

Finitude, Aging and Subjectivity*

Finitude, Envelhecimento e Subjetividade

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this article is to analyze the relationship of man with death and its deployment in subjectivity and in aging. With this intent, we first present a brief history of the vision of death over time and after an analysis of the process of aging and dying according to the logic of biopolitical management. With death and old age increasingly distant from the horizons of life, subjectivity has been weakened. Thus, incorporating these aspects as part of existence constitutes one of the challenges to the thought as well as to the building of the self.

Keywords: Death; Subjectivity; Aging.

RESUMO: *O objetivo deste trabalho é analisar a relação do homem com a morte e seus desdobramentos na subjetividade e no envelhecimento. Para tanto, recorreu-se a um breve histórico sobre a visão da morte ao longo dos tempos e realizou-se uma análise sobre o processo de envelhecer e morrer de acordo com a lógica de gestão biopolítica. Com a morte e a velhice cada vez mais afastadas dos horizontes da vida, a subjetividade tem sido enfraquecida. Assim, incorporar esses aspectos como parte da existência constitui um dos desafios tanto para o pensamento quanto para a construção de si.*

Palavras-chave: *Morte; Subjetividade; Envelhecimento.*

* Traduction by Sérgio Henrique Rocha Batista.

Living, aging and dying. Verbs so intrinsically linked to human existence, so characteristic of the subject, so "ours", so interconnected. Verbs that evoke the most different meanings and that drive man to act in the world in order to print a mark on the shortness of the finite existence.

Brazilian poet Manuel Bandeira, exalting everyday miracles that life produces, tells us that everything in the world is a miracle, except Death, a lady often unwanted and cursed; however, she is celebrated in the verses of the poet who says: "blessed death, which is the end of all miracles!". This notion of finitude of things that death brings with it is what ultimately gives meaning to our actions in the world. From the finite miracles of life, we engender our subjectivity and our aging process.

However, even though death is something so intrinsic to life, even if it is a certainty that follows us throughout our existence, this is a topic that arouses fears and represents the limit of the pretensions of modern man to get absolute control over their destiny. The persistent struggle of man against death makes him seek tirelessly means to banish it from his universe, or at least weaken it and delay its fateful worldly incursions, like the process of aging.

In this paper, our purpose is to approach the theme of finitude, analyzing the relationship between man and death in its crossings with aging and subjectivity in the contemporary scenario. Therefore, we begin with a brief history of man and death in the first part of the article. Then, we shall present a discussion, through the lens of biopolitics strategy, about the detachment of the individual with finitude and aging. Finally, we shall propose to take death as a tool, an analyzer of life and aging as something that, far from undermining the individual, can enhance the construction of human subjectivity process.

The subjectivity engendered by finitude: brief history of man's relationship with death

Understanding the process of subjectivity, i.e. the building of the self in contemporaneity, is an exercise in analysis that can be done by many ways and possibilities, like studying human relationships, family organization, affections, sexualities, or even by the wanderings and flows or stops and fixings of men. You can

also think of this condition from the ways in which the subject relates to the various institutions around them, such as health, the judiciary system, education, work, and many others.

These possibilities of analyzing hodiern man that we have referred to bring within them the sign of life and dynamism. Building oneself as an individual involves performing various movements throughout existence, like establishing relationships, changing physical, social and emotional spaces or moving and mobilizing oneself in time and space. However, in this article, we shall take the construction of subjectivity and the aging process beginning for another sign: death. Popularly associated with the end of everything, the disappearance of man and "eternal rest", we propose to think death as a device, a trigger and producer of procedures, mobilities and concerns.

The analysis of expressions and forms of death that man uses to deal with their dead is an important indicator of the position of a particular society against "the establishment of their own collective identity, to the extent that such integration with death and the relationship with it is one of the most important elements for the formation of a common cultural tradition" (Giacoaia, 2005, p.15).

