Conceptions of death in the Western world: bioethics from a critical anthropological perspective

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Abstract

Death is symbolically, historically and socially constructed. More than a biological process, death is a cultural elaboration, and discussing it means, therefore, to understand its representations and practices. Although it is currently understood negatively, it was not always considered a taboo. This article aims to unveil how the opposition between life and death favoring life as a positivity was established and what are the consequences of banishing the idea of finitude in favor of a myth of immortality. Through a literature review of the conceptions of death in the Western world, specifically in Brazil, this discussion proposes to rethink bioethics as a discipline that should include, besides dogmatic and authoritarian models, plural moral values. This reflection allows us to face death as a part of life and, thus, to confront the impossibility of nothingness, an inexorable end, as an endless possibility, in its various and different meanings.

Keywords: Death. Life. Western world. Bioethics.

Resumo

Ideário da morte no Ocidente: a bioética em uma perspectiva antropológica crítica

A morte é simbólica, histórica e socialmente construída. Mais do que um processo biológico, é uma elaboração cultural, e discuti-la significa, portanto, entender suas representações e práticas. Embora seja atualmente entendida de forma negativa, nem sempre foi tida como tabu. Este artigo busca desvelar de que modo foi estabelecida a oposição entre a vida e a morte em proveito da vida como positividade e as consequências do banimento da ideia de finitude em prol de um mito de imortalidade. A partir de uma revisão da literatura sobre as concepções da morte no Ocidente, especificamente no Brasil, esta discussão propõe repensar a bioética como campo disciplinar que deve abarcar, para além de modelos dogmáticos e autoritários, valores morais plurais. Esta reflexão permite encarar a morte como constituinte da vida e, assim, arrostar a impossibilidade do nada, fim inexorável, como possibilidade infinda, em suas diversas acepções e seus diferentes sentidos.

Palavras-chave: Morte. Vida. Ocidente. Bioética.

Resumen

Ideario de la muerte en Occidente: la bioética en una perspectiva antropológica crítica

La muerte es simbólica, histórica y socialmente construida. Más que un proceso biológico, es una elaboración cultural, y discutirla significa, por lo tanto, entender sus representaciones y prácticas. Aunque ella sea actualmente entendida de forma negativa, no siempre fue considerada como tabú. Este artículo busca desvelar de qué modo se estableció la oposición entre la vida y la muerte en provecho de la vida como positividad y las consecuencias de la exclusión de la idea de finitud en favor de un mito de inmortalidad. A partir de una revisión de la literatura sobre las concepciones de la muerte en Occidente, específicamente en Brasil, esta discusión propone repensar la bioética como campo disciplinar que debe abarcar, además de modelos dogmáticos y autoritarios, valores morales plurales. Esta reflexión permite encarar la muerte como constituyente de la vida y, así, confrontar la imposibilidad de la nada, fin inexorable, como posibilidad sin fin, en sus diversas acepciones y sus diferentes sentidos.

Palabras clave: Muerte. Vida. Mundo Occidental. Bioética.

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Declara não haver conflito de interesse.

Update

The construction of the conceptions of death in Western society

Death is not limited to the end of biological life, closing cultural, symbolic, historical and socially constructed aspects. Addressing it also demands understanding how the living interpret it and deal with it. This article aims at unveiling the construction of the Western conceptions of death, this term being understood as a textual operator, in Derridean terminology, because it is not a closed category, linear and fixed, but a concept encompassing heterogeneous representations and practices, some of which are presented here.

With this objective, a review of the literature on the conceptions of death in the Western world, specifically in Brazil, was made proposing to rethink bioethics as a discipline that encompasses, besides dogmatic and authoritarian models, plural moral values. The intention is, in this context, to allow a reappropriation of death and a deeper understanding of related issues, such as those concerning the health-disease process or the limits of life (euthanasia, abortion, etc.).

