this world and is absolutely elsewhere than here and yet it is paradoxically omnipresent,

9 Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 125.

10 Z. Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality and other life strategy*, cit., p. 14.

11 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, New York 1965, p. 250.

it permeates our être without being implied in it».<sup>12</sup> Aware of these paradoxes that characterize the concept of death, however, in this text, we will attempt to use our thinking to analyse this limited concept, not so much to propose a metaphysical or ontological reflection on death in itself, but rather to investigate its empirical manifestations and the concrete relationship of human beings towards it in contemporary society. To better understand this theme, however, a brief digression is necessary to clarify the fundamental categories, traditionally provided by Jankélévitch, of death in the first, second, and third person, to understand the differences in which death can manifest itself in our experience.

According to Jankélévitch, death in the first person can be defined as the reflection that the self makes upon itself, as «the reflected point of view of each person on oneself [...] in which the object of consciousness and the subject of dying coincide».<sup>13</sup> Death in the first person is, therefore, the dying person's own death experience, the end of a unique and irreplaceable human being that, as we have seen through Merleau-Ponty, coincides with an empty projection, in that «There is no death that is truly mine [...] I die only for others, never for myself».<sup>14</sup> At this point, it is important to investigate death in the second and third person, which represent the only tangible perspectives we can assume about death. According to Jankélévitch, the death in the second person, or the “death of the You”, consists of the death of an alter ego that is an immediate form of my non-self, of a proximity, of Ivan Ilych for Peter Ivanovic. The Alter Ego represents «the first Other, the other immediately different»:<sup>15</sup> it's the death of a close relative that terrifies me as much as my own death, it's the sudden disappearance of a dear friend through which I experience all the senselessness of existence. On the other hand, the death in the third person appears quite different. It is an anonymous and abstract death, devoid of a specific face, «the death in general [...] or even the proper death, insofar as it is considered from an impersonal and conceptual point of view in the way a doctor considers his

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12 I. Artemenko, *The Ethics of Mourning in the Narration of the Self in the Works of Marcel Proust and Andrei Tarkovsky*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017, p. 34.

13 V. Jankélévitch, *La mort*, Einaudi, Torino 2009, p. 22.

14 *Ivi*, p. 29.

15 *Ivi*, p. 26.

own illness or studies his case». <sup>16</sup> It is a death in which the self becomes «an anonymous and headless subject of an indifferent death». <sup>17</sup>

It would be wrong, however, to reduce such a complex topic as death to these few, albeit useful, analytical categories. These categories, if simply summarized and listed, although they may help us understand the phenomenon, immediately run the risk of misunderstanding: behind every “You” and every “He” there is in fact an “I” interpreted from a transcendent perspective. More precisely, every “You” reveals itself to be an “I” for itself, just as our “I” becomes a “You” once it is expropriated and alienated by the gaze of the other. It would be wrong, therefore, to see these three perspectives as rigidly opposed categories. In fact, a perspective that considers the complexity of the topic only emerges from an approach that brings to light the different relationships they have with each other.

Furthermore, each “I”, as death is an event that unites everyone, reveals a sort of communion with all other “Thou”. This bond is expressed in the sharing of the universal destiny of the first-person plural “We”, which, regarding death, reveals its contradictory nature. Death, in fact, while being an ecumenical, universal, and sharable event, a destiny common to all human beings, maintains the indelible character of an intimate and personal tragedy, of a private occurrence. In the “We”, therefore, two opposite and antithetical tendencies coexist: an egocentric perspective typical of the first-person singular and a sort of undifferentiated allocentrism typical of the third person. Death, in other words, makes all individuals common and paradoxically divides them in the vast multitude of their individual destinies. In the “We” that facing the end of existence, individuals are simultaneously associated and split: death, thus, exposes what Jankélévitch calls «the contradictory regime of the Absolute in the plural [in which] the tragedy of the ego awakens an echo in the We, but We relentlessly refer to the solitary experience of the ego». <sup>18</sup> Thus, we could say changing perspective, the inter-monadic community is contrasted with the *homo clausus*’s ethics, the heterogeneous amalgamation of opposing and irreconcilable solitudes that, according to the opinions of several authors

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<sup>16</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 22, 23.

<sup>17</sup> *Ivi*, p. 23.

