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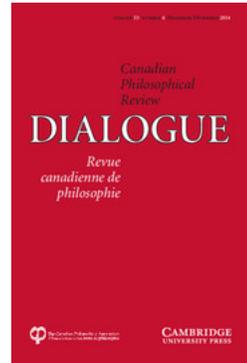
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Dialogue / Volume 53 / Issue 04 / December 2014, pp 715 - 735

DOI: 10.1017/S0012217314000390, Published online: 27 May 2014

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0012217314000390

How to cite this article:

G. ANTHONY BRUNO (2014). A Peculiar Fate: The Unity of Human Life in Kant and Heidegger. Dialogue, 53, pp 715-735 doi:10.1017/S0012217314000390

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A Peculiar Fate: The Unity of Human Life in Kant and Heidegger

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ABSTRACT: It is commonly held that nature is knowable in itself and that death has no explanatory priority in knowing nature. I reject both claims as they undermine an account of the unity of human life, failing, respectively, to thematize the limitations of finite understanding and to acknowledge what's most certain about finite existence. I use Kant's idea of the thing in itself and Heidegger's idea of death to solve two structurally analogous antinomies these failures leave intact. I conclude that to think these ideas is to represent the telos that unifies our living as, respectively, finite knowers and finite beings.

RÉSUMÉ : On tient souvent que la nature est connaissable en soi, et que la mort n'a aucune primauté explicative pour connaître la nature. Je rejette ces prétentions parce qu'elles compromettent une explication unitaire de la vie humaine, à défaut, respectivement, de thématiser les limites de la compréhension finie et d'aborder ce qu'il y a de plus certain à propos de l'existence finie. J'emploie l'idée kantienne de la chose en soi et l'idée heideggerienne de la mort afin de résoudre deux antinomies analogues, que les deux prétentions rejetées laissent irrésolues. Je démontre que penser ces idées consiste à représenter le telos unifiant de nos vies en tant que connaisseurs finis et en tant qu'êtres finis.

One of the deepest insights of Kant's critical philosophy is that we suffer a peculiar fate: we are driven to ask questions that, due to our limitations as finite knowers, we cannot answer. Accounting for the unity of human life is complicated by the fact that reason's ambitious nature is at odds with its confinement to the limitations of possible experience, that is, to the bounds of sense. Even more striking is the difficulty we face in trying to think the bounds of sense

Dialogue 53 (2014), 715–735.

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doi:10.1017/S0012217314000390

apart from the bounds of *life*, death being as unimaginable as that which transcends possible experience. In this paper, I will show that these two thoughts are in fact deeply related. It will turn out our fate bears an existential peculiarity that, drawing on Heidegger's analysis of the phenomenological significance of death, suggests a parallel approach to Kant's account of life's unity.

My point of entry is the pervasive belief that death turns us into *things*—corpses, ashes, dust—transforming us into 'remains'. Such a belief raises questions of how to think about death and how to think about things. Is death a meaningless event? Would that imply that the life it interrupts is not intrinsically valuable? Are the things we turn into merely material? Would that imply that we are merely material? Familiar answers suggest themselves. For physicalism, the living and the non-living are organizations of qualitatively indistinct matter, one consequence of which is that death is simply a recombination of matter, part of nature's *mechanical* structure. A rival view descending from Aristotle and developed by the German idealists holds that while I can give a mechanistic account of nature, I can do so only on the basis of an *organic* conception of myself as the subject accounting for it. As a subject, I am irreducibly self-organizing, for I am capable of setting ends, ends that include comprehending nature. On this view, my death is explained by a larger process that cannot be reduced to mechanistic terms.

Central for grasping the double character of our peculiar fate, and the sense in which this fate unifies our lives, is registering two claims shared by mechanism and organicism: (1) nature is comprehensible in itself and not merely as it appears; (2) death has no explanatory priority in our comprehension of nature. I reject these claims on the grounds that neither supports a self-critical account of what gives unity to living a human life. The first denies a distinction between our knowledge of things and things in themselves, a distinction that thematizes the limitations that our forms of cognition, that is, an agent's modes of knowing,¹ place on what we can know. Since only dogmatic claims lie beyond this boundary, it is necessary to keep in view for *epistemic humility*. The second denies that death can make sense of individuality, consigning it to a phase of mechanical or organic change. But death must play this role if I am to come to terms with what is most certain about my existence and, thus, if I am to pursue *existential authenticity*.

I will reject (1) and (2) by defending their negations, which I will then argue each serve to unify life by representing the *telos* of life lived either humbly, in accord with Kant's distinction between appearances and things in themselves, or authentically, in light of Heidegger's account of resoluteness toward death. The first task requires motivating Kant's idea of the thing in itself (§§1-2) and

¹ See Kant, AA: KrV: "I call all cognition transcendental that is occupied not so much with objects but rather with our mode of cognition of objects [*Erkenntnisart*] insofar as this is to be possible *a priori*" (A11-2/B25).

Heidegger's idea of death (§§3-4). I do so by analyzing the specific antinomy—the pair of commitments we must individually hold but simultaneously cannot—that, on my reconstruction, each idea is uniquely capable of solving. The second task requires demonstrating that these ideas are structurally analogous in their capacity to unify the same life. I do so by arguing that they solve their respective antinomies as limit concepts for finite knowledge and finite existence (§5). Since the referent of the idea of the thing in itself and the idea of death is ever-present yet beyond experience, the unity each provides is nothing we can *know*, something for which we can only *strive*. I will conclude that the antinomies they solve are aspects of a single problem we may approach with either a Kantian emphasis on epistemic humility or a Heideggerian emphasis on existential authenticity.

