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Nietzsche and Death
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I. The Reinterpretation of Death

"Death needs to be reinterpreted!" (Der Tod ist umzudeuten!). This is what Nietzsche claims from his readers in a posthumous fragment, from the fall of 1881. Guided by the "senses" we believe that the "dead world" (*totte Welt*) is something "exterior", indifferent, immovable. However, this is a flawed conclusion (KSA IX- 11(70)). It is possible to identify at least three assumptions that justify the rejection of the current understanding of death:

- a) The relations of forces in the "dead world"
- b) The eternity of the "dead world"
- c) The inexistence of the error in the "dead world"

In (a), Nietzsche states that the matter is far from being an extension without qualities, a hypothesis enabled by the criteria of "force" and "will to power". It is important to observe, at first, the inexistence of the empty space. The three-dimensional space is a constructed representation (KSA IX- 6(413)) because "'force' and 'space' are two different expressions and ways of considering the same thing" (KSA XI- 26(431)). Would it be more adequate, therefore, to deduct that there is no separation between space and matter? The question is undoubtedly more complex. Nietzsche promptly rejects the idea of "infinitely extensive" (KSA XI- 38(12)), revealing himself sympathetic to the campaign against substantialism promoted by the physicist Roger Boscovich¹.

Nietzsche has extensive compliments to Boscovich, recognizing him as a contemporary, as he, along with Copernicus, rejected the "materialistic atomism". "Boscovich taught us", says Nietzsche, "to forswear the belief in the last firm piece of earth, the belief in the 'substance', in the 'matter', this residue and particle of the Earth, the atom: the biggest triumph over the senses ever obtained on earth" (JGB / BGE- §12). In *A Theory of Natural Philosophy*, Boscovich manifests his Leibnizian inheritance, stating that notions such as extension and mass are inappropriate to explain the constitution of matter. In his understanding, there are inextensive and discrete material *punctas*, whose impenetrability is created by the action at a distance of attraction and repulsion forces (Boscovich, 1966- p. 20 e 134). However, if it is right to say that Nietzsche borrows from Boscovich's criticism of matter, it is not less truthful to say he

radicalizes it. In spite of Boscovich's remarkable originality, he still intends to explain what matter is (Boscovich, 1966- p. 10), which means he is still attached to the mechanicism. Boscovich does not equalize matter and forces (Hesse, 1962- p. 201). On the other hand, Nietzsche clearly states that "matter" does not exist, and that "forces" should be used instead (Letter to Peter Gast - March 20th, 1882/ KSA XI- 26(432)) / *JGB/BGE*, §12). The concept of force represents the definitive triumph over matter, essential for the change of perspective from an immovable, purely quantitative world to a dynamic and qualitative world (KSA XII- 2(157)). The "force is, as a magnitude, stable, while its essence is fluctuating, a product of tensions" (KSA XI- 35(54)). In other words, the world is comprised of a measurable quantity of forces that do not increase or decrease. However, it is necessary to say that "essentially", forces are not magnitudes, but qualities. This occurs because Nietzsche attributes an "interior dimension" (*innere Welt*) to the force which he calls "will to power" (KSA XI- 36(31)). What grants quality to the forces is the value judgment: "more" or "less" strong (KSA XII- 2(94)). This means that the world of forces cannot be a homogeneous and immovable mass, for it is governed by constant combats for a *plus* of power. Hierarchies are formed between commanders and commanded, which undergo constant modifications, that is, a force submitted to fight never ceases to resist, aspiring to be stronger, resulting in continuous transitions in the relations between command and obedience. The inorganic level, consequently, is comprised of forces in struggle (KSA XI- 36(22)). The philosopher constantly directs the attention to the "chemical qualities" fluidity, which would make unfeasible the existence of precise and strict "laws". Considering the uninterrupted becoming caused by the relations of forces, the proportion of – for instance – "9 oxygen parts to 11 hydrogen parts" is flawed. Such proportion cannot be maintained because "the oxygen is never the same as the in the previous instant" (KSA IX- 11(149) / XI- 36(18)).