Diniz[1] traces a brief history of the relationship with death and the dead in Western society. According to this author, until the eighteenth century there was no radical separation between life and death, since this was a domestic matter - a "good death" meant being surrounded by loved ones, with a ceremony open to the community, and burial in the church or in a cemetery adjacent to it.

From the nineteenth century, with the advent of the Enlightenment and bourgeois revolutions - and therefore, with the advance of rational thought, the laicization of social relations and the secularization of everyday life - death ceased to be socially shared, the solemn death in the family reached its end. Dying in hospitals became the norm. The dead were, thus, separated from the living, eventually confined to the outskirts of cities. If until this century the dead were part of life, from this point on a civilized silence - an apparent indifference, and a rational and practical attitude to remove the burden of death from life – loomed over them[1,2].

According to Rodrigues[3], from antiquity to the Middle Ages there was familiarity between the living and the dead. In the medieval period, the place of the dead was also the place of the living: the cemetery was a center of social life and, with the church, constituted public squares or sites that covered commerce, proclamations and all forms of collective information. It was a space for strolls, fun and amusements. Death was therefore public and communal[2].

Still according to the detailed description of Rodrigues[3], people frequented the cemetery without being overawed, without being bothered by the proximity of the communal graves that were left wide open until they were filled up, without being disturbed by the exhumations, mingling with the funeral ceremonies that happened right there. Nor did the sight and smell of the cemetery prevent the common bread oven from being located there: the proximity of food and corpses barely buried, exhumed, exposed - which would cause extreme disgust to modern people - did not disturb medieval people[2].

The author adds: *the coexistence with death [included] proximity to decomposition, whether figuratively, in the arts, or concretely, in exhumations or in collective graves that remained half-open until they were completed. Public events took place in the cemeteries until approximately 1750: in them people went to stroll, to dance, to sell and to buy, to wash clothes; in them justice was dispensed, community political questions were resolved, executions were carried out, meetings were held, theatrical performances were given and cattle were allowed to graze*[4].

In this period, until about the sixteenth century, death played an important role in the arts, religious and lay decorations, games and dances. In this atmosphere coexisted the profane and the sacred, life and death, whose vision and iconography were essentially joyous and folkloric, involving a kind of great communal and egalitarian feast: kings, bishops, princes, bourgeois, plebeians, all were equal before the end[2,3].

From the sixteenth century onwards, such feelings began to change. In the eighteenth century, traces of the economic activities that occurred in the cemetery still persisted, but the medieval fairs disappeared definitively from it. Representations of skeletons and skulls, frequent especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, began to play an ideological function different from that of medieval interpretation and iconography. Skulls and tibias combined with scythes, clocks and gravediggers' hoes acquired a gloomy character, composing the macabre imaginary[2,3]. *Memento mori* became part of most portraits painted during the Enlightenment, recalling the inexorability of death.

In this process, the image of death began to transfigure itself into decay and decomposition, losing the character of judgment, as will be pointed out subsequently, or even of sleep. The repugnance

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to odors and emanations accompanying funeral practices also arose during this period. The cemetery was then identified as a place of pollution[2,3].

The individual tombs, common in antiquity, reappeared between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries. Such individualization marked profound changes in the conceptions of death and life, and expressed an attempt to preserve the lives of the dead. These individual graves, as well as the funeral inscriptions and the representation of the deceased in the funeral statuary, ensured their permanence through a symbolic survival. Masks, statues and paintings also exemplify this process of individualization[2,3].

This concern with the marking of graves developed mainly from the 14th century onwards and began to dominate the funerary world from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This desire - and later obligation - to endow each deceased person with a grave, requiring burials to occur side by side, and no longer in superposition, began to delineate the cemetery configuration in contemporary times: a multitude of individual tombs[2,3].

Thus, gradually, the places of burial and funerary monuments were privatized and the recipients of funeral tributes preserved through their memories. Such practices would also reverberate in contemporary times. Rodrigues[3] points out, however, that the molding of corpses realistic portraits was partly contemporary and partly immediately after the transformation of the bodies of the deceased into objects that were banned from sight. Parallel to individualization, the use of coffins, which closed the corpses and removed them from view, become common[2].

