Abstract: This talk offers a collection of vignettes that position the relation between life and death as a central but unsolvable question for theorization in art and politics. Indeed, what to think of death in times when, yet again, the end of the world as we know it seems to be near?

Introduction

In his seminal essay “Necropolitics,” philosopher and political scientist Achille Mbembe writes,

contemporary experiences of human destruction suggest that it is possible to develop a reading of politics, sovereignty, and the subject different from the one we inherited from the philosophical discourse of modernity. Instead of considering reason as the truth of the subject, we can look to other foundational categories that are less abstract and more tactile, such as life and death. (Mbembe, 2003, p. 14)

In “Necropolitics,” Mbembe famously extends Michel Foucault’s thesis according to which modern sovereignty finds its basis in biopower, that is, that human life as such has become the primary domain for exercising productive power (“making live and letting die” [biopower] contra “letting live and making die” [authoritarian power in Roman law]). Mbembe argues that in addition to examining the various ways that biopower makes life, we should also pay attention how it manifests itself as a systematic destruction of human beings (as necropower) (for Mbembe, the history of colonies is the primary example of necropower as sovereignty). (“under conditions of necropower [death-worlds, as Mbembe calls them], the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred” [Mbembe, 2003, p. 40])

The reason why I wanted to start with this quote is that I remain puzzled by Mbembe’s claim that life and death are somehow “less abstract and more tactile” categories for political thought than reason. Here, I’m not suggesting that life and death are mere abstractions: indeed, bodies, living or dead, are here, in this world (of course, reason is here too, but differently…). Rather, I see that in order to make use of life and death as “foundational categories” for politics today (a claim that I do agree with), I see that we should also approach their limits; those moments when life and death don’t form a clear binary pair that would let us define the concreteness that makes them less abstract.

The title of this talk, “Death is all things we see awake; all we see asleep is sleep” (Kahn, 1981, p. 69 [fragment LXXXIX]) unfolds the kind of approach to relationship between life and death that I’m interested in developing in response to Mbembe’s claim. It is one of the fragments that have survived from the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus (the so-called weeping philosopher, best know for his phrase “everything flows”), whose thought united the
opposites, often in an obscure and paradoxical way. Like for Mbembe, here death presents itself as a foundational and concrete category (it is “all things that we see”); however, it is removed from its usual companion, its twin brother Sleep (Hypnos) who so often gives death its familiar appearance (silence and passivity; note: I do acknowledge that actual sleeping involves quite a lot of activity; my point is directed toward the idea of sleep as passivity as in political emancipation as a moment of “waking up”). This means that our relation with death involves a state of being “awake,” while sleeping is just sleeping (but, we still find them next to each other). It is this simultaneous affirmation of connection and disconnection that interests me; especially when approaching the concreteness of life and death that Mbembe argues for.

Indeed, how death becomes present to us? In this talk, I approach this question in three parts, mainly focusing on how death oscillates between the concrete and the abstract. What seems to drive this oscillation is the question of agency: that is, death as a likely end of agency, or, at least, as its troubling horizon (note: for those who immediately think of Heidegger here, I’ll just say that I’ve left him out of this paper). To oversimplify, death is that strange passageway that turns subjects into objects. But, as I will argue later, sometimes dead bodies were never subjects in the first place, at least in the eyes of Law; for European Union, a dead body washed to the shores of Greece or Italy is just a nameless body, sleeping its eternal sleep. However, a human body is never just a body, not even in cases of systematic mass destructions that Mbembe refers to: a dead body stands for something, it manifests a discontinuation, an end of a particular kind of agency and an affirmation of its finitude. This means that we always start to discuss about something else than just the body. So, my point is that the concreteness of death is never reducible to a dead body and a dead body never makes death lose its abstractness entirely.

