Death and Guilt: A Transcendental Account

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This essay distinguishes between empirical (ordinary, factual) and transcendental (metaphysical) forms of guilt, applied to the issue of death and mortality. Guilt in the transcendental sense is deeply related to the fundamental question about the meaningfulness of human life, including the meaningfulness or significance of morality, in particular; our mortality may be seen as challenging this significance at the most fundamental level. Reactions to this issue by philosophers such as Mark Johnston and Merold Westphal will be critically considered. In addition, the relations between the transcendental account of guilt and some other concepts open to a transcendental treatment will be discussed. Finally, the horizon of guilt is connected with another question of philosophical thanatology, namely that concerning our fundamental equality (vs. inequality) in the face of death.

Three Kinds of Guilt

The starting point of this inquiry is a certain kind of conception of ethics, which I can here only rather programmatically state instead of directly arguing for – while hoping that this essay as a whole will function as an indirect argument for its plausibility. According to this conception, ethics is not primarily about the good life or about the legitimacy of moral principles. Rather, ethics, pretty much like religion, presumably exists in the first place because we die, because we suffer, and because there is a lot of evil in the world. A certain kind of “negativity” is, in this sense, a key to morality, and the ethics of death and dying needs to be studied – not exclusively, to be sure, but perhaps primarily – from the perspective of negative moral concepts, such as the concept of guilt.

I want to suggest that we ought to distinguish between (at least) three quite different ways in which death and guilt are conceptually – and, hence, ethically – connected in our lives, moving from the more ordinary (empirical) to the more metaphysical (or, in a sense to be specified in due course, “transcendental”). These kinds of guilt overlap with one another; they can be placed on a continuum,
rather than being in all imaginable cases sharply distinguishable in terms of some essentialist criteria. Yet, the threefold distinction plays a heuristic role and is, though not exhaustive, I hope illustrative:

(1) There are, obviously, factual (empirical, ordinary) forms of guilt based on our causing death(s) by, e.g., killing other human beings.¹ This category includes causing deaths by means of omission, assuming that omissions are actions of some kind: when, for instance, we fail to provide a sick person with medicine, we may cause her/his death precisely by not doing something that ought to have been done in order to save her/his life.² These forms of guilt invoke a number of important applications to special topics in applied ethics, such as abortion, euthanasia, and war.

(2) However, in addition to the first category that is perhaps too obvious even to be mentioned, there is another form of guilt connected with the topic of death, namely, guilt based on our not having done something with or to someone during her/his life, i.e., before her/his death. This is, accordingly, a form of guilt resulting from our failure to be sufficiently strongly present or “available” in another person’s life. This form of guilt should be distinguished from the guilt resulting from our failure to do something specific, e.g., to save a life; it is based on a more general kind of omission. Yet, ultimately this form of guilt may be reducible to ordinary factual guilt, insofar as all omissions are understood as actions. A general failure to be present might be regarded as a very long conjunction of particular omissions.

(3) Finally, more importantly for my purposes here, there is something like guilt based on one’s life as a whole, on our life being fundamentally wrong or questionable.³ I see this as a qualitatively different kind of guilt in comparison to (1) and (2); hence my choice of the vocabulary of the “transcendental” – keeping in mind the overlaps acknowledged above, hence the impossibility of sharply, or essentialistically, distinguishing between the transcendental and the empirical. This metaphysical or transcendental guilt⁴ can be compared to the guilt of the innocent Oedipus, for instance. Oedipus is guilty of a horrible action which he had tried to avoid but, given his tragic fate, could not escape. It may also come close to the guilt felt by, say, Holocaust survivors, or the survivors of other genocides and mass murders. A survivor may ask why s/he was saved while so many others died. Hence, transcendental guilt should also be further connected with the ethics of memory, our duty to remember, and the guilt possibly involved in remembering certain horrible events of history – or, perhaps worse, in our inevitable failures to

¹ I will be concerned with human mortality in this essay and will therefore set aside issues concerning animal deaths.

² Conversely, of course, we may, by omitting a possible act of euthanasia or suicide-assistance, cause unbearable pain and suffering to someone who wishes to die but is not able or allowed to.

³ Cf., e.g., Merold Westphal’s (1984) analysis of something like this form of guilt as represented in Tolstoy’s famous short novel, The Death of Ivan Ilyich. I will return to Westphal’s views below.

⁴ See Pihlström 2011.
remember — even if we never did anything particular ourselves, or even if we were not even born when such events took place.\textsuperscript{5}

I will try to philosophically illuminate the deep link between death and guilt by considering the third form of guilt, in particular. This essay can partly be read as an attempt to apply to the specific issue of death and mortality certain considerations on transcendental guilt in general that are available in a previous work of mine.\textsuperscript{6} More importantly, it should, however, be read as an attempt to refocus the philosophy of death and mortality: the issue of guilt is unfortunately often only incompletely addressed in mainstream “philosophical thanatology.” Insofar as both death and guilt lead us to consider fundamental issues of human finitude, the integration of these concepts deserves detailed attention.

When speaking of “transcendental” concepts, or transcendental uses of concepts such as guilt, I am approaching my topic in a Kantian context, while avoiding (here) any Kant scholarship. The “transcendental” here denotes something that concerns the necessary conditions for the possibility of, and thus also the limits of, certain humanly possible (because actual) experiences and practices, such as morality (or what we may call the moral point of view). The transcendental, in brief, provides a context constitutively necessary for empirically possible — including of course factual — phenomena. Whether, and in what sense, such a use of a Kantian-like vocabulary is helpful or legitimate here will, I hope, emerge in the course of my inquiry. I am proposing this vocabulary as an illuminative way of dealing with the issue of death and guilt, instead of suggesting that these issues should always be approached transcendentally.

