

University of Tartu  
Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics

## **THE TIMELINE OF MORTALITY**

Master's Thesis in Philosophy

Olena Kushyna

Supervisor: Jaanus Sooväli (PhD)

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*"I see in my mind's eye that someday I will die  
And then my life becomes a star in the sky..."*

*(John Lindberg and Karl Berger Duet)*

## **Introduction**

Death is waiting for every one of us, even for me and for anyone who is reading these words. This is rather a truism than a revelation. But do we reflect on death enough to realize the consequences of our mortality for our life? In this thesis, I am going to argue that the topic of our mortality is an acute philosophical issue, which is especially pressing nowadays. I will show why this topic is an acute one by reconstructing its background in the history of philosophy. I will also show how this topic has become an especially pressing one by reflecting on the contemporary conception of death. Then, I will suggest considering a feminine perspective in the future reflections on this topic philosophy. As a result, I will offer "*The Method of Diotima*" as my contribution to the development of the topic.

I am addressing precisely the conception of personal mortality. That is, I am leaving aside the topic of deaths of others. In the heart of my inquiry lies the personal relationship between 'me' and 'my' death. Deaths of others occur to us as an actual experience, while our own death does not. Even if we survive the clinical death, this leaves us with the experience of survival, but not of being dead. The only way to deal with our mortality is through our conception of it. Through the conception of death and our attitude towards it, our death influences our lives.

In this thesis, I am addressing the past, the present, and the future of the conception of death in philosophy. This corresponds with three chapters of my thesis. In Chapter 1, the reconstruction of the past (5<sup>th</sup> century BC – 19<sup>th</sup> century) will show that death has been an important topic in philosophy since the times of Socrates. It will also provide the proper context and background for the further development of the topic. In Chapter 2, observing the present (19<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> centuries) will explain how the acuteness of the topic has become especially pressing nowadays. It will become apparent throughout these reconstructions, that mortality is strongly bound with the meaning of life. In Chapter 3, projecting the future will offer a possible development of philosophical reflections on our mortality. I will suggest considering the feminine perspective of mortality. I will offer to endeavor the existential analysis of childbirth in the light of mortality. I will also introduce my contribution to the topic, which is "*The Method of Diotima*". According to this method, we should develop the feminine stress response ("tend-and-befriend"), instead of the masculine one ("fight-or-flight"), when facing a stressful situation of our

mortality. This method has a potential to create an environment for philosophical reflection and open conversation about death, and to reduce the stress of facing mortality.

In the first chapter, I will provide the historical background of the conception of death. In section 1.1., I will show that the topic of death has already been intense for philosophers two and a half millennia ago, since the times of Socrates. I will reconstruct Plato's attitude towards death and his understanding of the place of death in the life and work of a philosopher, based on *Phaedo*. In section 1.2., I will reconstruct the Platonic-Christian conception of death. I will concentrate on Plato's arguments for the immortality of the soul, the myth about the afterlife, and his understanding of philosophy as an art of dying. According to Plato, death is a separation of the immortal soul from the mortal body, so, during earthly life, we should care about our soul in the context of eternity. For philosophers, the afterlife promises the pure knowledge of truth in the world of ideas, which is an ultimate goal of a philosopher's life. That is, death is a transition between earthly life and the afterlife; the meaning of life is transcendental; philosophy is an art of dying. Then, I will show how these fundamentals of Platonic conception of death were adopted by the Christian religion. I will concentrate particularly on the fundamentals of the Christian conception of death, which have remained unchanged for centuries. I will leave out the aspects that differ from one philosopher to another during this large period of time. These differences are irrelevant in the context of this thesis, as they do not interfere with the belief in an immortal soul, the afterlife and transcendental meaning of life. By addressing the Christian conception of death, I will show the conception that has been dominating in Philosophy. It has covered the intensity of the question about death. In section 1.3., I will show how this intensity was uncovered again in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This happened due to the paradigm shift, which has been described by Nietzsche in his conceptualization of the event 'God is Dead'. Even though the Christian religion is still a strong actor, and there still are religious people, this paradigm shift has been crucial for continental philosophy. In Nietzsche's terms, the loss of a dominant worldview leads to the necessity of reevaluation of all values. The question about death arose again. What is the meaning of life if there is no afterlife? This is indeed a disturbing question.

In the second chapter, I will show what has happened after the collapse of Platonic-Christian conception, that is, after the collapse of transcendental meaning. In section 2.1., I will analyze Heidegger's non-theistic conception of death in *Being and Time*. I will show the place of death in his philosophy. I will outline the relation of death to the question about Being, which is the most important question of philosophy, according to Heidegger. I will also concentrate on his term *Authentizität* (*authenticity*) in its relation to *Sein-zum-Tode* (being-towards-death). It turns out that, irrespective of the existence of God or religious beliefs, we must create a certain relationship with our own mortality in order to be authentic in life. This relationship is grounded in anticipation of death as a possibility. In section 2.2., I will analyze

Camus' atheistic approach. I will address Camus' theory of the absurd from *The Myth of Sisyphus*. According to this theory, life is absurd, and mortality is a constitutive factor of the absurd. From an atheistic perspective, life is meaningless, but, according to Camus, worth living. In the absence of transcendental meaning, we can create the meaning of our lives by ourselves by revolt against absurdity. The other strategies, including religion, are delusive. I am going to argue that, according to Camus, it is not possible to revolt against absurdity without accepting it first, and that it is impossible to accept absurdity without accepting mortality. In section 2.3., I will show that in the contemporary world (the end of 19<sup>th</sup> – the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> centuries), the question of death is especially acute. Even though philosophes like Heidegger and Camus have underscored the importance of acknowledging our mortality, we are still not ready to do so. According to Jean Baudrillard (*The Symbolic Exchange and Death*), in the contemporary society, we tend to marginalize death and turn away from accepting our mortality. I will refer to the example of COVID-19 outbreak, which has revealed unreadiness to face death (or even to talk about death) in the contemporary Western society. Baudrillard naturalistically describes the conditions of contemporary death and the delusional behavior we conduct. I will argue that philosophizing about death is inevitable in order to live a meaningful life in the contemporary world.

In the third chapter, I will outline a perspective for the future development of the topic. I am going to offer a feminine perspective on mortality. In section 3.1., I will provide the preliminary remarks of the feminine perspective. That is, in the philosophical reflection on mortality, we should consider female experiences, such as childbirth, and we should flourish the feminine approach. In section 3.2., I will address the existential meaning of childbirth in the light of mortality. I will refer to Hannah Arendt's notion of *natality* as a human condition opposed to mortality. In section 3.3., I will suggest my contribution: "The Method of Diotima". I will argue that childbirth as a female function corresponds with the structure of female reaction to stress. Because of a female function of childbirth and nurturing, there is a difference in female and male neurobiological responses to stress. While males demonstrate "fight-or-flight" response, females demonstrate "tend-and-befriend" response. I am offering that "tend-and-befriend" is a powerful mechanism that has a potential to help us deal with the stress of our mortality more effectively. Caring for others and cultivating life is a strong strategy for creating an environment for both philosophical reflections and public conversations about death.

Traveling through the past, present and future of the conception of death, I am going to demonstrate that our mortality is a particularly pressing issue in the contemporary world and offer a new perspective for the development of this topic.

## Chapter 1. Past. Historical Background

In this chapter, I am going to provide the historical background for the claim that death is an important topic in philosophy. I will also show the connection between the conception of death and the meaning of life. I will show that death has been an important topic in philosophy since the times of Socrates. For Plato's Socrates, the life and work of a philosopher assumes the acceptance of their mortality and welcoming death. I will reconstruct Plato's conception of death in *Phaedo*, which has been adopted by Christianity. The fundamentals of this conception are the following: the immortality of the soul, the afterlife, and transcendental meaning of earthly life. These beliefs used to be dominating in Europe for centuries. However, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Christian religion has lost its ultimate influence on the beliefs about death, and atheistic views arose. I will address Nietzsche's conceptualization of the event *God is dead* in order to illustrate this change and its consequences.

### 1.1. Socrates: Philosophy as The Ancient Art of Dying

*Phaedo* by Plato describes the last hours of Socrates' life. Surrounded by his friends, Socrates is preparing to die and has his last philosophical conversations. Naturally, the central topic of these conversations is death. A more detailed reconstruction of Plato's conception of death in *Phaedo* will be provided in section 1.2. In this section, I am going to concentrate on Plato's understanding of the place of death in life and work of a philosopher.

