

EDITORIAL

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Finitude and Death - certainties denied¹

Finitude e Morte: certezas negadas

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- Tell me, Bartolomeu: are you locked in your room like that, since you learned that your daughter died?
 - We never learn that a child died. There are knowledge that are beyond understanding.
Men understand life. But only animals understand death.
 (Mia Couto. Poisons of God, medicine of the Devil.
 São Paulo (SP): Cia das Letras, 2008, p.168)

The themes of this issue of the *Journal Kairós Gerontology* seemed determined to submit the publication to opposing pressures: on one side there were the several articles and article propositions sent by many authors and distinct approaches, demanding more than ever the effort of our collaborators in the evaluation process; on the other side there were our own difficulties (technical and personnel to take forward and quickly the task) and the inevitable delays. If the influx of articles clearly showed the interest and the opportunity of the journal's proposal, the unwillingly delays seemed to confirm the denial/avoidance face of the themes of finitude and death. Indeed, it seemed to us necessary the election of these themes for reflection for obvious reasons, especially when involved in a Masters in Gerontology: the more avoided the more the reflection is needed; in case of working or having a relationship (professional or personal) with many elderly, people close to death, or people facing definitive diagnosis, the avoidance perhaps brings more suffering than benefit to the parts involved. The old saying "In home of hanged don't talk about ropes" might have its justification, but common sense and touch is needed; it is not a "folk remedy".

¹ Traduction: Henrique Villas Bôas Concone.

It always seemed to me (I do not place myself out of it) that most humans think they are immortal or at least non-mortal (an indeterminate human deviation), to the extent that death and dying are pushed deep to the unconsciousness only surfacing back to consciousness in extreme situations. Death can be thought intellectually, turned into subject of literary, religious or philosophical speculation; it also can be turned into subject of anthropological, sociological or other types of investigation; it can be thought in numbers supporting epidemiological questions and population analysis; focused in cuts of gender, class, age, ethnicity; specified in causes and causes connected to each of the cuts above. In the end we are able of thinking in death “itself”, but we have difficulty to think of death for ourselves – as I have stated in another issue of this journal². We are in thesis... immortals, each one of us. This is good, if it allows us to live daily, scheduling our appointments for the week, the month, the year, as masters of the time; but it is bad, if it prevents us from living intensely and giving the proper value to people, to relationships, to things, to appointments, to time.

Pseudophilosophical speculations aside, the questions of this thematic issue allow for different approaches, scientific or not, involving rights (human's, women's, minorities...) and challenging the ethical reflection and practice. It is undeniable that the new ethical challenges are huge; just remember the debates related to euthanasia, dysthanasia, orthotanasia, brain death, assisted suicide, organ donation, research on stem-cell and embryo, embryo discard, egg and sperm donation, assisted reproduction, among other polemical questions; questions opposing opinions and knowledge. If, a few years ago, death was apparently more easily detected – clinically – by the manifestation or not of some signs due to a knowledge that, generally speaking, could be shared between expert and lay, nowadays this detection has unsuspected difficulties. Some of the above remembered situations and the words defining them show the complexity and cleavage of knowledge. The same can be said about the beginning of life when scientific and religious knowledge rarely agree. End and beginning involve humanely complicated representations when is introduced, for instance, the matter of soul. On the other hand, nowadays it is impossible to think the beginning of life detached from its end – organ donation or embryos' implant, for example, evoke the connection between end and beginning; again, the same can be said about another hot theme these days: it cannot be denied that the population aging itself (that is, the changes in the age distribution on the population pyramid) is linked to the decrease in the birth rate. Another challenge, of an epistemological character, has to do with the acknowledgment of the complexity of the phenomena and the need of building new inter, pluri or transdisciplinary knowledge. Exemplifying

2 Concone, M.H.V.B. (2007, dec.). Fear of aging or of looking old? (*Medo de envelhecer ou de parecer?*) *Revista Kairós Gerontologia*, 10(2), pp.19-44.

again, it was agreed to attribute the increase in life expectancy only to new drug and medical technologies, which is undoubtedly a simplification; here are more factors to be considered, like information regarding sanitation, food access, life conditions and many others that we still have not equated. We observe technology (a historical and cultural product) creating new social realities. The decrease in the birth rate, in turn, is largely related to two factors: control policies and the entrance of women in the work market. These factors, in turn, are due to historical and socioeconomic changes, that generated new expectancies and new society and family models, with several consequences, including biological ones. As seen, it is justified the reference to the multitude of possible approaches to analyze several phenomena and, obviously, for the specific themes of this issue, which show the dense interconnection of political, economic, psychic, cultural, social and bio genetic factors among others.

