تعلم الموت: ترجمة وتعليق

Learning to Die: Translation and Commentry

أ. **سفيان كروم:** باحث في مرحلة الدكتوراه، كلية الشريعة، جامعة ابن زهر، أكادير، المغرب.

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الملخص:

يثير الفيلسوف الفرنسي ميشيل هانوس في مقاله: تعلُّم الموت "**Apprendre à mourir**" تساؤلا عميقا عن العلاقة بين الميلاد والموت، فكلاهما محطات حتمية في مسيرة الإنسان، تحدث دون اختيار منه. كما أن أحدًا لا يتعلم كيف يولد، فإن النمو يأتي تلقائيًا، مدفوعًا بقوانين الطبيعة، في حين تقتصر الرعاية على التوجيه والحماية. فهل يمكن قول الشيء نفسه عن الموت؟ إن الاستعداد للموت، على عكس الولادة، خيارٌ واعٍ يفرضه إدراكنا لفنائه، وهو ما يجعل "تعلم الموت" عملية تستدعي التأمل والمصالحة مع الذات ومع الآخرين، لضمان رحيل هادئ وسلام داخلي لا يشوبه ندم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الموت، التعلُّم، ميشيل هانوس، علم النفس.

Abstract:

In his essay, *"Apprendre à mourir"* (*Learning to Die*), the French psychiatrist, psychologist Michel Hanus poses a profound question about the relationship between birth and death. Both are inevitable milestones in the human journey, occurring beyond one's control. Just as no one learns how to be born, growth unfolds naturally, governed by the laws of nature, while care is limited to guidance and protection. But can the same be said of death? Unlike birth, preparing for death is a conscious choice, compelled by our awareness of mortality. Thus, *learning to die* becomes a process that requires deep reflection and reconciliation—with oneself and with others—to ensure a peaceful departure, free of regret.

Keywords: Death, Learning, Michel Hanus, Psychology.

Who is Michel Hanus?

Michel Hanus was a French psychiatrist, psychologist, and psychoanalyst known for his significant contributions to the field of thanatology (the study of death). He served as president of the Thanatology Association and founded of the European Union *Vivre son deuil* ("Live Your Grief"). He taught at several prestigious universities, including those in Paris, Geneva, and Montreal, and enriched the scientific literature with numerous works on death and mourning, approached from genetic, psychoanalytical, and therapeutic perspectives. He passed away in April 2010.

Do We Learn How to Be Born?

We have no choice in the matter. Just as death is an inevitable fate, birth is also an inescapable event. But did we come into this world as a result of a conscious decision made by our parents, or were we merely an unexpected surprise —a stroke of chance? The moment we see the light, we find ourselves engaged in a struggle with life, surrounded by the care and protection of our parents. Yet we continue to grow instinctively—have we ever learned how this happens? Physical care does not create growth; it merely accompanies and protects the body from harm. Growth, in its essence, is an irreversible and inevitable journey.

But what about psychological, moral, social, and spiritual growth? These are the dimensions that shape the essence of our humanity. From an early age, a child becomes aware of being alive; yet moral consciousness does not awaken all at once—it develops gradually, shaped by upbringing and guidance in distinguishing between good and evil. In the early stages, the mind perceives "good" only as that which brings comfort, and "evil" as that which causes pain, in line with what is known as the "pleasure principle."

However, parents guide the child by expressing approval of good behavior and disapproval of misbehavior. As a result, the child's desire for love and acceptance motivates them to behave in ways their parents consider right, while the fear of losing that love or facing reprimand discourages undesirable actions. In this way, the child begins to adapt to the "reality principle," understanding that gratification may be delayed and that not all desires can —or should —be fulfilled at any cost.

Learning to grow, then, means adhering to parental values at a certain stage—though these values may later be reassessed or even challenged. Conversely, it can also mean surrendering to the absence of values, where nothing governs one's actions but the relentless pursuit of immediate gratification. So, what is it that we should truly learn?