§1

We can speak of the world in two ways—as we experience it and as it is independent of our experience. It is subject to our forms of cognition, but, insofar as we conceive it in abstraction from those forms, also transcends them.² We will see that both conjuncts must be affirmed. We will also see that this requires distinguishing the senses of speaking of a world that must bear empirical significance and one that cannot, between a world within and beyond our cognitive grasp, one tethered yet alien to our kind of life. Until we distinguish these senses, we will be saddled with what I call the *life antinomy*.

To find the conjunction compelling, consider what results if we deny its first conjunct. On the one hand, skepticism ensues if we doubt our forms of cognition represent the world. On this view, which Kant targets in the Refutation of Idealism,³ objects of cognition are *empirically ideal*, merely the mental states of a particular individual. As he argues in the Transcendental Aesthetic,

² See Kant, AA: P: “Above we noted limits of reason with respect to all cognition of mere beings of thought; now, since the transcendental ideas [namely, of our forms of cognition] nevertheless make the progression up to these limits necessary for us, and have therefore led us, as it were, up to the contiguity of the filled space (of experience) with empty space (of which we can know nothing—the *noumena*), we can also determine the boundaries of pure reason; for in all boundaries there is something positive ... whereas limits contain mere negations” (4:354). Compare Nagel (1971): “humans have the special capacity to step back and survey themselves, and the lives to which they are committed, with that detached amazement which comes from watching an ant struggle up a heap of sand. Without developing the illusion that they are able to escape from their highly specific and idiosyncratic position, they can view it *sub specie aeternitatis*—and the view is at once sobering and comical” (720).

³ See Kant, AA: KrV, B274-9.

however, space and time are necessary forms of cognition because they are *a priori* conditions of anything appearing at all. To deny this is to claim that space and time are concepts derived *a posteriori* from representations of objects, which they cannot be since, to represent such objects as occupying distinct and different places and as simultaneous or successive, the representation of space and time “must already be their ground”.⁴ To rely on my experience of the spatio-temporal features of objects in order to derive the concepts of space and time is to rely on the very concepts I aim to derive, for I need first to have encountered these features *as* spatio-temporal. Thus, we find that certain forms of cognition are indubitable insofar as they ground the very standpoint of the skeptic.⁵

On the other hand, dogmatism ensues if we credit the world’s mode of presentation to anything but our forms of cognition. In that case, we adopt the *transcendental realist* idea of nature bearing a mind-independent structure that explains our cognitive success. Kant argues in the Paralogisms that dogmatism leads to skepticism by assuming that space and time are features of “things in themselves, which would exist independently of us and our sensibility”.⁶ Since the dogmatist’s assumption depends on his conception of objects’ allegedly mind-independent spatio-temporal features *as* spatio-temporal, he cannot but refer to a state of his own mind. As Kant says, it is the “transcendental realist who afterwards plays the empirical idealist; and after he has falsely presupposed about objects of the senses that if they are to exist they must have their existence in themselves even apart from sense, he finds that from this point of view all our representations of sense are insufficient to make their reality certain”.⁷ To avoid the skeptical threat that his conception of space and time is a mental state peculiar to himself, the dogmatist must acknowledge that the world’s mode of presentation—how it shows up—is conditioned by forms of human

⁴ See Kant, AA: KrV, A23/B38, A30/B46.

⁵ See Wittgenstein (1972): “So is the *hypothesis* possible, that all the things around us don’t exist? Would that not be like the hypothesis of our having miscalculated in all our calculations?” (§55); “When one says: ‘Perhaps this planet doesn’t exist and the light-phenomenon arises in some other way’, then after all one needs an example of an object which does not exist. This doesn’t exist—as *for example* does...” (§56); “That is to say, the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn” (§341); “That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted” (§342).

⁶ Kant, AA: KrV, A369.

⁷ Kant, AA: KrV, A369.

cognition.⁸ As the first conjunct states, then, the world is as we experience it, lest we fall into oscillation between skepticism and dogmatism.

But experience does not yield exhaustive, *unconditioned* cognition of the world. There are many ways of comprehending nature, some of which are peculiarly human, as the Aesthetic shows.⁹ Our forms of cognition, including space and time, structure a unique activity. However necessary from the standpoint of transcendental logic, which seeks the *a priori* conditions of human cognition, they are arbitrary for general logic, which seeks only inferential consistency.¹⁰ This is no reason, *per impossibile*, to abandon our forms of cognition, but it is reason to affirm the life antinomy's second conjunct. This is supported by the first of two arguments Kant gives for why empirical cognition presupposes a conception of the world as it is in itself, that is, for why appearances presuppose the thing in itself. While this argument saddles us with the life antinomy, we will see that his second argument allows us to hold both conjuncts without equivocation and thereby to solve the antinomy.¹¹

The first argument arises in the *Critique of Pure Reason* in the Analytic of Principles:

⁸ See Putnam (1983): "Cognitive salience and relevance are attributes of thought and reasoning, not of nature. To project them into the realist's 'real world', into what Kant called the *noumenal* world, is to mix objective idealism (or, perhaps, medieval Aristotelianism) and materialism in a totally incoherent way ... If events *intrinsically* explain other events, if there are saliciencies, relevancies, standards of what are 'normal' conditions, and so on, built into the world itself independently of minds, then the world is in many ways *like* a mind, or infused with something very much like reason" (215-6). And see McDowell (1998): "in theorizing about the relation of our language to the world, we must start in the middle, already equipped with command of a language; we cannot refrain from exploiting that prior equipment, in thinking about that practice, without losing our hold on the sense that the practice makes" (330).

⁹ Establishing the non-trivial contingency of our forms of sensibility in the Transcendental Aesthetic is part of Kant's argument to the conclusion that cognition fails to exhaust the world as it is in itself and contrasts with what Ameriks (2000) calls Reinhold's "short argument to idealism", which "abstracts from any reference to a specific form of representation", such as human sensibility. Treating representation generally in this way makes its absence synonymous with the thing in itself, from which the latter's unknowability trivially follows (128-9).

