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## **Meet the thanabots: The digital Eusapia - the city of the dead - in the age of artificial intelligence**

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the relationship between death and Artificial Intelligence (AI), examining the ethical implications of the presence-absence status of the deceased in the digital realm. The paper commences with the phenomenological experience of death, where the corpse is a paradoxical boundary between existence and non-existence. It then introduces the notion of “digital remains”—the online footprints left behind by the deceased—which contribute to a sense of continuity in their existence. AI is emerging as a mechanism for “digital resurrection”, with thanabots acting as simulators of the deceased, thus allowing communication with them. This new situation parallels Eusapia, Italo Calvino’s fictional city, where the living and the deceased coexist through mirrors of reality. The final question concerns the ethical dimension of this technology: is it a form of “digital immortality” or merely an illusion of consolation in the face of mortality? The answer is not clear, as AI is redefining the threshold between life and death, shifting the paradigm of existential perception.

**Keywords:** Death, presence-absence, corpse, digital remains, thanabots, Eusapia, digital immortality, ethical dimension.

### **Introduction**

Man does not theoretically understand transience but *lives* through his encounter with his deceased. This experience produces a sense of responsibility: since life is finite, we must act with

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awareness of its end, pay tribute to the deceased, incorporate them into our memory, keep our promises to them, remember them with respect and not to cause them harm (Luper, 2018). Since the 1970s and Thomas Nagel's landmark titled *Death* (Nagel, 1970), philosophers have elaborated arguments about the respect and moral obligation we owe to the deceased and their bodies. When we try to determine, however, why corpses matter, we are faced with certain problems. Most -though not all - philosophers of death accept what Fred Feldman called the "termination thesis", the claim that persons cease to exist at the exact time of biological death (Feldman, 1994).

Our view is phenomenological: at the level at which we encounter other people, corpses are and are also not the person whose body belongs to. Their strangeness and paradox stem from this contradiction, a contradiction that may also be described in terms of continuity and discontinuity. Corpses interest us in a very particular way, precisely because they serve as material testimonies to the profound ambiguity of death: they remain intimately connected to the identity and dignity of the deceased, yet simultaneously highlight the stark reality of absence, decay, and loss. Encountering the corpse thus becomes a potent site of ethical reflection, inviting us not only to consider our obligations towards the departed but also to reassess the nature and scope of our commitments toward each other, as finite beings bound together by mortality.

In his book *The Dominion of the Dead* (2003), Robert Pogue Harrison, argues that each culture responds to a particular "charisma" of the corpse (Harrison, 2003), which requires that it be treated with a certain amount of care. He also amazingly states that:

*The corpse is the site of something that has disappeared, that has forsaken the sphere of presence, that has passed from the body into . . . into what? Death? The past? Another dimension? We hear these words and understand them abstractly, but faced with the spectacle of a dead body the primitive mind did not think to itself: "My mother has passed away into the dimension of the has-been." It more likely*

*thought to itself (something like): “Here is my mother lying before me. I can see her, touch her, feel her, yet she is not here. How can this be?” How indeed? Only something as resistant as the insensate body of a loved one—the enigma of its expired life and remnant thinghood—could give the anthropomorphic mind its first access to what we abstractly call death, and with it to the ethos of finitude (Harrison, 2003).*

Harrison’s observations resonate powerfully today, especially given contemporary technological attempts at digital resurrection, which seek to negotiate precisely this enigma—by digitally reanimating the deceased, we strive symbolically to reclaim presence, though ironically, we may only amplify the uncanny tension between life and death, presence and absence.

### **The presence of absence: From the ontology of loss to digital remains**

In its perfect resemblance to the person who has passed away, the corpse conceals a presence, at while making an absence present. The experience of loss is not perceived abstractly but embodied: we do not say that one “now lives in the past” or “in another dimension, that of death”, but we experience the contradiction of presence-absence in the corpse. In *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology* (1943), Jean-Paul Sartre gives the familiar example of entering a café, waiting for his friend Pierre, who is not actually there, as well as the experience that results from his absence. He refers to Pierre’s absence as “haunting”:

