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## From experience to gift.<sup>1</sup> Reflections on life as disclosed to consciousness. Part 2

In the first part of this reflection on the self-disclosure of life to consciousness I sketched an itinerary from the *data* of life towards the full philosophical and existential acknowledgment of life's gift-character. The mystery of life is difficult to access for the original fragmentation of its givenness. I argued that life gives itself for consciousness simultaneously in a threefold way: a) as the horizon of understanding the phenomena, i.e. life as *life-word*, b) as the inner life of the soul and c) as the event the meaning of which is transcendent to both, the life-world and the inner life of the soul. Despite this fragmentation, the self-disclosure of life refers to an original unity of the full life as such,

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<sup>1</sup> I own many thanks for correcting this essay and making many suggestions to its improvement to Dr. Aaron Riches, Dr. John Corrigan and Dr. William Hackett.

that becomes visible in and through the interrelation of these three dimensions.

Our access to the meaning of life is pre-formed by these three dimensions in the sense that whatever meaning of life we encounter it becomes tangible in reference to these constitutive poles. At the same time the unity of life as such becomes visible through the specific mode of *how* life reveals itself to consciousness. Life discloses itself to consciousness in and through ‘Er-lebnis,’ i.e. ‘vital-experience’ that occurs when the “same” and the “different” (to apply here the Platonic key categories) encounter each other in the ‘phenomenological field’ of consciousness. What I call here vital-experience is not the same as ‘experience of vitality or of life’ for this latter means experiencing an intentional object that would correspond to the notion of life. Vital-experiences are rather those original encounters that inspire life to the consciousness while also presenting the world as life-world full of events as manifestations of the meaning of life.

My claim is simply that there is something prior to all concrete conscious reflection on life and thus prior to whatever notion of life. Life in its original conscious form is derived from the fact that life always already gives itself to consciousness in a self-disclosing manner by the very fact that experiences (in the sense of ‘Er-lebnis’) are made possible at all. In short: we are already affected by life before thematically and reflexively experiencing it. This original ‘vital-experience’ is this event-encounter of the soul by which both the life-world and the inner life of the soul get radically transcended for it is prior and more original to all these dimensions of perception and interpretation.

And yet, when we want to know what life is in its original and immediate form, we have to go the “long way,” i.e. we have to analyze *how* life’s original self-disclosure takes place when mediated through thematic and reflected experiences of life. In this second part of our meditation I would like to argue that this original vital experience (Erlebnis) in which life is disclosed in a silent way is transformed by consciousness to reflected conscious experiences. This transformation that allows for a new access to life at the same time necessarily goes along with a certain reduction. It is this reduction that has to be traced back in order to discover the full

meaning of life, i.e. the *donum* (the self-giving character of life) behind the *data* or *simple givenness* of life.

I turn therefore to those typical forms of experiences in which life thematically reveals itself. As a last step I argue that in any vital experience what offers itself to the personal encounter is the full Life as such. Further I show how the gift of life is to be discovered in all three dimensions through which life discloses itself to human consciousness.

### 1. The reduction of 'Erlebnis' to experience

Let us consider here how the fact informs the meaning of life that it is given in and through 'Erlebnis'! 'Erlebnis' has always the character of a window to look through and what we naturally perceive is certainly not the window but the landscape with its lavish richness in details and relations.

All claims that I would like to make here, refer only to the 'meaning of life' as it is given within the act of 'vital experience,' not as it is in itself, i.e. in its sublime nature of divine life. The awareness of this ontological difference (not separation!) is of crucial importance here for somehow any 'Erlebnis' makes present (re-presents) the whole meaning of life. What one undergoes through having an 'Erlebnis' is life in its plenitude as it gives itself for participation. Thus the meaning of an 'Erlebnis' cannot be reduced or restricted to the concrete phenomena which thematically appears and confines the 'Erlebnis,' without this essential reference being overlooked.

The meaning of life that is transmitted by the 'Erlebnis' is therefore not clearly and fully defined by the concrete and specific topic. The content of the 'Erlebnis' is complex for it always contains infinitely many relations; already this inexhaustible richness requires reflection. What the 'Erlebnis' transmits as an event embedded in temporality becomes thereby related to millions of events on a temporal scale from the beginning till the end of times. How could somebody ever completely explain or fully describe all these relations that proliferate as time passes whereby the very horizon of interpretation widens.

