

# The Many Senses of Death: Phenomenological Insights into Human Mortality

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*This chapter opens a new philosophical perspective onto human mortality by elaborating three classical phenomenological arguments about human life. First, it demonstrates that classical phenomenology provides powerful conceptual tools for the articulation of the different senses of death crucial to human experience: death as an endpoint, death as event, death as interruption, and death as threat. Second, the chapter shows that the phenomenological distinction between the different senses of death makes possible a deepened understanding of Epicurus' famous statement according to which our own death should not concern us. Finally, this chapter argues that mortality is not simply the opposite of life but has a constructive function in the constitution of cultural objectivities and the cultural world.*

Phenomenology is a transcendental-philosophical investigation into the correlation between subjectivity and objectivity, or consciousness and being, which is fundamental to all human experience. It aims to disclose the essential features of the intentional acts that take part in the constitution of the different senses of objectivity and being, operative in human and animal experiences. In addition to intentional acts, phenomenology also illuminates the passive aesthetic synthesis that establishes the most rudimentary, primordial objectivities on which acts can operate. As such, phenomenology demonstrates how the different senses of being result from the constitutive activities and passivities of conscious subjects. It covers the whole variety of ontic sense: the being of material things, living things, persons, utensils, tools, values; theoretical entities, practical aims and goals, linguistic units, works of art; images, pictures, memories; real, possible, probable; present, absent, past, and future.

Phenomenology comes in many variations and styles. The hermeneutical variation, established by Martin Heidegger, distances itself from Edmund Husserl's original formulation of phenomenology by means of a powerful historical critique of the operative concepts of consciousness and subjectivity. Maurice Merleau-

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Ponty's existential phenomenology for its part emphasizes the importance of embodiment and affectivity in the constitution of the perceptual world, its saliences and affordances.

In the study of death and mortality, Heidegger's hermeneutical phenomenology has long been the dominant discourse. In his *Being and Time*, Heidegger argued that the experience of mortality has a crucial role in our self-understanding: by facing the possibility of death and by grasping the limits of our existence and its historical-situational character, we become conscious of our own possibilities as such, i.e. as our own in distinction from the general possibilities of human beings.<sup>1</sup> Thus we win an authentic sense of our being, a sense in which possibilities reign over actualities.

Due to Heidegger's vehement critique of all philosophies of consciousness and subjectivity, classical Husserlian phenomenology has long been neglected as an outdated form of Cartesian subjectivism, solipsism, and idealism. Husserl has been accused of disregarding the fundamental structures of facticity and embodiment, as well as the phenomena of death and mortality, when focusing his studies on the constitutive activities of consciousness and conscious subjects.

I will challenge this view by arguing that Husserl's classical phenomenology offers fruitful starting points for the study of human death. The gain of familiarizing ourselves with these sources is double. Husserl's reflections involve insights that complement and enrich the Heideggerian discourse of being-towards-death dominant in Continental philosophy. These reflections do not prioritize any one sense of death as more authentic or more genuine than others but explicate several different senses that are crucial to our personal and communal lives as human beings. In addition, Husserlian sources also allow us to find a fruitful new approach to the idea of death as an evil or harm widely discussed in analytical philosophy. They help distinguish between different types of harm, and by implication allow us to keep separate different forms of caution and prudence.

With these two purposes in mind, I will explicate and elaborate three Husserlian insights into human death. First, I argue that Husserl's phenomenology of embodiment and intersubjectivity provides powerful conceptual tools for the articulation of the different senses of death crucial to human experience: death as an endpoint of a natural process, death as a historical event, death as interruption, and death as threat. Second, I intend to show that the classical phenomenological analysis of the sense of death makes possible a deepened understanding of Epicurus' famous statement according to which our own death should not concern us. Finally, I argue that Husserl's classical analyses demonstrate that mortality is not simply the opposite of life but has a constructive function in the constitution

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<sup>1</sup> I discuss Heidegger's phenomenology of death in another article, "Being towards death," included in Schott (ed.) 2010. The volume also contains another article, "Future and others," in which I discuss three early critics of Heidegger – Emmanuel Lévinas, Hannah Arendt, and Simone de Beauvoir – and their discourses on selfhood, mortality, and generativity.

of cultural objectivities and the cultural world. The chapter explicates these three Husserlian insights and shows how they relate to one another.

Before focusing on the topics of death and mortality, however, I will first summarize the main results of Husserl's phenomenological analysis of human embodiment since this analysis provides methodological guidelines for the discussion of mortality. This is the task of the first section. In the three subsequent sections, I will then explicate and discuss Husserl's contribution to the philosophy of death and mortality: the second section distinguishes between the different senses of death, the third section studies the harm of death and our indifference to it, and the last section proceeds to examine the constructive role of death in our cultural life.

