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## Death, anxiety and metaphysical experience

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**ABSTRACT.** – The author focuses his attention on ancient philosophy in the sense of spiritual exercise of experience, of lived life, and introduces the theme of death, which according to Plato and other ancient philosophers represented the death of one's individuality to gain access to true thought and connect with the universality of the cosmic whole. Approaching modern philosophical thought, through Heidegger the author introduces the theme of anxiety as the inevitable viaticum to gain access to the 'pure being' of the human being or Dasein (being-there). Finally, leaning on the work of Elémire Zolla, the author attempts to identify a path that, in overcoming anxiety and 'losing' one's individuality of identity, can lead to identification with 'the being that simply is' in the world. This last passage recognises that mental disorders may emerge in lieu of possible enlightenment, especially if left to deal with the existential phenomenological experience alone.

*Key words:* being; unity; death; anxiety; metaphysical experience.

*'Around the time of Descartes, Pascal discovered the logic of the heart and compared it with the logic of calculating reason. The interior and the invisibility of the heart is not only more interior than the 'inside' of its calculated representation and therefore more invisible, but it embraces a wider reason than that of simply producible objects. In the invisible 'ultra-interiority' of the heart, man is driven first of all towards what must be loved: ancestors, the dead, infancy, the newborn.'*

Martin Heidegger

(at the conference commemorating Rainer Maria Rilke's 20th anniversary)

Death, anxiety, and metaphysical experience are states that can be merged and connected at various levels and in various ways. I will attempt to do this from a mainly philosophical perspective but will, at times, oscillate in a psychological-psychoanalytic observation vertex. Referring to Pierre Hadot's work (2001), we can say that historians distinguish between

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philosophical discourse (theory) and philosophy itself. Philosophical discourse was divided into three parts: logic, physics and ethics. Thus, we had the theory of logic, the theory of physics and the theory of morals. Philosophical theory in ancient philosophy was not 'Philosophy', or at least, did not exhaustively define it. Philosophy was at its origin an actual, concrete, experienced exercise: the exercise of logic, ethics and physics. True logic was not the pure theory of logic, but experienced, lived logic, the act of thinking correctly and *exercising* one's thinking accordingly in everyday life. Authentic ethics was not the theory of ethics, but ethics experienced, lived in life with others. True physics was not the theory of physics, but experienced, lived physics, a certain attitude with respect to the cosmos. This lived physics consisted above all in trying to see things, not from an anthropomorphic and egocentric perspective, but from the perspective of the universe and nature. The earth and everything human are an infinitesimal speck in infinitude. This experienced physics consisted, above all, in becoming aware that one is a part of the unitary Whole and that one must accept the course this Unity demands, and with which, since we are one of its parts, we should identify. In the history of philosophy, this experienced physics was a truly spiritual exercise (Hadot, 2002) and has always existed; it was physics but had spiritual value. We can use this fundamental distinction, *mutatis mutandis*, as a starting point to distinguish between, but also to connect psychoanalytic theory and clinical exercise.

The world can be understood scientifically using tools for measurement and exploration, through mathematical calculations but also through the naive use of perception. This duality may be better understood by thinking of Husserl's observation (1992), taken up by Merleau-Ponty (1945) for which theoretical physics accepts and proves that the earth moves, but, from one's perception, the earth is immobile. Well, it is precisely one's perception that forms the foundation of the life we live. It is in this perspective of perception that awareness of the presence of the world and of our belonging to it can be placed. Here, the philosopher's experience corresponds to that of the poet and artist, and could also correspond to that of the psychoanalyst. This exercise, as Bergson (1946) has shown, consists in overcoming our utilitarian perception of the world to reach a disinterested perception of it, not as a means to satisfy our interests, but simply for the fact that it is the world, as if it were to rise up before us for the first time. 'True philosophy', said Merleau-Ponty (1960), 'is relearning to see the world'.

This 'philosophical' attitude thus appears as a transformation of perception. Marcus Aurelius (Hadot, 1996) argues that perceiving things as foreign means transforming one's gaze so as to have the impression of seeing it for the first time, becoming free of habit and banality. It is an exercise aimed at making us overcome, once again, our particular partial point of view to make us see things and personal existence in a cosmic and universal

perspective, thus relocating ourselves in the immense event of the universe, but also, you could say, in the mystery of existence.

Let us consider our attitude, as psychoanalysts, to our patients' narration and their 'being' (Milanesi, 2022), or to Bion (1967), who advised approaching the patient 'without memory and desire', with a negative capacity which resembles *epochè* (Husserl, 1992), the inner monologue of certain writers, fluctuating attention, the possibility of oneiric encounters in the analytic field, where the invoking of reason to explain the world, the patient and patient-analyst interaction represent only noise, an incursion of that ruthless killer at work that Freud calls the death drive (Riva, 2022).

How could we conceive of a secular, spiritual lifestyle nowadays? We could think of it as a resolute intention to refine the quality of feelings, thoughts and actions to tend towards feeling, thinking and acting for the exclusive purpose of what engages us (Zolla, 2016) and not for any selfish or altruistic gain, both egocentric. The aim could be to lose our individualism and move towards an affirmation of the 'being as such'.

## On death

Plato argued that philosophy is the exercise of death (Plato, 1966). By that, he meant that the soul and the body need to be detached. This was not meant as the exercise of death, but as the exercise of the spiritual or intellectual life, of the life of thought; it meant finding a form of knowledge different from knowledge of the senses.