The question is how this original overwhelming abundance of reality and meaning given by the 'Erlebnis' becomes reduced by determining its specific content and thereby transforming it to an *experience of something*? How does the intentional object of the experience get a determined shape?

Let us start out with the following observation: What is revealed through 'Erlebnis' is certainly not just a neutral content for it always has the character of an appeal. (1) Whatever 'Erlebnis' one might have it becomes accessible through a spontaneous attitudinal response that is informed by the previous desire (outlook) with which one encountered reality. (2) After some reflection this primary attitude gives rise to an affirmation or rejection, i.e. to an act of taking a standpoint (*Stellungnahme*) towards the perceived reality. (3) At best the appeal can be understood in terms of vocation (call and mission) inasmuch the content, i.e. the core-meaning of the 'Erlebnis' is appropriated. In other words, any 'Erlebnis' reveals some transcendent value and truth that requires a proper answer. Once it is realized how an 'Erlebnis' puts into question a dormant image of our identity, the subject is confronted with the existential necessity to illuminate the nature of the 'Erlebnis.' This existential concern of clarifying our relation to a reality that is 'appealing' to us in some, yet unclarified way, prompts us to proceed from the 'Erlebnis' as the original affectedness to experience as the reflected stance in which some meaning is elaborated to be then appropriated. By *experience* thus I mean the most natural derivate of an 'Erlebnis;' not only that its content has been identified but its subjective and objective value has been discerned.

It is obvious therefore that 'Erlebnis' is a more encompassing term than *experience*. While any experience (*Erfahrung*) in the sense of reflected thematic meaning-unity is a derivate of 'Erlebnis,' both experience (*Erfahrung*) and vital-experience (*Erlebnis*) offers a however distinct but legitimate access to the essence of life. The transformation of an 'Erlebnis' into an experience is a complex process. Some 'Erlebnis' never reaches the conscious reception of getting transformed into to

experience (Erfahrung); its meaning remains dormant in consciousness until it is recalled and remembered. I limit myself here to one basic claim: the transformation-process implies at least three successive judgments.

1. The first type judgment concerns the determination of the topic that is extracted from the complex structure of 'Erlebnis.' A process of selection and division of what is relevant and what is not, reaches its culmination in the identification of the thematic unity of the given 'Erlebnis.' The subsequent conscious operations concentrate on this content that is circumscribed by the first judgment.

2. The second type of judgment is different inasmuch as it refers to the inherent ontological, moral, aesthetical, etc. value of the previously identified specific content. This judgment ascribes a place of the original 'Erlebnis' within the context of the lived life, i.e. the complex context of former experiences and desires. The new content is analyzed in the light of the truth about life one has already assumed. Both, connections and disconnections, similarities and the outstanding feature of the 'Erlebnis' are identified.

3. Within the process of the appropriation of any 'Erlebnis' and of its conversion to an experience the third type of judgment could be described as affirmation or rejection. This involves taking a standpoint towards an experience. The conscious revision of a spontaneous attitude requires reconsidering the identity of the self involved in the 'Erlebnis.' This act therefore does not exclusively depend on the outcome of the former judgment: we do not only accept the content of the 'Erlebnis' if it is pleasant for us. There are certainly bad experiences fully admitted as well. By accepting part of an 'Erlebnis' as experience, on the other hand, the self is bound to consider any future experience on the horizon that is co-defined by it.

It is important to notice that despite of the inevitable reduction in the process described above one does not erase that part of the meaning represented through the 'Erlebnis' which is not reaffirmed as belonging to the experience. Although in the conscious state, the presence of the elements of experience is different, they still remain part of conscious

life and thus can both be recalled and remembered any time.<sup>2</sup> All the renounced data in the process of determining the content that qualifies itself in composing the *experience*, becomes a secret treasury for reinterpreting life whenever we face adversity that calls us beyond the horizon formed by past *experiences*.

Curiously enough being faithful to the unclassified and not yet fully conceptualized content of the 'Erlebnis' that is already given to consciousness (the part of our experiences that we still do not understand) allows for the openness necessary to encounter real life beyond comprehension in the 'Erlebnis' that presents to us.

## 2. Life as thematically given in experiences

Up to this point on our itinerary to the full acknowledgment of how life is disclosed in conscious experiences as gift we focused on formal criteria that supposed to help us discovering the hidden reference to life in any 'Erlebnis.' In what follows we devote our attention to those specific vital-experiences in which life is thematically given for these might have a more direct allusion to Life in the full sense.

