

# METAPHYSICS AND DEATH IN EUGEN FINK'S THOUGHT

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*Abstract*

The aim of the contribution is to present and then question the thesis of Eugen Fink, Husserl's last assistant and Heidegger's student, on the inability of metaphysics to deal adequately with the problem of death. According to Fink, metaphysics, even though it sees the problem of death as its "existential" motive, is unable to transform it into its own object, since metaphysical concepts crumble in the face of the unspeakable power of death. The fatal difficulty of metaphysics consists, however, in the attempt to

conceive death in “phenomenal” terms, that is, starting from the presence of the entity based on its individuation; in other words, metaphysical conceptualizations always confront the single thing at the root of the understanding of being as presence. The latter is divided into three fundamental moments: the rise between earth and sky of the entity in its presence; the revealing of things to man, an entity endowed with reason, and therefore the ever-human reference of the apparition of things; the placing of man at the center of the totality of entities in time. But the philosophical understanding of death can offer us the opportunity to turn to a non-phenomenal dimension, that of absence, from which it is possible to fully understand the original moment of the evidence of things in their individuation.

*Keywords:* Eugen Fink, metaphysics, death, presence, absence.

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### **Metafizika in smrt v misli Eugena Finka**

#### *Povzetek*

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Prispevek predstavi in nato pod vprašaj postavi tezo Eugena Finka, Husserlovega zadnjega asistenta in Heideggrovega študenta, o nezmožnosti metafizike, da bi adekvatno obravnavala problem smrti. Po Finku metafizika, čeprav v tem problemu razpozna lastni »eksistencialni« motiv, smrti ne zmore spremeniti v svoj objekt, ker se metafizični pojmi razdrobijo spričo neizgovorljive moči smrti. Usodna težava metafizike namreč obstaja v poskus zajetja smrti s »fenomenalnimi« termini, se pravi, začeni s prisotnostjo entitete, temelječo na njeni individuaciji; z drugimi besedami, metafizične konceptualizacije se s posameznimi zadevami soočajo na osnovi razumevanja biti kot prisotnosti. Slednje sestavljajo trije temeljni momenti: dvig entitete v njeni prisotnosti med zemljo in nebom; razkrivanje zadev človeku kot entiteti, obdarjeni z razumom, in potemtakaem zgolj-človeško razgrinjanje prikazovanja zadev; postavitve človeka v središče totalitete entitet v času. Toda filozofsko razumevanje smrti nam lahko ponudi priložnost, da se obrnemo k nefenomenalni razsežnosti, se pravi, razsežnosti odsotnosti, z vidika katere je mogoče popolnoma dojeti izvorni okoliščino razvidnosti zadev v njihovi individuaciji.

*Gljučne besede:* Eugen Fink, metafizika, smrt, prisotnost, odsotnost.

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Eugen Fink's examination of the problem of death involves different interpretive perspectives which unfold throughout his philosophical work. The first treatment starts from the analysis of the fundamental phenomena of human existence; the second sees death as an important moment for the elaboration of a shared pedagogical project based on common ideals of life; the third—and this is what I am going to discuss here in detail—concerns death as a criterion for judging the very history of metaphysics. But before we set out on this path, it would be good to start from Fink's apprenticeship at Edmund Husserl's school with an illustration of his discussions of the problem of death with his mentor.

### Death and transcendental phenomenology

It is well known that Eugen Fink was Edmund Husserl's last assistant and that to their *synphilosophie* are to be attributed the five *Cartesian Meditations* edited by Husserl himself (to which Fink added a sixth), and therefore also *The Crisis*. It is, therefore, not only plausible, but certainly legitimate to suppose that the assistant, who had an unconditional esteem for his master,<sup>1</sup> knew very well what Husserl wrote in his notes drafted in the 1930s about the *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie*, i.e., the liminal problems concerning birth, sleep, and death. Although the treatment of death in Husserl's philosophy is neither extensive nor exhaustive,<sup>2</sup> there are many brief expositions of this problem. Certainly, their definition as *Randprobleme* does not appear congenial,<sup>3</sup> as it

