

Love and Death in the First Epistle of John:
A Phenomenological Reflection

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I. Introduction

“Whoever does not love abides in death,” writes John in his first epistle (1Jn. 3:14).¹

The statement, on the face of it, presents us with a paradox. Death, so we suppose, is precisely that in which one *cannot* abide. To ‘abide’ is to live in, to make one’s home in. The Greek word translated ‘abide’ here is *menein*, a cognate of the English ‘remain.’ Whoever does not love remains in, continues in, death. Our first thought is to interpret this as metaphor. John is saying that a life devoid of love is a life somehow *like* death. And yet a moment’s reflection reveals that this interpretation will not suffice. Presumably, a metaphor sheds light on the meaning of something relatively obscure by likening it to something relatively clear. But it is precisely the phrase ‘abides in death’ that is *not* clear. Having never died how can we know what it is to ‘abide in death’? More fundamentally, as death is the antithesis of life, the phrase ‘abides in death’ seems a veritable contradiction in terms.

But perhaps we must look at it the other way around. Perhaps it is not the failure of love that is being likened to death, but death itself that is being likened to the failure of love. Perhaps what we have here is not so much an interpretation of the absence of love – viz, that it is like death – as an interpretation of death itself – viz, that its deepest meaning is the absence of love. Here it is the meaning of death itself that is being explicated. Of course we all ‘know’ of death tangentially, as that against which we struggle when we struggle for life. Perhaps what John is saying is that what we struggle against in the struggle against death – if we would but realize it – is the loss of love.

But to make any of this clear we will need to clarify what ‘death’ might mean in this context, what ‘love’ might mean in this context, and how the two might be related to one another. This is what we will attempt in the following.

I propose to explore these questions with the aid of two philosophical interpretations of the meaning of death: Heidegger’s in *Being and Time* and Kierkegaard’s in *The Sickness Unto Death*. Having looked at these we will then seek to grasp their relation to one another and to the Christian idea of agapic love. Thus the body of my essay will be divided into three parts:

1. Heidegger and Being-Towards-Death, 2. Kierkegaard and the Sickness Unto Death, 3. John and Agapic Love.

II. Heidegger and Being-Towards-Death

To grasp Heidegger’s conception of death as a phenomenon we must first consider Heidegger’s depiction of the ordinary, or ‘everyday,’ human being (Dasein). Everyday Dasein, according to Heidegger, lives in a condition of flight from its own authentic self-experience. This condition of flight, which Heidegger dubs ‘das Man,’² manifests itself in a more or less continuous effort to conform to extrinsically imposed societal norms and expectations, not because one sees them as right or good, but because the struggle itself provides a constant, and on the whole effective, distraction from deeply troubling aspects of our own self-awareness.

Of this life of conformism (which, of course, can take the form of an excessive emphasis on ‘individualism’ if that itself is the societal norm) Heidegger writes: “We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they* [man] take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as *they* see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the ‘great mass’ as *they* shrink back; we find ‘shocking’

what *they* find shocking. The ‘they’ [i.e., das Man], which is nothing definite, and which are all, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness.”³

Though the life of das Man involves an immersion in sociality, it by no means entails a positive regard for others nor an interest in true communion with them. Rather, it is marked by what Heidegger calls (rather abstractly) ‘distantiality.’ ‘Distantiality’ is the concern we have for our social status vis-à-vis others. As Heidegger writes, “[T]here is constant care as to the way one differs from [Others], whether that difference is merely one that is to be evened out, whether one’s own Dasein has lagged behind the Others and wants to catch up in relationship to them, or whether one’s Dasein already has some priority over them and sets out to keep them suppressed.”⁴ Given this, the life of das Man, despite its apparent communality, is far from one of Christian charity. “Under the mask of ‘for-one-another,’” writes Heidegger, “an ‘against-one-another’ is in play.”⁵

What accounts for this? Heidegger’s answer is that Dasein flees into the life of das Man in order to escape the fundamental anxiety it finds within itself. But to make this answer clear we must say something about the nature of the ‘self’ that Dasein seeks to escape in this manner.