It is now proper to analyze (b). As known, the "dead world" is not equivalent to the common interpretation of immovable matter, as it is reducible to the relations of forces in struggle. Such theory is valid both for the inorganic and organic levels (KSA XI- 34(247) / 36(22)). To Nietzsche, the world is an "immensity of forces" (KSA XI- 38(12)), which "seen from inside" is "will to power and nothing else" (*JGB/BGE*- §36). Therefore, there is no difference in the nature of organic and inorganic. Such distinction, warns the philosopher, is only applied to the "world of phenomenon" (*Erscheinungswelt*) (KSA XI- 25(356)). Strictly speaking, everything that is "dead" was, at some point "alive" and vice-versa. There is a circular movement guaranteed by the "eternal duration" (*ewige Dauer*) (KSA IX- 11(84)). Time, which belongs to the "essence" of the forces, impedes the exhaustion of the becoming (KSA XI- 35(55)). Time's infinity summed up to a finite quantity of forces, necessarily implies the eternal recurrence of the same (KSA IX-11(202)). However, this permutation between life and death should be carefully analyzed, mainly when Nietzsche supposes, against Caspari, that the "whole" is not an organism². In his controversy with Thomson, Caspari rejects the mechanistic perspective of the universe by the absence of a final state in an infinite time. Considering that such state has not been reached, the universe can only be akin to an organism, dismissing any interventions from a *deus ex machina* (D' Iorio, 1995- p. 100 – 101). It is certain that Nietzsche re-uses, many times, similar arguments to Caspari's in order to oppose to the enthusiasts of the thermodynamic theories. In his understanding,

if it was conceivable that the world of forces would reach a balance, this would have already happened in the temporal infinity (KSA IX- 11(148) / 11(245)). However, this argument is redone in such a way that it becomes contrary to Caspari. To Nietzsche, "if the whole could be an organism, it would already have been" (KSA IX- 11(201)). Considering "the world as a living being" leads to obvious problems. It would have to feed on something, grow, and ultimately, perish. This representation, thus, is inadequate to sustain the hypothesis of the universe's eternity (D' Iorio, 1995- p. 111). It seems much more convenient for Nietzsche to admit that "whatever is alive is only a variety of what is dead", and he adds, "a very rare variety". The organic is "derived" and "late", something inessential (FW/GC-§109). The universe is fundamentally inorganic. "The inorganic completely conditions us: water, air, the sun, the Earth's configuration, electricity, etc."(KSA IX- 11(210)). Take, for instance, the protoplasm, which is a "plurality of chemical forces" (KSA XI- 35(58)). For this reason, judging "the dead world" as "exterior" is, to Nietzsche, a "completely false view" (KSA IX- 11(70)).

If there is no difference in nature between life and death, and moreover, if life is a variation of what is dead, what distinguishes such domains? This question leads us to (c). To Nietzsche, the organic beings are complexes of forces in struggle, in a way that the explanatory principle of an organ does not retrace its utility. An organ utility is always in service of something irreducible to utility itself. In order to understand what an organ is, questioning its utility is not enough. It is necessary to ask first: "useful for what?" (KSA XII-7(25)). Nietzsche intends to show, therefore, that the "value judgments" condition the organic functions (KSA XI- 26(72)). For example, primarily, the eye is not meant to see, or the hand meant to manipulate, for the meaning inherited by such organs are due to a will to power ownership process. Consequently, the "use" of an organ is always subjected to new meaning adjustments related to the "subjugate" and "overpower" that comprise the organic world (GM/ GM- II- 12). However, if the meaning of each organ corresponds to an interpretation given by a will to power, and if these meanings are continuously modified, how is an organism possible? According to Nietzsche, an organism only arises through "compassion" (*Mitleid*) among "different organs" (*verschiedenen Organen*) (KSA XI- 25(431)). This means that a uniformity of senses is indispensable as to facilitate the interrelation of organs in the name of survival. One force must overpower the others and neutralize the most primitive sense of the "hierarchy" in reducing the differences, for the whole organism assumes "the representation and belief in what is identical to itself, and persistent" (KSA IX- 11(329)). The organism would not be conserved if a synthetic activity didn't come in place to enable the ignorance of the original becoming (KSA XI- 26(294)). "The ultimate truth about the outflow of every thing (*die letzte Wahrheit vom Fluss der Dinge*) is unbearable to be *incorporated*, our (vital) ORGANS are in themselves consequences of such error" (KSA IX- 11(162)). Therefore, everything that is alive depends on the "error" (*Irrthum*) (XI- 40(39)). The same error, however, is not reiterated in the inorganic level, in which exactitude contrasts with the "indetermination" (*Unbestimmtheit*) and "appearance" (*Schein*) that prevails in the organic world. There, Nietzsche says, "truth prevails!" (*da herrscht Wahrheit!*) (KSA XI- 35(53)). In the inorganic world, "the error, and the perspective limitation (*die perspektivische Beschränktheit*) are absent", for there is an exact perception of "the values, forces, and power relationships" (KSA XII- 1(105) / XI- 35(59)). Therefore, perspective and perception coincide, as a force center perceives the