According to Michel Foucault[5], at the end of the eighteenth century the graves were individualized not for theological-religious reasons to respect the dead, but for political-health issues to respect the living. Urbanization had caused anguish in the face of growing cities, workshops, factories, and population, in addition to the epidemics and, hence, evermore numerous cemeteries. In order to maintain the health management of the cities, an urban medicine of analysis, control and organization of the space was developed. As for the dead, it was necessary to reduce the harmful danger they represented. Thus, not only did cemeteries migrate to the outskirts of the cities, but also coffins became individual, which allowed the scanning and classification of the dead, sanitizing the environment and, consequently, protecting the living.

This fear of death had begun to manifest itself in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. As pointed out, death no longer assumed a serene image, but

a judicial conception, closely associated with an understanding of life as a particular biography. At that time the book of life appeared, a symbolic volume that counted the good and bad actions of people. Living became a preparation for dying, when souls would be weighed, and their eternal salvation or perdition decided. Subsequently, such a conception would also change and the image of death would be associated with impurity and danger[2,3].

The anguish regarding the end of life proliferated with the same intensity as the making of clocks in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries[2,3]: [There were] *only two paths, two survival strategies: controlling the future through "eternal life" or immobilizing time through symbolic attempts to conserve and preserve the dead and their bodies. Both strategies* [were] *used in the Western-capitalist battle to conquer death*[6].

It may be supposed that from individual anguish regarding death came the ideas of material accumulation and sanctification through investment, labor, and profit, which Max Weber called the "spirit of capitalism"[3]. The conjunction of the process of individualization, transformation of affectivity, and the appearance of grave-markers meant, between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the denial of death and the preservation of the dead[2,3].

With the scientific revolution, between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, science appropriated the human body, which came to be considered as an object of analysis. The idea that humankind could dominate nature through science extended to the strategy of medicine to control death and thus prolong life. Death came to be considered not a limit of life, but of medicine.

From the eighteenth century onwards, in a process that culminated in the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, came dramatic funereal staging, in which despair over death was demonstrated by groans, screams, fainting. This exaltation of affectivity was associated with the promotion of the dead and of death to the status of a beautiful thing. The romantic funereal aesthetic that conveyed such beauty showed the ambiguity of funeral representations and practices, since it was contemporary to dreading death, and therefore meant rejection of finitude. This beauty was, therefore, the concealment of fear[2,3].

The association of the color black with death occurred back in the sixteenth century and revealed the somber character it acquired. In addition, the

use of a specific color to distinguish the mourners corresponded, on the one hand, to the relatively recent need to separate what is associated with death from what is associated with life and, on the other hand, to the appropriation of the deceased by those who were close to them. When life and death were not opposed and the latter was lived collectively, there was no sense in such discrimination [2,3].

The presence of people, who helped transport the deceased to the graves and cried over them in exchange for alms and/or coats (usually black, used in ceremonies by those closest to the deceased), was also common during funerals. Remnants of this practice can still be observed today in the "sale of water" in cemeteries by children, adolescents and adults in exchange for alms. "Selling water" is an emic expression of the workers of the São Francisco de Assis Cemetery, in Florianópolis (SC), which translates to the service of washing tombs. This task is combined with assisting in transporting materials used by people who visit the dead and the surveillance of vehicles left in the vicinity of the cemetery [2,3].

The management of the contemporary necropolis (cleaning, construction of roadways, provision of information, etc.), as already happened in relation to the city, became a function of the public authorities. The cemetery became an object of urban planning, ecological misgivings and aesthetic concerns. Decorating tombs with flowers, art objects, portraits and evocative texts became more and more usual [2,3].

