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Acting on Death

Anna Chaltseva

PhD researcher;
Boğaziçi University,
Bebek, 34342 Beşiktaş, Istanbul;
Email: annachaltseva@gmail.com

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Abstract:
In this essay, I focus on the problem of death as both a contemporary phenomenon that is either very weakly accounted for or even vilified and as a constitutive part of one's experiential and decision-making abilities. I posit the need to somehow reintroduce death to our worldview as something acceptable. I investigate the overlapping of human-death and human-nature relationship in various strands of liberatory thinking, such as trans- and posthumanism and Russian cosmism. I subsequently turn to Andrei Platonov's literary work as a depiction of liberation-in-progress and its complications and to the philosophies of Val Plumwood and Freya Mathews, the representatives of nature-centered, ecological philosophy. The two accounts have a common point of departure but nevertheless propose substantially different perspectives as to how the relations within and with nature are constructed. I conclude that the adoption of a more laissez-faire stance toward death also means a more careful consideration of nature's value.

Keywords:
Death, nature, ecological philosophy, Andrei Platonov, Russian cosmism, Nikolai Fyodorov, Freya Mathews, Val Plumwood

"A free man thinks of death least of all things; and his wisdom is a meditation not of death but of life" (Spinoza 1677: Part IV, Proposition 68). On the surface of things, one could observe that people today tend to abide by Spinoza's teaching in vast numbers. Death is becoming stranger and stranger for us and our contemporaries. Although when it comes to its being frightening, death has not lost a bit of its power. Arguably, death has become all the more terrifying as we have grown more estranged from it, both practically and conceptually. The purpose of this text is to look at this estrangement as a practical and theoretical phenomenon. Its purpose is not to chastise our way of life today: reality always tends to be more complex than theories would have it and any broad philosophic or sociological analysis is always a generalization from which life in all its subtleties tends to deviate almost ubiquitously. However, as deviant as our behaviors are, they are defined to a significant extent by the trends captured by theories; after all, deviations are always deviations from something. In this text, I am going to inquire into the peculiarity of a modern person's relationship with death,[1] and justify why I find the rethinking of this relationship by either trans- and posthumanists or by certain strands of ecological philosophy inadequate to our current needs and aspirations. Eco-philosophy, I believe, can tell us a lot about death; as will become clear in the discussion that follows, one's view on nature is likely to be parallel with one's attitude toward death. How one perceives nature can often tell us a lot about her opinions on death and vice versa. For this reason, I shall talk here about nature as a useful counterpart of death.

It is not only scholars that have observed how people have been becoming more and more alienated from death over the last century. Most recently, this has been brought up by Dina Khapaeva in her book *The Celebration of Death in Contemporary Culture* (2017, 2020). Khapeva posits that in recent decades people in the West have experienced a profound disappointment in their existence as humans, which has led, among other things, to death being cast in tones of futility and general confusion. For example, she brings up the impressive diversity of funeral practices that have sprung up recently. Khapaeva believes that the inability to ascribe any unambiguous and publicly shared meaning to the death of a loved one or of oneself has made this diversity necessary so that individuals can, at least, be able to commit to the ritual by applying a personal touch to it (Khapaeva 2020: 88–98; Khapaeva 2017; for the specific case of Russia, see Lexin 2010; Sokolova 2011).

[1] The accent will be on a modern person of the broadly and somewhat intractably conceived "West."

In his landmark *The Hour of Our Death* (1981 [1977]), Philippe Ariès emphasizes the lack of common practices — conversational, ceremonial, and so on — related to death. It is clear that a person-death relationship has never been an easy one, but previously it could be articulated and thus a framework of intelligible and "shareable" thinking facilitates this relationship. Ariès shows this no longer to be the case:

> The first is a massive admission of defeat. We ignore the existence of a scandal that we have been unable to prevent; we act as if it did not exist, and thus mercilessly force the bereaved to say nothing. A heavy silence has fallen over the subject of death. When this silence is broken, as it sometimes is in America today, it is to reduce death to the insignificance of an ordinary event that is mentioned with feigned indifference. Either way, the result is the same: Neither the individual nor the community is strong enough to recognize the existence of death.
>
> And yet this attitude has not annihilated death or the fear of death. On the contrary, it has allowed the old savagery to creep back under the mask of medical technology. The death of the patient in the hospital, covered with tubes, is becoming a popular image, more terrifying than the *transi* or skeleton of macabre rhetoric. There seems to be a correlation between the "evacuation" of death, the last refuge of evil, and the return of this same death, no longer tame. This should not surprise us. The belief in evil was necessary to the taming of death; the disappearance of the belief has restored death to its savage state. (Ariès 1977: 850)

Ariès directly links the expulsion of death to the expulsion of evil from the contemporary's conceptual framework, which entails bad things being represented as, in principle, transient and deprived of their proper substance — bad things are not something, but rather a deviation from something. Ariès' point of view makes sense since it is quite difficult to give any *positive* account of death — a positive rather than conciliatory account. If one lacks the vocabulary for accommodating evil, then one will also lack the vocabulary for accommodating death. Ariès' account of the contemporary image of death (or rather of the absence thereof) is particularly intriguing in that he binds it together with the view of life and its constitutive elements that has also undergone important transformations (1977: 806–34). According to Ariès' monumental overview of the history of death perception, for a person of the Middle Ages, in stark contrast to a person of today, not only was the perspective

of death manifest and written into one's life in bold but the same went for things that surrounded them during their lifetime. Those things were appreciated in themselves, they were not supposed to indicate anything (like social or economic status), did not serve as a sign of something else — this admiration of and fascination with one's possessions made the genre of still life emerge (ibid.: 209). Strangely enough, the recoil of death we are witnessing today goes hand in hand with quite the opposite attitude with regard to anything individual, be it a thing, a person, or a moment; individual moments tend to be perceived as valuable *stages* in one's life but are rarely awed as "monuments" of life's beauty. This returns us to what this paragraph started with: if evil does not find its place in the conceptual framework that presents the world as something solid and positive, with bad events still being on an equal footing with good ones, then one can only frame their idea of life by breaking it down into stages of transient evil and equally transient good.