Among the more significant of Heidegger’s insights is his recognition that the ontological ‘form’ of the human being is constituted as ‘being-in-the-world.’ It is essential to the human being to exist in constant relation to a surrounding world that, therefore, must be regarded as a constituent of Dasein’s being itself. This world consists of things whose meanings derive from and reflect the various life-concerns of Dasein, as well as of other Daseins, who, as such, are also instances, in their own right, of ‘being-in-the-world.’ Thus a full designation of the ontological form of Dasein might be better expressed as ‘being-in-the-world-*with-others*.’ Dasein’s relation to others is also an essential constituent of its being.

It is this relational structure that presents for Dasein a fundamental dilemma, manifest in the phenomena Heidegger calls ‘thrownness’ and ‘being-towards-death.’

By ‘thrownness’ Heidegger refers to our awareness of not being the basis of the ontological structure (‘being-in-the-world’) that we are. This awareness is mediated to us for the most part, not through an abstract reflection upon our contingency, but, far more directly, in our experience of what Heidegger calls ‘facticity’; our awareness that the world already contains within it ‘meanings’ to which we must comport ourselves and with which we must deal. We find ourselves always already thrown into a world not of our making, with which we must come to terms.

But this world into which we are thrown, and upon which we depend, is also one from which we are separable. Dasein, says Heidegger, is aware of the possibility of no further possibility, that is, of the ultimate fragility of its connection to its world. This is the phenomenon Heidegger dubs ‘being-towards-death.’ Heidegger writes: “[D]eath is the possibility of no-longer-being-able-to-be-there . . . When [Dasein] stands before itself in this way, all its relations to any other Dasein have been undone.”⁶

Upon first hearing this our inclination is to focus on the word ‘be’: Death is Dasein’s experience of no longer being able to *be*. Perhaps more central to Heidegger’s definition, however, is the word ‘there.’ Being-towards-death is Dasein’s experience (an experience that is with it always) of the possibility of no longer being able to be *there*; i.e., in relation to its world of things and others. Death is the possibility that Dasein’s being *as* being-in-the-world will be cut off; that Dasein will lose connection to the world with which it must maintain relation in order to continue and flourish as itself.

Understood in this way, the phenomenon of death appears as but the culminating point in a series of possibilities with which we are all too familiar; of exclusion, rejection, isolation, loss, loneliness, failure. All of these have in common a privation, in some degree or other, of full relationality with one's world. The threat of death may be seen as but the extreme of this threat. This is why we can intuitively *know* something of death even though we have never died. In loneliness, in rejection, in loss, in failure, we already *taste* something of death. Death, as the possibility of no longer being able to be *there*, haunts Dasein's self-experience at every moment, conditioning its flight into das Man.

Thus the very structure of Dasein's being, as being-in-the-world, is threatened by the existential status of Dasein's being, as thrown-being-towards-death. Heidegger speaks of the anxiety accompanying this threat as an experience of 'uncanniness.' The German word translated 'uncanniness' here is '*unheimlichkeit*,' which might be literally rendered 'not-at-homeness.' The self-world polarity that is Dasein is unable to rest securely in either self or world, hence Dasein experiences itself as 'not-at-home' in its own being.

Dasein flees into the life of das Man in the effort both to distract itself from this anxiety and to find there the home it cannot find within itself. But as the phenomenon of death itself makes clear, these efforts can never finally succeed. At best Dasein can achieve a temporary tranquilization of its ontological unease. Thus the life of das Man is ultimately one of despair. It is this despair to which Kierkegaard points in his book *The Sickness Unto Death*.

III. Kierkegaard and the Sickness Unto Death

In *The Sickness Unto Death* Kierkegaard notes two primary forms of despair, both of which can be related to Heidegger's account of *das Man*. Opposed to both of these, for Kierkegaard, is the life of faith.

