The Banality of Death

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Abstract
Notwithstanding the burgeoning literature on death, philosophers have tended to focus on the significance death has (or ought/ought not to have) for *the one who dies*. Thus, while the relevance one's own death has for others (and the significance others' deaths have for us) is often mentioned, it is rarely attributed any great importance to the purported *real* philosophical issues. This is a striking omission, not least because the deaths of others – and the anticipated effects our own death will have on those we leave behind – are normally of great importance outside the confines of academic philosophy. In this paper I want to do three things: (i) argue that philosophers' treatment of death tends to distort the issue (Sections I–III); (ii) outline some of the ways others' deaths figure in how we assess our own mortality (Sections IV–V); and (iii) raise some general questions about the value of 'theorising' death (Section VI).

> Death...makes men precious and pathetic. They are moving because of their phantom condition; every act they execute may be their last... Everything among the mortals has the value of the irretrievable and the perilous. Among the immortals... nothing is preciously precarious.[1]

I. Some banalities of death

There are various senses in which death is 'banal' – by which, of course, I do not mean trivial. Most obviously, death is inevitable; each of us will die one day. (As is often said, somewhat melodramatically perhaps, simply to be alive is to be destined for death.[2]) This brute inevitability is so mundane that a casual mention usually suffices in philosophical discussions of mortality. But the *mere* inevitability of death is just one limited sense in which death

[1] Jorges Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 1970), 146.

[2] See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 289, 298, 303 (hereafter abbreviated BT); Alphonso Lingis, *The Imperative* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), ch 16 (hereafter abbreviated IMP). I will assume that death is *final*; questions about immortality (and other forms of posthumous survival) are not the concern of this paper.

doi:10.1017/S003181910999012X © The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2009

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003181910999012X Published online by Cambridge University Press

is banal. Certainly, each of us will die at some future time and location. But it is also true that one day will prove to be one's 'last day'; or more accurately, to *have been* one's last day for those who remain behind. I may sincerely believe that today will be my last day – indeed, I may even have planned it in meticulous detail. But it will only truly be my last day when I have in fact died. (Death can always come sooner or later than anticipated.[3]) In this sense then, one's 'last day' is a retrospective designation, and thereby the property of the survivors, not I whose last day it actually was.[4] The same, of course, applies to one's 'last words' – something to which we often attribute great significance.[5] After all, any specific sequence of words could turn out to be my last (even these I am typing *right now*). Naturally, I hope the circumstances of my last words will be less ironic than the present context; just as I hope that their content will be more fortuitous than Rousseau's Mme de Vercellis's parting exclamation: 'a woman who can fart is not dead'.[6] Still, that any particular utterance I make *could* turn out to be my last is, I take it, uncontroversial.[7] A further sense in which death is banal is that it happens all the time. Directly or otherwise, we are surrounded by the deaths of *others*.[8] Indeed, given that we are not born with an

[3] See Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2002), 106 (hereafter abbreviated ECH); Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (London: Penguin, 1995), §587 (hereafter abbreviated PEN); Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays* (London: Penguin, 1991), 684 (hereafter abbreviated CE); Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity & Transcendence* (London: Athlone, 1999), 155 (hereafter abbreviated A&T).

[4] On one's last moments see Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, Vol 1 (London: William Heinemann), 189 (hereafter abbreviated EP).

[5] On the purported special epistemic and moral status of 'last words' see Robert Kastenbaum, 'Last words', *The Monist* 76 (1993). Frequently neglected here are the last words spoken *to* the dying *by* the living – most often, of course, these occur unwittingly and before any deathbed scene.

[6] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions* (London: Penguin, 1953), 86. See also Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 95.

[7] On photography and death see Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 2000), 9, 14–15, 32, 82, 84, 96–97; ECH, 39, 51, 97, 115ff, 132.

[8] See IMP, 154. We are surrounded by the dead in other less obvious ways. As Sartre notes, we the living 'decide the fate of the dead' – those who precede us, who form the cultural-historical background each of us inherits, and so on (see Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 542–543 (hereafter abbreviated B&N)).

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innate understanding of mortality, we first come to learn about death – and how to use that, and associated, concepts – through others' deaths; notably family, friends, neighbours, pets and fictional characters (human or otherwise).[9] Ordinarily then, we become aware of the commonality of death long before we have to confront it in its singularity as our *own* death. It is partly true, as Heidegger and others stress, that one's own mortality has a special significance for each of us.[10] But even this is not so deeply (or 'ontologically') engrained that the deaths of others cannot be equally – if not more – significant for us.[11] A similarly banal aspect of death is this: When I die I will leave others behind; family, friends, lovers, neighbours and work colleagues, not to mention the multitude of casual acquaintances who populate my daily life. My death will mark my departure from *their* lives.[12] What is more, it is others who will have to deal with the tangible posthumous traces of my life. *Someone else* will be left to mourn, take charge of my corpse, make funeral arrangements, sort through my personal belongings, contact friends and relatives, empty my home and clear my office. (The list is disconcertingly long.[13]) In one sense, as Wittgenstein

[9] 'A person's own death does become real to him after the death of both parents. Until then, there was someone else who was "supposed to" die before him; now that no one stands between him and death, it becomes his "turn"'(Robert Nozick, *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations* (New York, London, et al.: Touchstone, 1989), 20; see also 22). Bauman describes the death of a loved one as 'a death experience "once removed"', just as the 'breakdown of a relationship cutting an interhuman bond also carries a stamp of "finality"'(Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Fear* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2006), 44 (hereafter abbreviated LIQ)).

[10] Montaigne ridicules this in CE, 685.

[11] See Robert Solomon, 'Death fetishism, morbid solipsism', in J. Malpas and R.C. Solomon (eds.), *Death and Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 152 (hereafter abbreviated DFM). Note Cockburn's discussion of grief for the death of a loved one (David Cockburn, *Other Human Beings* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), 155–157 (hereafter abbreviated OHB)).

[12] See A&T, 154; Mary Mothersill, 'Death', in O. Hanfling (ed.), *Life and Meaning: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 86 (hereafter abbreviated DE).

[13] See DFM, 168, 172. There are many ways in which one can respect the dead, and these are highly culturally-historically malleable. Wittgenstein thus writes: 'Recall that after Schubert's death his brother cut some of Schubert's scores into small pieces and gave such pieces, consisting of a few bars, to his favourite pupils. This act, as a sign of piety, is *just as* understandable to us as the different one of keeping the scores untouched, accessible to no one. And if Schubert's brother had burned the scores, that too

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remarks, 'Death is not an event in life'[14] insofar as it brings one's life to an irreversible close.[15] And yet my death will be a more-or-less traumatic 'event' in *others'* lives (the death of a brother, son, friend, neighbour, colleague), just as others' deaths have been, and continue to be, 'events' in *mine*.[16]

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would be understandable as a sign of piety' (Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*', in C.G. Luckhardt (ed.), *Wittgenstein: Sources and Perspectives* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996), 66 (hereafter abbreviated RFGB)). This point can be extended further, for there is nothing *inherently* peculiar about eating the flesh of the dead out of respect – no matter how distasteful *we* might find such a practice. After all, it is not that difficult to see how *literally* consuming an other – *literally* 'taking the other into oneself' – could be performed out of deep love and devotion to their memory. As Winch rightly insists, to understand such practices, it is important to situate them in their broader cultural context (see Peter Winch, 'Understanding a Primitive Society', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1:4 (October 1964), 310 (hereafter abbreviated UPS)); though this does not in itself commit one to some form of cultural relativism.

