

## Conatus - Journal of Philosophy

Vol 4, No 2 (2019)

Conatus - Journal of Philosophy SI: Bioethics and the Holocaust



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doi: [10.12681/cjp.21088](https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.21088)

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#### To cite this article:

Maroudas, F.-F. (2019). The Holocaust, the Human Corpse and the Pursuit of Utter Oblivion. *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 4(2), 105–123. <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.21088>

# The Holocaust, the Human Corpse and the Pursuit of Utter Oblivion

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this article is to show that the current incineration techniques of corpses are directly related to the Holocaust itself and its purposes. It is the same technique which, in the inhuman years of Nazi atrocities, was developed to be applied massively against the Jewish people and the other groups, because as a method it served and expressed both politically and ideologically the plan of a “final solution:” the final “dis-solution,” the disappearance of the human body even as a residue, because the human body, even as a corpse, still retains identity and value. The findings of this study suggest a different analysis of the Nazis’ choice to eliminate the corpses of the Jews, while, at the same time, exploring the original approach offered here helps to understand better the value that the human corpse retains. Many social and religious groups that currently refuse to accept this way of managing human corpses become more understandable in their choice not to accept what nature itself denies but modern technique imposes, namely perfect oblivion, extinction of the corpse. Initially, it is presented in historical and intercultural terms in which ways human societies mainly behave towards the human corpse along with the most prevalent funeral burial customs. Subsequently, the semiology of the human corpse is evaluated in terms of philosophical aesthetics and is included in the corresponding aesthetic categories. Finally, this work airs and analyzes new bioethical issues which arise considering this ever-increasing tendency towards the practice of those responsible for the Holocaust, namely the disappearance of the human corpse.*

**Key-words:** *Holocaust; utter oblivion; human corpse; living bones; incineration; pulverizing; decomposition; annihilation; ugliness; tragedy; sublime*

## I. Introduction

By using the historical term *Holocaust*, one denotes the implementation by the Nazis of the program of the so-called “final solution,”<sup>1</sup> which culminated in the camps of mass extinction and the conclusive murder, among others, of about six million European Jews during the Second World War.

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre-André Taguieff, *Ο Αντισημιτισμός*, μετάφραση Γ. Σιδέρης (Αθήνα: Άγρα, 2019), 115-120.

In its realization, the Holocaust took on the character of total extermination: extinction of the synagogues, of archives, books, of all the evidence which could substantiate the existence of the targeted Jews. This means that the perpetrators did not find destruction sufficient but beyond this they also intended utter oblivion. Why did they actually decide to extinguish the Jews? Because for them it was the only possible way to achieve a definite, a final solution. In any other case, for instance if they merely changed the use of the synagogues while leaving intact the buildings, they would leave behind a certain piece of evidence for the existence of the Jews and no total extinction would be achieved. This would mean that a revival of the Jews could potentially take place sometime later. Any of us can figure out in which way the empty places of worship and the “lifeless” Jewish archives could pose a threat: they would clearly be living testimonies, evidence of a historical discontinuity, of an unnatural vacuum in the new German society which underwent a process of violent transformation at that time. They would still as well represent the future potentiality to give back to the Jewish faith and Jewish culture their prior place in the German society. The means employed towards the extinction were as regards the buildings the violent deconstruction/dissolution and as regards the spiritual evidence (archives, books etc.) to set them on fire, which literally amounts to the Holocaust on a material scale. In other words, what could not dematerialize by means of fire was definitively eliminated by deconstruction and dissolution.

An issue, the significance of which has not been so far assessed the way it should, is the fact that exactly the same combination of the two aforementioned forms of destruction of the material (synagogues) and the spiritual elements (books) of the Jewish existence, i.e. on the one hand fire and on the other deconstruction/dissolution, was chosen by the Nazis with regard to the corpses of the Jews.<sup>2</sup> It should certainly be noted that the annihilating cremation and pulverization of human corpses was not an invention and a creation of the Nazis. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century we have already the first mechanical cremations of dead bodies. But it was Nazism that for the first and so far the only time in history imposed the mass incineration against certain targeted groups of people on the basis of racist criteria. This means that a technique was selected which was meant to bring upon the corpses of the Jews just the same radically negating effects: absolute disparition, annihilation, oblivion.

We consider that the tactic of the mass burning<sup>3</sup> of the corpses of the Jews was not at all chosen by chance and that it cannot be explained solely

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<sup>2</sup> On the history of the cremation of the dead I recommend the very accurate, concise and unsurpassed study of Jakob Grimm, *Über das Verbrennen der Leichen* (Berlin: F. Dümmler, 1850).