To support the above arguments, we allow ourselves to take one last reference to the possible angles of reflection about the phenomena, even if taken under only one field; we have chosen the field of Anthropology with which we have more familiarity.

In an essay from 2005, posted in a website of a Journal of Anthropology³, the North-American scientists Kaufman and Morgan (of University of California and Mount Holyoke College, respectively) have made a comprehensive review of articles written in English (more than 200 texts analyzed), produced starting in the 1990's and that pondered about "the beginning and the end of life". The researchers point out that is old, albeit increasing, the anthropological interest about the themes of death and procreation/birth, and about the socially recognized categories, which define its boundaries. Ethnographic work have revealed that the understanding of "beginning" and "end" of life would depend on the form of assignment of individuality and sociability (start – construction of the person) and the acceptance of transformation of a "person into something else" (corpse, cadaver, non-person, spirit, ancestral, etc.); such processes would be in most instances culturally understood as temporary. Cultural ways of seeing the birth (reincarnation, resurrection) as well as exhumation and double burial practices change the Eurocentric, linear and theological view, highlighting, for instance, the perspective of life as a continuum. The traditional anthropological work, underpinned on culture and on the search of sense, have gained new extension in the past few years, as pointed out by the cited authors, due to the increasing interest for the practice and the production of scientific knowledge, with special attention to the growing biologization of the political and the private lives and to the impact of new technologies in the concepts of beginning and end of life (as seen above). Therefore, anthropology is moving toward the studies of the production and the

3 Kaufman, S.R., & Morgan, L.M. (2005). The Anthropology of the Beginnings and Ends of Life. In: *Annu.Rev. Anthopol.*, 34, pp.317-341. Recovered in September 21th, 2010, at: www.annualreviews.org.

cultural effects of bioscience and biocitizenship. In addition it is also incorporating new ways of interpretation that are emerging or have reinforced due to the perspective of biopolitics founded on the Foucault's thinking. According to the authors, the modern technological development in the field of biomedics, biogenetics and of the so called genetic engineering, destabilized the big theories that supported our understanding of life, be they genealogical, evolutionary or teleological theories. The authors point out a vast bibliography that brings analytical contributions characterizing the attention of anthropology (and related sciences) to the way how innovations reflect on the “cultural production of people”, on the naturalization of life and on the emergence of new forms of life.

This long preamble had dual purpose: highlight that this issue of the Journal addresses a small, although varied feature of the questions related to death and finitude; and show the many possibilities of new issues approaching a few more of the challenges proposed by the themes discussed.

As we will see, the articles presented in this issue are very diverse and came from several professional spaces and Universities, and include reflections, research results (field or bibliography) and essays. The articles are of distinct densities, being proposed by both beginner and senior researchers, providing us a current mapping of the involvement with these themes and pointing to a prospective view, of continuity. Despite the diversity of approaches in this issue, one can, however, track down the preference for studies about representations (the oldness, the death, the finitude) and about the way of dealing with the losses and the certainty of finitude (overcoming death and finitude by religious means). The matter of widowhood and euthanasia also appears in this dossier. Some approaches emphasize the need of “face the death taboo”, in name of the dignity, of the mental health and of the quality of life.

Without further ado, on to the presentation of the authors and themes of this issue:

1 – Invisible violence in Aging (A violência invisível na velhice)

Sandra Emma Carmona Valdés

Different areas surrounding the elderly where structural violence is expressed, are presented in this paper, considering the factors that influence their development, harmony and well-being; and those elements that involve the existence of unequal access and use of the material and social resources which impact adversely on their quality of life. So an analysis of the actions taken by the state to reduce existing inequalities and their impact on the welfare of the elderly is also presented by the author, Professor at UNAM, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico, Nuevo León.

- 2 – The imaginary of old people about life after death (El imaginário de los adultos mayores sobre la vida después de la muerte)

Felipe R. Vasquez Palacios

The researcher of the Study and Research Center about Social Anthropology, also from Mexico, proposes to analyze the imaginary of old people pertaining to several christian confessions (Catholic, Methodist, Adventist and Pentecostals) about life after death. Given the relationship that the respondents established between the expressions of the imaginary and the earthly life, he questions about this imaginary in the life of these people and how it gives sense to life and transforms it.

