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## **The Revelation of Death: Thinking the relation between death and meaning**

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### **Citation**

Brink, M. (T. M. T. ) van den. (2023). *The Revelation of Death: Thinking the relation between death and meaning*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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MASTER'S THESIS  
MODERN EUROPEAN PHILOSOPHY

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# The Revelation of Death

THINKING THE RELATION BETWEEN DEATH AND MEANING

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June 15, 2023



- LEIDEN UNIVERSITY -  
INSTITUTE FOR PHILOSOPHY

“What I said, in a nutshell, was: (...) ‘It’s not rational to be afraid of death.’ I now think that is not a good statement. Because I think it’s important to figure out why it is then, that people are afraid of death. Why am I concerned about it? My argument was: there’s no good reason for it. My sense of realism tells me: ‘well, no good reason or not, it is something that haunts me, the idea of dying soon.’ (...) There must be something I’m missing in this argument.”<sup>1</sup>

*Firstly, I want to express my thanks to Tijs Ooms, Dennis van Rij, Daniël van de Beld and Bram Kalkman, whose reading, advice and support helped me tremendously in editing this work. Up and above that, special thanks go to dr. Rozemund Uljée. Without her contributions, encouragements and expertise I could not have written this thesis.*

*Other than that, I wish the reader a good read.*

*Utrecht, June 2023*

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert Fingarette in *Being 97*, dir. Andrew Hasse, cur. The Atlantic, 2020.

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“For all systems of thought that take the question of finitude seriously, (...) the fundamental question is that of finding a meaning to human finitude.”<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

### THE TASK OF THINKING THE RELATION BETWEEN DEATH AND THE MEANING OF EXISTENCE

Do we in our time have an answer to the question to the meaning of human finitude, i.e. death?<sup>3</sup> Substantial answers have been put forth, most notably over the last century of continental philosophy. However, these are mostly presented as mere elements of more extensive ontological, ethical and phenomenological frameworks. The answers are scattered across philosophy’s historical library: contradictory, unintelligible and/or forgotten.<sup>4</sup> So, it is fitting that we should raise anew the question of the meaning of death, or rather: *the question to the relation between death and the meaning of existence*. Not for the sake of destroying the history of *thanatology*, but to gain insight into the coherence of some major perspectives that have been developed over the last century.<sup>5</sup>

I explicitly use the word coherence, because it is my contention that we – in our time – do have an answer to the question: hidden at the very core of the web of different perspectives, lies the central insight that – in my words – ***death reveals the meaning of existence***. This is the thesis I will put forth over the course of this investigation, based on a discussion of three major perspectives on the relation between death and meaning (to be introduced shortly). The thesis is centered around the verb *revealing*, interpreted in three different ways, allowing me to synthesize the different perspectives into one central claim whilst respecting their differences. The claim that death reveals the meaning of existence comes down to the attempt to think the paradox of death. As such, my main objective is to show that death must be *thought in its ambiguity*. Death’s ambiguity will turn out to be the common ground underlying all perspectives I will discuss; it is the space where death is *revealed* in its relation to the meaning of existence. As such, the claim that *death reveals the meaning of existence* will itself prove to be an equivocal statement.

Given that philosophy consists primarily of *φιλέειν σοφία*,<sup>6</sup> what wisdom is there to be found in such a reflection on death and meaning? As I will set out to prove over the course of this investigation, its relevance is twofold. First and foremost, I will provide a *theoretical integration* of philosophical thought on the relation between death and meaning, specifically accommodating the respective ideas of Martin Heidegger, Claude Romano, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida and Maurice Blanchot. Secondly, given the privileged position the experience of actual existence enjoys within this branch of philosophy, I will simultaneously provide the reader with an *existential insight* in dealing with the question to death and meaning, by showing what it means that *death reveals the meaning of existence*.

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<sup>2</sup> Simon Critchley, ‘Ily a - A Dying Stronger than Death’, *Oxford Literary Review* 15 (1993) 81-131, 122.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford 1962) Preface.

<sup>4</sup> J. E. Malpas Solomon Robert C., ed., *Death and Philosophy* (London 1999) 1 <doi:10.4324/9780203195154>.

<sup>5</sup> Thanatology: the act of reflecting and speaking on death, from *thanatos* (θάνατος: "death") + *-logia* (-λογία: "speaking").

<sup>6</sup> *Philéein sophía*; loving wisdom.

The entire aim of this investigation is to substantiate my central thesis, which is to be understood as the answer to a central research question: **How to think the relation between death and the meaning of existence, in the shadow of Being-towards-death?** Here, *thinking a relation* signifies understanding and conceptualizing a specific connection, including the establishment of this connection in the first place. *In the shadow of Being-towards-death* means: as pertaining to the tradition of thinking the relation between death and meaning in response to Heidegger's notion of Being-towards-death. Naturally, the general question to the relation between death and the meaning of existence is unacceptably extensive for any investigation of this kind, even when demarcated by a specific concept like Being-towards-death.

It must be stressed, therefore, that my aim is not to address this question for the sake of closing it definitively, but rather to propose an answer that, on the one hand, is entirely comprehensive, yet, on the other, preserves the vitality of the question by keeping it open. In the words of Blanchot:

A sound response puts down roots in the question. The question is its sustenance. Common sense believes that it does away with the question. Indeed, in the so-called happy eras, only the answers seem alive. But this affirmative contentment soon dies off. The authentic answer is always the question's vitality. It can close in around the question, but it does so in order to preserve the question by keeping it open.<sup>7</sup>

Death is never part of the 'so-called happy eras', in which 'only the answers seem alive'. Since death is dead; in death, nothing is alive. Death *de facto* does not allow for closed answers.<sup>8</sup> As a consequence, our intention can only be to construct 'an authentic answer closing in around it, in order to preserve the question by keeping it open.'<sup>9</sup> This does not, however, signify that my answer will inevitably be inconclusive. In fact, I will show that my thesis is, in Blanchot's terms, a 'sound response', which 'puts down roots in the question'; a *fully closed* circle around the *open* center which is the ambiguity of death itself. By exploring this hermeneutical 'circle of understanding' belonging "to the structure of meaning",<sup>10</sup> I will try to elucidate, explicate and bring together three different perspectives on the relation between death and meaning.

Before introducing these perspectives, however, it is necessary to briefly discuss two nineteenth-century philosophical developments that shaped the context from which they arose. The first consists of renewed reflection on *identity and difference*, inspired by the movement of German Idealism.<sup>11</sup> What can arguably be called the central debate in modern European philosophy comes down to the question whether everything in the grand scheme of things is ultimately reducible to a fundamental unity, or rather to a state of difference. Can difference be thought *as identity*, or must it be thought *as difference*?

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<sup>7</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* (Lincoln, London 1982) 210.

<sup>8</sup> A notion I will elaborate later, in chapter III.

<sup>9</sup> "Since each time an answer is given, the question manages to be asked anew, as though it were indifferent to these answers, we can hardly avoid seeing in the "anew" a particularly surprising insistence. It may be that the question is only seeking peace in the repetition where what has once been said lapses into mere recitation. But perhaps by this harassment the question means above all to remain open." Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 210.

<sup>10</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 132 (tr. 153).

<sup>11</sup> The work of G.W.F. Hegel in particular, whose *absolute idealism* is the ultimate example of a philosophical system in which difference is thought within identity; identity in and through difference.

It is a juxtaposition between two opposing spheres, which is reflected in the conceptual distinction between *the sphere of the Same*, in which everything is identical [unity, self, sameness], and *the Other*, who is radically exterior [difference, alterity, otherness].<sup>12</sup> All of the authors discussed in this investigation are in one way or another *thinking difference*, i.e. navigating this tension.

The second notable development is the emergence of a school of thought generally called *existentialism*, and the method of *phenomenology*.<sup>13</sup> When existentialism crossed paths with phenomenology in the work of Heidegger, the question to the meaning to human finitude inevitably became a major topic, due to the existentialist orientation towards *actual existence* (giving rise to topics like human finitude), and the phenomenological focus on the way in which meaning is ascribed to phenomena. This goes to show why Heidegger's *existential phenomenology*, principally defined by its emphasis on finitude and meaning, inspired renewed reflection on the topic of death and the meaning of existence. These two developments shaped the philosophical landscape which gave rise to the three main perspectives I will discuss in this thesis, organized after three etymological interpretations of *revealing*.

To *reveal* – meaning ‘to disclose’, ‘to make known’ – is etymologically derived from the Latin verb *revelare*, consisting of *re-* and *velare*. *Re-* is usually translated as ‘back’ or ‘again’, but can also signify ‘opposite of’ or ‘reverse’. *Velare* means ‘to cover’ and is derived from *velum*, meaning ‘sail’, ‘veil’.<sup>14</sup> As such, three different definitions of *revealing* can etymologically be established: 1) *Revealing as un-veiling*, meaning to uncover something previously hidden,<sup>15</sup> 2) *revealing as re-veiling*, meaning to cover something previously known back up,<sup>16</sup> 3) *revealing as revealing*, meaning ‘dis-closing’ something ‘closed’, i.e. *opening something up* to someone else: the Other. From these definitions, it follows that, regarding the meaning of existence, death fulfills three functions: 1) Death *defines* the meaning of existence, by demarcating its totality, which makes authentic existence possible, 2) death *denies* existence its meaning, by collapsing the dimension of responsibility in which meaning arises, and 3) death *defies* the meaning of existence, by rupturing the totality of existence, effectuating that its meaning can never be unequivocally ascertained. These functions of death correspond to the three perspectives I will discuss: 1) death *as my death*, 2) death *as the Other's death* and 3) death *as beyond*. This multidimensional division into three parts forms the structure of this thesis.

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<sup>12</sup> Over the course of this investigation, I will continue to use a capital letter when mentioning the Other. This decision is inspired by 1) Levinas' emphasis on the fact that the Other is a concrete other person; Another, 2) the general emphasis on the insurmountable *alterity* of the Other, referring both to the other person's radical otherness and to its high importance [altitude], 3) the fact that my translations of *Being and Time* and *Totality and Infinity* incidentally use capital letters to speak about the Other(s), 4) Levinas' emphasis on the fact that the concrete Other is the embodiment of the sphere of the Other, which the capital letter helps convey.

<sup>13</sup> Existentialism most notably through the work of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche; phenomenology through the work of Edmund Husserl.

<sup>14</sup> Robert K. Barnhart, ed., *The Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology* (USA 1988) 922; Michiel de Vaan, *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and the other Italic Languages*. Leiden Indo-European Etymological Dictionary Series 7 (Leiden 2008) 516, 660.

<sup>15</sup> From: *re-* ‘opposite of’ + *velare* ‘covering’

<sup>16</sup> From: *re-* ‘again’ + *velare* ‘covering’

The first chapter ‘I: Un-veiling: Death Defining Meaning’ is dedicated to the notion that death – primarily understood as *my death* – defines the meaning of existence by demarcating its totality. It reveals the meaning of existence in the sense of *un-veiling*: uncovering the previously hidden meaning of existence. This chapter functions as the foundation of this investigation, consisting of a discussion of Heidegger’s notion of Being-towards-death, as well as Romano’s critical account of the event of death. The next chapter ‘II. Re-veiling: Death Denying Meaning’ is devoted to the idea that death – primarily to be understood as *the death of the Other* – denies existence its meaning, by collapsing the dimension of responsibility in which meaning arises. It reveals the meaning of existence in the sense of *re-veiling*: covering something previously available back up. This chapter provides an evaluation of Levinas’ radical alternative to Heidegger’s understanding of death, ultimately turning towards Derrida’s critique of Levinas. The final chapter ‘III. Revealing: Death Defying Meaning’, then, consists of Derrida’s conception of death, as well as a discussion of Blanchot’s preliminary alternative, in order to bring all acquired insights together inside the statement that *death reveals the meaning of existence*. This chapter shows that death – primarily to be understood as *beyond* – defies the meaning of existence, by rupturing the totality of existence, effectuating that its meaning can never be unequivocally ascertained. It reveals the meaning of existence in the sense of *revealing*: ‘dis-closing’ something closed, i.e. opening a *definitive* answer up to *infinity*.

Thus, by the end of the final chapter, I will be able to bring together all perspectives in order to explicate the entire significance of the thesis that *death reveals the meaning of existence*; closing the investigation by substantiating my answer to the research question. As such, it will become clear what it means to think death in its ambiguity. Before initiating this quest, however, it is important to note that the distinction between the three different perspectives is based on the different emphases that characterize each of them respectively. It is not the case that the perspectives are entirely different: each perspective contains traces of the other ones. My aim is precisely to put forth a framework which shows the common ground connecting the perspectives – death’s ambiguity – in order to aid comprehension within this field of nuanced differences. Conceptualizing this common ground, however, can only be done by addressing the distinctions, which is why the investigation is structured as it is; inspired by the way the authors situate their own thought in relation to one another.<sup>17</sup> By showing that each perspective (implicitly or explicitly) substantiates the idea that death must be thought in its ambiguity, I will argue that all perspectives essentially advocate the idea that *death reveals the meaning of existence*.