<sup>3</sup> Facing History and Ourselves, *Holocaust and Human Behavior* (Brooklyn, MA: 2017), 494, 497.

according to the argument of saving space and time – or exclusively for hygienic reasons. We take into account that from mid-March until the beginning of April 1943 three gas chambers and correspondingly three crematoria had already begun their operation in Auschwitz (in the camp that after the war was to be considered as the historical symbol of the Holocaust) thus increasing dramatically the “production” of death and the conveyance of corpses. By June of the same year one more unit with a gas chamber and crematorium had been added to Auschwitz. All these units exterminated on a daily basis 4,756 corpses which were speedily made into powder. In the summer of 1944, six complete units comprising gas chambers and crematoria were operating and the daily destruction of corpses exceeded the number of 9,000. The crematoria were not enough and so cremations began to be carried out in holes in the outdoors area of the camp.<sup>4</sup>

In general, we refer only to some of the practical reasons that have been stated but we insist on the other hand that there always were ideological reasons behind the Holocaust, as it has been elsewhere mentioned.<sup>5</sup> While on the one hand, the fact that the killing of the victims happened in the form of an offense to their religious faith expressed an insult to the dignity of the victims and at the same time resulted in them being dishonored, on the other hand it constituted an integrated expression of the ideological convictions of the Nazis. As Evangelos Protopapadakis rightly observes, Nazi Germany invented “practical methods” that were allegedly based upon some reason (e.g. the right to opt for euthanasia) but in their implementation they served the ideological orientation of the ruling party (finally, after several manipulations and pretexts, they characterized the Jews as “not justifiably” living creatures).<sup>6</sup> By acting in this way, the whole talk about the methods served in the last instance as an alibi for the centrally planned tactics. The origin of these tactics can be traced back to 1939 when Adolf Hitler was the first to make a public appearance after a case of child euthanasia which later enabled him to subordinate this technique to Nazi ideology and in the end to turn it massively against Jewish people but also against any dissident.<sup>7</sup> This

<sup>4</sup> See more in the official website of Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece: [https://kis.gr/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=369:2009-06-05-10-49-42&catid=99:2009-06-04-07-06-01&Itemid=76](https://kis.gr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=369:2009-06-05-10-49-42&catid=99:2009-06-04-07-06-01&Itemid=76), viewed in June 2019.

<sup>5</sup> The fundamental issues at stake are the same as they have always been: balancing protectiveness against autonomy, risks against benefits, efficiency against deontological concerns. See Glenn I. Cohen, and Holly Fernandez Lynch, “Introduction,” in *Human Subjects Research Regulation: Perspectives on the Future*, eds. Glenn I. Cohen, and Holly Fernandez Lynch, 1-8 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Ευάγγελος Δ. Πρωτοπαπαδάκης, *Η Ευθανασία απέναντι στη Σύγχρονη Βιοηθική* (Αθήνα: Αντ. Ν. Σάκκουλας, 2003), 32.

<sup>7</sup> Πρωτοπαπαδάκης, 32.

example emphasizes my view regarding the ideological background and the initial stage for the massive generalization of the Holocaust practices. At first there came the elimination of life and then the dematerialization in order to achieve the disappearance of the victims from the country's history.

The Holocaust was in fact insulting and dishonoring because the Jews according to their traditional convictions were against the incineration of the dead, which means that this time they would suffer once again a *post mortem* torture and a humiliation. This selective hatred which was unprecedented in human history and extensively put into practice expressed and served ideologically the Nazi political decision of the total extinction, the aim of which was to achieve utter oblivion and to eliminate any remnant of Jewish origin. For these reasons I dare to claim that only by burning the corpses of the Jews – apart from all their sufferings while still being alive – and not by just killing them at an earlier moment the Nazis did accomplish the plan of the Final Solution and the genocide, because this was exactly the final, the total Holocaust. The only faint shadow in the logic of this project is that Judaism is not solely tied to a racial or genetic origin, it is not restricted to the factor of inheritance, but it has also a broader character. It was Nazi racism that made them focus on the total elimination of the Jewish race. But by interpreting in a narrow sense the doctrine of the Aryan Race they forgot that even if they succeeded in totally exterminating all Jewish people on the whole Earth there would always exist the possibility that someone could be born who by adopting Judaism could become a Jew himself!

So the existing fear, generated by the very existence of a corporeal residue in form of a corpse, reveals also in this way the inherent value that a human corpse somehow retains (to the extent that it even constitutes, as in the case of the Holocaust, a “living” menace). Thus this article deals with the technique of incineration which was chosen as an effective means to make the corpses disappear but even more with the current tendency towards the prevalence of the same technique as regards the total burning of human corpses, taking into account that the latter occurs at times by tacitly concealing the real facts and at times by employing embellishing images.

## II. Management of the human corpse:

Two options throughout history and a third one at present

Death, that is the confirmed, total and definitive stop of the bodily organs from functioning, raises necessarily the problem of dealing with the human corpse. During the long-lasting presence of rational human beings on Earth, single individuals and societies have not only established particular burial places but have also introduced burial customs for the deceased. As far as the human corpse is concerned there are two major options of dealing with it throughout historical ages: burying or burn-

ing.<sup>8</sup> Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century a new way of dealing with the human residue, aimed at its annihilation, has been implemented – a practice which during the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been increasingly adopted. This is the misleadingly called *incineration*. Thus we shall distinguish between the traditional burning of the dead and the relatively recent method which is to be characterized as *mechanical cremation*.

