

## HEIDEGGER, DERRIDA, AND THE APORIA OF DEATH

Rafael D. Pangilinan, M.A.  
University of Santo Tomas  
España St., Manila

### INTRODUCTION

Jacques Derrida is now generally agreed—by both devotees and critics alike—to be one of the most influential philosophers of the late twentieth century. To put it simply, Jacques Derrida became not just one of the best-known names in contemporary philosophy in the 1970s and 1980s, but something of a media phenomenon whose fame stretched far beyond the walls of the university. His mode of philosophy—which quickly acquired the famous or notorious brand name of ‘deconstruction’—has influenced almost every academic discipline from art history to sciences. For Derrida, his early explorations of the problem of writing in western thought only represented the beginning of a much wider enquiry and his many subsequent texts develop this theme in new, singular and surprising directions. After the 1960s, he went on to explore such diverse areas, themes and disciplines as art and architecture, literature, linguistics, politics and international relations, psychoanalysis, religious studies and theology, technology and the media, and witnessing and testimony. From the 1980s onwards, it also becomes possible to detect an increasingly marked ‘ethical’ or ‘political’ turn in Derrida’s work and thought. The philosopher at least appears to move away from the seemingly abstract philosophical questions of the earlier work and to gravitate towards concrete political problems such as apartheid, the fall of communism and the future of Europe. This impression is confirmed by the appearance of an increasingly ethical—even theological—vocabulary in the later work which draws on such themes as the gift, sacrifice, the impossible, and perhaps most intriguingly, the messianic.

This paper will not comprehensively thresh out the entire deconstructive project of Derrida *via* negotiating his more than 60 books translated into English, as well as his numerous essays and manuscripts in French that are still unavailable for English readership. Instead, it will concentrate on the expatiation of Derrida’s deconstruction of Martin Heidegger’s existential analysis of Dasein’s death in *Being and Time*,<sup>1</sup> which Derrida theorized as aporetic, through allusions to his *Aporias* and other related writings.

In *Aporias*, Derrida asks: Can we be “certain” of death? Not of what might happen after death,<sup>2</sup> but of the “brute” fact that each of us will meet with his or her own death? For Sigmund Freud, who has exerted a considerable influence on Derrida, it is impossible to imagine our own death, let alone be certain about it, because whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators. In fact, we could say that we assist at our own death, as if the one who dies in our imagination were a different person. We cannot imagine how we would be like dead, without being able to think or see, for example. We cannot accept our own death; at bottom no one believes in his own death. As Freud claims, in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality. There is no sense of the passage of time; time does not work chronologically in our unconscious. This unconscious belief that nothing can happen to

us may be seen as the secret of heroism. Since we have not gone through the experience of death (as we have never died before) and since death does not exist in our unconscious, we cannot actually fear death itself. When we say we are afraid of death, according to Freud, we may fear something else—such as abandonment, castration, various unresolved conflicts, or otherwise fear of death may be the outcome of a sense of guilt. Yet Freud also specifies that fear of death dominates us oftener than we know. It is not amiss to note that he posits the existence of death drive, a destructive drive, which has an aim to lead what is living into an inorganic state. “The aim of all life is death,”<sup>3</sup> he said. This leads Freud to the paradoxical conclusion that life is a detour on the way to death, based on “the drive to return to the inanimate state.”<sup>4</sup>

Seen in this light, the theoretical importance of the drives of self preservation, of self assertion and of mastery greatly diminishes [...] We have no longer to reckon with the organism’s puzzling determination to maintain its own existence in the face of every obstacle. What we are left with is the fact that the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion.”<sup>5</sup> Self-preservative drives are conservative drives, because they ensure that the organism will die “only in its own fashion.”<sup>6</sup>

This makes life circuitous paths to death, faithfully kept by the conservative drives and places the struggle for life, and so also the Erotic drives in the service of the death drive.<sup>7</sup> The repetition compulsion therefore overrides the pleasure principle, replacing the striving for pleasure with a striving for death.

Even though Freud admits that death is something natural, we do try to deal with it in various ways, and we react to it differently. Our different attitudes towards death may account for the existence of various behaviors, for the creation of beliefs such as those in life after death. Of course, it is our unconscious that is the cause of most of our beliefs and behaviors, or even feelings in relation to death.

Again for Freud, none of us has “certainty” with regard to death. We all say “I know I am going to die,” but deep down, behind the one-way mirror of the unconscious, the archival repository of the repressed, none of us believes it. For Heidegger, on the other hand, death is more certain—or better, is certain in a more “primordial” (*ursprüngliche*) way—than epistemic certainty or even cognitive certainty. Heidegger is no skeptic; for him, “holding to the truth of death—which as we will see means maintaining ourselves in the unconcealedness of the phenomenon of our own death—reveals a certainty which is absolutely basic to the totality of lived contexts constituting world intelligibility. As being-in-the-world (*In-der-welt-Sein*), Dasein dies; there is nothing more certain: “More original than man is the finitude of the Dasein within him.”<sup>8</sup>

If, accordingly, Heidegger and Freud are taken as two extreme characterizations of the cognitive relation one stands in relation to one’s own death, then it becomes easier to imagine why Derrida might ask such a strange, perhaps incredible, question; for this seems to be an irreconcilable opposition, an either/or of the type notoriously most vulnerable to Derrida’s deconstructions. Thus, when Derrida asks, “Is my death possible?” he is not simply speculating as to whether one can be certain of death’s obtaining; his is a more radical questioning: Can I

die? Is it even possible for me to die? Can I meet with death? In what sense can death happen to me—can “it” happen to “me” at all?

### **DECONSTRUCTION: TYING THE KNOT TIGHTER<sup>9</sup>**

Deconstruction is an approach, introduced by French philosopher Jacques Derrida, which rigorously pursues the meaning of a text to the point of undoing the oppositions on which it is apparently founded, and to the point of showing that those foundations are irreducibly complex, unstable or impossible. It generally tries to demonstrate that any text has more than one interpretation; that the text itself links these interpretations inextricably; that the incompatibility of these interpretations is irreducible; and thus that an interpretative reading cannot go beyond a certain point. Derrida refers to this point as an aporia in the text, and terms deconstructive reading “aporetic”. By demonstrating the aporias and ellipses of thought, Derrida hoped to show the infinitely subtle ways that this originary complexity, which by definition cannot ever be completely known, works its structuring and destructuring effects. An aporetic reading can, in addition, show the failure of earlier philosophical systems (like that of Heidegger) and the necessity of continuing to philosophize through them with deconstruction.

The book *Aporias*, a relatively recent addition in a long line of Derrida’s interpretation of Heidegger’s thinking, is surely best heard as speaking out of the rich heritage of that lineage.<sup>10</sup> The term “aporia” literally means “nonpassage” or “without passage” and involves an experience of not knowing what path to follow or coming to the point where no path can be found.’ As Derrida points out, the experience of the aporia is not at all foreign to the philosophical tradition.<sup>11</sup> In fact, following Heidegger, Derrida notes how, especially in Kant and Hegel, the experience of the aporia is rendered dialectically or dialecticized.<sup>12</sup> However, Derrida chooses the term aporia instead of “antinomy” (which Kant, of course, uses) since an antinomy involves “contradictions or antagonisms among equally imperative laws” that can be solved or overcome, whereas an aporia involves an irreducible and constitutive experience of impossibility or nonpassage.<sup>13</sup> The contradiction of equally valid and necessary propositions found in an antinomy is solved by showing how it is “apparent or illusory,” by dialecticizing the contradiction in a Hegelian or Marxist manner, or by rendering it as a “transcendental illusion in a dialectic of the Kantian type.”<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to these experiences of the aporia, the deconstructive articulation of the aporia shows it to be irreducible and constitutive to the degree that it cannot be overcome. While a Hegelian or Marxist thought, for example, would exploit the constitutive and necessary nature of the aporia in order to engender a dialectical progression, for Derrida the irreducible and interminable nature of the aporia will always disrupt this progress by showing how thought and action remain caught in the movement of the “double bind.”<sup>15</sup> Instead of being sublated or overcome, the aporia for deconstruction becomes the very ordeal of all experience. The aporia must be endured as interminable in order for experience to take place. As opposed to a contradiction of equally valid and necessary statements, the deconstructive aporia is perhaps best formulated by showing how the conditions for the possibility of something also prove to be the conditions for its impossibility.<sup>16</sup> The deconstructive aporia is thereby iterability itself, an ineradicable “doable bind” or an “experience of the impossible.”<sup>17</sup> Or, one could render aporia as undecidability, as the undecidability involved in a determinate vacillation between determinate

and structural possibilities and as the undecidability found when the conditions for the possibility of something also prove to be the conditions for impossibility.

