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# Death in the Vision of Doctors. An Anthropological Perspective

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## Abstract

*The research fits a cultural anthropology context, pursuing, at this level, the identification of particular views on death, as reported by doctors from various specialties. The current research took into consideration the meaning of death from the point of view of such doctors, without worrying that the way in which death is regarded will reflect upon the medical practice itself. This topic may be the object of further research.*

*The research was conducted through means of a constructive methodology, using the semi-structured individual interview as the main technique, the questions being asked in a non-specific order. The data interpretation was realized through the successive induction method, correlated with the explorative generative character of the research. The chosen methodology implies a systematic generation process with regard to concepts and theories based on the collected data. The role of data management theory in the research is emphasized in order to provide ways of conceptualizing explanations and descriptions.*

*Respondents usually have a spiritual orientation and don't accept the idea of death as an ending. The continuity of life after death gives sense to the entire existence and the idea of moral life. The human dimension of medical practice makes the respondents adhere to the need for humanizing existence through the guarantee of a post-existence dimension.*

**Keywords:** *Death, vision, doctors, anthropological, perspective*

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## **Introduction**

Modern techniques will allow a dead patient to be revived up to 24 hours after death, according to Dr. Sam Parnia, Head of the Intensive Therapy Section of the Stony Brook University Hospital in New York. "Soon enough, we will be able to save people from the claws of death", (Hall and Jenny, 2013).

The first organ transplants (the first kidney transplant was carried out in 1954 and the first heart transplant in 1967), as well as the development of immunosuppressive medication that prevents transplanted organs from being rejected, created new perspectives on saving chronically-ill patients. The increasing need for organ transplants has highlighted the need to adopt new legislation which will, on the one hand control the mechanism of acquiring the organs and, on the other, ensure protection for potential donors, alive or deceased.

The development of emergency medical systems, of resuscitation techniques, the extensive debates on assisted suicide, postnatal abortion etc., raises questioning with regard to the meaning of life from a social anthropological perspective. Parnia believes that death, as it is regarded in 2013, is a process that can be reversed (Hall and Hope, 2013).

The research fits in to a cultural anthropology context, pursuing, at this level, the identification of particular views on death, reported by doctors from various specialties. The current research took into consideration the meaning of death from the points of view of such doctors, without worrying that the way in which death is regarded will reflect upon the medical practice itself. This topic may be the object of further research.

## **Methodological dimensions of the study**

The research was conducted through means of a constructive methodology, using the semi-structured individual interviews as the main technique, the questions being asked in a non-specific order. The data interpretation was realized through the successive induction method, correlated with the explorative generative character of the research. The chosen methodology implies a systematic generation process with regard to concepts and theories based on the collected data. The role of data management theory in the research is emphasized in order to provide ways of conceptualizing explanations and descriptions. Given the high

value of the exploratory techniques used, the theoretical construction, along with the data gathering process, is continuous and is reiterative in nature. In order to analyze the categories, we followed the interpretive scale, the social-cultural meanings of death and their impact on the doctors, selecting only the ones that seemed relevant from this perspective.

The semi-structured interview method was used to gather data. The interview guide targeted the gathering of data regarding frameworks associated with the meaning of death, as perceived by doctors. We targeted the biological death dimension and its meanings, beliefs regarding the social and spiritual meaning of death, and the experiences of working with terminal patients, the families of the deceased, etc. The number of subjects was low, the quality of information and the diversity of the captured attitudes being more important than the quantitative aspect.

Conceptual categories with a high level of generality appear during an objective process, in such a way as to explain the researched topic. This approach is opposed to a deductive logic approach, starting from established assumptions based on the examination of existing theories in the scientific literature. Data encoding follows two stages: the initial coding and the selective/focused coding (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The initial coding targets data in order to discover significant themes or categories. This is followed by a focused coding process which implies a data categorization closer to the theory.

The coding process consisted of a series of stages such as open coding, which examines the interview transcriptions and identifies any keywords (Caras, Sandu, 2013). Given that, we didn't put the accent on the need for a large sample, open coding applying only to data from the interviews.

Analytical coding represents a reflection upon the sense of the interlocutors' comments. During this stage, a series of reference items are established, items that can be compared to the ones in the examination of the transcribed material (open coding). The lists resulting from this process need to be combined into a single list that constitutes a primary list containing the classification and the pattern and regularities of analyzing system. In the stage of open coding the answers of the subjects were interpreted in a synthetically-analytical manner. The meaning of the answers was interpreted from the perspective of the

meaning that could be identified. The analytical coding and the identification of regularities stage allowed us to formulate a series of cognitive patterns. We presented these as theoretical categories. Eventually, by resystematizing the categories, we developed a series of interpretative structures regarding the meanings of death from an anthropological point of view as it relates to the participants. These results were presented in a generative manner (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

When performing this research, we took into account the standard demands of research ethics (the informed consent of the subjects in terms of participating in the research, ensuring the confidentiality of the data, conceiving the data gathering instruments in such a way as to minimize the harmful potential with regard to the subjects from a social, psychological and emotional point of view).

We noticed, as a main limitation, that none of the respondents presented atheistic beliefs. In our opinion, a general spiritual attitude towards death is specific to professionals in the medical field, but we cannot rule out *an initio* the existence of certain doctors with atheistic beliefs. We could not identify such persons in the sample we investigated, which is why this can constitute bias in terms of the completion of the research. Nevertheless, performing qualitative research which targets the anthropological (Gavriluta, 2013) impact of the doctors' view upon death, doesn't deprive the universe of death-related meanings.

### Results

The operational definition of death will guide the doctor–patient relationship, especially in terminal cases, and the way the doctor reports to the patient.