### *i. Burial of the dead*

Burial is the option of dealing with the human corpse which has prevailed throughout history. Through burial the corpse is left to physical decomposition which is characterized by the fact that it takes the corpse several months to decay and become a constant residue. The buried body takes a course of partial decomposition which stands in a proportional relation to the time that was necessary for the attainment of its complete shape: just as it took it a long time to remain in the body of the pregnant mother and then to be raised so it takes many months to decay. Dissolution does not come at once. There is an essential difference between growth and decomposition of the body: since it has a biological beginning in time as an entity, it does not go back to a state similar to prior “nonexistence” but it leaves a certain residue behind. This means that it takes a long time for the flesh to become fully decomposed and in the end there is the skeleton which remains.<sup>9</sup>

### *ii. Traditional cremation of the dead*

Cremation of the dead is the other option of dealing with the human corpse, although it is less prevalent. This practice corresponded to the convictions of the societies that opted for it either because in some cases it served more effectively

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<sup>8</sup> We do not mention as a separate case the practice of the Zoroastrian Parsis who in some remote places of India even nowadays leave the corpses exposed to external factors on the so-called *Dakhma* (towers or columns of silence) to be devoured by the vultures because of the limited number of followers and also because the logic of this practice does not differ from the logic of traditional cremation as the main aim in both cases consists in accelerating the decay of the flesh. We find some very brief and valuable insights about the way these customs of the Parsis came to be considered in the Torah and the Talmud as a negative example of dealing with the dead in the first part of the tetralogy of Rabbi Dr. Kohn which was published in sequels as a reply to Rabbi Dr. Wiener, see Dr. Kohn, “Die Erd- und Feuerbestattung,” in *Jüdisches Literatur-Blatt* 15-16 (1886): 181-208; from the standpoint of architectural aesthetics cf. an interesting approach in Melanie Dawn Michailidis, *Landmarks of the Persian Renaissance: Monumental Funerary Architecture in Iran and Central Asia in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries* (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2007), 127-142, 276-318.

<sup>9</sup> About the special significance of the preservation of the skeletal residue – even greater than that ascribed to the flesh, which for instance can be removed in the case of a transplantation – according to the supporters of the burial, a certain idea can be obtained from Aslihan Sanal, *Flesh Yours, Bones Mine: The Making of the Biomedical Subject in Turkey* (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2005).

some extraordinary and practical needs (for instance they buried the dead fighters in order to facilitate the transport of their bones)<sup>10</sup> or because in some places there was a regional abundance of materials suitable for burning. The traditional cremation of the corpses was essentially nothing more than an acceleration of the main stages of the burial process. This means that because of the fire the flesh was able to complete its decomposition process in a shorter period of time.<sup>11</sup> Its soft tissues were burnt and dehydrated and at the end of the process there remained only the ashes and the skeleton.<sup>12</sup> Ashes and bones were kept in urns,<sup>13</sup> or the ashes were dispersed, and the bones were buried separately.

### *iii. The current method of mechanical incineration*

In mechanical incineration<sup>14</sup> the body is put into crematoria where unnaturally high temperatures are reached until in the end only the skeleton remains. It must be stressed and clarified that the terminology used, which actually has been derived from the traditional cremation ceremonies, does not depict the final effect of the process. It is misleading to call *incineration* a process that does not lead to the production of ashes, inasmuch as the soft tissues of the flesh and the other organs while burning at these unnaturally high temperatures get fully destroyed,<sup>15</sup> and they finally dematerialize.<sup>16</sup> We can talk of incineration in the sense that in

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Σταυρούλα Οικονόμου, *Ταφές Πεσόντων. Πολυάνδρεια, Κενοτάφια και Ηρώα* (Διδακτορική Διατριβή, Πανεπιστήμιο Κρήτης, 2012), 59-60.

<sup>11</sup> It was exactly this sense of the slight difference between the accelerated but fundamentally successful natural decomposition and the violent mechanical cremation that made the Indians, who were by tradition and since many centuries accustomed with the process of burning, oppose culturally and not immediately accept this western innovation that seemed alien and awkward to them. For more about the way the Eastern peoples with long traditions in the cremation of the dead saw the new technological innovation and about the propaganda that was spread to make it acceptable cf. David Arnold, "Burning Issues: Cremation and Incineration in Modern India," *NTM Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Wissenschaften, Technik und Medizin* 24, no. 4 (2016): 393-419.

<sup>12</sup> For details about the traditional cremation of the corpses and the way it was performed, see Jonathan Parry, *Death in Benares* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> The residue of Buddha for instance was allegedly buried in two ampullae: the ashes were buried separately from the bones, see B. N. Datta, "Vedic Funeral Customs and Indus Valley Culture," *Man in India* XVI (1936): 223-307, 290.

<sup>14</sup> For historical information and details about this modern technique, as it was initially invented, and the first positive and negative reactions to it cf. Franz von Berdorf, *Beerdigung oder Verbrennung der Leichen?* (Berlin, 1892), 27ff. and 38ff.

<sup>15</sup> This is exactly what the intended effect of cremation is cf. Sigrid Hünnewinkel, "Spätbronzezeitliche Brandbestattungen im ägäischen Raum" (PhD diss., Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg im Breisgau, 2007), 19: "Die Verbrennung eines Verstorbenen bedeutet die vollständige Vernichtung seines Körpers."