*It is certain that the café by itself with its patrons, its tables, its booths, its mirrors, its light, its smoky atmosphere, and the sounds of voices, rattling saucers, and footsteps which fill it – the café is a fullness of being. And all the intuitions of detail which I can have are filled by these odours, these sounds, these colours, all phenomena which have a transphenomenal being. Similarly Pierre’s actual presence in a place*

*which I do not know is also a plenitude of being... When I enter this café to search for Pierre, there is formed a synthetic organization of all the objects in the café, on the ground of which Pierre is given as about to appear... But now Pierre is not here. This does not mean that I discover his absence in some precise spot in the establishment. In fact Pierre is absent from the whole café; his absence fixes the café in its evanescence; the café remains ground; it persists in offering itself as an undifferentiated totality to my only marginal attention; it slips into the background; it pursues its nihilation. Only it makes itself ground for a determined figure; it carries the figure everywhere in front of it, presents the figure everywhere to me. This figure which slips constantly between my look and the solid, real objects of the café is precisely a perpetual disappearance; it is Pierre raising himself as nothingness on the ground of the nihilation of the café...It serves as a foundation for the judgement—"Pierre is not here." It is in fact the intuitive apprehension of a double nihilation...But, to be exact, I myself expected to see Pierre, and my expectation has caused the absence of Pierre to happen as a real event concerning this café. It is an objective fact at present that I have discovered this absence, and it presents itself as a synthetic relation between Pierre and the setting in which I am looking for him. Pierre absent haunts this café and is the condition of its self-nihilating organization as ground (Sartre, 1956).*

The quotation of this extract is not coincidental, as it comprehensively captures both the effect of absence and the “nowhere but everywhere” aspect that the living experience for the deceased. The present sense of absence that frames Sartre’s experience of Pierre’s absence in the café hints at the idea of an absent presence, an absence that is absent in space. The body of the deceased is the first and perhaps most fundamental object that is so intensely absent that its very absence is tangible, that is to say, it becomes a presence (Fuchs, 2018; Stokes, 2025). Death, like Pierre’s absence,

is not something we experience directly, but something we perceive as a negation within our very reality.

In similar terms, we can describe what we are and what we become through technology. We are increasingly present online, so much so that our profiles and avatars are embedded in our flesh as part of who we are. Our online presence is not so much a tool we use as it is a fact of who we are, a part of how we are present, seen and communicated with the world. We enter the internet and find ourselves face to face not just with photos or lines of text, but with that unique thing that characterizes each person, consciousness—what the great Ludwig Wittgenstein uniquely called “the light in the face of others” (Wittgenstein, 1967). But what happens when the source of this light goes out, or when the users behind these online identities die? What challenges does the possibility through AI to digitally embody our once beloved living, and now deceased, pose? After we die, what we leave behind is digitally transformed into remains, reflecting not just what we once were, but what we experienced, felt and did. Digital remains refer to data that remains after the end of their original purpose or interaction, such as social media profiles or other content that remains after a user has stopped participating or even after death. They often represent a “frozen” state of past activity, carrying historical and commemorative value, persisting after the end of active engagement and persisting past their original context (Lingel, 2013; Segerstad et al., 2022).

### **From digital remains to thanabots at the age of “Digital Eu sapia”**

Digital remains have this dual sense of radical absence and ongoing presence, where the deceased no longer exists, but continues to exist. They are elements of memory, which imbue the element of a paradoxical sacredness in whoever beholds them. In the case of digital remains, the image is the corpse. Robert Pogue Harrison again notes that the image is “essentially mortuary” (Harrison, 2003). Digital remains consist of just such images, behind which there is a person who stands mute but resilient. It is “digital flesh”, a concept developed in *Living and Dying in a Virtual World: Digital*

*Kinships, Nostalgia, and Mourning in Second Life* for *Second Life* by Margaret Gibson and Clarissa Carden, to describe the kind of embodiment we develop over time through immersion into digital spaces, which implies “the development over time of connections, of memories, and of temporal and emotional investments” (Gibson & Carden, 2018). These affective connections lend the digital image a peculiar vitality, a haunting liveliness, even when its referent is gone.

