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Wendell Phillips April 19, 2021

A Study of Affect and Death in Twentieth Century Philosophy

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Abstract

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In this thesis, I argue that 20th century continental philosophy's concern with the problem death poses for the subject is just one component of a broad nexus of affective relations and comportments towards death within the history of philosophy. Following Philippe Ariès' critical history of Western death mentalities, I claim that the present is characterized by a culture of death "denial," one that is defined by the absence of meaningful considerations of mortality, and which engenders within the culture of the self an omnipresent death "anxiety." My claim is that philosophy has the power to unearth and excavate alternative ways of knowing and "feeling" death from the past and that doing so can challenge the dominant affects and mentalities which shape the present. Specifically, I draw on three key philosophers of death to make my argument: the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, the esoteric writer Georges Bataille, and the phenomenologist Martin Heidegger. I argue that the dominant "affect" in Lacan's writings on death is a quasi-rationalist, "scientific" affect, which studies death via systematic analysis of topographical, linguistic structures of the unconscious. Georges Bataille, in contrast, also writes in the heritage of Freudianism yet departs from Lacan's structuralism, opting instead to descend into a mystical and irrationalist pursuit of non-knowledge and death, which find their bodily corollaries in the affect of eroticism and the manic-philosophical practice of laughter. My ultimate argument is that the narrative of the "mortals" offered by the late Heidegger, as opposed to the earlier figure of Dasein, is characterized by a meditative affect, one that surpasses Lacan and Bataille in extricating the meaning of death from the structure of the subject. Heidegger constellates death as the shrine of the Nothing and the revelation of the "secret" of Being; death divulges the meaning of life through the permanent concealment of the secret of existence, situating the individual within a community of mortals that shares and holds within itself an innate opacity: the mystery of death and nothingness. Heidegger's mortal dwelling views death not as something frightening, but as a shelter and refuge which enables serene, poetic communion with the world.

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Table of Contents

Introduction: A History of Death, Affect, and Philosophy

In *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino wrote of "Cities and the Dead," noting that it is death which constructs our world in its own mirror image. In Calvino's work of fiction, Kublai Khan, the ruler of a vast empire, engages in constant dialogue with a quasi-Heideggerian interlocuter: the wanderer and journeyman Marco Polo. Polo recalls tales of his journeys to the various cities which have been conquered by the military might of the empire and brought under the brutal rule of Khan. The emperor listens to Polo's stories such that he may achieve heightened awareness of the character and constitution of his new empire, yet he is taken aback by their fantastical nature. The story which Polo tells of Eusapia, the city of death, specifically conveys an important insight about death's ineradicable and unruly character. As Calvino explained,

> No city is more inclined than Eusapia to enjoy life and flee care. And to make the leap from life to death less abrupt, the inhabitants have constructed an identical copy of their city, underground. All corpses, dried in such a way that the skeleton remains sheathed in yellow skin, are carried down there, to continue their former activities.[1]
>
> […]
>
> The job of accompanying the dead down below and arranging them in the desired place is assigned to a confraternity of hooded brothers. No one else has access to the Eusapia of the dead and everything known about it has been learned from them.
>
> They say that the same confraternity exists among the dead and that it never fails to lend a hand; the hooded brothers, after death, will perform the same job in the other Eusapia; rumor has it that some of them are already dead but continue going up and down. In any case, this confraternity's authority in the Eusapia of the living is vast.[2]

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[1] Calvino, Italo. *Invisible Cities*. Translated by William Weaver, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1974, pp. 109.
[2] Calvino, pp. 109.

Calvino continued:

> They say that every time they go below, they find something changed in the lower Eusapia; the dead make innovations in their city; not many, but surely the fruit of sober reflection, not passing whims. From one year to the next, they say, the Eusapia of the dead becomes unrecognizable. And the living, to keep up with them, also want to do everything that the hooded brothers tell them about the novelties of the dead. So, the Eusapia of the living has taken to copying its underground copy.
>
> They say that this has not just now begun to happen: actually, it was the dead who built the upper Eusapia, in the image of their city. They say that in the twin cities there is no longer any way of knowing who is alive and who is dead."[3]

In Calvino's story, the dead of Eusapia not only "built" the city of the living in terms of a literal, temporal connection between the present and the past, cause and effect, but indeed endure in the present within in a city of their own, one which the world of the living was in fact constructed to reflect. Despite their supposed absence, the dead of Eusapia are very much alive, being neither present nor absent. The brotherhood of Eusapia fraternizes with the dead and are thus in a sense *with* death. They live in the world of death, and death essences and radiates throughout the world, keeping the citizens in constant relation to one another, and allowing them to defy the encroachments of any conqueror or emperor unacquainted with death's role in the constitution of their city.

In Polo's tale, death is not only something which the citizens of Eusapia are immanently aware of; it is novel and generative of a community of beings who share together in death and accompany one another towards its inevitability. Death is not something to be feared, for it is simply a resting place and refuge for the corpses of

[3] Calvino, pp. 110.

Eusapia, who are permitted to endure in their state of being precisely through dying. As we shall see in the ensuing chapters, our awareness of death is not something to be denied or repressed, since death is all around us. In the world of the mortals and their being-in-death, what Calvino called "Eusapia," there is no way of knowing who is alive and who is dead, and this fact is not even a source for distress for the mortals of the city.

For our cultural present, however, this sort of understanding has become unthinkable. We shall see by the end of the conclusion that the sort of magical realism which surrounds death in *Invisible Cities*, while unimaginable to the modern subject precisely because it initially appears to defy realism in its production of enchantment and wonder, is precisely what is needed in the present. Much like how Calvino draws attention to the hermeneutic abyss of death in the fictional wanderings of Marco Polo and his journey to the bustling city of Eusapia, philosophy must bring to the fore forgotten traces of old modes of understanding death which have been hitherto lost to the graveyard of Western history.

…

In one of his lesser known writings on the role of death in psychic life, *Thoughts For The Times on War and Death*, Sigmund Freud speculated on the meaning of his observations of the culture of "primeval man" for the innate structure of the mind, remarking that: "Our unconscious … does not believe in its own death; it behaves as if it were immortal."[4] Freud believed that the topography of the unconscious forbids

[4] Sigmund, Freud. "Thoughts for The Times on War and Death." *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund*, *Volume XIV (1914-1916)*, Translated by James Strachey, The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1957, pp. 296.

knowledge of anything that is negative; the mind cannot come to terms with negative content. Death can only appear to us as something alien and foreign, something which inevitably afflicts others, yet today it means nothing to us. Contra the Freudian thesis on primeval man, we will see that this view of the psychic import of death is a reflection of contingent cultural and historical circumstances, rather than something innate to all human beings.

This early twentieth century view of death opened on a wide range of complex philosophical perspectives, not only the birth of psychoanalysis, but also from phenomenology to the afterlife of German idealism found in thinkers like Alexandre Kojève. This thesis compares and contrasts the affects surrounding death in the works of three specific intellectuals of that century: Jacques Lacan, Georges Bataille, and Martin Heidegger. These thinkers are each, in their own distinctive ways, either overlooked or misunderstood in the context of their respective views of death. Each frames the relationship between affect and death in a unique and novel way, frustrating the culture of death which dominated the century in which they lived.

Since the time of its initial inception, however, philosophy has maintained an intrinsic relationship to death. From the moment that Socrates remarked that the purpose of philosophy is to prepare the self for death, death has arguably operated almost as a specter haunting the history of thought. Indeed, death has hitherto functioned as an undercurrent to thinking itself. As Saitya Brata Das suggests, “at the very birth of philosophy’s becoming there was a trembling and a cry, a seizure and an absence that has

already opened up philosophy at that very moment of its coming to its abyss…"[5] Death as conceived of in terms of "absence" or "abyss" can be located at the beginning of philosophy, and for significant figures in the history of philosophy like Hegel and his interpreter Kojève, philosophy becomes self-conscious of its own character through encountering death as an object of concern and contemplation.

The extent to which philosophy has been aware of this fact has varied considerably across different traditions, historical moments, and cultural contexts. As we shall see, it is impossible to think of philosophy, the self, or the value of life outside of some constitutive relation to mortality. According to a wide swath of twentieth century continental thinkers, the modern world can indeed be described as characterized by a fundamental denial of death, which in turn comes at the expense of life. Without the awareness of death, there is therefore no longer a way for the individual to live in lieu of their own death, and furthermore, we no longer possess the ability to adequately respond to death with our emotions. We are left with an anxiety whose genesis is our inability to think and speak of death in a complex manner, let alone associate its inevitability with moments of joy or other positive emotional valences.

As a result, continental philosophy in the twentieth century attempted to respond to this condition in a number of different ways. For the thinkers of interest to this study, death has served to undermine and destroy the pretense of a self-contained subject. The subject cannot know or possess itself in that it is in an inherently opaque relationship with its own being. That opacity is death. Death therefore complicates the question of the

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[5] Brata Das, Saitya. "(Dis)Figures of Death: Taking the Side of Derrida, Taking the Side of Death." *Derrida Today*, vol. 3, Issue 1, 2010, pp. 12.

nature of individuality in philosophy. For some, like Bataille, the constitutive nature of death undoes the presupposition of individuality altogether. For others, such as the early Heidegger, it is the singularity of a person's death which makes them an individual as such.

There are often answers provided as to how the individual is to incorporate knowledge of death into the way they live in life. The choice to live in accordance with death is therefore of paramount importance to the thinkers of this era. While the basic meaning of death for philosophy has been explored at length, there has been somewhat less of an emphasis on the significance of the affects these concepts and philosophies surrounding death are prone to inspiring in the individuals across different eras and cultural contexts. Which affects does death inspire in the self under different circumstances?

These problems are in part consequences of a common disconnect between theoretical analyses of death and the diversity of emotions a person could experience when contemplating them. In other words, there often exists in the study of philosophy a fissure or chasm separating an individual's theoretical understanding of death, or even simple awareness of it, and their emotional reaction to this understanding at the level of experience. This is true even of the most profound efforts at deconstructing the figure of death. One could even argue that concepts themselves, as Lacan will illustrate, are themselves tools for suppressing our feelings surrounding mortality. In other words, they serve as defense mechanisms which prevent us from grasping how we truly feel about our own death bound destiny as human beings.

I argue that Freud's original observation about the mind's incapacity to acknowledge death is extended by Jacques Lacan into a skeptical account of how language imprisons our experience in a fantasy of subjectivity, thereby foreclosing any type of "authentic" relation to or subjective "awareness" of death for the individual. If death is anything at all for psychoanalysis, it is the constitutive incompleteness of language, the inability of representation to give us access to the existential truth of our experience. The structuralist-psychoanalytic account of death offered by Lacan appears, at least initially, to severely frustrate and call into question the accounts of other philosophers who focus on the way individuals should respond to death.

Georges Bataille, for instance, attempts to appropriate the affective power of laughter as a way to enter into a deeper, dynamic continuity with death. However, his theory, which relies on many of the same insights about eroticism and the body established by Freud, turns out to reframe laughter as a subjective fantasy of the body's sovereignty over death, and in this way repeats in reverse the structure of subjectivism which Lacan and other psychoanalysts identified. Martin Heidegger, though, takes the affective turn further, arguing that we must cultivate a meditative practice and dwelling which implies a "cutting through" of the psychoanalytic bifurcation between "conscious" and "unconscious." Unlike Bataille, his account of death is not grounded in any notion of individual sovereignty, but in collective being and relationality within the community of mortals. In this way, Heidegger's project reveals the limits of the scientific-skeptical affect cultivated by the structuralists and calls for a rethinking of death beyond categories such as subjectivity or the unconscious. All three of these narratives critique the conceptions of death which we associate with the modern world, and either seek to

recover older understandings of death or maintain skepticism about the possibility of doing so.

…

In 1974, the French medievalist Philippe Ariès provided one of the earliest accounts of the history of these old ways of knowing death, death mentalities, to treat the subject as one worthy of rigorous historical and philosophical inquiry. The premise of *Western Attitudes Towards Death*, later followed by *The Hour of Our Death*, is that cultural attitudes towards death in the West are not of an a-chronic or unchanging nature. Rather, they are malleable symbolic constructs which have undergone gradual yet substantial alterations over dozens of centuries.[6] These diachronic changes in our attitude towards death have had profound yet overlooked consequences for the culture of the self. As Ariès shows, the perceptive infrastructure which organizes how we anticipate, feel, and think about death has evolved in distinctive ways which have left significant marks on the constitution of our world.

According to Ariès, the most recent and perhaps most fundamental transformation in the Western history of death mentalities took place around the time of the close of the nineteenth century and inaugurated the era of *forbidden death*.[7] Death, previously the subject of intense individual and social anticipation, was suddenly banished and, in a sense, forgotten. In the present, we live in the midst of an anxious mood concerning death brought about by the failures of this forgetting, and as a result our experience of life is

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[6] Ariès, Philippe. *Western Attitudes Toward Death*. Translated by Patrician M. Ranum, Boyars, 1976, pp. 2.
[7] Ariès, 89.

diminished. We are now unable to emotionally process the constitutive nature of mortality and are thus left only with a lingering anxiety concerning that we are always already arriving at death. As Ariès points out, this condition was not inevitable nor is it intractable. Taking the limits of any Eurocentric account of the history of human culture into account, we can say that the past two hundred years are very few in comparison with the vast millennia which preceded them.

In the first medieval period of the fourth through tenth centuries, for example, death was understood neither as a calamity nor as something to be feared. It was understood to be an inevitable facet of life, which could only be addressed through the carrying out of complex ceremonies. Individuals were *forewarned* in the sense that they usually anticipated the nearness of their death, meaning that to them it was not simply a spontaneous accident that one had simply failed to ward off. None of the rituals surrounding death featured great displays of mourning or sorrow by the dying person or by those present. It was the relationship of anticipation between the self and death which shaped the rituals and ceremonies. The dying person presided over their own death and processed it as such; there was in a sense a sort of active emotional "resignation" to the naturalness of dying.[8]

This intimate familiarity with death was in turn reflected in the organization of the culturally central structures of the town, specifically the churchyard and cemetery. There was, simply put, a meaningful coexistence between the living and the dead in these spaces. Church and cemetery were rectangularly united and were decorated with skulls

[8] Ariès, 11.

and limbs extracted from mass common graves. The last remains of the dead were used as ornaments rather than as relics to be honored with tombstones. Despite these displays of the macabre, the church and courtyard were celebrated as public spaces, where houses and shops were built and where joyous festivities took place.[9] The spectacle of the death was internalized into space; the joy of the crowds who exuberantly gathered therein reflected their unspoken familiarity with the dead and with death.

In the second middle ages, around the eleventh and twelfth centuries, this vulgate of death experienced a shift towards a concern for *one's own death*.[10] Death now appeared to the West as more of an individualized and personalized phenomenon. The individual's death, rather than death itself, came to the center fore of our culture. Our preexisting social familiarity with death evolved into collective notions of fate and destiny. The dying person did not flee from death; they solemnly accepted it as a threshold which each generation had to cross.[11] As such, the familiarity persisted, yet death as destiny took on a renewed importance, one which aided the dying person in processing their finitude. However, there was a newfound attention to the *moment* of death. The Last Judgment of the tradition of Christianity changed in function; there was now a specific judgment rendered at the moment of death which decided the fate of the soul. The behavior of the dying person on their deathbed, where they reflected on the character of the deeds of their life, was now of primary importance.[12]

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[9] Ariès, 23-24.
[10] Ariès, 27.
[11] Ariès, 28.
[12] Ariès, 32.