The identity of a people is built not only through the use of cultural products such as music, legends, folklore and gastronomy, among others, but also by the relationships of men with the figure of Death. It is interesting to note how this phenomenon establishes different practices throughout the ages and societies, with rich material for examining cultures that edify themselves using finitude as its raw material.

When we go through the literature dealing with the historical relationship of man with death, a fact inevitably draws our attention: the longstanding preoccupation with the burial of the dead is found even in our primitive ancestors. According to Edgar Morin (1997), in the process of individuation, *Homo faber* is made prominent by the use of tools as one of the ways of access to the construction of the history of civilization. With such tools, albeit rudimentary, this genus *Homo* intervenes in the world, branding it through actions that seek to appropriate of what exists in the worldly space in order to adapt it to their needs.

However, it is worth noting that in these primeval traces of civilization there is another characteristic of the *Homo* genus which, as pointed out by Morin (1997, p.23), can be seen as a

sentimental passport which is not subject to any methodology, any classification, any explanation, a passport without a visa, but that contains a touching revelation: the grave, i.e., the concern for the dead, i.e., the concern with death.

The author, based on several anthropological studies, says that since the Neanderthals, signs of burial of the dead were found, sometimes in groups. This shows us that such behavior would not be only instinctive but also a form of human thought about the phenomenon of death. Over the lifeless bodies were deposited several stones which mainly covered the face and head. At a later period, it was placed next to the corpses their weapons and also food. One cannot say, as Morin warns us, if this ritual of depositing gravestones was a way to protect the dead from animals or to prevent his return to life, but it is certain that the figure of the corpse aroused feelings which materialized in practice and funeral rites, where the dead were not simply abandoned without, at least, a trace of a rite.

In ancient civilizations is also possible to find some clues about the care for the dead. In ancient Mesopotamia, burial rituals consisted of interring the bodies with such zeal that it was "carefully accompanied of all the more distinctive features of their personal and family identities, such as their belongings, insignia and personal objects, their clothing and even their favorite foods" (Giacchia, 2005, p.15). Death was seen as a passage and there was concern that nothing could hinder the passage of the deceased into the other world. The cemeteries were located near the cities, working as a communication link between the living and the dead. According to Giacchia (2005), burials and cemeteries had the function of delimiting the boundaries between the living world and the world of death, leaving the latter to underground.

Ancient Hindu rituals, on the other hand, did not consist of burials, but rather of cremations. There was not a concern to preserve the identity of the body, as in the case of Mesopotamian civilizations that built mausoleums for their dead, but to consume the body into ashes, which were thrown in the wind and water. This ritual "marked the full dissolution of earthly existence, the purge of all your sins, with individual life itself meaning the laceration of the unit, the conflict, crime and transgression, which must be expiated by death" (Giacchia, 2005, p.16).

The historical study of Phillippe Ariès (1990), about the relation of man and death, also helps us understand some of its transformations time. Looking at the death

during the Middle Ages, the author tells us that she was a constant presence in daily time, represented in the works of macabre art and in the dissemination of lessons about the last moments. Understood as the final opportunity to repent and achieve eternal life, the moment of death was a kind of theatrical event attended by several actors (family, children, employees, religious) to watch the last breath and the repentance of sins committed during life, often duly paid through indulgences, extreme unction and Holy Masses.

According to the author, it is during Renaissance that appears to begin a small detachment of this relationship that seemed so close and intimate in the Middle Ages. You can see some signs of that slight remoteness from the ideas about the moment of death, the sermons on this topic and even the construction of cemeteries. For religious people in Renaissance, the dedication to eternal life in the celestial paradise should be a lifetime project and not just a deathbed worry, the staging of the agony and repentance of sins. For Catholics and Protestants of the time, the death was not the hideous and macabre caricature like seen in the late Middle Ages and its presence in the human world began to expand beyond the last moment and the last breath.

