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Author(s)	Andrew, Oberg
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Approaches to Finitude: Death, Self, Others

Andrew Oberg

University of Kochi, Japan

Abstract

The only real guarantee in life is that it will end, that each of us will die. We are of course aware of this, but we tend to be so in a superficial way, a knowledge of the type that is recognized but not felt. If we do think of death it is usually in regards to someone else's, and how their passing affects us, not how one's own passing might relate to others. In the below we seek to rectify these shortcomings and reflect on death with a bit more clarity, situating ourselves initially by a consideration of Heidegger's being-toward-death and examining his 'possibility' with a view directed at authenticity and expectation. Dying and death are differentiated, and what death as annihilation implies is stressed – and this throughout. The framework we have thereby found then becomes an important element in our next effort to discover some approaches to death, to human finitude, that might prove more apposite than the default one. We finally apply our ideas and attempts to ethical concerns about the other, and to how dying – while strictly personal – is never singular.

Keywords: approaches to death; being-toward-death; dying; ethics; existentialism; finitude; meaning

1. Gesture

Whatever the old joke about death and taxes might be, epistemologically death is woefully underrepresented. Do we *know* that we will die, or do we merely 'know' that we will die? Do we think on our own death, and if so how? *Can* we think on our own death, or is the topic ultimately unapproachable in any but a facile sense? This is a question worth asking, for the attitude that one takes to death influences not only internal comportment but external as well. These are conceptual matters, perceptual and ethical matters, and they are forcefully matters for today, for our digital modernity with its endlessly distracting, instinct numbing effects.

Walter Kaufmann points out that it was Martin Heidegger who moved the discussion of death onto contemporary philosophy's center stage (Kaufmann 1959), and we too will follow this lead in our own exploration, pirouetting upon Heidegger's famous being-toward-death as we seek first some clarity on the topic broadly before considering what an approach to one's personal death might consist in, and thereafter turning finally to how such could affect the interpersonal. Ours

is therefore not a study of the physiology of death, nor is it an analysis of death's cultural position; it is about neither euthanasia nor assisted suicide, nor even about the ritualism of death: it is simply the fact of one's coming demise. In our thinking on that we place our goals far more modestly. What we will attempt is merely a gesture, a pointing at death from a mind, one hand, two eyes that will – soon or sooner – meet it. In this glancing we can hopefully find at least a little preparation, and in that we may live a bit better while we yet do. We begin with some reflections on authenticity and expectation.

2. Looking, but Seeing?

Almost from philosophy's 'official' commencement¹ death has been a topic of interest. Epicurus, in his 'Letter to Menoeceus', issued the famous refutation to the still common intuition that death is a harm with the words:

Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing

¹ That is, from a Western tradition perspective.

to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and when death is come, we are not. It is nothing, then, either to the living or to the dead, for with the living it is not and the dead exist no longer. (quoted in Rosenbaum 1986, 218)

This is of course logical, and Epicurus is of course right, or anyway at least half right since death being ‘nothing’ to ‘us’ – whether we be Epicureans or not – is a position that not a few find difficult to arrive at. Many years later Sigmund Freud would observe that our respect for the dead often exceeds truth,² despite the deceased’s no longer needing it (Kaufmann 1959). This excess, we might add, can also run counter to the actual needs of the living that may bear grievances against the departed and be offended at the laudatory way he is being eulogized. Freud succinctly summarized the default position that we who live tend to have towards death with the following: ‘We have shown an unmistakable tendency to put death aside, to eliminate it from life’, and a little further on, ‘We cannot, indeed, imagine our own death; whenever we try to do so we find that we survive ourselves as spectators. The school of psychoanalysis could thus assert that at bottom no one believes in his own death’ (Freud 1918, 7). This purported ungraspability is a contention that we will return to, the attitude here described is the one Heidegger directly wished to challenge with his notion of being-toward-death.

Heidegger was concerned with the individual in the midst of the social, the self in the world (expanding on Husserl’s ‘horizon’ framework) into which she is ‘thrown’ at birth, incorporating all of the historical, socioeconomic, biological, cultural, linguistic, et cetera details over which none of us have any control. In the default and unreflective mode in which we tend to operate in this setting, death is something that is indeterminate and ‘out there’ in the future, and it is therefore no threat. As Heidegger put it, “‘One dies’” spreads the opinion that death, so to speak, strikes the they.”³ (Heidegger 2010, 243) He adds that, ‘Everydayness stops with this ambiguous acknowledgement of the “certainty” of death – in order to weaken the certainty by covering dying over still more and alleviating its own [i.e. the self’s] thrownness into death.’ (Heidegger 2010, 245)

Essentially Heidegger is asserting that death, in the manner in which it is normally considered in our day-to-day lives, is a fact that is recognized intellectually if called upon but not something that is ever really felt. We

might compare this to how many of us associate with the sun’s so-called movement: Yes naturally we *know* that the sun is stationary and the Earth rotates and revolves, but phenomenologically it really does seem as if the sun goes up and comes down, and indeed it is based on this notion – and not the concept of solar implacability – that we direct our lives. Thus it is, Heidegger thinks, that death is ultimately something ignored: we neither expect it as we should nor make any attempts to mentally draw close to it. In this accusation of a widespread neglect of death he does echo Freud (and many others), yet Heidegger goes further and stresses how such a willful avoidance is to our detriment. For a more authentic life, in order to distinguish oneself from the ‘they’ who surround and to better and more fully engage in one’s own being, death must be faced as a possibility.

