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## Death and the Form of Life

### Abstract

This article explores the relevance of death to the value of life. After a preliminary discussion of the human experience of mortality, I consider Heidegger's argument that death is a condition of authenticity, Sartre's claim that death is an externality that is irrelevant because it cannot be lived, and Simmel's theory that death is a boundary that is transcended by life. While all theories have their merits, I suggest that Simmel's approach, which articulates well with Levinas's ethical critique of Heidegger, offers important insight into our responsibility for other people and for the survival of other forms of life.

**Keywords:** Death - Heidegger - Sartre - Levinas – Simmel – humanism - posthumanism

In theorising some of the changes to social life over the last 50 years, two prominent discourses can be seen in the social sciences and humanities. The first of these, sometimes described as the 'individualisation' thesis, has responded to the subversion of long-established structural, cultural and philosophical determinisms by emphasising the weight of responsibility that now falls on the shoulders of the DIY self. The second discourse, often calling itself 'post-humanist', has endorsed a more radical dissolution of dualisms and divisions, including the boundary separating the individual from the animal, the vegetable and the machine. In the field of death and mortality studies, the first discourse often strikes a tone that is redolent of post-war existentialism: human finitude should be endured with heroic personal responsibility for a naturally limited life, but in practice we easily succumb to forms of bad faith, from siding with medicine in the war against the 'disease' of death, to rehearsing our demise by forming disposable identities and transitory attachments, to placating ourselves with immortal media fame and forms of notoriety that are now digitally indelible (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Bauman 1992). The second discourse, in contrast, takes a post-anthropocentric stance which claims to revitalise death by reintegrating it into the organic foundations of life's generativity: death, Braidotti (2013: 134-5) states, 'is not

mine', but rather 'is the inhuman within us, which frees us into life', a life which 'connects us trans-individually, trans-generationally and eco-philosophically'.

This abbreviated sketch is coarse and over-generalised, but it gives some disciplinary context to what follows. Reflecting on the meaning of mortality to human beings today, I track the existential understanding of death through the work of Heidegger and Sartre, before settling on a more ethically rounded conception in Levinas and Simmel. In Simmel's *Lebensanschauung*, in particular, there are themes that push towards a decentring of the rational unitary subject, but I read Simmel's thoughts on the interpenetration of life and death within the tradition of an imaginative ethical humanism.

### **Mortality and eternity**

What does it mean for me to be a mortal being, a being with a limited life span who is aware that I will die? All multicellular organisms are time-limited beings, but humans are seemingly unique in possessing communicable knowledge that they will die, a knowledge that exists independently of the actual experience – which animals obviously share – of physical morbidity, senescence, and even bereavement. It is at first glance a paradox that humans should be so concerned with the question of death when non-human life encounters its extinction more frequently and more immediately than does a species which has domesticated nature in order to hold the threat of destruction at a distance. Life in the natural world might be thought of as a perpetual flight from or rebellion against the risk of termination – by predation, hunger, disease – such that the very vitality of life, its attraction to things and its alertness to its environment, is equally a kind of repulsion or refusal of death. Humans, too, are naturally fleeing their terminal fate, 'like people walking on a ship in the direction opposite to its course' (Simmel, 2010: 70). But there is a difference as well, for the worldly artifice that humans have built to shelter themselves from the violence of nature both removes the forceful presence of death and restores it as an object of cognition. Humans are thus afforded both the luxury of contemplating death and the anguish that this contemplation brings.

In considering the significance of death to human beings, philosophers have often dwelled on the distinction between mortality and immortality, a distinction which also has some subtle and perhaps surprising points of contact. If death does have significance to our lives, it is logical to look for the absence of that significance in a life that does not come to

an end. Here we are considering not the fantasy of an altogether different being to our own – a being such as a god – but rather our own being, as far as we can imagine it, stripped of the necessity of death. A preliminary observation is that if I lived forever the future would carry the permanent promise of new possibilities. If I did not have to reckon with my own demise, I could waste my time wantonly, knowing that there would always be extra time to put to more determined use. As future time would always exist for me, however, questions of purpose, motivation and commitment naturally arise. What would drive me to persevere with something, to surmount the obstacles in the way of my achievement of something, to painfully apply myself to a task or a vocation in order to do something with success? Why would I do what I found difficult, and indeed what would ‘difficult’ mean to a being for whom the clock is never ticking, who can luxuriate in every activity knowing that time will never run out? If there is no difficulty then there is no traction, if there is no traction there is no momentum, and if there is no momentum then there is no movement towards a goal. Boredom, lack of direction, frivolousness or simple indifference, all therefore seem to be characteristic of the lot of the immortal, such as we can imagine it. This was certainly how Borges imagined it in his short story, ‘The Immortal’, whose Roman protagonist travels to the hidden City of the Immortals only to find its listless and apathetic inhabitants living like troglodytes in caves. Here ‘nothing is preciously precarious’, and what is remarkable is not the reaching beyond the impossible to achieve the extraordinary, but the impossibility of *not* composing the *Odyssey*, ‘at least once’. ‘No one is anyone, one single immortal man is all men. Like Cornelius Agrippa, I am god, I am hero, I am philosopher, I am demon and I am world, which is a tedious way of saying that I do not exist.’ (Borges, 1970: 145)