We have seen above that any 'Erlebnis,' no matter how we determine its specific content, gives a certain testimony of life. Undoubtedly, in order that the 'Erlebnis' becomes an experience (*Erfahrung*) some reductions are needed. The transformation takes places through a series of judgments as analyzed above. By determining the content of the experience through reflection on the 'Erlebnis' one not only excludes many possible meaningful aspects of reality but also runs the risk of bracketing

<sup>2</sup> I make here a distinction between spontaneously recalling something and volitionally remembering a determined content. At the same time it is to be noted that there is a certain part of any 'Erlebnis' that remains inaccessible to memory for in any 'vital experience' there is an unconstituted and original core-meaning that is of inexhaustible richness. At the bottom of any recalled experience there is certainly something that remains mysterious. This mystery does not concern so much aspects of the content as it is related to the process of life giving itself through the 'Erlebnis' – as I tried to describe it above. It seems that precisely these aspects are recognized by Jean-Louis Chrétien as "l'inoubliable" and "l'inespéré". See J.-L. Chrétien, *The unforgettable and the un hoped for*, transl. by J. Bloechl, Fordham University Press, 2002.

the deeper implications of 'Erlebnis' described above. Any 'Erlebnis' is capable of transmitting a new reality (life-world) that is pervaded by the same *logos* it expresses and is capable of engendering new life in the soul by manifesting a radically new self (ego of the eschatological future) who can embrace life in a fuller sense. Yet precisely because of the appearance of the new life-world and the new self full of interesting and concrete content there is a temptation to prescind from the relations of the given content to Life as such, i.e. to the *original* 'process' (*donum*) by which the content is given.

Meanwhile, any 'Erlebnis,' always transmits the meaning of Life as such however implicitly it may do that, the new and thematically given content of the experience usually occupies the centre of our interest. Moreover, the more precise the elaboration of the 'given,' supposed to form the content of an *experience*, the greater is the danger of certain 'impoverishment' inasmuch, as the awareness of the mere *datum* overshadows the *donum*.

In the most extreme case, the original givenness gets almost completely dissolved in the correlations within the complex meaning-unit of the event. There are however, three important exceptions in the case where focusing on the content (*datum*) as opposed to that on the givenness (*donum*) allows for and even might stimulate a deeper understanding of life as such. In the following I will analyze some experiences in which life itself is thematically present, such as birth, death and encounter.

### 2.1. Data of (new) life

The awareness of a new life as an experience recovers something of this inevitable loss precisely by highlighting some essential aspects of life. One of these features that I would like to focus on is the *gratuitous character of life*. The exact moment, the way, and the fact that a new life appears is not only unpredictable (despite all possible control) but it also lies essentially beyond human power and knowledge. Human activity, however extended, always remains on the level of influence, promotion and participation; for it cannot create new life *in stricto sensu*. Although

attempts of creating new life can clearly contradict the *logos* of nature, they still remain mere imitations; there is no human creation *ex nihilo*; all creative activity always necessarily relies on natural laws – even in case of disrespecting them.

In any birth there is always something gratuitous and truly miraculous that cannot possibly be wiped away, not even by the most precise and exhaustive explanation science can possibly offer. The most fundamental questions remain unanswered; they concern a mystery. And not only because of the fact that a new life cannot be fully reduced and completely ascribed to causal processes of the natural world despite all attempts of objectifying rationality. But also because in the end even if the quest for the causal link would be satisfactorily achieved it would only lead us to the threshold of an even more profound question: why is there something rather than nothing?<sup>3</sup>

The meaningful residuum of life that escapes the presumed neutral scientific approach by being unsusceptible to any reduction to the natural order as separated from any supernatural reality we can expose as follows. Beyond the mere *data* of life there is an undeniable *cosmological miracle* within the order of the universe. Namely, on one of the infinitely many known planets there is life. Our search for life in the cosmos (among other things like the loneliness of humanity) demonstrates that it is far from being obvious that there supposed to be living beings as opposed to lifeless entities. After the wonder and amazement that “there is something rather than nothing” the second relevant ontological data to grasp here consists in that some of what is there (il ya, es gibt) is not lifeless. This concept of life based on ‘the metaphysical datum’ appears in the context of the self-recognition of the human person faced with a lifeless environment. The acknowledgment of personhood as manifestation of

<sup>3</sup> This question that famously stems from Leibniz (G. W. Leibniz, *The principles of nature and of grace, based on reason*, [in:] G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophical papers and letters*, ed. by L. E. Loemker, Springer Netherlands, 1989, p. 636–642) when he formulated his argument of the sufficient reason for the existence of God has not only a cosmological relevance that he described but also an existential one, pointed out later by Martin Heidegger, in: M. Heidegger, *What is metaphysics?*, [in:] M. Heidegger, *Basic writings*, ed. by D. Farrell Krell, London 1993, p. 89–110.



the special dignity of the human person is impossible without the previous recognition of life as an immensely valuable gift. Confusing or reducing in any way life to the lifeless, i.e. not acknowledging the miraculous givenness of life, would therefore be tantamount to denying the real nature of human existence.