In this text, I will draw on these lines of thinking to demonstrate that death's exclusion from life as its integral part goes hand in hand with the sometimes conspicuous negligence of a wide array of practices that have up to today constituted a human's life; it seems that the ability to appreciate life "monumentally" and not dynamically also means to be strangely inert in the face of death. The tense relationship between humans and nature will then be examined as a milieu of death — this tension existing in all of the discourses that investigate either death or nature, notably in those that are evidently projects, that is, are unequivocally aimed at holistically reconstructing the existing social and economic order; a reconstruction that normally hinges upon the change occurring in humans' modus operandi broadly conceived. I shall first turn to the human enhancement discussion, focusing on trans- and posthumanist strands of thinking. I will do so for two reasons: first, I have no intention to argue that some particular enhancement, provided in circumstances X to a person Y is necessarily something bad; second, I have a problem with ideologies that claim to make enhancement *the* goal — ideologies that push to the extreme the logic of improvement, on which some things have already been said in this text and some others things will yet be said further. Trans- and posthumanism have the elimination of death as one of the main pillars of their project, so they will be the focus of my inquiry in the first part of the article. Then I will examine how death and nature are viewed and supposed to be dealt with in Russian cosmic philosophy, subsequently turning to Andrei Platonov's take on the matter in his literary work, which in important respects twists the

more straightforward understanding of the human-death-nature bond. Finally, I will move to Australian environmental philosophy, notably to Val Plumwood and Freya Mathews, who superficially lie in theoretical proximity but who can, on closer examination, be seen to stand at quite a distance to one another. Just like cosmists and transhumanists, the Australian authors aim at reconceptualizing the human-nature relationship, much more benevolently toward nature as a physical entity than the aforementioned projects — they are, in fact, nature-centered.

Human Beings, Posthumanism, and What a Theory Can and Cannot Do

From what has just been said, the readers may be tempted to conclude that they are being presented with an essentialist piece of nostalgia. That is quite wrong. My account is not so much essentialist as it is pragmatic, and if an account is pragmatic it can hardly be nostalgic. A pragmatic account is an account that combines both conservatism and experimentalism. A pragmatic account is conservative since it heavily relies on the state of affairs as it is, that is, if one feels hungry, one should probably eat and not invent ways to successfully doubt one's hunger [Peirce 1955: 228–29; see also Murphy 1990: 11].[2] A pragmatic account is experimentalist as it would only encourage trying out ways to satisfy hunger that tend to be frowned upon and repudiated by many — say, a pizza with pineapple, unless, of course, one has already established with certainty that she hates pineapple on pizza. So, a pragmatic account suggests that we should take the details of our current state of affairs seriously and do so in good faith — that is, not to ignore significant pieces of the picture in question for the sake of preserving some impressive theoretical edifice. If we act pragmatically, then we are happy to be innovative, but we would rather not invent things by escalating only one aspect of the state of affairs to immense proportions and then claim it answers to some pressing demands of ours. That said,

[2] See Pierce's famous "attack" on Descartes's universal doubt: "These prejudices [whatever Descartes thinks we believe uncritically] are not to be dispelled by a maxim, for they are things which it does not occur to us *can* be questioned. Hence this initial skepticism will be a mere self-deception, and not real doubt; and no one who follows the Cartesian method will never be satisfied until he has formally recovered all those beliefs which in form he has given up… The same formalism appears in the Cartesian criterion, which amounts to this: 'Whatever I am clearly convinced of, is true.' If I were really convinced I should have done with reasoning and should require no test of certainty." (Peirce 1955: 228–29; see also Murphy 1990: 11).

I hope to demonstrate here why transhumanism or posthumanism do, in fact, ignore a vast segment of our practices and are too hasty to sacrifice the multifaceted-ness of life to theoretical consistency.

The debate on human enhancement is intimidatingly extensive and I have no intention to cover it exhaustively. However, while some "sections" of this debate are preoccupied with finding rather fine distinctions as to what, for example, should count as treatment and what as enhancement, some lines of argument take quite extreme positions and, instead of recognizing the complexity of the problem faced, choose to make sweeping statements about the desirability of enhancement at its extreme.

Aiming at enhancing humans' natural capabilities, posthumanism is at its core in preparation for the ultimate transformation of humans into cyborgs.[3] For example, Kevin Warwick, professor at Coventry and Reading Universities, is on a mission to prepare humankind to life in a world where "robots, not humans, make all the important decisions" (2004). Its main inspiration seems to be relieving humankind from the scourge of physical and intellectual misery, thereby also exterminating hardship inflicted for social reasons. The goal is intuitively laudable; however, apart from this face-value benevolence, a couple of other things should not escape our attention: the fact that the view Warwick promotes is, first, the extreme version of the ideology of improvement, and second, a strange kind of fatalism, there being in their view no alternative to the era they are so eager to bring on.[4]

I would here dare to step forward with quite a strong hypothesis: this strive to eliminate death seems to be closely linked to the dwindling capacity to construe happiness in life on more sophisticated grounds than those of pleasure or pain, than those of "interest." This dwindling capacity in turn seems to hinge upon the convergence of a

[3] It is often argued (see, e.g., MacFarlane 2014; Ranisch 2014) that transhumanism does not insist upon the sidelining of the human-centered worldview, as posthumanism does; but since transhumanism is, essentially, about making people immortal — which does seem to be a radical instance of enhancement — the transhumanism-posthumanism frontier is but a matter of enthusiasm. I would say that the main difference of transhumanism from posthumanism is that the former does not fully appreciate its own consequences, while the latter does. Posthumanism, therefore, seems to be transhumanism theoretically perfected.

[4] See, e.g., Bostrom (2003). In fact, even sometimes critics of posthumanism subscribe to this deterministic outlook. For example, there is an argument, according to which there is no need to accelerate the advance of the new era, which, according to this opinion, will inevitably come; still, it is better to bide some time to negotiate our status as humans. See Agar (2013) and Robert and Baylis (2003).

lacking theoretical framework in which to construe evil as substantial and of the continuing encounters with this evil "outside" of theory. So, posthumanism is both a theoretical extension of the melioristic way of thinking so commonplace today and of the practice reflecting this way of thinking. Aya Kriman, one of the major contemporary theorists of posthumanism in Russia, says on the podcast "Inartificial Intelligence" *(Neiskusstvenny intellect)* that posthumanism is a friendly-for-all theoretical framework since it liberates humans from various labels associated with humanity and enables them to be whatever they want (*Neiskusstvenny intellect* 2020). However, people have so far managed to liberate themselves from many labels once associated with humanity without relying on a posthumanist line of thought: for example, we do not quite believe anymore that it is essential for a person to have children or family to be fully human, just as we do not believe that a woman should stay at home because it is a part of her "essence" as a female human. All this emancipation took place thanks to struggles in particular settings with activists appealing to specific reasons as to why certain views and practices should be forsaken. Emancipation enabled women to live diverse lives, yet not infinitely diverse lives — as they continued to exist in a space and time circumscribed and framed by particular events and disputes. All-inclusive posthumanism seems to include posthumans into nowhere, and I am not sure whether this is liberating or handicapping. Life conceived of as constant aspiration to improvement cannot but sever the individual from everything she has been caught up in *already*; from things that sort of dawned on her, that surrounded her without any prior asking as to her wish to be so surrounded.