If I am immortal ‘I do not exist’ because my emergence as an active and autonomous agent capable of crafting meaning in the world requires the friction of the ‘reality principle’, as Freud called it, by which the contours of the self are drawn and the borders formed to an interior world of not-yet-fulfilled desire. Hegel had of course already captured the relationship between mortality and freedom in his account of the master-slave dialectic: ‘It is only by staking one’s life that freedom is proven to be the essence’ and ‘self-consciousness is proven to be not *being...but...being-for-itself*’ (Hegel, 2018: 111, his emphasis). Or in Simmel’s more delicate phrasing: ‘The “No” and the “too little” of the outer world vis-à-vis our own allows the latter to operate beyond its contact with the world in

such a way that the ego thereby becomes aware of its independence, and above all of the continuity flowing only from its own impulses.’ (Simmel 2010: 72)

### **Death of the self**

Yet a curious similarity may also be observed here between what seems to be the futility of an eternal life and what from one perspective is the pointlessness of a mortal one. If all one’s desires, purposes, achievements and goals are destined to turn to dust, how can a mortal being recover from the inevitability of oblivion and assert a will to live? Phillipe Ariès dates the origins of the concern for the ‘Death of the Self’ – the second of his five overlapping periods of successive historical attitudes towards death – to as early as the twelfth century. Coinciding with an emerging consciousness of the uniqueness of the self, death began to arouse an anxiety that was only partly allayed by Christian eschatology, the use of wills to order extravagant numbers of Masses and the penitent disbursement of the testator’s worldly goods, and treatises on the *artes moriendi* that depicted the Final Judgement as the dying person’s last undiluted responsibility to either summon confidence in divine mercy or surrender to despair and the morbid contemplation of a sinful life. Along with the commemorative use of biographical gravestone inscriptions and the fashioning of wax and plaster death masks, these late-Medieval practices show how strong had become an unprecedented impulse: ‘to save from destruction a few things that express an incorruptible individuality, particularly the face, which contains the secret of the personality’ (Ariès, 1982: 262).

Simmel’s elegant formulation of this process of individualisation draws a familiar parallel between the evolution of complex multicellular organisms and the development of the social division of labour. Just as the cell’s capacity to regenerate declines as it becomes more differentiated, so the specialisation of individual life in the most ‘advanced’ societies progressively deprives that life of the endlessly renewable energy of the collective. As Simmel characterises it, in the most traditional of societies where the individual does not stand out, ‘the immortality of the species devours the mortality of individual’. This is the context of that more ancient attitude that Ariès called the ‘Tame Death’. When people are defined by their likeness to others or to a time-honoured social role, the death of a person is no break in the continuity and reproduction of life. Only when the individual begins to see itself as a unique entity does death pose an existential problem: ‘The question of mortality

thus only becomes acute at all in respect to the genuine individual, in the sense of the non-repeatable, the irreplaceable.’ (Simmel, 2010: 82-3)

By the nineteenth century, Ariès argues, Western attitudes had changed, with more intimate kinship ties reorienting the self to its attachment to others, such that grief and loss following the ‘Death of the Other’ became the prevailing framework for the cultural articulation of death. In its most romantic conceptions death was a sublime and beautiful exit that promised to reunite the deceased with those whose loss had been so painfully endured in life. For those deprived of this romantic faith, however, life itself had become a morbid series of disappointments and deprivations, an intolerable burden of pointless injustice and suffering. Thus for Schopenhauer the finality of death insinuates itself into all our profane tasks and purposes, since we can only have goals by suffering the lack of what we desire, and we can only remedy that lack by reaching the goal and killing the desire. Hence ‘life swings like a pendulum to and fro between pain and boredom’ (Schopenhauer, 1966: 312).

There are echoes of immortality here – of the endless incompleteness of one’s projects that would be an acute predicament if one lived forever. But with an eternal future, the swinging pendulum would not strike to the heart of one’s existence, for a mortal must also anticipate the end of one’s life, and with this comes the inescapable thought that one might have lived a different one. Such is the despair over the purpose and meaning of life that often comes to a climax in middle age. One remedy for this crisis sometimes proposed is a reorientation of the individual’s search for meaning away from the achievement of specific goals, whose finality we can never possess, to the intrinsic satisfaction of practices themselves. Thus Kieran Setiya, reflecting philosophically on the mid-life crisis, advocates for the importance of ‘atelic’ rather than ‘telic’ activities, the former having no terminal aim but being enjoyed for their own sake. Setiya draws this argument partly from Aristotle (*Ethics*, 1177b1-4), for whom the contemplative life is the highest good because contemplative activity is not done for the sake of something more important – its value is ‘underived’, as Setiya (2014: 8) puts it.

Setiya’s recommendation implies a kind of ‘mindfulness’ or ‘living in the present’ which ironically echoes Schopenhauer’s claim that the ‘one respect in which brutes show real wisdom when compared with us’ – ‘us’ who are cultured enough to transcend suffering through the disinterested contemplation of beauty – is ‘their quiet, placid enjoyment of the