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<sup>17</sup> See e.g.: “Whereas for Heidegger death is my death, for me [Levinas] it is the Other’s death.” Richard Kearney, ‘Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas’, in: Richard A. Cohen ed., *Face to Face with Levinas* (New York 1986), 26.

“By its very essence, death is in every case mine.”<sup>18</sup>

# I. Un-veiling: Death Defining Meaning

## DEATH AS MINE: TOTALITY AND MEANING

The current chapter forms the foundation for the investigation into the relation between death and meaning. It consists of a more comprehensive exploration of the notion that death *defines* the meaning of existence. That is to say, the idea that death *reveals* the meaning of existence in the sense of *unveiling*; bringing to light. By doing so, the chapter simultaneously offers a justification for our underlying assertion: the idea that it is possible to think a relation between death and meaning at all. The aim of this chapter is to explore what it means to conceptualize death *as mine*. At the same time, in light of the central research question, I will show how this perspective substantiates the idea that death must be thought in its ambiguity.

In response to the traditional understanding of being as *something* eternal, fixed, atemporal, Martin Heidegger introduced temporality [*Zeit*] into being [*Sein*]: proposing a temporal conception of Being. According to Heidegger, the horizon of temporality – especially human finitude – has continuously been overlooked in traditional ontology, despite the numerous attempts at understanding the meaning of being, starting with Plato. As a result, his 1927 *Being and Time* [*Sein und Zeit*] arguably comes down to an attempt at assigning death its well-deserved place within a philosophy concerned with the meaning of being. Beautiful as this may sound, Heidegger’s conception of death and especially the significance he ascribes to it is far from unproblematic. Critical questions have been raised concerning the mineness [*jemeinigkeit*] of death, the conception of death as Dasein’s radical ‘possibility of impossibility’, the idea that death can be ‘anticipated’ by Dasein, the ontological priority of death and the relation between death and authenticity, as we will come to see.

These are in fact the major questions that will be discussed over the course of this investigation, starting in this chapter, after having introduced the notion of Being-towards-death, using Claude Romano’s account of the event of death. This chapter is structured as follows: first, I will (I.I) explicate the notion Being-towards-death from the context of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*,<sup>19</sup> especially its relation to authenticity and meaning. Next, I will (I.II) critically evaluate the notion of Being-towards-death using Claude Romano’s 1999 *Event and World* [*l’Événement et le Monde*].<sup>20</sup> Finally, I will (I.III) bring the acquired insights together in order to evaluate the significance of conceptualizing death *as my death* with regards to the main thesis.

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<sup>18</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 240 (tr. 284).

<sup>19</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

<sup>20</sup> Claude Romano, *Event and World* (New York 2009).

## **I.1 *Sein-zum-Tode***

### Being-towards-death

Starting with Heidegger, whose thought is the foundation of this investigation. Finitude renders life significant, death is the root of meaning; that is, in very simple terms, what Heidegger's notion of Being-towards-death entails. He places *memento mori* at the service of *carpe diem*, by proposing that the anticipation of death makes authentic existence possible, since death constitutes the meaning of existence. To improve our understanding of 'Being-towards-death', it is first necessary to discuss it in relation to the context in which it is put forth by Heidegger. Secondly, I'll discuss the connection between 'Being-towards-death' and authenticity within the framework of *Being and Time*.

### **Heidegger's *fundamental ontology***

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger is concerned with one sole question. The *existential analytic* of his *fundamental ontology* serves to explicate, reevaluate and answer *the question to the meaning of being*.

Do we in our time have an answer to the question of what we really mean by the word 'being'? Not at all. So, it is fitting that we should raise anew the question of the meaning of Being. But are we nowadays even perplexed at our inability to understand the expression 'Being'? Not at all. So first of all we must reawaken an understanding for the meaning of this question.<sup>21</sup>

The book is an attempt to address the *Seinsfrage* in a way that is at least as rigorous as it is innovative. What is at stake from an existentialist point of view is an answer to the question to the meaning of existence. What is at stake from a more general philosophical point of view is an answer to the age-old question of being: "Our aim in the following treatise is to work out the question of the meaning of Being and to do so concretely. Our provisional aim is the Interpretation of time as the possible horizon for any understanding whatsoever of Being."<sup>22</sup>

This is Heidegger's main innovation: introducing temporality into the core of the atemporal structure of classical ontology.<sup>23</sup> This is what his infamous destruction [*Destruktion*] of ontology expresses. It does not mean to dispose of the entire history of metaphysics altogether, but to tinker with its core assumption – that Being is presence, eternal, unchangeable – and, thereby, to construct a structure which underlies the classical conception of Being.<sup>24</sup> In short, to establish a (more) *fundamental ontology*.<sup>25</sup> Within this context, one of Heidegger's core ideas consists of devising the *ontological difference* (between 'Being' and 'beings').<sup>26</sup> This creates the conceptual space to approach Being from a perspective traditionally only reserved for beings; in terms of temporality, happening, event.

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<sup>21</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Preface.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>23</sup> As argued, for example, by Levinas in *Unforeseen History*, trans. Nidra Poller (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 68-69, acquired from Romano, *Event and World*, 10.

<sup>24</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 22-23 (tr. 44).

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, 37 (tr. 61).

<sup>26</sup> Rozemund Uljée, *Thinking Difference with Heidegger and Levinas. Truth and Justice*. (New York 2020) 2.

Heidegger starts his quest by analyzing the being for whom the question to the meaning of being is an issue, which he calls *Dasein* [Being-there].<sup>27</sup> This conceptual entity is his entry point into the investigation. As a matter of fact, the entire first division is dedicated to an analysis of *Dasein*. Very generally speaking, this section explains *Dasein* as *being thrown in the world*. The ‘there’ [da] is conceptualized as a world shared with Others [*Mit(da)sein*],<sup>28</sup> experienceable and interpretable via state-of-mind [*Befindlichkeit*],<sup>29</sup> and the ‘Being’ [sein] is conceptualized as ‘care’ [*Sorge*],<sup>30</sup> which amounts to a general description of *Dasein* as a caring [*besorgd*] being-in-the-world [*in-der-welt-sein*], primarily concerned with its own Being.<sup>31</sup>

“If in care we have arrived at *Dasein*'s primordial state of Being, then this must also be the basis for conceptualizing that understanding of Being which lies in care; that is to say, it must be possible to define the meaning of Being.”<sup>32</sup> In order to understand *Dasein* as a whole, however, Heidegger needs to address temporality, since *Dasein* – as a concretely existing individual posing the question to the meaning of being – exists in time. Consequently, the second division is dedicated to *Dasein*'s temporality.<sup>33</sup> It is within the dimension of temporality that Being-towards-death enters the investigation, since death is the most significant consequence of the inescapability of time, i.e. finitude.

### Being-towards-death

Heidegger employs finitude to ‘close’ the hermeneutic circle of understanding *Dasein* as a whole.<sup>34</sup> The entire problem of traditional ontology comes down to a lack of courage when it comes to standing strong in the face of the confrontation with death as one’s ownmost possibility of absolute impossibility. “Death is a possibility-of-Being which *Dasein* itself *has to take over in every case* [my emphasis]. With death, *Dasein* stands before itself in its ownmost potentiality-for-Being. (...) *Dasein* cannot outstrip the possibility of death. Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of *Dasein*.”<sup>35</sup> Death is thus ascribed the highest importance within this philosophy.

Methodologically speaking, death brings to light *Dasein* principal *existentials*, which means that for Heidegger, understanding death is the key to understanding *Dasein*'s existence.<sup>36</sup> However, not death itself, since “when *Dasein* reaches its wholeness in death, it simultaneously loses the Being [sein] of its “there” [da]. By its transition to no-longer-*Dasein* [*Nichtmehr-dasein*], it gets lifted right out of the possibility of experiencing this transition and of understanding it as something experienced.”<sup>37</sup> In

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<sup>27</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 8 (tr. 27).

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, 114 (tr. 149).

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, 134 (tr. 172).

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, 237 (tr. 193).

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, 141 (tr. 180-181).

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem, 230 (tr. 273).

<sup>33</sup> Would Heidegger not have been so dismissive of the history of western philosophy, one could argue quite confidently that *Being and Time* is roughly structured parallel Kant’s epistemic conditions of space [Being-(thrown)-in-the-world] – *Sein* - and time [‘Being-in-time’ as Being-towards-death] – *und zeit*.

<sup>34</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 236 (tr. 280).

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem, 250 (tr. 294).

<sup>36</sup> Romano, *Event and World*, 18-19.

<sup>37</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 237 (tr. 281).

other words: understanding death is impossible. Instead, it is the *anticipation* of one's own death as an inescapable and unpredictable event that confronts Dasein with its ownmost possibilities, making authentic existence possible. As such, Being-towards-death is the keystone within the structure of Dasein's existence.

Being-towards-death is the anticipation of the one and only possibility that inevitably marks every individual; the possibility of one's own absolute impossibility, i.e. the possibility of no-longer being-able-to-be-there. "In anxiety in the face of death, Dasein is brought face to face with itself as delivered over to that possibility which is not to be outstripped."<sup>38</sup> The insight that death can actually and unexpectedly come for you specifically at any moment, induces anxiety [Angst], according to Heidegger. It is exactly this anxiety which must be accepted and faced in order to gather an understanding of the meaning of Dasein's being, particularly the possibilities specific to oneself. "As Guignon nicely expresses the crucial point, for Heidegger death reveals 'that what I am at the most basic level is a reaching forward into possibilities, not an actualizing of possibilities'."<sup>39</sup> It is in this sense that Dasein itself has to take over death in every case.

It must be stressed that not-facing one's own death is a very real possibility. In fact, Heidegger stresses that existing authentically as opposed to inauthentically is the exception, instead of the rule. Dasein is rooted in the average everydayness of 'the they' [das Man], which shapes its (non)identity to be the same as everyone else, as 'them'; identical to what 'they' think, value or do.<sup>40</sup> Every event can be experienced and interpreted both authentically or inauthentically, including the ontologically prioritized event of death, which leaves space for an everyday understanding of Being-towards-death.

The "they" concerns itself with transforming this anxiety into fear in the face of an oncoming event. In addition, the anxiety which has been made ambiguous as fear, is passed off as a weakness with which no self-assured Dasein may have any acquaintance. (...) Everyday Being-towards-death is a constant fleeing in the face of death (...) - giving new explanations for it, understanding it inauthentically, and concealing it. Factually one's own Dasein is always dying already.<sup>41</sup>

In other words: the secret to authentic existence consists of not-fleeing in the face of death. It is in Being-towards-death that Dasein's possibilities, which come to it from the future, are rendered finite. Death marks the end point of Dasein's seemingly infinite *being-ahead-of-itself* as *potentiality-for-Being*.<sup>42</sup> This means that, in facing one's own death, Dasein is able to gain understanding of its ownmost possibilities, i.e. the possibilities that are particular only to itself.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibidem, 254 (tr. 298).

<sup>39</sup> Guignon, Charles. *Heidegger and Kierkegaard on death: The existentiell and the existential*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. In: Iain Thomson, 'Rethinking Levinas on Heidegger on Death', in: Hans Pedersen en Megan Altman ed., *Horizons of Authenticity in Phenomenology, Existentialism, and Moral Psychology: Essays in Honor of Charles Guignon*. Contributions To Phenomenology 74 (Dordrecht 2015) 239-262, 252 <doi:10.1007/978-94-017-9442-8>.

<sup>40</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 126 (tr. 164).

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, 254 (tr. 298).

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem, 193 (tr. 237).

<sup>43</sup> Iain Thomson, 'Can I Die? Derrida on Heidegger on Death.', *Philosophy Today* 29 (1999) 29-42, 33.

Free for its ownmost possibilities, which are determined by the end and so are understood as finite [*endliche*], Dasein dispels the danger that it may, by its own finite understanding of existence, fail to recognize that it is getting outstripped by the existence-possibilities of Others, or rather that it may explain these possibilities wrongly and force them back upon its own, so that it may divest itself of its ownmost factual existence.<sup>44</sup>

This is what effectuates the authentic mode of existence; experiencing existence according to one's own terms, aware of one's ownmost possibilities. Death, authenticity and meaning are thus inseparably connected: "Death, a mode of existence uncovered in anxiety, (...) appears to Dasein [as] the origin of all self-authenticity and selfhood,"<sup>45</sup> and, as such, as the origin of meaning, given that "futural possibilities would not *matter* [be meaningful] to us if our embodiment was not thrown up against the limits of our own temporal finitude."<sup>46</sup>

### **The possibility of my death**

Heidegger's perspective comes down to the claim that every Dasein is inevitably determined as Being-towards-death, whether one dares to face this fate or not. Instead of fleeing into the everyday understanding of Being-towards-death in order to get rid of the anxiety induced by this possibility of absolute impossibility, one has to 'accept the fact' of one's mortality and acquiesce in the anxiety this induces. "[Death] alone removes Dasein from the impersonality of events, of which it is not itself the origin. Death alone allows the constitutive mineness of existence to be affirmed."<sup>47</sup> As stressed before, according to Heidegger, this 'resignation' to temporality and finitude is necessary if we want to succeed at addressing the question to the meaning of being.

