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# Comprehension, Possibility and Death. The Justification of the Ontological Understanding of Death

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**Abstract**— If death is revealed to us, in our human experience, as a certainty, one of the decisive questions of explaining our human condition aims at questioning and justifying this certainty.

One of the authors who tackles this question is the German thinker, Martin Heidegger. According to him, death is understood and described, through a phenomenological and hermeneutical explanation, as an inner existential possibility as an ontological condition of the human being.

This understanding has received various criticisms from contemporary philosophers. One of these belongs to Bartrand Schumacher who sustains that the only ontological understanding of existence cannot provide a certainty of its own end. In this way, Schumacher opposes an ontic meaning to the Heideggerian ontological understanding of death.

In response to Schumacher's critics we propose to look more deeply at the concept of possibility as the key-concept in the Heidegger's ontological understanding of death.

**Keywords**—death; existential understanding; possibility

## INTRODUCTION

The fact that our existence in this world has an end looks like an indisputable certainty. The real problem appears when we want to justify this certainty. The whole of Martin Heidegger's<sup>1</sup> reflection on death, as it is

<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) was a German philosopher whose philosophical work is mostly associated with phenomenology and existentialism. His ideas have exerted a seminal influence on the development of contemporary European philosophy.

unfolded in his famous book *Being and Time* (1927), seems to arise within the horizon of the following question: *What gives me certainty that my existence has an end and that it is oriented to this end?* Through a laborious philosophical research, Heidegger attempts to provide an ontological solution for death's certainty. According to this, death is understood and described, through a phenomenological-hermeneutic explanation, as an inner existential possibility of the *Dasein*<sup>2</sup>: "As potentiality-for-Being, *Dasein* cannot outstrip the possibility of death. Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of *Dasein*. Thus death reveals itself as that possibility which is one's ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped. As such, death is something distinctively impending. Its existential possibility is based on the fact that *Dasein* is essentially disclosed to itself, and disclosed, indeed, as ahead-of-itself." [1] Consequently, the ground for the certainty that *Dasein* is a dying being, should be found by *Dasein* itself in its own existential data. Heidegger says it expressly: "In the center of these considerations we have the task of characterizing ontologically *Dasein*'s Being-at-an-end and of achieving an existential conception of death." [2]

They have also had an impact far beyond philosophy, for example in architectural theory, literary criticism, theology, psychotherapy, and cognitive sciences.

<sup>2</sup> *Dasein* is a German word that means "being there" or "presence". It is a fundamental concept in the existential ontology of Martin Heidegger. The German philosopher uses the expression *Dasein* to refer to the experience of being that is specific to human beings. Thus, *Dasein* is a form of being that is aware of and must confront such issues as personhood, mortality and the dilemma or paradox of living in relationship with other humans while being ultimately alone with oneself.

In others words, if we want to enlighten why we are dying, we have to question even our existence. Thus, we could emphasize Heidegger's ontological solution as following: The certainty of my death lies in my existence.

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Namely this claim of Heidegger's becomes the object of Bernard Schumacher's critique presented in his work *Death and Mortality in Contemporary Philosophy*. Schumacher's commentary on Heidegger's understanding of death is focused on the definition of death as the possibility of impossibility of Being, as Heidegger developed it in *Being and Time*. Especially, Schumacher aims to discuss the certainty of this possibility<sup>3</sup>. More precisely, Schumacher attempts to put in question the ontological solution provided by Heidegger for obtaining the certainty of 'authentic dying' by which Heidegger designs the ontological meaning of death and tries to correct this Heideggerian ontological solution by referring to an ontical analysis in connection with the intersubjectival experience of the death. The aim of Schumacher's critics on Heidegger existential understanding of death is to ask whether Heidegger really succeeds in deducing Being-towards-death and the certainty of existential "dying", which he posits as fundamental principles of the ego, from the sole basis of his ontology of temporality, without having recourse to a provincial (narrow) ontical analysis of death.