Let us now examine in more detail the consequences of posthumanism being an extreme melioristic philosophy. Melioristic thinking conceives of improvement as being in principle never-ending — one's interest is always about something that is not yet here. So, on the one hand, satisfaction can be achieved only after the event; on the other, interest, since what I want has not yet been actualized, points to a flaw in the world's current configuration. The individual-acting-in-one's-interest finds herself both out of time and out of space, or, more precisely, she is bound to be in constant struggle against them. Satisfaction exists only insofar as it is put off again and again. This logic seems to poorly fit a comfortable life and it looks as if posthumanism comes to realize this — no improvement of humanity is improved enough. So, in order to escape this horror of "never the best," humanity needs, in fact, to cease to exist. And too bad for those who claim their interest has nothing to do with the project. Here we see how improvement teleology is joined by

determinism: an individual acting in her interest transpires to be unable to act. So, with all of posthumanism's proclaimed readiness to make radical decisions, it, in fact, strips people (or posthumans) from their decision-making ability.

In the end, posthumanism fails to avail the individual of her ability to act, but the problem is more complex than that. If posthumanism indeed could avail somebody of something, the absence of the possibility of actual actions within its framework would not be so bad. However, posthumanism does not confer any abilities on people, nor does it take them away, and trying to strip people of their ability to act would be very close to Cartesian doubt — a mental experiment quite short of making the purported change. Posthumanism's problem, I believe, concerns the fact that it is not the metaphilosophy it pretends to be,[5] but rather an extreme development of a very particular trend — and no particular trend can ever accommodate everybody. It seems to me that the debate on human enhancement has seen so many avid critics not so much because of new technological opportunities but because there has been a feeling among some people that, taking into account some trends of contemporary decision-making, it is likely that humanity will not be able to draw lines all that easily. A rather popular strand of argumentation against posthumanism is the so-called "authenticity" argument — that is, claiming that artificial enhancement is inauthentic in the sense that it does not allow individuals to acquire the very experience that makes the achievement valuable (see, e.g., Agar 2013; Kass 2003). This argument is directed not against any particular instance of enhancing, but is essentially an argument against the sweeping logic of enhancement when it becomes the guiding trend. Of course, it is impossible to turn history backward, nor is it possible or desirable to answer new questions by pretending they do not exist. Of course, it is quite possible to imagine a particular instance of enhancement to which the authenticity argument would not apply: a person might decide to enhance oneself in a certain way because she is now interested in doing X and for that she needs an enhancement. Just like deciding to move to another country can easily be authentic if you are interested in doing so, have a job there, and so on, in the same way, it can be authentic to enhance oneself. But there is a big difference in enhancing oneself for a reason strictly relevant to a person's proper practice and enhancing oneself because one should enhance oneself.

Posthumanism is not about justifying instances of enhancement — it is an ideology of enhancement. This ideology is prob-

[5] In the sense of inclusivity, the ability to accommodate everybody's interests.

lematic because it ends up ignoring important aspects of the human modus operandi such as their ability to realize their own projects born within certain contexts and modifying those very contexts and thus not alleviating the problems of modern life — associated largely with the improvement rush — but rather bringing them to their apogee. In the end, the human becomes the problem; the human and its problems change places. These are probably not quite the grounds upon which we would like to oppose death; it only exacerbates the problems we have, rendering it more intelligible and thus less frightening. Indeed, this melioristic way of thinking not only aspires to make dying impossible (which, on its own, could be a good thing). Dying is to such an extent out of the framework that it cannot be conceived of as having any meaning whatsoever; if you die, you die *elsewhere*. But what is also foreign to that mode of thinking are the many things in important respects discontinuous from the conception of interest and improvement and that we still cherish, although many people are struggling more and more with giving a conceptual account of their value.

Death as Object and as Optics

Disclaimer: there will now be a little bit of pathos, but, I guess, it is pretty relatable, even if one has grown somewhat repulsed at seeing these kind of passages in a philosophic and/or academic context. There are doings exhaustive and inexhaustible, where the state of affairs is both given and performed. It is given insofar as I already find myself immersed in the important and the valuable that seem to be strangely prescribed to me. On the other hand, this prescription is rendered actual via the ascription that I perform in recognizing this state of affairs as such. Any aspiration to the world I want to be in is only possible within and via the world where I am. Thus, any interest I might have is understood in terms of what I have already. In this case, interest is the manifestation of a fulfillment already achieved and can be maintained only insofar as this fulfillment persists. There is a fundamental common ground between the why and the what of desire. As a consequence, the status of the "essential" does not belong to the object of my interest, but to the space of interest itself.[6]

[6] A slightly more touching account of the pragmatic framework — I am placing it here to show that the framework itself has not been invented (in the sense explained above), but has been carefully extracted from within daily goings-about — that a going-about in which we eat when we are hungry and do not try to convince ourselves of our hunger's illusionary status.

Apparently, in the mode of thinking posthumanism exhibits, the fulfillment is not paid its due. In fact, once we understand that on the one hand posthumanism cannot accommodate death and mortality and wholeheartedly aims at fighting it, and on the other that it is also exclusive with regard to the successful conceptualization of certain practices, we might investigate what it is that is so peculiar about death that denying its legitimacy also means sidelining certain practices. This duo is by no means self-evident: even if we consider certain experiences as a vindication of things that I, at other moments, suffer and endure, it is not obvious how it demonstrates the necessity to preserve these latter in our lives. It seems, should we get rid of them, it would be all the easier to focus on what is really important. Death is surely a handicap, so why should we go on putting up with it?

Death, that is, the absence-of-presence, seems to be essential to the occurrence of the kind of experiences described above. What has been missing so far in the account of the experience's constitutive elements is their transition from the unapprehended to apprehended. However, that is exactly what distinguishes an experience from an absence thereof. We could shed light on this somewhat counterintuitive proposition by turning to an example. People who suspect themselves of knowing what kind of music they like sometimes find themselves in a funny situation: hearing a song, they are sure they *could* like it, could they just find the right moment for it. What is lacking here is the actual act of appreciation, it is only via this appreciation that I can make the song change its status of potentially likable to liked.

