**Penultimate Draft to Official Version Published in *Southwest Philosophy Review* (37:2)**

All citations of this work should consult and refer to the published version available [here](https://www.pdcnet.org/swphilreview/content/swphilreview_2021_0037_0002_0131_0147).

**Heidegger on Anxiety in the Face of Death—An Analysis and Extension**

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*Abstract:* A significant portion of the secondary literature on Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* has focused on interpreting his formal conceptions of death and anxiety. Unlike these previous works, this essay will serve to fill a gap in the Heideggerian portrayal of death. Although he argues that Dasein is anxious about death at a fundamental level and that it proximally and for the most part covers up such anxiety, Heidegger does not provide ontic evidence in support of his claim, instead opting to uncharacteristically take it as something self-evident. I attempt to supplement Heidegger’s framework by introducing Stephen Cave’s immortality narratives and the emerging field of Terror Management Theory as the aforementioned ontic evidence that rounds out Heidegger’s notion of death, before ultimately transitioning from Heidegger’s work into the larger philosophical discourse on death and demonstrating the potential joy that can manifest when one gains a lucid understanding of the ownness of their death and the narratives to which it gives rise.

1. **Introduction**

One of Martin Heidegger’s major contributions to philosophy in the twentieth century was his adaptation and utilization of phenomenology to grapple with the meaning and significance of death, positing that our relation to death is of the utmost importance when it comes to the question of the fulfillment of the subject. Heidegger’s focus on mortality and finitude thus set into motion what was to become a major point of debate among those working in phenomenology, existentialism, and the Continental tradition at large, a dialogue in which I hope the present essay can make a contribution.

In Heidegger’s groundbreaking work, *Being and Time*, he holds anxiety to be Dasein’s fundamental *Stimmung*, or mood, where moods are understood as making “manifest ‘how one is, and how one is faring’” (1962, p. 173). Our moods influence our comportments and modes of Being-in-the-world. This means that, in light of anxiety being designated as our primordial mood, Dasein is *always* anxiousin some capacity; indeed, it is “anxious in the very depths of its Being” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 234). How we respond to or cope with such anxiety will ultimately prove determinative for the way in which our lives are lived. As we will see, what Dasein is anxious about shall prove to be death. If Dasein is anxious in the face of death, and such anxiety manifests proximally and for the most part in the fallen covering up of anxiety (as Heidegger claims), then it follows that we should be able to uncover ontic evidence in support of this, both in the present and historically.

This paper will serve to present such evidence, drawing largely on the findings of Stephen Cave’s *Immortality: The Quest to Live Forever and How it Drives Civilization*, in which, following the research on terror management theory influenced by Ernest Becker and conducted by Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg, he describes the ontic strategies that dominate human life, and which serve to cover up the certain reality of death. My aim is to show that the four groups of “immortality narratives” found in Cave’s work provide the evidence that Heidegger needs to defend his claim that anxiety is always ‘present,’ even in the tranquil mode of everydayness that seduces us via its leveling down and covering up of anxiety in the face of death, before situating this work in other philosophical and psychological understandings of death. This essay is thus not a critique of Heidegger, but rather a *supplement*—where Heidegger proposes the ontological structure of Dasein, this essay seeks to see how this ontological structure manifests itself in ontic reality, that is, in what Dasein does. Such an undertaking does not prioritize the ontic over the ontological, but rather looks to the ontic for *clues* that can lead us to a greater understanding of the ontological structures that Heidegger describes.

The unfolding of this paper will then be carried out as follows: first, an overview of Heidegger’s conceptions of death and anxiety in *Being and Time*; second, a presentation of the “immortality narratives” that all known civilizations have combined in some way to subvert anxiety in the face of death, as well as an analysis of how these narratives provide the ontic evidence necessary to support Heidegger’s positing of anxiety as Dasein’s primordial mood; and finally, an examination of the upshot of overcoming the pervasive immortality narratives, which emphasizes the fact that even the overcoming of such narratives via anticipatory resoluteness and authentic Being-towards-death does not allow one to escape or overcome anxiety—indeed, anxiety is still ‘there,’ but in a radically different way.