Beyond the cosmological miracle there is a further data that especially characterizes the birth of a human person. A new birth means a new consciousness of the cosmos, a point of view from which the world appears in an irreducible and unpredictable new way. By contemplating a new born baby one also realizes that we ourselves form part of this new consciousness. The birth is not an additional fact of the ontological inventory but it is both, an infinite enrichment of the cosmos (a renewed creation of the world) and the new perspective to look at our own existence. Thus the new birth of a human person entails in, however hidden a way, the possibility of our own new birth as well, i.e. the radical reconsideration of our own identity.

Reflecting on the fact that the new life gives rise to infinitely many new relations within the ontological order makes it perhaps even more evident that the new life cannot be fully explained by natural causation for there is an unbridgeable disproportion between the concrete causal link and the effect of a new birth. The new birth as a birth of the whole universe (as explained above) cannot be due to any physical, chemical or biological process. The fact that the new birth is not reducible to natural causality and thereby to any past event helps us to see that its meaning presupposes a radical openness towards future.

This brings us to another level of interpretation of the notion of new life: moral and spiritual conversion. *Conversion* in this sense means nothing else than a new life within the life, a new beginning that implies a renewed consideration of what life is. Conversion as a rebirth of the soul (new life) is therefore an *answer to the datum*, to what is already given. It leads to a disposition, i.e. to radical openness towards future. A new birth in this sense is, however, only possible on the basis of conceiving life as a gift, as something the meaning of which we rather discover than arbitrarily ascribe.

## 2.2. Death

Death is not simple the absence of life but is a very illuminating phenomenon concerning life. We usually think of death as opposed to life for they exclude each other but the implication of their meaning is more complex. Death reveals more than one important characteristic of life.

There are basically two ways of how death can shed light on life according to the distinction between a) death in the more general sense that implies the temporality of our being in the world and b) death in a more specific sense as the concrete event within our life or the life of others. As before, I am going to focus here also exclusively on the relationship between *datum* and *donum*, arguing that in the light of death life appears as a proper *donatum*.

### a. Temporal existence

One can understand temporality in two distinct ways: *temporality as such* and the *temporal limitation* of one's existence.

Let us therefore consider first the experience of temporality as such! Not just certain experiences like the changes of seasons or the aging of the human person give witness of passing time but *any* experience *per definitionem* presupposes temporality. We realize how time is passing by, and every single moment is replaced soon by another one and turns to nothingness. Is than temporality not an infinite sequence of finite moments as discreet unities that refer to states of the world? Reality would be just a momentary connection of different states of affaires that are just about to vanish in order to be replaced by another state of the world. The world and every single entity in it would then continuously fall and nothing sustain it from disappearing into nothingness.<sup>4</sup> This Sartrean vision of the world denies any teleology, especially concerning the human person who thus decides about its own destiny.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. J.-P. Sartre, *Bariona ou le Fils du tonnerre*, [in:] J.-P. Sartre, *Théâtre complet*, éd. M. Contant et al., Paris 2005.

Bringing the idea of temporality as a mere *datum* to its most extreme conclusions in this way has very questionable results, on the metaphysical level. If the existence of every substance is merely temporal what is then the reason for another state of the world? There must be at least something that is beyond temporality to explain the causal relations between one state and the subsequent one. There is therefore, hardly any *datum* even thinkable without a *donum*, without sufficient reason and source of its existence beyond the moment.

In strict terms the momentary existence is not even thinkable for in order to affirm the existence of something one needs two different states for it is impossible to make any predication without a subject about which we predict something but one can only reasonably talk about identity if there are two distinct moments in which the given X is in some sense the same.

