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The Philosophical Problem of Eternal Life: Reading Heidegger through Wittgenstein

Leonardo Caffo

Abstract: In this article I analyse the philosophical problem of eternal life through Wittgenstein's and Heidegger's analysis of dying as a philosophical concept. Using the latter part of the *Tractatus*, in fact, it is possible to read differently Heidegger's lessons on the fundamental concepts of metaphysics, so as to claim that there are some really immortal life forms: those without memory.

Keywords: ontology of life, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, death, immortality

1. Nothing is eternal: psychological time runs parallel to the thermodynamic arrow. Death simply arrives. The only possible form of eternity happens when psychological time does not flow because it does not know its parallel: it does not know it will die. "He lives eternally who lives in the present", says Wittgenstein (*Tractatus*, 6.4311): if one is not in the past (through memory) or in the future (through projects) but only exists in the "here and now", one is literally eternal – the arrow crashes. In his *Fundamental Concepts Of Metaphysics. World, Finitude, Solitude*, his 1929-30 lectures, Martin Heidegger claims more than once that "the animal cannot die": it just "stops living". This controversial position was then interpreted, but also theorized by Heidegger himself, as a negative conception of the animal: it is "poor in world". Mortality is denied to it.

2. In this paper I will try to overturn Heidegger through Wittgenstein¹. First of all if Wittgenstein is right, and eternity is therefore an eternal present, then the same reasons why Heidegger deprives animals of mortality are those that make it eternal: animality – with no long-term memory, with no distinction between the present / past / future – is eternal. Eternity only exists in animality.

3. The preliminary question is: what does it mean to die? Evidently, both in Wittgenstein and in Heidegger (although the former, too, compares it to the "world that ends"), it is not simply the end of life: that is death, not dying. The point here is not to revive the Epicurean issue of the fear of dying², but rather to understand what dying

is in philosophical terms.³ Both perspectives imply the perception of death: Heidegger's in the ability to separate oneself from the outside world so as to prove its "possession", while Wittgenstein's in altering one's practice to the extent that perception is temporally limited to the present time. If this is dying then the non-dying of which Heidegger speaks negatively so as to create a hierarchy (weak, but still clear)⁴ between living entities, is instead the immortality yearned for by our species.

4. Immortality belongs to very young children and animals that are not too complex from a neuro-cognitive standpoint: eternity belongs to the simple; death to the complex. The relationship between simple and complex is not quantitative but worldly: it is a matter of being inside or outside the world.

5. This reading of Heidegger through Wittgenstein leads to the thesis that "The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of this problem"⁵: the present is a full space. But how can we reach it if the adult condition of Homo Sapiens seems intrinsically tied to the dimension of dying? The life/death distinction is an all-encompassing cognitive map: it limits all of our actions. "Our life is endless in the way that our visual field is without limit": thus Wittgenstein famously stated in his *Tractatus* (6.4311). But what does this mean? Or, to stick within Wittgenstein's encyclopaedia, what "means"? The distinction between life and death is polysemic: it is political because, as is known, it has been administered thanks to biopolitical thought; it is metaphysical by definition. In one of the most complex and less known parts of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein suggests that this distinction between life and death is not appropriate, despite stating in 6.4312 that "The temporal immortality of the human soul, that is to say, its eternal survival after death, is not only in no way guaranteed, but this assumption in the first place will not do for us what we always tried to make it do." Sharp distinctions often propose a view that only holds within a system: in fact, while it is obvious that the dead differ from the living, because the former *are not* and the latter *are*, it is far from obvious that the living can die. This issue is not trivial, and the whole administration of existence is stratified based on this possibility. And yet, if by possibility we mean the things that the subject can do,

dying simply isn't one. We may think that it is possible to approach death, but death always comes as an external event: the world ceases to be without us being aware of it. If Wittgenstein's reading key is true – that is, if only he who lives in the present lives eternally – one can see why politics in every form is based on time management: politics has to make us mortal.

6. The riddle of life cannot be solved with the great dictionaries of natural science: this is a philosophical problem that has no coextension with any other discipline. What follows both from the analysis of Wittgenstein and from my interpretation through the lenses of Heidegger, is that the human being has the potential for immortality: if you are not able to separate life and death, and if death is not lived, then you're literally immortal. From this point it follows that the living / mortal distinction is a hole in the extended present in which every form of life should exist: a time that is levelled day and night, but not through the anxiety of the linear flow of the things of the world. This hole, which partly turns every memory into a form of nostalgia and transforms the future into a goal to reach by stages, is the essential passage of the organization of the living: the flow of events has to be administered. As mentioned, immortality aims to focus on children and animals, and is already present within them: what should the constructive proposal be at this point? The solution to the problem of living lies in the destruction of "human life" as it has been understood by human sciences: the space that must follow is a timeless space. Here one must be careful because the implied philosophy becomes deliberately dangerous, taking a stance against contemporary human beings and in favour of a species to come, able to go back to the eternity of time promised by Wittgenstein and condemned by Heidegger. The idea that consciousness is a gift to be paid on a daily basis at the price of suffering which characterizes us as a species is a false myth created by the philosophy of mind: memory, writing, temporalised memories are exactly what philosophy, with an extreme paradoxical effort of memory, must aim to eliminate. The animal life form is the ultimate goal.

