

Death's Doorstep:

A comparative analysis on the notion of death in Heidegger and Gadamer

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Abstract

Contrary to his former teacher Heidegger, Gadamer has not formulated an extensive and unified notion of death. His articulation of the subject must be reconstructed from short essays he has written throughout his lifetime. This has caused Gadamer's view on death to contain some ambiguity. I will attempt to provide insight into Gadamer's account on death by comparing his writings to Heidegger's notion of death as presented in *Being and Time*. Gadamer's philosophy has been highly influenced by Heidegger. Therefore, it is to be expected that there is some degree of compatibility between the two notions of death. I will argue that because of its fragmented character, Gadamer's notion of death is very much susceptible to interpretation. Donatella Di Cesare offers one such interpretation by reconstructing Gadamer's view via his texts on death as well as his other fundamental philosophical positions. I will provide an account of Gadamer's notion of death solely on the basis of his specific texts on the subject and argue why Heidegger's and Gadamer's views on death might be more compatible than is suggested by Di Cesare. Using an isolated version of Gadamer's conception of death will reveal the degree of susceptibility to interpretation of this notion and therefore also the obstacles in acquiring clear insight into Gadamer's view on death.

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Introduction

As long as we live, we die. However, a lot remains mysterious about this inevitable phenomenon and thus philosophy has a vast history of investigating death. The existentialist tradition in particular has devoted special attention to the meaning of death and dying for us. One of the most important existentialist studies on death, and a source of contemplation for many contemporary philosophers, is Martin Heidegger's account of dying as 'being-toward-death' in his magnum opus *Being and Time*. Like most of Heidegger's work, this exploration on the existential meaning of death has puzzled and vexed many a philosopher, but has also been of great influence for later thought within the continental philosophical tradition on the concept of death.

One person who has been particularly influenced by Heidegger is his former student Hans-Georg Gadamer. However, Gadamer's philosophy has also diverted from Heidegger's teachings in many ways. With this research project I want to gain more insight into Gadamer's notion of death. Contrary to Heidegger, Gadamer has not written extensively about this subject and therefore his view has to be reconstructed out of several short essays. Due to this fragmented presentation, Gadamer's notion of death contains some ambiguity. This problem of ambiguity lends our research project its importance.

Considering that Gadamer's philosophy is heavily influenced by his former teacher and considering that Heidegger does have a unified and well-defined notion of death, comparing Heidegger's notion of death with Gadamer's view on the subject can help us clarify the latter. To direct this comparison, we will be investigating the compatibility between the two authors. Donatella Di Cesare, philosopher at the Sapienza University of Rome, former student of Gadamer and author of the book *Gadamer: A Philosophical Portrait* (2013), claims that the compatibility between the two philosopher's notions on death is limited. One of the ways she supports this claim is by arguing that Gadamer does not share Heidegger's notion of authenticity in relation to death¹. Di Cesare arrives at her claim by implementing her knowledge of Gadamer's philosophy as a whole into his notion of death. However, the aforementioned ambiguity in Gadamer's notion on death leaves his notion susceptible to many different interpretations. Within this research, I will perform an additional comparison to Heidegger, in which I keep to Gadamer's specific essays on death. The extent of the ambiguity and the possible consequences of this ambiguity with respect to the degree of compatibility between the two philosopher's notions on death will be the main subject of my investigation.

This leads us to the following research question:

¹ Di Cesare, 'Hermeneutics as Philosophy,' 181.

To what extent remains Di Cesare's proposed degree of compatibility between Gadamer's and Heidegger's notion of death supported when we investigate Gadamer's notion of death exclusively on the basis of his three essays on death?

I will argue that an analysis of the isolated version of Gadamer's notion on death points to a greater compatibility between Heidegger's and Gadamer's notion on death than is claimed by Di Cesare. I will show this by designating certain excerpts from Gadamer's texts that seem to contradict Di Cesare's claim and by showing how the aforementioned ambiguity in Gadamer's essays invite other interpretations in which a stronger compatibility can be recognized.