It is not without reason that I use Freud to introduce a paper on the relationship between Derrida and Heidegger, a relationship marked by differences which I take to be best characterized as generational. This assertion would surprise Derrida least of all, who describes his argument with Heidegger's generational,<sup>18</sup> and thus as a generational altercation. It should not be surprising, then, that when Derrida turns to consider the possibility of "my death," it is Heidegger's thinking—Heidegger's ghost as well as his *Geist*—that he finds himself confronting. In an interview given to the *New York Times Magazine* (January 23, 1994), just after the English translation of *Aporias* was published, Derrida said: "All of my writing is on death. If I don't reach the place where I can be reconciled with death, then I have failed. If I have one goal, it is to accept death and dying."<sup>19</sup> Given the central role, Heidegger's thought play in *Aporias*, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Heidegger has come between Derrida and his death."

Thus, in the early pages of the *Aporias*, before explicitly invoking Heidegger, Derrida writes, "concerning the threshold of death, we are engaged here toward a certain possibility of the impossible."<sup>20</sup> This "possibility of the impossible" is, of course, a paraphrase of the facial moments in Division Two of *Being and Time* as a phenomenological definition of death. At what could be taken as the zero-point of his proximity to Heidegger, Derrida (re)defines "deconstruction . . . as a certain Aporetic experience of the impossible."<sup>21</sup> It should escape no one's notice that this definition of deconstruction is nearly identical with Heidegger's phenomenological definition of death (as the "possibility of an impossibility"), with "Aporetic experience" substituted for "possibility." These generation *proxemics* turn, then, around Derrida's interpretation of the possibility of death as an aporetic experience.

## SPECTRALITY OF DEATH

In the *Specters of Marx* Derrida states that to live is not something that one learns from either life or oneself. The question, "How ought I to live?" does not receive an answer from life, but arrives "only from the other and by death."<sup>22</sup> Learning to live is never something one does alone, all by oneself. It is never something one learns to do in the present now, in the absence of the *contratempus*.<sup>23</sup> To learn to live, in Derrida's words is "ethics itself." Yet the ethics of learning to live alone cannot be just "unless it comes to terms with death. Mine as (well as) that of the other."<sup>24</sup> Learning how to live would involve moving away from the ontology of the present and entering the hauntology of the *contretemps*. For Derrida, this involves:

... learn[ing] to live *with* ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company and companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts. To live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly. But *with them*. No being-with the other, no *socius* without this *with* that makes *being-with* in general more enigmatic than ever for us. And this being with specters would also be, not only, but also, a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations.<sup>25</sup>

Derrida reminds us that these ghosts must be welcomed. Derrida defines the ghost as the “effect of another’s crypt in my unconscious.”<sup>26</sup> He provides a rough schematic of how this crypt within me may be formed. For example, if I lose a loved one and fail to mourn properly,<sup>27</sup> the dead person would continue to live inside me, “but as a stranger.” Derrida explains that “the incorporated dead, which one has not really managed to take upon oneself, continues to lodge there like something other to ventrilocate through the “living.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, talking with the dead would now mean communicating with the dead-in-me who speaks through and to me as I speak to/with others in the universalism of our conversation.

How would this learning how to live, become possible, especially for traditional scholars who only believe in Being-as-presence? For all those such scholars the Specter will never be heard. Derrida provides,

A traditional scholar does not believe in ghosts nor in all that could be called the virtual space of spectrality. There has never been a scholar who, as such, does not believe in the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living, being and non-being (“to be or not to be,” in the conventional reading), in the opposition between what is present and what is not, for example in the form of objectivity.<sup>29</sup>

Moving beyond the traditional scholar still trapped in the logic of binary opposition and in the negative way of asserting, another scholar might be capable to think

beyond the opposition of presence and non-presence, actuality and inactuality, life and non-life, of thinking of the possibility of the Specter and the Specter as possibility. Better (or worse) he would know how to address himself to spirits. He would know that such an address is not only already possible, but that it would have at all times conditioned, as such, address in general. In any case, here is someone mad enough to hope to unlock the possibility of such an address.<sup>30</sup>

Derrida held that Heidegger was the first scholar who defined Being-as-presence and for whom out-of-joint-time (*contretemps*) would have to be canceled along with the Specter. For the scholar of the future, learning to communicate with the dead might involve rethinking the *Da* (there, implying its being a site of disclosedness or *Erschlossenheit*) of Dasein. Now we turn to an analysis of Heidegger’s understanding of communication and being-towards-death (*sein zum tod*).

## DEATH AS AN APORETIC POSSIBILITY

To articulate his own “aporetology or aporetography,” Derrida hunts down basic aporias, sites of “impossible but necessary passage” at the heart of Heidegger’s existential analytic. As Derrida thinks through the aporias, paradoxes, or legal conundrums of Heidegger’s existential-phenomenological analysis of death, he develops his own projects of thought “in the margins” of *Being and Time*, traveling back and forth between textual exegesis and self-elaboration.<sup>31</sup> Here Derrida follows Heidegger’s thought-path with the rigor of reflexivity so critical it seems at times almost to paralyze the logic of its own unfolding. Wittgenstein once said that philosophy is

like a kind of bicycle race, the point of which is to go as slowly as possible without falling off. Derrida's stylistic *adagio* is certainly graceful, but whether or not he "falls off" remains to be seen. In *Aporias* Derrida claims that Heidegger wants to make the existential analysis of death (*der Tod*), primary and universal; that is to say philosophical and not logical or psychological. While Derrida carries out a detailed reading of Heidegger's understanding of death, he is also attentive to what Heidegger has gotten in his analysis. He shows that in *Being and Time*, Heidegger does not conduct an existential analysis of the ghost, spectrality, living-on, surviving or mourning.

Before we can understand why Heidegger forgets the ghost, we must first engage in a brief analysis of his explication of death. Death, existentially interpreted as such, is not an ending in the sense of fulfillment. For, at death, *Dasein* loses its possibilities, and for the most part, ends in unfulfillment. Nor is death an ending in the sense of stopping or finishing. Heidegger seeks for a more precise formulation of the phenomenon of death in his three distinctions of *Verenden*, *Ableben*, and *Sterben*. *Verenden*, meaning perishing, properly characterizes living organisms below the human level. *Ableben*, meaning demise, refers to the biological termination of human life, that is, the ontic annihilation of human existence. And *Sterben*, the term for dying, is an existential modality in which this ontic nullification is permeated with consciousness, and is taken up in the existential process of *Dasein*.<sup>32</sup> Heidegger clearly defines: "Let the term 'dying' stand for the way of Being in which *Dasein* is towards its death."<sup>33</sup> Thus, death, now understood in terms of dying, is definitely a phenomenon of human life. Death is not an event which puts an end to life, but an existential-ontological determination of existence; as such, it is a fundamental structure of life. *Dasein* is, in this sense, defined as a being-towards-death.

In Section 51 of *Being and Time* Heidegger points out that death understood in an everyday manner is "known as a mishap which is constantly occurring as a 'case of death.'" <sup>34</sup> In our everyday way of being, and through idle-talk, we understand death as something indefinite, in other words, as something that did occur to others whom we read about in newspapers or notices but not something that can or will occur now. This inauthentic understanding of death ignores that, "death is a way to be, which *Dasein* takes over as soon as it is. As soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die," according to Heidegger.<sup>35</sup> In the existential-ontological sense, this means that death belongs to the very constitution of human existence; it is an ever-present essential element in the ontological constitution of *Dasein*, which Heidegger calls an "existential". The existential view of death is such that, in the analysis of human existence, death is the existential of totality" (*das Ganzheitsexistenzial*)<sup>36</sup> in the structure of *Dasein*; death embraces the totality of human existence. Being-towards-death is thus a being which has death in the midst of its actual process of life. Furthermore, in this ontic way of talking about death through our idle-talk, "death is understood as an indefinite something which, above all, must duly arrive from somewhere or other, but which is proximally not yet present-at-hand for oneself, and is, therefore no threat."<sup>37</sup> Thus, the dying which is essentially my death and my dying "is perverted into an event of public occurrence which the "they" encounters."<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, according to Heidegger, "the dying of Others is seen often enough as a social inconvenience, if not even a downright tactless against which the public is to be guarded."<sup>39</sup> Even if one knows that death is certain, often, we are not "authentically certain" about our own death and dying. In other words, we live inauthentically in our fear of death.