### Meanings of death

Death is signified differently according to the subjective perspective of the individual as related to his personal history:

*For a medical student it is difficult to define that using a single definition, because we learned something in University, and something totally different at home, therefore we made our own definition in time. (R1)*

*Pentru un student la medicină cred că e greu de definit cu o singură definiție pentru că noi la facultate am învățat ceva, acasă am fost învățați altceva, și în timpul vieții ne-am formulat o definiție proprie. (R1)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

The subjective experience of death – as a human phenomenon in general, and the loved ones’ experiences in particular – clears, in time, as the individual matures.

*I think that lately, the word “death” has acquired a greater importance to me. Before that, I didn’t realize that much. I must admit I didn’t witness that many deaths in the family, or I had several deaths among relatives that I wasn’t very close to, or I was too little, and because I wasn’t very close to them I didn’t care that much. Afterwards, as a medical student, you face this situation a lot, and tend to become slightly inhuman (insensitive) and not care that much. For the past 2 years I grew up myself, and witness a death that made me question. I also took some specialties that made me think a lot more about the perspective of death, taking it a lot more seriously and thinking about what would happen after. (R8)*

*Cuvântul „moarte” în ultimul timp cred că a început să capete o importanță mai mare pentru mine. Înainte nu conștientizăm atât de mult. Trebuie să recunosc că nu am avut atât de multe decese în familie, asta în primul rând ,sau am avut unu-două decese care nu m-au influențat foarte mult pentru că nu erau persoane apropiate sau eram eu foarte mică, dar pentru că nu erau persoane foarte apropiate nu m-au făcut să mă gândesc foarte mult. Ulterior, ca student la Medicină te întâlnești foarte des cu această situație și ții să fii un pic inuman (insensibil), să nu bagi așa mult în seamă. În ultimii doi ani poate m-am maturizat și eu, am avut un deces care mi-a ridicat semne de întrebare, cred că am făcut și specializări care m-au pus mai mult pe gânduri și m-am gândit mai mult la perspectiva morții, în sensul că o iau mult mai în serios și m-am gândit mai mult la ceea ce se întâmplă după. (R8)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

The experience of medical professionalization adds a new meaning to death, and is considered as inhuman by the respondents. In our opinion, it is rather alienating. The same

medical professionalization makes the respondent reflect upon the meaning of life ending, in correlation with the perspective of spiritual survival.

*Death to me: during childhood, death, to me, meant an absolute form of lack of existence of a human being. Growing up, I came into contact with some religious concepts, death becoming something rather shocking. It is normal, in human existence: passing from the current existence into a different one, partially known, but which appears superior to the current one. (R2)*

*Moartea pentru mine: în perioada copilăriei moartea reprezenta pentru mine o formă absolută de lipsă a existenței a unui om. După ce m-am mai maturizat și am intrat în contact cu niște concepte religioase, moartea nu mai reprezintă ceva șocant. Este ceva firesc în existența unui om: trecerea din existența actuală în altă existență, parțial cunoscută dar care apare superioara celei actuale. (R2)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

The operational definition of death that doctors work with is infused by the classical definitions in the specialty literature, without being identical to it. Usually, respondents attach a different anthropological and spiritual value compared to the medical definition of death, generally correlated with spiritual survival and the existence of life after death.

The end of life remains an existential mystery and the anthropological reflection becomes metaphorical:

*The ending of a beginning – life, the continuing of the ending of a way of passing existence. A "bridge" which reminds you that every step is important, and in the end, nothing is endless on a "pedestrian" way. (R10)*

*Sfarsitul unui inceput - viata, continuarea sfarsitului unei forme de existenta trecatoare. O "pasarela" care iti aduce aminte ca fiecare treapta e importanta si ca intr-un final nimic nu e nesfarsit pe o cale "pietonala". (R10)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

### The ending is reported to the biological existence

*Death of the body appears to be a normal, biological phenomenon, an interruption of vital functions, basically an ending to functioning. Everybody knows about death. When the blood flow shuts down, the oxygenation and nutrition of the tissues ends, the cell dies, it stops its activity. (R2)*

*Moartea corpului mi se pare un fenomen biologic absolut normal, firesc, o încetare a funcțiilor vitale, și pur și simplu o oprire din funcționare. Toată lumea știe despre moarte. Pe lângă oprirea fluxului sanguin, oprirea oxigenării și nutriției țesuturilor și atunci celula moare, își oprește activitatea. (R2)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

*No, the cell doesn't have a spirit. It seems to me that The Holy Spirit gives life for the other organs and tissues to function, but the cell itself, separately, doesn't have a soul. (R2)*

*Nu, celula nu are spirit. Mi se pare că Duhul lui Dumnezeu dă viață pentru ca celelalte organe și țesuturile noastre să funcționeze dar celula în sine, ea ca și unitate separată nu are dub. (R2)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

Even in the situation in which the question was related strictly to biological death, and was specifically formulated with regard to the biological dimension, the connection between biological death and spiritual survival wasn't particularly defining for respondent R3.

Respondent R8 also defines biological death through the metaphor of the spirit *leaving the shrine*.

Most references target the shutdown of vital functions such as breathing, blood flow, etc. There were no references to the idea of brain death as the end of life.