present moment' (Schopenhauer, 2010: 436). Whether we read this perspective as sophisticated or condescending, the argument remains unsatisfactory because it ignores the way the meaningfulness of human activities, especially those activities that are entangled with our sense of identity, derive in large part from us wanting to be *good* at those activities, such that if we did not place value on being a successful parent, lover, colleague, teacher, politician, etc., then these activities would not inspire our care. 'Time spent with a good friend can be relaxing', Sigrist (2015: 93) observes, 'but that is different than having a relaxed attitude towards the friendship. For those friends I care most about, it's important not just that I be a friend but that I want to be a *good* friend, and being a good friend involves caring about the success of the many small and large accomplishments that go into friendship'. Such 'accomplishments' might be understood as intermediary steps towards that important if elusive goal, as Simmel (1991: 56) notes when he criticises Schopenhauer for neglecting 'all the genuine mediating moments between the poles of not having and having', and for ignoring the way progress towards an end always participates in the value of the end itself. The kindred argument to the Aristotelian one – made by Epicureans such as Lucretius, for example – that death is not an evil that should concern us, and it doesn't matter whether one dies old or young since whatever the case one will be dead, also overlooks the way life, as it unfolds over time, allows for the enrichment and extension of meaning. To find meaning in life we need time to learn to do things well, and doing more things well and doing them better and for longer is why we normally have good reason, as Bernard Williams (1973) argued some time ago, to desire a longer life.

### **Being-towards-death**

A longer life, however, is not the same as an eternal one. It was Heidegger who most famously argued that the meaningfulness of human existence rests on our 'being-towards-death'. Heidegger defined human beings as 'potentiality-of-being' or as 'able-to-be', meaning that we are open-futured beings whose existence is always incomplete, who live always towards what is 'not-yet' or what is 'outstanding'. *Dasein* (human existence) has a 'constant unfinished quality', since 'it is essential to the basic constitution of *Dasein* that there is constantly something still to be closed' (Heidegger, 2010: 236). What is outstanding is not everything that we are not, nor a random thing that we have not yet become, but rather what we *are* in so far as we are beings striving for completion. When we say, for

example, that the payment of an 'outstanding' debt would settle the accounts, we recognise that what is outstanding is a 'lack' that is at the same time a property of the being that lacks it. 'Dasein always already exists in such a way its not-yet *belongs* to it.' (2010: 243) The not-yet, in other words, is not something to come, not an external event that has not yet occurred, something that approaches from without like a bus arriving or an expected change in the weather. For Heidegger the not-yet *belongs* to us, it is *ourselves* as beings who are always ahead-of-ourselves, who are always heading towards an end. The not-yet is not an arbitrary determination, Heidegger says, but is a 'constituent' of what Dasein *is*.

As a being which is always ahead of itself towards its ends, Dasein must clearly reckon with its ultimate end, which is death. When we recall that what we not-yet are belongs to us as that which is outstanding, then it becomes apparent that death also belongs to us, that we are 'being-towards-death'. Our everyday, inauthentic apprehension of death erroneously treats it as an external thing (like Tolstoy's Ivan Ilych, we have factual knowledge that all humans will die, and by deductive logic we therefore understand that, as a human being ourselves, 'some day' we also will die). For Heidegger this is a misapprehension, however, because death is not an external event that approaches from the outside. Death is not an impersonal thing whose existence is already established, the only indeterminacy being when or how that thing will pay us a visit. Death is *my* death, it belongs to me as *my* 'end', and does so from the moment I exist: 'Death is a way to be that Dasein takes over as soon as it is.' (2010: 245) This doesn't mean that my existence *is* death, but rather that death is my ultimate 'not-yet' – 'my most extreme possibility', as Heidegger also calls it. Death is the outstanding end that I am ahead-of-myself-towards and which, as a being that is always dying, I must therefore immediately assume responsibility for.

Heidegger famously says that death is the 'possibility of the impossibility of existence' (2010: 251). Because my death (the 'impossibility of existence') cannot exist for me as an 'actuality' – that is, as a tangible thing I can witness – Heidegger argues that it must therefore be regarded, notwithstanding the factual certainty that all humans die, as my 'possibility'. For I cannot 'be' dead, I can only be *towards* my death as the outermost not-yet that I ultimately am. Medical-scientific accounts of death as a physiological state describe death as an *actuality*, and therefore do not help me understand my true being-towards-death. Death, Heidegger argues, is my 'ownmost' possibility, because it is the possibility of everything that I am not existing at all. As I cannot survive my own death, it is



also a possibility that cannot be surpassed or overtaken by another possibility, hence Heidegger describes it as my 'outermost' [*äusserst*] possibility which is insuperable (*unüberholbar*). Finally it is a possibility that is 'non-relational' in the sense that it cannot be realised by another person in my stead.

If I think or talk about my own death as if it were an actuality rather than a possibility, I am being inauthentic. In that case I am talking about death-in-general, about my own death in the eyes of others, or about someone else's death as it appears to me, but I am not apprehending my *own* death as *my* possibility. Heidegger argues that an authentic being-toward-death requires an attitude of 'anticipation' (*Vorlaufen*), a term to which he gives a specific existential meaning. The German word literally means 'to run ahead' or 'to run in front'. Dasein 'runs ahead' *to* death, not ahead *of* it. This implies not a passive waiting for an external event that is 'expected' – to 'expect', Heidegger says, is simply to 'wait for the actualisation' of something, and as noted my death is not an actuality – nor a flight from the inevitable (like trying to 'outrun' death), but rather an active engagement with or 'cultivation' of this possibility (2010: 261-2). Because death is the one possibility that can never be superseded by another possibility, our engagement with death is not a transitory task but is intrinsic to the whole of our existence. Dasein therefore 'lays claim' to death 'as something individual', and in doing so presents us with the fundamental truth that our present possibilities are *finite* possibilities and we must choose and take responsibility for them *now*. 'Becoming free *for* one's own death in anticipation liberates one from one's lostness in chance possibilities urging themselves upon us, so that the factual possibilities lying before the insuperable possibility can first be authentically understood and chosen.' (2010: 264) Being 'thrown into death' therefore means grasping death not as non-existence – whether as a non-existing thing (the physical state of death), or as a no-thing (oblivion) – but rather as *finite existence* (2010: 329-30).