¹⁰ For Kant's distinction between transcendental and general logic, see AA: KrV, A55-7/B79-82.

¹¹ I model these arguments on what Franks (2005) calls Kant's "analytic" and "synthetic" commitments to the thing in itself (43-5).

Sensibility and its field, namely that of appearances, are themselves limited by the understanding, in that they do not pertain to things in themselves, but only to the way in which, on account of our subjective constitution, things appear to us. [...It] follows naturally from the concept of an appearance in general that something must correspond to it which is not in itself appearance, for appearance can be nothing for itself and outside our kind of representation; thus, if there is not to be a constant circle, the word ‘appearance’ must already indicate a relation to something the immediate representation of which is, to be sure, sensible, but which in itself, without this constitution of our sensibility (on which the form of our intuition is grounded), must be something, i.e., an object independent of sensibility.¹²

Empirical cognition for Kant is a nexus of sensibility and understanding. What we sense is restricted by what we can intuit in space and time, while what we intuit is determined or “limited” by what we can think. It is because our forms of sensibility are peculiar to our “subjective constitution” that we cognize only what appears to this constitution. But then appearances are not logically self-standing: their concept is qualified by their conformity to human sensibility, which implies the concept of what is independent of this conformity. Thinking appearances is transitive in this sense, lest, as Kant says in the B Preface, we hold “the absurd proposition that there is an appearance without anything that appears”.¹³ While our sort of sensibility defines the field of appearances, appearances themselves compel the thought of a non-sensible object or thing in itself. Hence, the world is in some sense independent of our experience of it.

This follows from “the form of thinking in general,”¹⁴ that is, from reflecting on appearances. It says nothing of what makes thinking the thing in itself *valid for cognition*. It only shows that we hold two conjuncts that yield an antinomy. Specifically, this leaves unclear (a) the concept that is proper to thinking the thing in itself and (b) the significance of thinking it. Until we clarify (a), we risk equivocating between the world as we experience it and as independent of experience. And until we clarify (b), we do not know the end served by thinking the thing in itself. I will argue that Kant’s second argument for this thinking clarifies (a) and (b) with an account of the *unity* of understanding.

§2

The argument begins in the Introduction to the Transcendental Dialectic with a distinction between the unity understanding gives to particular cognitions, by bringing intuitions under concepts, and the unity reason gives to the *body* of cognitions that the understanding functions to produce. The latter is “not the

¹² Kant, AA: KrV, A251-2.

¹³ Kant, AA: KrV, Bxxvii.

¹⁴ See Kant (1900–), AA: KrV, A55/B79.

unity of a possible experience,” but “the unconditioned [condition] for conditioned cognitions of the understanding, with which [the understanding’s] unity will be completed”.¹⁵ Kant does not mention the thing in itself in this section. But he later argues that the unity of an unconditioned condition is provided by the thing in itself construed, not as what is implied by the concept of a *particular* appearance, but as what reason demands for the *whole* of appearances. It is a unity that is “obviously synthetic; for the conditioned is analytically related to some condition, but not to the unconditioned”.¹⁶ Mere analysis goes no further than showing that the concept of an appearance entails that of a thing in itself: it is no contradiction to conceive infinite appearances each conditioned by a thing in itself yet unified by no systematic ground. Such a ground requires synthetically thinking of appearances as that whose logical entailments form a unity, one furnished by an unconditioned condition. In other words, it requires thinking, not of infinite conditioning things in themselves, but of an *infinitely conditioning thing in itself*.

This construal of the thing in itself forms the thought of what in Chapter Three of the *Dialectic* Kant calls the “transcendental ideal”.¹⁷ The ideal derives from reflection on the principle of thoroughgoing determination, according to which, for all pairs of opposed predicates, one predicate applies to every object. The “whole of possibility, as the sum total of all predicates of things in general ... contains as it were the entire storehouse of material from which all possible predicates of things can be taken” and is “nothing other than the idea of an All of reality (*omnitudo realitatis*). All true negations are then nothing but limits, which they could not be called unless they were grounded in the unlimited (the All)”.¹⁸ Kant identifies the ground of this storehouse with the thing in itself:

Through this possession of all reality, however, there is also represented the concept of a thing in itself which is thoroughly determined, and the concept of an *ens realissimum* is the concept of an individual being, because of all possible opposed predicates, one, namely that which belongs absolutely to being, is encountered in its determination. Thus it is a transcendental ideal which is the ground of the thoroughgoing determination that is necessarily encountered in everything existing, and which constitutes the supreme and complete material condition of its possibility, to which all thinking of objects in general must, as regards the content of that thinking, be traced back. It is, however, also the one single genuine ideal of which human reason is capable, because only in this one single case is an—in itself universal—concept of

¹⁵ Kant, AA: KrV, A307/B364.

¹⁶ Kant, AA: KrV, A308/B364.

¹⁷ Kant, AA: KrV, A571/B599.

¹⁸ Kant, AA: KrV, A571-2/B599-600, A575-6/B603-4.

one thing thoroughly determined through itself, and cognized as the representation of an individual.¹⁹

The totality of reality (*omnitudo realitatis*) is the sum of all predicates, within which objects' predicates are determined negatively, relative to what they are not. This totality has its ground in a most real "being" (*ens realissimum*) or transcendental ideal. Kant casts *the* thing in itself as this ideal, notwithstanding his talk elsewhere of *things* in themselves.²⁰ Crucially, he indicates this ideal is the *telos* toward which thinking of objects traces. To think an object is to think that whose existence is a limitation, not only of the relative existence of other objects, but of that whose existence is unlimited—a most real being. Thinking of objects synthetically, as parts of a totality, thus leads to thinking of that totality's unconditioned condition, the concept of which provides the unity of thinking of objects in general, which is to say, *the unity of understanding*.