1. **Defining Our Terms**

Heidegger’s work has proven to be notoriously difficult for many people, due in large part to his redefining of classical philosophical terms and use of neologisms. For the sake of clarity, it is necessary that time be devoted to the proper characterization of a few pivotal terms to be discussed throughout this paper. These include the ‘they,’ anxiety, death, fallenness, Being-towards-death, and anticipatory resoluteness. The characterizations given will be in connection to the context in which they are to be used in *this* essay, and it is worth noting that they play more robust roles in the overall scheme of Heidegger’s text. Also, it must be remembered that these terms are interpreted and understood in radically different ways by very reputable scholars working in the rich secondary literature on Heidegger, especially when it comes to the concept of death, which, as Hubert Dreyfus notes, has no less than eight prominent and plausible interpretations (2017, pp. 68-69).

Beginning with the ‘they,’ we find that proximally and for the most part Dasein is not its own Self, but the ‘they-self,’ whereby “everyone is the Other, and no one is himself” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 165). We tend to be lost in the world of our concern and fascinated by what it offers us to toil with. In our everyday lostness in the world we do things as *one* does them. Our ways of Being are dictated to us by the ‘they’, meaning that we drive down the road as *one* drives, we speak as *one* speaks, are shocked as *one* is shocked, and even rebel as *one* rebels (Heidegger, 1962, p. 164). The ‘they’ levels down individuality into a mode of averageness, meaning that it noiselessly suppresses any and every kind of priority or exceptionality, while also prescribing what onecan and cannot do; in other words, it thrusts possibilities upon Dasein and tells it that these possibilities are exclusive (Heidegger, 1962, p. 165). We might wonder why we allow ourselves to be subjected to the dictatorship of the ‘they.’ The answer for Heidegger is quite simple—the ‘they’ seduces us by easing the burden of our existence and providing us with tranquility (1962, p. 165). The public interpretation of things that the ‘they’ provides makes us feel at home in the world, where everything becomes familiar and has an air of certainty in regard to its Being.

The next logical question is as follows: what is the burden from which we need easing? Heidegger answers this question by introducing what he calls *anxiety*, which he sharply contrasts from fear. Fear is always fear *about something*; anxiety, on the other hand, is indeed anxious about ‘something,’ but this ‘something’ is the *nothing*. That is, in anxiety Dasein is anxious in the face of itself and in the face of its Being (Heidegger, 1962, p. 229), i.e., it is reflexive. What is it that lies in its Being that causes Dasein to succumb to the temptation of the ‘they’ though? In a Heideggerian ‘anxiety attack,’ one is torn from the grips of the ‘they’ and stripped down as an individual. In such a case one can no longer define themselves by the former objects of their concern; things cease to show up as meaningful—the feeling of familiarity is lost and replaced by one of *unheimlichkeit*, or the feeling of not Being at home in the world. The former question still does not seem to have been answered fully though: what does anxiety bring Dasein face to face with that causes it to *flee* back into the grips of the ‘they?’ The manifest answer to this question is death and the structure of finitude.

To be sure, a Heideggerian anxiety attack (simply referred to henceforth as an anxiety attack) is not Dasein’s first encounter with the event characterized as the ending of *biological* *life*, for such a physical ending is what Heidegger classifies as *demise*, which is to be sharply contrasted from existential death. By death, Heidegger does not have in mind some event, but rather a *possibility* which Dasein comports itself towards as a way of Being. Death is that possibility which is ownmost, non-relational, and not to be outstripped, which is to say that others cannot stand in for one in their death, and that the possibility itself is one that is certain, yet indefinite (1962, p. 294). The last component, death’s indefiniteness, is perhaps the most important and unnerving, because understanding it means understanding that death is not only certain at *some* time in the distant future, but that it is *always* looming as a possibility that Dasein cannot overcome or escape from so long as it exists—“Death is a way to be, which Dasein takes over as soon as it is. As soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 289).

The ‘they’ robs one of this understanding of death by substituting demise in its place and thereby concealing death itself. As Heidegger notes, the ‘they’ tells us via everyday talk that death is merely a ‘case of death,’ and that “one of these days one will die too, in the end; but right now it has nothing to do with us” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 296). Andrew Mitchell captures this sentiment nicely, writing, “It is the they who claims that death is possible for anyone at any moment…. That death is possible at any moment could not be further from the truth—death is present at every moment, though present in a mode that is not-yet present” (2015, p. 227). When conceived of in this way, it is better to consider death as a capacity for death where one is ‘Being-in-death’, as opposed to towards some event, which better illustrates that death is *always* a possibility for one, and therefore always something that one is coping with in some way.