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1 In 1933, Fink wrote an article in defense of the master's transcendental phenomenology against the attacks of the neo-Kantians, entitled "The phenomenological Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Contemporary Criticism," which Husserl preceded by a brief foreword in which he wrote: "At the request of the distinguished editorship of *Kantstudien*, I have carefully gone through this essay, and I am happy to be able to say that there is no statement in it that I could not make fully my own, that I would not explicitly acknowledge as my own conviction." (Edmund Husserl: "Vorwort," in Fink 1966, VII–VIII)

2 Cf. Dodd 2010, 51. Another interpreter, however, emphasizes that Husserl's thematization of birth, death, and sleep is a way to approach human finitude in a phenomenological transcendental way, showing birth, death, and sleep as limit-phenomena, intersubjective phenomena, and paradoxical phenomena (cf. Geniusas 2010).

3 As the curator of *Husserliana XLII* states (cf. Husserl 2013, XXIII).

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could connote them as being secondary or marginal. But Husserl's intention is to think of them rather as extreme problems, precisely because they are located at the beginning and conclusion of conscious life, and therefore force phenomenology, both static and genetic, to its extreme possibilities. The question is, in fact, one of being able to phenomenologically grasp the cessation of life as a vital interest, i.e. as an activity of consciousness; hence, the fundamental question is that of the possibility of thinking about birth, sleep, and death at the moment of dissolution (or suspension in the case of sleep) of the intentional constitution of the world.

56 It is clear that birth and death are fundamental events of our existence within the *Lebenswelt*. The access that Husserl initially explores is that of the analogy with waking and falling asleep. Certainly, the problem is the lack of continuity of conscious life before and after waking up, as well as the loss of any possibility of consciousness with a “dreamless sleep [*traumloser Schlaf*].” The noematic correlates of unconsciousness [*Unbewusstsein*] are therefore *das Unbewusste*, the non-conscious, that is, what does not belong to the acts proper to the thinking, desiring, and evaluating consciousness. Husserl's attempt is, therefore, to try, through the analogy of sleeping, to make phenomenologically conceivable what lies beyond any datum and therefore any description, i.e., the subject before his experiential entrance into the world and disappearance as an experiential subject. This problem appears to concern the constitution of transcendental phenomenology: how can the transcendental self grasp the question of death, a fact belonging to the objective world?

It is evident that for the transcendental subject, its own death is unthinkable, and yet the subject has experience of death, knows it as an “event in the world of men” (Husserl 2013, 78–79), an event that happens in our world, which is primarily nature and physical corporeity. Husserl had already committed himself to the analysis of death by following this approach, and had, in 1916, written:

The objective world is the permanent being in objective time, and the subjects belong to the objective world as psychic subjects. But the objective world is world for my consciousness and a rule of my consciousness, and also of my empathized subjects. But I die, this or that one dies. (Husserl 2013, 17–18)

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The world that stands before my intentionality is a world that lasts, that has time marked by objectivity, which provides the norm and criterion to my conscience; well, in this world, in which I am present together with others that are perceived empathically, one dies, that is, I die, another one dies. Certainly, this death that I meet in my observation of the world, precisely because of its *Naturhaftigkeit*, because it is marked by randomness and senselessness, is something irrational as opposed to the rational formation of life; it is basically a scandal for every reason, says Husserl, and here he, it would seem, “embraces” the Parmenidean thesis.

Therefore, there is a problem of accessibility to the phenomenon of death for the ego, which reflects it phenomenologically, that is, on the basis of transcendental reduction: it has the possibility to experience this phenomenon only through others, not by itself: my death is not an experience of mine. However, precisely because of the experience I have of my body, I can think of developmental trends that are specific to my ego: my aging, my progressive loss of bodily operational capacity, the decrease in strength, the reduction in vision. Thus, from a concrete point of view, writes Husserl, I can ultimately obtain a sort of prefiguration of death from my intersubjective worldly experience, which, we remember, is always an intermonadic experience:

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*My death as a world event* can only be constituted for me when I have experienced *the death of others* as physical-organic decay and disintegration, and (as) impossibility of the continuation of identifying empathy, (as) impossibility of experiencing life in streaming intentionality in presentation. *The death of others is the death that was previously constituted.* [...] Thus, I find my death as a world event, as a datum of experience on the way through other deaths; but as a transcendental ego it is me who constitutes the world with all the dying-ones, the dead-ones, and my human death. (Husserl 2013, 3)

This prefiguration also shows the inadequacy of the analogy with sleep or illness: I can fall ill, lose consciousness for a period of time, and at the end of this momentary unconsciousness return to my flow, the before and the present interspersed with that time when I was powerless. But death is something else:

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“It’s over with me.” (Husserl 2013, 2) Now, it is clear that Husserl’s conception is marked by an extreme pre-eminence of the present, starting from the temporal constitution which is proper to the synthesis of the ego. This is the key that makes it possible to reconnect the past to the present at the moment of awakening, after the temporary interruption of the flow of consciousness in sleep, and that is not allowed when the interruption of the flow is definitive, in the dreamless sleep, a definition that brings us back to the Socrates of the *Apology*.

As we have already mentioned, Fink worked and collaborated closely with his master’s projects, officially embracing his lines of research, as shown by the closing of the essay entitled “What Does the Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl Want to Accomplish?” Here, after recalling that, thanks to intentional analysis, fundamental research fields open up to phenomenology, starting from the clarification of the “natural attitude,” to which he adds the fields of investigation concerning the constitutive problem, Fink writes:

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However, even the highest “metaphysical” problems, which in traditional philosophy have never arisen as problems that require commitment, but only as “theses” (like God, death, teleology, “meaning of existence,” etc.), do not lie outside of the horizon of the work of phenomenology. Even though these problems do not offer themselves to an initial grasp, even if a long and laborious way leads to them, still a philosophy which knows that in its self-understanding it is placed within the innermost essence of the spirit which precedes the world and all Being can never capitulate in the face of ultimate “irrationalities.” (Fink 1966, 178; English translation: Fink 1972, 27)

It is clear here that Fink’s intention is to follow the long path of the Husserlian method in order to arrive at the clarification of metaphysical problems which, as such, are not objects of our experience. But is this, in fact, his position? The notes, which he wrote at the same time, and which have been made accessible by recent publications of the *Gesamtausgabe*, show the young scholar’s doubts about the viability of this path. The reduction effectuates a “destruction of horizon” with the view to acquiring a “critical” terrain, on which

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the perception analysis operates. This is how the hyletic data can be obtained and shown as belonging to a “wakened” ego, since only a waken ego has hyletic data in connection with its *Erlebnisse*. For this reason, “the phenomenological analysis of the unconscious (sleep, death, birth, and so on) cannot operate by constructing uniform sense fields” (Fink 2008, 116). The problem that Fink seems to be facing is an impossibility of the methodology adopted by Husserl in his fourth Cartesian meditation, i.e., to try to make everything familiar through forms of variation: for the states of unconsciousness, this approach cannot be considered valid, because here we are faced with the reinforcement of consciousness, which does not offer analogies with the intentional analysis of consciousness, which must be conceptually understood starting from its *Inständigkeit*, its insistence.

What approach, therefore, may be adopted in order to seek access to what is not given to conscience? Here, Fink begins to outline the path that would lead him to his sixth meditation: the phenomenological exhibition [*Aufweisung*] alone is not enough, indeed, it remains blind, while the speculative creation [*Schöpfung*] remains empty. It is thus necessary to find a unitary engagement, to open a new space for philosophical thought: “A philosophy that brings everything back to its original self-giving, excludes itself from the possibility of finding self-giveness there, where the common intellect does not presume any ‘space,’ of discovering stars in the skies which are not yet opened.” (Fink 2008, 117) It is no coincidence, then, that immediately afterwards Fink mentions the problem of the cosmos, understood as the Entity’s field of action [*Spielraum des Seienden*], which he now defines with the term *Umständlichkeit*, circumstantiality. Here, conscience can never be aware of such circumstantiality, since the latter remains unthematized and without the possibility of being thematized. But how can conscience address it? Fink takes as an example the description of silence. Can we think of defining it as an objective happening without sound? Certainly not, for it is silence that makes the presence or absence of sound possible. Silence, understood as a world situation, leads us to transcendence understood as the horizontality of the entity.

