



Mortality

Promoting the interdisciplinary study of death and dying

ISSN: 1357-6275 (Print) 1469-9885 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cmrt20

This life, or the lives of others? Rethinking mortality as vulnerability

Finn Bowring

To cite this article: Finn Bowring (02 Oct 2026): This life, or the lives of others? Rethinking mortality as vulnerability, *Mortality*, DOI: [10.1080/13576275.2026.2740070](https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2026.2740070)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2026.2740070>



© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 02 Oct 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 37



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

This life, or the lives of others? Rethinking mortality as vulnerability

Finn Bowring

School of Social and Spatial Sciences, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

ABSTRACT

The condition of mortality is conventionally understood as the possession of a finite lifetime. As lifetimes have lengthened, and ageing and dying have become more protracted, a more open awareness of mortality has emerged. The de-tabooing of death has increased the pertinence of the existential injunction to authenticate 'this life', but arguably it is also accompanied by more casual attitudes to the deaths of others, as reflected in the popularity of dark tourism, the viral spread of images of military and terrorist killings, and the view, shared by advocates of assisted dying, that some lives would be better brought to a faster end. In this article I argue that a more truthful understanding of the human condition of mortality would conceptualise it not as finitude but as vulnerability. When we think of mortality as a limit of time, death becomes another component of life to be consumed or mastered before time runs out. Rethinking mortality as vulnerability, on the other hand, reminds us that dependency and suffering are conditions of caring about the world, and of finding meaning in lives other than, and after, our own.

KEYWORDS

Vulnerability; suffering; immortality; resonance; existentialism

The management of death

A prominent sociological theme in the field of death studies is the role that dying, mourning and disposing practices play in mitigating the anguish of mortality and keeping people attached to the ultimately futile business of life. At the root of every society's 'death system', as Robert Kastenbaum (2016) called it, is the existential upheaval of death, and the need to contain that upheaval for the sake of both psychological integrity and social order. Bereavement, terminal illness, the crises of mid-life and ageing, transform factual knowledge of human mortality into a personal revelation that can be as troubling for society as it is for the individual. Not unlike the very different feeling of erotic love, where the obsessive devotion to a single person can inspire both audacious accomplishments and scandalous treacheries, death, in Peter Berger's phrasing, is a 'marginal situation' which throws the legitimacy of the everyday world, and our habitual complicity with it, into question (Berger, 1990, pp. 42–4, 192).

CONTACT Finn Bowring  bowringf@cardiff.ac.uk  School of Social and Spatial Sciences, Cardiff University, Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff CF10 3WT, UK

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Such was the influence of Phillip Ariès's historical study of death that it was long assumed that the marginal situation of death – 'death of the self', in Ariès's formulation – first emerged in post-Medieval Europe, and before that time the disruptive force of death in Western culture was spontaneously 'tamed' by the integrating influences of collective identities, religious worldviews, and the assumed continuity between this life and the next. An important role here was played by the community of the dead, whose first-hand knowledge of humans' fate gave them moral authority over the living. In the *Iliad* (1987, p. 23.71–4), for example, Achilles is visited by the ghost of his slain comrade, and possibly lover, Patroclus, who urges him to expedite his burial, as the dead 'will not let me cross the river to join their number' until his funeral rites have been completed. In Sophocles's *Antigone* (74–77), the heroine explains to her sister why she feels authorised to disobey King Creon and bury the corpse of her traitor brother, observing that she will need to please the dead for much longer than she has to answer to the living. In Plato's (2002) account of Socrates's trial, the condemned philosopher is, at worst, indifferent to his post-mortem fate, whilst at best he imagines being able to continue his conversations with the deceased luminaries of Greek history and culture who await him (*Apology*, 40d–41c). In later Medieval Europe, as Ariès (1982, pp. 67–71) documents, the moral audibility of the dead was complemented by their graphic physical proximity, with the cemetery doubling up as the community's public square, as marketplace and athletic field, auction house and promenade, political forum and rendezvous point. With quotidian life lived amidst the ubiquitous bones of the dead it was easy for Ariès to conjure from this picture the supposedly age-old 'image of an unbroken family of living and dead, unity on earth and in eternity' (Ariès, 1982, p. 161), and easy to agree with Simmel that death poses no problem so long as 'the immortality of the species devours the mortality of the individual' (Simmel, 2010a, p. 82).

If we look a little closer, however, there is plenty of evidence that already among the wealthy urban classes of Greek antiquity death had become a source of disquiet. The woes of ageing and dying are described with despair by the chorus in Sophocles's (1912) *Oedipus at Colonus* (1225–40), and in *Antigone* (333–62) the chorus sing of human's glorious supremacy over everything except death. In Euripides's (1996) *Alcestis*, Admetus accepts the gift of an unnaturally long life in exchange for his wife's death, then berates his ageing father for not volunteering to give up, in place of his daughter-in-law, what little time he had left. The father's response reverses Antigone's logic in a way that resounds with modern sensibilities: 'It's a long time, I reckon, I'll be spending dead, a long time, and only a short one alive, but all the more precious for that' (641–73). Even earlier, in the *Odyssey* (1991), there are signs of a troubled attitude to death, with the ghost of Achilles rebuffing Odysseus's claim that the warrior's heroic demise was blessedly immortalising: 'I would rather work the soil as a serf on hire to some landless impoverished peasant than be King of all these lifeless dead' (11.483–91).

