

**Toward a
Critical Theory of Death:
Adorno on Dying Today**

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Abstract

Keywords

I. Dying Philosophy

THIS paper explores the scattered writings of Adorno on “dying today”—on the transformation of human death and dying in contemporary society—as potential resources for the development of a critical theory of death. The broader intention, for which this paper is only preparatory, would be to develop such a critical theory of death sufficiently to serve as an alternative to the two predominant and inadequate philosophical approaches to human death in contemporary philosophy: on the one side, analytic philosophy of death, with its distinctive leveling of the existential meaning of human death and dying in the name of methodological purity; on the

other side, the Heidegger-inspired existential phenomenology of death, with its complementary leveling of the social and historical dimension of human death in the name of ontological purity.

Both of these alternatives are ideological, insofar as their methodological and ontological commitments mirror, and deepen, the leveling and cheapening of human death already required by the social conditions in which these philosophical attitudes flourish. Identifying and following the dialectics of human death and dying “today” will thus also entail showing how existing philosophical approaches to human death can be revealed as ideological. I attempt this in this paper’s first section, using Adorno’s work as a general guide in the discussion of analytic philosophy of death, and then drawing directly on Adorno’s critique of Heidegger in *The Jargon of Authenticity*.¹

For Adorno, human death is a dialectic between bodily and social existence in which the possibility of a fit, aptness, or measure between these two registers has been deeply distorted by a range of concrete social institutions and practices of domination and unfreedom. Human beings are not able to live in such a way that their material, bodily existence, and their status as social moral agents, entwine or unite. Since they cannot, their bodily and social deaths, whose identity would be the requirement for the utopian ideal of a human life as a narrative whole, cannot align: they come apart. If “life does not live,” then one way to grasp this global wrongness is to see that human death has become incapable of *concluding* life.

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973). Henceforth cited as JA in the body of the text.

Social and bodily death, both distorted, miss their appointed rendezvous with one another, meaning that “dying today” entails a social death that comes either too soon, or too late, to meet its appointment with the destruction of the human body. The phenomenology of this distinctive dis-appointment is a range of pathologies in which people, incapable of living a narratable life, are forced into distinctive liminalities, bodily destroyed in ways that are no longer identifiably human, or socially killed while the body itself lingers on. Most controversially for the prospects for a critical theory of death, Adorno (not surprisingly) sees the experience of industrialized mass murder in the Nazi concentration camps as the paradigmatic case of this dis-appointment, epitomizing a transformation of “dying today” for which we lack a concept – even a word. But the complementary phenomenon of dying in Auschwitz is “living on” [*fortleben*] bodily, liminally, once one’s social existence, the possibility of a narrative unity of life with others, has already been lost because its social bases have been destroyed. While the one form of dying today is the gruesome destruction of the body, the other is the loss of the possibility of a recognizable human life.

In the first section of the paper I briefly discuss what for shorthand I refer to as “analytic philosophy of death” before turning to a longer discussion of Heidegger’s description of human death in *Being and Time*,² and Adorno’s critique of that description in *The Jargon of Authenticity*. Juxtaposing analytic and Heideggerian philosophy in this way is, clearly, a shorthand for the larger social situation of

² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962). Henceforth cited as BT in the body of the text.

academic philosophy today, but also deliberately echoes Adorno's own diagnostic approach to his own contemporary philosophical landscape from the 1930s to the 1960s.

One of the defining features of twentieth century analytic philosophy—what many of its earlier practitioners would refer to as among its crowning successes—is the deflationary effort to desist in the attempt to use philosophy as a way of getting at overarching questions of the meaning of human life and the nature of the human predicament. This surely explains why, up until work by Nagel and Williams in the 1970s, analytic philosophy was under a sort of *Todverbot*. Death (or love, or meaning) was off-limits insofar as it seemed a poor prospect, methodologically, for a conceptual analysis that would yield sufficiently generalizable claims, meaning that a standard analytic approach to normative questions – thought-experiments meant to “pump” intuitions, and the evaluation of the fit between intuitions and higher-order normative claims – was unpromising.

Analytic philosophy of death was only able to turn its purified methodology to the question of human death by reviving the classic question of late Greek and Roman Stoic philosophy—can death harm the one who dies?—in a way that deliberately transformed that quintessentially practical question into one purified of all practical relevance. This peculiar project begins with Bernard Williams' work in the early 1970s, and with Nagel's essay from *Mortal Questions* in 1979, an essay that takes up the question of the harm of death more or less precisely where Epicurus and Lucretius had left it two thousand years earlier, in their claims that death cannot

be considered an evil to the one who dies.³

Nagel's essay has continued to set the agenda for the analytic philosophy of death, whose core motivational question is to determine whether the concept of death (as the end of a lifespan conceived narratively as the successive pursuit of individual interests) is harmful to the person who dies. And while much of this philosophy has branched out tentatively from this core question, exploring related questions such as the possibility of posthumous interests, harms and rights, at heart, the Nagel-inspired program has remained preoccupied with rendering as precise as possible the circumstances under which death is harmful to the person who dies – a peculiar approach, one might say, given all that has happened in the 20th century, but one which nonetheless is evidently mandated by the self-imposed constraints that analytic philosophers long since have determined were obligatory for philosophy to maintain (and anxiously patrol) the disciplinary boundaries removed it from other forms that of normatively informed theory.

In Nagel's well-known original approach, the familiar puzzles and paradoxes left relatively untouched since Epicurus regarding the irrationality of the fear of death (it is irrational to fear oblivion to come but remain indifferent to the oblivion preceding our births; it is irrational to fear what we by definition will not experience) shifts from part of a practical

³ See “Death,” in Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge University Press, 2012). For more recent standard works in the analytic philosophy of death see Stephen Luper, *The Philosophy of Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Ben Bradley, *Well Being and Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); and more broadly the essays collected in John Martin Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Death* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1993).

catechism for reducing the role that debilitating fear will play in one's life to solving, insofar as they admit of solutions, the metaphysical puzzles themselves.

For Nagel, clearly the candidate for a form of harm justifiably to be feared is not physical death (since none of us would consent to a much longer life on condition that one would persist perfectly contented but with the awareness of a newborn). What we regard as harm in death is therefore only the difference between when we will die and when we might otherwise have died, all other things equal. Hence it's the deprivation of what we could reasonably expect in terms of well being, and the plausibility of such an expectation in the (hypothetical) span separating the future date of our actual deaths and that of the biological maximum over which we strut and fret. "The trouble is," Nagel concludes—and no more anti-Adornian sentiment can be imagined—"that life familiarizes us with the goods of which death deprives us." Psychologically compelled to see our own temporal span of individual experience as open-ended, we insist on seeing ourselves in the midst of *a life*—a recognizably human life—and not a span of biological subsistence. "Viewed in this way, death, no matter how inevitable, is an abrupt cancellation of indefinitely extensive possible goods."⁴

The fearful view that death harms us is therefore something of a trick arising from a peculiar perspective. Of course death deprives us of *more* experience, for better or ill. But the view that death harms us—is evil—arises only insofar as we map an indefinite narrative (an impossibility, a story

without end) onto what we know cannot sustain such a narrative: an embodied life. To be deprived of goods that would have been ours had we lived longer is not a harm, in this sense, but simply indwelling in, and deducible from, the settled meaning of the relevant terms. "If there is no limit to the amount of life that it would be good to have," Nagel concludes, "then it may be that a bad end is in store for us all."