It seems therefore that temporality implies both the changing of the *datum* and the idea that this change is only possible because there is a *donum* a sustaining reason, an existence beyond time in which the moment participates. In this sense the changing, the diminishing and the final vanishing of the *datum* is necessary in order that the *donum* comes to the sight. If there is only one single tone that is never changing and disappearing, one would never know about the miracle that the birth of a tone from nothingness implies. The disappearance of the givenness is necessary so that the act of giving by which it exists becomes visible.

### Temporality of the personal life

Death as the sign that indicates our temporal existence modifies the reason of life as such for it shows what of the *datum* concerning life is of a temporal nature. Aging and the different époques of life with their characteristic preoccupations and concerns make it difficult to consider life as such for one might easily be distracted by the facts of this or that period of life. Getting immersed and absorbed by the presence, by the immediate givenness of what we have in front of our eyes is a serious temptation for it impedes to ever assume the responsibility for life as such. Without this gesture what remains is a fragmented life lived by

a fragmented subject without any identity: the ‘Mann ohne Eigenschaften’ of Musil<sup>5</sup> or the ‘the hollow men’ of Josef Conrad.<sup>6</sup>

The threatening shadow of death extended on all our temporal existence calls us to *recollection*. Death, in the sense of temporary limited existence, is an appeal to consider life as something more than just a (never ending) sequence of moments in which the *datum*, the mere givenness of things to which we actually relate absorbs our being.

The consciousness of the fact that life is limited allows for acknowledging phenomena as contingent occurrences. The temporal limitation of life is not a purely negative phenomenon for two reasons: first it makes every single act unrepeatable and completely unique endowed with a unique sense that is only given at that particular context that exists at the particular moment.<sup>7</sup> Secondly the contingency revealed by the temporal limitation of life also makes possible to consider life as artwork<sup>8</sup>, something that only makes sense as a unity of the unrepeatable meaningful acts. The unity of a temporal life is not a natural givenness it appears rather as a task to achieve and a challenge to be met. It is precisely the life heading towards an end that calls for a new unity that is able to transcend the meaning of the parts and fragments towards eternity.

In this sense death, when seriously faced, illuminates another dimension of meaning of the singular act that arises beyond the immediate intention: the meaning of *life as such*. There is an expressive capacity of life that stems specifically from its unity. And even though certain unity of life is only given when one’s life is over and completed, certain acts and attitudes are capable to resume one’s life. These acts and attitudes

<sup>5</sup> R. Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, Bd. 1: *Erstes und zweites Buch*, Hrsg. A. Frisé, Neu durchges. und verb. Ausg. Rowohlt, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1978.

<sup>6</sup> J. Conrad, *Heart of darkness & other stories*, Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1998.

<sup>7</sup> The unique meaning of every single act does not mean that it also participates in and alludes to something that is beyond time. On the contrary, because our human acts are always already responses to something that is beyond the momentary existence these answers have a unique meaning in a particular context. This meaning consists in the re-presentation of that to which it is an answer.

<sup>8</sup> See on this especially *Letter of His Holiness John Paul II to artists*, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_let\\_23041999\\_artists.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists.html) (10.10.2010).

are distinct by their incomparable veracity: they are able to allude to the meaning that is always transcendent that this particular life as a whole (thus the unity) is called to realize and to manifest.<sup>9</sup>

Certainly, this unity and veracity of life requires another outlook on the immediate preoccupations as well as a revision of the past and future intentions. Death renders apparently every past and future moment equally meaningless. Can something resist its annihilation? The answer to this question certainly changes the view of the revised conscious data. What appeared before as a mere *datum*, as something naturally given looks like now as givenness, i.e. as something that is not simply there but has been given for reasons still to be clarified. What comes to the fore behind the static data (the factual life) reveals itself as a dynamic reality: life as coming to existence and being given.

The awareness of life as dynamically giving itself introduces a new and ‘personal’ sense of contingency. Facing death the contingency of life is not just a metaphysical data according to which there is no necessity to live forever as much as it is an existential experience: the givenness of life escapes any volitional control. Life that simply appears without us doing anything could also disappear against our will and desire.

It is thus not just some aspect of life but the very givenness of life that is beyond control. Any yet it is given to us as it has been given before. The mere data of life that – when dealt with in the *natural attitude* – often appears as something impersonal to be mastered, but now, in the light of death suddenly becomes radically personal<sup>10</sup> and uncontrollable. The awareness of these two aspects allows for the conscious shift from life considered as givenness to *life as gift* for any gift is essentially beyond control of the recipient and is meant to be received personally.