In *Phaedo*, Socrates aims to calm his friends down, explaining that there is no need to be afraid of death, especially for a true philosopher. At some point, Plato's Socrates says the following: "[a]ll who actually engage to philosophy alright are practicing nothing other than dying and being dead" (*Phaedo*, 64a)<sup>1</sup>. Death was seen by Plato as a specifically philosophical topic: "...true philosophers, and they only, study and are eager to release the soul. Is not the separation and release of the soul from the body their especial study?" (*Phaedo*, 67d) Moreover, living a life of philosopher was seen as an art of dying. In *The Apology of Socrates*, Plato shows the following vision of what happens after death. There are two possible options of what happens after death. The first is that death is the annihilation and the loss of consciousness, a long, dreamless sleep. The second is the soul's travel to a different world (Hades), where one meets his old friends and the Greek heroes. However, the message remains similar. No matter what

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<sup>1</sup> Here and further I am referring to: Plato (2002). *Phaedo*, Oxford University Press, Oxford. Translated by David Gallop

is the case, there is nothing bad in death, so there is no point to be afraid of it. The important point here is that we do not know which option is true. According to Critchley (2009), for Plato, there is no certain knowledge that we can gain on what happens after we die. Philosophical reflection on death is not dedicated to acquiring knowledge about death. Rather, it is dedicated to the search of the way we should think about death while we live. A true philosopher should build a certain relationship towards death, which is rather anticipation than fear. (Critchley, 2009: 15-16)

In *Phaedo* (as we will see in the next section), Plato's Socrates provides arguments for the immortality of the soul, which is based on his theory of ideas. In *Phaedo*, Socrates concentrates on the second option: after death, our soul travels to Hades, where it has access to pure ideas. The knowledge gained during the earthly life by the sensations is delusional. A true philosopher should distance himself from his bodily sensations in order to concentrate on recalling the knowledge from the world of ideas. In the afterlife, philosophers are liberated from their bodies. For Plato's Socrates, the life of a true philosopher is a preparation to death: "all who actually engage in philosophy aright are practicing nothing other than dying and being dead" (*Phaedo*, 64a). This preparation makes a philosopher calm in the face of death: "those who practice philosophy aright are cultivating dying, and for them least of all men does being dead hold any terror" (*Phaedo*, 67e).

However, even though a true philosopher welcomes death, it is not acceptable for Plato to commit suicide. In the next section, I will show that a philosopher welcomes death as the way of soul to be closer to pure ideas and true knowledge. However, this may sound as if a philosopher should desire death. To prevent his friends from drawing such a wrong conclusion, Plato's Socrates offers some reasons not to commit suicide. It is a wrong thing to do: "we men are in some sort of prison, and that one ought not to release oneself from it or run away" (*Phaedo*, 62b) (by "prison" Plato's Socrates means the body, where the soul is locked). Also, there would be a punishment for such an escape. To summarize the discussion, Plato's Socrates offers that "one should not kill oneself until God sends some necessity" (*Phaedo*, 62c).

According to Plato's Socrates in *Phaedo*, being calm in the face of death an important feature of philosophical wisdom. Also, a philosopher should not separate his life from the search for wisdom. We should keep reflecting on death, even though it is impossible to gain any certain knowledge. Philosophical reflection can help us to build a good relationship with our mortality, even without knowledge. This relationship can help us to live a more honest life: we acknowledge mortality but we are not paralyzed by terror. Reflection on personal mortality is the ultimate task of this thesis. Maybe it will produce more questions than answers, but Plato's Socrates would not think of it as a disadvantage, and neither should we.

## 1.2. Platonic-Christian Conception of Death: Two Millennia of Transcendental Meaning

In this section, I will reconstruct the arguments behind the fundamentals of Platonic conception of death, as presented by Socrates in *Phaedo*, and I will show how the core ideas of this conception had been adopted by Christianity. These core ideas are the following: the body is a prison of the soul; death as a transition between earthly life and afterlife; life has transcendental meaning.

Before I proceed, I would like to justify the choice of this dialogue. The views of Plato's Socrates on immortality of the soul and afterlife are not homogeneous. In such dialogues as *Meno*, *Timaeus*, *Phaedrus*, and *Republic*, Plato presents different interpretations of immortality, its nature and features. A. G. Long in *Death and Immortality in Ancient Philosophy* (2019) summarizes it as follows:

“Within Plato's dialogues we find competing views of immortality: everlastingness; divinity and godlikeness; and (in the *Phaedrus*) everlastingness and constant activity. By the last pair of criteria, an everlasting, frozen body and even an everlasting, changeless soul, such as the *Phaedo* describes, are not immortal. Within one and the same dialogue, the *Timaeus*, Plato explores immortality both as a quality guaranteed of rational souls by their creator, no matter how we behave or reason, and later as an achievement of the most successful mortal-immortal composites. In the second passage, immortality has nothing to do with duration, let alone everlastingness.” (Long, 2019: 207)

However, despite the differences in the views on immortality of the soul, the immortality itself is not questionable. In every dialogue where Plato's Socrates addresses the topic of death and afterlife, we find a thesis that the soul is immortal. In this thesis, I limit my reconstruction of Plato's views on death with *Phaedo* because they illustrate the continuation of the belief in the immortality of the soul from Plato to Christianity.

For the reasons mentioned above, in this thesis, by Platonic conception of death I am going to refer to the views presented by Plato's Socrates in *Phaedo*.

According to Platonic conception of death, a human has the body and the soul. The body is mortal, and the soul is immortal. Death is the separation of the soul from the body. Soul continues existence in the afterlife. That is why, during our earthly lives, we should keep that in mind in order to earn ourselves the better afterlife. The meaning of life is, thus, transcendental. It does not relate to the earthly life itself, but to the afterlife.

Later, these fundamentals came to be the premises for the Christian conception of death. For centuries, Christian religion had obtained the monopoly on interpreting mortality for both philosophers and public. The most crucial component of Plato's conception of death is the immortality of the soul. In *Phaedo*, Plato provides four arguments: the argument from opposites; the argument from recollection; the argument from affinity; theory of the soul as *eidos* of life. Another component is the myth about afterlife.



The argument from opposites (70c-72d) is ontological. According to it, “opposites come to be only from their opposites – in the case of all things that actually have an opposite”. (70e) An opposite to living is being dead (71c), so, Plato’s Socrates makes the following conclusion: “there really is such a thing as coming to life again, living people are born from the dead, and the souls of dead exist”. (72e) That proves immortality of the soul, because, in order to come to life, the soul should have existed as dead before; in order to die, the soul should have been alive before. Plato considers this process to be cyclical. This proves that souls had been existing before being born to human life, and that they will be existing after it.

The argument from recollection (72e-78b) is epistemological: “our learning is actually nothing but recollection” (72e). For example, when we first see something “equal”, we recognize it only in case we already have the knowledge of what “equal” is. (75b) That is, we must recall this knowledge. And “that would be impossible, unless our souls existed somewhere before being born in this human form”. (73a) This argument proves that the souls had been existing before being born.

According to the argument from affinity (78c-84b), there are two kinds of beings. The one we can sense with our senses, it is visible and changing. The other we can approach only by reasoning of intellect, it is invisible and constant. (79a) A human consists of two parts: body and soul. Body belongs to the first kind of being, and soul belongs to the second:

“... soul is most similar to what is divine, immortal, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, unvarying, and constant in relation to itself; whereas body, in its turn, is most similar to what is human, mortal, multiform, non-intelligible, dissoluble, and never constant in relation to itself” (80b).

During the earthly life, soul uses the senses of body to study. However, in this process of learning, soul is always limited by the capacities of body. That is, during the earthly life, we cannot learn constant intelligible things (as has been stated before, we can only recall them). This argument proves that the soul is immortal because it belongs to the realm of immortal things.

The final argument (103b-107b) is based on Plato’s theory of forms. According to it, soul is the *eidos* (form) of life. The form cannot admit its opposite: “The opposite itself could never come to be opposite to itself” (103b). That is, life has to vanish for death to happen. Even though, according to the argument of opposites, life comes from death and death comes from life, it is impossible to be alive and dead at the same time. This is so not only for opposites, but also for the opposite properties of things. What brings the property to a thing, cannot admit this property’s opposite. Body has a property of life because of the presence of the soul, and soul brings life to the body. (105c) That is why soul is the form of life. Therefore, soul never admits the opposite of life, which is death. Something that does not admit death is immortal; soul does not admit death; therefore, soul is immortal. What is immortal is also

imperishable: “the form of life itself, and anything else immortal there may be, never perish” (106c). Therefore, soul is indestructible.

The main consequences of Plato’s arguments about immortality of soul are the following: body is a carrier of immortal soul; death is a transition between earthly life and afterlife. The myth about afterlife (107c-115a) describes Plato’s conception of afterlife. The meaning of life is affected by these consequences. During earthly life, we should care about our souls in the context of eternity. Our decisions, thoughts and actions define what happens to our souls after the separation from bodies. “... when those who have died arrive to the region to which the spirit conveys each one, they first submit to judgement, both those who have died and those who have not” (113d). After this life, we will submit to judgement. We will receive benefits for good deeds and be punished for bad deeds. Then, we will return to earthly life again. The only way to escape from this circle is to commit an outstandingly horrible deed. Only those souls are “...hurled by the appropriate destiny into Tartarus, whence they nevermore emerge” (113e). That is another consequence of immortality of soul. The meaning of earthly life is projected to eternity; it does not belong to earthly life itself.

In Christianity, physical death is also not an end for immortal soul. According to The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, “We look for the Resurrection of the dead, And the Life of the age to come”. In order to have an afterlife, one has to live a good earthly life. That is, to believe in God: “Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die” (John 11:25-26) We are responsible in front of God, and after dying our immortal soul continues existence in a way we have deserved during our earthly life. The meaning of life is preparation to afterlife. During our earthly lives, we should perform the necessary religious rituals, avoid sin, follow the moral code, etc. We should do everything that allows us to be saved. In Christianity, suicide is not permissible for the same reasons as Plato offers: our bodies belong to God, and it is not in our power to decide when does earthly life come to its end:

“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

Even though there has been innumerable amount of various interpretations of Christian doctrine, the basic presuppositions of death and meaning of life have remained unchanged through centuries. According to these presuppositions, our soul is immortal; body imprisons soul; death is soul’s separation from body; there is afterlife; the meaning of life transcends the earthly life.