<sup>16</sup> Δημήτριος Ν. Βαρυτιμάδης, *Η Αποτέφρωση των Νεκρών* (Διπλωματική Εργασία, Αριστοτέλειο Πανεπιστήμιο Θεσσαλονίκης, 2015), 36.



the end only residue and ashes are left (with the exception of the bones), as opposed to traditional cremation.

But following this description, a question arises: what is the material that the relatives get back after the end of the process while being told that it is the ashes of the deceased? For it is well known that with the use of poetic images the relatives are urged either to disperse this material into the sea or into picturesque landscapes or to bury it into urns.

The dehydrated skeleton that remains after the mechanical cremation, being still soft due to the heat, is put into a grinding bin that works the same way that household mixers do. In this device the skull and the bones are broken; they are smashed and crushed until they become pulverized and then these crumbs of the broken bones, the powder that has emerged, is handed over to the relatives and falsely labeled as ashes. The avoidance of the factual term *pulverization* in favor of the inaccurate expressions about ashes and cracks in the bones, even in studies which focus on the subject,<sup>17</sup> is disappointing. I consider the term *incineration* to be misleading because it creates the association and the image of a complete combustion while the combustion is, in fact, incomplete. For the process to be completed more actions need to be undertaken, which are being hidden from the interested persons probably because they are generally seen as particularly vandalizing, disgusting and dishonoring as far as the whole process results in smashing and pulverizing the skull and the other bones of their loved one(s).

#### *iv. Differences and similarities between the three ways of dealing with the corpse*

Soft tissues and organs: In the burial they are left to decay gradually. The traditional cremation turns them into ashes. Therefore, in both cases there is a temporary residue left. Mechanical cremation causes them to dematerialize and thus leaves no residue behind.

The skeleton remains complete in all three cases. Traditional burial leaves the skeletal residue and all its genetic data intact.<sup>18</sup> Traditional cremation

<sup>17</sup> For instance such is the case in Tim Flohr Sørensen, and Mikkel Bille, "Flames of Transformation: The Role of Fire in Cremation Practices," *World Archaeology* 40, no. 2 (2008): 253-267.

<sup>18</sup> The discovery that genetic information are present in bones and remain unchanged over time should support the reevaluation of classical philosophical considerations regarding death and the human corpse that were originally formulated on the basis of external observations which do not correspond to the level of our present knowledge. It was for instance Epicurus who linked the atoms constituting Flesh with the constitution of the Soul and inferred that if the former is dissolved then the same happens also with the latter while on the other hand he ignores totally the value of the skeletal residue. Epicurus may be excused according to the fact that all bones look the same and void of content to the naked eye but on the other hand it is understandable that he would have composed his philosophical thought differently if he



also means that the skeleton to a great extent retains its genetic data before finally being buried. However, through the process of contemporary mechanical cremation the skeleton retains its integrity after the burning process but its genetic data suffers a radical deformation before being put into grinding bins where the skull and the other bones completely disintegrate into powder which contains no genetic information at all. This complete dissolution of the corporeal residue is very accurately compared by David Arnold to the management of the urban waste that the modern states prefer; in both cases fire is employed the same way.<sup>19</sup>

#### *v. Funeral and burial customs reveal their value*

Whichever way is chosen for the management of the corporeal residue, the human corpse seems to have an inherent value and by this it is also possible to explain that it never has been treated as a piece of flesh which has meanwhile become indifferent, but on the contrary it serves as a point of departure for unfolding certain customary behaviors towards it, the so-called funeral and burial customs. It is important to point out that burial customs have existed since the dawn of the humans' presence on Earth<sup>20</sup> and of course they have been preserved until today. This begins with certain primeval habits, such as closing the eyes of the dead so that they do not remain open,<sup>21</sup> washing the corpse,<sup>22</sup> waiting for a certain period of time until the burial can take place, placing the dead into a tomb with a symbolic orientation,<sup>23</sup> and progresses to the more complex ceremonies and rituals as regards the inhumation of the corpse and its residue<sup>24</sup> which also even include distinctive marks of the of-

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had known about the genetic chain preserved eternally in the bones. Cf. Evangelos D. Protopapadakis, "Death is Nothing to Us: A Critical Analysis of the Epicurean Views Concerning the Dread of Death," in *Antiquity and Modern World: Interpretations of Antiquity*, edited by Ksenija Maricki Gadjanski, 316-323 (Belgrade: The Serbian Society for Ancient Studies, 2014), 319.

<sup>19</sup> Arnold, 393-419.

<sup>20</sup> A very interesting analysis of the burial ceremonies and their rituals can be found in Milton Cohen, "Death Ritual: Anthropological Perspectives," [http://www.qcc.cuny.edu/SocialSciences/ppacorino/DeathandDying\\_TEXT/Death%20Ritual.pdf](http://www.qcc.cuny.edu/SocialSciences/ppacorino/DeathandDying_TEXT/Death%20Ritual.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> *Genesis*, 46, 4.

<sup>22</sup> More about burial rituals in Eastern countries in Anusaranasasanakiarti Phra Khrû, and Charles F. Keyes, "Funerary Rites and the Buddhist Meaning of Death; An Interpretative Text from Northern Thailand," *Journal of the Siam Society* 68, no. 1 (1980): 1-28, 7ff.