In chapter one I will provide an overview of Heidegger's notion of death as formulated in *Being and Time*. Due to the space available I will have to limit my exploration of Heidegger's notion of death to what I consider to be the structural foundations of Heidegger's project: freedom, anxiety and authenticity. I consider these to be the most important concepts related to Heidegger's notion of death due to their centrality in the concerning chapter and their interdependence on each other in revealing Heidegger's existential meaning of death. Chapter two will contain an analysis of Gadamer's notion of death and to what extent his notion differs from Heidegger's approach. In the third chapter I will attempt to answer the main question by first explaining Di Cesare's claim, after which I will designate certain excerpts from Gadamer's texts that seem to contradict Di Cesare's claim. Subsequently, I will show how the ambiguity between Gadamer's essays invites other interpretations in which a stronger compatibility can be recognized than is initially done by Di Cesare, especially on the Heideggerian concept of authenticity.

Chapter One

Heidegger's concept of death

One of the central issues in Heidegger's notorious *Being and Time* is the existential meaning of death. I will extract Heidegger's notion of death mainly from division two, chapter one: 'The Possible Being-a-Whole of Dasein and Being-toward-Death'² in which Heidegger explicates his project. I will frame my own reading of *Being and Time* through Havi Carel's interpretation in 'Temporal Finitude and Finitude of Possibility: The Double Meaning of Death in *Being and Time*' (2007).³ Havi Carel is professor at the University of Bristol and a specialist in the field of phenomenology and philosophy of death. Carel's interpretation seems to me the most complete interpretation of Heidegger's notion on death considering that she uses the commonly used Dreyfus and Blattner interpretation and corrects the ostensible misinterpretations made by the otherwise notorious interpretation by Edwards and Philips.

Due to the space available for this research project I will have to limit this overview to what I consider to be the main structural foundations of Heidegger's notion of death - freedom, anxiety and authenticity next to Heidegger's general notion of death. I consider these to be the most important, because of their interdependence on each other and because they are the main topics in the aforementioned chapter of *Being and Time*. Other relevant concepts that are provided in other chapters, such as the idea of guilt and temporality, I deem of lesser importance and will therefore not be discussed in this research project. However, therein lies a possibility for future research.

Context and motivation

What is Heidegger's motivation in formulating a philosophy on death? First of all, his project in *Being and Time* revolves around the question of the meaning of being, a question he deems only human beings can ask.⁴ Therefore, he introduces the concept of Dasein, which is most commonly interpreted as Heidegger's indication for the special entity that human beings are.⁵ In the first division of *Being and Time* Heidegger performs a fundamental analysis of this concept. Heidegger views this analysis as the preparation for his task in division two: the original existential and ontological interpretation of Dasein.⁶ Heidegger explains this project as having to bring the being of Dasein to light existentially in its wholeness. He suggests that if at all possible, it would only be through the concept of death, considering that the wholeness of Dasein is bound by the end of being, or death.⁷ Hence, an

² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 227-255.

³ Carel, 'The Double Meaning of Death,' 541-556.

⁴ Wheeler, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

⁵ Wheeler.

⁶ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 295.

⁷ Heidegger, 298.

existential account of death is necessary. Comprehending the existential meaning of death therefore equates to comprehending the existential meaning of our lives. Thus, Heidegger denotes with Dasein what it is for humans to be humans and attempts to unveil this kind of being fully through exploring the importance of the concept of death to this being, which is *our* being.

Dasein's freedom and care

If we want to gain further insight into Heidegger's notion of death, we have to acquire an understanding of the properties he attributes to Dasein. First of all, Heidegger characterizes Dasein as a being whose existence is its essence.⁸ Whereas non-human animals are said to have an essence that determines the course and meaning of their lives, that what 'determines' the lives of humans is a freedom to make themselves through choosing future projects and attributing meaning.⁹ This freedom is referred to by Heidegger as 'existence'.¹⁰ This characteristic of existence thus separates human beings from other creatures. However, this unique freedom to decide on our own lives is not unlimited. It is a situated freedom. We inherit certain circumstances from the past and therefore not all projects are available to us as possibilities.¹¹