This term ‘possibility’, in Heidegger’s usage, is an area of some contention but is of vast importance to his being-toward-death, and so let us dwell on it for a moment and attempt to understand – or at least find a response to – what it is that Heidegger may be arguing. Taken on its surface the word would appear to indicate that for Heidegger death becomes a project when it is purposely accepted, when it is faced up to, embraced, planned (in a way) and, so to speak, *built* authentically. Paul Edwards has written that while this sense of ‘task’ or ‘act’ is the typical reading of Heidegger, and in fairness is based on Heidegger’s own initial use of ‘possibility’, it is in fact wrong, and the fault for so many thinkers mistaking the term’s implications lies with Heidegger himself since he suddenly shifts the way he employs the term and – Edwards accuses – he probably does so to be intentionally vague and therefore appear to be saying something deeper than he actually is (Edwards 1975). Edwards’ claim is that in writing of death as a possibility Heidegger is not writing of the death-moment or a (potentially extended) period of literally dying, but rather of deadness as such, and that not as the state of having already passed (as if something could be placed in to make up a post-mortem ‘state’), but rather as the nullity of every state. ‘Possibility’ really means that death allows no actualization of anything, thus saving us from mistakenly hoisting a content into or onto the state of death. If Edwards is right in his assertion then Heidegger’s engagement of the term runs essentially counter to the word’s definitional meaning itself.

If there is a task or act involved here then it would be undertaken regarding dying, the path to death – whether long or short –, but even there Edwards thinks that Heidegger’s conclusions are unwarranted. He writes that, ‘It is not necessarily nonsense and it may in certain cases be true that a death-producing event is a task and a capital possibility;⁴ and the same holds for “dying”.

2 E.g. in statements made along lines such as: ‘He was a good man, beloved by all...’

3 I.e. ‘they’ as in the anonymous ‘one’ or ‘every/anybody’; in this case with the nuance – likely unnoticed by the subject herself – of always being about ‘someone else’.

4 Edwards states that he considers ‘capital possibility’ to

As universal propositions, however, these statements are quite certainly false.’ (Edwards 1975, 554) Jean-Paul Sartre made a similar critique of Heidegger’s ‘possibility’ as a project of some kind – which, again, is how most have taken it and how Heidegger himself certainly appears to be using the word for much of his analysis – when he pointed out that in death nothing at all is realizable, and hence it is not a possibility but rather ‘the nihilation of all my possibilities’ (Sartre 1956, 537; Kaufmann 1959). Edwards thinks Heidegger comes to realize this only at the end of his discussion on death and hence as a kind of corrective abruptly makes the move to (mis)employ the term in the (new) sense of ‘annihilation’:

What are we to make of this conclusion and the way in which Heidegger arrived at it? Primarily two things – first, if one agrees, as I do, that there is no survival, Heidegger is quite right in describing death as *total* absence, and, second, that his use of the word ‘possibility’ is fantastically misleading. (Edwards 1975, 557; emphasis in the original)

Edwards summarizes that, ‘Heidegger is *not wrong, but perverse*. He uses language which is almost certain to be misunderstood and the misuse, as I have indicated, is not completely unintentional.’ (Edwards 1975, 562; emphasis in the original)

Heidegger’s prose is indeed often overladen, and while I sympathize with Edwards and find his distinctions between a period of dying, a death moment, and deadness as a state to be highly necessary and very helpful, I think that Heidegger might (*might*, it is often difficult to really be sure of anything when reading Heidegger) in fact be indicating that it is the facing-up-to that is the possibility or task rather than anything else, which if so would then be about an attitudinal adjustment rather than a condition. It is true that in his discussion of the ‘*possibility of the impossibility of existence*’ in Section 53 (Heidegger 2010, 251; emphasis in the original⁵) the topic does seem to be about annihilation – deadness per se –, but the same extended analysis also states that ‘anticipation does not evade the impossibility of bypassing death, as does inauthentic being-toward-death, but *frees* itself for it’ (i.e. the attitude allows itself to recognize the unavoidability of death), and because anticipation discloses all possibilities, one is thereby granted (or takes?) ‘the possibility of existing as a whole *potentiality of being*.’ (Heidegger 2010, 253; emphases in the original) To me this is emphasizing the responsibility inherent in working towards and achieving a relationship

be a better translation than the more standard ‘distinctive possibility’ for Heidegger’s original German of *ausgezeichnete Möglichkeit*.