<sup>18</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 24, 25.

that we will analyse below, is the main tendency of contemporary society. In other words, to cite Jankélévitch, «Opposed to every monadic harmony, the solipsism of parallel solitudes, each enclosed in its own soliloquy like a besieged city, paradoxically constitutes the torn unity of that great Self, of that Hydra with a thousand heads that we call the collective».<sup>19</sup> At this point, however, a legitimate doubt may arise that there is a contradiction between the starting point, which is the elimination of the unsustainable thought of one's own death, and the individualistic attitude under discussion here. In other words, if people are truly focused on their individuality, isn't it right to think that they would also focus on their own death as a result? And in this case, what place does the elimination of death from the social horizon occupy? Therefore, before proceeding, some clarification is necessary.

Individualism can be described as the exaggerated triumph of individual needs over collective demands, as «the belief that individual people in society should have the right to make their own decisions, rather than be controlled by the government». Without delving into the merits of such a complex topic, due to limited space, it suffices to consider that the type of individualism under discussion here, which is the hedonistic and narcissistic individualism that has been well described, among others, by Lipovetsky and Lasch. This form of individualism is based on «the emotional realization of itself, eager for youth, sport, rhythm, committed to a lesser extent to succeed in life than to be continuously realized in the intimate sphere».<sup>20</sup> Moreover, this choice is motivated by the widespread diffusion of this type of orientation and by its importance in the phenomenon of the repression of death.

The term “individualism”, therefore, refers to the emergence of a new anthropological type, the product of a permissive capitalism that is hedonistically focused on its desires and the spasmodic realization of its own pleasure in a context in which the *res publica* is increasingly devitalized. This idea, therefore, although it may appear obvious, is important to clarify, it being based on the affirmation of the individual and their success, of which death

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> J. Lipovetsky, *L'ère du vide. Essais sur l'individualisme contemporain*, Gallimard, Paris 1983, p. 15.

represents the diametrically opposite pole, as their end and cancellation. It is precisely from this perspective that Lasch, in *The Culture of Narcissism*, affirms that «In a society that dreads old age and death, aging holds a special terror for those who fear dependence and whose self-esteem requires the admiration usually reserved for youth, beauty, celebrity, or charm».<sup>21</sup> The elimination of death, which we will discuss, therefore intersects both the life of the collective and that of the individual: socially enacted, as we will see, this elimination also occurs at the individual level. In short, to use again the words of Morin in *Man and Death*, the elimination of death from the social context reflects an «individual crisis [that] cannot be abstracted from the general crisis of the contemporary world»<sup>22</sup>.

### 3. The impersonal death

As argued by Philippe Ariès in *Western Attitudes Toward Death*: «Death, so omnipresent in the past that it was familiar, would disappear. It would become shameful and forbidden».<sup>23</sup> According to the French historian, this change manifests itself in two fundamental directions: the shift of the dying person from the domestic deathbed to dedicated areas in hospitals, and the social trend of viewing outward manifestation of mourning with reluctance and embarrassment. To better understand what Ariès means, it is necessary to inquire more deeply into the stages of his reflection, attempting to reach an overall perspective. Firstly, following the reflections of the French historian, in contemporary society there is an elimination of death from the domestic sphere in favour of an aseptic and impersonal treatment in special departments of the hospital. The dying person no longer passes away at home surrounded by family and friends, as was once the case. Rather, they die surrounded by medical personnel who have a say in the patient's last moments of life. For

21 C. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism. American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, Norton & Company Ink, New York 1991, p. 41.

22 E. Morin, *L'Homme et la Mort*, cit., p. 321.

23 P. Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present*, cit., p. 85.



Ariès, all of this serves the purpose of «avoid[ing] – no longer for the sake of the dying person, but for society's sake, for the sake of those close to the dying person – the disturbance and the overly strong and unbearable emotion caused by the ugliness of dying and by the very presence of death in the midst of a happy life».<sup>24</sup> In this scenario, the intellectual observes, it is as if the family members had lost the courage to communicate the truth to the patient, sharing with him in a transparent way the real state of their decay, at the same time losing the ability to bear the thought and the spectacle of a body close to death.