Therefore, if phenomenology wants to replace metaphysics by renewing its discussion of philosophical questions, it must be able to take on the constitutive problems such as birth and death, however undoubtedly complicated it is to

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deal with them. Thus, Fink attempts to establish in fundamental points what can be achieved through transcendental phenomenology and what its limits are:

1. First of all, it is clear that birth and death are not objects, since they do not fall within the field of experience. Moreover, transcendental consciousness cannot be shown in its coexistential being, since constitution here cannot mean the plurality of the subjective *Erlebnisse*, in which an identity is constituted.

2. Therefore, it is evident that they are unattainable, both protentionally and retentionally, since consciousness always remains in the existence of its own flow.

3. The integrity of the transcendental flow of the *Erlebnisse* is a temporal unit absconding from the present [*entgegenwärtigende Zeiteinheit*].

4. The events of birth and death, as they are present, are always events of strangers to my ego.

5. For this reason, my death and my birth are necessarily a construction [*Konstruktion*], and not a constitution.

60 6. In this construction lies the problem of generative time and therefore the objective worldly time.<sup>4</sup>

Here, Fink's early, however concise, reflection on these themes is interrupted. It is possible to summarize it synthetically as a doubt about the possibility of making an object of an eidetic reflection upon what conscience is unable to thematize, especially because it is anchored to the vision, which considers presence as the Archimedean point, also for retention and protention. In this way, metaphysical questions, such as those of birth and death, risk being excluded from the possible access of transcendental phenomenology. In other words, prohibiting the speculative path would prevent Husserlian phenomenology from succeeding in bringing to completion the renewal of metaphysical thought. But, as we shall see, Husserl's approach is flawed, and links him to the same tradition from which he wanted to depart.

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4 Cf. Fink 2008, 122–123.

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## Death from an anthropological point of view

Now, the time has come to focus on Fink's mature reflection upon the theme of death, and particularly upon what is the object of an anthropological perspective. Primarily, death presents itself to us as a phenomenon: it is something that happens before our eyes continuously. But what kind of a phenomenon is it? The phenomena that present themselves to us can never be exempt from a preliminary "existential" interpretation, that is, our access to them is guided by the self-interpretation of existence. This means that the philosopher, whenever he tries to grasp universality, can do so only because he has a certain amount of intimacy with himself that gives access to the phenomena to be interpreted. Philosophy itself, after all, can also be understood as an attempt to give answers, which arises from man's belonging to the enigma of his nature. Man has a continuous relationship with the mystery of his own existence, and this can be called the preliminary access to his own fundamental situation. This relationship is therefore man's most proper property: while the animal, according to the property of its being, can never reach a high degree of consciousness, only human nature happens continuously as an interpretation aimed at clarifying the mysteries of its own existence and of the world.<sup>5</sup> This means, on closer inspection, that Eugen Fink is distancing himself from the transcendental phenomenology of his master, Edmund Husserl: man is never an *unbeteiligter Zuschauer*, a disinterested spectator, but he who continually gets involved by means of and with his interpretative action: "Man is a witness to the unfolding of his life, always bearing witness to it: in deeds and words; he interprets himself and these interpretations contribute to forming his own being." (Fink 1995, 93) This proximity to oneself, which is expressed in the uninterrupted interpretation of one's own existence, in which every man takes part, provides the formal structure, within which the interpretation of death occurs. However, one should not think that this intimacy with existence reintroduces traditional themes, such as the personality of the self and its relationship with freedom and historicity. Fink, on the other hand, intends to

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<sup>5</sup> Eugen Fink explicitly refers to the concept of *Jemeinigkeit* in Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (cf. Fink 1995, 98–114).

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start from the fundamental phenomena of human existence, in order to see in concrete terms how, from time to time, the ipseity, freedom, and historicity of the ego take shape in the historical occurrence of the central phenomena of human existence.