### The religious dimension of death

The reference to spiritual and religious elements is highly represented in the answers of those interviewed. Their vision mostly consists of a Christian Orthodox religious point of view:

*The Church believes in the existence of a soul, therefore life on earth is some kind of a trial phase for the soul, death deciding where this soul will travel*



*further, what will its evolution be. If it was worthy and faithful while on Earth, it will go to Heaven, and if it wasn't, it will go to Hell. (R1)*

*Biserica crede în existența unui suflet , iar viața pe pământ ar fi cumva o etapă de încercare a sufletului ,iar moartea decide unde va merge acest suflet, care va fi evoluția lui. Dacă pe pământ a fost demn și a ascultat de credință și de poruncile lui Dumnezeu, va ajunge în Rai iar dacă nu, va ajunge în Iad. (R1)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

Religion is the one point of view giving death a meaning, therefore humanizing it.

*Death was first defined from a religious point of view because people needed to believe that there is life after death, otherwise the thought of a sudden and steep ending would have been unbearable. (R7)*

*Moartea a fost întâi definită din punct de vedere religios și oamenii aveau nevoie să considere că există viață după moarte pentru că ar fi fost insuportabil gândul unei finalități bruște și abrupte. (R7)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

Facing the death of a loved one turns this experience into a cathartic one. Religious rituals help maintain the memory of the loved one as he was when alive, allowing the family to establish a sui-generis connection with the deceased.

*I personally consider that the Orthodox rituals related to death, in Romania in general, and in this area in particular, play the role of catharsis for the family. There are all kinds of rituals that help them remember the missing one, thinking that they can still do something for him. (R7)*

*Consider că, cel puțin ritualurile ortodoxe sau cele legate de moarte din România și din zona asta au rolul de catharsis pentru familie , în sensul că există tot felul de ritualuri care îi ajută să-și amintească de cel mort, să-și închipuie că pot să facă în continuare ceva pentru el. (R7)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

The meaning of death relates to the transition between a mainly material existence and a mainly spiritual one.

*Church says that there is Heaven and Hell after death. Human's soul reaches either Heaven, or Hell. The ones that will go to Heaven will be happy*

*forever, while the ones that will go to Hell will be tormented for the entire eternity. (R6)*

*Biserica spune că după moarte există Rai și Iad. Suflul omului ajunge ori în Rai, ori în Iad. Cei care vor ajunge în Rai vor fi fericiți pentru o veșnicie, pe când cei care ajung în Iad se vor chinu pentru veșnicie. (R6)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

Heaven and Hell are seen as postmortem experiences. Eternal reward or punishment not only gives death a meaning, but also raises it to the state of the fundamental experience of the human condition.

*Death has a meaning. From a religious point of view, death is not necessarily treated with indifference, but it has its own purpose. It is a sequel of life in a spiritual way, not necessarily bodily or temporal. Religion or Christianity treats death as being a part of life that isn't necessarily included, but is more like a step towards something else. (R5)*

*Moartea are un rost. Dpdr religios, moartea nu este tratată neapărat cu indiferență, ci are rostul ei. Este o continuare a vieții sub aspect spiritual, nu neapărat corporal sau temporal. Religia sau creștinismul tratează moartea ca făcând parte din viață, dar nu a o include neapărat, ci este doar un pas către altceva. (R5)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

The meaning of death as an eternal life experience gives a meaning to life itself, describing it as a trial period for human nature, and its adherence to Christian values.

*It somehow provides an optimistic approach, the way you live your life reflecting onto your existence after death. (R5)*

*Oferă totuși o portită optimistă asupra ei, în sensul în care cum îți trăiești viața, după moarte vei avea o altă viață, dar altfel. (R5)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

*From a religious point of view, beginning with Adam and Eve and their capital sin, everyone must die. From a Christian point of view, we know there are two parts: the body and the soul. The body becomes the decomposing matter, and the soul faces the Judgment towards the two states. (R9)*

*Dpdr religios, să zic de la Adam și Eva, de la păcatul capital, oricine trebuie să moară, nu mai există diferențiere. Dpdr creștin, știm că sunt*

*două componente: trupul și sufletul. Trupul rămâne materia care se descompune și sufletul merge la Judecată spre cele două stări. (R9)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

Death, as a mystical experience, is regarded as an encounter with itself and with the Creator.

*Death makes sense to me if I explore its spirituality. Death is great occasion to meet The One that started faith, The Son of God impersonated. Death is a stage in the void of existence. Death is anticipation and life. Death is the "mountain" we need to climb, hoping to find/rediscover ourselves, by ourselves and our Creator. (R10)*

*Moartea are sens pentru mine dacă abordez spiritualitatea ei. Moartea este un bun prilej de întâlnire în trăirea ortodoxă cu Cel de la care porneste "credința", cu Fiul Lui Dumnezeu înomenit. Moartea este o trecere printr-un vid al existenței, într-o nouă formă de existență. Moartea este așteptare și viață. Moartea este "muntele" pe care trebuie să-l urcăm cu nașpinta găsirii/regasirii" tale, de către tine și de către Creatorul tău. (R10)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

The postmortem existence appears as *a void of our existence*. We discover an ontological level of post-existence which is associated with a state of void, an expectancy. Death is also an ascending experience, being called "the mountain you need to climb". The final result of this ascension is meeting the Creator, the final purpose of the entire human experience.

### **Death from a psychological point of view**

From a psychological point of view, the respondents appeal to psychoanalytic theories, understanding death as an instinct, along with the sexual one. Addiction is also due to the instinctive dimension, and to various forms of aggression.

*Death is an instinct. We are born with two instincts, the death and the sexual one. Even the idea of aggressiveness and some particular addictions also lead to death. (R3)*

*Moartea este un instinct. Ne naștem cu două instincte, cel al morții și cel al sexualității, chiar și ideea de agresivitate care duce*

*spre moarte, chiar și anumite adicții tot acolo duc, spre moarte.*  
(R3)

*(Romanian original speech)*

The respondents clarify their own vision with regard to Freud's theories regarding the existence of the two instincts: the sexual one, Eros, and the death one, Thanatos. The respondents consider that Freudian theory could be improved since, for the moment, it only covers the extreme situations.