'Make every effort to keep the soul separate from the body, and get it used to collecting itself and withdrawing into itself away from every corporeal element, and to remain there, as far as possible, in the present life, as in the future, alone in itself, intent on this liberation from the body as if from chains' (ibid., p. 144).

For the soul, it means freeing itself, stripping itself of passions of the senses, in order to acquire independence of thought. In fact, we would be able to represent this spiritual exercise better if we understood it, again, as an effort to be free of the partial passionate point of view, that pertaining to the senses and rise to a universal point of view.

Plato, the Stoics, the Epicureans have always considered the exercise of death as an exercise of life (Hadot, 2001). Meditation or thought or the exercise of death is ultimately always an exercise of life and it is worth being clear that practicing dying does not mean torturing the body; it is, again, the exercise of dying to one's individuality, to one's passions, seeing things in a perspective of universality, which is different from what one may understand on reading Plato superficially. The rejection of the body, then, would be the rejection of that tiny object that we are, and, on closer inspection, it may not even be a rejection, but an awareness of the fact that we are only a small part

of the whole and that there are far more important things, values that are somehow absolute. This, however, does not imply a repulsion toward the body (Hadot, 2002).

What is striking about this profound consideration of Plato and of a considerable number of ancient philosophers, is the relative lack of phenomenological descriptions of the subjectual process on an existential level. It is as if the totality of the cognitive system of the phenomena described was anchored to '*ratio*' as the only viable way to explore the knowledge of the world, without any supplantation by intense emotional experiences.

It seems to me that Zolla (2016) and even earlier, Heidegger (1976), as we will see, go down other paths, based less on '*ratio*' and '*logos*', tending more towards the loss of individuality and the approach of the 'Unity of the Whole'. For Heidegger (1971), the essence of what has just been said lies in the idea that preempting or anticipating death is a condition of authentic existence. The consciousness of finitude must induce man to assume existence as it is. But Heidegger does not seek, as in ancient times, to eliminate the anxiety of death; as we shall see, his philosophy is a 'exercise of death': the authenticity of existence lies in the lucid projection of death, distinguishing being-towards-death from *meditatio mortis* (ibid). It may be that it is a feature of the modern world that has engaged thinkers such as Nietzsche (1995), Rilke (2017), Kierkegaard (2020) and Goethe (2013). In other words, the idea that the awareness of existing is linked to anxiety and that the value of life, as Goethe said, in reality, consists of trembling in the face of *Ungeheure* (roughly translated as the terrible, the prodigious or the monstrous); in any case, it is completely absent in Spinoza, Epicurus, the Stoics and Plato (Hadot, 2002). It is crucial to remember, however, that Plato (1966) in the Republic, presenting philosophy as an 'exercise of death' made an extremely important decision, of a very profound truth, which had an immense influence on Western philosophy (Hadot, 2001).

Thus writes Montaigne (1953, p.110) in one of his most famous essays: '*he who has learned to die, has unlearned to serve*'.

The thought of death impacts on the tone and level of our inner life promoting the possibility of its transformation. This philosophical and psycho-analytic theme is related to the idea of the infinite value of the present moment to be lived as if it were the first and the last. According to Platonic philosophy, it is not just a question of thinking about death, but of exercising death which, in reality, is an exercise of life, which leads to a conversion accomplished with the totality of the soul:

'As an eye which cannot be turned from darkness to light except by turning the whole body, at the same time, the faculty of apprehension must be detached from perishable things with the whole soul, until it becomes able to bear the sight of what 'is' [...] Education is the art of directing this eye of the soul' (Plato, 1966; Repubblica p. 343).

For our contemporaries, this devaluation of the sensible in favour of the intelligible is hardly acceptable as it was probably hardly acceptable for Plato's contemporaries (Hadot, 2002); but Heidegger's interpretation of Plato's thought can help make sense of it.

## On the unity of human beings and on thinking

### *Heidegger's interpretation of Plato's soul as tension toward being*

In the perception that occurs through the senses, writes Heidegger (1997), there is a seeing, a hearing, a tasting, but who sees and hears and tastes? It would be terrible if there were 'nobody' who could, at the same time, see, hear and smell; if this were not possible, we would witness a fragmentation of the entire human being, which would be torn apart and lacerated. The essence of man would be lost. If, on the other hand, there is 'someone' and, therefore, the unity of the human being exists, we should ask ourselves how this is possible. Heidegger suggests that this unity can be called *soul* and if we use this term, from the Greek *ψυχή*, *psychè*, we must understand it exactly as it is defined by the Greek terms of *ιδέα* (idea as 'unity' and as a certain 'thing seen') and we may not understand it in any other sense (ibid). In order to avoid a terrible dispersion in the various percepts, there should be something like an 'idea'. Plato, with the word *idea*, means something related to his most intimate philosophical questioning, something which opens and guides this questioning and defines the meaning of 'thinking' as 'learning through', 'taking one thing through the other'. There is a duplicity, in other words, a 'welcoming' of what is shown but also a 'questioning' in relation to something. The idea would be the means to grasp the essence of it; in a nutshell, to say that a certain thing is, for example, a book, is possible thanks to the idea of a book that allows us to grasp the essence of the book itself. Thinking, in this sense, thinks of the being of things, even without knowing it, and has little what to do with thinking as it is understood today, as a function of *ratio*; the latter is not at all thinking in the sense that Plato strives to define, in developing the doctrine of ideas, as the essence of thinking (ibid).

In short, the general meaning of the word *idea* can be understood as '*that which is sighted, precisely in its being sighted*' (ibid. p. 205). This seeing and such sight are not to be understood as the sensible seeing of eyes. This 'sight' and this alone can pick up on something that has a certain aspect, that is present in its unity in this or that way.