Heidegger himself asserts that death is "in every case mine. (...) In dying, it is shown that mine-ness and existence are ontologically constitutive for death."<sup>48</sup> According to him, the meaning of existence is thus defined by death as my utmost possibility of impossibility. The fact that Heidegger conceptualizes death as a possibility – "Dasein as an ability-to-be does, indeed, collapse, but something remains aware of the collapse and survives to open the new world,"<sup>49</sup> – inspired a lot of critique, part of which I'll come to discuss later. Whereas Heidegger can be defended against the critique that conceptualizing death as ultimate possibility is nonsensical, as shown e.g. by the rigorous analysis of Paul Edwards, it can be asserted quite confidently, as Edwards acknowledges too, that Heidegger's usage of the word possibility leaves a lot to be desired, justifying his successors' quest towards improved conceptualizations of death.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 264 (tr. 308-309).

<sup>45</sup> Romano, *Event and World*, 18-19.

<sup>46</sup> Thomson, 'Can I Die? Derrida on Heidegger on Death.', 33.

<sup>47</sup> Romano, *Event and World*, 18-19.

<sup>48</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 240 (tr. 284).

<sup>49</sup> Hubert L. Dreyfus, 'Foreword', in: Mark Ralkowski ed., *Time and death: Heidegger's analysis of finitude* (Aldershot 2005) ix-xxxvi, p. xxxiv-xxxv.

<sup>50</sup> "Two things - first, if one agrees, as I do, that there is no survival, Heidegger is quite right in describing death as a total absence, and, second, that his use of the word 'possibility' is fantastically misleading." Paul Edwards, 'Heidegger and Death as `Possibility', *Mind* 84 (1975) 548-566, 557.

Be that as it may, Heidegger's discussion of Being-towards-death in any case contains major internal tensions. For example, on the one hand, death is equated with existence - "Factically, Dasein is dying as long as it exists,"<sup>51</sup> - but, on the other, death is explained as the insurmountable end of existence - "when Dasein reaches its wholeness in death, it simultaneously loses the Being [*sein*] of its "there" [*da*]."<sup>52</sup> And in another sense, on the one hand, death can be anticipated and must be taken over by each Dasein, yet on the other, death is conceptualized as being radically unexpected and nonexperienceable: "that [death] is possible at any moment,"<sup>53</sup> and "by its transition to no-longer-Dasein, [Dasein] gets lifted right out of the possibility of experiencing this transition and of understanding it as something experienced."<sup>54</sup> It is these types of tensions in Heidegger's framework that inspired Claude Romano's *Event and World*.

## I.II l'Événement de la Mort

### The Event of Death

In *Event and World*, Claude Romano presents the phenomenological framework of *evential hermeneutics* as a critical response to Heidegger.<sup>55</sup> The framework is based on the idea that Being is to be approached in terms of *events* that *advene* [come towards] to "the one who alone is 'capable' of events",<sup>56</sup> called *the advenant*; 'capable' of events through experience.<sup>57</sup> Through *experience*, events fundamentally transform the advenant's understanding of its world and itself. The main aim of *Event and World* - to think the sameness of 'thinking' and 'being' radically in terms of experience and event<sup>58</sup> - is inspired by Heidegger's achievements within the domain of ontology, yet Romano uses these innovations precisely to propose a fundamental critique of *Being and Time*.

Generally speaking, Romano's critique boils down to the claim that Heidegger doesn't think Being in terms of 'events' radically enough, even though he himself propagated such an understanding of Being.<sup>59</sup> Romano appoints the notion of Being-towards-death to be the main culprit responsible for the fact that Heidegger is still thinking being in terms of a totality, and consequently, he proposes to conceptualize death differently; in terms of event. By doing so, Romano is moving towards a more ambiguous understanding of death, whilst remaining within the perspective of death *as my death*. Thus, in the broader context of this investigation, Romano's thought serves to substantiate the idea that death

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<sup>51</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 251-252 (tr. 295).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, 237 (tr. 281).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, 258 (tr. 302).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, 237 (tr. 281).

<sup>55</sup> Romano, *Event and World*, 3.

<sup>56</sup> *Advenant* is Romano's conceptualization of the human being, his alternative to *Dasein*. *Ibidem*, xi.

<sup>57</sup> Romano coins the term *ex-per-ience* when talking about the experience of events in the evential sense, in order to stress the transformative power of events, i.e. the fact that an advenant is changed by experiencing an event. For the sake of simplicity and overview, I won't use this technical term here.

<sup>58</sup> The general aim of philosophy: "τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστὶν τε καὶ εἶναι." Transl. "for thinking and Being are the same." Parmenides VIII, 34-41

<sup>59</sup> Romano, *Event and World*, 17.

must be thought in its ambiguity, since it emphasizes that the perspective of death *as my death* contains clear traces of death's paradoxical character.

### **Romano's *evential hermeneutics***

Romano's critique is founded on the observation that Heidegger fails to appreciate the eventuality ['event-ness'] of death: by prioritizing death ontologically over other events and instrumentalizing it in order to conceptualize the being-whole of Dasein, Heidegger still thinks death in terms of presence (albeit 'in disguise'). Heidegger *ontologizes* death "so to bring existence to light", according to Romano.<sup>60</sup>

Death as always mine (*je meines*), the possible impossibility of all existence, a possibility that remains, by this very fact, a modality of this existence. Rigorously understood, death is here a mode of *Being* of Dasein, in which it is related, through the ordeal of anxiety, to the uttermost possibility of the impossibility of the possibilities in which it is thrown from the outset of its existence [*geworfenheit*]. A modality of authentic existence and the uttermost possibility of that existence, death is just as much as existence is.<sup>61</sup>

By conceptualizing death as the keystone which closes the hermeneutical circle of understanding Dasein as a totality, Heidegger fails to think death as an event. Interestingly, Romano thus opposes the idea that death constitutes Dasein's wholeness, while at the same time holding on to the idea that death *as my death* defines the meaning of existence.<sup>62</sup> Romano mainly objects the idea that authenticity is only constituted by death; proposing instead that any event powerful enough to change the advenant's conception of its world and possibilities, 'ontologically' constitutes the advenant's selfhood.<sup>63</sup>

While a number of different events can justifiably be called events *in the evential sense*,<sup>64</sup> the event of death does enjoy a special position within this framework: it is a "privileged evential".<sup>65</sup> There are two reasons for this. First of all, death is a limit experience, which forms the ultimate boundary of the advenant's *adventure* [existence, life]; it closes advenant's world for the last time. Secondly, this event explicitly demonstrates the major characteristics of an event: its inexperienceability, unexpectability and non-anticipatability.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibidem, 19.

<sup>61</sup> Ibidem, 18.

<sup>62</sup> "Death no longer signifies that singular possibility that closes Dasein's resolute existence in on itself, but it is much rather that which comes to open Dasein from the outside, (...) thus transcending the "horizon" of its finitude," yet death "makes it possible to comprehend an advenant in his adventure, according to the fullness of his phenomenal features." Ibidem, 184, 180.

<sup>63</sup> 'Ontologically', since Romano thinks Being in terms of event. The event is the most fundamental ontological 'entity'. Romano's main example is the event of birth, for which, he argues, there is no place in Dasein's existential analytic. Metaphorically speaking, Romano's work is thus an attempt to implement a germ of life [i.e. birth] into the closed totality of Heidegger's framework; he tries to breathe the *adventure* of life into a system ruled by death. Ibidem, 19.

<sup>64</sup> Events that fundamentally change the advenant's conception of his world and himself, such as romantic encounter, divorce, bereavement and trauma.

<sup>65</sup> A privilege death only shares with the event of birth. Romano, *Event and World*, 180.

To the extent that death is never realized or experienced as a fact, it appears, in one sense, as an event *par excellence*: about death, about my death, I can never say that it has occurred, (...) because as soon as it is actual, I lose any possibility of being there and undergoing it.<sup>66</sup>

Romano thus conceptualizes the event of death as a paradoxical notion. On the one hand, the event of death “makes it possible to comprehend an advenant in his adventure, according to the fullness of his phenomenal features,”<sup>67</sup> yet, on the other, it fundamentally closes the advenant’s adventure. Romano asks the crucial question himself: “can we still speak of an “event” (...) where the world is not transformed or re-configured but simply lost, where experiencing the end entirely coincides with the end of experiencing?” The ‘world’ that is opened by death is a world of absolute impossibility of possibilities.<sup>68</sup> Romano answers by asserting that the event of death opens the advenant to *a whole new world*, unforeseeable and invisible beforehand.<sup>69</sup> Anticipating death precisely in its incomprehensibility shows one the transformative power of events, and the fact that they are radically unforeseeable. Death is the event *par excellence* in the sense that it confronts oneself with the inescapable eventuality of one’s adventure.<sup>70</sup>

### **The ambiguity of death**

The realization that death will inevitably strike the advenant itself at one point, including the anxiety this induces, can be a genuine event in the evential sense. Conceptualized like this, the anticipation of my death does constitute an advenant’s selfhood. The difference is that Romano’s event of Being-towards-death can never be conceptualized as the keystone enclosing the advenant’s adventure as an accomplished whole.<sup>71</sup> Death does not ultimately constitute the totality of one’s existence, on the contrary: it is an impersonal event that deprives the advenant of its selfhood.<sup>72</sup>

For, nearing death, one perceives death (...) as what comes upon us without coming from us, happens to us in the impersonal mode of an event, since when I think I have grasped it, in fact it has grasped me by undoing my grip on myself and delivering me over to the ungraspable. This death, in its transcendental impersonality as an event, always happens to me out of a future that is radically yet to come, (...) as Blanchot writes so well: ‘In it I do not die, I have fallen from the power to die. In it *they* die; they do not cease, and they do not finish dying.’<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibidem, 181.

<sup>67</sup> Ibidem, 180.

<sup>68</sup> “First, like all genuine ex-per-ience, it is an experience that has never been had before. (...) Second, the ex-per-ience of death is such that it puts selfhood in play, as does all experience in general. (...) Finally, this singular and privileged ex-per-ience shares the adventurous character of all other experience.” Ibidem, 182-183.

<sup>69</sup> “To understand this limit experience requires that we stop envisaging death as the ultimate turning-point from ‘being’ to ‘non-being,’” Ibidem, 183.

<sup>70</sup> “Death, as death that is undergone, is also the ex-per-ience *par excellence*: self-undergoing at the point of nothing, traversal of the untraversable.” Ibidem.

<sup>71</sup> “An advenant can never circumscribe the adventure into which he is born by enclosing it as an accomplished whole that has its meaning in itself and is entirely understood on the horizon of his death, for death is precisely an event.” Ibidem, 185.

<sup>72</sup> Ibidem, 182.

<sup>73</sup> Ibidem, 184.

This brings us to the topic of the death of Others. For Heidegger, the death of Others is ontologically insignificant, because Dasein cannot experience the Other's death *as death*. Of course, the passing of loved ones can be experienced as a great loss, but this can't be the source which constitutes authenticity. Heidegger: "In suffering this loss, however, we have no way of access to the loss-of-Being as such which the dying man 'suffers'. The dying of Others is not something which we experience in a genuine sense; at most we are always just 'there alongside'."<sup>74</sup>

In Romano's framework, however, the event of the death of Others is ontologically significant. Bereavement transforms the advenant and its world: the advenant is changed in its selfhood and in its possibilities because of the Other's death. With the death of another, the present advenant dies too, and turns into a new advenant, changed by the event. With this analysis, however, Romano asserts that the significance of death is derived from the experience of the Other's death *as my death*. It is precisely because I die with the Other, that the Other's death is rendered meaningful. So, while he is moving towards otherness – "events in their radical alterity" coming to us *from outside* – at the same time, Romano does remain within the boundaries of Heidegger's notion of death *as my death*.<sup>75</sup>

By addressing Being-towards-death's intrinsic tension between death's anticipatability on the one hand, and its inexperienceability on the other, and by conceptualizing death as paradoxical,<sup>76</sup> Romano advocates the idea that death must be thought in its ambiguity. However, he ultimately subscribes to the Heideggerian intuition of meaning as rooted in the Same, given that meaning is to be appropriated from events by the individual advenant, and the advenant's capacity to be changed by events is the condition for meaning.<sup>77</sup> As such, meaning arises in the sphere of the Same. That being said, events advene to the advenant from outside, as alterity. Without events, there wouldn't be anything for the advenant to appropriate. As such, meaning is dependent on the Other.

Since within evential hermeneutics it seems to be the case that meaning – what *matters* to us – arises in the experience of the individual, Romano sides with Heidegger with regards to the idea that death *as my death* defines the meaning of existence. He tries to keep up a delicate balance regarding this interplay between the sphere of the Other and the Same. The fundamental question is whether or not a common ground, which Romano attempts to establish with this balance act, can ever exist. With Heidegger and Levinas – whose philosophies can both be interpreted as *pièces de résistance* against the possibility of such a connection – as his main philosophical forefathers,<sup>78</sup> Romano is walking on very thin ice. Yet, by doing so, he is precisely proving the point that, even when from the perspective of death *as my death*, death obliges us to think its ambiguity.

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<sup>74</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 239 (tr. 282).

<sup>75</sup> Romano, *Event and World*, 185.