This consistency of method generates a highly distinctive flattening of the affective dimension – as though the death of a loved one or the reflection on one's own approaching death were of no deeper significance than twin earths or fake barns. This methodological self-restraint—indistinguishable from a program of willed abstraction or what Adorno calls 'bourgeois coldness'—also underlies the distinctive tone of existential cluelessness regarding what it is like to be a human being, a tone that justifies the impression that the most mediocre novelist (on a bad day) sees deeper into, understands better, the depth of human life and death than the best philosopher (on a good day). This is—as Adorno would point out in relation to Viennese and Cambridge logical positivism as early as 1931—a direct challenge to philosophy's actuality.

On one level, certainly, objections of this sort are simply not to the point – one can always object that a philosopher ought to be doing something other than what she is actually doing. The effects of consistent philosophical methodology in themselves are, however irritating, hardly cogent objections to the larger philosophical problems that the method was intended either to illuminate or avoid. However, methodological choices are not neutral and do not occur in a social vacuum. To insist otherwise is a sure sign of the fatal

⁴ "Death," Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 10.

certainty in philosophy's capacity to exempt itself from social mediation yet remain a relevant social practice. This claim lies at the very core of critical theory's commitment to imminent critique, in which supposedly neutral methodological choices, and the various theoretical outcomes they sanction, can be shown "from the inside" to express and deepen concrete and non-neutral positions, preferences, and powers that both define and limit the philosophically possible at a given time and in a specific historical and social context. Imminent critique does not refute its object but illuminates the dialectic between inside and outside of theory that theory itself, in its traditional form, blinds itself to.

In the case of Heidegger's philosophy of death, our job is simpler since we have in addition to the "Existence" model from *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno's *The Jargon of Authenticity*, which includes a compendious and exhaustive critique of the notion of death as *Dasein's* "own-most possibility" in the central sections 47 to 54 of *Being and Time*.

The Jargon of Authenticity is, however, a troubled work in many respects, chief of which is that Adorno's loathing of Heidegger impedes—indeed seems at times to rule out—a properly dialectical reading that would transcend a mere hermeneutics of suspicion, and that would not only read into Heidegger's texts the moments where supposed claims to immediacy serve to cloak and further the interests of a specific socio-economic class of persons, but conversely those places where Heidegger, as heir to and critic of the tradition of German philosophical idealism, is able to turn that idealism against itself in productive and unexpected ways.

The Jargon of Authenticity eschews immanent criticism

by axiomatically positing the very category of 'jargon' as pseudo-profound linguistic smoke. The result of Adorno's own methodological presupposition, however, is to position the work simply to perform the very non-productive encounter with Heidegger's texts that is familiar to virtually anyone who has spent time with Heidegger's texts, whose language establishes such a robust inside-outside distinction that the work of translating specific formulations into more standard philosophical nomenclature generally produces either incoherence or inanity.

This is certainly the case with Adorno's attempt to read the famous claim that death is *Dasein's* 'own-most possibility.' Read in terms of Heidegger's own project, this claim is meant to deprive *Dasein* of its familiar efforts to comprehend its own situation as a series of problems to be solved or interests to be pursued, since the absolute possibility of the impossibility of *Dasein's* existence runs counter to *Dasein's* unreflective attachment to anticipation and actualization.

The anticipation of death does not make self-anticipation impossible but rather releases the latter from the cloud of false projections and conventional readings-off of the meaning of existence by which *Dasein* is accustomed to cope with its otherwise paralyzing fear of death, the fear of its own existence. This wrenching away from such conventional tropes of incessant forward progress, of the pre-assurance of narrative coherence as a span of otherwise empty time that *Dasein's* busyness is meant to fill up, is what Heidegger means by the claim that the 'own-most' possibility of death, of *Dasein* as a being-towards-death, is a wrenching away from *das Man*. What's lost is the illusory refuge of a series of tactically generated, soothing attitudes toward the meaning of "one's"

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life that *Dasein* operationalizes through a dreary syllogism – one’s life must be filled at every moment with meaningful projects; I am such a one; therefore I must fill the remaining duration of my lifespan with meaningful projects (BT, §53, 309).

The supreme importance of embracing one’s own possibility of nonexistence in an utterly non-relational (unmediated) manner represents the basic task of ontological as opposed to merely ontic death – of wrenching oneself from social convention. It also grounds Heidegger’s notorious argument for the radically non-relational status of the very possibility of death overall: ‘one’ does not—cannot—die. Death is for Heidegger “*unvertretbar*” in the sense that the death of another cannot in any sense “stand in for” and render coherent and intelligible the possibility of death for *Dasein* itself (BT §50, 284). Moreover, this radical “*Unvertretbarkeit*” of death is, Heidegger insists, also and at the same time the radical “*Unüberwindbarkeit*” of death, a claim clumsily rendered as death’s inability to be ‘outstripped’ in the Macquerrie translation, but which more accurately might be taken to mean that there is no such thing as “death” as a concept whose application to me (“All men are mortal”) renders me a member of a class of beings-toward-death. Judgment itself mediates, and all mediation here operates as a mode of inauthenticity – perhaps the last effort to ground the feeling that my death does not render me quite so alone.

Rather, the *Unüberwindbarkeit* of death is the claim that the incapacity to evade the reality of *Dasein*’s own death is the source of an authentically, sincerely lived life. By living, *Dasein* is free for, not (for the moment) free from, its own death.” Being free for death is living in genuine anticipation.

“When, by anticipation, one becomes free for one’s own death, one is liberated from one’s lost-ness in those possibilities which may accidentally thrust themselves upon one; and one is liberated in such a way that for the first time *Dasein* can authentically understand and choose among the factual possibilities lying ahead of that possibility which is not to be outstripped” (BT §264, 308).

The distinctive form of anxiety that *Dasein* embraces in this eyeball-to-eyeball with its [his?] own death may strike us as a high price to pay for a clear view of its own projects. *Dasein* is nevertheless at core a being-toward-death, and being toward death, Heidegger insists, is ‘essentially’ anxiety, a perpetual holding-open of the possibility of its own non-existence. But anxiety has at least this advantage, that it marks the successful resistance to the perpetual temptation to approach it as a problem to be solved—that is, as fear, as the *timor mortis* of both the epicureans and the stoics—a problem actually all too easily solved, as it turns out. All that’s required is looking away, finding distractions. The fact that in the end Heidegger regards the distractions of an Ivan Ilyich (playing bridge, home decoration) not qualitatively different than the commitment and inter-braiding of one’s essential being with those of others (finding love, devoting oneself to other persons) as not essentially different, as facets of the same stone of inauthenticity, is one of the scandals of continental philosophy in the twentieth century.