<sup>23</sup> Μαρία Κουμαριανού, *Η Αντίληψη του Θανάτου μέσα από μια Σημειολογική και Ανθρωπολογική Προσέγγιση του Ασιατικού Νεκροταφειακού Χώρου* (Διδακτορική Διατριβή, Εθνικό Μετσόβιο Πολυτεχνείο, 2007), 25-28.

<sup>24</sup> Rijan Maharjan, "A Brief Introduction of Funeral Rites and Rituals in Theravada Buddhist Countries (Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar)," *Academic Journal of Buddhist Studies* 1 (2018): 458-465.

fice, the social class, the sex of the deceased etc.<sup>25</sup> These customs have multiple recipients: they are addressed not only to the surviving relatives, in the form of a consolation or a reminiscence, but also to the soul of the deceased itself or to the new spiritual environment, and to the world which is supposed to be the next stage in the course of his/her life.<sup>26</sup> The particular behavior towards the human corpse is certainly inferred not only from the honors paid, but also from the cases where a negative or revengeful treatment prevailed, if for instance the corpse belonged to a person who had done damage or who had been confronted with a hostile attitude on the part of the community.<sup>27</sup> But apart from philosophical, theological, psychological, or socially focused considerations which can be expressed on this issue there is one thing that can be noticed throughout positive and negative behaviors, namely that the dead body has value and that this value cannot be separated from it.<sup>28</sup> It is even the case that the violation of the space pertaining to the dead body in all times is considered as a sacrilegious and punishable act, while the removal of objects from the dead since the ancient times constitutes the crime of grave robbery.

### III. Aesthetic semiology of the human corpse

The assessment of an object in the terms of philosophical aesthetics consists usually in determining its aesthetic value and necessarily in subsuming it into the relevant aesthetic categories with the aim of its assessment.<sup>29</sup>

The search for information on an aesthetic approach of the cremation or the burial of the corpses returns usually a superficial aesthetic description of the crematories, of the ways the residue is buried or, more frequently, of the preceding ceremony; this happens more easily by avoiding to describe the procedure that is adopted between the cremation and the emergence of the residue.<sup>30</sup> In other words, we obtain information on any other issue beside the

<sup>25</sup> Fredrik Fahlander, and Terje Oestigaard, *The Materiality of Death Bodies, Burials, Beliefs* (Oxford: Archaeopress 2008), 7, 10, and 11.

<sup>26</sup> This may refer to God, to Hades or the Underworld; cf. Γεώργιος Αντουράκης, *Ταφή, Καύση και Ανάσταση των Νεκρών: Μηνύματα από την Παράδοση και την Τέχνη* (Αθήνα, 1981), 5ff.

<sup>27</sup> For a brilliant piece of scientific information about the burial process, taken literally out of “anonymously” mixed bones who were buried into a hole, along with a detailed analysis and substantiated inference towards the detection of a revengeful behavior, see S. Mays, et al., “A Multidisciplinary Study of a Burnt and Mutilated Assemblage of Human Remains from a Deserted Mediaeval Village in England,” *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 16 (2017): 441-455.

<sup>28</sup> Rashmi Gupta, “Death Beliefs and Practices from an Asian Indian American Hindu Perspective,” *Death Studies* 35, no. 3 (2011): 244-246.

<sup>29</sup> Ευάγγελος Παπανούτσος, *Αισθητική: Ο Κόσμος του Πνεύματος* (Αθήνα, 1969), 277ff.

<sup>30</sup> For a relevant example cf. Norbert Fischer, “Körper – Asche – Natur: Über Transformationen

main point, which are the dead body and its cremation by mechanical means. This accordingly renders impossible the proper aesthetic assessment of the procedure.

The aesthetic value of the human corpse is assessed by evaluating the elements provided by the corpse itself. A corpse is distinguished by the gradual change of its qualitative traits and causes emotional feelings or impulses of thought that either come from the external appearance of the deteriorations occurring in it or from the internal impact of these elements on the psyche of all the people having in some way to do with it or finally by the corporeal residue itself regarding the special elements of its identity.

### *i. Aesthetic categories*

The death of the body itself with the subsequent deteriorations in its form and its composition along with the contrast to the image that was formerly shaped by its living presence, involves as far as aesthetic experience is concerned not only the dimensions of *ugliness* and *tragedy*, but also that of the *sublime*.

From the standpoint of Aesthetics, the human corpse is evaluated as ugly. The notion of the ugliness focuses mainly on its external features and on the reactions that it inspires. The color changes from rosy to ecru white, the facial features lose their contours (the face and especially the nose immediately become disfigured, with the mouth and the eyes shut<sup>31</sup>), the limbs become frozen and stiff, an unpleasant odor spreads out, several fermentations and changes follow due either to internal parasitic microorganisms that were hosted in the living body and after the moment of the death cause its erosion or to external factors that now cause its decay. All these constitute a gradual course comprising consecutive phases which result in the elimination of the prior form and of the physical elements and finally lead to the ultimate negation, the dissolution of the body. The spontaneous reactions of many persons, such as aversion, fear or refusal to touch the dead body manifest the element of its ugliness.<sup>32</sup> This sense of ugliness is even considered to be somehow contagious, for in some traditions the corpse is even seen as impure to the extent that whomever comes in contact with it becomes similarly impure

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des Leichnams durch Krematoriumsbau und Feuerbestattung vom späten 19. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart," *EthnoScripts* 19, no. 1 (2017): 81-98.