The ‘they’ levels down this ownmost possibility by offering consolation, telling those whose death appears medically imminent that they will surely recover and be ‘back at it’ in no time; should that person actually reach their demise, it will be euphemistically said that they have merely ‘passed on.’ Such language hides the indefiniteness of death, not only from the consoled, but also from the *consoler.* Part of the reason that this concealing of death is so pervasive is that those who contemplate death and question the everyday understanding of it are said to be cowardly and insecure (Heidegger, 1962, p. 298). Furthermore, those who attempt to engage in a dialogue that questions the status quo will find that the conversations such questionings give rise to, at least outside of a philosophical setting, prove to be awkward and strained, before being deemed altogether inappropriate. Heidegger’s recognition of this, however, does not prevent him from returning death to the realm of philosophical discussion, an arena where it would feature prominently throughout the 20th century continental tradition.

The second aspect of an anxiety attack, which motivates the fleeing in the face of death that re-disperses one into their lostness in the world of the ‘they,’ is the understanding that the everyday status quo is ungrounded. Our way of Being is contingent upon our thrownness. We are thrown into a world that we did not choose and that could have been otherwise—there is no ultimate justification for the common understanding or arranging of things, which creates the possibility for a feeling of uncanniness, but also for the feeling of liberation and creative freedom.

The final preliminary remark to be made pertaining to death is just what it means to characterize it as a *possibility*, as opposed to an event. A possibility is a way to befor Dasein— “In each case Dasein *is* its possibility, and it ‘has’ this possibility, but not just as a property” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 68)—which means that it comports itself *towards* them. Death then, is something that Dasein comports itself towards either authentically or inauthentically, or more precisely, either as its *own* or not. Such language can be misleading though, because the language of ‘comporting towards’ seems to imply a comporting towards some event in the future. Heidegger is clear, however, that “death *is* only in an existentiell *Being towards death*” (1962, p. 277). Dasein *is* its death, in that its death is determinative for how it exists *now* and in *every* case.

After one has been brought face to face with their naked Being in anxiety, there are two possible ways of ‘returning’ to their Being-in-the-world. Proximally and for the most part Dasein flees in the face of death and returns to the tranquilization of the ‘they,’ writing off its moment of anxiety as really nothing at all (Heidegger, 1962, p. 231). In such fleeing, Dasein clings to the illusory certainty of the public understanding of things by attempting to ignore its anxiety by re-immersing itself in its projects and day-to-day life. Dasein cuts out a manageable world for itself, which allows one to merely ‘go through the motions,’ so to speak, by merely accepting the pre-established cultural programming that tells one what they should do, where they should look, and so on. This fleeing into the tempting tranquilization that conceals and alienates one from their ownmost possibility, i.e., death, is what characterizes Heidegger’s conception of *fallenness*—fallenness as the ‘falling’ back into the average everyday mode of Being.

The second possible way of returning is one in which Dasein takes up its Being as its *own*, resolving upon itself to be the “null basis of its own nullity” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 354), in which it affirms that the everyday understanding of things is contingent, that death is its ownmost, certain, and indefinite possibility, and that it is free to *choose* itself, as opposed to having possibilities thrust upon it. At the same time, one must also understand that whatever choices and meaning structures one takes up can ultimately fall away in a future anxiety attack. This response to anxiety captures what Heidegger means by *anticipatory resoluteness*. This mode of Being does not cover up anxiety; on the contrary, in it Dasein makes a resolution to “‘choose’ itself and win itself” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 68), while holding itself open for anxiety and anticipating death. It is in this mode that the truth of Dasein’s Being becomes transparent, which allows it to exist with a type of lucidity and focus, thereby allowing it to ‘see’ and choose which possibilities matter to it, as opposed to those which have been thrust upon it and are not meaningful to it as its *own*. Heidegger conveys this message in a rich passage, writing:

Anticipatory resoluteness is not a way of escape, fabricated for the ‘overcoming’ of death; it is rather that understanding which follows the call of conscience and which frees for death the possibility of acquiring *power* over Dasein’s *existence* and of basically dispersing all fugitive Self-concealments…. it brings one without Illusions into the resoluteness of ‘taking action’…. [Furthermore] it springs from a sober understanding of what are factically the basic possibilities for Dasein. Along with the sober anxiety which brings us face to face with our individualized potentiality-for-Being, there goes an unshakable joy in this possibility. In it Dasein becomes free from the entertaining of ‘incidentals’ with which busy curiosity keeps providing itself. (1962, pp. 357-358)