This observation allows us to identify the newly important emotion of anxiety, wherein the encroaching moment of death was now anticipated as the event which will lead to either damnation or salvation. There still remained a certain passive acceptance of death's inevitability and generational importance, yet the feelings and emotions which encircled and circumscribed the deathbed had taken on an anxious character. The moment of death had, in a sense, become the very moment where the individual fully realized and became aware of the totality of their personhood.[13] Anticipation therefore became partially synonymous with a heightened degree of anxiety.

This sense of death as something personalized further developed during the eighteenth century, which Ariès terms the century of *thy* death. The anticipation of death became a newly *dramatized* phenomenon. The prevalence of fear and anxiety persisted and increased. Nonetheless, death was at times even worshipped; it was now represented with iconography related to love. Death and sex were now closely related as Thanatos became conjoined with Eros. Both functioned as transgressions which ripped the individual out of the rational world and threw them into an equally irrational, unknowable, yet beautiful reality.[14] While these affects certainly stood in contrast with anxiety, they contributed to the emerging view of death as something unordinary, and as something which violently tears the dead person out of the world of the living. Death was now perceived as a remarkable break from the ordinary.

The era of thy death now featured the cultural refusal to accept the death of others. The death of others was no longer greeted with purely ritualized expressions of

[13] Ariès, 36.
[14] Ariès, 57.

mourning and sadness, rather, it was now met with excessive displays of emotion. There emerged a modern cult of tombs and cemeteries. The family often desired to keep their loved one "at home" in a sense, wherein the dead person was buried literally alongside the home, or in a public cemetery where they could be visited.[15] This is what Ariès refers to as a "private" cult, yet it was still in a sense a public one, as Heidegger pointed out. We observe here a new cult of memory, which began with the compulsion to grieve the loss of individual life and then gradually became the dominant technology of mourning in the broader collective.

Yet, something happened then which constituted a change far more substantial than those which marked the transitions between previous epochs. The aforementioned era of forbidden death came into being. As Ariès says, "Death, so omnipresent in the past that it was familiar, would be effaced, would disappear. It would become shameful and forbidden."[16] The individual now sought to avoid, for the sake of society itself, and for those close to the dying person, the "unbearable" emotion brought on the ugliness and presence of death. Life became something that must always be happy, and death as a pillar of sadness was seen to be contrary to this goal. An enormous culture of death denial thus began to take shape. Too much sorrow concerning death inspired repugnance rather than pity. One could only display sorrow at home rather than in public.[17] The spectacle of death became cordoned off to hospitals where the moment of death could be hidden, such

[15] Ariès, 72.
[16] Ariès, 85.
[17] Ariès, 92.

that one could be shielded from witnessing the death of others and thus experience the feelings such spectacles could provoke.

Death is now something unnamable. It became difficult to even speak of. We no longer recognize death in a meaningful sense, and as such there no longer exists a way of contemplating how to feel about or comport ourselves towards it. Ariès states at the conclusion that "neither I nor those who are dear to me are any longer mortal. Technically, we admit that we might die; we take out insurance on our lives to protect our families from poverty. But really, at heart we feel we are non-mortals. And surprise! Our life is not as a result gladdened!"[18]

…

Contrary to Ariès, we all *know* that we will die, yet the demand that we feel as though we are not mortal does not erase anxiety or rob death of its presence, it has merely amplified it. Philosophy, in response, can aid us in processing this knowledge. If anxiety is the prominent affect towards death under modernity, there are many ways that thinkers can respond to it. And often these responses have taken the shape of previous understandings of death, reframed in new terms. Heidegger and Bataille, in particular, turn to medieval and classical death-practices as ways of attempting to displace our anxiety. The past becomes a resource for knowing death differently. By contrast, in Lacan's work, the disinterested affect characteristic of science is cultivated to try and generate futural, entirely new modes of knowing and feeling that are not bound to the historical moods of the past.

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[18] Ariès, 106.

The therapeutic goal of Freud's analysis, the talking cure, was to ease the neurotic symptoms of distress and anxiety in his patients which were brought on by the defense mechanism of repression. What is at stake in any consideration of our psychic awareness of death is not its impossibility, but rather the significance of its contemporary historical absence for the life of the individual. Indeed, Freud's position could itself be interpreted as a representative of the currents of repression that obfuscate the fact of our constitutive mortality in the modern world. As Freud argued, it is only through talking about something that we can process it, come to terms with it, and leave behind distressing affects through the adoption of new ways of emotionally processing our being in the world.

Anxiety is the prominent "modern" affect surrounding death. We live under the specter of an anxious mood concerning death, which must be staved off and hidden from us at all costs, and this repression ultimately diminishes our experience of life. The absence of awareness of death from modern life does not allow us to live or enjoy life to the fullest; it merely indicates a fundamental trauma which haunts the individual incapable of coming to terms with it. However, we rarely peer beyond this anxiety and consider death in other ways. The three thinkers of interest to this thesis are all involved in projects which excavates alternative ways of knowing death, different affects for relating to it. Our anxieties about death are like the surface of a lake, and when we dive below, we find a whole set of other possible ways of knowing it. What lies beneath our modern understanding of death are other repressed affects.

Lacan, Bataille, and Heidegger can all be understood as offering alternatives to our modern anxious denial of death. For Lacan, death itself is an abstraction, which we

cover over with subjective fantasies: images of our bodies falling apart that repeat the essential drama of the mirror stage in reverse. These fantasies function to shore up our idea of ourselves as complete, unified subjects, ones who can only be threatened by the body falling apart. The typical, anxious view of death is thus a neurotic effect of our own attachment to what Lacan calls the "alienating armor" of subjectivity. Death anxiety functions, paradoxically, as a way to restore the security of our body image and remind ourselves that we own our identities.

Bataille frames our death anxieties quite differently, advocating for an erotic affect towards death, in contrast to Lacan's scientific affect. Death relates to a continuity between the body and the world that is outside of language and is closely linked to sexuality. Following Freud, Bataille frames the polymorphous perversity of eroticism as a kind of encounter with the Real of death, one that he approaches through the recurring motif of laughter. Laughter becomes a way of breaking through death anxiety and embracing the experience of continuity. For Bataille, this is closely linked to sovereignty, an individualist metaphysics in which the subject becomes continuous with the world through a hedonistic egoism shrouded in mysticism. While Bataille's affective orientation towards eroticism frames death as something outside of language, I will argue that it is precisely the correspondence he draws between the Freudian materials of perversity and the death experience that makes his account vulnerable to Lacan's critique. Rather than recovering a prelinguistic continuity, Bataille's account of death ultimately reframes the phenomenon within the aesthetic fantasies of the body-image that constitute subjectivism.

Between the scientific and erotic affect lies the meditative, which is found in the work of the late Heidegger. In *Being and Time* and other early works, Heidegger posits

anxiety itself as a *positive* affect to cultivate in the face of death. However, he moves away from this subjectivism in his later work. The singular protagonist of *Being and Time* is displaced by a community of mortals who are collectively sheltered in death. Unlike Bataille, Heidegger's project does not fall prey to the fantasy of subjective rearticulation entailed in the image of the body and its collapse. Rather, Heidegger understands death as the central mystery within a broader relational ontology. Through *releasement*, he escapes the abstract categories of "language" and "unconscious" which constrain Lacan's analysis within a clinical affect detached from worldly experience. Ultimately, Heidegger offers an affective orientation to death that turns away from the anxious fascination of modernity towards a meditative community.

It is important to clarify the terminological meaning of "affect" at this time. As Brian Massumi explains, contemporary discussions of affect usually take place within an impersonal Deleuzian framework, which understands affect as distinct from emotion and as the capacity to affect and be affected.[19] However, this account is not particularly useful for understanding and analyzing these thinkers, at least for our purposes. Each philosophy relies upon distinct views of emotion, mood, and affect which are by no means reducible to this line of thinking. As such, despite that there are parallels and overlaps between these thinkers with more contemporary debates in affect theory, this understanding will largely be overlooked, despite that Deleuze and Guattari will both be occasionally mentioned throughout the different chapters.

[19] Massumi, Brian. "The Autonomy of Affect." *Cultural Critique*, no. 31, 1995, pp. 94.

For example, Lacan's scientific affect distrusts emotional reactions to trauma which take place in the process of analysis, and instead offers a more intellectual and rationalist attention to the true nature of trauma and emotion. Bataille, in contrast, interprets emotions in the context of an affect of eroticism, which often concerns the body. Lastly, late Heidegger frames death and our relation to it in terms of a meditative affect in which there is no clear distinction between the "conscious" and the "unconscious" or the body and the world. I do not intend to conflate these concepts or use them entirely interchangeably; each must be considered on their own terms, but that is not to say that there is not sufficient overlap to allow us to draw comparisons between them. As each thinker argues, affects related to dying meaningfully alter our experience of the world. Our experience of life and our willingness to live can be altered in accordance with our feelings about death. Therefore, certain affects and ways of feeling should be privileged over others and can indeed respond to one another. For this to become possible, each thinker must be approached on their own terms.

Chapter 1: Jacques Lacan, Scientist of Death

The significance of death in Lacan's philosophy is difficult to immediately describe due to a surprising contradiction in his thinking: despite that his work was more concerned with the issue of death than most other figures in the history of psychoanalysis, he almost never spoke of it. We can discern, however, within Lacan's writings and seminars a highly systematized analysis of death as a structural tendency inherent to all the processes and operations of the unconscious. This analysis virtually unfolds without any sort of explicit reference to death, at least within the familiar conceptual terminology which would make it amenable to subjectivist accounts of mortality. Instead, Lacan's critique of the often taken-for-granted notion of "subjectivity" renders any account of death on its own terms as immanently problematic. Ultimately, Lacan's account is one which reframes the truth of death as a property of symbolic *systems*, rather than as something we can describe in any subjective orientation through concepts and symbols.

In part, this reflects a broader proclivity in psychoanalysis towards treating the psychic anticipation of death as essentially secondary in importance to more fundamental structures of the unconscious. For example, the view that the self cannot ever truly "believe" in its death as an actual possibility was offered by Freud not too long after psychoanalysis came into existence as a discipline. This assumption has been iniherited and passed down by analysts over the decades, resulting in a relative absence of core psychoanalytical literature related to death, let alone literature concerned with the intricacies of the emotions and affects associated with it. This has even led contemporary

interpreters of Freud like Liran Razinsky to brand the project of psychoanalysis itself as, in a sense, one which is historically "against" death.[20]

There are of course exceptions to this norm, perhaps most notably Melanie Klein's theory of death anxiety as the deepest, most primary form of anxiety.[21] Nonetheless, Lacan's theory provides us, at least for our purposes, with a more useful account of death as essentially an integral function within the structure of the unconscious. However, it is an account that can only be ascertained through the margins. Unlike philosophers like Bataille or Heidegger, there is no singular work in Lacan's opus that purports to give an account of death. Rather, Lacan apprehends death almost parenthetically; it is a tendency and movement in his thought, rather than a clear principle. As we begin to explore what sets Lacan apart from these other thinkers, we will see why this difference in style is so vital.

Much that defines Lacan's view on death can be traced to his reading of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which can be interpreted as one of the core underlying foundations of his entire intellectual project. Freud's early intimations of a death *instinct* in the text proved to be of remarkable importance for Lacan's theory of the subject. While most analysts post-Freud view the hypothesis of a death instinct as suspect due to its apparently non-scientific character, Lacan reappropriates it as an essential function of language. One of the central hypotheses put forth in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, that

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[20] Razinsky, Liran. *Freud, Psychoanalysis and Death*. Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 15.
[21] Razinsky, *Freud, Psychoanalysis and Death*, pp. 191.

the goal of all life is death, is reconsidered as an observation that the endpoint of all life is *repetition*.

The death drive, rather than representing an innate, literal desire of all organisms to die, is rearticulated as this tendency to engage in repetition even to the point of dying. For Lacan, repetition illustrates the structural tendency of the unconscious towards self-dissipation. Death is repetition and can be glimpsed only temporarily in moments of self-subversion. The death drive appears as the most direct way to grasp "death" in Lacan's theory, but we will see that what it affords us primarily is a theory of language, and a mode of critique for encountering other death related philosophies.

Death in language takes an undefinable shape. And yet, it is still addressed as death, if only obliquely, and if at first glance, through a turn of metaphor. However, we will see that Lacan's remarks on death, which seem to reframe living psychological processes as "death" in a metaphorical sense, are in fact deeper than metaphors. In speaking of death, Lacan gestures to a whole set of exchanges between the symbolic order of language and the imperceptible Real, in which the mystery of the body's experience is situated.

For Lacan, language structures reality at the level of the unconscious, and so our perception of the world and of our bodies is intractably filtered through the "signs" that organize our unconscious. These signs take root differently for differently for different people and establish an architecture of subjective experience in the process of language learning. This insight came from the marriage of Freud's analysis of pathological patient *speech* and Ferdinand de Saussure's analysis of language as an abstract, structural system.

In structuralism, the system of language stands outside of individual subjects, who participate in it through speech acts. Lacan borrows this picture to understand language as a kind of unconscious parasite, one that latches onto the childhood in early development, sinking its hooks into the unconscious and giving the child the tools to participate in the social world, which Lacan terms the "Symbolic" order within his register theory of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary. This entry into social life through language learning is correlated with the Freudian experience of castration. In infancy, the baby is in a boundless unity with its mother figure, from which the outlines of subjects and objects are indiscernible. In the weaning process, however, the child is told "No," that it cannot remain attached to its mother's body and that it must recognize itself as an "I" beyond her. This reframing of classical Freudian concepts in terms of an emerging structural grammar is a line running throughout Lacan's work.

Lacan attends to the drama of language learning and subjective development as a tragedy. Man, for him, is subject to an "original fracturing."[22] What is fractured is the prelinguistic unity with the mother that comes before the grammatical categories of "subject" and "object" that intervene between body and world with symbolic divisions. More radically, this fracturing presents itself in the subject's speech acts, which emerge at once as the enunciations of a felt body and as the cold, abstract semantic statements of a symbolic system incommensurable with that body. It is this kind of "fracture" between the symbolic outside and the repressed unity of the pre-linguistic Real that Lacan says

[22] Lacan, Jacques. "Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis." *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. Translated and edited by Bruce Fink, W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, pp. 100.

results in a situation where: “at every instant [man] constitutes his world by committing suicide.”[23]

Our experience as divided subjects, in this way, is akin to dying every second. Here, Lacan turns our attention to the death drive. The death drive relates to the way language “produces” subjects through processes of repetition. Language both assembles and disassembles the subject; the compulsion to repeat manifest in language has a dual function of constructing the “I” and subverting it from within. It *mutilates* the body and constructs the unconscious as necessarily split from the bodily Real. The images which the infant receives and forms of itself are thus inherently fragmentary. The unconscious is cut off from true knowledge of the self, and all that remains are subjective fantasies which work to reassemble the notion of self via the stringing together of signs and symbols. The world of the subject is thus predicated off of an innate ongoing process of self-annihilation and, in a sense, suicide.

