

## The Efficiency of Applied Philosophical Thematization: The Works of István Király V.\* in the Context of European Philosophy

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**Abstract:** The subject of this paper is the presentation and contrasting analysis of the so-called “ultimate metaphysical questions” in the works of István Király V., who had spent several decades of consistent fathoming of the senses of life, death, freedom, history and illness. Although Király’s Heideggerian thinking, his commitment to *fundamental ontology* and *hermeneutics* is beyond dispute, he can be regarded as an independent thinker who forms his own thinking autonomously and independently from the authors he prefers to refer to (Kierkegaard, Heidegger, etc.) His originality lies in the fact that he rethinks and takes forward the Heideggerian questions and answers, trying to join the abstract views of *fundamental ontology* with the “life-commitment” of *applied philosophy*. This way he sees the questions of death, freedom and illness connected to euthanasia or abortion, that is, the concrete questions of human existence which often test the limits or paralyse freedom. The paper does not claim that Király’s radical interpretation of being is an isolated attempt. Therefore the author of the paper compares Király’s applied philosophy experiment with other similar approaches of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Ernst Bloch, Nicolai Berdyaev, Emmanuel Lévinas, and Jean-Paul Sartre, in the mirror of whose works the originality and challenging innovation of Király’s thoughts is even more apparent.

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*Some* two years ago I found myself in an interesting and revealing debate on the current position of Hungarian philosophy with a friend of mine who is of course also an expert of the field, what’s more, a well known researcher of the history of Hungarian philosophy. I happened to say, partly by conviction, partly as a provocation (a debate is a debate) that the quality of Hungarian philosophy is not

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\* István Király V., *Kérdő jelezés....* (Question marking...) (Pozsony [Bratislava]: Kalligram, 2004), 219p. Idem, *Halandóan lakozik szabadságában az ember* (Mortally dwells man in his freedom) (Pozsony [Bratislava]: Kalligram, 2007), 309p. Idem, *Kérdés-pontok a történelemhez, a halálhoz és a szabadsághoz* (Question-points to history, death and freedom) (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2008), 253p. Idem, *A betegség – az élő létlehetősége* (Illness – A Possibility of the Living Being (With a detailed English summary) (Pozsony [Bratislava]: Kalligram, 2011). 198p.

significantly different today than it was in the 1960s–1970s. I tried to prove my claim in the following manner: if one is a regular visitor of larger second-hand bookstores, cannot but notice that the works of philosophy edited thirty-forty years ago are still lining up on the philosophy shelves, almost untouched for years. For instance, the works of István Hermann (*A gondolat hatalma* [The power of thought], *A szfinx rejtvénye* [The riddle of the Sphynx], etc.), without anyone being apparently interested in them (although Hermann gave good titles to his books, and if nothing else, this should really be worth learning from him). “Do you think we are any more worthy than the previous generations? Will anyone still be interested in our works thirty years from now?” – I asked my friend. Waiting for no answer, I continued: “For we ourselves are good for nothing else than repeating the lesson, just like them. Don’t add any extra! – claims the imperative of Hungarian philosophy. Rorty said this, Derrida said that – and this is basically how far our thinking reaches. How are we any more special than they were?” Then – with a hint of envy – I started explaining how different all this is in Slovenia for example, where Slavoj Žižek, Alenka Zupancic or Mladen Dolar, unlike Hungarian philosophers, dare think as well on their own, something that should supposedly not be very far from the nature of philosophy... Of course, as I have mentioned, I myself was just half serious about what I said, I merely like to tease the dedicated followers of capitalist parliamentarism (my friend is one of them), who say that “in whatever way things may have changed since the regime change”, we now live in freedom, and “to whom may freedom be more important than precisely the philosophers?”

And indeed, if one reads the books of István Király V., one can be sure that there may be some truth in my friend’s argument, since the Transylvanian philosopher is one of the few who “swim against” the tide and try to live with the possibilities offered by this (relative and) often threatened freedom, and dare even think. The author’s major study on freedom engaging in a dialogue with Gadamer and Heidegger also has a personal reference: István Király V. personally experienced the power of periodically reviving censorship which continues to poison the public life of contemporary Romania (and Hungary).<sup>1</sup> The author’s “existentially committed” and “emphatic” style also betrays the author’s commitment to freedom, while his quite original phrasing, syntax and punctuation also reveal a “free thinker”. This original tone of Király appears in all three of his books. That is to say, Király has no connection with that widespread objective tone which characterizes today not only analytical philosophy and works of philosophy of science (in which case it may even seem in order), but which also counts as an almost unbreakable norm also in works of so-called life philosophy. One could say: for István Király V., philosophy and *philosophizing* has had, and will have an existential stake, therefore it appears to him as almost a question of life and death what he writes, where he stands, who he fights with or agrees with, at least in part. For the author wants to be permanently present in person on the pages of his book, and this subjectivity lends a special dynamics to the works of the Transylvanian philosopher, committed also to the rules of rational argumentation. After this introduction it would probably be most

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Király, *Kérdő*...83–131. If not marked otherwise, all foreign-language quotations are translated into English by Emese Czintos.

appropriate to structure my impressions and critical remarks about his studies around his most recently published book. While doing this, I will make references to the chapters of the other two books which dwell in more detail on, or are more argumentative in underlining, the theses formulated in this latter, visibly synthetic volume.



This got on the way but it did not stop me.  
I climbed

**Patricia Todoran**, *On Obstacles*  
40 cm x 50 cm, lambda print, 2015

The first chapter centres on the *consubstantial* nature of human existence, death and history: namely, that there is no history without death, and that death – just like life, the mortal life – “is only meaningful” if placed in a historical-existential dimension.<sup>1</sup> In other words, Király claims that the meaning of history can only be given if it is “directed to its end”, since all “(...) factic life is always, factically, somehow **approaches on death**”.<sup>2</sup> “Approaching on death”, at least in terms of man, is by no means identical with biological disintegration.<sup>3</sup> Death is much rather a force that compels one to acknowledge the radical finiteness of the future and also naturally the past (that is, of time), which can be *faced*, but *can also be avoided*. This latter is what usually happens, in our author’s view. However, to

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<sup>1</sup> *Halál és történelem – Prolegomenák egy “történelemfilozófiai”, illetve történelemontológiai lehetőséghez.* (Death and history – Prolegomenae to the possibility of a “philosophy of history” and ontology of history), in *Kérdés-pontok*. 7–110.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>3</sup> “Dying, human death is never *merely* biological, never a process or event defined *merely* by the natural laws of the living world”. Király, *Halandóan...* 107.

ignore the burden of radical finiteness, to turn away from the problem of death is not merely a matter of the “genetic weakness of will” of historical subjects. Actually, the flight strategies which turn man away from taking on the true burden of the radical end (death understood as dying) are in fact built in the very foundations of European (and extra-European) cultural traditions. These flight directions always aim, one way or another, at minimizing our personal implication deriving from the existential nature of death (meaning that it cannot be transferred) either by promising the immortality of the soul, or by transforming the “issue” of one’s own death into the “issue” of the other people’s death. The first direction is taken by religions and so-called philosophies of religion, while the second direction is shared by medicine, ethnology, historiography, cultural anthropology, etc.

In what follows, I will present some strategies “to avoid the problem of death” which differ from the traditional problem of the immortality of the soul and some of which are also at times taken into account by Király V.; his judgment is of course almost always “ruthlessly rejecting”, as a direct consequence of the author’s admittedly fundamental ontological commitment.

### **The utopian victory over death I. – Ernst Bloch’s philosophy of hope**

The traditional problem of the immortality of death is not a primary concern of Király’s philosophy. This is clearly stated in his response to one of his opponents in an application.<sup>1</sup> The criticism formulated in the context of conservative protestant philosophy of religion reproached the author that he completely neglected the several thousands of years long Christian interpretations of the immortality of the soul. Now, there was indeed not much to be done with this criticism, betraying quite a conservative kind of thinking. If I am not mistaken, this question was last discussed with a philosophical depth by Bernard Bolzano and Ludwig Feuerbach – the former in a rather affirmative way, the latter in a rather critical tone.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the problem of immortality has its other kinds of materialist or rather quasi-materialist approaches too, among which one of the most notable is the version of Ernst Bloch’s philosophy of hope.<sup>3</sup> Starting from the ancient cultures of human history, Bloch outlined a series of a kind of anti-death utopias which oppose death and are somehow able to domesticate it. One last link in this series is the baroque tragedy analyzed by Walter Benjamin with its allegorizing tendencies. The death of the tragic hero – says Benjamin – releases the spirit “in a spiritual way”,

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<sup>1</sup> See *Kérdő...* 86–92. Berdyaev, who has a way of seeing the existential relation to death in many respects similar to that of Lévinas – or rather, Lévinas’s is similar to Berdyaev –, writes: “The question of the immortality of the soul is one of the now obsolete metaphysical questions”. Nikolai Berdyaev, *O naznacsenyii cseloveka – opit paradoxalnoj etyiki* [English: The Destiny of Man] (Paris YMCA-PRESS, 1981), 268.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Bernard Bolzano, *A lélek halhatatlansága, avagy Athanasia \* Mi a filozófia?* (The immortality of the soul, or Athanasia \* What is philosophy?), trans. Csikós Ella (Budapest: Szent István Társulat, 2001); Ludwig Feuerbach, “Gedanken über Tod und Unsterblichkeit.” In Idem, *Frühe Schriften, Kritiken und Reflexionen* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1981), 175–517.

<sup>3</sup> Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*, vol. 3. (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1956) (Hoffnungsbilder gegen den Tod), 196–279.

whilst the body can also enforce its rights. The *physis* can only be allegorized by the dead body. “And the actors of the tragedy die because they can only reach their allegorical homeland as corpses”<sup>1</sup> Bodies become emblems, says Bloch, rethinking Walter Benjamin’s analysis, because history in general is a huge pile of ruins and as such, in a Baroque emblem, “the deadness of the figures and the abstractness of the concepts is therefore a precondition for the allegorical transformation of the pantheon in a world of magical conceptual creatures.”<sup>2</sup> Although the hero dies in the Baroque tragedy, his figure lives on in the allegory.<sup>3</sup> Although the complaint against death appears in the tragedy, it is eventually set aside, since the hero – at the expense of losing his factual life – acquires an immortal character. Bloch regards death as it appears in German tragedy as a sort of *chisel*: with the function of shaping the character of the hero, and make it immortal in its final form. This form of death can by no means be regarded as an unsurpassable possibility of human existence. This is the form achieved – at least in Bloch’s view – in the victory of socialist consciousness over death. The communist hero does not simply immunize the fear of death in his consciousness (like for instance the martyrs of Christianity), but goes well beyond it. At the same time, Bloch strangely argues that the communist hero can neither be regarded a pantheist thinker who hopes that the atoms of his body would simply merge into the universe after his death. Although it is true that the communist hero dies without the hope of personal resurrection, Bloch still says about the death of Sacco and Vanzetti that their martyrdom is in fact not even martyrdom. The martyrdom of a communist martyr is not individual, but also not a general collective martyrdom, but a previously inexistent unity of the individual and the collective; and this is what Bloch terms *solidarity*.<sup>4</sup> True solidarity does not merely mean the cohesion of those who live close together in space, but it is also an essentially temporal cohesion as well: the sacrifices of the past meet, or rather become present in the actions of future winners. Still, however skilfully might Bloch use the dialectical possibilities offered by the German language, every kind of teleological and utopian philosophy of history must face the inevitable fact of individual death, and therefore he himself cannot possibly avoid the question of the individual’s existential end-orientation. On the last pages of his analysis of the problem of death, Bloch intends to reveal the ontological structure of the “actual being related to death”, and these are precisely the thoughts that Lévinas reflects on in his book on death.<sup>5</sup> Bloch states that man approaching death does not cease to be inquisitive. And this inquisitiveness also contains the affect of *cheerfulness*, as the world does not cease to offer original experiences to the very last breath of the dying man. “And this instinct urging for research presupposes of course an I which tries

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 264. “Und die Personen der des Trauerspiels sterben, weil sie nur so, als Leichen, in die allegorische Heimat gehen.”