[14] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 6.4311. See also A&T, 155; IMP, 153. Note also Winch's remarks on the intimate relation between our conception of life and death (UPS, 322–323).

[15] See also Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea: Abridged in One Volume* (London: Dent/Everyman, 2000), 211.

[16] See DFM, 170; Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 59 (hereafter abbreviated APP). According to Sartre, death is the 'triumph of the point of view of the Other over the point of view *which I am* toward myself' (B&N, 540). While alive, I have control over my life's meaning and value. My facticity, the life-projects I choose, and my interpretation of both (indeed, the latter is part of the 'project of the self' (ibid. 541)) are in my 'own hands' (ibid. 543). But with the advent of my death, it is the other who becomes 'the guardian' of the value and meaning of my life. In death I thus 'lose…[my] personal existence' (ibid. 541–542) to what *others* will make of it; whether they offer a positive 'reconstruction', let my life fall into 'oblivion' and become 'forgotten' (ibid. 541), subsume me 'into a mass' or 'collective existence' (ibid. 542), and so on. For Sartre then, the 'very existence of *death* alienates us wholly in our own life to the advantage of the Other. To be dead is to be prey for the living. This means therefore that the one who tries to grasp the meaning of his future death must discover himself as the future prey of others' (ibid. 543). Needless to say, Sartre's portrayal of 'the Other' as *threatening* here is in keeping with his broader, and rather bleak, account of intersubjectivity.

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My hope is that these preliminary observations are mundane and uncontroversial. For not only are they the sort of things we learn during childhood, they are also the terms in which most of us fully socialised adults *actually* think about death. So, for example, when seriously considering *my* own death, I routinely ask myself whether I will die in hospital, in the street or supermarket in the company of strangers, at home with my family, or alone? If it turns out to be the latter, then who exactly will discover my body? Likewise, I wonder if I will die before my parents and partner, and if so, how they will deal with my passing? Who will take care of my dog? Who will pay any outstanding debts? (Again, the list seems interminable.[17]) These sorts of questions are commonplace. We do *not* ordinarily wonder if death is best thought of as a 'harm'. Neither do we devote much, if any, time to considering whether it is rational to fear our own death,[18] nor the purported a/symmetry between pre-natal and posthumous non-existence.[19] Likewise, we do not normally wonder whether 'experience' *as such* is a good that death deprives us of,[20] or what constitutes an 'authentic' attitude towards our mortality. These latter questions are the sort of things *philosophers* worry about. Only when they are not 'doing philosophy' do they consider with due seriousness the mundane events surrounding *their* actual demise, including the deaths of *their* family, partners, friends, beloved animals, and so on. In itself, of course, this need not count against philosophers' professional activities; after all, they are supposed to question things we routinely take

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On a more cathartic note, see Aurelius' remarks about others wanting 'to be rid of us' (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* (London: Penguin, 2006), 103–104 (hereafter abbreviated MED)).

[17] See DFM, 170–171.

[18] See Epicurus, 'Death is nothing to us', in P. Helm (ed.), *Faith and Reason: Oxford Readers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) (hereafter abbreviated DNU); Lucretius, 'We have nothing to fear in death', in O. Hanfling (ed.), *Life and Meaning: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) (hereafter abbreviated NFD). Bauman thinks that the prototypical fear is fear of death; indeed: 'Dangers are conceived as "threats" and derive their frightening power from the meta-danger of death' (LIQ, 52; see also Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, 'Fearing Death', *Philosophy* **58**, 224 (April 1983), 181 (hereafter abbreviated FD)).

[19] Nagel argues against this alleged symmetry in Thomas Nagel, 'Death', in J.M. Fischer (ed.), *The Metaphysics of Death* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1993), 67–68 (hereafter abbreviated D).

[20] On the latter see ibid., 62.

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for granted. Nevertheless, their tendency to neglect – or at least downplay – the banal facts of death is prone to distort the purported object of analysis. If one wants to do justice to the ordinary weave of human life in which death (not to mention ageing and illness) actually occurs, then one cannot stay long in the realms of abstraction. To treat death abstractly renders it just one more intellectual puzzle – albeit a puzzle we have little hope of solving.[21] But death is something that will inevitably happen to all of us fleshy, finite, vulnerable creatures. In the following discussion I therefore want to suggest that the aforementioned banalities of death are worth taking much more seriously, even if doing so ultimately leads us away from the pleasures of theorising. Let us begin by briefly considering some established philosophical approaches to death.

II. Being (almost) dead

Like most philosophers dealing with questions of mortality, Nagel thinks that the significance death has for *the one who dies* is the 'primary case'. Indeed, he explicitly avoids discussing the value one's own life (and its inescapable end) 'may have for others' (D, 62). Likewise, when considering the possibility of long-term suspended animation, Nagel sidesteps discussion of the numerous 'inconveniences' that, once reanimated, '[f]amily and friends may have died in the meantime; the language may have changed; the comforts of social, geographical, and cultural familiarity would be lacking'. None of these factors, he therefore maintains, would 'obliterate the basic advantage of continued, though discontinuous, existence' (ibid. 62–63). But to describe the intervening deaths of family and friends (amongst other things) as 'inconveniences' is, I think, a gross oversimplification. Nagel's disregard for such banal considerations re-emerges, albeit more subtly, in *The View from Nowhere*:

> Like the contingency of our birth, the inevitability of our death is easy to grasp objectively, but hard to grasp from within. Everyone dies; I am someone, so I will die. But it isn't just that TN will be killed in a plane crash or a holdup, have a stroke or a heart attack or lung cancer, the clothes going to the Salvation Army, the books to the library, some bits of the body to the organ bank and the rest to the crematorium. In addition to

[21] Solomon makes a similar point in DFM, 154, 155, 169.

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> these mundane objective transitions, my world will come to an end, as yours will when you die.[22]

My contention is that if we really want to think about the significance of one's own (and others') death, then these sorts of 'mundane objective transitions' cannot be set aside. Precisely why so many philosophers have neglected the everyday banalities of death is not altogether clear. But it is reasonable to think that this general disregard is due, in part, to the lasting influence of the Epicurean tradition. As is well known, Epicurus attempts to demonstrate why fear of one's own death is irrational and thereby best relinquished. For if all good and bad 'consists in sense-experience' (DNU, 42) (a notably contentious claim), and if death constitutes the 'privation of sense-experience' (a rather less contentious claim), then we have no good reason to fear our own terminal non-existence. In a nutshell: '[W]hen we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist' (ibid. 41);[23] hence, we should cease worrying about our mortality. Indeed, as Lucretius notes, we cannot even *imagine* our own death without thereby being 'present' as a spectral observer:

> When a living man confronts the thought that after death his body will be mauled by birds and beasts of prey, he is filled with self-pity. He does not banish himself from the scene nor distinguish sharply enough between himself and that abandoned carcass... He does not see that in real death there will be no other self alive to mourn his own decease... (NFD, 79)

What philosophers seem to have inherited from this way of viewing mortality, even when they have been overtly critical of the Epicurean 'nothing-to-fear' account, is the guiding assumption that the *real* issue here is the prospect of *non-existence* for the subject *him/herself*.[24] This dual emphasis is made abundantly clear in Nagel's work, in which the permanent vanishing of *my* unique subjective perspective on the world remains the crucial issue. What is notable about Nagel's discussion of death, however, is his initial

[22] Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 225 (hereafter abbreviated VN); see also LIQ, 42–43. Solomon refers to the dead body (and our anxieties about what will happen to it upon death) in DFM, 173.