In line with his first argument, Kant says the thing in itself *qua* unconditioned condition is "transcendent in respect of all appearances, i.e., no adequate empirical use can ever be made of that principle".²¹ Thinking it expresses reason's drive for the transcendental ideal, but is no cognition of it: as the "*supreme and complete material condition*" of totality's thoroughgoing determination, it is the matter that outstrips our forms of cognition. Still, this clarifies (b), for the significance of this thought owes to reason's desire for a *system*, which Kant defines in the Transcendental Doctrine of Method as "the unity of the manifold of cognitions under one idea. This is the rational concept of the form of a whole ... to which all parts are related and in the idea of which they are also related to each other, allow[ing] the absence of any part to be noticed in our knowledge of the rest".²² That this thinking is non-cognitive clarifies (a) by isolating a thinking that is "regulative".²³ As Kant says in the Appendix to

¹⁹ Kant, AA: KrV, A576/B604. In his lectures on religion, Kant describes the "*ens originarium* as an *ens summum*", as a "*living being, as a living God*". As suggestive as the identity between the *ens realissimum* and the *ens summum* is, Kant is only a would-be organicist, for his description is consistent with the postulate of something we do not know but "must think" (AA: VPR, 28:1000-1). Thus, he remains committed to rejecting the first claim common to mechanism and organicism.

²⁰ See Kant, AA: KrV: "cognition reaches appearances only, leaving the thing in itself as something actual for itself but uncognized by us. For that which necessarily drives us to go beyond the boundaries of experience and all appearances is the unconditioned, which reason necessarily and with every right demands in things in themselves for everything that is conditioned, thereby demanding the series of conditions as something completed" (Bxix-xxi).

²¹ Kant, AA: KrV, A308/B365.

²² Kant, AA: KrV, A832/B860.

²³ Kant, AA: KrV, A664/692.

the Transcendental Dialectic, this thinking is not “cognition of the object itself (as in the application of the categories to their sensible schemata), but only a rule or principle of the systematic unity of all use of the understanding”. Such a principle is “subjective” insofar as it is held, not from personal interest, “but from the interest of reason in general to a certain possible perfection of the cognition of this object”.²⁴ Thus, while we experience the world as it appears to our forms of cognition, we have a distinct interest in thinking it as a “systematic unity” that, because unknowable, is assumed by our sort of subject—contra claim (1) that nature is comprehensible in itself, not as it appears. This distinction avoids equivocating between the conjuncts in the life antinomy. It thereby allows us to hold both simultaneously and to solve the antinomy, a solution won, not by *knowledge*, but by a sort of *commitment*.²⁵

The thing in itself is neither the presence of what can appear in experience nor the absence of what can never appear, like a square circle. Its significance is as that whole on condition of which the “absence” as well as the presence of its parts are possible. We might call it the *absence of presence and absence*, that which we can neither place nor misplace because it transcends the bounds of sense. While this “being” is unknowable, it unifies the understanding by serving as its *final cause*, the ideal at which understanding aims. It is in this sense that we who seek to understand nature are being-bound.

§3

As I hinted in the introduction, there is a quite similar way in which, given the bounds of sense, we are death-bound. I can speak of death in two ways: as my surest possibility and as the inaccessible state *par excellence*. I cannot deny that I will die, but I cannot claim any insight into the nature of death. We will again see that both conjuncts must be affirmed. And we will again see that this requires distinguishing the senses of speaking of a state that

²⁴ Kant, AA: KrV, A665-6/693-4. Compare Cavell’s (2003) implicit formulation of the life antinomy and its solution in regulative thinking: “Kant’s conception of experience as appearance, hence of a world for us and simultaneously of a world of experience denied or lost to us, will force us to recuperate, such as we can, both worlds by a philosophy of necessary Ideas, of things and matters beyond our knowledge; then philosophy has to do with the perplexed capacity to mourn the passing of the world” (115).

²⁵ Compare Nagel (1971): “What sustains us, in belief as in action, is not reason or justification, but something more basic than these—for we go on in the same way even after we are convinced that the reasons have given out. If we tried to rely entirely on reason, and pressed it hard, our lives and beliefs would collapse—a form of madness that may actually occur if the inertial force of taking the world and life for granted is somehow lost. If we lose our grip on that, reason will not give it back to us” (724).

must bear existential significance for me and one that cannot, between a state within and beyond my possibilities for being, one unique yet foreign to my life. Until we distinguish these senses, we will be saddled with what I call the *death antinomy*.

We can look to Heidegger's *Being and Time* to see why the conjunction is compelling. Consider that we must affirm the first conjunct on pain of two errors that parallel the skeptical and dogmatic denials of the life antinomy's first conjunct. Those denials assume an *impersonal ideal of cognition*, the first doubting our knowledge claims on the grounds that this ideal cannot be met, the second buttressing those claims on the grounds that it can. The first lacks conviction in the veracity of our forms of cognition while the latter is convinced of veracity beyond our forms of cognition. Similarly, the errors preventing affirmation of the death antinomy's first conjunct take opposing stances on an *impersonal idea of death's certainty*—one that evades this certainty and one that induces it from experience. Neither, Heidegger argues, is adequate to grasping this certainty.

Evading death's certainty is enabled by the cliché of an unreflective public—what Heidegger calls “the they”²⁶—for whom death is a distant event: “One also dies at the end, but for now one is not involved”. Speaking of the impersonal “one”, I disown death as my surest possibility, convinced that “in no case is it I myself [who dies], for this one is *no one*”. This transforms what is “irreplaceably mine” into a “publicly occurring event” through an “evasion of” or “*tranquilization about death*”.²⁷ Just as Kant's skeptic retreats from owning her forms of cognition, so the they “*does not permit the courage to have Angst about death*”.²⁸ This is a kind of paranoia—a being *beside* one's understanding—for it ascribes a fate to oneself while refusing to ascribe it to oneself *as oneself*. Hence, Heidegger says it is “something like” certainty about death, yet not “authentically ‘certain’”. Rather than allow the certainty of my death to be the “sole determinant” of how I comport myself to it, I allow clichés to guide my attitude.²⁹ But evasiveness cannot achieve authentic certainty about death.

