Review of Contemporary Philosophy
ISSN: 1841-5261, e-ISSN: 2471-089X
Vol 24 (1), 2025
Pp 256 - 263

The Question of Death in the Philosophy of Luc Ferry

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Abstract: This study aims to address one of the most complex philosophical issues discussed in philosophy in general, and in the philosophy of Luc Ferry in particular. The latter introduced a new philosophical conception — metaphysical in its essence, spiritual and humanistic in its dimensions — founded on the principle of love as a metaphysical principle that transcends the individual and the personal toward the universal and global. In doing so, it can serve as the optimal solution to the problem of death.

Keywords: death, life, love, humanism, philosophy of Luc Ferry.

Received: 12 March 2025 **Revised: 10 April 2025** **Published: 11 May 2025**

Introduction:

The question of death represents one of the most problematic subjects raised by humankind both in ancient and modern times. Its dimensions are diverse, and its branches and articulations are numerous. Metaphysics embodies its most complex depth, religion its vital core, while philosophy serves as its most fertile and rich domain. Moreover, the question of death refers us to a subject laden with paradoxes and contradictions, making its treatment extremely difficult and complex.

If we contemplate it at first glance, we encounter within it the paradox of the universal and the personal at the same time. Death is universal and absolute, encompassing all of humanity without exception. Yet despite its universality, it remains of a personal nature — individual in itself. Each of us will die, and necessarily, each will die alone. No one can substitute for another. It is an experience that is inherently subjective and personal, which every human will inevitably go through — sooner or later.

The contradictory nature of death also appears in the final image through which it manifests: it represents the limit or the end, which inevitably refers us to the very concept of what constitutes a limit or an end. This has led most philosophical studies to approach it from a posthumous perspective — that is, from the angle of what comes after death. As a result, those studies have generally oriented themselves toward addressing the question of immortality.

The most striking paradox of death is evident in its nebulous image, which causes it to oscillate between certainty and uncertainty. We are certainly heading toward death, yet we have absolutely no knowledge of when it will occur — and it remains unknown to humanity. Hence, we are inevitably faced with a subject of profound awe and dread. The human being finds within themselves a fear and apprehension that compels them to shy away from addressing the subject of death — even though, more often than not, they find neither security nor peace in life.

It is in this context that the philosophical conception presented by Luc Ferry emerges, as he seeks to unveil one of the most intricate philosophical problems raised in contemporary philosophy — namely, the problem of death. Through this, Ferry attempts to present a comprehensive philosophical vision that moves from the narrowness of individual specificity toward the horizon of universality and globality. This can be discerned through his treatment of the question of death, which in its content encompasses the essence of contemporary philosophical discourse.

This is what we will address through the following:

Problematic: What is the essence of death? What is the nature of the philosophical conception that Ferry offers regarding death? And can the human being challenge death? In other words, to what extent can death be transcended?

1. Definition of Death

1.1 – Linguistic Definition:

The word death is derived from the verb "to die". A person who has died is described as "dead", meaning that life has left him and the soul has departed from his body. To say that someone "died a natural death" means they passed away peacefully, typically in their bed, without external causes.

The verb also extends metaphorically:

- It is said that the wind "died" when it calms and subsides.
- The fire "died" means it was extinguished.
- His feelings "died" toward someone implies a loss or transformation of emotional connection.

The noun "death" is a singular form that originates from the root verb "to die", as does the adjective "dead". The plural of "dead" is "the dead", referring to those who have passed away. In a linguistic sense, "dead" functions as a verbal adjective indicating a permanent state resulting from the act of dying.(Omar, 2008, p. 2136).

1.2 – Technical Definition:

There are various technical and philosophical conceptions of death. In some interpretations, it is seen as a condition opposite to reason and faith, or as something that undermines nature and is unsuitable to it — such as fear, sorrow, or difficult circumstances like poverty and humiliation.

According to Sufi thought, death is understood as a veil that obscures the lights of divine revelations and manifestations, and also as the subjugation of the soul's desires. In this sense, "whoever dies to his desires is revived by divine guidance" (Saliba, 1982, p. 440).

It is said that death is of two kinds:

- Voluntary death
- Natural death

Similarly, life is also classified into two types:

- Voluntary life
- Natural life

By voluntary death, they refer to the deliberate suppression of desires and abstention from indulgence in them. By natural death, they mean the separation of the soul from the body(Saliba, 1982, p. 441).

In contrast, voluntary life refers to what a person actively seeks in worldly life — such as food, drink, and sensual desires. Whereas natural life denotes the eternal survival of the soul in everlasting bliss, attained through true knowledge, which purifies the soul from ignorance.(Saliba, 1982, p. 441).