5 See especially the second paragraph of the page listed here.

with one’s own coming death as opposed to the default ‘they’ position as described above. If one can establish an authentic looking to one’s death then it attains a ‘certainty’ that is ‘more primordial than any certainty related to beings encountered in the world or to formal objects, for it is certain of being-in-the-world.’ (Heidegger 2010, 253-254) One’s death finds its place, and that is centrally located.

John Llewelyn also reminds us that Heidegger is expressly focused in *Being and Time* on ‘concern’ or ‘care’, and that this care a self has about itself and its world cannot segregate any time lines: past, present, and future must all be considered together (Llewelyn 1982). The interpretation of usage I offered as one’s *approach* being the object of analysis reaffirms taking ‘possibility’ in its usual sense and allows us – if it is correct – to read Heidegger as treating the term consistently and without insinuating any verbal subterfuge on his part. In this I may well be wrong, and I admit that my reading is by no means original in its conclusions, but it does at least fall in with how many other commentators have understood Heidegger. Yet all this hardly settles much and indeed now raises a further aspect, leading both out of and deeper into our roundabout on ‘possibility’: Is one’s personal death actually truly faceable? Comprehensible? Acceptable to a sufficiently meaningful degree? We saw earlier that Freud thought contrarily, and he is not alone in casting doubt on the human ability to come to terms with finiteness.

As remarked, death is not typically a topic that we (the ‘they’) bear in mind in the midst of daily affairs and must-do activities, of the seemingly incessant miscellanea. Heidegger is quite apt, I think, when he insists that death is ‘covered over’ for most of us most of the time, that it is not felt and even if so certainly not as it applies to oneself. An aphorism of E.M. Cioran puts the everyday (everyperson) perspective thusly:

Deep inside, each man feels – and believes – himself to be immortal, even if he knows he will perish the next moment. We can understand everything, admit everything, *realize* everything, except our death, even when we ponder it unremittingly and even when we are resigned to it. (Cioran 1976, 159; emphasis in the original)

Simon Critchley too emphasizes the terribly difficult conditions we live under wherein while we must come to terms with our limitedness nothing in our environments is particularly conducive to helping with that, and he cites approvingly what he regards as Stanley Cavell’s central insight of ‘*the need for an acceptance of human finitude as that which cannot be overcome*’, neither in a redemptive sense along the lines of a religious understanding nor in a willed and willful victorious sense

such as a Nietzschean ‘superman’ (*Übermensch*) might imply (Critchley 2004, 157; emphasis in the original). It is, he states, a ‘radical ungraspability’ as we find ourselves mired in an ‘inability to lay hold of death and make of it a work and to make that work the basis for an affirmation of life.’ (Critchley 2004, 31)

From common experience and in reflecting on our own lives this might seem true enough – and it is, in a way – but one problem we need to realize here is that all talk of death’s ‘ungraspability’ or ‘mystery’ or ‘inadmissibility’ et cetera clouds over the simple fact that death is not an object of knowledge, and neither is it something we *could* ‘lay hold of’ nor ‘make of it a work’ – and moreover this lack of capability is not due to some inner quality of death but rather to its absence, to its utter nullity. On the epistemic side, Richard Cohen writes that ‘death is recalcitrant to knowledge regarding its nature. It is not enough to say that one knows nothing and can know nothing about what death is.’ (Cohen 2006, 29) To label death as a ‘mystery’ or to claim its ‘ungraspability’ carries the (surely unintended) nuance of a continuity of some manner with one’s life wherefore a concept such as ‘knowledge’ or ‘work on’ might apply to it. Here again I think the issue revolves around a failure to distinguish dying from death; the former does relate epistemologically to life, the latter does not – except as the brute fact of being that to which we are headed. The entirety of what we can ‘know’ about that finality is merely that it will occur, it is otherwise – and must be – *contentless*. Similarly, all that we can ‘work on’ regarding death is the period which precedes it – in other words: one’s life, itself, in its duration and the fullness of which is a dying when death as the end is confirmed.