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., “Abgestorbenheit der Gestalten und Abgezogenheit der Begriffe sind also für die allegorische Verwandlung des Pantheons in eine Welt magischer Begriffskreaturen die Voraussetzung.”

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ibid., 264.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ibid., 270.

<sup>5</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *La mort et le temps* (Paris: Éditions de l’Herne, 1991), 106–122.

hard to preserve itself while dying, in order to be able to observe death.”<sup>1</sup> The desire for knowledge triumphs over anxiety, and in this sense it also becomes apparent that the power of *epistemological commitment* may turn at times into an ontological fact.<sup>2</sup> All this, according to Bloch, is inseparably connected to the ultimate experience of existential time. Bloch claims that the experienced existential *now* as absolute directness occupies precisely that spot which cannot be experienced.<sup>3</sup> The new or the moment as *not-being-there* (*Nicht-Da-Sein*) appears to the mortal as the entangled fabric of his arranged and unarranged fate. Man is born, and by this his origin is lost in the past, since we can never remember the moment of our birth, although it most intimately belongs to us. Death *through its other side, which remains problematic in all respects* (as the definite in the world, where it appears rather as *fragments to define*), never opposes, not even despite being the strongest anti-utopia, the trivial realities that are there in the mass of hopes and suspicions connected to death. However, it does oppose the categorical system of scientific-concrete utopias (because of the lacking continuities connected to one’s previous life). The “meaning” of death appears in the darkness of the given moment, or in other words: in the blind spot of the given moment. That is to say, the not yet defined how, or how-being (*Daß-Sein*) must break through the factual givenness of being-there (*Da-Sein*) without finding a stable grab in his previous life. The question stays of course: do the moment being lived and death not have the same root? “(...) namely the not yet involved how-being without the being-there (...)”<sup>4</sup> Undoubtedly Bloch sees the death of man as appearing in the essential kernel (*Kern*) of every thinking and acting being existent in time. In contrast to religious utopias, in Bloch’s utopia of hope, in the projection of the *not-yet-being-there* (meaning the problem of

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Bloch, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*, 273. “Dieser Forschungstrieb setzt freilich ein Ich voraus, das während des Sterbens, ja nach ihm erhalten bleibt, um den Tod beobachten zu können.”

<sup>2</sup> This is not to say, of course, that the dying person is able to accurately communicate the phenomenology of the process he undergoes. István Király V. is right to claim: “What could such a thought- or actual experience which is probably not useless, but, as we have emphasized, asking for its actual happening, possibly “inform” about? Is it not precisely that the gradually dying phenomenologist gradually but definitely loses his ability to gradually communicate his interpretations and experiences – *recte*: phenomenological description – of dying, becoming more and more obscure?!” Király, *Halandóan...* 66. Of course, even in the case of a person with extraordinary “self-control” who could perhaps offer an “objective” exposition of the process of his dying to the last “moment” of his life one would have to face almost unsolvable dilemmas. That is, it would still be problematic whether one could get any closer to disclosing the enigma of dying even in such a strange and special case. One would have to face the question often asked by Luhmann whether self-observation can be any more objective than external observation. Undoubtedly, I have a privileged access to my own mental state. This means: nobody can see into my head. But I have no access to the observation of my own observation. This could be thought of as an all-seeing eye which would not just want to see *everything*, but also *how* it sees everything. According to Luhmann, the blind spot of one’s own observation can only be corrected by taking into account external observations. These are of course only occasional observations which should be clarified by further investigations, but this is not the place for such an endeavour.

<sup>3</sup> Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung. I.* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1954), 313.

<sup>4</sup> Bloch, *Das Prinzip...III.* 275. (...nämlich noch nicht involviertes Daß-Sein ohne Da-Sein

the liberation of mankind) the “death present in an anticipated way” does not belong to the dying person. “The kernel (Kern) of existing beings, as that which *has not yet come into being*, always *falls outside* Creation and Passing, of which neither is able to grasp the core of our being.”<sup>1</sup> And this is how it happens, argues Bloch, because an exterritorial dimension is absolutely necessary to successfully achieve the human essence transposed into the future. The negativity of death surrounds the subject-kernel as a hard shell, but is it not impossible to break this kernel. And if the hard shell can be successfully broken, says Bloch, then an incorruptible novum, opposing transience, appears in this earthly “salvation history”.

Beyond doubt, Bloch’s utopia of hope – with its extraordinary complexity and terminological sleight – shows some similarity with Heidegger’s interpretation of death. Nevertheless, one must not be silent about the weaknesses of Bloch’s interpretation of death. For he also, as well as any teleological vision of the philosophy of history, must face that uncomfortable side effect that the last generations of history can only be happy at the expense of the suffering of their predecessors. (I shall return to this question in the next chapter).

## **Victory over death II. – Projects of communism and postmodernity**

It may seem quite baffling, or even distasteful at a first sight to be concerned these days with the problem of attaining immortality. It might pass somehow in a B category Hollywood movie, but such fantasies are hardly acceptable today as objects of serious philosophical treatises. Boris Groys, one of the best known art philosophers of our age, has a different opinion on this: “Of course, it was all different earlier. It did not count as embarrassing to speak about immortality, because it was thought that the soul can outlive the body. And it seemed as a completely meaningful and noble thing to wonder, even during worldly life, where would the soul go after death – to handle the question, before anything else, which part of the soul is potentially immortal, and which part is mortal.”<sup>2</sup> From Platonic philosophy to modernity, the problem of *metanoia* (the moving of the soul from this world to another) counted as a cardinal issue of any philosophy. However, one of the most important assets of modernity is precisely that the anticipations connected to personal immortality became inauthentic, but the acceptance of this fact was anything but easy. If the body alone becomes the sole reference point of man living in the world, then – in parallel with the acceptance and recognition of his mortality – his place in the world also becomes problematic. Many modern people try to solve this dilemma by considering their body completely independent from their soul (and God, who had been declared “dead” meanwhile), or also hold it as natural that as a

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 278. “Der Kern des Existierens ist, als noch *ungeworden*, allemal *exterritorial* zum Werden und Vergehen, von welch beiden unser Kern noch gar nicht erfaßt ist”

<sup>2</sup> Boris Groys, “Politik der Unsterblichkeit,” in Idem, *Die Kunst des Denkens* (Hamburg: Philo Fin Arts, 2008), 35. “Früher war dies freilich anders. Es galt nicht als peinlich, über die Unsterblichkeit zu reden, denn glaubte, dass die Seele den Körper überleben würde. Und es schien durchaus edel und vernünftig, sich noch während des irdischen Lebens Gedanken darüber zu machen, welchen Weg die Seele nach dem Tod nimmt – vor allem die Frage zu behandeln, welcher Teil der Seele potenziell unsterblich und welcher Teil vergänglich ist.”

talking, acting being, they have completely stuck amidst spatial coordinates. This is how the class, the race or these days the gender could become new reference frames of human action, where natural determinants were replaced – and are still being replaced – by social (self)determinations. This has a fundamental influence on the transformation possibilities of the *metanoia* as well. For, if there is no soul any more, then the body (or perhaps the corpse) could just as much be a vehicle of immortality. The corpse is of course something that decays and finally perishes. “However, the process of rotting is potentially endless – one can never say that this process will definitively end sometime, since the remains of the body can be identified for a long time. But even in the case if the trace of the corpse can no longer be identified, it does not mean that the body has completely disappeared, it only means that the elements of the body, the molecules, atoms, etc. have been dispersed in the universe and that the body is practically united with the universe, or, if we wish, it has turned into a body without organs”.<sup>1</sup> This new, evidently cosmic perspective creates a new possibility for *metanoia*. It is not the soul, but the body which intends to become immortal. Part of the citizens of the Western world anticipates the possibilities of the perpetuation of the body just as they used to do it before with the soul. Groys uses the term *heteronoia* to denote the recent visions in fashion of the after-life transformations of the body – although, thinking of the Egyptian mummies, the ideas of the immortality of the body seems even older than the anticipations of the immortality of the soul. It is definitely worth mentioning that Groys builds on the concept of *heterotopia* introduced by Foucault. The body, as it “frees itself” from the soul, moves to a new place: the graveyard. Foucault, says Groys, points out the museum and the library, in addition to the graveyard, and eminent manifestations of heterotopias. The body, by entering a new kind of lifetime, transcends the graveyard or the museum. Man experiences thus a kind of heteronomia, as he “experiences” his body as a corpse even in his lifetime. At this point we do not ask where he comes from, but where he will be taken after his death – and this very heterotopic endpoint is the starting point of his worldview.<sup>2</sup>

European philosophy has been concerned for a long time with the metaphysics of the corpse. The decadent movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were centred precisely on the questions of the metaphysics of the dead body. Among others, Groys refers to Walter Benjamin’s allegory interpretation mentioned in the previous chapter. Jacques Derrida’s deconstructivism may also belong here. In his case, one can speak about a kind of *metanoia* as well: Derrida thematizes a kind of post-

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 37. “Dieser Vorgang des Verwesung is potenziell unendlich – mann kann nicht sagen, wann dieser Prozess definitiv endet, denn die Überreste des Körpers lassen sich lange genug identifizieren. Aber auch in dem Fall, dass sich die Leichspuren nicht mehr identifizieren lassen, bedeutet es nicht, dass der Körper verschwunden ist, sondern es heißt nur, dass sich seine Elemente, d. h. Moleküle, Atome usw. so sehr über das Ganze der Welt verteilt haben, dass der Körper mit dem Ganzen der Welt praktisch eins oder, wenn man so will, definiv zu einem Körper ohne Organe geworden ist.”

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 38–39. So kann der Mensch eine Heteronoia erleben, indem er schon während seines Lebens seinen Körper als Leiche erlebt. Dann fragt man sich nicht, woher man kommt, sondern wohin man nach dem Tod gebracht wird – und man diesen heterotopischen Endpunkt zum Ausgangspunkt seiner Weltbetrachtung.



mortem falling apart, which already began in one's "real life". It is a permanent bodily fall, which has no beginning and no end. Or Giorgio Agamben's "Muslim" could also be mentioned, interestingly described in the Italian philosopher's book entitled *Homo sacer*.<sup>1</sup> The "Muslim" is the "living corpse" of German concentration camps. Or rather, the Muslim is a "man" not completely alive but also not completely dead; he is almost impossible to be defined on the basis of a dual logic. (I must note that the *homo sacer* condition is not identical with the liminal situations of Jaspers, or the frequently mentioned death experience of people who survived coma. It is in connection to them that Király repeatedly mentions that there is no such thing as "someone is a little dead, and a little not dead."<sup>2</sup> The Muslim is in fact already dead, or more precisely a dead person whose death is constructed by biopolitics in a way elaborated with technical precision. That is to say, the death of the *homo sacer* can only be perceived in its real meaning if embedded into a social perspective). In Groys's opinion we find very similar phenomena in the mass cultural imagination of our age as well. "We are dealing here also with immortal bodies without souls. It is primarily zombies, clones and living machines, that is, various immortal beings, which stand in the centre of contemporary mass culture."<sup>3</sup> Still, the real stages of bodily immortality are cultural archives, and especially art collections, claims Groys. Art museums are outstanding showcases for the storage of dead things: the things preserved and put on display have already lost their connection with life practice, their function, and they are offered as mere spectacle. Works of art live a vampire-like life: just like vampires, they must be protected from light. Modern avant-garde has always considered its primary role, and continues doing so, to demonstrate pure corporeality, that what is corpse-like. Avant-garde art fights the average art consumer who tries to project "a soul" into the works of art in the form of interpretations or historicizing. By this, however, the viewer prevents the possibility of heteronomia: the viewer tries to look at the work of art from a worldly perspective instead of changing the perspective and looking at the world from a museum perspective, that is, learning to experience the world as a corpse. Art is becoming more and more radical in fighting this false reaction: it does its best to reduce even more the experiential world to a corpse. The world of artistic representation becomes more and more deserted, disintegrated, having no reference. Groys considers Malevich's painting *Black square against white background* one of the purest projections of the dead body.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2002). I analyzed this book in detail in my book *Haladásparadoxonok – bevezetés az extrém korok filozófiájába* (Paradoxes of progress – introduction to the philosophy of extreme ages) (Budapest: Liget, 2009), 25–33.