[23] See also MED, 14.

[24] What Heidegger calls 'Being-come-to-an-end' (BT, 282) and 'Being-no-longer-in-the-world' (ibid. 284).

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response to the question 'What is the specific object of this [fearful] feeling?' Before Nagel develops his own analysis of death (and associated themes), he thus provisionally answers this question as follows: 'In part, it is the idea of the objective world and objective time continuing without me in it...[that] the world will go calmly on without me after I disappear'. Although he refers to this disappearance as 'the ultimate form of abandonment', Nagel immediately sets this 'idea' aside, for 'the special feeling' he is concerned with 'does not depend only on this' (VN, 226). Interestingly, in his own musings on the fear of death, Derrida thinks that, more than the prospect of total *non-existence*, what is

> ...scarier is the fantasy...that we are going to be present at and in attendance at this non-world, at our own death. We will continue to be dead, that is, absent, while attending the actual world, being deprived of sharing the life of the survivors. This is even more terrible [than the fear of non-existence]: dead without being dead...What is absolutely scary is the idea of being dead while being quasi-dead, while looking at things from above, from outside.[25]

(Somewhat curiously then, Derrida describes his reasons for attending conferences devoted to his work as follows: 'I would like to see what it looks like *as if* I were dead, listening to what people are saying, listening and being among them, while not playing the pathetic role of the dead person...[I]t is *as if* I were dead' (AID, 215).) What Derrida describes above as the most fearful 'fantasy', and what Nagel diagnoses as the 'ultimate abandonment', are getting at the same thing: namely, the strange prospect of one simultaneously being dead *and* witnessing one's own absence. Seeing our own death through the eyes of an imagined other is perhaps the only way we can envisage our inevitable, irreversible demise. But it is not obvious why we should judge this sort of projective imagining as having nothing to teach us about death. Here we might return to Nagel's description above and ask *who* exactly is being 'abandoned' at my death? In our imagined state of being 'quasi-dead' we might reasonably respond that here it is *I* who am – or has been – 'abandoned' by the world (including those others who live on after me). In this spectral state, I am, as it

[25] Jacques Derrida, '*As If* I Were Dead: An Interview with Jacques Derrida', in J. Brannigan, R. Robbins and J. Wolfreys (eds.), *Applying: To Derrida* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 216 (hereafter abbreviated AID). See also APP, 60.

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were, stuck on the outside, passively left to watch worldly events unfold without being able to take an active part.[26] This is one way of understanding Nagel's 'abandonment' and Derrida's 'quasi-death'. But there is another, more tangible, sense of 'abandonment' worth reminding ourselves of. For at my death it is also *I* who 'abandon' *others*; notably those intimates who I knew, loved and cared for, and those to whom I had specific responsibilities.[27] As noted earlier, in my death I leave others behind; those numerous others – strangers, intimates and the multitude in-between – who *survive* me. This is an extremely mundane fact, though one we are prone to overlook when philosophising.[28] Keeping these points in mind, let us now briefly turn to Heidegger's analysis of death.

III. My own death

Heidegger seems more attuned than Nagel to what I am calling the 'banalities' of death. Not only does he emphasise the significance that one's death is not merely *inevitable* (it will happen *one* day), but *immanent* (in principle *possible at any moment*[29]), Heidegger acknowledges that we gain *some* 'experience of death' (BT, 281) through witnessing the deaths of others. Likewise, he reminds us that the other's dead body is '"more" than a *lifeless* material Thing' or 'just an item of equipment', and, as such, the dead continue to be 'an object of "concern"' for 'those who have "remained

[26] See Solomon's remarks in DFM, 175.

[27] Interestingly, Wittgenstein suggests that belief in immortality can be understood, not as a quasi-empirical hypothesis regarding one's posthumous survival, but rather in terms of the feeling that one has ethical responsibilities to specific others that *even death* could not obliterate (see Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'Lectures on Religious Belief', from C. Barrett (ed.), *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 70).

[28] Somewhat dismissively, Solomon refers to 'the obvious comment that death affects the survivors as well as the deceased' (DFM, 166).

[29] See BT, 302; LIQ, 51; Jacques Derrida, 'I have a taste for the secret', in J. Derrida and M. Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret* (Oxford: Polity, 2001), 23. As we will see shortly, in this Heidegger is not entirely original (see Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 148–151 (hereafter abbreviated CUP); Jacques Derrida, *Aporias* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1993), 4).

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behind"'(ibid. 282).[30] Indeed, Heidegger even thinks it worth remarking that 'the "dying" of Others is something that one experiences daily. Death is an undeniable "fact of experience"', and that such instances of others' deaths are 'the factical occasion for Dasein's first paying attention to death at all'. Despite all of this, however, he insists that this sort of 'empirical certainty' (ibid., 301) is a distraction from the really important issue; namely, *one's own* death.[31] Heidegger is so eager to cast death in terms of one's 'ownmost potentiality-for-Being' (ibid. 294)[32] that the significance of many of the aforementioned banalities soon get lost amongst the details of his '*existential analytic of Dasein*' (ibid. 34). Heidegger is therefore insistent that the 'dying of Others is not something which we experience in a genuine sense; at most we are always just "there alongside"'. As such, the proper focus of philosophical attention here should be 'the ontological meaning of the dying of the person who dies, as a possibility-of-Being which belongs to *his* Being' (ibid. 282–283).[33] So, while Heidegger pays lip service to the social, intersubjective dimension of death, what clearly preoccupies him is how this *compromises* one's own authentic being-towards-death.[34] The crucial problem for Heidegger is that, subsumed in the anonymous collectivity of the 'they' (and their

[30] On related themes see Raimond Gaita, *The Philosopher's Dog* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 85ff (hereafter abbreviated PD). Cockburn remarks: '[T]here is a significant continuity between the live and dead human being. For the extended, tangible being does not lose its history through death, and our understanding of what we are confronted with when we are confronted with a corpse is...crucially conditioned by our acknowledgement of its history' (OHB, 187–188).

[31] See Pascal's remarks in PEN, §170.

[32] According to Levinas, death is not the 'possibility of impossibility' (as Heidegger maintains), for this, he thinks, implies 'a human power'. Rather, death is better described as '"an impossibility of possibility"' (A&T, 155). See also Jacques Derrida (with Maurice Blanchot), *The Instant of my Death/Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), 65 (hereafter abbreviated DEM).

[33] And similarly: '*No one can take the Other's dying away from him*', for '[b]y its very essence, death is in every case mine' (BT, 284).