In this sense, the reflection around death, especially during sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, would be the object of the thought of a life and not just in front of or near the moment of death itself. According to Ariès (1990, p.329), "the art of dying is replaced by the art of living. Nothing happens in the dying room. Everything, however, is distributed by the time of life and in every day of this life".

Learning to live life with the eyes of death, which was what should guide human existence. Therefore, several treaties on Catholic and Protestant religiosity were disseminated in Renaissance centuries that taught the living to meditate about death, bringing a new look to both life and finitude, in which the insights into the fragility of life would not let the man immersed in worldly illusions and ephemeral pleasures. Death loses its repulsive, grotesque character and life becomes a preparation for the last moment.

Since Renaissance the theme of the importance of the moment of death begins to take a lower value, in which the "bittersweet meditation about the fragile life and its course" (Ariès, 1990, p.3447) is gaining more space in the human existence of modern man. This change in attitude of the medieval feeling towards death and life causes what the author calls a "sense of reticence" in relation to the time of death, i.e., a discrete

distance before a once so privileged occasion in medieval culture. In the words of the historian: "Death was then replaced by general mortality, that is, the feeling of death, once concentrated in the historical reality of his time, from now on will be diluted in the whole mass of life and thus loses its intensity" (Ariès, 1990, p.345). Thus death, despite being part of human existence, was a distant moment of life, and very easy to forget.

This divide between Renaissance man and death can be exemplified with the change in the location of cemeteries in the sixteenth, seventeenth and, more intensely, in the eighteenth centuries. With the Council of Trent, which occurred between 1545 and 1563, the Catholic Church has expanded its field of activity which, in turn, demanded an expansion of physical space as well. Thus, cemeteries were built outside the specific environment of the church where normally the bodies were buried. In the process, we can see what Ariès (1990) calls "topographical separation" between rich and poor even in death: the cemeteries located adjacent to or near religious buildings were intended to the rich; the remote and suburban areas were meant for the poor. Even today it is possible to see that separation in current cemeteries, where the graves close to the entrances are more expensive than those located at the back of the cemetery. Moreover, in large cities such as São Paulo, there are cemeteries both in noble and poor areas, as well as those that are public and those that are private.

The change of location of the cemeteries from the churches to other physical spaces also occurred for other reasons. Since the Catholic Church was increasingly exempting itself from the responsibility of burying dead, the cemetery was finally transformed into a space specialized in tombs. Moreover, in the name of public health and the hygienist project of modernity, the necropolis were removed from the city and the churches (Reis, 1991). In Paris, for example, in the year 1763, there was a process of transferring the cemeteries away from the city, as part of a project of public hygiene. In the last two centuries of the Old French Regime, several ancient cemeteries were destroyed for reasons of ecclesiastical policies and progressively gave rise to new facilities increasingly distanced from the urban environment (Ariès, 1990).

In addition to the influences of ecclesiastical policies in building cemeteries, one important factor to underline in the historical relationship of man with death is the emergence of science in modernity. The desire to prolong life and, perhaps, to obtain immortality gains greater accent in the rise of both the bourgeoisie and the modern scientific development (Illich, 1975). Gradually, medical science, whose office was to

preserve health and cure diseases, will stabilize its mastery over death and attain a new mission, proclaimed by Francis Bacon, as early as in the seventeenth century: to prolong life. However, as Ivan Illich warns (1975), medicine has taken up the task about a century and a half later, instigated by a person willing to financially reward physicians in efforts to bring more years to life clientele:

[...] The new type of customer is a rich man who refuses to die: he wants to go to the utmost of his strength and die in full swing. He does not accept death unless it will find him in good health, advanced in age but always active (Illich, 1975, p.173).