²⁶ Heidegger (1996), 114.

²⁷ Heidegger (1996), 253. Compare Schopenhauer (1969): “no one is noticeably disturbed by the thought of certain and never-distant death, but everyone lives on as though he is bound to live forever. Indeed, this is true to the extent that it might be said that no one has a really lively conviction of the certainty of his death, as otherwise there could not be a very great difference between his frame of mind and that of the condemned criminal. Everyone recognizes that certainty in the abstract and theoretically, but lays it on one side, like other theoretical truths that are not applicable in practice, without taking it into his vivid consciousness” (281-2).

²⁸ Heidegger (1996), 254.

²⁹ Heidegger (1996), 255-6.

Neither can inducing death's certainty from observing the dead. We may think that our kind of being—what Heidegger calls "Dasein"³⁰—can grasp this certainty simply by experiencing the deaths of others. But, he says,

when someone has died, his Being-no-longer-in-the-world (if we understand it in an extreme way) is still a Being, but in the sense of the Being-just-present-at-hand-and-no-more of a corporeal Thing which we encounter. In the dying of the Other we can experience that remarkable phenomenon of Being which may be defined as the change-over of an entity from Dasein's kind of Being (or life) to no-longer-Dasein. The *end* of the entity *qua* Dasein is the *beginning* of the same entity *qua* something present-at-hand. However, in this way of interpreting the change-over from Dasein to Being-just-present-at-hand-and-no-more, the phenomenal content is missed, inasmuch as in the entity which still remains we are not presented with a mere corporeal thing. From a theoretical point of view, even the corpse which is present-at-hand is still a possible object for the student of pathological anatomy, whose understanding tends to be oriented to the idea of life. This something which is just-present-at-hand-and-no-more is 'more' than a *lifeless* material Thing. In it we encounter something *unalive*, which has lost its life.³¹

According to Heidegger, Dasein is that whose existence consists in *possibilities* for being.³² In dying, the other ceases to be such an existence and becomes actual, fixed, "*lifeless*". He ceases to be what, in life, was more than mere matter. But observing his corpse third-personally cannot show how his "change-over" is a certainty *for him*. His corpse is not merely present-at-hand: it signifies continuity with a perspective for which death could have come as a loss. Showing how his death is a certainty for him requires conceiving death from the first person, from the standpoint from which *I* expect death as *my* surest possibility. Neither abandoning death's certainty to the impersonal standpoint nor observing its effects from that vantage can exhibit the certainty of death as that transition I am to make.

To grasp death as my surest possibility, I must speak of it as uniquely mine:

the suggestion that the dying of Others is a substitute theme for the ontological analysis of Dasein's totality and the settling of its account rests on a presupposition

³⁰ See Heidegger (1996), 12.

³¹ Heidegger (1996), 237-8.

³² See Heidegger (1996): "*The essence of Dasein lies in its existence*. Accordingly those characteristics which can be exhibited in this entity are not 'properties' present-at-hand of some entity which 'looks' so and so and is itself present-at-hand; they are in each case possible ways for it to be, and no more than that ... So when we designate this entity with the term 'Dasein', we are expressing not its 'what' (as if it were a table, house or tree) but its Being" (242).

which demonstrably fails altogether to recognize Dasein's kind of Being [...namely,] that any Dasein may be substituted for another at random, so that what cannot be experienced in one's own Dasein is accessible in that of a stranger ... *No one can take the Other's dying away from him* ... Dying is something that every Dasein itself must take upon itself at the time. By its very essence, death is in every case mine, insofar as it 'is' at all.³³

What individuates me is not my capacity for reason, which I share with other Dasein, but my capacity to die. It isolates me profoundly. No one can save me from it, which is why anxiety is the proper mood for its apprehension.³⁴ It is a capacity I cannot substitute for yours, "an existential phenomenon of a Dasein which is in each case one's own".³⁵ As the first conjunct states, death is my "ownmost potentiality-of-being,"³⁶ my surest possibility.

And yet we must affirm the second conjunct, for where death is, I am not.³⁷ It has "the character of a no-longer-being-there". This is why Heidegger contrasts death—what he calls Dasein's 'not-yet'—with a debt, where what is outstanding (goods owed) has "the same kind of being" as what is already secured (goods owned). Repaying a debt means aggregating more of the same, increasing a stock. Dying is not seamless in this way. It is not a "progressive' piecing-on" of what is now dead with what was once alive, as if the first stock raises the second: "[t]hat Dasein should *be* together only when its not-yet has been filled out is so far from the case that precisely then it no longer is".³⁸ Dasein's not-yet is, moreover, categorially unlike the moon's pending fullness, which "pertains only to the way we *grasp* [the moon] perceptually". I do not perceive more of death, like I do of the moon as it moves through its phases, for it "'is' not yet 'real' at all".³⁹ Heidegger qualifies reference to death with quotation marks, helping to illustrate the point: my life's manifest presence *betrays* my reference to death. This is perhaps why the absence of the deceased complicates our

³³ Heidegger (1996), 239-40.

³⁴ See Haugeland (2000): "Heidegger says that anxiety *individualizes* Dasein. This does not mean that Dasein is not, in each case, already an individual, but rather that, in anxiety, a person's individuality is 'brought home' to him or her in an utterly unmistakable and undeniable way. Falling back into public life (normality) is a way of escaping anxiety, and the public culture encourages this" (63-4).

³⁵ Heidegger (1996), 240.

³⁶ Heidegger (1996), 263.