### **Immortality and finitude**

Following his year studying at the Institut Français in Berlin in 1933, German existential phenomenology had a major impact on Sartre's thinking. The 'futural' nature of human existence, the constitutional experience of 'lack', and the emphasis on freedom, responsibility and authenticity were all insights that Sartre acquired from Heidegger. In one important respect, however, Sartre departed from Heidegger's approach. In *Being and*

*Nothingness* Sartre argues that the individual's experience of finitude, and the sense of responsibility it engenders, has got nothing to do with death. This is apparent, he suggests, from the fact that even an immortal being would be faced with the necessity of choice, and would therefore have to 'individualise' itself and bear the consequences of its decisions. When a conscious being – whether mortal or immortal – selects one course of action over another, Sartre points out, it 'temporalises' itself; in other words it becomes a being who acts this way and not that, and whose choice of action marks out a unique path that it alone is responsible for. Death is irrelevant to the experience of finitude, since even an immortal being cannot reverse time and re-live its choices in a different way (Sartre 1966: 668-9).

Immortality does not remove the necessity of choice, Sartre argues, and therefore it is not from being-towards-death that humans acquire either their finitude or their freedom. But to choose the manner of one's life implies an awareness that one could live otherwise, and it is not at all clear what living 'this' way or the 'other' way would mean to a being capable of living, in time, an infinity of ways. The very content of my life, in other words, becomes visible to me as a distinctive entity among other distinctive entities only because I can separate the span of my life from the things that might comprise it; because I can distinguish my 'life-time', however speculatively and mistakenly I measure it, from the different ways I might spend that time. If I lived forever, however, life would, as Simmel (2010: 71) suggests, 'remain indistinguishably fused with its values and contents, and no real impulse at all would exist to imagine these outside of the single form in which we know them and can experience them infinitely often'. Or to put this somewhat differently, while humans choose under conditions of constraint, their options being meaningful in so far as they offer different opportunities to exercise their freedom, an immortal being would know no constraint, for every obstacle would be surmountable 'in time'. The fact that Prometheus's supposedly eternal punishment came to an end with Heracles's intervention is one indication that constraint, even of the eternal kind, doesn't make sense for a being that lives forever. Similarly, while Camus (1955) felt justified in championing the dogged eternal labour of Sisyphus as the mark of the archetypal 'absurd hero', for the Greeks themselves what made a man a hero was the immortalising act of risking one's life. We shouldn't forget that Sisyphus's ordeal, at least in one telling of the myth, was his atonement for the hubris of believing he could cheat death. What made his punishment so punishing was that it, but not he, was eternal.

Here we also find an important point of contact between mortality and immortality that has until now been overlooked, which is that eternity is intelligible – however elusively and imprecisely – only to a being which is itself perishable. A being that lived without limit would be pure transcendence and therefore incapable of transcending itself in order to know both what it is and what it isn't. Humans, by contrast, dwell permanently in the vicinity of both death and immortality, of time and timelessness. Aristotle's instruction in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1171b31) that we 'make ourselves immortal', invokes the familiar idea that the most memorable of human thoughts and deeds display such perfection they may transcend all that is contingent and shine like lodestars through the centuries. But a more profound immortality that is unburdened by the logical contradiction between genesis and permanence, between a creator who was born and the creations that will not die, is also a discernible element of mortal human experience. For even in the most original of minds there lurks the intuition that the most intense and exhaustive truths are not created but found, or at least that they are the recreation or realisation of ideals that have always latently existed. Such a profound intuition would be alien to a being that was itself eternal. As Simmel formulates it, it is precisely by setting a limit to the endless flow of life that death for human beings 'allows life to founder so as to permit the timelessness of its contents, as it were, to become free' (Simmel, 2010: 90, 74).

For Simmel, whose writings on this topic were peremptorily dismissed by Heidegger (2010: 239 n6) for their conflation of the biological with the existential, the boundary that is death gives 'form' to life, not by sealing the latter in an immobilising shell, but by intensifying it – condensing the flow of existence towards a unique gravitational unity – while simultaneously allowing that unified impulse to reach beyond its frontiers. The limits of life 'dam up' its otherwise shapeless stream, giving the self both a bounded continuity and a centre from which the walls of the dam are continually overflowed. Life, as Simmel puts it, is thus 'a bounded form that continually oversteps its bounds'. Transcendence as well as death is therefore immanent to it; life is always 'more-life' and 'more-than-life'. At the purely intellectual level, for example, knowledge of our boundaries is already a movement beyond them, such that even the things that escape our known and comprehensible world gain partial illumination by being thought of as 'unthinkable'. (Simmel, 2010: 9, 13, 5)