Another important aspect of human being's existence is its footing in the Heideggerian concept of 'care'.¹² Heidegger explains care as a being-ahead-of-itself in which Dasein fundamentally *is* an understanding of its own potentiality-of-being.¹³ Essentially, this shows an understanding of human beings as creatures who constantly project themselves into and relate to their own futures, and in this way even coincide with their potential futures. Related to the notion of care is the idea of 'not-yet-being'.¹⁴ The 'not-yet' is precisely that potential future, that what Dasein can be but not yet is. This does not, however, point to a multitude of not-yet's which Dasein can take on, but refers to a more abstract notion of what Dasein will have to become considering that as long as one lives one has not acquired all that one is. It is important to note that Heidegger does not understand Dasein to be incomplete when it still has a future it needs to become. On the contrary, Dasein is whole and includes all that it not yet is at every moment in time of its being.¹⁵ Especially important to our investigation is Heidegger's notion of death as the ultimate not-yet.¹⁶ The theory of care reveals death as not something we solely move towards in the literal sense of nearing our literal end, but as something we carry with us and that always already defines us.

⁸ Heidegger, 114.

⁹ West, *Continentental Philosophy*, 111.

¹⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 114.

¹¹ West, *Continentental Philosophy*, 111.

¹² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 221.

¹³ Heidegger, 227.

¹⁴ Heidegger, 223.

¹⁵ Heidegger, 233-235.

¹⁶ Heidegger, 240.

Heidegger's notion of death

Because death is something we always already are, as follows from Heidegger's concept of care, Heidegger postulates death as a 'possibility of being' and approaches death as an existential phenomenon.¹⁷ To clarify this existential notion of death it is useful to know what death is not in Heidegger's understanding. Death for Heidegger is not an epistemological concept, it does not point towards the knowledge of death.¹⁸ Also, there is no completion of Dasein in death, just as there is not completion in becoming all that one not yet is. Dasein does not disappear in death, because death is understood as a possibility of being.¹⁹ Accordingly, Heidegger's concept of death does not have the way of being of something that is available to us in our world. It is not 'objectively present or at hand'.²⁰ Therefore, Heidegger's existential notion of death should not be confused with his concept of 'demise'. In demise or *ableben*, death is considered as the event that ends Dasein's life.²¹ However, demise still differs from the way non-human animals die, or 'perish' in Heidegger's terminology, because contrary to perishing, demise entails an awareness of this ending.²² In conclusion, these aforementioned interpretations of the concept of death refer to something other than death or dying in Heidegger's terminological register. Heidegger therefore formulates death in the existential sense as not a 'being-at-the-end' of Dasein but as signifying a 'being-towards-death'.²³ Thus, Heidegger's notion of death, encapsulated in the term 'being-toward-death', is a way of being that Dasein is as soon as it comes into life.²⁴ It is inherent to living, that we are also always dying and thus have death as this 'possibility of being' already accredited to our identity.

But what characterizes this way of being that is being-toward-death? Carel refers to the Dreyfuss and Blattner interpretation as a correct understanding of this terminology. Dreyfus explains Heidegger's concept of being-toward-death as the existential, 'ontological possibility of not having any possibilities,' also referred to by Heidegger as the 'possibility of the impossibility'.²⁵ In being-toward-death, death is a possibility of being in which Dasein still is, but cannot press into possibilities anymore. Furthermore, Heidegger attributes certain essential characteristics to being-toward-death summarized by the following quotation: 'The full existential and ontological concept of death can now be defined as follows: *as the end of Dasein, death is the ownmost, nonrelational, certain, and, as such, indefinite and insuperable possibility of Dasein.*'²⁶ Death is the '**ownmost**' possibility because it is the only possibility that has intrinsic meaning for Dasein in that it can only be taken up by Dasein

¹⁷ Heidegger, 231.

¹⁸ Carel, 'The Double Meaning of Death,' 550.

¹⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 236.

²⁰ Heidegger, 236.

²¹ Heidegger, 238; Carel, 'The Double Meaning of Death,' 544.

²² Heidegger, 238; Carel, 544.

²³ Heidegger, 236.

²⁴ Heidegger 236.

²⁵ Heidegger, 241; Carel, 'The Double Meaning of Death,' 544.