Allan Kellehear has argued, in fact, that the social management of death anxieties and the pursuit of the 'good death' has been going on for thousands of years longer than Ariès believed. Dying became a socially stylised phenomenon, Kellehear (2007) suggests, when our distant ancestors began to form stable farming settlements. In earlier hunter-gatherer communities, where life was nomadic, precarious and unpredictable, death for most people would have been a sudden and unexpected event related to an accident or miscalculation, and 'dying' was essentially a *post-mortem* journey facilitated by the likes

of grave goods and the ritual practices of ancestor cults. Kellehear argues that the domestication of nature and the transition to organised agriculture meant people were now obliged to live amidst their own and their animals' detritus. Infectious diseases then became the primary causes of death, and as such deaths were slower and more predictable in their course, space opened up both for anxieties about death and for the assuaging of those anxieties through the ritual management of dying as an interactional rite of passage.

Kellehear's argument is essentially that the 'tame' death which Ariès (1982, p. 28) claimed was 'the oldest death there is', is actually a rather recent phenomenon in the social history of our species. Death, moreover, had to become something 'wild' before it could be tamed, and what turned death into an unruly adversary was the gradual process of human settlement and urbanisation, and with it the transformation of nature – including humans' physical vulnerability – into an object of control and domination.

From the 'grief-free society' to the 'age of spectacular death'

Longer lifespans, growing reflexive individualism, and much more open attitudes to death in Western culture have of course shaped contemporary understandings of the good death in new and important ways. People who live to extreme old age may be more inclined than in the past to approach death as a welcome release from both social and physical diminishment. At the same time, however, the survivors of the dead, having shared a personal bond for a more extended length of time, may suffer a deeper sense of loss, and be in need of more powerful and more imaginative mourning practices. This is why Walter (2017) argues that, rather than the much-publicised contest between denial and recognition of the 'death of the self', contemporary attitudes to death actually have more in common with nineteenth-century Romanticism and the pre-eminent mourning of 'Thy death'. Clive Seale's research, on the other hand, suggests that the evidence points towards a *dampening* of the significance of death in most people's lives. Well in advance of death itself, both the dying and the bereaved are, Seale argues, enrolled in a variety of 'resurrective practices' that use conversational scripts and institutional routines as everyday substitutes for traditional mourning rites. Reflexively formulating their own obituaries and mourning in anticipation of both their own and others' death, the result, in Seale's view, is 'a relatively "grief free" society' (Seale, 1998, p. 201). As Kellehear himself observes, in a curious echo of the seventeenth-century sensibility that Ariès called 'remote and imminent death': 'For all intents and practical purposes, preparations for death are now associated with the less urgent and more general recognition of mortality across the lifespan' (Kellehear, 2007, p. 216).

All these sociological analyses sound a note of scepticism towards muscular philosophical treatments of mortality as an existential revelation of selfhood. They recognise, nonetheless, the success of what Lofland (2019) called the 'happy death movement' in arguing for open awareness of death as a precondition for living freely and authentically. The influence of this 'revivalist' discourse can be seen in the growth of support for assisted dying legislation, and its 'death positive' message may also be a contributing factor in the increasing visibility of death, dying and killing in the digitally mediated world, which some sociologists claim is now so ubiquitously intertwined with commerce, tourism and

entertainment culture that it justifies new nomenclature in the periodising of death mentalities – the so-called ‘Age of the Spectacular Death’ (Jacobsen, 2016).

Is there a connection here, belied by the progressive humanist ethos of the hospice movement, between the ‘revival’ of death and the devaluing of the lives of others? Research by Seale and Addington-Hall (1995) in the UK found that non-spouse relatives and friends of a deceased person are more likely than spouses to say that an earlier death would have been better for the deceased, a finding that remained statistically significant when controlling for pain, distress, dependency and age, and which was still apparent even when the deceased had not expressed a wish to die sooner. With elderly women disproportionately represented among those for whom an earlier death was thought better, Seale, reflecting on the argument that legal euthanasia puts the most vulnerable at risk, surmised that ‘elderly women were less likely to be cared for by people with a large emotional investment in their continuing existence’, and concluded by warning that ‘concerns about the slippery slope seem justified’ (Seale, 1998, p. 190). Ruminating on these findings today, one might legitimately ask whether a ‘grief free’ society so fascinated with ‘spectacular death’ is one that, increasingly energised by ethno-nationalisms and hostility towards the most desperate and in need, is also one that has become more comfortable with killing. In what follows I want to approach this question from a different direction, and consider how other lives look when we think of the condition of mortality in terms of vulnerability rather than finite time.

Does mortality make us free?

One of the most acclaimed accounts, in recent years, of the importance of death-awareness to a meaningful life is Martin Hägglund’s *This Life: Why Mortality Makes Us Free*. The premise of Hägglund’s book seems uncontroversial: knowledge that we cannot live for ever is what obliges us to *choose* what to do with our limited time, and to invest that time meaningfully and make things *matter* to us. Reminiscent of an argument first made by Georg Simmel (2010b), that every form of life is a ‘reaching beyond itself’ and a striving for ‘more life’, Hägglund begins by describing a ‘natural freedom’, possessed by every living being, which is a spontaneous endeavour to be itself as well as to flourish beyond the parameters of mere survival. He then distinguishes this from a ‘spiritual freedom’ that is, as far as we currently know, unique to human beings.¹ The latter is normatively oriented (it reflects our constitution as social beings interested in a common good), it is inseparable from the formation and display of personhood (our choice of ourselves and our efforts to remain true to that choice), and in practice it is an always contestable answer to a question that Hägglund insists cannot be posed without some degree of existential anxiety: what should I do with my limited life-time?