Ultimately, does AI allow us to survive our death? In this contradictory juxtaposition of presence and absence emerges Death Tech and AI, which add to the ongoing presence the element of reanimation—rendering the deceased seemingly responsive. Notable platforms such as Jason Rohrer’s *Project December* (<https://projectdecember.net/>) offer simulations of the deceased through large language models, breathing new “life” into what would otherwise be inert data. Through such tools, the digital remains of the deceased are not merely preserved—they are reanimated. They become thanabots or deadbots: digital deceased whom the living choose to keep near, to converse with, to seek comfort from. In these algorithmic continuations, death no longer marks an impassable boundary but is reframed as a technological threshold—suggesting, perhaps dangerously, that it can be crossed (Reséndiz & Reséndiz, 2024).

This is because, after all, the transience *they experience* through their encounter with their deceased is something they cannot come to terms with, like the citizens of the fictional city of Eusapia, from Italo Calvino’s novel *The Invisible Cities* (1972). In this book, Marco Polo describes fifty-five imaginary cities to the Emperor Kublai Khan, each with a symbolic character, representing different themes and reflections on human experience, memory and identity. Eusapia is presented as the city where the inhabitants have constructed an exact replica of their city underground. It is an underground necropolis, a buried mirror, where the deceased can continue the activities they had in life there. In such a way, they ease the transition from life to death, making the experience of the finality less abrupt. As the text states:

*No city is more inclined than Eusapia to enjoy life and flee care. And to make the leap from life to death less abrupt, the inhabitants have constructed an identical copy of their city, underground (Calvino, 1974).*

In Eusapia, then, life and death coexist symbolically: the deceased are placed in the underground city and live eternally in their former positions and professions, while the living gradually imitate the changes that occur in the underworld, to the point where it is not clear who is alive and who is deceased. So great is the similarity between the city of the living and the underworld where it seems that the deceased are the ones who built the upper Eusapia in the image and likeness of their city below, creating, ultimately creating two twin cities (Calvino, 1974). The name Eusapia was made famous by Eusapia Palladino, a notorious 19<sup>th</sup> century Italian spiritualist (medium). Palladino claimed to have supernatural abilities and that she could communicate with the deceased (De Ceglia & Leporiere, 2020). Calvino's allusion to her suggests not only an interest in necromancy, but a broader cultural fascination with mediating death—an impulse echoed today in our own attempts to digitally “speak” with the deceased through AI.

Eusapia is more than a metaphor; it is a warning. It allegorizes a culture obsessed with its past, clinging to memory not as a process of mourning but as a simulation of permanence. The deceased do not simply rest—they rule, subtly reshaping the world of the living in their image. It is a meditation on posthumous existence and necrophilic nostalgia, where human beings seek an illusion of immortality not through transcendence but through replication. In this sense, the digital reanimations offered by AI platforms represent not just technological tools but the manifestation of a deeper metaphysical longing—the desire to evade loss by preserving what is ultimately unpreservable. In today's digital Eusapia, the lines between memory and simulation dissolve. AI enables us to build a mirrored underworld where our deceased not only linger, but “perform” for us. Contemporary technology thus extends and complicates Calvino's allegory, challenging us to ask: do we actually honor the deceased?

### **When the deceased remain with us: “Digital Eusapia” as a model of digital immortality(?)**

AI serves as a new agent of digital continuity after death, preserving a person’s digital presence while enabling digital resurrection—whether through simulation, recreation, or revival of the digital identity of those deceased (Sherlock, 2013) and ultimately, offering a form of digital immortality. A definition given by Maggi Savin-Baden, David Burden, and Helen Taylor for digital immortality is “the continuation of an active or passive digital presence after death” (Savin-Baden et al., 2017). Maggi Savin-Baden and Victoria Mason-Robbie clarify that the term “afterlife” implies a presence that may or may not continue to exist, while the term “immortality” implies a presence, in at least some form, indefinitely. More precisely, digital immortality is the potential of interactivity after death. Although these terms can be used interchangeably, the afterlife is a broader and more flexible construction, as it does not contain assumptions about the duration or persistence of digital presence (Savin-Baden & Mason-Robbie, 2020). Digital afterlife treats digital presence as being a representation of the deceased person, but also as one that is existing and having form beyond leaving behind letters, diaries and personal items or posts and GIFs on Instagram or Facebook.