³⁷ See Mulhall (2009): "a human being's death is not an event in her life, not even the last" (99).

³⁸ Heidegger (1996), 242-3. Compare Levinas (2000): "Can death be said without its nothingness being converted into a structure in-the-world? Does death not imply a rupture with the comprehension of being?" (90).

³⁹ Heidegger (1996), 243.

reference to him. He is not *somewhere* else. His is an absence of both presence and absence.⁴⁰ Like the thing in itself, death is not elsewhere. Similarly, we will see, referring to death requires non-cognitive or regulative thinking. Hence, we must affirm the second conjunct of the antinomy.⁴¹

While death is not lacking in the way of unpaid debts or unseen phases, neither is its inaccessibility stably interpreted as something outstanding. What for fruit is outstanding is neither more of the same nor what is unseen, but ripeness. Fruit does not ripen merely with the addition of external materials, for *qua* living it contains the means to ripen itself. It *is* its unripeness, just as it generates its ripeness. Heidegger says this is only “formally analogous”⁴² to death, for whereas ripening is fruit’s fulfilment, death does not fulfil my possibilities for being, but robs me of future ones. “Even ‘unfulfilled’ Dasein ends,” which means what for fruit is outstanding is categorially unlike my not-yet. It becomes urgent, then, “to ask *in what sense, if any, death must be grasped as the ending of Dasein*”.⁴³ Indeed, it raises the question of what makes thinking of death *valid for cognizers*, for we who die are left to affirm the conjuncts of an antinomy⁴⁴ for which we

⁴⁰ Compare Adorno (2004): “Attempts to express death in language are futile, all the way into logic, for who should be the subject of which we predicate that it is dead, here and now?” (371).

⁴¹ Compare Kant, AA: AP: “The fear of death that is natural to all human beings, even the unhappiest or the wisest, is therefore not a horror of *dying* but, as Montaigne rightly says, horror at the thought of *having died* (that is, of being dead), which the candidate for death thinks he will still have after his death, since he thinks of his corpse, which is no longer himself, as still being himself in a dark grave or somewhere else.—This illusion cannot be pushed aside, for it lies in the nature of thought as a way of speaking to and of oneself. The thought *I am not* simply cannot *exist*; because if I am not then I cannot be conscious that I am not” (7:167).

⁴² Heidegger (1996), 244.

⁴³ Heidegger (1996), 244.

⁴⁴ Compare Coetzee (1999): “All of us have such moments, particularly as we grow older. The knowledge we have is not abstract—‘All human beings are mortal, I am a human being, therefore I am mortal’—but embodied. For a moment we *are* that knowledge. We live the impossible: we live beyond our death, look back on it, yet look back as only a dead self can. When I know, with this knowledge, that I am going to die, what is it, in Nagel’s terms, that I know? Do I know what it is like for me to be a corpse or do I know what it is like for a corpse to be a corpse? The distinction seems to me trivial. What I know is what a corpse cannot know: that it is extinct, that it knows nothing and will never know anything anymore. For an instant, before my whole structure of knowledge collapses in panic, I am alive inside that contradiction, dead and alive at the same time” (32). And compare Rosenzweig (2005): “[Man] feel[s] as violently inevitable that which he never feels otherwise” (9).

need a solution.⁴⁵ Again, the antinomy leaves unclear (a) the concept proper to thinking of our death and (b) the significance of thinking it. Until we clarify (a), we equivocate between a possibility we can neither abandon nor realize.⁴⁶ Until we clarify (b), we do not know the end served by thinking of death. Like Kant's second argument, Heidegger clarifies (a) and (b) with an account of unity, namely, of Dasein's existence.

§4

Again, we are confronted by an activity—here, living—whose concept entails its limitation, a boundary that raises questions about how to think beyond it and for what purpose we must think beyond it. Again, we will find answers by thinking synthetically about the unity toward which this activity strives.

Dasein's existence is constituted by what Heidegger calls "care".⁴⁷ Unlike something merely objectively present, for which "its being is a matter of 'indifference'," I am always already concerned about my own being. For any possibility I may undertake, the "*personal* pronoun" accompanies it.⁴⁸ While cognition is an example, possibility includes non-cognitive activities like the skilled use of tools, quasi-automatic techniques and the ability to cope with situational change. Care is the mode of being whereby I project myself onto such possibilities for being the unity of which, as the unity of my existence, is accordingly a *unity of care*. In this connection, Heidegger says the "whole of the constitution of Dasein itself is not simple in its unity, but shows a structural articulation which is expressed in the existential concept of care".⁴⁹ My existence

⁴⁵ See Mulhall (2009): "[A]s long as Dasein exists, it can never achieve wholeness; it will always already be ahead of itself, essentially related to an unrealized possibility, so something that it is not (yet). And yet, of course, human life does have an end. In Being-ahead-of-itself, Dasein also understands itself as relating to, standing out towards, its own future completion, towards a point at which there will be nothing of itself left outstanding. But the point at which the human individual's span of existence is complete is also the point of its own non-existence: its death. Hence, any human life will embody, and so any full philosophical analysis of human existence must include an account of, *this structural paradox*—the fact that Dasein's conception of itself as necessarily ahead of itself and hence incomplete nevertheless incorporates a conception of itself as subject to death, and hence as necessarily completing its existence" (99, italics mine).

⁴⁶ Heidegger (1996) says the truism, "As soon as a human being is born, he is old enough to die right away", is a "negative" commitment to Dasein's not-yet. A "positive" commitment is needed whereby we are "unequivocally oriented toward the constitution of being of Dasein" (245-6).

⁴⁷ Heidegger (1996), 57.

⁴⁸ See Heidegger (1996), 42-3.