Heidegger was absolutely right to advise against the penchant to ‘paint’ into death a substance of some kind (Heidegger 2010; Edwards 1975), to think – assume – death were a thing that might be comprehended or created. Emptiness does not sit still enough to be reflected upon – it does not sit at all, it is no object – and it needs no hands to labor over it. Whatever language we may try to use to outline or define it will be wide of the mark because it is indescribable: only silence will do; although that too has its flaws. A thousand things might be said in a single breath about dying and each be correct, but death is not dying. In that crucial distinction death can be seen to not only be unknowable, unworkable, but *inapplicable*: as annihilation death is not ‘this’ nor ‘that’ as if it had relatable characteristics, and it only ‘is’ in the sense of ‘not’. An attitude to *it* (it itself) cannot be formed because it ‘is not’ ‘any thing’ at all; however, an approach to *the fact that* death is what we inevitably face and will reach is something that is formable, and this, I think, is our ‘possibility’, it is our task and our challenge. In this, and I believe we can say ‘in this authentically’ (i.e. in Heideggerean vernacular),

every moment of life is dying, and so the manner in which we shape ourselves in that relation will clearly affect both one’s being towards oneself as well as one’s being towards others. This phrasing, incidentally, is intentionally meant to evoke the same being-toward-death that we have been considering, for it is the juncture of self-death-others that will make up the remainder of our study.

3. Facing Finitude

Death then is not a topic of analysis; it is not even a topic at all. It is a fact, a brute one, a datum connected to the biology of life; nothing more and nothing less. Taking death in this way would allow a de-romanticization, a defetishization (or at least go a long way in that direction), a danger to which many thinkers appear prone, perhaps induced by a stance that takes death as a ‘mystery’, a beyond that somehow transcends, and thereby falling victim to the temptation to ‘conflate death with an alternative sort of life’ – as Harry Silverstein put it discussing the Epicurean ‘no subject’ challenge with which we opened the previous section (Silverstein 1980, 406) – or in other words, to foisting a content into the void.⁶ Another aphorism of Cioran’s should suffice to exemplify this trend:

Life is nothing; death, everything. Yet there *is* nothing which is death, independent of life. It is precisely this absence of autonomous, distinct reality which makes death universal; it has no realm of its own, it is omnipresent, like everything which lacks identity, limit and bearing: an indecent infinitude. (Cioran 1976, 152; emphasis in the original)

The closing ‘indecent infinitude’ has a wondrous, poetic ring, an expression evocative of some awe, and while it fogs and distorts the view we seek of death in its affixation of quality even while claiming its lack, the pairing still points in the right direction – that of finitude. Since we cannot think about death, since there is nothing in death to think about (acknowledged here too by Cioran), we focus instead on dying, on the undeniable of and unavoidable to which lead only to death. For those who have embraced it in life this finitude has often been taken as an impetus, but to me it can also be applied as a salve. Let us initially consider the more common side.

To take one’s limitedness as a motivator for action is to understand only too well life’s brevity and therefore

⁶ Not ‘the abyss’, which carries a nuance of space – and therefore something that might be engaged, filled, interacted with. We must take great care with all terminology.

to stoke the fire, pour on fuel, redouble one's efforts in striving for X goal/desire/pursuit: an objective that one most probably considers both meaningful and meaning-making. This is taking a decision and bending all one's might to go after it, embracing one's internal alarm clock⁷ in the quest to accomplish that sought while one yet can. There are many potentially resulting attitudinal permutations of such an approach, but for reasons of space we will glance only at three, taking an illustrative quotation as representative of each.

The first comes from Kaufmann and elicits what we might call 'the marathon' view of death. He writes that:

...once I have succeeded in achieving – in the face of death, in a race with death – a project that is truly mine and not something that anybody else might have done as well, if not better, then the picture changes: I have won the race and in a sense have triumphed over death. (Kaufmann 1959, 91)

This is a call to taking one's life as an exercise in accomplishing, to train hard for the grueling forty-two kilometers one finds at birth, to strap on running shoes as soon as one can, and then to pump one's legs as hard as physically possible until the finish line has been reached. If one can do that, Kaufmann argues, then all else falls by the wayside. Moreover, upon the completion of this central undertaking and the accompanying accolades (either stemming from oneself in recognition and/or (if one is lucky) from others), any extra time spent is purely a bonus, in many ways irrelevant. Kaufmann goes so far in this as to state that what happened to two famous Friedriches – Hölderlin and Nietzsche – in their later years (madness and vegetation, respectively) does not really matter since their works had by then been done. Death may come at any moment; one is ready and satisfied, satiated and full.

Some issues that come to mind regarding this stance is that first and foremost there is hardly any guarantee of one's being able to actually do what one sets out to attempt. In the messy and complex real world of the practical far too many extenuating circumstances will be involved – do chance's dice fall in your favor or against it? Might the obstacles encountered be overcome or will they prove insurmountable? Are there enough controllable elements? How large a role does luck really play? Additionally no matter how much effort one makes there is always the possibility that one has chosen poorly and is pursuing something either beyond one's ken or so dependent on other factors as to be highly unrealistic and therefore unlikely. Furthermore Nietzsche, at least, considered himself to be in the very midst of his life's

7 A device, we are only too aware, which typically does not alert us with how much time remains before it rings.

great work – his reevaluation of all values – when he succumbed to the disease that left him comatose and eventually killed him. From his own point of view his meaning-making project was far from finished.⁸ A final counter is that presumably few of us would be prone to taking the months or years following the closure of a long term task very positively if such were thought of only as an 'extra', as icing on the cake: a nice addition to a life lived but not a necessary one. This calls to mind a biography of the novelist Kurt Vonnegut written by Charles J. Shields in which the last fifteen years of his life are filed into a chapter titled simply 'Waiting to Die, 1992-2007' (Shields 2011). Idling away the days until a welcome death arrives does not seem to match the accomplisher-as-conqueror image that Kaufmann means to conjure.⁹ Still, this is certainly a viable attitude that one might form about one's passing, and it does respond to the call of finitude.

