Heidegger Course on Death and Being

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# **Introduction**

ταὐτό τ' ἔνι ζῶν καὶ τεθνηκὸς καὶ [τὸ] ἐγρηγορὸς καὶ καθεῦδον καὶ νέον καὶ γηραιόν· τάδε γὰρ μεταπεσόντα ἐκεῖνά ἐστι κἀκεῖνα πάλιν μεταπεσόντα ταῦτα

- Heraclitus DK B88

Exposition of the Problem

What, today, of death? Are we at all perplexed by the fact that we die, that we are mortal? Or are we rather rushing away from our mortality? Our mortality seems to be the most obvious fact of all. After all, logic has long since been using the proposition “all men are mortal” as its standard example of the syllogism: all men are mortal, Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is mortal (cf. Demske 1970: 1). In the concept of “man” the predicate “mortal” is always already contained. That man is mortal is obvious. But do we encounter death as something obvious, something almost benign as the syllogism example suggests? Or do we rather encounter death as something uncanny and unknown? The obviousness with which death is encountered here might hence cover over something crucial. The abstraction of mortality, which serves to prove the validity of the logic of the syllogism, abstracts away from death – from our death that we each have to die. Perhaps what this indicates is that death has become abstract to us. An abstract *problem* that as such can and must be solved. Consequently, Harari and Kahnemann confirm in a conversation that “death is optional” (Harari and Kahnemann 2015, published online). In the same conversation Harari points out that “[d]eath has been relocated from the metaphysical realm to the technical realm.” Death has become but an abstract, instrumentally rational problem for the posthuman human being. Here death is no longer, to borrow Goethe’s expression, threefold separation “not hoping ever to meet again” (Goethe 1874: 165), which speaks to the pain and helplessness humans confront when a loved one dies. Here death is simply something to choose or not choose from a catalogue. Is such a technical response a humane response or do they already echo another non-human dimension? Are they not already signs of the replacement of the human-ethical with the epistemic-rational?

What are the “solutions” posthumanism offers? Biohacking and bio-enhancement lure us into believing the limitations of the human body can be eradicated at will. The easiest way to enhance the human body is to replace it altogether with machine parts. Others might prefer to dispose of their prison of the flesh by uploading copies of their selves to the cloud. The aim here is digital immortality. In the cloud the laws of physics and biology no longer apply. The mind is perfectly free to choose at any time any virtual body it desires. If anything, death is but a necessary evil, a passageway to a better, fuller life without limitations, a life of absolute negative freedom in the digital sphere. Here death does not constitute a horizon of meaning, here death is not something that pushes us back into our existence and our possibilities. Instead, death is but something to be overcome and something that does not concern us, at best death here only concerns us insofar as it serves as a passageway towards a better “life”, some enlightened and liberated state. It remains questionable whether notions such as “liberation” and “freedom” even make sense in such a world.

And yet, we are still mortal. Still human beings die every day and if we follow Heraclitus, then new death is born every day. Why this shying away from death? Whence this groundless abstraction and even failure to face up to this “problem” that is death for our existence and being? What motivates some to dream up transhumanist techno-fantasies of digital immortality? Is it not death itself that drives all of these endeavours? Those who wish to eradicate death, who already call death “optional”, are bound and driven by the horizon death constitutes. The meaning of their projects originates precisely from what they want to control. They want to be “im-mortal”, yet is there immortality without mortality? Put differently, even if some version of fantasised im-mortality were technologically achievable, would it not rest on being mortal? Our mortality, then, is not a source of meaninglessness, but a source of meaning. Yet, how we respond to death, and to our mortality and finitude seems to be pivotal. The assumed technical controllability of death amounts to little more than what Iain Thomson pointedly refers to as “compensatory subjectivistic fantasies” (Thomson 2011: 76). This is on point because these are the fantasies of the inflated postmodern subject that posits itself as the ultimate foundation of beings. Do we not resort to various fantasies regarding our desired subjective immortality, for we are utterly unwilling to face our death? These escapist fantasies, however, indicate and at once cover over a certain need. In fact, they indicate the need to consider more profoundly the question of death in a way that does not escape death, but rather in a way that confronts death and in a way that is thus neither technological nor purely metaphysical. It is striking that the technological responses to death are rather similar to some of metaphysics’ responses, if by metaphysics is meant some sort of supersensual salvation. Transhumanism tries to justify and overcome the cosmic “evil” of death, the perceived “screaming injustice” that such a noble creature as man is bound to die and ultimately utterly powerless. Death is here but a passageway and both “solutions” speculate or even calculate what comes after death.