Should we seek ways to bypass rules and social norms in pursuit of personal gain—even at the expense of others—as long as we avoid punishment? Or does true learning consist in engaging with the world through ethical interaction?

Life compels us to grow, and it falls upon parents and responsible adults to teach the child —and eventually, to teach them how to learn. In this way, the child becomes capable of independence and, to a large extent, responsible for their own fate. But does one always desire to learn? Do we strive for growth beyond the physical body, which reaches its peak at a certain point before beginning its inevitable decline?

Biological existence alone is not sufficient to form a complete human being. While physical growth occurs automatically, psychological, moral, and social development demands ongoing care and intentional guidance. A child is not born a fully developed human being; they become one through learning, experience, and the internalization of values imparted to them. In this context, the importance of education emerges not merely as a means of regulating behavior, but as the art of shaping conscience—an

art that elevates the individual from the realm of immediate pleasure to the horizon of responsibility and maturity.

Learning—But for What Purpose?

Is it an innate drive, or merely a deeply ingrained habit that requires no justification? Why do we learn —and where does it lead us? Life's timeline inevitably ends in death, but could life itself hold a meaning beyond merely awaiting its conclusion? Does it not offer lessons that must be understood?

It is common and convenient to view death as nothing more than the end of life—a perspective reinforced by most major dictionaries, with the notable exception of the Encyclopédie of the 18th century. If death were merely a final stop, it would teach us nothing. Yet, it is more than just an ending; it resides within our bodies and minds throughout life, even if unconsciously. The body's existence is a perpetual balance between construction and destruction, between growth and programmed cell death, as Jean-Claude Ameisen illustrated in his work on apoptosis. In our consciousness, death has been present long before its actual arrival.

The death we witness is the withering of nature, which perishes only to be reborn. It is the death of the animals around us. But above all, it is the death of our loved ones—the loss that fills us with sorrow. Yet, what do we truly know about our own death? Rationally, we acknowledge its inevitability, knowing that its moment will surely come. And yet, unless we face old age or illness, we tend to avoid thinking about it, as if a part of us refuses to accept it. Death? We'll think about it later! Death? That's for others!

Since 1915, Freud went even further, asserting that most of us live as if we will never die. He suggested that we deny death by remaining silent about it and that we lack a concrete image of our own mortality.

Thus, we remain torn throughout our lives—between our rational awareness, which occasionally reminds us of our mortality, and a deeper, instinctive, perhaps unconscious part of us that refuses to acknowledge it, clinging instead to the illusion of immortality.

The text goes beyond the biological aspect to remind us that learning, growth, and awareness are not merely habits, but efforts to design a meaningful life amidst the reality of mortality. It is a call to understand life from within, rather than in anticipation of its end.

Learning to Die

The first step is not to dismiss thoughts of death when they arise. It is ever-present in newspaper headlines and television broadcasts, as well as a central theme in many literary works and films. Yet, we only feel its profound impact when it comes close to us.

The fear of death has a geographical dimension—tragedies striking the Middle East would affect us more deeply if they occurred in France. Similarly, the death of a famous artist or politician may stir emotions, but it does not compare to the pain of losing someone dear.

Michel Hanus points to a profound psychological and social dimension: our awareness of death is shaped not only by abstract facts but also by emotional and geographical proximity. This helps explain why the daily tragedies endured by Palestinians in Gaza often fail to elicit the same level of attention or human response as similar events occurring in geographically or culturally closer contexts. Such disparity in reactions highlights the limitations of human empathy when it is not supported by a moral consciousness that transcends borders. It raises pressing questions about our responsibility as human beings toward the suffering of those who are perceived as distant—despite the fact that their humanity is no less than that of anyone else.

The Fear of Death and the Fear of Dying: Not Entirely Synonymous.

What does the fear of dying encompass? Simply acknowledging and living with this fear is already a step toward learning to die. How many boldly declare that they fear nothing—not even death—yet this fear is universal, perhaps even inherent to human nature? Even those who long for death as an escape unbearable physical or emotional pain are not exempt from it.