This unity does not arise from, with and through single perceptions, it is something that is already there. Plato says that this *unitary area* of possible apprehension of the percept which we always have before us, we can call

‘soul’. So, what is the soul? The ‘soul’ is what envisages this *unitary ambit* of apprehendability, which can perceive and which, in perceiving, assumes the percipient/percept relation. The nature of the soul, understood in this way, is characterised by relating to, it is extended towards; *the relationship is the soul itself* (ibid., p. 208). The soul is such by virtue of the fact that it only gives itself the ‘through’ in the form of organs through which we perceive everything that is generally perceptible. Only in this way can a physical body become a human body. The human body, which in one respect is a physical body, is such only because it identifies with a soul; the opposite is not true, that is, that a soul can be formed into a physical body. The soul does not stand on its own, with – and almost attached to it – a thread that descends to things. Soul is a name indicating a relationship with the being of things and in a sense, we could say that ‘the soul is the body and the body is soul’.

In interpreting Plato’s *Theaetetus*, Heidegger (1997) suggests imagining lying on the grass while looking at the blue sky and simultaneously hearing the song of a lark.

‘Color and sound are displayed through a ‘view’. We apprehend both. But what do we apprehend about both? Do we not apprehend of both, through the senses, that both ‘are’? For example, that one, with respect to the other, is always another, but with respect to itself, it is identical?’ (ibid., p. 216).

One, being, is a different object for the other, but for itself, it is the same object. Both are apprehended as ‘existent’ and on this basis, is it possible to apprehend color and sound as different and identical entities, and in this way, we can also apprehend being equal and unequal. Conversely, if both present to us as different, we have already apprehended both as ‘existent’, whether we know it or not. Therefore, something extra is to be learned, in a manner of speaking, and everything that can be built on being and non-being, being-identical and being-other, and so on, belongs to this extra; all the concrete characters which, implicitly, always presuppose ‘being’. In other words, if I say that a pillow is white, it is not the white that constitutes its being, but the ability to define it as white, which presupposes an earlier being.

This learning takes place through the soul, in its passage through itself. In order to apprehend being, non-being, equal being, otherness and the like, the soul passes through itself without using any psychic quality, it *is* in itself what the unitary ambit of learnability envisages. It is *in itself*, by its very nature, reaching towards something other, that may be given it, and it is continually, solely tensed; the soul is, therefore, ‘tension to being’ (ibid.).

For the first time, the exercise of pure thought is given a name by Plato that will be preserved throughout ancient tradition: ‘greatness of mind’. The greatness of mind is the fruit of the universality of thought that tends to think and to grasp the being of things, and all the speculative and contemplative work of the philosopher thus becomes a spiritual exercise to the extent that,

by elevating thought to the perspective of the whole, it is freed from the illusion of individuality (Hadot, 2002). Marcus Aurelius (1986, p. 134):

‘Do not just co-breathe the air around you any longer, but, from now on, co-think with a thought that is all embracing. Since the power of thought is no less diffuse everywhere, it insinuates no less into every being capable of letting it penetrate, than the air into one who is able to breathe it... an immense field will open up before you, since you embrace with your thought the totality of the universe, you traverse the eternity of duration.’

It is evidently on this level that we can say one dies to one’s individuality in order to access both the interiority of consciousness and the universality of the thought of the whole, which, I will attempt to show, is the acceptance of being.

### Being towards death

Why do we believe it important to investigate the existential meaning of death, the final moments of a human being?

My aim is to highlight the deeply evolutionary significance inherent in the process of discovering one’s death as a possible event.

Please note the following points: i) the meaning of ‘existence’ in the etymological sense is not equivalent to the meaning of ‘reality’ as has been maintained over the centuries by traditional ontology, based on the concept of ‘being as a simple presence’; existence means ‘possibility of being’; ii) the terms ‘Dasein’ and ‘human being’ are generally considered synonymous, likewise the terms ‘object’ and ‘entity’.

Dasein, as long as it is, brings with it a ‘not-yet’ which will be; a constant deficit, a ‘non-totally’ which only death puts an end to, and, in addition, Dasein has always existed in such a way that the not-yet *belongs* to it even if it has yet to *become*, that is, *be* what it is not yet (Heidegger 1971). A concrete example will make what we have said more comprehensible: the unripe fruit ‘moves towards’ ripening. But in this ripening process, what is not yet, is not gradually added as if it were something not present. The fruit itself moves towards ripening in such a way that this moving-towards is in the nature of being fruit. Whatever is added cannot, of itself, cancel the unripe state of the fruit if the fruit itself does not proceed toward its ripening. The not yet of the unripe state does not mean the absence of something extrinsic which, indifferent to the fruit, can simply be added to it. The not-yet constitutes the fruit in its particular state of being. The fruit itself, when ripening, *is* the unripe state. The not-yet is already included in its being, and not fortuitously, but as its constituent element. Similarly, Dasein, as long as it is, *is always, already its not-yet, its possibility of being insofar as it exists.*



Whatever constitutes 'non-totally' in the human being, one's permanent ahead-of-himself is not something which has not-yet-become-accessible, but a not yet that Dasein, insofar as it is the entity that it is, always has to be (ibid.).

Can we say that death is the end of Dasein? Yes, but we must clarify some basic points. The death of Dasein cannot be characterized by an ending that is valid for other objects connoted as mere presences; it is not a dissolution, a coming to completion. The death of a human being is not adequately delineated by any of these ways of ending.

