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Bring the Dead into Ethology[1]

The body of Lars, a musician, is lying on the bed. His wife, Petra, is close by. With her is Heidi, a death midwife. Other people are moving about the house. One of them is Alexa Hagerty, who told this story ("Speak Softly to the Dead"). Everyone is talking softly, to each other, and to him. Lars's mouth is wide open. It has been like that since his death a few hours ago. It is a reminder of his illness and his agony, for Lars had a respiratory disorder.

The wife and midwife try to close his mouth, in vain. The scarf won't stay in place. After many frustrated attempts, everyone was called out of the room by a temporary distraction

When they return, Lars's mouth is closed and he's smiling. Petra and Heidi agree that this is a sign he has left for them. He is no longer suffering and is now at peace.

The presence of the death midwife stems from a recent phenomenon that Alexa Hagerty studied for her master's thesis: home funerals. The home funeral movement was started by a handful of people in the United States, who mobilized collectively to denounce and protest about the way in which the bodies of dead people are treated, the commercialization of this process by undertakers, the family's exclusion, and the violence done to the corpse by the embalming techniques used. These collectives decided to relearn to care for their deceased and to pool their expertise. Counselors, called death midwives, are trained to solve administrative and legal problems, to help in taking care of the corpse and controlling its decomposition, and to organize the funeral vigil.

Home funerals put into practice an important dimension of the lives lived by the deceased: this type of funeral participates actively in the *instauration* of their existence.[*]

In this respect, the vigils that they organise with great care are particularly crucial. Here, the deceased retain their full relational capacity. The midwives stress that it is important to carry on talking to them, *with love, softly, carefully choosing one's words*, because, they say, while we have to get used to seeing them leave us, they have to get used to it, too, and we must help them. Although death is indeed a passage, which the anthropology of death never tires of theorizing as such, this passage is not one that goes from life to nothingness – as scientists and academics have defined it. On the contrary, it is the perilous moment of transition of a being towards a new way of being; a moment in which the living have work to do that has nothing to do with the work of mourning. Death is no longer inscribed within a medico-scientific time frame; it is no longer what happens at a determined moment in time (determined mainly by doctors). In fact, it becomes a long

process in which what we call the person's agency, their ability to act, and where the body remains "vibrant matter" (Bennet) especially because communication remains possible.

This is the perspective from which Lars's smile was understood. The midwife and Petra agreed that it was a sign, a gift which is comforting his wife and his family. Saying it like that means paying attention to effects; more precisely, it means taking care of events through their effects. There is no need to go any further by asking who (Lars) or what (the sign) is the one that comforts. But we could if we wished to. We could, for example, suggest that, by smiling, Lars intentionally gave his family a sign. Those who cultivate the practice of home funerals would readily accept this idea, or would even state it themselves, because they believe that death is not an interruption in the process of life: cells carry on communicating for some time, hair carries on growing, and the body undergoes transformations. What do we know about what the body continues to feel and causes the person to feel once it has stopped breathing?

Death midwives share the conviction that death is not a matter of all or nothing. The heart may have stopped beating, but there is still someone, a form of presence, albeit one that is certainly much weakend. They hypothesize that the dead continue to understand and even to respond to the words of the living, and that the question of concern not only applies to the latter. The deceased can respond by way of facial expressions, odors, or through signs in nature or the immediate environment. They can still talk to those who remain through memories or thoughts that arise in their presence (Hagerty, untitled 59). These are signs and, as such, they remain open to the possibility of being understood differently. Lars smiles to comfort his family and the midwife, which is how the widow interprets it.

But the midwife also adds that sometimes death affects the face muscles in such a way that it produces a post-mortem smile. Hagerty notes that one explanation does not preclude the other. The midwife adds a possibility, not in the sense of "either or," but of "or else, also" in the valuable grammatical register of conjunctions: and, and, and…

The outcome of this active conjunction of hypotheses is that the smile that comforts makes the deceased a particularly robust being for he unifies two ways of being: he becomes an expressive relational being, and his body becomes *matter for expression*. From this perspective, *that which* expresses and *that which* is expressed remain undetermined. We can of course determine them ourselves, but there is no guarantee that the one does not actually relate automatically to the other. As I have often heard said, why do the deceased not abide by the laws of biology (or physics?) when there is something they wish to communicate?[2] But these laws of physics (when objects fall or break spontaneously, or when electrical appliances seem to defy control), or of biology are not cited as evidence. In fact they prove nothing and nor do they give the phenomenon its scientific

imprimatur.[**] These are expressive modes that require no explanation, only recipients. They just call for one to take into account.

This deliberate coexistence of two versions implements a particular type of epistemological engagement, that home funerals practitioners refer to the "threshold." Hagerty writes that the threshold is the space: "in which the dead body is *both* biological *and* sacred, object *and* subject, disenchanted *and* enchanted, inert *and* still offering its enspirited care" ("Speaking softly to the Dead").

The disjunctive and controversial "or else" of the preferred conceptions are carefully replaced by "and," and it is these "ands" that challenge medical epistemology. For, unlike medical epistemology, the dispositif of home funerals considers that each version "adds" to the situation rather than requires the removal or substitution of a previous version. The fact that a smile can be a "natural" phenomenon does not prevent Lars from having wanted to comfort his family. It is not the hypotheses of enchantment that challenge medical epistemology, but the affirmation of the possibility that multiple and contradictory versions coexist. The "and" introduces a non-polemical challenge, I would say an *open* challenge (insofar as it opens up to other narratives), in terms of "there is always something else." This is a commitment, in that it transforms ways of thinking and of feeling.