⁴⁹ Heidegger (1996), 200.

is the complex structure of the projects I undertake. I articulate this structure by carrying things out—by unifying specific efforts toward the completion of specific tasks. But how is it that I am the “unity” of all such unifying efforts? What makes me a unity of care, a “whole” life composed of such tasks as parts?

Heidegger addresses this question in §75 of *Being and Time*:

Inauthentically existing Dasein first calculates its history in terms of what it takes care of. In so doing, it is driven about by its ‘affairs’. So if it wants to come to itself, it must first *pull itself together* from the *dispersion* and the *disconnectedness* of what just ‘happened’, and because of this, it is only then that there at last arises from the horizon of the understanding of inauthentic historicity the *question* of how one is to establish Dasein’s ‘connectedness’ ... This question cannot ask: how does Dasein acquire such a unity of connection that it can subsequently link together the succession of ‘experiences’ that has ensued and is still ensuing; rather, it asks in which of its own kinds of being *does it lose itself in such a way that it must, as it were, pull itself together only subsequently out of its dispersion, and think up for itself a unity in which this together is embraced?* Lostness in the they and in world history revealed itself earlier as a flight from death. This flight from... reveals being-toward-death as a fundamental determination of care.⁵⁰

Heidegger conceives the unity of Dasein’s existence as a unity of care, specifically, an *interconnected history* of instances of taking care. Such a history—my history—cannot precede these instances and “subsequently link” them, for they always already constitute me: they have no temporal precedent. Instead, I grasp my history after critically exposing my absorption in a public that dissuades thoughts of what is my ownmost. My unity of care is only perspicuous in its absence and it is my responsibility to find its absence perspicuous. Amid the they, I am inauthentically “driven about by [my] ‘affairs’,” externally thrust by circumstances beyond my control. These affairs become my own history only when I resolve to ask how they comprise a synthetic unity of possibilities whose ground lies in me. This ground is my being-toward-death, my ownership of what most individuates me, for since I cannot abandon my death as a possibility, it is *exemplary* for any other possibility I might authentically pursue. By accepting my sole certain possibility—the standard of mineness—I disclose “the possibility of existing as a *whole potentiality-of-being*”.⁵¹ Being-toward-death is my willingness to bear responsibility for this whole, to “*take over [my] own thrownness*”.⁵² Thus, I grasp my unity of care as a life lived resolutely in light of my mortal fate.

⁵⁰ Heidegger (1996), 390.

⁵¹ Heidegger (1996), 264.

⁵² Heidegger (1996), 385.

Earlier, in §74, Heidegger says the more that Dasein

understands itself unambiguously in terms of its ownmost eminent possibility in anticipating death, the more unequivocal and inevitable is the choice in finding the possibility of its existence. Only the anticipation of death drives every chance and ‘preliminary’ possibility out. Only being free *for* death gives Dasein its absolute goal and pushes existence into its finitude. The finitude of existence thus seized upon tears one back out of endless multiplicity of possibilities offering themselves nearest by—those of comfort, shirking and taking things easy—and brings Dasein to the simplicity of its *fate*. This is how we designate the primordial occurrence of Dasein that lies in authentic resoluteness in which it *hands itself down* to itself, free for death, in a possibility that it inherited and yet has chosen.⁵³

Dasein’s peculiar fate articulates or “pushes” its existence into its finite shape. Anticipating it is therefore a function of individuation: being-toward-death sets in relief a unity of care—a life—by resolving to accept what is irrevocably unique about it. As Heidegger says, death “claims not only *one* definite kind of behaviour of Dasein, but claims Dasein in the complete authenticity of its existence”.⁵⁴ In other words, it has the explanatory significance of making sense of a life, *contra* claim (2) that death has no explanatory priority. Authentic Dasein resolves to accept, not death’s power to annihilate the body—the effect of which Heidegger calls “perishing”—or death’s power to halt the pursuit of possibilities—the effect of which is “demise”—but death’s power to explain Dasein’s striving to authentically take over its possibilities as its own—the effect of which is to reveal Dasein as “dying”.⁵⁵ Such a conception of death has the power of a *final cause*, one that “defines being-whole”. Hence, it “is not something which Dasein ultimately arrives at only in its demise,”⁵⁶ but rather is the way in which Dasein lives in the shadow of an individuating certainty.

Like Kant, Heidegger solves his antinomy by clarifying (a) and (b). Grasping the idea of death as the unity of Dasein’s existence, a unity revealed through self-critique, allows us to conceive it, not as something we passively suffer, but as a way of living. But since death is always not-yet, this unity is never

⁵³ Heidegger (1996), 384.

⁵⁴ Heidegger (1996), 265.

⁵⁵ See Heidegger (1996): “*Dying*, however, serves as a title for the way of being in which Dasein *is towards* its death. Thus, we must say: Dasein never perishes. But Dasein can only demise so long as it is dying” (247).

⁵⁶ Heidegger (1996), 259. As Blattner (1994) notes, inauthentic Dasein *conflates* death with demise (55-6), disowning its being by treating its death, not as internal to, but as an *external check on* its possibilities.

actual.⁵⁷ Like the thing in itself, the idea of death is valid for cognizers only within *regulative* thinking, which clarifies (a). To think it is to anticipate what never fully, but always shall, define the unity of care that is my life. It is an endless task. And yet death's standing outside the possibilities I pursue, and its standing out there *for me*, is what marks them as phases of my own history and not affairs driving me about, which clarifies (b). Thus again, we solve an antinomy born of our finitude, not by knowing, but by striving with a certain attitude or conviction.