While the focus of this talk is mainly on human death, the question of agency inevitably connects to the non-human modalities of death, specifically the end of the world as the death of the world. If, following thinkers like Jane Bennett and Timothy Morton, the age of the Anthropocene requires radically different approaches the world than the ones that are based on subject/object, passive/active, living/non-living dichotomies (that is, approaches that radically decenter human life from this equation), I claim that, following my previous argument, we certainly could include death in this discussion as well. This could help us to approach the contested ground between the human and the non-human without having to assign quasi-metaphysical life-agency to objects. Death is, after all, radically non-human while being simultaneously something that humans desperately want to own.

To talk about death means that we talk about something that we have not experienced or, in some cases, have almost experienced. This is why we are doomed to talk about death always in relation to life. However, in order to introduce a level of inaccessibility to life as well, I will focus my discussion on the concept of immortality, that is, the idea of defeating death. I see the search of immortality is an attempt par excellence to own death and make it measurable with human finitude and agency (was this agency understood in secular or spiritual terms). In

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1 For example, “Immortals are mortal, mortals immortal, living the others' death, dead in the others' life.” (Kahn, 1981, p. 71 [fragment XCII])
Heracleitan spirit, I will push immortality and mortality toward each other and hopefully unfold the abstractness in their concreteness and their concreteness in their abstractness.

Part 1: Curing Death

A few years ago, Google announced that they are financing a research unit called Calico (shortened from California Life Company), whose mission “to harness advanced technologies to increase our understanding of the biology that controls lifespan.” (http://www.calicolabs.com) This project, publicly accessible only through a nebulous website, made the headlines as Google’s attempt to cure death.

Google is certainly not alone in this quest. In fact, there is an international organization called The Immortality Institute (they also call themselves LongeCity) whose mission is “to conquer the blight of involuntary death” (http://www.longecity.org/forum/page/index2.html/_/feature/about-r28). One of the researchers associated with this organization is Aubrey de Grey, a researcher at Cambridge University, who has written a few books and given a plenty of TED talks on his visions of overcoming aging and death (in fact, he has declared a “war on aging”, [de Gray, 2004]).

Having a background in computer science, de Grey has a very practical approach to the relation between life and death. When asked in an interview why would he like to live forever, he responded:

It’s not really a matter of living forever, it’s just a matter of not wanting to die. One doesn’t live forever all in one go, one lives forever one year at a time. It’s just a case of "Well, life seems to be fun, and I don’t see any prospect of it ceasing to be fun unless I get frail and miserable and start declining." So if I can avoid declining, I’ll stay with it really. (http://www.livescience.com/6967-hang-25-year-wait-immortality.html)

For me, these peculiar statements about immortality offer an intriguing starting point for thinking death and its relation to human agency today. Here, I’m not interested in simply repeating the argument (put forward by people like Philippe Ariès) that death is excluded and hidden from societal life in modernity. While this might be true, I’m more interested in this desire to overcome (not simply hide) death, that is, to strip it away from its necessity; and how might this connect to the social, economical, and political climate of contemporary capitalism.

So, what can we say about overcoming death in this context? Notably, one of de Grey’s central arguments for the war on aging is that aging is expensive; both for the aging person and for the society. So, this opens up an interesting biopolitical twist on the current austerity politics: one does not have to have merely an entrepreneurial spirit, but a body, too: a body that can “stay with life” and thus reduce its societal costs.

This means that in a true (neo)liberalist spirit, both Calico’s attempt to supervise the “biology that controls lifespan” and de Grey’s “war on aging” turn the relation between life and death into a matter of choice. Thus, overcoming death means choosing life.

What is interesting about this choice is that it’s not merely about choosing not to end someone’s life (as Katharine Hamnett’s WHAM t-shirt originally promoted; that is, don’t kill yourself or others), but it’s more about choosing not to cease living. For de Grey, for whom
“it’s reasonable to suppose that one could oscillate between being biologically 20 and biologically 25 indefinitely,” human life seems to be potentially an infinite resource and we’re obliged to make sure that this resource can be used properly.