- 3 – Involuntary freedom in elderly widows - Narrative insights (Liberdade involuntária em idosas viúvas – Olhares narrativos)

Sílvia Carriço, & Rui Neves

Due to the existing age gap between the average life expectancy of males and females, the widowhood process in old age is mainly experienced by women. In light of this, this study, by the authors, professors and researchers at University of Aveiro, Portugal, aims to understand the state of widowhood from a female perspective, analysing its impact at the level of lifestyle choices, in addition to identifying the changes that took place in the lives of elderly women and to what extent widowhood influences the choice of daily life as well as leisure activities. This is an exploratory-descriptive study that resorts to a qualitative methodology, using a study group comprising 30 elderly widowed women, aged 65 or above. Data were collected during semi-structured individual interviews and its content was analysed with the WebQda Software (Web Qualitative Data Analysis). Results show that becoming a widow gave the elderly a greater sense of independence and freedom. Simultaneously, it also showed that in the early years of widowhood, widows experience more feelings of grief and nostalgia for their loved ones (feeling of missing someone immensely).

- 4 - Finitude, aging and subjectivity (Finitude, envelhecimento e subjetividade)

Mariele Rodrigues Correa, & Francisco Hashimoto

The authors, professors and researchers at UNESP-Assis (SP), make a brief journey about death's history before diving in the analysis of the relationship between men and death and its unfolding for subjectivity and for aging. They consider that distancing from old age and death becomes a factor of weakening subjectivity; thus, to incorporate such aspects as part of existence are challenges for thinking and for the construction of oneself.

5 – The old man and death (O velho e a morte)

Lucy Gomes Vianna, Altair Macedo Lahud Loureiro, & Vicente Paulo Alves

The researchers from the Catholic University of Brasilia develop a reflection about the relationship between Man and Death, considering that, regardless the certainty of passing, the fear of death “is maybe one of the deepest human feelings”. They also point out that, in a society such as ours, guided by “productivism and consumism”, in which the young is its main model, there is an stigmatization of old age connected to the non-acceptance of bodies that show the passage of time and proximity to death.

6 – Networks of Life: a Jungian reading about aging and death (Redes da vida: uma leitura junguiana sobre o envelhecimento e a morte)

Gilzete Passos Magalhães, Giselli Renata Gonçalves, Glaucia Sawaguchi, Sheila Taba, & Durval Luiz de Faria

This group of psychologists, linked to the Program of Graduate Studies in Clinical Psychology of PUC-SP and to the Group of Jungian Studies, addresses in this work the questions related to the phases of aging and death in the process of individuation in light of Jung’s theory and the post-Jungian. They performed an imagistic and bibliographic study about aging and death. The work reveals the relationship between the images related to death and the process of individuation, evidencing the need for this taboo theme in our society be lived in a creative and significant way, “something synthesized by Jung himself in the phrase ‘dying with life’ ”.

7 – Aging and death in the conception of the elderly and Nursing professionals: an integrative revision (Envelhecimento e morte na concepção dos idosos e profissionais de Enfermagem: uma revisão integrativa)

Bárbara da Silva e Silva Cunha, & Fátima Helena Espírito Santo

The authors, from the Nursing School of the Fluminense Federal University (UFF), present a reflection about the conceptions of aging and death by the elderly and the perspectives of the health professionals about these themes. They searched in th Visual Library in Health (*Biblioteca Visual em Saúde – BVS*) for evidences of the descriptors: “death; death and elderly; death and thanatology; death and aging”. This survey allowed an analysis of the scientific articles that have been found and that were included in the following categories: approach of the aging and death for the elderly; human finitude; death and dying for nursing professionals. The text covers the variety of attitudes towards aging and finitude and tries to explain this fact.

- 8 - Euthanasia: would elderly people from the socioeconomic classes D/E accept or allow for members to their families? (Eutanásia: idosos de classes socioeconômicas D/E aceitariam ou permitiriam para membros de suas famílias?)

Diego Fraga Rezende, Gabriela Nunes Oliveira, Lucy Gomes Vianna e Isabel Borges dos Santos

The opportune article of this group connected to the Catholic University of Brasília looks at the controversial theme of euthanasia, having listened to 75 elderly people about their permission, or not, in relation to applying euthanasia in members of their families.

9. Whisper when speaking of death: the significance of death in senescence (Sussurros ao falar a morte: a significação da morte na senescência).

Alba Sandra Alencar da Silva, & Alexandre Cavalcanti Galvão

From the Catholic University of Brasília comes this article in which the authors aim to promote the dialogue between thinking of death and the understanding of human finitude, not in a pessimistic aspect, but rather in a desire to propose a successful senescence. From the understanding of the meanings attributed to their perishability, the man, in its universal and singular condition, seeks an authentic existence. Even when a person cultivates spiritual values, concepts such as immortality of the soul do not keep away the fear of death.

- 10 – About the death and the dying: a space of reflection (Sobre a morte e o morrer: Um espaço de reflexão)

Ana Maria Yamaguchi Ferreira e Katia da Silva Wanderley

The authors, connected to the Hospital of the State Public Server “Francisco Morato de Oliveira” (HSPE), São Paulo (SP), Brazil, discuss concepts and ideas about Thanatology and Palliative Care, sciences dealing with the subjects of death and the dying process, aiming to enlarge the theorization already existing about these issues in order to help both the lay public and the health professionals to deal with the themes of death and the dying in a more humane and close way, as conditions that relate to every human being.