other forces' power from the perspective of its own level of power. That is exactly why Nietzsche considers dying as a "party". When the living being is freed from its life, it dismisses the errors, which cause suffering, and "reconciles with the effective" (*versöhnen mit dem Wirklichen*), that is, with the world of "force against force" (KSA IX-11(70) / 11(125)). In a sense, finally, it is reasonable to admit that the passage from organic to inorganic represents a remarkable advancement (KSA X- 4(177))³.

II. Freedom to Death

What are the consequences of Nietzsche's reinterpretation of death to men, or, how is the relationship between men and death affected by this reinterpretation? It is too early to answer this question. At first, it is important to emphasize that, to Nietzsche, men experience death in two opposite ways: on one hand, there is the "coward death" (*Feiglings Tod*), or "non-free death" (*unfreier Tod*), and on the other hand, the "voluntary death" (*freien Tode*), or the "freedom to death" (*Freiheit zum Tode*).

The "coward death" may be defined, in a few words, as an experience of death as "by chance", in which the immediate effect is the desire to die. In this case, death is wished because it occurs. The lack of life longevity is enough for life abandonment to be preached. Those who think like that, Nietzsche says, are the "Preachers of Death". They are the ones who, when seeing "a diseased, or old man, or a corpse, say promptly: 'life is refuted!' (*das Leben ist widerlegt!*)" (*Za/ZA- Of the Preachers of Death*) Nietzsche bears in mind here, "the miserable and terrible comedy Christianity has made of the moment of death" (*GD/TI- §36*). Christianity is "the religion that, among all of the hours of human life, considers the last as the most important" (*UB/UM. II 8*). The hope of the Christians, or the "Preachers of Death" is that by renouncing this life, "assaulted" by death, a path will be opened to another life, an "eternal life" (*Za/ZA- Of the Preachers of Death*), a hope that is, in reality, a will to nothing.

The preachers of death aspire to leave this life because death comes, because "death sneaks in like a thief". And so they hope, "clenching their teeth", "death at the wrong time" (*ein Tod zur unrichten Zeit*) (*Za/ZA- Of the Preachers of Death/Of the Voluntary Death / GD/TI- §36*). Although what is the reason for death to be seen as a "thief" that steals life by these type of men? This occurs due to an interpretation of time as a father who devours his own children, that is, as an irreversible outflow directed towards death. According to Nietzsche, men, differently from other animals, is characterized by the capacity of remembering the "it was" (*Es war*). Then begins all human suffering. The "'it was' is what gives all the teeth clenching and the most solitary angst" when will cannot want backwards. The "it was" is not only a type of time past, alongside present and future, but it is time itself in its totality⁴, which makes every happening seem like a "horrific chance". Time as "it was" frustrates the freedom of will, which cannot do anything about what is "not any more". Powerless against the past, man recognizes himself immersed in a time which does not go back. He feels like a victim of the "passing by" (*Za/ZA- Of Redemption*). Therefore, the unfree death must be a logical consequence of the captive will in front of the time that goes by, for this is the only way death can be seen as an accident that assaults men. The time when one cowardly dies is always the wrong time, when time itself is faced as the cause of

incompleteness (*GD/TI- §36*). Thus, death arises as a fatality that must be feared. Finally, the anger against death comes along with the anger against time. The spirit of revenge, in condemning time for impeding man to be entirely who he is, condemns the inevitable death, by saying: “everything perishes, everything, therefore, deserves to perish!” (*Alles vergeht, darum ist Alles werth zu vergehn!*). In this sense, men’s anger toward the inescapable finitude caused by time is reflected, as it could not be different, on a repulsion to death, the most radical chance.