## A Phenomenology of Human Embodiment

Classical Husserlian phenomenology makes a clear distinction between the human body as it is *lived* in perception and the human body as it is *objectified* in different kinds of activities and practices, from everyday occupations to scientific reflections. On the one hand, our bodies are aspects of ourselves as *perceiving subjects* and, on the other hand, our bodies are *perceived things* among other worldly things. All bodily states and processes can be considered from these two perspectives: simple movements and sensations, such as pleasure, pain and dizziness, as well as complex bodily states and processes, such as ecstasy, sickness, and old age. Death, too, can be considered in two different ways: as a structural feature of our experiencing and as experienced reality.<sup>2</sup>

Both perspectives are implicated in the specific way in which our living bodies relate to themselves in perception. When a human being touches herself, or when she hears herself cry or laugh, she both captures herself as a perceptual object (the touched) and at the same time she lives in the sensual activity of perceiving (touching).<sup>3</sup> In such experiences, our bodies are given to us both as sensed objectivities (*Gegenständlichkeit*) and as centers of our movements and sensations, and moreover these two positions are not separable phenomena but are reciprocal and interchangeable, appearing as two aspects of one and the same phenomenon.<sup>4</sup> They can be distinguished in analysis, but they cannot be separated or detached in experience.

Here 'objectification' does not mean any negative operation – alienation or estrangement – but must be understood as a necessary structural feature of all

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed account of these two attitudes, see Heinämaa 2003, 21–51; Heinämaa 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Husserl Hua4, 96/101, 145–147/153–155. The pagination given first refers to the original source, and the pagination that follows this, after the slash, refers to the English translation.

<sup>4</sup> This fundamental phenomenon is called "double sensation" or "double apprehension" (Husserl Hua4, 147/155; Stein 1917, 47–48/43–44; Merleau-Ponty 1993 (1945), 109/93).

experience of worldly phenomena. To be sure, the fact that we objectify ourselves, other human beings, and other living beings in perception allows for different forms of abuse, violence, and mishandling, but perceptual objectification as such is not an act of violence.<sup>5</sup>

Another phenomenological distinction that is crucial to philosophical reflections on mortality is the distinction between two different ways in which we can intend human bodies as worldly entities: on the one hand we can relate to human bodies as an expressive totalities (*Leib*) and on the other hand we can study them as a mere material things (*Körper*).<sup>6</sup> The main source of this distinction is in the unpublished second part of Husserl's work *Ideas*,<sup>7</sup> but all later phenomenologists used it in their analyses of the human condition.<sup>8</sup>

The starting point of Husserl's analysis in *Ideas II* is the fact that we can thematize and study living bodies in two fundamentally different ways. On the one hand, we can take the attitude of the natural scientist and abstract all value and purpose away from the bodies that we study and conceive them as merely material entities. When we proceed in this way, the positions and movements of bodies appear to us as various effects of external and internal causes, and it becomes possible to explain and predict their behaviors by subsuming them under the general laws of the biological and physical sciences. On the other hand, we can – and we do – relate to living bodies as meaningful and purposeful wholes. As such, living bodies belong to animal agents and to human persons. We grasp them as instruments

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5 Cf. Morris 1999.

6 A usual notion is that Husserl's distinction between *Leib* and *Körper*, i.e. the distinction between the body of a living being (human or animal) and an inert material thing, would coincide with the distinction between the body-as-lived-in-1<sup>st</sup>-person and the body-as-observed-in-3<sup>rd</sup>-person. I have argued elsewhere that the two distinctions are not identical and must not be lumped together (Heinämaa 2011). The first distinction is between two different types of perceptible and experienceable *entities*; the latter is between two types of *relations* to living beings. Husserl himself argues that we can take an observational and objectifying (3<sup>rd</sup> person) perspective on the living bodies of others and, via others, on our own living bodies (e.g. Husserl Hua1, 123/91; Hua4, 162–168, 170–178; Hua6, 107–108). In other words, we can objectify our living bodies and the living bodies of others as we experience them in motivational and expressive nexuses; and we have to objectify them, for example, in the practices of sports, physical training, therapeutic treatment, and warfare. When we do this, we do not treat living bodies as mere material things or as pieces of inert matter. Rather we insert them as wholes in the universal network of causes and effects and study them in such networks. The fields of life sciences and behavioral sciences depend on this possibility.

This of course depends on our possibility of experiencing our own bodies as instruments of will, as zero points of spatial orientation, and as fields of sensation, but to state this is to state a relationship of conditioning and not to determine the limit of the objectifying attitude (see Heinämaa, 2011).