Nowadays, some strategies are used to stop time and preserve the dead: in the tombs, natural flowers are often replaced by plastic flowers, which do not die, and life is perpetuated in moments captured by film and photographs, some of which identify the graves. In addition, the dressing and the makeup of the bodies of the deceased seek to eliminate all traces of death. After being washed, embalmed, dressed and made up, the corpses are enclosed in coffins and hidden in graves under monuments, which can still be concealed by walls or plants. The cemetery is an ambiguous space that makes the dead disappear and at the same time be conserved [2,3].

The process of laicization that reached the realms of life and death during the age of enlightenment reverberated with the separation between body and soul, the transformation of the body into an object, the appropriation of death by medicine, the development of hygienic ideology and the consequent separation between the cemetery, the church and the city [2,3]. The conceptions of death and dying, once linked to magic and religion, became linked to science.

In the twentieth and twenty first centuries, there was a silencing of pain; the privatization of - and even reduction in the duration of – mourning; the disappearance of the funeral procession, condolences, visits and last honors; the neutralization of funeral rites; and the economy of feelings and of emotions [2,3]. People stopped dying at home, among their relatives, and began dying in hospitals, where compulsory ignoring of death obliges physicians and family members to conceal the severity of the state of health of the individual, who, being ill, becomes a number. At the same time that humanity is lost, the preparation for death is extinguished, both for those who die and for those who remain [3].

The invention of the hospital as a place that safeguards death is contemporary to the development of hygienic ideology: the hospital protects families from disease, the patient from emotional pressures, and society from death. As mentioned before, death ceases to be natural and begins to be seen as an accidental event, human failure, or a shortfall of science. While physical immortality is not achieved, symbolic immortality is conquered [3]. The consequences of this prolongation of life at all costs, which disregards the dimensions of existence beyond the biological, are no longer measured. Thus, to avoid death, society began to invest in medicine, social welfare, safety, food. The suppression of death, therefore, refers not to individual sensitivities but to social coercion which has come to treat it as a taboo [2,3].

Jean Baudrillard [7] also discusses the individualization and denial of death - the modern internalization of the anguish caused by the end of life. For him, the institution of death, like that of survival and immortality, was a late conquest of the political rationalism of castes of priests and churches, who founded their power over the management of this imaginary sphere of death. As for the disappearance of religious survival, it was the later conquest of a state political rationalism, which founded its power over the management of life as actual survival - it was the imagination of life that increased the power of the State [2].

The existence of the Church, as well as of the State, was only possible by eliminating the symbolic requirement of the group. Then came the political economy imposed by the Church against the communities, and the collective rituals: personal salvation through faith and, later, through the accumulation of deeds and perfection. Still in the fifteenth century, the party that was the Dance of Death, which demonstrated the equality of all before the end, challenged the inequitable order of birth,

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wealth and power. This is the last moment in which death could appear as a collective expression [2,7].

Then, in the sixteenth century, the modern figure of death was generalized. The Counter-Reformation, the funereal and obsessive games of the Baroque, and especially Protestantism individualized consciences before God and accelerated the process of individual anguish regarding the end of life. Thus, with the disintegration of traditional Christian and feudal communities, through bourgeois reasoning and the nascent system of political economy, death ceased to be socially shared. An obsession with death and the desire to abolish it through the accumulation of value - particularly of time as value, in the fantasy of a postponement of the end – came into existence, becoming the fundamental driving force for economic policy rationale [2,7].

According to Baudrillard [7], there has historically been an effort in Western society to dissociate life from death. The abolition of death branched in all directions: in religions' belief of survival and eternity, in science's production of truth, in the economy's productivity and acquisition.

No other society knows this opposition between life and death in favor of life as a positivity. In analyzing the primitive order, this author shows that, while *we* dissocialize death by assigning it the immunity of science and autonomizing it as an individual fatality, *they* do not naturalize it, considering it a social relation. In other words, in these societies the definition of death is social: it subscribes to a symbolic ritual of exchange between the living and between the living and the dead. This reciprocity between life and death gives place in our society to a system that, although living off the production of death, denies it and enters into a process of accumulation of life as a value. Thus, the symbolic reversibility of death ceases. For Baudrillard [7], only the symbolic, which lets death openly signify, ends accumulation and enables the reversibility of life at death [2].