### 1.3. Nietzsche: The Collapse of Transcendental Meaning

Platonic-Christian conception of death, described in the previous chapter, had been dominating in Europe for a long time. Christian religion had been responsible for the relationship with mortality for centuries. The situation has started to change with the processes of secularization and Enlightenment. The most dramatic change has appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Simon Critchley points out that the crucial characteristics of modernity is secularization, and modern age is rather post-religious. However, modernity is still not post-metaphysical. Even though we as a society are going through the processes of rationalization and capitalization, which leads to decline of the religious traditions and worldview, we are still longing for metaphysical basis for our activity. (Critchley, 2004: 12) Returning to the topic of this thesis, in the contemporary world, we are still in need of explanations about death, but now we lack ultimate answers.

This dramatic change was first conceptualized by Nietzsche: “[t]he most important of more recent events - that "God is dead," that the belief in the Christian God has become unworthy of belief - already begins to cast its first shadows over Europe.” (Nietzsche, 2001, 343) The main consequence of the event “God is dead” is collapse of the whole Christian paradigm. “What must all collapse now that this belief had been undermined, - because so much was built upon it, so much rested on it, and had become one with it” (Nietzsche, 2001: 343). This collapse is a sign of nihilism. For Nietzsche, nihilism means that “the highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking; "why?" finds no answer.” (Nietzsche, 1967: 2). That means the collapse of transcendental meaning, which used to be an ultimate answer to our “why?”. In *The Gay Science*, after the saying that God is dead and we killed him, madman asks a number of metaphorical questions. Among them: “Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? How were we able to drink up the sea?” (Nietzsche, 2001: 125) These questions lead to the feeling of abandonment; we are left in an empty world with nothing to rely on. Then, he continues: “Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to?” (Nietzsche, 2001: 125) These questions remain rhetorical, as after the death of God we lack the landmarks to answer them. This is the dark and unpleasant side of nihilism. But it does not mean the end of history. Nihilism is only a stage in Western history. It is to be overcome.

As Heidegger writes regarding this, this overcoming starts with revaluation of all values:

“Nietzsche recognizes that, even with the devaluation of the hitherto highest values for the world, the world itself remains; and above all that the world grown value-less is inevitably impelled toward a new dispensation of value. After the hitherto highest values have lost their validity, the new dispensation of value is changed, in regard to the former values, into a "revaluation of all values." The no to the former values is derived from the yes to the new dispensation of value.” (Heidegger, 2002: 159)

This is the bright side. We do not just deny all the old values; we are now free to reinvent every and each of them. Later, in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche writes:

“At last the horizon seems open once more, granting even that it is not bright; our ships can at last put out to sea in face of every danger; every hazard is again permitted to the discerners; the sea, our sea, again lies open before us; perhaps never before did such an "open sea" exist” (Nietzsche, 2001: 343)

This is in a way an answer to rhetorical questions he asks before. We have wiped away the horizon – but after that, the horizon seems open once more. We have drunken up the sea – but it will be there again, and this new sea will be as open as anyone has ever seen it before. The sea is more open with a different horizon, and the new values will be stronger and deeper after the revaluation.

Nietzsche’s conceptualization of the event “God is dead” has been the sign of decline of domination of Christian religion. In the following chapter, we will see, what has happened next. That is, atheistic philosophical views on mortality arose. We will see the examples of such views in the following chapter.

## **Chapter 2. Present. After the Paradigm Shift**

As we have seen in the Chapter 1, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Christian religion has lost its monopoly on forming the fundamental premises about death. Even though there are still a lot of religious people and religious philosophers, the discourse has changed. Alternative views arose, for example, non-theistic and atheistic. What is death if the existence of God is not an inevitable premise anymore? What is death if there is no afterlife? What if we agree that we cannot be sure what happens after death? How should we relate to our own mortality, then? In this chapter, I will show two examples of twentieth century philosophers who answer these questions. According to Heidegger (section 2.1.), it is important to accept mortality in order to do the right philosophy, that is, to formulate the question about the meaning of being. It is also important for anyone who desires to live authentic life. According to Camus (section 2.2.), the most important question in philosophy is the question about the meaning of life. His take is that life is absurd. However, this does not imply that life is meaningless or not worth living. I will show how accepting our mortality is crucial for living a meaningful life, according to Camus. Both philosophers underscore the importance of the topic of death, not only in the context of academic philosophy, but also in the lives of individual people. Philosophy can be used as a great tool for helping people deal with their mortality, especially after the decline of Christian religion. It might seem that, if there are such bright examples of philosophers who address the topic of death, we are good. But in social reality, the topic of death is marginalized. I will show that, despite the importance of this topic, in contemporary society it has become the most ignored. Baudrillard (section 2.3) provides accurate analysis of this situation. He shows how our society alienates our death from us, and how death has a power over our lives because of that. This analysis shows that not only is death a hugely important topic in philosophy, but also it is a pressing issue for the general public. To strengthen this claim, I will refer to the example of the public reaction towards COVID-19 outbreak.

### **2.1. Heidegger: Mortality and Authentic Life**

In this section, I will show why death is an important topic in contemporary philosophy, according to Heidegger. His work is a great example of twentieth century non-theistic philosophy. According to Heidegger, the question about God is secondary; we are not ready to ask it yet. His philosophy does not depend on this. The questions that he claims to be the most important for philosophy are preceding to the question about existence of God. No matter whether God exists or not, no matter whether we have immortal soul or no, there are questions we must raise before finding that out.

For Heidegger, death is an important topic because of two main reasons. Firstly, reflecting on death is an inevitable step on the way to the most important question for philosophy. Secondly, accepting mortality is a necessary condition for living authentically. This illustrates the importance of the topic of death in contemporary philosophy.

Heidegger's main claim in *Being and Time* is that the most important question of philosophy is the question of the meaning of being. Not only do we not have an answer to this question yet, but also the question itself is not formulated yet. Moreover, according to Heidegger, Plato also did not ask this question. Heidegger analyzes three major prejudices about Being:

- (1) Being is the most universal concept.
- (2) The concept of being is indefinable.
- (3) Being is the self-evident concept.

He insists that these prejudices are the excuses that are used in the history of philosophy to forget the question of Being. Let me introduce the conclusions of Heidegger's analysis of these prejudices.

(1) Being is seen in the history of philosophy as the most universal concept, but "that cannot mean that it is the clearest and that it needs no further discussion" (Heidegger, 1996: 2). Furthermore, "[t]he concept of being is rather the most obscure of all" (Heidegger, 1996: 2).

(2) Being is an undefinable concept, but "[t]he indefinability of being does not dispense with the question of its meaning but forces it upon us".

(3) "Being is the self-evident concept" (Heidegger, 1927: 3), yet "the meaning of being is ... shrouded in darkness" (Heidegger, 1927, p. 3). From this analysis, Heidegger concludes that "not only is the answer to the question of being lacking but even the question itself is obscure and without direction" (Heidegger, 1927: 3). That is, we must first formulate the question. "The question to be formulated is about the meaning of being" (Heidegger, 1996: 4). But what is a starting point of this question? Even by asking "what is being?" we already imply that we have some knowledge of "is". That is, when asking, we already know something about what is asked. According to Heidegger, even when there is no explicit concept of being, we are still able to gain some ontological knowledge.

We ourselves are a being, so we have a tentative understanding of being, which allows us to presuppose being by taking a preliminary look at it. Our very inquiry about being is itself a mode of being. Our being a being which questions the being, "this being which we ourselves in each case are and which includes inquiry among the possibilities of its being" (Heidegger, 1996: 6) is Dasein. However, again, what Heidegger means by formulating a question about the meaning of being concerns precisely the concept, otherwise, ontology is "fundamentally blind" (Heidegger, 1996: 9). Dasein has an ontic-ontological

priority among other beings precisely because its interrogation of the being. Dasein is a primary being to be interrogated and Dasein is always related to the meaning of being. (Heidegger, 1996: 12)

According to Heidegger, mortality is a constitutive characteristic of Dasein. Heidegger underscores that death is not merely an end of life. Moreover, our own death as an actual event of the end of life never occurs to us. We never experience our own death as an actual event. Rather, death is a possibility, “the possibility of impossibility of existence in general” (Heidegger, 1996: 242). This possibility permanently accompanies our life: we can die any moment, and it is certain that at some moment we are going to die. This makes death as a possibility the constitutive way of our being, “Death is a possibility of being that Dasein always has to take upon itself” (Heidegger, 1996: 232). Heidegger reminds us that death is not limited neither by something that happens to others nor by something that will happen to us in the future.

To proceed with Heidegger’s concept of death and in order to reconstruct Heidegger’s idea of our relationship with our mortality, it is necessary to clarify the distinction between *authentic* and *inauthentic* modes of being of Dasein. *Authentic* mode reveals the nature of Dasein itself. That is, “my” *authentic* mode of being is “me being myself” to the full extent, respectfully to the full potentiality of “my” being. Living an *authentic* life means acknowledging all the potential possibilities which are standing before me and prioritizing them in the sake of “myself”. This does not at all dictate actualization of all potential possibilities. Moreover, such actualization is not one of these possibilities, it is impossible to actualize all of “my” possibilities at once, as some of them cancel each other. But what is the most important to Heidegger is that while “I” ignore death as “my” possibility, I cannot live *authentic* life. In fact, one of the reasons why *authenticity* is available to us as acknowledgement of potentiality rather than actuality is that it is impossible to actualize all our possibilities within limited time. This means that, in order to live *authentically*, we also have to choose among these possibilities and acting accordingly. *Authentic* choice is made with prioritizing “my” being. “I” choose authentically when I choose what truly belongs to “me”. This is how “I” can express “myself” in the society. *Inauthentic* mode of being means prioritizing “my” potentiality in the sake of the “they”, which means concentrating on actuality rather than potentiality of “my” being. That is, *authentic* life tears me away from the “they” and from actuality, and *inauthentic* life tears me away from “myself”, from the possibilities that stand before me, that is, from potentiality. The choices that “I” make in the sake of “myself”, the potentiality of my being, are *authentic*, and the choices that “I” make in the sake of the “they”, the actuality of my being, are *inauthentic*. In this context, death is a very special possibility, which constitutes *authenticity*. As such possibility, death is to be anticipated. Death is closer than it may appear: “Factically one's own Da-sein is always already dying, that is, it is in a being-toward-its-end” (Heidegger, 1996: 235) However, we tend to ignore this in our everyday life. We do not

acknowledge death as the always-present possibility. Contrariwise, "...everyday being-toward-death is a constant flight from death." (Heidegger, 1996: 235) This constant flight from death as a possibility makes our everyday lives inauthentic: "Everyday, entangled evasion of death is an inauthentic being toward it." (Heidegger, 1996: 239) This is inauthentic being-toward-death, according to Heidegger, which we reveal as inauthentic "they-self". Authentic being-toward-death is also possible by anticipating death as a possibility. Let us now see how Heidegger qualifies this possibility.