The implication of this view is, in part, that authentic relationships with death are an impossibility. We are alienated from ourselves and we are barred from the world. The type of personalized methods of relating with death which we observe in thinkers like Bataille or the early Heidegger are simply fantasies. They are fictions of subjectivity which pull us away from the *truth* of death. Death cannot be conceived of as the “end of life,” for to think in such terms is to reassert the neutrality of fantasies which inevitably situate a fictitious self in relation to its imagined “end.” Death is thus everywhere and nowhere in Lacan’s work. It is the structural underpinning of analysis despite the absence

[23] Lacan, “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis.”, pp. 101.

of explicit, clear references to it. The cessation of cellular mitosis marking the end of the body's "life" cannot be grasped through analysis without recapitulation to bodily fantasies which attempt to stabilize and suture the fragmented nature of the self. These fantasies are not of our own making. They have been transferred to us from the imagined Big Other through language. The only death that can ever be "real" to us or studied is in the moments of analysis where the subject paradoxically appears through its disappearance.

The affect we can observe permeating the dimensions of Lacan's thought relevant to this sense of "death" is that of a detached scientific observer. As Mari Ruti explains, there is no positive project or program inherent to Lacanian psychoanalysis.[24] There is no normative goal or endpoint other than an intervention and exploration into the idiosyncratic contours of the subject's desire. The point is not to construct a "new" subject, but rather to understand the nature of its desire and through that understanding put pressure on unconscious mental structures such that they become more in touch with and responsive to the subject's tendencies to engage in self-subversion. Moreover, Lacan's dismissal of other attempts to elucidate death philosophically amounts to a septicism characteristic of the enlightenment project.

For Lacan, we should strive to be scientists of language, and in doing so we can become scientists of death. The quasi-rationalism we find in Lacan maintains an analytic diagnostic affect as well as the clinical assumption of the necessity of a "cure" to problematic subjective fantasies related to death. We can equally say that Lacan's

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[24] Ruti, Mari. *Between Levinas and Lacan, Self, Other, Ethics*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2015, pp. 132.

commitment to linguistic structuralism implies the same scientific affects in the context of the broader Symbolic order. This scientific disposition is one which would approach different affects related to death, different ways of knowing death, as in essence units within a larger record of the Symbolic. Lacanian analysis thus operates under the assumption that we should deconstruct the history of our imaginal subjectivizations of death such that we can push for a new futurist conception of death premised upon a scientific deconstruction of its place in our past.

The rest of this chapter will further elucidate the role of death within the structure of the Lacanian subject as well as the affective comportment towards death implied by the scientific disposition of Lacan. It will proceed first by articulating Lacan's structuralist-psychoanalytical theory of the drive, language, and the unconscious, and will combine this explanation with an interpretation of how these theoretical tools are underpinned by an assumption of an underlying "death" or self-negation which provides structure and emergence to the subject. It will then proceed to situate this analytical framework and its understanding of affect in historical terms, offering a critique of and challenge to the sorts of accounts of death this thesis will find in Bataille and Heidegger, a Lacanian affective outlook towards death, as well what this analysis within the type of critical history provided by Ariès.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud articulated the experimental hypothesis of the existence of an instinct towards self-negation, one which he intimated was integral to the fabric of vitalist matter. Freud's thesis developed from observational studies of trauma patients into an arguably metaphysical form of philosophical speculation which went far outside the boundaries of the more "scientific" and empirical methodologies

which provided the foundation for early psychoanalysis. The meaning of the statement that "the goal of all life is death" was not initially reducible to the innate, hidden goal of the mind or psyche, but rather indicated a belief in a literal instinctual movement within organic life to return to an inorganic state of being. Thus, Freud's statement that the goal of all life is death is followed by the perplexing claim that "the inanimate was there before the animate." For the goal of organic striving to be a return to the *inanimate* implied an instinct to return to an "old state of things," a state of being which had been departed from, a return to the inorganic: death.[25] This urge to "return" is expressed in life in the form of repetition. Freud quite literally suggested that the tendency of cells to return to the quiescent state of their cellular walls being less energized implies that this repetition is implicit in the organization of matter.

The compulsion to repeat Freud observed frustrated his former theory of the pleasure principle, along with the clarity of its association with other concepts such as sublimation and the reality principle. The pleasure principle could largely be understood, at least in part, through an "economic" meta-psychological framework. In this original narrative, pleasure and pain exist in relation to any given quantity of "excitation" present in the mind, which responded with a movement towards the reduction of excitation. Freud began to doubt this narrative upon observing the psychological tendencies of trauma victims. Trauma victims, Freud argued, possessed a psychic tendency to repeat a more original state that is less energized, less excited, and less stimulated by the recurrent images of trauma which their psyche was incapable of repressing. The most well-known

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[25] Sigmund, Freud. "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." *The Freud Reader*, Translated and edited by Peter Gay, W. W. Norton & Company, 1989, pp. 613.

of his patients included shell-shocked soldiers from the first world war. However, the far more interesting and insightful clinical example Freud offered was the archetypal scene of a child at play. In this story, Freud observed a moment in the development of language in the scene of his young grandson participating in a game of *disappearance* and *return*.

The child would throw objects into the corner of a room, making them disappear, and expressed his interest and satisfaction in this act with the word "fort" (gone). One of the boy's toys, the yo-yo, would disappear momentarily, only to return when the child reeled in the string tied around it. The child would then enunciate the word: "da" (there). In this way, the boy made the object of his desire disappear, only to joyfully express himself through language upon making the object reappear.[26] Freud's initial assumption was that this game was a manifestation of an underlying Oedipal attachment to the mother, wherein the boy simulated the disappearance of the mother, only to make her reappear in a triumphant moment. In a sense, this was about the reclamation of trauma, wherein the boy could have an active role to play in the distressing scenario rather than a purely passive one.[27] There is a repetition of a trauma such that the return to a calmer state of quietude may also be repeated once again. For Freud, this reflects not an instinct towards the maximization of pleasure, but a subtle and easily overlooked form of masochism. The infant's behavior cannot be explained through pleasure (there) or pain (gone). It goes beyond these categories altogether, and thus it is beyond the pleasure principle. It is a manifestation of a tendency to repeat.

Lacan's "return to Freud" is arguably solely focused on this story of the child in the crib. For Lacan, the event Freud witnessed in this everyday scenario is a prototypical

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[26] Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, pp. 599.
[27] Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, pp. 600.

infant developing the capacity for language. The child at play throws the spindle out of the crib, linguistically marking it as "gone," and in pulling it back redefines it as "there." This is the repetition of a primary state: the infant goes from there, to gone, and then back again. The infant thus learns to speak through the binary repetition of the one and the zero. This illustrates a stage in a child's ascension to the Symbolic order. It also illustrates, for Lacan, that the structuralists are correct about language. Structuralists such as Ferdinand de Saussure argued that language is animated by a "diacritical principle," which organizes signs.[28] In essence, signs have no inherent identity; their identity consists only in their differences from one another. What makes "here" different from "there" is not anything inherent about the words, only the differences between them. All language consists in this architecture of mutual differentiation, which has an essentially binary form, and for the structuralists, reveals itself as trees of nested conceptual binaries which accrete into broader patterns of differentiation. At the root, though, is the same principle of repetitive division. The system develops, ironically, by reinstating a primary binary difference.

The principle of differentiation itself is a principle of repetition. The yo-yo is pulled back into the crib and, in the process of the restoration of this original state, there is a kind of "return." Difference is always a relay calling back to itself. When something becomes "different," it becomes that way only in relation to an original quiescence. Freud said that life was a detour from death, and Lacan can be understood to be saying the same about language. The system of language is a lifeless clockwork of signification, which Lacan likens to a chain, with signifiers as links along it. When a person speaks, they are

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[28] Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Course in General Linguistics*. Originally Published in 1916, Translated by Roy Harris, Open Court, 1986.

not selecting their own words, but rather are submitting to a certain structural organization of the unconscious. We slip along the signs that knit together the signifying chain, not realizing that our speech is a combinatory organized by a principle of repetition. In this sense, Lacan reconstructs language as an inhuman force that reveals the pervasive automatism behind psychic life. Death is encountered through the articulation of a signifying chain which reveals the subject's disappearance from the chain of what it is.

What Freud's grandson, Ernst, learned is that the only meaning of "there" is that it is not "gone" or "not-there." Signifiers are detached from their signified; their meaning subsists only in the network of relational differences that constitute the Symbolic order. The subject emerges through the enunciation of the "I" in language, yet in structural terms, it is merely a semantic abstraction which is grafted upon the body. The claim that the unconscious is structured like a "language" is in essence a statement that the unconscious is something unnatural, something that has been programmed by an alien force which installs itself in the body, almost like a virus which gradually rewrites the RNA of any given life form in its own image.

For a child to enter the Symbolic order entails the creation of a network of repetitive associations in the unconscious that structure its world in a certain light. These associations are introjected into the self, yet they find their grounding in nothing other than the relational connections between them. In this sense, the unconscious is ordered such that it is from the outset alien to the Real, and thus it is radically "out of joint." The subject is thus best understood as a void, and in a qualified sense, as *lacking*. The tripartite structure of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary does not shape the

subject as a substance, but rather fractures, splits, and fragments it. These three registers encircle the absent circle of negativity that is the unconscious. The unconscious emerges as something *discontinuous* in a world of *continuity*.

If, for Bataille, death is a representative of the totality and continuity of existence in the dumb, *base* matter of the noumenal world, then the Lacanian unconscious is something which is wholly alien to this apparent continuity. Similarly, contra Heidegger, death does not reveal the fundamental relationality of our being in the world, but rather reveals from a structural perspective that the unconscious is not of the world. It is something unnatural; the signifier, the word, mutilates the flesh and structures the self around this principle of alienation, rendering the subject something which is always already out of joint with its bodily Real.

This perspective gives new meaning to the Freudian claim that the unconscious is "outside of time" itself. As Zizek says, the "cogito" of the Lacanian unconscious, generated by the gap between subject and object, is akin to the Hegelian night of the world.[29] This is true to such an extent that the gap of the unconscious is essentially *pre-ontological*.[30] It does not lend itself to encapsulation within any ontological framework which would posit it in relationship to some notion of Being. For Lacan, "discontinuity, then, is the essential form in which the unconscious first appears to us as a phenomenon – discontinuity, in which something is manifested as a vacillation."[31]

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[29] Zizek, Slavoj. *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. Verso Books, 1999, pp. 63.
[30] Lacan, Jacques. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (Seminar XI)*, Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, Translated by Alan Sheridan, W. W. Norton & Company, 1998, pp. 29.
[31] Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, pp. 25.

The discontinuity of the unconscious is an effect of repetition and the death drive. They relate to another central phase in the Lacanian narrative: the mirror stage. Lacan said that the death drive is the "mask" of the Symbolic order.[32] The Symbolic, the diacritical mesh of signifiers that structures the unconscious in childhood, is "masked" by the death drive. This mask is structural: it is a surface for projection that stands between us and the Thing. Transference is the process by which the primary structural categories of the unconscious become the framework for interpreting experience. For example, an individual may see a friend die, but their experience of the death is the repetition of the death of a childhood pet that is primary to the understanding of the sign "death."

Masks are surfaces for projection because they are configured for repetition. A mask is the essential form of the transference, which Lacan repeatedly describes in terms of the death drive. In structural terms, intersubjectivity is always experienced as the intercession of a third term. In his analysis of the Oedipus complex, Lacan reframed the parental-sexual dynamic as an abstract mathematical one: the infantile unity with the mother is broken by a third: the weaning process, which says "No, you must begin to formulate desires for yourself." Before weaning, the mother anticipates the desire of the baby, and thereby constructs it. As Lacan says, all desire is the desire of the other. This is not just the other person, for the mother is more radically an (Other), she is experienced by the baby not just as a different person, but as difference itself, as the differentiating fabric that is language (the diacritical principle of structuralism). This is because the mother puts words in the baby's mouth. What the baby experiences before it can speak

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[32] Lacan, Jacques. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis (Seminar VII), 1959-1960*. Translated by Dennis Porter, Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, W. W. Norton & Company, 1997, pp. 55.

Lacan refers to as mere "need." The baby does not know what it wants, only that it wants something. When this need is given shape by the mother, however, when the mother asks: "what do you want?", and then fills in the blank for the baby, the elementary structures of differentiation begin to take root.

However, Lacan argues, it is not enough for the baby to simply learn the meaning of signs. For the baby to understand its role in the family, indeed within the greater architecture of society, it must do more than simply internalize the semantic structure of language. Desire exists, but it is free-floating, or connected only to bodily need. Desire has no "object-cause," nothing to set it in motion as a wish for true recognition from the Other. Indeed, Lacan observed the case of psychosis in which the subject seems to wish for no recognition at all, and for whom words are just things to be played with.[33] Critically, the formation of authentic desire hinges upon the successful separation from the mother: what Freud called the Oedipus complex but what Lacan will describe as "symbolic castration." In this process, the free-floating signifiers of desire are strung together by the introduction of a third term, which splits the subject from the mother, dividing it from its unconscious in the process.

This process Lacan describes as the formation of the paternal function.[34] Before weaning, the baby does not recognize itself as a subject and its mother as another subject. It does not know that it has a name. And, importantly, it has no sense of itself as having a family-name, as belonging to a family in which it has a certain *position*. While it does not

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[33] Fink, Bruce. *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique*. Harvard University Press, 2009, pp. 101.
[34] Lacan, Jacques. "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis." *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. Translated and Edited by Bruce Fink, W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, pp. 249.

have to involve a man at all, the paternal function describes the process by which the patriarchal structure of the family is implanted in the child, stabilizing the structure of desire. Patriarchy does not refer to men, but to a certain idea of familial positioning, in which children are oriented through parents and in which difference is processed through the matrix of sexuality. The paternal function imposes the identity of the subject (the name) as an effect of positioning within a structure of family naming. In this way, Lacan argues, subjects are "integrated" into society, they can competently understand themselves as a subject and avoid psychosis.

And yet, this process is traumatic and the subject copes by forming masks. These masks take the shape of repetition. Like Freud's postwar trauma neurotics, we are all traumatized by the original advent of language, and what masks this trauma is the repetition of an earlier unity, a wish to return to a pre-traumatic state. And yet, it is a repetition that constantly reveals itself as such, constantly its own mechanisms, subverting the construction of the subjective fantasy. The discontinuities of the unconscious, from the simple slip of the tongue to the desire that seems to contradict one's entire being. Psychoanalysis is the science of these discontinuities. The symbolic reveals being as somehow scripted, or as pervaded by uncanny automata. At its limit, Lacanian theory suggests that all experience of the Other is a repetition of that original experience with the Other of language itself, and that the illusion of subjectivity is not just a trap, but an inescapable process of ongoing suicide. Lacan puts this eloquently towards the end of "The Function and Field

of Speech in Psychoanalysis," stating that:

> When we want to get at what was before the serial games of speech in the subject and what is prior to the birth of symbols, we find it in death, from which his existence derives all the meaning it has. Indeed, he asserts himself with respect to others as a death wish; if he identifies with the other, it is by freezing him in the metamorphosis of his essential image, and no being is ever conjured up by him except among the shadows of death.[35]

One of our foremost masks for concealing the trauma of language is the body image itself. Lacan associates the body-image and the ego with what he calls the order of the Imaginary. These things are imaginary in the precise sense that the fiction of the self is a suture used to repress the trauma that speaking being is a marionette of language, a process no more visible for Lacan than in the process of subjectivization, where we define ourselves through desires that we seem either perpetually unable to attain, or perpetually unsatisfied by. All desire gives way to new desires as the differentiating field of language proliferates. This indeed, is Lacan's explanation of Freudian polymorphous perversity, which emerges in the aftermath of the formation of the body-image. In infancy, the body is autoerotic, and Freud observed that infantile masturbation is disconnected from any meaningful understanding of the body. Infantile eroticism is the root of what Lacan called *jouissance*: an intensity that is beyond the pleasure principle, but that animates the field of desire with an ambivalent mixture of pleasure and pain.