<sup>31</sup> Matthias Mißfeldt, "Vergehende Zeichen. Der tote Leib und die trauernde Erinnerung," in *Tot und toter Körper*, eds. Dominik Groß, et al., 179-186 (Kassel: Kassel University Press, 2007), 182.

<sup>32</sup> If in the world of Art something Ugly may imply the Beautiful, an essentially ecological approach to the unpleasant fact of mortality could add more life to our life, cf. Emily Brady, "Ugliness and Nature," *Enrahonar* 45 (2010): 27-40, 31.

for a certain period of time,<sup>33</sup> as regards the ritual sense of impurity.<sup>34</sup>

The human corpse also involves elements of the *tragic*, i.e. of an aesthetic category that arises out of no other creature than the humans themselves<sup>35</sup> and in this case expresses the internal affect and the mixed feelings that are caused in the spectator by the absence of life and get intensified by the view of the human corpse. The living memory of the acting person is absolutely opposed to the inert body, which lies lifeless, inactive, unable to defend its integrity and its dignity, completely and involuntarily abandoned to be managed by other people's hands or by natural forces.<sup>36</sup> All these traits are incompatible with the previous situation during its life, and therefore the view not only of the corpse but also of all these new and contradictory situations concerning it create inside the soul sadness, sorrow, screams and cries but also ironic comments and, in some cases, scorn. The body itself was the substrate of a set of various interactions: it had contributed to the creation of life, it had given birth, it had been a source of consolation, protection, love, inspiration or fear, its presence could even pose a threat but now it has been stripped of all these special characteristics. It resembles a hero of a tragedy who after a hard and long itinerary of personal achievements now suffers consecutive blows, debasements by disproportionately more powerful forces or collusions until at the end he/she yields and unexpectedly gets defeated by them. The view of this utter contradiction between the past that belonged to life and the present that belongs to non-being deepens the sense of the tragic in the spectator in two ways: on the one hand it activates inside him/her an association of memories and sentiments like the ones we have already described, on the other hand, it makes him/her bear in mind, even in an unconscious and associative way, the moment he/she will enter the same condition of a corpse.

In the human corpse, parallel to the dimensions of ugliness and tragedy, is also the element of the *sublime*. This is perhaps the most important aspect of its aesthetic value which unfortunately, as the relevant literature shows,

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<sup>33</sup> The flesh is in general considered even more impure than the bones, cf. Terje Oestigaard, "Death and Ambivalent Materiality – Human Flesh as Culture and Cosmology," in *Combining the Past and the Present: Archaeological Perspectives on Society*, eds. T. Oestigaard, et al., 23-30 (BAR International Series 1210) (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2004), 23ff.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *Numbers*, 19.11ff.

<sup>35</sup> Παναούτσος, 288.

<sup>36</sup> In the ancient Egyptian culture the technique of mummification of the corpses for the Pharaohs and the high rank officials had been developed as a way to escape from this tragic situation, along with the use of several objects that were supposed to inhibit the tragic process of putrefaction. Cf. Martin Fitzenreiter, *Tod und Tabu – Der Tote und die Leiche im kulturellen Kontext Altägyptens und Europas* (Berlin: IBAES 1, 1998), <http://www2.rz.hu-berlin.de/nilus/net-publications/ibaes1/Fitzenreiter/text1.pdf>.

is commonly neglected or dissociated from it. One of the main features of the aesthetically sublime is that it transcends time. Whatever seems to go beyond certain limits and continues to exist without being subject to the bonds of a visible and definitive end or annihilation, whatever tends to persist and in some way to break the limit of an estimated period of time, involves a sublime symbolism, because the notion of the end, of the limit and of decay are interwoven with the circle of the natural order of things.<sup>37</sup> In the case of the corpse the skeletal residue remains eternally unchangeable: it obtained its existence from generative parts that do not exist anymore (from the fluid egg cell and the sperm – from elements that were produced by the same organism in thousands and millions but most of them were lost anonymously and without a trace) and it keeps existing after having completed the course of its life. There will always be something that belongs to someone and can be concretely identified only with reference to him/her. Its bearer existed undoubtedly for some time but something of him/her will always exist and thus it will always transcend the limits of his/her living existence. This is the essence of the sublime, timeless aesthetic value. This importance of the human residue has been surrounded by such a great value and has exerted such a deeply existential influence upon humans that already since the dawn of every artistic expression and of every thought that has come down to us the bones were considered as worthy of respect and involving life. An example that remains vivid throughout the ages, is the well-known and commonly accepted belief of billions of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, which is depicted in their Holy Books in a very nice symbolic manner, that human bones contain life and some day they are destined to sprout again. This belief which sums up, expresses and conforms wholly with the sublime aesthetic value of the skeletal residue with this beautiful symbolic illustration of new shoots out of “dead” branches, is also confirmed by the relatively recent scientific discovery of DNA.<sup>38</sup> Dead bones as well as dead flesh that have been well-preserved retain eternal and immutable traits pertaining to the identity of the dead.<sup>39</sup> It is even scientifically possible by means of well-developed laboratory techniques to make them “sprout” again and to extract new life from them in some regard. In order to illustrate this thought it would be enough to say that the identi-

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Filotheos-Fotios Maroudas, *Aesthetics of the Holy Prayer Rooms of the Abraham Religions: Synagogue – Mosque – Church* (University Lectures, Athens 2018/2019), 8-11.