<sup>2</sup> "(...) the reports of people brought back from the experience of "clinical death" or – as a result of medical science – saved or revived in increasing numbers inform about experiences of people who eventually did not die."

<sup>3</sup> Boris Groys, "Politik der Unsterblichkeit," 40. Es handelt sich dabei meistens um unsterbliche Körper ohne Seele. So stehen vor allem Zombies, Klone und lebende Maschinen, d. h. unterschiedliche Untote, im Zentrum der heutigen Massenkultur.

<sup>4</sup> See also Codrina Laura Ionita's recent interesting study on Malevich: "L'au-delà du visible ou l'abstraction dans l'art," *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai. Philosophia* 1 (2010): 107–123.

This strange, “necrophile” turn of the aesthetic experience was prepared by the eccentric Russian philosopher of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Nikolai Fyodorov, although his initial intention was completely different. Fyodorov has been the object of fierce disputes in Russia lately. According to some, he was a mad monomaniac, who by mere accident had some revelations, but must not be taken seriously. Others say, however, that no great spirit like him has been born in Europe in the last 500 years, and only Leonardo could be measured to him. What lies therefore behind this strange man and strange teachings? Fyodorov, who became the librarian of Rumyantsev Museum in Moscow in the 1860s, was eccentric in all respects. He never published a book in his lifetime, but two years after his death, in 1905, two of his disciples, Kozhevnikov and Peterson, published his “dictated writings” in two volumes entitled *Philosophy of the Common Task*. Fyodorov’s gigantic project was built in fact on two elements. One part of his theory is a technicist utopia founded on religion, connecting the victory over the cosmos with the task of the universal dissemination of Christian faith. If there are rational beings in the universe, then it is the duty of man to introduce to them the ideas of Christianity. A less known fact is that Tsiolkovsky was himself a follower of Fyodorov, and as a religious mystic, he also worked on rocket theory with the aim of the cosmic dissemination of Christianity. The excellent scholar of Fyodorov’s works, the German Michael Hagemeister, thinks nevertheless that “(...) Tsiolkovsky’s plans of astronautics were most definitely influenced more by the works of Jules Verne and Camille Flammarion, while the direct influence of Fyodorov cannot be proven.”<sup>1</sup> It can be said nevertheless: it is the strange irony of history that the Soviet astronautics, always so proud of Tsiolkovsky, did not actually apply his theory in practice. Although the similarity is very apparent, at least structurally, since the dominant side in Soviet astronautics was also the spiritual one, the cosmic dissemination of communist ideas, and not the technical one.

Fyodorov’s other “idea” is connected to the resurrection of the dead. “According to Fyodorov, the resurrection of the dead is not only a scientific possibility, but also a moral responsibility. He thinks that we have to focus all our power to this end, and we can only hope for the successful solution of seemingly independent problems like war, poverty and the destruction of the environment, if the entire mankind undertakes the task of resurrection.”<sup>2</sup> As Groys also mentions, Fyodorov looked at Rumyantsev museum as the utopian model of the society of the immortal. He thought of the possibility of a kind of common social *heteronoia*, which should have had to turn into a *heterotopias* in order for it to become the living space of the entire mankind. Fyodorov saw the state as a kind of museum, with the people in it as works of art.

Fyodorov’s views were met with ridicule all his life, although he could be regarded as the forefather of many ideas only accomplished in our time, from gene technology to the internet (!). Hagemeister also writes in his monograph on Fyodorov

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Hagemeister, “Az orosz kozmizmus az 1900-as években” (Russian cosmism in the 1990s), in G. B. Rosenthal, ed., *Az okkult az orosz és a szovjet kultúrában* (Occultism in Russian and Soviet culture), trans. Katalin Teller (Budapest: Európa, 2004), 261.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 216.

that the idea of international inter-library loan also comes from him. If nothing else were connected to Fyodorov's name, his name would still be worth remembering for these. The ascetism of Fyodorov's private life is strangely completed by his alchemistic/occult activism, since, as Eliade writes: "The alchemist on its part strives to realize the dream of prolonging his body and the youth, force and flexibility of his body."<sup>1</sup> For this reason, from an occultist's perspective the nature which lacks human activity is wild and cruel in itself. Maxim Gorky, who – and few know this of him – trained himself, albeit as an autodidact, to be an extremely well-informed philosopher – viewed nature in a similar way. In addition to Dostoevsky, he used many elements of the teachings of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Eduard von Hartmann for elaborating his anarchist-Gnostic worldview. He wrote in his article *On culture* in 1928: "Nature is the chaos of unorganized, instinctive forces. These forces afflict man with earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, drought, intolerable heat or unbearable cold (...) Nature unreasonably wastes its force on useless microorganisms causing all sorts of diseases – bacilli carried by dangerous insects – mosquitoes, flies, lice -; these carry the poison of typhus, malaria and others of the kind over to the blood of people. Nature has created countless dangerous and completely useless plants and animals. A legion of parasites sucks on the healthy juices, and thus weakens the organism (...)." <sup>2</sup> In another of his writings, Gorky uses – in a witty formulation – the expression *stepmother-nature* instead of *mother-nature* known from myths. Gorky's contempt of nature however was not unmatched in the age. Representatives of just forming Soviet Marxism had a similar way of thinking. Ivan Skvortsov-Stepanov states in his handbook *Historical materialism and modern natural sciences* published in 1926: "It is impossible not to recognize the rough, barbaric, destructive, devastating processes of nature (...) Where is the 'providence', 'harmony', 'expediency' so often referred to? These are the wild actions of the blind processes of blind nature! Man acts incomparably more reasonably and expediently when he creatively... penetrates the processes of nature and begins to control, regulate and rule them."<sup>3</sup> "A new world must be created!" – claims Gorky, and this way he actually returns to his younger anthroposophist-Gnostic self. Gorky anticipated the concept of the "socialist Übermensch" already in his poem *Man*, an outstanding work of his young age. The most important idea of this work rhymes with the famed Nietzschean thought that "God is dead". Man must overcome his natural determination and, reclining on the unlimited creative power of reason, he must step into the place of the dethroned God. It clearly emerges from these that Gorky was not the least a materialist. Rethinking Oswald and Bogdanov's energetism, he saw as the basis of material phenomena the inexhaustible energetic transformations, which – in his view – the superior man is able to guide by his own will. The new man is even able to defeat death with the help of energy freed from the prison of the matter.

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<sup>1</sup> George M. Young Jr., *Az okkultizmus Fjodorov-féle változatai* (The Fyodorov-type variations of occultism), trans. Katalin Teller, in Rosenthal, *Az okkult az orosz és a szovjet kultúrában*, 227.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Mikhail Agursky, "Velikii eretik (Gor'kii kak religioznyi myslitel')" *Voprosy filosofii* 8 (1991): 56.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 56.

Returning to Fyodorov's strange views, following Groys's interpretation, it is evident that the opposition with the utopian equality idea of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Socialist doctrines plays an important role in them. I would also add that Fyodorov in his strange way also pointed out the greatest weakness of all teleological concept of history: progress can only be achieved in fact if the successful generations of the future only use their contemporaries and even the previous generations as instruments to attain their own happiness. "Socialism functions so that it exploits the dead to the benefit of the living – and so that it exploits those living today to the benefit of those living in the future."<sup>1</sup> But this is unacceptable, Fyodorov claims, for the well-known Kantian imperative, namely that one should never use their fellow human beings as instruments, must not only be understood *horizontally* (that is to say, it is not only valid for living generations, for one's own contemporaries, but also *vertically*: the categorical imperative must refer to earlier generations as well.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to Fyodorov, Gorky had no intention of resurrecting the dead, but in one of his lectures delivered in 1920 he projected that death could be defeated forever in the not very distant future. "Human reason proclaims its fight against death perceived as a natural phenomenon. Yes, against death. It is my deep conviction that sooner or later, in 200 years, or perhaps 100 years will also be enough, man will actually attain immortality".<sup>3</sup> The idea of the resurrection of the dead and the unrestricted perfection of nature appears, besides journalism and quasi-philosophical literature, also in the literature of the age. Hagemeister cites an interesting fragment of Platonov's novel *The Foundation Pit*, the protagonist of which said in a funeral speech that the meaning of Lenin's embalming was that he could be resurrected sometime in the near future, at a more developed level of Soviet science. Merely as a curiosity, I must mention that about a year ago I read in a newspaper that Russian geneticists claimed: they were able any time to obtain cells adequate for cloning from the eighty-year old mummy. In another of Platonov's novels, *The Sea of Youth*, one of the characters (agronomist Visokovsky) "(...) hoped that the evolution of the animal world which has previously come to a halt would get into full swing again in the age of Socialism and every poor, furry being which thinks dimly today will raise to the level of conscious existence (...) Communist natural science will raise the earthly flora and fauna to close relatives of the human being".

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<sup>1</sup> Groys, "Politik der Unsterblichkeit," 44. (Der Sozialismus funktioniert als Ausbeutung der Toten zugunsten der Lebenden – und als Ausbeutung der heute Lebenden zugunsten der später Lebenden.)

<sup>2</sup> Fyodorov understands correctly Kant's intentions in this case. It may suffice to mention Kant's work entitled *The Conflict of the Faculties* (German: *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, in *Schriften zur Anthropologie, Geschichtsphilosophie, Politik und Pädagogik*. Erstel Teil, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1964). This kind of approach is also accepted by István Király V. For example: "This does not mean however that death in itself, any kind of death would be, directly and explicitly, annihilation. On the contrary: the historicity of human existence lies in the fact that the generations living in their mortality base their lives on the works of generations past, continuing, caring for, and changing them, giving them up or taking them on... In fact, maximum four generations of people (can) live on the Earth at one time, all the rest is either already dead or have not yet been born..."

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Agursky, "Velikii eretik," 61.