Special topics that could be discussed from the perspective of the transcendental vs. empirical/factual distinction include (among others) the following, the ongoing discourse on each containing a distinctive element of guilt but each (in its received form) typically ignoring the full-blown transcendental aspect of the problem of death and guilt: (i) moral nihilism, as opposed to the appreciation of the fundamental importance of morality — and the possible survival of “the good”;\textsuperscript{7} (ii) suicide — recalling Albert Camus’s famous question: Why doesn’t everyone commit suicide, given that the world is absurd? — and (iii) the ethics of memory.\textsuperscript{8} I cannot discuss these topics comprehensively in a single paper, but I will try to show through brief exemplary discussions how this theme should in my view be approached.

\textsuperscript{5} Another possible formulation of this concept of guilt is Heidegger’s concept of \textit{Schuldenwerdenkönnen}: according to Heidegger, the human \textit{Dasein} is guilty “authentically” (see, e.g., Heidegger 1961 (1927), 287, 333-334). I am indebted to Leena Kaunonen’s paper presented at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies \textit{Death and Emotions} symposium (November 2011) for a reading of Heidegger along these lines, in the context of Eeva-Liisa Manner’s Heideggerian influences.

\textsuperscript{6} Pihlström 2011.

\textsuperscript{7} Cf. Johnston 2010.

\textsuperscript{8} See Margalit 2002.
Whose Guilt: The Transcendental Subject Revisited

The transcendental vs. empirical distinction is clearly not unique to the phenomenon of guilt. There can be analogous accounts of other death-related emotions. Fear, hope, and other emotions relevant to our mortality may also be available both in their ordinary (or factual) and transcendental versions. When these emotions are discussed in relation to, for example, the Epicurean controversy regarding the question whether it is irrational to fear death, the relevant notions are usually employed in their ordinary or factual sense, though occasionally such discussions may be enriched by transcendental considerations drawn from the Kantian and existentialist traditions.

The problem of the transcendental subject inevitably arises here: whose emotions are we talking about when investigating (say) death and guilt? Am I, in addition to being (or having) an ordinary psychological self with a flesh-and-blood body in the empirical world, also a transcendental self, or do I perhaps “have” one? (And if so, who would this “I” be?) This issue needs to be settled in some way, as transcendental guilt, in particular, can hardly be ascribed to the ordinary empirical, factual self. This issue might be seen as a version of “the paradox of subjectivity” – our need to view ourselves as both empirical objects in nature and (transcendentally) as subjects to whom the natural world is given – discussed in the phenomenological tradition. It is typical of non-transcendental philosophers to avoid such complications – for better or worse. Richard Sorabji, for instance, completely ignores the transcendental aspect of the issue of subjectivity, despite his otherwise extremely detailed and comprehensive discussion of the history of the concept of a self and its current relevance for understanding personal identity and death.

The basic view I am proposing is close to what I attempted to articulate in my Transcendental Guilt (2011): (i) the irreducibility, superiority, and “overridingness” of the ethical point of view in comparison to other perspectives on the world (e.g., scientific, religious, political, economic) that we may adopt within different human practices, (ii) the necessary role played by (potential) guilt in constituting this point of view (or its very possibility), and (iii) the deep, mutually constitutive relation between guilt and mortality must all be taken extremely seriously when we reflect

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9 See, e.g., Nagel 1979; Sorabji 2006.
10 Schumacher 2010.
11 The metaphysics of the transcendental self is an extremely complex, and perhaps paradoxical, matter. While there is no way such issues could be settled here, let me note that Carr’s (1999) work on the “paradox of subjectivity” is one of my points of departure, though only implicit here (cf. also Pihlström 2003).
13 Sorabji 2006.
on the challenge mortality poses to our ethical relations to each other and to the world we live in.\(^\text{14}\)

Furthermore, there is a sense in which a certain kind of solipsism—“transcendental solipsism,” as we may say—emerges as a philosophical framework for any properly transcendental inquiry into the significance of human mortality. Both death and guilt are fundamentally my problems, primarily concerning not the mind-independent world but, rather, the world as “limited” by my transcendental subjectivity.\(^\text{15}\) This does not mean that I am a solipsist, or that I would be urging any transcendental investigator of death and mortality (or guilt) to be one—or that a solipsist (in this transcendental sense) would in any sense ignore the ordinary, everyday reality of other people. Rather, I am making a methodological point—without subscribing to a sharp dichotomy between methodological and “real” solipsism, either. What I mean is that the distinctive nature of the transcendental method, in the sense in which such a method has been employed in the philosophical tradition by thinkers such as Kant and Wittgenstein, requires, when applied to this special case, that we examine the meaning (or the lack of meaning) of the life, or lifeworld, limited by mortality from within those limits that our mortal condition itself sets us. This view is an explication of the cryptic remarks on the metaphysical (transcendental) subject as a “limit of the world” in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*.\(^\text{16}\) I am not here hoping to offer a correct interpretation of Wittgenstein, but I do think that our understanding of the *Tractatus* may be enhanced by reading Wittgenstein in the light of a transcendental philosophy of death and mortality.