One characteristic of the form given to life by death is time, since mortality, by drawing a limit to my future, provides the urgency to 'fill' my time, albeit in a way that

always overflows the container. Life, in this sense, is both constituted by time and something that continually transcends it. We 'have' time and yet we are always 'losing track' of it; we are 'pressed for time' but we are always able to find more of it. If I lived forever, however, I would have little reason to count the passage of time and little sense of a life being shaped and intensified by the way I have chosen to dispose of it. Finitude for Sartre, to reiterate, comes from the *sequence* of my activities, which he points out is unique and irreversible even for an immortal being. Because my choices define me, if an opportunity comes round today that I rejected some time in the past then it is not the same choice now because by rejecting it the first time I chose to be a different person. But 'choosing oneself', as Sartre urges us to do, is an action roused by the constraints of time. I *have to choose* because time is always slipping away, and I know I have to *miss out* – to accept the finitude of acting this way and not that – because if I don't make a choice my life will stagnate and contract under the force of the given, the ultimate form of which is death. It is, moreover, only because I am mortal and constrained by time that my choice always has the potential to be a life-defining act, an act that runs ahead of itself and cannot be reversed – not simply because I cannot go back in time, but because the factual 'end' of my time weights my actions with the meaning of 'finality', however premature this meaning may turn out to be.

### **The for-itself in situation**

Simmel's argument that human life is simultaneously form-constituting and form-transcending has echoes of Heidegger's understanding of authenticity, but also reminds us of Sartre's analysis of the for-itself as a 'situated' being. If freedom is not to be a pure abstraction, Sartre argues, my freedom must be *my* freedom – it must be the choice to affirm, modify, utilise, repudiate or escape from the given circumstances I find myself in, albeit circumstances I 'find' only be revealing their relationship to the ends I have freely chosen for myself. I am always free to choose, but my freedom is therefore not limitless. I cannot choose to be a different social class, a different race, a different birth-sex, a different nationality, to be a different native language speaker, to have a different body, to have different parents ('my place, my body, my past, my position in so far as it is already determined by the indication of Others', Sartre says, are all factual aspects of my situation that my freedom both transcends and reveals as that which I have to be – but always in the mode of not-being-it, in the mode of 'nihilation'). Of course Sartre stresses how the

meaning of my past always depends on my project towards the future. It is how I project myself into the future – my ongoing choice of myself – which determines which elements of my past are significant and which are inconsequential, and in what way I define, value or devalue them. If the marriage vows I took twenty years ago matter to me, it is because I choose that they matter to me *now* rather than because they mattered to me when I originally made them; if I now renounce those vows as a naïve mistake made in the recklessness of youth, it is because today I am constructing the past as ‘that which I am no longer’. Whether we repudiate the past or seek to remain faithful to it, whether the past appears to us as a source of pride, embarrassment, regret, anger or indifference, our freedom requires that we confer on the past ‘a value, an hierarchical order, and an urgency in terms of which this facticity *motivates* the act and conduct of the for-itself’ (1966: 617, his emphasis).

But here, reflecting again on the significance of death by means of contrast with a life that was eternal, we return once more to the problem of ‘motivation’, for how could I acquire motivation from the past if my future infinitely exceeded it? Why would my past *matter* – why, to take some of Sartre’s own examples, would I even refer back to the promise of love I once made, to the contracts I signed, to my teenage experience of mysticism, to the period I spent in prison – if my future opportunities for action were limitless? Sartre emphasises that ‘the urgency of the past comes from the future’ (1966: 610), but what need would I have for this ‘urgency of the past’ if time was not running out, that is, if I was not dying?

Only a mortal being can attribute significance to its own past, for what distinguishes *the* past from *my* past is that the latter gathers meaning and momentum from its own finality – it is the ‘weight’ of the past, growing heavier as one’s future shrinks, which gives gravity to the question of selfhood and answers it with a sense of responsibility for the totality of one’s being. Thus did Simone de Beauvoir (1969: 55), acting against Sartre’s advice, rush to see her terminally ill mother before she died. ‘Why attribute such importance to a moment since there would be no memory?’, de Beauvoir asks herself, since she wants to be there for her mother’s sake, not for herself. ‘I understood, to the innermost fibre of my being, that the absolute could be enclosed within the last moments of a dying person.’

## Being-for-others

Another important dimension of the 'situation' of the for-itself that provides insight into Sartre's understanding of finitude is my being-for-others. For I live in a world of other people, of other subjects with their own consciousnesses and their own projects. To the extent that I exist for others, Sartre argues, I am an object to their gaze. Part of my existence is inescapably exterior to myself – an 'outside' that is apprehended by the Other but not by myself. Thus does Luigi Pirandello describe the descent into madness of Vitangelo Moscarda, the fictional protagonist of *One, No One and One Hundred Thousand* (1926), which begins when his wife casually tells him that his nose 'tilts to the right'. Sartre's preferred literary illustration is Kafka, whose protagonists find the meaning of their actions continually eluding them, faced as they are by the essentially unfathomable perspectives and motives of the Other. How we are seen by others never exactly coincides with how we see ourselves; but the incongruity is more than a matter of degree, for I cannot exist as an object for myself in the same way that I am an object to others, or as others are an object to me. The Other, as Sartre puts it, is a 'transcendence that transcends me', turning my situation into something exterior to me rather than something I have revealed by going beyond it. Because I cannot be the dense and static object that I am to the other – I cannot be 'a devout Muslim', 'a disabled person', 'an ardent feminist', 'a homeless immigrant', 'an ex-offender' – then to exist in a social world I must confront 'the total alienation of my person' (1966: 642).