Whatever else we may think of this discussion of death as *Dasein*’s own-most possibility, it certainly does provide a powerful objection to the approach to death in the analytic philosophy of death. For one thing, Heidegger’s approach offers an explanation for the distinctively detached, affectively

flattened and existentially uninvolved tone that is *de rigueur* for analytic philosophy's discussions of death's impending nature, and of the relation between death and well-being. The standard defense here, that the tone is merely the product of prior methodological commitments, without which the concept of death could not in the first place be made a fitting object of conceptual analysis, doesn't adequately respond to the Heideggerian objection that what analytic philosophy is in fact analyzing is not death at all, since its methodological purview is self-consciously limited to "one's" death, the death of s, and that the *Unvertretbarkeit* of death implies that "one's" death is by definition not to be experienced. But if this is true, and if moreover *Dasein's* (your) death is only to be experienced in the form of anxious anticipation, only as your possibility, then analytic philosophy is literally left without anyone's death to discuss. It has, despite or because of its own illusory commitment to methodological neutrality, made death strippable, *überwindbar*, indeed has stripped it, and is instead speaking of something distinct: the relation between the biological period of life and the biological period of non-life, in which the fact of being not-alive prevents "one" from a range of activities and pursuits that "one" might otherwise have engaged in. "One's" death, on these terms, is in essence no different than "one's" withdrawal from an active life.

Unfortunately, *The Jargon of Authenticity* makes no attempt to salvage from Heidegger's treatment of death a critical corrective to the ideology of value-neutrality in this way. Rather, in *The Jargon of Authenticity*, Adorno reads Heidegger purely forensically, via a hermeneutics of suspicion that is itself strikingly undialectical and uncharacteristic of Adorno's more familiar subtle approach to imminent critique. *The Jargon of Authenticity* takes Heidegger as a charlatan,

behind whose views lie ill-concealed (and somewhat contradictory) motivations to preserve the ideological function of the very philosophical metaphysics he sets out to dismantle. Heidegger ends (so claims Adorno) by justifying and ennobling the inner core of violence that Adorno diagnoses in Heidegger's thought; a violence highly characteristic of the German intellectual Right at the historical moment where the fragile experiment with social democracy in the Weimar Republic hung in the balance. Heidegger's philosophy of death, in context, helped that experiment to fail.

Regarding the treatment of death in *Being and Time*, Adorno's argument aims to reveal that a failed, or withheld, overcoming of metaphysical idealism renders Heidegger's account of *Dasein* as being toward death to be just as compulsorily hollow, as free of all experiential and normative content, as the death of the absolute, unmediated Cartesian I whose reversal BT takes as its most fundamental task. Like analytic philosophy of death—though from an opposite direction—*Being and Time's* account of *Dasein's* death once again shows that the only death that can be predicated of such an abstract existence is an abstract one, as the kind of death modern conditions both evoke and demand. As Adorno puts the matter:

Once self has emptied itself of all qualities, on the grounds that they are accidental-actual, then nothing is left but to pronounce that doubly pitiful truth, that the self has to die; for it is already dead. Hence the emphasis of that sentence, "Death is." For the ontology of *Being and Time*, the irreplaceable quality of death turns into the essential character of subjectivity itself: this fact determines all the other determinations that lead up to the doctrine of authenticity, which has not only its norm but its ideal in

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death. Death becomes the essential element in *Dasein*. Once thought recurs – as though to its ground – to the absolutely isolated individuality, then there remains nothing tangible for it except mortality; everything else derives only from the world, which for Heidegger, as for the idealists, is secondary” (JA 137-138).

Dasein's authentic anxiety in the face of its own-most possibility is, for Adorno, therefore also the slip of the mask that gives away the ruse lying at the core of existentialism. As idealism by other means, it is, like idealism, caught in the contradiction between the fantasy of purity, of immediacy, and the entirely mediated social relationships it both occludes and deepens. And like idealism, at bottom existential phenomenology pours into the frozen image of the negation of the autarkic “I” all the grandeur and transcendence of which the empirical self is deprived, together with the malice and resentment that this diminished self projects against the immutability of the social forces that oppose and, ultimately, obliterate it. *Dasein* “identifies” with death as a sort of Stockholm syndrome of the living body, seeing in its own looming extinction the only source of its meaning, while steadfastly refusing to see that the structure of care that could possibly have concerned it in the first place is nothing other than what Heidegger had dismissed as merely ontic: the transformation of self through the death of the significant *other* through which and the self is and remains itself.

What remains, once this ontic cleansing is completed, is the negation of the inanity of the “merely ontic” discussion of death in analytic philosophy of death: but now it is the ‘merely ontological’ self-relation of an overblown and self-absorbed ego to itself. In this self-relation, Adorno sees another, complementary vacuity, a repetition with variation of

the same vacuity that Hegel had diagnosed as the romantic flight into subjectivity, and which the latter saw as the only thing in the world that truly deserved the name of evil.

Dasein's noble silence in the face of its own finitude, supposedly the comportment that is meant to reverse the idle chatter of *das Man*, is for Adorno in fact a complement to idle chatter—call it idle silence—which has its most fitting expression in the fatuous will to sacrifice, a pseudo-nobility or false profundity all-to-familiar from the German martial classes, to whom the German petty bourgeoisie looked with such unrequited longing, and which National Socialism so astutely commandeered. The core feature of this historically and culturally specific form of ideology of sacrifice is the resistance to introspection. “The fascist ideology,” Adorno writes,

had to completely remove from consciousness that sacrifice which was proclaimed for the sake of German supremacy. The chance that such a sacrifice would reach the goal for which it was intended was from the outset too doubtful. It would never have been able to survive such a conscious introspection. In 1938, a National Socialist functionary wrote, in a polemical variation on a social democratic theme, ‘only sacrifice will make us free. Heidegger is at one with that (JA 132).

Ontological or idle silence is nothing more than an exalted form of seething, a toxic brew of vacuity and undifferentiated rage, a “racial quality of inwardness:”

Violence inheres in the nucleus of Heidegger’s philosophy, as it does in the form of his language. That violence lies in the constellation into which his philosophy moves self-preservation and death. The principle of self-preservation

threatens its subjects with death as an *ultima ratio*, a final reason; and when this death is used as the very essence of that principle, it means a theodicy of death (JA 134).

In the moment of maximum political uncertainty of the Weimer Republic, the mid-1920s, when the political fortunes of Germany could still conceivably have gone in the direction of a stabilized democratic political culture, *Dasein's* silence in the face of its own possible death was hardly *immediate*, hardly “merely” ontological. It reflected, and furthered, the spread of a mentality that “knew”, but refused to know that it knew, that it was literally sentencing its own children, by the million, to premature and violent deaths. Just a little introspection would reveal that you cannot be a Nazi without also willing the death of your own children. The preemption of guilt of this sacrifice (it is not my children but I myself whom I sacrifice) subtends the lie.⁵

The conclusion that Adorno draws from this is entirely straightforward. In attempting to redefine death as ontological, Heidegger's crypto-idealism leads him instead to perform a logic of identity. “Death and *Dasein* are identified;” Adorno writes, “death becomes pure identity, as in an existent which can absolutely not happen to any person other than oneself. The analysis of existence glides quickly over the most immediate

⁵ Postscript: On September 6 1941 Heidegger writes to the mother of a former student of his who had just died in action, saying that “for those of us left behind, it is a difficult step to the knowledge that every one of the many young Germans who are today sacrificing their lives with a still-genuine spirit and reverential heart may be experiencing the most beautiful fate.” Quoted in Rüdiger Safranski, *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*, trans. Ewald Osers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 328.

and trivial aspect of the relation between death and *Dasein*, their simple nonidentity; the fact that death destroys *Dasein*, truly negates it” (JA 138).