**The Survival of the Good?**

At this point, I will digress from the explicit topic of guilt for a moment in order to explain why Mark Johnston’s ingenious theory of the “survival of the good,” as developed in his *Surviving Death* (2010), is in my view insufficient, given the deep entanglement of death and guilt. Johnston is, for the purposes of this paper, interesting not primarily because he would offer correct answers to our questions regarding the relations between death and moral emotions like guilt—indeed, his theory is highly problematic—but rather because he is asking the right question,
the properly transcendental question (though he does not call it by that name) about the meaning of life, especially the meaning of morality, given the ineliminable facts of mortality and finitude.

Johnston begins from the observation that death is a threat to the “importance of goodness”.17 “Death is the great leveler; if the good and the bad alike go down into oblivion, if there is nothing about reality itself that shores up this basic moral difference between their lives, […] then the distinction between the good and the bad is less important. So goodness is less important.” (Ibid.). This serious threat is genuine even if moral considerations are regarded as “overriding,” because “we can ask about the importance of the moral point of view itself, given that reality – as depicted by secular naturalism – is indifferent to the very distinction that point of view treats as so important.” (Ibid., 8). The world itself seems to be “deaf” to the cries that injustice deserves punishment and goodness reward (ibid.).

Johnston notes that he is not dealing with the Epicurean refutation of death at all. It is “simply not designed to address the threat death makes to the importance of goodness” (ibid., 13) – and here I fully agree. The Epicurean argument that the fear of death is irrational because death is “nothing for us” does not even begin to address this issue. Johnston wants to argue, however, that “there is something in death that is better for the good than for the bad”: “the good, but not the bad, can overcome death, in part by seeing through it” (ibid., 13–14). This will be a matter of degree, though, resulting from the fact that the good person “has undergone a kind of death of the self,” living a “transformed life driven by entering imaginatively into the lives of others,” as a “caretaker of humanity” (ibid.). This is a kind of personal identity different from the standard accounts focusing on the psychological continuity of the individual self. The good are not tied to any narrow identities of their own selves, so they can literally survive death. Yet, Johnston’s methodology – as well as his metaphysics – is completely naturalistic (ibid., 15–16; see also, e.g., 291). He wants to rescue religious (or at least religious-sounding) ideas, including survival, from supernaturalism.

Moreover, he argues that supernaturalism is fundamentally irrelevant to this entire problem. There are no selves worth caring about, and the persons we are have a “Protean nature” (ibid., 292). We just cannot be supernaturalistically resurrected in the way religions suppose. Yet,

given the response-dependent element in personal identity, living out the ideal of agape would make us live on in the onward rush of humankind and not (or not especially) in the supernatural spaces of heaven, even if such spaces existed and were inhabited by inheritors of our souls.

Even if supernaturalism about death, say the existence of soul-inheritors in an afterlife, were literally true, this would be morally and religiously speaking a kind of distracting,
We couldn’t, then, he maintains, deserve heaven without remaining on earth (ibid., 297). This is an idea I think we ought to find ethically persuasive.

Now the basic argument is that the good are better placed to face death as they are less attached to their individual personalities than those who are not good, and the individual personalities will indeed be obliterated in death. The good care about the flourishing of individual personality as such, not just about the flourishing of their own personality, and so they can face death more easily than the bad. And the really good – distinguished from the “reasonably good” – literally survive (ibid., 318, and passim.).

But what is goodness, or good will, and who are the good? Good will, we are told, is “a fundamental disposition manifested in one’s style of practical reasoning and action,” “a disposition to absorb the legitimate interests of any present or future individual personality into one’s present practical outlook, so that those interests count as much as one’s own” (ibid., 332). So far so good, but what are legitimate interests? Our interests conflict, as we all know. Frankly, I am not at all sure how helpful this analysis is, practically speaking. Yet, the theoretical idea is perhaps the most important here. We need not know exactly what goodness is if we can still reasonably approximate it, and if we can thereby rationally hope for a kind of survival.

Johnston thus defends a “Religion of Humanity” (ibid., 339). The good can “see through death in a way that the utterly selfish cannot,” as the latter are attached to their individual personalities, which are all that really matters to them, and they are hence obliterated in death (ibid., 341). But, again, the nagging question returns: who are (the) good – not just “reasonably good” but genuinely, really good? Is anyone, or can anyone be, good in this sense? What Johnston here offers us is this: “The only place to begin that provides any chance of self-understanding is under the standing accusation that one’s own will is not a good will, along with the horror and self-disgust that this entails.” (Ibid., 341). This brings us back to our main theme, as death and guilt are, again, intimately related here: what I have above called transcendental guilt is the fundamentally life-transforming experience that my will is not a good will. I can try to approximate goodness and try to do what I can to take others’ interests into account (insofar as I understand what those interests are and am able to regard them as legitimate), but this task is, because of my necessary finitude, in a way impossible for me, because it is endless, infinite; I can never fully complete it. My apparently “moral” actions are often based on narcissistic motives, for instance (cf. ibid., 342), and even if this is not always the case, they always could be.

One key observation here is, then, that we never have legitimate reasons or full justification to believe that we are (morally) good, or even “good enough”. (If we claim we do, we fail to understand the demands of moral goodness.) We are, then,
inevitably guilty of failing to take others’ “legitimate interests” into account. Guilt and death remain a problem, or a set of intertwined problems, for us, threatening our ability to find meaning in goodness (insofar as it is a morally desirable ideal for us in our lives), even though the problem(s) could be resolved at an abstract level not really involving us. Or, more positively, goodness remains an infinite task for us. Precisely, therefore, guilt is a constitutive and thoroughgoing – transcendental – feature of our mortal lives.