In this perspectives, our approach of Schumacher's commentary aims to question the reasonability of his critics of Heidegger's ontological solution for certainty of dying and to verify the pertinence of his own solution for this certainty settled on an ontical and intersubjectival acknowledge of the death.

Schumacher disagrees with Heidegger's ontological solution on the account that the existence of Dasein unfolded as Being-ahead-of-itself does not logically imply its end [2]. In others words, Schumacher sustains that the only ontological understanding of existence cannot provide a certainty of its own end. In this regard, Schumacher affirms: "the impossibility of deducing

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<sup>3</sup> Schumacher's critical approach concern the definition of death as the possibility of the impossibility of Being, as Martin Heidegger developed it in his work *Being and Time*. To do this, Schumacher introduces, first, the distinction between the ontical and the ontological levels; second, he shows that Heidegger maintains, along with Epicurus, that it is impossible to experience "my death" in the sense of "the state of death". In the third place, Schumacher describes how the philosopher of Freiburg affirms that one cannot know with certainty one's "authentic dying" through an analysis of someone else's death. Fourth, he discusses the solution that Heidegger had proposed for obtaining such certainty by referring to the notion of Being-towards-death.

Being-towards-the-end solely from an ontological analysis of Being-ahead-of-itself" [3].

Schumacher objects to Heidegger that his attempt to establish the certainty of 'authentic dying' is based solely upon his ontology of temporality (without having recourse to an ontical experience of another's death). Consequently, discussing Heidegger's ontological (onto-phenomenological) conception of the death, Schumacher arrives to affirm that the certainty of my own possibility of impossibility of being is conceivable only from experience of another's death.

In response, Schumacher insists that the certainty of my own death is conceivable only starting from the experience of another's death: "I maintain that this Being-towards-the-end is conceivable only starting from the experience of the Dasein's finitude, that is, from the experience of another's death" [4]. This solution can be recognized as an ontical one. The death of another human being provides the certainty of my own death. It should be mentioned that Schumacher's critique does not aim to surpass Heidegger's ontological standpoint opposing to it an ontical point of view, but rather to affirm the priority of the ontical certainty under the ontological certainty of human condition of mortality. In others words, Schumacher's claim is to ground the certainty of the possibility of my own death on the evidence of the reality of another's death. In this way, the ontical certitude seems to have the form of a logical necessity which can be expressed by the famous death's syllogism: "All human beings are mortal, I am a human being, therefore I am mortal". In this syllogism we encounter two certainties: "I am mortal" and "All human beings are mortal". The former correspond to the ontical certainty of my death and it is derived from the last. Thus, the ontical solution assumes the certainty of my death deducing its possibility from the evidence of the actuality of another's death.

On the other hand, Heidegger, in whose view the ontological level underlies the ontical level, intends to base the certainty of my possible death on the possibility as such. Precisely, Heidegger wants to find the certainty of Dasein's death not in the evidence of actuality of another's death, but rather even in the imminence of its own possibility of death. Thus, an ontical certainty appears as a mediate certainty: I acquire the certainty of the fact that I am a dying being through the evidence of the death of another being like me. Being mediate, the ontical certainty is the result of deduction. Contrary, the ontological certainty assumes the character of an immediate certainty. How is it possible to acquire immediate certainty of the possibility of death?

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If we remember Heidegger's famous sentence from &7 of the book *Being and Time* that "Higher than actuality is possibility", the problem of Heideggerian

certainty of Dasein's death could be reformulated as follows: *higher than the actuality of death is the possibility of death*. The question which arises now is: *what makes the possibility of death something higher than the actuality of death?* If we want to clarify this point, we should question namely the way in which the Dasein refers to the possibility as possibility. According to Heidegger, the ontological relation with the possibility is assured by the *comprehension*. In this regard, Heidegger is as explicit as possible: "The kind of Being which Dasein has, as potentiality-for-Being, lies existentially in understanding." [5] Thus, while Heidegger defines death as possibility, the certainty of death should be described in terms of *existential comprehension*.