2 – Death According to Luc Ferry (1951)

Before addressing Luc Ferry's position on the problem of death, it is essential to begin with a reading of the philosophical depth presented by Greekthought as well as Christian and religious thought, since both traditions have explored this question in considerable detail. These two — Greek philosophy and religious doctrine — hold special significance for Ferry, as will become clear in the following discussion.

2.1 – The Greek Conception of the Issue of Death

Ferry believed that the Greeks laid the philosophical and metaphysical groundwork for the question of death in a way that surpassed earlier approaches from other civilizations — especially those of the ancient Eastern traditions. What set the Greeks apart was their capacity to confront and challenge death through a cosmological perspective, particularly as developed in Epicureanism and Stoicism.

However, before delving into these schools, it is important to clarify the views of Socrates and Plato on the matter, given their profound influence on nearly all subsequent philosophers.

A – The Metaphysics of Death According to Socrates (470–399 BCE)

The Socratic conception of death appears inseparable from his understanding of life. Socrates approached death with remarkable peace and serenity, even in the final moments before his execution. To him, death was not a moment of despair but rather a moment of challenge and confrontation, representing one of the highest expressions of human vitality.

According to Socrates, the human being is a finite and transient creature, yet his greatness lies in accepting his human condition, embracing his sense of responsibility, and displaying moral courage in the face of death. As he famously stated:

"Did you not all know that nature condemned me to death from the moment of my birth?" (Choron, 1984, pp. 48–51)

From this perspective, we can see the metaphysical depth of the question of death in Socratic thought. He viewed death as a natural state, one that should not provoke fear or anxiety — in contrast to many earlier philosophers and thinkers. On the contrary, death was to be accepted as an inevitable part of life: a person dies by necessity in the very moment he begins to exist through birth.

B – Plato's Metaphysics of Death

The Platonic conception of death emerged from the teachings of Socrates, his mentor. While the core of the idea remains largely the same, Plato's perspective bears a distinct idealistimprint, particularly in his vision of what lies beyonddeath. According to Plato:

"Death is nothing more than the liberation of the soul from the body — a passage the soul takes to cross into the other life, the life that represents its ultimate goal and destination" (Choron, 1984, p. 53).

Plato believed that the soul is of heavenly origin, and that during life it dwells in the body much like a prisoner. At death, it is freed, allowing it to regain its divine essence (Choron, 1984, p. 53).

Within his Theoryof Ideas, Plato developed a profound idealist analysis of death, centered on the dualityof existence:

- The world of ideas, which is eternal, unchanging, and to which the soul naturally belongs.
- The world of senses, which is material, impermanent, and to which the body belongs.

From this dualism, death represents the naturalreturn of each element to its originalrealm: the soulascends to the higher, celestial world, while the bodyreturns to the material plane. In this light, Plato affirms:

"The true philosopher is one who constantly seeks death and dying — not out of despair, but because he seeks truth. Since the body is an obstacle to the acquisition of knowledge, true understanding becomes possible only when the soul is freed from the shackles of the body — and this is death according to Plato" (Choron, 1984, p. 56).

Thus, death, for Plato, is not a source of fear, sorrow, or anxiety, but rather a gateway to eternaltruth and ideal life. It is a moment of reassurance, peace, and liberation.

C – Greek Cosmology and the Question of Death

The question of death, or more precisely, the fear of death, appears to be the essential driver behind the emergence of philosophy itself. This fear stems from uncertainty about what lies beyond life, and when it penetrates deeply into the human psyche, it can poison life, casting a shadow of darkness over all experiences — the darkness of death itself. In such a state, it becomes difficult to appreciate life's pleasures. However, philosophy, as a discipline of reason and reflection, offers a path toward overcoming this existential anxiety.

As **Epicurus (341–270 BC)** declares:

"Philosophy is the medicine of the soul, and its ultimate goal is to make us understand that we should not fear death."(Ferry, *Learning to Live*, n.d., p. 28)

Ancient Greekthinkers generally believed that philosophy could address the deepest human anxieties, especially those surrounding death. According to Luc Ferry, death was not just one of the many philosophical concerns — it was the origin and gateway of philosophical inquiryitself:

"The Greeks traced all deep philosophical questions back to a single source — the fear of death — which, in essence, has a dual effect on human behavior. It can either lead to collapse and despair, or, conversely, fuel the drive toward resistance and freedom, thereby enabling creativity and resilience."(Ferry, *Learning to Live*, n.d., p. 29)