On the other hand, to Nietzsche, the “voluntary death” is the one that comes at the “right time” (*recht Zeit*) because “I want it” (*ich will*). The way one wants death now differs from the death cultivated by the preachers of death. Different from wishing death because death occurs, the voluntary death follower wants death in order to affirm himself. It is no longer adequate taking death for a stranger who steals life, for it is always “my” death, that is, something inherent to my own being (*Za/ZA- Of Voluntary Death*). Therefore, the excessive attachment to longevity becomes condemnable. According to Nietzsche, when it is no longer possible to live “proudly”, one should choose to “die proudly”, and not continue to live indecently, depending on doctors and treatments. On any case, the apology to suicide should be seen with reservations. The point is that any death, either natural or not, is a suicide, for we invariably perish due to ourselves deed. Only those who enjoy a coward death have the (equivocal) impression of death being “someone else’s deed” (*GD/TI- §36*).

The “freedom to death” is reached when one “dies in time”. For those who die in the “wrong time”, death always comes either too late or too early, because “how could someone who does not live in time, die in time?”. Thus, the way from the coerced will by death, to the free will to death, goes through a deep modification on the perception of time. For those convinced that time passes, life, haunted by the “it was”, unreachable to the will, is never complete, so death can only occur by chance, that is, at the “wrong time”. The will that says “but I will it thus”, to the “it was”, is the one able to affirm its own death, that can only come at the “right time”. In assenting to the “it was”, the will is free from its captivity and reconciled with time. Will becomes, therefore, free (*Za/ZA- Of Redemption*). However, it is not enough to affirm the time that goes by, but it is necessary to wish time returns for all eternity. Nietzsche submits men to a crucial test, since before proposing men triumph over the spirit of revenge by reconciling with time, the philosopher proposes that redemption is only consummated with the transformation of time itself. Upon the desire to live life “countless times”, which includes “each pain, and each pleasure, and each sigh, and each thought, and everything that is indescribably great and small”, time is no longer something that goes by (*FW/GC- §341*). The “it was” only exists for those who believe everything that happens by chance. The doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same provides the transition from the successive time to the “instant” (*Augenblick*), which in its eternity does not know the outflow (*Ewigkeit*) (*Za/ZA- Of the vision and the riddle/At Noontide*). Consequently, with the incorporation of this teaching, the “thought of death” is annulled⁵. The death that steals, violates, attacks, frustrates, limits, etc., is a morbid symptom of men whose time is considered as the father who eats his own children. In adhering to the eternity of the instant, one becomes complete and death never arrives.

It is now clearer that the interpretation of death as something “exterior”, inanimate and hostile to life is directly linked to a certain way of devaluing existence.

Therefore, Nietzsche's reinterpretation of death is, firstly, a psychological exercise in which the objective is to prepare the human will to affirm death by neutralizing the "it was" sovereignty. Secondly, however, Nietzsche's proposed reinterpretation of death is far from being a sole psychological trick. It implies a reconnection with the world as it is, where there is no separation between life and death, or, where life is only a variety of death. Whence Zarathustra's equivalence between the love for the Earth with the desire to die. Free from denial and the fear of death, and assured that dying is a "party", Zarathustra, thus, says: "I want to become earth again, that I may have peace in her who bore me" (*Za/ZA- Of Voluntary Death*).