Another usual notion is that the distinction between the body-as-lived-in-1<sup>st</sup>-person and the body-as-observed-in-3<sup>rd</sup>-person would equal the distinction between the expressive body and the physical body (the merely material thing). This does not hold either, since the observational attitude is not restricted to physical or merely material things. We can also observe and make systematic observations of living bodies, on their gestures, expressions, and modes of conduct; and we do this, for example, in the practices of negotiation, trade, and dance as well as in the sciences (scientific practices) of zoology and medicine.

7 Most importantly in Hua4, but see also Hua5 and Hua6 and the early accounts included in Hua13 and Hua16.

8 E.g., Stein 1917; Sartre 1943; Merleau-Ponty 1945; Beauvoir 1949; Heidegger 2001 (1987).

and as expressions that belong to goal-directed and self-shaping subjects. In this case, our own activity and interest is not in explaining or predicting the behavior of the bodies, but in responding to their movements and gestures.<sup>9</sup> Husserl calls this attitude ‘personalistic’.

These two attitudes to the living body are not on equal footing in Husserl’s analysis. He argues that the primary way in which living bodies are thematized in experience is personalistic and expressive. We do not perceive living bodies – animal or human – as bio-mechanisms, or as human-made artifacts, but as expressive means, motivated by sensations and feelings, directed by intentions and purposes and responsive to affects and appeals.

## Making Sense of Death

In *Sickness unto Death*, Søren Kierkegaard warns against the tendency to conceptualize death simply as an event or happening in intersubjective time. In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, he refers to the fragility of our existence and writes:

Suppose death were insidious enough to come tomorrow! Just this uncertainty, if it is to be understood and held firm by an existing person and consequently be thought into everything precisely because it is uncertainty (...) so that I make it clear to myself whether I am beginning something worth beginning (...) – this uncertainty already gives rise to unbelievable difficulties (...). If, however, the uncertainty of death is something in general, then my dying is also something general. Perhaps dying is something in general for systematians, for absentminded people. (...) But for me, *my* dying is by no means something in general; for others, my dying is some such thing in general.<sup>10</sup>

The idea here is that we should not assume that death is given in a similar way to all persons involved, the dying subject, the mourning survivors, and casual passers-by. To be sure, all these people live in the same space-time. The witnesses of death, however, experience a temporal worldly event or a process – devastating perhaps, or unthinkable or unbearable, but proceeding in time and preceding other events.<sup>11</sup> Time, however, is ‘running out’ for one person in a crucial and specific sense, or, as Heidegger put it, “the end is impending.”<sup>12</sup> Kierkegaard warns that if we confine ourselves to thinking about death merely as an event or as a worldly

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9 Husserl Hua4, 183–239/192–250; cf. Stein 1917, 44–60/41–54.

10 Kierkegaard 1960 (1846), 167/VII 139.

11 Merleau-Ponty argues that such experiences disclose two different layers of experiencing, the personal and the anonymous: “While I am overcome by some grief and wholly given over to my distress, my eyes already stray in front of me, and are drawn, despite everything, to some shining object” (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1993 (1945), 100, 84; cf. Heinämaa 2015).

12 Heidegger 1993 (1927), 250/293.

happening, we shut ourselves from death as that which might show us our singular lives “as true.”<sup>13</sup>

How should we understand this warning? What is at issue here?

The phenomenological account of embodiment outlined above helps to clarify the problems involved in the tendency to reduce the meaning of death to an event. It shows that this reduction<sup>14</sup> can take two different forms: a natural scientific and a personalistic. Superficially these are different, but from the point of view of Kierkegaard’s argument about the singularity of death they function in the same way.

In the natural scientific reduction, we think about our own death as a natural end of our biological or organic life, similar to the perishing of animals and the wilting and withering of plants and comparable to the breakdown of machines, such as the ‘dying’ of an engine. In such reflections, our death is given to us as one natural occurrence among other natural occurrences. One particular organism ceases to exist in objective space and time, but the world persists and life goes on.

In the personalistic reduction, we study ourselves and other human beings as meaning-producing expressive subjects and spontaneous agents. Accordingly, death is not just an end of an organism but also an end of a unique and original perspective to the world as a whole. Thus the personalistic reduction may seem humanly or ethically less problematic than the naturalistic one since it acknowledges that something irreplaceable is lost forever.

However, from the point of view of Kierkegaard’s caution, the personalistic reduction equals the naturalistic one in confusing two perspectives on dying: own and alien, immediate and mediated. In both reductions, we insert our own death into objective time, as an event among other events, and avoid thinking through the special kind of temporality that characterizes the ending of our own subjectivity. Instead of facing our own death and understanding its relation to our life, past and present, we postulate or imagine a future event in intersubjective time, a worldly event that we ourselves cannot experience or live through but that is given to others basically in the very same way as any other event. The others see it happening, they can empathize with us, and they may mourn our absence, but afterwards, when the dreadful moment has passed, they necessarily attend to other things – however senseless or insignificant such things may appear to them in relation to the loss. We, however, do not experience any such loss or change, for we have ceased

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13 Kierkegaard 1950 (1849), 99; cf. Heidegger 1993 (1927), 236–239/279–283.