An example of the treatment of death in the primitive order is given by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl [8], according to which, in the mentality considered primitive, beings are involved in a network that organizes them. Death comes from diverse representations, sorcerers, spirits of the dead or other forces, whose origin is collective. These mystical powers are felt both in the individual and in the social group. The author also shows that beings are involved with objects in that network. Thus, if a crocodile devours a man, that animal is necessarily the instrument of a wizard or the wizard himself. Therefore, the identified wizard and crocodile

participate in this collective representation, the latter being formed by the former [2].

In turn, Maurice Leenhardt [9] evokes a conception of a person, as a position in the network of social relations, close to that referred to by Lévy-Bruhl [8]. The author reports that, for the Kanak of New Caledonia, the person is participatory, social, and is only known by the relationship he/she maintains with others. In fact, apart from human beings, they are a *kamo* (*ka*, "what", and *mo*, "alive", "what lives" or "truly human"), animal, vegetable and mythical persona, if they share a certain humanity [2].

Nor do the Melanesian distinguish the living from the dead. God, corpse and even the living consist of the *bao*. *Bao* is eloquent in showing the tenuity of this entreaty that separates and, at the same time, protects life from death. Life and death do not oppose one another in this mythical reality. Living and *bao* are kept in constant interchange, and death is not regarded as annihilation of the being, it is not mistaken for nothingness – one does not die in Melanesia [2,9].

The language itself does not have a term that translates the verb "to die". Death appears as a negative state of life and a different form of existence, which is therefore, in its visible and invisible aspects, perennial in the eyes of the Kanak. Thus, death participates in the persona and in god, in *kamo* and in *bao* [2,9].

Among the Araweté, to give a (last) example of an Amerindian society, death also plays a key role. For this Tupi-Guarani people, the conception of a person underlies death. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro [10] maintains that death is the place where the Araweté person is realized - disjunctive synthesis. Living and dead are intertwined in this society, and death presents positivity, that is, it is a productive system [2,11].

The destiny of the Araweté person is to become another. This is the person in this society: a becoming, a potentiality that is completed with death and the transformation into a cannibal god. The *Maï*, the real others, created by exclusion the human condition, which is surpassed by death itself and by itself. In this instance, myth is also a manifestation of a reality. The Aravetés tell that, when the souls of their dead reach the sky, they are devoured by the gods, who resurrect them from the bones; then they become immortal like the gods. Death unveils, therefore, the Tupi-Guarani conception of person. While "becoming", the Araweté person is not; he/she is a "between". Alterity is constitutive of beings [2,10,11].

According to Edgar Morin [12], the refusal and horror of death are revealed especially in societies

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in which individuality is affirmed. When, as in the examples listed, the social group affects the individual intimately, the traumatic presence of death dissolves; when, on the other hand, individuals assert themselves over or in society, death is feared. That is why, according to this author, quoting Frazer and Hocart, the fear of death is less pronounced in the so-called archaic peoples than in the so-called evolved societies[2].

Specifically in Brazil, attitudes towards death and the dead are traced by Koury[13]. According to this author, the process of privatization of death and dying gradually settled in the country in the nineteenth century and deepened in the last three decades of the twentieth century. Until the 1970s, it was still a tradition to keep vigil and publicly mourn for the dead, but, from then on, a new economy of affections, characterized by the control of emotions, would have emerged in Brazilian urban society[2].

Koury[13] shows that death and its relation to the world of the living have been apprehended by more individualistic codes and no longer by expressions of a relational sociability characteristic of the 1980s, as it was suggested by Roberto DaMatta[14], for whom modern systems would worry about death, while relational systems would worry about the dead. In those, the individualistic societies, practices would try to destroy the dead, not even a memory of them should remain, because to think systematically about the deceased and to speak constantly of them would be classified as a pathological attitude. DaMatta[14] considers that Brazil would be included in the second group[2].