*Death can be control through social standards but, somewhere, instinctively, we all have this idea of death and sexuality. Psychologically speaking, I consider it a form of aggressiveness, related to death as when you hurt yourself, you're irritated, that being one of the primary Freudian instincts. He is based on the idea that we are ruled, he has his own theory. That doesn't mean I adhere to it 100%, but we are governed by two instincts: the sexual one, tending to satisfy our sexual desires, and the death one, representing Eros and Thanatos. If you don't head towards Eros, you're most likely heading towards Thanatos, and when you seek to satisfy the death instinct, you're either sadistic or masochist. He went for the extremes. (R3)*

*-Moartea poate fi controlată cu norme sociale dar undeva, instinctiv, la bază, toți avem ideea asta de moarte și sexualitate. Psihologic vorbind o văd ca ideea de agresiune, pe lângă faptul că moartea înseamnă sfârșitul vieții, și în ideea de agresivitate e asociată foarte mult moartea ca atunci când îți faci rău, când ești nervos, asta e unul din instinctele primare ale lui Freud. El merge pe ideea că noi suntem guvernați, el are teoria proprie, nu înseamnă că ader 100% la ea, dar suntem guvernați de două instincte: cel sexual în sensul că tindem să ne satisfacem dorințele sexuale și cel al morții, care sunt la doi poli opuși: Eros și Thanatos. Dacă nu mergi spre Eros, în mod sigur mergi spre Thanatos, și atunci când vrei să-ți satisfaci instinctul morții ești fie sadic, fie masochist. El a mers în extreme. (R3)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

## Representations of post-existence (Heaven and Hell)

For a better understanding of the respondents' point of view regarding the spiritual meaning of death, the interviews included an exploratory part related to post-existence representations, particularly with regard to the ontological areas of Heaven and Hell.

Believing that Heaven and Hell exists is a Christian tradition, being part of Orthodox teachings on death. The respondents generally referred to the two ontological dimensions of post-existence using Orthodox terms.

*I am not able to present to you arguments from the Scripture or the Gospel, but the idea is that I see Heaven as a way of embracing God itself, and Hell seems to be a lack of God, that turmoil a person that doesn't believe in God faces. Heaven, on the other hand, is a full awareness of Him. Just like I stand in front of you, that's Heaven, facing God. (R2)*

*Argumente din Scriptură și din Evanghelie nu știu să îți redau dar ideea este că Raiul îl percep ca fiind o împărțășire de prezența lui Dumnezeu, împărțășire deplină de prezența lui Dumnezeu și Iadul mi se pare o lipsire a prezenței lui Dumnezeu, constatarea concretă a absenței lui Dumnezeu și acea frământare, tulburare a omului care nu-L are pe Dumnezeu. Iar Raiul este împărțășirea deplină de El. Ca și cum eu stau față în față cu tine, așa-i și Raiul, față către față cu Dumnezeu. (R2)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

Heaven and Hell are known as ontological states, correlated with the possibility of sharing the presence of God (Heaven) or the lack of God (Hell).

*Hell is not as beautiful as Heaven. I cannot imagine it in flames, it's just too much... The soul cannot feel flames. I cannot imagine it as something material, similar to a place. I believe it's more like a state of being. A continuous emotion. (R3)*

*Iar Iadul ceva nu la fel de frumos ca Raiul. Nu-mi iau imaginez cu flăcări, mi se pare prea mult... Sufletul nu poate să simtă flăcări. Nu văd ceva material, să identific cu un loc. Cred că mai mult cu o stare de a fi. O emoție continuă. (R3)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

Hell is regarded as the painful experience of lacking God, which leads to anxiety and turmoil. On the other hand, fully embracing Him, which is specific to Heaven, is a state of *face to face* between the human soul and God.

The respondents avoided the idea of Heaven resembling the mystical garden of Eden, and Hell as being a place full of tar boilers designed to eternally torture sinners.

*Ever since I was a child, I was thought that Heaven is a green and peaceful place, where the souls of the good ones go, and Hell is a place with fire and tar, a place where the souls of the sinners will forever be tortured. Now, since I'm almost graduating from Medical School and have managed to develop my own personal opinions, I am not sure whether to be believe in all these anymore. I mean of course, I don't believe what I just said literally, anymore. I will always believe in the existence of a soul, but I cannot know what will happen after we die. I can only imagine each of us will face some sort of a retribution for the way we behave while on Earth. (R1)*

*De mică am fost învățată ca o poveste, că Raiul este locul cu verdeață și liniște, unde ajunge sufletul celui care a făcut fapte bune, iar Iadul un loc cu foc și smoală unde se va chinui acel suflet, care a făcut păcate. Acum, că am trecut aproape printr-o Facultate de Medicină și am reușit să-mi fac și eu cumva alte păreri, nu mai știu dacă să cred în totalitate în astea, adică cu siguranță nu cred mot-a-mot în ce am zis mai devreme, în povestioara spusă mai devreme. Cred întotdeauna în existența unui suflet, dar nu pot să știu ce o să se întâmple după ce vom muri. Nu pot decât să-mi imaginez că fiecare își va primi cumva un fel de răsplată a comportamentului din viața de pe pământ. (R1)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

The detachment from the mythological understanding of Heaven and Hell is assigned to medical education. The cultural dimension of belief and its intellectualization, brings an essentiality to it, which reduces the understanding of post-existence to a belief in the existence of an immortal soul. This soul is passive in the face of a transcendent judgment that, somehow, rewards the mundane behaviour of the individual. Basically, we keep the religious dimension of understanding post-existence, which refers to the existence of an immortal soul, and the reward of the mundane behaviour, in the transcendental dimension of

existence. The anthropological and mythological visions with regard to the ontological geography of post-existence are rejected.