This leads to a fundamental recognition of human finitude: as we (or I) never have sufficient reasons to believe in our (my) goodness, survival is for us (me) at best a mere hope – comparable to what Kant has to say on the question, “What may I hope?”, and the postulates of practical reason. Yet, perhaps this is sufficient for our being able to “look through” death (as Johnston suggests)? Perhaps such “looking through” is also a way of looking through our inevitable (transcendental) guilt, even though that guilt, any more than our mortality, can never be completely wiped away?

**Death, Guilt, and the Meaning of Life**

As a contrast to Johnston’s problematic argument, let us briefly turn to Merold Westphal’s discussion of the deep link between death and guilt. I have already discussed Westphal’s book in my *Transcendental Guilt*, as his is one of the very few philosophical inquiries that explicitly connect death with guilt. We may, in Kantian terms, follow Westphal in saying that the person who experiences guilt experiences not just (or perhaps not at all) unhappiness as such but the unworthiness of being happy. This highlights, according to Westphal, the intimate connection between moral guilt and the religious experience of sin or sinfulness (see ibid., 76; also 86-87). Guilt, understood in this way, is a form of self-consciousness: “We have seen conscience as the self saying to itself, Thou art the man.” (Ibid., 81). Westphal summarizes this view as follows: “Objectively guilt is (1) liability to punishment. Subjectively it is (2) fear of punishment, and (3) approval of my own punishment, or, more carefully stated, approval of the other’s disapproval of me which may render me liable to punishment.” (Ibid., 89; see also 118). Religion both intensifies guilt – our guilt becomes truly metaphysical, that is, guilt in front of God – and offers, possibly, salvation.

Furthermore, Westphal plausibly argues that, especially when considered from a religious perspective, there is an intimate relation between the problems of guilt and death, and their human significance. In guilt, we may feel that our *entire life has been in vain*. For Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilyich, “the question of death is also the question

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18 Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) is the key reference here.

19 Westphal 1984. I will in this section cite Westphal’s book by providing the page numbers in the text.
of guilt” (ibid., 93); death and guilt are essentially a “single concern” in religious life (ibid., 251). The story of Ivan Ilyich pictures death “as an enemy which (1) leads us to deceive ourselves, (2) robs us of the meaning of life, and (3) puts us in solitary confinement” (ibid., 90). Chapter 5 of Westphal’s book, “The Existential Meaning of Death” (ibid., 90–106), provides a detailed discussion of Tolstoy’s novella in the light of existential philosophy. “For Ivan, dying is an experience which exposes and intensifies the personal isolation of a life lived in the forgetfulness of death and guilt.” (Ibid., 94).

When reflecting on our guilt from the perspective of our worthiness for happiness, we inevitably reflect on our life as a whole, on whether we have lived in vain. This brings the Wittgensteinian transcendental self, as a limit of the world (which is the same as life, as Wittgenstein announces in the *Tractatus*), back into the picture. It also brings the issue of death onto the agenda, as our life as a whole is obviously limited by birth and death. I find Westphal’s comments on the connection between these two fundamental issues highly important. The challenge, according to Westphal, is to deal with threatening ethical nihilism and existential anxiety (cf. ibid., 99–101): our entire life, our guilty and mortal life, may lack meaning and worth in a fundamental sense, and this is something that the notion of transcendental guilt (in my vocabulary, not in Westphal’s) is intended to express. It is right here, according to Westphal, that the religious sense of these problems proves to be decisive: guilt and death represent “spiritual needs” – needs that are “higher” and “deeper” than the more mundane needs of happiness, such as health and wealth – linked in Martin Luther’s view, so that “[i]f sins are forgiven, death is gone” (ibid., 108). In different ways, different religious traditions (a phenomenological description of which is Westphal’s main goal) attempt to deal with these problems: “the religious life is attractive to the believing soul largely because of the hope that through a proper ‘relation’ to the Sacred guilt and death can be overcome” (ibid., 160).

Yet, a religiously conceived afterlife is not the crux of the matter from Ivan Ilyich’s point of view: “For only if there is a life free from self-deception, from guilt, and from loneliness in the crowd would any life after death be heaven instead of hell.” (Ibid., 94). This comes strikingly close to Johnston’s view: one cannot deserve any (religiously conceived) afterlife, or the prospect of such a life does not make any sense, morally speaking, if one fails to be “good” in a sense that finds any hope for an afterlife ultimately irrelevant. And Westphal goes on: “When death is looked squarely in the face, what is the meaning of this life, and how should it be lived? The answer to that question will be the key to any hopes and aspirations for what lies on the far side of death.” (Ibid., 95).

Heidegger can be seen as offering an (unacknowledged) commentary on Ivan Ilyich, because for both Heidegger and Tolstoy, “death individuates” (ibid., 96-97).

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20 See Wittgenstein 1974 (1921), § 5.621.

21 This cannot be applied to any (imagined) non-mortal being: arguably, only death limits our life into a whole whose meaning, value, or lack thereof can be examined. Only mortality provides a transcendental framework constitutive of the sense of such questions.
Yet there is an important difference: for Tolstoy, it is “bitter loneliness”; for Heidegger, “an heroic human achievement” (ibid., 97). Death asks “whether we have acknowledged and accepted the freedom that we are and the responsibility that goes with it,” and whether we “have exercised such freedom wisely, lovingly, and honestly,” by fulfilling the task of becoming a self (ibid., 100). Through this existentialist approach to death, guilt – as well as, perhaps, regret – is again brought into the picture: “it is just at this point where the problems of guilt and death merge, that the problem of death becomes a fully human problem and my selfish in the truest sense becomes involved” (ibid., 101). Thus, “death is finally a question of freedom rather than of necessity. That is to say, it is not a question about what will happen to me, but about what I will do with my life.” (Ibid., 102).