Actively maintained, this coexistence signals the particular mode of existence of the deceased; not so much in the register of the occult – understood in the sense of alternation, although this register does also characterize them insofar as their "brilliance of reality" (*éclat de réalité*) is *à occultation*[***] –, but, more precisely, according to what people report, in that of an oscillation, that is, active resistance to what can be termed, following Whitehead, as the "bifurcation of nature" — which consists in dividing reality in two: a causal realm of facts and an experiential realm of appearances (or subjective productions) (Savransky).

The deceased invite themselves into dreams, they make "presences of presence" felt[****], they prevent or activate through various stratagems, and they play on coincidences (as far as they are concerned, anything can be used to make a sign, for they are opportunists of enigma). In everything they implement or set in motion, they thwart all attempts to give meaning to the action.

But, fortunately, they do have regularity (albeit local and always in relation to a particular milieu) that we can rely on. It is therefore possible to constitute a science of the deceased that fits them; one that describes them, anticipates their behaviors, and even that can interpret (in the sense of guiding a reply to) what they want or request. The deceased thus have an ecology (milieu is a crucial issue for them, and we sometimes witness real extinction in highly unfavorable niches) and, above all, an ethology – the science that hitherto studied the behavior of animals. Provided, however – and the same also applies to animals – that we are not referring to the traditional version

of what is called classical ethology, otherwise known as behavioral biology and which primarily studies specific instincts and invariants.

The science of ethology is above all a practical science. It is the science of what beings do and get others to do, what they are capable of doing. Therefore, the facts that it describes should only be described using the infinitive.

This definition of ethology is actually the one proposed by Gilles Deleuze, in his lectures on Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics* (1677):

> [E]thics is better known to us today under another name, the word ethology. When one speaks of an ethology in connection with animals, or in connection with man, what is it a matter of? Ethology in the most rudimentary sense is a practical science, of what? A practical science of the manners of being. . . .
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> In what is called the animal classifications, one will define the animal above all, whenever possible, by its essence, i.e. by what it is. Imagine these sorts who arrive and who proceed completely otherwise: they are interested in what the thing or the animal can do. They are going to make a kind of register of the powers (pouvoirs) of the animal. Those there can fly, this here eats grass, that other eats meat. The alimentary regime, you sense that it is about the modes of existence. An inanimate thing too, what can it do, the diamond, what can it do? That is, of what tests is it capable? What does it support? What does it do? A camel can go without drinking for a long time. It is a passion of the camel. We define things by what they can do, it opens up forms of experimentation.

Ethology thus defined meets the criteria proposed at the working seminar in July 2014 held at the École des Mines in Paris, "Reinstituting Nature: A Latourian Workshop":

> Ethology is just beginning to accept the hard lesson that one does not learn from beings turned into zombies. The due attention demanded from ethologists thus requires addressing an animal defined as 'non-indifferent,' an animal for which the way it is addressed matters. (Debaise, Didier, et al. 171)

Ethology reconfigured in this way becomes a practical science of the modes of interrogating and experimenting with ways of being, that is, for emphasizing the necessary redoubling of its definition: a practical science of the modes of attention that are required by the ways of being of those it aims to study.

Translated from the French by Liz Libbrecht.

[1] There are two types of notes in this paper. When the note is indicated by a number, it means the note provides additional information. When it is indicated by an asterisk, it signifies a direct reference to *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, from which it has either borrowed a tool, or in relation to which it differs slightly.

[2] The following theories that form this ethology of the dead draw on material from a study that I have been conducting since 2007, which consists in collecting accounts from people who experienced the death of someone close to them, and who continued to maintain relations with that person. See my book *Au bonheur des morts: Récits de ceux qui restent* (2015).

[*] The term instauration proved to be crucial in this research. In the context we are concerned with here, the act of instauration means participating in a transformation that leads to a *certain existence*, that is, to *more existence* (in the case of the deceased, both a biographical supplement and the accomplishment of an existence in another realm of reality): an existence that, in the case of a particularly successful accomplishment, may manifest what Étienne Souriau calls its "brilliance of reality" (*éclat suffisant de réalité*) (10). For we can indeed talk of "reality" as regards the existence of the deceased, provided we agree on the right regime of reality that can be granted to them. By envisaging the definition of the mode of existence that enables us to account for what the deceased do and what they have others do – so that we can describe how they interfere in the lives of the living –, we avoid the trap in which our tradition captures and generally freezes the problem. This trap is that of separating the ways of being into two categories: that of physical existence, and that of psychological existence; either of the material world, or purely subjective productions. This ominous choice leaves only two possible fates for the deceased, and the one is as miserable as the other: either non-existence, or else fantasy, belief, and hallucinations.

[**] This means that the individuals who recount these events are attentive to use of the wrong category. For them, saying that the deceased can use the laws of physics to appear does not mean that the laws of physics will explain the event (on the contrary, were that the case, it would mean that these people would be doing something very different: rationalizing, with the aim of simplifying and de-animating the event or, in other words, changing categories along the way).

[***] In the mode of appearance-disappearance.

[****] As I have often heard or read, and that would in a sense be the semantic version of the redoubling of the action.

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