My anxiety is not reducible to a psychological condition that can or should be overcome. Rather, anxiety is a condition of intelligibility for leading a free life and being passionately committed. As long as my life matters to me, I must be animated by the anxiety that my time is finite, since otherwise there would be no urgency in trying to be someone and trying to do something. Even if my project is to lead my life without psychological anxiety before death, that project is intelligible only because I am anxious not to waste my life on being anxious before death. Indeed, it is because I am living with the anxiety that my time is finite that I can reject certain occupations or activities as unworthy of who I take myself to be. Even the sense

that something lasts *too long* – that it takes too much time – is intelligible only because I hold that my life is too short. (Hägglund, 2020, p. 192)

Death, in Hägglund's quasi-Heideggerian formulation, is the unchosen, unacquaintable, always partly receding 'horizon' which gives us the spatial-temporal coordinates to put things into meaningful perspective, order our desires and priorities, and acquire a sense of purpose and direction. 'For anything to be urgent and for anything to be at stake in prioritizing one thing over another, I have to project the horizon of my death'. (Hägglund, 2020, p. 201) In Peter Berger's account of the same humanist reasoning, this project is as much the responsibility of sociology as it is a challenge for the individual. The performance of social roles may protect us from terror in the face of the 'abyss of being', but society is also 'a conspiracy to bring about inauthentic existence' and to perpetuate injustice by means of our unquestioning inertia. The first task of sociology is therefore to make the familiar strange, to *induce* the marginal situation or 'ecstasy' of the outsider, and to help people 'confront the human condition without comforting mystifications' (Berger, 1966, pp. 170–1).

Berger's debt to Heidegger's concept of '*das Man*' is as obvious here as Heidegger's influence is on Hägglund's thinking. Heidegger argued that *Dasein* (the human subject or, literally, 'being-there') routinely maintains the pretence that death is an external happening, an impersonal factual event that 'one' (*das Man*) must eventually undergo. This is a self-deception, for the real condition of mortality is a lived relation to the most extreme, but also the most imminent, possibility of my own inalienable existence – 'the possibility of the absolute impossibility of *Dasein*' (Heidegger, 2010/1927, p. 241). Absorbed in the complacent, conformist chatter of social conventions – Berger (1966, p. 168) likens the concept of *das Man* to Mead's theory of the 'generalised other' – we are protected not just from anguish but also from living a free, authentic, wakeful life. In Heidegger's view, such a life must interiorise its death as the ultimate limit and condition of its existence, and live consciously, and anxiously, as a 'being-toward-the-end'.

The idea that the most important, most freedom-catalysing marginal situation is the contemplation of our inescapable extinction – the conscious recognition that we cannot live for ever – has two curious lacunae. One is that the death of the self strikes powerfully at the meaningfulness of life, and for humans to re-establish, in the face of this knowledge, the animal's spontaneous enthusiasm for living, some degree of forgetfulness of death is, as Seale (1998) argues, psychologically necessary.² The second deficiency in the Heideggerian paradigm, however, is the one I want to explore in more depth. For it bears emphasising that meaning in 'life' presupposes meaning in the world, and our capacity to find the world meaningful – our sense that something *matters* to us and is worth *caring* about – is ultimately rooted in the fact that as mortal entities we cannot live without that world. Rather than making us free, our mortality makes us vulnerable, dependent and uncertain beings who must expose ourselves to and wait upon the care, neglect and violence of others. Need, vulnerability and suffering are conditions of mortality, moreover, not only in states of terminal disease or in the decay and decline of ageing. The marginal situation of life's precariousness, and the sense of 'urgency' that is aroused by this, derive not simply from knowledge of our terminal fate, for our vulnerability is a condition of mortal embodiment present at every stage of the life course. We are daily called to action by the actual or anticipated needs and dependencies of ourselves and others – by hunger

and tiredness, by sickness and infirmity, by love and yearning, and by the multiple interlacing practices and procedures by which our inescapable incapacities are socially managed and tended to or, conversely, denied, abused and exploited.

Not only are we called to action by needs, but our needs also catalyse and give meaning to the actions and reactions of others, sometimes leaving those who labour to care for the most vulnerable in society with an inexplicable sense of gratitude, as if giving were itself a form of exposure and receipt. It is Levinas, who famously opposed Heidegger's virile theory of freedom-in-the-face-of-death, to whom we owe recognition of the *moral* significance of our passivity and helplessness. In suffering we encounter our mortality not as the condition of autonomy, he argued, but as an event in which we are 'no longer able to be able', 'an event over which the subject is not master, an event in relation to which the subject is no longer a subject' (Levinas, 1987, pp. 69–74). For Levinas, mortality is the condition of vulnerability that arouses the subjectivity and responsibility of *others*; or, conversely, it is the mortality of the other, the other's defencelessness and exposure to harm, which is the starting point of *my* moral agency (Levinas, 1969).

In a careful linguistic re-reading of the passion of Jesus as told in the gospels of Mark and John, Bill Vanstone questioned the primacy accorded in much Christian teaching both to the 'betrayal' of Judas and to the death of Christ. Concentrating instead on the original meaning of 'passion' or 'suffering' as simply 'being done to' – as being handed over to the actions of others – Vanstone uses the story of Jesus's last days, and the revelatory significance they had for the Apostles, to challenge the assumption that humans reach the height of their dignity only in action. Passion, Vanstone (2004, p. 70) stresses, 'means dependence, exposure, waiting, being no longer in control of one's own situation, being the object of what is done'. It is what we know most keenly from the experience of illness, disability or ageing, but it is also a component of many mundane aspects of everyday life, and in some respects it is an inescapable consequence of technological growth, the social division of labour, and our reliance on increasingly complex systems that determine the supply and distribution of goods. It clashes, incongruously, both with the ethical pre-eminence accorded in Western culture to the individual's independence and autonomy, and with the increasing acceleration of social, economic and digital life and the unprecedented speed with which some actions and decisions today bear fruit. Yet commonplace frustration at having to wait for the actions of others, and resentment towards those who are perceived as not doing their fair share of acting and achieving, overlook the manifold nature of our passivity and receptivity. Liking the human being to 'a radio receiver capable of picking up a very wide range of frequencies', Vanstone (2004, pp. 58–9) illustrates how we 'may be questioned, refuted, criticised, embarrassed, inspired, amused, humiliated, flattered, betrayed, enlightened, patronised, corrupted, acquitted', and in each case there must be an accumulation of subjectivity in our passivity for us to be able to understand precisely what is being done to us – to distinguish 'being admired', for example, from 'being flattered'. There is an echo here of Simmel's argument that our interior sense of independent selfhood and judgement can only take shape through friction with a world that resists us and makes us wait: '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, 2010a, p. 72)