Heidegger defines his existential and ontological concept of death as follows: "As the end of Da-sein, death is the own most [1] nonrelational [2], certain [3], and, as such, indefinite [4] and not to be bypassed [5] possibility of Da-sein" (Heidegger, 1996: 239). Let us pay attention to each of these five characteristics.

(1) Death is an ownmost possibility. That is, my death belongs only to me. I cannot share it with anyone, I cannot die instead of someone. And, as such, death reveals itself as a possibility, by anticipating which, Dasein tears away from the "they".

(2) Death is a non-relational possibility. "Death does not just belong in an undifferentiated way to one's own Dasein, but it lays claim on it as something individual. ... individualizes Dasein down to itself." (Heidegger, 1996: 239) This means priority of ownmost potentiality of being rather than they-self. By anticipating death, "I" become "myself" through making decisions based on my own potential rather than actuality of other people and things.

(5) Death is a possibility which is not to be bypassed. It is imminent. While inauthentic being-toward-death evades the impossibility of bypassing death, authentic being-toward-death frees itself for it. "Becoming free for one's own death in anticipation frees one from one's lostness in chance possibilities urging themselves upon us, so that the factual possibilities lying before the possibility not-to-be-bypassed can first be authentically understood and chosen." (Heidegger, 1996: 242) By acknowledging the inevitability of death, "I" can consider "my" mortality while making decisions in life.

(2) Death is a certain possibility. As was stated in the first sentence of this thesis, death is waiting for every one of us. Heidegger points out that not every one of us lives accordingly. Some of us are living as if they did not know. This attitude constitutes inauthentic mode of existence. On the contrary, holding death for true is "claims Dasein in the complete authenticity of its existence" (Heidegger, 1996: 244). That is, not only is the very act of acknowledging death as a possibility authentic, but it makes possible authentic existence as such. By anticipating death, we can live authentic lives.

(4) Death is indefinite possibility with regard to its certainty: "In anticipating the indefinite certainty of death, Dasein opens itself to a constant threat arising from its own there. ... The attunement which is able to hold open the constant and absolute threat to itself arising from the ownmost individualized being



of Dasein is Angst". (Heidegger, 1996: 244). Holding death as a certain possibility, we still lack understanding of the time, place and way that it comes to us. Being aware of death means to be always near the possibility of impossibility of no existence, but never there. This state Heidegger calls "Angst". Those who choose to be living on the edge of the abyss must overcome it by understanding themselves through it.

To sum up, for Heidegger, the most important question in philosophy is the question about Being. The starting point of this question is Dasein. The constitutive characteristic of Dasein is being-toward-death. Being-toward-death should be taken as possibility, which is own most, nonrelational, certain, and, as such, indefinite and not to be bypassed. Taking death as a such possibility means anticipating death. This is the necessary condition for living an authentic life, which is, in turn, is the necessary condition for Dasein to be the starting point of formulating the question about Being. This is the place of death in Heidegger's metaphysics.

## **2.2. Camus: Mortality and Revolt Against Absurdity**

"There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide" (Camus, 1991: 4) – these are the opening lines of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the book that is a great example of the 20<sup>th</sup> century atheistic philosophy of existence. From the first sight, this claim seems quite random for at least two reasons.

Firstly, because suicide does not seem to be a specifically philosophical problem. Moreover, Camus himself acknowledges that "[s]uicide has never been dealt with except as a social phenomenon" (Camus, 1991: 5). Suicide is definitely not a tolerable phenomenon, so we are trying to prevent it. Mostly, we pay attention to various social reasons that lead to suicidal thoughts and attempts, for example, poverty, loneliness, or discrimination. Otherwise, suicide is a problem of psychiatry, a symptom of various medical conditions. However, with all due respect to these reasons and to those who try to eliminate them in order to save lives, these aspects of suicide are not what interests Camus. He aims to address "the relationship between individual thought and suicide" (Camus, 1991: 5) in cases where the influence of social and/or medical reasons is absent or is so low that can be neglected. In such cases, "people die because they judge that life is not worth living" (Camus, 1991: 4) Judging whether life is worth living is strongly bound with the meaning of life, which is a matter of philosophy. Camus claims that "the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions" (Camus, 1991: 5), precisely because it must be answered in order to choose life instead of suicide. This brings us to the second reason why we may doubt the opening lines of *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

Secondly, even if we agree that suicide is a philosophical problem, it still seems doubtful this problem is the only truly serious one. There are plenty of serious philosophical problems, such as ethical (what is morally good?), epistemological (what is knowledge?), aesthetical (what is beauty?), political (what is justice?), logical (how to solve a liar's paradox?), not to speak of metaphysical (for example, just in the previous section of this thesis we have seen that, for Heidegger, the most important philosophical problem is questioning the meaning of being). So, what gives such a priority to the problem of suicide? According to Camus, the most serious problem is the one that has the most serious consequences. And there hardly can be imagined something more serious than death. "I have never seen anyone die for the ontological argument" (Camus, 1991, p. 4), points out Camus. Meanwhile, it is easy to imagine that someone dies because of deciding that life is not worth living.

We should keep in mind that Camus is an atheistic philosopher. That is, we do not obtain immortal soul; death is not a transition but the end of existence; there is no afterlife; and earthly life has no transcendental meaning. This means that when we are questioning the meaning of life, we cannot find any answer. Here we come to the main concept of Camus' philosophy, which is the absurd. We have a need of rational explanation of our existence, but we fail to find some in unreasonable world.

"The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. [...] This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. For the moment it is all that links them together." (Camus, 1991: 15)

We are thrown into existence without asking for it. We live in the world which is not always good to us. Moreover, life is full of complications. "Living, naturally, is never easy" (Camus, 1991: 4). Just to keep existing, to survive, we must do a lot. We also inevitably suffer. And then we die. One of the fundamental reasons why life is absurd is the fact that it is finite. Everything I have done will disappear one day. All people I have loved will die. Every piece of art I have created will eventually be lost and forgotten. My children will also die; so, will their children and their children, and their grandchildren. Moreover, everything I am will disappear as well. My body, which is a source of various pleasures and pain, which is one of my main concerns in life, will be destroyed by time and nature. Even if I take into account that nothing actually disappears completely and on the micro-level the particles of my body will remain in existence, they will never be "me" again. The integrity of physical particles which I call my body will disappear forever. The same will happen to my consciousness, my soul, the whole thing I call myself. But not only I will disappear. The whole world as I perceive it will turn to non-existence with my death. This is absurd: "From this inert body on which a slap makes no mark the soul has disappeared. This elementary and definitive aspect of the adventure constitutes the absurd feeling" (Camus, 1991: 12)

But it is not necessary to go through suicidal thoughts or purposefully question the meaning of life in order to recognize absurd. The feeling of absurdity is closer than it appears. This feeling interrupts a flow of everyday life:

“... rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm — this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the “why” arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement.” (Camus, 1991: 10)

This “why?” that breaks the flow can lead to nothing – or it can lead to awakening, to acknowledging absurdity. In the search of “why?” in the chaotic and irrational world which does not make any sense, a man does not receive any answer. Being in a position to decide whether life is worth living or not, we need clear answers but we fail to find them.

Death and the absurd are strongly bound. Not only death is the source of a feeling of absurdity, but also the way we deal with both absurdity and mortality is alike. It is hard to accept mortality as a complete end of yourself. It is also hard to accept absurdity of life. It is even harder to accept both of them at the same time. Camus points out that we live as if we do not know that we are going to die: “I come at last to death and to the attitude we have toward it. ... Yet one will never be sufficiently surprised that everyone lives as if no one “knew.” (Camus, 1991: 12). He finds the reason of such behaviour in lack of experience of death: definitely, nobody has an experience of dying and being dead, all we know is being alive. However, we tend to pretend that we do not know about absurdity either, even though we experience it.