<sup>76</sup> "All these expressions, which are not so much obscure as deliberately paradoxical." Ibidem, 182.

<sup>77</sup> Romano explicitly discusses the disappearance of meaning once the advenant loses its *passibility* and *responsibility* [capacity to respond to events], e.g. in despair.

<sup>78</sup> Both in terms of content (given that Levinas is responsible for introducing Heidegger to French academia) and concretely, since Romano is clearly well at home in the work of both authors.

### I.III Significance

Given that our main aim is to think the relation between death and meaning in the shadow of Being-towards-death, the above-discussed ideas form the foundation of this investigation, as well as the first substantiation of the idea that death must be thought in its ambiguity. According to Heidegger, the anticipation of death as one's ownmost possibility of impossibility unveils Dasein's possibilities, making authentic and – therefore – meaningful existence possible. Within Romano's framework, the realization that my death as the event *par excellence* will transform myself and my world in a non-anticipatable way is conceptualized as constitutive for my selfhood, thereby rendering existence meaningful. The main difference between the two is the fact that, to Heidegger, my death is the ultimate constituent of the ontological meaning of existence, whereas to Romano, my death is 'merely' a privileged event which ends the succession of events with the capacity to constitute selfhood.

Regarding the question to the relation between death and meaning, death can thus be said to *define* meaning in the sense of *un-veiling*, given that it constitutes the possibility to experience existence authentically, i.e. as meaningful. Death establishes the ontological meaning of existence, and simultaneously it provides the possibility of coming to understand this meaning. It might be even be argued that death is the most important event of all when it comes to providing meaning.<sup>79</sup> In the experience of the realization that my death unveils my ownmost possibilities, my existence is rendered meaningful to me, since this experience teaches me that my ownmost possibilities constitute my authenticity and fundamentally shape my selfhood.

However, the presented perspective does not assign this special status to the empirical event of death itself, since death is radically inexperienceable. It is the realization that the possibility of death (as absolute impossibility) can advene at any moment, which unveils the meaning of existence. As such, whereas it can be stated that my death defines meaning, this does not mean that the meaning of existence is ultimately rooted in the event of my death. Rather, the fact that my death will inevitably and unexpectedly advene is the ultimate ground which establishes the meaning of existence as well as the possibility to understand it. The obvious assumption underlying this perspective is the notion that something is meaningful only once it matters *to me*. With the anticipation of my death, this is the case not only because it is experienced by me as something that matters, but because it is actually ontologically constitutive of my selfhood; *scio me ipsum moriturum esse, ergo sum qui sum*.<sup>80</sup>

While it is true that alterity does play a role in the perspective of death *as mine*, the sphere of the Other is ultimately subordinated to the Same. Both Heidegger and Romano are indeed thinking alterity, e.g. when acknowledging death's radical unknowability, but, in the end, their emphasis on the mineness of death leads them to designate the sphere of the Same as the main locus of meaning. It is my contention that this perspective bites itself by the tail by ultimately prioritizing the sphere of the Same over the Other; paradoxically striving to overcome the ambiguous character of death after having asserted the insurmountability of this ambiguity itself. Consequently, for the sake of counterbalance, the next chapter is dedicated to the opposite perspective: death *as the Other's death*.

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<sup>79</sup> This is in fact Heidegger's position. Romano conceptualizes the event of death as equally important to birth.

<sup>80</sup> *Transl.* I know that I myself will die, therefore I am who I am.

“The death of the Other: therein lies the first death.”<sup>81</sup>

## II. Re-veiling: Death Denying Meaning

### DEATH AS THE OTHER’S: ALTERITY AND MEANING

The current chapter is dedicated to a more comprehensive exploration of the idea that death *denies* the meaning of existence. That is to say, the idea that death *reveals* the meaning of existence in the sense of *re-veiling*; covering it up again, precisely by annulling existence and thereby closing the dimension of responsibility in which meaning arises. The aim of this chapter is to explore what it means to conceptualize death primarily as *the death of the Other*, since this concept will allow us to understand the role of death as denying meaning. At the same time, in light of the central research question, I will show how this perspective substantiates the idea that death must be thought in its ambiguity.

Over the Parisian winter and spring of 1975-76, Levinas taught the seminar *Death and Time* [*La Mort et le Temps*] at l’Université Paris-Sorbonne, while Derrida guided students at l’École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales through the seminar *Life Death* [*La Vie la Mort*].<sup>82</sup> The main contention shared by both consists of the idea that meaning is not rooted in the sphere of the Same, but arises only in relation to the Other. However, their accounts differ when it comes to the emphasis on the death of the Other. Whereas Levinas stresses that death must primarily be understood as the death of the Other [*Autrui*], Derrida is rather critical of Levinas’ approach, emphasizing the ambiguity of the death as wholly other [*tout autre*].

This chapter consists of a discussion of Levinas’ conception of the death and Derrida’s critical reading of it, from the context of their philosophical innovations in twentieth-century France. I will start out by (II.I) discussing Levinas’ notion of death as he presents it in *Time and the Other* (1948), *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and *Death and Time* (1976).<sup>83</sup> Next, (II.II) Derrida’s critical reading of Levinas, as presented in *Violence and Metaphysics* (1967) and *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (1995), will be discussed.<sup>84</sup> These perspectives will allow for (II.III) an understanding of the significance of conceptualizing death as *the Other’s death*, teaching us that the death of the Other reveals death to be the denial of the meaning of existence, given that death is the without-response which closes the relation of responsibility in which meaning arises.

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<sup>81</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, ‘Death and Time’, in: vert. Bettina Bergo, *God, Death, and Time* (Stanford, California 2000), 43.

<sup>82</sup> Levinas, ‘Death and Time’; Jacques Derrida, *Life Death* (Chicago 2020).

<sup>83</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 1987); Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority* (20ste druk; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 2007); Levinas, ‘Death and Time’.

<sup>84</sup> Derrida, *Life Death*; Jacques Derrida, ‘Violence and Metaphysics. An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas.’, in: vert. Alan Bass, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago 1978) 79-153; Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford, California 1999).

## II.I *La Mort d'Autrui*

### The death of the Other

In direct opposition to the tradition of Western philosophy starting from Plato, Levinas declares ethics to be the *prima philosophia*, arguing that meaning is revealed in relation to the Other.<sup>85</sup> According to Levinas, the anticipation of one's own death is not at all the root of meaning. Rather, meaning is solely to be understood in relation to the Other's death.<sup>86</sup> It is important to stress beforehand that, according to Levinas, the Other is infinitely other to us, yet at the same time, a connection with the Other is possible: in the face-to-face encounter, a trace of the Other becomes 'visible'.<sup>87</sup> "We recognize the Other as resembling us, but exterior to us; the relationship with the Other is a relationship with a Mystery."<sup>88</sup> This notion of the Other as a mystery is reflected in the 'absolute unknowability' of death.<sup>89</sup> In order to understand how Levinas conceptualizes death in relation to meaning, it is necessary first of all to discuss Levinas' view on death and the role it plays within his philosophy. From this, a discussion of the meaning of the death of the Other and the impossibility of my death will be conducted.

### Levinas' *ethical phenomenology*

Levinas' work can be regarded as a clash with one thinker in particular, shadowing his work as a *malin génie*: Heidegger. The core of the Levinasian critique is the claim that Heidegger does not succeed at his intended *destruktion* of traditional ontology; in fact, that he himself is – despite his best efforts to introduce temporality into philosophy – continuing this exact tradition, by attempting to interpret Dasein's existence as a totality. Heidegger trades 'being as presence' for the 'presence of Being', which, according to Levinas, is still the traditional 'philosophy of presence'. The cost for prioritizing the totality of Dasein, is that there is no place for the Other. That is not to say that Heidegger doesn't address others, but that he subordinates them to the totality of Dasein, i.e. that he reduces the Other to the Same. The main notion that Levinas opposes is his understanding of Heidegger's idea that Others are ontologically subordinated to Dasein. The individualistic focus on Dasein's authentic existence, including the negative description of Others (in the form of *das Man*, *Gerede*, etc.), as well as the ontological priority of Being-towards-death, are the most important bones of contention.

Whereas to Heidegger the authentic existence of Dasein is fundamentally marked by the anxiety face-to-face with death as one's ownmost 'possibility of impossibility,' Levinas describes human existence in terms of enjoyment and responsibility face-to-face with the Other, who embodies infinity; beyond the horizon of death as the fundamental 'impossibility of possibility'.<sup>90</sup> It is in relation to the Other that meaning is to be found. Without the Other, and without mortality as the fundamental vulnerability of the Other, meaning would not exist. In fact, without the Other nothing would 'exist'; that

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<sup>85</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, 304.

<sup>86</sup> "Whereas for Heidegger death is *my* death, for me it is the *Other's* death." Richard Kearney, 'Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas', in: Richard A. Cohen ed., *Face to Face with Levinas* (New York 1986), 26.

<sup>87</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, 'The Trace of the Other', *Tijdschrift voor Philosophie* (1963) 605-623.

<sup>88</sup> Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 75.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibidem*, 68-71.

<sup>90</sup> Richard A Cohen, Translator's introduction to *Ibidem*, 8-9.

is the point of the reversal of ontology and ethics. According to Levinas, it is only in relation to the Other that being *comes into existence*. It is a product of intersubjectivity; of ethics. It is only because of the Other that the Same can be conceptualized. Without the Other, we wouldn't be able to think or speak of the Same.<sup>91</sup> This focus on the Other over the Same forms the core of Levinas' philosophy. The idea is that identity presupposes difference, or, in other words: that ontology is founded on ethics.

Levinas argues that meaning arises from the face-to-face relation with the Other as a concrete, existing human being [Another, *Autrui*].<sup>92</sup> It is important to understand that this relation is not neutral in any way. It is a relation of infinite responsibility towards the Other, whose vulnerability is expressed in the face, which simultaneously provokes an act of violence and 'expresses' the commandment "Thou shall not kill".<sup>93</sup> Responsibility is based on the radical vulnerability of mortality. The very vulnerability that makes an act of violence possible, simultaneously urges me to take care of the Other. Put positively: it binds me to the infinite task of responsibility for the Other. The relation with the Other is radically dissymmetric: I am infinitely responsible for the Other, without asking or expecting anything in return. The appeal of the face of the Other binds me to the absolute priority of the Other. This intersubjective relation is the mysterious home of meaning. "Signification or intelligibility does not arise from the identity of the Same who remains in himself, but from the face of the Other who calls upon the Same."<sup>94</sup> As such, the mortality laying at the core of the relationship with the Other is inherently connected to meaning.

### **The death of the Other**

It is nonsensical to speak about death and meaning without relating it to the Other, according to Levinas: "Death, source of all myths, is present only in the Other, and only in him does it summon me urgently to my final essence, to my responsibility."<sup>95</sup> How to think this relation between death and the Other? Levinas starts from the phenomenological experience of death, which is available to us only in the death of the Other. As Blanchot puts it: "There is a level of this experience at which death reveals its nature by appearing no longer as the demise of a particular person, or as death in general, but in this neutral form: someone or other's death."<sup>96</sup> We can never be present to the experience of death, since death signifies precisely the end of our experience as 'present' beings.<sup>97</sup> However, what we can experience is the death of the Other.

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<sup>91</sup> Since thinking and speaking require difference; they occur always *about* or *on* something by someone, which means they require a plurality, difference.

<sup>92</sup> Levinas, 'Death and Time', 115.

<sup>93</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, 199.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibidem*, 96-97.

<sup>95</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, 179.

<sup>96</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 240.

<sup>97</sup> Levinas agrees with Heidegger on the fact that "we have no way of access to the loss-of-Being as such which the dying man 'suffers'. The dying of Others is not something which we experience in a genuine sense; at most we are always just 'there alongside'," yet this just means that we don't experience the Other's death *as dying ourselves*. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 239 (282).

For Levinas, dying is, at its core, a passage: “[Death] leads us toward an order of which we can say nothing, not even being, antithesis of the impossible nothingness.”<sup>98</sup> This comes down to saying that death is radically other to us, it is not a matter of either being or nothingness.<sup>99</sup> The first encounter with death is not an experience of either being or nothingness, but the lack of response – the “without-response” – of the deceased, experienced by the survivor.<sup>100</sup> “In the face of death one is no longer able to be able;” to respond to the Other.<sup>101</sup> As Derrida notes: “This question without response, this question of the without-response, would thus be underivable, primordial, like the interdiction against killing, more originary than the alternative of ‘To be or not to be.’”<sup>102</sup> Here, the different layers of the notion of the death of the Other start to become visible.

The death of the Other signifies both the actual death of the other person, as well as the radical otherness of death as opposed to life. Levinas thinks these dimensions as a unity, unified in the embodied Other, and only ‘present’ to us as a trace in the face of this Other. When he says “Death (...) is present only in the Other,”<sup>103</sup> this is what he means. It’s a unity between the first dimension, which concerns the only way death can ‘become present’ to us, as a trace in the vulnerability, suffering and death of the Other, and the second dimension, which concerns the domain of otherness; “the Other, inseparable from the very event of transcendence, is situated in the region from which death, possibly murder, comes.”<sup>104</sup> As such, ‘the death of the Other’ carries this double significance, unified in one concept, or rather: one person.