The cosmologicaldimension of Greek philosophy approaches death through the lens of cosmicharmony. The Greeks did not see the universe as chaotic or random but rather as orderlyandharmonious — what they called the cosmos. As Ferry explains:

"The world is not chaos and disorder, but rather it is completely harmonious, which the Greeks call *cosmos* or cosmic order... The good life, on the basis of the story of the origin of the universe, is represented by harmony with the world order — by becoming one with the rhythm of the universe. The more we feel that we participate in the divinity of the eternal cosmic harmony — the source and end of all true value — the less we fear death."
(Ferry & Claude, *The Most Beautiful Story in the History of Philosophy*, 2015, pp. 23–24)

From this perspective, cosmic eternity reflects the possibility of human eternity, provided that there is harmony between the individual and the cosmos. Ferry asserts that when such cosmic-humanharmony is achieved, it allows us to transcend the humancondition, and thereby overcomethe idea of death:

"Death will never fully conquer man. It may deprive him of some aspects of his individual existence, but it can never erase that dimension of our being which participates in the indestructible splendor and order of the cosmos."(Ferry & Claude, 2015)

In other words, immortality becomes available to those who live in alignmentwiththeuniverse. By participating in this cosmic order, one lives the present moment, which becomes a gateway to eternity and immortality. As Ferry eloquently puts it:

"The good life is represented by the harmony of the self with the harmony of the world and the universe. And because the universe is eternal, our self becomes a part of eternity through this harmony, like a piece of basalt fitting into a grand cosmic mosaic."(Ferry, *Paradoxes of Happiness*, 2018, p. 203)

Thus, fear of death ceases to be a burden, and death itself becomes merely a transition, not a separation — provided that the person lives in the heart of the world, in universal human harmony.

Achieving this ideallife, a life of calm and serenity, depends entirely on understanding one's place in the cosmos. This awareness brings overwhelming peace, dispels anxiety, and transforms death into a transitionalphase rather than a terrifying end:

"When one lives in harmony with the cosmic order, death becomes simply a crossing — the moment where fear and panic are forever overcome."(**Dahmani**, 2022, p. 22)

Yet, this cosmicharmony cannot be fully realized unless one learns to transcend both the past and the future, which are often sources of regret and worry. As Ferry notes:

"The past no longer exists, and the future has not yet come into being, and yet we live our whole lives between memories and projects, between nostalgia and hope... disturbing the only dimension of existence that is real and worth living: the present moment."(Ferry, *Learning to Live*, n.d., pp. 30–31)

Thus, life is a presentmoment that blossoms amidst pain, always referring us back to death — which swings between a past that no longer exists and a future that has not yet arrived. Only the present deserves to be lived, as it opens the door to immortality, provided that one lives in universalharmony.

In this light, the Stoics brought this philosophy to its peak. They held that freedom from the fear of death arises when the wise individual realizes he is a small but essential part of the eternal cosmic order:

"The wise man, by virtue of his attachment to the cosmic logos, comes to consider death as a passage from one state to another — not as a radical disappearance."(Ferry, *Learning to Live*, n.d., p. 148)

For the Stoics, death is an existentialmoment that must be accepted and understood — not feared. Salvation, according to them, requires three essential steps:

"First, one must understand the cosmic order; second, strive to imitate it; and third, merge with it and find one's place within it. Only then can one attain a form of immortality." (Ferry, *Learning to Live*, n.d., p. 149)

In this vision, speaking of death is ultimately to speak of eternity and immortality. When the individual merges with the eternal order of the cosmos, all fear and panic dissolve.

2-2- The Religious Perception of the Question of Death

Anyone who contemplates the issue of death in the context of the various Abrahamic religions finds that it is inextricably linked to the relationship between the Creatorandthe creature. The Creator is the eternal source of all truth—everything emanates from Him, and everything must ultimately return to Him. If immortality is the defining attribute of the Creator, then death is the inevitable destiny of all created beings. Consequently, all religions have strived to reconcile human beings with the reality of death, seeking to tame its emotional impact and transform it into a concept that can be accepted and comprehended by human consciousness (Mabrouk, 2011, p. 80).

Religions have thus offered a distinct approach to the problem of death, diverging from the Greek perspective, which left humans adrift in their attempts to achieve harmony with the cosmos and to draw immortality from that which is inherently eternal. By contrast, religions—particularly **Christianity**—succeeded in transcending the Greek model by proposing compelling answers to the question of human finitude. These answers, as Ferry notes, were unparalleled in their depth and appeal, to the point that they imposed themselves upon large segments of humanity as truths of ultimate significance. Christianity, in particular, developed a radically new moral vision and a doctrine of salvation grounded in love, which captivated human hearts and relegated philosophy to a secondary position, subordinated to religious teachings (Ferry, *Learning Life*, n.d., p. 100).