Kierkegaard writes: "The human self is . . . a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another. This is why there can be two forms of despair in the strict sense. If a human self had itself established itself, then there could be only one form: not to will to be oneself, to will to do away with oneself, but there could not be the form: in despair to will to be oneself. This second formulation is . . . the expression for the inability of the self to arrive at or be in equilibrium and rest by itself, but only, in relating itself to itself, by relating itself to that which has established the entire relation."⁷

Here we have Kierkegaard's summary of the ontological inadequacy of the human being considered in him- or herself. As 'a derived, established relation,' the human being is not the basis of itself. This leads to its desperate attempts to provide for itself a foundation, which, in turn, yield two complementary modes of despair. The first – not to will to be oneself – corresponds closely to Heidegger's depiction of the life of *das Man* as a life of flight. But Kierkegaard makes explicit what is at best implicit in Heidegger's account, that this flight from self is rooted in the even more basic will to establish oneself: "Yet, this second form of despair (in despair to will to be oneself) is so far from designating merely a distinctive kind of despair that, on the contrary, all despair ultimately can be traced back to and be resolved in it."⁸

At the core of our 'sickness unto death,' then, is the futile project to become for ourselves our own foundation. We seek, impossibly, to establish dominion over the world of things and others so as to secure our relationship to it. When this pursuit fails we seek to escape our anxiety by

escaping ourselves. These two modes of despair can be related to Heidegger's account of Dasein as being-in-the-world. The will to be oneself, to establish oneself in oneself, plays itself out in the will to supremacy; the will to make one's world (and hence others) subject to oneself. The will not to be oneself expresses itself in the will to conformity; the will to lose oneself within the world of others. That these two tendencies conflict does not preclude Dasein's pursuing both at once; for they each provide, in their limited ways, not a resolution to, but a temporary tranquilization of, Dasein's existential unease.

Is there any way out? Kierkegaard writes: "The formula that describes the state of the self when despair is completely rooted out is this: in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself the self rests transparently in the power that established it."⁹

But what can it mean to 'rest transparently in the power that has established one'? We find a striking answer to this question in John's first epistle. John writes: "We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death" (1Jn. 3:14).

III. John and Agapic Love

The immediate concern prompting John's letter appears to be his desire to warn those to whom he writes, his 'little children,' against "those who would deceive you" (1Jn. 2:26). These are the 'antichrists' (1Jn. 2:18) who are denying or distorting what John takes to be the essential message of Jesus. We are told little to nothing about the teaching of these 'antichrists.' John's endeavor throughout is not to refute them with counter-argument, but to point, often in arresting terms, to the authentic phenomenon of faith their teaching distorts. What is this authentic phenomenon? John writes: "The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this

way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters. For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another” (1Jn. 3:10-11).

The touchstone, the litmus test, of authentic faith is agapic love: “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers and sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen” (1Jn. 4:20).

Our first response to this might be to ask ‘why not?’ After all, as Kierkegaard’s work indicates, in God we look for what our brothers and sisters cannot provide, the ontological foundation we require. What our needy brothers and sisters provide us with, on the other hand, is burden after burden. They tax our resources, try our patience, consume our time, distract us from our amusements, and, at times, threaten our very security. On the face of it, anyway, it seems absurd to say that one cannot love God without loving brother and sister.

And yet about this point John is adamant: “The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brother and sister also” (1Jn. 4:21). Again, “No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us” (1Jn. 4:12). And again, “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1Jn. 4:8).

The love of brother and sister is so fully implicated in the love of God, according to John, that it is impossible to have the latter without the former. We might ask how John knows this. Is he presenting metaphysical speculation, repeating hearsay, making inferences from a study of scripture?

On the contrary, as he tells us in the epistle’s opening passage, he is reporting his own direct experience: “We declare to you . . . what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word [*logos*] of life” (1Jn. 1:1).

We might think at first that he is referring here to his worldly encounter with Jesus, but he next says, “this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us” (1Jn. 1:2).

What he is professing to have ‘seen and touched,’ in other words, is eternal life itself. Eternal life is manifest in the love of brother and sister. This is the central declaration of the epistle. Love is God’s concretion. Those who live the life of love “abide in God” (1Jn. 4:16). Those who do not do not *know* God, however much they may profess to. They are lying, if only to themselves.

Can we find a way of understanding this? Let us consider again the work of Heidegger and Kierkegaard.

Our review of Heidegger’s work has suggested that in death we sense a threat to the relational structure that is the self-world polarity of the human being. The two modes of Kierkegaardian despair are means through which we seek to resolve this threat; through trying to subsume the world within the self, on the one hand, through trying to lose the self within the world, on the other, but in both cases we destroy the very relationality we seek to preserve. Both of these modes imply an inability to affirm relation as such. If the dread of death is indeed a dread of non-relationality, then, as Jesus says, in trying to save our lives we lose them.