Before closing this section, we must add one more caveat to Heidegger’s account of anxiety that will play a crucial role in the remainder of this essay. Recall from the introduction that anxiety is Dasein’s primordial mood, which means that it is always ‘there,’ even if it is only latent and covered up in one’s fallenness into the ‘they.’ Heidegger is explicit on this point, writing:

anxiety… belongs to Dasein’s essential state of Being-in-the-world, which, as one that is existential, is never present-at-hand but *is* itself always in a mode of factical Being-there…. That kind of Being-in-the-world which is tranquilized and familiar is a mode of Dasein’s uncanniness, not the reverse…. Dasein is anxious in the very depths of its Being. (1962, p. 234)

This means that Dasein is always anxious, whether such anxiety manifests explicitly in an anxiety attack, in the responsive and fallen fleeing in the face of death back into the tranquility of the ‘they,’ or in anticipatory resoluteness which holds itself open for anxiety. Heidegger’s characterization of the pervasiveness of anxiety, and by extension the role that our relation to death plays in the shaping our lives, thus serves as a philosophical precursor to the work of Ernest Becker, who opens the preface to his now famous text, *The Denial of Death,* poignantly stating:

The prospect of death, Dr. Johnson said, wonderfully concentrates the mind. The main thesis of this book is that it does much more than that: the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity—activity designated largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man. (1973, p. xvii)

The next section then, will focus on the fallenness that is motivated by anxiety. If Heidegger is correct in his pronouncement that Dasein is always anxious, and that proximally and for the most part it covers up the nature of its death and finitude, then we should be able to uncover ontic evidence of this phenomenon. Furthermore, such evidence should be uncovered not only in our own society, but in all societies, both present and past. Heidegger provides the examples of common everyday sayings that subvert the reality of death, but something more concrete seems necessary to ground his claims, and for that we now turn to Stephen Cave’s work, which proposes that death permeates every aspect of our lives.

1. **Ontic Evidence of the Proclivity of Dasein to Mask its Finitude**

The fear of death that permeates the human condition is admittedly peculiar, as our non-existence was the case prior to our Being-thrown, and yet this causes most people no qualms. Vladimir Nabokov captures this tension quite poignantly in a passage of his memoir, writing:

The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness. Although the two are identical twins, man, as a rule, views the prenatal abyss with more calm than the one he is heading for (at some forty-five hundred heartbeats an hour). (1967, p. 9)

This distinction between the two abysses garners a heightened tension still, because in our moment in the clearing, that is, while we *exist* the clearing as the light of Being, we cannot conceive of what non-existence is ‘like.’ As something indeterminate, nothing intelligible can be said about it— even in those moments when one attempts to envision the darkness of the abyss that metaphorically characterizes non-existence, they cannot eliminate the *viewer* from the situation. This leads to what Stephen Cave labels the *mortality paradox*— that is, although we know that our biological life must end, we cannot fathom our own non-existence (2012, p. 16). This paradox elicits a response from us, which primarily takes the form of covering up and fleeing in the face of our own mortality; we acknowledge that *others* die, but hold that it is never one’s own self that ceases to exist. The poet Edward Young (1989) wrote, “All men think all men are mortal, but themselves,” which Heidegger strongly echoes in *Being and Time*— “One *knows* about the certainty of death, and yet ‘is’ not authentically certain of one’s own” (1962, p. 302). This failure to be certain of one’s own death results from the substitution of *demise* in its place (Buben, 1974, p. 974). Understanding death does not involve a gazing into the abyss, but is rather the understanding of *ourselves* in terms of that ownmost possibility itself, that is, in terms of our own finitude, which is characteristic of an authentic Being-towards-death. The influence of death, however, is strongest when we are not aware of it, as Zygmunt Bauman notes in *Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies*:

The impact of death is at its most powerful (and creative) when death does not appear under its own name; in areas and times which are not explicitly dedicated to it; precisely where we manage to live as if death was not or did not matter, when we do not remember about mortality and are not put off or vexed by the thoughts of the ultimate futility of life. (1992, p. 7)

Heidegger clarifies what understanding the pervasiveness of death actually entails, claiming that “understanding does not primarily mean just gazing at a meaning, but rather understanding oneself in that potentiality-for-Being which reveals itself in projection” (1962, p. 307). In such an understanding one appropriates, or takes up, their death and ‘carries’ it with them, so to speak.