§5

We are now poised to grasp the structural analogy between the idea of the thing in itself and the idea of death. Insofar as the former sets the bounds of possible experience and the latter sets the bounds of mineness, each represents that which is *unconditioned*, either by what I can know or by ways I can be. Accordingly, to be bound for the thing in itself, as the ideal of unified understanding, and to be bound for death, as the ideal of unified existence, are parallel activities. Indeed, since the referent of each idea is not conditioned, neither can be rendered determinate—either by any object of knowledge or by any way of being. But if neither is distinct just as such, then neither is distinguishable *from the other*. Hence, they present the selfsame problem, viewable from Kantian or Heideggerian perspectives, of grasping the unconditioned that exceeds human life. If this is so, then the joint claim of mechanism and organicism—that (1) nature is knowable in itself and that (2) death has no explanatory priority for our knowing nature—can be refuted by adopting either Kant's epistemically humble or Heidegger's existentially authentic account of the unity of human life.

My aim is not to signal something Heideggerian in Kant's insight or something Kantian in Heidegger's insight. It is to show how the life and death

⁵⁷ See Mulhall (2009): “[death] is that against which specific features of the existential terrain configure themselves, an omnipresent self-concealing condition for the human capacity to disclose things (including itself) as they really are, and so something that is in a sense revealed in anything and everything we can genuinely grasp. In Costello's and Coetzee's terms, one might say that death is the self-concealing and self-revealing wound of human life, a wound that is touched on in every aspect and element of any such mode of existence” (101). See also Blattner (1994): “Suppose we call situations in which an ability cannot be manifested because stifled a ‘limit-situation’ for that ability ... Limit-situations (*Grenzsituationen*) help to define an ability by revealing its limits (*Grenzen*) [...] Death is the limit-situation that defines the limits of Dasein's ability-to-be [...] ‘Death’] is the name for a certain condition in which Dasein can find itself ... Since ‘death’ picks out this existential condition, rather than the ending of a human life, Heidegger can refer to death as a possible way to be Dasein” (67-8).

antinomies are not really distinct, but express a single problem, Kant's and Heidegger's solutions to which indicate a deep bond between transcendental idealism and phenomenology. The first conjunct in each antinomy illustrates the conditions that our standpoint places on *possibilities*: neither the world nor death is intelligible independent of our subjective constitution. The second in each illustrates these conditions' inadequacy for knowing a *unity* of possibilities: our constitution is inadequate to a complete signification of either the world or death. Not only does each antinomy reveal a pair of commitments we must make but cannot simultaneously meet: they are resolved by thinking (not knowing) beyond the bounds of sense, construable in terms of possible experience or of possibilities for being. They are isomorphic problems whose solutions consist in *structurally analogous thoughts*. Rather than really distinct problems, then, the life and death antinomies represent from different aspects and with differing emphasis the same predicament of accounting for the unity of human life. Striving for this unity marks the common *telos* of epistemic humility and existential authenticity. As Kant and Heidegger both recognize, our predicament is inborn: it is the result of a standpoint whose constitution is both the object of its own critique, as when it sets the bounds of sense or life, and the obstacle to cognizing the ground of its unity, insofar as these bounds are insurmountable.

The questions raised by the pervasive thought with which I began—that death makes things of us—are accordingly deeply connected. In a passage that might apply to the thing in itself, Heidegger says:

The nearest nearness of being-toward-death as possibility is as far removed as possible from anything real. The more clearly this possibility is understood, the more purely does understanding penetrate to it *as the possibility of the impossibility of existence in general.* As possibility, death gives Dasein nothing to 'be actualized' and nothing which it itself could *be* as something real. It is the possibility of the impossibility of every mode of behaviour toward..., of every way of existing. In running ahead to this possibility, it becomes 'greater and greater', that is, it reveals itself as something which knows no measure at all, no more or less, but means the possibility of the measureless impossibility of existence. Essentially, this possibility offers no support for becoming intent on something, for 'spelling out' the real thing that is possible and so forgetting its possibility. As anticipation of possibility, being-toward-death first *makes* this possibility *possible* and sets it free as possibility.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Heidegger (1996), 262. By the same token, Heidegger's (1984) account of the world could equally apply to death: "we can say about the world that it is a *nothing*. What sort of *nihil* is it? ... If it is a *nihil*, then it must not be a *nihil negativum*, i.e., not the simple pure empty negation of something. The world is nothing in the sense that it is nothing that is. It is nothing that is yet something that 'is there' ... We therefore call it the *nihil originarium*" (210).

Ever close at hand, death is neither objectively present nor ready for care. It is as near as it is far: like the thing in itself, it is the absence of presence and absence. Likewise, we could say of the thing in itself that it is “nothing which it itself could *be* as something real” and something that “knows no measure at all”. And yet *neither* is a possibility all on its own. *We make* them the impossible possibility they are by self-critically finding ourselves bound for them. To think either as grounding the unity of life just is to think ourselves bound for them, for it is a matter of asking, not just Kant’s question of what we are,⁵⁹ but what we are *to become*. Confronting the life and death antinomies, then, is principally a way of putting ourselves into question.

Whether we adopt an epistemic or existential orientation toward the unity of human life, we acknowledge a boundary wrought by our own finitude, beyond which neither cognition nor care provides any insight.⁶⁰ As I have argued, the effect is to refute two key claims shared by mechanism and organicism—though not to undermine their respective projects. Just as Kant’s critical interpretation of the thing in itself is prior to any scientific endeavour as its condition of possibility, so Heidegger’s “existential interpretation of death is prior to any biology and ontology of life” insofar as any scientific account of “the ‘life’ of the ‘dying person’” presupposes “dying itself”.⁶¹ No project, scientific or otherwise, is salient outside the first person standpoint, which we cannot reflectively occupy without the thought of the unity lying beyond its bounds.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Paul Franks, Ulrich Schlösser, Rebecca Comay and Robert Gibbs for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

⁵⁹ See Kant, AA: JL, 9:25.

⁶⁰ The idea of a non-cognitive commitment that makes possible a domain of cognition finds parallels in Kant’s analyses of aesthetic and teleological judgment in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

⁶¹ See Heidegger (1996), 246-7.

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