[34] See Karsten Harries, 'Death and Utopia: Towards a Critique of the Ethics of Satisfaction', in J. Sallis (ed.), *Radical Phenomenology: Essays in Honour of Martin Heidegger* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1978), 138, 141ff, 145, 148–149 (hereafter abbreviated DU). As Harries rightly notes, Heidegger's use of the term 'authenticity' has a normative dimension (see ibid. 147).

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everyday 'idle talk'), we come to consider death as a sort of 'mishap', albeit one that occurs 'constantly' (ibid. 296). ('Someone or other "dies", be he neighbour or stranger. People who are no acquaintances of ours are "dying" daily and hourly'.) According to Heidegger then, we are prone to think along the following lines: '"One of these days one will die too, in the end; but right now it has nothing to do with us"'.[35] The *genuine* significance of mortality is here tranquillised[36] by our treating death as 'an indefinite something. . .which is proximally *not yet present-at-hand* for oneself, and is therefore no threat'. Certainly we all know that 'one dies', but 'this "one" is *the* "*nobody*". . .nobody in particular' (ibid. 297); some anonymous 'other' or, to borrow Winch's phrase, a mere 'instance of humanity'.[37] In the grip of the 'they' then, death is routinely 'perverted into an event of public occurrence'. More specifically, what troubles Heidegger here is that 'Death gets passed off as always something "actual"'– namely, as one event among others that will actually happen at some, albeit unpredictable, time and location. But in this, death's 'character as a *possibility* gets concealed. . .Dasein [thereby] puts itself in the position of losing itself in the "they"' (ibid., my emphasis).[38] In other words, 'they' do not allow one '*the courage for anxiety in the face of death*', and as such, one's 'everyday Being-towards-death' is most commonly a 'constant *fleeing in the face of death*' (ibid. 298). While even in the attitude towards death prompted by the 'they' there is recognition of the inevitable '*certainty* of death' (ibid. 299), this is a long way from authentic being-towards-death. For such certainty constantly obscures the fact that death '*is possible at any moment*. Along with the certainty of death goes the *indefiniteness* of its "when"'(ibid. 302). On Heidegger's account then, focussing on the deaths of others will inevitably distract us from the really important philosophical issues. Indeed, he has no doubt that by concentrating on the significance death has for *Dasein itself*, he is revealing the fundamental, 'universal'[39] features of death – those features which would have to

[35] See also BT, 302; IMP, 155.
[36] See BT, 298.
[37] Peter Winch, *Trying to Make Sense* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 174.
[38] In a similar vein, Derrida stresses his own interest in death as a *possibility*, not merely an inevitability (see Jacques Derrida, (various remarks in) S. Glendinning (ed.), *Arguing with Derrida* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 102ff).
[39] See BT, 295.

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ground any respectable anthropology, 'biology, psychology, theodicy, or theology of death' (ibid. 292).[40]

Although Heidegger's analysis of death has been hugely influential in certain philosophical quarters, many of his central claims are not particularly original. Most notably, Heidegger's preoccupation with Dasein's everyday 'inauthentic' attitude towards death is beautifully described in Tolstoy's 'The death of Ivan Ilych'.[41] There Tolstoy tells us of one of Ivan's colleagues, Peter Ivanovich, who realises after Ivan's death that this 'might suddenly, at any time, happen to me'.[42] And yet, despite this startling realisation, Peter is immediately consoled by the 'customary reflection' that *this* death 'had happened to Ivan Ilych and not to him, and that it should not and could not happen to him'. That is to say, Peter quickly came to view Ivan's death as an 'accident natural to Ivan Ilych but certainly not to himself' (DII, 234). (In Heideggerian terminology, Peter here 'loses' himself in the tranquilising chatter of the 'they'.) The same theme emerges elsewhere in Tolstoy's narrative. For prior to his death, Ivan himself has much the same experience of failing to grasp the fact that *he* was going to die. Of Ivan, Tolstoy thus writes:

> The syllogism he had learnt...: 'Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal', had always seemed to him correct as applied to Caius, but certainly not as applied to himself. That Caius – man in the abstract – was mortal, was perfectly correct, but he was not Caius, not an abstract man, but a creature quite separate from all others... 'Caius really was mortal, and it was right for him to die; but for me...Ivan Ilych, with all my thoughts and emotions, it's altogether a different matter...' (ibid. 259)

[40] Heidegger insists that his 'existential Interpretation of death takes precedence over any biology and ontology of life', just as it provides the necessary 'foundation for any investigation of death which is biographical or historiological, ethnological or psychological' (ibid. 291). Likewise, anthropological studies of how death is perceived and dealt with in different cultures presuppose an 'existential analytic' of Dasein and 'corresponding conception of death' (ibid. 292).

[41] Heidegger briefly refers to Tolstoy's 'The death of Ivan Ilych' in ibid., 495 n xii.

[42] Leo Tolstoy, 'The death of Ivan Ilych', in *The Raid and Other Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 233 (hereafter abbreviated DII).

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On this point at least, Heidegger is also prefigured by Kierkegaard, who writes:

> If [the 'when' of] death is always uncertain, if I am a mortal creature, then it is impossible to understand this uncertainty in terms of a mere generality unless indeed I, too, happen to be merely a human being in general. But this is surely not the case...[T]he fact of my own death is not for me by any means such a something in general, although for others, the fact of my death may indeed be something of that sort. (CUP, 149)[43]

According to Kierkegaard then, taking seriously the 'certainty' of death (both its inevitability *and* its imminence) should make us ask whether our chosen life-projects are even 'worth beginning' (ibid. 148). Surely, the prospect of death should 'transform a man's entire life', so that he has to 'think its uncertainty...in every moment' in order to 'prepare himself for it' (ibid. 150–151).[44] (We are therefore warned that to think about death only occasionally is 'the same as not thinking about it at all' (ibid. 149)). These proto-Heideggerian themes are striking. However, it is to Levinas, one of Heidegger's former admirers,[45] that I want to turn next. For it is here that the focus of philosophical attention is decisively moved *away* from one's own death.

IV. The deaths of others

In his numerous reflections on human mortality, Levinas maintains that death marks a 'nonknowledge that translates into experience

[43] See also CUP, 151. Solomon emphasises much the same thing in DFM, 158–159.

[44] Seneca similarly notes: 'There is no fixed count of our years. You do not know where death awaits you; so be ready for it everywhere' (EP, 191). And likewise, Epictetus variously writes: 'Let death and exile and every other thing which appears dreadful be daily before your eyes; but most of all death...' (*Discourses of Epictetus with the Encheiridion and Fragments* (London: Bell and Sons, 1912), 387 (hereafter abbreviated DOE)); 'Do you not know that both disease and death must surprise us while we are doing something? the husbandman while he is tilling the ground, the sailor while he is on his voyage? what would you be doing when death surprises you...?' (ibid. 209).

[45] Levinas never forgave either Heidegger's involvement with National Socialism, or his silence on this matter after the war.