The respondents considered the discussion about the representations of the after-world somewhat dangerous.

*I find it a bit dangerous to express how you imagine Heaven and Hell. (R2)*

*Mi se pare un pic periculos să zici cum îți imaginezi Raiul și Iadul. (R2)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

The vision of the after-world is influenced, not only by the vision of the Orthodox Church, but also by cultural and philosophical outlooks which make up the common mentality, such as the description of Purgatory, Hell or Paradise, as given by Dante Alighieri in the Divine Comedy.

*Yes, I have read when I was a teenager something by Dante Alighieri. It was something about the Purgatory, and I would imagine it like that: Heaven is a beautiful, quiet place. The Purgatory was the place where the souls would wander. There was also a Judgment between the two, a place where you would cross from one place to another. (R3)*

*Da. Am citit prin adolescență ceva de Dante Alighieri. Era vorba despre Purgatoriu și îmi imaginez așa :raiul cu ceva liniștit, frumos. Era vorba și de Purgatoriu, între, unde sunt sufletele rătăcite E o judecată acolo, se merge dintr-o parte în alta. (R3)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

The belief in post-existence, no matter how life is regarded after death, is a necessity. The loss of faith in the after-life, questions the efforts of the individual to perfect themselves, spiritually and morally.

*It is nice to know that the soul goes somewhere and doesn't just lie around, or that it comes back to Earth reincarnated. I cannot say for sure which one I would prefer. I need to believe there is something for the soul after death. (R3)*

*E plăcut să știi că sufletul merge undeva și nu rămâne pur și simplu sau într-o manieră și mai veselă că ar reveni pe pământ într-o altă formă, în ideea de reîncarnare. Nu pot să spun sigur pe care aș adopta-o. Există, vreau să cred că există ceva după pentru suflet. (R3)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

The belief in Heaven and Hell is an historical one, based on the answers of the interviewed doctors.

*It would help me believe that, because most of your life you do things for your soul as well. It would be a shame then, for something that your support so beautifully to get lost. It cannot even get lost, no matter the religion. And since I study the science of the soul, I cannot believe it doesn't exist. (R3)*

*M-ar ajuta să cred asta pentru că în mare parte a vieții lucrezi și pentru sufletul tău. Lucrez eu pentru sufletul meu, ca să fiu mai explicită. Atunci ar fi păcat ca ceva care-l susții atât de frumos să se piardă. Nici nu are cum să se piardă, indiferent în ce religie nu cred că există ideea ca sufletul, energia, ce o fi acolo să se piardă. Iar eu studiind știința sufletului nu pot să cred că nu există... (R3)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

The belief in Heaven and Hell is an historical one, based on the answers of the interviewed doctors.

*I believe you can feel it on Earth as well, these... Heaven and Hell. It can be noticed, felt, because ever since man was created, he confronted these aspects. Inside him there was always the desire to know, that moment of transcending, that moment of questioning where he comes from and where he goes to. I remember that, while reading Dostoyevsky, I found a phrase that said: "Man is made to kneel" in front of a superior force, and it referred to God. We are made to kneel in front of a divine creature. (R3)*

*Cred că și pe pământ pot fi simțite aceste ... Raiul și Iadul. Poate fi sesizat, simțit pentru că încă din istorie, de la apariția omului pe lume, el s-a confruntat cu aceste aspecte. În el, în om, a existat dorința de cunoaștere, un moment de transcendere, un moment de întrebare de unde vine și încotro pleacă. Îmi amintesc că citind Dostoievsky am găsit la el o frază în care spune că „Omul este făcut să îngenuncheze” unei forțe superioare lui și se referă strict la Dumnezeu. Noi suntem făcuți să îngenunchem ori unei forme idolatrice, ori unei forme divine. (R3)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

The human existence is seen as part of the sacred horizon, a *misterum tremensis* in which the natural human attitude is that of seeking, of knowledge, of aspiration towards transcendence, but also the need to kneel.



At the same time, we consider the transcendental feeling as part of the human condition.

In the same time, we consider the transcending feeling as part of the human condition.

*We have in ourselves that "It's Me!". "Who am I? Who is God? I Am what I Am!" (R3)*

*Există în noi sădit acel „Eu Sunt!”. „Cine sunt eu? Cine este Dumnezeu? Eu Sunt cel ce Sunt!” (R3)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

### **The development of post-existence**

The main event that marks the after-life is the Judgment.

*God's Judgment decides things, the Judgment based on the Scriptural, Evangelical side: God's Commands and other things. (R2)*

*Există judecata Lui Dumnezeu care hotărăște acest lucru, judecată care se bazează pe partea Scripturistică, Evanghelică: poruncile lui Dumnezeu și alte lucruri. (R2)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

The spiritual destiny in the after-life depends on those actions each individual took during his life on Earth, but also the mentalities that rule his human existence.