Similarly to Kaufmann's position is that of Steven Luper, who finds life's meaning – and thereby the relation to its ending – as indistinguishable from success: in place of Kaufmann's 'marathon' we now have only 'the finish line'. The quotation we will take from him is this:

Your life has meaning just if, and to the extent that, you achieve the aims that you devote to it freely and competently... These achievements are *the* meaning of your life. (Luper 2014, 198; emphasis in the original)

In this we again have it that what one is able to do in life is what matters, and indeed appears to be *all* that matters. As far as what such 'freely and competently devoted' aims might consist of, in an earlier book Luper argued that meaning is connected to desire fulfillment, and that desires must be unconditional in order to be strong enough to compel one to go on living (Luper 2009). While the view here is not a direct stance vis-à-vis finitude, it is clear that based on such thoughts Luper would consider a death reached without attainment of one's goals as indicative of a life that lacked meaning (and possibly purpose), and it therefore seems reasonable to infer that the meeting of one's chosen objectives would register as justifying, on Luper's conceptual framework, the antecedent life spent and its necessary ending. This is not to assert that Luper would take the fact of death as a positive, nor that he might think of the

8 What is particularly odd is that Kaufmann, having written about Nietzsche's personal history in the introduction to his earlier collection of translations and commentaries on the philosopher's work (Nietzsche 1954), surely knew this and yet included him as an example here.

9 Yet this 'welcome death' is nevertheless a notion that we will return to in a more positive vein.

time following achievement as the kind of ‘surplus’ we saw with Kaufmann,¹⁰ it is just to highlight that for this perspective too death can be satisfactorily met only if one can read into the existence prior to it an affirmative ‘proof’ of some kind. To admit finitude here appears to first require ‘achieving’ meaning.

In response to this we might again point to the highly contingent nature of goal attainment, and to the somewhat chilling consequences this outlook has for those of us who spend year after year in pursuit of that which, try as we might, remains outside our grasp. Luper would have to judge our lives as meaningless on his account, and it is reasonable to think our deaths might hence be labeled so too – a fair finish to failure? Yet how does one fail at living? Not meeting an aim attempted might be called a defeat, but could an entire period of biological vitality be? Even if, on these merits, the life in question was considered to be ‘meaningless’? There is also the issue of Luper’s connection between unconditional desires (and the fulfillment thereof) and being: I do not know many – or any – people that would respond that they are staying alive due to their restriction-free wishes. In my experience most of us carry on living because we do not die, and although there are no doubt certain things that people would say they live *for*; that is a separate issue from the compulsion to live itself. I do not need to be compelled to go on living, I just do; and then in the midst of that I create or find what I direct my time towards. Might I discover meaning therein? I may, or I may take it from elsewhere, but Luper’s ‘to the extent that’ addendum on his stance that life is only meaningful through verifiable successes appears particularly cruel when we remember the emphasis above on the lack of a guarantee for anything in a world as heavily conditioned as ours.

Still, we must admit (once more) that Luper’s is not strictly an attitude to human finiteness, it is not a being-toward-death; however, given its conjunction of *the* meaning in life – every one of which is capped only by an ending – with goal attainment, the implications of taking on such a view limit how one could perceive necessary finitude in light of the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of one’s present (which is also one’s dying). Death, as was argued, is nothing – it ‘is’ annihilation – and what matters is the dying, the way to death; if we are bound to see it as one long potential failure, or as maintained merely by a string of desires, then we are left with little ‘possibility’ and quite a bit of the default ‘covering over’: or in other words a

focus (an obsession) with what-I-want instead of an acceptance of limitedness. An acknowledged cessation is still a motivator for action in Luper’s account, but it is a glossed over and hidden one, and in that arguably insufficient.