This logic of identity completes the surreptitious movement in which Heidegger, attempting to understand how *Dasein* can live authentically in the face of its own death, its own-most possibility, asserts its identity with that same possibility: *Dasein* = death. This final movement completes, in mirror image, the moment of reification in analytic philosophy of death, in which “the person,” with “its” undefined and indefinable projects and interests, submits to various tests of quantitative performance, whose success-quantum is to reach an acceptable index in order for death to be interpreted as a culmination rather than as a stop: as the job-end, rather than the technical breakdown of the production of well-being.

Just as the ontic death of “the person” needs to be projected into the proximate future as the meaningful retirement of productivity, so ultimately for Heidegger ontological death is a technical requirement for maintaining the ideology of the narrative whole, the completely lived life. In this sense Heidegger's philosophy of death is, if anything, even more thoroughly mediated by the categories of his social context—and the reification that those categories subsist in—than the philosophers of *das Man*. Heidegger is “smitten with death as that which is supposed to be absolutely removed from the universal exchange relationship. Yet he does not realize that he remains caught up in the same fatal cycle as the exchange relationship which he sublimates into *das Man*. Insofar as death is absolutely alien to the subject, it is the model of all reification. Only ideology praises it as a cure for exchange. This ideology debases exchange into the more

despairing form of eternity, instead of getting rid of proper exchange by letting it fulfill itself properly” (JA 152).

And yet both of these meaning-giving strategies succeed only insofar as they redefine and reverse polarities between death and those who die; the latter becoming more and more thing-like, vacuous, abstracted and uniform while the former, death, is reconceived as the fixed point of reference against which the meaning of these lifeless entities, lost somewhere, at whatever time *t* in an indeterminate duration of lifespan, must find whatever meaning they can. (“Death is.”)

Just as living human beings are brought into focus only under the appearance of the non-living (and what else is reification?) so the end of life is successfully brought under philosophical concepts, both in ‘analytic’ and ‘continental’ philosophy, only by endowing it with the same qualities of life—meaning—that the life we live denies us.

II. “Dying Today”

The first part of this essay offered an Adorno-inspired imminent critique of the methodological and substantive features of recent analytic philosophy of death, and then in a second step reconstructed Adorno’s critique of Heidegger’s reflections on death in *Being and Time*. The idea was to show how each of these two approaches, under critical analysis, disclose ideological investments that belie their claim to philosophical immediacy and methodological neutrality. The critique of each would help to illuminate the critical dimensions of the other. This is highly characteristic of the interpretive approach of Adorno’s thought, which of course has

both its evident strengths but also its clear weaknesses. Among the latter must count the highly elusive and suggestive character of any substantive philosophical argument that imminent critique will offer to supplant its superceded alternatives.

The remainder of the essay speculates on what that alternative position, a critical theory of death, might look like. In a first section, I will argue that the highly historically and socially mediated nature of human death and dying resists any simplistic attempt at reduction. This should come as no surprise. More interesting is the conclusion that can be drawn from the specific way in which the concept of death resists the dismantling of its own dialectical structure. It is, I argue, a direct derivation of the larger dialectic of *natural history*, which Adorno seems to have consistently regarded as the clearest version of dialectics *as such*. This suggests that from an Adornian perspective, not only is death to be read dialectically, but that death (read through the lens or ‘way of seeing’ of the concept of natural history) is dialectics.

This means that a critical theory of death might do well to orient itself by the concept (or constellation of concepts) that, as Adorno argues, lies at the very center of the dialectic of natural history, where nature and history in their most complete moment of development “reverse” into one another: this is the concept of transience [*Vergänglichkeit*]. I suggest that transience captures something crucial about how a critical theory of death reconfigures (cancels, uplifts, preserves) the concept of death that has been bequeathed to it. In a third section, I argue that the dialectical critique of the different valences of transience suggests not just the dystopian idea of a world in which not even death remains as a possible authentic

experience, but the negation of this dystopian reading as well: a weak utopianism that suggests the lingering possibility of meaningful death. I explore that possibility in the paper's conclusion.

Following Adorno, that the analysis of the concept of death reveals its dialectical structure, its discrete 'moments,' this analysis aims less at clarifying conceptual content, or testing intuitions, than in illuminating the moments of contradiction between a concept and the range of its application; moments in which the failure of fit between concept and world discloses something about the world that otherwise remains ideologically screened. Death is also of course a concept, which criticism shows to be productively inadequate to its intended referent. The polarity imminent in the concept is best thought of as a specific variant of what Adorno frequently nominates as the quintessential polarity of more significant philosophical concepts, those of nature and history. Natural history is the primary instance of dialectics.

In the concept of death, the relation between the natural-biological and the social-historical dimensions or axes will be definitive. Everybody dies, and everybody's death is much the same insofar as we emphasize one axis (nature) over the Other (history). This fact simultaneously supports and contradicts the equally obvious fact that the *meaning* of death—how death exists as a social practice—is highly dynamic and protean. Death is the end of the animal, the termination of the animal drive for self-preservation. But as human death is a biological event, it is also utterly inflected by the social history of the species and of the institutions and practices definitive for the intelligibility of the biological categories (such as 'life') themselves.

The dialectic of natural history is an implicit argument that no "nature in itself" rests at the end of a process of abstraction from historical-social mediation, just as no social practices are coherently analyzable independently of the material, bodily medium in which actual human beings live, suffer, and die. The will to abstraction, in which a natural or a social-historical immediacy can somehow be distilled from the dialectic of natural history, itself bears unmistakably the same buried stratum of rage that Adorno insists is at the core of identity thinking: the will to stop mediation is the will to kill what impinges from a supposed outside.

As concepts, nature and history reverse polarities at the extremes of their respective developments. Nature, understood as the unchanging substratum against which history registers incessant change, is, as the fact of the material life of the body, of embodiment and its vicissitudes, also legible as the consignment of human beings to the fate of every other natural body: death as the expiration of the creature, as passing away, as the "nothing more" of animal life, a failed repression whose constant eruption through the weakly defended borders of conscious mind is an unceasing catechism of its own finitude. But that is nothing other than its consignment to history, to the passing away of all creatures in and through time. Nature is only nature as it is to us; perceived under the sign of our own radical finitude. Radical finitude is not thinkable outside of the omnipresence of our own embodiment. Nature and history cross at the very zero point at which the human being is brought face to face with her own peculiar fate: as a material being whose materiality, whose self-relation as a natural being, is disclosed as being itself thoroughly historical. And this zero point has, for

Adorno, a specific name: transience (*Vergänglichkeit*).