However, Freire[15] demonstrates that currently in the country there is a distance from the dead - family life is replaced by medicalization in hospitals and later burial in places far from the city, public mourning is disapproved, and feelings and emotions are used sparingly. Brazil would thus be transitioning to the group defined by DaMatta[14] as individualist[2].

This author also points out the emergence of private cemeteries along with the growing real estate speculation in public cemeteries. Citing Maria Elizia Borges, Freire[15] says that Brazilian cemeteries are now crowded and poorly managed - there is a shortage of staff and night surveillance, and therefore constant depredations, the consequence of meager funds needed to maintain these sites. To show this process, the author uses a research carried out in the *Morada da Paz* (Abode of Peace), a private cemetery located in the city of Natal (in the state of Rio Grande do Norte)[2].

In spite of the emergence of park cemeteries - such as the site researched - which would be, besides an abode of the dead, environments of sociability among the living and that could be conceived as the result of the formation of a new Brazilian sensibility in the twenty first century, Freire[15] affirms that the path of individualization is the tonic of coping with death in today's urban Brazil. According to this author, these cemeteries are only specialized societal spaces, destined for the bereaved and created by the marketing game, which end up reaffirming the isolation of those who suffer the loss of a loved one and the silencing of pain[2].

Also in Florianópolis (in the state of Santa Catarina) the sanitization process removed from the center of the city the aforementioned São Francisco de Assis Cemetery, better known as "Itacorubi Cemetery" because it is located in the neighborhood with the same name, exactly at the bifurcation that leads to the northern and southern beaches of the island. Built next to the Companhia de Melhoramento da Capital - COMCAP (Capital Improvement Company), the garbage dump, and a penitentiary, this necropolis concentrates the maladjustments and even the filth and pollution attributed to it by the surrounding society. The same taboo that is associated with death and the dead is associated with this cemetery and, consequently, with its workers[2].

From the perspective of geography, when analyzing the location of death in the modeling of the urban space in Fortaleza (in the state of Ceará), Maria Clélia Lustosa Costa[16] underlines the construction of cemeteries on elevated terrain and its afforestation (to promote air circulation), as happens in the São Francisco de Assis Cemetery, as measures of the Brazilian medical-hygiene discourse[2].

Cemeteries are paradoxical symbolic spaces that separate and concomitantly harbor life from death. They are privileged places to reflect on death, but also, and above all, on life. As a prelude, discussing death consists, ultimately, of rethinking life itself.

In fact, the conceptions of death and life are not watertight and finished. As shown, they depend on the symbolic, historical, and social context in which they are constructed. Nor is death necessarily imbued with negativity, as was equally covered. Nowadays, among the eternal companions of death[17], like the gravediggers of the São Francisco de Assis Cemetery, death, though feared by some, is considered a necessary good - not a "necessary evil", as per the current expression. It is also seen as a passage or the embodiment of someone to whom the dead are delivered and who provides them with protection. It is also considered beautiful[2].

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The banishment of the idea of death in the name of the myth of immortality has the perverse effect of ignorance regarding the human condition itself. Now what is death but this alterity which at the same time annihilates and constitutes us? To be human is to admit the possibility of not being [18]. In this sense one can (and should) question how we deal with death. What are, for example, the consequences of prolonging life at all costs in the name of the amount of supposedly infinite time, and to the detriment of the quality of death and the care that the end of life requires? How, then, to re-signify existence?

This debate extends to discussions pertinent to bioethics, such as the right to die with dignity, stem cell research, and the right to abortion. This discipline raises reflections on the links between life and death through the realization of the existence of a moral pluralism, which is attentive to diverse knowledge and deeds concerning death (and consequently life), depending on the historical and socio-cultural context considered, as evoked throughout this text. To recognize (or to know) this diversity of conceptions (of life and death) and of morality associated to life and death makes it possible to re-signify them.