Thus, experience occurs via differentiating itself from non-experience. Moreover, experience cannot be preplanned or predicted. The experiential structure acquired by the world is always additional to its "hard" circumstances, open to universal description. Due to this "additional," extraneous to its own elements, character of experience, we can suggest that experience is nothing but a modification of its own conditions and circumstances. Since these "circumstances" are the same for both experience and nothing, there is always place for Martin Heidegger's (2006 [1951–52]: 148) gratitude, for being thankful to things that chose to emerge before us in a different light. This said, however bland and unworthwhile we may find non-experience, the occurrence of any particular experience is accompanied by the recognition of its ability to occur, or, consequently, to not have occurred.

However, I would like to emphasize that this "collaboration" of life and death is not happening as a simple contrast between one and the other: the fulfillment of plunging into presence/life is in no way analogous to the joy we experience when, for example, we enter an air-conditioned room during a heatwave. Death as optics

has nothing to do with life as optics. The latter does not include the former (or, at least, I can hardly see a way for us to actually observe it — such a conclusion seems to me a dishonest and thus unsatisfying way out) so that in this inclusion it would recognize death's necessity and value. What the latter does include is rather the knowledge that there could be no such optics as life, that there are points in a life's space where there is no life — here death is present not as world-forming optics but as an absence of its own presence. So, to claim that death is point blank indispensable for us to operate within life optics would probably be yet one more manifestation of an aspiration to suppress death optics and to think it out into theoretical certainty. One cannot make such a claim in good faith, however; it is curious how this apprehension of experience, in the face of the possibility for this experience never to have been, occurs each and every time an experience comes about. These experiences push us into a peculiar complacency, and, since these experiences are arguably life-constituting, the people who do not fall into this complacency from time to time but who, at the same time, constantly speak of making life better, are somewhat suspect.

This leads us to a hypothesis of the following sort: any act of conferring meaning that we perform, we perform in the face (turned at times in the opposite direction) of death. That is why one may feel a peculiar sort of ill will hidden within the benevolence of those seeking to relieve human beings from the burden of death and mortality.

Here I wish to remind my readers of an observation made above: discourses that choose to see death as something intervening, extraneous to human lives and their goals, thus attribute death to and parallel it with nature, to nature as something that has been for centuries regarded as an imperious force, foreign to human aspirations and desires (see, e.g., Ariès 1977: 609). So, although these anti-death projects are in their essence liberating, the way they were formulated and conceptualized made them dependent on nature as the negative Other; since this relationship of antagonism with regard to nature (as a locus of death) is still to be maintained, the discourse of liberation turns out to mean only exchanging one handicapping strand of representing the world for another, just as handicapping. We see instances of this in posthumanism: seeing nature as a force from which one is to shield with technology, fighting nature is granted such importance that it effectively becomes as important to combat humanity — the ominous power of nature is here mirrored by the doom of mortality.

Now, there is a blatant counterexample to posthumanist anti-humanism that exhibits a similar attitude toward nature and death — in

the line of thought I am now turning to, in Russian cosmism, the view of the human is, on the contrary, an optimistic one.

This optimism is evident in both the scientific and mystical strands of cosmism. In Nikolai Fyodorov's patrofication project, people are to harness technology and, relying on the Christian faith, have to get to know nature well enough in order to combat death, resurrect the dead, and stop reproducing, reproduction being only the other face of death (Masing-Delic 1992: 86). Vladimir Vernadsky's (1943) concept of the noosphere presupposes the human effort to counter nature-provoked negative phenomena. The same applies to Alexander Chizhevsky and Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, who both, in their own domains, worked on scientific projects that were essentially soteriological ones (see, e.g., Lytkin 2012). It is not an accident that all those scientists used to insist, and rightfully so, on their status not only as scientists but also of thinkers. Indeed, none of them stayed within the limits of science only, as demonstrated by Fyodorov's two-volume *Philosophy of the Common Task* (2008 [1906]), Vernadsky's article "Some Words About the Noosphere" (2005 [1943]), or Chizhevsky's experiments, clearly politically and socially motivated, on the Palace of the Soviets' ionization (Post Nauka 2015). And that is very curious indeed: these thinkers' optimism with regard to humankind is one as we had known it, that is to say, they steer clear of any scientism applied to human "inner" life (the term's awkwardness is fully acknowledged, but that seems to be the easiest way to refer to what was said above). What I have discussed already at some length here, when ascribing the contemporary estrangement from death to humans' relative departure from "disinterested" life practices, does not seem to apply here at all — look, for example, at Fyodorov's mix of technology and Christianity (1995b: 200), his patrofication's avid supporter (see, e.g., Masing-Delic 1992: 111), or Vladimir Solovyov with his ideas of Sophia and of Godmanhood (Solovyov 2021 [1878]). Moreover, if we look at Fyodorov closer, we will see that he is, in fact, rather anti-progressive. Here is one telling passage:

> Progress is nothing but production of dead things, accompanied by the marginalization of living people; it may be called a true, actual hell, whereas a museum, even if a paradise, is still a projective one, since it is about collating, in the guise of old things, of the dead people's souls. . . our time is deeply reverend to progress and its primary expression — the exhibition, i.e., to struggle, to marginalization and would, of course, like this marginalization to be there forever, together with progress, this process of perfecting things, perfecting that would never lead to a perfection that could eliminate the pain

> that accompanies all perfecting. And there is no way our time would be so defiant as to imagine the progress itself to be a part of history (and not history itself), to imagine this sepulture, the museum, to have become the place of the progress' victims in an epoch where struggle is replaced with harmony (mutual accord), with the unity in the task of restauration, that alone is capable of reconciling progressivists and conservatives. (Fyodorov 1995a: 370; my translation)

As noted above, Fyodorov not only wanted to resurrect the dead but also put an end to reproduction: the world his project envisaged was about preserving and, indeed, perpetuating the past. What makes this mix, eclectic to a contemporary eye, possible?

The distinction is probably with an optic that is applied to humans. This difference seems to lie in the attitude toward humans as a species destined for happiness and not for success. Humans, as Fyodorov (1995b) puts it, were supposed to be happy together and not be better individually. Thus, death is regarded not so much as a hindrance but as a suffering that has to be eliminated together with sickness and poverty. Suffering here is clearly seen as coming from the outside. So, once death is done away with, humans will still be able to live and prosper as they always did, but without intervals of suffering. It is not an accident that for Fyodorov (1995b), the immortality of the living and the resurrection of the dead go hand in hand with the Second Advent of Christ: humans should essentially stay the same, it is only death and suffering that will go away.