If death had once instilled fear and despair in the human soul, diminishing the joy of life, then religion—especially Christianity—offered the most effective remedy for this existential condition. It reassures the believer that there is no need to fear, for their deepest hopes will be fulfilled, and they may live the present moment with peace, awaiting a brighter future. At the heart of this vision lies a benevolent and infinite Being who loves us more deeply than we can imagine, and who will save us from loneliness and reunite us with the loved ones we have lost (Ferry, *Learning Life*, n.d., p. 31). In this way, religion provides a dual assurance—of divine presence in both the present life and the life to come. Consolation for the death of loved ones lies in the promise that they still live and that we shall inevitably be reunited with them in the eternal afterlife.

However, this passage to eternal life is contingent upon faith, which is the only path to salvation from death and its terrors. Without faith and divine grace, humanity cannot transform fear into hope. Thus, all major religions—Christianity foremost among them—emphasize the necessity of belief and submission to the Supreme Being as the means by which to overcome the idea of death and achieve ultimate salvation.

The Christian faith surpassed Greek philosophy in its capacity to overcome the fear of death. As Ferry notes, the Christian's path to victory over death begins with humble faith in the Incarnate Word, adherence to His commandments, and the experience of divine love—a love that encompasses both God and others. Through this process, the believer and their loved ones are welcomed into the Kingdom of eternal life (Ferry, *Learning Life*, ed., p. 149). Thus, far from inducing panic, death becomes a source of comfort and hope—an essential transition into a more profound life. As Ferry writes elsewhere, religious traditions have long sought to prepare individuals for their own death and the deaths of loved ones, urging them to discover the true meaning of life through this very preparation (Ferry, *The Deified Man or the Meaning of Life*, 2002, p. 7).

In this religious framework, life and death are two sides of the same existential coin. To understand one is to understand the other. Fear fades when death is redefined not as an end, but as a meaningful threshold to a new beginning. Christianity, in particular, promises not only personal resurrection, but also the full continuation of individual identity in both body and soul—something Greek philosophy, especially Stoicism, could not fully achieve. Whereas Stoicism left only a faint hope of partial, impersonal immortality within a cosmic order that overshadowed the individual, Christianity offered personal salvation and a definitive victory over death itself (Ferry and Claude, *The Most Beautiful Story in the History of Philosophy*, 2015, p. 33).

This promise resonated deeply with believers, distinguishing Christianity from earlier philosophical models. The Christian vision of the afterlife offered incomparable bliss and eliminated the need to cling to the transient pleasures of earthly life. It promised that "death is not the end," that personal identity is preserved, that our future form will differ but remain real, and that our eternal life will unfold under conditions of divine happiness and love (Ferry, *Paradoxes of Happiness*, 2018, p. 13). Under divine providence, happiness becomes eternal, and "we will feel no peace unless we believe that another life begins after our disappearance from this world—one in which we meet again with our loved ones, body and soul, as truly real individuals. This life must be different, but above all, it must be better: it will know no death, and love and truth will reign supreme" (Ferry, *Paradoxes of Happiness*, 2018, pp. 13–14).

However, Ferry also expresses a critical perspective. While Christianity appears to triumph over Greek philosophy in resolving the question of death, this theological approach entails a double loss**:** reason is once again subordinated to faith, and the determination of how to live the good life is no longer in the hands of human beings, but rather under the authority of God (Ferry and Claude, *The Most Beautiful Story in the History of Philosophy*, 2015, p. 33). Thus, the **Greek rational spirit** is displaced by divine revelation, and human autonomy is constrained, making way for religious authority at the expense of human reason.

3. The Human Moment and the Question of Death

Through what he terms *humanistic philosophy*, Luc Ferry sought to transcend the cosmological understanding of death and move beyond the religious moment, which he viewed as having confined humanity within the boundaries of theology. Instead, he proposes a moment of immanence and transcendence simultaneously—a *humanistic moment* that arises from the spirit of philosophy itself. It is from this perspective that the ideal solution to the problem of death emerges: a secular solution grounded in human reason and, at the same time, a transcendence achieved through the metaphysics of love.

As Ferry explains, philosophy shares with religion the objective of defining the conditions for a good life for a finite and mortal being. However, unlike religion, philosophy seeks to achieve this goal through independent reasoning and conscious reflection, using tools derived solely from human faculties (Ferry &

Claude, *The Most Beautiful Story in the History of Philosophy*, 2015, p. 19). Thus, all philosophical traditions aim, either explicitly or implicitly, to overcome fear—particularly the fear of death and finitude.