Dasein, in the same way that, as long as it is, *is* already constantly its not-yet, *is* also therefore always already its end. The ending proper of death does not mean a being at the end of Dasein, but a *being-for-the-end* on the part of this entity. Death is a way of being that Dasein assumes as soon as it is. Human beings, at birth, are already old enough to die and this phenomenon is placed on an existential level (ibid.).

Death is by no means something not yet accomplished, it is not an ultimate deficit, but, is first and foremost, a looming existential imminence, *the way of being* in which the human being *is* for-his-death.

Every Dasein must face death alone. To the extent that death 'is', it is always essentially 'my' death which must be faced alone. In this case what is at stake for Dasein is being purely and simply in the world. Death is, for Dasein, the possibility of no-longer-being there (in an existential sense) and since, in this case, Dasein is incumbent on itself, it defers *completely* to the more real able-to be. Dasein does not create this possibility except occasionally in the course of its life. If Dasein exists, it is also already 'thrown' into this possibility. Dasein tends to have no explicit or even theoretical 'knowledge' that it is consigned to death and that it therefore is part of its being-in-the-world. *The being thrown into death reveals itself to him in the most original and penetrating way in the emotional state of anxiety* (ibid.).

Anxiety in the face of death is therefore anxiety 'before' one's own being possible. One's own being possible can also be generated in the face of other experiences, such as for example a successful mirroring of oneself which may generate a distressing circle of discovery of one's being in the world; in fact, human beings become distressed to discover their being in the world and their 'pure and simple being possible' which is also inevitably the 'being towards one's own death'. Anxiety should not be confused with fear of death; anxiety is by no means a depressive, contingent, casual emotional state of the individual. Since anxiety is the basic emotional condition of Dasein, it is Dasein's way into its existence as a being thrown for its own end into one's own, authentic being possible. Thus, the difference becomes clearer between being-towards-death as opposed to simply passing, pure ceasing to live, and finally the 'lived experience' of death.

Being-for-the-end is not the result of sudden, occasional deliberation,



but I would re-assert that it is an essential part of being in the world of Dasein, and is revealed thanks to anxiety (ibid). The observation that, in fact, many men do not know anything about death in this sense cannot be adduced as proof that being-towards-death does not belong universally to human beings, but rather serves as proof of the fact that Dasein, generally speaking, conceals this experience by fleeing from it and taking refuge in an inauthentic life, trivialising anxiety as a fear and weakness that should not be in the nature of a self-confident human being (Heidegger, 1976).

### The metaphysical experience

Heidegger has shown us that through anxiety, our own being possible is realised, the very real acceptance of one's being in the world and, therefore, the pure and simple 'being possible' of human beings. We could also say: 'finding oneself in one's own being which simply is'. Taking Elémire Zolla's work (2016) it is interesting to explore the possible processuality of this anxiety and with it the becoming of the pure and simple being that simply is, if one can reach it.

When perceiving and the percept, the subject and the object, merge and absorb each other, what can be defined as a 'metaphysical experience' (ibid) takes place. This experience is well represented in poetry, for example it is the sea into which Leopardi of the *Infinite* and the *Solitary Life* (2016) gently sinks:

'Then I sit so motionless I almost lose myself, and forget the world: and it seems to me my limbs are so still, no spirit or feeling can ever stir them again, and their primal calm is merged with the silence of the place.'

'Metaphysical experience', a name that should not be confused with the thing, is a statement that Elémire Zolla (2016) adopts to define this 'mistaking of the I with the being', which Leopardi allows us to glimpse in existence, thanks to his admirable poetic synthesis.

The metaphysical experience is achievable only by disengaging from everything that normally keeps us bound to an existence based on the reality of the *ego cogito*, to get to dwell ec-statically in the truth of being, where simplicity reigns (Heidegger, 1976), and where the 'unified' human being can affirm 'I am', but no longer 'I am this', 'I am that'; not because he has suffered a loss, on the contrary, he has achieved vertiginous growth, in fact, when 'I am' can become 'I am being', we witness the flowing of contact with simple and pure being, deconstructing and allowing thought to enter into a questioning capable of attempting and allowing oneself be involved in the 'thing' of thought, abandoning the fear of crashing into 'the thing' itself and sinking: there is an abyss between 'philosophising' about sinking

and letting our thoughts actually sink (ivi, p. 75). At the same time, the subject-object dichotomy is overcome to go beyond it, to where the sensations of the world exist, but the individual does not suffer them, does not oppose them, simply notices how they emerge and disappear, without intervening with feelings and judgments, without contaminating them with gossip and comments (Zolla, 2016);

‘And the truth of being will perhaps acquire language and that thought will be its expression and at that point perhaps language will become ‘silence’ and not a hasty enunciator of chatter’ (Heidegger, 1976).

Plotinus writes (1997, p. 285):

‘You were already the whole, but, since something extra has been added to you over the whole, you have become less than the whole by the addition. This addition was not positive (after all, what can you add to something that is all?), it was entirely negative. Whoever becomes someone is no longer the whole; it adds a negation to it. And this lasts until the negation is discarded. Therefore, you grow by removing all that is other from the whole: if you remove it, the whole will be present to you... It needs to come, to be present. If it is not present, it is because you have distanced yourself from it. Distancing yourself does not mean leaving to go elsewhere, since it is there; but means turning away from it, when it is present’.