Transitioning back to the work of Stephen Cave, we find that in his book, *Immortality*,he makes the case for four immortality narratives that serve to undergird the establishment of civilizations and sustain them as they press into the future. The ways in which we attempt to reconcile death with our lives will then not only define ourselves, but by extension our civilizations, which propel towards new heights by means of our collective cognizance of death. Cave argues that civilizations promise citizens the prospect of a longer life and that, at their cores, civilizations are little more than a mere collection of life-extending technologies—that is, agriculture, medicine, science, government, and other modes of the societal structure function to promote the prolonging of human life; indeed, he claims that behind every problem society attempts to address is death (2012, pp. 35, 59). Modern agriculture attempts to stave off starvation, modern medicine attempts to increase life expectancies, and modern science attempts to give us insights into the beginning and eventual end of the universe (and also attempts to control nature in order to meet our various needs). Such endeavors give us the illusion that we are in control of our ultimate fate and ownmost possibility. Indeed, the promise offered by one’s civilization, by the ‘they’, is that an individual can give up some of their freedom and submit to the order of society in order to prolong their life. As we shall see, the “immortality narratives” that Cave describes arise from a promise that continually stretches itself towards an indefinite longer, with the rationale being that although we are born mere mortal beings, civilization can redeem us (2012, p. 41).

Central to *this* essay will be an application of Stephen Cave’s analysis of the various immortality narratives that civilizations employ in order to cover up the certainty and indefiniteness of death, which thereby rob us of the *focus* that accompanies the knowledge of our finitude. These narratives are employed to give people the illusion that their existence is not finite, or least does not necessarily have to be as such. The first such narrative that Cave presents is the “Staying Alive Narrative.” This narrative is characterized by attempts to stay young and healthy. It includes efforts such as the pursuance of a fountain of youth, elixir of immortality, and the medicalization of everyday life (here meant to encapsulate the notion that taking one’s vitamins, exercising regularly, and not smoking will push one’s death far off into the future). Others simply believe that they need only live long enough for science to cure mortality. While some of the aforementioned efforts have positive health effects, they afford one an *illusion* of control and mask the fact that death is a possibility in *every case*, not merely some distant event.

Some people are skeptical of the aforementioned efforts to stay alive, which brings us to the “Resurrection Narrative,” which serves as a backup to the first, promising individuals that even if they must physically die, they can still *physically* arise with the same body they knew before death. This view has been adopted by various religious groups, as well as those who place their faith in cryonics. Those doubting in the certainty and permanence of the material world, however, can find solace in the “Soul Narrative,” whose positing of an immortal soul is perhaps the most widely accepted narrative in the 21st century (Cave, 2012, p. 5). The fourth and final immortality narrative is the “Legacy Narrative.” It is perhaps the most diverse in its particular manifestations. It includes those who affirm the permanence of cultural and historical significance—for example those who attempt to gain fame from sports, art, literature, or other means in the attempt to create a *legacy* that will ‘live on’ after their demise, as well as those who consider their genes to be immortal in so far as they live on through one’s offspring.

Now that we have a working understanding of the nature of these four immortality narratives, we can proceed to work through the role that they play in Cave’s work, who claims that *every* civilization we have knowledge of employs some combination of them. First, in a Heideggerian manner, Cave argues that these narratives arise under the framework of what psychologists Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon have labeled *Terror Management Theory* (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2015), which hypothesizes that civilizations create and employ narratives that counteract both the fear of individual extinction and the fear that cultural worldviews and understandings are merely manufactured ideologies (Cave, 2012, p. 22). These fears cause people to *cling* to their immortality narratives and to become aggressive when they are threatened. For evidence of this, one can turn to the work Greenberg *et al*, themselves strongly influenced by the work of Ernest Becker, who, in testing the hypothesis that we have developed our cultural worldviews in order to protect ourselves from the fear of death, predicted that subjects would cling more tightly to the core beliefs of their worldview and react negatively to those who threatened it after being reminded of their own mortality.[[1]](#endnote-1) Greenberg *et al* have since conducted over four hundred studies testing their hypothesis, and the complete body of studies has convinced them of the idea that civilizations provide psychological protection against the fear of oblivion. They argue that cultural worldviews, including our religions, national myths, and values are “humanly created beliefs about the nature of reality shared by groups of people that serve to manage the terror engendered by the uniquely human awareness of death” (Greenberg et al, 1998).