14 The term “reduction” is here used in the general sense of an account that brings a complex phenomenon back to one of its parts or aspects. So at this point, I am not talking about the phenomenological-transcendental method of reduction that proceeds from worldly objectivities to their subjective correlates and conditions.

to exist as experiencing subjects. There is a fundamental difference between these two perspectives.<sup>15</sup>

This does not imply that as survivors we would be unaffected by the death of others: the loss of a beloved one may color and tone our lives till the end; and even the death of a total stranger may change our ways of seeing and experiencing the world. Moreover, the other's death may affect our relation to our selves in a fundamental way and turn our lives to a completely new direction.<sup>16</sup> Kierkegaard does not deny any of this but merely points out that the two perspectives – the perspective of the dying person and the perspective of all others – are distinct and cannot be reduced one to the other. My death as it is given to me differs from my death as it appears to any other, and the other's death as it is given to her differs from what I can witness happening to her.

Emmanuel Lévinas expresses the common problem of the two reductive approaches to death by saying that in both cases death is thought in the perspective of the “survivors.”<sup>17</sup> In the natural-scientific reduction, death is inserted into the objective time of natural history; in the personalistic reduction, it is posited as an event in the intersubjective time of human history:

Birth and death as punctuous moments, and the interval that separates them, are lodged in this universal time of the historian, who is a survivor. [For the historiographer] interiority as such is a “nothing,” “pure thought,” nothing but thought.<sup>18</sup>

Neither form of thinking captures the special form of lived time or immanent temporality that structures conscious life and frames our human experience of mortality. In both forms of reduction, we avoid posing the question about our own death and its meaning for the wholeness of our life and the givenness of the world. We think about some related or similar worldly phenomena, the collapse of devices and mechanical systems, the death of animals and plants, the death of our near ones and beloved ones, and fail facing our own death as the “possible impossibility of every way of existing.”<sup>19</sup>

Two misunderstandings should be clarified. The point is not that my own death is more important or more significant to me or to my life than the death of someone else. The argument is about the meaning of death, but here ‘meaning’ does not

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15 The “perspective of survivors,” as Lévinas calls it, covers both the perspective of the near ones who in sympathy attend to the suffering of the dying patient (i.e. the 2<sup>nd</sup> person perspective) as well as the “perspective” of the bystanders who observe the event without personal interest (i.e. the 3<sup>rd</sup> person perspective). The perspective of medical and care personnel at hospitals and hospices usually combines these two perspectives because medical care of patients involves both therapeutic-manipulative skills and emotional-communicative expertise.

16 Cf. Merleau-Ponty 1993 (1945), 96–101/80–85; Dastur 1994.

17 Lévinas 1971 (1961), 47–49/55–56; cf. Kierkegaard 1960 (1846), 154–177/VII127–147; Heidegger 1993 (1927), 237–240/281–284, 246–247/291.

18 Lévinas 1971 (1961), 55.

19 Heidegger 1993 (1927), 262/307.

denote worth, valence, or importance, but the intentional structure of experience. So the claim is not that my own death affects me emotionally in a more fundamental way than the death of the other, but rather that in order to understand what the other's death means to her, I need to have a relation to my own mortality.<sup>20</sup> So an eternal consciousness or an immortal person, such as Virginia Woolf's Orlando or J.M. Barrie's Peter Pan,<sup>21</sup> can be affected by the deaths of others, even greatly and deeply, but in so far as such persons cannot die, they cannot experience what it means to live with the consciousness of the possibility of dying and thus cannot understand what death means to us humans.

Another possible misunderstanding confuses the question of meaning with the question of knowledge. I may come to realize that I will eventually die, not by reflecting on the processes of my own life, but by experiencing the death of someone else. Children, for example, usually start asking questions about death and mortality when exposed to dead animals; and in adult life, the death of a parent is often an awakening and disenchanting experience. However, the phenomenological argument is not about the way in which we come to realize a possibility, but is about the meaning of this possibility. The argument does not include a stand on the question of how one comes to realize that one dies, but concerns the meaning of this possibility.

So the argument is not that my own death or life is more important or more significant to me than someone else's death or life, but that I can only understand the meaning of death by facing the possibility of my own death, and by studying what implications this "impossible possibility" has to my life here and now.