The rise of the bourgeois class and family, along with the advancement of modern medical science, will contribute greatly to the change of man's relationship with death and also with aging. The improvement of bourgeois living and working conditions allowed those few to accumulate capital and expertise, leaving the precarious work of the factories to the poorest, at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution (Illich, 1975). And it is in this scenario that the sedentary job acquires prestige and interest, with this modality increasingly reserved for the elderly. If, in prior periods, the oldest did not enjoy a pronounced social prestige, being seen as a burden and one more responsibility for the family to care, old age now begins to have a certain social value attributed to the wisdom arising from the accumulation of knowledge during life which could be placed at the service of producing more wealth and accumulating capital, in the process of managing business.

With the enrichment of the capitalist class led by patriarchs invested by an aura of knowledge and experience, there begins to be a greater demand for medical knowledge, in an attempt to prolong life and die a "natural" death. In the words of Illich (1975, p.177):

The health becomes the privilege of expecting an opportune death, irrespective of the medical services required for this purpose. Medieval death had wielded a saber. In the wood engravings, the skeleton and the spectator laughed scornfully while the victim refused to depart. Now the bourgeoisie seizes the clock and indicates doctors to say to death if the time came. The Age of Enlightenment attributed to the physician new power, but without knowing whether or not he had acquired the domain over dangerous diseases.

It seems that, finally, the man sees a real possibility to circumvent death, trying to mislead it and postpone it by trusting the medical-scientific knowledge. The desire to control time and death is made possible through the payment of medical honoraria and investments in research, in order to master the "dangerous diseases" and therefore the last moment. Just like in the past, when Catholics were spending large amounts of money in order to obtain indulgences from the Church seeking to secure a place in Heaven, men now have big financial investments to ensure a place and extra time in Earth.

All this new process generates large changes in man's relationship with death, which slowly begins to be expunged from the scene of life. If, from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century, death was still the companion of the living, this close relationship was increasingly fainting, a modification that took place gradually, with a few changes, sometimes subtle ones, as Ariès (1990) and Illich (1972) report, in the ways of coping with death, which have been altered more intensely in the West at the turn of the century eighteenth to the nineteenth century. Here begins the era of the clinical death, the medicalization of the demise: a process that has its origin in the nineteenth century and has reached its peak today, producing new meanings in our relationships with finitude.

Starting as an inseparable, yet dreaded, companion, death seems to have become the victim, during the passage of time and even more today, facing what once it had alone the power to inflict in man: the oblivion. With the development of modern science and life extension, we risk saying that death appears to find itself being gradually killed and buried along old age, the individual and his subjectifications.

Subjectivity, aging and finitude: biopolitics strategy and the distancing of death in the scenery of life

The insertion of the medical-scientific knowledge in man's relationship with finitude brought new directions to the clash between life and death. This knowledge came to be the main mediator of such relationship, in which the expert lists ways to live guided by a competent speech (Chauí, 1982), which, in turn, with its wealth of new technologies, holds the promise of the desired longevity. So, gradually, such strategies

will promote a distancing of man with aging and, consequently, with the specter of death.

Although death is a constitutive part of the human condition and constant in our existence, nowadays it is set nearly as a taboo, an interdict for thought and for collective or individual reflection. Although it bounces into view, occasionally undressed by the media, we witness a singular moment of man's relationship with death, in which it "is the target of a massive device that wantons it mercilessly, turning it into something else" (Leis, 2003). Old age also seems to suffer this evil, for though the population is rapidly aging, we have seen the production of a number of strategies to mitigate the effects of time in the body. Even in youth people fight up wrinkles, white hairs, the unproductiveness of free time and the slowness of movements; like death, the aging process is also truly overshadowed and detached from even the possibilities of existence and thought.

To analyze modern society we rely on the observations of Foucault (1988) that, analogously to the phenomenon of death, both sexuality and aging can be taken as devices for understanding the contemporary subject, because in them are concentrated the processes of visibility and camouflage of the human condition.