With the separation from the mother the infant is introduced to its body and to the symbolic meaning of its sex organs. Certain things, the baby is shown, are to be touched at certain times. In this way, the body is written over with language, and the erogenous zones of puberty are pre-invested with the significatory meaning that will make them the

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[35] Lacan, "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," pp. 263.

locus of desire. At the same time, Freud saw that perversion always supersedes and overcomes the limits of the erogenous zone. Perversions are always becoming entangled with new signifiers, and the "polymorphous" nature of perversity emerges from the way that jouissance (the repressed infantile real of the body) electrifies the field of the symbolic. The body image (the imaginary) and its fundamental sexual signifiers are unstable. The unconscious, as Deleuze and Guattari observed, is like an unstoppable factory for desire.[36]

Lacan's principal metaphor for subjectivity takes the form of a m ask. In his essay on the mirror stage, Lacan describes subjectivity as an "alienating armor."[37] Armor is a protective mask, and this is exactly what the body image affords the subject. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari posit a parallel dynamic wherein the Freudian discovered unleashed a flood of difference and immediately contained that difference within the organizing structure of the Oedipus complex. In the Lacanian theory, this play of difference and containment can be observed in development itself. The intensity of jouissance, which is incommensurate with language and thus threatens to outstrip the diacritical meaning of the sign, drives the flow of desire through the Symbolic, while in parallel, the force which strings together the symbolic order (the Name-of-the-Father) functions to contain and constrain the free movement of desire within the confines of socially determined signification.

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[36] Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Penguin Books, 2009, pp. 3.
[37] Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function." *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. Translated and Edited by Bruce Fink, W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, pp. 89.

Subjectivity is the alienating armor that enables us to maintain a consistent fantasy of "self" and mask the symbolic automatisms that define us. When the baby is still learning to talk, the mother takes it in front of the mirror and says, "look that's you." All desire, even the desire to recognize oneself, is the desire of the Other, of language, and repetition. Subjectivity is alienating in the sense that, even as it armors us, it strips us of access to the mechanisms that define us, masking them with the illusion of a continuous, unified self: our reflection in the mirror. This is because its form is death itself, which is to say, repetition.

Lacan argues that at an early stage in development, the baby's ability to understand the word "I" as a reference to a self with body, hinges upon an encounter with its reflection. In early life, the baby does not understand itself as having a body. Its limbs are no different from the environment, and rather than feeling events with meaning, the baby simply experiences the world as a storm of ongoing feeling, pleasure, and pain (jouissance). It is only when the baby is brought to the mirror and asked to recognize itself that these limbs are drawn together into a whole. The body is more than the sum of its parts. It bundles up what were once sense-impressions into the unity of an image attached to the sign "I." While the infantile world was once constantly collapsing, the world of early childhood is stabilized by the object permanence of the body image.

If repetition is the mask of the symbolic, the emergence of body images is the function of the Imaginary. While the death drive masks the symbolic, covering over its automatism with the repetition of an earlier, quiescent state, the Imaginary masks the death drive itself, conferring the illusion of an ongoing unity of subject. In the formation of its body-image, the baby learns to regard itself not only as a subject, but as a living

subject, whose body is in a particular *state*. The emergent body, which overdetermines the signifiers that compose it, becoming a metonymy for faith in language itself (the I) to confer a sense of unity to life, is at the root of Lacan's intervention into psychology. The mirror stage presents a problematical unity that functions as a fantasy of the undivided subject, concealing the combinatory processes beneath. The Symbolic is masked by the death drive, which is itself masked by the Imaginary.

This occurs no more clearly than in the way we imagine death. We imagine that we must take ownership of our death, that we must live our lives that in some way "prepares" us for the death that is "ours," and that our death will define us or otherwise mark our day of judgment. We imagine that these revelations should cause us to change how we "relate" to our death, to adopt some new way of thinking or living. Death, in the conventional way philosophy imagines it, is supposed to motivate us to change our respective lives. In imagining death, we preoccupy ourselves with owning it, with taking sovereignty over it or authentically relating to it. Yet, death is not ours. There is nothing special about death beyond its difference from other signs, and in this sense, death is but a decoy for other signs. Indeed, pondering death seems always to lead back towards pondering life, to instigate some new set of desires, to cause us to rethink our "self." In the Imaginary, death itself becomes a mirror, reflecting back the structure of desire of the living subject. There is no fear of death that is not of the Symbolic.

It is important here to consider the role of the body-image. The corollary to the subject of the mirror stage, whose body is composed from the dismembered images of flesh and limbs into a living whole, is the fantasy of death. As Ariès shows, cultures of death have historically emphasized the image of the body collapsing, its decay into a

skeleton, or in so many religious traditions, the saintly architecture of its mutilation. Even now, as death is shrouded from view, something we are horrified by, our culture and media still delight in images of bodily collapse, in horror films for example. Slavoj Zizek has made a living for decades by pointing this out. The death fantasy is like a film of the mirror stage running in reverse. Even though it is going the other direction, its structure is still the same. It repeats the essential structure of subjectivization, and the effect of death fantasies, whether they come from philosophers or not, is only to reinforce our investment in a subject that is not divided, that is not simply ruled by the architecture of its symbolic unconscious.

Lastly, what then is the fate of the Real? It is first distinguished on the basis that it has very little to do with the field of the pleasure principle. The economy of the Real admits something new, namely, the "impossible."[38] We are still in contact with the Real, even if we don't consciously experience it. The death drive is in part a repetition compulsion, a constant desire, to break through the pleasure principle and to *touch* the lost Thing whose traces manifest in our experience of the Real. Much like how Freud believed that the goal of the organic is to return to the original state of the inorganic, Lacan argues that the endpoint of the drive is the genuine reunification of the three registers of the unconscious, and thus the effacement of the unconscious itself. It is therefore a death drive.

In *Seminar VII*, Lacan introduces the stolen Heideggerian terminology of *Das Ding*, one of two German phrase denoting "things," namely *the* Thing. This analysis might seem to be somewhat of a deviation from the general narrative of the drive we've

[38] Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, pp. 167.

discussed, and this is a result of the cryptic nature of Lacan's remarks regarding it. Das Ding is the "beyond-of-the-signified." It is the dumb reality which in the past had only been grasped clearly in the philosophy of Kant. The function of this "beyond" is that it holds the subject in a relation of distance from itself, while engendering within the subject an intense desire for its reclamation.[39] It is, at the level of the drive, in a sense synonymous with the lost wholeness of the union between infant and mother, self and world which was lost via the introduction of the Third Term. The significance of the Thing is in part that it is an imaginary object; there never was any wholeness to begin with. For the Thing to ever exist in a literal sense would mean the end of the self. Yet, it is only in the imagination of this perceived loss, a loss so significant that it is *originary* in nature, that the drive can finds its early origins. The Thing, or rather its loss, as Todd McGowan describes it, engenders a form of death that occurs within life rather than at the end of it.[40] It's significance for the drive is difficult to overstate. As Lacan described in *Seminar VII*, "I was once alive. But when the commandment appeared, the Thing flared up, returned once again, I met my death. And for me, the commandment that was supposed to lead to life turned out to lead to death, for the Thing found a way and thanks to the commandment seduced me; through it, I came to desire death."[41]

Das Ding is the ultimate lost object. The unconscious, in desiring and producing differentiation through language and repetition, dances in an endless vacillation around the void the Thing left behind. The drive is the constant motor of the subject to go beyond

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[39] Lacan, Jacques. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis (Seminar VII), 1959-1960*. Translated by Dennis Porter, Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, W. W. Norton & Company, 1997, pp. 55.
[40] McGowan, Todd. *Enjoying What We Don't Have: The Political Project of Psychoanalysis*. University of Nebraska Press, 2013, pp. 35.
[41] Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis (Seminar VII), 1959-1960,* pp. 83.

language and touch the Thing, and in expressing itself, it goes beyond pleasure or pain. The distinctions between things set forth by language begin to break down in the experience of *jouissance* (enjoyment). The quest for jouissance, which compels the subject to ceaselessly surpass language and touch up against the excess which structurally eludes symbolization, is the path towards death. Since all drives are striving to achieve jouissance through touching up against the Real, every drive is a death drive, ad every drive is defined by a compulsion to break through the pleasure principle.

In the next chapter, I will consider the work of Georges Bataille, who, like Lacan focuses on the polymorphous eroticism studied by Freud as a subject of analysis. Unlike Lacan though, Bataille makes death central to his analysis, arguing that the flood of erotic difference revealed by Freud is not reducible to any system of scientific understanding. Instead, Bataille relates death to eroticism, arguing that a deeper understanding of death can be pursued through the erotic experience of laughter in the face of death. In what follows, I will examine how this theory holds up in light of the Lacanian ideas about desire, jouissance, and the body-image that I have explored so far. Ultimately, I will argue that Bataille is compromised by some of Lacan's findings, but that the scientific affect that runs throughout Lacan's work is equally called into question.

Lacan's affective orientation towards death is preeminently scientific in the sense that it does not attribute any intrinsic or transcendental *meaning* to death. It is characterized by skepticism, an intuition that any attempt to approach death directly is simply a decoy for a more complex and specific field of nested signifiers. While the thinkers that will follow this analysis often try to excavate historical ontologies of death to reframe it in the present, Lacan is different. His account looks past the ways of

thinking implied in Ariès' history of death, and as I've shown, would regard it as more of a history of subjective fantasies about death. Against this, he searches for a radical, post-conceptual and formalistic understanding of death grounded in the scientific synthesis of psychoanalysis and structural linguistics.

Chapter 2: Georges Bataille, Eroticism & Laughter

There are a number of similarities and points of agreement between Lacan's quasi-rationalist, systematic account of the barred subject and the depiction of the human conditioned offered by Georges Bataille. In many respects, the former account can be viewed as somewhat of a response to the latter; both thinkers were contemporaries, ran in the same intellectual circles, and indeed were friends. If Lacan was correct in describing his project as a "return" to Freud, then one could be forgiven for interpreting Bataille's writings as a transitional middle term wherein Freud's study of the psyche departs into a descent into mysticism and irrationalism, only to reemerge with Lacan's system on the other end. Both Lacan and Bataille conceive of the human being in terms of a profound ontological insufficiency; the notion of a lack in language responsible for the original fracturing of man is a dimension of each of their respective works, yet they profoundly disagree on its significance and meaning.

Bataille's main point of departure from Lacan is the championing of the affect of eroticism as defined by an openness to, fascination with, and pursuit of death. Erotic affects suffuse all of Bataille's writings with an appreciation for death; each of his texts are laden with heterogenous and contradictory feelings of joy and anguish, fascination and horror. The meaning of eroticism cannot be reduced to sexuality in any simplistic or superficial sense, but rather has to do with the breakdown of stable distinctions between self and other, subject and object, life and death. There is an immanent continuity to all base matter which subverts and lacerates the system of language which Lacan argues renders us permanently discontinuous. This continuity is death.

Continuity unites sexuality and death. Like Lacan, Bataille describes a world where language breaks up being into the regimented, discontinuous binary of subject and object. However, he also understands this structure of control as something that we can transgress, recovering a more unified relation with the world. For Bataille, contra Lacan, death opens the subject up to the world in a movement of becoming which liberates seemingly isolated beings from their solitude, freeing the human from the "prison" house of language and allowing it to be one with all beings. In a sense then, death simultaneously makes you nothing, while also opening the self upon the totality of existence in a triumph of sovereignty.

In *Erotism*, Bataille states that: "We are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity. We find the state of affairs that binds us to our random and ephemeral individuality hard to bear. Along with our tormenting desire that this evanescent thing should last, there stands our obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is."[42] As discontinuous beings, we fear the loss of our autonomy, yet we also crave a return to our original and primordial unity and oneness with all things. Bataille is in agreement here with Freud and Lacan that we share a tendency and *desire* to "return" to a state of continuous being. Humans are "beings" that emerge as temporarily discontinuous in a world of continuity. Each being is distinct from all others: our respective births, deaths, and the events of our lives are of interest to others, but we ultimately are born alone and die alone. This view is in part a reflection of the harsh conditions which

[42]Bataille, Georges. *Erotism: Death & Sensuality*. Translated by Mary Dalwood, City Lights Books, 1986, pp. 11.

defined Bataille's life.[43] Solitude and anguish are the truth of Bataille's life, and according to him, we are not "thrown" into the world in the same way which Heidegger would have it. Rather, we are abandoned to the world.

In *Inner Experience*, Bataille describes the experience of being an individual, *ipse*, as that of being a wanderer in a labyrinth. The human is a being that is lost in the world and is tossed about in the world. We have an innate desire to be "everything" and master the labyrinth by standing about it; we try to reach the summit of the world as though it were a pyramid. We struggle to submit the world to our autonomy, and in doing so, we preserve the illusion of our solitude as necessarily permanent and as *inescapable*. Solitude, in which we attempt to seek refuge, is simply a new illusion, one which produces *anguish* precisely in our flight from our base insufficiency and inability to be stable, whole compositions who possess a fixed Being.[44]

Yet, death puts our continuity back into play, constituting an abyss and gulf which connects, hypnotizes, intoxicates, and dizzies us, and into which we are constantly slipping. Humans are never complete, because nothing ever can be. There is only an identity for either a subject or object insofar as that identity is incompleteness, and that the truth of humanness is that we are indefinable impossibilities that cannot escape limits but can also never fully remain inside them either. There is no small or large to anything, the tiniest particle and fragment of reality is not any smaller than the whole, imperfection and incompleteness is the precondition for wholeness. We are each linked to everything

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[43] Bataille, Georges. *Guilty*. Translated by Stuart Kendall, SUNY Press, 2011, pp. 21.

[44] Bataille, Georges. *Inner Experience*. Translated by Stuart Kendall, SUNY Press, 2014, pp. 88-89.

else via death. Nick Land, during his time as a radical leftist mixing the paradoxical philosophies of both Deleuze and Bataille, describes this concept of death as a motor of pure exteriority which life can never separate itself from. Life is an exploration of death that is constantly being swept along into the currents of a formless oceanic abyss.[45]

As Bataille says, "Each person is a stranger to the universe, belonging to objects, to meals, newspapers – that enclose him in his *particularity* – leaving him ignorant of all else. What links existence to everything is *death*: whoever looks at death ceases belonging to a room, gives himself to the free play of heaven […] I have seen this unintelligibility face to face."[46] Living in the labyrinth does not endow one with Being. Being is found *nowhere*. Eroticism seems to lead to death; in the context of sexuality, it represents the dissolution of beings into one another, which is ultimately the fate of all *ipses* in death. As such, death is the community of all beings. We are all subjects of the empire of death.