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through my ignorance of the day of my death, an ignorance by virtue of which the "me" writes cheques on an empty account, as if he had eternity before him'.[46] Indeed, because death is the 'most unknown of unknowns' (A&T, 153),[47] we cannot help but 'speak of it without ever being sure...what we are talking about' (ibid. 154). Despite his intellectual debt to Heidegger,[48] Levinas nevertheless wants to shift attention away from *one's own* death to 'the *others'* death'[49] – and not merely the deaths of 'those "dear to us"'(ibid. 162).[50] So highly does Levinas estimate the significance of the other's death that he insists: '*the Human* consists precisely in opening oneself to the death of the other, in being preoccupied with his or her death...[A]round the death of my neighbour...the humanity of man is manifested' (ibid. 157–158).[51] Extending this point, he proceeds: 'I would even say in any approach to a mortal man, the reverberations of that extraordinary unknown [death] can be heard' (ibid. 161).[52] For Levinas then, to encounter another human is to encounter a singular, embodied, vulnerable, finite being, whatever social roles s/he may take on.[53] Our intersubjective encounters are thereby 'ethical through and through' (ibid. 162) in virtue of the

[46] Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), 21 (hereafter abbreviated GDT).

[47] See also A&T, 155–156; LIQ, 29–30.

[48] See E&I, ch 2.

[49] Emmanuel Levinas, 'Ethics of the infinite', in R. Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 62 (hereafter EOI). See also A&T, 157, 167; Raoul Mortley, *French Philosophers in Conversation: Levinas, Schneider, Serres, Irigaray, Le Doeuff, Derrida* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 15 (hereafter abbreviated FPC).

[50] See also A&T, 167. Cockburn discusses the deaths of strangers in OHB, 183–184.

[51] See also A&T, 161.

[52] See also Derrida's remarks on his friendship with Paul de Man in Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 29.

[53] See Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1992), 86 (hereafter abbreviated E&I); J. Robbins (ed.), *Is it Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001), 135, 204 (hereafter abbreviated IRB). According to Cockburn, others' 'irreplaceability' is poorly understood as their possessing a collection of 'psychological characteristics' (OHB, 158), but is rather *inextricably* connected to their having 'a particular history' (ibid. 155; see also 156–157, 183, 187); a history nobody else could possibly have without *being that person*.

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other's mortality.[54] (Indeed, between invulnerable, disembodied, immortal beings there could be no ethical relation.[55]) Levinas' preoccupation with the other's death becomes even more tangible in his semi-phenomenological description of 'the face'.[56] We need not worry about the details of this here. What is relevant for us is Levinas' insistence that the face of the other is 'exposed to death', for the 'human being in his face is the most naked' (ibid. 163).[57] More specifically, the other's face 'asks me [albeit silently] not to let him die alone' (EOI, 60).[58] ('[M]ortality lies in the Other...in its mortality, the face before me summons me, calls for me, begs for me...The other man's death calls me into question'.[59]) For Levinas then, the 'whole of ethical conduct' begins in this recognition of the mortality of the other who faces me.[60]

[54] See Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 46 (hereafter abbreviated GOD).

[55] According to Levinas, the finite, vulnerable body is the 'condition of giving' (GDT, 188; see also Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being Or Beyond Essence* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994), 77). Levinas, albeit tacitly, retains Heidegger's emphasis on death as possible *at-any-moment* insofar as the former's concern with the death of the other is not restricted to the *actually* dying other (though, of course, we are all in a sense always already dying). That is, for Levinas, the other's inherent fragility includes their being vulnerable to death *at any moment*, not merely their being vulnerable to death *one* day.

[56] For more detail on this, see Bob Plant, *Wittgenstein and Levinas: Ethical and Religious Thought* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 131ff (hereafter abbreviated W&L).

[57] See also E&I, 86.

[58] See also Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject* (London: Athlone, 1993), 44 (hereafter abbreviated OS).

[59] Emmanuel Levinas, S. Hand (ed.), *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 83; see also 86; E&I, 89, 96; IRB, 48. Levinas insists that 'access to the face is straightaway ethical' (E&I, 85; see also 87, 97). Note also Barthes' remarks on 'waiting' (specifically for one's lover) as a 'minor mourning' for the other who is 'as if dead' (Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), 37–38).

[60] See A&T, 164. Levinas' attitude toward non-human animals is rather negative (see Emmanuel Levinas, 'The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas', in R. Bernasconi and D. Wood (eds.), *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988) (hereafter abbreviated POM); Bob Plant, 'Welcoming dogs: Levinas and "the animal" question', forthcoming in *Philosophy & Social Criticism* (USA)).

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The suggestion that the other's death 'calls me into question' is in-keeping with Levinas' more general claim that the other's vulnerability and mortality places me (whether or not I acknowledge it) in a state of 'bad conscience' (A&T, 165). Indeed, this bad conscience pertains, not only to my practical moral insufficiencies, but also to my simply *being-here*.[61] The anguished relation I have to *my own* death is 'the scandal of an existence dying always too soon'. But Levinas insists that, understood in this egocentric way, the 'good conscience of being remains intact in that finitude'. What is more important here is that 'the death of the other...challenges that good conscience' (ibid. 166). It is not incidental then that Levinas chooses to employ Heideggerian terminology to explain this all-pervasive bad conscience:

> The self is the very crisis of the being of beings in the human...because I myself already ask myself if my being is justified, if the *Da* of my *Dasein* is not already the usurpation of someone's place. A bad conscience which comes to me from the face of the other who, in his mortality, uproots me from the solid ground where, as a simple individual, I stand and persevere naively – naturally – in my stance. A bad conscience which puts me in question.[62]

In other words, my being 'affected by the death of the other is...my deference to someone who no longer responds, already a culpability – the culpability of the survivor' (GDT, 12).[63] (I will return to this latter point in a moment.)

[61] For more detail on this recurrent theme in Levinas' work, see W&L, ch 6.

[62] Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 148; see also OS, 48; FPC, 19; POM, 172; Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God who comes to mind* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998), 169, 171, 175.

[63] See also GDT, 17; A&T, 162; GOD, 51, 68–69, 70–71, 85–86. Echoing Levinas, Derrida similarly thinks that 'We are all survivors who have been granted a temporary reprieve' (Jacques Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally: The Last Interview* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 24 (hereafter abbreviated LLF)). Indeed, he confesses that this 'question of survival' has 'always haunted' him in '*every instant*' of his life 'in a concrete and unrelenting fashion' (LLF, 25–26). After all, 'life *is* living on, life *is* survival' (ibid., 26; see also 51–52; DEM, 45; Jacques Derrida, G. Anidjar (ed.), *Acts of Religion* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 383; Jacques Derrida, 'To Forgive: The Unforgivable and the Imprescriptible', in J.D. Caputo, M. Dooley and M.J. Scanlon (eds.),

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As we have seen, Levinas makes a decisive shift away from the Heideggerian preoccupation with Dasein's *own* death toward the *other's* death. More recent commentators, notably those of a broadly feminist orientation, have similarly objected to Heidegger's preoccupation with one's own death, and indeed his obsession with death *per se*.[64] MacAvoy thus thinks that Heidegger's analysis leads to a view of authenticity which remains 'highly individualistic. . .and exclusive of Being-with-Others'.[65] In order to counteract this 'traditionally masculine' preoccupation with death, she therefore urges us to consider our finitude from the opposite end; namely, as beings who are *born*.[66] Our 'modern, western' (HBD, 73) fixation on death, MacAvoy reasonably postulates, is in part due to the way death has been gradually extricated from our 'firsthand experience' in everyday life. After all, today 'an entire industry has been established to deal with the dead, and we no longer really attend to the deaths of others' (ibid. 72). Moreover, it has been, and indeed continues to be, predominantly *women* who care for the dying, sick and those most 'vulnerable' (ibid. 73), and this needs to be given due attention when theorising about the nature and significance of mortality. Although MacEvoy does not want to dismiss Heidegger's analysis, but rather to supplement it with an account of 'Being-towards-birth' (ibid. 76), she nevertheless questions Heidegger's emphasis on death as Dasein's *fundamental*, 'ownmost' mode of being.