## The Impossibility of Dying and an Epicurean Wisdom

We can deepen this account of the different perspectives on death, and the different senses they disclose, with the help of Husserl's phenomenology of temporality.

The core of Husserl's analysis of time is the argument that lived time, time as we experience it in sensations and perceptions and in cognitive, volitional and practical acts, is not a series of punctual moments or self-enclosed points but is an original unity.<sup>22</sup> In a manuscript, Husserl formulates the point with the concept of nativity by writing: "new birth belongs to every present as a mundane occurrence

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20 The second person perspective to mortality and death is discussed extensively by the German phenomenologist Michael Theunissen (1991, 197ff.) and by the French phenomenologist Françoise Dastur (1994, 1998). For the distinction between the first and the second person perspective to mortality and death, see, Heinämaa 2010, 104ff. For more personal philosophical discussions, see, Beauvoir's *Une mort très douce* (1946), in English *A Very Easy Death* and *La cérémonie des adieux* (1981, in English *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*) and Roland Barthes' *Mourning Diary* (2009).

21 Orlando is Woolf's main character in the novel of the same name (1928). In addition to being immortal, Orlando also appears in different genders: s/he lives both as a woman and as a man. Peter Pan is a J.M. Barrie's character in the play and novel *Peter and Wendy* (1911); Peter is a boy who can fly and who never grows up.

22 See esp. Husserl Hua10; Hua11, 125–145/170–192.

but then also as a transcendental occurrence.”<sup>23</sup> Each moment of lived time bears internal references to all other moments and each opens up in two directions, the past and the present.<sup>24</sup>

Husserl distinguished this inner time or lived time from the intersubjective time which is shared equally by all conscious beings and includes all entities and facts that can be experienced by any conscious self. Moreover, he argued that the constitution of all experience, all experiencing subjects, and all experienced objects, practical and theoretical, natural and historical, is based on the constitution of inner time. Thus, no object can be given to us unless time constitutes itself for us in the stream of our experiences.<sup>25</sup>

The exact time of the natural sciences is constitutionally grounded on the shared time of intersubjective communion, and this, in turn, is grounded on the internal time of lived experience. The objective notion of time thus proves to be a dependent notion. Lévinas explains the main idea in an illuminative way:

[Inner] time, which Husserl distinguishes from objective time (...), is thus not the form of a stream of consciousness which would be like another being facing the being of the world. The intentions and sensations which are immanent to the stream of consciousness are not a sort of psychological reality (...); they are implicated in the meaning of this deep subjectivity, about which one can no longer say that is a being.<sup>26</sup>

Husserl’s account of the constitution of time implies that human death is not just a worldly occurrence or an unacceptable event for us, but is also a specific type of impossibility. He formulates his view by stating: “the transcendental self cannot die and cannot be born.”<sup>27</sup> This can easily be misunderstood as a statement about some specific sort of incorporeal entity – an immortal soul or an eternal spirit residing in a non-material universe above the world of perception. But Husserl explicitly rejects such readings; what is at issue in the impossibility of dying is not any atemporal or supratemporal entity but the integrated structure of experiential time.<sup>28</sup>

More precisely, Husserl’s thesis about immortality concerns the unity of inner time. Every intentional experience directed to whatever object, internal or external,

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23 Husserl Ms C 17 86a.

24 Husserl calls these modes of consciousness *retention* and *protention*. For a good introduction to these topics, see Zahavi 2003, 80–98. For the later developments of Husserl’s reflections of time, see Kortooms 2002; Rodemeyer 2006; Zahavi 2004.

25 I choose to use the active phrase “time constitutes itself for us” rather than the passive “time is constituted for us,” since the passive phrase suggests, or may suggest, the mistaken idea that a subjective agent constitutes time for us.

26 Lévinas 1998 (1940), 77–78. For a detailed account of Lévinas’ complex relation to Husserl’s phenomenology of time, see Bernet 2002.

27 Husserl Hua11, 379–381/469–471; cf. Hua4, 103/109; Hua14, 156–157; Hua29, 332–333.

28 E.g. Husserl Hua11, 377/467; cf. Heidegger 1979 (1925), 422–442/305–320; Merleau-Ponty 1993 (1945), 483–484/422–423.

tingly or non-tingly, real or ideal, opens onto other experiences, preceding and following it in inner time.<sup>29</sup> If every experiential moment by necessity includes an opening onto a future moment, then it is not possible to experience any 'last moment' of life, a moment that would halt the succession and close the futural opening.