Hence, it is at the deepest level a question about my guilt, my life’s being morally structured in terms of transcendental guilt. For philosophical thanatology aiming at individual existential relevance, this moral structuring must, arguably, be examined from the perspective of a kind of methodological solipsism.

Other Emotional and Cognitive Responses

In order to enrich our picture of transcendental guilt, the relations between some other important emotions and/or experiential states, including cognitive states, that are invoked by death and/or mortality need to be considered. I will try to determine how far the transcendental vs. empirical distinction can be applied to these other emotions, analogously to the suggested application to guilt. I will not discuss the possibility of reducing these states to each other, though that may in some cases be an option; rather, I assume their autonomy and irreducibility in my brief comparative remarks. Obviously, again, my discussion does not aim at exhaustiveness. For instance, shame, a very important emotion in some ways close to guilt, will not be discussed here; it would deserve a special treatment of its own.

Let us take the cognitive responses to human mortality first – without postulating any fundamental boundary between the cognitive and the emotional, though. Our knowledge of death, especially of our own mortality, deserves detailed discussion in philosophical thanatology. The epistemology of death and mortality may operate, for instance, in terms of the distinction between intuitive (a priori) and empirical (say, inductive) knowledge about one’s own mortality. However, it may be asked whether there even can be any emotionally neutral knowledge about the “pure facts” of mortality. Is mortality more generally a critical test case for epistemologies

22 In addition to Heidegger, Westphal comments on Karl Jaspers’s views on death in relation to Tolstoy’s story, invoking Jaspers’s notions such as boundary situations, existential awakening, etc. (1984, 98–99): “As I allow myself to become fully aware of death as a boundary situation it becomes ‘a challenge … to live and to test my life in view of death.’ Then death becomes “the mirror of Existenz … the test that proves Existenz and relativizes mere existence.” (Ibid., 100). Westphal here cites Jaspers’s Philosophy II (1932/1970).

allegedly focusing on our knowing “mere facts,” as distinguished from the emotional responses and attitudes those facts require from us, or the “moods” our encountering such facts in our lives may give rise to? Could it even be argued that, for instance, the continuous and ineliminable possibility of transcendental guilt must be present in all cognitive and/or epistemic attitudes to death and mortality (and, similarly, in any serious existential attitudes we may have to our lives)?

Secondly, turning back to emotions, fear and horror are of course very close to each other, both in general and as emotional responses to mortality in particular, but may nevertheless be distinguished: horror, unlike fear, often has no specific object – and is therefore more readily available to a transcendental account than (mere) fear. While it may be (empirically, factually) irrational to fear death, as has been argued since Lucretius’ Epicurean reflections on the matter, horror may be an inevitable emotional horizon for us at the transcendental level. Yet, admittedly, relief is also in many cases an appropriate emotional response to one’s, or someone else’s, death or anticipated death; however, one’s feeling of relief does not preclude one also being horrified – nor being guilty. Fear, furthermore, is clearly future-directed, while horror need not be. In this respect, again, horror is more naturally available to a transcendental, as distinguished from an empirical/factual, treatment. While we may or may not fear what will happen to us in our future process of dying, we may face our present – and continuous – condition of being mortal with horror even when we are not afraid of anything in particular.

Thirdly, the anxiety or anguish arising from the inevitable prospect of one’s own death (captured in Heidegger’s famous notion, Sein-zum-Tode, or being-toward-death) is not only connected with horror but seems to crucially invoke memory as well: remembering and missing the lived live – or, possibly, longing for the unlived, presumably only to be reached by imagination – contributes to our feeling anxious about our finitude. There is obviously a lot more that needs to be said about all these experiential states. Let me here just emphasize the way in which they invoke – or are perhaps, rather, invoked by – the cosmic challenge of human mortality we have discussed earlier, that is, the challenge that there is no objective meaning on the cosmic scale and therefore our lives are, ultimately, insignificant.  

Finally, yet another relevant emotion would be rejection or revolt. Geoffrey Scarre cites the famous poem by Dylan Thomas: “Do not go gentle into that good night, // Old age should burn and rave at close of day; // Rage, rage against the dying of the light. // Though wise men at their end know dark is right, // Because their words had forked no lightning they // Do not go gentle into that good night.” This is far from a Stoic acceptance and resignation: “Thomas urges us to reject [death] with anger.” This is a form of non-acceptance and life-affirmation – something that we

26 Ibid., 75.
arguably also find in William James, and obviously in Miguel de Unamuno’s notion of the “tragic sense of life,” influenced by James.27

Our cosmic reflection invoked by anxiety and rejection eventually comes close to the mood of “ikävä” or “kaipuu” (longing) that the Finnish poet Eino Leino movingly describes in his poem, “Ikävöi ihminen” (“Long, man”). Leino notes that human beings may long for the possibility of living outside time entirely (which is clearly something for which imagination is needed): “Kaipaatko milloin sa ajan, paikan ja kuolontaa taaksi, istuen illoin, tuntien hiljaa maatuvas maaksi?” This yields what we may regard as the culmination of the poem: “Itketkö, ihminen, silloin kauneinta tiedon ja tunnon, hienointa sydämen, herkintä pyrkivän pyyteen ja kunnon?”28

Here, one’s anxiety, longing, or sorrow (and perhaps even mourning, whenever we have a specific life or death to be mourned, either our own or someone else’s) extends to human limits, finitude, and mortality generally: our most important and deepest cognitive, aesthetic, and ethical goals and ideals inevitably remain unrealized, or their realization is in any case only partial, contingent, temporary, and fragile; humanity as such, not merely individual human beings’ lives, is finite and vulnerable, falling desperately short of fully realizing its moral, intellectual, and all other aims and projects. This could also make the individual human being, each one of us, feel sorry for the general human condition (or, arguably, should do so). Or at least it may make us feel guilty about it, and feel guilty, perhaps even more guilty, if we do not feel sorry.