Until recently, dying was often associated with immense suffering. However, thanks to palliative care and the Leonetti Law, it is now possible to hope for a painless death. Nevertheless, death remains linked to one of humanity's oldest fears—the nightmare of being buried alive. For some, this may even be a hidden reason for choosing cremation over burial.

Death also means parting from loved ones, with the painful certainty that they will suffer in our absence. Thus, learning to die also involves preparing for this stage in a way that eases the pain for those we cherish. The fear of death encompasses all this and more, embodying the inescapable finality of existence.

It may represent the culmination of a life well lived—a peak moment of fulfillment. But it can also marked by sorrowful regret for joys never realized and opportunities forever lost. Death is the ultimate boundary imposed on humanity—one we cannot choose, yet must inevitably face.

Learning to Die…

Death, in any case, is the ultimate stripping away. This is why Indian sadhus renounce their families and relinquish all their possessions, wandering the roads in absolute poverty as they await death—as if preparing in advance for this inevitable detachment.

But death also carries fears that extend beyond the moment of passing itself—fears of what may come after. The terror of hell, once deeply ingrained in Christian societies for centuries, has largely faded, even among believers. Yet uncertainty about what follows death still lingers. Even those with deep faith and a life marked by good deeds are not entirely immune to this anxiety—though perhaps to a lesser extent than atheists, who are convinced that their fate is total annihilation.

In 1926, Freud observed that what frightens humans most is the unknown—yet they remain irresistibly drawn to it.

Learning to Die…

We now face two new steps. The first is learning how to live with the unknown. The second is accepting that, despite the legitimate fear it evokes, this mystery holds a hidden source of inspiration. At times, we may even make peace with it—some might even long for it in moments of unbearable suffering.

Learning to Die…

It means practicing detachment, little by little, throughout life. Necessary renunciations are an inseparable part of any existence that aspires to growth. A teenager, for example, must let go of childhood in order to become a man or a woman. But the renunciation we speak of here goes beyond this natural progression; it refers to the conscious choices we make to achieve true liberation—liberation from the superficial and transient, so we can focus on what is truly essential: the meaning we give to our lives.

Learning to Die…

It is about renouncing fleeting possessions in favor of an inner investment in fundamental values. As an Indian proverb says: *"We truly own only what we have given to others."* But why do we desire ownership

in the first place? And what is the purpose of possession in the face of death? Letting go of what is unnecessary is the path to true liberation.

The Abrahamic religions speak of rewards in the afterlife, of paradise. But why do we need rewards? Is the good we do merely an investment for the future, or does it hold value in itself, as the very essence of life—to be happy now, as soon as possible, and to help others achieve happiness within our limited means?

What more do we need to attain peace of mind, the greatest lesson in learning to die?

Learning to Die Is About Being Well-Prepared!

But to prepare, we must first understand how we wish to die. The prevailing desire today is to die without awareness—during sleep, or in a painless episode, without witnessing the moment of departure. But if that is the case, why prepare for an event we will not be conscious of? Why learn to die? And yet, how can we be sure that those who die suddenly do not sense death approaching?

Accompanying the dying has taught us that time shifts in moments of departure—a single second can stretch into what feels like an eternity. Even a swift, unexpected death does not exempt one from experiencing their own demise.

The Abrahamic faiths speak of judgment at or after death, while Eastern philosophies and religions, more reserved in their claims, believe that our actions follow us, determining our place in the cycles of reincarnation. For Jews and Muslims, judgment is immediate, while Catholics emphasize Judgment Day. But what difference does it make? In the end, there is always accountability!

Learning to Die…

Perhaps it is simpler to imagine that every individual's moral conscience takes one last look at their life. If so, then learning to die means seeking, while we still have time, inner peace. To achieve this, we must acknowledge our mistakes and shortcomings and consider how to mend them.

The heaviest sins are not those we have committed, but those we could have prevented—or the good we failed to do.

How many opportunities were lost to fear? To laziness? To a lack of courage?

How much regret awaits us?