What happens when it is hard to accept absurdity? There are two main strategies that Camus considers: delusion and revolt. There are different kinds of delusion: ignoring; hope and religious hope; nostalgia; philosophical suicide. The most radical kind of delusion is suicide. Delusion is ignoring the need of questioning about life meaning. Hope is an instrument of denying absurd. For example, religion gives us hope to survive death with our eternal souls which reunite with God after the bodily death: “hope of another life one must deserve (Camus, 1991: 7) Also, there can be found hope for the transcendental meaning of life: “...trickery of those who live not for life itself but for some great idea that will transcend it, refine it, give it a meaning, and betray it” (Camus, 1991: 7). Nostalgia is our need to create a rational narrative that would explain the meaning of life. That can be done, for example, by scientific approach. Philosophical suicide is another way of denying absurdity. By philosophical suicide, Camus means the act of conscious neglect of absurdity by adopting a certain philosophical system of views. These systems make an attempt to resolve the confrontation between the rational mind and irrational universe. As one of examples of philosophical suicide, Camus refers to Kierkegaard’s leap of faith. In this act, “a thought

negates itself and tends to transcend itself in its very negation” (Camus, 1991: 28). The most radical way to escape these disturbing thoughts is an actual, physical suicide. Any of these delusional ways of behaviour is plausible for Camus.

Life is absurd, but does the absurd actually imply that life is not worth living? Camus prevents us from making such a conclusion. Absurd only means that the universe is unreasonable, that there is no ultimate transcendental meaning of life to be found in our lives. “people have played on words and pretended to believe that refusing to grant a meaning to life necessarily leads to declaring that it is not worth living. In truth, there is no necessary common measure between these two judgments” (Camus, 1991: 7). However, this does not mean that life is not worth living. Such a claim is plausible for those who are too cowardly to accept its premises and act delusional. Just like patients who refuse to accept their illness, they lack the reason to cure it. That is, they calm themselves down by living in imaginary world where there is no absurdity, and their choices are corrupted by their false premises. They suffer from it by living inauthentic life. The most radical consequence is death from suicide. This is a paradox: those who refuse to accept their mortality are willing to meet death. As if they truly believed that they were immortal. Some religious movements even use this human flaw. They set people on suicide for the promise of good afterlife. That is, people who disagree to accept that their souls are mortal, have shorter life. We never know what meets us afterwards, and those people are out of our judgement area. However, Camus argues that they made a mistake. If they had enough courage to accept absurdity, they could choose much better strategy: revolt.

Absurdity does not cancel out all possibility of having meaning in life. Life is meaningless, because there is no transcendental source of meaning. That is why it is impossible to ‘find’ the authentic meaning of life. But it is possible to create one. In order to put yourself in the position which allows to do so, a totally different strategy has to be chosen: revolt. “One of the only coherent philosophical positions is thus revolt.” (Camus, 1991: 36) So why to choose meaningless life if you can choose meaningful? But then, you would have to go and do something real, to be honest of yourself and be authentic. While delusion assumes lack of acceptance, while revolt is possible as a result of acceptance. Life is in a way revolt against absurdity. Every time you decide to live and not to commit suicide, you revolt against absurdity. Philosophy is an act of revolt against absurdity: first of all, you contribute to absurdity, but, secondly, you choose to reflect on absurdity even though it is absurd. The ultimate ways to revolt against absurdity are, for example, art and philosophy. In the section 3.2., I will supplement this list with childbirth.

Through revolt, one can reach a point where meaningless life is the only meaningful reason to live it. This is the authentic meaning one can create. And there is no possibility to revolt against the absurd without accepting it first. To accept the absurd, one must accept mortality.

### **2.3. Baudrillard and COVID-19: The Conditions of Contemporary Death**

As we have seen in the previous sections, without belief in the afterlife, mortality still influences our life. When death is seen as the end of the self, and as an always-present possibility, it becomes hugely important to create a relationship with mortality. Therefore, it is not a good thing to ignore mortality. We should reflect on death in order to be free from it for living authentically (according to Heidegger), and to revolt against the absurdity of life (according to Camus). Such bright examples of deep philosophical reflection on death may seem to be a sign of significant interest of the topic. However, this is not the case. On the contrary, in our contemporary society, we tend to marginalize death. When death has become a real threat with COVID-19 pandemic, this unreadiness has been uncovered.

In this section, I will elaborate on the attitude that the contemporary society has towards death. Firstly, I will reconstruct Baudrillard's arguments which support the claim that death is marginalized in the contemporary society. Death is excluded from the society, as the symbolic exchange between life and death is not happening anymore. Death is neutralized by the prolongation of life (as "normally" we die in the "third age"), and by the dominance of rationality in our society. The only cases when death attracts our attention and when we openly discuss death are accidents. This condition marks our unreadiness to face our mortality. Secondly, I will provide the example of COVID-19 outbreak as an accident in Baudrillard's terms.

Nowadays, we have the luxury to live as if we were immortal without believing in the immortality of the soul. We face the new conception of death, according to which, when we die, we disappear completely. Unlike before, we treat death as a bald biological fact. Death is not a transition between worlds anymore, and there is no afterlife. In the opening lines of the preface to *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (written in 1976), Jean Baudrillard claims that "[s]ymbolic exchange is no longer the organising principle of modern society." (Baudrillard, 1993: 14) According to Baudrillard, the fundament of the symbolic exchange as the organizing principle of the society is the symbolic exchange between life and death. By rationalizing death, we exclude it from the symbolic exchange. This is why the symbolic exchange is no longer there in our society. Also, death is not available to us symbolically anymore. We treat death as a mere biological fact.

As has been stated before, this highly rational non-religious way of thinking is comparatively new. Baudrillard qualifies our conception of death as a specific for our culture: “[t]he irreversibility of biological death, its objective and punctual character, is a modern fact of science. It is specific to our culture. Every other culture says that death begins before death, that life goes on after life, and that it is impossible to distinguish life from death.” (Baudrillard, 1993: 158) In our society, death is something that is supposed to be “natural”, and, therefore, “normal”. We shall die as late as possible, ‘at life’s proper term’ (Baudrillard, 1976: 180). It is quite easy for us to marginalize death, to live and think as if we were not mortal. Our life expectancy is as long as never before. The risk of early death is as low as never before. Our healthcare is well developed. The more and more people live up to their natural deaths in “the third age”. And when our elder relatives die, we outsource their funerals. We do not die at homes; we die at hospices and hospitals. The quality of our lives is high, as we live in the safe and comfortable environment. Offering the opportunities to live a long life of good quality, contemporary Western civilization prevents us from reflections on our mortality. The texture of our clean, safe, and secure life is one of the reasons why we disconnect from our death. Moreover, we create projects which in the long run aim to reach physical immortality of humans (for example, transhumanism), or immortality of human consciousness (for example, some developments of AI). As Baudrillard point out, “[n]atural death is subject to science, and death’s call is to be exterminated by science” (Baudrillard, 1976: 180)

Baudrillard points out that death is marginalized even in the structure of our physical surroundings. He interprets the structure of our “new towns”, or “contemporary metropolis” as the embodiment of “the rationality of a modern society” (Baudrillard, 1976: 144). In Western-European cities, the cemeteries are usually located on periphery. In the same way, the rationality of a modern society abandons death. Not only death is ignored; it is stigmatized: “[a]t the very core of the ‘rationality’ of our culture, however, is an exclusion that precedes every other, an exclusion preceding all [of them] and serving as their model: the exclusion of the dead and of death.” (Baudrillard, 1976: 144).

As a consequence of marginalization of death, in the contemporary Western society, we are just not ready to face our mortality. When our tendency to ignore our mortality becomes impossible to follow, we lack the alternative ways to deal with it. Current situation with COVID-19 pandemic is a relevant example of this. Suddenly, our mortality is not just an abstract concept of some event that is going to happen to us in indefinite future. The danger of death is everywhere, again. We have ignored the fear of death for a while, but here it is again, and we face it unarmed. Not only we lack a familiar way to deal with it, we also lack a familiar way to talk about it openly.

The only situation in which we are still able to talk about death is accident. “Natural” death is neutralized, while “violent, accidental, and chance death [...] has so much meaning for us: it is the only

one that is generally talked about; it is fascinating and touches the imagination” (Baudrillard, 1976: 183). We get the chance to reflect on death in such cases. Moreover, we start talking about death more: “the only events of immediate, unmanipulated and straightforward significance for all are those which in one way or another bring death onto the scene” (Baudrillard, 1976: 183). Now, during COVID-19 pandemic, death is more present in our informational space. In the media, we see the constantly updated statistics: how many people have been tested COVID-positive, how many people have died, just like with any other accident.

According to Google Trends, the interest to the topic of death has reached its peak in the times of COVID-19. Within the last sixteen years, the worldwide interest to the topic of death has reached its peak last month (April 2020). The interest has increased unprecedentedly, as the current level of interest is twice higher than average within the last sixteen years. (Appendix, Chart 1) If we look closer to these changes, we can see that interest to the topic of death has started rising at the end of January 2020, when COVID-19 started to spread worldwide, and reached its peak in the end of March – the start of April 2020, in the middle of exponential growth of the COVID-19 cases. Also, in the end of March 2020, governments started implementing strict security measures. This brings us to another aspect of the accident. Baudrillard argues that accidental death remains the only case of death that is not under societal control. Accident is a threat: “a natural catastrophe is a danger to the established order, not only because of the real disorder it provokes, but by the blow it strikes to every sovereign ‘rationality’, politics included” (Baudrillard, 1976: 180). Described logic can be easily found in USA’s attempts to file a lawsuit against China for COVID-19 outbreak (Tan, 2020). That is, to bring the natural accident back under societal control. One of the forms of such control is security, not only the one which is supposed to defend us, but also “security as blackmail”, as Baudrillard calls it. During the COVID-19 quarantine, we had undergone through serious restrictions of our freedom in the sake of our own safety. In the pandemic situation, we are not allowed by the government to decide for ourselves to risk our health. According to Baudrillard, “[i]t is necessary to rob everyone of the last possibility of giving themselves their own death as the last ‘great escape’ from a life laid down by the system” (Baudrillard, 1976: 196).