It could be argued that Levinas’ philosophy is fundamentally a philosophy of life. Whereas to Heidegger existing is equivalent to dying, to Levinas, death is the opposite of existence. “Death in Heidegger is an event of freedom, whereas for me the subject seems to reach the limit of the possible in suffering. It finds itself enchained, overwhelmed, and in some way passive.”<sup>105</sup> Put simply: Heidegger would say *leben ist sterben*,<sup>106</sup> and Levinas *vivir est n’être pas mort encore*.<sup>107</sup> The difference in these perspectives forms the core distinction between the *defining* and *denying* roles of death. Heidegger stresses the fact that death is hermeneutically indispensable when it comes to understanding the meaning of existence, whereas Levinas stresses the fact that death is radically unknowable. As a result, Heidegger’s emphasis suggests that meaning is ultimately rooted in death, while Levinas argues that meaning arises in existence, as inseparably tied to life.

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<sup>98</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, 233.

<sup>99</sup> Levinas in “Bad Conscience and the Inexorable,” 40. In: Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 6.

<sup>100</sup> Levinas, ‘Death and Time’, 9.

<sup>101</sup> Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 78.

<sup>102</sup> Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 6.

<sup>103</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, 179.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibidem*, 233.

<sup>105</sup> Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 70-71.

<sup>106</sup> To live is to die. Recall from ch. 1: “Factically, Dasein is dying as long as it exists,” Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 251-252 (tr. 295).

<sup>107</sup> To live is not to be dead yet.

## The impossibility of my death

Death definitively closes the dimension of possibilities. Therefore, it can't be experienced or anticipated. "I can absolutely not apprehend the moment of death; it is 'out of reach,' as Montaigne would say. *Ultima latet* - contrary to all the instants of my life, which are spread out between my birth and my death, and which can be recalled or anticipated."<sup>108</sup> That being said, death is indeed – as Heidegger asserted – inherently connected to fear: "My death is not deduced from the death of the others by analogy; it is inscribed in the fear I can have for my being. The "knowledge" of the threatening precedes every experience reasoned in terms of the death of the Other."<sup>109</sup> Notice how Levinas describes this fear not as a fear of death, but as a fear for my being; a small, yet crucial, detail.

Somehow, to Heidegger, even though death is the possibility of *impossibility*, death is still somehow part of Dasein's ownmost *possibilities*, since it can be anticipated and feared.<sup>110</sup> In emphasizing death as the absolute *impossibility* of possibility, Levinas asserts that death itself cannot possibly be anticipated or, therefore, feared. The only thing which can be feared for is my being, given death's immanent threat to end it, and, paradoxically, the idea that there is no end to my being, since my death is an impossibility.<sup>111</sup> While arguably very similar, Levinas' fear for being is very different compared to Heidegger's anxiety for death. It is, again, a reversal.

The imminence of the menace does not come from a precise point of the future. *Ultima latet*. The unforeseeable character of the ultimate instant is not due to an empirical ignorance, to the limited horizon of our understanding, which a greater understanding would have been able to overcome. The unforeseeable character of death is due to the fact that it does not lie within any horizon. It is not open to grasp.<sup>112</sup>

As such, death cannot serve to define meaning; it lies beyond the horizon of the domain of everything meaningful. Not only that, it actually denies existence its meaning, since it signifies the passage into a new order of things, a new paradigm, incommensurable with that which is meaningful in the realm of existence.<sup>113</sup> The very moment death 'arrives', existence is denied its meaning. This is revealed to us in the immanent threat of death, which can be experienced in existence as a trace of otherness resembling the trace of the Other: "the fear for my being which is my relation with death is not the fear of nothingness, but the fear of violence - and thus it extends into fear of the Other, of the absolutely unforeseeable."<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, 234.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibidem*, 233.

<sup>110</sup> As discussed in I.II.I, based on Romano, *Event and World*, 180-189.

<sup>111</sup> The idea of death as an impossibility in the sense that there is no end to my being (which induces fear through the realization that existence can't be escaped, not even through death) will be explored further in chapter III.II, with the notion of the *ily a*.

<sup>112</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, 233.

<sup>113</sup> From this perspective, it makes sense to fear the loss of my being, since it comes down to losing the meaning of [the realm of] existence.

<sup>114</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, 235.

In other words: the relation I have with death is characterized as fear induced by the radical unknowability of death, which situates death in the same region as the Other. The only ‘experience’ of death is the without-response, which is rooted in the fear for being. “Death threatens me from beyond. This unknown that frightens, the silence of the infinite spaces that terrify, comes from the Other, and this alterity, precisely as absolute, strikes me.”<sup>115</sup> It is in suffering, and especially the radical experience of dependency that accompanies it, that one experiences first-hand the movement towards one’s own death as a movement towards the Other. “My solitude is thus not confirmed by death but broken by it.”<sup>116</sup> Death – both the unforeseeable event of my own death, as well as the only possible ‘experience’ of death: the death of the Other – inevitably leads me to the Other.

The death signified by the end could not measure the entire significance of death without becoming responsibility for another — by which one becomes oneself in reality: one becomes oneself through this untransferable, undelegatable responsibility. It is for the death of the other that I am responsible to the point of including myself in his death.<sup>117</sup>

It is not my own death that effectuates authentic existence, and it is not through anticipating my own death that my existence is rendered meaningful. Meaning is fundamentally rooted in the connection to the Other. Only in a relationship of infinite responsibility towards the Other do I become myself in reality,<sup>118</sup> only here can my existence be understood as meaningful, and only from this perspective can ‘the entire significance of death’ be brought to light. “This is perhaps shown in a more acceptable proposition: “I am responsible for the Other in that he is mortal.” The death of the Other: therein lies the first death.”<sup>119</sup>

The perspective of the death of the Other thus teaches us primarily that death is at its core a without-response. Death, in the face of which one is ‘no longer able to be able’, closes the relationship of responsibility towards the Other.<sup>120</sup> The deceased does not respond to the question of the survivor. Death denies existence an answer to its appeal – its “*allo, allo,*” to check if the Other is still there – and, as such, denies the meaning of existence.<sup>121</sup> That being said, two problems seem to arise in this perspective: to state that death, as the impossibility of possibility, can only be made sense of in terms of the death of the Other seems to contradict the radical unknowability of death. And, secondly, to equate death to otherness, and otherness to the Other, appears to equate death to God, in the Levinasian framework.<sup>122</sup> How could God and death ever be the same thing? As I will show next, these are the questions that Derrida raised in response to Levinas.

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<sup>115</sup> Ibidem, 234.

<sup>116</sup> Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 74.

<sup>117</sup> Levinas, ‘Death and Time’, 42-43.

<sup>118</sup> “The death of the Other who dies affects me in my very identity as a responsible “me” [*moi*]; it affects me in my nonsubstantial identity, which is not the simple coherence of various acts of identification, but is made up of an ineffable responsibility.” Ibidem, 12.

<sup>119</sup> Ibidem, 42-43.

<sup>120</sup> Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 78.

<sup>121</sup> Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 9.

<sup>122</sup> God and the Other are tightly interwoven in Levinas’ framework; at times up to a degree that they can’t be distinguished from each other. See e.g. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, 79.

## II.II *La Mort: Tout Autre*

### Death as wholly other

Thinking difference *as difference*; thinking the Other *in its alterity*: that's the topic that captures Derrida's attention in relation to the work of Levinas. Derrida and Levinas simultaneously teaching seminars on death at different universities in the same city is a beautiful metaphor for the relation between their ideas on the topic: the two authors were familiar with each other, both professionally and personally; they operated within the same philosophical context of (post)structuralism and postmodernism in France, the same atmosphere of sixties' and seventies' Paris; yet at the same time, they were not always on the same page, teaching at different universities, using their own methods and writing differently.<sup>123</sup> One question can arguably be placed at the center of their interaction: "How to think the Other, if the Other can be spoken only as exteriority and through exteriority, that is, nonalterity?"<sup>124</sup>

It is the way in which Levinas conceptualizes the Other in *Totality and Infinity* that moves Derrida to write an extensive reply, which is simultaneously an appraisal and a fundamental critique, describing Levinas' thought as very promising yet obscure and problematic. According to Derrida, Levinas leaves a lot to be desired when it comes to *thinking alterity*, but does so in the shape of a project which opens up an exciting new direction within philosophy: "At the heart of the desert, in the growing wasteland, this thought, which fundamentally no longer seeks to be a thought of Being and phenomenality, makes us dream of an inconceivable process of dismantling and dispossession."<sup>125</sup> In order to further evaluate the notion of death *as the Other's*, it is necessary to discuss Derrida's remarks on Levinas' conception of death.

### Derrida's *deconstruction*

Derrida's fundamental critique of *Totality and Infinity* is the fact that "Levinas' metaphysics in a sense presupposes (...) the transcendental phenomenology that it seeks to put into question."<sup>126</sup> According to Derrida, Levinas' system implicitly presupposes and continues the exact thing he is actively trying to prevent: reducing the Other to the Same. By using terms like infinite, Other, alterity, etc. in the way he does, Levinas is trying to assimilate the dimension of otherness into the realm of written philosophy; the sphere of the Same.

If one thinks, as Levinas does, that positive Infinity tolerates, or even requires, infinite alterity, then one must renounce all language, and first of all the words *infinite* and *other*. Infinity cannot be understood as Other except in the form of the in-finite. As soon as one attempts to think Infinity as a positive plenitude (one pole of Levinas' nonnegative transcendence), the Other becomes unthinkable, impossible, unutterable.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> The methods of *phenomenology* and *deconstruction* respectively.

<sup>124</sup> Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics: an Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas', 116.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibidem*, 82.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibidem*, 133.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibidem*, 114.

Derrida recognizes that Levinas' aim appears to be thinking the Other in its alterity, to develop philosophy into a practice of doing justice to one's neighbor, i.e. the dimension of otherness. "Perhaps Levinas calls us toward this unthinkable – impossible – unutterable beyond (tradition's) Being and Logos. But it must not be possible either to think or state this call."<sup>128</sup> In other words, according to Derrida, Levinas' method – his (written) language – paradoxically falls short, which translates to the (partial) failure of the project: "If, as Levinas says, the same is a violent totality, (...) Levinas would be speaking of the Other under the rubric of the Same, and of the Same under the rubric of the Other, etc. If the finite totality was the same, it could not be thought, or posed as such, without becoming other than itself."<sup>129</sup>

One of the problems Derrida points out is the contradiction of the Same and the Other, on the one hand, as absolutely different, yet, on the other, as connected via a trace in the face of the Other. "The infinitely Other cannot be what it is – infinitely Other – except by being absolutely not the same. That is, in particular, by being other than itself (non ego). Being other than itself, it is not what it is. Therefore, it is not infinitely Other, etc."<sup>130</sup> How exactly can the two spheres come together whilst being absolutely different? And, concerning this relation, another question arises: does the dissymmetry which Levinas ascribes to it not actually rely on a fundamental symmetry: the absolute egoity of the I and the Other? "The egoity of the other permits him to say "ego" as I do; and this is why he is Other, and not a stone, or a being without speech in my real economy. This is why, if you will, he is face, can speak to me, understand me, and eventually command me. Dissymmetry itself would be impossible without this symmetry."<sup>131</sup>

In essence, Derrida's critique shows that philosophy is not satisfied with a mystery as the ultimate principle, or at least not a mystery that cannot be properly explained, and justifiably so.<sup>132</sup> The question is whether or not the Other as the Mystery is indeed a mystery, or instead the most concrete entity to ever serve as the foundation of any philosophy.<sup>133</sup> The ambiguity of this idea, however, combined with Levinas' sometimes rather questionable interpretation of Heidegger, motivates Derrida partial defense of Heidegger against Levinas' critique.<sup>134</sup> It is important to note in this regard that Derrida doesn't criticize Levinas in order to discredit the latter's response to Heidegger entirely, but for the sake of moving beyond their opposition in a constructive fashion; exhibiting, in fact, the core characteristic of *deconstruction*.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>129</sup> Ibidem, 119.

<sup>130</sup> Ibidem, 126.

<sup>131</sup> Ibidem, 125-126.

<sup>132</sup> Philosophy is not satisfied with a mystery as the final answer; mysticism is.

<sup>133</sup> Is the Other primarily a mystery, or the concrete Other; Another? Levinas would say: both.

<sup>134</sup> E.g.: "The thought of Being [Heidegger] is neither ontology, nor first philosophy, nor a philosophy of power [as Levinas asserts]. Foreign to every first philosophy, it is not opposed to any kind of first philosophy,' which means that 'the 'relation to the Being of the existent' cannot possibly dominate the 'relation to the existent'." Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics: an Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas', 137-138.

<sup>135</sup> 'Constructing by destructing' and 'destructing by constructing'; *deconstruction* can arguably be characterized as the attempt to think difference beyond oppositions. It is *destruction* and *construction* combined.