In a similar vein, Secomb complains that philosophers' accounts of death have routinely failed to do justice to the sheer 'range of human experience of death and relations to death' (PDF, 111). In particular, she identifies Heidegger's description of '*Dasein's* authentic dying' as overlooking the 'functioning of shared experience and

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Questioning God (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 49; Jacques Derrida, *Adieu: To Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999), 6).

[64] Solomon dubs Heidegger the 'patriarch of death fetishism in philosophy' (DFM, 163).

[65] Leslie MacEvoy, 'The Heideggerian Bias Toward Death', *Metaphilosophy* **27**,1–2 (January/April, 1996), 64 (hereafter abbreviated HBD). According to Secomb, that I cannot die the other's death can be broadened, for I cannot 'experience the other's experiences' either. As such, 'being-with-others in their dying is not unique in this regard' (Linnell Secomb, 'Philosophical deaths and feminine finitude', *Mortality* **4**, 2 (1999), 114 (hereafter abbreviated PDF)).

[66] See HBD, 64, 73ff.

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community in the construction of the relation to death'; an account that again relies upon a 'predominantly masculine experience of death'.[67] Women, Secomb thus argues, tend to experience death intersubjectively 'through being-with dying and dead others'. As such, 'death comes to us when the other – a friend, lover, an unknown person, or a whole community – dies' (ibid. 112).[68] She proceeds:

> Our 'ownmost' experience of dying is founded on a prior experience of the other's death...this experience of the other's dying and death, and the experience of loss and grief that this evokes, mediates the relation to 'my' own death...I experience 'my' death through a process of dwelling-with-death. (ibid. 114)[69]

MacAvoy and Secomb are, I think, right to highlight the historical and cultural contingencies that shape, not only our thinking about death more generally,[70] but specifically the prioritisation of one's *own* death and what that means for *oneself*. The way Levinas shifts attention to the others' mortality is, however, rather more extreme. After all, he repeatedly insists that in one's everyday 'relation with the death of the other' – that is, through merely encountering concrete, finite others – one discovers that 'the death of the other has *priority* over yours' (A&T, 164 my emphasis).[71] As noted

[67] See also PDF, 123. In this regard, Secomb claims, Heidegger's analysis is 'partial and incomplete' (ibid. 114).

[68] See also ibid. 113.

[69] See also ibid. 121–122. More caustically, Solomon describes Heidegger's account of being-towards-death as 'morbid solipsism, a denial of the obvious in favour of an obscure and mock-heroic philosophical theory' (DFM, 175).

[70] See DFM, 175. This is not to say that death (amongst other things) is conceived of in *radically* different ways across different cultures. As Winch (following Wittgenstein (see RFGB, 66–67)) puts it, the 'very conception of human life involves certain..."limiting notions"'– notably those surrounding 'birth, death [and]...sexual relations' (UPS, 322; see also 324; Peter Winch, 'Nature and Convention', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 20 (1960), 238–239). The horizon of possibilities for how human beings conceptualise and deal with these natural phenomena may not be *radically* open, but neither is it rigidly circumscribed. It seems to me that, regarding issues of mortality, philosophers could learn a lot from other academic disciplines (anthropology, sociology, psychology, and so on), not to mention those actually working with and caring for the dying.

[71] See also EOI, 60.

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earlier, the other's death clearly *can* have priority over one's own; one may, for example, prefer one's own death to that of one's child or lover. But Levinas' claim is much stronger than that. (Although there are ways of making his point more plausible, I will not discuss them here.[72]) Still, whatever its specific shortcomings, Levinas' general position, like MacAvoy's and Secomb's, provides a valuable counterweight to philosophers' routine assumption that one's *own* death is the 'primary case' (D, 62) or *real* philosophical issue.

V. What we leave behind

In *Philosophical Explanations* Nozick draws attention to the mundane fact that 'when you are no longer around...then all that will be left of you is your effects, leavings, traces'. Specifically what interests him here are the 'traces' one wants, intends or plans to leave behind. This seems reasonable enough. After all, we frequently consider it 'important to continue to be around somehow' after our demise. (The motivating thought here, Nozick suggests, is something

[72] One way of making this point more plausible (though somewhat less Levinasian) is to follow Cockburn's distinction between first- and third-person perspectives on suffering and death. He suggests that there is an important 'asymmetry' (OHB, 167) between others' deaths and one's own death. My concern (anxiety, fear, horror) about *my own* death does not depend upon who *I* happen to be, but it *is* highly relevant to my concern about others' deaths *whose* death it is. In this sense, my relation to my own death is morally 'thin' (ibid. 193). It would therefore be misleading to say that my death matters *more* to me than the death of my lover or child. (Cockburn places great emphasis on those intimates with whom one shares a personal history (see ibid. 155–157).) In other words: 'What is for me an overwhelmingly significant fact – the fact that it is *Jane* [for example, my lover] who is dying – is barely registered in the internal standpoint [regarding my own death]' (ibid. 168; see also 194–195). My concern about Jane is 'concern about a *particular* person...an individual with a history' (ibid. 183; see also 187), but the concern I have about my own death (and suffering) is more akin to a 'violent reflex' (ibid. 193; see also 194). As such, we should not think that focussing on the latter – as philosophers are prone to do – is going to help clarify the real significance of death (see ibid. 168). Following this broadly Wittgensteinian approach, we might therefore say that Levinas is not entirely off-beam, but that the other's death is not simply *more* important than mine; rather, the significance of each is different. In short, the former is, to use Cockburn's terms, morally 'rich' (ibid. 193).

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like: '[I]t shouldn't *ever* be as if you had never existed at all'.[73]) The 'traces' we explicitly *want*, or at least hope, to leave for posterity are clearly important to most of us. As Scarre remarks of one's prospective posthumous fate: '[T]hough death – being dead – is no sort of unpalatable experience, it marks our irreversible loss of the world. But as if that were not bad enough, it is also the world's loss of us'. As such, there is nothing 'irrational about caring how the world shall be when we are gone'.[74] Still, we need not think of all of this merely, or even primarily, in terms of our posthumous reputation. Neither need we assume that such concerns are in essence a poor secular substitute for traditional religious hopes of immortality; that is, of 'living on' in what one leaves behind.[75] What often matters more to us *here and now* is how, after our death, our friends and family will cope, how our children will flourish or fail, whether our partner will find love elsewhere (and so on). In other words, so much of what we care about *now* has enough 'posthumous scope' (PR, 214)[76] for us to be concerned about our own death, and to be so concerned through what our own death will likely mean for those who survive us. (As I will explain shortly, such concern is inadequately characterised as *fear*.) Mindful of Nozick's talk of 'traces' then, those who raise children usually want the world to be a better, safer place for their offspring after their own demise.[77] But alongside the traces we *want* to leave behind (the sort of things we can now work towards establishing), lie all of those traces we simply *do* leave behind at death. So, for example, I do not *want* to leave behind a house full of my belongings for others to sift through. Neither do I *want* to leave behind a body that has to be discovered, stripped, examined, dressed appropriately, buried,

[73] Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 582.