But another character goes even further, saying: “Not even your most daring dream may surpass the perspectives offered by our party (...) We erect an eternal bridge between live and dead nature.”<sup>1</sup>

These seemingly naïve phantasms turned very important in the last decades because of the degree of the interference with natural processes, which could previously only be imagined by the greatest fantasists. Bionics (the connection of human flesh and technical instruments, like pacemakers), biotechnology (the connection of biology and information technology, e.g., researches conducted on computer-controlled human organs), and especially the most recent achievements of genetics are now definitively confusing us about the undisturbed application of natural and unnatural codes.<sup>2</sup> All this is completed with the ever stronger tendency of modern art since Baudelaire that art should not imitate nature but be a creator of alternative worlds. The penetration of biotechnology and nanotechnology into art can increasingly be perceived ever since the 1980s. Three famous representatives of body-art, Matthew Barney, Stelarc and the French Orlan (who was originally a woman!) claim that the natural human body is no longer natural in our age, therefore in the age of technology the body must be trained to that technological, political and social milieu we inhabit. The solitary creation of the solitary artist is doomed, artists must cooperate with physicists, technicians, engineers, information technologists, plastic surgeons, etc. There is a need for new body techniques, the successful (!?) application of which may result in the complete transformation of the Homo sapiens. While being a fairly well-known body-artist in France, Orlan also tries to theoretically explain his strange activity, interpreting his work as a special kind of existential critique. To Orlan, the primary boundaries are not the social determinations; she is not content with the human body's nature of being “given” once and for all. It is precisely corporeality (charnel) from where the world can be questioned. In the view of Orlan and other body artists the body is not a “givenness” but a “commitment”, a possibility shaped almost unlimitedly. Orlan has been transforming her body in operations from the beginning of the 1990s. She also uses the computer to compose her new looks. She puts together her continuously changing body identity from the representations of man and chimaeras of Greek and Oriental mythologies, her own imagination and all kinds of computer software. Her most important concern is never to resemble the female ideal that began to shape beginning with European Renaissance culture and – at least to her mind – has hardly changed ever since. In this, she follows the views of radical feminist Judith Butler, who claims that the female gender identity is nothing else than a product of the colonization of male culture. Orlan has been planning lately to grow her nose several times its length with plastic surgery. Earlier she also had small horns operated on her forehead. The Orlan regarding herself as “her own” Pygmalion intends to continue the radical transformation of her body ever “after her death”. More precisely, she is interested in the possibility of attaining immortality or at least quasi-immortality (just like Fyodorov, as we have seen earlier). “Death will not come for Orlan for

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<sup>1</sup> Andrej Platonov, *Munkagödör* (The Foundation Pit) (Budapest: Európa, 1989), 220.

<sup>2</sup> Joël de Rosnay, *L'Homme symbiotique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2000).

we'll find her mummified body some day in a museum, inserted into an installation with interactive video.”<sup>1</sup> Just like the representatives of Russian cosmism once (and the Bolsheviks too, who also relied quite heavily on the views of the cosmists but kept discreetly silent about their names) who wanted to turn natural laws into obedient instruments of their will, Orlan also fights against all external determinations. “My work – she notes – is a fight against the innate, the inexorable, against nature and DNA (which is our direct rival as performance artists) and God.”<sup>2</sup> Of course, in Orlan's case we tend to say that this is merely the fantasy of an eccentric and solitary artist. But this is not quite the case. As one of her French critics says: the identity that Orlan changes through her body from time to time is itself subordinated to the collective phantasms produced by a mediatised society. Plastic surgery may indeed give us a face that we would like to see in the mirror later. But for this view to rise to aesthetic standards, there is need for much more. It is precisely the mediatised world of images conveyed by television which provides the ammunition even for individual revolt. It is still a question of course whether there is a constant “natural” basis for a body constructed by society, which resists its unlimited transformability. These dilemmas – which, whether we want it or not, always become ethical problems – appear not so much in connection with **bionics** and **biotechnology** (as these technologies clearly have no effect on future generations), but with the vertiginous possibilities of human genetics.

It seems that István Király V. is completely uninterested in these variations of radical anthropological endeavours and the linking of these strange fantasies with the problem of death. It is obviously so because clearly for Király any historical, sociological, cultural anthropological, medical ethical interpretation of death necessarily *misses the metaphysical/fundamental ontological meaning of dying*, that is, such reductionist “interpretations of death” are unable to inquire about the “(...) ontological-existential resultants (...)” of death.<sup>3</sup> However, Király claims, even the purely philosophical problematizations most often miss the essence of the problem of death, even though it is only pure philosophical thinking that takes itself seriously that is the only “**(...) mode (of being) or “area” in which we humans can face or confront death, our death and the problem of death, with all its dead ends, difficulties and weight, in our most authentic and responsible – although not quite comforting – way possible.**”<sup>4</sup> As I have mentioned, the author is quite critical about the history concept of the entire Greek-Jewish-Christian culture, which, at least in his opinion, hardly thematizes death as dying as a *sui generis* philosophical problem, or, if it does on occasions, it tries to get rid, as soon as possible, of its true weight, often even at the expense of trivializing the problem. For the *telos* of our culture inspires us primarily to perceive our basic relationship to death as its

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<sup>1</sup> David Le Breton, *L'Adieu au corps* (Paris: Éditions Métailié, 1999), 44. La mort n'arrêtera pas Orlan, car son cadavre momifié doit se trouver un jour dans un musée, inséré dans une installation avec vidéo interactive.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 44. Mon travail, écrit-elle, est en lutte contre l'inné, l'inexorable, la nature, l'ADN (qui est notre rival direct en tant qu'artiste de la représentation) et Dieu.

<sup>3</sup> Király, *Halandóan...* 13.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 26.

“handling” or “management” (and therefore elimination). Institutions and organizations like churches and various branches of the humanities (anthropology, psychology, sociology, etc.) have undertaken and continue to undertake this task even today.

István Király V. considers that every historical, social psychological and religious interpretation of death necessarily falls into the error of relativism: this is how people died in the Middle Ages, and this is how they die today amidst the clinical conditions of the modern world. This is why he hardly treats the works of Philippe Ariès, Huizinga, Mikhail Bakhtin and other famed philosophers of culture. Király claims that all of the sociological approaches extend over their real possibilities, and chance on the obscure field of suppositions. For a historical/sociological reconstruction may give a more or less adequate answer to the “external questions” regarding death: namely, what was the religious, artistic, cultural, political, ethical or medical/pragmatic relation that man created throughout the ages to “handle” the fact of death, how he tried to domesticate the almost “unconceivable”. But an authentic interpretation of death is only possible through metaphysics that keeps in mind the constant or at least quasi-constant character of nature and “(...) it is not understood as a kind of philosophical ‘discipline’ (...), but a *possibly actual* existential and ‘theoretical-conscious’ relation to finitude and death”.<sup>1</sup> Although István Király V. claims nowhere explicitly that he considers human nature constant, this is what derives from his argument. For the author, a committed Heideggerian thinker (with all its advantages and disadvantages) only recognizes two kinds of modes of being: an *authentic* and an *inauthentic* attitude to the world. As if independently of time and space. The consequence of this radical anti-historicist attitude is that for Király there are only some thinkers in the entire history of philosophy who are indeed able to adequately guide us through the “problem of death”. Evidently, Király “handles” these philosophers apart from the rest and with obvious respect. They are Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger, whose particular existentialist and fundamental-ontological views he considers an at least “discursible” starting point to penetrate to the deepest layers of the problem of death, or, as he puts it, to the root and origin of the problem of death.<sup>2</sup>

The theses of Heidegger’s existential ontology are in all respects the most important guidelines for Király; Heidegger is almost the only philosopher that he unconditionally trusts. This is not to say, of course, that he gives up his right to even confront his “master” at times, when the formulation of his own, autonomous standpoint requires so. I shall come back to the Heideggerian problem of death and Király’s interpretation of it, but first I would like to sketch the wider interpretive frame which, according to the author, offers the best chance not to miss the question of death.

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<sup>1</sup> Király, *Halandóan*....69.

<sup>2</sup> Király, *Kérdés*... 19.



**Irina Dumitrașcu Măgurean, *Photogram***  
10,8 cm x 8,5 cm, polaroid, 2014

First, says Király, one should start from the fact that death or the “discourse of death” unfolds at the narrow confines of complete rationality and complete irrationality. “From a certain point of view the difficulty or problem connected to death is precisely that, on the one hand, it is rationally almost fully comprehensible by nature (physis) (...) On the other hand, still, death is fully ‘irrational’ – that is, ‘incomprehensible’.”<sup>1</sup> Király terms the “unitary thinking” of this strange paradox as “thinking-nothing”.<sup>2</sup> Although he does not refer here to Nietzsche, in all probability he thinks in his spirit, as long as Nietzsche also makes a difference between “not

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<sup>1</sup> Király, *Halandóan...* 82.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.



wanting *anything*” and “wanting *Nothing*”.<sup>1</sup> For “wanting *Nothing*” presupposes freedom or the need for freedom, and if this need does not exist or is trivialized, the direction of the correct interpretation of the problem of death will again be missed. Király’s unequivocal formulation needs no further commentary: “So, although this necessarily sounds like a paradox, we should still say that, *without* freedom, human death, that is, ‘becoming mortal’ is **impossible!!!** The question is only whether this is valid also the other way round? Namely, is freedom, actual human freedom possible without mortality and death?”<sup>2</sup> Freedom, according to Király, does not equal the formal legal equality. Freedom is based on correct recognition of man’s unique and unrepeatable nature, claims Király. And it is only such a philosophical “thanatology” which recognizes the triad of being, death and freedom and takes it as a necessity, which is capable of not trivializing the problem of death. However, as I have mentioned, interpretations usually go in different directions and tend to give way to easier solution which can be better coped with. One quite frequent direction – which will probably be even more enforced in the future with the development of modern medicine – is the minute description of the physiological process of death, which presents dying as a slow and unproblematic falling asleep. The ancestor and in all certainty unsurpassable figure of this approach is the French philosopher active in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Xavier Bichat. Király refers to Bichat and Schopenhauer, who also reduces the existential fact of death to the *decline of vitality* (which is in fact the incarnation of *Weltwille*) *visible on the level of the individual*.<sup>3</sup> This approach partly of the metaphysics of will and partly based on natural sciences considers that its main task is to ensure life’s almost unnoticed passage to death. Naturally, the problem in itself is not that, accepting the argument of this approach,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *Die Tücke des Subjekts* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2001), 151.

<sup>2</sup> Király, *Halandóan...* 119.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 124. I mention Bichat’s genial description of the process of dying as a mere curiosity, which simultaneously proves the heights of the great physiologist’s knowledge of nature and spirit of observation, and insensitivity to the existential problem of death: “Natural death is remarkable because it almost completely ends the animal life before the organic life would come to an end. Let us look at a man who died at the end of a long life: this man dies in pieces, almost step by step; his external functions cease one after the other; the causes which usually trigger normal perception, now just run across him. The gaze grows dim and becomes confused, and no longer transmits the image of objects: this is the so-called old age blindness. Sounds begin to transform into obscure noise in the ear, but soon this will also cease. The skin surface becomes hard because it turns into keratin, and its place is partly filled with clogging blood-vessels, and now it is nothing more than the centre of a confused and hardly distinguishing sense of touch. It also becomes his habit to perceive his feelings bluntly. First it is the organs depending on skin that weaken and die. The body hair and beard grow grey. In absence of biological nutrients the body hair and most of the hair falls out. Smells only cause a very faint impression in the nose. Isolated in his natural environment, and deprived of most of the functions of his senses, the old man soon finds himself facing his diminishing brain activity. He hardly has any perception (...), his imagination dims, and slowly it even disappears. His memory of present things also fades away: the old man forgets almost in the same instance what he was told (...).” Xavier Bichat, *Recherches physiologiques sur la vie et la mort* (Paris: Marabout, 1973), 109–110. Quoted in Giorgio Agamben, *Ce qui reste d’Auschwitz* (Paris: Rivage poche/Petite Bibliothèque, 2003), 166–167.

the truth value of statements like “XY is still alive” or “XY is already dead” is impossible to decide, but that death, and its complement: life, both lose their weight. Actually the weakest point of such kinds of approaches is that they makes almost impossible the “possibility of the impossibility of the absolute being-here” of death, even if death, says Heidegger, “reveals itself as that *possibility which is one’s ownmost, which is non-relational*.”<sup>1</sup> Király in his own “death discourse” closely follows this quite paradoxical Heideggerian death definition, and even *continues it with a series of individual interpretation possibilities*. Of course, the definitions Király uses most often are also apophatic, but this cannot possibly be held against him. In case of “deadly serious” questions this is totally in order. Apophatic or negative definition means that we find out in the first place what a “thing” is not, but we can only have slight suspicions about what it actually is. In this sense death is by no means a reversible event, the author claims. Therefore the accounts of those who “return from clinical death” are no references to figure out the nature of death, since those who return stand as evidence precisely for “not having died yet”.<sup>2</sup> The very expression of clinical death is a term created by medicine which can be completely misunderstood: as we have seen, for a philosophical (metaphysical) relation to death, it is a completely unacceptable statement to say that “somebody is a little dead and a little not dead”. But one’s relation to death also misses the point, claims the author, when we look at it as some kind of extreme situation, as Jaspers does in his commentaries on liminal situations. For extreme situations can also be survived! Since “No matter how much a liminal situation pushes someone very close to death, its experience can only become an original source of philosophy if it has a contemplative, reflecting *survivor*”.<sup>3</sup> This clearly results, claims the author, in the fact that the problem of death is not the problem of the last minutes of human life, neither a “temporarily eminent problem”, but the problem of the *entire, reflected human life*, conscious and self-aware. Nevertheless, a new difficulty does arise here, that I have briefly touched upon before. As I mentioned, a differentiation should be made in the investigation of the phenomenon of death between the *metaphysical fact* of death and its reduced form, the *concept of death*.<sup>4</sup> This means, in all probability, that death is more than what can be expressed of it conceptually. The Greek philosopher Philolaus said: “some concepts are stronger than we are”.<sup>5</sup> This is why István Király V. can rightly claim that “the road is narrow” to establishing the phenomenon of death, and it can hardly be expressed conceptually.<sup>6</sup> The author also adds, however, that this is not a problem raised only by the phenomenon of death, since: “The notion of ‘pine tree’ is also never identical with the ‘pine tree that I am

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2001), 250–251.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Király, *Halandóan...* 68.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ibid., 42.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Jacques Rolland, *Parcours de l'autrement. Lecture d'Emmanuel Lévinas* (Paris: PUF, 2000), 357.