On re-creation platforms, which allow users to converse via AI with simulations of both real and imaginary people - including the deceased – via AI, both time and space are fluidized and reshaped as fragments of the self-move from the phase of static to the phase of energetic. In these environments, the boundaries between past and present begin to collapse, as the persistence of the digital self generates the illusion of temporal continuity. The digital deceased seems to be this consensual hallucination that contains memories and experiences that may exist outside of the human bodies from which they originated, allowing for an understanding of the perception of death as a final event that one passes through to be led into a new environment of prior existence preservation. Memories, experiences, and personal traits become detached from the body from which they originated, assuming a new, networked form and

reaffirming the enduring relevance and interconnection between the physical and the virtual world (Puzio, 2023; Stokes, 2025).

Such digital “entities” generate environments where death is reconceptualized not merely as a terminal event, but as a threshold transitioning into sustained existence within networked digital ecosystems. This reconceptualization not only reframes human mortality but also redefines the boundaries of identity, as memories and experiences take on a life independent of their original embodiment, becoming inherently relational and interactive within the digital landscape. Consequently, the digital deceased do not simply represent stored or static archives but active, responsive presences that engage dynamically with users, preserving interpersonal bonds in novel forms (Harju, 2024; Tabarak & Maysoon, 2025). Moreover, this shift compels a reevaluation of the fundamental ethical paradigms of identity and selfhood. If our identities can meaningfully persist outside the organic body, what implications arise for the authenticity of personal relationships and the integrity of individual narratives (Floridi, 2011)? That digital re-creation, although convincingly interactive, risks reducing nuanced human experience to algorithmically mediated interactions, thereby diluting the richness of embodied human relationships. Thus, the proliferation of such platforms necessitates careful ethical navigation to ensure these digital engagements meaningfully supplement, rather than superficially substitute, our profound human capacities for remembrance, grief, and connection.

Corpses remain, in an ambiguous way, persons for others. The person dwells among us, as a body, as a memory. The deceased are those to whom we owe enduring duties, encompassing responsibilities of love, remembrance, respect, and sometimes even justice. These duties reflect an enduring moral relationship that survives physical death, emphasizing that moral personhood does not cease abruptly with biological termination. This acknowledgment does not negate the radically different ontological status of the deceased; rather, it deepens our understanding of profound loss, anchoring grief in the enduring ethical and emotional bonds we maintain with the deceased. Yet, there remains an apparent sense

in which, for us—if not for the deceased themselves—their moral identity extends beyond the boundaries of their biological existence. Selves—as those we preserve through digital remains and as those who are “digitally resurrected”—may not persist in the world of life, but persons persist and remain (Ratcliffe, 2016). Hence the question arises: among the duties of love and remembrance we owe to the deceased, is there also that duty of wishing to preserve them digitally? The answer, of course, cannot be given in this text.

### **Towards a new ethics of death?**

This remaining existence—the being-but-not-being sense—fundamentally alters the way we perceive corpses. When it comes to our attitude towards the deceased, as Palle Yourgrau puts it, “Our hearts here see more clearly than our heads, for these natural attitudes are disturbed by a beleaguering metaphysical conscience” (Yourgrau, 1993). The question we have posed from the outset is: does AI allow us to survive our death? Initially, the obvious answer is *no*. Now, however, we seem to have arrived at an answer that lacks the same certainty. We are accustomed to thinking about death in binary terms: either you are deceased, or you are alive. While it may sometimes be difficult to determine whether a particular organism is still alive or not, the underlying assumption remains that there must be a definitive fact about whether something is living or deceased. If then, we define dying as ceasing to exist, there must always be a definitive fact about whether a person continues to exist or not. The claim we put forward here, however, is that our deaths are multiple and ambiguous—especially in the age of AI and advanced technology (Öhman & Floridi, 2018). The deceased are gone, and yet they remain with us, capable of continuing to “live” long after their biological decomposition. The idea that persons can exist beyond the boundaries of their biology may seem strange, still it raises some profoundly noteworthy ethical concerns.