The authentic approach to the being of Dasein as care (*Sorge*)<sup>40</sup> results in the proclamation that death, seen from the perspective of the totality of human existence, is a possibility. This is quite a corollary to the foregoing description that Dasein in its existential state is a possibility. Here it should be noted that the possibility of Dasein does not signify something to be actualized in the future but the immanent reality underlying the ontological structure of Dasein. Authentic being-towards-death apprehends its own death as the last outstanding possibility of Dasein in the concrete particularity of human subjectivity. Dasein conducts itself towards this possibility not by actualizing it, nor by brooding over how it may finally be actualized, but by projecting it.<sup>41</sup> To project toward death is to make oneself anticipate towards it in such a way that, in terms of the totality of existence, death reveals itself as a genuine possibility, “the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all.”<sup>42</sup> Heidegger specifies the existential relationship of Dasein to its death as “anticipation” of the uttermost possibility. Thus, he states:

Being-towards-death is the anticipation of a potentiality-for-Being of that entity whose kind of Being is anticipation itself. In the anticipatory revealing of this potentiality-for-Being, Dasein discloses itself to itself as regards its uttermost possibility. ... Anticipation turns out to be the possibility of understanding one’s ownmost and uttermost potentiality-for-Being—that is to say, the potentiality of authentic existence. The ontological constitution of such existence must be made visible by setting forth the concrete structure of anticipation of death.<sup>43</sup>

In the above quotation, we clearly find the intrinsic relationship of the anticipation of death to the actual possibility of authentic existence. The term “anticipation,” defined as a mode of being, is not restricted to its cognitive or emotional dimension; it is a way of relating towards one’s own death which has these dimensions, but “in a unified rather than composite fashion.”<sup>44</sup>

The concrete modes of anticipation as the authentic relation of Dasein to its own death are then determined by an examination of Heidegger’s detailed analysis of the characteristics of death as the possibility of impossibility of existence. Death is, first of all, Dasein’s ownmost possibility.<sup>45</sup> In anticipating my death as the most proper and distinctive possibility of my own, I realize that it is precisely through death that Dasein is liberated from domination by impersonal “someone”. The anticipation of my death as my ownmost possibility enables me to recover from the inauthentic condition of possibility to an authentic confrontation with death as an ever-present possibility of my own being.

Death is also a non-relational possibility. Heidegger claims that this “non-relational character of death, as understood in anticipation, individualizes Dasein down to itself.”<sup>46</sup> Death as Dasein’s unique possibility is not transferable to others even in its communal world. This individualizing and personalizing impact of the authentic confrontation with death presents the possibility of accepting the responsibility for existential choices and decisions for one’s individual destiny.

Death is a possibility which can not be outstripped. Even though death, in relation to Dasein, presents itself as a future possibility, it is experienced in the present as a constant

possibility. Authentic being-towards-death resolutely faces it by becoming totally free for it. Thus, Heidegger states:

Since anticipation of the possibility which is not to be outstripped discloses also all the possibilities which lie ahead of that possibility, this anticipation includes the possibility of taking the whole of Dasein in advance [*Vorwegnehmens*] in an existentiell manner; that is to say, it includes the possibility of existing as a whole potentiality-for-Being.<sup>47</sup>

Death, when authentically confronted, is interpenetrated with freedom, rejecting any kind of self-absolutization of its intermediate possibilities, and thereby appears as the final possibility for the totality of existence.

Death as the unsurpassable possibility of Dasein is certain. In anticipating my own death as a possibility with existentially apodictic character of certainty, I realize that its certitude is not based on the statistical probability but experienced in existential awareness. Death is appropriated as an intrinsic possibility which is interpenetrated into every moment of existential decisions.<sup>48</sup> This reveals that anticipation is an essential structure of human existence.

Finally, death is indefinite as regards its certainty. In anticipating my own death as an indefinite possibility, I see that I can never know when I will die. The authentic self thus appropriates death as an imminent reality. The indefiniteness of death drives the fundamental anxiety as the existential mode of anticipation. Heidegger develops the function of anxiety and its relation to anticipation as follows:

In the state-of-mind, Dasein finds itself face to face with the “nothing” of the possible impossibility of its existence. Anxiety is anxious about the potentiality-for-Being of the entity so destined [*des so bestimmten Seienden*], and in this way it discloses the uttermost possibility. Anticipation utterly individualizes Dasein, and allows it, in this individualization of itself, to become certain of the totality of its potentiality-for-Being. For this reason, anxiety as a basic state-of-mind belongs to such a self-understanding of Dasein on the basis of Dasein itself.<sup>49</sup>

In Section 47 of *Being and Time*, Heidegger makes a distinction between the deceased, (*Der Verstorbene*) and the dead person (*dem Gestorbenen*). Another distinction is made between perishing (*Verenden*) and ending. We turn to the distinction between the deceased and the dead person. According to Heidegger, as related by Derrida, the deceased is that which “has been torn away from those who have remained behind.”<sup>50</sup> The mourners who have remained behind are with the deceased, “in a mode of respectful solicitude.”<sup>51</sup> However, although the mourners are with the deceased in a respectful solicitude, the relationship they have toward the deceased cannot be understood as a “concernful Being-alongside something read-to-hand,”<sup>52</sup> as it would be for a non-deceased person.<sup>53</sup> The second distinction concerns perishing and ending. We never experience the coming-to-an-end of the deceased. We only experience the loss of the loved one. However, according to Heidegger: “in suffering this loss ... we have no way of access to the loss-of-Being as such which the dying man suffers.”<sup>54</sup> In a certain sense, when another dies we can only be “there alongside.” At the moment of watching and waiting and crying we will eventually



encounter a corpse, which according to Heidegger is “something unalive, which has lost its life.”<sup>55</sup> What remains behind according to Derrida are memories, impressions, traces, photographs, and the ash of mourning.

Derrida in *Aporias* explores further Heidegger’s analysis of death and poses the question “My death—is it possible?”<sup>56</sup> He asks whether death can “be reduced to some line, crossing, to a departure, to a ration, to a step, and therefore to a *decease*?”<sup>57</sup> Derrida asks, “What, then, is to cross the ultimate border?”<sup>58</sup> He considers death’s radical inaccessibility in terms of the aporetic logic of the passage into the nonpassage. Culturally, death is one half of the powerful metaphysical set life/death. The classical role for deconstruction at this point would be to highlight how, in our culture, life has been favored over death, and then to go on to demonstrate in a series of texts how our concept of life is predicated on that of death thus redressing the balance. However, the logic of the nonpassage does not do this, as it can’t pass from one term to another as the name suggests, and it reveals an aporia in deconstruction because of this.<sup>59</sup> Of all semantic and discursive sets the life/death set is the most challenging to deconstruction primarily because the two terms are not, as one might assume, bound together in a relationship of mutual infection. They are not two parts of a set, but two heterogeneous realms with literally nothing in common. So, in terms of quality, they are radically different, by which I mean it is not true to say that every aspect of life as a continuum is predicated on its opposite in death. Death is not life’s opposite; it is its limit. Further, the categories life and death do not fit together in a structure as structure is definable by limitations and death is the limit of the concept of finitude. Thus, death is precisely an *aporia* or the impossibility of what cannot pass. Death is the nonpassage, the non-crossable border. Throughout our tradition, death has been defined as a border or limit. Death means to become ungrounded, to become spectral, and to live-on spectrally. Death would be the space without a ground; where no path exists because no path is required to exist.