<sup>6</sup> This problem is also treated in detail by Vladimir Jankélévitch, to whom Király frequently refers. Cf. Vladimir Jankélévitch, *La Mort* (Paris: Flammarion, 1977). Especially chapter *La mort dans l'instant mortel*, 219–256.

looking at' (...)”<sup>1</sup> This dilemma, which seems to resemble in some of its aspects that ancient debate of nominalism vs. realism, is usually of no consequence in the average topics of the life world, but it cannot be fully disregarded with respect to the phenomenon of death. Király solves this existential problem clad in epistemology by distinguishing between the validity level of the *concept* of death and the *fact* of dying. However, he still thinks that these two levels can be connected at a further step, for it must be clear, the author claims, that the concept of death can and must be meaningfully conceived together with the fact of dying. But how can one communicate about this, the approximately adequate concept of death, in a way that is meaningful for the other? However witty Király's proposed solution might be, it is still incapable of reassuringly freeing us of the persisting discomfort coming from the inextricability of the tension between the *radical singularity* of existential experiences and the *universalism of communication by language which necessarily neutralizes every personal experience*. (I might be wrong in this judgment, and it may indeed belong to the essence of the facticity of death that the theoretical reasoning that wishes to face it is doomed to eternal uncertainty and anxiety.) For István Király intends to (and indeed does) explore wise ideas about death in such a way that he considers the experience of death absolutely singular and irreproducible. As he writes one place: “So the experience of death as one's own dying is impossible to communicate also because it absolutely always and with everyone only happens once.”<sup>2</sup> This is so in all probability. However, this radicalism has its costs. On the one hand, it is somewhat disturbing that the existential facticity of death is often mixed up in Király's argumentation with the conceptual universalism of the philosophical discourse on death. Nevertheless, we must still face here the duality of language/meta-language, although the facticity of death should be regarded not so much as language, but rather as an anti-language. In short: clearly, no man who died will ever talk out of his grave saying: “Sir, you were right, it was indeed Heidegger who saw things right, and not Jaspers and Lévinas.” Therefore we must accept that the incommunicable “facts of dying” are on the opposite side of the more or less acceptably formulated philosophical sophistries on death. To this, another difficult question is added: how can one differentiate an authentic life history narrative including the phenomenon of death from a narrative which escapes the fact of dying?<sup>3</sup> Then there is a further dilemma, deriving from the fact that – as mentioned before – in the case of man death is by no means identical with passing, with transition to “non-being”. This is a problem that Heidegger himself had to face after WWII. We have seen: for Heidegger, death appears to man as the absolute possibility of all possibilities, unsurpassable and non-relational. Therefore death as

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<sup>1</sup> Király, *Halandóan*...127.

<sup>2</sup> Király, *Halandóan*...52.

<sup>3</sup> “By simply stating: the life history narrative, no matter how many histories of fate, ‘events of faith’ it might attest, it does not project or think them over, and does not UNDERSTAND them to the end of the life history called as death and happening factually as dying...” Cf. *Halandóan*...131–132. (The author's personal completion, sent to me as a result of the present review).

such is *privileged* imminence.<sup>1</sup> However, the events that happened in extermination camps place this quite enigmatic death-interpretation of Heidegger in a special context. For, so it seems, the camp is precisely the privileged *place* where death as an unsurpassable possibility could be “experienced”, for everything was lacking in those camps but death. Heidegger himself felt after the war that something is still not right, and tried to reformulate the problem of death in 1949. His first lecture in Bremen, dealing with the risks of a technicized life (*Die Gefahr*), tries to grasp the phenomenon of death more clearly (meaning: historically specified) than it had been exposed in *Being and Time*, now also calculating with the Nazi extermination camps. I quote Heidegger: “Sterben sie? Sie kommen um. Sie werden umgelegt. Sterben sie? Sie werden Bestandstücke der Fabrikation von Leichen. Sterben sie? Sie werden in Vernichtungslagern unauffällig liquidiert (...) Sterben aber heißt, den Tod in sein Wesen austragen. Sterben können heißt diesen Austrag vermögen. Wir vermögen es nur, wenn unser Wesen das Wesen des Todes mag. (...) Massenhafte Nöte zahlloser, grausig ungestorbener Tode überall – und gleichwohl ist das Wesen des Todes dem Menschen verstellt.”<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, Heidegger is undoubtedly an extremely sensitive analyzer and interpreter of the horrors of the concentration camps. On the other hand, in this lecture he still insists on the *aristocratic* and strongly *reductionist* interpretation of the phenomenon of death, that is, the facticity of dying. For, if we take Heidegger’s words seriously, then we cannot call the passing, destruction or extermination of many of our fellow humans dying, but we should find different terms to name their “death”. This may even be in order for those people whom we “know for sure” to escape the acknowledgment of the “non-relational facticity” of death, but then how should we call the death of our fellow humans who were murdered, died in an accident, or of a serious illness, and even at a very young age? We cannot say in their case that they escaped the only “unsurpassable possibility” of life. They simply had no chance to consider the “essence of death” their own. Heidegger says in *Being and Time* that the “unfinished” Dasein also ends.<sup>3</sup> This is so in all probability. Just as the “finished” Dasein also ends! But how could one make a difference between these two forms of “finishing”, or how could this definition of difference be made on the grounds of an intersubjectively valid consensus? Heidegger cannot be expected to give much help on this issue. Naturally, as I have hinted to it, this is not to say that Heidegger would be completely insensitive to these problems. That said, I still think it is problematic to apply “differentiated concepts of death”. What is more, if we tried to introduce

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<sup>1</sup> “... als die *eigenste, unbezügliche, unüberholbare Möglichkeit*. Als solche ist er ein *ausgezeichneter* Bevorstand.” Cf. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 250–251.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge*. Gesamtausgabe, vol. 79., 56. Quoted in Agamben, *Ce qui reste d’Auschwitz*, 79–80. (“Have they died? They perished. They were eliminated. Have they died? They became the products of an industrial corpse fabrication. Have they died? They were liquidated discreetly in extermination camps (...) But being able to die means to suffer death in its essential sense. Being able to die means to be able to accept the ultimate suffering. But we can only do that if we consider the essence of death our own essence (...) The number of terrible undied deaths around us is impossible to count – still, it is the essence of death that has been forbidden for man.”)

<sup>3</sup> “Auch ‘unvollendetes’ Dasein endet.” Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 244.

some kind of semantically “appropriately” differentiated “concept-family of death” into everyday language to denote “modes of passing of dying” of different value – beyond the fact that the success of such an endeavour is highly doubtful – would we not divide the human race even more than it is now? For with this “conceptual clarification” affair we would take away even their equality in death, for this would divide the human race into first-class (authentic) and second-class (inauthentic) dead.<sup>1</sup> Although Király is totally right to state that the differentiation is valid with respect to the so-called “accomplished” life preceding death and the “potential values” of a not lived life: “For what else is most terrible in a murder that if not the fact that the victims are deprived not only of their lives but also of the possibility of facing their death, or *undertaking* their own dying.”<sup>2</sup>

Of course, this dilemma can be dissolved in a way, by voicing the interpersonal aspects of the question of dying, and Király does undertake indeed this possibility, much more than Heidegger.<sup>3</sup> The true meaning of euthanasia – and Király is very much right about this – can only be achieved if the interpersonal meanings “(...) cannot influence or liquidate that basic self-reference, or that I definitely have to take my death, my dying only and exclusively upon myself, and I cannot assign it to something or somebody else.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore the science of “good death” can by no means be exhausted merely in that one person makes the death of the other easier. According to István Király V. the interpersonal dimension of euthanasia is special compared to every other kind of interpersonal relation in that this dimension “(...) is **reflexive** to the highest possible degree!”<sup>5</sup> The authenticity of this interpersonal relation is given by the fact that the partners taking place in the interaction “(...) be in an authenticity-seeking relation **with their own mortality** (...)”<sup>6</sup>

Although the medical or professional aspects of euthanasia, the conditions of prohibition or permission can – and need to – be regulated by law, but it will never be possible to elaborate such a perfect legal framework, protocol, etc. which might replace that persisting evidence that the final decision is not taken in the form of “inductive deductions” from the laws, but “(...) it can only actually derive from those ontological and existential sources from which, usually in a concealed and non-admitted way, these regulation themselves derive.”<sup>7</sup> Euthanasia becomes

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<sup>1</sup> This division would definitely not be grounded in the “moment” of dying, but retrospectively: it would be the entirety of one’s lived life that would count as authentic or inauthentic, which of course changes nothing.

<sup>2</sup> Király, *Halandóan...* 192.

<sup>3</sup> Király, *Halandóan...Exkursus* – The chapter Az eutanázia, avagy a méltóság(á)hoz segített halál (Euthanasia, or death assisted to its dignity), 136–183. In this chapter the author, probably guided by respect for Heidegger, says that “The ‘unreferentiality’ of death and dying, and the connected circumstance that death and dying makes claim to the *Dasein* as ‘unique’ does not mean – even for Heidegger – that it has no ‘interpersonal’ weight, meaning or importance.” Ibid, 156. Later on, I will try to briefly express my opinion that Heidegger misses the very basis of the problem of interpersonalality.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 156–157.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 160.

legitimate if the dialogue of the doctor and the dying person (whether actually dying or potentially dying in the sense of “living testament”) reveals that the dying person “(...) is indeed a victim, but **not** the victim of the other person who does the euthanasia or helps (him) with it, but only of his own illness, condition and situation.”<sup>1</sup> The practice of a well understood euthanasia – even if it seems like an attack against the value of human life considered absolute and intangible – still proves that the existential solitude of dying is not completely impossible to share and communicate: if we are all mortals, then we have the right to *make our fellow humans understand* what this mortality means *to us*. Therefore the existential fact of death can be grasped precisely in the paradox that the death of the *Dasein* is, on the one hand, indeed impossible to be assigned or replaced, while on the other hand we can still make, or sometimes must make statements understandable and perceivable for our fellow humans on this impossibility of assignment or replacement.