Here we can see that cosmists are pretty straightforward in their effort for salvation, maybe a little bit less straightforward than their communist colleagues, as Vernadsky's (1943) abovementioned article testifies in its dedication to the possible dangers of technological intervention into nature, but nevertheless straightforward enough. The road from a human being's intention for happiness to the happiness itself is in no way winding.

Now, although the acknowledgment of death's allegedly constitutive role in human fulfillment and happiness is missing from this account, it nevertheless seems to me curiously sympathy-provoking. The reason here is, maybe, the peculiar inconsistency of the cosmists' theory and of their practice and the priority that the latter takes over the former: a lesser scientist among them, Fyodorov, saw his philosophy primary as a recipe for action ("Philosophy of the Common *Task*") and its goals were best justified by their attainment and not by theory (Masing-Delic 1992: 81).

So, although their theory, as I am trying to demonstrate, is incomplete, their practice is more complete than their theory and so

spills over to and fills the latter. It is possibly due to the fact that their aspiration to immortality is framed in a pretty mortal fashion: the denial of death takes place only theoretically, but never practically. Life and death not as notions, but rather as world-forming optics, can well do without their eponymous notions in the mind of those within the optic. This seems to be the case with the cosmists who were, I believe, in their modus operandi human-, death- and nature-friendly. In fact, it is possible that had Fyodorov witnessed his project come true he would feel rather confused, since there would be no more "task," the *presence* of which, it seems, justified his project to a no lesser extent than the purpose assigned to it.

To uncover the cosmic project's actual optics, we can turn to writing that lies elsewhere within the genre and is thus spared strict theoretical elaboration: Andrei Platonov and his literary work.

Chevengur (1978; 2009 [1972]) and *The Foundation Pit* (1975 [1968]) are two spectacles of the curious tension between an action's motive and what this action actually amounts to. In both novels we can see people earnestly trying to bring about ultimate happiness onto the world — in the words of Zakhar Pavlovich, "the end of the world" (Platonov 1978 [1972]: 45). However, people's diligent efforts to eliminate suffering (including death) and bring about the reign of happiness and satisfaction never seem to be successful.

And it looks like this failure resides in the task's very essence. In *The Foundation Pit*, Prushevsky sees, as if in a dream, "white peaceful buildings, glowing with more light than there was in the air" (Platonov 1975 [1968]: 65); from this view, he feels "chagrin": "He was more comfortable feeling sorrow on the extinct terrestrial star. Alien and distant happiness aroused within him shame and anxiety. He would have preferred, without awareness of it, that the world, eternally under construction and never finished, resemble his own ruined life" (ibid.: 65). For Prushevsky, "life seemed good. . . when happiness seemed unattainable, when only trees whispered about it, and band music sang about it in the trade union park" (ibid.: 57).

In *Chevengur*, the village's handmade communism stays sterile and is often remarked to be rather "un-communist." However, when found, communism resides in the most unlikely places. When a woman's child dies and she retreats from the community's commiseration to spend some time alone with his dead body, Kopenkin exclaims: "your whole communism here in Chevengur is a dark place near the lady and that boy of hers," going on to say "how come the communism inside of me moves forward? Because Rosa [Luxembourg] and I have a profound task to do, even if all one hundred percent of her is dead" (Platonov 2009 [1972]: 253). Kopenkin's words are

made particularly salient by the translator, Anthony Olcott, due to a mistake in the translation; in fact, the translation says the opposite of what Platonov actually wrote. The translation goes: "How come the communism inside of me *never* moves forward?" (Platonov 1978 [1972]: 253). This mistake is a symptomatic one, in a sense it is not even a mistake. It looks like communism, that is, fulfillment and happiness, can only move forward when it does not, when it is not yet here and we always remain at a distance from it.

The role of melancholy in Platonov's prose has not escaped scholars. Artemy Magun, in whose work negativity is a central theme, emphasizes the subjectifying function of melancholy in Platonov. The builders of the new society are so uncomfortable in it because their activity is based on an existential experience of suffering and, in building this new society, they renounce themselves (Magun 2020: 368–87). To my mind, it is not only because of their activity's particular historical circumstances that Platonov's characters feel this way. Taking into account that it is probably they who felt most comfortable in the society they were building — if one compares them with the following generations — I would rather say that a certain melancholy is constitutive of acting as such. We can see that things curiously seem to shift a little bit more toward the "more communism (fulfillment) / less suffering" modus with the shift in Chevengur inhabitants' intentions. These intentions are no longer straightforward; they cease to be aimed directly at the aforementioned modus but are aimed instead at the little particles that constitute Chevengur's daily life (e.g., its ailing member Yakov Tytich's health). Happiness and fulfillment per se and thus their antipode, suffering and death per se, escape direct manipulation on the part of humans. Thus, the thing with death is not simply that it might be a constitutive part of fulfillment but also that it is an implicit one, blurred into the background. Happiness is not to be treated as an object in order to be attained and neither is death in its guise of one's suffering and solitude — since if one pursues happiness as an object so does she pursue the absence of death. So, nobody gets to deal with life and death as world-forming optics directly, as if with objects ready for a straightforward intended manipulation that cannot come out wrong. Once Chepurny believes Chevengur's communism to have set in officially, he is still at a loss as to how to find it not via a reasoning, but in an actual apprehension: "Even Chepurny, as he left the family circle of the transient woman could not clearly sense or see the communism in nocturnal Chevengur, even though communism now existed officially" (Platonov 1978 [1972]: 252). No "mobs that are moving for

the sake of existence" (Platonov 1975 [1968]: 86) will ever be able to actually exist.

Here the distinction between life and death as on the one hand notions and on the other as optics is pertinent. Platonov illustrates it thus: "By thought Dvanov intended not idea, but rather the pleasure of continually imagining beloved objects… Now he feared the expansion (in the sense of exhaustion) of his calm spiritual sufficiency and wished to find another, secondary idea by which he might live and which he might spend and use, leaving his main idea as an untouched reserve, dipping into it but rarely for his happiness" (Platonov 1978 [1972]: 283). So, a positive result can indeed be obtained in an action but only in case this action is but an expression of life optics, is performed "under the aegis" of it, serving as an intermediary between intention and life.