<sup>38</sup> Beside the widely known DNA genetic code, there are also further methods who reveal many identity marks; we mention for instance the very interesting study of Richard Dirnhofer, “VIRTOPSY – Auf dem Weg zur minimal-invasiven Autopsie,” in *Tot und toter Körper*, eds. Dominik Groß, Andrea Esser, Hubert Knoblauch, and Brigitte Tag, 147-150 (Kassel: Kassel University Press, 2007).

<sup>39</sup> Even in bones that come from traditional cremation the sex, the age and some more characteristics can be easily discerned, cf. Hünewinkel, 20-21.

fication of all the corpses that were pulverized in the crematories during the Holocaust could be in theory achievable, it would thus be possible to give them back to their surviving relatives but also to obtain “confessions” from them about the conditions of their life and their martyrdom.

*ii. Aesthetic assessment of the methods of inhumation, cremation and pulverization*

Inhumation and traditional cremation are both compatible with the assumptions and the principles of aesthetics: for whether they leave the body to decay naturally in the earth or they expose it to fire, also a natural process, the enduring result of the presence of the skeletal residue and of all the data that are contained in it and that actually constitute its identity, is that they all remain as they had been determined by nature. If we approach the problem more cautiously, we notice that fire shortens the time needed for the decomposition and consequently it does not give those involved in the process the necessary time to shape completely the impressions that otherwise would have been unavoidable. It deprives the temporarily emerging notions of the ugly and the tragic of their duration and so finally it denies the spectator the valuable benefits of an empathetic<sup>40</sup> experience which is a pivotal element of the psychic life. The contemporary mechanical incineration (or any other technique that leads to similar results, such as the environmentally more “friendly” method of defrosting and then composting of corpses) while aesthetically succeeding in the removal of the temporary ugly or tragic elements of the dead, permanently strips the corpse of its more important and constant aesthetic value:<sup>41</sup> the sublime character of its eternal skeletal residue, the individualized information about its identity that is, as has been proven, hidden within. It also removes from the corpse all those things that have an instructional value for humans and for science. Of course, one could argue that for the dead themselves this instruction has no sense at all, and, even if the surviving persons obtain some lessons, this does not benefit the person who had opted for the mechanical cremation. However, the clear reply to this way of thinking consists first of all in accepting that the dead themselves certainly won't sense any of these changes. Human beings are not born as ready genetic packages that just unfold the information engraved in them during their lives; they also become what they are by the acquired characteristics of

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<sup>40</sup> The term *empathy* (“Einfühlung”) was initially introduced by Friedrich Theodor Vischer and it denotes philosophically the particular appropriation of representations and experiences.

<sup>41</sup> Hubert Knoblauch, “Der Tod der Moderne, die neue ‘Kultur des Todes’ und die Sektion,” in *Tot und toter Körper*, 197.

their nurture or by their own deeds thanks to their education.<sup>42</sup> Therefore the humans' attitude towards the final annihilation and the decisions they make about the management of their residue do have an impact upon their attitude in life and influence both their own lives and the societies they live in. One can easily imagine that the official legislation and the general social tolerance take on completely different forms if society cares for its dead members the same way it treats the rest of its waste or if the inherent value of the dead is duly recognized.

Relatives and friends do not just see and know all that goes on during the process of mechanical incineration. Guided by a limited sense of reality and moving within a hedonistic view of life without really understanding their own experience, they stick to a fictional frame and form the meaningless illusion that this procedure can avoid worm infestation of the corpse, while it is their own intervention that causes a suffering even worse than that.<sup>43</sup> Apart from this, for the first time in history we have "urns" void of content, without any data being provided by the dust stored in them, because after the cremation by unnaturally high temperatures and after the pulverization of the smashed bones, the existing genetic code has actually been completely extinguished. Any genetic information is annihilated and this means that in the end the use of the genetic code itself as a transmitter of information about individual identity dies with the body. In the case of mechanical cremation, we perform placebo-rituals for the relatives and funerals for a vague residue that does not correspond to the person to whom it supposedly belongs. Regarding its genetic information, the residue has the same value as carbon dust or desert sand.

#### IV. Bioethical issues about the annihilation of the human corpse

The considerations and dilemmas that arise after our presentation of the annihilation of the genetic material and the identity of the skeletal residue, are connected with issues that go far beyond the narrow limits of a simple personal decision about being buried or cremated after death. They reach in fact the sphere of the bioethical approach to the subject because we can now talk not only of the grey zones of life but also of the "grey zones of death."<sup>44</sup>

The first question is if it can be accepted within society that the financial concerns about the costs of funeral ceremonies may inevitably lead to the

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Μυρτώ Δραγώνα-Μονάχου, "Ηθική και Βιοηθική," *Επιστήμη και Κοινωνία* 8-9 (2002): 1-26, 8.