Now, if the proposed immortality narratives outlined by Cave are indeed a form of terror management theory, this means that they are *responsive* in nature, which draws a strong parallel to the Heideggerian model of fallenness discussed earlier. Heidegger tells us that:

Only to the extent that Dasein has been brought before itself in an ontologically essential manner through whatever disclosedness belongs to it, *can* it flee *in the face of* that in the face of which it flees. To be sure, that in the face of which it flees is *not grasped* in this turning away in falling. (1962, p. 229)

Dasein only flees into the tranquil fallenness of the ‘they’ *after* it has been brought face to face with its Being—i.e., in *response* to anxiety. This is true for the ‘generic’ Dasein, but at the level of individual persons, we are not first fleeing, but simply lost in the world of our concern while under the guise of the illusions of immortality that we have *inherited* as the result of our thrownness. We always find ourselves already ‘in the world,’ and thus the narratives that cover up the nature of death and finitude are thrust upon us by the ‘they.’ Similarly, for Cave we are born into a civilization that thrusts pre-existing immortality narratives onto us. These narratives are not typically chosen by us, rather they are built into the structure of human societies and date back to others who *did consciously flee* the nature of their Being.

We can extend Cave’s work then by positing that an individual only flees *back* into a set of immortality narratives after something akin to a Heideggerian anxiety attack. Indeed, the terror of death is so overwhelming that we typically conspire to keep it unconscious by fleeing back into the comfort of our inherited narratives. Cave continues by extending his notion of cultural heredity, however, to the level of biological heredity. We have a biological propensity to survive and reproduce, thereby perpetuating our genes and extending our species into the future—natural selection produces self-perpetuators, thus making immortality the unintended ‘goal’ of biological life (Cave, 2012, pp. 14-15), which creates and nurtures what I label as the *will to immortality.*  Cave cites certain psychological studies that seem to support this notion of a biologically inherited will to immortality by showing that young children without any prior introduction to a particular religion or immortality narrative already exhibit the belief that their mind is capable of surviving their physical death, because they cannot grasp the possibility of the complete non-existence of their self (Bering, 2011).

The purpose of this overview of Cave’s work has been to address what I understand to be an insufficient amount of ontic evidence provided by Heidegger in support of his claim that Dasein is *always* anxious, even in its average everyday mode of Being, although I acknowledge that an in-depth examination of the ways in which death is concealed via our fallenness into the ‘they’ would have been outside the scope of the project of *Being and Time*. I agree with Heidegger that the ‘they’ covers up the nature of death and that Dasein is provided tranquility by the leveling down of death that the ‘they’ offers, which is why I have offered the work of Stephen Cave as a necessary supplement to Heidegger’s handling of the matter. Heidegger gives us a few everyday sayings that mask the certainty and indefiniteness of death, but Cave’s work provides us with more concrete evidence of not only how such maskings occur within our own paradigm, but also with a collection of narratives that hold, in some combination, for *every* society of which we have knowledge, therefore serving to better ground Heidegger’s framework.

1. **The Upshot of Overcoming the Everyday Immortality Narratives**

The previous work we have done, elaborating upon the dictatorial nature of the ‘they’ and the various narratives it employs to restrict our possibilities, has the potential to be misconstrued as altogether denying the importance of some type of conformity; such a characterization, however, would be too rash. Julian Young (2007) addresses this concern in succinct terms, clarifying that, “Without conformity, of course, there could be neither language nor society. And without language there could be no thought. Conformity is a necessity of human existence. But conform*ism* is not.” Heidegger’s work affirms this distinction, as the ‘they’ is an essential existentiale, i.e., it is a ‘part’ of the structure of the Being of Dasein (Heidegger, 1962, p. 168). One can never ‘escape’ the ‘they,’ only modify their relationship with it by not allowing it to be *determinative* for them. One must ask themselves: “Am I living *my own* life or letting others live it for me?” To be certain, answering this question is no small task, as Dasein “always says ‘I am this entity’, and in the long run says this loudest when it is ‘not’ this entity” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 151). Indeed, “authentic *Being*-one’s-Self is just the sort of thing that does not keep on saying ‘I’; but in its reticence it ‘is’ that thrown entity as which it can authentically be” (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 369-370).