If there is one philosopher, not just of the 20th century, but of the whole of the history of Western philosophy, who substantially devoted his thinking to death, then this philosopher is Martin Heidegger. In fact, we find in Heidegger one of the most profound and most enduring engagements with questions concerning mortality, finitude, and death. In *Das Ereignis* (*The Event*), a text written from the perspective of the history of being, Heidegger writes that “[w]e devastate the abyssal … event-related essence of death if we seek to calculate what might be “after” it. Thereby we degrade death to a null passageway.” (Heidegger GA 71: 194/ 165[[1]](#footnote-1)) The technological fantasies of transhumanism essentially see death as a passageway. Moreover, religious responses to mortality and death see death as a passageway. Heidegger’s thought, however, is devoted to a thinking of death that is neither metaphysical nor technological. Death is central to Heidegger’s thought precisely because death here comes into focus in a radically different way. One could say, death comes into focus in its own right.

The core argument of this course is thus twofold. First, death is central to Heidegger’s thinking path. The question of being can only be asked in light of death. We might expect death to be significant in Heidegger’s seemingly more existential endeavours in *Being and Time*. Nevertheless, I attempt to show that death remains of key importance far beyond the analytic of Dasein. I shall hence argue that death is pivotal for Heidegger’s entire thinking path. This means, second, that one can articulate a response to the question of being, Heidegger’s “unique question” (GA 65: 10/ 11[[2]](#footnote-2)) – as manifold as this question is along the thinking path – if one takes death into consideration at every major step of the thinking path. In the *Contributions to Philosophy* Heidegger hence even goes as far as calling death the “highest testimony to beyng” (GA 65: 230/ 181). I take this to be definitive for his philosophy as a whole. By explicating death’s fundamental role, I thus attempt to formulate a response to the question of being and that also means to the historical situation we are in and how the history of being moves. As any access to being is temporally structured, my attempt at a response to the *Seinsfrage*, of course, “cannot lie in an isolated and blind proposition,” as Heidegger puts it in *Being and Time* (SZ: 19/ 18[[3]](#footnote-3)). Thus, the response to the question of being here emerges as the argument develops. For the sake of clarity, I should already now point out that my response shows death to be a primary entry point into Heidegger’s manifold ways of approaching the question of being. This is why this course follows the development of the thinking path. This course should thus also be helpful for those interested in the unity of Heidegger’s thought.

In my view, there are in Heidegger’s thinking path four major topics and that means approaches to the question of being: 1. the existential-ontological and transcendental analytic of Dasein; 2. the thinking of *Ereignis*; 3. the question concerning technology and the world as fourfold; 4. language and more specifically poetry.

Following the thinking path the structure of the course is as follows. Part I engages with the phenomenon of death in the context of Dasein’s fundamental ontology. *Being and Time* is the main focus here, but I also consult surrounding texts from Heidegger’s time in Marburg and from his early years in Freiburg. Part I argues that death brings Dasein before being. On the one hand, being is here the understandable disclosedness and presence of beings, a presence which, however, withdraws from focus. On the other hand, being is the being of Dasein insofar as being cares for its own being in its everyday existence. In the analytic of Dasein Death is Dasein’s utmost limit and as such death co-constitutes Dasein’s horizon of understanding. Thus, Dasein can at all project possibilities of existence, can at all take issue with its own being and understand what it means to be because Dasein is mortally finite. Moreover, Dasein is closest to being, which is an issue for Dasein, when Dasein authentically takes over its ownmost possibility, death. By facing death Dasein realises the draw, the withdrawal of its own being, for death means the impossibility of Dasein’s being. This pushes Heidegger to think being itself as abeyant possibility.

The main body of Part II then explicates the role death plays in the thinking of *Ereignis*. The main texts of interest here are the *Contributions* *to Philosophy* and *The Event*, both published posthumously. Parts I and II serve as the foundation for the rest of the course since they reconstruct the transition from *Being and Time* as a text steeped in metaphysics to Heidegger’s unique being-historical (*seinsgeschichtlich*) approach to being. The tension between metaphysics and the history of being, I claim, does not leave Heidegger’s thought after the turn, but rather continues to drive it. I shall argue here that death is central to a proper and sound understanding of both the *Ereignis* as the realm where being and human beings encounter each other. Hence a sound understanding of the role of death in the texts on *Ereignis* is also crucial for a sound understanding of the movement of the history of being – the history of simultaneous withdrawal and coming-into-presence. Death, I shall show, is the locus of being’s withdrawal.

Part III investigates Heidegger’s writings on technology and looks at the relation between death and technology. In this part I aim to show that death harbours the distinct possibility to overcome *Gestell*. Heidegger refers to death as the *Gebirg* of being by the time he engages with questions concerning technology. As the *Gebirg* of being death is the gathering of all *bergen* (sheltering, recovering, concealing) and also of ἀλήθεια as *Ent-bergung* (un-concealment). The mode of *bergen* is aware that any disclosing is simultaneously a covering over. *Stellen*, in turn, is the prevalent mode of technology and *stellen*, positioning, forgets that all disclosure means simultaneous concealment. *Gestell* wants to position everything everywhere at any time in perfect presence and availability. In technology positioning takes the upper hand. Nevertheless, the sheltering mode of disclosure, *bergen*, is still possible precisely because death utterly defies control and positioning. Hence Part III in a nutshell argues that Heidegger sees in death a prime possibility to dismantle the power of technology. In light of his critique of technology Heidegger begins to develop the fourfold as a possibility to overcome technology. In the writings on the fourfold (*Geviert*) Heidegger begins to call human beings “mortals”, for they need to face death in order to provide a way out of *Gestell*.