62 Death is the first fundamental phenomenon to be examined analytically, because it is the one which opens to the essential constitution of our existence, finiteness. Our mortality, in fact, pervades every possibility of human existence, it is “the ownmost, non-relational possibility, which is not outstripped” and “certain,” as Heidegger writes (cf. Heidegger 1993, 264; English translation: Heidegger 1962, 309). But if we consider it as a possibility, we cannot consider it as something that comes from the outside, it is rather something, which lies inside the very being of man. Thus, the potentiality of death is a potentiality of no longer being possible, rather than being possible. As a properly human phenomenon, in that it does not belong to the animal or to God, death also determines man’s relationship to things present in the world. Thanks to the knowledge of finiteness, man is able to understand the essence of what is artificial, distinguishing it from what is natural and consequently mortal. It is therefore on the basis of this elementary anthropological knowledge that man goes so far as to ask himself about the origin of things, grasping the dependence of things upon their ontological determination. In other words: to understand the artificiality of something means to understand the relationship between being and nothingness: “Only a being, who in his own essence relates to nothingness, can understand what is created as created. And perhaps only a being open to nothingness can ‘create,’ ‘produce,’ ‘process.’” (Fink 1995, 116) In this sense, it is highly significant that Fink emphasizes how death, together with work and domination, reveals the ambiguous way, in which man relates to the world.<sup>6</sup>

The awareness of mortality, thus, acquires a particular primacy within man’s understanding of his own being and of the being of entities: in this knowledge, Fink sees the authentic actualization of the promise made by the

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Fink 1995, 321. Cf. also van Kerckhoven’s essay (2003) on this subject. Recently published collective book of essays edited by Nielsen and Sepp (2019) is dedicated to the question of dwelling in reference to the essential worldly constitution of man.

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serpent in the holy Bible: “eritis sicut Deus” did not mean that humans can achieve omnipotence, omniscience, and eternity, but that they can recognize the difference between the divine eternity and the caducity of things. Far from any “traditional” understanding of death, which created a mixture of elements taken from the animal world (disintegration of the body) and the divine world (eternal spark), Fink considers it necessary to access this phenomenon from a completely human perspective, avoiding distorting interpretations. To attain this access, it is necessary to start from the “case of death,” from the fact that we encounter in our lives someone who dies. Now, it is clear that this knowledge is only valid for the one who observes, while death is always the death of the one who dies; this is the meaning of the Epicurean sentence, according to which one cannot live one’s own death, but, in any case, it must be considered that in observing the death of others the certain and anguished understanding of one’s own death is always included: we recognize the phenomenon, which we see in the death of others, as something that invests others in the totality of their being; that phenomenon represents for them their own death. Upon deeper inspection, this means, however, that we truly understand our own death, not at the moment, in which we die, but in living, that is, during our own life: our own death becomes something, of which we are aware, above all, in the inner certainty that accompanies our entire life. This certainty cannot clearly be a lived experience, nor even an anticipated representation of future death as in Heidegger, but it consists in holding it before us every moment, while living our finiteness in constant waiting and in readiness.

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### **The metaphysics of death**

But, regardless of the indisputable advances, which we make through the analytics of existence, the question of death becomes an essential step to clarify the ontological problem. In the face of death, it seems necessary to adopt a different ontological register, in order to give meaning and significance to the perishing of phenomena, that is, to their disappearance in their individuality, with a view to the understanding of entities in general. We have now come to the relationship between death and metaphysics, which marks the second part of our paper. Let us start from a basic consideration: every understanding of

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the being of entities is constituted by their manifestation before our eyes, that is, by their presence.

This obvious assertion becomes extremely problematic when we use the same ontological register to deal with the problem of death. In other words, the question could be addressed in this way: can we use our understanding of the being of an entity that we encounter in the world in its phenomenality, or even the understanding of the totality of entities in the cosmic perspective, to be able to attain an appropriate access to the disappearance of entities from their phenomenality? It is not possible for me to explain here one of the most important themes of Fink's thought, the relationship between the singularity of the entity that comes to its phenomenality and the totality of the phenomena in their worldly constitution, and yet this crucial problem, for the history of metaphysics, does not affect the conception of death starting from the appearance of entities and the ontological register that comes from it. If it is true that being is always understood as "presence," it is also true that other essential aspects besides presence are connected to its phenomenal appearance. Fink refers to an image, dear to the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, the image of a tree that grows with its foliage towards the sky, in the light, but has solid roots that go deep into the dark ground, and remain inaccessible to the eye, and are nonetheless necessary for the tree to rise in the phenomenal world. Thus, the earth and the sky mark the boundaries of the space, within which it is possible to understand the presence of a tree, also temporally measuring its phenomenal duration, perceived—as all entities are—by the only entity who manages to understand ontologically what presents itself to the presence.