Notes

¹ Nietzsche discovers Boscovich much likely in 1873, after having read *Über die physikalische und philosophische Atomlehre*, from Theodor Fechner, and *Geschichte des Materialismus*, from Friedrich Lange (SCHLECHTA, K / ANDERS, A.- Friedrich Nietzsche. Von den verborgenen Anfängen seines Philosophierens Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt- Frommann Verlag- 1962- p. 128 / STACK, G.- Lange and Nietzsche- Walter de Gruyter- Berlin/New York- 1983- p. 226). In spite of the dialogue with Boscovich having been intensified in the decade of 1880, some interpreters state that the physicist's presence can be noticed in the young Nietzsche, mainly through the posthumous writing from 1873, called by many *Zeitatomlehre* (SCHLECHTA, K / ANDERS, A.- Friedrich Nietzsche. Von den verborgenen Anfängen seines Philosophierens Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt- Frommann Verlag - p. 140 / WHITLOCK, G.- Examining Nietzsche's "Time Atom Theory" Fragment from 1873 in: Nietzsche Studien Band 26- Walter de Gruyter- Berlin/New York- 1997- p. 350). This would prove that Boscovich had always been present in Nietzsche's thought, having been a character that played a significant role in his philosophy (WHITLOCK, G – Roger Boscovich, Benedict de Spinoza and Friedrich Nietzsche: The Untold Story in: *Nietzsche Studien Band 25*- Walter de Gruyter- Berlin/New York- 1996- pp. 202 e 206).

² Michel Haar, in *Vie et totalité naturelle*, present in *Nietzsche et la métaphysique*, believes that Nietzsche targets, in his refusal of the world's organicity, the stoic model of the universe as a "Great Living Being" (HAAR, M.- Nietzsche et la métaphysique- Gallimard- Paris- 1996- p. 170). This is a controversial statement, mainly after the contributions left by Paolo D'lorio's research. In *Cosmologie de l'éternel retour*, present in *Nietzsche Studien 24*, besides *O Eterno Retorno. Gênese e Interpretação*, published in *Cadernos Nietzsche* n. 20, D'lorio affirms, based on a thorough investigation of Nietzsche's library, that the criticism towards the world as a living being is inserted in the discussion of the universe thermal death, manifestly objecting to Otto Caspari (D'lorio, P.- Cosmologie de l'éternel retour in: Nietzsche Studien Band 24- Walter de Gruyter- Berlin/New York- 1995- pp. p. 99 – 111 / O eterno retorno. Gênese e interpretação in: *Cadernos Nietzsche* 20- Trad. Ernani Chaves- Humanitas- São Paulo- 2006- p. 76 – 100).

³ "Organic creatures may be seen not as an advance over the inorganic forms, but as a degeneration of them" (MOLES, A.- *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Nature and Cosmology*- Peter Lang- New York- 1990- p. 156).

⁴ "Nietzsche considers revenge as 'the recalcitrant will against time and its 'it was'. Such definition does not unilaterally emphasize an isolated time character, neglecting the two others, but characterizes the fundamental aspect of time in its own and absolute essence" (HEIDEGGER, M.- *Ensaio e Conferências*- Trad. Emmanuel Carneiro Leão, Gilvan Fogel e Márcia Sá C. Schulback- Vozes- Petrópolis- 2002- p. 101).

⁵ Sean Ireton, in his article *Heidegger's Ontological Analysis of Death and its Prefiguration in Nietzsche*, published in *Nietzsche Studien 27*, proposes that Nietzsche's and Heidegger's considerations about the death theme are very similar, mainly when Nietzsche's concept of "freedom to death" (*Freiheit zum Tode*), reappears in section 53 of *Being and Time*. The interpreter believes that to both thinkers "freedom to death" had, firstly, a critical function for being opposite to an "unauthentic" way of dealing with death, that is, as an event that does not directly affects us. Later on, such concept would be indispensable, to Heidegger, for the *Dasein* to become "authentic", by assuming death as his extreme possibility, and in Nietzsche's case, to affirm not only life, but also death. In conclusion, Ireton says that both thinkers gave importance to the decision to choose the right time to die was, which is the basis for men to conquer their "freedom" (IRETON, S- Heidegger's Ontological Analysis of Death and its Prefiguration in Nietzsche in: *Nietzsche Studien Band 26*- Walter de Gruyter- Berlin/New York- 1997- pp. 403 – 420). Such reading is questionable at two points. First, Ireton incorrectly interprets the meaning of "freedom" to Nietzsche and Heidegger. Second, he assumes both thinkers get to similar conclusions for operating with the same concept ("freedom to death"), another questionable supposition, in spite of the unquestionable legitimacy of the relationship established. As it is known, Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, opposes to Heidegger's "freedom to death", when he attributes to death a "contingent fact", which comes "from outside", a statement that compromises the "free will of finitude" (SARTRE, J.P.- *O Ser e o Nada*- Trad. Paulo Perdigão- Vozes- Petrópolis- 2001- pp. 653 e 668). Nevertheless, as shown by Gustavo Catalo