For Bataille, the world of *things* imparts an *unreal* character to death. The world of things depends upon the illusion of transcendence which posits that things are maintained with a foundation by *duration*, when in fact nothing is ontologically separate from anything else; the only conceivable way of stabilizing the world is by presupposing an illusory understanding of "future" time which is undone and frustrated by death. The "real" order of the world which attempts to maintain a fixed binary of subject and opposition rejects the affirmation of *intimate* life signified by death, whose "measureless

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[45] Land, Nick. *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism*. Routledge, 1992, pp. 181.
[46] Bataille, *Guilty*, pp. 12.

violence is a danger to the stability of things, an affirmation that is revealed fully only in death."[47]

According to Bataille, the modern world is organized around a repression of the knowledge and *experience* of death through the subjugation of life, the body, and thought to the profane world of utility and rationality. There is a cultural history of death provided in his work which argues that the type of portrait of the discontinuous individual offered by Lacan is a contingent one which reflects an intentional forgetting and erasure of mystical and embodied encounters with death. In this way, Bataille opens up some of the historical memories traced by Ariès and argues for excavating the notion of death implicit within them. Civilization is premised upon and depends upon the use of calculation to assure the continued existence of life that is rooted in an intense fear of the horror of death.[48]

This is carried out via work, whose emergence implies a very early foundation for rationality, in that the composition and creation of tools designed to serve specific functions constituted more complex attempts to manipulate matter through calculation. The idea that humans and society should work towards a specific goal-oriented end is what further distanced humanity from animality. This was concurrent with a quite literal "rise." Neanderthals began to stand upright, and the forms of artistic play they used embodied in cave paintings like those at Lascaux changed to reflect this fact.[49] This

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[47] Bataille, Georges. *Theory of Religion*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Zone Books, 1989, pp. 46.
[48] Bataille, Georges. *The Tears of Eros*. Translated by Peter Connor, City Light Books, 1989, pp. 23.
[49] Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, pp. 46.

further "rise" led to an even greater emphasis being placed on death and the dead by human culture. Taboos were formed and restrictions imposed on human action consistent with an underlying extraordinary fear of death. For example, erotic pleasure and activity became limited to a much narrower emphasis on sexual procreation.

The significance of taboo and prohibition during this period is perhaps represented best represented in the treatment of corpses and the coming into existence of complex burial rites. The horror of the corpse as a sign of human putrefaction and physical decomposition was not only a symbol of the contagiousness of violence but a form of violence in of itself. Death did not only hurt a community by robbing it of a member or reducing the capacity for conducting work.

Death also left behind a "tormenting object" that stood as a symbol for an inescapable violence that destroys not just one human but all of humanity in the end.[50] The corpse unleashed a contagious horror that which exposed, even temporarily, the arbitrary and provisional nature of all limits via the irruption of the sacred into the profane. Corpses threatened a generalized collapse of the structures of meaning and social law that make up the profane world: if life can disappear by randomly and by chance, then what is the meaning of anything?

We can discern in Bataille's work an early intimation of the concept of abjection and the affects it inspires, something taken up to a wonderful extent decades later by Kristeva. The encounter with the abject, in this case the corpse, is one which provokes nauseating disgust and terror brought about by a blurring of the lines between subject and

[50] Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, pp. 44.

object, causing the appearance of absolute otherness.[51] The death manifest in the corpse takes the form of putrid decomposition, the spillage of fetid bodily fluids, and the physical conveyance of the generalized fragility of human bodies and identities. This engenders a drive to expel the corpse from community at all costs. The move to begin burying corpses was less so about keeping the body safe after death than it was for the community itself to be protected from its presence and contagion.

Bataille observed that there was at times a sense that the dead being buried were "angry" at or perhaps jealous of the humans who were still living, and as such mourning rites emerged in part to placate and appease these spirits rather than to help manage the grief and sorrow of the survivors. In some ways, the corpse was an almost "supernatural" peril which came from beyond the profane world and revealed the continuity or intimacy of all life in death. In contrast, eroticism refuses these attempts to expel the sacred, continuity, and death motivated by affects like horror, anxiety and anguish.

To provide some extra background on the relation between our authors, Bataille argued that Heidegger's philosophy of death is the philosophy of *fascism*. Bataille, who likely only read the very earliest of Heidegger's writings, argued that the philosophy of project in these early writings is complicit with a covert will to master death which dresses itself in the terminology of *authenticity* and *anxiety*. The outcome of Heidegger's early philosophy of project amounts, for Bataille, to an enclosure of life within a misdirected, illusory quest for authentic ways of living which paper over the fundamental pain and anguish of Being: death. This is a false promise of apparently puerile

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[51] Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon Roudiez, Columbia University Press, 1982, pp. 2.

individuality which encloses the human within homogenizing intellectual categories such as *temporality* and *being-towards-death* that he claims replicate the will to mastery which Heidegger claims to criticize.[52]

The notion of anxiety as a "positive" affect in the face of the temporal possibilities opened by death and the "Nothing" is ultimately a nostalgic fantasy for Bataille which maintains the self-sufficiency of the subject, and therefore its desire to dominate and "project" itself upon the world. It suppresses the truth that living is just a single point in an oceanic reprieve that is death, that living is just a manner of dying. The commitment to project in the face of death mirrors the commitment to work and the doomed quest of the wanderer in the labyrinth attempting to rise to the summit. It is only a half-measure towards the re-enchantment of the world, and this seems to be why Bataille calls it a philosophy of fascism. As we shall see, this is an extraordinarily facile reading of Heidegger which will be completely invalidated by the next chapter centering on a reading of the late Heidegger.

In contrast to all of these examples, Bataille offers a multitude of different *heterodox* emotional manifestations of erotic affect throughout his writings, such as the fusion of terms like anguish and horror with joy, or tears with laughter. While interpreters of Bataille like Stuart Kendall caution against conceptualizing Bataille as a pure thinker of laughter,[53] we can say that a certain type of embodied laughter (inextricable from thinking) is paradigmatic for Bataille's philosophy. For Bataille, laughter entails a bodily

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[52] Bataille, Georges. "Critique of Heidegger." Translated by Stefanos Geroulanos, *October*, Vol. 117 (Summer 2006), pp. 27.
[53] Kendall, Stuart. *Georges Bataille (Critical Lives)*. Reaktion Books, 2007.

manifestation of eroticism, where the absurdity of finitude and the insufficiency of all beings is embraced in tragic comic affirmation. Laughing at the world liberates one from the shackles of life.

Laughter suspends closed logics of discontinuity, both at the level of speech and language, but also at the level of the bodily Real. It involves the suspension and passage from self-seriousness towards a willingness to dissolve into an ecstasy of communication with that which is radically Other to the self and which threatens its stability as a supposed substance. Laughter is erotic in the sense that it transports us out of the rigid structure of linguistic differentiation, where the purpose of sound is communicating meaningful intent, drawing us into an embodied relation where we can no longer clearly separate ourselves from the world. Bataille concludes his analysis of the labyrinth which an invocation of this laughter:

> Laughter intuits the truth that the laceration of the summit lays bare: that our will to arrest being is cursed. Laughter slips on the surface the length of slight depressions: laceration opens the abyss. Abyss and depressions are an equal void: the inanity of the being that we are.[54]

Bataille continues:

> Man is no longer like the beast, a plaything of nothingness, but nothingness is itself his plaything – he ruins himself in it, but lights the darkness with this *laughter*, which he reaches only intoxicated by the very void that kills him.[55]

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[54] Bataille, *Inner Experience*, pp. 93.
[55] Bataille, *Inner Experience*, pp. 94.

Bataille philosophy is a philosophy of laughter in that it calls for a liberation from the shackles of independence and solitude in favor of affirming the not only inevitable but ongoing dissolution of the self into the depersonalized totality of death. This occurs at the level of the body and subverts any pretense of there being a self-contained cogito which has access to a terrain of transcendence through rational knowledge. Thus, Bataille's "project" entails a tragic comic affirmation of eroticism which laughs at death, not in spite of it, but rather through it. His position is thus the dual underside of the Lacanian scientific system in its championing of the absurd, bodily experience, and the mystical. Death as the ontological tendency of the subject towards self-negation is not what imprisons us, but rather what frees us and sets us loose upon the unspeakable reality of the "impossible" that is the pure continuity of beings. The experience of erotic laughter thus attains a fusion of subject and object, wherein the subject enters into nonknowledge, and becomes an object of the unknown.[56] This is a return to an experience that is not the automatic, repetitive quality of language conceived of by Lacan, but is rather a step outside of the social order and the paternal function Lacan theorized.

In the *Thirst for Annihilation*, Nick Land commented that laughter is in some ways a rewriting of the Freudian theory of mourning. Throughout his writings, Bataille speaks of laughter in a manner which is synonymous with excrement, waste, and filth. Here, laughter is an affirmation of erotic, intimate life, wherein in a sort of mania (rather than melancholia), the individual laughs as an expression of the excess of life communicated through the universe of death. In this way, much like how Freud initially theorized that Ernst was driven by a repetition compulsion to take "ownership" of his

[56] Bataille, *Inner Experience*, pp. 16.

trauma, laughter seizes sovereignty over death and dispossession, and manically affirms the perverse absurdity of existence. Land argues that:

> His texts obsessively reiterate that the decomposed body is excremental, and that the only sufficient response to death is laughter. […] "Rire" (Laughter) is, in part, a contribution to the theory of mourning. Laughter is a communion with the dead, since death is not the object of laughter: it is death itself that finds a voice when we laugh. Laughter is that which is lost to discourse, the hemorrhaging of pragmatics into excitation and filth.[57]

For Bataille, this embodied experience of laughter provides the gateway to accessing a twisted notion of individual *sovereignty* achievable through erotic continuity, perverse experience, and unification with the totality of all existence in death. This philosophy is what Bataille refers to as *non-knowledge*.[58] It entails a tragic comic, almost manic affirmation of life through death in the vein of Bataille's interpretation of Nietzsche. The tragedy of death, in a moment of slippage through laughter, becomes an encounter with a moment of comic joy. Something "unexpected" is produced which seems to be in contradiction with the knowledge that we already have. Laughter represents the destruction of fixed notions of the world, notions which separate being into profane objects and knowing subject, by revealing their own insufficiency in extending themselves into unknown realms.

This is in effect the only real way of killing God in any complete way. Rather than placing Christ on the crucifix, all that is required is to see the world in its glorious incompletion. The breakdown of subject and object is *experienced* through laughter and

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[57] Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, pp. vii.
[58] Bataille, Georges. *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*. Translated by Michelle Kendall & Stuart Kendall, University of Minnesota Press, 2004, pp. 133.

its philosophical counterpart of non-knowledge, which expose the true character of the world as an indefinable, incomprehensible, sacred, and "impossible" beyond. Death, rather than a current which can be managed, reveals itself as a river jumping its banks, completely annihilating what we thought we knew about truth and the pretense that we should take our lives "seriously" on the basis of truth. The world is death. Living is a dice throw without an afterthought. The universe is free for Bataille: it does not have anything to do. To ignore and forget this point, as Hegel and Kojève did, is to forget chance and laughter.

Signifiers, Bataille argues, are *felt* before they are known, and the materiality of language rather than the symbolic organization of desire is what characterizes the art of eroticism. This is because the body is sovereign in erotic experience. When one laughs in the face of death, one embraces death, rushing erotically towards it. In *Guilty*, Bataille goes so far as to ask the question: is it possible to laugh to death?[59] In this embrace of self-annihilation, one asserts a kind of mastery over language that represents the body itself, rising as sovereign against the soul. Liran Razinsky, contrasting the eroticism of Bataille with the scientism of Freud, puts this succinctly in the statement that while Freud doubted the capacity of the self to believe in death, for Bataille, death can be violently *imprinted* on our minds through experience. This is achievable through laughter, a kind of violent activity of its own.[60]

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[59] Bataille, *Guilty*, pp.101.
[60] Razinsky, Liran. "How to Look Death in the Eyes: Freud and Bataille." *SubStance*, Vol. 38, No. 2, Issue 119: Close Reading (2009), pp. 63.

In the context of death, and the "absence of the living," this refers to the sudden destruction of the universe as we have previously known it.[61] Bataille pursues laughter in an attempt to overcome a sense of futility and resignation that may initially arise from the awareness of the inevitable slide from life into death. To partake in laughter is to experience a sovereign moment that opens the depths of the world in a pure affirmation of incompleteness.[62] In other words, laughter inspires and is joy, laughter is life. Laughter may seem initially pointless, yet to comic thought, laughter leaves us with a feeling and triumph which celebrates a marriage of power and loss. Power is a feeling arising from a perceived success against nature, against continuous being, which inevitably causes structures of power to slip into incompleteness, an incompleteness signified by laughter. Ecstasy and joy are freed and made immanent in the event of laughter, which opens up not only the laughing person but those who surround them infinitely. Laughter is a state of rupture, of "letting things go" in the face of death. It rejoices in what puts our lives in danger.

This is a uniquely philosophical celebration of the body that is part and parcel with the carnivalesque familiarity and kinship with death that Ariès located in the medieval period. Death underlies the field of the Symbolic, along with its respective histories, and death can also animate these terrains via sovereign moments of ecstatic bodily jouissance. While in Lacan, death was a formal process that could not itself be symbolized, Bataille argues that death is a transcendental experience. Against Bataille's view, we might follow Lacan and suggest that Bataille's philosophy of eroticism

[61] Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, pp. 145.
[62] Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, pp. 90.

represents primarily a reflection of the structure of desire of the subject itself. For example, in Bataille's erotic fiction, puns and metaphors are deployed which reduce parts of the body, such as the circular eyeball, to a series of metaphorical exchanges with other round objects, such as eggs. This is an interesting example for visualizing the Lacanian theory of desire, in which signifiers slip along a chain of systematic differentiation and become new signifiers in accordance with a logic of unconscious figuration that operates according to principles such as metaphors.

Bataille may agree that the human is shaped by an ontological condition of insufficiency, and that this is in large part a consequence of the incompleteness and lack of language which Lacan inherited and rearticulated. As fragmented beings, we possess meaning in terms of our relation to other fragments. In the event that we did not possess this relationality, we would simply be degraded, individualized particles cut off from the world. However, this agreement is negotiated in different ways. For Lacan, we must destroy the illusion of unity itself, acknowledging that subjectivity is divided and constantly implicated in its subversion. For Bataille, on the other hand, the body image becomes a foil for fantasies about death and sex. At its surface level, this narrative of transgression through sovereignty appears to escape the critique of egoistic subjectivism leveled by Lacan, but it ultimately fails to disentangle itself from the centrality of the body image to the construction of subjectivity, which Lacan lays out in his work on the mirror stage.

Ultimately, Bataille fails to provide a compelling critique of the Lacanian theory of death. While, at first glance, he posits an existential anthropology in which the subject and its unified body are dethroned by the deterritorialization of that body into its erotic

materials, he ultimately evinces the same dualism charted in the last chapter in its concluding analysis of *Anti-Oedipus*. To review, Deleuze and Guattari argued that there were two consequences to the Freudian discovery. On the one hand, Freud released a flood of polymorphous perversion into discourse. Suddenly, individuals could be known in terms of their proximity to a sexual norm of liberal society, and the figure of "neurosis" emerged to contain and classify this field of difference.