And further:

‘We must not think of a particular form, we must strip the soul of a particular form, discard all things. Then, in a momentary flash, the metamorphosis of the ego takes place: ‘then the seer no longer sees his object, because, in that instant, he no longer distinguishes himself from it; he no longer represents two things, but somehow has become something else, no longer itself or to itself but one with one, as the centre of a circle coincides with another centre’ (ivi, p. 435).

We notice a kind of explosion and total loss of individuality.

When we identify with the cosmos, we overcome the innate abstract terror that lies at the root of our being, we eradicate the torment that arises from feeling surrounded by a universal, indistinct, terrifying disorientation, and sense of alienness. Only by becoming one with the cosmos can we emerge from anxiety. Under penalty of falling into psychiatric diagnoses or, even more simplistically, attributing the cause of this torment to an unsatisfied need for love; it should be noted that the only adequate love is the one that erases the person, in some respects canceling them, and fuses them with the cosmos (Zolla, 2016).

I believe that in these reflections, we can intuit the seed of a projection/possible becoming from the Heideggerian ‘thrown-ness’ and from the anxiety related to contact with one’s pure and simple being.

Let us now consider other cultures and other worlds.

Our conventions exclude from the norm the habit of entering different psychic states, such as the *trans* that allows the Balinese to penetrate her flesh with *Kriss* without causing bleeding, or as happens in some exercises in southern India, where one can be pierced without pain and walk freely on burning embers (ibid.). Most of our certainties and convictions topple if we observe certain phenomena, such as the idea that there is a clear and objective demarcation between health and disease. If anything, we can define physical health as the state of the body that allows the psyche to open up to a pure awareness of being, and the psyche, in turn, can be said to enjoy health when it spontaneously transforms into such awareness. Jung (2004) noted that Buddhists favor hallucinations, making them complex works of art, in order to break the yoke of an illusory 'world-consistent sanity' and argued that even mental dissociations and schizoid states are part of meditation.

From the perspective of a metaphysical experience, mental illness is often a sign that one has dared to raise profound questions about being in the world without fully realising it, without identifying the right formulation. Illness is like a shadow with the light behind it; the madman dared to knock on the door that opens onto the higher levels of being and pays for the audacity of having glimpsed them unprepared. The distance of metaphysical experience from ordinary life can terrify, or perhaps, as Heidegger (1971) claims, always terrifies through a sense of anxiety. When the possible illuminative sense of obsessions and compulsions is revealed, the disease is seen as a sequence of signifiers from which the signified is subtracted and which consequently opens the doors to the 'significance' that lies before the opposition signifier/signified. Yes, because the condition of presence to one's pure and simple being is the place of 'significance', the base from which man begins to 'signify' the world by giving expression to being (Milanesi, 2022), thus building his own way of being in the world, his '*identity construct*', behind which a pure and simple being is concealed, whose contact terrifies because it is the other side of the coin of 'nothingness', in its turn, the source of being. Therefore, any phenomenal experience of contact at this level exposes one to the terror of 'nothingness', the terror of not existing. Thus, psychosis may be seen as an access into this level of being and therefore an unconscious request for knowledge that forces patients and those around them to face questions that daily life normally suffocates and hides.

Some speak of 'Implicit Psychosis' or 'White Psychosis' (Green, 1992) founded on 'psychic structures' oriented towards a state of hyper-normalization, a constitutive and ineliminable state in humans which is comparable to anxiety. The 'mad' alternative is that the madman is out there (Riva, 2022).

Non-dualistic truth looks like chaos, and defenses are erected to hide it from view. When a fissure opens in the defences and metaphysical reality is

glimpsed beyond them, one rushes to fill the crack with an ideology or a delirium. But for an instant something is seen, a revelation is conferred, a window is opened. The paranoid who the instant intuit their rigid ‘world system’, or the schizophrenics who for the first time abandon themselves to their hallucinations, knowing that it is ‘their own delirium’, can experience the thrill of revelation, like Dostoevsky’s auras during his seizures (Zolla, 2016). If they are subsequently cured, the truth emerges as the motionless pillar of stillness, also the source of a possible subversion, Unity. Are mental disorders perhaps attempts to investigate unity? The apathy of the schizophrenic could be a paradoxical reaction to the painful issue of one’s openness to the sway of the outside world. Paranoia would guarantee a recursive circularity to explain the universe. Delirium would bring order to the chaos of existence. The patient who perceives his mental processes as alien and feels influenced and invaded by thoughts that appear to be extraneous forces cast into his inner world, is one step away from the enlightenment where mental processes become objects among other objects in the external world (ibid.). The loss of a sense of identity is a step towards metaphysical experience: it could be avoided by addressing the anxiety and disorientation that accompany it. The estrangement typical of certain mental illnesses could be an excellent starting point for the metaphysical experience. Could it not be that contractures or hysterical convulsions anaesthetise the body as in the Indian exercises mentioned above? All they lack is the metaphysical goal. Schizophrenia discloses profound metaphysical truths, such as the fact that Unity confers unity to the smallest parts of the existent (ibid.); things do not exist for themselves but by virtue of the unity that ontologically precedes them and is projected onto them (Heidegger taught us that the being of things precedes the simply present thing, which is the *conditio sine qua non* of the existence of simple presence itself) (Milanesi, 2022). If these stimuli are unfamiliar, patients are overcome with dismay when, for example, they see the face in front of them not as a complete and expressive totality but see only an eye, a tuft of hair, a lobe, a pore, and are astonished, inert, or tremble with dread at those details that loom so large and are overwhelming. (Zolla, 2016).