So, here the ability to choose is directly related to a specific understanding of agency as personal freedom: since I own my life, I own the rights to be in control of it. Aging and biological death are, then, something like big government for the Right: an unjust taxman who takes away the life that belongs to me. Deciding to continue one’s life limitlessly would be, then, an ultimate manifestation of such freedom.

What does this freedom mean, then? When asked what he would do with his infinite lifespan, de Grey replied:

They say variety is the spice of life, so I don’t think I would do the same things every day. I’d like to be able to spend more time reading, and listen to music, and all that sort of thing, things that I never get to do at all at the moment. (http://www.livescience.com/6967-hang-25-year-wait-immortality.html)

Interestingly enough, de Grey’s words bring in mind young Marx and his famous passage in *German Ideology* where he states that in a communist society one can “do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic” (Tucker, 1978, p. 160). While Marx targeted his words against the distribution of labor in capitalist societies (that is, it is the distribution of labor that prevents us from doing all these things), de Grey’s target is much more cosmological: it’s not capitalism, but death that keeps us from actualizing our true potentials. On this cosmological scale, however, my life as my choice does not coincide with other lives; my life is not supported by other lives except my choice to live (here, one can think of Ayn Rand). Since I want to live, I don’t deserve to die.

What if we relocated the argument for infinite lifespans to, let’s say, miners digging cobalt by hand in unregulated mines in the Democratic Republic of Congo (cf. Amnesty International, 2016)? What would the task “to conquer the blight of involuntary death” mean for them and how does their choice to live differ from de Grey’s? Or, perhaps most importantly, what is the relation between de Grey’s desire for infinite lifespan and those miners who suffer from chronic lung problems and body aches that eventually kill them (if the collapsing mines don’t get them first)?

Anthropologist and critical theorist Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) has examined similar questions when discussing the ethical and temporal landscape of late liberalism, focusing mainly in Australia. She is particularly interested in how forms of biopolitical governmentality affect not only how Australian aborigines are treated as subjects of legislation, but also how it affects their bodies that, in many cases, are slowly decaying from chronic sores, heart, kidney, or lung failures, alcohol abuse, and ineffective medication. She talks about “states of letting die” (coming close to Mbembe) that privatize and individualize these forms of decay and turn them into consequences of bad choices: it is the Aborigines themselves who are choosing their death by alcohol, cancer, or whatever happens to kill them. The only life that the Australian government allows them to choose is the one that is based on assimilation: in order to make the right kind of choices, they have to let go of their own
ways of life (imbued with bad choices) and adapt themselves to the entrepreneurial spirit and body that “stays with life.”

By drawing from Ursula Le Guin’s short story “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” a short story about a utopian city of Omelas where the heavenly bliss of its citizens is directly related to the incarceration of a “feeble-minded” child in a broom closet (in the story, everybody knows about this child, so it’s not some sort of a dark ideological secret that ought to be uncovered), Povinelli links the temporal and ethical structure of these right kind of choices to what she calls “future anterior,” meaning,

I am not in you. You are not in me. We are merely playing the same game of chance whose truth lies not here and now between us but there and then in who wins and who loses. No one is killing me. I am killing myself. Maybe . . . we’ll see . . . the future will tell. (Povinelli, 2008, p. 517, emphasis mine)

So, if, according to Calico and the Immortality Institute, the authorship over one’s life necessitates a death sentence (one has to kill death as the idea of curing a disease and waging a war entail), could we also understand it in more concrete terms (following Mbembe)? In other words, what if this act killing was not some kind of abstract idea (indeed, how does one wage war on aging?), but something that manifests itself in actual human lives as forms of “letting die”? Since, following Povinelli, “letting die” is nothing spectacular (like tsunami or an earthquake) but a slow process of decaying, it lacks the kind of clear limits that would grant it the status of a proper event, a proper death. Indeed, this is precisely what makes the act of killing a state of dying: it merely happens (meaning, of course, that we’re not seemingly responsible of it). This is a death that seems to be much more difficult to conquer, since it remains in the “broom closet,” while being present in “all things we see.”