Sanguinetti, in *Muerte y Libertad en Martin Heidegger*, from *Philosophica* 26, Sartre makes a mistake attributing a common meaning of freedom to the meaning used by Heidegger, the same mistake made by Ireton. Far from being a will “decision” the “freedom to death”, is a “let it be”. The interpreter correctly demonstrates that Heidegger’s “resolution” (*Entschlossenheit*) is not a choice. But lamentably, Sanguinetti fails when he ignores the existing link, in this context, between Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s concepts of “freedom to death”. Just as Ireton, he thinks Nietzsche is a follower to the voluntarism in respect to death (SANGUINETTI, G.C.- *Muerte y Libertad en Martin Heidegger* in: *Philosophica* 26- Ediciones Universitarias de Valparaíso- Valparaíso- 2003- p.44 – 47). It is pointless to expose here the severe critics the philosopher makes of the usual notion of will (refer to, among other excerpts, §19 from *Beyond Good and Evil*). It is enough to remember that, along our exposition, the idea of “freedom to death” has an essentially negative principle that aims to destroy the interpretation of death as something “exterior”. The free will, that reaches the “I want it thus”, for the “it was”, is the one able to affirm all the fatality, transforming it into necessity. Thus, the famous *amor fati* formula: “wanting nothing different, either backward, forward, or in the whole eternity” (EH/EH- II- 10). Therefore, Nietzsche and Heidegger would agree that the “freedom to death”, previous to being a “decision”, comprises a change of perspective on death, whose result is its internalization. Nevertheless, the implications of such internalization are too distinct to each thinker, which leads us to the second problematic point of Ireton’s reading. To Heidegger, the “freedom to death” is the culmination of the *Dasein*’s “anticipation” of his own death far away from the indifference of the “Uno” (*Man*). The anticipate has no similarity with the self-suicide, nor is it similar to the act of imagining one’s death; not even death, as the limit of anticipation, is a “ceasing”. Anticipating means, instead, that *Dasein* is a being-to-death (*Sein-Zum-Tode*), that is, he submits all the existence to this possibility, which results in its “nothingness” (HEIDEGGER, M.- *El Ser y el Tiempo*- Trad. José Gaos- Fondo de Cultura- Mexico- 2002- pp. 283 – 291). This is not Nietzsche’s view for sure, starting with the more, so to speak, modest position the death theme has in his philosophy. This does not mean, though, that the theme was not one of his greatest concerns. Facts indicated that he even planned to dedicate an entire chapter to the theme, which would be named “About the New Way of Dying” (*vom neuen Sterben*), the epilogue of a never-written book, whose name would be *Noon and Eternity* (*Mittag und Ewigkeit*) (KSA XI- 35(41)). The alienation from the death theme is much more a strategic move, in agreement with his philosophy, which aimed to combat negativity. In §278 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche notices that people live with a feeling of “so far, so little”, and that the “imminent future will be everything”, ignoring that the only certain thing in the future is death. However, instead of regretting this attitude, the philosopher encourages it: “I am happy to see that men do not want to think about death (*Gedanken an den Tod*)! I would honestly like to do something to bring you the thought of life (*Gedanken an das Leben*) a thousand times more worth the thought” (FW/GC- §278) Nietzsche, then, “thinks” about death aiming to diminish the exaggerated importance we give it. At the end of the day, “the freedom to death”, or the incorporation of death, coincides, somehow, with the death “forgetfulness”, understood as a fatality, as soon as men integrates the eternity of the instant and feels complete. Finally, against all tendencies that would arise in contemporary philosophy, that give death a privileged position, Nietzsche seems to have more sympathy for the way that the ancients dealt with the end of life. This excerpt of *De rerum natura*, from Lucrecio, could have easily been written by Nietzsche: “Death is nothing, it does not matter to us, for the nature of the spirit is mortal” (LUCRECIO- *De la nature des choses*- Trad. Georges Cogniot- Sociales- Paris- 1974- p. 167).

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