While Király is very close to Heidegger’s existential-ontological conception, he is quite critical about Emmanuel Lévinas’s “thanatological meditations”. He is right to say: “Broadly speaking, Lévinas has two basic objections against Heidegger’s philosophy. One is that he [Heidegger – A.L.K] centres or restricts all philosophy to ontology, and the other is that the *Dasein* analysis he never completely transcended actually only examines the latter singularly, in its isolation from the ‘Other’.”<sup>2</sup> I would like to quote a remarkable observation of Lévinas, a good rendering of the difference between the two viewpoints. In one of his interviews, Lévinas says: the fundamental difference between Heidegger’s views and his own is that Heidegger underestimates too much the intersubjective world of everyday life. It is widely known that Heidegger’s terms *Mitsein* or *Miteinandersein* express the fundamental dimension of human being-together. According to Lévinas, “this is, however, only one instance of our being-in-the-world. It is by no means central. The preposition *Mit* always expresses a lateral togetherness (*à côté de...*) and not a face-to-face one. This kind of togetherness (*Zusammensein*) may perhaps be understood as marching together (*zusammenmarschieren*).”<sup>3</sup> While on the one side we see that Heidegger underestimates the interpersonal relations of everyday life (let us think of his term of *chatting* which is impossible to be understood without a pejorative sense), Lévinas’s elevated and ceremonious concept of dialogue on the other side threatens, at least seen from everyday communication, to dive into a mysticism incomprehensible for the discursive mind. For Heidegger, my death (Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein* is simply an alternative name for the first person singular personal pronoun), while for Lévinas, the death of the Other means a starting point and at the same time the ultimate point of reference as well. Lévinas is of course consistent in his own way, for to his mind the ultimate basis of the I-identity must be sought outside the limits of the I: in the Other or in You. Lévinas’s concept must be understood as a kind of reverse intentionality: that is to say, it is not I who looks at the Other, but the Other looks at me, as if “I myself am seen in the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *Entre-Nous – Essais sur le penser-l’autre* (Paris: Grasset, 2000), 126.

face of the Other.”<sup>1</sup> This is why Király’s conclusion that all this applied to the problem of death means in Lévinas’s case that the death of the Other actually belong more to me than my own death.<sup>2</sup> István Király V. sees this view again as the well-known over-moralized return of the problem of death. It is true, Lévinas himself often claimed that for him ethics preceded ontology. But it must also be observed that Lévinas has a very specific way of interpreting the ethical dimension. It is well known that almost all modern conceptions of moral philosophy starts from the symmetric relation of moral subjects. But Lévinas builds on the radical asymmetry of the *I-You-relation*. Several serious difficulties emerge however from this asymmetry, first of all that the *I* becomes a *hostage* (otage) and *victim* (sacrifié) or *defendant* of the *You*. The vulnerability of the *I* is fulfilled on looking at the masque-like face of the dead *You*, since from that time on it can no longer expect any “external” help to define its own identity. But is it possible at all to build a discursive ethics on such an unusual semantic foundation? For in this peculiar linguistic world the spontaneity and activity of the *I* exhausts in that it allows itself to be absorbed by the demand of the *You* (the Other). This is how Georg Römpp argues against Lévinas: “A relationship can only be called ethical if the demand in it is formulated as a must coming from the Other in which the submissive party actually submits to its own freedom, and not the suffocating compulsion deriving from becoming the Other’s hostage.”<sup>3</sup> But perhaps this dilemma can be somewhat dissolved, claims Király, if we do not exclude an interpretation of Lévinas’s texts which suggest that he might also speak about the fact that “(...) in the first place, death should be thought of precisely with reference to ourselves”.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the Transylvanian philosopher is merciless, for he is very quick to reject this option. He claims: amidst the worrisome and responsible care for the death of the Other (and every “Other”) “(...) the problematization and acceptance of One’s own, Our own death is actually, always and permanently unrecognized!”<sup>5</sup> I suspect: some of those who will face these “ruthlessly consistent” thoughts of Király may accuse him of “ontological autism”. I ask them: please don’t! For the author does not want to be the prophet of the nowadays trendy ideology of “self-caring society”, and does not want to urge “everybody to care for themselves” so everything is settled. Király’s radical programme of the “self-centring” of death is preserved for an outstanding event (happening) which must not be generalized since the facticity of death owes its ontological privilege to precisely the fact that it stubbornly resists any attempt of generalization.

With all the resoluteness that Király holds on to the exclusive “authenticity” of Heidegger’s death interpretation, it must be seen nonetheless that there are many

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Teljesség és végtelen* (Fullness and infinity), trans. László Tarnay (Pécs: Jelenkor, 1999), 161–162, and Étienne Feron, *De l’idée de transcendance à la question du langage* (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1992), 39.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Király, *Halandóan...* 95.

<sup>3</sup> Georg Römpp, “Verantwortung als Obsession? Kritische Anmerkungen zu Lévinas’ Philosophie des Subjekts,” *Theologie und Philosophie* 4 (1999): 544.

<sup>4</sup> Király, *Halandóan...*, 99.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

other conceptions as well, opposing Heidegger's. Lévinas has just been mentioned. But Nikolai Berdyaev or Jean-Paul Sartre are also harsh critics of Heidegger's views. Berdyaev says that "Death is an insanity which derives from ordinariness. The everyday consciousness approaches death with the sense of the paradoxical and irrational. This rationalization as social everyday in its ultimate consequences is eager to forget about death, shut people away from it, buries the dead almost unnoticed... The victorious spirit in everyday life is that which opposes the Christian prayer that we must preserve the memory of our dead. In this respect the civilized man is deep below the ancient Egyptians. The paradox of death is not only ethical, but it also takes on the form of aesthetic expression. Death is the extreme form of ugliness, of deformity. Falling apart, losing the face, the complexion, and the regard is in fact the victory of the inferior material world. But death is at the same time also beautiful, it may become the ultimate dignity of mortals (...) The moment will come when it becomes more beautiful and harmonious in its ultimate tranquillity than it was as a living being."<sup>1</sup> Of course, Berdyaev's religious personalism rejects death, and calls man to defeat it. The categorical imperative of the personalist activism revolting against the new, objective world order goes as follows: act so that you assist at all times the defeat of death and the attainment of eternal life in your relation with your fellow beings. Berdyaev thinks that love is the force which can defeat even death. He writes in his philosophical biography: "Thinking of myself, I arrive to the conclusion that I am mobilized by the revolt against objectivation, the revolt against the objectivation of reason, life and death, religion and values. (...) Christ defeated death. This victory was accomplished in the subject, that is, in the true primary life and primary reality. The objectivation of this victory is nothing else than making it comprehensible for an average consciousness. (...) However, I am not satisfied with the purely spiritualistic conception of the immortality of the soul, just as I am not with the idealist teaching about the immortality of the universal spiritual force."<sup>2</sup> For Berdyaev the acceptance of the finiteness of being would equal the capitulation before the rule of things. Undoubtedly, says the Russian philosopher, they we can only break out of the world of average ordinariness if the authentic life undertakes also the defeat of the laws of the material world, or at least never gives up the hope of victory.

This point of view is utterly unacceptable, at least at a first sight, both for István Király V. and Martin Heidegger. For both of them stand at the position of radical confrontation with radical finiteness. For them, the "true domain" of the fight

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<sup>1</sup> Berdyaev, *O naznacsenyije...* 272.

<sup>2</sup> Nikolai Berdyaev, *Önmegismerés* (Self-knowledge), trans. Gyula Gasparics és Erzsébet Kovács (Budapest: Európa Kiadó, 2002), 402–403. Berdyaev strongly believed in the demiurgic and emancipatory power of love. This aspect is the direct continuation of Vladimir Solovyov's "erotomane" views: "Death is unacceptable even for the last, most deplorable creature, and if we didn't strive to defeat it in our relation to it, then the world could not be justified, and actually could not be accepted. Everything and everyone must be resurrected for eternal life. This means that the ontological principle of eternal life must be enforced not only in our relations to human being, but also in animals, plants, or what is more: even in objects. Man must act as a life-giver always and in his relation to everyone, and must be able to light the creative energy of eternal life." Berdyaev, *O naznacsenyije...* 273.



against death is where death happens as one's absolutely own death, and this fact (which is at the same time an artefact<sup>1</sup>) makes also possible – or enables through itself – the almost incommunicable, *authentic interpretation of death*.<sup>2</sup> Facticity and hermeneutics are almost inextricably linked in Király's metaphysics of death. It remains a question still: is it not so that the authentic fact of dying (which is also an interpretation of death), even if uncommunicable, is distinguished from inauthentic death (and interpretation of death) by the fact that the former version did defeat death after all? And if the light has been born once, why could it not be born again?

Finally, Jean-Paul Sartre's understanding of death, which again disputes Heidegger's "domestication of death", is also worth looking at. According to Sartre, it is impossible to relate to death in a non-subjective way, since every manifestation of man necessarily bears the signs of anthropomorphism. Furthermore, and this argument is addressed distinctly to Heidegger: in fact every human activity is individual and unassignable, not only the facticity of death: "Nobody can love instead of me, meaning that he cannot make the vows which are *my* vows, experience the emotions (however trivial) which are *my* emotions" ("Nul ne peut aimer pour moi, si l'on entend par là faire ses serments qui sont *mes* serments, éprouver les émotions (si banales soient-elles), qui sont *mes* émotions")<sup>3</sup> It can be objected of course that the missed love can perhaps be replaced even in the case of the same person or another one, while the missed or false (that is: "inauthentic") death is actually unrepeatable. However, one may reply that *my* betrayal (let us think of historically tense situations) is also *unreplaceable* in the sense that nobody can take over my responsibility. In Sartre's opinion it is the unrepeatable and unreplaceable *situatedness* that belongs to the Dasein's "always mine" nature, and not the *external* and *absurd* facticity of death. What is more, modern mass wars mostly prove that man can die practically instead of anyone else, for he is nothing but a statistical data in the calculations of military strategies. (Naturally, as we have seen earlier, for Heidegger and Király this kind of death is not even a true death, much rather merely a "destruction". Such an approach would definitely be acceptable, although I must repeat the formerly asked question: how can one make any difference between an authentic and inauthentic death from the external perspective of an observer?) Furthermore, the *time management* connected to death also seems almost like a impossible endeavour, says Sartre, since I cannot wait for death as for my friend Peter coming with the night train. Death is not the single most

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<sup>1</sup> For Heidegger, the "ability of being" of the existence running forth to death means at the same time "being" and "reflection on being", thus it comprises both the ontological and the epistemic level. "However, to project oneself on one's ownmost ability-of-being means: to be able to understand oneself in the being of a so revealed being: to exist. Running forth proves to be the possibility of the understanding of one's ownmost and ultimate ability-of-being, that is, the possibility of actual existence." ("Auf eigenstes Seinkönnen sich entwerfen aber besagt: sich selbst verstehen können im Sein des so enthüllten Seienenden: existieren. Das Vorlaufen erweist sich als Möglichkeit des Versehens des *eigensten* äußersten Seinkönnens, das heißt als Möglichkeit *eigentlicher Existenz*"). Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 262–263.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Király, *Halándóan...*43.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 579.

promising possibility of man, on the contrary: it is the annihilation of all my further possibilities. “Death means the victory of the other’s point of view over the point of view that *I am myself*” (“[...] elle est le triomphe du point de vue d’autrui, sur le point de vue que *je suis moi-même*”)<sup>1</sup> Death is the *lack of meaning*, a kind of anti-hermeneutics, claims Sartre, which resists any kind of metaphysical domestication.