Sartre provides our closing illustrative example on human finiteness and a potential (and intriguing) attitude in relation to it, which, following our previous samples, we might wish to call the ‘finding the right running shoes’ approach. He states:

...human reality would remain finite even if it were immortal, because it *makes* itself finite by choosing itself as human. To be finite, in fact, is to choose oneself – that is, to make known to oneself what one is by projecting oneself toward one possible to the exclusion of others. The very act of freedom is therefore the assumption and creation of finitude. (Sartre 1956, 545-546; emphasis in the original)

In this selection and pursuit are once more paramount, and interestingly Sartre places finitude as a choice rather than as a fact, of nature or otherwise. Were humanity blessed or cursed (take your pick) with immortality finitude would yet remain as an essential element since the exercise of freely deciding entails limitation – taking this over that – and in such acts recognizing the fragmentary nature involved: by X it is clear that I remove Y from the picture. Self-creation, the path through life that one sets out on, is a reduction, but it is a willed and purposive one, and in that there is none (or anyway little) of the ‘turning away’ against which Heidegger argued. Sartre’s is an approach to life made with eyes wide open to the eventualities that pertain, which of course includes death (*‘even if’* immortal – Sartre is not imagining an alternative world of immortals, he is emphasizing the very known mortality we face). This position strikes me as being readable thusly: I will die, but now I choose, and in that I make my being and furthermore make known to myself this created creaturehood. As with Sartre’s oeuvre generally the openness of human existence and the insistence on actively grasping that openness are what are paramount.

Amongst the attitudes to finitude that see in it a stimulus to exist fully while one yet lives this is perhaps the least objectionable in that it promotes the *pursuit* of goals and not the attainment thereof. Win or lose, Sartre seems to be saying, what is crucial is to play the game. There is though a nuance here in relation to finitude that I think is slightly misleading when it comes to life as a dying. To write that choice (*‘The very act of freedom’*) is an ‘assumption and creation of finitude’ is to use the term ‘finitude’ in relation to a narrowing or a limitation of breadth, a whittling down of options, rather than in the temporal sense of length in which we think

10 Luper does not differentiate between a ‘great aim’ (à la Kaufmann) with the everyday notion of more general ‘aims’; on my understanding his focus is on the continual movement between making and meeting ambitions rather than on a single overarching pursuit.

when we reflect on the ultimate end of our lives in the moment of death. I agree with Sartre that self-making and seeking that which one actively decides to – and I would stress that ‘success’, attainment, achievement, et cetera have nothing to do with this – are the pillars of a view on finitude that both apprehends and accedes to its inevitability, but to me an emphasis on brevity is more called for than one on constriction, and that because while we can understand the manner in which our choices reduce even while they construct, we cannot come to terms with our utter exit thereby. I will die: all consciousness, all perspective, all experience, the entirety of this so well-known entity, will fully and permanently cease – that is the reality I must look to, and not only the contours of that reality while it still proceeds.

Thus for facing finitude and finding in it an incentive to act, let us now turn to finitude as balm. Albert Camus remarks that, ‘We get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking. In that race which daily hastens us towards death, the body maintains its irreparable lead.’ (Camus 1955/2005, 6) As mentioned above in our considerations on Luper, most of us live only because we are born, we do not give much thought to it, each day presents its own challenges and demands, and we find ourselves either meeting them or not. The years glide by, sickness and frailty present themselves if an accident or tragedy does not do so first, and then we realize suddenly – much too late – that the fact we most sought to avoid, to ‘cover over’, will no longer be ignored. I will die, I have been dying – all of *this* has been a dying – and I am dying even now, this very second. Mortality, inevitability, inescapability. Heidegger urges us to face this and find a way with its possibility(ies), Kaufmann to create a life’s (worthy) work, Luper to succeed at one’s devotions, and Sartre to choose and pursue. I would like to add ‘welcome’ to our list.

To ‘welcome’ death is a phrase that could easily be read in a manner which I do not intend here: I am not advocating suicide by this, nor a reckless risk taking,¹¹ but neither am I necessarily staking a position against either of those; at least not yet, we will consider the important role of the other in one’s death below. Instead, by evoking this coinage in the way I am, I wish to present death as a balm, as an alternative to the attitudes of both one’s personal death as ignored – as a (mere) fact always about ‘them’ (what we might call the default approach) – and as a motivator. Allow me to place a background setting for this view with some minimal comments: We find ourselves alive, none of us deciding either to be born nor the manner and conditions into which we

are born, every aspect of our being coming to us in our developmental years as a *fait accompli*, and we remain powerless to do anything but be buffeted and shaped – stamped and molded – by these forces. By the time we are finally cognitively developed enough to start to think for ourselves we have already been so acculturated and ‘educated’ that we are effectively programmed, ready to be slotted into the existing socioeconomic structures dominant wherever and whenever we happened to have been physically dropped. As John Lennon put it, ‘When they’ve tortured and scared you for twenty-odd years/ Then they expect you to pick a career’ (Lennon 1970, lines 11-12). Our understanding is limited, our reach miniscule.