The first half of the Deleuzian-Guattarian problematic is visible in Bataille's work, in which sexuality is free-floating, and the jouissance of the body becomes the guideway for a mystical experience. In contrast, Lacan's structuralist interpretation of desire represents the other half, in which jouissance is not a kind of redemptive return, but the nostalgic trace of an infantile eroticism that can never be recovered. Jouissance circulates in the Symbolic order, animating the field of desire, and we can see this process at work in Bataille's own writing. In a sense, Bataille represents a complete portrait of a free-associating analysand on the couch. His writing is inflected with the same associative style as Freudian case histories, and his attention to the way that everyday words encode occulted, sexual meanings is reminiscent of the interrogation of tongue slips that Freud used as the foundation of psychoanalysis.

Bataille positions himself as the analysand who's intense jouissance outstrips the clinical capacities of his analyst. Knowledge, he argues, is inherently incomplete, and the attempt to know the patient during analysis is an attempt to strip joy out of his speech. However, Lacanian theory points out that this is simply a reaction-formation, suggesting that Bataille's literary work is little more than a portrait of a certain structural organization of desire, a set of signs idiosyncratically oriented by a man's own life

history and then mistaken as the keys to mystical truth. In some respects, Bataille is simply a disturbed individual rambling about whatever comes to his mind about death and sex. He is unable to dethrone the Lacanian view of the sovereignty of language through his claims about the sovereignty of the body.

In his book, *The Culture of Death*, Benjamin Noys makes an interesting, similar point (albeit without the use of psychoanalysis) about how Bataille ultimately destroys the meaning of death through this sort of practice. By reducing death to the sovereign body and its experience of free-floating unconscious representational associations with sex, waste, and laughter, Bataille unintentionally defangs the sovereignty *of death*.[63] In its attempt to break through to the Real, in arguably a "passion" for the Real, Bataille submits death to the mere regurgitation of the subjective fantasies which we see Lacan critiquing. Death becomes nothing more than a predictable, pseud-Gothic aesthetic interspersed with disturbing pornographic images and manic philosophical laughter.

We can see this quite clearly in a text Bataille wrote during the time of his participation in the secretive organization of the Acéphale: "The Practice of Joy Before Death." Bataille initially begins here with writing reminiscent of Nietzsche, with somewhat of a detour into a reference to "fever" and "agony" as an experience of the body, until he concludes with a plethora of bizarre associations between death, war, ejaculation in sex, and the earth being projected in space as though it were a woman's head caught in flames:

I AM joy before death.

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[63] Noys, Benjamin. *The Culture of Death*. Berg Publishers, 2005, pp. 115.

Joy before death carries me.

Joy before death hurls me down.

Joy before death annihilates me.

I remain in this annihilation and, from there, I picture nature as a play of forces expressed in multiplied and incessant agony.

I slowly lose myself in unintelligible and bottomless space.

I reach the depths of worlds.

I am devoured by death.

I am devoured by fever.

I am absorbed in somber space.

I am annihilated in joy before death.[64]

[…]

I MYSELF AM WAR.

I imagine human movement and excitation, whose possibilities are limitless: this movement and excitation can only be appeased by war.

I imagine the gift of an infinite suffering, of blood and open bodies, in the image of an ejaculation cutting down the one it jolts and abandoning him to an exhaustion charged with nausea.

I imagine the earth projected in space, like a woman screaming, her head in flames.[65]

[…]

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[64] Bataille, Georges. "The Practice of Joy Before Death." *Visions of Excess, Selected Writings*, *1927-1939*. Translated by Allan Stoekl, University of Minneapolis Press, 1985, pp. 237.
[65] Bataille, "The Practice of Joy Before Death.", pp. 239.

> I can only perceive a succession of cruel splendors whose very movement requires that I die: this death is only the exploding consumption of all that was, the joy of existence of all that comes into the world; even my own life demands that everything that exists, everywhere, ceaselessly give itself and be annihilated.
>
> I imagine myself covered with blood, broken but transfigured and in agreement with the world, both as prey and as a jaw of TIME, which ceaselessly kills and is ceaselessly killed.
>
> There are explosives everywhere that perhaps will soon blind me. I laugh when I think that my eyes persist in demanding objects that do not destroy them.[66]

…

The Lacanian drama of subjective fantasy encapsulated by the mirror stage, as I argued in the previous chapter, exposes a reverse fiction here that operates in the same way: the fantasy of one's own death. In Bataille's fiction, and in writings such as the example provided above, we see death blended with the body and sex in increasingly absurd and scandalous combinations, and thus we also see the fantasy of the symbolically grounded body decaying into absence and meaninglessness. The figure of sovereignty, even as it abandons subjectivity for continuity, surreptitiously smuggles in the fantasy of the unified body image as a mythical figure that can, in a certain sense, conquer death through language.

And yet, the figure of sovereignty allows Bataille to transcend and redefine the structure of language. The polymorphous perversity that makes his work post-Freudian is overdetermined by the transcendental signifier of death and the field of continuity implicit within it. Bataille argues that language is deeper than the abstract, structural

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[66] Bataille, "The Practice of Joy Before Death.", pp. 239.

meaning of signs. The embrace of self-annihilation Bataille associates with laughter, as we've mentioned, arguably asserts a kind of mastery over language. In Lacanian terms, the Real of jouissance asserts itself over and against the structure of desire, insisting on a radically different mode of enjoyment.

Nonetheless, Bataille has a point that death as self-negation cannot be fully contained or made coherent within the Lacanian psychoanalytic, scientific framework. In this way, Bataille exposes problems with Lacan's narrative, while remaining beholden to a proclivity of symbolically enframing death as something that can be "touched" or fully identified with. The affirmation of continuity of being in erotic laughter is the reversal of the unconscious and the scientific affect of Lacanianism, yet the passion for the Real that opposes itself to anti-systematic thinking does not allow us to access death as a gateway to a pure transcendental experience of reality.

Lacan and Bataille are thus two sides of the same coin. Lacan believes in the sovereignty of language, and Bataille believes in the sovereignty of the body. Where they differ is the affective frame that situates these different views. The cultural and symbolic skepticism of the former neutralizes the sexualized, mystical, unsettlingly erotic affect of the latter, while the latter frustrates the assumption that death can be captured within a metaphysical systematic framework. The latter demonstrates that death appears as the fundamental tension in reality which prevents its systematization. His critique of science descends from the idea that science and rationality, as *nonknowledge* demonstrates, can never fully picture a world of continuity, only a world of discontinuous classification.

In this way, Bataille perhaps implicitly counters Lacan's skepticism with his own. It is potentially impossible to develop any unifying theory of death, so the most we can

do is gesture towards it through experience. Bataille's critique thus points us in a valuable direction. Even if he does maintain the idol of the body image as a foundation of his theory, his turn away from scientific affects towards eroticism should not be entirely thrown out. The turn to the erotic is rooted in a turn towards experience and psychic structure. In *Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, Bataille explains this relationship to science in the context of laughter, stating that:

> Someone who laughs, in principle, does not abandon his science, but he refuses to accept it for a while, a limited time, he lets himself pass beyond it through the movement of laughter, so that what he knows is destroyed, but in his depths, he preserves the conviction that, just the same, it isn't destroyed.[67]

In the concluding chapter, late Heidegger will radicalize this turn towards experience, attempting to undo even more fundamental structures such as the unity of the notion of "subject" itself. If the impasse between Bataille and Lacan concerns the fact that one believes in the sovereignty of language while one believes in the sovereignty of the body, in Heidegger we will find a thinking where death is in a way even more fundamental, and wherein death itself is sovereign.

[67] Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, pp. 144.

Chapter 3: Martin Heidegger, Meditations on Mortal Dwelling

In the preceding chapters, death has emerged as a structure and a series of intensities, or figures that define the subject. In Lacan, death is a kind of decoy for a systemic tendency of language towards the subversion of subjectivity. In contrast, for Bataille death acquires a lucid reality in the experience of eroticism. Contrary to Lacan, who associates death with the form of the symbolic system, not its content, Bataille frames death in terms of the symbolic content it is connected to. The subject proclaims its sovereignty over death, thereby transcending the structuring, disunifying force of language and entering into a continuity of experience. As structure or as series of intensities, the complexities of death are navigated by these philosophers with a resort to the analysis of language and its erotic discontents. In this sense, they are offspring of Freudianism.

In Heidegger, however, Freudianism is nowhere to be found. Freud worked to decipher the psychic structure of experience, and as such might seem an essential feature of Heidegger's ambient intellectual environment. But in Freud, the scientific affect overrides all else. Lacan's scientism is a direct result of this, and Bataille's anti-scientism might be read as a reaction-formation against it. Heidegger, on the other hand, has no interest in Freud, and a strikingly different set of guideposts for thinking about the world. The essence of hermeneutic phenomenology lies in an investigation of the apodictic properties that structure experience. In Heidegger's hands, the phenomenological project takes shape as an analysis of the form of average everyday experience, which sets him at odds with Bataille and Lacan, whose interest is not in the everyday, but the pathological.

In contrast, Heidegger can be understood as exemplifying a meditative affect towards death. Unlike Lacan, for whom death is a phenomenon to be understood formally, or Bataille who situates it at the heart of bodily sovereignty, Heidegger argues death cannot be mastered. It is a mystery that we understand deeply, yet do not possess and cannot communicate. Death is beyond us, it is not a sign among other signs, redirecting us back to the field of desire, but rather is a relation between revealment and concealment that reveals itself in all of our everyday goings-on, and in the basic ways we relate to the world.

In this chapter, I will review Heidegger's understanding of death and contrast it with the previous theories. I will begin by analyzing the initial conception of death laid out in the second division of *Being and Time*, Heidegger's first major work. I will argue that the centrality of Dasein and the concept of authenticity that shrouds the idea of being-towards-death retains a latent, present-at-hand metaphysical objectification of death. Death becomes, as Lacan warned, a master signifier that orients the horizon of a field of desire. In this sense, Heidegger's early conception of death falls prey to the same problems as Bataille, as it reorients the subject within the unifying illusion of the ego, despite its claims to the contrary. Death is approached through a complex frame of mineness and, just as in the case of sovereignty, this becomes a kind of stabilizing frame that fails to address the true significance of death.

In the late Heidegger though, these problems are resolved. I will argue that the final works of Heidegger reveal a more philosophically coherent and multivalent conception of death than do the works of Bataille or Lacan. In these later works, Dasein is displaced by the idea of a community of mortals. The name "*mortals*" breaks through

the subjectivizing frame of death without reducing death to an element within a quasi-scientific system. Instead, death is revealed as a mystery that hermeneutically unfolds all around us, never towards any total, unifying conclusion, and never in a way that teaches us clear lessons about what to do, but in a way that shelters us, and reveals the kindness of the earth.

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The ontological rethinking of death and finitude which occurs at the opening of *Being and Time*'s infamous Division II is commonly received by those new to Heidegger as an iconic staple of his thought, one which maintains the theoretical complexity characteristic of the text as a whole in its reconceptualization of death as something personalized. Heidegger presents us with an account of human mortality which attempts to destabilize and frustrate inherited illusions of any preexisting or underlying coherency or solidity to the world, and then proceeds to reconstruct and stabilize Dasein's identity according to an internal recognition of its own constitutive finitude.

Death is used here to further bring into question preconceived notions of the subject which conceptualize identity and subjectivity in possessive terms, such as the association between subjectivity and the ownership of an interior or self-enclosed dimension to one's identity. Yet, at the very moment that *Being and Time* presents death as the revelation of Dasein's essential openness and exposure to nothingness, it moves to immediately reconstruct the conceptual moorings and foundations of the world via the recognition of Dasein's own internal relation to the nothing. If death reveals the groundlessness of the world which Dasein has been thrown into, then each individual

Dasein is challenged by death to rebuild its own world upon this intimate confrontation with the nothing.

The notion of "mineness" is central to this consideration of death. Dasein's death makes its life irreducibly its own. No one can die in Dasein's place; its death cannot be exchanged or substituted with the death of any other. Thus, death reveals the significance of Dasein's acts, in that each human being is bound by a personalized finitude which makes their actions their own and nobody else's. Despite that Dasein cannot 'own' or "possess" its death due to its inability to conceive of death outside of the relation of being towards it, rather than the experience of any "end" in itself, death ultimately provides Dasein with its singularity and constitutively shapes its totality. In this way, we can see how the early Heidegger participates in the same fantasy of subjectivization Lacan locates at the crux of the subject's traumatic response to language.

Death is what is most my own and paradoxically that which I cannot possess. It is the ultimate non-relational possibility which cannot be outstripped. As Dasein's most extreme possibility, the possibility of the impossibility of Dasein, it must be taken up in each case. Every Dasein must engage in an anticipation of a death which cannot be mastered yet in every instance is their own.[68] The arc of each Dasein's thrownness and the grounding for its horizons of temporal possibility presuppose and are determined by the ontological singularity of its death. This is one of the most obvious points of resonance between Heidegger and the existentialist projects of those who borrow from *Being and Time*. Death does not amount to an oblivion or pure absence, nor does it

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[68] Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by Macquarrie & Robinson. Blackwell Publishers, 1962. pp. 294.

completely erode every conceptual foundation which could allow Dasein to possess an individual identity or sense of freedom. The "event" that seemingly annihilates boundaries between self and other becomes the foundation for the reconstitution of Dasein's selfhood and uniqueness.

One could accuse the Heidegger of *Being and Time* of overstating the supposed singularity which death affords Dasein. To be more specific, perhaps Heidegger *overemphasizes* the extent to which death's character is non-relational, or rather the extent to which it is inaccessible outside of an individual relation to extreme possibility. Regardless of whether death singularizes Dasein, why must there be such an anathema to all attempts to de-individualize death? If Heidegger is right that death as a possibility is not something "in" Dasein but rather something Dasein is being-towards, then why must a recognition or focus on death's relational character as an aspect of the world and being writ large always come at the expense of authenticity?

The concern for authenticity ultimately comes at the expense of seeing death as all around us. There is a problem of a tunnel vision or overemphasis at the very least, wherein Heidegger's critique of the "*they*" makes it difficult to foreground a rich and comprehensive account of death's relation to being. By refusing to de-individualize death, Heidegger arguably diminished death in the sense that *Being and Time* does not allow it to be extricated from the boundaries of a *singular* Dasein's being-towards-it. This is not true in the sense that Heidegger explicitly replicates the idea that the human can triumph and overcome its death. Rather, he does not emphasize fully enough death's character as being *outside* of us rather than as what simply opens us or relates us to our outside or exterior.

In this way, Heidegger remains trapped within the same liberal individualist notion of subjectivity as Bataille and Lacan. While Lacan attempts to deconstruct the centrality of the subject, he does so by imposing a grid of intelligibility on the world, that as Heidegger effectively shows, rips significance out of the field of relations that constitute it, and thereby fundamentally misrecognizes its meaningful being-for-us. In early Heidegger, death becomes an abstract principle of Dasein that seems unlinked from the world around it. Death seems to be stripped out of things, existing in a semantic space. This semantic space becomes the orienting pole of a field of desire, and Heidegger's affective preference for anxiety, authenticity, and anticipating death reveals not an essential philosophical insight, but the outlines of a subjective fantasy.