Transience refers to the range of disclosive possibilities for interpreting the meaning of death once the concept of death has been removed from the ideological context of bourgeois metaphysics, including the allegedly post-metaphysical appropriation of the concept of death in Heidegger. Terms such as finitude, mortality, anxiety, dread, and other subject-centered cognates arise from the persistent effort to discipline the concept of death by freezing its motion, in favor of the subjective side. Releasing this frozen dialectic renders the concept of death unstable. This instability is productive, itself disclosive of new interpretive possibilities in the way that the concept is thought and applied.

Transience can thus be taken as a way to think of a disenchanting version of human mortality; one that has parted ways with the immediacy of the self and its self-relation; that is beyond the need for the false consolation of this historically and socially bankrupt illusion of the mandatory model for a life well-lived; that rejects the very logic of meaning on which this model of the bourgeois autonomous self always rested. This is the myth of the narrative autonomy, one might call it, of the full or complete, that is the 'whole' life, the life given meaning by projects, whose completion the autonomous self can retrospectively take credit and draw satisfaction. "Thus I have willed it," is the form that this self takes in projecting itself into a narrative future in which its futural self, at the moment of death, will look back and grasp the shape, direction, and meaning of a life lived well. And even if the projects in question are nothing more than counting blades of grass, this narrative construction of a *life-span* is definitive for the 'moral power' of self-authorship.

An Adornian critical theory of death will observe that contemporary social and economic conditions make this life un-livable, given the mythically repetitive nature of work and consumption, and the domination of even the everyday forms of life that dissociate the I from any real capacity to own its own projects, even as this pattern remains the only one available to interpret or misinterpret what has happened in one's life. Transience—again dialectically—stands for both the impossibility of deriving a meaningful narrative life span in the form of the retrospective on successful projects, as well as the insight into just this impossibility. It makes the possibility of meaningful death as the conclusion of a meaningful life—the coincidence, as it were, of biological death and the end of a life—now possible only through the critical rejection of the false promise of narrative wholeness or completion that capitalist modernity offers but offers as empty.

As we saw in the first half of this paper, that foundational paradigm of the narrative completeness of life, whether in analytic or Heideggerian garb, was implicitly committed to the view that life's wholeness—the ability of an individual human life to exhibit meaningfulness or intelligibility, to count even as a candidate for evaluation of either authenticity or wellbeing—rests on the narrative logic of retrospection from the perspective of death's approach. But this glimpse into a post-metaphysical, that is, a fully disenchanting re-appropriation of a *human* death is only one, and for a critical philosophy perhaps not the most important line of inquiry. More important still is the exposition of *what is in fact the case* regarding the concept of death. If death is *not* the full realization of the spectrum of possible meanings of transience, then what *is* the concept of death, both intrinsically and in its

relation to its relevant field of application?

Answering this question involves interpreting the dialectic of natural history in a distinctly different dimension. For here the basic question is to understand what has happened to the natural history of human death through the concrete historical circumstances that humanity—above all members of modern, disenchanting, market-based societies of Western countries—has undergone in the last several centuries. The concept of death is of course also in monadic form the crystallization of a spectrum of human experience. That experience does not crystallize in narrative form but is, like the social context it encapsulates, reticulate: it forms a dense web of interconnected experiences, memories and expectations.

Death changes – it kaleidoscopically recombines elements of nature and history, diffracted through changing historical configurations and crystallized under distinct kinds of social and economic pressures. There is no single human history and hence no one way to die. But the history of death points to one recurrent theme in the suite of human histories: the exacerbation of contradictions that drive complex societies toward ever-graver forms of domination, self-delusion, and loss of meaning.

The promise of bourgeois modernity was the freedom of the individual understood as formal autonomy. Life should be lived according to one's own direction; the autonomous man could be reliably placed in a position of authority over the processes of his own self-realization and self-direction, and moral and technological progress would ultimately initiate a virtuous circle whereby the intangibles of rational autonomy would produce, and be prolonged by, revolutions in scientific

and medical technology that would dramatically reduce physical suffering and vastly prolong longevity.

No properly dialectical reading of the transformation of death in modernity can responsibly deny the partial realization of these Enlightenment hopes. We in the wealthy Northern democracies live longer than our ancestors, and our poor fellow human beings. But “dying today”—and here we truly can take death as a synecdoche for the fate of the individual in modernity—has transformed under this very process in ways entirely undesired and unforeseen. As the predominant ideology of the autonomous and free bourgeois self aged, the world that this ideology helped to create is not one in which this kind of self, and this kind of life, are possible. We outlive our projects. We live on, and this *Fortleben* is the expression of technological triumph, the widening of the gap or mis-alignment between the end of the creature and the conclusion of the life. *Fortleben* in the nursing home, we have added time to our lifespans, even if it is frequently empty time.

The objective impossibility of freedom and autonomy and the life that they mandate, in combination with the lingering metaphysical demand for transcendence, opens up an unresolved gap, a wound, between the expectation of death as meaningful conclusion or culmination of the whole life, and the actual experiences of persons whose lives, never whole and never entirely livable, do not culminate but merely stop. This gap fuels the specific transformation of death that Adorno identifies in late modernity, when the resources of religious consolation can no longer maintain their functional relevance. A lengthy quote from Adorno's lectures on metaphysics can illustrate:

The change I have in mind can also be expressed, perhaps most simply, by saying that death, in the form it has taken on, no longer accords with the life of any individual. For it is a lie to say that death is an invariant at all times; death, too, is a quite abstract entity; death itself can be a different thing in very different times. Or one might say, if you will not take my literary references amiss, that there is no longer an epic or a biblical death no longer is a person able to die wary, old, and sated with life. [...] Another aspect of the situation I am trying to indicate to you is that old age, with categories such as wisdom and all that goes with it, no longer exists, and that old people, in so far as they are condemned to become aged and too weak to preserve their own lives, are turned into objects of science – the science of gerontology, as it is called. In this way age is seen as a kind of second minority, so that something like a program of euthanasia carried out by some future form of inhumanity, of no matter what provenance, becomes foreseeable. Thus, the reconciliation of life, as something rounded and closed in itself, with death, a reconciliation which was always questionable and precarious and, if it existed at all, was probably a happy exception – that reconciliation is out of the question today.⁶

The promise of the medical technological prolongation of life delivered. But it also made visible, and exacerbated, the tendency already latent in that social formation in which death was taken as a technological problem: it opened wider the gap between biologically dying and coming to the end of what one could take as a meaningful life, to such an extent that it widened beyond measure the already considerable distance between physical and social death, introducing yet another variant of that liminal zone of the individual who has died one

⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 106-07.

death but not another, whose deaths do not coincide.