The understanding of being on the basis of presence is grounded in three essential traits: firstly, an entity's rising in its presence between the earth and the sky; secondly, the fact that things show themselves to an entity called "man," who is endowed with reason, and, therefore, the fact that appearances of things always have a human reference; thirdly, the fact that human experience is placed at the center of the totality of entities in time. Fink argues that, in order to look for new ways to develop phenomenology, it is necessary to rethink the very concept of *phenomenon*, especially the essential link that connects it to the subject's ability to perceive it. In order to reach this result, it is no longer necessary to start from man's external experience of things through

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representation, but to venture on the search of an essential link between the being of the thing and its manifestation, and then to try to reach its being itself. Fink's way of arguing challenges centuries of modern philosophy, as he, renouncing the primacy of the subject and its worldly experience, tries to grasp the being-thing of the thing. Precisely this is the objective of the search for being-the-same, a search to grasp the assumption that makes every event experienced possible. This being-the-same should not be understood as the recognition of a kind of consciousness of everything that surrounds us, but rather as a reference to the relationship that a thing has with its being-itself, a relationship, which remains obscure to the eyes of the ego that represents it. This means that the representation can only touch the shell of what is shown to us and stop at the possibility of turning an entity into an object. Fink calls this mode of manifestation of the entity *Anschein*, appearance-for-me. Yet, if we observe critically, or rather speculatively, the possibility of such an apparition, we recognize that there is a dimension of luminosity that makes such an apparition possible. This apparition does not depend on human cognitive capacity, but on *Vorschein*, appearance-in-itself. With this latter concept, Fink's intent is to indicate the movement, through which the entity realizes its being by assuming a shape and border. With the arrival to its appearing-in-itself [*Zum-Vorschein-Kommen*], the entity enters in the world of distinctions, like a flower, which grows from the womb of the earth like a baby grows from his mother's womb. This appearing-in-itself is the presentation of the entity's own being. But, while the human representation of an entity is subject to randomness, its appearance is not necessary for its essence (there are unknown fish in the depths of the ocean as well as unknown plant species in impenetrable forests); appearance-in-itself is the intimate link with the essence of each manifestation.<sup>7</sup>

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Thanks to Fink's philosophical understanding of death, the links with the most obvious interpretations of death are broken, because we are now led towards a dimension that lies beyond the phenomenal world, an obscure dimension, that of absence. The heart of the problem of a philosophical interpretation of death is, thus, to understand the "negative" of death.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Fink 2018, 279 ff.

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Ultimately, the problem of death is of fundamental importance in the attempt to overcome the understanding of being exclusively based on the phenomenal world, to finally arrive at the phenomenality of things. If death would simply be the passage to “nothing,” then Epicurus’ remedy would be effective, but instead we have a continuous relationship with the rising of things, which means, with the fact that something which previously was not there comes to manifestation, with the fact that something which previously belonged to the realm of non-being acquires evidence in the world of individuation.

In other words, it is clear that the question of death in Fink, besides being the subject of fundamental significance for a full understanding of the finiteness of human beings, is the gateway to trying to deal with the subject of nothing, as he himself wrote to his friend Jan Patočka in August 1969 in a letter, wherein he announced the imminent publication of *Metaphysik und Tod*, which he described as “a meditation in a failing attempt to think the nothingness, to which human death points as a silent, terrifying pointer” (Fink and Patočka 1999, 70)<sup>8</sup>