The being that we are for the Other is, Sartre says, 'unrealisable', and at various points in his discussion of this being he draws implicit and explicit analogies with humans' relationship to death. We can and of course do take an attitude towards our being-for-others – we protest against it, hide from it, make humour out of it, claim it with a sense of inferiority or with a sense of pride – but because this being is *external* to us, and receives its identity from the consciousness of the Other, we cannot assume and take responsibility for it in the way that we can other aspects of our situation. Recognition of the subjectivity of the Other, and of that outside that we are but cannot experience, is always accompanied by a primitive feeling of 'shame', Sartre argues, and this is regardless of what it is that we may have been doing when we discover ourselves as a looked-at object in the world of another consciousness. We can certainly respond to the initial feeling of shame by reasserting our own autonomy, degrading the subjectivity of the Other by making the Other *our* object. But

in doing so we destroy the very perspective that might finally reveal the truth of our 'outside'; or as Sartre likes to put it, when we look back at the Other we do not see what the Other sees, but see only a pair of eyes.

As an alternative to shame, pride (or 'vanity') is in fact described by Sartre as an attitude of bad faith precisely because it claims what is impossible: to apprehend the Other's approval or admiration of me without constituting the Other as an object and thereby dissolving this positive viewpoint (1966: 356-7). The objectification of the Other is of course their objectification *for me*, and it does not mean therefore that when I look back at the Other the Other will recognise my subjective act of looking and feel the same shame that provoked my own defiance. It is bad faith, too, when the Other denies being a looker looked-at, and sees what he looks at not as a result of his active looking but as *how things look*. I use the male pronoun here deliberately, since the most prevalent example of this is the public male ogling of women, the shamelessness of which is made possible by those hegemonic institutions, ideologies and values which, as Sandra Harding (1993) and others have argued, have historically allow the privileged to misconstrue their shared interests and perspectives as an agentless 'objectivity', as a 'seeing' rather than a person who actively looks. 'The They' really is *das Man*.

For Sartre, then, the one aspect of my situation which *is me* but cannot be *mine*, is that which exists for the Other, and which I cannot realise as mine but can only interiorise as an 'exteriority which remains exteriority', as Sartre puts it (1966: 648). And here Sartre suggests that there is an uncanny similarity between the external limit posed by the freedom of the Other, and the situation-limit that is death. Humanist thinkers have long been attracted to the image of death as the summation and the sealing of a life, like the final chord in a melody. Life may be conceptualised, Sartre says, as a kind of 'waiting', in the sense that we are continually waiting for ourselves to make sense of our situation, the meaning that situation has for us always being contingent on what we may subsequently decide in the future. 'Thus it is necessary', Sartre writes, 'to consider our life as being made up not only of waitings but of waitings which themselves wait for waitings.' Only with death does this indeterminacy come to an end. At that point, it is imagined, 'We should know for always whether a particular youthful experience had been fruitful or ill-starred, whether a particular crisis of puberty was a caprice or a real pre-formation of my later engagements; the curve of our life would be fixed forever.' (1966: 658) The problem here, Sartre reminds

us, is that in most cases we cannot choose the moment at which the account will be closed, and death will always visit us when we are in the course of one project or another, interrupting rather than rounding off our life. To be a human being is to be a 'being-in-perpetual-suspense', a being which continually places the meaning of its life in question. And since life is therefore a never-finished attempt to make sense of our existence and give it meaning, death can only arrive at the 'wrong time', that is, in the course of living rather than at the 'end' of it.

The ultimate absurdity of our death, therefore, is that it can never be under our command. Even if I will my own death, Sartre points out, I must give up the meaning of that death to the Other who will outlast me. I may see this act of self-destruction as a crowning articulation of my heroism, my intolerable suffering, my mystical faith, my indictment of my enemies; but as with all forms of death, the meaning of my life now rests in the hands of posterity, the court of which may decide that my suicide was the act of a fool or a madman, or which may instantly forget me and condemn my existence to oblivion. Death is thus 'the triumph of the point of view of the Other over the point of view *which I am* toward myself' (1966: 661).

For Sartre, then, 'there is no place for death' in the reality that is human existence, for the latter is defined only by its trajectory towards the future, by its claim to an 'after'. Since there cannot, *for me*, be an 'after-my-death', death takes the alienation posed by the presence of the Other to an absolute level. When we are alive, we can still escape the 'outside' that we are for the Other by transforming the Other into an object, into a 'transcendence-transcended'. To be dead, however, is to be wholly a 'prey for the living'. All combat with the Other now comes to an end, and even one's victories are lost: 'to die is to exist only through the Other, and to owe to him one's meaning and the very meaning of one's victory' (1966: 665-6). Death is therefore a radical contingency that, Sartre argues, human beings simply cannot adopt an attitude towards: 'to contemplate my life by considering it in terms of death would be to contemplate my subjectivity by adopting with regard to it the Other's point of view. We have seen that this is not possible.' (1966: 667)

### **Enter Levinas**

Sartre's account of being-for-others probably has more relevance to the experience of mortality than he would have dared admit. Sociologists often speak of the 'social death' of



the self, and this is seen as particularly virulent among the elderly, especially in societies with ageing populations which are at the same time increasingly dedicated to speed, vigour, novelty and youth. That the loss, discrediting or invalidation of selfhood described in sociological studies of human interaction might be regarded as a quotidian existential experience of death is rejected as an intellectual trivialisation by those who follow Heidegger in arguing for the centrality of death to an authentic existence (White, 2016: 86). It is no mere coincidence, however, that people become less socially visible as they near the end of their lives, and that the social gaze becomes less and less discriminating of those who are edging closer to death (an 'othering' we are all complicit in when we speak of 'those' instead of 'us'). As infant mortality rates have diminished and life-expectancy increased, the social status of children has grown while society minimises the 'moral shock', as Blauner (1966) described it, of the more frequent deaths of the elderly by reducing their visibility and social importance. Removed to hospitals and nursing homes, the terminally ill, the frail and the elderly are subjected to that social mortification of self that Goffman (1961) associated with the 'total institution'. 'Never before have people died as noiselessly and hygienically as today in these societies,' Norbert Elias (1985: 85) observed, 'and never in social conditions so much fostering solitude.'