At this point it might be useful to trace a connection between what has been said so far on an existential phenomenological level and what we can call ‘psychological thought’. Perhaps psychology, in the sense of psychotherapeutic treatment, or treatment through words, came into existence when philosophy at a certain point in its historical evolution abandoned its ancient origins and, from being the exercise of life and spiritual exercise, it became the profession of teaching and the theoretical systematization of the world, losing interest in life itself to become only theoretical knowledge and has settled on a terrain that, day by day, is eroded by the sciences. Philosophy has therefore evaded the question that human beings have

always sought an answer to, the question of the meaning of one's being in the world, of one's existence, of one's being born, growing up, working, producing, consuming, growing old and dying; a life cycle that often flows by without identifying or following any profound or recognizable trace of oneself, and which leads one to say: 'I have chosen to live like this' and 'I have given expression to this with my life'. We all suffer from this failure and perhaps through suffering we may discover on opening onto the problematisation of the meaning of one's existence; it is a problematisation to which we would naturally be inclined given that we have a conscience, but instead we live unthinking lives which we do not pay the slightest attention to, dulling our presence to ourselves through work and the escape routes that society, in a thousand ways, provides, or we are left to suffer the pain of an unanswered question.

In the first case, the question is interred and no one is concerned with it, also because we, in the first place, are not concerned with it; work, consumption, family, sex, football, TV, Facebook, Instagram *etc.*, and life passes by without too many questions.

In the second case, when the question of meaning will not leave us in peace and keeps returning, explicitly or through various crises, we find a possible answer through so-called 'psychological thinking', which, in my opinion, may be classified and categorised as psychopathology.

So, either one goes to the pharmacy for an antidepressant - naturally only on medical advice - or one goes into psychotherapy, either to adapt to the world we live in, since one cannot change the world, or to find oneself and find what is causing emotional pain, respectively.

No one knows the answer to the 'meaning of life' but it is one thing not to have answers, it is quite another to move further and further from the real problem whose roots are precisely in this great existential dilemma into which we could venture, at the very least recognizing it as the origin of our manifest discomfort; and it is another to move concretely towards a resolution of the discomfort itself and symptomatologic suffering, considered as annoying obstacles to a 'happy life' instead of manifestations of deeper meanings.

'Psychological thought' proposes intervention through the use of various forms of psychotherapy. Interventions vary from proposals for adaptation (cognitivism) urging us to adjust our ideas and reduce our cognitive dissonances in order to create more in harmony in the context we live in, to proposals for the adaptation of our conduct (behavioralism) which follow the same direction as above in preferring adjustment; this is regardless of one's feelings and ideas and experiences which, if discordant, are tolerated only if confined to the private sphere and cultivated as an eccentricity, only provided they have no public repercussions. Thus we have a paradox in which authenticity, being oneself, knowing oneself, which the ancient oracle of

Delphi indicated as the way to health of the soul, is seen as pathological, just as being self-centered or being unable to adapt, problems to which behaviorism and cognitivism are able to give concrete answers to through the acquisition of techniques that reposition man at the level of a *performance* required by society. It therefore appears evident that 'being oneself' and not giving up the specificity of one's identity is pathological. In fact, both cognitivism and behaviorism, as conformity psychologies, assume compliance as their ideal of health, which, from an existential point of view, is the typical trait of disease. For their part, people take on board the models on which cognitivism and behaviorism are based and reject any in-depth individuating study that is not functional to the world they live in.

Psychoanalysis, or perhaps we should say 'psychoanalyses', which are also expressions of 'psychological thought', move in the direction of investigating oneself, one's deepest self. In a nutshell, this is accomplished by drawing attention to the extent to which we have tricked ourselves into seeking compromises between our inalienable desires, and the limits and demands made on us from the outside which we cannot flee from, retracing, in a way, the story of our progressive, deep, implicit adaptive movements. If analysis works well, it sheds light on this aspect, but it also sheds light on what we do not want or cannot accept about ourselves, on what 'compensates' for our weaknesses that we never wanted to consider, and also, finally, on what is a true 'expression' of ourselves that we have not yet had the courage to express. If well conducted, all psychotherapies achieve their goal, whether with patients who prefer not to analyse themselves deeply, and are satisfied with finding a suitable way to adapt, whether with those who wish to delve more deeply into themselves independently of adaptation. In any case, the more deeply one delves into self-knowledge, however much one may have adapted to society and have overcome this or that symptomatic pain, the more one comes into contact with the very essence of pain that can never disappear but can only be 'accepted' because it is bound to the meaning of one's existence, of one's 'being thrown into the world'. For those who touch this deep level there is no remedy in the pharmacy and perhaps not even in psychotherapies and psychoanalyses. None of us inhabit the world as such, rather, we inhabit 'our own vision' of the world; Being-there, in fact, is 'being in the world'. Further, a sense of our existence cannot be found if we do not first clarify a vision of the world which is responsible for our way of thinking and acting, of rejoicing and suffering. Can psychotherapy tackle this? Can this be extracted from between the lines of a request for psychotherapeutic help? Certainly, such a request can manifest itself in infinite forms and should not be listed and classified in psychopathology in a nosographic sense. Someone who makes this request, which is, on close inspection, most of mankind, is not 'sick', but is looking for meaning. It would be interesting to study the possible evo-



lution of psychotherapies (in particular those psychoanalytically oriented) towards forms of 'existential treatment'. This paper would like to be a first step in this direction.

Similarly, it would be interesting to undertake a study of psychopathology from a phenomenological and existential point of view. I have only touched on this aspect here. A huge task. Therefore, I will simply reiterate my belief that the root of all distress is bound to one's 'being in the world', the origin of the very sense of being.