None of this is new nor especially revelatory, we know this but – very much like death – mostly fail to feel it in the midst of our day-to-days. What I wish to highlight about this fact of our embeddedness is that the act of living is never chosen and, given the biological imperatives and conditioned perceptions that form large parts of that embeddedness, recognizing suicide as an option and purposely not taking it does not of itself impart any responsibility: it does not mean that one ‘embraces life’ simply because one does not immediately end it. If that were the case then everyone breathing would be living authentically and Heidegger could have saved himself the trouble of penning *Being and Time* (and his host of other works, really). Camus’ ‘one truly serious philosophical problem’ (Camus 1955/2005, 1) of self-murder is provocative but fairly empty – again, I typically go on living simply because I go on living. You too, I would imagine. Camus’ challenge is to confront life and make something of it, as Heidegger urged in his own way and as Sartre did as well (and Kaufmann, on a generous reading of his ‘life’s work’ approach). Yet if we are clear sighted enough we might arrive at the conclusion that even filling up a life to its brim with meaning-making activities and tasks it will yet nevertheless end in the same ignominious manner, and sooner or later every legacy will fade (if we are fortunate enough to even have generated one). For many of us life can seem like that shirt you received on your last birthday: a nice enough gift but not something you wanted, nor one that you would pick for yourself. Well, I suppose I shall have to wear it anyway.

What is it to not wish to be alive but to also not wish (strongly enough) for death such that one makes the very large extra step to suicide? To think and feel this way might result in a life experienced as a passing of the time, as a kind of bizarre purgatory, a sentence being served, neither an acceptance (life!) nor a release (suicide). To such an individual I offer this attitudinal ‘welcome’: finitude as balm. All is and will be well for all growth fades, and all faded grows; the cosmos turns, then turns again. As for the now of living, either pursuing

11 My thoughts on suicide are somewhat in flux but an earlier argument was presented within a wider context in Oberg 2015.

an objective or pursuing a non-pursuit are equally valid, and neither need be exclusively held. Take your pick today – and tomorrow. We need not have a reason to go on – we just do – and so too we need not have a reason to stop going on. We can take the joys we find or form or discover during life and still maintain an approach to our unquestionable human finitude that is ready for and welcoming of death, of an end. This is a path open to us. On it however we are not alone, and by walking it we perforce affect others. That affecting is the aspect which must be our final deliberation.

4. My Death and You

Value might have its roots in the present, in what is here now as a part of our lives (be it in a material or purely conceptual or desirous form), but as Samuel Scheffler has argued such must be directed towards the future in order for that valuation to really stick (Scheffler 2013). Our own futures are of course naturally limited, and confronting this finitude has formed a major part of our study heretofore. However, we are also aware of the other in whom we may see or hope for a continuation beyond that of our own transitory flesh. We do not, after all, merely care for ourselves – that is the hallmark of a clinical psychopathic personality – we are also concerned deeply for those who are related to and/or dependent on us, in one form or another, in loose or firm ways. This facet of our being is as much a part of the embeddedness remarked on above as our historical, genetic, geographic, familial, et cetera inheritances are. At birth we fall into a world that is nothing if not thoroughly interconnected. Given this, for each human animal there is ‘a dual value investment between self and community that seems inevitable, an inextricability of self from community’ (Oberg forthcoming), and if we therefore attempt to work out a way of dying – a constant within a life lived, as argued – that takes into its consideration only the singular self of ‘me’ we find ourselves confined in what Edith Stein called ‘the prison of our individuality’, a place where ‘Others become riddles for us, or still worse, we remodel them into our image and so falsify historical truth.’ (Stein 1989, 116) Aside from caring for those close to us, to being worried about their welfare after one has died, how might an ethics of the other fit into the picture being presented here? How might an approach to finitude, to the fact of death, affect the way in which we situate ourselves with those who surround us now – while we still are?

In thinking on this we find Emmanuel Levinas writing that significance in life stems from an ‘authority’ that pertains to one even after death, meaningfully tied in with the sociality that each self both contributes to and receives from, that this indeed is ‘an obligation that

death does not absolve.’ (Levinas 1987, 114; Cohen 2006) Cohen connects this idea further with the notion of justice that (most of us) inherently have to one degree or another, and asserts that however we may term such an ‘authoritative’ concept (as ‘justice’, ‘authority’, ‘God’, ‘transcendent’, ‘supernatural’), it is in its ‘imperative force [that] death and mortality make sense’ (Cohen 2006, 37). We will comment on this shortly, but first a further clarificatory note on the topic of futurity and Levinas’ ethical considerations vis-à-vis finitude is called for: Levinas emphasizes that death is always a to-come, something that none of us can ever ‘catch up to’, and thus any kind of being-toward-death simply cannot (on his view) be subjectively integrated (Levinas 1987; Cohen 2006). This perspective does take death as annihilation, but also that we are unable to understand it (Levinas 1987).