Although we must not dismiss the evidence, marshalled by Tony Walter (1994) for example, that recent decades have seen a 'revival' rather than a denial of death in the West, the social treatment of the elderly should give anyone interested in the human significance of death cause for serious concern. The moral value of Sartre's existentialism probably ends here, however, since the for-itself cannot take the standpoint of the Other – which, like death, is an 'ex-centric limit' to my existence – and so each of us has responsibility only for ourselves. Heidegger, it is true, advanced the most systematic philosophical challenge to the commonplace flight from death, but his account shares the deficiency in Sartre, in that death for Heidegger should arouse a consciousness of my freedom, but this consciousness is 'non-relational'; it is *my* death that I am ahead of myself towards, and therefore I can only assume responsibility for *my* freedom.

It was of course Levinas who was among the first to question Heidegger's claim that Dasein achieves full authenticity only by thinking about and assuming its own death. For Levinas the height of moral selfhood is when compassion for the mortality of others takes precedence over concern for one's own death. Like Sartre, Levinas sees death as a radical

exteriority which, contrary to Heidegger, cannot be appropriated and owned. Unlike Sartre, however, the externality of death is for Levinas a matter of both suffering and moral remediation: the Sartrean homology between death and the Other is transfigured insofar as our helplessness and vulnerability is also our exposure to moral companionship. Death, in Levinas's account, is the always approaching but never arrived absolute inertness that announces its debilitating power in the form of physical pain and suffering. As virile, sensing, sensuous beings, we are, Levinas (1969: 235-6) states, 'being against death', not being-towards-death as described by Heidegger, which is why 'my relation with death is not the fear of nothingness, but the fear of violence'. For Levinas, as for Merleau-Ponty, the vitality of the subject is nothing if not embodied.

In stark contrast to Sartre, who saw a Cartesian freedom in the for-itself who always 'suffers from not suffering enough' (1966: 111), Levinas thus defines suffering as 'the very irremissibility of being. The content of suffering merges with the impossibility of detaching oneself from suffering' (Levinas 1987: 69). But something of the 'not yet' – as opposed to Sartre's 'not enough' – still persists in this experience, for physical pain also includes the futurity of death within it 'like a paroxysm'. It is, Levinas continues, 'as if there were something about to be produced even more rending than suffering, as if despite the entire absence of a dimension of withdrawal that constitutes suffering, it still had some free space for an event' (1987: 69). And this free space for an event, this ever-shrinking interval that always separates us from death, is a space for hope as well as degradation. This is because, for Levinas, our consciousness of death's implacable hostility and externality also makes possible an appeal to the alien will of the Other: 'A social conjuncture is maintained in this menace...as though the approach of death remained one of the modalities of the relation with the Other' (1969: 234). Precisely because death resists comprehension and assimilation – because, contrary to Heidegger, it cannot be made *mine* – it exposes me, helplessly, to what is other than me: 'My solitude is thus not confirmed by death but broken by it.' (1987: 74) Death stalks us like 'murder', Levinas says, yet fear of this menace is equally hope for its postponement or alleviation. 'The doctor is an a priori principle of human mortality. Death approaches in the fear of someone, and hopes in someone' (Levinas 1969: 234). Viewing the same relationship from the other side, if I am not to be a murderer then I must be an aid: the suffering of the Other 'commands me to not remain indifferent to this death, to not let

the Other die alone, that is, to answer for the life of the other person, at the risk of becoming an accomplice in that person's death' (Levinas 1987: 109).

In his own reading of Levinas, the American translator of *Time and the Other*, Richard A. Cohen, stresses how, when moving from individual moral responsibility to the broader demands of social justice, the focus of our compassion must stretch beyond the proximal face of the Other to that wider community of unseen, unknown, and even unborn others; and that for this to occur the individual 'must live for a time beyond its own time, beyond, that is to say, its own death' (Cohen 2006: 37). Thus Cohen cites Levinas's argument that moral meaning 'comes from an authority that is significant *after and despite my death*', implying obligations to the Other 'that oblige me beyond my death' in a way which is commonly but 'improperly' thought of as 'super-natural' (Levinas 1987: 114-5). As Ryan Coyne (2018) has suggested, and as I shall explain further in what remains of this paper, an ethical stance similar to that of Levinas can be gleaned from Simmel's *Lebensanschauung*, although the journey to the same destination follows a different tack. While Levinas insists that death is an unknowable obscurity whose approach is suffered without ever being grasped, Simmel grants death its elusiveness while at the same time removing from it the untranscendable futurity it possessed for Levinas. This makes Simmel's analysis ontologically closer to Heidegger, even though the ethical implications of this analysis are potentially richer than in Heidegger's solitary being-towards-death.