The nonpassage therefore reveals itself as the limit of deconstruction, or deconstruction’s aporia, as Derrida admits:

In one case, the nonpassage resembles an impermeability; it would stem from the opaque existence of an uncrossable border: a door that does not open or that only opens according to an unlocatable condition, according to the inaccessible secret of some shibboleth ... In another case, the nonpassage, the impasse or aporia, stems from the fact that there is no limit. There is not yet or there is no longer a border to cross, no opposition between two sides: the limit is too porous, permeable, and indeterminate.<sup>60</sup>

Death, considered as the nonpassage, is deconstruction’s limit because there is no communication between this side and the next and so no deconstructive dynamic can be set up. All its ambitions are stymied. Yet, at the same time, and due to the same logic, there is also a total permeability akin to that of the hymen outlined in Derrida’s “The Double Session”<sup>61</sup> and “The Law of the Genre.”<sup>62</sup> Because there can be no limit established between life and death, as death will not succumb to borders and limits, this in effect means death is everywhere around, in, and between us. Although it is also over and beyond us as well. *Aporias* is important in relation to how one could come to understand how this could be so. Derrida is deliberate, in this text, in relating the dead being “in us” to his early work on iteration when he says:

Everyone's death, the death of all those who can say "my death," is irreplaceable. So is "my life." Every other is completely other. [*Tout autre est tout autre.*] Whence comes a first exemplary complication of exemplarity: nothing is more substitutable and yet nothing is less so than the syntagm "my death." ... This is also true for everything that entails first-person grammatical form.<sup>63</sup>

If Derrida defines death as the *aporia*, the possibility of the impossible, there might be another definition of death, of being-human, and of living-on. Such a definition would show us that death is not the *aporia*, we are the *aporia*, and we are the impossibility of what cannot pass away—we, who live in what he calls the *hauntology of the contretemps*, we who live spectrally, we, who are both guests and ghosts, held hostage in each other's arms through our universal mourning. Derrida's spectral subject is not Heidegger's circled *Dasein* who vacillates between the authentic and the inauthentic, between inauthentic *das Man* and authentic *Dasein*. For Derrida, one cannot be responsible as such without experiencing contradictions, contradictory duties. To face a situation that is free of contradictions or undecidability requires no responsibility. The spectral subject is the beyond the corpse of any determined corpus.

As Derrida notes, it is easy to speak for the dead and, through the repetition of the first person grammatical form, to overtake their death and make it your own. If one looks at Mallon's speech quoted in the same work one can see him doing the same thing for the living. To say "my death" is a singular speech act, but the reiterable nature of language then carries that singularity away through material repetition: "I am I am I am I am ..." The early, grammatological, Derrida would have left it there, but what is fundamentally ethical about Derrida's more recent positions is that he realizes that just because there is no friend, that the dead friend does not exist except within us, or that the phrase "my death" can disperse the radical singularity of death, death does not mind.

Derrida notes throughout his work on death and mourning that it is death's radical unknowability that makes it a site for ethics to take place. One cannot know death, know about it. As Jean-Luc Nancy puts it, "I recognize that in the death of the other there is nothing recognizable. And this is how sharing—and finitude—can be inscribed ..." <sup>64</sup> We are bound together by the fact that we can never be bound together in a form of communion; community is never here but always over there, beyond the finitude of death. Death, and our relation to it, ties us to the other as other, the fundamental ethical position I am considering, as it is unrecognizable just like the other is unrecognizable, and just as the other also is unable to recognize death. One cannot address oneself to death as death is always not there, and so is always unable to respond. Further, one cannot be in agreement with death. Death is always in the negative, which is not to say that it is tantamount to Hegelian theories of negation and subjectivity. Rather we must take this negativity more as a simple speech act of refusal. One cannot vote for death; it has no policies. It is death's job to say no to everything.

Unknowability is what marks death out as foundational to a deconstructive position, for if deconstruction is the identification of *aporias* and their investigation, then death as the ultimate *aporia* is the most apt place to start an investigation of deconstructive ethics. Even more so because of the ethical obsession with the other qua other, which, as we have seen above, comes essentially from what one might call the re-cognitive challenge of radical absence. Perhaps one

can know death, have a cognitive relationship with it, but there can be no repetition or reiteration in this and so one can never re-cognize it.<sup>65</sup> Once one knows death one is dead and at this point discourse stops.<sup>66</sup>

## DIFFERENT POSSIBILITIES IN DEATH: A PROVOCATION

True enough, Derrida's deconstructive reading endeavors to "bring to light several aporias" in the phenomenological interpretation of death, as that interpretation is expressed in Heidegger's assertion that: "Death is the possibility of the very impossibility of Dasein." Derrida writes that in *Being and Time*:

There are several modalized occurrences of this nuclear proposition. It is often cited. However, its gripping paradox is hardly noted, and the importance of all the successive explosions that it holds in reserve, in the underground of the existential analysis, is probably not measured . . . What can the possibility of an impossibility be? How can we *think* that? How can we *say* it while respecting logic and meaning? How can we approach that, live, or *exist* it? How does one testify to it?<sup>67</sup>

It is indeed an intriguing assertion upon which to focus for, as Heidegger says in another context: "The sentence is easy to read but difficult to think."<sup>68</sup> To begin with, what Heidegger means by "possibility (*Möglichkeit*)—in "the possibility of an impossibility"—is by no means straightforward. Derrida recognizes that "a certain thinking of the possible is at the heart of the existential analysis of death"<sup>69</sup> and he is correct that Heidegger's understanding of death turns on his distinctive (and peculiar) understanding of possibility. Nevertheless, his conclusion—that "one can turn what is thus at the very heart of the possibility of the existential analysis against the whole apparatus of *Being and Time*, against the very possibility of the existential analysis"<sup>70</sup>—is based on a subtle but important misreading.

In this misreading, Derrida notes that "the essence of *Dasein* as entity is precisely the *possibility*, the being-possible (*das Möglichsein*)."<sup>71</sup> From this he infers that if being-possible is the being proper to *Dasein*, then the existential analysis of the death of *Dasein* will have to make of this *possibility* its theme.<sup>72</sup> By formulating this claim conditionally, Derrida expresses rhetorically a caution which I take to be portentous; for, failing to adequately characterize Heidegger's distinctive sense of "existential possibility," Derrida substitutes *Möglichsein* for *Seinkönnen*, a semantic *glissement* which then allows him to attribute Heidegger an untenable reliance on the impossible experience of death as such. This calls for some explanation.

Derrida claims that "two meanings of possibility co-exist in *die Möglichkeit*."<sup>73</sup> The first is "virtuality" or "imminence," the second "ability," in the sense of *capability*, "possibility as that of which I am capable, that for which I have the power, the ability or the potentiality."<sup>74</sup> This characterization is insufficient and potentially misleading. Heidegger distinguishes his own use of possibility, *existential possibility*, from two other understandings of possibility common to the philosophical tradition, namely the logical and categorical possibility; as an *existentiale* of Dasein, possibility is constitutive of Dasein's being. Existential possibility is "the most primordial and ultimately positive way in which Dasein is characterized."<sup>75</sup> Here Heidegger has

not simply inverted the millennium-old Aristotelian distinction according to which actuality is granted metaphysical primacy of place over possibility; according to Heidegger's thinking of "existential possibility," Dasein exists through the constant charting of "live-options," choices that matter. Existential possibilities are what Dasein forges ahead into: the roles, identities, and commitments which shape and circumscribe the reflexive comportment of Dasein as a "thrown project." Heidegger's distinctive sense of existential possibility is, he later says, best understood as enabling possibility, as "what enables" us to be what we are.<sup>76</sup>

Heidegger further specifies that existential possibility does not signify possibility in the Kantian sense of "capability": that which I could but may or may not choose to do.<sup>77</sup> Derrida's equation of existential possibility with "capability" is misleading, then, insofar as existential possibility does not describe—except in derivative "breakdown states"—our standing back in a detached theoretical pose, deliberating over which possible outcome to "actualize."<sup>78</sup> That Derrida has taken a wrong step becomes clear in another context when step becomes clear in another context when he asserts that "every relation to death is an interpretive apprehension and a representative approach to death."<sup>79</sup> Existential possibility, on the contrary, describes our ongoing non-calculative "charting the course" of live options in which we are always already immersed.<sup>80</sup> Even imminence, which Derrida does well to emphasize as an ineliminable constituent of the phenomenology of death, will be misunderstood if thought of as the theoretical grasping of an impending event rather than as the encroaching of an indefinite horizon within which we embody possibilities.

## DEATH AND FUTURITY

Heidegger brings in Dasein's futurity to contrast this "being-possible" with Dasein's "ability-to-be" (*Seinkönnen*): "As being-possible (*Möglichsein*) . . . Dasein is existentially that which, in its ability-to-be (*Seinkönnen*), it is *not yet*."<sup>81</sup> This difference between *Seinkönnen* and *Möglichsein* is elusive, but it is crucial for an adequate explication of Heidegger's phenomenological understanding of death. In the context of such an explication, Derrida's central exegetical claim—that "if being-possible (*Möglichsein*) is the being proper to Dasein, then the existential analysis of the death of Dasein will have to make of *this* possibility its theme"<sup>82</sup>—is misguided. Heidegger *does* privilege the context of such an explication, Derrida's central exegetical claim—that "if being-possible *Möglichsein* as "the most immediate [mode of] being-in."