This implies that each human death – however natural as an organic process and however expected as a historical event – bears the significance of a violent interruption. Further, this implies that the most proximate sense of death is that of a threat:

Only a human being is a person and is not just a subject of action but also sees herself as a subject of an open horizon of life and action, [only a human being] is permanently threatened by death as a rupture of this waking life and action and as an end which, in its indefiniteness, is merely an incessantly continuing, never-ending threat.<sup>30</sup>

Our expectations and anticipations of the future can be minimal, or they can be despairing, and in the nearness of death or in the process of dying they often are.<sup>31</sup> There is no time to do anything anymore, no time for good byes, consolation or forgiveness, just another gasp for breath or another moment of pain. However, the idea of a last moment of experiencing that would not include any opening onto a future is a construct or else derived from the experience of the other's death. Each moment, even the moments that from the objective viewpoint are the last ones, open onto an unknown future. We cannot pass our ending as conscious subjects; we can only think our death in analogue to the deaths that we have witnessed or grasped through descriptions and images. Husserl's analysis of the confusion is stringent: from the thought about the possible cessation of every conceivable particular object, one *illegitimately* moves to the thought of a putative cessation of a stream of life that gives us all such objects. "The cessation itself as cessation of the object presupposes non-cessation, namely, consciousness to which the cessation is given."<sup>32</sup>

This analysis provides a fresh approach to Epicurus' famous argument according to which death "is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and

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29 Husserl Hua11, 378/467–468; Hua14, 156–157; cf. Merleau-Ponty 1993 (1945), 249/215.

30 Husserl Hua27, 98.

31 Emmanuel Levinas' metaphysical ethics includes a detailed discourse of human vulnerability and its manifestation in the nearness of death. Havi Carel's *Illness: The Cry of the Flesh* (2008) offers a phenomenology-inspired account of living with terminal illness.

32 Husserl Hua11, 377/467. Anthony Steinbock calls such phenomena "limit-phenomena" and explains their paradoxical character as follows: "By limit-phenomena, I understand those matters that are on the edge of accessibility in a phenomenological approach to experience, and not simply those matters that have historically been at the border of phenomenological discourse. For the purposes of this presentation, I will characterize limit-phenomena as those 'phenomena' that are given as not being able to be given. According to this general understanding of limit-phenomena, limit-phenomena can include the unconscious, sleep, birth and death, temporality, the other person, other worlds, animal and plant life, the Earth, God, etc." (Steinbock 1995, 290; cf. Steinbock 1998).

when death is come, we are not.”<sup>33</sup> It suggests that Epicurus’ statement does not concern death as an event, or the effects or the time of any events, but concerns death as a limit of experiencing.

In the phenomenology-grounded reading, the core of Epicurus’ statement is in the realization that originally death does appear to us in the form of a worldly event or occurrence – or that it appears to us as an event only secondarily, through the mediation of other subjects. And since death is not originally articulated as an event, it cannot have eventual outcomes or an eventual timing for us as long as we retain what is original to us and not dependent on others. Thus the phenomenological analysis indicates that the conceptual framework of events misguides the interpretation of Epicurus’ insight.<sup>34</sup>

The limit-character of death does not imply that our death would not concern us or that Epicurus would be careless when he states that death is “the most awful of evils.”<sup>35</sup> Rather than dismissing the negative character of death, the phenomenological analysis suggests that the phenomenon is terrifying or threatening exactly as a limit phenomenon. The task then becomes to understand the dreadfulness of death without confusing it with the evilness or harmfulness of the phenomena that we encounter *within* our lives. So the Husserlian analysis urges that we should exercise great caution in the conceptualization of the negativity of death: this evil is not that of an event or an occurrence but is the evil of a threat, “an incessant threat,” as Husserl calls it.<sup>36</sup>

From this reconceptualization of death we can proceed by the following reasoning: in so far as death is not an event for us, we should not relate to it as we relate to threatening worldly happenings, that is, by precautions, preparations, provisions, supplies, insurances, and guidelines. A tomb of an ancient Egyptian king serves as a concrete example of a misguided articulation: death is managed by sacrifice of vital resources and life itself. The phenomenological analysis warns against such fallacious investments. Rather than trying to bar against a gigantic misfortune and a final catastrophe or to minimize the effects of such imaginary events we should aim at controlling the focus of our attention here and now.<sup>37</sup>

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33 Epicurus in Laertius 1925, 10 125.

34 E.g., Luper 1996, 2003, 2009.

35 Epicurus in Laertius 1925, 10 125.

36 In this paper, I will not discuss the sense(s) in which *the process of dying* is, or can be said to be, an evil to human beings. This can be clarified by reference to several different factors: pain, loss of agency, isolation, weakening of cognitive functions (e.g. memory), and humiliation. It is worth mentioning, however, that 20<sup>th</sup>-century phenomenology involves several different perspectives on this process and on the harm that it involves. These include: the analyses of the intentionality of pain and the experience of sickness, illness and disability (e.g. Slatman and Widdershoven 2009; Svenaeus 2001; Carel 2008); the many approaches to the care and the hospice of the dying, developed in the phenomenology of medicine during the last 20 years (e.g. Hamazu, 2013); the recent discussions on old age and alienation inspired by Simon de Beauvoir’s *The Coming of Age* (e.g. Stoller (ed.), 2014); and Lévinas’ discourse on the dying other and the ethical demands that the other imposes on us.