In this regard, we highlight the advances of modern science, which have greatly affected both the organization of life and the management of death. Taken as objects of state control and allies to medical knowledge, biopolitics (Foucault, 1988) has transformed the attitude of modern man towards death. Biopolitics strategy is a concept that refers to the logical management of populations based on control and regulation of the body in order to invest on the life of the

[...] body-species, the body pierced by the mechanics of the living being and in support of the biological processes: proliferation, births and mortality, the level of health, duration of life, longevity, with all the conditions that can make them vary; such processes are undertaken by a multitude of interventions and regulatory controls: biopolitics of the population (Foucault, 1988, p.131).

According to this logic of management of populations, itself originated during the XVIII-XIX centuries period, the power no longer tries to suppress, subdue, but rather to encourage and produce surveillance, aiming to optimize the life forces it submits. According to Peter Pelbart (2007, p.22), "[...] this biopower is not intended to

bar life, but to take charge of it, intensify it." For this end, sophisticated technologies of subjection and control of populations such as education, science, health, demographics and many others that spread themselves through life have been developed moving into various spheres of human existence. Power takes life by storm and invades subjectivity, intelligence, imagination, aging and even death, which becomes the domain of science, of the state, of the media and of capitalism, by means of scattered anonymous mechanisms. Such mechanisms could act in the ways of being, feeling, loving, judging, growing old and dying.

In this sense, biopolitical management can be exemplified in the management control strategies over birth, aging and also over death. In the name of quality of life and promotion of health, bodies and social spaces of the city are higienized, while diseases are managed and it is produced healthy, functional and profitable bodies to the economic system (Birman, 2006).

Aging, death and disease, the great human ghosts, are now exorcised by the many specialized biopower discourses. The political strength of the production of subjectivity in this sense vanishes when captured by the discourse of the horror of aging and of the overinvestment in a young and healthy body as a raw surface (Correa, 2009).

If in previous times the body was subjected to the forces of disciplinary control (Foucault, 1979), individuals are currently subjecting themselves to scientific knowledge and aesthetic ideals in name not of their egos but of their bodies (Pelbart, 2007). If in the past the focus of man's concern was his psychic interiority, today he turns to his own body-matter. As stated Pelbart (2007, p.25), "[...] today the individual is the body. Subjectivity has been reduced to the body, to the appearance, to its image, its performance, its health, its longevity".

Thus, modern man does not spare resources to exorcise the ghosts of old age, sickness, and death. The production of scientific discourse and the development of technology are seen as the "saviors" of the body from the "horror" of aging and dying, since the ideal for many is the possibility of living the immortality of a young body. The intense demand for maintaining the biological health and youthful appearance aesthetically brings several consequences for human subjectivity. By not contacting the constituent dimensions of human existence, aging and death arise as obstacles in thinking and building oneself. Thus, man is immersed in an eternal present, with the horizon of death increasingly distant.

Like aging, death came to be the object of scientific-medical asepsis, on behalf of a well dying. Nowadays, it almost leaves the scene, silenced and placed in hospitals due to the distance in specialized funeral homes responsible for caring and guarding the bodies. In the United States, 80% of people die in hospitals, and in 1950 this index did not reach 50% (Leis, 2003). By medicalized and aseptic death, the individuals are entrusted in the hands of specialists and hospitals, being kept away from their families and loved ones, in a strange and often impersonal environment.

It is evident that we should celebrate the advances in medicine, life extension and the possibility of treating a number of diseases. Undoubtedly, scientific development indeed helped to improve the quality of life. However, we cannot fail to notice that such benefits have caused a drastic change in man's relationship with death. To Leis (2003, p.344), "there is no doubt that modern society have separated (or dichotomized) the phenomena of death and life" through technological means that have detached the individual from the last moment, creating a series of procedures that keep death away, not to disturb or unduly affect men, turning it from a natural fact into an artificial one.

And thus death is farther and farther distanced from the reality of individuals, in a movement perceptible since the Renaissance period. In a world established upon the promise of freedom for the human creation, the inevitability of biological death was the greatest threat to man. To combat death was, and still is, the goal of humanity, but efforts were made in modernity towards concealing the death rather than facing it; they have tried to deny death, to keep it away, ignore it, trivialize it and thereby set mankind even more separated from itself and its world.