Therefore, so that psychopathology (also nosographic psychopathology) and a phenomenological-existential vision do not remain confined to being different and irreconcilable hermeneutics, we must clearly focus on the fact that there is an underlying sense of being in psychopathology (classical psychopathology) which is mis-understood as the very essence of psychopathology, whereas what we call psychopathology, as this paper argues, is in its essence an existential malaise which is as yet unrecognised as such.

### Wakefulness and sleep

On the divide between wakefulness and sleep, upon waking or in drowsiness, a trace of the sleeping being hovers above both wakefulness and dreaming; this torpor persists or is heralded as an indeterminate, unified, universal being, beyond identification and without either positive or negative emotion, and yet it has consistency, a 'how' rather than a 'something'. So, there it is; the metaphysical experience can also be viewed as the flow of this experience that is somehow present in sleep without dreams (*ibid.*).

On close inspection, wakefulness is permeated with drowsiness; it gazes discontinuously on a background of sleep. Normal work and inspired work are both performed in a dreamy, enraptured, 'sleepy' state. When we are in this state of apparent non-presence, where are we? One can be efficient while being, apparently, elsewhere, lucid beyond reflected attention. In this enthusiastic impetus, one could say that the most intense vigil matches the deepest sleep. One could exclaim: 'I have lost the notion of space and time', a commonplace of lovers, of sportsmen during a *performance*, of artists, perhaps even of the psychoanalyst who is about to capture a patient's essence, or anyone who is so engrossed in what they are doing that they are like sleepwalkers caught in ecstatic rapture. The term ecstatic or 'standing outside' for Heidegger (1971) is the meaning of existence, *the ex-sistere* of human life in its 'ecstatic' nature, exposed to its 'not yet', which is to say, that in ecstasy one is in a state of 'possibility of being'. Could this 'I of sleep' be the ideal identity? Freeing ourselves from the idea that self-awareness is superior to abandonment and possibility? On the other hand, being precedes consciousness ontologically; how many times have we found our-

selves, as psychoanalysts in sessions, but also in everyday life, once the noises of reason have been removed, immersed in oneiric thoughts in wakefulness (Bion, 1967) which always, distant and faint, accompany us constitutively as a possibility of being.

‘In the metaphysical experience there is a being that slightly transcends the state of deep sleep which it asymptotically approaches’ (Zolla, 2016; p. 47).

Those who meditate, eyes closed, immersed in an experience where everything and nothing merge, are not dissimilar to those who venerate nature, enraptured, eyes wide with ‘ecstasy’ at the landscape, swallowed up, nullified in space. In both cases, identification with a daily way of being ceases, and as one gradually dis-identifies with it, it becomes difficult to distinguish interiority or, the opposite, a projection into exteriority, or to say whether objects are located inside or outside the epidermis. The adoration of nature is a metaphysical experience where, although there is a certain separation from nature, there is no difference in meaning between getting lost in interior or exterior space (ibid.). In turning their attention and moving towards objects that are in the so-called external world, human beings do not leave the inner sphere in which they are initially enclosed; Dasein, by virtue of its primary way of being, is already always ‘outside’ the object it encounters in a world that is already always open. Pausing at an unknown entity does not mean abandoning the internal sphere, since, even being outside at the object, Dasein is clearly inside; that is, it exists as a being in the world it knows. And, again, the acquisition of the known is not a return to the ‘enclosure’ of consciousness with its conquered prey, since even in learning, preserving and retaining, the knowing human being, *the Dasein, remains outside (ex-sistere)* (Heidegger, 1971).

The fusion can be described as immersion in interiority or as losing oneself in external nature, and the subject is able to experience it as a state of blissful and dreamy stillness, or as a challenging goal, or in other ways, but in and of itself it is a pure, naked presence.

‘Whose presence? A naked presence is not an entity entrenched in itself, in its separateness: it is everyone and no one. Presence to whom? To another naked presence, which mirrors it and is mirrored by it, and which is the totality of being, whose body is the universe, whose creation is nature’ (Zolla, 2016; p. 48).

It would be interesting to explore how far this idea of presence differs from the concept of ‘presence’ in Michele Minolli’s work (2015), but this is not the place; here, I will simply say that presence, in the Minollian sense, keeps its referent solidly in the I-Subject (ibid.), perhaps for fear of ‘losing it’, but in so doing, does not open the way to becoming in the being which simply is, and which dwells outside the dichotomous distinction of subject

and object and beyond an understanding based on *logos* and *ratio*. Perhaps we should talk of ‘presence to being’ and not ‘presence to the self’.

This cursory sketch deserves a more detailed study. Here, we could usefully mention a temporal point of view on presence, a ‘temporal presence’. One can stand before a simple presence just for the sake of standing before it, nothing more; this phenomenon would be ‘curiosity’ in its most basic sense. To be sure, this attraction towards something new is a pull towards something hitherto unseen, in such a way that the presence (in the sense of present time) seeks to avoid any possible expectations. In this sense, curiosity refers, completely inauthentically, to the ‘possibility of being’ (which implicitly and essentially has future reference) so that a ‘possibility’ is not expected, but in the longing a ‘false presence’ is created based on the expectation of something, but something that we continually flee from (Heidegger, 1971).

There is, therefore, a modification of the expectation in continuous pursuit, a modification which takes place in fleeting present time; this is the temporal existential condition of dispersion where one is never oneself. A sort of dispersive inability to pause or linger that gets tangled up in itself and assumes the characteristic of never-being-still.