<sup>43</sup> "Experiences of ugliness have epistemic value, they increase our 'aesthetic intelligence' through the development of an engaged appreciative awareness of ugliness and all forms of aesthetic value," see Brady, 38.

<sup>44</sup> Γεώργιος Κουμάντος, "Οι Γκρίζες Ζώνες της Ζωής," *Η Καθημερινή*, 2 Ιουνίου, 2002.



physical annihilation of the dead by the interventional destruction of all genetic data pertaining to his/her corporeal residue.

Then, in case the interested person is not clearly informed about the procedure of mechanical cremation and the subsequent genetic disappearance of all personal data due to crushing and pulverizing, the next question to be asked is to what extent relatives and friends have the obligation to fulfill the will of the deceased. It would certainly be possible, in keeping with the bioethical principle of autonomy, to argue in favor of the personal right of the individual to decide about the fate of his/her corporeal residue. However, if no clear information is being provided about the stages of the adopted procedure, the basic question concerning the persons who are rightfully eligible to decide about the genetic annihilation of the corporeal residue of someone (a question that already goes one step beyond the penultimate one concerning the human existence, i.e. who has the right to decide about the premature death of someone through euthanasia) becomes even more complicated than the already mentioned bioethical triptych “what people want, what doctors do and what the law permits.”<sup>45</sup> Since individuals do not receive the opportunity to make informed decisions the first biomedical principle, namely the principle and the right to autonomy, is immediately violated.<sup>46</sup> Especially in the case of pulverization and the total destruction of genetic residue we have beside this a violation of the third bioethical principle of non-maleficence, or avoidance of harm/damages.<sup>47</sup>

The third question results from the following observation: if we assume that the objective genetic value of the dead human body is not accepted and respected, namely, if we handle the dead bodies as objects without any real value, then it is rather possible that new discussions will start about the remaining value of the living but brain dead bodies or the bodies with loss of self-consciousness (Alzheimer’s disease). What I mean is, if society stops to respect the objective genetic value of the corpses of their dead ones,

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. Ira Bedzow, “Dying with Dignity: State vs Patient,” *The Aspen Times*, A14, July 14, 2015. <https://www.aspentimes.com/opinion/columns/guest-column-dying-with-dignity-state-v-patient/>.

<sup>46</sup> The issue of *informed consent* first rose to prominence after the Holocaust in the *Nuremberg Code* from 1947. Cf. Stacy Gallin, and Ira Bedzow, “Holocaust as an Inflection Point in the Development of Bioethics and Research Ethics,” in *Handbook of Research Ethics and Scientific Integrity*, ed. R. Iphofen (Dordrecht: Springer, 2019), 3, and 12-4; a more detailed presentation of the four principles of Biomedicine is contained in the classical work, where they were originally formulated Tom L. Beauchamp, and James F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

<sup>47</sup> See Sue Cannon, “Reflections on Fieldwork in Stressful Situations,” in *Studies in Qualitative Methodology*, vol. 3, *Learning about Fieldwork*, ed. Robert G. Burgess (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1992), as cited in Martyn Hammersley, “Ethics of Ethnography,” in *Handbook of Research Ethics and Scientific Integrity*, ed. R. Iphofen, 1-13 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2019).

than, in a further state of mind, it is not very far from what led to the Nazis euthanasia program of the feebleminded, and sure then, this is a “proper object of fear.”<sup>48</sup>

## V. Conclusions

The Holocaust, which was chosen by the Nazis as the final and ideal solution in order to fully express their hatred and their will towards extinction, could not be regarded as completely implemented by those who thought up and perpetrated it without the imposition of utter oblivion, the disappearance of any element of identity and identification of its targeted victim groups. As an ideal means to be implemented in the last stage of the final solution, the perpetrators chose the posthumous, mechanically mediated and unnatural annihilation of the corporeal dimension and presence of those murdered. This historic example and its consequences must be taken into consideration by every human being because the essence of the management of the remnants of his/her presence on Earth is something that exceeds by far the duration of a funeral closing ceremony.

To the existing individual and bioethical rights one more is now added: the right to be protected from the imposed genetic oblivion and annihilation.

What has been stated in the present article makes the dictum of the great Arthur Caplan seem eerily prophetic: the “whole discipline of biomedical ethics rises from the ashes of the Holocaust.”<sup>49</sup> Our responsibility is to ensure that the powder resulting from the Holocaust serves as the foundation for protecting the dignity of the human body, in life and in death.

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<sup>48</sup> Evangelos D. Protopapadakis, *From Dawn till Dusk: Bioethical Insights into the Beginning and the End of Life* (Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2019), 141.

<sup>49</sup> Arthur Caplan, “The Stain of Silence: Nazi Ethics and Bioethics,” in *Medicine after the Holocaust: From the Master Race to the Human Genome and Beyond*, ed. Sh. Rubinfeld (London – New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 82. This statement, which in the meantime has become famous, refers back to the study of Robert F. Drinan, “The Nuremberg Principles in International Law,” in *The Nazi Doctors and the Nuremberg Code: Human Rights in Human Experimentation*, eds. George J. Annas, and Michael A. Grodin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 174-175.

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