<sup>9</sup> I especially think here on act of self-sacrifice but any act of true self-gift would be a fitting example as well.

<sup>10</sup> It is enough to recall here the famous passage of Tolstoi’s *The death of Ivan Ilyich*: “The example of a syllogism that he had studied in Kiesewetter’s logic: Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal, had throughout his whole life seemed to him right only in relation to Caius, but not to him at all” (L. Tolstoy, *The death of Ivan Ilyich and Master and man*, transl. by A. Pasternak Slater, Modern Library Paperback 2004).

However important it is to consider life as gift is a transitional step on the long road towards understanding not just life as a gift at certain moments but also the 'gift of life'. This latter presupposes namely some knowledge on what life as such is good for, i.e. a deeper meaning that is enfolded in life but that goes beyond life. The horizon of this question is established by the highest act of love, i.e. giving one's life for others. For sacrificing one's life cannot be understood in other terms than returning the gift by giving oneself away (*donatio suiipsius*). This act however presupposes understanding life as such as a precious gift unless one would not be able to see the value of other's existence.

However a great step it is to intuit and to contemplate the 'gift of life' by identifying its gift character as an essential feature it remains only a preparatory step towards exploring the infinite dimensions of the Giver of this gift. There is no gift without life being given previously and thus the real author of any gift is the Giver of life. It means that any gift is given by participation in the gift of life. This participation allows for a personal knowledge of the Source of life. By deepening this relationship one gains an *original* view on what is real that focuses on the precise moment of donation and thus recognizes everything as gift.

Thus the phenomenon of one's own *death* that set into motion such a reflection gradually progressing towards a mystery of *life* culminates in the following question: who is the giver of life and how is he? How is life when lived at the source and heart of all life with full vivacity? – The real mystery of one's own death when taken to the heart, however dark it might appear, illuminates life inasmuch as it introduces us in the relationship between the Giver of life (Donator) and the recipient of the gift.

#### b. Death of the other

The death of the other person (especially in the case of a loved one transmits the meaning of life beyond the general notion of temporality. This event of an unchangeable character illuminates the reality of the other person beyond all the transformations it went through along our relationship. By the definite physical disappearance of the beloved person

it becomes evident that the life of the other is far more than just a *datum*, a mere presence in front of the eyes. With the disappearance of the datum as a momentary presence it becomes obvious that the meaning of the communion with the other person lies beyond the limits of actual presence. The meaning of this community, the experiences that we had together, acts that contributed to its existence are not questioned by the death of the other, but become even more prevalent. The absence of the other does not annihilate the meaning of the community between us. Acts and attitudes like sadness, missing the other person, the mourning make sense only due to the persistence of the community, i.e. of a donation beyond the *datum*, beyond the physical presence of the other.

Inasmuch as the *datum* (vivid presence) is withdrawn from the centre of consciousness by the fact of the death, the *donum*, the act of giving that explains the givenness of the other's presence in my life, becomes more evident. It is an occasion to discover the gratuity of the past of the other person and to realize that with the vanishing of the *datum* there is something that still remains: a gift that has not been taken away. The person that passed away is still 'alive' for, the relationship to her/him is not broken or annihilated. There is a meaning of his life that is still accessible to me, sometimes (in the case of giving one's life for others for example) in an even more intense way than before. This spontaneous radiation of the meaning of life of the deceased person illuminates life beyond the present givenness as a continuous gift.

### c. My own death

My own death can be present for me in two radically distinct ways. I can consider my death in the context of *losing my life* and in the context of *giving my life*.<sup>11</sup> As far as a death that is to be avoided, the event by which my life comes to an end is something beyond my control. It simply happens. It is obvious that death is very distinct one compared with all other possibilities of life. But what appears to be from an existential point

<sup>11</sup> "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

of view an impossibility of being is still a possibility of life. If somebody looks at life only from the perspective of a possibility of acting, he clearly has to consider the preservation of life as the highest value.<sup>12</sup> There is a legitimate reason for considering life as the highest value for it is presupposed for any reasonable act.

But what is presupposed for all acts is not necessarily the fin of those. Life is precisely that what gives the opportunity to choose the highest value. Whatever that value might be, it has to manifest itself as something that goes along with or offers the 'full life', life at its zenith. Whatever act expresses thus the meaning of life in the best way, has to refer to life in its totality and full essence.