What is ironical, Baudrillard refers to the following words of Octavio Paz: “Modern science has eliminated epidemics, ...” (Baudrillard, 1976, p. 179). Baudrillard uses this reference to illustrate his idea that the irrational features of death are forced out by the rationality of the science. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that this is not actually the case. The same as it turns out that epidemics are not in fact eliminated, the irrationality of death is not necessarily repressed for good. COVID-19 already provokes interest in the deeper reflections on the topic of death. Now, one can find a philosophical article by S. Critchley about dealing with mortality in *The New York Times*, where he writes to a broad audience:

“... beneath the trembling of fear lies a deeper anxiety, the anxiety of our mortality, our being pulled toward death. And this is what we might try to seize hold of, as a condition of our freedom.” (Critchley, 2020)

We are given a chance to reflect on our mortality, and to talk about it instead of excluding it from our discourse. But how exactly should we do that? In the next chapter, I am offering a perspective that has a potential to help us deal with our mortality.



### Chapter 3. Future. Feminine Mortality

As I have shown in the previous chapters, death is an acute topic in philosophy, and is especially pressing nowadays. Heidegger argues that anticipating death is a necessary condition of an authentic life. Camus claims that accepting the absurdity of life and death is the necessary condition of revolt against this absurdity and creating meaning in our lives. However, in our contemporary society, we tend to ignore and even stigmatize death. In order to overcome this, we need to reflect and to talk openly about death and our mortality. But how exactly should we do it?

In this chapter, I am offering a strategy of behaviour that is useful in order to be in a safe position. I am offering to change a perspective to a more feminine one by including female experience in the realm of our philosophical reflections on death and mortality. I am going to argue that we should consider childbirth as a significant existential factor in such reflections. I am also going to offer a strategy that has a potential to create a safe environment that allows a fruitful reflection and conversation about death and reduces the stress of facing mortality.

In the section 3.1., I am providing the preliminary remarks on feminine side of mortality.

In order to strengthen this claim, in the section 3.2., I am going to refer to Hannah Arendt's notion of *natality*, which she calls "the miracle that saves the world" (Arendt, 1998, p. 247). However, Arendt refers not only to the literal meaning of natality as childbirth, but rather to the human capacity to begin in a general sense: biologically, politically, artistically, etc. As opposed to Heidegger, for whom, as I have shown in the section 2.1., mortality is the most important existential condition, for Arendt, *natality* is. I see a great potential in developing the balance between these opposed ways of thinking. That is, I offer to reflect on our mortality in order to become able to anticipate our own death, but through the lens of natality. In order to do so, I offer to concentrate a bit more on the existential dimension of childbirth itself.

In the section 3.3., I am going to provide one more argument and to offer the method of dealing with mortality. I call it "The Method of Diotima", in the name of Diotima of Mantinea, Ancient Greek philosopher, the character of Plato's *Symposium*, the teacher of Socrates who taught him about love and childbirth as overcoming mortality. The method that I am offering is deeply rooted in acknowledging the power of love and empathy, and comes from the neurobiological research of female behaviour. That is why it is plausible to name it after Diotima, who is, firstly, a woman, and, secondly, a philosopher who taught Socrates about love. I offer that we acknowledge the situation of facing our mortality as a stressful one. As I have shown in the section 2.3., in our contemporary society, we tend to marginalize the topic of death, which makes it even more stressful to us. Our neurobiological reaction to stress is described as

“fight-or-flight” mechanism. As it was claimed in the section 2.2., Camus points out that in the stressful situation of facing the absurd, we show the same response. It is a “flight” response as delusion (various ways of ignoring the absurd) or “fight” response as revolt against the absurd. The same is going on with our reaction to our mortality: we either “flight” from it by excluding this topic, or we “fight” by anticipating it. But this mechanism is not an exclusive one. As I will show in the section 3.3., “fight-or-flight” is mostly a masculine response to stress. In the recent neurobiological research, the feminine response to stress is described as “tend-and-befriend”, that is, taking care about children and creating strong bonds with others. The Method of Diotima is adopting a feminine response to the stressful situation of mortality. That is, our capacity to begin and, especially, to give birth to new humans has a great potential for reducing our stress in the face of mortality. Also, by adopting The Method of Diotima, we are able to create an environment that allows us not only to reflect on our mortality within academic philosophy, but also to talk openly about death with the general public.

### **3.1. Feminine Side of Mortality: Preliminary Remarks**

By *feminine side of mortality*, I mean a perspective that allows us to reflect on our mortality by opposing “death” to “birth”, not to “life”, and to consider feminine experience in this reflection. Let me introduce the preliminary remarks for this concept.

I do not at all mean that I am addressing exclusively women and our experience. Rather, I am addressing quite a conventionally feminine side of our social behaviour and biology, such as childbirth. Even though women are obviously more involved in the process of childbirth than men, it is important to keep in mind that making a decision about childbirth and the labor of parenting is (or, at least, *can be*) of equal interest and responsibility for men. Our ability to give birth to a new human being, as a creative action, should be considered in reflecting on our mortality by all humans. Also, I am addressing the tendencies in female neurobiological mechanisms. This does not at all mean that these mechanisms are exclusive for women and cannot be adopted by men. On the contrary, my claim is that feminine perspective is useful for all humans, even though it is intrinsic for females.

Considering all mentioned above, I still acknowledge that we find a tendency to unfairly neglect female experience and feminine optics in the history of philosophy. Such a powerful experience as childbirth is mostly neglected by the great philosophers of the past. The main reason is that philosophy has been gendered. While talking about humans, philosophers have been assuming males: “...the disembodied impersonal voice of philosophy is, as a matter of fact, already deeply gendered, reflecting the perspective of a dominant voice that has the luxury and privilege of taking itself as definitive of human

experience” (Adams and Lindquist, 2013: xi). Moreover, the majority of philosophers and historians of philosophy had been males themselves. Women used to have no voice in philosophy for centuries, and this only starts to change nowadays. “To say that philosophy has historically been unkind to women would be an understatement. Not only have women been largely excluded from the practice of academic philosophy, but their experiences have also rarely found just representation in the canon” (Adams and Lindquist, 2013: 3) However, from the feministic perspective, women’s reproductive experiences, including their existential dimension, “are, at least *prima facie*, irreducible to other phenomena.” (Adams and Lindquist, 2013: 7) Even though feminist philosophy nowadays does address the problem of childbirth, the questions they rise are mostly practical and belong to anthropological, ethical, social, and political realms. For example, we find philosophical reflections on the problems of abortion, adoption, parenting, etc. In metaphysical and existential realms, these questions are quite rarely addressed. However, I insist that these questions are important and they inevitably are going to emerge in philosophy. Also, this topic has a potential to change our attitude towards our mortality and the meaning of life.

### **Section 3.2. Hannah Arendt: Natality and Mortality**

In this section, I am offering to consider the feminine experience in the reflection on our mortality. That is, I am addressing the existential dimension of childbirth in the light of mortality.

By focusing on the *existential dimension* of childbirth, I am adopting Camus’ limitations of his analysis of the existential dimension of suicide, which has been revealed in the section 2.2. This limitation is based on existential aspects of a phenomenon and laying aside the secondary aspects. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, when Camus is addressing the problem of suicide, he explains it as follows: “[s]uicide has never been dealt with except as a social phenomenon. On the contrary, we are concerned here, at the outset, with the relationship between individual thought and suicide” (Camus, 1995: 5). I am approaching the topic of childbirth from a very similar position. That is, the secondary aspects of childbirth, such as ethical, social, political, psychological, medical, cultural, etc., should be laid aside. I focus on the relationship between woman’s individual thought and childbirth, which reveals itself in a woman’s decision to give birth. The important aspects of this decision are woman’s and her potential child’s mortality and her understanding of the meaning of life. I offer to lay aside such cases as, for example, a woman’s decision to do abortion. This is a totally different matter. What provokes the philosophical interest for me is the question “do I want to have children?” in the situation of acknowledging mortality.

The context for developing this topic has been outlined in the previous chapters. That is, the absence of transcendental meaning of life; the necessity of anticipating death in order to live authentically;

absurdity of human existence; marginalization of death in the contemporary world. The aim of this analysis should be not at all to produce an ultimate decision, but to provide enough reflection.

The first steps to developing this thought are already taken. The powerful example is Hannah Arendt's conception of *natality*. In her book *The Human Condition* (written in 1958), she takes quite an original approach. Instead of opposing "death" to "life", which is a common place, she opposes "mortality" to "natality", which represents the opposition between "death" and "birth", not "life". This opposition does not only involve "my birth", but also "me giving birth". Moreover, Arendt claims that "the most general condition of human existence [is] birth and death, natality and mortality" (Arendt, 1998: 8) Just as opposite to Heidegger, she considers natality, and not mortality, the crucial condition of human existence. Moreover, she claims: "[t]he miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, "natural" ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action that they are capable of by virtue of being born. (Arendt, 1998: 247) By *natality*, Arendt does not only mean childbirth, but rather the general human capacity to begin something new (biologically, politically, artistically, etc.) Arendt does not strictly separate childbirth from creativity and action as such.<sup>2</sup> But I offer to philosophically consider childbirth as a specific kind of human experience by distinguishing "the new men" from "the new beginnings". This does not at all cancel Arendt's genius idea of including childbirth to the realm of new beginnings as such. Moreover, this distinguishing develops and details her ideas.

So what is so different between childbirth and, for example, writing a book? Let us pay attention to one of the distinctions, the one which is related to the topic of this thesis. By childbirth, we do not only create something new. We create a new human being, who is certainly going to die. I am offering to concentrate on the existential dimension of childbirth in the light of mortality.