Another important “field of research” of István Király V. is the problem of freedom and the virtually unrejectable “compulsion of questioning” deriving from the deeper meanings of freedom. That is to say, in the author’s view living in freedom means nothing else than never giving up *the right to questioning*. (The term “right” is not used in the usual formal-legal sense, but meaning that man recognizes himself precisely in the ontological situation of being questionable and problematic, compelled to question.) The author actually warns us, with the implication of the most varied digressions of the history of ideas, epistemology, language theory and logic, to take seriously the original programme of European philosophy: that every philosophical experiment that takes itself seriously unfolds in the dynamic force field of the connection to, and the delimitation from, tradition. This means that freedom comprises the right of both preservation and change, naturally without the possibility to decide, in the name of some a priori hierarchy, which freedom is “more original”.<sup>2</sup> “Actually, one of the most important roles and missions of philosophy with respect to factic life is precisely to make *questionable* that what is *never* a question in its direct actuality and generality for the lively factic life. No tradition or bequeath becomes questionable just “by itself”. It might only become extinct.”<sup>3</sup> Király analyses the hermeneutical problems of freedom, emancipation and openness primarily with a focus on the works of Heidegger and Gadamer. It is therefore natural that the author always finds a close relationship between the necessarily “language-based” nature of freedom, questioning and the human world. Rethinking Gadamer’s thesis, Király stresses that man, deriving from his environmental openness, has some kind of autonomy from names, since he is free to “practice his linguistic abilities in various ways”, but since language exists in its practical realizations (firstly in discussion), this freedom can always only acquire its historically possible forms in the context of cultural tradition. This way the problem of tradition, freedom and language, despite the undeniable conflicts between these, is only worth analysing in the dimension of “co-original *belonging together*”.<sup>4</sup> Tradition is always problematic; language is condition and limitation at the same time, since the unhindered dialogues that make tradition questionable always have to take into account that they will once also become part of tradition, and paradoxically it is always precisely the successful dialogues which have to face this fate.

István Király’s third volume, the *Question-points*, investigates the problem of the genetic belonging together of history, death and freedom. There is no history

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 585. What is more, by my death, after my death I will be completely at the mercy of the interpretive power of future generations, since from now on they say who I was (am), and I am not able to defend myself. Cf. Marc Crepon, *Vivre avec – La pensée de la guerres et la mémoire des guerres* (Paris: Hermann Éditeurs, 2008), 56–57.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Király, *Kérdő...* 100.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 109.

without death! This is basically the main thread of the author. This statement would of course be difficult to refute. So they say, the ancient Greeks had no philosophy of history for their cyclic conception of the world based on reincarnation had no concept of the dramatic nature of history (Berdyayev).<sup>1</sup> Temporality, death-related existence and historicity belong together not only in a conceptual, but also in an ontological sense, claims Király. Or, in other words, history and death belong together in a co-original way, for it is only the finite being, and the reflection on the finite being which is able to create history, and inhabit it in an understanding way. The historians' work is paradoxical, inasmuch as they do their work against death, and at the same time as a parasite of death. "Historiography, the historian's work is therefore something which in its essence – that is, athematically, independently from the analyzed theme – is forced and tries to turn death, by death and against death, towards a summarizing or analytical knowledge of the past, primarily addressed to the present (but probably also referring to the future)."<sup>2</sup> What is most often unrecognized in historical works, claims Király, is precisely that the historian/questioner does not take it into account that he is himself part of history, so that the stories of the past did not simply become past, but become "concluded facts" by the **cooperative surplus of historical memory**. The past is not a simple givenness for the present, but a task which becomes real past, that is, history as a simultaneous realization of the radical finiteness (mortality) and obligatory freedom of those who remember in the present.

The other main "question" of *Kérdés-pontok* is about human freedom. According to Király – formulated with some simplification – the essence of human freedom lies in the fact that the man never ceases to ask questions about the finiteness of human existence. The primary concerns of the author are not the free will or the possibilities/impossibility to confront natural-causal determinations, but the ways and directions of the "problematization of being". "The actual meaning of freedom, human freedom (...). Ultimately, the question and questioning of being itself, opening to beings and the being always in search for meaning."<sup>3</sup> It is obvious that the author is not so much concerned with the successfulness of questioning; his primary interest is always the steadiness and persistence of questioning. Király considers that to question the dying, the freedom, the finiteness and weight of being is in itself a value that must be an acceptable accomplishment almost regardless of the answer. What is truly important for him, can be summarized in the following thesis or imperative: "It is only important that the co-original belonging together of death, freedom and history must not be lost, since this is only which gives real weight to the questions of the

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<sup>1</sup> Aron Gurevich says: "The ancient Greeks contemplated and experienced the world not through the categories of change and development, but either as a state of immobility or a rotation on a huge circular track. The events happening in the world are not singular: the alternating ages repeat, the people and phenomena of times past return after the end of the "great year", the Pythagorean era." Aron Gurevich, *Időképzetek a középkori Európában* (Concepts of time in medieval Europe), In *Történelem és filozófia* (History and philosophy), ed. Tibor Huszár, trans. Csaba Könczöl (Budapest: Gondolat, 1974), 36.

<sup>2</sup> Király, *Kérdés-pontok*... 65.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 200.

questioner.” This stance lies at the basis of the author’s very serious treatment of the current problems of the teaching of philosophy. In the context of modern university mass education, there is even greater risk that philosophy is instrumentalized, that is to say, by the logic of capitalist market economy it is reduced to a mere marketable commodity. “Chair philosophy” degrades thinking to a simple subject (and a course), therefore it, as a “philosophical thing”, unproblematically integrates into the comfortably manageable world of technical order. Philosophy becomes thus a corrupted surrogate of “keeping up”, “alignment” and “adaptation”, giving up its original destination. In contrast, Király insists on the original intention of philosophy: to be the primary stage and forum of freedom. Therefore: “(...) **philosophy can only be taught by philosophizing even at university level, regardless of the fact that the direct audience – the students – would want to invest their scholarships or tuition fees for “philosophy itself” or exchange it for other horizons (“instrumentalization”).**”<sup>1</sup> The addressee of real philosophy is the autonomous individual, just as he is the perpetuator of philosophical tradition. For this reason any person seriously dealing with philosophy must also take into account that sooner or later he/she will be regarded as an uncomfortable, or even directly suspicious person.

As a summary to the problem of death, I only wish to mention: István V. Király’s works are also afflicted by their chosen subject: the questions asked by the author imply further questions, and challenge the reader to further questioning. I suspect this is not at all contrary to the author’s intentions.

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In addition to the existential philosophical meaning of death, Király has been concerned in recent years with the problem of *illness as a particular possibility of being*.<sup>2</sup> The author clarifies in the introduction to his book that illness for him is a *sui generis* philosophical problem. This is of course and acceptable viewpoint in case of work of philosophy; I, nevertheless – taking on the role of the devil’s advocate – start the analysis of the mentioned work with the sociological aspect, and try to reiterate Király’s position returning from there.

In relation to the sociological interpretation of the ill body, Christine Detrez speaks about the fact that in English the semantic field of “ill health” is described by three, semantically well differentiated notions: *disease* means the biological (pathological) changes of the body; *illness* the person’s subjective *feeling unwell*; and *sickness* refers to the social construct of illness (meaning the person who is considered ill by the environment, or by medical power).<sup>3</sup> In a sociological interpretation, illness has a particular geography and history, which may take on the most varied forms of value and representation. All this clearly indicates that illness

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>2</sup> István Király V., *A betegség – az élő létlehetősége. Prolegoména az emberi betegség filozófiájához*. Részletes angol nyelvű összefoglalóval / *Illness – A Possibility of the Living Being. Prolegomenae to the Philosophy of Human Illness*. A Detailed English Summary, trans. Emese G. Czintos (Pozsony [Bratislava]: Kalligram, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Christine Detrez, *La construction sociale du corps* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002), 100.

cannot be reduced merely to the biological sphere even from the point of view of sociology, because the problem of illness *versus* health has several social and community aspects which are “outside” the fundamental-ontological or existential interpretive framework used by Király; however, the sociological approach can be regarded as the entrance hall to the problem of illness conceived as a fundamental existential problem.

Approaching the problem of illness starting from history, it can be stated with considerable certainty that people had been thinking for a long time – and to a certain degree still think – about health as the “lack of body”: if I am healthy, I hardly notice I have a body. (Psychological illnesses in the current sense hardly existed before the birth of modern psychology). The “silence of the body” guaranteed health. In the twentieth century the X-ray revealed the traces of illness even on a seemingly healthy body, for instance the signs of tuberculosis on the lungs, like in the case of the protagonist of Thomas Mann’s novel *The Magic Mountain*, who arrived to the sanatorium as a *healthy* man for a simple medical check-up, and remained there as an *ill* man.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, one cannot disregard the change of concept that nowadays it means more or something else to be healthy than simply not to be ill. In other words in the cultural milieu of late capitalism it is not enough to define illness merely with the help of privation, but health also contains such positive determinations like saying that someone is “fit”, “agile”, “impulsive”, “full of vitality”, etc. In this sense being healthy is not a state but a task that one must prove day after day in a way visible for the environment.

Király’s starting point builds on that evidence of the life world that illness is “(...) an actually *universal and necessary* experience”<sup>2</sup> of all human existence. For hardly is there any person who has never met any kind of illness in their lifetime.<sup>3</sup> We cannot be exonerated from accepting illness, or rather the existential consequences of illness. In spite of this, the history of philosophy most often offers examples for how the majority of thinkers analyzed the strategies to avoid illness, while the problem of facing illness was neglected. However, an existentially committed philosophy cannot leave “unthematized” this question, for, in the author’s words: “The fundamental task and mission of philosophy stands precisely in the currently possible philosophical exhibition of precisely these directions or detours.”<sup>4</sup>

But the endeavour to interpret the problem of illness solely through the “purely positive” definition of health is also debatable. For in this understanding “being healthy” is identical in fact with living in total mental harmony with ourselves. Or, as the author puts it: with the state of social satisfaction and “well-being”. This kind of approach does not only lead the problem of illness astray, but

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>2</sup> Király, *A betegség...*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> It cannot be excluded of course that there were and are people who lived their life in complete health and then ended it with a sudden death. But as Bernard Andrieu warns, aging is an “undesired fatality” which we might perhaps delay for a while, but cannot avoid. And aging is itself a specific sort of illness. See Bernard Andrieu, *La nouvelle philosophie du corps* (Ramonville Saint-Agne: Éditions Érès, 2002), 145.

<sup>4</sup> Király, *A betegség...*, 16

also identifies, without any further ado, health with *happiness*. This interpretation preserves of course something of the interpretation of illness as the opposite (or relational term) of health, “but – says Király – in such a way that meanwhile it obscures the *essential* relation between health and illness.”<sup>1</sup>

However, one must also face that fact that philosophy cannot undertake the task to come up with a compact, all-inclusive and comprehensive definition of illness. What philosophy can do is that it consciously deals with the fact that illness is a *possibility organically* (literally and metaphorically) pertaining to human existence. A possibility which – in case of its successful realization – points beyond itself because, perspectively, it promises to grasp and understand the entirety of human existence. It is also true, the author acknowledges, that a philosophical approach cannot fully eliminate the biological, medical and sociological terminology from the analysis of the problem of illness. To formulate more clearly: Király knows and respects the endeavours that analyze the discourse of illness/health from the perspective of medical power or biopolitics. Still, he does not wish to pursue the path of Foucault or Canguilhem, but asks the existential questions of human existence, and precisely in connection with illness. He is interested in finding out what lies behind the fact that “(...) the human being experiences, reveals and records illness *continuously*, actually, existentially always as a *possibility*, a *particular possibility pertaining to the essence of life*, and also relates to it this way.”<sup>2</sup> In addition to this, a philosophy that thematizes illness does not only want to reveal, through the phenomenon of illness, the possibility of human life, but the *living being’s possibility of being* and the *possibility of living-being*.