37 Cf. Carel 2008, chapter 4.

Further, the phenomenological analysis clarifies the task of focusing by demonstrating that the threatening character of death depends on its sense as an interruption. Clarity is gained by noticing that the dimensions of our lives that are most severely threatened by interruptions are its progressive dimensions, that is, our practical and goal-positing activities. An unfinished book manuscript, an aborted journey, and the reforested ruins of an old civilization all symbolize the tragic and threatening character of human death. The tragedy at issue is not only that the posited goals were not achieved and the devised plans were not executed; these miscarriages also nullify other activities and dimensions of life that were sacrificed for the projects at issue.

This suggests two alternative foci of life: in order to manage the threat of death, one should invest one's life powers on activities that involve their own goals and on activities that can be carried forward by descendants and successors. In other words, life filled with solitary heroic projects, projects that can only be carried out single-handedly, is the type of life that suffers most from the threat of death.

## Mortality and Generativity

Death and mortality also play a central role in Husserl's account of the constitution of the sense of culture, i.e. cultural objects and the cultural world. Husserl argues that in order to understand the special character of cultural objectivity, we must distinguish between two kinds of conscious and self-conscious subjects: on the one hand, subjects who are conscious of themselves as mortal beings and, on the other hand, subjects who lack consciousness of themselves as mortals.

The idea here is that only subjects who are conscious of their own finitude, mortality and natality, can consciously relate to non-contemporary others and thus participate in activities and practices that involve asynchronous subjects in an open infinity of generative becoming. In order to grasp the core idea of Husserl's distinction between full-fledged historical-cultural persons and non-persons or potential persons, it is instructive to study two special cases: the infant and the animal.

Both the infant and the animal are excluded by Husserl from the category of persons on the same grounds: neither experiences itself as a member of a generation that is connected to other generations and to an open totality of generations by the means of narration and writing.<sup>38</sup>

Husserl contends that both the infant and the animal consciously participate and intentionally live in many different types of communities of contemporaries, and even in communities that use signs for multiple practical purposes. However, what he considers crucial is that neither the infant nor the animal experiences itself as a being who is born and who will die, a being who shares a communal past and

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38 For a full account of generativity, see Steinbock 1995; Heinämaa 2013.

future with other similar beings that are not present, and cannot become present in flesh and blood.<sup>39</sup>

The others who in our mature human experience are separated from us by our birth and death are not just contingently absent for us but are absent in their very essence: some lived before our birth, and others will live after our death. Neither type of other can be intended by infant and animal subjects in so far as these subjects lack the sense of themselves as natal and mortal beings.

We mature adults can reach both types of absent other by means of language, and this can be realized in several different ways. For example, we hear and read stories about our ancestors and we may address such others in prayer or orison, but we can also capture their very words as repeated by our older contemporaries and we can read their writing without any mediation of third parties (or any other mediation than language). Similarly, we can address our successors by our own writing and we can rehearse our younger contemporaries to repeat our own words for others. All this is senseless for the infant and the animal in so far as they do not understand themselves as mortal and natal beings who have generations of others behind and ahead of them in time.

Several deprivations or lacks are implied by the fundamental lack of generative time and trans-generational communication: in so far as the infant and the animal have no conscious membership in chains of generations, they cannot participate in transgenerational practices and cannot share the accomplishments of such practices. This deprives them of culture and cultural tradition in a crucial sense: cultural-historical goals that are shared with multiple generations in an endless openness; cultural-historical tools and utensils that are retained, maintained, and repaired in the view of coming generations; and ultimately the cultural-historical world with contains all this openness.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, Husserl argues that the senses of personhood, culture, tradition and history go hand in hand, and that all these senses depend on the senses of death, birth and generations. For him, no subject who lacks these fundamental senses can intend cultural objectivities as such, i.e. as objects that can be shared by asynchronous subjects. Animal and infantile subjects are empirical examples of such subjects. But nothing in Husserl's argument depends on the existence of such subjects or on the fact that most empirical infants and all familiar animals lack

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39 Husserl Hua15, 140–141, 165–185, 280; cf. Hau1, 169/142; Hua27, 98–99.