## The ambiguity of death

Following the logic of Derrida's critique, the question is whether or not Levinas' notion of the death of the Other does not essentially come down to my death, given that Levinas is said to reduce the Other to the Same. Would that be the case, then Heidegger's concept of death would clearly be more useful. In fact, if Levinas would have stopped writing after *Totality and Infinity*, this might have very well been the result. Derrida states:

One cannot simultaneously save the themes of positive infinity and of the face (the nonmetaphorical unity of body, glance, speech, and thought). This last unity, it seems to us, can be thought only within the horizon of infinite (indefinite) alterity as the irreducibly common horizon of Death and the Other. The horizon of finitude or the finitude of the horizon.<sup>136</sup>

The problem is that God is equated to death here: "Infinite alterity as death cannot be reconciled with infinite alterity as positivity and presence (God). Metaphysical transcendence cannot be at once transcendence toward the Other as Death and transcendence towards the Other as God. Unless God means Death."<sup>137</sup>

However, as has implicitly become clear in the discussion on Levinas' understanding of death, the notion of the death of the Other was developed further after *Totality and Infinity*. Presumably in response, at least in part, to Derrida's *Violence and Metaphysics*, Levinas' thought developed into maturity during the late 1960's and the 70's, culminating in the publication of *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (1974).<sup>138</sup> It is no coincidence that, when he addresses Levinas for a last time (at the latter's actual funeral) in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, Derrida explicitly cites passages from the 1975-76 seminar. While the notion of the death of the Other appears already in *Time and the Other* and *Totality and Infinity*, it is only in *Death and Time* that it is fully developed.

That being said, when Derrida poses the crucial question "Is my death possible?" – central to the debate on the meaning of death in light of Heidegger, and to this investigation – in *Aporias* (1993), the priority of the death of the Other is not firmly established.<sup>139</sup> According to Derrida, Levinas' statements on the death of the Other "either designate the experience I have of the death of the Other in demise or they presuppose, as Heidegger does, the co-originary of *Mitsein* and of *Sein-zum-Tode*. This co-originary does not contradict, but, on the contrary, presupposes a mineness of dying or of being-toward-death, a mineness not that of an ego or of an egological sameness."<sup>140</sup> In other words, the notion of the Other's death as primary is not strictly a fundamental critique of Heidegger, even though it might indeed have been defended by Levinas as the best way of bringing to light 'the entire significance of death'.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics: an Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas', 115.

<sup>137</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>138</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (6de druk; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 2006).

<sup>139</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Aporias* (Stanford, California 1993) 21.

<sup>140</sup> Ibidem, 39.

<sup>141</sup> Levinas, 'Death and Time', 43.

By the end of the development of the notion of the death of the Other, Derrida seems to have come to agree with the main premises: the idea that death comes to us as the without-response from beyond, from the absolutely Other, and moves us beyond the traditional dichotomy of being or nothingness.<sup>142</sup> “Everyone’s death, the death of all those who can say “my death,” is irreplaceable. So is “my life.” Every Other is completely other.”<sup>143</sup> Not only that, but, as such, death itself is completely other. At this, Levinas and Derrida agree. This idea lies at the core of both their conceptions of death. It is this conception that fundamentally connects their philosophies, and – at least I like to think so – it is because of this connection that Derrida is actually able to say *à-Dieu* to Levinas at his funeral; to “greet him beyond being.”<sup>144</sup> This brings us to Derrida’s conception of death, which will be our entry point into the third and final chapter of this investigation.

### II.III Significance

Given that our main aim is to think the relation between death and meaning in the shadow of Being-towards-death, the above-presented perspective provides an opposite alternative, as well as the second substantiation of the idea that death must be thought in its ambiguity. It has been argued that my death, understood as the absolute impossibility of possibilities, cannot possibly be a ‘precise point of the future’, from which meaning can be derived.<sup>145</sup> On the contrary, death is characterized as radically unknowable, signifying that the meaning of existence cannot possibly be derived from it: death actually closes the dimension of responsibility in which meaning can arise, since death means that “one is no longer able to be able” to respond to the Other.<sup>146</sup> Blanchot summarizes the Levinasian connection between the unknowability of my death and the experience of the death of the Other very well when stating: “Death, then, would not be ‘the possibility absolutely proper to man,’ my own death, (...) but on the contrary, that which never happens to me, so that never do I die, but rather ‘they die.’”<sup>147</sup>

It is only in the death of the Other that some sort of experience of death is possible, showing us that death is primarily to be understood as *a without-response*. As such, the meaning of existence, which arises from the relationship of *responsibility* towards the Other, is denied by death. Death denies the previously available capacity to respond to the appeal of the Other, and, being the absolute impossibility of all possibilities, it renders any possibility of meaning whatsoever impossible. To be clear: this perspective is not to be understood as asserting that mortality isn’t crucial when it comes to the meaning of existence, but rather as emphasizing the fact that the very event of death *denies* the meaning of existence by way of *re-veiling* it with a veil of darkness, ‘refractory to all light’.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 5-7.

<sup>143</sup> Derrida, *Aporias*, 22.

<sup>144</sup> Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 13.

<sup>145</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, 233.

<sup>146</sup> Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 78.

<sup>147</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 240.

<sup>148</sup> Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 71; Richard A. Cohen, ‘Levinas: Thinking Least about Death - Contra Heidegger’, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* Vol. 60, No. 1/3 (2006) 21-39, 29.

It must be stressed that Levinas is indeed attempting to think death in its ambiguity. In fact, the perspective of death *as the Other's* contains multiple traces of death *as mine* and death *as beyond*. For example, when paralleling Heidegger in the idea that *my death* “cannot be deduced from the death of Others,” or when stating that “death threatens me from *beyond*.”<sup>149</sup> In this sense, reducing *the death of the Other* to an unequivocal concept would be even more unjust than doing the same to *my death*. I am, however, setting apart differences in emphases here. In addition to the creation of a strong opposition with Heidegger, Levinas' emphasis on the death *of the Other* gives rise to the idea that Levinas prioritizes the sphere of the Other over the sphere of the Same when it comes to the meaning of existence. While it is true that Levinas conceptualizes meaning as arising *in relation to* the Other, emphasizing the Other's death leads him to designate the sphere of the Other as the main locus of meaning. It is my contention this perspective just about bites its own tail, by seemingly trying to overcome the ambiguous character of death whilst explicitly asserting the insurmountability of the entire paradox of death itself.

As has become clear by now, for the sake of understanding the full significance of the idea that *death reveals the meaning of existence*, it doesn't suffice merely to oppose my death to the death of the Other. In fact, both previously discussed perspectives have ultimately indicated that a move beyond the dichotomy is necessary if we are to make sense of death in its ambiguity.<sup>150</sup> An understanding beyond 'the alternative of being and nothingness' is to be developed, and this will be the aim of the next chapter.<sup>151</sup> In order to conceptualize death *as beyond*, I will discuss the thought of Derrida and Blanchot, given their specific attention towards thinking death in its ambiguity. Continuing with a discussion of Derrida's own conception of death and additionally of Blanchot's attempt to move beyond these 'two kinds of death', the function of death as *revealing* the meaning of existence – in the sense of *defying* a definitive answer to the question of the meaning of existence – will be explicated.

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<sup>149</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, 233-234.

<sup>150</sup> Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 71.

<sup>151</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, 233.

“There is something like a double death.”<sup>152</sup>

### III. Revealing: Death Defying Meaning

#### DEATH AS BEYOND: AMBIGUITY AND MEANING

The current chapter is dedicated to a more comprehensive exploration of the idea that death *defies* the meaning of existence, signifying that the meaning of existence can never be understood completely precisely because of death. It concerns the idea that death *reveals* the meaning of existence as in *revealing*: disclosing the meaning of existence, in the abstract sense of ‘tearing open’ a definitive answer to the question of the meaning of existence; opening us up to an infinity – “an absolute excess” – of meaning.<sup>153</sup> The general focus of this chapter is to explore what it means to conceptualize death *as beyond* its opposition to life and the dichotomy possibility-impossibility, since this will allow us to understand the role of death as *revealing*; defying meaning.<sup>154</sup> In light of the central research question, it will become clear how this perspective shows what it means to think in its ambiguity. The guiding threads will be Jacques Derrida’s lecture series *Life Death* (1976) and Maurice Blanchot’s *The Space of Literature* (1955).

Conceptualizing death as the space *beyond* will function as the capstone of this thesis, since it allows us to bring together all the acquired insights under the main statement that *death reveals the meaning of existence*. This chapter is divided into two parts. First, (in III.I and III.II) I will discuss the thought of Derrida and Blanchot on death, interpreting their ideas as a hermeneutical framework aiding us to make sense of death in its ambiguity. The essence of this paragraph will be to think death as a paradox;<sup>155</sup> that is to say, to respect death’s paradoxical character – ‘inseparably connected to life’ and ‘radically other’, ultimate ‘possibility’ and ‘impossibility’ – while nonetheless ‘stubbornly’ attempting to shed some light onto this dark abyss.<sup>156</sup> This will be the conceptual foundation for a final discussion of the central research question. As I will show (in III.III), the perspective of death as *revealing – defying* an answer to the question to the meaning of existence – allows us to formulate a radically open yet definitive answer; appreciating death precisely in its ambiguity.

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<sup>152</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 154.

<sup>153</sup> Cf. Romano: “The absolute excess of meaning in general over all appropriative understanding. (...) A human adventure is open to *the infinity of a meaning that does not originate in me* – inexhaustible in principle.” Romano, *Event and World*, 155.

<sup>154</sup> Both Blanchot and Derrida use the term *au-delà*; ‘beyond’. Blanchot: *Le Pas Au-delà*; Derrida: “What interests me under the rubric of the beyond (...) is indeed this limit without opposition between opposition and difference.” Derrida, *Life Death*, 39.

<sup>155</sup> “For thought, death is inherently paradoxical.” Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, ‘Death and Authenticity: Reflections on Heidegger, Rilke, Blanchot’ 9 (2014) 17-25, 18.

<sup>156</sup> Cf. Schelling’s terminology: “In man there is the whole power of the dark principle and at the same time the whole strength of the light. In him there is the deepest abyss and the loftiest sky or both centra.” Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* (Albany 2006), 32.

### III.I *La Vie La Mort*

#### Life Death

As we have seen in the previous chapters, the fundamental opposition between death *as mine* and *as the Other's* is predominantly caused by a difference in emphasis, rather than by an insurmountable gap between different conceptualizations of death. While this difference indeed results in radically opposite accounts, as shown in chapter I and II, it does not mean that death couldn't possibly justify both interpretations; perhaps the phenomenon of death itself inspires both. This is the idea that both Derrida and Blanchot pursue in their work. Acknowledging the ambiguity of death provides the conceptual space to appreciate these diverging interpretations as the metaphorical building blocks of the multi-lateral structure of death. It is important to note that this endeavor does not consist of the attempt to sublimate the paradox (as in Hegelian *Aufhebung*), but to think death in its alterity; respecting the refusal of the Other to let itself be reduced to the Same.<sup>157</sup> And this incentive, in turn, is not the result of an 'arbitrary' personal preference, but of the realization that death's ambiguity urges us to think death as a paradox.

Derrida's attempt to think the paradox of death is characterized by two, arguably contradictive, endeavors: 1) dismantling apparent contradictions, like 'my death <-> Other's death' and 'life <-> death', which can be called *destruction*, and 2) coining new concepts, like *lifedeath*, in order to aid comprehension beyond contradiction, which can be called *construction*. Together these endeavors form the *deconstruction* of death, aiming to understand death in its ambiguity. From this perspective, Derrida's critique of Levinas' conception of death can be understood as a methodological attempt to move beyond the strong opposition in which Levinas entangled himself against Heidegger, since this opposition obscures the ambiguity of death, preventing them to think its paradox. As a consequence, throughout his work on death, Derrida is constantly maneuvering between positions.<sup>158</sup> In *The Gift of Death*, this dynamic attitude, aimed at thinking beyond oppositions, is reflected:

The arguments intersect in spite of their differences. They ground responsibility, as experience of singularity, in this apprehensive approach to death. (...) My own death becomes this irreplaceability that I must assume if I wish to have access to what is absolutely mine. My first and last responsibility, my first and last desire, is that responsibility of responsibility that relates me to what no one else can do in my place.<sup>159</sup>

What becomes apparent here, importantly, is the fact that Derrida is constructing common ground between Heidegger's emphasis on the mineness of death and Levinas' emphasis on responsibility towards the Other. This way, he is actively trying to 'defuse' the contradiction 'my death <-> Other's death', by arguing that their opposite perspectives do not fundamentally exclude each other. This is Derrida's

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<sup>157</sup> "That is where oppositional logic leads us when the greatest attention is paid to death (as in Hegel): to the suppression of opposition, to its sublation in the elevation of one of the terms." Derrida, *Life Death*, 22.

<sup>158</sup> As e.g. in Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics. An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas.', in: vert. Alan Bass, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago 1978), 79-153.