According to Heidegger's ontological view, the certainty of the possibility of death is not something to be deduced from the actuality (in that case it would not be immediate) but rather something to be understood as possibility. The problem is not how can I logically deduce the certainty of my own death from the evidence of the others death, but how can I understand the certainty of my imminent death. In this way, we can say that the ontological certainty is not a certainty of "I know" (a formula proper to ontical certainty) but rather a certainty of "I understand". Consequently, the immediate relation with the ontological possibility of the death should be justified as the fact of existential comprehension. The comprehension, as a mode of being constitutive to Dasein, provides an ontological certainty as non-mediated certainty of possible death, avoiding the fact of another's death. Let's try to explain it. I cannot understand an existence (a Dasein) without understanding at the same time its understanding of itself, because the self-comprehension is a constitutive part of its being. Thus, the certainty of death as understanding of its possibility could not involve the fact of another Dasein's death, because it would furthestmost need the self-comprehension of the dead Dasein, i.e. the comprehension of itself as a dead Dasein. Therefore, if we want to find a certainty of the death of one being we should understand the manner in which this being understand itself its own death. Consequently, the certainty of human condition of mortality depends essentially on the understanding of my own being as a Being-towards-death.

Although, we have to ask what it means to understand death? Following Heidegger's thought we can say that to understand death means to assume it as an existential possibility, namely as the possibility of the impossibility of being: "Death, as possibility, gives Dasein nothing to be 'actualized', nothing which Dasein, as actual, could itself be. It is the possibility of the impossibility of every way of comporting oneself towards anything, of every way of existing" [6]. Heidegger designs this understanding of death in the mode of existential assuming of the possibility as 'anticipation' (*Vorlaufen*): "The ownmost, non-relational possibility, which is not to

be outstripped, is certain. The way to be certain of it is determined by the kind of truth which corresponds to it (disclosedness). The certain possibility of death, however, discloses Dasein as a possibility, but does so only in such a way that, in anticipating this possibility, Dasein makes this possibility possible for itself as its ownmost potentiality-for-Being. The possibility is disclosed because it is made possible in anticipation" [7]. Thus, the 'anticipation' of death can be described as assuming the possibility of death through comprehension and as comprehension. In this sens we find the following words in Heidegger's *Being and Time*: "Since anticipation of the possibility which is not to be outstripped discloses also all the possibilities which lie ahead of that possibility, this anticipation includes the possibility of taking the *whole* of Dasein in advance in an existentiell manner; that is to say, it includes the possibility of existing as a whole potentiality-for-being" [9]. Or, even more precisely in this way: "the authentic Being-towards-death is *anticipation*" [10].

If the possibility of death is found by comprehension as 'anticipation', we can continue to ask how we should understand the certainty of possibility? According to Heidegger, the certainty of possibility is the imminence. Thus, the certainty of possibility of death means that the death is an imminence for a Dasein. Precisely, Heidegger wants to find the certainty of Dasein's death not in the evidence of actuality of death, but rather as the imminence of possibility of death. Moreover, "when one has an understanding Being-towards-death - towards death as one's ownmost possibility-one's potentiality-for-Being becomes authentic and wholly transparent" [11]. In this perspective, the difference between evidence and imminence of death overlaps the difference between ontical and ontological certainty of our mortality.

Strictly speaking, the imminence is a possibility which cannot be surpassed by a Dasein. I can surpass the possibilities to travel through Asia, to have a child, to write a book. We can identify two kinds of the surpassing of possibilities: as accomplishment of possibility and as renunciation of possibility. But, death as the possibility which remains always ahead of Dasein is unsurpassable. This fact means that the surpassing of the death either in the form of accomplishment or in the mode of renunciation is impossible. It is easy to understand why the surpassing of the death as renunciation is impossible: we can renounce only to something in respect to which I can exert my will. But death does not lie within my power. More problematic seems to be the affirmation that the death is unsurpassable in the sense that it cannot be accomplished. If it is so, why does the death of another Dasein appear as something accomplished? The surpassing of the possibility of one trip is possible in the sense of its realization, because we can find ourselves after this realization. This is precisely that what is impossible in the case of death, namely this recovering of

itself is missed. On the account of this impossibility of self-recovering, the character of unsurpassable can be attributed to death. Thus, death represents a kind of unsurpassable possibility because the fact of self-recovering after death is also impossible.