To conquer death means, then: my choice to live is at the same time a death sentence to someone else. My choice to not be miserable requires that I allow someone else to be miserable. My quest for immortality is directly related to someone else’s mortality.

These statements do not express a future-oriented causality (if… then…): here, life and death coincide; they both take place in the present, in “all things we see.”

Part 2: Death Beyond Us

Of course, the idea of defeating death is everything but new: historically, it is directly linked to the contested division between humans and gods and our seeming difficulty to accept the finitude of human life (and, indeed, the limits of our agency). Here, two obvious names come to mind: Gilgamesh and Jesus.

Generally speaking, what differentiates Gilgamesh from Jesus is the notion of limits: while the epic of Gilgamesh is often read as a reminder that humans have a specific place in the cosmos; a place that is limited by time and space of the mortal world, the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus ensured that all mortals can reunite with their divine and eternal origin: following Jesus’ words in John 11:25-26: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (NRSV). For Christians, then, the limitations of the mortal world (greatly detested by Gilgamesh) became merely temporary: it is faith (a spiritual connection with the eternity) that provides the key to eternal life after death (so, one does not have to travel to see
Utnapishtim like Gilgamesh did). Physical death was not a limit, but a passageway, a biological fact secondary to the divine plan.

I'm not suggesting that Christianity totally abandoned limits that death introduces to human existence. Here it is important to make a distinction between two types of death in the New Testament by distinguishing two words for it in the original Greek: *nekros*, which usually denotes a dead body, and *thanatos*, which means death as such. For example, in Romans 6:9, one reads “We know that Christ, being raised from the dead [nekros/nekron], will never die [apothneskei; to put to death] again; death [thanatos] no longer has dominion over him” (NRSV)\(^2\).

Thus, *thanatos* suggests that there is something about death that goes beyond a dead body: that is, something metaphysical, something that belongs to the domain of the soul. This is famously put forward in Matthew 10:28: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (NRSV)\(^3\). Indeed, this passage suggests that humans are made of two elements, body and soul, the material and the immaterial, the ephemeral and the eternal, and that death means different things for both of these elements.

Thus, unlike Gilgamesh, for whom death always reinstalled the division between the human and the divine (that the human world and the world of gods were not to coincide except through divine interventions like when gods created Enkidu or when they created the Great Flood), the Christian version of defeating death ultimately denotes the unification of the divine (eternal) and the profane (ephemeral) in eternal life (notably, it’s not quite clear what does this unification looks like; that is, does the soul get back its body or something else; see Thacker, 2011, p. 109). Subsequently, the so-called second death (that is, the death of the soul “in hell” that we find in the aforementioned passage from Matthew) means that the soul vanishes together with the material body: *nothing* remains left of the one who dies, neither the body nor the soul.

In terms of the division between *nekros* and *thanatos*, one could say that by defeating *thanatos*, Jesus turned the age-old battle against death foundationally abstract: a body (living or dead) didn’t matter anymore (indeed, while for Gilgamesh the decaying dead body of his friend Enkidu was the primary reason to search for the immortal Utnapishtim, Jesus didn’t mind at all that Lazarus’ body stunk after being dead for four days). In this sense, the limit that death poses to us became also more abstract: it’s not merely the materiality of *nekros* that manifests this limit (a body that stinks and decays), but its immaterial, metaphysical excess, *thanatos*.

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\(^2\) In Greek, the passage goes, “εἰδότες Ὄτι Χριστὸς ἐγερθεὶς ἐκ νεκρῶν οὐκέτι ὑποθνήσκει; θάνατος αὐτοῦ οὐκέτι κυριεύει,” where the death from where Jesus raised from is νεκρῶν (nekroi), the verb “die” is ἀποκτεῖναι (apokteinai, put to death), and the death that “no longer has dominion over him” is θάνατος (thanatos)