This can be taken as a variant of one of Adorno's best-known aphorisms: if the wrong life [*falsches Leben*] cannot be lived rightly, it should come as no shock that it cannot be ended rightly either. It is easy to see how closely this kind of Marxist-inflected critique approaches Heidegger's indictment of the fear-laced superficiality of the idle chatter about death and the meaning of life that is *das Man's* stock in trade. In few places are the tangled lineages of critical theory and existential phenomenology more evident than here. The apparatus of individuality on which an exhausted metaphysics depends has long since buckled under the weight of a pervasive regime of social lies. The death of individuals has lost all meaning just because the individual, the basic counting unit of modernity, has been expunged long since by the very world it brought into being. Citing *Minima Moralia*:⁷

Thus death comes within the scope of history, and the latter in turn can only be understood through it. Its dignity used to resemble that of the individual. His autonomy, economic in origin, culminated in the conception of his absoluteness once the theological hope of immortality, that had empirically relativized it, began to pale. To this corresponded the emphatic image of death in which the individual, the basis of all bourgeois thinking and behavior, was entirely wiped out. Death was the absolute price of absolute value. Now it shares the ruin of the socially defunct individual (MM 231).

And:

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005). Henceforth cited as MM in the body of the text.

If the individual whom death annihilates is himself nothing, bereft of self-command and of his own being, then the annihilating power becomes also nothing, as if in a facetious application of Heidegger's formula of the nothing that nihilates. The radical replaceability of the individual makes his death practically – and in utter contempt – revocable, as it was once conceived to be with paradoxical pathos by Christianity (MM 232).

This means that death “today” is entirely, or nearly entirely, socially assimilated. The dialectic of natural history here turns entirely into the social with the evaporation of the biological. It becomes a matter of hygiene, a mummified remnant of bourgeois tact, why we do what we do, or don't do what we don't do, with, to, and for the dying and the dead. “In being seen as no more than the exit of a living creature from the social combine,” Adorno writes, “death has been finally domesticated: dying merely confirms the absolute irrelevance of the natural organism in the face of the social absolute” (MM 232). And:

What the National Socialists perpetrated against millions of people, the parading and patterning of the living like dead matter, then the mass production and cost cutting of death, threw its prefiguring shadow on those who felt moved to chortle over corpses. What is decisive is the absorption of biological destruction by conscious social will. Only a humanity to whom death has become as indifferent as its members, that has itself died, can inflict it administratively on innumerable people (MM 232).

Adorno gropes for a term that would capture this new mode of dying and offers the peculiar German verb “*krepieren*,” which has no suitable English translation but is often rendered

as “croaking” or “snuffing it,” idioms that do capture the sense of casual indignity and dehumanization surrounding the actual act of expiring, but carry a kind of informal and even genial aura that *krepieren* lacks entirely. The German (borrowed from the Italian ‘*crepare*’) carries the strong connotation of dying wretchedly, of dying utterly. (A parallel meaning of the word is to be blown to smithereens; to fly apart or come utterly to pieces. For instance, a cannon may *krepieren* if it's fired when overheated; a piece of machinery operated too long with no maintenance can *krepieren*, fly to pieces, rather than simply break down.) A beaten horse may *krepieren* once it receives the one last blow that moves it from barely-alive to entirely dead and fit for the knacker's yard; a human being *krepiert* once the last particle of the will to survive is expended and the balance of forces making human life possible collapses.

In this vein Adorno's description of the debased and flattened significance of death is a close analogue to Heidegger's phenomenology of ontic death, and this includes the observation that the intensity of the classic affects accompanying the contemplation of one's own sure death—that of fear, *timor mortis*—varies inversely with the significance that death is capable of bearing. The less people live their lives, the more terror their death holds for them. This inverse proportionality is once more a distinctive mark of the modern: it presupposes (and describes) the doomed effort to generate a coherent sense of transcendence in the wake of modernity.

The less effectively life continues to be interpreted through the collapsing schema of the autonomous self, whose lifespan is to be narratively appropriated as a predetermined meaningful progression, the more death, as the supposed

culmination and focal point of that narrative, is a motor for terror. One might suppose that at least part of the reason for this inverse relation between fear of death and meaning of life is the simple fact that the failure to live as we should, or at least as we have been led to believe that we could, transforms our prospective deaths from the culmination of a distinctly human life to the “mere” stop of death as obliteration. A wholly imminent account of the relation between life and its other means that narrative wholeness or completion is the only game in town when it comes to the possibility of the transcendence of the merely creaturely and the advent of a distinctly human significance in life. Even in the (always frequent) cases of premature deaths (or merely stupid, accidental, contingent ones) that sense of an ending as narrative completion is the only post-metaphysical standard left by which a life can be, by contrast, mourned as unfinished – for without it we have mere duration of success at self-preservation, and every life, at every moment, is just as “finished off,” that is, just as fitting to end, as any other.

Wrong life will frustrate the demand for its meaningful culmination since it is in itself a sham of meaning, just as those who live it register that they are shams of fully individuated, that is to say autonomous persons. This itself is a critique fully in conformity with a line of anti-modern criticism at least as old as the century, and Adorno will frequently cite romantic anti-moderns (Nietzsche, Peguy, Rilke) as bringing to expression a deep undercurrent of protest against the vanishing capacity to die a death of one’s own commensurate with the evaporation of meaning in life. “The terror of death today,” Adorno comments in the same lecture course on metaphysics, “is largely the terror of seeing how much the living resemble it. And it might therefore be said that if life

were lived rightly, the experience of death would also be changed radically, in its innermost composition.”⁸

The famous segment at the conclusion of *Negative Dialectics* on ‘dying today’ marks the completion of this argument. If modern conditions transform the old myth of death as fulfilled culmination into merely *krepieren*, then Auschwitz completes this process. The specific horror of the advent of administrative murder or industrial mass death at Auschwitz, and the reason why it marks both culmination and completion of historical trends leading to it but at the same time also a radical, indeed an abyssal break from all precedent, seems roughly to lie in the introduction of a process designed to convert human beings into a previously unknown form, one captured neither by reference to mere matter, nor to animality, nor to exaggerated versions of classical models such as ‘bare’ or naked life, as in Agamben’s work. Instead, the industry of victimization appears to have produced kinds of liminality—of neither-this-nor-that—simply not captured by any normative or descriptive use of concepts at our disposal. This liminality is part of the horrified cluelessness that is highly characteristic of efforts to interpret the holocaust normatively.

Adorno’s central claim regarding the implications of Auschwitz in this regard is that in its wake it is henceforth unclear whether any metaphysical experience is any longer possible. In this sense the specific modes of death introduced at Auschwitz constitute a new form of natural history, and though Adorno does not describe this form in these terms one can say that it amounts to a transition from death as the reality transience or *Vergänglichkeit* to a new natural-social

⁸ Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 136.

reality, something that is neither the extermination of the animal nor the death of the individual human being; neither the perishing of the creature nor the end of the narratable life.

Death at Auschwitz, in other words, ‘fulfills’ in a malign sense, the disenchantment of death leading from epic death to a historically new mode of transience. Here, however, the obverse of the possibility of a progressive transfiguration of transience translates into something new – and new in the sense that it evokes, horribly, anthropologically ancient fears and insecurities. The experience of the camps transforms transience into its own frozen negation. The zero-point of the dialectic of nature and history is itself obverted; transience turns to something else, some other way of non-being, which is both uncannily archaic and at the same time so out of touch with the sum total of collective human experience that it requires concepts and words not in our possession, for which critical thinking with utmost reluctance has to go searching.