As we have noted, proximally and for the most part Dasein makes no decisions of its own, having them instead dictated to and thrust upon it by the ‘they.’ This point is picked up again by Ernest Becker, whose clear writing better portrays what Heidegger intends to say:

What we will see is that man cuts out for himself a manageable world: he throws himself into action uncritically, unthinkingly. He accepts the cultural programming that turns his nose where he is supposed to look; he doesn’t bite the world off in one piece as a giant would, but in small manageable pieces, as a beaver does…. He learns not to expose himself, not to stand out; he learns to embed himself in other-power. (Becker, 1997, p. 23)

This ‘other-power’ protects one not only from ostracization from others, but also, and more importantly, from one’s ownmost possibility. The tranquility of the immortality narratives that the ‘they’ provides us with thus prove to be tempting and seductive. Dasein tends to align itself with the ‘they-self,’ because, although an individual, that is, a *somebody*, must surely die, the ‘they,’ as the *nobody* in particular, lives on. To the extent that one identifies with the ‘they,’ they gain the illusion that they have transcended the penalty of individuality—i.e., mortality. Such an identification is costly, even pernicious, in that it denies one of both the *focus* afforded by finitude and the joy that replaces apathy in authentic Being-towards-death. Schopenhauer describes the perniciousness of the denial of such focus, acknowledging that for the many:

The present is accepted only for the time being, is set at naught, and looked upon merely as the path to the goal. Thus when at the end of their lives most men look back, they will find that they have lived throughout *ad interim*; they will be surprised to see that the very thing they allowed to slip by unappreciated and unenjoyed was just their life, precisely that in the expectation of which they lived. (1970, p. 53)

For Heidegger, it is not only that one has lived *ad interim* by pressing forward into possibilities that were not one’s own, but also that such possibilities were thrust upon them, thereby denying them of the joy of focus, creativity, and freedom— “Only by the anticipation of death is every accidental and ‘provisional’ possibility driven out. Only Being-free *for* death, gives Dasein its goal outright and pushes existence into its finitude” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 435).

It is the grasping of finitude that makes transparent the fact that there is no *necessity* to follow the standard urgencies that the ‘they’ has dictated to us; it is after such an insight, after *“an impassioned* ***freedom towards death—***a freedom which has been released from the Illusions of the ‘they’” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 311), that Dasein becomes free to choose *itself*. In its understanding of the contingency of the status quo, Dasein is freed from its lostness and afforded the *focus* that arises in the understanding that it has ‘no time to lose’ and that it can construct its own life in some sense, as the “null basis of its own nullity” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 354). The understanding of finitude is the precondition of such freedom and focus, because it is that very understanding and lucidity, and *only* it, which brings the narrative totality of one’s life into view, thus endowing one with a sense of urgency.

The fact that Heidegger takes such an understanding of death, finitude, and contingency to elicit joy and freedom is undoubtedly perplexing to most, who would instead consider such an understanding to not only be faulty in its deviation from standard immortality narratives, but also to be nihilistic and life denying. Such perplexity, however, is the result of one still being bound up in the averageness of the ‘they,’ wherein such creativity and focus are shunned and leveled down because one has not come to understand death, but rather only *demise*, which gets characterized as something evil that must be covered up by immortality narratives. Nietzsche captures this tension in a passage from *Human, All Too Human*, where he provides us with the insight that: “The certain prospect of death could introduce into every life a precious, sweet-smelling drop of levity—and yet you marvelous apothecary souls have made of it an ill-tasting drop of poison through which all life is made repulsive!” (1996, p. 390)

We must be careful, however, in characterizing authentic Being-towards-death and the joy that accompanies the taking up of one’s Being the null basis of a nullity. In such a mode of Being Dasein is *still* anxious, as anxiety is its primordial mood, and it is not immune to anxiety attacks in which its own decisions and created meanings cease to mean anything at all to it. Authentic Being-towards-death is the ‘product’ of anticipatory resoluteness, which *preserves* the mood of anxiety and holds oneself open for it. In the anticipation of anxiety and death, one is ‘prepared’ for them. One understands that “in its death, Dasein must simply ‘take back’ everything” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 356). Similarly, the resolute individual understands the possibility of an anxiety attack, but this fundamental mood “neither inhibits nor bewilders him” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 395), for it is precisely this mood which has *freed* one *from* the illusions of the immortality narratives that served to conceal the nature of anxiety in the face of death, and *for* their *own* possibilities. The denial of the understanding of one’s ownmost possibility that is perpetuated in the pervasive domination of the illusory immortality narratives is what justifies the characterization of them as pernicious, because they rob one of freedom, joy, and the ability to choose one’s Self and focus on those possibilities that are truly important but only grasped *after* one has gained hold of the narrative totality of their existence.