Immortality as a thought experiment

A common tactic in philosophical discussions of mortality is the 'thought experiment' that contrasts the condition of human life with that of an immortal, and I want to dwell on this in order to highlight the centrality of passivity and vulnerability to our experience of mortality. An interesting example is offered by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* – interesting because, for all Sartre's intellectual debt to *Being and Time*, on the question of death, and its relationship to freedom and authenticity, Sartre and Heidegger parted company. Sartre essentially restated the Epicurean position that death is an unreachable, inherently meaningless externality, a futureless future which cannot be assumed and transcended, 'transcendence' being, for Sartre, the mode of 'going beyond' by which the human actor – 'being-for-itself', in his Hegelian terminology – expresses its capacity for meaning.

To support his argument that the condition of mortality is inconsequential to our authentic responsibility for our own life, Sartre imagines the opposite: being immortal. If I lived forever, he argues, I would still be free to decide what to do with my time, and the chosen *sequence* of my acts would singularise them and make the unique content of my life visible to me: 'the immortal man like the mortal is born several and makes himself one' (Sartre, 1966, p. 669). Having endless time is not the same as being able to travel in time, and even if I live forever I cannot rewind the past, no matter how open and timeless my future. The path of my life, the ventures I undertake and the inquiries, discoveries and accomplishments I pursue, will always be a unique concatenation of decisions which display both my individual freedom and the specific conditions, or 'finitude', of its existence. Hence Sartre's direct repudiation of Heidegger: 'death is in no way the foundation of the finitude of the for-itself' (Sartre, 1966, p. 669).

If philosophical discussions that compare the difference between mortality and immortality tend to sound rather contrived, this is partly because descriptions of immortality, in order to make sense to us, rely on an anthropomorphism that clashes with what we know to be the non-humanness of what is imagined. Because contrasts between things are only possible if those things also have something in common that puts them in the same intelligible universe, to elucidate the condition of immortality requires us to image that the immortal is, paradoxically, 'human'. If Sartre's argument strikes the reader as unconvincingly abstract, this may be because he makes little imaginative effort in this respect, since his aim is to repudiate the contrast and dismiss the significance of death. If we turn to literary fiction, however, a richer picture emerges.

One well-known example of this is the short story, 'The Immortal', by the Argentinian poet and writer Jorge Luis Borges. It is a tale narrated by a Roman soldier who recounts an epic journey to find the famed City of The Immortals. After a series of trials he eventually finds the hidden city, but discovers it empty of inhabitants and seemingly vandalised and left in ruin. Retracing his steps he returns to a nearby group of pale-skinned, hairy troglodytes who live a curiously wanton existence, sheltering in caves and pits, never speaking, only appearing to move when provoked by an elemental stimulus like a downpour of rain. He tries to teach one of them a few words and, after some time, he

begins to break through to him. He calls the cave man 'Argos', and eventually Argos mumbles in recognition: 'Argos, Ulysses's dog'. 'What do you know of *The Odyssey*?', the Roman asks in astonishment. Eventually the man replies: 'Very little. It must be over a thousand years since I wrote it'.

Homer is one of the Immortals, but why does he and his companions live the life of a feral dog? For the immortals, everything is possible in time, and because of this nothing can count as an achievement that would merit social approval or acclaim. With no prospect of failure, everything is in vain, and the cave dwellers have sunk into a state of profound apathy.

Indoctrinated by a practice of centuries, the republic of immortal men had attained the perfection of tolerance and almost that of indifference. They knew that in an infinite period of time, all things happen to all men. Because of his past or future virtues, every man is worthy of all goodness, but also of all perversity, because of his infamy in the past or future ... Seen in this manner, all our acts are just, but they are also indifferent. There are no moral or intellectual merits. Homer composed the *Odyssey*; if we postulate an infinite period of time, with infinite circumstances and changes, the impossible thing is not to compose the *Odyssey*, at least once. (Borges, 1970, pp. 144–5)

The narrator then contrasts this with the condition of mortals:

Death (or its allusion) makes men precious and pathetic. They are moving because of their phantom condition; every act they execute may be their last; there is not a face that is not on the verge of dissolving like a face in a dream. Everything among the mortals has the value of the irretrievable and the perilous. Among the Immortals, on the other hand, every act (and every thought) is the echo of others that preceded it in the past ... or the faithful presage of others that in the future will repeat it to a vertiginous degree. There is nothing that is not as if lost in a maze of indefatigable mirrors. Nothing can happen only once, nothing is preciously precarious. (Borges, 1970, p. 146)

Sartre argued that an everlasting life does not relieve the immortal of the burden of choice, but Borges adds something obvious that is missing from Sartre's more abstract and individualistic description of immortal beings: our dependence on one another and the importance, for social animals, of actions deemed worthy of dignity, approval and respect, if not praise and admiration. If all actions are possible in time, every immortal being may be free and unique, but nothing they might do is *precious* because everything is eventually achievable, and indeed repeatable. If immortals are invulnerable to failure and to suffering – as they must be, since a being with physiological needs would always be at risk of the fatal deprivation of those needs – then they can neither excel and win the esteem of others nor be hurt and summon their help and concern. Mortals, moreover, are not simply conditioned by having *limited* time, but also by *not being able to control* the length of that time. Mortality is both the necessity *and the uncertainty* of death. This uncertainty is the certainty of one's *vulnerability to dying* – and to death's ultimately fateful emissaries, pain and suffering. It is because people are vulnerable to, rather than certain of, death, that 'every act they execute may be their last'.