And here again we have to adopt a hesitantly experimental use of terms in order to gesture toward, at least, that for which we have no concept. I will propose a candidate along the same lines as Adorno’s experimental *krepiieren*. There is a peculiar German adverb, *verschollen*, a past participle of a verb that no longer exists. It means literally to have gone missing; to have vanished, irremediably, without a trace. But it also connotes that which has been expunged from memory – obliterated and unrecoverable from the consciousness of human beings.

Verschollensein—the state of being entirely and irretrievably lost—would certainly be a peculiar coinage. It is not clear how such a word could itself even

exist. (Only one modern author to my knowledge has attempted to use a version of the word in contemporary literature: Kafka’s original title for the novel *Amerika* was *Die Verschollene*, which would have captured the experience of those left behind when the emigrant, full of plans and hopes, sails off and is never heard from again. In his essay on Kafka in *Notes to Literature* Adorno observes that it would have served the novel far better; the word itself, Adorno writes, “is a blank space for a name that cannot be found. The perfect passive participle *verschollen*, ‘never heard from again,’ has lost its verb the way the family’s memory loses the emigrant who goes to ruin and dies. Far beyond its actual meaning, the expression of the word *verschollen* is the expression of the novel itself.”⁹ The moral evil of a massive engineering designed to bring about the *krepiieren* of millions of human souls lies not *just* in the wretchedness and suffering inflicted on them; not *just* in the harm done to them and not *just* in the deprivation of what might have been their due. For it is true that humanity has never been a stranger to inventive and large-scale projects for the suffering and murder of humanity. The moral evil of Auschwitz consists at least in part *also* in what motivated that industrial *Krepiierenwerk*, and what that work in large measure accomplished: the deliberate conversion of human beings to *Verschollene*. They were disassembled, and as a result they were not merely gone, but vanished, “gone missing” in ways previously unimaginable.¹⁰

⁹ See “Titles: Paraphrases on Lessing” in Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, trans. Rolf Tiedemann (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 7.

¹⁰ J.M. Bernstein puts this complex point in the following, illuminating way: “The idea of the conformability of a death to the life lived is indigenous to our moral picture of human lives: full, cut short, wasted; and it is transmitted from there to our telling of lives and thence to philosophical history. Adorno construes the expropriation of death that occurred to individuals in Auschwitz -- their death removed as their own because of their ‘administrative murder’ involved the

III. The Dialectics of Death

True to Adorno's larger diagnosis of the fate of experience under conditions of modernity, the overall transformations in death have registered as complex losses. The loss of the possibility of the noble death of the bourgeois individual, of a death rendered intrinsically valuable by its integration into the narrative of the autonomous self, is on one level simply one of the hard truths of life in a deeply disenchanted world. Wrong life cannot be lived rightly, and so cannot be ended rightly either. We can expect no alignment between physical death and the end of a narratively meaningful life; transience registers this lack of fit. But that same disenchantment also reveals the illusory character of a historically specific conception of the autonomous subject in the first place. That death is not as we wish it is, in one sense, because the social context in which such deaths were still possible is gone; in another sense because that context itself was from the first based on a functional level of mendacity.

The transformation of death—its final loss of aura or the advent of a genuinely post-metaphysical concept of death—is, as I have tried to show, dependent on a creative re-appropriation of the dialectic of natural history. If the Nazis inaugurated a new reality in which people no longer die but only "*krepieren*," then this horrific fact rests on the possibility of horrific persons taking it upon themselves to appropriate

systematic elimination of any 'own-ness,' any individuality – as reverberating on the concepts and categories through which we attempt to comprehend it. The idea that a death belongs to a life, is tellable in relation to it, is part of the categorical syntax through which process (life) and result (death) are connected. Here the result overtakes the process itself, leaving it without result..." See J.M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 379.

natural history for their own purposes – to dismantle the dialectic between the embodied and the social self, to try to demolish the sociality of the self and leave nothing but body (and ultimately not even that) behind, as the most radical project of victimization ever attempted. It was in the final analysis the attempt to smash the dialectic of natural history in order to obliterate the truth that lies at the intersection point of the historical and natural axes. Transience, the distinctively human status of being and being-not, entails not just the fragility and destructibility of the body but also the persistence, the survival, of the fabric of social bonds in which the human body, uniquely, is sustained. The attempt to obliterate even transience then exceeds the "mere" technology of victimization and the "mere" appropriation of human death, since the goal is the very production of nihility itself: not just the killing of people, but the obliteration of their killing itself – the transformation of persons into nothing, into *Verschollene*, rather than into former or posthumous persons.

Even at (perhaps especially at) this nadir, a critical theory of death will however also encounter, as a limit concept and as a mirror of its own intention, a countervailing impulse. This impulse too is part of what would be ultimately critical about a critical theory of death. There is a weak utopian current that still charges the discourse of human perishing, even at the remarkable extreme that Adorno reaches. And like all persistent utopias in critical theory in general and in Adorno's work in particular, this utopian current exhibits a strongly child-like, indeed a childish element. It is the utopian 'No' to death, the demand that death be cancelled. Through this prism even dying today as *krepieren*, even the transformation of *Vergänglichkeit* into *Verschollensein*, provide in a refracted way an insight into the remnant of a

metaphysical experience.

This utopian undercurrent of Adorno's otherwise sober and adult writings on human death is only lightly documentable, showing up like a sort of ghostly or phantom other to those writings and, as it were, leaving them no peace. Adorno is said to have once made the (neither offhand nor lighthearted) comment to Helmuth Plessner and Thomas Mann that death is in fact a "human scandal" whose abolition was morally obligatory.¹¹ Only one published text documents this willed naivete, which insists on the mere demand for death's abrogation regardless of its consequences. That text is a peculiar one, a transcript of a conversation with Bloch that was broadcast in 1964.¹²

Utopia, Adorno comments, is at heart nothing other than the utterly rational conviction regarding the contingency of apparently natural and inevitable social arrangements. In the face of that naturalness, the rationality of the diagnosis of contingency, like that of calls for making things different, inevitably appears as naïve and childlike. This, and not the child's attachment to the possibility of gratification without loss is, for Adorno, the surest characteristic of the utopian impulse. That impulse, rational and childish at once, applies not least to the most natural and the most non-contingent of

¹¹ See Stefan Muller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Polity, 2009), 481.

¹² Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno, "Etwas fehlt...Ueber die Widersprueche der utopischen Sehnsucht," in Ernst Bloch, *Ergaenzungsband zur Gesamtausgabe Tendenz-Latenz-Utopie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978). Transcript of radio conversation with Bloch and Adorno, moderated by Horst Krueger, 1964.

all arrangements, death.