66 With the philosophical understanding of death, therefore, we attain a relationship with something, which is totally incongruent with the normal understanding of the being of things in the world, which is other than all representations that we have of being, because all our conceptual grids, which try to remove and exorcize the fear of death, are inadequate. But does man not already live in an understanding of reality which refers to something absent? Does what is imagined, dreamed of not open up the horizon of being other than mere presence? These “images” of reality, which may seem different from the usual understanding of being, belong to the same ontological structure of reality that is grounded in presence. Both the fictitious projection of a dreamlike inner world beyond death and the denial of the void opened by death seek to close the gaping chasm in the face of nothingness, since the first attitude seeks to inadmissibly broaden the understanding of being that refers to the phenomenal world, while the second blocks the way to this understanding,

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that, in his subsequent letter to Patočka, Fink describes his *Metaphysik und Tod* as being “without results [*ergebnislos*],” as being suitable for a “skeptical speculative.”

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putting aside the fact that the understanding of death radically questions this meaning resulting from closure itself.

Fink's "cosmological" thesis about death is, therefore, that the dead individual compels us to reconsider the problem of man's being, because the problem of death opens a gap in the conception of the being of the self as individuation, since man's death entails precisely the erasure of this self. With death, self-affirmation disappears and the individual ceases to have his own singularity. For this reason, myths and religions seek to affirm the survival of these aspects through perceptions and experiences that the deceased supposedly have in the afterlife. Faith in the persistence of a person is the center of the belief in immortality. But, at the same time, death offers the possibility of leaving the experience of "truth" in the sense of un-concealment of the entity and of sinking into the dark and the undifferentiated.

The methodical significance of the analysis of death is based on a fundamental trait of human existence, not present in animals or in God, which has not been exposed, but above all on the fact that it refers to an unprecedented tension and to an enigmatic depth of the human understanding of being, truth, and the world. [...] Death is the most serious and terrible indicator that goes beyond the sphere of indication and dissolves the question of truth, which does not grasp what is individual. (Fink 1995, 204–205)

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Death, in the dimension of the direction, the "sense" to which it refers that we want to follow, provides us with a way to start philosophically understanding the phenomenality of phenomena, to try to broaden our gaze towards the continuous play of the coming-to-light of what was not yet and the disappearance-from-presence into the night of what is no longer. Ultimately, this is the cosmological horizon, within which it is possible to understand the phenomenon of death, to try to grasp the spatial and temporal co-belonging of our death and the exit from the light of transient things. It is said that matter does not end, but changes its form, so that a rock shattered by the waves becomes sand. But is it possible to apply this representation, upon which a certain ontological understanding is based, to man? Or is it necessary to get

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out of the circularity between metaphysics and death, in order to be able to conceptually understand death?

The certainty achieved by the Cartesian cogito does not ensure an exit from the realm of perishability, quite the opposite: the subject who guarantees the certainty of *cogitata* with respect to the illusion of the outside world, has always known of its mortality. “The ego cogito is actually a fragile *res cogitans*.” (Fink 1969, 20) On the other hand, the wonder of the appearance of things, has as a counterbalance the terror of bearing-witness to their disappearance. The conviction, common to philosophy and science, that things hide their true nature from us, that something is hidden behind their appearance, also resides for Fink in the inability to come to a definitive agreement with death, to be able to understand it as a phenomenon, and this is because neither science nor philosophy succeed in grasping the connection between the end of man and the end of intra-worldly things.

68 Ultimately, the problem of death is of fundamental importance in overcoming the understanding of being that I have exclusively in the phenomenal world, or rather the phenomenality of things. The continuous relationship with the rise of things, with something coming to manifestation from the realm of non-being, means that, with death, through it, we arrive to the relationship with something that possesses total strangeness with respect to the normal understanding of being of things in the world, something other than all the representations that we have of being. For this reason, all our conceptual grids are inadequate to try to grasp and exorcize the fear of death. But does man not already live in an understanding of reality that refers to something absent as in the case of the imagined? Although such “images” may seem unconnected with reality, they do not highlight ontological structures in open contradiction with the obvious understanding of reality, to which we are accustomed.<sup>9</sup>

The usual statements regarding death concern the fictitious projection of a dreamlike inner world that lies beyond death and the denial of an emptiness traced with death. As has been mentioned, both possibilities seek to close the gaping chasm in the face of the tremendous nothingness, since the first affirmation seeks to inadmissibly broaden the understanding of being that

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9 Cf. Fink 1978, 178. On these topics cf. Schmidt 1996.