‘This mode of present is diametrically opposed to the ‘moment’. In that, Dasein is everywhere and nowhere. This, on the other hand, brings existence into the situation and unlocks the authentic Da (There)...’ (ivi, p. 650).

‘Curiosity is stimulated not by the endless expanse of what we have not yet seen, but by a projective form of temporalisation belonging to the present that springs forth and flees...’ (ivi, p. 651).

Thrown into being-towards-death, Dasein reacts by fleeing in the face of this being thrown. The present springs forth fleeing from its authentic future and from its having been authentic. In other words, being overwhelmed by being-thrown in the world, one loses oneself in the ‘world’; a phenomenon I would call ‘flight into the present’.

‘The present, which is an existential sense of overwhelming involvement, for its part never reaches any other ecstatic horizon, unless, in deciding, it recovers from perdition and can, staying in the moment, unlock its situation and with it the original ‘borderline-case’ of being-towards-death’ (ivi, p. 651 652).

It would be interesting in another work to investigate the clinical repercussions of this phenomenon of flight in the present, and in particular, the significance of the ‘here and now’ of the ‘moments’ of a patient-analyst session.

Could metaphysical experience be the acknowledgment of Dasein, which, let us not forget, is always in relation to one’s being, to one’s being in the world as the original condition of the thrown-ness taken in the pres-

ent? In metaphysical experience, we overcome anxiety which, by ‘disorienting’, unlocks Dasein, and lays it bare before its own being in the world as such.

I spoke earlier of the ‘unconscious identity construct’ that is, the result of the stabilisation of a way of being and living in the world following the meanings assigned to Heidegger’s thrown-ness and from nothingness. However, identity is not to be understood as something ultimate that can constitute an essence, it is always a question of ‘content’ of which we can say that ‘it is mine, but it is not me’. There is being, and there is ‘the being which is’ (the soul which is tension towards being);

JG Fichte (Zolla, 2016) began his lessons by saying:

‘Gentlemen, look at the wall!’. And after a pause: ‘gentlemen, look at yourselves looking at the wall!’

Some of the listeners, acting as disembodied witnesses, may have been surprised and have thought: ‘Who is looking at the wall?’. We could say that once the being that is, the soul in its tension towards being, has obtained detachment, rest follows; this state whose referent is being, pure witness to the fact that it ‘is’, through its mere presence acts, but, at the ‘unconscious identity construct’ level, anxious terror may be unleashed (instead of calm) for the imminence of the loss of identity itself. If there is insufficient stability, that distance will not be borne and will become intolerable. The soul, within the body and the self, repeats incessantly: ‘I am not this body, this identity, this content’. These moods, feelings, images, thoughts are outside me, ‘they are mine, they are not me’; this simple statement of truth will lead to the separation of the soul (of the being that is) from the content, which includes, as I said, that same unconscious identity.

It is easy to imagine in these experiences which herald the loss of one’s individuality, that psychopathology would ascribe to them the phenomena of de-realisation or de-personalisation, misrepresenting the deep meanings of being-in-the-world which evidently assume different tones and dimensions if studied from a phenomenological and existential perspective.

## Conclusions

There is a procedural passage in existence: the vehicle is anxiety, and the shores through which it moves are the world closed in on itself, and the ‘universal’ world. In the first world, the other is in terms of the self; in the second world, the other is, initially, for the self, and subsequently, in the processuality, is lost, just as the self is lost, in the sense that there is no longer a referent that ‘loses or holds’ and located at the ‘centre’, but both are part of a whole that ‘is’; the other is lost together with the self, and both

strangers finding themselves, are free to be.

One can ‘disengage’ or ‘emancipate oneself’ from the other using ‘formulas’ that imply false ‘separations’, where one is always ‘in terms’ of the other, by opposition or by removal or a split. Another possibility is keeping the other in a prospect of the Whole and of the universal being, as the ancient philosophers themselves indicated.

To do this, however, it is necessary to put a stop to the tendency to seek certainty in the presence of the other, of the object, but giving up ‘believing’ in objects implies abandoning subjectivity, abandoning the ‘unconscious identity construct’. Only by discarding our form and our name will we attain the truth, as Shakespeare (1997) explained in Richard II:

‘whatever I am,  
neither me nor anyone who is only a man  
will ever be satisfied with anything, until  
he is appeased by being nothing’.

or Edmond Jabès (1989):

‘I had to understand him, follow him step by step, in his wandering as a beggar and to succeed, I had to erase my life with the stroke of a pen; so long as listening requires self-abandonment to its advantage.  
-Renunciation of oneself?  
-The uniform erasure of body and soul. Reaching for nothing.  
-To dissolve into nothing and disappear forever?  
- Count on nothing. Finally being nobody.  
Finding the origin which is emptiness. From the beginning.  
Nothing is the key. It opens onto the unknown.  
Oh nothing, before the sun.  
Birth of man’.

Even Heidegger thinks that being is the other face of nothing, considering man guilty in its foundation as *being the null foundation of a nullity* (Heidegger, 1971); being and nothingness coincide on this original level, just as absolute individuality and absolute universality coincide in the ‘monad’ of metaphysical experience, which cannot be ‘touched’ by any word. Words are signifiers that can denote certain meanings but not the signification itself which, as we have said, is more original and is located beyond the opposition of signified and signifier (Zolla, 2016).

It is the signified that brings the thing to our notice and pulls it from nothingness drawing on the significance inherent in being thrown; Dasein is, or signifies, and the things come to life and so ‘they are’ in their turn, and everything that is situated at a lesser level than being is unreal in proportion.

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