- 11 – The Elderly: A New Social Actor ahead of the Finitude/Death (O Idoso: Novo Ator Social diante da Finitude/Morte)

Rita de Cássia da Silva Oliveira, Paola Andressa Scortegagna, & Flávia da Silva Oliveira

The goal of the article, by Authors from the University of Ponta Grossa (PR), is after to

identify the stereotypes that impregnated the old aged, reflect about the elderly in your new paper as a social actor while identifying the social movements focused for this segment. A bibliography research was performed. The conclusion was because of a hostile scenario imposed by a contemporary society to the elderly, the need for public policies recognize and guaranteeing basic rights for them is imperative. Despite the prejudices, the elderly mobilizations enable them to overcome situations of vulnerability, which they are exposed especially when in the proximity of your finitude. To the consolidation of a social actor, we need educational actions directed to that segment, bringing knowledge and information for all elderly. Education throughout life has a relevant role, in order to equip and empower the elderly. Hence, it will be possible to think, in actuality, of an elderly that is more active, participative and integrated to society, it is positioned to searching for their rights and engaging in social movements, ultimately escaping the stereotype still widespread in society that nothing else in life would expect death.

12 - The creativity crisis in dying: death passes by rushed in post-modernity (A crise da criatividade ao morrer: a morte passa apressada na pós-modernidade)

Clarice De Franco

In post-modernity, time is seen as tomorrow's main controller. The illusion of infinitude, endorsed by the biomedical advances and the industry of eternal youth, tries to contain the desperation of uncertainty, and death, although certain, does not give us as many warnings (doesn't it?) as we would like it to. "Dying" suffers with modern haste, as the rituals concerning death are impoverished, as far as their symbolism is concerned, and a deeper contact with this stage of life is increasingly avoided. Therefore, death is no longer a "social act", shared by the community - as it was during centuries -, going to the private scope, something to be experienced alone. According to the sociologist Norbert Elias, the elderly were seen, during the latter decades of the 20th century, as living representatives of death. For this reason, their exclusion served the society due to the unbearable possibility of contact with finitude. Currently, with the increasing life expectancy, the "third age" is not directly associated with the idea of death anymore; therefore, a field of more inclusive possibilities to this sector was opened, but still working within the logic of death's denial. Death must represent to life a possibility of becoming aware of our existential process, not the mark of the end of the line. It must be an ally, not an opponent.

- 13 - Representation of death: conceptions from life experiences of elderly users of PSF (Representação da morte: concepções a partir de experiências de vida de idosas usuárias do PSF)

Márcia Andrea Rodrigues

The author, affiliated to the Federal University of Goiás, aims to approach in this article the existing relationship between death and aging, from the experience of three old women whose recognition of death follows distinct models. Her research showed that although the elderly women share the widespread condition of best age, the representation, the senses related to death pass by distinct moments, depending on the life history of the subjects: death can be beneficial, brought as something good; it also promotes a new sense for life; and, lastly, there is an element for denial and total seclusion from this problematic in the current management of active aging.

- 14 - Widowhood: The representation of death through of the vision male and female (Viuvez: A representação da morte através da visão masculina e feminina)

Marcela Eiras Rubio

The article presents the understanding of the widowhood from the experience after death of the spouse, what changes to the widower over 65 years of age and for the widow over 65 years of age. The psychic conflicts in identity of the old-aged and the consequences that bring on to them. The widowhood of the man brings as a consequence the end of the personal care provided by the woman; on the other hand, the widow woman changes her life with the absence of the authority from man, but at the same time, she acquires the experience of freedom. By understanding the phenomenon of widowhood we can start taking in consideration its uniqueness and human subjectivity, but rescuing the gender difference.

- 15 - The infinity in religion: when a life is not enough (A infinitude na religião: quando uma vida só não basta)

Eliane Garcia Rezende, Flamínia Manzano Moreira Lodovici, e Maria Helena Villas Bôas Concone

The authors (one newly-doctor in Social Sciences – Anthropology – by PUC-SP, a linguist and an anthropologist, both professors and advisors at the Gerontology Program of PUC-SP) work with the notion of death as a socio-cultural construct. They use examples of the self-defined spiritualistic literature as their subject of reflection where “disembodied spirits” tell the epic of their many incarnations in search of spiritual elevation. From this perspective, death is nothing more than

the passage to another level, passage that can be franchised as often as needed for the improvement of the spirit. These texts have great appeal to millions of readers seeking sense to life.

For a good reading all!

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