In Part IV I further develop the possibility of overcoming technology in light of poetry. Poetic language provides a path toward the fourfold, a world where technology does not rule over us, because, as Heidegger claims, there is an “essential relation [*Wesensverhältnis*] between death and language … [which] remains still unthought.”(GA 12: 203/107[[4]](#footnote-4)) Part IV develops this “unthought” relation from within the thinking path.

## ***Memento Mori***

Before I begin to explicate the role of death I would like to address claims that Heidegger’s philosophy of death amounts to little more than antihuman pessimism. Givsan, for example, claims Heidegger is an inhumane philosopher because of the importance Heidegger places on death in *Being and Time* (cf. Givsan 2011). To be sure, Givsan maintains that Heidegger’s is a “*Denken der Inhumanität* – thinking of inhumanity”, as though what Heidegger is after with the focus on death is really a project of dehumanisation. With death as a constitutive trait of Dasein, maintains Givsan, Dasein must of necessity be *supposed to* die. The sooner Dasein dies the better, Givsan claims. Givsan admits that Heidegger rules out suicide (cf. Givsan 2011: 103 & 170). Yet, Givsan does not buy that Heidegger’s analysis of Dasein’s death is purely ontological, thus only related to the question, *what it is to be*, but not a moral or ethical endeavour.

Of course, one could point out against Givsan that human beings are mortal beings, that human beings – throughout the ages and across various cultures and civilisations – have thought of themselves as mortal beings, often in opposition to gods. Heidegger’s appreciation of death is a reformulation of *memento mori* for modern times. He warns us against being blinded by hubris and assuming that finite human beings have now reached absolute power and the end of history, where everything that is can be manipulated and dominated at will. This is not a moral, but an ontological warning. What is at stake is the being of beings. The question is whether all beings are just manipulable objects of use for the all-controlling and all-consuming subject deluding itself to be the centre of history; or whether beings are allowed to be on their own accord. Instead of a crude, misanthropic pessimism, Luther’s and Kierkegaard’s formulation of the *memento mori* are in the background of Heidegger’s analysis of death, as George Pattison stresses in his recent study of death in Heidegger (cf. Pattison 2016: 83). Death brings us before the simplicity of existence, which we participate in but which we certainly do not control. Heidegger’s focus on death and mortality is not at all “inhumane,” except, of course, if our mortality is inhumane. Heidegger stands in the tradition of, among others, Socrates, Augustine, Luther, Hegel, and Kierkegaard. For them our mortality is so fundamentally human that one has to wonder, whether our current ignorance of our mortality, the attempts to eradicate mortality scientifically, might not itself be of a great inhumaneness. Is human hubris not rampant in an epoch that assumes that everything can at will be controlled at any time and place? Heidegger wishes to confront this hubris of modern man by his sustained focus on mortality. Heidegger’s *memento mori* aims to show us once more how fragile we are in the face of one of the oldest questions: the question of being. By regarding death as integral to our existence we begin to appreciate our existence. “*Dasein* never [merely] perishes” (SZ: 247/ 238), as Heidegger writes in *Being and Time*, because death is at Dasein’s core. Instead, human beings *die*, and they die, for they are mortal and finite beings, dwelling on the earth and bound by the earth. In an age rampant with human self-aggrandisement, death reminds us of our place in the world. We are neither the centre of history nor the measure of all things. Rather, we are in the midst of beings.

Heidegger’s teacher, Husserl, on the other hand, levels the exact opposite accusation against Heidegger’s analysis of death in *Being and Time*. While Givsan sees Heidegger’s interpretation of death at the heart of Heidegger’s “inhumaneness”, Husserl does not accuse Heidegger of reducing human beings to mortality. Instead, Husserl argues that Heidegger reduces the peril of death: “The dazzling, profound ways in which Heidegger tackles death will hardly prove acceptable to death.” (Husserl 1985: 332[[5]](#footnote-5)) In my view, Husserl’s interpretation fails to see the true meaning of death for Heidegger’s thought. Neither does Heidegger reduce existence to death, nor does he try to tackle or domesticate death. Rather, death is welcomed into existence, not as domesticated and tamed, but as a mystery of our existence.

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1. Translation by Richard Rojcewicz. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Translation by Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Sein und Zeit* abbreviated as SZ. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Translation by Peter D. Hertz. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. As quoted by Tanja Staehler (2016: 207). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)