Now, one of the essential features of life is that one can lose it: life is contingent and cannot sustain itself. A life that is depending on something else outside of itself receives its nature outside of itself: it is a givenness. 'Being given' is thus an essential characteristic of life. Only an act that means at the same time 'giving,' 'offering,' 'delivery' and 'surrender' can refer to the totality of life. This act is self-sacrifice.

Self-sacrifice is in no way a denial of life's intrinsic value; it is rather the greatest and most objective acknowledgment of it for the life of the other person is perceived as something worthy of the renouncing of one's concrete possibilities. All these possibilities namely, are seen as valuable inasmuch as they are related to *life as such* and not merely as to some aspects of life. It is remarkable that the reference to *life as such* is established precisely here through the act of gift for this is the only way to fully respond to the fact that our own life is a gift.

It seems that we can observe here the following dialectic between life as *datum* and life and *donum*. Whenever one insists on the *datum*, the true

<sup>12</sup> Against the testimony of Matthew 16:25: "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it."; Mark 8:35: "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it."; Luke 9:24: "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it."; Luke 17:33: "Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it."; John 12:25: "The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."



meaning of life is vanishing. On the other hand putting into the fore the *donum* by recalling its nature of gift sheds light on the *datum* in its fullness.

Death is an explicit denial of life as *datum*, thus within this dialectic there is a possibility that it highlights the *donum*: life as gift.

### 2.3. The encounter

The third concrete phenomenon that allows for a reflective penetration into the essence of life is the encounter. Formally speaking the phenomenon of birth and death only reveal life from the point of view of potentiality. The new life is full of potentiality and by death all potentialities are withdrawn; birth is life not yet lived meanwhile, death is not-life, at least, in the full sense. Encounter, however, transmits life in its plenitude. Through the perception of the other person life is not transmitted as fully actual for the perceived data reveals a life that is partially potential and partially actual. Thus, plenitude does not refer here so much to the full actualization of life but rather to the *way of transmission*.

Since the 'plenitude of life' is always that of a concrete person, it cannot stem from my own self that is limited. The plenitude is received from outside of ourselves and is thus inseparable from the *gift of (another) self*. The *datum* of life appears in its full meaning when considered from the perspective of love, i.e. from the act of giving. The *donum* as it is expressed in the act of giving enlightens the *datum*, the life that is present in front of my eyes.

One can talk about an encounter only if the interaction between the two persons includes more than just the transmission of the relevant *datum* concerning their identity. What actually qualifies the encounter as such is the transformation of the *datum*, the actual existence of the person as a mere data by the revelation of the *donum*, his existence as a gift. In other words, in the encounter there is a shift of the attention from the mere 'whatness' of the person to the 'whoness' that is freely donating itself and that is a gift concerning its very existence.

To be more precise by *donum* I mean here two things: the origin of the *datum* and the act of giving it. Within the encounter there should be an

allusion to the gift as such, the person received, in order to be what he is, i.e. to represent the *datum* he does. His personality, his being as givenness is revealed through the event of encounter for the other person as a gift, as a specific meaning, whose origin is beyond the actual person. Conceiving the other person as a gift implies a reference to a giver. It is natural that the event of encounter urges us to the act of thanksgiving. Yet it would not be quite proper to direct this natural gratitude for the existence of the other to him/her personally for, nobody became what he/she is as a result of his/her own achievements. Any honest gratitude is directed beyond the concrete person who appears as a gift to the ultimate source of all that there is: the Giver himself.

The plenitude of life manifested in the person one encounters

Now let us have a closer look at how the encounter with the other person can transmit the 'plenitude of life'! As argued before every 'Erlebnis' implies a certain revelation of life (in three different aspects). What any other 'Erlebnis' in which life is not thematically present left in the background comes to the fore in the case of the encounter. The latter is namely the kind of vital experience that can never be reduced to the *datum* that is highlighted by the experience. The *datum* that appears in relation to the *donum* resists any reduction for the surplus of meaning that it represents. Still we cannot talk about reversing the way of comprehension even though this is announced here. One still proceeds from the *datum* to the *donum*, from the immediate givenness to the mediated transcendent reality, but the reality of the other person is already grasped as something beyond presence.

Let us illustrate this transference of attention from the *datum* to the *donum* concerning the three spheres described in the first part of this meditation.

#### a. Life-world

What I mean by encounter is not just the event composed of specific social acts by which we make acquaintance with the other person. I refer

here to encounter rather as the beginning of friendship. Encounter in this sense entails therefore a fundamental change within the perception of the other. This transformation of the vision concerning the other person is due to the revelation of the other person's true reality. The change occurs because we become aware of who the other person really is, i.e. in relation to God.