The relation between woman's decision to give birth and her conception of death and meaning of life should be taken as reciprocal. On the one hand, woman's conception of death and meaning of life influence her decision whether to give birth. Once a woman realizes that life is absurd and she is mortal, she faces the problem. In Camus' terms, deciding to give birth means to multiply absurdity, while it also can become a way of revolt against absurdity for a woman herself. Also, to give birth to a mortal human means to multiply death. But is there a necessity to multiply entities? Occam's razor is sometimes the most certain method of contraception. Dealing with the absurdity of already present life is inevitable from the ontological point of view. But giving birth to a new life is a totally different matter. It requires more courage than just preserving own existence. On the other hand, when a woman faces the question whether to give birth or not, her conception of death and meaning of life can change. Answering the question

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<sup>2</sup> This goes along with Camus' conception of revolt against the absurd by creating art.

“why to give birth?” has equal consequences to answering the question “why not to commit suicide?”. It is unlocking the possibility of becoming an authentic self. No wonder that quite often parenting becomes the meaning of life for women. Some women see childbirth as a way to overcome death (as their life continues in their children); and motherhood is sometimes seen as the meaning of life for a woman. However, these connections can be inauthentic. By today, we have not produced enough philosophical reflection on the criterion of authenticity of such a decision. It should be noted that the question of childbirth is a natural question for each and every woman. Each and every one of us faces the question of childbirth and answers it in her own way. Of course, this answer can be (and very often is) corrupted by various social factors. However, in the first world countries, childbirth already becomes a private decision of a woman. Nowadays, some of us can decide by ourselves; and we start questioning the ontological and existential premises of childbirth.

### **Section 3.3. The Method of Diotima**

When Camus talks about our reactions towards the absurd, he describes two possible options: delusional (such as hope or philosophical suicide), and revolt. These options correspond with “fight-or-flight” response, which is believed to describe the most likely behavior for humans and some animals. The idea of this response is also used in social sciences, psychology, and, as we have seen, in philosophy. But, according to the newer research, “a little-known fact about the fight-or-flight response is that the preponderance of research exploring its parameters has been conducted on males” (Taylor et al., 2000: 412) However, neither absurd nor mortality depends on sex. Women face absurdity, and are mortal, too. If our reaction is framed not (or not only) by “fight-or-flight” response, then, what is it? According to the neurobiological research, this is “tend-and-befriend” response, which is based on female’s function of childbirth and nurturing. This response means that, when a female faces stress, she is, first of all, caring about her children, and searching for help in the supportive relationships with other females. In this chapter, I am offering to consider the feminine response towards stress as a possible strategy of dealing with a stress of mortality.

I am suggesting The Method of Diotima, named after Diotima of Mantinea, Ancient Greek philosopher, the character of Plato’s *Symposium*, the teacher of Socrates who taught him about love and childbirth as a way to overcome mortality. Diotima teaches Plato about the ladder of love, and also, she claims that childbirth is a way of overcoming death: “...to the mortal creature, generation is a sort of

eternity and immortality.” [*Symposium*<sup>3</sup>, 206e] I do not necessarily offer to agree with Diotima in this. Rather, I offer to consider childbirth in our reflections on mortality.

The Method of Diotima assumes applying “tend-and-befriend” response, which is rooted in our capacity of childbirth, to the stressful situation of our mortality. This is a metaphor of facing death together, caring about those who are close to death, and creating a safe environment for philosophical reflections and open public conversations about death.

Let me explain what does “tend-and-befriend” strategy means. The biobehavioral mechanism underlying this pattern is “the attachment-caregiving system, a stress-related system that has been previously explored largely for its role in maternal bonding and child development” (Taylor et al., 2000: 412). Tending is “quieting and caring for offspring and blending into the environment” C. This evolutionary was more efficient for females than “fight”, which could “put themselves and their offspring in jeopardy”, or “flight”, which “may be compromised by pregnancy or the need to care for immature offspring” (Taylor et al., 2000: 412). Befriending is “the creation of networks of associations that provide resources and protection for the female and her offspring under conditions of stress” (Taylor et al., 2000: 412). That is, caring for your offspring and yourself has been more effective in a group with strong supportive bounds, so females are likely to create those bounds as a response to stress.

To sum up, feminine “tend-and-befriend” response is different from masculine “fight-or-flight”. This response to stress is characterized by “patterns that involve caring for offspring under stressful circumstances, joining social groups to reduce vulnerability, and contributing to the development of social groupings, especially those involving female networks, for the exchange of resources and responsibilities” (Taylor et al., 2000: 422). I offer that we adopt this response when dealing with the stress of our mortality. This is The Method of Diotima.

By adopting The Method of Diotima, we are bounding with each other on the ground of the stressful situation of mortality. This involves both philosophical reflection and public conversations.

In the sphere of publicity, as philosophers, we can support others in the stress of mortality. We can also raise awareness about death. This can be, for example, explaining death to our little children, or having conversations with those who are traumatized by near-death experience, or with those who are close to death. We are able to provide people with systematic analysis of the problems that they are facing, such as accepting their mortality, preparing to death, surviving the deaths of others. These tasks have been traditionally conducted by religion, and nowadays, mostly by psychologists. However, philosophical reflection is necessary, too, as I have shown in this thesis. In the sphere of academic philosophy, applying The Method of Diotima method means paying attention to the feminine experiences and behaviour. For

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<sup>3</sup> Plato (n.d.). *Symposium*. (B. Jowett, Trans.) [PDF file]. Retrieved from <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1600>

example, we can develop the ideas of Hannah Arendt by conducting an existential analysis of childbirth in the light of mortality (which has been outlined in the previous section).

We can become our authentic selves not only by prioritizing our own possibilities, including death (as Heidegger suggests), but, in addition, by cultivating life and new beginnings (as Arendt suggests). Our reflection on death should not always be rational and does not have to be a “fighting” revolt. We can philosophically reflect on death through providing emotional support to our readers and analyzing our feelings. This is The Method of Diotima, which has a potential to unlock the great power of our vulnerability in the face of death, and to bring the topic of death to the spotlight. As I suggest in this thesis, we should talk more about death, and we can always choose to do it with love.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have shown that death is an important topic in philosophy. It has been so since the times of Socrates, and becomes even more pressing nowadays. However, in the contemporary society, we tend to marginalize death instead of reflecting on it. I am suggesting that we should develop the topic of our mortality in philosophy. I am offering The Method of Diotima, which both shows the direction and the approach for one of the possible developments of the topic. According to this method, we should address female experiences, such as childbirth, when reflecting on mortality. Also, as academic philosophers, we should care about others by initiating public conversations about death.

In the first chapter, I have reconstructed the historical background of the conception of death. According to Platonic conception of death, as presented by Plato's Socrates in *Phaedo*, the soul is immortal, there is the afterlife, and the meaning of life is transcendental. These views have been adopted by Christianity. For centuries, Christian religion had influenced the attitude towards death. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, alongside with the process of secularization, the Christian religion has lost its monopoly on the fundamental beliefs about death. With the strengthening of the secularization and scientific worldview, this has changed. Nietzsche proclaims: "God is dead!", which means that we cannot rely on religion and its ultimate answers anymore. We need to reevaluate all values, and one of them is our attitude towards our mortality.

In the second chapter, I have addressed the present time (19<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> centuries). After we have lost the belief in the immortality of the soul, we have become truly mortal, and mortality has become an especially pressing issue. In the twentieth century, we find bright examples of non-theistic and atheistic thinkers who have addressed this topic. I address the examples of Heidegger as a non-theistic philosopher, and Camus as an atheistic philosopher. For both of them, it is hugely important to acknowledge our mortality. According to Heidegger, we should anticipate our death to live an authentic life, and to be able to address the most important question of philosophy (the question of Being). According to Camus, the only plausible way of thinking and living is revolt against the absurd. The constitutive feature of absurd is death, so, only having accepted our mortality, we are able to accept the absurd. Accepting absurd, in turn, is necessary to be able to revolt against it. Therefore, it is necessary to accept our mortality in order to revolt against absurd. But how exactly should we achieve this state of accepting, or even anticipating our mortality? While death is still discussed in philosophy, the people of contemporary society lack understandable strategies to deal with our mortality. As Baudrillard argues, death is marginalized in our society, and is brought to spotlight only by accidents. Our medical, political, and technical development creates quite a safe environment in the developed countries. Death is simply not there for us, which makes



it easier to ignore it. Also, our worldview tends to rationalize death by narrowing it to a mere biological fact. During the COVID-19 outbreak, just while I was finishing this thesis, it has become apparent that he was right. Our interest to the topic of death has increased, but we have found ourselves unready to reflect on it. Now, when the absence of an ultimate answer on the question of death puts us in need of creating a new attitude.

In the third chapter, I have projected the future development of the topic. I have suggested The Method of Diotima as a new way to reflect on our mortality, which is relevant and useful for both academic philosophy and general public. This method offers to reflect on our mortality from a feminine perspective. This does not at all mean that I have been addressing exclusively to females or analyzed exclusively female experience. Rather, I have addressed the side of our lives which conventionally represents the feminine side of our personalities and social being.