<sup>159</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago 1995), 43-44.

general aim, as he explicitly confirms in *Life Death*: “It is toward a certain other thinking of the beyond, of beyond, (...) especially of the *step (not) beyond* [pas au-delà] of Blanchot, that I would like to lead this seminar.”<sup>160</sup>

### ***Life Death as beyond***

Over the course of the 1975-76 seminar, Derrida deconstructs the traditional dichotomy of ‘life <-> death’.<sup>161</sup> According to him, life and death are so closely related, that it would be better conceptualized as *life death* [la vie la mort] or even *lifedeath* [lavielamort], getting rid of the ‘space’ between the two. Death is not to be understood as life’s opposite nor as its ultimate completion, but rather as the space which simultaneously limits life and makes it possible.<sup>162</sup>

“By saying, with the blank of a pause or the invisible mark of a beyond, “life death,” I am *neither* opposing *nor* identifying life and death (neither *and* [et] nor *is* [est]), I am neutralizing, as it were, both opposition and identification, in order to gesture not toward another logic, an opposite logic of life and death, but toward another topos, if you will, a topos from which it would be possible to read, at the very least, the entire *program* of the *and* and of the *is*, of the positionality and presence of being, both of these being effects of ‘life death.’”<sup>163</sup>

In a sense, Derrida is continuing Levinas’ attempt to move beyond the question ‘to be or not to be’ as the question par excellence here.<sup>164</sup> The entire point of his view on death is contained in the title of the seminar. “By doing away with the *and*, I was trying to intimate (...) that this alterity or this difference was not of the order of what philosophy calls opposition.”<sup>165</sup>

Coining a term reminiscent of Levinas’ notion of death as the without-response, Derrida uses *survivance* to speak of the idea that “to survive does not mean to escape from death, or to continue living after life, but rather to die alive.”<sup>166</sup> That is to say that, in the very act of living, death is already present; as vulnerability, as mortality. *Survivance* is the ‘passive practice’ that inherently intertwines life and death.<sup>167</sup> This is why Derrida advocates to “take into consideration a sort of originary mourning,”<sup>168</sup> with regards to the relation with alterity. While he adds that (among others) Levinas doesn’t speak of mourning in this way,<sup>169</sup> the concept is indeed very similar to the Levinasian notion that death is first experienced in the death of the Other. That being said, the general picture sketched before, of Derrida trying to think the alterity of death in a radically more fundamental or elemental way, by focusing primarily on language (and urging Levinas to do the same), is confirmed here.

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<sup>160</sup> Derrida, *Life Death*, 24.

<sup>161</sup> Derrida, *Life Death*.

<sup>162</sup> Based on the editors’ summary of *Ibidem*.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibidem*, 6.

<sup>164</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, 233.

<sup>165</sup> Derrida, *Life Death*, 1.

<sup>166</sup> Rozemund Uljée, ‘The Time of Friendship: Mourning, Survival, Spectrality.’, in: L. Collison, C. O Fathaigh en G. Tsagdis ed., *Derrida’s politics of friendship: amity and enmity* (Edinburgh 2022) 119-126, 121.

<sup>167</sup> Kas Saghafi, ‘Dying Alive’, *Mosaic* 48.3 (2015) 15-26, 18 & 21.

<sup>168</sup> Derrida, *Aporias*, 39.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibidem*.

The question “Is my death possible?”, raised in *Aporias*,<sup>170</sup> captures everything I have tried to discuss up to this point; it is the question to the meaning of death, by questioning ‘my death’ in terms of a ‘possibility’. It contains the fundamental opposition between death as a possibility or an impossibility, as well as death *as mine* or *as the Other’s*. As has gradually become clear over the course of this discussion, Derrida is attempting to move beyond the opposition: “It is from the site of death as the place of my irreplaceability, that is, of my singularity, that I feel called to responsibility. In this sense only a mortal can be responsible.”<sup>171</sup> The meaning of death is not a matter of deciding between either possibility or impossibility, between my death or the Other’s, but it is to be found in the space in between; not *either/or*, but *both/and*.

### III.II *l’Espace ‘de la Mort’*

#### The Space of Death

Four decades prior to *Aporias*, Maurice Blanchot had raised a question nearly identical to Derrida’s ‘Is my death possible?’ If death – he asked – is ultimately inexperienceable, as both Heidegger and Levinas assert, would it, then, ever be possible to state that I die? “Can I die? Have I the power to die?”<sup>172</sup> Blanchot is fascinated by the same mystery that would later motivate Derrida: “the deep of death,” which is “the center from which all the ambiguity of the movement radiates.”<sup>173-174</sup> Blanchot was the first author attempting to think death in its ambiguity so explicitly. Two interconnected aspects of Blanchot’s philosophical innovations were crucial in this regard: 1) his account of “double death”,<sup>175</sup> providing a clear overview of the main opposition that had arisen in philosophical discourse, and 2) his attempt to conceptualize the beyond using the notions of the *il y a* and the *neutre*. A discussion of these innovations is important for the sake of answering our research question, given that Blanchot’s thought glues together all perspectives. It is the space in which Heidegger and Levinas come together as the foundation for Derrida and Romano.<sup>176</sup>

Blanchot is a *romancier* doing philosophy.<sup>177</sup> His attention to the topic of death originates in his investigation into *the space of literature*.<sup>178</sup> It is literature that guides him towards death, since, according

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<sup>170</sup> Ibidem, 21.

<sup>171</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 41.

<sup>172</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 94.

<sup>173</sup> Derrida, *Life Death*, 24.

<sup>174</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 152.

<sup>175</sup> Ibidem, 153.

<sup>176</sup> This explains why Blanchot kept reappearing all throughout this investigation. His ideas will paradoxically allow us to ‘close’ the never-ending hermeneutical circle of the relation between death and the meaning of existence. Ibidem, 210.

<sup>177</sup> *Romancier*: novelist, writer.

<sup>178</sup> “Because literature is the form in which this double meaning has chosen to show itself behind the meaning and value of words, and the question it asks is the question asked by literature.” Maurice Blanchot, ‘Literature and the Right to Death’, in: vert.Lydia Davis en Charlotte Mandell, *The Work of Fire* (Stanford, California 1995) 300-344, 344.

to Blanchot, literature and death are inseparably interwoven.<sup>179</sup> Blanchot's main idea consists of the assertion that literature arises from a sort of primordial space beyond existence, and aims to return there. As such, literature is fundamentally characterized by ambiguity: "Ambiguity is the truth of literature, and perhaps also the truth of truth, which is to say that the truth is something duplicitous and bivalent - like *physis*, it loves to hide."<sup>180</sup> This mysterious, undiscernible source and destination is the space of literature.<sup>181</sup> It is the central point: "ambiguity itself."<sup>182</sup>

The space of literature is explicitly equated with death: "Ambiguity, therefore, is ultimately an ambiguity about death, where the writer is suspended between two rights to death, death as possibility and death as impossibility."<sup>183</sup> These are the two kinds of death Blanchot describes with the notion of "double death".<sup>184</sup>

There is one death which circulates in the language of possibility, of liberty, which has for its furthest horizon the freedom to die and the capacity to take mortal risks; and there is its double, which is ungraspable. It is what I cannot grasp, what is not linked to me by any relation of any sort. It is that which never comes and toward which I do not direct myself.<sup>185</sup>

Blanchot thus identifies two relations with death, represented on the one hand by Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger, and on the other by Levinas. The first perspective is characterized by the attempt to provide a positive answer to the question: Can I die? "Three systems of thought - Hegel's, Nietzsche's, Heidegger's - (...) are all attempts at making death possible."<sup>186</sup> In these systems, death is understood as the ultimate possibility.<sup>187</sup> The second perspective is radically opposed to the first: "[Death] is the abyss of the present, time without a present, with which I have no relationships; it is that toward which I cannot go forth, for in it I do not die, I have fallen from the power to die."<sup>188</sup> From this perspective, the answer is negative. No, I can't die. Death is an impossibility.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> "If we want to restore literature to the movement which allows all its ambiguities to be grasped, (...) we must see death." Ibidem, 336.

<sup>180</sup> Critchley, 'Il y a - A Dying Stronger than Death', 117.

<sup>181</sup> "This original double meaning, which lies deep inside every word like a condemnation that is still unknown and a happiness that is still invisible, is the source of literature." Blanchot, 'Literature and the Right to Death', 344.

<sup>182</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 42.

<sup>183</sup> Critchley, 'Il y a - A Dying Stronger than Death', 121.

<sup>184</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 102.

<sup>185</sup> Ibidem, 103.

<sup>186</sup> Ibidem, 95.

<sup>187</sup> "Death is therefore the most fundamental possibility of the Subject. (...) Death is a civilising power and the condition of possibility for freedom, projection and authentic existence." Critchley, 'Il y a - A Dying Stronger than Death', 120.

<sup>188</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 153.

<sup>189</sup> "The end, in this perspective, would no longer be that which gives man the power to end - to limit, separate, and thus to grasp - but the infinite: the dreadful infinitude on account of which the end can never be overcome." Ibidem, 240.

## *Ily a* as beyond

In the wake of Being-towards-death, Blanchot is the first attempting to provide a somewhat balanced overview of the opposition between the possibility and impossibility of death. By *asking* the question 'Can I die?', instead of *answering* it, he quite literally creates the conceptual space to think death in its ambiguity: "Inevitable, but inaccessible; certain, but ungraspable."<sup>190</sup> He investigates death's veil of difference which keeps its identity secret, precisely by asking the question. Even though he ultimately tends toward conceptualizing death primarily as absolute impossibility,<sup>191</sup> his point is never to definitively close the question, like Heidegger and Levinas have tried, but to gain insight into "the doubleness within which such an event withdraws as if to preserve the void of its secret."<sup>192</sup> This is the equivocal dynamic at play in the 'deep of death'.<sup>193</sup> "It is death as the extreme of power, as my most proper possibility, but also the death which never comes to me, to which I can never say yes. (...) Indeed, I elude it when I think I master it through a resolute acceptance."<sup>194</sup> So, phenomenologically speaking, from the perspective of the existent, death is ambiguity; doubleness. As a consequence, the only possible way for us to understand death, is as a paradox.

This is where the notion of the *ily a* [there is] comes in: a notion Blanchot developed in tandem with Levinas in the late 40's.<sup>195</sup> The *ily a* is used as a name for this primordial space beyond (or before) existence: "The trembling, pre-linguistic darkness of things, the universe before the creation of the human being."<sup>196</sup> According to Levinas and Blanchot, it is the very *neutrality* of Being, the presence of the absence of anything whatsoever: "this very nothingness of all existents would itself be experienced as a kind of presence: (...) 'An atmospheric density, a plenitude of the void, or the murmur of silence.'"<sup>197</sup> This is the space of ambiguity which is the space of literature and death. "The fundamental experience towards which literature tends is the ambiguity of the *ily a*."<sup>198</sup> And this is the (non)metaphorical experience of being awake at night.<sup>199</sup> "Ambiguity, the truth of literature, consists in the experience of being suspended between day and night, of watching with eyes open in the night, of eyes stupefied by the spectre of insomnia in the day."<sup>200</sup> This is the reason why death can't be mastered, since entering into the domain of death, I cease existing, hence my death becomes impossible: "in the *ily a*, death is

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<sup>190</sup> Ibidem, 153.

<sup>191</sup> Ibidem, 240.

<sup>192</sup> Ibidem, 153.

<sup>193</sup> Ibidem, 152.

<sup>194</sup> "In believing that death is something that can be grasped (...) I expose myself to the radical ungraspability of death." Ibidem, 153; Critchley, 'Ily a - A Dying Stronger than Death', 126.

<sup>195</sup> Critchley, 'Ily a - A Dying Stronger than Death', 110.

<sup>196</sup> Ibidem, 109.

<sup>197</sup> Ibidem, 112.

<sup>198</sup> Ibidem, 118-119.

<sup>199</sup> "When everything has disappeared in the night, "everything has disappeared" appears. This is the other night. (...) This other night is the death no one dies, the forgetfulness which gets forgotten." Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 162-163.

<sup>200</sup> Critchley, 'Ily a - A Dying Stronger than Death', 118-119.

impossible.<sup>201</sup> The *il y a* is thus the locus of the paradox of death which continues to hound us, which defies us clear answers, “preserving the void of its secret” underneath its ambiguity.<sup>202</sup>

What separates Blanchot and Levinas when it comes to the *il y a*, is the fact that Levinas appreciates it negatively, calling it tragic and horror, an experience of anonymity which must be overcome, since it undermines responsibility, whereas Blanchot conceptualizes it in more neutral terms.<sup>203</sup> Blanchot’s aim is to face this neutrality – “something neutral which there is no getting used to” – in order to understand literature and death precisely in their ambiguity.<sup>204</sup> The *il y a* is the equivocal space which must be explored if we want to gain insight into death. As a consequence, Blanchot regards the notion that *il y a* must be overcome as “a strategy of evasion, motivated by fear,” leading away from an understanding of death in its ambiguity.<sup>205</sup> The importance of the *il y a* lies in its character as middle ground: it is the presence of absence as well as the impossibility of negation.<sup>206</sup> In other words: it is both death’s possibility [as present absence; inevitable and certain] and its impossibility [as inaccessible and ungraspable]. The *il y a* is Blanchot’s conceptualization of the beyond, which would later inspire Derrida’s *lifedeath*. The observation that death presents itself as ambiguous and ultimately ungraspable, is our point of return to the main thesis. It defies us an answer to the question to the meaning of existence; revealing that any closed answer will always be *disclosed* again by the ambiguity of death itself.