To say that humans are always on the verge of *final acts* – while never knowing if those acts will actually be their last – also means that we live in the precarious shadow of posterity. We are always acting towards a yet-to-be-realised future, and this includes the future after our death. This is not a conceit. How we imagine the future after our death – and how our finished life might feature in it – will more than likely be inaccurate, but there will certainly be a future, and

in that future a life that has ended will be remembered, judged and reflected on in one way or another, as well as, sooner or later, forgotten.³ Each of us therefore exists as a being who will be someone who *used to be*. Only when we have become someone who *used to exist*, in fact, do we become a definite person, 'a life', in the complete sense. Death is what finishes us, what completes us. We cannot claim to have lived until we have died, until we have surrendered ourselves, irrevocably, to the verdict of others, to the stories they will tell, or not tell, about us.

Sartre would retort that, because we cannot be a contesting witness to these stories, they are as irrelevant to us as death; life is transcendence, and we cannot transcend the judgements of others when we are dead. But knowledge of this 'cannot', of this not-being-able, is central to our mortal experience of life. It is the absolute manifestation of our ordinary helplessness, our everyday dependence on others, our practical existence as an object at the mercy of the world. We are all actors or agents, Hannah Arendt explains, but we are too entangled in the world to be the *authors* or *producers* of our lives. We are the 'subject' of our story 'in the twofold sense of the word, namely, its actor and sufferer, but nobody is its author' (Arendt, 1958, p. 184). As Walter Benjamin pointed out in his essay on 'The Storyteller', this is what we intuit from novel-reading (or more often, today, from film and TV). Whether through the actual death of characters or the figurative end that is the story's final chapter, the meaning of a life is disclosed only in death (Benjamin, 1973/1935, pp. 100–101). We often learn this when the life of a deceased person assumes a richer, more vivid and more three-dimensional shape when the bereaved begin to exchange their stories, grieving not by 'letting go', as the psychological orthodoxy claims, but by constructing a shared memory that evokes the continued presence of the dead (Walter, 1996). This, in any case, is why the lives of Borges's Immortals are so shapeless. No matter how free they are to plot their own passage through life, this is a plot that cannot be summarised or delineated, a story that, because it never finishes, is always yet to be told.

Earlier I suggested that meaningful distinctions between mortality and immortality require some degree of equivalence to make sense to us. We can isolate specific aspects of the condition of immortality as pitiful or abhorrent, but only against the backdrop of other conditions that are recognisably human. Might this backdrop, that is, the features that we share with whatever we are distinguishing ourselves from, tell us more about what we are – or at least, as the posthumanists would argue, about what we imagine ourselves to be – than the differences? If we cannot think the unthinkable, can we discern in the way we think of immortality something recognisably truthful about *ourselves*?

Borges's immortals live in a community that has *almost* lost any sense of moral concern for others, a community whose general mood is 'almost that of indifference'. One of them fell into a gorge that was originally quarried for the stone that built the city. It was 70 years before someone threw him a rope, the Roman narrator recalls, emphasising the immortals' insensitivity to . . . well, insensitivity to what? 'He could not hurt himself or die', Borges (1970, p. 145) writes, 'but he was burning with thirst'. In order to convey the Roman narrator's astonishment that it took 70 years to rescue the unfortunate fellow, his misfortune has to arouse our, as well as his companion's, moral concern. Thus the immortal man stuck in the quarry cannot 'hurt', but Borges smuggles in the possibility of suffering in another form – the burning torture of thirst. Wasn't that burning the reason why the rope was, eventually, provided? The immortals are *almost* indifferent, and *almost* without suffering. They aren't so much devoid of vulnerability and care as being incredibly ponderous in their responsiveness.

Lemuel Gulliver, the eponymous adventurer of *Gulliver's Travels*, also has a story to tell about immortals. In the kingdom of Luggnagg, a rare but well-documented occurrence is a child born with a facial birth mark that indicates it is a struldbrug, one who will never die. Delighted to learn of these thousand or so inhabitants of the country, Gulliver excitedly imagines the accumulation of glory, wisdom and wealth that would be possible for beings 'who, being born exempt from that universal calamity of human nature, have their minds free and disengaged, without the weight and depression of spirits caused by the continual apprehensions of death!' (Swift, 2006, p. 339) Like Borges's Roman explorer, Gulliver is in for a shock. For while Borges made his immortals intelligible by giving them eternal life but not complete freedom from suffering, Swift achieves the same moment of recognition by making the struldbrugs deathless but not ageless. Gulliver's naivety was to fantasise about a life of eternal youth, and therefore to overlook the accumulation of miseries – and stereotypical vices – that come with ageing and with physical and cognitive decline.

They were not only opinionative, peevish, covetous, morose, vain, talkative, but incapable of friendship, and dead to all natural affection, which never descended below their grandchildren. Envy and impotent desires are their prevailing passions ... The least miserable among them appear to be those who turn to dotage, and entirely lose their memories. (Swift, 2006, pp. 346–7)

Rendered useless by their infirmities, they are despised by the mortal majority and resented for their interminable claim on a level of public assistance already so parlous they frequently have to resort to begging.

As soon as they have completed the term of eighty years, they are looked on as dead in law; their heirs immediately succeed to their estates; only a small pittance is reserved for their support; and the poor ones are maintained at the public charge ... At ninety, they lose their teeth and hair; they have at that age no distinction of taste, but eat and drink whatever they can get, without relish or appetite. The diseases they were subject to still continue, without increasing or diminishing. In talking, they forget the common appellation of things, and the names of persons, even of those who are their nearest friends and relations. For the same reason, they never can amuse themselves with reading, because their memory will not serve to carry them from the beginning of a sentence to the end; and by this defect, they are deprived of the only entertainment whereof they might otherwise be capable (Swift, 2006, pp. 347–8).