His words point to what might be called "sins of omission" — those that concern what we failed to do, rather than what we did — such as hesitating to take a stand or falling short in a moment that called for courage. This subtle moral dimension reminds us that inner peace is not something granted, but rather something built through the courage to face ourselves, to acknowledge our shortcomings, and to make amends — as long as we are still alive.

Learning to Die…

To live to our fullest potential means daring to take initiative, accepting the possibility of making mistakes. It means moving forward—here and now—toward completeness, revealing the best within us, and inspiring others in the process.

We were speaking of the compromises imposed by life—those we do not choose. In this context, grief becomes the greatest teacher. Grief, especially that which comes with great losses, teaches us how to die. It brings death close to us once again, making it present in our lives. When

we stand before the body of someone we loved who has passed away, we realize clearly that one day, we too will be in their place—dead.

This confrontation with death, and the deep pain that accompanies it, reorders our priorities. It allows us to see many aspects of our lives differently: how trivial, meaningless, and even irrational our former daily fears seem! Comfort, money, success, physical love, and many other things that once seemed essential now appear secondary and marginal.

In those moments, what truly matters becomes clear: the authenticity of our relationships with others, and the regret that we didn't live them more fully; the deep meaning of life and the core values that define it. It's not too late—we can still live with honesty and presence, and enjoy every moment. As for tomorrow—it may be too late.

Grief Immerses Us in the Experience of Pain:

It is then that we realize pain is an inseparable part of life, inevitable, because it reflects the emotional bonds and love we hold for those who have passed. Therefore, we learn how to die long before death arrives—if we wish, as much as possible—not to be taken by surprise.

Learning how to die…

It also means preparing to face it. Many people, while claiming not to fear death, believe it's better not to think about it—on the pretext that "its time will come later". Yet it seems we all carry remnants of primitive magical thinking, where the word and the thing it denotes are considered inseparable—that merely thinking about death, or worse, speaking of it, might somehow summon it!

Learning how to die…

Primarily, it means accepting to think about it—not pushing the idea of death away, but embracing the reality that we are mortal and allowing

that awareness to guide us. But our death is not just an abstract idea. Even if, as Freud writes, we lack an accurate representation of it, it still has practical implications for our lives and the lives of others—especially our loved ones.

How Do We Wish to Die?

Do we want to die without feeling it, as most people today seem to prefer? Or would we rather see it coming so we can better prepare for it?

A death with as little suffering as possible is a universal desire, and the Leonetti Law has granted us the right to it.

But isn't it better to decide in advance—at the right time—what our instructions would be, and to appoint a trusted person to act on our behalf should death strike before we are able to remain conscious?

Euthanasia is a false dilemma: why should we ask others to make choices we ourselves failed to define beforehand?

We must clearly establish the limits beyond which we do not wish to go—and prepare the necessary tools for that: advance directives and a trusted person to whom we've given our instructions.

Learning to die…

It also means not clinging to an unreasonable life that brings us no good and becomes a burden to others. This requires deep reflection, from which practical actions suited to each situation can arise.

Advance directives and a trusted representative mean opening up the conversation about death with those around us.

The **first step** in learning to die is thinking about death—not rejecting the thought of it.

The **second step** is speaking about it.

The **third step** is preparing for it.

When someone close dies—a neighbor, a relative, even a pet—children often ask questions about death. This offers a valuable opportunity to speak openly about the subject, to explain that we, their parents or grandparents, are not eternal, and that one day, we too will be gone. Naturally, they respond with protests: “Later… later!” But they do hear us—and when they eventually confront death, they will understand.

Our death is, indeed, our own concern—but it also concerns those around us.

They will grieve when we’re gone and shouldn’t we take that into account? Should we speak with them about it? Most of the time, people will respect our wishes. But that doesn’t necessarily mean their wishes are the same as ours. Cremation, for instance, is far from universally accepted.

Even if not everyone agrees, at least they will have been informed. When nothing is said, the funeral arrangements and the reading of the will can bring unexpected surprises.

Learning to die…

is about facing things with clarity and realism—there is still much to be done.