The Method of Diotima assumes, firstly, addressing female experience when reflecting on death and, secondly, reacting to the stressful situation of mortality in a feminine way. As an example of female-inclusive reflection, I offer the existential analysis of childbirth in the light of mortality. This is an extension of Hannah Arendt's notion of natality as the human capacity of giving birth to new men and new beginnings. I suggest that we differentiate childbirth from other actions. Giving birth to a mortal being reveals our attitude towards our mortality. Moreover, in our care about the new person we find a powerful potential of being together in front of death. This brings us to the second feature of The Method of Diotima. As for the contemporary people facing mortality is stressful, it is more productive to cultivate a feminine response to stress ("tend-and-befriend") rather than a masculine one ("fight-or-flight"). If we respond to the stressful situation of being mortal with "tend-and-befriend" reaction, which is rooted in our capacity of childbirth, we can create the environment for open conversation and reflection on mortality. Being together makes us stronger in the face of death. Even though it is not a new ultimate answer, but it is, for sure, a good place for reflecting and talking openly about death.

I am offering that we should talk more openly about death and our mortality. Not only we should do it in academia, but also with all the people, even with little children. The topic of death can no longer remain a taboo. Only by bringing our mortality from the shadow of our fears, we are able to accept it and consider when making decisions in our lives. But how exactly should we do this? I am offering that we may address this question from the feminine perspective. In this thesis, I have outlined The Method of Diotima, which is the strategy that we may take in order to anticipate our mortality by caring about others and creating meaningful relationships. I am planning to expand this topic in my future PhD thesis.

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## Appendix

### Interest to the topic of death according to Google Trends

*Explanation:* Numbers represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart for the given region and time. A value of 100 is the peak popularity for the term. A value of 50 means that the term is half as popular. A score of 0 means there was not enough data for this term.

Chart 1. Worldwide, Jan 2004 – May 2020 (retrieved 28 May 2020)

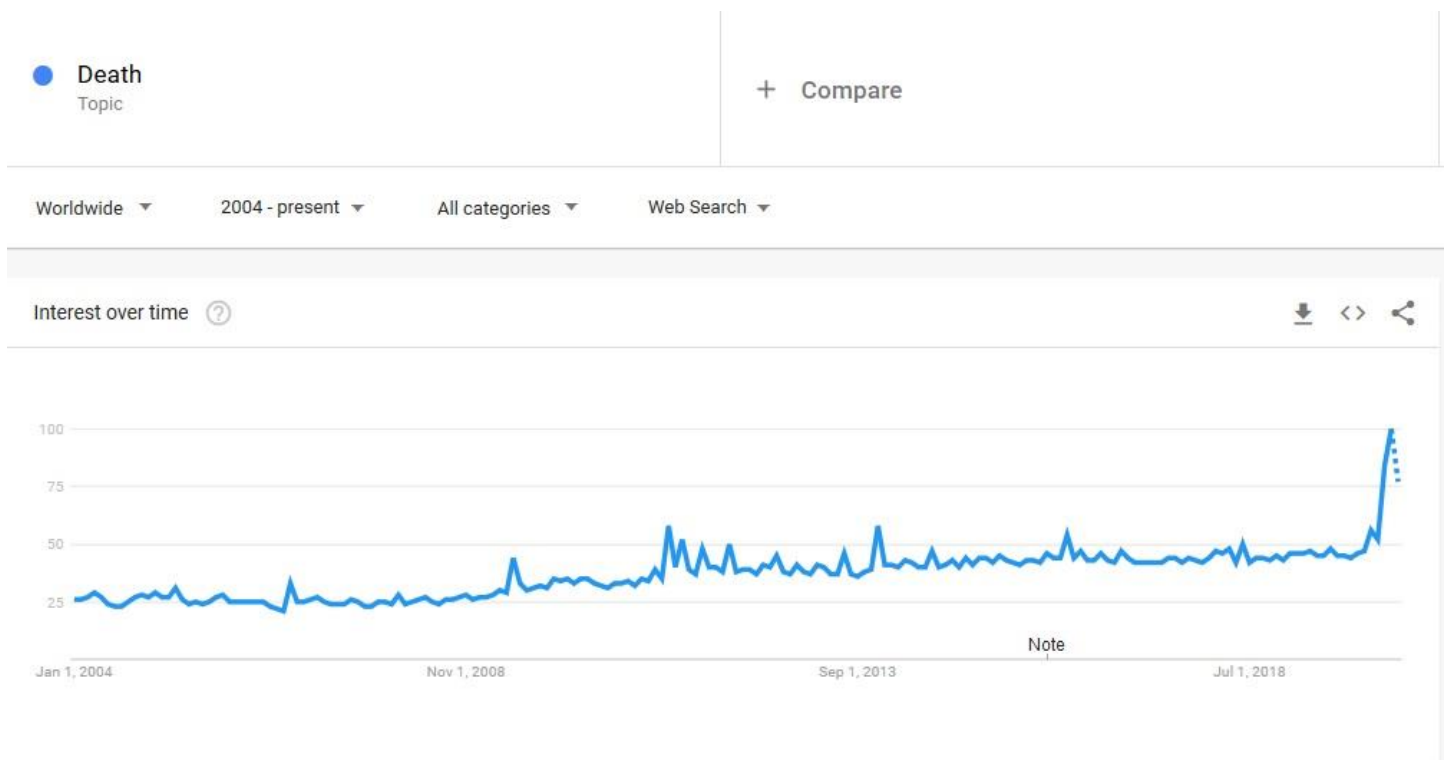
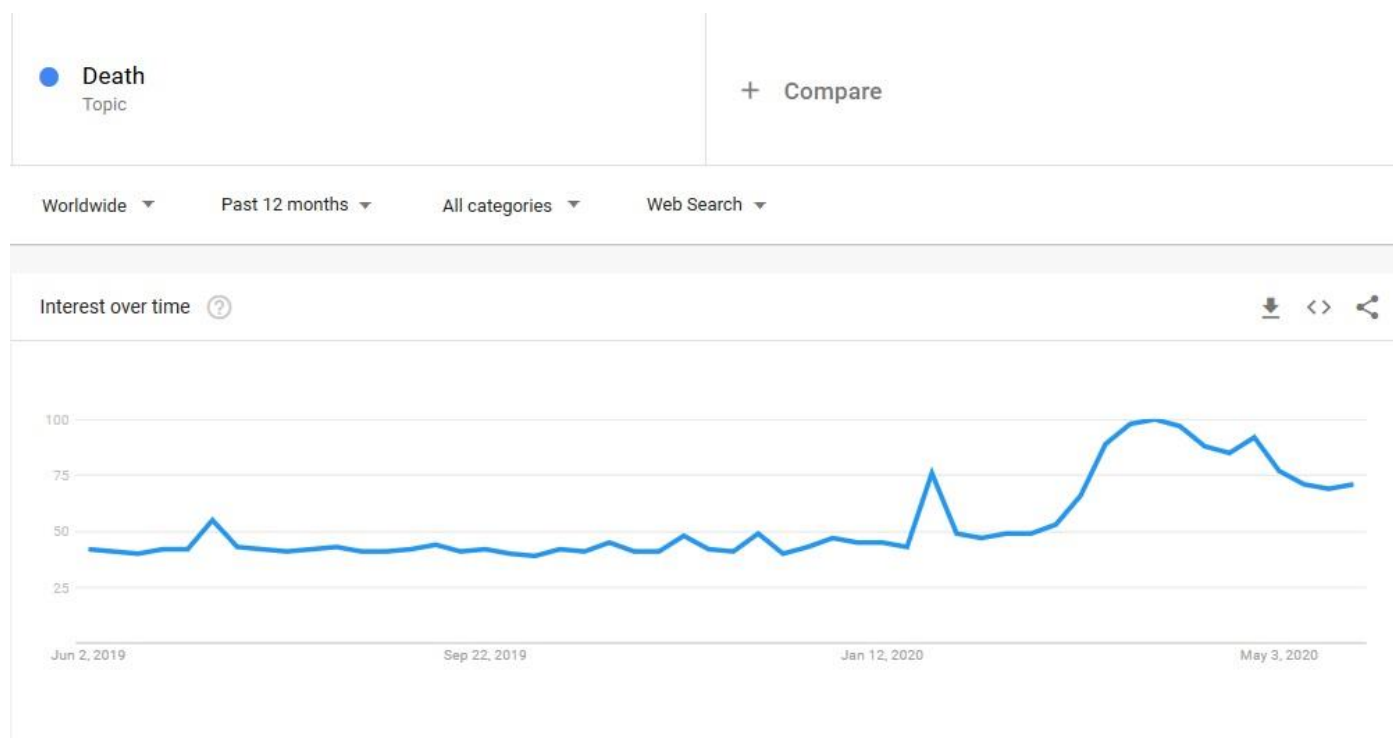


Chart 2. Worldwide, Jun 2019 – May 2020 (retrieved 28 May 2020)



## **Abstract**

In this thesis, I am addressing the past, the present, and the future of the conception of death in philosophy. In the past, the ultimate answers about death had been given by religion. Later, alongside with the process of secularization, Christianity has lost its monopoly on interpreting mortality, and atheistic views arose. Without believing in immortal soul and afterlife, the reflection on death is still necessary. In present, it is even more acute, as there are no ultimate answers anymore. According to Heidegger, we should anticipate our death in order to live authentically. According to Camus, we should accept our mortality in order to revolt against the absurd. In our contemporary society, we rather marginalize the topic of death. I suggest that, in the future, we should reflect more on death and talk about it openly. I offer “The Method of Diotima”, which assumes reacting to our mortality with “tend-and-befriend” response. As an example, I suggest that we should philosophically reflect on female experience by existential analysis of childbirth in the light of mortality. We should also care about others through sharing philosophical reflections on mortality with the broad audience and raising awareness about death.

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***31/05/2020***