It is a further question to ask what one means by the term of *possibility*. The concept of possibility and contingency usually means that something is not *necessary*, but neither it is *impossible*. The author mentions another interpretation that he calls popular: that possibility stands close to the concept of *probability*. Probability is usually understood as a mathematical probability which can be *calculated* and expressed in *numbers*. The author accepts neither of the two above interpretations, but chooses an ontological approach: “the possibility of illness pertains to *life* itself and – evidently *in a particular way* – also to *human life*, to *human existence*.”<sup>3</sup>

However, Király’s reflections do not exclude completely the aspects of cultural and science history. The excursus entitled *Schematic considerations about the problematic issues of “Christian medicine” and “Christian healing”* is a good example for such analyses. The author starts from the historical fact that the Christian Middle Ages faced a almost unsolvable dilemma or series of dilemmas when it tried to introduce the phenomenon of illness into its worldview. First, it considered all illnesses as a *consequence of the original sin*, from a twofold perspective: first, the divine punishment afflicted the human race in general with all kinds of illnesses and epidemics, and second, it “punished” every person in particular, based on their sins, with individual and specific forms of illnesses. Király very wittily argues that the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 25.

medieval man saw the possibility of “ontological difference” accomplished by divine providence in the endless, individualized variations of illnesses and the suffering they caused. This meant, he continues, that, “if (...) we give a serious thought to it, it looks very questionable *whether* the human-medical efforts to *confront* and *heal* these divine punishments called illnesses count indeed as respectable human endeavours “corresponding” to the divine intentions and destinations?”<sup>1</sup> Based on those above, one can rightly say that the medieval theological and philosophical medicine did not heal in the strict sense of the word, but rather only *relieved the pain* or offered *consolation*, and trusted the *divine* mercy and *miracle*. The author is right to say that medieval medicine actually hindered the development of ancient (Mesopotamian, Greek, Latin, Jewish etc.) medicine because the practice it exercised was *caretaking* rather than *healing*. As Király himself mentions, this kind of quasi-medicine lived well into the Late Middle Ages (let us only think of the French kings healing by laying on their hands), but there are such practices even today, for instance in the primarily American neo-Protestant churches the bizarre manifestations of “healing procedures appearing in collective prayer”.

Therefore, however harsh the author’s judgment may be, Christian medicine is an essential contradiction.<sup>2</sup> This is of course not to say that the medieval “medical culture” may not have tried to canonize some ancient physicians possibly considered “monotheistic” (e.g. Galen), but this was only enough to create a medical paradigm which ruled for almost a millennium almost without ever being questioned.

The aforementioned methods of healing also delimited the possible boundaries of medical discourse. It is extraordinarily interesting how Király analyzes the etymology of the Hungarian word “orvos” (medical doctor). The author thinks that “(...) [the Hungarian] word “orvos” understands illness as a depriving, sneaking force, effect, action or process which is treacherous and insidious.”<sup>3</sup>

(I myself consider that medical power has preserved something of this *demonic* or shaman-like *tradition* to this day. Neil Postman in his bestseller published more than two decades ago presents a strange variation of medical power that appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The story is connected to the invention of the stethoscope. This nowadays very ordinary instrument was invented by the French doctor René- Théophile-Hyacinthe Laënnec in 1816. One time he wanted to auscult the heart of an elderly and quite corpulent female patient, but the lady refused to have the doctor’s ear pressed against her chest, therefore Laënnec thought of rolling a piece of thicker paper into some sort of tube-like shape and auscult the woman’s heart with this instrument. The idea worked brilliantly and from then on other parts of the body could also be “looked”, or rather listened at. The stethoscope (the meaning of the Greek word: “I see in the chest”) has then become the symbol of internists. In England for instance internists walked on the street with a stethoscope near their top hat so that everybody saw they were not just any kind of doctor but an *internist*.<sup>4</sup>)

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>4</sup> See Neil Postman, *Das Technopol*. Die Macht der Technologien und die Entmündigung der Gesellschaft (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag 1992), 107–108. Trans. Reinhart Kaiser; Original: *Technopoly* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), 1991.

This digression into medical and cultural history is especially important, claims the author, by clearly stating the necessity to return to the original starting point. In this sense illness is not a violent force breaking into a healthy person's life from outside, but a *possibility of the living being*. This is of course not opposed to the evidence that "(...) the *norm*, the normality of the living being is still to be *healthy*."<sup>1</sup> Health perceived this way is therefore not a static state given once and for all, but a kind of battleground where illness may appear any time for illness itself *belongs to the essential possibilities* of the ill person. Therefore it is very difficult to draw a distinct line between health and illness, as shown by the life of viruses and parasites.

The chapter entitled *Dialogue with Aristotle* deepens the analysis of the problem of illness. In order to see and understand illness as a particular possibility of being in its philosophical complexity, it is indispensable to reiterate the categorial analyses in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Most importantly, the author talks about the necessity of the complex analysis of the concepts of *dynamis*, *energeia*, *entelechia*, and *physis* as concepts of *possibility* interpretable in new dimensions. This procedure is all the more justifiable as Aristotle himself interprets possibility first of all in the semantic field of *dynamis*. The word *dynamis* contains the most varied versions of the meaning of "possessing force", "having power". At the same time the *dynamis* also connects to the essence (*ousia*), for it is "(...) precisely because it is the *dynamis*, the possibility which penetrates the *ousia*, the essence, and its entirety, its complexity, its richness, and all its sides, even the dark ones."<sup>2</sup> Any kind of change is the actualization of the *dynamis*, which is at the same time *energeia*. On the other hand, claims the author, movement itself is none other than *dynamis*, that is, the actualization of possibility(ies). "That is: *energeia*. Thus the force now actually at work and functioning".<sup>3</sup> However, the *dynamis* appears not only as positive activity, but also has a kind of negative activity: it possesses the ability of passivity or that of bearing. However we may look at it: *energeia* is the force appearing in "actualization", in functioning. *Energeia* and *actualitas* do not only distance themselves in *dynamis* but also lean back to it.

For the understanding of the content of activity, it seems especially important to analyse another fundamental category of Aristotle. This is the *entelecheia*, of which the author says the following: "The *entelecheia* is one of Aristotle's most wonderful ideas and words. Maybe he coined it himself to see and name as accomplishment the movements and changes of things and processes and the essential *function* – that is, *telos* meant not only as "purpose" – of human activities connected to these, first in the contradictory and indefinite tensions of the colourful *dynamis*, then in the explicit functioning of the *energeia*."<sup>4</sup> Man however has a special purpose and function: namely, that within and also beyond the possibilities offered by the *physis* he may develop his existential historical possibilities and create a so-to-say *physis* "beyond *physis*". For the "task" of the

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<sup>1</sup> Király, *A betegség...*, 36.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 61–62.



human being is primarily to ask, investigate and shape its own historically given but unfinished (open horizon) modes of being.

One of these modes of being – and precisely one of the most special modes of being because of its painful or suffering forms of appearance – is the one burdened with illnesses. “Illness itself is primarily, in its primary relation to the privation, damaging or deficiency of health, but as such, it is still an essential possession, its own “positive” property (*ousia*) and not just some external “attribute” of the ill person.”<sup>1</sup> The lack (*steresis*), the privation from something does not simply appear here as emptiness, for it has a constructive role. It appears as a very “energetic” *activity* which damages, impairs health. This is why Király is right to claim that in the relation health *versus* illness: “the *ousia* of illness and health is the same, for both are essential possibilities of the same being.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore the state of recovered health after illness is not merely the restoration of a previous state but the act of the birth of *a different kind of health*.

Illness is of course not only present in the mode of the being of the living in its actualized form, but as a *danger* or *threat* permanently lurking in the background. This fear is an experience with the “structure of challenge and trial”. Illness as *deficiency* is woven into the multitude of human modes of being. That is to say, it is both a challenge and a possibility for medicine, health care, humanities culture, religious, literature, and various everyday activities. If for no other reason, *deficiencies* therefore cannot be described as mere lack, or empty negativeness.

It is a fact that the illness radically rearranges and restricts the ill person’s being-in-the-world, but – paradoxically – opens ways to new possibilities of action and interpretation. The incurable diseases and devastating epidemics yield to possibility both for the ill person and their environment – precisely for the reason of *deficiency* – to reveal the “previously concealed” aspects of being. As the author puts it: “and it may suffice to refer here to the lengthy and repeated, let’s say, medieval epidemics of plague and smallpox. Which at that time could not be either stopped or healed, and which therefore restructured mankind both immunologically and biologically.”<sup>3</sup>

The understanding of health as *deficiency* also offers a possibility to reveal the real existential relations of health, for “health must be reclaimed from illness.” However, we must also see, claims the author, that illness is a sign of special importance: it warns us that *we are mortal!* Just like in his works treating death and mortality, Király emphasizes again: “For the so-called ‘immortals’ however neither illnesses and suffering, nor their easing, healing or caretaking etc. may have any kind of stake or significance.”<sup>4</sup>

These recognitions drive us almost as a necessity to the philosophical thematization of the relation of illness and freedom. In a first approach we can say that *illness* robs the *healthy* person for it “deprives” him of precisely one of his most important assets. A more thorough reflection however point way beyond this

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 92.

ordinary obviousness – says the author. It is worth starting from the fact that the essence of freedom is questioning, or rather the ability or gift of “questioning well”. But no “subject” is more prone to questioning or “curiosity” than illness. An ill person does nothing else – at least at the beginning – than asks questions. (Why did it happen to me, what have I done wrong to bear this terrible suffering, etc.) But, as seen above, it is not all the same what questions we ask and what kind of meaningful answers we expect. For instance, we can by no means regard freedom as a medicine giving solace to the ill person. Such an interpretation “would be unworthy of the case, its existential weight and of philosophy itself.”<sup>1</sup> It seems like a much more productive approach to stars – partly based on Gadamer – from the *question-structure* of the experience of illness (as a fundamental experience of being). Because the understanding of the world with the help of questions is also self-understanding. And it is not in need of painful instances. “This is why Gadamer claims with Aeschylus so nicely that experience is actually nothing else than learning at the expense of suffering.”<sup>2</sup> For where man is successful in questioning well, meaningfully, there *freedom* also appears. However surprising it may sound, says the author, the illnesses which can indeed be regarded as human “(...) actually are only possible in the all-time horizons, ontologically constitutive and existentially world-like, of human freedom.”<sup>3</sup> That is to say, the questions directed to the ill person and his illness are never merely questions directed at a specific “illness-object”. The case is much rather the curiosity regarding the essential possibilities of human existence, and dwelling on the nature of existential threats. Caring about illness does not only aim at the avoidance or prevention of illness, and it is not merely about listing the losses caused by the illness, “(...) but about what resources does [the ill person] have meanwhile (...) and the struggle of his world and “environment” with the illness, rearticulated and re-outlined in this situatedness...”<sup>4</sup> This way the suffering is not merely a “pathos” understood in the sense of passivity, but an active and acting experience. For the same reason one must not see illness merely as the ill person’s deprivation from freedom (although *that too*), but as the creation of new horizons of experience enabled by the restructured life conditions. Therefore we can learn from illness, our illnesses. But not only how we can protect ourselves from falling ill again (our possibilities are still very limited even today, in an age of modern technology applied in the health care system), but to learn to *find* and then *esteem* the true values of life. Another way to formulate this is that illness and ill people of the one hand, and the world on the other are complementary notions. For “(...) the world does not really exists ‘without’ illnesses and ill people.”<sup>5</sup> To SERIOUSLY examine illness and illnesses primarily means: to enrol into the basic course of the understanding of being. For illness, and suffering and learning from it, is the primary way for anyone to test what he is actually capable of...

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 104–105.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 116.

As a final conclusion, Király's insight in the concluding sentences of his book is: "Every illness has its own dynamis on the one hand, while on the other hand every illness is the ill person's illness (...) it is individual and singular. That is why I argued that it could possibly still be able and meaningful to philosophically examine various illnesses to a certain degree, which always presupposes – or would presuppose – an essential, ontological and existential, clarifying insight on them. As a result of which we would then better understand our being, our modes of being, and consequently our illnesses and the free meanings of life inevitably connected to them. And as a result, also our existence as humans."<sup>1</sup>

Translated by Emese Czintos

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 126.