The aging process is also restricted by this vision that we have of death. In the division of human life in different stages of development, old age is placed as the last phase of life, leaving death as its next step. Admittedly there were a number of changes these days that contradict this statement; for example, it is common today in Developmental Psychology to work with the notion of life-cycle from a psychodynamic view (Eizirik, & Bassols, 2001), in which aging and dying are seen as processes that occur since birth. Moreover, the very idea of old age appears reinvented (Debert, 1999), opening room for the realization of life projects that were abandoned over time, and transforming the conception of old age as the one when only expectation is the arrival of death, especially after the emergence of notion of the third age (Correa, 2009). Still, we

would venture to say that aging and old age remain as custodians of a view of the proximity of death, even though we know that it can come at any age of life. Otherwise, there would be no reason for human investment in various technologies to ward off man from the effects of aging and death.

The ability to live longer and with a better quality of life is undoubtedly a great achievement for the contemporary man. It is a legitimate right to have access to technology, knowledge and practices that ensure longevity. On the other hand, one cannot deny how such technologies have transformed the relationship between man and his process of aging and dying. If today we live longer, this is due to the prescriptions that science offers us. The result is that the invisible enemy, death, has vanished away from sight and speech. The price we pay is the intense surveillance and management of life in order to ban the presence of the threat of death or, more precisely, in order to advance technologies for the management of this last bastion of humanity. We become thus "invalid people watching life through the windows of the hospital" (Bauman, 1998, p.195).

Death became a matter for specialists and not for the common man, the mortal himself. To be removed from the field of immediate experience of man, the worldliness, and carried to the fields of abstract systems, dominated by technical rationality (Giddens, 1991) and by the market, death is put a little more distant from its comrade and favorite: the individual. Along with death goes a large, if not the largest, portion of the individuals and their productions.

Death as a mean – not as an end...

To conclude, therefore, we can understand the construction of subjectivity by the death through some analyzers. First, through the notion of finitude, that provides meaning to human life and actions. As a phenomenon that declares the end of the existence of the individual, death is often feared and execrated socially, while humanity maintains a proper distance from it by the practice of caring for the dying, by the abandonment of elders in institutions of long permanence, by the remoteness of cemeteries, by aseptic hospitals and finally by the medicalization of death. Over the

centuries, we can see that mankind was turning away more and more from this fact so natural and inherent to life, transforming the moment of death into something artificial.

But, if on one hand man has been departed from this phenomenon, on the other there is a spectacularization of dying, characterized by daily massive display of corpses in various media, and often such killings are justified by his executioners shamelessly.

All this background shows us some interesting paradoxes to examine death, aging and the subjectivity of contemporary man. Keeping death distant, we see her transform into an external representation to our inner self (Leis, 2003), not as a constitutive part of human life. If in times past the death of the other awakened reflections about own finitude, today, to prevent it from disturbing our brief existence, we appeal to various technologies such as psychotropic medications, the search for the fountain of youth, prolonging life at any cost etc.

For psychology and other sciences that deal with human life, this is an extremely fertile field of analysis because it deals with intense and contradictory feelings, from the desire to die to the specter of finitude, from subjectivity to the social role of death. It is the psychologist's duty to find a balance between the knowledge of the area and the sensitivity to analyze the nuances of such a complex object.

In this game-like struggle between life and death, we can hardly choose a winner. The desire to live intensely and for as long as possible is more than worthy for humans, but it cannot be dissociated from the idea of finitude, of approaching death and aging as objects of thought and reflection while building a full life. If, as Montaigne says, "to philosophize is to learn how to die," to establish itself as an individual is also to subjectively incorporate death and old age not only as objects of life but also as life's greatest advocates, instead of its executioner. As recalled Ariès (1990), "Death is just a way to live better...".

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