*The passing towards something in particular depends very much on the mentality of the individual. The understanding of these two concepts comes from the way of being. For example, if you are an optimistic person, a cheerful one, a religious one, your will most certainly keep the same characteristics that you developed during your life, when you pass in the after-life. If you will be grumpy, evil, grieved, you will probably take these features with you in the spiritual world. (R5)*

*Trecerea spre ceva anume depinde foarte mult de mentalitatea omului. Înțelegerea acestor două noțiuni vine și din felul de a fi. De exemplu, dacă ești un om optimist, un om bucuros, un om credincios, cu siguranță o să ajungi în cealaltă lume tot cu aceleași caracteristici pe care ți le-ai dezvoltat în timpul vieții. Dacă vei fi un om morocănos, un om rău, unul mâhnit, probabil că vei duce cu tine toate aceste caracteristici, aceste trăsături spirituale. (R5)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

The dominant features that the individual developed during his life will determine his destiny in the after-life.

*For example, if you are an optimistic person, a cheerful one, a religious one, your will most certainly keep the same characteristics that you developed during your life, when you pass in the after-life. If you will be grumpy, evil, grieved, you will probably take these features with you in the spiritual world.*  
(R5)

*De exemplu, dacă ești un om optimist, un om bucuros, un om credincios, cu siguranță o să ajungi în cealaltă lume tot cu aceleași caracteristici pe care ți le-ai dezvoltat în timpul vieții. Dacă vei fi un om morocănos, un om rău, unul mâhnit, probabil că vei duce cu tine toate aceste caracteristici, aceste trăsături spirituale.*(R5)

*(Romanian original speech)*

We raise the spiritual degradation of the world, the difficulty to do good deeds, by considering morality from a religious point of view. Spiritual decay can be motivated by the difficulty of human existence in contemporary times. Mundane evil is justified by the actual state of humanity, and not necessarily the evil nature of the individual, who needs to make an effort in order to live a spiritual life.

*In the present, the population and everything surrounding it seems to go from bad to worse, it seems like most people only make bad decisions, and there are very few of us that do good. If it were to consider the beliefs from years ago, most of us should go to Hell. I repeat, there are two perspectives: the way good and evil were seen hundreds or thousands of years ago, and the way they are seen today. Nowadays, it is really difficult to be good. You try your best, but I think people make you worse. Some time ago there were not so many temptations. The world became evil not necessarily because of their own fault, but because nowadays most people face difficulties and troubles. Life has its own good parts, but people evolved mostly due to the money.* (R8)

*La momentul actual populația și totul în jurul nostru mi se pare că merge tot spre rău, mi se pare că majoritatea oamenilor fac numai fapte rele și sunt foarte puțini cei dintre noi care fac bine, dacă ar fi să ne luăm după cum se considera înainte cu foarte mulți ani în urmă, cred că la momentul actual foarte mulți dintre noi ar trebui să ajungem în Iad. Repet, la fel sunt două perspective, cum se considera că e bine și îndeplinirea celor sfinte acum câteva mii-sute de ani și ceea ce se*

*întâmplă în ziua de astăzi. În zilele noastre cred că este cu adevărat greu să fii bun în adevăratul sens al cuvântului. Ți dai silința, dar cred că oamenii te fac mai rău. Înainte nu erau atâtea ispite, nu era lumea atât de rea. Lumea nu era atât de mult supusă răutăților, nu neapărat produse de oameni pentru că oamenii s-au făcut răi între timp poate nu din cauza lor, dar acum majoritatea au foarte multe greutăți și suferă probabil multe răutăți, viața le oferă probabil foarte multe necazuri. Viața are și părți bune, dar cred că mulți oameni s-au transformat din cauza vieții și din cauza banului. (R8)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

### Reflection upon death

The respondents were asked to give a series of details regarding the moments in which they reflect upon death, and the frequency of these moments.

Reflection upon death has two forms - the reflection upon one's own death, and upon the death of another person. Death is a way of alienation transposed through the existential condition of otherness, either divine or in terms of its own condition in post-existence as otherness.

*Every time I see sick people, or when a member of my family is ill, I think they might die. I rarely think about my own death, but when I do is when I am very happy. I always think all these will not last forever and that all of this has an ending. (R1)*

*Aproape de fiecare dată când văd o persoană bolnavă, sau când o persoană din familie este bolnavă mă gândesc că ar putea muri iar la moartea mea mă gândesc destul de rar, în special în momentele în care sunt foarte fericită. Mă gândesc că asta nu o să dureze pentru totdeauna și că există un final pentru toate. (R1)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

The ending of existence and its ephemerality constitute the base for after-life reflections.

Death, as an extreme state of existence, can constitute an invitation to express interest in everyday events.

*I sometimes think of death when I don't pay that much attention to my behavior, or when I become reckless, and think of it as an awakening. "If I'd die I wouldn't do that anymore!" As a wake-up call: "Wake-up, you're not doing it right!" In that moment, my behavior changes depending on my state*

*of mind. Other times I quench when I think of it.*  
(R2)

*Mă mai gândesc la moarte în momentul în care nu sunt prea atentă la comportamentul meu sau mă comport într-un mod mai neglijent și atunci mă gândesc ca o trezire a gândului, moartea ar reprezenta o trezire. „Dacă aş muri, nu aş mai face acest lucru!” Ca un semnal de alarmă: „Trezeste-te, nu te comporti bine!” În acel moment comportamentul meu se schimbă, nu în totalitate, depinde de starea mea, uneori se modifică. Uneori mă potolesc gândindu-mă la asta. (R2)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

The reflection upon death can take serious shapes, of acknowledgment, experimenting with the ending of dimension, reflecting upon the meaning of life, but also a ludic dimension given by a trust in post-existence. From a religious perspective, death can be considered a success when it follows a life dedicated to spirituality.