In the case of the tacit understanding of life as life-world one can observe the following transformation due to encounter: the life-world both, as a word centered on me and the intersubjective reality undergoes a radical change when it is conceived as the world shared with the *friend*, the subject of the real encounter. Every person has his own world, his own subjective vision of reality that is inasmuch accessible as we are getting to know this person. The concepts formed on the basis of our experience are challenged by the presence of the other person and through the interaction with him/her. Our horizon of meaning on which the phenomena appear is called to be modified and amplified in order to adopt more from the transcendent reality of the other person.

My friend does not only introduce me to the sphere of reality by providing me with knowledge rather he is revealing me a new sphere of life through his own attitude towards these realities in question. He teaches me new ways of conceiving my own life when related to the sphere that was unknown to me before. The new sphere of reality becomes accessible through the attitude my friend has towards it. The relationship to my friend is therefore the organic link between me and reality.

In this sense part of reality becomes meaningful and alive for me as it is more and more conceived from the perspective of friendship, from the perspective of the 'us.' The ego-centered world-view is radically questioned by friendship and with the increasing gift of the self is gradually overtaken by a vision of the world structured around the friend. The tee for example that is on the table I consider as meaningful to me because my friend likes or dislikes it.

To sum it up: the encounter with the friend does not only result in gaining some knowledge concerning the phenomenon that is the other person; it leads to a whole transformation of the reality that is getting

infused by the meaning of life, the other person manifest. Thus one can properly talk about a life-world in reference to friendship for there is no reality truly pervaded by life unless by personal relationship based on self-giving.

#### b. Life of the soul

The beginning of the relationship with the friend does not only amplify the reality in the external sense but also enriches the inner life of the person. The transformation manifests itself in offering a new perspective to look on our own reality. Friendship presupposes a benevolent attitude towards ourselves and the admiration for the virtues we bear thus, the vision the faithful friend has of us is certainly more realistic than our own for, the ego that is troubled by sin often loses the right perspective of the self. Through friendship, i.e. the acceptance of the friendly and loving vision of one's own self however, one can recover and resuscitate the perspective of the self that is centered on hope rather than on deficiencies. The friend that is given to me by the experience of the encounter can really become to our 'real' ego an alter ego in the sense that he offers a stand point (ego) from where the hidden resources of our self could be glimpsed. When these potentialities of the self are realized, effectively a new inner life starts. Again, also in this sense what proves to be the source of life is the overcoming of *datum* by the *donum*. The gratuity of love of the other person gives us credit (does not stick to the *datum*) which restores the real image of our self. At the same time, precisely this gratuitous gift requires the due response that can only be given by growing, i.e. by abandoning ourselves and letting our will be directed by the sincere wish to be reborn and to love.

#### c. Erlebnis as event

There is a third meaning of how the plenitude of life becomes transmitted by the encounter with the friend. The very idea of 'Erlebnis' also undergoes a fundamental change. What has been part of a temporal sequence

becomes the beginning of a *new life*. The encounter somehow entails all past experiences that build the horizon on which the reality of the other person appears; and at the same time every encounter implies a promise of a new life, of a new community in which a fuller sense of life is possible.

### 3. From the data of life to life as *donum*

The mystery of life is too close to our eyes to be seen clearly. The immense amount of data concerning life and living beings are so overwhelming that it requires a special philosophical attitude to contemplate life as such. It needs a methodology, i.e. a certain itinerary to regain the wonder and amazement for the very fact that life is not only given, but continuously discloses itself to our consciousness in various forms. The self-revelation of life goes by in all silence yet it happens continuously in any conscious experience before it is made to an object of reflection. It is a special task of philosophy to discover and to describe the fundamental structure of this pre-reflective data as well as to analyze its content.

After having offered in the first part of this meditation an introductory analysis of the three dimension life discloses oneself, in the present paper I investigated the transition from this tacit self-revelation of life to reflective experiences of life. As a second step I put under the loophole what I think are the three most relevant experiences concerning life and described their reference to the original fullness of life.

And while my itinerary can be regarded as philosophical for its ascending character, it is to be admitted that such ascension would not be possible without a previous descent: the revelation of the origin of full life, that is, a divine gift in which we can participate.

Life when disclosing its meaning to our consciousness both in a tacit and in a thematic way resembles a descent that contains an invitation to elevate ourselves to its ultimate origin.

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