The subtlety here is that the optics cannot be acted upon since it is always there for us in advance. But within the optics, life and death as notions can be reflected upon. That is why suffering, as an object, may, of course, make one sad, but it does not make one lifeless and indifferent. That is to say, death (or rather mortality, inflicted by death) seen in the light of life optics is not frightening but is peculiarly valuable as either a possible or already accomplished ground for life experience, and for this reason it once again draws us into complacency and complicity with the possibility of the death event. It seems very hard indeed to fight with death per se and not exchange life optics for death optics. Even if one succeeds (and I clearly conceded the chance for the cosmists), they will probably be disappointed at the point of the ultimate success.[7]

Platonov's understanding of nature is very important in his take on death and suffering. For him, nature and death have a lot in common: Nature is analogous to death in the sense that it also constitutes a powerful obstacle in the way of human happiness, while simultaneously playing its part in the latter. In Platonov, nature usually comes on stage as a sign of failure and futility of all human enterprise. There is "miserable rain in nature" (Platonov 1975 [1968]: 86) accompanying Christ in his sad "going about"; to Alexander Dvanov, weather is "inhospitably damp" (Platonov 1978 [1972]: 191). At times nature becomes the locus of human death:

[7] Unless, of course, one plunges into some sort of nirvana as a result of the accomplishment. Note, however, that this is explicitly not the idea behind the cosmist project. For example, Fyodorov's project is not aimed at eliminating one's perception of a thing as a cause of suffering. On the contrary, he wishes to get rid of the things that cause suffering themselves. So, these things are taken objectively as the suffering's cause and not as causes of illusory perceptions.

Dvanov's father drowns himself in the lake because he was interested in death and could not wait to see what it was like to die; the death of a Red Army soldier is, contrary to his life, a natural phenomenon: "the reflection of the cloudy sky came vividly into his dead eyes, as though nature returned into a person as the life which had opposed it head-on left" (ibid.: 56).

But sometimes it seems as if nature could be tamed. Such taming occurs in *Chevengur* when the days are warm and sunny. Upon his arrival, Dvanov observes that "nature lacked its former alarm" (ibid.: 258). This pretense, however, shows itself to be excessive and not really in line with a person's fulfillment: "after two days of meadowland desolation and contemplation of the *counterrevolutionary blessings of nature,* Chepurny grew sadly wistful and turned for a mind to Karl Marx" (ibid.: 195; emphasis added). So, nature can be tamed, but, just like suffering, not in general but within particular interactions with it.

Therefore, nature, just like death, tends to put obstacles in the way of life's affirmation. But at the same time those obstacles reveal themselves as just the places of human acting, feeling, and thinking. Here again we face the irreducible interval between individual action and its aimed principle: for an action to succeed, the principle must still remain further along the road. Or, more precisely, it can be attained within an action, but rather as optics than as a solid reality able to exist without further participation. "Communism is the end of history and the end of time, for time runs only within nature, while within man there stands only melancholy" (ibid.: 273). If one puts an end to history and time, she cannot do so but artificially, it would be but wishful thinking, since we never started history intentionally in the first place.

Although the proletariat "does not admire nature, but rather destroys it with labor" (ibid.: 227), that is why this destruction is, if pursued coherently, a peculiar form of care, since nature will never be destroyed. It will instead be there as an antagonistic and foreign element, which, due to its very antagonistic nature, will in many of its manifestations be seen as valuable and worthy of respect and attention. Platonov's human is open to nature (it is no accident that *Chevengur*'s full title is *Chevengur. A Journey with an Open Heart*), both in the beauty of its frightening might and in its almost comrade-like manifestations of domesticated (or even simply individual) animals and trees (ibid.: 157).

This counterintuitive nature-friendliness we find in Platonov that is in fact a product of its actual hostility would hardly find sympathy on the part of those contemporary environmental philosophers in whose thinking nature is not one of the intervening entities that

humans run into and come to value as they try to navigate their lives, but is rather a self-sufficient object, a raison d'être of their philosophies. It is to them we are now going to turn.

Accommodating Action: Rethinking Death with Eco-philosophy?

Environmental philosophy has a special place in Australia and New Zealand, with these lands having their own history of human-nature relationship to reflect upon. It has developed over the decades from a mix of aboriginal activism and reflection and the Western tradition of thought, with representatives of the latter trying to process the trauma brought upon nature by the twenty-first-century humans and to reinvent contemporary civilization as more nature-friendly. We will now examine the views on the problem of the nature-human interaction of two contemporary Australian environmental philosophers who, while approaching the issue from a similar angle, come up with rather different ideas as to how and why a nature-friendly humanity should emerge. We shall look first at Val Plumwood, then at her colleague Freya Mathews. Neither of these scholars explicitly pose the problem of death; however, each implicitly provides a certain perspective on life that is of interest in the investigation of death.

Val Plumwood's philosophical motivation seems to be analogous to that standing behind trans- and posthumanism, that is, the twentieth-century disappointment in human's capacity to deal with things reasonably, with nature being in the front row of those "things." So, here again, although in a way completely opposite from that of trans-posthumanism, nature and humans are sharply divided, inasmuch as the latter have thought of themselves as within a European civilizational framework in the sense of a willing and somewhat unstraightforward creature. Plumwood wants to reinvent the human and blur the line of the human-nature opposition as much as possible.

Thus, Plumwood (1993: 41–69, 120–41; 2002: 38–62) sees her main task in the incapacitation of the mind/body and human/nature dichotomies. She does so via both demonstrating the pragmatic interdependence of humans and the natural world and appealing to the impoverishment of experience that we incur as a result of this dichotomic attitude. For her, the criterion of whether this or that being (or natural object) is to be assigned an ethical standing is not intrinsic value, which she claims to be just an extension of a restrictive anthropocentric ethics applied today. Instead, she appeals to what she calls "intentional recognition" (ibid.: 176). Intentional

recognition is owed to any creature or object we manage to encounter on our lifepaths. Applying this criterion demands practical openness rather than any carefully premeditated and more or less closed theory. For Plumwood, a viable ethic is that which is able "to take coincidence seriously" (ibid.: 228) and shows disregard toward rigid and all-encompassing concepts that ignore performative aspects of this open attitude, which come to light once it is adopted.

Plumwood's intentional recognition is a two-way street: beings encountered are to be considered as valuable not because they happened to be valuable to me, but because they *show* themselves as valuable. Thus, an encounter is simply a point in which their value, otherwise objective though not yet discovered, reveals itself to me. This seems to be a view quite close to the pragmatist approach I endorsed above; however, as we will soon see, it stops short of being true openness toward the various aspects of practice.