Dying in peace requires reconciliation before it’s too late: asking forgiveness from those we’ve wronged and making amends where possible.

It is about putting our affairs in order. While this is often understood in terms of material matters, it equally applies to our relationships with others. Now may not seem like the ideal time to adress strained

connections —but it is precisely awareness of our own mortality that urges us to do so.

Accepting the idea of death means recognizing that time is running out. It means stepping away from the trivial—material concerns—and moving toward the essential; toward inner peace, which is the true source of happiness.

Learning to die…

is, at its core, a desire to die in peace. And those who live in peace have little to worry about. To ensure that this peace endures beyond our passing, it is truly helpful to write a will—an ethical will, if we wish to leave a meaningful message to our children, and a material will to determine how our assets will be distributed. But wouldn't it be wiser to discuss these materials in advance, to prevent any unpleasant surprises?

The law no longer grants the deceased much freedom, yet it still allows for certain decisions concerning the reserved portion of the estate and the distribution of personal belongings.

As for funerals and burial sites, views differ. Many eldery individuals choose to make arrangements in advance—selecting the type of ceremony, the burial location, and sometimes even preparing their own graves. Others, however, even at an advanced age, believe that such responsibilities should be felt to their children. In any case, those left behind will do their best to honor what they believe the deceased would have wanted. This, too, offers an important opportunity for open discussion.

We Can Learn to Die…

It is wise to do so. Yet no amount of preparation can fully dispel the mystery that surrounds our death. It will always remain a unique and deeply personal experience—one that ultimately escapes our

understanding, slipping beyond our awareness at the very moment it unfolds. And yet, it leaves behind something essential: the truth of who we were, whether that be light, peace, or something else entirely.

Thus, in Michel Hanus's view, death is not merely an inevitable biological fate; it represents an ontological horizon that fundamentally reshapes the individual's relationship with both the self and existence. Through conscious engagement with the concept of finitude, one learns to free life from superficiality and false conformity, thereby moving toward a more authentic and fulfilling way of being. Death, in all its fragility and deprivation, does not diminiish meaning—rather, it illuminates it. It calls upon the individual to reexamine core values and reorder priorities in a way that elevates genuine human connection and existential integrity. In this light, contemplating death is no longer an exercise in pessimism or withdrawal, but rather a meditative and transformative practice deeply rooted in the essence of being. It leads to the realization that only a life lived in awareness of death is truly a life worth living.

Key Insights and Conclusions:

1. **Death as a Cognitive Instrument, Not Merely a Biological Event**: Hanus presents death not as a sudden rupture detached from life's continuum, but as an integral component that permeates every moment and decision. It is not something to be feared, but rather embraced as a source of insight—one that teaches us how to live more consciously and deliberately.

2. **Learning from Death as a Lifelong Education**: Hanus advances an educational vision of death, viewing it not as a postponed event but as a continuous process of learning—one that unfolds across multiple dimensions:

- **Psychologically**: through adaptation to loss and the awareness of human fragility.
- **Socially**: by rethinking our relationships with others.
- **Ethically**: by internalizing the meaning of genuine living and existential honesty.

In this view, death becomes a cornerstone of profound human education, enabling the full maturation of the individual.

3. **Grief and Death as Pathways to Inner Reconstruction**: Hanus does not regard grief as a purely negative psychological state, but rather as a constructive force. The sorrow arising from the loss of loved ones—or from the contemplation of mortality—promotes self-reflection and reevaluation of life's direction. He thus connects grief with learning, arguing that authentic sorrow is not a pathway to collapse, but to maturity. This perspective resonates with existential philosophy's concept of "productive anxiety", which propels the individual toward questioning, growth, and action.

Michel Hanus's philosophy does not merely encourage adaptation to the idea of death, but invites us to live in its light. Death is not a terrifying end, but a threshold to a deeper understanding of life—an understanding that liberates us from illusion and dispersion, and draws us closer to the human core. The more we contemplate death, the nearer we come to discovering life—not as a mere sum of days, but as a depth of lived experience and existential sincerity.