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refers to the phenomenal world, the other instead speaks of a closure of this understanding, putting aside the fact that the understanding of death radically questions this comprehension, this closure. Upon this ground, also the respectful but difficult duel with Heidegger took place during the seminar on Heraclitus. Here, Fink, on the basis of an interpretation of the “The Obscure” of Ephesus, interprets the earth, not as something phenomenal, and not even from a formal point of view, but symbolically, as a positive and real-life power, a power of re-enactment. In his dialogue with Heidegger, Fink tries to underline the opacity of the earth, on which the boundedness of the open domain of light rests. We mortals dwell on the opaque earth whose boundary is marked by light. The darkness is not the one of night, illuminated by the stars, but that of a closedness of the soil, into which no light is able to penetrate: “In contrast to the closedness of the earth, the dark of night has by itself fundamental illuminability.” (Heidegger and Fink 1979, 43)

It is clear that Fink, discussing the un-phenomenality of the earth, the un-phenomenality of the night,<sup>10</sup> is trying to arrive through a metaphorical, almost mythical language to the speculative dimension, through which it would be possible to overcome the non-transparency of death, that is, of nothingness. This is the aspiration which Fink expressly states in front of Heidegger’s relentless questioning:

69

*Heidegger:* With my questions, I would only like to get at the place from which you speak of another night.

*Fink:* If I have spoken of another, more original night, of the nightly abyss in explication of the sun fragment, I did so in preview of the death-life fragments. From there I have viewed the deeper sense of the phenomenon of closedness of the earth and in a certain way also of the sea as the boundary of the sun’s domain. Only when we first consider the relation of life and death will we see how the realm of life is the sun’s domain and how a new dimension breaks open with the reference to death. The new dimension is neither the domain of openness nor only the closedness of the earth, although the earth is an excellent symbol for

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10 On this subject cf. the essay by Barbarić (2005).

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the dimension of the more original night. Hegel speaks of the earth as the elementary *individuum* into which the dead return. The dimension of the more original night is denoted by death. That dimension, however, is the realm of death, which is no land and has no extension, the no-man's-land, ...

*Heidegger*: ... that cannot be traversed and that also is no dimension. The difficulty lies in addressing the domain denoted by death. (Heidegger and Fink 1979, 54)

The decisive confrontation takes place on this terrain: Heidegger thinks that only starting from the *there* [*Da*] of the *clearing* [*Lichtung*] a chance can be given to understand what is comprehensible of the darkness, while for Fink it is important to point out that, if we grasp the hiddenness [*Verborgenheit*] of the darkness starting from the *clearing*, we risk to consider the darkness only as the limit of openness.<sup>11</sup>

70 Without the claim to utter any final words in what is only a mere sketch of the issue, it can be claimed in conclusion that for Fink the wisdom of thought must not be founded in the pure standing in the clearing, but rather as entering into the night of the earth.<sup>12</sup> The question of death contains in itself, therefore, the access, problematic and unattainable, through which it is possible not only to grasp, in all its concrete authenticity, the fragility of our existence, but also to try to approach the mystery of being and its relationship with nothingness.

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<sup>11</sup> "*Heidegger*: The dark is in a certain sense also the openness, if a light is kindled in it. This dark openness is only possible in the clearing in the sense of the *Da*. // *Fink*: I would suppose that we may think the concealment of the dark not only out of the relationship of clearing of the *Da*. There is the danger that one understands the dark only as boundary of what stands open, as the exterior walling of the open. I would like above all to indicate that a human relates himself at the same time to the open and to the concealing darkness." (Heidegger and Fink 1979, 130) Cf. Vetter's essay (2011) regarding the comparison between the thoughts of Heidegger and Fink in relation to the question of Nothing. For an overall phenomenological interpretation of the Heraclitus fragments cf. Ardovino's book (2012).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Fink 1977, 238.

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