[74] Geoffrey Scarre, 'On caring about one's posthumous reputation', *American Philosophical Quarterly* **38** (2001), 209 (hereafter abbreviated PR). See also Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 91ff.

[75] This sort of 'living on' seems rather paltry, for presumably what one wants from immortality is self-continuity; that it is *I* who continue to exist, not merely (for example) the *memory* of my former life in the thoughts of *others*.

[76] See also PD, 92; DFM, 173.

[77] This does not mean that only those with offspring can have such posthumous wishes; one may similarly want the future to be 'better' for friends, relatives, work colleagues, one's favourite charity or beloved football team.

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incinerated or grieved over.[78] But doubtless I *will* leave these – and many other – things behind for the survivors to deal with.[79]

Keeping these (again, very mundane) points in mind, let us recall that when Levinas discusses the other's death he refers explicitly to the 'bad conscience' (A&T, 165) and 'culpability of the survivor' (GDT, 12). Here Levinas is referring to *one's own* 'bad conscience' for surviving *the other*; that is, the bad conscience *of* the survivor.[80] But this is only part of the sense in which 'bad conscience' can meaningfully function here; there can also be bad conscience *for* the prospective survivor. That is to say, I may *now* experience 'bad conscience' for *my own* (future, inevitable, yet unpredictable) death and the implications that will likely have for those who will survive me. Taking this point seriously, we can begin to make sense of the notion of 'fear of death' in a way that is not reducible to my fear of *mere* 'non-existence'. For at least part of what I 'fear' about my own death is what my own death will bequeath the *other*; that is, the various burdens (emotional, psychological, economic) for others that my death will leave in its wake.[81] It is difficult to express this thought without sounding unduly melodramatic. Still, there is a sense in which I am *now* sorry for this posthumous debris; I am, as it were, prospectively apologetic about the fact that at my death all my worldly belongings, my body (and so on) will not immediately disappear from view and memory.[82] (Of course,

[78] In Sartre's *Nausea*, Rôquentin makes a similar point: '[E]ven my death would have been *In the way*. *In the way*, my corpse, my blood on these stones, between these plants, at the back of this smiling garden. And the decomposed flesh would have been *In the way* in the earth which would receive my bones, at last, cleaned, stripped, peeled, proper and clean as teeth, it would have been *In the way*' (Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Mysticism of the Absurd' (extract from *Nausea*), in J. Westphal and C. Levensen (eds.), *Life and Death* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1993), 61).

[79] Of publishing (and 'writing' in the narrow sense) Derrida remarks: 'The trace I leave signifies to me at once my death. . .and the hope that this trace survives me' – though this is not, he insists, 'a striving for immortality', but rather something 'structural' (LLF, 32). In short: 'I live my death in writing' (ibid. 33).

[80] As I have argued elsewhere, this emphasis is best understood by reading Levinas as a post-Holocaust thinker (see W&L, 128ff).

[81] Mothersill makes a related point in DE, 90.

[82] Indeed, one need not have led a particularly murky life in order to feel anxiety – and even prospective embarrassment or shame – at the thought of others (perhaps *especially* other intimates) sorting through one's personal

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this inevitably conflicts with my also *wanting* to be remembered and thought of fondly, especially by those I care about.[83]) My death will most likely be a burden on those I leave behind – especially on my family, friends and other intimates. Understood in this way then, 'fear' of one's *own* death becomes rather less paradoxical than it might initially seem. For it is not my future non-existence *in itself* that is the primary issue here, but rather what this pending absence will mean for *others*. This very concrete prospect I can reasonably be anxious about *right now*.

This then is one way we might re-cast the seemingly paradoxical notion of 'fear of death'; namely, in terms of fearing what significance one's own death will have for others. But it seems to me that 'fear' is not the main or most obvious response toward the prospect of one's own death. Setting aside the fear I may have of others' deaths,[84] and the fear I may have of experiencing a painful or humiliating dying, if truth be told, I am more *saddened* by the prospect of my own death than I am *fearful* of it.[85] Here I experience what I can best describe as self-mourning. Now, this might initially appear to be just as paradoxical as the 'fear of non-existence' diagnosed by Epicurus, but I do not think it is. Such sadness or self-mourning naturally accompanies what Derrida describes as the 'fantasy' of being 'quasi-dead' (AID, 216) and what Nagel describes as 'abandonment' (VN, 226); that is, one's spectral imaginings of one's absence (discussed earlier). Solomon makes a similar point:

> When I think of my death, I cannot help but think of what others will see in me, how others will see me, how others will think of and remember me. When I imagine myself at my own funeral. . .it is the eyes of others I am imagining, not my own, whether or not

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belongings. Love letters, diaries (and so on) are normally kept private. But at death such private items soon become public – albeit to a restricted audience.

[83] It also conflicts with my not wanting to prevent others from their need to grieve, engage in funeral rites (and so on).

[84] For example, when an other is dying we might well 'fear that we shall not be able to endure. . .[her] suffering' (IMP, 160). We may similarly fear not being available to care for an other when death comes to them (see ibid. 161).

[85] Craig recalls feeling 'unbearable sadness' (William Lane Craig, 'The Absurdity of Life without God', in E.D. Klemke (ed.), *The Meaning of Life* (2nd Edition), (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 41) when first learning that one day he would die.

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> 'my perspective' is, logically and irreducibly, mine and mine alone. When I imagine my body on a slab, or bloodied in the street, or frozen from terminal pain, it is others I imagine thus seeing me, not I. When I worry about how I will die, bravely or badly, it is for others that I am concerned. (DFM, 175)[86]

I would be saddened to oversleep and miss New Year's celebrations with my family and friends – even though there will be other New Year celebrations in the future.[87] Indeed, the very possibility of this occurring can cause me prospective sadness *right now* – if I choose to dwell on it. Here I want to suggest that the sadness I currently feel about the prospect of my death is an extension (albeit it a radical one) of this very ordinary sort of anxiety; namely, I will miss seeing my children grow, accompanying my lover into old-age, witness my friends pursue various projects and plans (and so on). The prospect of dying *saddens* me precisely because I know that no matter how final death is for me, those I leave behind will continue their lives without me.[88] Of course, I *want* them to continue without me; I do not want those I care about to spend the rest of their lives weeping over my absence. Still, that their lives will unfold in unpredictable ways without my assistance, delight and love (and also my worry, unwanted interference, and occasional admonition) causes me sadness *now*. There is nothing very mysterious or metaphysically puzzling about this.