**Does Death – Or Guilt – Make Us Equal?**

The general human situation of transcendental guilt that has been articulated above can now be applied to a specific philosophical question central to thanatological investigations, namely, our fundamental equality vs. inequality in the face of death.

Death and mortality raise, rather obviously, difficult issues of social and political equality and inequality. People in different countries and different socio-economic classes face their deaths – and the often painful processes of dying leading up to their deaths – in quite different ways. Differences in life expectancy and the availability of adequate medical services and end-of-life care tend to vary considerably, and increasingly, across socio-economic classes even in relatively “equal” and homogeneous societies (e.g., the Nordic welfare societies); typically, such variations are enormous in Third World countries. However, this socio-economic-political notion of equality vs. inequality is not our main interest here.

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28 Free English translation: “Do you ever long to move beyond time, place, and even death, sitting still in the evening, feeling you are gradually decaying? […] Do you weep then, man, for the most beautiful feelings of knowledge and emotion, the finest feelings of the heart, the most sensitive emotions of pursuit and courage?”
Instead, I want to, continuing my reflections on guilt, briefly discuss the topic of equality in a more *metaphysical, or existential,* sense.29

Politically, inequality may be the problem, but existentially the situation may be the reverse: equality, rather than inequality, may be what troubles us in our relation to human mortality. As we saw, the view of death as the “great leveller” is the starting point of Johnston’s inquiry into the challenge that death is a threat to the “importance of goodness”.30 As I hope has become clear, I agree with him that we should not regard our lives as morally indifferent just because we die; yet, I disagree with him on the kind of solutions available to this ethically and metaphysically demanding problem. Let us, however, now consider some other dimensions of the equality (or inequality) of death and mortality, which will eventually bring us back to the topic of guilt.

We should note that the Epicurean and the so-called “privation view” theorist, whose positions define the basic opposition in the debate on the evil of death, in a way hold symmetrical views regarding our equality in the face of death—that even though their controversy is one of the key issues in contemporary mainstream philosophy concerning death and dying. Either death is “nothing to us” because there will be no “us” anymore experiencing anything after death (just as, symmetrically, the time preceding our birth is not a bad thing, as there was no “us” then, either), as the Epicurean argues, following Lucretius’ famous formulation in *De rerum natura.* Or a “bad end is in store for us all,” as Thomas Nagel concludes his well-known essay, “Death” (1971),31 arguing for the view that death deprives us of things that could have been good in our lives had we not died. In both cases, dying and death do again make us equal. Admittedly, the privation theorist succeeds in saving some of the inequality we may find worth saving, as different lives are deprived of different things by death at the empirical level, but it does not follow that it succeeds in saving the ethically relevant sense of metaphysical inequality I am primarily interested in here. Again, the distinction between the empirical and the transcendental is crucial, and it seems to me that both the privation view and Epicureanism operate at the empirical/factual level without even raising their issues in a transcendental manner.

Therefore, I will not try to settle the debate between Epicurean and Nagelian (or other) views on the evil of death here.32 I just want to point out that both positions may—in my view because of their tendency to arrive at a metaphysically egalitarian conception of death—lead to the kind of moral nihilism we started from. As death,

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29 Such an approach to this issue may, I hope, be indirectly relevant to the more political questions of inequality as well. While I thus primarily continue to adopt the perspective of individualist ethics, the basic concerns raised regarding our equality in the face of death need to be addressed by anyone hoping to understand this phenomenon from the point of view of social ethics and political philosophy. For a more comprehensive investigation of the issue of metaphysical equality in relation to death, see Pihlström 2014.

30 Johnston 2010, 4.

31 Reprinted in Nagel 1979, chapter 1.

32 For relevant contributions, see, e.g., Fischer 1993.
in a metaphysical sense, strikes us equally, saving no one, we may be led to think that nothing ultimately matters – whether or not that stroke is itself something bad or evil (Nagel's privation view) or merely something indifferent (Epicureanism).

Another contemporary debate that seems to me to be neutral in relation to the equality vs. equality issue is that on the “tedium of immortality” launched by Bernard Williams’s essay, another modern classic of philosophy of death and dying.\(^{33}\) Those who argue, with Williams, that an immortal life would be boring because the one who lived forever would have time to do anything, and everything, and those who oppose this argument by pointing out that human beings could always ingenuously invent new activities and therefore immortality would be a good thing for us,\(^ {34}\) seem to maintain that the inevitable tedium of immortality or, alternatively, the evil of death resulting from the fact that immortality would not necessarily be tedious but actually a good thing concern, in principle, all human beings equally. There could, however, be major individual differences in how the immortals could, for instance, rejuvenate their desires and invent new ways of life.\(^ {35}\)

Let us take up a more literary – but for that reason no less philosophical – example. The British writer Julian Barnes, in his semi-autobiographical essayistic book dealing with death, *Nothing to Be Frightened of* (2008), discusses the peculiar situation of the writer positioned in a kind of gray area between being remembered and being forgotten (and this applies to anyone who writes, not just novelists but philosophers and other scholars as well). Just as death eventually equally concerns us all – though we can find highly personal responses to this universal human condition that is equally yours, mine, and ours, such as Barnes’s very elaborate self-reflection on his own peculiar fear of death – so does being forgotten. Barnes describes how the writer gradually falls into oblivion, until eventually “at some point – it must logically happen – a writer will have a last reader. […] At some point between now and the six-billion-years-away death of the planet, every writer will have his or her last reader.”\(^ {36}\) And that final reader will die, too, though the speed at which one is forgotten of course varies significantly; as Barnes notes, “while, in the great democracy of readership, all are theoretically equal, some are more equal than others” (ibid., 226). Yet, at some point the last reader and her/his eventual death will hit us all.