40 Many familiar animals can of course use tools. We all have seen photographs, films, and video clips in which apes and birds use sticks to capture food, or an octopus unscrews a jar in order to grasp the crab inside. In Husserl's analysis, such tools are given, and can be given, to the animals in question only in a *temporally* restricted way, and thus their givenness is crucially different from the givenness of human tools. According to him, animal tools are used merely, or at best, for present purposes and they are only shared with contemporaries (Husserl Hua27, 97–98; cf. Hua1, 141/111). They are not, and cannot be, experienced by animals as objects inherited from predecessors nor as objects shared with successors, since the experience of permanently absent others – other that cannot be or become perceivable – is not articulated for animal subjects. In other words, animal and tools do not, in their practical sense, imply asynchronous non-contemporary others who share goals with present users despite their fundamental separation in time.

awareness of their own mortality. Husserl's argument is about possibilities: even if our enviroing world would not include any such subjects, the structure of our consciousness involves the possibility that there are other conscious beings who lack the threatening consciousness of death that characterizes our lives.<sup>41</sup> Science fiction offers plenty of examples of such beings, and they all are non-existent by definition.

The core of Husserl's discussion of animals and infants is in the insight that the open endlessness of generations is necessary for our experience of the world as an infinitely open whole. He argues that more limited senses of the world, e.g. the world as an environment or the world as a perceptual or experiential field are possible for non-generative subjects,<sup>42</sup> but the full sense of the world as an open infinity is possible only for subjects who consciously connect to one another in an endless and endlessly branching chain of generations. In a manuscript, Husserl distinguishes the openness of the cultural-historical world from the openness of the perceptual world by describing his own condition as an infant as follows:

I had no notion of death and birth, even if I already had the words for these. I knew nothing about literature, science, arts, nothing about historical culture in general, even if I already had an enviroing world with pictures, with utensils etc. The ontic sense world that I had was under constant reconstruction of sense, and not by mere extension of sense through possessed horizons. The world-horizon had no determinate delineation, at least no openly, endlessly continuing determinate delineation, even if it already had a certain openness.<sup>43</sup>

The cultural world, inaccessible to the infant and to anyone who is unaware of her own mortality, is a universe of entities and processes in temporal becoming and generative succession.<sup>44</sup> Already the natural world is an open, non-closed whole of unexpected events and unimagined things, but the openness of the cultural world is of a different magnitude since each of its parts refers to a history of practisers and users and to a multi-unit network of such histories. The possibility of becoming a member of a generative community and consciously participating in its activities

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41 Instead of calling the two types of subjects "animal" and "infantile" we could call them "b-subjects" and "c-subjects" and make a threefold distinction between a-subjects who are consciousness of their own mortality, b-subjects who lack such consciousness but are able to achieve it, and c-subjects who lack consciousness of their own mortality and cannot achieve it.

42 Husserl Hua15, 168, 626.

43 Husserl Hua15, 140.

44 As a cultural object, a picture, for example, is not merely a meaningful thing with enjoyable or disagreeable, practical or unpractical qualities, but also comes with a productive past and with future horizons of use. The picture is produced by someone and can be reproduced via certain methods by peoples of different times and cultures. It may be an original work of art with unique creative qualities but it may also be a simple sketch used for practical purposes. It may be a reproduction, a copy of something produced earlier and more originally, but it may also be a subtle pastiche with sophisticated and complex references to earlier products and modes of production. To be sure, a picture is subject to material damage and destruction and is easily affected by many kinds of causes but by the same token it is mendable and repairable: if it is ripped up, it can be patched together and if it is damaged by damp, it can be restored by cleaning.

is open for the infant, but the realization of this possibility requires that the infant consciously grasps the factuality of his or her own natality and the inevitability of his or her own future death.

## Conclusion

I have argued that classical Husserlian phenomenology provides powerful analytical tools that allow us to distinguish between several senses of human death and to separate them on the basis of their constitutional primacy. I used these tools to distinguish between three different senses death: death as an event, death as threat, and death as impossibility.

I argued that our own death is given to us in two different ways: directly and via the lives of others. In the first case our death appears to us as an unreachable limit and in the second case it appears to us as a worldly event. These two senses combine in concrete experiences but they can be distinguished by the analytical methods of transcendental phenomenology. These distinctions help us understand the motivational links between our experiences in facing death and the suffering of the dying.

My analysis also clarified the constitutive dependencies between the two senses of death: constitutionally the idea of one's own death as an event among other events depends on the experience of death as a threatening limit of living. Only a human being who is capable of grasping the temporal limits of his or her own life is able to understand the unparalleled meaning that the other's death has for the other. The explication of death in the sense of threat further illuminated Epicurus' dual discourse on death that emphasizes the complete insignificance of death and the incomparable evil of dying.

Finally, I explicated the sense in which death is not simply the opposite of life but has a constructive role in the constitution of cultural objectivities and the cultural world.

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