VI. Our mundane mortality

There are various ways in which one can be concerned about death. I can be concerned about what *my* death means for *me*, and what *my* death means for *others*. Likewise, I can be concerned about what an *other's* death means for *them*, and what *their* death means for *me*. For the most part, philosophers have been preoccupied with the first of these. But what *my death* means for *me alone* is not

[86] Regarding 'fear of death' Rorty remarks: 'Some fear that the world will go on without their being there to experience it...The drama will continue without their participation, and perhaps none the worse for that'. Interestingly, she continues: 'What turns such *sorrow* into fear is the thought that all our efforts to live well...were all in vain...that our lives were idle and pointless, our enterprises arbitrary' (FD, 177 my emphasis).

[87] I am not suggesting that 'fear' plays *no* role here, merely that other emotional responses are *at least* equally appropriate.

[88] See DFM, 174.

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obviously the most pressing issue. Indeed, in one sense my anxieties about my own death are very unremarkable. After all, as even Camus recognises, the body naturally 'shrinks from annihilation'[89] – though, of course, the determined suicide can override such basic drives.[90] Those of us with a particular philosophical education may want to try and explain this by reference to the 'positive' (D, 62) goodness of experience *as such*.[91] But this, one might reasonably suspect, is little more than philosophical veneer adorning a mundane natural fact. Likewise, it is far from clear why 'say[ing] we have a natural dislike of oblivion...is simply to reframe what needs to be explained' (PR, 210). Nobody seriously thinks that our propensity for hunger (even our craving specific foods) requires philosophical 'explanation'. Why then should we think that our natural adversity to death (amongst other things) requires such theoretical bolstering?[92] There is something right about Marcuse's allegation that Heidegger perverts the mundane 'biological fact' of death by granting it the status of 'an ontological essence' (DU, 138).[93] But it would be unfair to reserve this sort of criticism for Heidegger, for he is far from alone in underestimating the banalities of our mortality.[94] In particular, trivialising (or simply ignoring) the significance our own death has for others – not to mention the import others' deaths have for each of us – seems to be an occupational hazard of philosophers of various methodological

[89] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1971), 72.

[90] See OHB, 193; Oswald Hanfling, *The Quest for Meaning* (Oxford and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1995), 32–33.

[91] It is a curious notion that experience *as such*, regardless of its specific content, could be 'good', 'bad' or anything else.

[92] Rorty plausibly argues that 'fear of death' can, at least in part, be cashed out in terms of its natural ('pre-rational' (FD, 180)) 'functionality' (ibid. 179); that is, fear of death is 'more efficient than an indefinite number of particular fears', such as 'fear of exposure in very low temperatures, fear of dehydration, fear of this and fear of that' (ibid. 181). She goes on to suggest that the 'metaphysical fear of death – *angst* at one's non-being' (ibid. 185) is a 'by-product' of functional fear (ibid. 186). In a nutshell then, fear of death is 'a natural fact, a consequence of being constituted in a certain way' (ibid. 188).

[93] See also DU, 150ff.

[94] Mothersill refers to the 'academicism' of 'Philosophical writing on the topic of death' (DE, 87; see also 88–89). More caustically, she criticises Nagel: 'Pronounced in a vacuum, "Not only do I not want to die, but it would be a *bad thing* if I were to die" is rather pretentious' (ibid. 91).

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persuasions. As I suggested earlier, even the much-discussed paradoxes of 'non-existence' cannot plausibly be isolated from its intersubjective significance. Treating *my* death as an essentially monadic prospect (or even Heideggerian 'possibility') simply feeds a philosophical fiction. Solomon is therefore right to insist that 'philosophers should argue that it makes a difference *to me* whether I live or die not because of the phenomenology of experience but because of the particular phenomenology of *social* experience'. As he goes on to remind us: 'What I really care about are the people I leave behind...Death is what individuates us only in so far as it targets the vulnerability of intimate and significant relationships' (DFM, 175–176).[95] The significance my prospective death has for me is not, as Nagel claims (and many others assume), the 'primary case' (D, 62). For what my death means to me is highly dependent on what my death will mean to those others I will leave behind. Just as my ongoing assessment of my own *life* is mediated by my relationships with others (notably, but not exclusively, with intimates), so too is my attitude towards my own *death* mediated by others.[96] To describe this as 'inauthentically' losing oneself in the 'they' is deeply misleading; it is rather an eminently *human* response to having personal relationships and a shared history with unique, singular others. Hermits and sociopaths aside, the past, present and future of our ordinary lives are inevitably intertwined. Given that we are all finite, vulnerable beings, our mortality is part of this wider narrative.

Whatever we might think about Heidegger's analysis of death, his approach is just one manifestation of philosophy's broader

[95] In a similar vein, Solomon writes: '[W]e are, first and foremost, phenomenologically and ontologically as well as biologically, social animals. One's own death is always, except in the most lonely of cases, a disruption (one hopes, not too minor) of a network of relationships. And even in those lonely cases, one's death is, in one's own thinking, a disruption of past or possible relationships, or, at the outer reaches of pathos, a lament that one is, quite unnaturally, dying all alone' (DFM, 175). I agree with Solomon that what is important about death is not the mere 'dread of the unknown' or the 'confrontation with nothingness' (ibid. 174), but rather the 'social dimension of death' (ibid. 175). However, I see no reason to follow him in judging even the latter as manifesting an unflattering degree of 'self-interest' (ibid. 176).

[96] Despite his numerous remarks to the contrary, Solomon sometimes suggests that questions about one's own death are 'quite distinct' from questions 'concerning the death of others' (ibid. 155). I think this is far from obvious.

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self-conception. For philosophers generally tend not to care much for the contingencies or 'merely empirical' dimension of our lives; instead, they want to say something of *fundamental* significance. (Even when, like Nagel, the 'subjective' perspective is given considerable attention, it is the *general* features of such a perspective that ultimately count.[97]) But the banalities of death I have here been emphasising are poorly understood as 'merely empirical' phenomena. My ordinary concerns about who will discover my body (assuming I die alone), how family and friends will deal with my death, and who will sort through my belongings, are not 'merely empirical' issues. Of course, in one sense these *are* 'empirical' considerations. But it is little more than a philosophical prejudice to think that such facts do not get to the heart of the matter; that focussing on these would be to miss the real 'conceptual issues'.[98] It seems to me that without taking such banalities seriously philosophers will continue to treat death as an intellectual conundrum; a puzzle that bears little relation to the concrete realities of our mortality and the persistent concerns we (including off-duty philosophers) naturally have about it. Death is mundane, and should we feel the need to theorise about it, we should do so more mundanely.[99]

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[97] As Nagel insists in his discussion of the absurd, he is not interested in the way feelings of absurdity arise in ordinary situations (the sorts of experiences Camus famously describes), but the deeper 'philosophical sense of absurdity'; namely, the way 'pretension and reality inevitably clash *for us all*' (Thomas Nagel, 'The Absurd', in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 13 my emphasis).

[98] The customary philosophical distinction between merely 'empirical' and genuinely 'conceptual' (properly *philosophical*) questions seems to me very shaky indeed.

[99] Thanks to Gerry Hough for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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