In reacting to these thoughts in light of our journey thus far we will likely find the future orientation of valuing (as far as others are concerned) to be a valid aspect of human existence, that much appears undeniable whenever we place the self in any kind of context. Stein is right, I think, that if we limit our reasoning to only this ‘me’ we lose – and distort – a great deal, and in my judgment Levinas and Cohen are also correct to emphasize the care for others we have, *but not in the way that they do*. My death will reduce not only me to nothing but also – for me – everything that does now and has ever related to me. Whatever ‘obligation’ I might have such cannot last beyond my death, and to assume that any could is to make the same imparting-into-death mistake that Heidegger warns against. Nothing at all regarding my post mortem state can touch me during life because there is no state to be had there, it is nothing, I am nothing, all my cares and concerns today about what might happen to my family tomorrow will cease with the stoppage of my physical functioning. The ‘authority’ or ‘force’ is that brief. I cannot ‘catch up to’ death, yes, but that point is irrelevant because death is not a thing to ‘catch up to’ – again, it is nothing at all, it is not a state but the absence of all states, all statehood, all (in our Heideggerean vein) ‘possibilities’ of state-ness. Death is ‘nothing’ not in the sense of ‘empty’ as if it were a container that might have a filling but simply does not; no, death is ‘nothing’ as ‘no thing’, as void, as null. Our failure to grasp the absoluteness of annihilation is the source I think of these conceptual confusions and persistent inadequacies regarding an appropriate attitude towards finiteness.

Yet still the real issue is not death but dying, and we certainly can ‘catch up to’ dying because we already are – right now you have lost (perhaps a good) part of your life in reading this, I am sorry to say. I also disagree with Cohen’s declaration that death and mortality only make sense in the face of an ongoing justice, but not because I

discount justice or find that notions of it are excessively temporal, rather only due to a lack of ‘making sense’ even being a consideration. Humans die, all life forms do: why need that make sense in a rational or justificatory way, as if existence had to be exculpated? Nevertheless, in these thoughts we find that in an approach to death as motivator or as balm what remains is the other, and that if we face death as a mental means to promote action during life (motivator), or as a welcome – and plain – fact of life (balm), still those around us will importantly figure into each. We will finally then take a deeper look at how, and from both perspectives.

In coming to terms with our personal finitude, in establishing within ourselves, and in the midst of our day-to-day suchnesses and thises and thats, an attitude towards death and its annihilative quality, we are in and remain amongst a great many others in our embeddedness, and as Lisa Guenther stresses this includes the fact of birth itself as a part of what is bequeathed. Our lives are, she writes, ‘stretching along between birth and death’ (Guenther 2008, 105), and that however others respond to our death after it has occurred that response forms a ‘leftover’ that ‘helps constitute the intersubjective meaning of my own death in ways that I cannot control or choose, but which nevertheless form[s] an important aspect of my Being-with-others’ (Guenther 2008, 113). We are naturally aware of such while alive, and it behooves us to be cognizant of – vigilant, towards – these facets of being as we shape and maintain (or shift) the approach to death that we choose to take. It may be that after death we are very soon forgotten, or our absence even celebrated, yet regardless there will be that portion that resides, as it were, ‘of’ us although we ourselves have ceased. There is that signification in which the I posited in you can never be fully removed. In the midst of this the lives of those others and for other others will carry on, and the cyclical, thickly interwoven nature involved has ramifications worth considering. Due to this spinning coil, Adriana Cavarero has argued that ‘individual death in its dramatic, centripetal meaning is immediately relegated to the background, as something that in the larger scheme of things belongs to the primitive phenomenon of life’ (Cavarero 1995, 114).

Experientially, phenomenologically, I doubt that a relegation of this magnitude would make much of an impact on an individual as far as one’s personal death is concerned, but there is a noteworthy nuance at play here. Unless we happen to be living – and so dying – during a time of total planetary apocalypse we will think that life, as a system, will continue beyond our ceasing, that however long or short the others with whom we shared our time remember our having been, the fabric of our existence with theirs and together with our environs will bear a contributory mark. For our selves (our being) annihilation will be complete, but for our having-been

there is a footprint of sorts, at least for a while. If we find in death a motivator this might spur us on in the manner and constructing of the project(s) undertaken, or if we find in death a balm this might provide a further layer of psychological comfort: inescapable death may be welcome still the more in the warmth of merely forming a portion within the great wheel of birth-growth-decay-death-birth that characterizes the universe we inhabit. The other is central, but not in the individual-as-separate/separable manner that many in the Western tradition have argued for, rather the other is crucial in that very otherness that is partially constitutive of the self, as Guenther, Cavarero, and I stress. I must face my own death, you must face yours, we both must come to terms with finitude, but we do so amongst one another and we factor into each other’s approaches to that facing, that being-toward-death, in whatever form it takes: as motivator, as welcome, or as something else. The task now is to see it.

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