Plumwood views death as an integral part of human participation in the life of nature — in no way does she suggest fighting against it as the final point of human life. "Since these communities of nature live on after an individual's death, a satisfying form of continuity for the fully embedded person may be found in the mutually life-giving flow of the self upon death back into the larger life-giving other that is nature, the earth and its communities of life. Some may feel they need more: for me, this recycling is enough" (Plumwood 2002: 227). So, death is just one more manner of our participation in nature and is thus redeemed. But is it?

There is no question about the viability and applicability of Plumwood's account in *some* cases. Indeed, a life in close and intimate connection to nature is a fulfilling life; in fact, it could be miraculously fulfilling. However, this fulfillment may occur only once this way of life is *chosen* (which means that another lifestyle could be chosen as well, and this latter choice's grounds would be no less legitimate than the former's). Moreover, for this kind of choice not to be a sort of caprice would require a lot of effort and work. In spite of its putative passivity, this kind of life is, in its essence, active. And this does not escape Plumwood herself, as she speaks of the value and intentionality that we encounter and recognize. Obviously, encounter differs dramatically from recognition. To encounter means to find oneself in a situation that opens up possibilities for recognition. Then, if performed, recognition is performed by one. Contrary to how Plumwood portrays it, this choice is in no way automatic. Moreover, when this choice is actually made, it demonstrates unambiguously the impossibility of a human being naturally accepting her mortality, since the performance of recognition is an

action, and to act means to be able to endorse or reject; thus, death, a thing that simply annihilates one's ability to act, can hardly not cause an adverse reaction in the one contemplating this prospect.

It appears to me that Plumwood's theoretical depiction of the world of respect toward nature is strangely void of genuine respect. She makes a considerable effort to eliminate any basis for it whatsoever by proclaiming that the mere possession of a higher level of consciousness does not make human beings in any way superior to other species and does not give humans extra importance once the two clash. The openness of intentional recognition is indeed laudable and is something we all should practice. However, it is not clear how I can abstain from any further judgment once I have experienced intentional recognition. It seems like on this account my takeaway is limited to a memory of a fact and to the general confusion as to what I am supposed to do afterward. Such deprivation from the capacity of judgment is bound to put one in a limbo where she would wait, in a state of confused wonder, for another being to come into her presence, without ever being able to actually posit that an encounter *did* occur. If we want an encounter to actually occur, we need to write it into an intelligible framework, not because we are so sure this image is flawless, but because for an encounter to occur means to be written into it, to write itself into it.

In fact, Plumwood's judgment is flawless insofar as the grounds for *not* performing certain actions are concerned: a basic interaction with a dog or a cat is more than enough to find a reason not to beat it with a stick or even to feed it. However, our ability to only rely on interactions in our reasoning should not be extrapolated on each and every case of reasoning we perform. Certainly, making a difficult decision about one's life or crafting a policy are much more intellectual types of reasoning and cannot be ignored in any account of the "human condition." So, Plumwood starts out as a daring pragmatist but then quickly kicks back against her own approach.

Let us now move back a little and return to experience and the way it is structured. That experience, as discussed, is by no means passive, thus it does not occur in a resistance-free world. That is to say, the absorption of death into the fabric of experience is, in fact, an overcoming of death, just in a fashion proper to it. A relationship that is constructed within experience is positive toward death structurally (i.e., death serves as a constitutive element), but needs not be positive in terms of its content — the glorification of death or suffering per se is foreign to it. As in the above paragraph, the possibility of affirmation (here, of death's affirmation) means that objection is also possible. The choice of leaving death as it is

only happens because we choose to not remain passive in the face of things imposing themselves upon us.

Thus, it should be said that any theory proposing a particular way to conceive of the world and, within this conceptual relationship, to view death as acceptable, should make room for humans' ability to act — indeed, for the human need to act.

Freya Mathews seems to offer a more action-sensitive account of ecological awareness. She builds on a tradition known as Deep Ecology, providing a more nuanced, individual-attentive view on how one builds a fulfilling relationship with the world. In its initial version set forth by Arne Naess (1989 [1974]), Deep Ecology advocates for an intricate spiritual relationship between oneself and the Self, embodied in and derived from Nature. Once established, this relationship becomes both the field and the vehicle of self-realization, under the aegis of which the whole life of a particular individual is now to unfold.

Mathews comes in to significantly modify the concept of "self" as Naess presents it. For her, one need not forfeit one's selfhood to attain harmony with the environment, the world, the others. (Arguably though, Naess's original version of Deep Ecology seems to regard the self as an unswerving guarantor of the Self, via the practice of skepticism and abstention from formulating any rigid tenets of the philosophy in question. See Anker 1999.) The concept central for Mathews — cosmos — is conceived as an open, self-maintaining system upon which all other selves are predicated. To explain this second-grade selfhood, she invokes the metaphor of whirlpools on the water surface: a whirlpool can only exist as long as there is water, however it still has a structure and impulses of its own, unexpendable to other spots on the same surface (Mathews 1991: 74–75). Mathews grants selfhood to any being that is organized in such a way as to have self-perpetuation for its main objective — human beings, of course, fall into this category.

However, despite her joining Plumwood in privileging encounter over knowledge (Mathews 2003: 73–89),[8] for Mathews the world is far from being "flat." That is to say, Mathews does not expect humans to strive simply via immersion into the wonders of nature. It is only plants and animals for whom the ability of unconscious fulfillment is reserved. Humans, however, benefit from their awareness of themselves as inherently cultural beings. Culture is the milieu in which a human being comes out to oneself as a human being and a part of Nature. Drawing inspiration from Spinoza, Mathews proclaims the

[8] Here they are joining many people, myself included.

expression of a being's desire to maintain itself to be conatus, to strive. Thus, a being would always turn to what is good for it, even if this particular "benefit" accrues to it indirectly, that is, if it accrues to a larger self-maintaining system, of which the being in question is the "whirlpool." Thus, a human being is not only able, via culture, to draw inspiration from and admire nature and the world in their various manifestations but also to recognize the very fact of being inspired and of admiring as, in its turn, a source of inspiration and admiration. That is why, according to Mathews (1991: 105), human beings are endowed with the role most peculiar — in their striving they supersede the amount of self-maintaining joy assigned to them by nature, and contribute to the cosmic conatus by this "added value" of conscious value-recognition. Human beings essentially perform this affirmation of love and admiration toward the world, they make a judgment, they make a choice of which they are aware and this awareness, in turn, is productive from the point of view of action.

Mathews' account does not strip people from their ability to weigh one importance against the other. What she is attempting at is precisely to enlarge the possible bases upon which this weighing might take place. She is rightly critical of the shallow understanding of self-interest. However, according to her, our ability to discern and judge is not to be forfeited but refined. For Mathews, thinking and acting, as the forms of rendering things intelligible and thus important, remain to be the major loci of human existence.