In this regard, it is significant to mention two essays published a few months apart in the early 1980s, by two intellectuals who were themselves facing death, but were animated by two different and contrasting needs. The first, with the purpose of eternalizing the memory of the last years of the recently deceased spouse, describing in a personalistic perspective the end of life of the companion, is *Adieux. A Farewell to Sartre* by Simone de Beauvoir. The second, on the other hand aims to provide a scientific reflection on the solitary state of the dying in a context of death removal, is *The Loneliness of the Dying* by Norbert Elias. In the first work cited, almost at the end, Simone De Beauvoir asks herself: «There is one question that I have not asked myself, I admit. It will perhaps occur to the reader. Should I not have warned Sartre of the imminence of his death? When he was in the hospital, weakened and without resilience, all I thought of was hiding the gravity of his condition from him».<sup>25</sup> This precious testimony, therefore, reveals how, even among people with immense cultural capital, explicitly manifesting the conditions of the illness to the person living it is a phenomenon felt with unease, sorrow, and embarrassment. However, we must note the exceptional case of Sartre: that of a recognised and privileged bourgeois intellectual who dies in a Paris that mourns him, which proposes a state funeral and burial in the Pantheon, an honour reserved only for thinkers such as Rousseau, Voltaire, and Victor Hugo. Quite different, however, is the case that Elias describes, namely that of the majority of the elderly: people who are not privileged and esteemed, relegated to passive presences placed in the

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<sup>24</sup> *Ivi*, cit., p. 87.

<sup>25</sup> S. de Beauvoir, *Adieux. A Farewell to Sartre*, Pantheon, New York 1985, pp. 126, 127.

appropriate unit of the hospital, condemned to loneliness without appeal. Most of the dying, in fact, are not known to the public, and die an anonymous death that is meaningful only for a few people: a daughter, a husband, a loved one. In short, Sciascia, in *The Council of Egypt*, obliges us to reflect on the fact that the history of Kings, Nobles and Cardinals erases the history of our fathers and their hunger. The same could be said here of death. Famous, in fact, is the definition of death as the complete equality of unequals, but, we could argue, in earthly events where the dying is remembered this is simply not true: even death is - and always has been - a matter of privilege, just think of the difference, during the plague of 1300, between Alfonso XI of Castile, buried in the Collegiate Church of St Hippolytus in Cordoba which was already a well-known centre of pilgrimage, and the millions of people who were piled up in mass graves or burnt on pyres.

Returning to Elias, however, it is interesting to note how the scholar highlights that in the old type of death, namely the domestic one, there was less attention paid to hygiene, compensated for by a greater degree of physical contact, which for the dying person could be a profound and meaningful joy, finding «resonance of feeling in others for whom one feels love or attachment, whose presence arouses a warm feeling of belonging».<sup>26</sup> The precepts of hygiene, therefore, have in Elias's view prolonged existence and at the same time made death solitary and isolated: the dying moves us, but we attempt to remove death from the stage of public life and hide it behind the aseptic curtain of the health institution. Here then the real result of the encounter between death and narcissistic individualism appears explicitly: the elderly finds themselves alone and give an individual sense to their death, a sense in the first person which, however, as we stated earlier, is a kind of non-sense and empty projection. Family members, on the other hand, unable to bear the burden of the illness, dissimulate their suffering with individual strategies of removal. In this way, however, the Death of the Thou is emptied of content, becoming an experience-limit to be avoided with all the means at our disposal. In this way, however, the individual finds himself incapable of coping with it, of bearing its

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26 N. Elias, *The loneliness of the Dying*, cit., p. 87.

weight and even being able to describe it.

The second fundamental aspect on which Ariès' research focuses, and which allows us to move from individualised and solitary death to the effect of individualism in the removal of survivors' grief, is the issue of mourning, and more specifically on the fact that we «have the right to become emotional [only] in private, that is to say, secretly».<sup>27</sup> Following his reflection, in fact, in contemporary societies what counts is «that society – the neighbours, friends, [...] – notice to the least possible degree that death has occurred».<sup>28</sup> In the French historian's opinion, mourning, once codified in long ceremonies and rituals that inspired compassion in the collective spirit, has now become privatised: «One only has the right to cry if no one else can see or hear. Solitary and shameful mourning is the only recourse, like a sort of masturbation».<sup>29</sup> And yet, this private dimension that the manifestation of grief takes on, Ariès observes, even if its purpose is to conceal it, has the paradoxical effect of accentuating the suffering of the survivors: «the obligation to suffer alone and secretly, has aggravated the trauma stemming from the loss of a dear one».<sup>29</sup> Trauma, in fact, hangs perpetually in the balance, neither addressed nor thematised, given the lack of the means at our disposal to give it meaning and significance. This social mechanism of removal, in other words, does not correspond to the removal of individual pain. On the contrary, it establishes structural roots, now devoid of any concrete outlet. To be more precise, as Marina Sozzi points out in *Reinvent death*, the contradiction behind the elaboration of contemporary mourning lies in the oscillation between a social push towards denial of pain, which urges the individual to reintegrate as soon as possible into the social fabric, and the widespread dissemination of a vast literature on the subject that encourages us to accept pain as a constitutive part of such experiences. This leads to a deep dissociation and division of the self, in short: «grievors, often unprepared and disoriented, oscillate between the feeling of suffering excessive external pressures and the feeling of being abandoned to themselves, without guidance. Many grieving individuals are surprised by what they feel and have