Humanism, in this view, reaffirms the essential role of philosophy in life. It entrusts humanistic philosophy with the task of creating value and meaning and thereby enriching human life. This is the only way, Ferry contends, to overcome the existential threat posed by death. There is a pressing need to "give meaning to our lives," a point also underscored by Spinoza (1632–1677) and Schopenhauer (1788–1860), who emphasized that this meaning must be enduring and resilient in the face of death—constructed independently of divine intervention and founded instead on reason and the unity of the mind (Ferry & Claude, 2015, pp. 19–20).

Ferry attributes the emergence of this humanistic worldview to Enlightenment thought, which emphasized the self as a source of freedom and intellectual creativity (Amer &Hafyan, 2022, p. 67). Thinkers such as Max HorkheimerandTheodor Adorno, in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, described Enlightenment as a project of progress aimed at liberating humanity from fear and establishing autonomy. Likewise, Auguste Comte (1798–1857) considered humanism to be a collective moral and intellectual framework in which altruism supersedes selfishness. This humanism affirms the sanctity of the human being, not through divine authority but through immanent human dignity and rational freedom (Amer &Hafyan, 2022, p. 67).

Ferry advances this vision by developing a new form of humanism. He cautions against anchoring life to a single immutable principle, as doing so would subject it to "idolatrous concepts" that stifle transformation. Contemporary philosophy, according to Ferry, encourages individuals to construct their own lives without submission to external normative authorities. His "new humanism" reflects a further evolution of this ideal (Bosnina, 2013, p. 249).

This *second humanism*, as Ferry calls it, distinguishes itself from that of Descartes (1596–1650) and the Enlightenment. Rather than limiting human value to reason, rights, and progress, Ferry's version is grounded in love. He proposes that love has become the new metaphysical foundation upon which the entirety of life is built. It is love that imparts meaning to human existence. According to Ferry, the only way to live a fulfilled and happy life today is through love—a force that instills concern for humanity and all living beings. In this way, happiness becomes manifest in the heart of the loving experience (Bosnina, 2013, pp. 249–250).

Ferry argues that the meaning of life is inseparable from the dual values of love and happiness. The question of meaning, he says, is profoundly complex—each term within it posing deep philosophical challenges. For Ferry, a meaningful life is one that, through love, points toward a form of symbolic immortality. Love is stronger than death; it alone provides salvation and opens the path to a kind of eternity. Thus, love becomes the essence of life and the antithesis of death. "As long as there is someone in this world to love—as long as love, real or potential, exists—life is still worth living" (Ferry, *Paradoxes of Happiness*, 2018, p. 88).

Ferry affirms the value of a purely humanistic outlook—one that dispenses with both cosmological and theological doctrines. In his view, humanism does not require recourse to God or the cosmos but relies on a humanity that acknowledges its self-sufficiency. "In such a new framework," he writes, "I give meaning to my life through the history of what is achieved in progress—that is, when I am able to say on the day I die that I have contributed to human construction, to progress, and to public affairs" (Ferry, *Paradoxes of Happiness*, 2018, pp. 203–204).

The mission of philosophy, then, is to create meaning and value for existence—to explore how humans can live meaningfully despite the brevity and limitations of life. According to Ferry, the only way to achieve this today is through love. This love, which serves the individual, society, and humanity as a whole, is not merely personal or emotional; it is a universal experience that links the individual to the collective and the particular to the whole. In this, Ferry finds the most profound and viable answer to the question of death (Bosnina, 2013, p. 250).

Conclusion

Anyone who reflects on the history of the problem of death will inevitably realize that the human mind has long strived to grasp the essence of life and mortality. While contemplation and reflection are indispensable, the ultimate truth remains elusive and transcendent. The universe is vast, filled with countless mysteries and secrets, and life itself stretches across a horizon so broad that our vision remains limited, our understanding fragmentary, and our future uncertain.

Despite humanity's persistent efforts to unravel the enigma of death, we continue to confront it—consciously or unconsciously—at every moment of our existence. It is in this context that Luc Ferry presents a renewed philosophical perspective: metaphysical in essence, yet deeply spiritual and human in its dimensions. At the heart of this vision lies **love**—elevated from a mere emotion to a metaphysical principle capable of transcending the individual and the personal toward the universal and the global.

In this way, Ferry's philosophy offers not merely a theory but a path: a humanistic response to the existential dilemma of death. Love, in its profoundest form, becomes the force that gives meaning to life, connects us to others, and opens the door to symbolic immortality. It is through this principle that Ferry proposes what may be the most compelling and hopeful solution to the enduring question of death.

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