\(^3\) καὶ μὴ φοβεῖσθε ἀπὸ τῶν ἀποκτενόντων τὸ σῶμα, τὴν δὲ ψυχὴν μὴ δυναμένον ἀποκτεῖναι; φοβεῖσθε δὲ μᾶλλον τὸν δυνάμενον καὶ ψυχὴν καὶ σῶμα ἀπολέσαι ἐν γεέννῃ; here, the verb ἀποκτεῖναι, apokteinai, to put to death is used in the same sense as in the previous example. (See also Anchor Bible Dictionary, p. 1937 on the second death)
To take this argument a bit further, the *true* limits of death-as-*thanatos* are, generally speaking, *unattainable* by humans, since they are *not of this world*. Notably, this is not specifically a Christian invention. We can find this thought expressed already in Plato’s *Phaedo*, where Socrates explains why “a man who has really spent his life in philosophy is naturally of good courage when he is to die, and has strong hopes that when he is dead he will attain the greatest blessings in that other land.” (2005, pp. 221-223) As philosopher Sarah Clift (2006) points out, this makes philosophy a “death-rehearsal” and philosophers “half-dead” since they have “always allied [themselves] to what does not pass away, change, or grow old.” (p. 21) This means that a physical death is not an obstacle for actualizing human potential, since this potential (in philosophy and in faith) always exceeds the limitations of the finite world. In this sense, death is not a passageway that turns subjects into objects: rather, it can *elevate us beyond* subjects and objects, to the world beyond this world where everything *just is* (which, in Jesus’ words, finds its opposite in the flames of hell that *destroy everything* (subjects, objects), leaving *nothing* behind).

It is here where we can try articulate the difference between the secular and spiritual approaches to defeating death in terms the oscillation I mentioned in the beginning of this paper; that of, the oscillation between the concrete and the abstract death.

As I pointed out earlier (but in different terms), the secularity embedded in defeating biological death is of a particular kind: it is materialistic in a sense that matter, in this case, human bodies (either living or dead), exists as separate entities (*things*, “relata” in Karen Barad’s terms). There is no distinction between an individual dead body (*nekros*) and death as such (*thanatos*): thus, defeating death automatically means defeating *nekros* (contra Jesus, who defeated *thanatos*). This does not mean, however, that every *nekros* would be treated as a singular event: going back to Povinelli, some deaths remain in the “broom closet.” In fact, for the Immortality Institute and others, *nekros* becomes treated like *thanatos*: it denotes a universalized individual human death,4 or more specifically, a death of an individual human agency akin to de Grey. This is why conquering death means, for the Immortality Institute and others likeminded, an ultimate manifestation of individual authorship over one’s life story, a transgression of *nekros as a limit*. Aging and dying bodies are problems to be cured, since, like viruses that infect the body, aging and death enter a *truly* living body from the outside; that is, they are not part of who we *really* are.

This is, I believe, also the reason why curing death as *nekros* is not exclusive of the death of Others: like in Le Guin’s narrative of the child in the broom closet, a life that is excluded from the universality of *truly* living bodies is a life that is also excluded from the universality of *nekros*. A *truly* dead body (a body that counts) is *nekros* whose absence has a place among us. The death of Others remains outside this distribution of life and death, since they haven’t been *fully* alive. Their death belongs to the domain of sleep that is just sleep.

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4 Thacker (2011, pp. 108-109) points out that in *Odyssey*, *nekros* also means “the dead,” that is, “dead souls [that are] immaterial and yet not transcendent.”
Part 3: The End of All Things