Recall Schopenhauer’s claim that most people look back at their lives as they reach old age and are burdened by the abysmal recognition that the life that they have lived is not one that they would have chosen for themselves. If this is the only existence that we are guaranteed, and we know it to be finite, then it is imperative that we understand we are not dealing with a ‘dress rehearsal,’ but indeed the totality of what is to be our existence. In the continuation of this metaphor, we must take our place on the ‘mainstage’ that is our *own* life, and do so in the understanding that there will be no ‘second act.’ Fleeing ourselves and getting swept away in the everyday dealings that are dictated to us by the ‘they’ steals from us that which is most precious, by hastening life to such an extent that one simply moves from one thing to the next without joy or choice:

We labour at our daily work more ardently and thoughtlessly than is necessary to sustain our life because it is even more necessary not to have leisure to stop and think. Haste is universal because everyone is in flight from himself; universal too is the shy concealment of this haste. (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 158)

Everydayness is aptly characterized by haste, because it keeps one moving at such a pace so as to ensure that one never gets hold of the true nature of their Being; yet in another sense, everydayness is more primordially characterized by *apathy*, in that one is prevented the right to choose and win oneself through the grasping of what the narrative totality of their life is to be. We all know Tennyson’s famous line, ‘Tis better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all,’ but perhaps we would be well-served by the extension of this mantra to our very lives themselves! It is in that vein that one should consider: ‘Tis better to have *lived* one’s *own* life and lost (as we must ‘take back’ everything in the end), than to have never *lived* it at all.’

Furthermore, there is a sense in which we are responsible for appropriating our existence as our own. In the haste of everydayness, one can hardly hear one’s authentic Self calling back to them, because such a call communicates *silently*, and does so constantly (Heidegger, 1962, p. 318). This call of conscience attempts to show one that another mode of existence is possible—it demands that one ‘be their Self.’ Proximally and for the most part this call goes unheard, or rather, as Nietzsche describes it, one *flees* the deafening silence of such a call because they are afraid of what it will say— “The man who does not wish to belong to the mass needs only to… follow his conscience, which calls to him: ‘Be your self!’… Every youthful soul hears this call day and night and trembles when he hears it” (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 127). Because of this conscience that always silently calls on Dasein to *own up* to itself, one is responsible for the stance they take on their Being, that is, for choosing and winning their Self. Even in the face of our thrownness into a world that was not factically determined by us, and in the face of the fact that in the end we will simply have to ‘renunciate’ everything, we must nevertheless understand that *this* clearing, *this* finite existence, is all that we have to ‘build’ from and affirm via anticipatory resoluteness. Again, we find this Heideggerian sentiment echoed in the earlier work of Nietzsche, who writes that:

We are responsible to ourselves for our own existence; consequently we want to be the true helmsman of this existence and refuse to allow our existence to resemble a mindless act of chance. One has to take a somewhat bold and dangerous line with this existence: especially as, whatever happens, we are bound to lose it. We are responsible for our Being, which is undoubtedly a burden that is easy to shirk and flee; but we are also *free* to be bold and defiant by ‘building’ in the face of certain destruction. (1997, p. 128)

1. **Concluding Remarks**

Let us now take into account the work that has been done in this essay. We began with an analysis of key terms from Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. From here, we noted that although Heidegger claims that Dasein tends to flee into the comfort of the ‘they’ in order to conceal the nature of its anxiety in the face of death, he does not provide sufficient ontic evidence in support of this position. In light of this, we proceeded by providing an overview of Stephen Cave’s immortality narratives, which was utilized in the filling in of the aforementioned gap in Heidegger’s project. Finally, after the supplementation of Cave’s work had been carried out, we worked through *why* overcoming the standard immortality narratives and maskings of finitude was a worthwhile endeavor, ultimately concluding that illusory conceptions of death are pernicious in that they rob one of the possible lucidity, joy, and focus that one can be afforded by bringing the narrative totality of their life into view via an understanding of their own finite existence.[[2]](#endnote-2)

1. This research, conducted mostly in the 1990s, is revised and built upon by its authors in their 2015 book *The Worm at the Core*. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For helpful comments and feedback that aided the clarity and structure of this paper, I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers. I would also like to thank Dr. Pol Vandevelde for insights that arose from our discussions on Heidegger and mortality, as well as for his time spent looking over earlier drafts of this manuscript.

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