Consequently, besides the meaning of the possibility of the impossibility of being, death can be furthermore described in terms of the impossible possibility. Moreover, being understood in this way, this impossibility of death as unsurpassable possibility seems to unfold the certainty of the possibility of death. In other words, the certainty of possibility of death could be found even in its inner impossibility to be accomplished or canceled.

### CONCLUSIONS

Shumacher bases his claim on Heidegger's characterization of Dasein as being ahead-of-itself, which accordingly does not logically imply the end of that being. One must then ground the certainty of the end of Dasein's being on the death of another person. Dasein then deduces the possibility of its own death from the deaths of others. This is problematic according to us for several reasons. First, according to Heidegger, the ontological level (or the level of general structures ) underlies the ontic (or the level of the specific and particular), so the certainty of my possible death should be based on the possibility as such. For Heidegger, the ontological relation with the possibility is assured by the comprehension. Possibility is higher than actuality for Heidegger. The death of another, as ontic or particular, is known through deductions, as it is an actual death. But, if we want to find a certainty of the death of one being we should understand the manner in which this being understand itself its own death. We can never understand how another Dasein understands itself in its own death. So to understand the possibility of one's own death, the actual death of another is no help. The 'anticipation' of death can be described as assuming the possibility of death through comprehension and as comprehension." When we anticipate death we see it as the certainty of the possibility of death, which means it is a possibility which cannot be surpassed by Dasein either in the form of accomplishment or in renunciation. The death of another Dasein seems to be accomplished. The certainty of the possibility of death can be found in the impossibility of death being accomplished by my own Dasein as I will not be able to 'recover' myself after death.[5]

Ontologically speaking, though, just as Dasein is[6] never without a world, Dasein is also never without others. Our comportment towards, or the way we relate to, others can be 'authentic,' where we free others for their possibilities, or 'inauthentic,' where we leap in for the other, and take care of their possibilities for them. Heidegger bases his characterization of the authentic on the inauthentic – by seeing the inauthentic way people

relate to one another and to death we can see the way authenticity lies latent in the everyday. In our ensnarement with the 'everyday' or the 'inauthentic' it is the very things we flee from and the way we cover them over that shows our concern. Being with others, or being with the 'they,' helps us flee from death, leading to the idea that 'one dies' or 'they' die, but it is really no one that dies. I would like to argue that this is inauthentic being-with-others, but being with others is not always a 'they.' In our most meaningful relationships it is rather a 'we.' Shumacher makes a point of saying that we can be shown the possibility of death by the loss of one of the people to whom we are closest. When one of the most integral people to us dies it is not a 'no one' who dies, or a 'they' who dies, but a very important someone, a someone we have a hard time conceiving of ourselves without. So in a sense, a 'we' which Dasein is part of, dies, and this seems to be part of Dasein's own experiential data. According to Heidegger, when we are authentically with others or with another, the other person frees Dasein for his or her possibilities. Death is a person's own-most possibility. So it seems that authentically being-with another in his or her death can free Dasein to the possibility of his or her death in a way that a strictly conceptual understanding of infinitude cannot, as we can conceptually know about death without really understanding or comprehending it. Authentic being-towards-death is a way of being that transcends the conceptual and completes Heidegger's project of finding the authentic from the inauthentic world of the everyday. Instead of assuming that we must have an authentic being-towards-death before we can have authentic being-with-others, perhaps we need to have authentic being-with-others before we can have authentic being-towards-death.

When we authentically anticipate death we see the possible as possible. An authentic being-with relationship with a person who dies can free us to that possibility.

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