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34 See, e.g., Bruckner 2012.

35 As a side remark, I should point out that I find Bruckner’s position utterly implausible, because it hardly makes sense to speak about the rejuvenation of human desires or the invention of new ways of spending time in the context of an imagined situation of immortality in which human life would no longer have the kind of natural limitations we know it to have, limitations that largely define the ways in which we take our lives to be capable of making sense, or of failing to do so. This, however, is not the topic of the present essay. In any case, Bruckner 2012 is helpful also because the paper summarizes much of the literature responding to Williams’s original paper.

36 Barnes 2008, 225. I will in this section cite Barnes’s book by providing the page numbers in the text.
Barnes observes that we might want to be sentimental about our last readers – until we realize that there is no good reason for that: “[…] your last reader is, by definition, someone who doesn’t recommend your books to anyone else. You bastard! Not good enough, eh? You prefer that trivial stuff […]? I was about to mourn your passing, but I’m getting over it fast. You’re really not going to press my book on anyone else? […] Then you don’t deserve me. Go on, fuck off and die. Yes, you.” (Ibid.). Furthermore, just as necessarily as every writer will have her or his last reader, every grave – and in that sense every human being who lived and died – will have the last visitor. So this is another kind of equality in the face of death, the final posthumous equality:

So here’s another logical inevitability. Just as every writer will have a last reader, so every corpse will have a last visitor. By whom I don’t mean the man driving the earth-digger who scoops out your remnants when the graveyard is sold off for suburban housing. I mean that distant descendant; or, in my own case, the gratifyingly nerdy (or, rather, charmingly intelligent) graduate student – still bibliophilic long after reading has been replaced by smarter means of conveying narrative, thought, emotion – who has developed a quaint and lonely (or rather, entirely admirable) attachment to long-forgotten novelists of the distant Print Era. (Ibid., 248)

For some of us it might just be the man driving the earth-digger, but for each of us it is someone. There is no way of escaping the last visit. Again, whether or not this is a bad end (and it is, necessarily, a posthumous end), it is certainly in store for us all.

However, we clearly want our lives to be relevant to how we face death, and vice versa. While we may want to fight political and economic inequalities inherent in our practices of dealing with processes of dying, we hardly want death itself, and hence life, to make us “completely equal.” This is because otherwise nothing matters – the way we live and face death won’t matter – and therefore life, like death, collapses into absurdity. This is the kind of equality, the equality of moral nihilism, that we must, for ethical reasons, avoid.

What we should observe here is that the metaphysics of death ought to be based on ethics – this is something that I cannot argue here but that could be argued, for example, on the basis of a pragmatist approach to metaphysics. What a metaphysical investigation of death and mortality comes down to according to such a pragmatist proposal is an ethical investigation of what it would mean for a human being to live in a world in which the relevant metaphysical conceptions of death and mortality would be true. In particular, whether death equalizes our lives in the sense of the “equality of moral nihilism,” as we may fear, is a crucial question that may shape our entire lives; it makes a fundamental difference to us whether we take the world to be such a nihilistic place or not. Directing attention to

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37 As proposed in, e.g., Pihlström 2009.

38 See also Hobbs 2011.
the ethical pictures that inevitably influence our metaphysical reflections is itself an ethical must. The ethical quality of one’s life determines, or ought to determine, how exactly, and indeed whether, death matters to the particular person whose life is at stake. The premise here is, of course, that it does matter; the argument says that it can matter only if the ethical dimension of our metaphysical commitments is taken seriously. We need to explore the metaphysical implications of this transcendental-sounding argument. Such an exploration is, I would like to suggest, an instance of the “pragmatic method” applied to metaphysical problems – as proposed by William James, among others.39

We may distinguish different ways of developing this idea, such as Johnston’s above-discussed view on the “survival of the good” and Terry Eagleton’s account of evil as a certain kind of inability to face or accept one’s own death and mortality.40 My critical discussion of Johnston should be seen as an attempt to contribute to this exploration of the ethical basis of metaphysical views of death and mortality. Equipped with our transcendental account of the relation between death and guilt we might conclude that it is guilt that makes us fundamentally equal in the face of death. Guilt in this metaphysically pregnant sense – a transcendental sense, as I prefer to describe it – is, I have argued, ineliminably present in the question concerning the ethical meaning of life. Death makes us ask whether we have lived rightly or wrongly. The urgency of this question makes us equal, although our different individual answers to it may lead to extremely unequal lives.