Moreover, and this is the closely related modal fallacy Derrida commits, Heidegger does not assert death is impossible, only that it is possibly impossible.<sup>83</sup> This difference becomes crucial when we remember Heidegger's claim that, "As being-possible (*Möglichsein*) . . . Dasein *is* existentially that which, in its ability-to-be (*Seinkönnen*), it is *not yet*."<sup>84</sup> Since it is "ability-to-be (*Seinkönnen*) rather than "being-possible" (*Möglichsein*) that receives elaboration "in conjunction with the outermost possibility of death," Dasein embodies the possibility of an impossibility only as something which is *not yet*. "Being towards one's ownmost ability-to-be (i.e., death) means that in each case Dasein is already *ahead* of itself."<sup>85</sup> Heidegger holds that as being-toward-death I am ahead of myself, able-to-be what I am not yet. How is this to be understood?

In 1928, Heidegger is clear; this seemingly strange “being ahead of myself, able to-be-what I am not yet” is in fact simply an accurate phenomenological description of our basic experience of futurity.

Expecting (*Gewärtigen*) is . . . ecstatic (from *ek-statis*, “stepping out”). Expectance implies a being-ahead-of-oneself. It is the basic form of the toward-oneself. . . Expectance means understanding oneself from out of one’s own ability-to-be. . . This approaching oneself in advance, from one’s own possibility, is the primary ecstatic concept of the future. We can illustrate this structure, insofar as this is possible at all, in this way (the question mark indicating the horizon that remains open).<sup>86</sup>

Heidegger’s implicit claim about the structure of futurity and its relation to possibility is that Dasein, through its ability-to-be, projects itself ahead of itself, opening the “horizon” of the futural “ecstasis,” the phenomenal space within which we comport and understand ourselves futurally. The existential possibilities we “press forward into” or “project ourselves upon” (e.g. teaching a class) return back to us as who we *are* (e.g. professor). Dasein’s “disclosedness” is constituted according to this “ecstematic unity of the horizons of temporality.”

However, it is well known but little understood fact that in this implicitly tripartite structure Heidegger privileges futurity:<sup>87</sup>

What do we mean by the horizontal character of the ecstasies? . . . The being-carried-away as such . . . provides . . . futurity as such, i.e., possibility pure and simple. Of itself the ecstasis (futurity) . . . produces the horizon of possibility in general. . . The horizon manifests itself in and with the ecstasis; it is its *ecstema*. . . And, corresponding to the unity of the ecstasies in their temporalization, the unity of the horizons is a primordial unity. This ecstematic unity of the horizon of temporality is nothing other than the temporal condition for the possibility of *world*.<sup>88</sup>

It is as gathering this “ecstematic” unity of the horizons of temporality that Dasein “exists” (from “*ek-sistere*”) or “stands-out” into Being, and thereby comes to have an intelligible “world.” But why does Heidegger call the futural *ecstema* “futurity as such, i.e., possibility pure and simple”? Perhaps it is because without death (signified appropriately enough by the question-mark in Heidegger’s diagram) there would be no futurity, the possibilities we press into would not “come back to us,” constituting us.<sup>89</sup>

Heidegger’s underlying intuition seems to be that futural possibilities would not matter to us if our embodiment was not thrown up against the limits of our own temporal finitude. In other words, death makes the future matter, and thus opens the horizon within which we “press-into” the possibilities which in turn constitute us. For Heidegger, then, death is not something we embody, but the ineliminable limit of our embodiment, the indefinite but irremovable horizon within which all embodied possibilities unfold.<sup>90</sup>

## THE APORETIC THRESHOLD OF DEATH

Derrida's objection focuses on and problematizes the idea of a "limit-line," "threshold," or border separating life and death, which he argues is an aporia implicit in Heidegger's existential analysis of death. For Derrida, since Dasein embodies its possibilities existentially, and death is "the possibility of an impossibility," embodying the possibility of *an impossibility* would seem to entail embodying an impossibility. Thus Derrida writes: "If death, the most proper possibility of Dasein, is the possibility of its impossibility, death becomes the most improper possibility and the most ex-propriating, the most inauthenticating one."<sup>91</sup> What are we to make of this objection?

Obliquely recalling Kafka's "Before the Law" parable from *The Trial* and Blanchot's "The Madness of the Day,"<sup>92</sup> Derrida's reading appeals to an "experience where the figure of the step is refused to intuition, where . . . the identity of oneself and therefore the possible identification of an intangible edge—the crossing of the line—becomes a *problem*."<sup>93</sup> For Derrida, Heidegger's phenomenology of death (the "authentic" conception of death or "properly dying" (*eigentlich sterben*) tacitly relies on the crossing of this threshold (the "vulgar" or "common" conception of "perishing" (*verenden*) and thus conceals an "aporetic structure" which, once exposed, threatens to tear apart the logical and performative cohesion of *Being and Time*.<sup>94</sup>

For Derrida, even the faithful must admit of the logical possibility—although we should not forget that Heidegger is talking about existential rather than logical possibility—that death is the end, the cessation of experience. But, to follow Derrida's logic: if this possibility should in fact obtain, if death turns out to entail the cessation of experience, then, strictly speaking, my death does not happen to me. Derrida formulates this point provocatively: "here dying would be the aporia, the impossibility of being dead, the impossibility of being dead, the impossibility of living or rather 'existing' one's death."<sup>95</sup> Simply put, we cannot eradicate the possibility that we cannot experience death. This possibility clearly recalls Heidegger's reading of Epicurus' maxim that "Dasein is nothing to us; since when we exist, death is not present, and when death is present, then we do not exist."<sup>96</sup> If death is the end of experience, and I cannot experience the end of experience (for to set a limit is to be in some sense already beyond it, Hegel teaches us), then I cannot experience my own death. Thus, even when I die, my death does not happen to me. I never meet my death.

Following Blanchot, Derrida tends to read this recognition (of the impossibility of my death's happening to me) not as leading to the contentment of Epicurean *ataraxia*, but rather as an agonizing form of damnation. This tragic impossibility of death leads to an existence which more closely resembles that of the cursed vampire (who cannot die). This "impossibility of being dead"—rather than conferring me with a kind of "mortal immortality" in an "eternal moment of the now" (as on Heidegger's reading of *Zarathustra's* recognition that *it is never not now*)—leads to what Derrida calls "ruination," "the final impossibility of dying, the *disaster* that I cannot die, the worst unhappiness."

Why is this "mortal immortality" suffered or, at best, "endured" as a kind of disastrous ruin? The Heideggerian explanation would seem to be as follows. In the search for something

that is uniquely my *own* (*eigen*), my relationship with my own death, in its “mineness” (*Jemeinigkeit*) and “irreplacability” (the fact that no one else can die in my place), seemed to hold out to me a last promise of “authenticity” (or “ownmostness,” *Eigentlichkeit*). But the recognition that I can never meet with that which is uniquely my own leads the quest for authenticity toward a realization of the tragic impossibility of death, the tragedy—as “Blanchot constantly repeats”—“of the impossibility, alas, of dying.”<sup>97</sup> Not even my own death will be mine. This reading is dramatic and powerful, but is it compelling as a reading of Heidegger’s text?