Swift realises that he cannot describe his immortals as suffering an eternal physical decline, since ageing is a terminal process of atrophy, attrition and senescence that has to end in death. Instead he arranges for his struldbrugs to be stuck for eternity in extreme old age – their diseases 'continue, without increasing or diminishing' – and he makes this condition deplorable by asking us to imagine the torture of living for ever with so little capacity, the unrequited envy aroused by those lucky mortals for whom existence is precious because it is fleeting, and the hostility which the latter direct at those who, for all their degeneracy, still make a moral call on the weary conscience of the population.

The struldbrugs are deathless but not ageless. The elves of Middle Earth, by contrast, are ageless but not deathless. They have exceptional powers of healing and disease resistance, but they suffer pain and can be killed in battle. There is jeopardy in their ageless lives; there is glory to be earned by outshining or deflecting death, and sorrow to be endured in bereavement. Borges's immortal cave dwellers cannot fully escape the burden of physical suffering, Swift's

immortal struldbrugs cannot escape the enfeeblement of old age, Tolkien's immortal elves cannot escape the fatal force of a well-flighted arrow or the sword of a stronger enemy. Each humanising defect is necessary to elicit our identification and sympathy, to bring the immortal within an horizon of human intelligibility, on the basis of which contrasts can then be made. But these contrasts, I have suggested, are less significant than the similarities, since the latter convey most clearly our irreducible existence as vulnerable and dependent beings.

Death and the catastrophe of resonance

This paper began by recognising the disruptive force of death anxieties, and the long social history of their management. A more open culture of death awareness in the contemporary Western world has brought with it new attitudes and resources, ranging from the existential ethos of *carpe diem* to the dilution and dispersal of mourning practices that ready people for death and bereavement ahead of the event. I also cited literature on the increasing public fascination with death, dying and killing, however, and I mooted the idea that indifference to the lives of others may be one consequence of the way mortality is conceptualised, worried about and managed. I then argued for a different understanding of mortality which highlights the condition of vulnerability rather than the possession of a finite lifetime. I used examples from literary fiction to show how this understanding comes to light when we attempt the impossible task of contrasting ourselves with an immortal.

Rethinking mortality as vulnerability addresses the one-sided elevation of agency in conventional understandings of death awareness, making our dependency as visible and significant as our autonomy. It also provides a deeper insight into how mortal people find meaning in life, and it therefore has direct implications for how we reckon with mortality as an existential threat to meaning. In a slightly different idiom, and moving from philosophy to political economy, we can speak of the loss of meaning as 'alienation'. We must be mindful, however, that Marx theorised alienation dialectically, as both the deprivation of naïve self-unity and the yearning for a richer connection to the world. In the *Grundrisse*, in particular, he described 'the great civilising influence of capital' in classic modernist terms, praising a force that, by dissolving 'all traditional, confined, complacent, encrusted satisfactions of present needs', roused the slumbering creativity and unique productive imagination of humans (Marx, 1973, pp. 409–10). It was the 'tearing-down of all limited, one-sided aims' by the promiscuous dynamics of the marketplace which finally freed human subjectivity from adherence to a specific form of life, and in doing so allowed it to create new needs – 'the first historical act' according to Marx and Engels (1998, p. 48) – but also to suffer the unfulfilment of those needs or, in Marx's parlance, their alienation.

Hartmut Rosa (2019) calls this yearning for unmet needs a desire for 'resonance' – a desire to find meaning by 'connecting' with nature, people, ideas, practices and things. He develops this concept partly to correct the productivist bias in Marx's theory of work and alienation. Whilst an element of resonance can be detected in Marx's appreciation for work as craft and vocation, Rosa stresses that resonance is not ownership, mastery or control, and it is certainly not the Promethean domination of nature implied in Marx's concept of *praxis*. Resonance presupposes both a passiveness and receptivity – a willingness to be hurt, touched and moved – and an active determination to persevere with, and be attentive to, that which is strange, elusive, difficult or unexpected. Our desire for resonance informs modern ethical ideals of social solidarity, civic responsibility and care for the 'other', and it is clearly implicated in the concern

many people do feel for the most vulnerable in society, as well as for other forms of life endangered by the crisis of the Anthropocene. It is key to our desire to find a *home* in nature rather than to handle it instrumentally as a resource to be used and disposed of, and it is central to the emergence of affective individualism and the culture of romantic love. The latter perhaps best illustrates Rosa's point that resonance is impossible without the independence and mystery of what is loved – hence heterosexual intimacy could not arise until women were recognised and valued as autonomous subjects – and without the lover thereby risking the pain of rejection, disconnection or defeat. This is also why Vanstone describes love as the most human expression of the passion exemplified by Jesus: 'When we love we hand ourselves over to receive from an other our own triumph or our own tragedy. Where love is, action is destined to pass into passion: working into waiting'. (Vanstone, 2004, p. 96)

As with Marx, Rosa highlights how our capacity for resonance has dramatically expanded with the pacification of nature and with the revolution in sensibility brought about by nineteenth-century Romanticism. This capacity, however, is increasingly misappropriated and misunderstood. As the competitive conditions of life have grown harsher while the technological means of mastering things have become ever more powerful, the risk of moral injury or failure has degraded the desire for resonance into a self-defeating impulse to control. What Simmel called the 'tragedy of culture' – tragic, because 'the destructive forces directed against [our] being spring forth from the deepest levels of this very being' (Simmel, 1968, p. 43) – is for Rosa a 'catastrophe of resonance'. This is the process by which the world is transformed from something to be cared for into multiple 'points of aggression' – a world of recalcitrant objects that, in our eagerness to appropriate and subdue them, are robbed of a voice that might speak to us and whose language we are too defensive and unreceptive to hear. And in this catastrophe – the most striking manifestation of which is our plundering of the planet that sustains us – is deeply implicated our attitude to and experience of mortality.