On the other hand, guilt, as existentialist thinkers have recognized at least since Heidegger’s Sein und Zeit (1927),41 and indeed earlier, individualizes us, makes our moral problems truly ours. And so does death. This is why it was necessary to examine Westphal’s approach to the existential meaning of death and guilt, epitomized in the question of whether one’s life is completely “in vain.”42 We again arrive at the conclusion that it is in relation to the question concerning the very meaningfulness or meaninglessness of life – a question inextricably intertwined with the question of guilt, with the possibility of our life having been a wrong kind of life entirely – that we are equal in the face of death. Yet this fundamental equality leads to the possibility of arriving at very different (hence “unequal”) moral responses to life and death. Those who recognize their guilt and engage in existential self-reflection may be able to face death quite differently from those who find nothing wrong in their lives and are unable to accept their finitude. The equality is in the way life and death challenge us to reflection; the individual differences can be

40 See Eagleton 2010.
41 See Heidegger 1961 (1927).
42 For another highly illuminating discussion of this fundamental challenge that death poses us, that is, that we may have “lived wrongly,” see Schneider 1981 (also referring, like Westphal, to Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilyich).
found in those reflections themselves and in the kind of lives, and deaths (as well as, perhaps, dyings), they yield.

Insofar as we find guilt central, or even constitutive, in the conceptual network explored here, we should also keep in mind that there is a sense in which guilt, though social, is deeply “first-personal” (cf. above). According to Dostoevsky, every human being is guilty for the sins of the entire humankind – and I am more guilty than anyone else. (This theme runs through many of Dostoevsky’s major novels, including The Brothers Karamazov in particular.) Thus, there is a tension here between equality and inequality. In a sense guilt equalizes; humanity as such is equally faced with the question of whether life is fundamentally wrong or “in vain.” At the same time, this horizon of guilt dawns on each one of us (equally) individually and personally, concerning me first and foremost. There is no way of sharing this kind of guilt; it is mine. This dialectic between “first-personal” and “third-personal” ways of understanding guilt might in fact be seen as analogous to the similar kind of dialectic, or tension, between the first- and third-personal ways of relating to death.

**Conclusion**

Through a transcendental consideration of the different emotions characterized above, we may again arrive at the insight – though this is not explicitly part of Eino Leino’s poem cited above – that guilt is essential in our entire network of emotional responses to mortality. At least guilt needs to be considered in any attempt to examine, with Johnston, whether death is a “threat to the importance of goodness.” It also needs to be considered in any attempt to determine whether we are in a fundamental way equal in the face of death or whether the moral status of our lives actually makes a difference in how death matters to us. The reflections of this paper have barely begun what a more comprehensive account would seek to accomplish: a transcendental examination of human finitude and finality, and their “meaning-threatening” nature, both personally and generally.

This human finitude is not just a contingent limitation of a natural creature, although it is of course that, too. Just as guilt, I have argued, is a constitutive element of morality – to the extent that it can be regarded as transcendently constitutive of the moral point of view itself – so mortality, leading us to the guilt-invoking question of whether we have lived wrongly, is a transcendently constitutive feature of humanity. This may come close to the Heideggerian view of being-unto-death as an existential feature of human being-in-the-world. Preferring to avoid the Heideggerian terminology, however, I believe we could speak about the transcendently, and hence metaphysically, necessary character of human mortality. While our mortality in the biological sense is, of course, a mere natural necessity, comparable to the necessity of the laws of nature (however that necessity in the last analysis ought to be construed), this natural fact about us manifests a deeper metaphysical necessity. Without being mortal we would not, and could not,
be the kind of beings we are – namely, human beings – and without being able to live in the horizon of guilt we would not, and could not, be the kind of ethically engaged beings that we, inevitably, find ourselves being. Guilt and death, then, define us in a way that goes beyond mere natural facts about human biology.

As a social emotion par excellence – despite its deep first-personal nature – guilt also highlights the ways in which we as mortal subjects are “transcendently constituted” through certain basic (metaphysical) relations to other subjects, relations that are, precisely in their metaphysical constitutivity, also ethical. That is, we may say that we are transcendentally constituted through our relations of recognition or acknowledgment to other mortal selves, including especially relations of mutual recognition of the other’s mortality. Without this community of mortals capable of guilt there would hardly be human life as we know it. Again we are not dealing with merely contingent natural and/or social facts about human existence but with more deeply metaphysical – transcendental – features that nevertheless need to be manifested in natural circumstances and processes of life (and death).

The metaphysics of death clearly needs further philosophical attention in relation to the ethics of death; more generally, ethics and metaphysics cannot eventually be dichotomously separated. This also concerns guilt, transcendentally analyzed. We are, I have suggested, guilty in a transcendental sense, even if we are not “factually” (empirically) guilty of anything in particular, and therefore our mortality and finitude, as ethico-metaphysical elements or characteristics of our common humanity, make us anxious about our lives as wholes, and about human life in general. Furthermore, while both death and guilt are something universally human, their capacity of being shared is, as we have noted, also severely limited: each one of us must face them – in the transcendental sense – individually, or even solipsistically.

The notion of the transcendental self (or transcendental subject), understood as a “limit” of the world in the Wittgensteinian sense, therefore crucially deepens our understanding of death and guilt, though it hardly leads us to anything like adequate comprehension of this perennial mystery. Appreciating this insight is an important step in the process of coming to appreciate the universal human significance of one’s (my) death not being just another event among others in the world but the (or, acknowledging otherness, an) end of the world.

43 This essay is not the right place to invoke theories of recognition in general (cf. Honneth 2005), but in principle my treatment of death and guilt could be enriched by introducing the vocabulary of recognition into this context. The mortal other needs recognition, and failures of recognition are an obvious source of guilt.

44 An early version of this paper was presented in the symposium, Death and Emotions, organized by the Argumenta Project “Human Mortality” (funded by the Finnish Cultural Foundation) at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies in November, 2011. I am grateful to the audience for valuable critical remarks. The topic of the final substantial section discussing death and equality is more comprehensively addressed in Pihlström 2014. For another related recent investigation of the same topics, cf. Pihlström 2015.
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