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27 P. Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present*, cit., p. 89.

28 *Ivi*, cit., p. 90.

29 *Ivi*, cit., pp. 91, 92.

the impression of going crazy».<sup>30</sup>

At this point, using the categories that Jankélévitch has provided us, then, we can say that contemporary society is characterized by a paradoxical attempt to mask death in first and second person by removing it from its horizons, that pushes towards a typical impersonality of the third. Yet, at a closer look, one notices that although death in the third person is a death that is definable as anonymous and impersonal, it is at the same time, because of its generality and abstraction, the idea of death itself that society is trying to hide and remove. Thus, the titanic and contradictory effort made by society can be summarised as follows: there is the attempt to make death impersonal (in the sense of suppression of death in the three perspectives adduced), but this can only lead to a *débâcle*, as it always refers to something intimate and individual that remains despite the attempt to erase it. In short, any “Death of the Thou” will only ever lead back to the “Death of the Ego”. Moreover, the biological phenomenon of death, even if we try to hide it, is for now inescapable, given our current technical knowledge. We will continue to die, albeit alone and hidden. The vicious circle is clear, then: by being unprepared to deal with such emotions of mourning, we leave the dying alone and will be left alone in turn when it is our turn. Society, therefore, trying in vain to rid itself of death in the first and second person tries to reduce it as much as possible to an aseptic, technical phenomenon, which degrades it and strips it of its complexity. The impersonal character does not, however, erase the phenomenon of death; on the contrary, no longer anchored to a specific subject, it refers to its universality, effectively entering the domain of metaphysics. Death has become mysterious, a mystery, however, very different from the past: if in a Christian society it referred to the mystery of faith, today’s western society, having witnessed the death of God, finds itself incapable of describing this phenomenon with either the divine verb or human words. Thus, Epicurus’ words describing death as a ‘nothingness’ have a different meaning today. Death remains nothingness, in a certain sense, but the path by which one reaches this conclusion has been reversed: the nothingness spoken of is no longer the result of careful reflection,

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30 M. Sozzi, *Reinventare la morte. Introduzione alla tanatologia*, Laterza, Roma 2009, p. 137.

but is a nothingness encountered before any reflection, it is a tabula rasa, a stratagem not to ask complicated questions, a desperate artifice to try to escape from an inescapable void.

#### 4. Conclusion. The paradox of distance

Han, in *The Palliative Society*, states that digital order excludes death and mourning. In it, he says that «Death and pain do not belong to the digital order. They represent disturbances. Mourning and longing are also suspicious. The pain of the nearness of distance is alien to the digital order. Distance is inscribed into nearness. [...] everything is rendered accessible and consumable».<sup>31</sup> It is perhaps because of this loss of distance that death has in fact become unthinkable today. At a closer look, applying a method of phenomenological dissection to these ideas, we can see that death is in a certain sense the disappearance of life that degrades a body from *Leib* (i.e. a body animated by an inner psychic life) to a *Körper* (i.e. the unity of corporeality as an organic totality of determined anatomical parts) which holds particular pre-reflective meanings, determined by its quality of “*Leib* no longer animated”. With the disappearance of the living otherness, however, we might say, that cognitive void that is always established between the Ego and the Alter Ego and that constitutes the deepest sense of what Husserl calls the “experience of the stranger” does not disappear.<sup>32</sup> That absence that makes the Other a Non-ego and prevents me from knowing the Other as I know myself, on the contrary, continues to subsist by changing form. This distance has been reduced to a physical distance between me and a lifeless object (the dead body) and to a distance in time that reconnects me and the dead person through memory to a past that we shared or in which, though not each other, we were equipped with the same manifestative systems. Perhaps above all, however, the experience of death in second person links to a distance at the same time physical and temporal from which I learn that, in the phenomenon of

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31 B. Han, *The Palliative Society. Pain today*, Polity, New York 2021, p. 107.