In 'Science as a Vocation', Max Weber highlighted the transformation that had occurred in capitalist modernity from a world in which a person could die 'satiated with life', to one in which the relentless pace of technological progression and social and intellectual diversification leaves almost everyone with the conviction that death will come too early and they will be left missing out (Weber, 1970, p. 140). The Durkheim-Hertz theory of society as the quasi-immortal being that we commune with in order to transcend our profane, perishable selves, already looked problematic under Weber's scrutiny, and it seems even more tenuous when considered in the context of the accelerated transformation of social life that we are now so familiar with. Arguing that meaning cannot possibly be found in transient attachments, Durkheim had stressed not only that the durability of 'social facts' allows for their objective study, but also that this durability is what rescues us all from mortality-induced anomie: it is 'because societies are infinitely more long-lived than individuals, that they permit us to taste satisfactions that are not merely ephemeral' (Durkheim, 1972, pp. 93–4). As human longevity expands, however, and the lifespan of social practices and institutions contracts, we have instead the conditions of Bauman's 'liquid' modernity:

the snag is that none of those constituents of the idea of 'society' we can see now, judging from our experience, is 'infinitely more long-lived' than ourselves and therefore offers us 'satisfactions that are not merely ephemeral'. *Pace* Durkheim, it is now each of us, individually, that is the 'longest living' of all the bonds and institutions we have met: and the only entity whose life-expectation is steadily rising rather than shrinking. (Bauman, 2001, p. 21)

Rosa prefers the term ‘social acceleration’ to describe the post-war formation of a globalised capitalist economy which gradually jettisoned the Keynesian consensus and its commitment to citizens’ security, replacing that system with a ‘logic of escalation’ that compels all social actors to compete, innovate and optimise without respite. Structurally, the social and economic system stabilises itself by means of compulsory growth and dynamism; psychologically, it requires of people the motivation not simply to keep up with the Jones, but to keep up with *life itself* by filling up the pores of time with new options, pleasures and opportunities. Every consumer must now compile a ‘bucket list’ of tasks and experiences to be completed before they run out of time, the hope being that, if they start early enough and act with maximum efficiency, ‘the horizon of an “eternal life” can be won back here by imagining an unlimited acceleration. *One who lives infinitely fast no longer needs to fear death as the annihilator of options*’ (Rosa, 2013, p. 183, his emphasis).

In practice, however, this strategy backfires, and the ‘tragedy’ of objective culture that Simmel described occurs. The acceleration of social life increases the density of consumption, but it also increases the volume of production, with the result that the options available to us, and which we inevitably have to forfeit, grow faster than our capacity to experience them. ‘The *rate of growth* (of options) undeniably exceeds the *rate of acceleration*. So the time resources that are already in short supply anyway become even scarcer’. (Rosa, 2013, p. 184, his emphasis) This is how a greater awareness of death – awareness of mortality as *limited time* – results in a renewed attachment to life that is nonetheless self-defeating, and how this impulse to capture and possess our own existence, by fetishising agency over vulnerability, ends up deadening the experience of life and making us insensible to the precarious lives of others. The archetypal example of this is the appropriation and hoarding of experiences via camera phones. In the field of nature tourism, for example, where consumers hurry to record what is at risk of anthropogenic destruction, environmental scientists report that social media trends pose a significant threat to biodiversity, with some rare species now at risk of being ‘liked to death’ (Davis et al., 2024).

Ageing may eventually put paid to the infinite acceleration of life, yet even here a new remedy offers itself, which is that final, defiant, incomparable gesture of autonomy – to own one’s own demise, write one’s obituary, control death in assisted suicide, consume it in a living funeral. Many will argue that these are merely the latest, most culturally meaningful forms of the timelessly pursued ‘well-managed’ death, and that to question them is to favour unnecessary indignity and suffering. Rosa himself acknowledges that suicide and assisted dying may be ‘responsive’ ways of relating to the uncontrollability of death, and Tony Walter (2025) has developed this intuition further by outlining ways that the dying may find meaningful ways of resonating with their diminishing physical or mental capacities, with carers and friends, with natural life and with the prospective lives of future generations. But Rosa’s reflections on suicide and assisted dying are qualified with a note of scepticism that highlights how both practices ultimately express ‘the modern rejection of the idea that there is anything beyond the control of the subject, that there is any limit to our control beyond what is technically possible. In both cases, dying appears as a point of aggression, a task to be mastered’. (Rosa, 2020, p. 84)

What appears to be a passionate engagement with ‘this life’ may therefore be the opposite: a holding back on, or closing down of, living – which is precisely what we do, the psychoanalyst Otto Rank (1945, pp. 126–7) warned, when we try to reduce the repayment that is death. I have argued that to connect with and care for the world around us we

must be exposed to that world, must relinquish the impulse to control and instead be willing to be injured, affected, challenged and disappointed by it. 'Resonance implies vulnerability and a willingness to make ourselves vulnerable'. (Rosa, 2020, p. 53) Rethinking mortality as vulnerability helps bring back into focus *other lives* and *other forms of life* – including those we hope will thrive when we are dead – while at the same time making this life more hurtful, but also more resonant and more real.