To recognize that it is a compelling reading, but not a convincing critique, it is important to be clear about something which Derrida does not make clear. Heidegger insists that: “Dying is not an event; it is a phenomenon to be understood existentially.”<sup>98</sup> Heidegger treats death not as an occurrence that happens to us, but phenomenologically, in terms of its showing-itself as phenomenon. Phenomenologically, death is the unknown; like Being as such, death does not show itself directly. It is for precisely this reason that Heidegger writes in the *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*: “Death is the highest and outermost witness of Being (*das höchste und äußerste Zeugnis des Seyns*).”<sup>99</sup> Because Heidegger is doing a phenomenology of death, his existential analytic does not rely on the possibility of experiencing “the moment” of life’s cessation. “When Dasein dies,” Heidegger writes, “even when it dies authentically—it does not have to do with an experience (*Erleben*) of its factual demising (*Ableben*).”<sup>100</sup> But if *Being and Time* does not rely in our being able to experience the “instant” of death, then the existential analytic cannot be “brought to ruin” by the impossibility of experiencing this instant. Derrida’s stirring ideas about the “disauthenticating,” “disappropriating,” impossible experience of death turns out to be Blanchotian themes read into Heidegger’s text.<sup>101</sup>

Nevertheless, Derrida successfully opens a provocative new reading of *Being and Time* for us here; he raises poignant and moving questions which, though they do not undermine Heidegger’s own existential analysis, certainly philosophical contributions in their own right. And, not surprisingly, there are moments in *Aporias* where Derrida clearly seems to recognize this. Thus, despite presenting what he takes to be a devastating critique, Derrida nevertheless acknowledges that there is something profound in Heidegger’s phenomenological interpretation of death worth preserving. He finds, in the end, that Heidegger’s existential analysis of death constitutes “a powerful and universal delimitation.”<sup>102</sup> Derrida’s alternative to Heidegger’s indefensible “privileging” of the ontological entails a re-situating Heidegger’s supposedly ahistorical existential analysis of death within the “Judeo-Christian-Islamic experience of death to which the [existential] analysis testifies.”<sup>103</sup> In this way Derrida would historicize without dissolving the performative status of phenomenological attestation or testimony (*Bezeugung*) (the methodology of *Being and Time*), even taking such phenomenological testimony as a paradigm for the most defensible methodological strategy of reasoned justification available for post-Heideggerian thought.

## Conclusion

Derrida could thus be seen as initiating nothing less than a radical reconceptualization of “legitimation” *via* a promising renewal of ancient paradigm of ethico-political adjudication, a strategic methodology of argumentation which Derrida calls simply testimony. It is in terms of

Derrida's return to the richly evocative thematic of "the witness" that his reading of the impossibility of death casts a new and revealing light on Heidegger's thinking. As he made clear in his 1994 Irvine seminar, Derrida thinks of death as the instant that shatters the illusion of instantaneity (our feeling of existing in an eternal moment of the now), separating "the witness structure" into its two component parts or moments, *witnessing* and *bearing* witness. I take it that here Derrida is interpreting Heidegger's notion of *Ereignis*, beings become intelligible once tacitly interpreted as something; beings show up according to a pre-existing (ontological) understanding of Being ("the clearing") which tacitly filters their showing-up.

This originary doubling (or "fold")—in which things show themselves only after first being implicitly interpreted according to the dominant historic-cultural understanding of Being—is rechristened by Derrida as "ineviterability." Like Heidegger's understanding of "endowment" (upon which it is clearly modeled), Derrida thinks of inevitability as conditioning the very possibility of intelligibility. But, in the case of death, this originary doubling is shattered, and the condition of possibility becomes a condition of impossibility. Here death is thought as the last instant which can be witnessed, perhaps, but not subsequently borne witness to—thus effectively splitting "the witness-structure" into its two "moments" ("discrepant," as he wrote in *Of Grammatology*, "by the time of breath").<sup>104</sup> But it is precisely by thinking it as shattered against the impossible instant of death that this "structure" of enowment or inevitability becomes visible. In this sense, Derrida's deconstructive altercation with *Being and Time* grants us access to the phenomenon which the later Heidegger calls "the gentle law of *Ereignis*,"<sup>105</sup> the inconspicuous occurrence of the tacit but constant interpretive filtering which constitutes the intelligible, and this is a great service indeed.<sup>106</sup>

To conclude, I say that *Aporias* is a turning point for deconstruction and a challenge to the community of thinkers who work through, with, or against deconstruction. As a text, its logic of impermeability returns our attention back to the singular, summons us to come back from the logic of the repetition of phrasing, and asks us to pay attention to the singularity of this phrase and every phrase.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> As the new quest for the meaning of Being, the traditional concept of metaphysics which has for so long been taken for granted by philosophers, Heidegger's fundamental ontology begins with the analysis of human existence. Since Being cannot be grasped in itself, Heidegger takes the being of human existence as the point of departure in his ontological inquiry. In this preliminary analysis, human being as Dasein is depicted as a being-in-the-world [*in-der-Welt-Sein*]. A human being is always involved in the historical world as a pattern of references; the world is inseparable from the human self, since the latter is always in the former. (Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987], 81). Being-in-the-world is one's entire context or field of relationships, and as such, it is an integral mode of Being, because by it the conventional dichotomy of subject and object is overcome.



However, this preliminary existential analysis reveals that the everyday character of Dasein is an inauthentic mode of human existence, wherein the total potentialities of Dasein are not discovered and fulfilled since it precludes birth and death because of its structural limitation. Thus the inner transition for a more primordial analysis is demanded: “If the Interpretation of Dasein’s Being is to become primordial as a foundation for working out the basic question of Ontology, then it must first have brought to light existentially the Being of Dasein in its possibilities of authenticity and totality.” Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 276. What is meant by this clarification is that the totality of Dasein must include its death. But this would seem to mean that the totality can never be attained for Dasein becomes no longer Dasein at the point of its death. Here Heidegger vigorously points out that the understanding of death as the mere ceasing-to-be of Dasein is neither sufficient nor appropriate for the attainment of the totality of Dasein. He goes further to insist that death be interpreted as the very relation of Dasein to its end (*ibid.*, 285–7).

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps we should acknowledge that we do not know what happens after death, that our knowing is limited to what Levinas calls the “this-sidedness” of death. But this brings up an important point. When we explicate Heidegger’s distinctive sense of possibility, we will come to realize that Heidegger’s definition of death as the “possibility of an impossibility” does not explicitly make the above acknowledgement. Heidegger is not saying that death is only possibly the end of experience; for Heidegger, it is certainly the end (to simplify: possibilities are embodied for Heidegger; interpreted phenomenologically, “death marks or limits the end of embodied possibilities). But if we remember Hegel has taught us about “the limit,” we should recognize that death, as a limit, both does and does not belong to the ensemble that it delimits (and hence cannot be entirely purged of its “other-sidedness” of death over its “other-sidedness,” Derrida’s *Aporias* can be seen as fleshing out this criticism; for it is this ineradicable “possibility” (in the ordinary non-Heideggerian sense) that death, as the limit of life, does not belong entirely to life, that gives Derrida’s critique its life.

<sup>3</sup> *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 18, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology, and Other Works* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1975), 38.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Eros (the life drive or libido) is concerned with the preservation of life and the preservation of the species. It thus appears as basic needs for health, safety and sustenance and through sexual drives. It seeks both to preserve life and to create life. It is associated with positive emotions of love, and hence pro-social behavior, cooperation, collaboration and other behaviors that support harmonious societies. Thanatos (the death drive, mortido, or aggression), on the other hand, appears in opposition and balance to Eros and pushes a person towards

extinction and an inanimate state. Freud saw drives as moving towards earlier states, including non-existence.

The death drive was an extension of Freud's earliest writings, having to do with conservation of energy in the organism, and was also the latest version of the dualism that was a constant in his work. In his earlier thinking, mental conflict had originated among component instincts of the libido—ego and object libido, self-preservative and erotic instincts. In the new conception, all these previous instincts were subsumed under the libido, or Eros, and opposed to the death instinct. According to the logic of the pleasure principle, energy was to be conserved at all costs. In view of the repetition compulsion, Freud amended his view: On the one hand, energy was to be conserved; on the other, according to the logic of the death drive, the reduction of tension demanded that energy be reduced to nothing, returned to a state of rest—a return to the inorganic stasis that Freud (borrowing from the science of his time) believed to be the original condition of all matter.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. Richard Taft .Bloomington: Indiana, 1990, 156.

<sup>9</sup> The later Heidegger claimed that “only the way forward will lead us back”; Derrida asserts that the only way out of a bind is *to tie the knot tighter*. Martin Heidegger, “Dialogue in Language Between a Japanese and a Inquirer,” in *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter Hertz .San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1971, 12. Derrida's remark comes from the 1995 Irvine Seminar where it was preceded by: “What philosophers do not understand is that . . . .”