In other words, while death is framed as that which opens Dasein into relations with the world, it cannot be thought of as existing outside of the horizon of Dasein's respective possibilities. It cannot be thought of in the sense that, at the very least, to do so is discouraged for being apparently symptomatic of metaphysics' forgetting of the intimate meaning of finitude for each human being. The focus on Dasein's relation to its own death comes at the expense of being able to apprehend death outside of any given Dasein's clutches. In a sense, while death provides Dasein with the personalized structures of freedom and temporality, this specific focus makes it difficult to consider death's function and relation to being outside of this structure. Thus, in a certain way, death remains caught in a residual space of subjectivity.

Death is not encountered as something of the world, but rather as a concern for *our* individualized being-in-the-world. It is an extreme individual possibility which *relates* Dasein to the world, but not necessarily as *the world itself*. Moreover, in framing

our relation to this possibility in terms of *anticipation* and *running ahead*, Heidegger arguably positions Dasein as *standing over* and looking upon death as something that can, in a certain residual way, mastered. Indeed, this could technically be viewed as a kind of relapse into a will to master death, in the sense that death is grasped as possibility in a manner which remains subordinated to Dasein, in a perhaps narrow yet enduring way. In this way, we can see how the early Heidegger has not yet traversed Nietzsche.

How then can one argue the validity or even significance of the claim that this perspective has defanged or "disrespected" death by circumscribing it, through overemphasis, within the structure of individual selfhood? Heidegger argues that mortality signifies that being-towards-death is a being-towards something outside of or beyond Dasein. Even if we assume that being-towards-death's framing of death in terms of possibility (the most extreme, radical possibility for that matter) diminishes aspects of its character, what is the practical significance of this observation? This question can be answered through an analysis of how death functions in Heidegger's later work. Division II in *Being and Time* is of course far from Heidegger's last word on death. We can see in the ensuing work a gradual process of amending and adding to this initial characterization of death. These transformations do not occur alongside any vocal, direct renunciations of *Being and Time*, or even an explicitly stated immanent critique of it. Instead, the new ways that death is treated and spoken of suggest an implicit recognition of the inadequacy of *Being and Time*'s individualized characterization of death.

The differences we can observe between the narratives demonstrate that there is in fact a residual subject-centeredness (or perhaps "Dasein-centeredness") to Dasein's existence which is latent in the concept of being-towards-death. They suggest that there is

an enduring conservatism here which, relative to Heidegger's later thinking, maintains a thematic commitment to mastering death. While this theme of mastery may appear to be dormant upon initial observation, we shall see by comparing *Being and Time* to later works that it is actually philosophically significant, particularly in terms of how human beings should emotively comport themselves towards death or relate to the deaths of others. We can see a shift from the nostalgic affect towards a meditative affect, that takes the critique of science laid out in *Being and Time* even further to reconstruct a different *way of speaking.*

We can specifically observe fundamental changes in Heidegger's thinking of death in the decades following *Being and Time*. These become visible just a decade later with the *Contributions to Philosophy*, but more so appear in a significant, crystallized manner in the early years of the post-war period. Specifically, the Bremen lectures of 1949 ("Insight Into That Which Is"), which marked Heidegger's semi-formal return to institutional philosophy, as well as subsequent essays like *Building Dwelling Thinking* feature the development of new concepts surrounding death. These years and works constitute the main turning point for Heidegger's new reconstellation of death.

Death is no longer mainly apprehended in terms of a relation to any mere being but rather is thought of as that which essences being itself. The significance of this change is evident alone in part with Heidegger's choice to displace Dasein as the name for the essence of the human being with the name *mortals*. Given that the name Dasein was formulated for the purpose of displacing the association between the conventional human and the metaphysical subject, it should be clear that the new language of mortals carries with it an even greater and more radical emphasis on ontological pluralism and

difference. In other words, the name "mortals" should indicate a significant radicalization of the already radical figure of "Dasein," even if it first appears only as a shift in language if not immediate content. This is one of the most vital distinctions between Heidegger and our other thinkers: the concept of the mortals displaces subjectivity with plurality, Dasein is now understood to be always already reaching out towards a community of others that constitute it.

From the outset, we see that the mood and tone has shifted and gone beyond the call to honestly reconcile with and accept death towards more of an ongoing engagement with death as an element and medium of the world. The capacity to engage with death more actively allows for new ways of relating to and comporting oneself towards death. If anxiety in *Being and Time*, for example, is the fundamental mood that Dasein occupies when contemplating its mortality, then the transition to the mortals is a move which heralds the potential for more joyful and optimistic affects. This is not to say that anxiety necessarily has to do with sadness or somber emotions in the first instance. Anxiety is a way that the Nothing becomes manifest in Dasein's experience.

As a mood, it enables Dasein to engage with the Nothing. Anxiety can technically be productive of a number of different desired affects or feelings. The problem is not with anxiety per se, but rather that the anxiety brought to the fore in *Being and Time* and *What is Metaphysics?* is born from an individualized internal relation with the nothing rather an appreciation of it consistent with the pluralism implied by *mortals*. The claim that anxiety is primordial assumes a type of Hegelian confrontation between an individual who can gaze at the nothing of death and derive authenticity or value to life from this personalized encounter. That Dasein is replaced by mortals allows us to generate new emotional

valences that have more to do with the sheer relationality of death implied by a community of mortals rather than death as a singularly non-relational possibility for Dasein.

Through the mortals, the previous account of Dasein's being-towards-death is replaced by a newfound *being-in-death* where death appears as something more readily accessible (though not present-at-hand), namely as a shrine of nothingness and the shelter and refuge for being and its secret. Whereas the Nothing was thought of in Division II and *What is Metaphysics?* as the source of primordial anxiety for a singular or individual Dasein, it is now what creates and shelters a *community* of all beings. To frame anxiety as an individualized mood which provides motivation for the temporal appropriation of oneself as a project reflects a reluctance to fully relinquish mastery over the terms of one's death or to comport oneself in a *releasement* towards death.

With the transition to being-in-death, death becomes the medium of the mortals in their becoming-mortals, almost like a flowing river that enables the mortals to essence, expand, and grow within. The mortals engaged in dwelling are swept away in a constant arriving, a becoming outside, a dying which is never finished. They relinquish mastery through dwelling and releasement; anxiety gives way to shelter, refuge, and dwelling. The traditional horror provoked by the thought of the absence of being disappears as absence reveals itself to be being's *refuge*. This type of releasement is what *Being and Time*, when read mainly on its own terms, at least partially forecloses.

Ultimately, the shift from Dasein's being-towards-death to the mortals who are being-in-death indicates a conceptual migration away from a personalized perspective on death towards one which foregrounds death as that which draws in and relates via

distance *all beings* to the world. This migration is in itself a sort of releasement from the personalized anxiety of *Being and Time* through a newly advocated mode of *dwelling* which allows us in our becoming-mortals to foster more creative, experimental ways of comporting and relating to death, which could include the promotion of more positive, accepting, and welcoming emotions concerning human mortality.

Motifs from Aries' history of death are frequent throughout Heidegger's work on death. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger recognizes that we can be *with* the dead through rituals of mourning, which observe what the vanished Dasein has left behind: a corpse. The dead body is not something present at hand, but rather is a distinct kind of object that is treated with respect. Dasein does not perish. It becomes unalive.[69] The corpse is more than a lifeless, merely corporeal thing, it is something which has lost its life and become deceased. To make the deceased an object of concern is to treat them as more than just a piece of equipment. The dead are still with us in a certain sense, even if they are not present in their facticity.

However, Heidegger, when speaking of the cult of graves, adopts here a critical perspective on attempts to make the deceased an object of concern in the way of rituals such as a funeral. If we extend Heidegger's argument farther, then practices of ritualistic mourning or other communal practices erode our authentic relation to death by appropriating it as a collective, which of course de-individualizes death's mine-ness. Heidegger seems to have an aversion at this stage to a something we could call a "culture" of death which frames and represents death as something which concerns a

[69] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 285.

community of beings, rather than a singularly death bound individual Dasein. Here we can see a similar theme as in Bataille's reading of sovereignty, and his fascination with death motifs. For Bataille the culture of death and its elements can be seized by the individual in intense moments of subjective experience. Somewhat similarly, Heidegger's earl conception of death locates individual practices of mourning as central to affect.

As such, this seems to foreclose the types of cultural exchanges with death which in the narrative of the mortals takes the form of a shrine, a refuge, even something which can keep the dying one "from their death" in a preservative function. These types of practices where the mortals' "affiliation" with death is recognized could seem to be contrary to the moments of individual authenticity which *Being and Time* views as essential. To summarize, Heidegger's early work evinces the same problems as Bataille's theory of death when looked at from the perspective of Lacanian theory. Death is in part reduced to a subjective fantasy of Dasein, rather than thought of in terms of the ready-to-hand experience of a plural community of mortals. It is only in the later Heidegger that a different view of death emerges, and these problems located by Lacan begin to fall away.

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If Dasein in *Being and Time* stands over its death in a very specific way, by virtue of anticipation and running ahead, then we can understand the mortals of the fourfold as being-*in*-death. Death is the *medium* of their mortality. Death is no longer mainly thought in terms of possibility (although possibility is a mode of affiliation) but rather as that which essences mortal existence. The mortals are no longer being-towards-death. They are in death. It is as though the mortals are fish swimming in the current of the great river

of death. Death is a shelter, a refuge, and a place for the mortals to find themselves in. In her essay *Death: An Essay on Finitude*, Dastur summarizes this distinction as follows:

> If in *Being and Time* authenticity is defined in a still quite Hegelian way as Dasein's capacity to stand and face the gaze of death, in later writings, when 'mortal' becomes the proper name of man, it is a question of man's gaining access to and entering death.[70]

Death is no longer a "drive" that can be comprehended by a scientific affect. And it is not a series of intensities that provide access to a different realm of experience. Instead, death is a world that affords us, or a river, death is something we enter into, not something that defines us or that we can grasp and own. The ontological pluralism implied by the name *mortals* indicates an extrication of the meaning and essence of mortality from the confines of an individual Dasein into a broader community of mortal beings, which is constitutively defined by an even greater absence of interiority and a deeper condition of exposure and openness to the world. This condition is a product of the mortals' ability, or rather capacity, to die. This is in contrast with the metaphysical enframing of the human being within avatars that are either fully integrated with the world or which possess a sense of interiority that is outside of the world. The ability of the mortals to die maintains them in a relation of openness and exteriority to the world.

Heidegger explains in the lecture *The Thing* that "The mortals are the humans. They are called the mortals because they are able to die. Dying means: to be capable of

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[70] Dastur, Françoise. *Death: An Essay on Finitude*. Translated by John Llewelyn. Athlone Press Ltd, 1994, pp. 82.

death as death. Only the human dies."[71] This is followed by an explanation of the relational contours of things as well as a consideration of death's essencing of the mortals into constitutive relationality with things. In *Building Dwelling Thinking*, these remarks are essentially restated, with the key difference being the clearer articulation of the mortals as members of the fourfold, further emphasizing that the mortals are of the world and live amidst others. Heidegger states that "Only man dies, and indeed continually, as long as he remains on earth, under the sky, before the divinities. When we speak of mortals, we are already thinking of the other three along with them, but we give no thought to the simple oneness of the four."[72]

In *The Fourfold: Reading the Late Heidegger*, Mitchell uses the language of "living amidst death" which is "nothing apart from us" to describe the affiliation of the mortals with their element. For us to continually die within the element of death suggests that, "To seek for signs of death, one need look no further than the world around us. The world is death. This world is our death. We die always in the world and of the world."[73] Indeed, since death is what *enables* us and retains us, it is nothing to fear or guard against, since it is *guarding us*. That death enables us suggests that it shelters us. Death is our refuge. To clarify with another example, the mortals' affiliation with their medium is not too dissimilar from a salmon swimming with the current of its river. The fish is not trapped in the water. It is always arriving. The fish, as it swims, is always crossing into

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[71] Heidegger, Martin. "The Thing." *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*. Translated by Mitchell, Indiana University Press, 2012. pp. 17
[72] Heidegger, Martin. "Building Dwelling Thinking." *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Hofstadter, Harper Perennial Classics, 2001. pp. 148
[73] Mitchell, Andrew. *The Fourfold: Reading the Late Heidegger*. Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, 2017. pp. 230

water which in a relation of distance which is being overcome. The fish is open to the water which is its medium.

Likewise, our arriving in death is not the same as being *stuck* or frozen in it. The mortals are maintained in death, but that maintaining does not mean that the mortals *are* death, just like how the fish is not entirely indistinct from the current of the stream. The fish and its relations are enabled by the medium precisely because the medium allows the fish to develop and create new relations as well as expand existing ones. Similarly, death enables the mortals to grow, create, expand, and *essence*. Furthermore, since this maintaining is active in the sense of arriving, we are becoming the mortals rather than just being them. To become is to be something and not be it at the same time.

In this sense, the notion of the mortals is a sort of releasement from the remnants of thematic "mastery" present in Dasein's ability to be and live authentically towards its death. The mortals, in their being mortals, are not the mortals. Their way of being is one of becoming, of being in-between. In contrast, Dasein transfixes this condition of non-belonging and being not yet into moments of authenticity or authentic being. While Dasein certainly is intended and for the most part does resist the metaphysics of presence which traditionally surrounds dying, relative to the mortals it can be said to replicate it in the death-bound pursuit of moments of authentic individuality. Dasein, at least in comparison to the mortals, cannot fully engage in the releasement or dwelling which embraces our affiliation with and our essencing in death. Already, Heidegger has gone further than Bataille and Lacan, and our analysis of his thought shows that the first, through perverse fetishism, and the second, through scientific enframing, render death a

present-at-hand object to be manipulated. Death does not reveal the world, however, as Heidegger argues that it reveals the shape of an essential concealment.

In *Building Dwelling Thinking*, Heidegger recalls the example of the incorporation of death into the home (farmhouse) of the German peasant, a space where entire generations were born, lived, and died. Space was partitioned, organized, and arranged to make "room" for the altar of the dead: the Totenbaum. Heidegger explains that these familial generations, through the shrine, were preserved in their dying by the essencing of the Nothing. He explains that this essencing took place alongside other notable spaces and monuments in the household, even the natal childbed, stating:

> Let us think for a while of a farmhouse in the Black Forest, which was built some two hundred years ago by the dwelling of peasants […] It did not forget the altar corner behind the community table; it made room in its chamber for the hallowed places of childbed and the "tree of the dead" – for that is what they call a coffin there: the Totenbaum – and in this way it designed for the different generations under one roof the character of their journey through time.[74]

Heidegger is trying to uncover here an old way of knowing death that has been papered and covered over by metaphysics, the conceptual corollary of technological and industrial thought. This is the cause of his use of very old and deep German etymology. Vodun (Voodoo) provides a non-Eurocentric example of the same phenomenon. In African societies which affiliate with and practice the Vodun tradition, objects and ornaments said to enshrine the spirits of dead ancestors imbue physical space with such

[74] Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking." *Poetry, Language, Thought*, pp. 157-158.

meaning that they literally take shape in the ways that people make decisions. People will change their minds and make decisions based on their intuition that space is alive with the spirits of the dead. They live their lives on the basis of these ancestor spirits, which they understand to be a part of the world with them. Such spirits are invisible, and yet, they nevertheless *are*. No native would deny that they are real, and that their reality is deeply influential. Already in this simple example, where the invisible spirit is there in a radically enough way to shape the goings-on of a mortal community, we can see the delicate mystery of Heidegger's understanding of death, in which a play of revealment and concealment reveals the structure of a mystery: the secret.