Notes

1. The distinction between a natural and what Hägglund calls a 'spiritual' freedom was already made by Marx in the 1844 *Manuscripts*. There Marx described the individual as 'a corporeal, living, real, sensuous, objective being full of natural vigour', 'a suffering, conditioned and limited creature, like animals and plants', 'a passionate being' because 'passion is the essential force' of a life 'energetically bent on its object'. But the individual is *also* a 'being-for-itself', a 'species being' who must choose what is best for its nature, and who thereby 'makes his life activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness' (Marx, 1964, pp. 181–3, 113).
2. Or as Blum (2017) puts it, for humans to live without crippling despair in the face of death, life must be re-energised as an irrational 'addiction'.
3. Cicero famously mocked Epicurus for philosophising that 'death is nothing to us' while taking great pains to ensure the posthumous transmission of his estate and annual celebration of his birthday (Rohde, 1925, p. 167). But a greater, more unfathomable narcissism than the vanity of posterity is to make 'this life' so conclusive that *we do not care at all about the world we leave behind*.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Finn Bowring is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Social and Spatial Sciences, Cardiff University. He is the author of five books, the most recent of which is *Trouble with Death: Making Sense of Mortality in the Anthropocene* (BUP, 2025).

References

- Arendt, H. (1958). *The human condition*. University of Chicago Press.
- Ariès, P. (1982). *The hour of our death*. Vintage.
- Bauman, Z. (2001). Consuming life. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 1(1), 9–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146954050100100102>
- Benjamin, W. (1973/1935). The storyteller. In H. Arendt (Ed.), *Illuminations* (pp. 83–109). Fontana. (Original work published 1935).
- Berger, P. L. (1966). *Invitation to sociology: A humanistic perspective*. Penguin.
- Berger, P. L. (1990). *The sacred canopy: Elements of a sociological theory of religion*. Doubleday.
- Blum, A. (2017). *The dying body as a lived experience*. Routledge.
- Borges, J. L. (1970). The immortal. In D. A. Yates & J. E. Irby (Eds.), *Labyrinths* (pp. 135–149). Penguin.
- Davis, R. A., Greenwell, C., Davis, B. J., & Bateman, P. W. (2024). Liked to death: The impact of social media and photography on biodiversity. *Science of the Total Environment*, 949, 175106. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2024.175106>

- Durkheim, E. (1972). The science of morality. In A. Giddens (Ed.), *Emile Durkheim: Selected writings* (pp. 89–107). Cambridge University Press.
- Euripides. (1996). *Alcestis and other plays* (Trans. J. Davie). Penguin.
- Hägglund, M. (2020). *This life: Why mortality makes us free*. Profile.
- Heidegger, M. (2010/1927). *Being and time*. State University of New York Press. (Original work published 1927)
- Homer. (1987). *The iliad* (Trans. M. Hammond). Penguin.
- Homer. (1991). *The Odyssey* (Trans. E. V. Rieu, revised by D. C. H. Rieu). Penguin.
- Jacobsen, M. H. (2016). 'Spectacular death' - proposing a new fifth phase to Phillipe Ariès's admirable history of death. *Humanities*, 5(2), 1–20.
- Kastenbaum, R. J. (2016). *Death, society and human experience* (11th ed.). Routledge.
- Kellehear, A. (2007). *A social history of dying*. Cambridge University Press.
- Levinas, E. (1969). *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority*. Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas, E. (1987). Time and the other. In *Time and the other [and additional essays]* (pp. 39–94). Duquesne University Press.
- Lofland, L. (2019). *The craft of dying: The modern face of death* (40th anniversary ed.). MIT Press.
- Marx, K. (1964). *The economic and philosophical manuscripts of 1844*. International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1973). *Grundrisse*. Penguin.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1998). *The German ideology*. Prometheus.
- Plato. (2002). *Five dialogues: Euthyphro, apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo* (Trans. G. M. A. Gruber; 2nd ed.). Hackett.
- Rank, O. (1945). *Will therapy and truth and reality*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Rohde, E. (1925). *Psyche: The cult of souls and belief in immortality among the ancient greeks*. Ares.
- Rosa, H. (2013). *Social acceleration: A new theory of modernity*. Columbia University Press.
- Rosa, H. (2019). *Resonance: A sociology of our relationship to the world*. Polity.
- Rosa, H. (2020). *The uncontrollability of the world*. Polity.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1966). *Being and nothingness*. Washington Square Press.
- Seale, C. (1998). *Constructing death: The sociology of dying and bereavement*. Cambridge University Press.
- Seale, C., & Addington-Hall, J. (1995). Dying at the best time. *Social Science and Medicine*, 40(5), 589–595. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536\(95\)80003-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536(95)80003-3)
- Simmel, G. (1968). On the concept and the tragedy of culture. In *The conflict in modern culture and other essays* (pp. 27–46). Teachers College Press.
- Simmel, G. (2010a). Death and immortality. In *The view of life: Four metaphysical essays with journal aphorisms* (pp. 63–97). University of Chicago Press.
- Simmel, G. (2010b). Life as transcendence. In *The view of life: Four metaphysical essays with journal aphorisms* (pp. 1–17). University of Chicago Press.
- Sophocles. (1912). *Volume, 1: Oedipus the King, Oedipus at colonus, Antigone* (Trans. F. Storr). Harvard University Press.
- Swift, J. (2006). *Gulliver's travels*. Open Road Integrated Media.
- Vanstone, W. H. (2004). *The stature of waiting*. Darton, Longman and Todd.
- Walter, T. (1996). A new model of grief: Bereavement and biography. *Mortality*, 1(1), 7–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/713685822>
- Walter, T. (2017). How the dead survive: Ancestors, immortality, memory. In M. H. Jacobsen (Ed.), *Postmortal society: Towards a study of immortality* (pp. 19–39). Routledge.
- Walter, T. (2025). Resonance and alienation in dying. *Mortality*, 30(2), 447–465. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2025.2450238>
- Weber, M. (1970). Science as a vocation. In H. H. Gerth & C. W. Mills (Eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in sociology* (pp. 129–156). Routledge and Kegan Paul.