<sup>10</sup> As I will argue, Heidegger and Derrida both provide answers to the question of the philosophical significance of death, and do so in ways that are both radically different and fundamentally connected (the latter building on a problematic but provocative interpretation of the former). However, to rigorously make the case for their difference within connectedness (we could say their identity and difference) one would have to treat not only Derrida on Heidegger on death (and thus borders, delineation, and finally argumentative justification itself), but Derrida's other important interpretation of Heidegger, on temporality and the tradition, on spirit, the earth, art, and home, on the hand, subjectivism and animality, on hearing and the voice of the friend, on naming and negative theology, and perhaps most importantly, on the pre-attunement of the agreement (*Zusage*) more fundamental than (or, to take Heidegger at his word, already meant by) the “piety” of questioning (*On the Way to Language*, 72). Nevertheless, any serious reader of Derrida must come to terms with the profound influence Heidegger has had on Derrida before hoping to grasp the subtle but important distanciations Derrida effects via his immanent critiques.

<sup>11</sup> *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993, 12.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> This makes Derrida a theorist of heritage, of the relationship to father, fatherland, and Law. Our cybernetic age of unprecedented reproductive technology—an era of intense struggle between prophylactics and promiscuity—has taught us that if each generation loses some of the resolution of its predecessor(s), it also picks up certain irreducible properties of its own.

<sup>19</sup> There is much to be said about these remarkable words. That Derrida—a thinker, famous for, among other things, subverting the privilege of speech over writing—spoke these words gives any careful reader pause for thought. Where there might be quotation marks, inflections, emphases? (These same considerations also apply to my citations from his Irvine lectures.) And what does it mean that all of his writing “is on death?” Is this the Derridean *Ungrund*, the “perhaps necessary appearance of ground” (Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 3) whereby the writings are founded on a paradox of death which *Aporias* so painstakingly draws? Rather than guessing his intentions, arguably a very un-Derridean hermeneutic strategy, one would no doubt do best to tease out the full implications of the polysemic phrasing, tracing the links between these phonemes cast very publicly into the world.

<sup>20</sup> *Aporias*, 11; cf. 4.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 15. Variations on this definition can be found in many of Derrida’s recent works.

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1993), xviii. In this text, Derrida analyzes the euphoria of certain scholars like Francis Fukuyama who believed that the collapse of communism has also meant the death of Marxism and the securing of liberal democracy as the only viable way of organizing our world. Of course, Derrida wants to avoid the euphoria of the Fukuyama scholar. Even if communism has collapsed and liberal democracy (which sees itself as “the ideal of human history”) has moved in to fill the site that “Marxism” has previously occupies, many problems remain. Derrida points out: “Never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity. Instead of singing the advent of the ideal liberal democracy and of the capitalist market in the euphoria of the end of history, instead of celebrating the “end of ideologies” and the end of the great emancipator discourses, let us never neglect this obvious macroscopic fact, made up of innumerable singular sites of suffering: no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, never have so many men, women and children been subjugated, starved, or exterminated on the earth” (*ibid.*, 85).

<sup>23</sup> This word literally means hitches.

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<sup>24</sup> *Specters of Marx*, xviii.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *The Ear of the Other*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 59.

<sup>27</sup> In an interview entitled “Dialanguages,” Derrida says the following: “I cannot complete my mourning for everything I lose, because I want to keep it, and at the same time, what I do best is to mourn, is to lose it, because by mourning, I keep it inside me. And it is this terrible logic of mourning that I talk about all the time, that I am concerned with all the time, whether in ‘Fors’ or in *Glas*, this terrible fatality of mourning. The psychoanalytic discourse, despite its subtlety and necessity, does not go into this fatality, this necessity: the double constraint of mourning.” *Points, Interviews 1974–1994*, trans. Peggy Kamuf. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995, 152.

<sup>28</sup> *The Ear of the Other*, 57–8.

<sup>29</sup> *Specters of Marx*, 11.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>31</sup> From this perspective, *Aporias* culminates in a self-consciously violent gesture whereby Derrida rhetorically subsumes the alterity of Heidegger’s existential problematic, interpreting the phenomenological analysis of death as “one example among others . . . of the aporia (*Aporias*, 72). Ironically, this hermeneutic violence is undeniably Heideggerian in its style, its model being the subsumption and Nietzsche characteristic of Heidegger’s work *The Will to Power as Art*, vol. 1 of *Nietzsche*, trans. Frank Capuzzi. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982.

<sup>32</sup> Calvin O. Schrag, *Existence and Freedom: Towards an Ontology of Human Finitude*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1961, 96.

<sup>33</sup> *Being and Time*, 291.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 296–7.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>36</sup> James M. Damske, *Being, Man, & Death: A Key to Heidegger*. Lexington, KN: The University Press of Kentucky, 1970, 3.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>40</sup> The formal existential wholeness of the ontological structure of Dasein is summed up by Heidegger as “ahead-of-itself-Being-already-in-(the-world) as-Being-alongside (entities encountered within-the-world)” (*ibid.*, 237). This structural formula is finally called “care” or “concern” (*Sorge*), which term must be understood, not as an ontic suggestion, but in a purely existential-ontological sense. And, conversely, Dasein, identified as care in turn encompasses all these ontological characteristics in its existential unity on the basis of temporality.

<sup>41</sup> In this subjective apprehension of death as an individual and imminent possibility, Its relevance for the whole of existence is made manifest. Death is seen to permeate the totality of life and qualifies it at every instant It is no longer viewed as a simple external and natural phenomenon which seems to happen to all people at some point in time and which has no reality until it arrives. Death when it becomes relevant for the whole of life is apprehended as a reality already present. Cf. Schrag, *Existence and Freedom*, 106–7.

<sup>42</sup> *Being and Time*, 307.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Demske, *Being, Man, & Death*, 33.

<sup>45</sup> *Being and Time*, 307.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

<sup>48</sup> Schrag, *Existence and Freedom*, 116.

<sup>49</sup> *Being and Time*, 310.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 282. According to Heidegger, the deceased “is an object of concern (*Besorge*) in the ways of funeral rites, interment and the cult of graves.”

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> The following question arises, if Heidegger defines death as “a way to be, which Dasein takes over as soon as it is,” does it make sense to talk of the deceased as having abandoned our ‘world’ ” or to speak of the mourners as those who have “remained behind?” If this is the case then death is an event that projects us away from the “here” to “there.” As such,

death cannot be understood as something “Dasein takes over as soon as it is.” On the one hand, Heidegger wants to maintain that Death is “something Dasein takes over as soon as it is,” which means that Dasein remains Dasein even when it dies. Yet according to Heidegger’s spatial metaphors of *here and no longer here*, Dasein as that which dies can no longer be Dasein but becomes that which is no-longer-Dasein.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Aporias*, 3.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>59</sup> Derrida aligns his understanding of ‘aporia’ with that of Aristotle’s *Physics* (217b). Aporia for him is a situation of impasse, where one cannot transgress the limits of one’s borders; it is an experience that paralyzes us before a door, a passage, or a traversal. In *Aporias*, he outlines succinctly other such aporias in his texts, which include: a) double bind (in *Glas*); b) work of impossible mourning impracticable opposition between incorporation and introjection (“Fors” in *Memoires for Paul de Man* and *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*); c) step [*pas*] and paralysis, and non-dialectizable contradiction; d) birth date that only happens by effacing oneself; e) iterability, which means a condition of possibility as condition for impossibility (“Signature, Event, Context” in *Limited, Inc.*); f) invention of the other as the impossible (*Psyche: Inventions of the Other*); g) nine antinomies of the philosophical discipline (in *Right to Philosophy*); h) gift as the impossible (in *The Gift of Death*); and i) single duty that recurrently duplicates interminably, fissures itself, and contradicts itself without remaining the same, i.e. that which concerns the only ‘single’ and ‘double’ contradictory imperative (in *The Other Heading*).

<sup>60</sup> *Aporias*, 20.

<sup>61</sup> In *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 205–85.

<sup>62</sup> trans. Avita Ronnell, *Critical Inquiry* 7, No. 1, 1980: 55–81.

<sup>63</sup> *Aporias*, 22.

<sup>64</sup> *The Inoperative Community*, ed., Peter Connor; trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland and Simona Sawhney. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, 33.

<sup>65</sup> Death and secrecy occupies the final section of *The Gift of Death*, “Tout Autre est Tout Autre.” It is also shown as being the precondition for an ethical appreciation of other *qua* other in *Memoires for Paul de Man*, when Derrida considers how one could go about a kind of true

mourning that does not sacrifice the otherness of the other person: “True ‘mourning’ seems to dictate only a tendency: the tendency to accept incomprehension, to leave a place for it, and to enumerate coldly ... those modes of language which, in short, deny the whole rhetoricity of the true (the non-anthropomorphic, the non-elegiac, the non-poetic etc.)” Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava and Peggy Kamuf. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, 31.