Mathews' take on how the human-nature relationship is to be construed is much more "tolerant" with regard to possible "weaknesses" that humanity is infected with, such as the capacity to judge. While Plumwood seems to be preoccupied with the possibility that if human beings do not let go of their decision-making powers, some choices will inevitably run counter to the interests of Nature, Mathews still grants humankind quite the benefit of the doubt in this respect, since in her account this decision-making is a crucial manifestation of humans' participation in Nature and of their contribution to it. This means that, as long as the whole spectrum of things is properly taken into account, some actions that are putatively directed against Nature in this or that manifestation may still be justified and in accordance with the "grand scheme of things." It may be justified because this very act would reflect the human capacity to introduce modifications into the world as an expression of humans' ability to appreciate and to establish value relationships. The fact that this kind of action demands good faith (which, of course, does lack sometimes and, probably, even often so) does not in any way undermine this line of thinking.

Mathews' philosophy speaks of a world whose plethora of particles are recognized as potential value-valves, as loci of experience. However, in this world, experience is conceived as an action, insofar as by action we mean a conscious modification of given circumstances. Thus, experience is understood as a reappraisal of one's environment in a new light — although, for the sake of precision, we could say that acting *is* experience.

Mathews' theory can accommodate all the relevant aspects of human practice today. However, as, I believe, has not escaped the readers, on the theoretical level her account does not quite provide a satisfying response to the existence of death. She formulates a framework of life without explicitly answering the death question. Therefore, one could (rightly) observe that neither Mathews, nor I for that fact, provide an alternative view on death than, for example, the one held by posthumanism. Indeed, Mathews has no solution — what she does provide, though, is the grounds to not yet offer one. If, for example, someone now told me that in order to seamlessly sew death into my life I have to become a Christian or Buddhist nun, I would tell this person that she reversed the order of actions. As Philippe Ariès (1977) shows in his thousand-page work, there were not so much solutions but practices. Mathews is offering practices, which, at some point, may make us less conceptually clumsy when we approach the question. On the other hand, as the dual object/optics nature of the subject of death suggests, it might be that any relevant answer to this question can only be achieved within the dynamics of acting and experiencing.

Conclusion

This text's point of departure was my long-time bemusement and suspicious curiosity both toward those (or rather "those's" claims, since, fortunately, people claim a lot of things and often contradict themselves at the very same time they are saying something) who are determined to improve things and those having a special carefully designed place reserved for almost scheduled hardship. Death, on the one hand, is the ultimate deprivation people endure; on the other, it starts looking strangely acceptable once one dares to openly defy it, per se, as the overarching and impersonal phenomenon that it is. In this text, I have tried to come closer to a theoretical resolution of this conundrum of human practice.

Nature has a special relationship with death — the attitude to one often reflects the attitude to the other; and this is the case for all the strands of thinking brought up in this text. Since humans' relation

with nature and humans' relation with death are both sources of controversy, ambiguity, and confusion, it might be worth trying to get both problems straight in one shot. If the ways we think of death and nature are so alike, maybe, in fact, there is something else we speak of, when we bring death and nature up?

There seems to be an acutely perceived controversy we encounter while living, but one that demands a rather fine theoretical rendition: there are things we cannot act upon, but, if we want to act at all, it is these very things we have to act upon. Life and death are not only objects we seek to preserve or eliminate but are also the ways we feel toward things — as either tractable for us or as if aiming at excluding us. As optics that define the world we are in, they escape the direct manipulation we would like to put them to.

First, this means that the other optics, inactive in the here and now, is necessarily seen in the light of the other: death is reduced to object in the world of life; so is life in the world of death. That is to say, the death object (a thing that is suffered), and the death optic itself conceived as an object, is reduced to something not at all desolate and threatening, but is rather conceived of as something capable of accommodating our efforts to experience or combat it, and thus to appreciate it. We here fall into a strange complacency with death since we want to hold onto it as something that gives rise to things we can come to value; or, if, at other moments, what we appreciate via the life optics is not suffering but rather an unequivocal peaceful joy, in this case, we seem to be as complacent, since, if someone vigilant enough waves a death flag in our face, we would probably go as far as asking "so, what is the problem now?"

Second, the fact that the "how" we see takes priority over the "what" teaches us tolerance toward things we do not choose, moreover, here we learn that, in fact, our own acting, endorsing something or objecting to something, is permeated with this kind of thing — at this point, we are not that far from recognizing things that at times seem to *object to us* as essentially strongly bonded with us. As was said before, nature and death are conceived as external phenomena, antagonistic to our actions and welfare. If this division is maintained, it leads to a deficit both for humans and nature — for the simple reason that this division is about assigning interest and direction. Posthumanists make humans deficient since they are not good enough to combat nature; for Plumwood, humans should become more deficient, reject action, in order to get better at preserving nature. From neither account is it clear why technological and intellectual development (the first case) or nature (the second) are so important that all other relevant things should be sidelined on their behalf.

But once this division is breached, as happens in Mathews and what Platonov so impressively displays, we come to see that the relationship between what we value and what we fight are complicated; what we fight can be seen as valuable since our fighting it is an expression of life and the existence of this something does not really go against our will in principle (though at the particular moment of acting it does!), but rather constitutes a place where our will can be deployed. So, in the heat of the moment, we deal with particular manifestations of death and are too busy to fight death in principle — there are things more urgent to do. At other moments, as the death wave recedes, we contemplate it as the locus of experience and value — and thus are again too busy to combat death, per se. And even if we cede to the temptation, once we turn to life and death themselves, unmediated, we run into the fact that they escape our straightforward grip.

The reticence to act against death in principle should not mean endorsing and propagating suffering — just as a modification of nature in particular cases should not mean negating its value. I believe that in practice we should be a little bit like the cosmists — not let abstract theory (and any theory is prohibitively abstract when deployed in the wrong place) distract us from the moment's demands; but nor should we let the urgency become theoretically driven or, unlike the comparatively benign case of early *Chevengur*, we risk to end up living in a world where fulfillment exists only and exclusively "officially."

For sure, the account given above defends a totally unnecessary lifestyle. If there suddenly sprang up a world in which death did not exist, their total and complete difference from us would not be a problem for creatures there. The thing is, however, that we are not those creatures and thus there are things we must take into account if we wish to display our knowledge of what the word "account" even means. After all, reclaiming the ability to conceptualize death is not about being smart, death-wise, it is about doing justice to ourselves as acting beings.

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