The solution, then, can only be some mode of being that will permit us to affirm relation as such. From the Christian perspective, this is made possible only through faith. One must come to trust the ontological basis upon which one stands, a basis that transcends and comprehends both self and other. We have good reason, of course, not to trust it. Our subjection to loss and death, illness and injury, makes clear that the finite goods upon which we depend for our worldly well-being are unstable and insecure. The person of faith, however, comes to see the penultimacy of such worldly goods, through dedication to a good that transcends them. The anxiety of

‘thrown-being-towards-death’ is now seen as consequent upon our failure to fully recognize and/or align ourselves with this transcendent good, a failure that leaves us feeling bereft and alone, abandoned to ourselves. Faith in this transcendent good resolves the not-at-homeness Heidegger sees at the core of human being, thus freeing us from the desperate need to try to make of the world our own possession, and thereby opening us to caring relation with others. It is through faith in God, then, that the predicament of finite being-in-the-world-with-others is resolved.

But the matter, unfortunately, is not as simple as this. As John’s great fear of ‘antichrists’ suggests, dedication to what gets called ‘God’ is rather easily co-opted by our projects of self-establishment. The very idea of God, as a being absolute in power and authority, can serve as a prop for the exaltation of self or group. It was against such corruption of faith that the Hebrew prophets railed again and again. How, then, can we know if our faith in God is authentic? True faith, says John, manifests itself in the relation of love.

Love is the affirmation of full relationality, an affirmation of the basic communality of being-in-the-world-with-others. In faith, one defers to God as the overarching power that upholds relation *as* relation without becoming thereby a discrete term of the relation itself. God, thus, is the agapic bridge between self and other that unites both without reducing one to the other. God’s ‘law’ is the law of wholesome relationality. God’s ‘justice’ is that which sustains and restores such relationality. The ‘righteousness’ demanded by God are the character traits that make such relationality possible. Thus, God’s norms are not the norms of one individual or another, nor even the norms of God conceived of as a supreme individual, they are the norms of love itself. It is through deferral to God in faith that we are able to open to the other in love

without needing either to dominate or conform. Thus faith in God is that through which the relational ontology of human being is fulfilled.

As John presents it, the love relation serves not merely as confirmation of authentic faith, but as its final consummation as well. It is through this relation, deeply realized, that we arrive at our own true satisfaction. It is just in this sense that ‘God is love.’ John writes, “No one has ever seen God; if we love one another God lives in us and God’s love is perfected in us” (1Jn. 4:12). Such a state, fully realized, is characterized, not by the restless anxiety described by Heidegger, but – in the words of the Apostle Paul – by a ‘peace that passes all understanding.’ Agapic love, then, is the concretion of ‘eternal life,’ through which our ‘abiding in death’ is finally overcome.

Of course, there is nothing easy about this message. Our will to supremacy is deeply rooted, fortified by our anxiety, and hidden under layer upon layer of self-deceit. The passage from death to love is fraught with struggle, as the image of the Cross suggests. Hence John’s great worry that the ‘antichrists’ who have emerged, distorting the message of Christ, will lead his ‘little children’ astray. How are they to know, in the darkness of this dark world, that they are following the true path? “We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another,” writes John (1Jn. 5:21); “Whoever lives in love, lives in God” (1Jn. 4:16).

¹ All New Testament quotes are from the *New Revised Standard Version*, National Council of the Churches of Christ, 1990.

² Translated as ‘the they’ in the Macquarrie-Robinson translation of *Being and Time* and ‘the One’ in the Joan Stanbaugh translation, the German phrase ‘das Man’ is used to refer to the impersonal personification of the conventional social norm that is taken to be the proper standard of behavior. It functions in German somewhat as ‘one’ functions in the English ‘One doesn’t do that sort of thing.’

³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962), p. 164, H. 126-127.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 163-164, H. 126.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 219, H. 175.

⁶ Ibid., p.294, H. 250.

⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), 14.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 49.

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