Surely the demand that we ought no longer have to die is, Adorno observes, a utopian wish not categorically different from other ones that challenge the supposed impossibility of thinking differently. Unlike utopian wishes even for other biological universals mediated through social arrangements, though, the demand to eliminate death opens itself up to a particularly fierce defense, as if, Adorno writes, demanding the end of death was akin to throwing a stone in front of the police station. The wish is, Adorno notes, a 'sore spot.' One does not expect a temperate response.

And yet this very sore spot, and the energy with which it is policed, indicates an ineradicable, indeed a foundational part of utopian consciousness, the neat (and deliberate) reversal of Heidegger's "own-most possibility" of death; the mere possibility of not having to die. What Heidegger would have dismissed as a merely ontic preoccupation, a response to fear, a convention of self-avoidance, Adorno insists is both a utopian and a critical response to the enormous ennoblement of death in Heidegger. Indeed the "*Heiligung*" of death, not just in Heidegger but in the entire scope of philosophical existentialism, is the latter's deepest secret: its hatred of, and attempt to banish the last traces of, utopian thinking.

Death as culmination to a whole life – beyond even the mendacious function of this ideal under current social conditions, Adorno suspects that this was from the first a bit of proto-idealism left over from the rise of the monotheistic religions and their ascetic demands. "It might be asked," Adorno speculates in his lecture course on metaphysics,

whether that kind of epic wholeness of life, the biblical idea that Abraham died old and sated with life, whether this wishful image of a life stretching out in time so that it can be narrated, and rounded off in its own death, was not always a mere transfiguration. I cannot escape the suspicion that wherever such a harmony between a self-contained life and death appears to have existed in the past, the life of those to which the harmony is attributed was subjected to so inordinate a burden, was, as one is apt to say today, so alienated from them, that they did not even get so far as to perceive the heterogeneity of death, and integrated themselves with death out of a kind of weakness. Consequently, the idea of a complete life, meaningful within itself, must probably be abandoned with the conception of the epic death – for catastrophes always have the power to draw into themselves remote realities and events from the distant past. If mortally weary people take an affirmative view of death, it is most likely the case that death relieves them of a burden. The reason for the allegedly positive relationship to death taught by these metaphysics is none other than the one which comes forcibly to mind today [...]: that the life in question amounted to so little that there was little resistance to its ending.”¹³

Anyone who has tended a very old or very ill loved one at death knows what Adorno means here. It might have been well to have the sort of world in which narrative wholeness links life and death in the way that these “epic” longings reach for. We do not and never have lived in that world. We do not die that kind of death.

The awareness of transience among those for whom life has become burdensome can certainly accommodate the

most contradictory of affects: the sentiment that one is “nearly finished” expresses an ambivalence that no hermeneutics would ever resolve. The ‘immeasurable sadness’ that Adorno attaches to the gradual dawning realization that absolutely nothing of one’s world and its attachments will remain, that all will be lost, is not an affect that can be helpfully assigned to the dying one herself, since those to whom she mattered see it as well: tending the very old, “especially if one loves them, one becomes so aware of the decrepitude of that part of them which one would like to regard as the immortal that one can hardly imagine what is to be left over from such a poor, infirm creature, which is no longer identical with itself.”¹⁴

Transience also means that the eternal passing away of all things makes such a death no longer an individual experience—it simply cannot be my “own-most” and never was—since transience is at bottom also the most profound mediation; a dispersal of self into its others, whether other subjects or indeed other objects. Transience is *also* intersubjectivity, a way of glimpsing the tight weave of shared lives whose individual threads never get separated out into a single narrative line, and whose unbroken expanse (which will close up over us, leaving not or barely a trace behind) is quite rightly the object both of abjection, but also deep comfort, the fabric of life.

In this contradictory affective dimension of transience, Adorno locates at least the traces of whatever dimension of transcendence might be left to us, we heirs to a thoroughly disenchanted world. Beyond metaphysics and its theological ancestor (neither of which, Adorno notes with interest, has

¹³ Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 134.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

ever expressed a particle of interest in what it would actually be like to be immortal), what remains of the idea of immortality is the impersonal survival of life, bodied forth not in its successful projects and acceptable wellbeing, but in goodness.

The fully secular, fully disenchanting analogue of the metaphysical dream of the survival of death consists in what Adorno, quoting Proust (and, indirectly, Kafka) calls ‘a very paradoxical form of hope.’ Describing the death of Bergotte while gazing at Vermeer’s “A View of Delft,” Proust describes the dying author’s (Bergotte is a stand-in for Anatole France) tact, even as he is faced with a sense of infinite loss as he realizes that a single patch of the most vivid yellow in the Vermeer painting he is gazing at exceeds in its agonizing beauty all his own precious writings. Bergotte dies; this is his last thought. But Proust wonders if this death is not also a release or dispersion of some of Bergotte’s goodness into the material world which is not entirely unreceptive to it. Bergotte’s transience also registers as the elective affinities of concrete configurations of the material world with the process of what we can call Bergotte’s concluded life: “Through the night following his death,” Proust writes, “in the lighted shop windows, his books arranged three by three kept vigil like angels with outstretched wings.”

He was dead. Dead forever? Who can say? Certainly, experiments in spiritualism offer us no more proof than the dogmas of religion that the soul survives death. All that we can say is that everything is arranged in this life as though we entered it carrying a burden of obligations contracted in a former life; there is no reason inherent in the conditions of life on this earth that can make us consider ourselves obliged to do good, to be kind and

thoughtful, even to be polite, nor for an atheist artist to consider himself obliged to begin over again a score of times a piece of work the admiration aroused by which will matter little to his worm-eaten body, like the patch of yellow wall painted with so much skill and refinement by the artist destined to be for ever unknown and barely identified under the name Vermeer. All these obligations, which have no sanction in our present life, seem to belong to a different world, a world based on kindness, scrupulousness, self-sacrifice, a world entirely different from this one and which we leave in order to be born on this earth, before perhaps returning there to live once again beneath the sway of those unknown laws which we obeyed because we bore their precepts in our hearts, not knowing whose hand had traced them there - those laws to which every profound work of the intellect brings us nearer and which are invisible only - if then! - to fools. So that the idea that Bergotte was not dead forever is by no means improbable.¹⁵

Bergotte’s immortality, such as it is, does not rest in the enduring effects of his work – it consists just there, in the immediate wake of his passing, as a transient material detail that does not refute but deepens the sense of transience. Neither success nor fame offers this strange glimpse into Bergotte’s perdurance. It is Bergotte’s goodness, which required neither fame, nor skill, nor ambition. In goodness indeed Bergotte approached the very limit of the conception of the person – for goodness in this sense is not individuated, and therefore Bergotte does not die because what is important about Bergotte, his goodness, is not the same as the sort of thing (the individual I identical with the man, Bergotte) whose

¹⁵ Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past, Vol. 3: The Captive, The Fugitive & Time Regained*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Vintage, 1982), 186.

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death would result in obliteration, in annihilation.¹⁶

¹⁶ Though working this out would be the task of an entirely different project, my strong suspicion is that the metaphysics underlying Proust's intuition regarding Bergotte's death matches precisely that recently developed by Mark Johnston. See Mark Johnston, *Surviving Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

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