Bioethics from a critical anthropological perspective

The notions of death (and also of life) are therefore variable. Being attentive to this variability, according to social configurations and cultural arrangements existing in the Western world in general, and Brazil in particular, means admitting the insufficiency of dogmatic and authoritarian models, and the need to discuss bioethical questions from different moralities that emerge from specific contexts.

This analysis allows us to reflect on the limits of principlism, a theory based on the principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice, that emerged in the United States in 1979 as a proposal for mediation of moral conflicts, and which spread to other countries, such as Brazil . Despite its importance, its supposedly universal character ignores diverse sociocultural realities [19].

By placing life and death in perspective in a symbolic, historically and socially variegated society such as the Western one, and more particularly the Brazilian one, there may be displacements between what is morally acceptable and what is not. This is reflected directly in the socially constructed conceptions of legality and illegality, and the consequent (dis) authorization in the formulation of public policies,

specifically in the cases addressed by bioethics. Different moralities underpin different meanings of death and life, and therefore form diverse state actions. This approach makes it possible to understand why, on the one hand, euthanasia and abortion are allowed in countries such as the Netherlands and Belgium and, on the other hand, are criminalized in Brazil.

Still in the field of health, this discussion also provokes the understanding of the health-disease process beyond biological factors - which attest that diseases are caused by etiological agents, such as viruses and bacteria - by encompassing social and cultural dimensions. These are some of the approaches that this study has tried to take.

In the specific case of Brazil, the proposed reflection makes it possible to envisage the existence of multiple values in a diversified society, composed of populations such as the Amerindian, Quilombola, etcetera, with ethnic-racial inequalities, besides those related, for example, to gender and class. These populations should also participate in decisions concerning them, such as those pertaining to life and death.

In this scenario, anthropology becomes a counterpoint to the principlist theory for presenting ethnographies of different moralities, which, as aforementioned, extrapolate the four principles. In fact, to resort to these principles, it would be necessary, first, to find social reparation mechanisms for them to be guaranteed, which does not occur in inequality contexts such as the Brazilian one [19].

The demands and rights of minorities in Brazil should therefore be part of the discussions on bioethics in a broader sense; after all, this discipline must pay attention to the diversity of values that make up the country. Resolving ethical conflicts requires the consideration of non-hegemonic moralities, and a social bioethics must be able to investigate the social-historical basis of these problems based on concrete realities, not on allegedly universal abstract principles [20].

To be born and to die, to interrupt and prolong life, to maintain it artificially, to transplant organs, these are questions permeated by non univocal definitions of life and death, as discussed in this paper. A critical perspective on principlism that proposes, for example, addressing human rights, including the right to health, must take into account the historical, social, economic and cultural specificities of individuals, communities and populations that are the target of ethical-political decisions. And this is the perspective that this work intended to invoke.

Specifically on the tenuous frontier between life and death, Claude Lévi-Strauss argues that, *in fact,*

everything happens as if culture and society arise among living beings as two complementary responses to the problem of death: society to prevent the animal from knowing that it is mortal, culture as a reaction of man to the awareness that he is mortal[21].

According to Zygmunt Bauman, *it is because we know we will die that we are so busy producing life. It is because we are aware of mortality that we preserve the past and create the future. Mortality is ours without asking - but immortality is something we must build ourselves. Immortality is not the mere absence of death; it is challenging and denying death. (...) There would be no immortality without mortality. Without mortality, there would be no history, there would be no culture - there would be no humanity*[22]. Finally, Edgar Morin[12] asserts that society and culture exist not only in spite of and against death, but also through death, with death, and in death.

Thus, reflecting on the construction of the conceptions of death in Western society allows us to rethink life and face death not only as a termination, but as the most appropriate and unsurpassable outcome of human existence. The notes presented here give rise to a reappropriation of the meaning(s) of dying and living. Seeing death as a constituent of life means, therefore, to cope with the impossibility of nothingness, an inexorable end, as an infinite possibility, in its various interpretations and its different meanings.

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