To sum up my argument thus far, I’ve tried to articulate what does it mean to approach death as a limit that could be, through material or spiritual means, overcome (that is, make it bend under our agency). The concreteness of nekros and the abstractness of thanatos pose us different tasks that, as I’ve argued, both lead us to a dead end (pun intended): they become universal limits that, like with any universalisms, are fundamentally exclusionary. Following Povinelli and Mbembe, there are people who are living in “death-worlds” (Mbembe’s term) where the conditions of possibility to live are deeply entangled with dying. Then, nekros isn’t a clear limit after all and, I believe, it is within these unclear limits where the question of agency and the seeming lack of it become politicized. While Christianity makes nekros secondary and seemingly equalizes us in the face of death, it does this by removing one’s true agency from this world and connecting it to the world beyond this world (that is, universal faith serves as the life-force beyond death). Interestingly enough, one can detect echoes of this approach also in de Grey’s secular claims that it is death (and not, for example, capitalism) as a physical-yet-transcendental force that hinders us from actualizing our true potential to live a good life (like Christians choose Jesus as the only viable choice, de Grey chooses life). Once the limits of death-as-thanatos are located in the transcendental realm, our whole life becomes a death-rehearsal where the rules of this rehearsal are simply informed to us (by an angel, a prophet, Milton Friedman, etc.…).

So, how could we articulate these limits differently? As you might have noticed, thus far I’ve discussed death only in terms of how we humans might perceive it (concretely or abstractly). Going back to the beginning of this paper, however, this human perspective (if, in post-metaphysical fashion, we count the transcendent as part of this perspective) is becoming increasingly insufficient when trying to understand life and death on Earth. I think there is something deeply bizarre that Google has launched Calico in times when the awareness of global warming (as the unnerving manifestation of the Anthropocene) and its possibly detrimental ecological consequences set limits to the future of the entire planet. And, as if they would purposely want to push the paradox even further, the death that they are trying to cure is first and foremost human death: the immortality of plants, animals, and other non-human beings is completely absent from the discourse on infinite lifespans.

This primacy of curing human death finds its strange parallel in Jesus’ warning about the second death, the death of the soul. After all, our anthropocentric world is a world where we are the soul of the Earth, its wise guardians. Since a body devoid of soul is just a body (organic matter, nekros), its destruction does not really count; what counts is the infinity of the soul (transcendent spirit, non-matter). If this soul dies, we’re left with nothing but the apocalyptic burning hell that so often depicts the end of the world.

This deep entanglement of human finitude with the finitude of the world is probably one of the reasons why Immanuel Kant named his short text on the eschatological tendencies of human thought as “The End of All Things,” (1996) in which he noted that humans tend to expect the world to end because if something was created for a reason, this reason needs to be eventually fulfilled (that is, everything comes back to the One that created Many). He also argued that the end of the world remains ultimately incomprehensible to us, since it is beyond time and place, an ultimate limit to everything. Here, thanatos, the abstract death of humans, takes over “all things,” leaving nothing behind but celestial bodies whose infinity completes
the divine reason why matter existed in the first place. The world ends because we are destined to end.

So, we need to ask again, how could we articulate the limits that death poses to life without universalizing our sense of finitude? While I don’t have a clear answer to this question (this is perhaps something that we can tackle together in this event), I see it requires that we inhabit the very limits that we are facing here, that of, the countless materialities of nekros and the deeply non-human characteristics of thanatos. Following philosopher Eugene Thacker, one possible way of inhabiting these limits is to turn to mysticism; not as a way to unite oneself with the transcendent, but to acknowledge the finitude of the world-for-us, that is, acknowledge that the world bears agencies that are completely unknown to us and incompatible with our agencies. In order to be very clear about what he means (and I mean), let’s quote him at length:

If mysticism historically speaking aims for a total union of the division between self and world, then mysticism today would have to devolve upon the radical disjunction and indifference of self and world. If historical mysticism still had as its aims the subject’s experience, and as its highest principle that of God, then mysticism today – after the death of God – would be about the impossibility of experience, it would be about that which in shadows withdraws from any possible experience, and yet still makes its presence felt, through the periodic upheavals of weather, land, and matter. If historical mysticism is, in the last instance, theological, then mysticism today, a mysticism of the unhuman, would have to be, in the last instance, climatological. It is a kind of mysticism that can only be expressed in the dust of this planet. (Thacker, 2011, pp. 158-159)

Following Heraclitus, the “dust of this planet” is precisely “all things we see.” And, to line up Mbembe, this can also provide us with an approach to the politics of life and death quite different than what we have inherited from the philosophical discourse of modernity.

References