7. The "child" is a concept: the people of eternity is composed of such concepts. "The things that we have owned for decades may be the mirror of our experience of time going by"⁶. This buildup, which is not only memory but also physical possession, is what fundamentally triggers the life / death distinction: the destruction of the archive, represented by the child deprived of ownership (even of the concept of property), is its starting point. The issue is related to images: what you already own as a pre-visual legacy. In fact, as John Berger argued, all images are a human product, and our world has been built on collecting (which is the real sense of contemporary ontologies, because thus we operate "an attempt to challenge the threat of death. Collecting a number of objects means imposing, at least for a moment, a sense of order on a universe that has none"⁷). Therefore, it is against this apparent metaphysical order, which soon turns into domination, that the philosophical problem of

eternal life must work. The child thus becomes an ally – without objects, images, memory – and represents the starting state of mind whence to reach immortality.

8. Children are on the other side of any Kantian schematism: the horror experienced when facing the platypus, which is unclassifiable so that one has to create new *ad hoc* categories for it, is only an issue for those who need to reduce all of reality to their theories. A problem for adults. After all, *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry is a book of naive metaphysics: immortality looks a little like the strange space travel described in it (where space, by definition, is always space-time). Jacques Derrida, in his *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, had sought this new ontological starting point in animality – to be precise, in a cat surprised by his nakedness⁸. In my view, he was mistaken: Martin Heidegger was right, then, because animals have no need to relate to the world. *Animals are the world*.

Humans fracture the "we-world" relationship and it is starting from this fracture, which is already a residue in Clément's sense, that we must look for the origin of man. Traditional ontology, which runs like a thread from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* to Quine's work, would largely approve of the image of a world that is always seen through a filter – this filter being schematism (linguistic, cognitive, or in some other form, it is always a paraphrase of "being that can be understood is language"). In its most recent version in cognitive science, then, the underlying idea is that – to put it with Kant – "intuitions without concept are blind" (think of the discourses on equivalent interpretations in Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics). The point is that this vision has literally imposed itself on reality, because every form of cleverly oriented description becomes a prescription, and thus we are no longer able to know what is not given for us to know to begin with. Therefore, knowledge always amounts to complying with a schema: that which does not find its place either has the privilege of a new box (the platypus), or – simply – does not exist, as it has been deprived of all its properties that fall under other boxes, up until eliminating the *surprising whole* we initially had.

A "surprising whole" is that special kind of entity that, in violation of any schema category, forces us to see a new portion of the world: since the schema does not contemplate surprise, the classical reaction is its compression into a previous category.

The child is free from schematism, as genetics does not weigh more than the environment. This produces a similar situation to that of a world that emerges, within a childish and animal space, crossing the minds of those who inhabit it – who then, having acknowledged of the world, will use it to experience it. In fact, in this case, what we see is always a world that comes from behind: an ontology emerging on the basis of the manifestation of reality not only as a "negative resistance" but also, and primarily, as positive emergence⁹. The child sees the world in the sense often discussed by Ludwig Wittgenstein: "the child learns by believing the adult. Doubt comes *after* belief"¹⁰. Whom would we believe, if there were no adults? Here is the destruction of memory that I mentioned above: the human would, finally, start rebuilding and the essential

items, previously invisible to the eyes, would once again be visible. The apocalypse, perhaps, is immortality: if you do not remember you cannot die.

Notes

¹ This has already been done in relation to many other topics: D. Egan, S. Reynolds, A. J. Wendland (eds.), *Wittgenstein and Heidegger*, Routledge, London, 2013.

² I have spoken of this in L. Caffo, "Hypochondria, Or, The Awareness of Death that Goes Against the Cure", *Annali dell'Istituto Superiore di Sanità: a Science Journal for Public Health*, Vol. 52, No. 1 2016, pp. 4-5.

³ See D. Sisto, *Moral Evil or Sculptor of the Living? Death and the Identity of the Subject*, in G. Chiurazzi, D. Sisto, S. Tinning, (Eds.), *Philosophical Paths in the Public Sphere*, Lit Verlag, Berlin 2015, pp. 31-46.

⁴ See M. Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism", in Id. *Basic Writings: Martin Heidegger*, Routledge, London 1977.

⁵ L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 6.521.

⁶ D. Sudjic, *Il linguaggio delle cose*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2015, p. 9.

⁷ D. Sudjic, *Il linguaggio delle cose*, op. cit., p. 12.

⁸ J. Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am, Jacques Derrida and David Wills", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Winter, 2002), pp. 369-418.

⁹ See M. Ferraris, *Positive Realism*, Zer0 Books, London, 2015.

¹⁰ L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, Arion Press, 1991, §160.