Furthermore, the dead preserved in the Totenbaum are, in a sense, very much alive within the home. They are alive and they are dead. They are *in* the medium of death which enables their dying. The deceased occupy, or are *in*, a state of being which escapes the metaphysical dualism between absence and presence which we can still observe in *Being and Time*. This indicates further that death is afforded a much more relational existence for the mortals. Since death is all-pervasive and is all around us, we are sheltered from any pure annihilation of our being, and thus we ultimately are enabled to persist in the space between being and nothing. The dead one is preserved in their relational existence, which is made possible only by death, and thus the living mortals can exchange with them in ways they otherwise could not.

In this way, Heidegger's meditative affect lifts different elements of Ariès history of dying than Bataille's erotic thinking. No longer is the event or image of death the central figure of this history, but rather the general ambience of dying, and the way the dead and the memories of the ancestors shelter us in history. Late Heidegger thus enables

a hermeneutic mysticism, in which death reveals itself as a funeral shroud, meaning that it reveals the Nothing by concealing it. Death, the shrine of the Nothing, "harbors" in itself the essencing of the Nothing, which is not simply "nothing" but rather something that essences as *being itself*. There is certainly something radically unique about our respective deaths. Nobody can die in your place. Your death cannot be stolen from you. Yet, while *Being and Time* would have us 'run ahead' and live in a way which makes our being authentic, for the mortals, death is the *refuge* and reprieve of being. Death protects and shelters being through the Nothing.

The deer being hunted by a predator can take shelter in a hollow log. In a sense, this is metaphorically what death does for us at a much more serious scale. It is not a question of our survival; only we die. As mortals, we are defined by our death, not by our possession of any quality. We are thereby intrinsically vulnerable and threatened in the environment. Our dwelling then entails taking shelter in death. Death allows us to see the withdrawal of being which reveals its fundamental weakness, which is that it is always arriving (in-between) and never actually present. It is a safe space of concealment, which needs to exist at least minimally for anything to be revealed.[75] This is why we conceal the dead in a shrine, which traces their nothingness without revealing it.

Mitchell points out that in a reprinting of *The Thing* for an anthology in 1954, the phrase "secret of being" is added to Heidegger's original statement of death being the shrine of the Nothing. Derrida talks about this development in Heidegger extensively, and his account is summarized and amended by Mitchell.[76] The notion of the secret further

[75] Mitchell, *The Fourfold: Reading the Late Heidegger*, pp. 239.
[76] Mitchell, *The Fourfold: Reading the Late Heidegger*, pp. 237.

drives home the increasingly relational character of death for the mortals. While death singularizes the individual, this is in part a result of a relationship between self and other which implies our belonging in a community.

We all share in a secret, and that secret is Nothing. The mortals can only be singularized in the sense that self and the other are each necessarily keeping a secret from the other. This makes them different, for if they did not keep secrets, then they are in effect the same. Yet, the secret which the mortals hold is nothing at all. Death conceals the essence of being in the enshrining of the Nothing, thereby allowing for the secret of the Nothing to exist. The secret is a revelation of concealment for Heidegger; it is not something concealed that is then revealed, but something that has been revealed to be already concealed. In a way, the revelation of permanent concealment suggests that death's functioning as a refuge is also permanent.[77]

In a sense, this is the most radical departure from the other thinkers that concern this study. Death is a secret that we all share, it is not something we can fundamentally know. All we can know about it is that it's a secret. Relinquished is the early attempt to "know" death, and in the process, Heidegger reveals Lacan and Bataille's attempts to incorporate death into a system of thinking, however chaotic that system might be, are characteristic of metaphysics and its attempt to wrest this secret from us and scold us for accepting it as a secret. And our mutual understanding that we both share this secret (that beneath the deepest layer of concealment, nothing is concealed) is what unites us as mortals and draws us together. Already we can see how this primordial reading of death

[77] Mitchell, *The Fourfold: Reading the Late Heidegger*, pp. 240.

could be operative for understanding Paganism, which inflects Heidegger's thought with a nostalgic affect.

We never die or enter into pure absence just as we never exist or survive in complete presence. Death places us in a becoming-exterior, a dwelling and dying that throws us into an in-between which protects us from our dying and in a sense makes us immortal, as evidenced by our ability to continue essencing in space after our hearts have stopped beating. Rather than conceiving of death in a way generative of anxiety or the effort to achieve authenticity in being, we can choose to relinquish ourselves into the sheer exposure and relationality shared by the mortals in their way of being. To embrace openness, exposure, and relationality is to embrace possibility and the joys of being amongst others in the community of mortals. It isn't the same as resigning oneself to *pure* passivity but rather a renewed way of actively engaging with others in the world and our interconnection with the other elements of the fourfold. We would look at death as not an end or pure absence, but the path and road we always already are traversing and accompanying with others. To find comfort and joy in our non-belonging enables us to think of new ways of welcoming and receiving others, as well as how to arrive in the world. The mood and tone shifted from an acceptance of death as a possibility we must radically anticipate towards an ongoing amending and forging of new relations with death.

These new relations stand apart from the other affects traced by this study. I began by showing how a structuralist critique of death as a symbolic element reveals the flaws in many philosophical accounts of death, which attempt to render it an object that for the subject to possess and understand. These ways of relating to death merely reduce

death to a decoy for other signifiers, and an epiphenomenon of the linguistic structure of desire itself. I showed also how the corollary posture, which rejects the formalist interpretation of death and immerses itself in the jouissance of death's materials, its cultures, falls prey to the theme of subjectivization which Lacan critiqued, which utilizes death as a way to shore up the integrity of the body illusion.

Beyond these two positions, which reflect different reactions to psychoanalysis and to the advent of the early 20th century, Heidegger rejects the affect of science and the affect of eroticism. A meditative history of metaphysics, in which death is revealed as a mystery that philosophers have tried and failed to conquer for generations, situates the reader, not in anxious anticipation of their own death, but in a history of ancestors, loved ones, and other fellow mortals that reveals the world as an interrelated mystery. The death we were "running ahead" towards in *Being and Time* is now something which, in the revelation of its further concealment, has paradoxically become something more accessible. It has now become so mysterious that it appears to be something we are already immersed in and which is all around us, and that we can be guarded within it.

Conclusion: The Mortals, Eusapia, the Secret, and Consumer Society

Affects surrounding death contain histories and are not merely reflections of concepts. The way we understand death has changed over time and it reflects many basic aspects of our culture. In this particular historical moment, we are anxious about death. As Jean Baudrillard showed in his treatise, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, consumer society is a massive white noise machine that functions to delete the fear of death from the emotional environment. This affective posture, which characterizes industrial and hyper-technological existence under late capitalism, is a far cry from any of the affects we have surveyed thus far. Lacan's scientific affect, Bataille's erotic affect, Heidegger's meditative affect: all these forms of relating to dying seem so distant now. They may appear here and then in culture, but only as consumer objects themselves; fantasies of a "better way" of living. Death, as Baudrillard showed in his landmark study, has been displaced by a procession of simulacra.[78]

In this thesis I have reviewed the way affects structure theories of death in 20th century continental philosophy. I have argued that the insights of psychoanalysis and structural linguistics are vital orienting forms for an understanding of how we make sense of death. And yet, the scientific affect that underlies these forms of analysis cuts them off from an understanding of death as experience. My analysis has focused on the figure of the subject, and subjective fantasies, which I have argued compromise our ability to understand death more deeply. It is only in the late Heidegger that the figure of the subject is fully escaped through a meditative study of the way that death is constituted in

[78] Baudrillard, Jean. *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. Translated by Iain Hamilton Grant, Sage Publications, 1993.

the very nature of the way the world reveals itself to us. Heidegger's reading of death is of particular note for the differences that separate his work from Bataille or Lacan. Perhaps most fundamentally, Heidegger's reading of philosophy is diachronic, it is a history of the destruction of metaphysics that itself constitutes a component of that destruction. The synchronic readings of Bataille and Lacan, which lift motifs from history but ultimately position death as a timeless conceptual figure, fail to grasp death as the outcome of a historical process.

Heidegger chose not to construct death in terms of subjectivity in the later stage of his thought. Death became a shelter that holds a community of mortals in continuous relation with one another and with a world that extends beyond them and holds them in an arcing relationship with the whole of being. The early theory of death presented in *Being and Time* does not navigate the world by *inhabiting* death, but only by nostalgically fantasizing it. It is only in the later Heidegger, where the language of metaphysics itself begins to break down into a poetic communion with the world, that death is given its true due. The notions of shelter, secrecy, and shrining that Heidegger invokes through death seem confusing until one considers the presence of ancestor worship throughout most world religions.

If Lacan was cognizant of the way that the Western family structures organized around a denial of death, he was also afflicted by the same liberal-industrial mode of scientific rationality that was entwined with that family structure. To return to *Anti-Oedipus*, Freud's discovery of polymorphous perversity was a discovery born from the roots of bourgeois urban society and the rise of capitalism. As Deleuze and Guattari show, neurosis and schizophrenia are the condition of life under industrial society.

Perversion was a figure of capitalism in the same sense that consumer society and its simulations are. The body becomes a product, and language differentiates itself faster and faster through the dissemination of media and the relentless interpretation of that media by newly amassed urban publics. Urban living and the anxieties of Freud's patients can be understood as reflections of life in industrial society and its relentless stimulation, its endlessly unfolding discourse. To put it another way, modern societies do not need scientific systems of psychoanalysis. They need shamans of death.

The shaman is the medium of the outside, of death and its ancestor spirits.[79] The shaman becomes an intermediary between the material world and the animistic world of spirits. He becomes, like the psychoanalyst, a healer. But unlike the Lacanian psychoanalyst, it is he who is stricken by what Deleuze and Guattari called "schizophrenia,"[80] the shaman's visions of death radiating through the world is the conduit of healing, and not the "problem" to be healed. While Bataille locates himself as a reactive figure, as an aggressive, uncontrollable analysand, Heidegger escapes the doctor-patient relation altogether, departing in this type of quest.

It is no surprise that Lacan is neurotically fixated on a "science of the subject," and that Bataille is perversely fascinated with all of the intense forms of experience that dethrone that subject with its more primitive, infantile body-image. In both cases, subjectivity *as a problematic* is taken for granted. It is not that Lacan ultimately restores the unity of the subject in the way Bataille does. Indeed, Lacan's thought represents a

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[79] Selinger, Bernard. "The Navajo, Psychosis, Lacan, and Derrida." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, Vol. 49, No. 1, Genetic Criticism (Spring 2007), pp. 64.
[80] Selinger, pp. 65.

radical break from the history of metaphysics in its conception of the subject as necessarily split or divided. And yet, the problematic of subjectivity as an orientation for his philosophical investigation is highly revealing. Subjectivity is the central problem for Lacan, even if its coherence is progressively deconstructed. The same goes for Bataille and the early Heidegger. However, as Heidegger's thought develops, traversing Nietzsche and reconstructing Western philosophy as a history rather than a series of synchronic concepts, the subject gradually falls away as an orienting force.

By the time Heidegger begins to speak of the later concept of the fourfold, Dasein is no more. There is only the mortals. Subjectivity ceases to operate as a foundational problematic and is revealed as a figment of a certain orientation in the history of metaphysics. The present-at-hand objectification of reality through the culmination of metaphysics in the will to power and conceptual classification is no more visible than in the problem of the subject, which presumes that any individual and their respective death is even intelligible outside the community of mortals.

As Calvino implied through Marco Polo's narrative storytelling in *Invisible Cities*, death makes a fiction of the metaphysics of presence, revealing an originary abyss and supposed "absence" which, for modern society, inspires terror in its frustration of all efforts to presence death and the secret as present-at-hand objects. In Polo's story, the city of the dead founds the dual city of the living upon an ongoing process of dying, one which never ends. The brotherhood which fraternizes with the dead journeys up and down, back and forth, and always between the cities of the living and the dead. Throughout their journey, they unearth relics and memories left behind by their ancestral

heritage, bringing the meaning of the secret of death and its constitutive role in shaping mortal being to the fore.

Thus, Marco Polo's story served as the preface for this thesis as a consequence of its brilliance in illuminating Heidegger's central point about the mortals: death is nothing to fear, for we are always dying, and indeed our lives are maintained through death and its essencing and enshrining of the Nothing. The fraternity of hooded brothers, who accompany one another underground in a constant arriving at death, are acutely aware that the world of the dead is not something frozen or lost to us but is animated by the spirits and ghosts of the past. We never really die, since there is no such thing as pure absence, nor is there such a thing as pure presence. In the world of the mortals, of Eusapia, of the Germanic peasant or the shamans of Vodun, there is no absolute way to demarcate who is dead and who is alive.

As mortals, we do not live under the sovereign authority of language, nor the sovereignty of the body, nor do we live as subjects of the emperor Kublai Khan, or of any individuated emperor for that matter. It was the dead who built our world in the image of their own city, and as this thesis has shown, philosophy enables us to excavate and recover the ghosts and traces of past modes of understanding mortality, thereby revealing that we are all share in the unfurling of an interrelated mystery that is death. We are not the servants of any living emperor; we are only citizens in a community of mortals insofar as we are all subjects of the kingdom of death and the dead. Death is the only sovereign, and insofar as we could ever be called "subjects," we are subjects who live as historical members of an ever-expanding empire of death.

The subject is meaningless outside of the mortals that share in death's secret. We are what we are because we share the knowledge of a fundamental mystery, a funeral shroud that we can never unwrap, but whose concealing power reveals that there is nothing beneath it and reveals in fact that Nothing itself is constantly being revealed to us. The mystery of how Nothing can be revealed is the meaning of death. It transcends the structure of desire and the life-histories embedded in it. It transcends the jouissance of the body and the intensity of the limit experience.

Death is not something we need to seek an understanding of in a traditional philosophical sense, or in therapy, or in eroticism. It is something that we already understand and that conditions understanding as such. Death is nothing to fear, for it is already all around us, even if we have drowned out its voice with anxiety inducing noise. Death is the secret that makes friendship possible, and it draws us out of ourselves, towards care for the world around us, not because it forces us to rethink our desires, but because it reveals we are part of an unfolding relation that is not separate from us, death is what we are dwelling in. To conclude with an apt passage from "Language," Heidegger states that:

> These mortals are capable of dying as the wandering toward death. In death, the supreme concealedness of Being crystallizes. Death has already overtaken every dying. Those "wayfarers" must first wander their way to house and table through the darkness of their courses; they must do so not only and not even primarily of themselves, but for the many, because the many think that if they only install

themselves in houses and sit at tables, they are already bethinged, conditioned, by things and have arrived at dwelling.[81]

[81] Heidegger, Martin. "Language." *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Hofstadter, Harper Perennial Classics, 2001, pp. 189.

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