*...I sometimes think of it, either in a ludic, or a serious way (...)* (R2)

*...mă mai gândesc, când într-un mod mai ludic, când într-un mod mai serios. (...)* (R2)

*(Romanian original speech)*

*In the religious conception, certain monks consider that thinking of death brings you a clerical success. This helps you better evaluate your life and current estate. You get a better understanding of yourself and manage to act according to God's standards. Man can discover his status in the eyes of God by means of death. He discovers his purpose. Monks think of death in order to gain redemption. It's like some sort of awakening: like when you get ready for an exam, and all you can think of is that exam. (R2)*

*În concepția religioasă, anumiți călugări au concepția că gândul la moarte îți oferă un succes dubovnicesc. Prin asta îți evaluezi mult mai bine viața și starea actuală. Te înțelegi mai bine pe tine și reușești să ai un comportament plăcut în fața Lui Dumnezeu. Omul prin raportarea la Dumnezeu și prin moarte află cine este în fața lui Dumnezeu. Află menirea sa. Călugării folosesc gândul morții pentru mântuire. E ca o formă de trezvie: e ca și cum te-ai pregăti pentru un examen și ai în cap gândul aceluia examen. (R2)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

Extreme situations are the ones that generally lead to reflecting upon the ending of the human condition.

*Or, in extreme situation, let's say when I'm driving, I am very tired, I try to concentrate, that's when I realize that, worse than death itself, is the social death, meaning you're no longer able to enjoy everything you have: walking, seeing, hearing, enjoying all your functions. Death is not one of my favourite concerns. (R3)*

*Sau în situații limită, să spunem când conduc, sunt foarte obosită, încerc să fiu atentă când îmi dau seama că mai rău decât moartea poate să fie și o moarte socială, adică să nu mai pot să te bucuri de tot ceea ce ai: să mergi, să vezi, să auzi, să te bucuri de toate funcțiile tale. Nu e o preocupare de a mea moartea (R3).*

*(Romanian original speech)*

*I could say I think about death when I come into contact with a patient with a severe condition. That makes me reflect upon how short and unpredictable life is, or when I hear about all kinds of accidents. (R4)*

*Aș putea să zic că mă gândesc la moarte atunci când intrăm în contact cu un pacient în spital care se află într-o situație gravă, când ne pune pe gânduri cât de scurtă și de imprevizibilă este viața, când auzim de tot felul de atentate și tot felul de accidente, atunci ar fi momentul în care mă gândesc la moarte (R4).*

*(Romanian original speech)*

## **Representations of own death**

As far as representations of one's own death are concerned, these are generally regarding the future, a future that should be very far ahead, regardless of the fact that the possibility of this happening anytime in the course of a lifetime is highly acknowledged. The representation of one's own death is connected, in general, to incurable diseases, of which the most commonly featured is cancer, despite the fact that official statistics state the opposite. The social imagination places cancer in a *privileged* position when referring to causes of death, associating this disease with the inevitable ending due to the terrible suffering involved.

*I sometimes think I might, someday, have cancer or have an accident. I wonder whether it's going to be sudden, or preceded by a long period of suffering. When I think of what the soul will become after death, I get scared and don't have the guts to think of it anymore. I only hope I will be worthy of it. (R1)*

*Mă gândesc că poate o să am un cancer sau poate o să am un accident. Mă gândesc dacă o să fie subită sau după o lungă suferință dar apoi când mă gândesc ce o să se întâmple cu sufletul mai departe, nu prea am curajul să-mi imaginez prea multe. Sper doar să fiu demnă de o continuare bună a lui (R1).*

*(Romanian original speech)*

*(...) although I had a good friend who recently confronted the possibility of a rather critical diagnose, and that's when I realized we all may die at some point. (R7)*

*(...) deși am avut o prietenă bolnavă care recent s-a confruntat cu posibilitatea unui diagnostic destul de grav și atunci m-am gândit că e posibil să murim în orice moment al vieții (R7).*

*(Romanian original speech)*

The majority of respondents refuse to imagine their own ending, and when they do, they relate their moment of death to the ones still living. The belief in post-existence, even though stated previously as a significant subject in the doctors' anthropological reflections, isn't a point of reference when concerning their own deaths.

*No. I haven't imagined it. (R6)*

*Nu. Nu mi-am imaginat-o (R6).*

*(Romanian original speech)*

*I imagine I will die later on, although I had a good friend who recently confronted the possibility of a rather critical diagnose, and that's when I realized we all may die at some point. I can't imagine it in a certain way, in certain circumstances. I'd rather not go into too many imaginative details, but I wouldn't be surprised if it would happen two weeks from now. There are accidents (R7)*

*Îmi imaginez că am să mor mai încolo, deși am avut o prietenă bolnavă care recent s-a confruntat cu posibilitatea unui diagnostic destul de grav și atunci m-am gândit că e posibil să murim în orice moment al vieții. Nu mi-o imaginez într-un anumit fel, nu-mi imaginez anumite circumstanțe, prefer să nu intru prea mult în detalii imaginative despre asta, dar nu m-ar surprinde să se întâmple peste două săptămâni. Există accidente (R7).* *(Romanian original speech)*

*I am tempted to think of other people's vision towards my death. Today, for example, I thought of how other would perceive it. I removed myself from that situation, and I rarely think of what I would do*

*in that situation. To watch myself in death and try to analyze. (R2)*

*Sunt tentată să mă gândesc la viziunea altora asupra morții mele. Chiar azi am avut un gând referitor la asta și mă gândeam cum ar percepe alții. Eu m-am susținut din situația aceea, mă gândesc la viziunea altora, rar mă gândesc la exact ce aș face eu în acel moment. Să mă privesc eu în moarte și să mă analizez (R2)*

*(Romanian original speech)*

*I visualized myself today, my grave, and there were many well-known people. I couldn't visualize myself though. (R2)*

*M-am vizualizat, chiar astăzi m-am vizualizat că era mormântul meu și erau mai multe persoane cunoscute la mormântul meu. Pe mine nu m-am vizualizat (R2).*

*(Romanian original speech)*

The respondents identified a series of experiences, either the loss of dear ones, or situations from their own personal experience when they faced situations with a high risk of death. These kind of experiences are the ones that develop representations of death.