32 See E. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations, An Introduction to Phenomenology*, Martinus Nijhoff Pub., The Hague, 1982.

the death of the Alter Ego, the intimacy of a “Self” close to me has disappeared forever, leaving me effectively inaccessible to the deepest core of its worldview that it has so many times tried to share with me through language.

From a phenomenological perspective, we’ve described distance as the cause of cognitive limitations concerning death, but it is interesting to note that, at the same time, such distance can also be considered a condition for its thinkability. Jankélévitch asserted that «death only becomes thinkable through distance: either distance in time, which makes one’s own death thinkable, or distance in space».<sup>33</sup>

It is interesting to note, then, how contemporary society creates a distance from death both physically (by isolating the dying within hospitals) and ideologically (by reducing death to a taboo), while simultaneously attempting to eliminate the distance of which Jankélévitch speaks. Unlike the concept of ego-referential distance that situates the possibility of our own death in the future or makes it possible to think of the death of a “You” as a “non-Self”, contemporary society erects a moral distance with the aim of concealing this natural phenomenon from view and mind. This we shall call the “paradox of distance”. This paradox remains unresolved for now and could only be resolved through a new conceptualization of death, perhaps a futile pursuit, but nevertheless fundamental, in search of a vocabulary that allows us to abandon the thick lenses of indifference we wear today, and don glasses capable of enabling us to look directly at the sun and death.<sup>34</sup> Finally, the attempt to conceal death appears contradictory for one last reason. As noted by Bauman and Donskis in *The Moral Blindness*, in fact, for the moment we are «at least so far our capacities stop well short of removing the mother of all fears, the “fear of fears”: that master-fear exhaled by the awareness of our mortality and

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33 V. Jankélévitch, *La mort*, cit., p. 30.

34 The quote is inspired and paraphrased in a more modern style a famous passage contained in *Réflexions ou sentences et maximes morales* by François de La Rochefoucauld: «Le soleil ni la mort ne se peuvent regarder fixement», «Neither the sun nor death can be looked at with a steady eye». See F. de La Rochefoucauld, *Maximes*, Maxim 26, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015.

the impossibility of escaping death»<sup>35</sup> and it is indeed the fear of death and the awareness of mortality that has always spurred man to produce culture, such as «sediment of the ongoing attempt to make living with the awareness of mortality liveable»,<sup>36</sup> so we can «conclude that it is our knowledge of mortality, and so our perpetual fear of death, that makes our mode of being-in-the-world, and ourselves, human».<sup>37</sup> It is no coincidence that Borges in *The Immortal* portrays everlasting creatures as troglodytes, beings who have forgotten the use of writing and speech, or perhaps are no longer interested in them. The immortals of his story are locked up and absorbed in their thoughts and without motivation, as passive spectators of days that follow one another in an eternity in which all, at least once, have written the Odyssey and in which, Therefore, this work has lost its meaning and value.<sup>38</sup>

Therefore, we can ultimately affirm that, despite the titanic attempts of society to remove death from the social horizon, it remains an inescapable part of human existence. It is necessary to become accustomed to the thought of death, to sensitize ourselves to its importance, to confront the weight of this possibility by seeking words with which to describe it, by inserting it into our discourse and pedagogy. In short, we must educate ourselves and be educated about death. Death is an eternal possibility from which existence derives meaning, the ultimate term that gives a retrospective meaning to cultural production. Whatever the effort of society, the death of a loved one, be it Ivan Ilic, a young friend, or Sartre, will always remind us of our own disappearance, and our disappearance will remind us of that terrible castration of possibilities that, at the same time, is the only contingency that is truly necessary.

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35 L. Donskis, Zygmunt Bauman, *Moral Blindness. The Loss of Sensivity in Liquid Modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2013, p. 101.

36 *Ivi*, p. 101.

37 *Ivi*, p. 19.

38 Cfr. J. L. Borges, *The Aleph and Other Stories*, *The immortal*, Penguin Classics, New York, 2000.

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