<sup>66</sup> As Nancy makes clear: “In death ... there is no longer any community or communication: there is only the continuous identity of atoms” (*Inoperative Community*, 12). The formative role of death in forming community is that in death, all communication is lost, and yet “what this community has ‘lost’—the immanence and the intimacy of a communion—is lost only in the sense that such a ‘loss’ is constitutive of ‘community’ itself” (*ibid.*). Thus ethical community is very much an attempt at Derridean true “mourning” or mourning through acceptance of the radical alterity and incomprehensive nature of death.

<sup>67</sup> *Aporias*, 68.

<sup>68</sup> *The Question of Being*, trans. Jean T. Wilde and William Kluback. London: Vision Press, 1956, 73.

<sup>69</sup> *Aporias*, 62.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 77. Apparently referring to Heidegger’s assertion that it is “the relation to death in which Dasein’s character as possibility lets itself be revealed most precisely” (*Being and Time*, 293), Derrida writes “death is possibility *par excellence*.” This too is more than a bit misleading.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* (italics supplied)

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> “The Being-possible (*Möglichsein*) which Dasein is in every case is to be sharply distinguished both from empty logical possibility and from the contingency of something present-at-hand . . . As a modal category of being-present-at-hand, possibility signifies what is *not-yet* actual and what is *not at any time* necessary. It characterized the merely possible . . . On the other hand, possibility as an *existentiale* is the most primordial and ultimately positive way in which Dasein is characterized ontologically” *Being and Time*, 183.

<sup>76</sup> *On the Way to Language*, 93.

<sup>77</sup> “Possibility, as an existential, does not signify a free-floating potentiality-for-Being in the sense of the liberty of indifference. In every case Dasein, essentially having a state-of-mind, has already got into definite possibilities.” *Being and Time*, 183.

<sup>78</sup> Explicit thematization is not paradigmatic of ordinary experience, but rather is primordially encountered and must be thought, Heidegger argues, as a break in the flow of involved experience - Heidegger criticizes the mistake of philosophers like Descartes who model their understanding of human life on such “break-down states”.

<sup>79</sup> *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, 45. Derrida published this text in 1992, the same year he delivered the lecture that forms the basis of *Aporias*.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger’s *Heraclitus Seminar*, trans. Charles Siebert. University: Alabama University Press, 1979, 11–3, where Heidegger persistently resists Fink’s assertions that “steering” necessarily involves the calculative use of reason.

<sup>81</sup> *Being and Time*, 185–6.

<sup>82</sup> *Aporias*, 6 (my italics). Derrida makes this claim despite noting earlier, correctly, that “‘properly dying’ belongs to the proper and authentic *being-able* of Dasein.”

<sup>83</sup> At the root of the modal fallacy Derrida commits is a subtle and in itself innocuous substitution. In *Being and Time*, as we have seen, Heidegger defines our phenomenological relationship to death as “the possibility of an impossibility.” But in *On the Way to Language*—in an analysis which Derrida explores in *Aporias*—the “mortal” is defined (in contradistinction to “the animal”) by the relation (presumably through language) ‘to death as such.’ Taking “mortal” and “Dasein” as equivalent expressions here (arguably a justifiable move, but one that as prominent a Heideggerian thinker as Reiner Schürmann argues against, and which would thus seem in need of some defense), Derrida implicitly puts the two definitions together—substituting *Being and Time*’s “the possibility of an impossibility” for *On the Way to Language*’s “death”—to yield the following: Dasein is defined by its relation to “ ‘the possibility of an impossibility’ as such.” So far, no logical error. The problem arises when Derrida transforms this new definition by illegitimately shifting the square-quotes, subtly rearranging these sentries at the borders of meaning. It is as if Derrida thinks that “(the possibility of an impossibility) as such” and the “possibility of (an impossibility as such)” were logically equivalent expressions; they are not. The former is the position supported by combining Heidegger’s above two definitions (of “death” and of “the mortal”); the latter is the position with which Derrida’s modal fallacy would saddle Heidegger, ascribing to Heidegger an untenable reliance on death as “the possibility of an ‘impossibility’ as such,” rather than simply as “ ‘the possibility of an impossibility’ as such.” This subtle but untenable move is supported neither by modal logic nor by Heidegger’s texts, and it is ironic that Derrida makes this kind of mistake, given the care with which he ordinarily treats such cautionary signs as square-quotes, parentheses, underlining, etc. See, e.g. Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby



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(Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 31. Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 70, n. 43.

<sup>84</sup> *Being and Time*, 185–6.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>86</sup> *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, trans. Michael Heim. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984, 206 (my emphasis).

<sup>87</sup> We are interpreting Heidegger's claim that "the primary meaning of existentiality is the future" (*ibid.*, 376).

<sup>88</sup> *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, 208.

<sup>89</sup> This also helps explain why Heidegger does not think that the extension of "Dasein" includes "world-poor" animals; for he holds—"A thousand signs to the contrary," Derrida rightly objects—that animals lack a relationship to their own deaths (cf. *Aporias*, 35-42; *On the Way to Language*, 107–108).

<sup>90</sup> "In Dasein, as being toward its death, its own uttermost "not-yet" has been included—the not yet which all others lie before" (*Being and Time*, 303).

<sup>91</sup> *Aporias*, 77.

<sup>92</sup> Derrida is well aware that Blanchot's "story"—"No, no, stories, never again"—his *impossible* story, as Derrida calls it, points back to Kafka's famous "Before the Law" parable from *The Trial*.

<sup>93</sup> *Aporias*, 11.

<sup>94</sup> "It is with regard to death that we shall approach this aporetic structure in *Being and Time*" (*ibid.*, 32).

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>96</sup> Cf. Epicurean Philosophy Online, "Epicurus' Letter to Menoeceus," in *The Life of Epicurus*, bk. 10 of *The Lives and Opinions of Famous Philosophers*, by Diogenes Laertius, § 125, <http://www.epicurus.info/etexts/Lives.html#140>. Accessed 26 February 2009.

<sup>97</sup> *Aporias*, 77.

<sup>98</sup> *Being and Time*, 284.

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<sup>99</sup> trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999, 284.

<sup>100</sup> *Being and Time*, 291.

<sup>101</sup> Derrida's final footnote near the end of *Aporias* in which he says that "it would now be necessary to re-read and cite [two of Blanchot's] texts from beginning to end" provides some confirmation of this thesis (see 87, n. 18).

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> In this case, a *last* breath. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak. London: John Hopkins University Press, 1976, 18.

<sup>105</sup> *On the Way to Language*, 128.

<sup>106</sup> This contribution is made greater by the fact that it is a short step from recognizing *Ereignis* to recognizing Being. For, acknowledging both that we tacitly interpret the intelligible according to metaphysically predetermined ontological parameters, and also that these metaphysical parameters pre-filtering "what-is" have a history, leads to a recognition of that which for the later Heidegger always exceeds and thereby makes possible each of these historical epochs of intelligibility (and the possibility of a non-nihilistic futural clearing), namely, Being, the "always-outstanding," the "never-autochthonous" (as Heidegger puts it).

It seems especially fitting that reading Derrida on Heidegger should lead us here; for was not the recognition of Being the goal toward which Heidegger's "ontological destruction" in *Being and Time* (so influential on Derrida) was *on the way*? (Recall, e.g., Heidegger's famous claim that: "We understand this task as one in which, taking the question of Being as our clue, we are to deconstruct the traditional content of ancient ontology until we reach into and recover those primordial experiences in which we achieved our first ways of determining the nature of Being—the ways that have guided us ever since" [*Being and Time*, 44]). In retrospect, is not Derrida's facilitation of this recognition—both of "Being" (understood as the ineffable source of historical intelligibility) and of the phenomenon of "enownment" or "ineviterability" by which "Being" is tacitly interpreted and so made intelligible—Derrida's own answer to *Being and Time*'s "call" for an "ontological destruction"? Thus, while Derrida's deconstruction of Heidegger have undoubtedly responded critically to this call, they have nevertheless managed to respond so as to illuminate the texts to which they respond in surprising and important ways. And, as Derrida likes to say, the response is the beginning of responsibility.

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