### III.III Significance

Given that our main aim is to think the relation between death and the meaning of existence, the above-presented perspectives show what thinking death in its ambiguity entails, building on a conclusive overview of the main opposition between *my death* and *the death of the Other*. This allows us to formulate an answer to the research question, bringing together all the acquired insights under the statement that *death reveals the meaning of existence*. Firstly, I will summarize the relevance of the endeavor to think death *as beyond*. Then, I will conclude this investigation by formulating an answer to the research question, and finally, I will close with a discussion and reflection.

The above-discussed perspectives show that thinking death *as beyond* comes down to thinking a space beyond opposition, not in the sense that the intrinsic tension of ambiguity is overcome, but rather as explicitly acknowledging this tension as part of the attempt to understand death precisely as a paradox. The beyond is the conceptual space beyond opposing hermeneutical perspectives, yet also the space beyond clear answers, since it can’t be grasped by the sphere of the Same. *Death as beyond* means to think death in its alterity, and the alterity of death cannot be reduced to the Same.<sup>207</sup> As such, death can never

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<sup>201</sup> Ibidem, 121.

<sup>202</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 153.

<sup>203</sup> In his later work literally proceeding to use the term: the *neutre*. Critchley, ‘Il y a - A Dying Stronger than Death’, 114.

<sup>204</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 257.

<sup>205</sup> Critchley, ‘Il y a - A Dying Stronger than Death’, 114.

<sup>206</sup> Joseph Kuzma, ‘Maurice Blanchot (1907-2003)’, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ISSN 2161-0002 (8-6-2023) [<https://iep.utm.edu/maurice-blanchot/>].

<sup>207</sup> Any attempt to do so only effectuates the withdrawal from the Other “as if to preserve the void of its secret.” Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 153.

be fully understood, in the sense that death doesn't let itself be known completely. Only in the shape of a trace, glimmering into the realm of understanding, does death become visible. This is the reason why "for thought, death is inherently paradoxical."<sup>208</sup>

Notwithstanding its ambiguity, however, there is a lot to be said about death. The paradox of death consist precisely of the fact that it somehow does cast a shade of presence over existence, even if only in the shape of the immanent threat of absence. It is this trace of present absence that gives rise to an intuitive "knowledge' of the threatening [which] precedes every experience reasoned in terms of the death of the Other."<sup>209</sup> Whereas death's ambiguity renders death itself ungraspable, it is precisely this paradoxical character which effectuates a 'knowledge' of the threat of death. The anxiety face to face with death originates in its alterity. The inevitable yet inaccessible, certain yet ungraspable character of death induces anxiety, a fear of the undefinable. Death opens us up to a radically different dimension, which is unknowable, but which ruptures the totality of our existence. Put differently: the sphere of the Same is opened up to the sphere of the Other by death.

This is what it means to conceptualize death as *revealing* the meaning of existence, in the sense of opening it up to a dimension of otherness. Death *discloses* the meaning of existence, and thus, it defies us a closed answer to the question of the meaning of existence. Because of death, the meaning of existence can never be unequivocally defined, as Romano puts it: "The meaning of a human adventure [existence] eludes any possible totalization and can never be rendered entirely transparent."<sup>210</sup> Because of death, establishing *the* meaning of existence is impossible. Death is the metaphorical *punctum caecum* of our existence; an invisible hole perforating the closed whole of our existence as a totality, opening it up to the realm of infinity.<sup>211</sup> Itself ungraspable by definition, death is vital when it comes to making sense of the meaning of existence. Without death, it would be senseless to speak about the meaning of existence, yet, at the same time, the meaning of existence can never be fully ascertained precisely because of death. Just as the *punctum caecum* can only be perceived as a trace of invisibility hiding in the field of visibility, the space of death – situated beyond the realm of our grasp – is only 'present' to us as a trace: simultaneously defining, denying and ultimately defying the meaning of existence.

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<sup>208</sup> Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, 'Death and Authenticity: Relections on Heidegger, Rilke, Blanchot' 9 (2014) 17-25, 18.

<sup>209</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, 233.

<sup>210</sup> Romano, *Event and World*, 138.

<sup>211</sup> The *punctum caecum* is the anatomical part of the optic disc of the retina where the optic nerve and blood vessels leave the eye, resulting in a blind spot. It is thus a spot of invisibility, which is effectuating visibility [blood supply] and, as a consequence, intelligibility [impulse transmission]. Richard Gregory en Patrick Cavanagh, 'The Blind Spot', *Scholarpedia* 6 (2011) 9618 <doi:10.4249/scholarpedia.9618>.

## Conclusion: Death and the Meaning of Existence

Let us return for the final time to the central research question: How to think the relation between death and the meaning of existence, in the shadow of Being-towards-death? Heidegger's introduction of temporality into ontology and phenomenology inspired many thinkers to dedicate a substantial amount of thought to the relation between finitude and meaning. Following Heidegger in his argument that finitude is a vital existential element inseparably connected to the question to the meaning of being, I have shown how Romano, Levinas, Derrida and Blanchot conceptualize this connection between death and the meaning of existence. Throughout the discussion of these perspectives, I have continually attempted to substantiate the idea that death must be thought in its ambiguity, as presented in the claim that *death reveals the meaning of existence*.

This is to be understood as follows: the research question prompted us to investigate three different perspectives on the relation between death and meaning, based on three interpretations of the verb *revealing*. The first perspective – conceptualizing death *as mine* – signifies that death *defines* meaning, in the sense that my death establishes the ontological meaning of existence and simultaneously provides the possibility of coming to understand this meaning. In opposition to the first, the second perspective – conceptualizing death *as the Other's* – proposes that death *denies* meaning, in the sense that death as the without-response closes the dimension of responsibility in which meaning arises. The third perspective – conceptualizing death *as beyond* – entails the idea that death *defies* meaning, in the sense that death tears open the totality of existence, i.e. radically *discloses* a 'closed' answer to the question of the meaning of existence, opening it up to an "infinity of meaning."<sup>212</sup>

Throughout the three chapters, I have tried to show that the entire significance of *death revealing meaning* is present in all of the three perspectives respectively, justifying my attempt to synthesize them into one central argument. As has gradually become clear, even the perspectives of death *as mine* and death *as the Other's* substantiate the ambiguity of death: Heidegger's conception of death as 'the possibility of impossibility' is inherently just as paradoxical as Levinas' 'impossibility of possibility'. That being said, these conceptualizations of death are both part of an attempt to curb death in the name of meaning (be it as *defining*, or as the *denying* meaning). Both authors try to partially overcome the ambiguity of death by emphasizing death's mineness or alterity respectively. By prioritizing one characteristic over the other, Heidegger and Levinas shoot past the very insight which initiated their quest: that death is hiding exactly in between. As a result, the ambiguous space of death, which is fundamentally connected to the domain from which meaning arises, remains hidden.

The etymological equivocality of the verb *revealing* allowed us to conceptualize death in its ambiguity, following Blanchot and Derrida in their attempts to think its paradox. This endeavor comes down to conceptualizing the space of death as beyond, as *il y a* or *lifedeath*, based on the acknowledgement that death is both possibility and impossibility, both *mine* and *the Other's*, as such, simultaneously *defining* and *denying*, and – as a result – *defying* meaning; i.e. effectuating that the meaning of existence can never be unequivocally ascertained. The combined perspective of Blanchot and Derrida comes

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<sup>212</sup> Romano, *Event and World*, 155.

down to the idea that death *ruptures* the totality of existence.<sup>213</sup> As such, it becomes clear that the idea that *death reveals the meaning of existence* is implicitly or explicitly substantiated throughout all the perspectives.

It has been my aim in this investigation, however, to present the entire significance of *death revealing meaning* throughout the different perspectives. I have done so, paradoxically, by arguing for the idea that death must be thought precisely in its ambiguity; *as beyond*. Death is “inevitable, but inaccessible; certain, but ungraspable.”<sup>214</sup> The inevitability of death entails the certainty of the radically unknown advening towards me, while the inaccessibility of death signifies the ultimate ungraspability of that which is most certain to me: my finitude. Death is the certainty of the question and the questioning of certainty: an *interrogang* [?].<sup>215</sup> Death is the ultimate possibility of impossibility *and vice versa*. Its identity is hidden behind the veil of ambiguity, yet this is exactly how it is related to the meaning of existence: meaning arises from the intricate interplay of the elements constitutive of the space of ambiguity. This is the *punctum caecum*: the invisible point of contact between the sphere of the Same and the Other; the space of the *ily a*. Death is fundamentally dynamic, as in *life death*: a continuous movement between inseparable yet opposite poles, and an eternal passage beyond opposition; abandoning our understanding in the process.

This is ultimately what death presents us with: the task and possibility to understand without grasping, to grasp without fathoming, to fathom without understanding, that *death reveals the meaning of existence*. Perhaps, this is what a revelation ultimate comes down to. Death is indispensable when it comes to understanding the meaning of existence, yet at the same time that, because of death, the meaning of existence will never be brought to light in its entirety. As such, death and the meaning of existence are tightly interwoven, but their paradoxical relationship is shaped by ambiguity. What does this mean regarding the meaning of existence? It means that a definitive answer is impossible, since death must be addressed in answering the question to the meaning of existence, and death precisely ensures that no definitive, closed answer can be given.

## Discussion and Reflection

The implications of this conclusion are twofold. First of all, the idea that death must be thought in its ambiguity substantiates an approach to ontology *à la* Romano, thinking being primarily as an event. This approach provides a framework which tries to accommodate thinking in the realm of ambiguity, without being discouraged by the realization that unequivocal insights into ‘the truth of Being’ cannot be ascertained. The critical question to be asked here is whether or not this ‘surrender’ to equivocality is 1) sufficiently substantiated (e.g. by the tradition of French theory), 2) still worthy of the name *ontology* (given the apparent shift from *being* to *becoming*), and 3) philosophically justifiable (given philosophy’s origin in thinking the *sameness* of thinking and being). In line with this, secondly, this thesis implicitly advocates a *metamodernist* approach to philosophy, in the sense that it attempts to move beyond [*meta*]

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<sup>213</sup> This term is used by Romano to speak about the world-opening character of events. *Ibidem*, 42, 44.

<sup>214</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 153.

<sup>215</sup> Punctuation mark combining the functions of the question- and exclamation mark.

opposite poles whilst moving between [*meta*] them; moving beyond postmodernism on postmodern terms.<sup>216</sup> Here, the critical question to be raised is whether or not this approach is 1) justifiable in light of post-/modernism, 2) not just *Hegelianism* in disguise, and, as a consequence, 3) philosophically constructive rather than obscuring.

It must be stressed again that my endeavor consists of an interpretative reading of the different emphases all authors propose. The method of juxtaposing and examining emphases inevitably means navigating a field of nuanced differences.<sup>217</sup> My decision to explicitly discuss the axes of difference and disagreement between perspectives at times obscures their similarities and is admittedly at risk of turning them into straw men, which I – of course – tried to prevent rigorously. This approach is, however, inspired primarily by the authors themselves, specifically by the way they positioned themselves opposite and/or alongside and/or in dialogue with one another. Through dedicating specific attention to the way the authors position their own thought in relation to others, I have tried to be as transparent as possible about the influences that shaped my perspective.

I'm well aware of the fact that this thesis is at risk of the same spirit of critique that Derrida offered Levinas in *Violence and Metaphysics*, i.e. that I'm reducing the Other to the Same precisely in my attempt to conceptualize the ambiguity, by 'grasping' the Other in conceptual language. Given the aim of this investigation, however, being essentially an attempt at integration based on a theoretical analysis of specific perspectives, there was no way of preventing this, even if I had wanted to try.<sup>218</sup> That being said, in my decision to conceptualize the relation between death and meaning primarily around the ambiguity of the verb *revealing*, I have consciously tried to balance clarity and ambiguity for the sake of proposing a clear argument on an inherently paradoxical topic. As such, I have tried to stay true to the ideas of the included authors in all their complexity, as well as to my straightforward aim to propose a clear argument.

Finally, there is one question in particular that I would like to raise out of pure curiosity: Is a better approach to the question to the meaning of human finitude possible? An alternative conception, which closes in on the question just a little bit closer, or better: an entirely different approach, which is somehow capable of grasping the topic more comprehensively, more concretely or more 'common-sensically'. I'm afraid that this question is equally as unacceptably extensive as my question was in the first place. If someone, however, is equally stubborn or ambitious enough to take up (part of) this challenge in the future, I hereby declare that at least one person will be interested in acquiring a copy.

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<sup>216</sup> See: Vermeulen, Timotheus; van den Akker, Robin (2010). "Notes on metamodernism". *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*. 2 (1): 5677.

<sup>217</sup> This is perhaps an insurmountable characteristic of *verstehen* [to understand] – the general aim of the humanities – as opposed to *erklären* [to explain] – the general aim of the sciences. Distinction conceptualized by Wilhelm Dilthey.

<sup>218</sup> Since, additionally, I was explicitly instructed to write in a structured manner, in order to exhibit comprehension and present my thesis as straightforwardly as possible. This style of writing – more analytical in character – can justifiably be considered irreconcilable with the attempt to think the Other in its alterity, yet it is still generally considered the clearest demonstration of understanding, hence the decision.

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