The central question is whether death engenders its own moral framework—a distinct ethics of death that extends beyond the ethics of finitude. As an event, death does not inherently possess a moral dimension; rather, it acquires ethical significance through the

ways in which the living engage with it (Laqueur, 2015). However, if we accept that life's finitude constitutes the foundation upon which all moral attitudes toward the human condition are constructed, then it may be possible to formulate a new ethics of death within the scope of technology, in which various moral dimensions intersect. These dimensions include:

- The ethics of memory, wherein the corpse compels remembrance, acknowledgment of loss, and the institutionalization of commemorative rituals. Digital technologies amplify these dynamics, transforming memory into a constantly interactive, often algorithmically driven practice (Walter, 2018). In this transformation, memory is no longer static or private, but becomes performative and exposed, mediated through algorithms that prioritize engagement metrics over authenticity.
- The ethics of burial or cremation, reflecting a fundamental human need to ritualize death and to anchor remembrance in a specific place. AI and digital platforms pose challenges to traditional rituals by offering alternative, disembodied, and non-spatial forms of commemoration. In such a context, the grave and the urn are no longer the only places of mourning (Saraiva, 2025).
- The ethics of temporality, which has become increasingly complex as the digital age reconfigures our understanding of life, death, and persistence (Lagerkvist, 2017). The traditional linearity of life and death becomes fragmented in the digital realm, where existence is prolonged indefinitely through virtual interactions. This indefinite prolongation challenges the grieving process itself: if mourning presupposes finality, what happens when the deceased continue to "respond"? Time becomes cyclical, even suspended, as thanabots replicate presence without closure, keeping mourners in a temporal limbo.
- The ethics of presence and absence, wherein the corpse itself testifies to an ontological paradox—simultaneously here and not here, familiar yet unfamiliar (Laqueur, 2015). Thanabots deepen this paradox by manifesting deceased individuals in

continuously interactive forms. In this way, they do not replace absence with presence—they simulate presence through absence, creating “entities” that are affectively near but ontologically hollow.

As AI-generated presences of the deceased become increasingly sophisticated, they blur distinctions between genuine interaction and digital simulation, raising questions about authenticity and dignity. This phenomenon raises the question of whether digital Eusapia—digital manifestations that seemingly extend existence beyond biological limits—represents a genuine ontological extension of existence or merely provides a comforting illusion in the face of human mortality. The unresolved nature of this dilemma underscores the urgent need for ethical guidelines and clear regulations to manage digital afterlives responsibly (Hollanek & Nowaczyk-Basińska, 2024; Öhman & Floridi, 2018). Ultimately, the final resolution of whether AI and digital technologies can genuinely extend human existence beyond death, or merely simulate it convincingly, belongs to the future. Until then, a cautious, reflective ethical stance is required to navigate the complexities that arise when technology encroaches upon the fundamental boundaries of human life and death.

### **Conclusion**

The intersection of death and technology forces us to reconsider long-held assumptions about the presence, absence and continuity after the end of biological life. Thanabots seem to challenge the finality of death, blurring the boundaries between the living and the deceased. As we navigate this evolving landscape, the ethical implications of digital preservation or even resurrection of the deceased demand our attention. Do these technological extensions honor the deceased or merely serve the needs of the living? Is “digital well-being” a form of immortality or is it an illusion created to assuage the human fear of loss? Ultimately, our preoccupation with death and the possibility of some form of digital immortality reveal more about the living than the deceased. While AI can pre-

serve voices, memories, even fragments of personality, it cannot solve the fundamental mystery of what it means to exist—or to cease to exist. The question remains: does technology prolong life or redefine what it means to pass away? The answer, it seems, lies not only in AI's potential but also in the values we choose to uphold in the face of mortality.

At the heart of this inquiry echoes the seemingly simple yet profoundly groundbreaking statement by Thomas Nagel, which he formulated while examining the fundamental question of whether death is good or evil:

*I wish to consider whether death is in itself an evil; and how great an evil, and what kind, it might be. This question should be of interest even to those who believe that we do not die permanently, for one's attitude towards immortality must depend in part on one's attitude towards death (Nagel, 1970).*

Nagel's insight reminds us that our ethical stance toward death inevitably shapes our vision of what a good—or continued—life should look like, whether organic or digital. Thus, the challenge ahead is not to solve death through technology, but to preserve death as a human experience, so that our encounter with it remains ethical, rather than programmable.

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