*There was an episode, when I was smaller, in the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade. I didn't have religious perspectives back then. I almost drowned. I visualized myself in my room, in a coffin, on the table. That was the only experience, I never had another one. (R2)*

*A fost un episod când eram mai mică, prin clasa a VII-a, a VIII-a, atunci nu aveam percepții religioase absolut deloc. Era să mă înec, credeam că o să mor și atâta a fost. M-am vizualizat în camera apartamentului meu, în sicriu, pe masă. Asta a fost singura trăire, nu am mai avut alta (R2).*

*(Romanian original speech)*

*I had an experience when I think I fainted. I wouldn't know for sure because I was alone at the time, but I know I lost conscious and I felt close to death. I felt I had no more control over my brain. (R1)*

*Am avut un episod de sincopă sau leșin, nu pot să știu exact ce a fost pentru că am fost singură în acel moment, dar știu că mi-am pierdut starea de conștiință și m-am simțit aproape de moarte. Am simțit că nu mai am deloc control asupra creierului (R1).*

*(Romanian original speech)*

*The death of my grandparents, my friends. I didn't face a near-death experience myself. When my grandparents died, I witnessed a feeling of helplessness, but also pain, and that void they leave in your soul. In that moment I thought that each of us experiences this, that I have to support the close ones, namely my parents. And they died of old age. In my opinion, it's easier to accept the death of an 85 years old person, rather than the one of a 20 years old. (R4)*

*Decesul bunicii, prietenii. Nu am avut eu o experiență apropiată de moarte. La decesul bunicii a fost un sentiment de neputință că nu puteam să-i ajut dar și durerea și golul pe care ți-l lasă în suflet. În acel moment m-am gândit că oricare dintre noi trece prin această experiență, că trebuie să-i susțin pe cei din jur, mă refer la părinți, și că la un moment dat în viață toți ajungem în această etapă. Iar ei au decedat la o vârstă înaintată. Este mai ușor de acceptat moartea unui om de 85 de ani decât a unuia de 20, din punctul meu de vedere (R4).*

*(Romanian original speech)*

Near-death experiences, and in general, death experiences, either in the case of personal ones, or the ones witnessed with regard to loved ones, have transforming valences, reaching a series of profound resorts of the consciousness.

*In that moment, that night, I actually believed that I was separating from my house, my belongings, even my family. When I came back, it seemed like everything tasted differently, like I was wandering about everything I had. It was like I was reborn. It was a state of joy. (R2)*

*Eu chiar credeam în acel moment, în acea noapte, că mă despart de casa mea, de toate lucrurile apropiate, inclusiv de cei din familie. Când am revenit, parcă gustam altfel totul, parcă mă minunam de tot ce aveam. Parcă am renăscut. Era o stare de bucurie (R2)*

*(Romanian original speech)*



### **An anthropological perspective on death**

The vision of death on the part of the doctors selected in the sample we used for the current research, is a multi-valent one. It comes from the scientific positive culture given by medical education, especially from the idea of medicine based on articulated proofs in a traditional Christian background, in which the respondents have socialized like individuals.

Death is a complex phenomenon. Its understanding implies a series of levels that the respondents highlighted in various forms in their answers.

- The biological one, in which death appears as the shutdown of vital functions, in particular the circulatory one;
- The cerebral death used as a landmark for future possible organ transplants;
- Death as an object of the medical act. In this perspective, the respondents refer to the practices of palliative assistance, but also to the artificial support of vital functions. On this regard, the respondents show the need for certain clarifications regarding the right to live, but also the right to die, and possible euthanasia practices. Dominating this view is the Christian vision in which life should be protected at all costs, and lived until God decides differently.
- Social death as the ending of all social interactions. This view, even though not characterized by actual death, creates a state of vulnerability that the individual usually perceives as being dramatic.
- At the social level, death is considered to be illogical and unfair. Respondents show that, in general, the relatives of the deceased tend to find the doctor guilty, or sometimes even God. Death is considered an offense towards the human condition, a challenge that is usually worth fighting for. We can also observe here the vital enthusiasm that patients need in order to hold up psychologically, especially in terminal phases, and endure the associated pain.
- Death from a religiously spiritual perspective, as the passing onto the after-life. This perspective spiritualizes death, making it become some sort of a limit, an experience of crossing into a

different world, either heavenly or hellish, in close connection to the way that the individual concerned lived his life on earth.

- Death from the perspective of relatives and loved ones, seen as a dramatic state of separation from the deceased.

## Conclusions

The respondents usually have a spiritual orientation, and don't accept the idea of death as an ending. The continuity of life after death gives sense to the entire existence and the idea of a moral life. The human dimension of medical practice makes the respondents adhere to the need for humanizing existence through the guarantee of a post-existence dimension.

Usually, the anthropomorphic elements of death culture associated with the mythological perspective, are often rejected. A subtle dimension of death is preferred, one that takes the shape of a metaphysical continuity in a world in which the determined ones are generally unknown but presumed, according to the moral side of the human existence.

The respondents show that the religious understanding of a person's role on Earth catalyzes the acceptance of death and suffering as a redeeming state, and guarantees a superior condition in post-existence.

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