### **Death and the (moral) form of life**

For Simmel, 'death is immanent in life from the outset', with life stretching both in excess of itself and below itself in one and the same action, transcendence and decline being not 'additions to life' but 'the condition of life itself' (2010: 14). Simmel was not interested in distinguishing authentic from inauthentic attitudes to death, viewing the meaningfulness of life's contents – their distinctive value and form – as shaped '(obviously not by conscious consideration, but instinctively and traditionally) from the outset within bounds proportioned to a death-delimited life' (2010: 66). Regardless of the individual's intellectual or existential disposition, death necessarily 'inhabits life' – it 'appears as the seeming "outside" of life that in truth is its "within", forming every element of this "within" as only we know it' (2010: 68). It forms life 'instinctively', since living beings must adapt to their physical vulnerability and assimilate the danger of death; and it does so 'traditionally',

insofar as human practices and institutions are culturally calibrated in relation to the magnitudes, phases and thresholds of a perilous and perishable life.

Not only does death give form to life, Simmel observes, but life in turn always 'needs more than a given form', and therefore continually reaches beyond the boundaries of life, not just towards 'more-life', but also to 'more-than-life' (2010: 15). It is, indeed, because 'the unified act of life includes both boundedness and the transcendence of boundary' (2010: 3) that what is 'outside' or 'more than' my individual existence – whether this is the life of the Other or life 'after' life – is something that holds significance to me. Simmel pushes this insight even further when, noting how human existence retains an element of mystery that cannot be wholly explained by chemical or physical processes, he rejects the summary dismissal of the obscure possibility that the 'soul may have yet other, nonconstruable forms at its disposal than just life' (2010: 75).

The extraordinary plasticity of human life and the variety of its historical forms reminds us that a social and cultural existence is always a relative 'closing' of human's natural 'world openness', as Berger and Luckmann (1967: 69) described it. Yet Simmel draws attention to the way this closed, finite existence, in all its absurd and often dreadful contingency, always leaves behind an unfulfilled 'residue of life', a restless feeling of unresolved possibilities and unrealised potentialities that equips us 'with the intimation of an intensive endlessness that is projected in the time-dimension as immortality' (Simmel, 2010: 76). We must recognise, therefore, 'that as finite we are more than finite, that in every motion that is singular by virtue of its specific content, something infinite in itself gives voice to itself just by failing to give voice' (Simmel, 1991: 25-6). Note here that it is Simmel, the sociologist, rather than Sartre the voluntarist, for whom the boundaries of facticity and finitude are so integral to life that to live is to gravitate beyond them. Even as fantastical a notion as the transmigration of souls, Simmel (2010: 95-6) argues, resonates with this puzzling truth: 'that a being is always something different, yet always the same', and that aroused by the diverse contents, vicissitudes and changes encountered in the course of a single life is 'the occasional feeling that its decisive poles have touched the boundaries not only of human existence but of imaginable existence whatsoever'.

Simmel applauded Schopenhauer for rejecting the Kantian dogma – later taken to its extreme by Sartre – that each singular action is free. 'Freedom and responsibility', Simmel agrees, must be 'moved from doing to being', for 'our singular actions, which seem to

emanate from ever-new impulses of the will, are really just occasions in which we learn to know ourselves'. But Schopenhauer was equally dogmatic, Simmel argues, in insisting that this being is immutable, ignoring how what is foundational in our existence tends radically towards change: 'to become different is the ultimate and inherent meaning of our essence and is the form of our metaphysical substance' (Simmel 1991: 126-9). It is because life, in its normal course, is the transcendence of boundaries and the creation of new forms, that it is possible to think of death as 'only the end of an individual form of life, but not of the life that has appeared in it' (Simmel 2010: 91). In each fluctuation of human finitude, each incomprehensible change, disparity and divergence, we are bereaved of ourselves and yet are renewed and reborn. The excess of life that this reveals may nourish a faith in the infinity of the soul, but it also 'carries over into the realm of ethics', giving rise to the conviction that 'the moral task of man is to overcome himself' (2010: 5).

The mysterious transit from pain to painlessness, from connection to estrangement, agitation to ennui, misery to contentedness; the book, film or person we once truly adored but today no longer recognise; the warmth of a sun we cannot imagine in the harsh depths of winter, no matter how many summers we have seen – who has not known these extremes without sensing a metamorphosis so radical that death and rebirth seem more than mere metaphors, the continuity of our own existence being both irrefutably certain and a constant surprise? 'Something persists in us while we are wise men and then fools, beasts and then saints, happy and then despairing.' (Simmel 2010: 96) From Simmel's humanistic understanding of the person – a person who, in order to persist in being, 'must be able to be different than he is' – might we then draw confidence in the post-human ethical reach of the individual, a reach that can 'overcome' the solitary 'man' of Sartrean and Heideggerian existentialism and begin to address the anthropogenetic crises of our time? For surely it is because human life is always more than human life that we can imagine, conceptualise and feel a kinship with those many different lives – and those many different forms of life – whose survival is in peril now, and whose existence matters even beyond the boundary of our own. This was, at least, Bertolt Brecht's final intuition, expressed in his death-bed poem, 'When in My White Room at the Charité'. Listening to a blackbird singing near the window, his anticipation of his own nothingness becomes, in the final lines, a moving intimation of unbounded life: 'Now/I managed to enjoy/The song of every blackbird after me too.'

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