²⁶ Heidegger, 248.

itself. It is the possibility of Dasein's life that is not available to others in the way that all other future projects are.²⁷ Everybody has to take on their own death, no one can die for another. Dying is **nonrelational**, because standing eye to eye with its own possibility of not being and thus with itself, 'all relations to other Dasein are dissolved in it.'²⁸ Furthermore, death is certain in that everyone has to die. More importantly, **being certain** in Heidegger's sense means a way of being, of holding dying for what it is, namely a potentiality-of-being, without softening it to just a possible future event.²⁹ This certainty also includes being certain of the **indefiniteness of death**, the fact that death is possible at any moment.³⁰ Finally, death is an **insuperable possibility** of Dasein in that as being a potentiality-of-being Dasein cannot surpass the border to not-being-able-to-be.³¹ To complete and clarify our understanding of Heidegger's notion of death we need to discuss two more Heideggerian concepts: anxiety and authenticity.

Anxiety

Heidegger understands anxiety as not just a regular mood or weak moment of an individual, but as a *Grundbefindlichkeit*.³² He explains this concept and thus anxiety as a basic ever-present current underlying all our explications of 'how one is.'³³ In other words, we all always carry anxiety with us, it is the basis of our being and feeling in the world. Heidegger uses the word 'unheimlich' to indicate this feeling one has in anxiety. It is the feeling of not being at home that makes us restless and shows us the meaninglessness of the 'world' we tend to call our home.³⁴

But what is it that we are anxious about and why do we feel *unheimlich*? We are essentially anxious about 'nothing', or at least nothing available within our world.³⁵ Anxiety points to our being-in-the-world while realizing that there is nothing tying us to this world. The aforementioned freedom of Dasein can therefore also be seen as a groundlessness, because we have no determinate ground by which to live. Anxiety, in revealing us our groundlessness, distances us from being in the world and others. Therefore, nothing in the world causes our anxiety but the observation of the world itself, its contingency and our consequential homelessness.³⁶ We will attain more clarity on the notion of anxiety and its importance to the existential concept of death by discussing the final structural foundation: authenticity.

²⁷ Carel, 'The Double Meaning of Death,' 544-545.

²⁸ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 241.

²⁹ Heidegger, 247.

³⁰ Heidegger, 248.

³¹ Heidegger, 241.

³² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 241.

³³ Heidegger, 182.

³⁴ Heidegger, 182.

³⁵ Heidegger, 180.

³⁶ Heidegger, 181. Karademir, 'Heidegger and Foucault,' 378.

Authenticity

Heidegger bridges the notions of being-toward-death and anxiety by means of the concept of authenticity and its accompanying attitude of ‘anticipation’:

Because the anticipation of Dasein absolutely individualizes and lets it, in this individualizing of itself, become certain of the wholeness of its potentiality-of-being, the fundamental attunement of anxiety belongs to this self-understanding of Dasein in terms of its ground. Being-toward-death is essentially anxiety.³⁷

Heidegger thus identifies anxiety with being-toward-death, because both uncover the groundlessness of Dasein to itself.³⁸ However, what exactly is meant by anticipation and how does it explicate authenticity? To be authentic in the face of death is to take on the attitude of anticipation also known as forerunning or *vorlaufen*. Carel describes this as the attitude in which death as ‘the possibility of the impossibility’ is recognized and Dasein understands itself as ultimately groundless, similar to anxiety.³⁹ Therefore, in authentic being-toward-death, Dasein does not sooth its anxiety by dismantling death’s seriousness but acknowledges it and stands rooted in anxiety. According to Heidegger, authentic being-toward-death frees the possibility of no longer being by recognizing it.⁴⁰ In anticipation Dasein recognizes its ultimate possibility and understands its existence in terms of this possibility.

Understanding its existence in terms of this possibility entails not getting lost in arbitrary possibilities but to take responsibility for one’s choices.⁴¹ By acknowledging the anxiety that accompanies authentic being-toward-death, human beings can understand their existence as groundless and will have to realize that Dasein has to be the groundless ground for itself. They thus have to decide for themselves what projects are to be taken on and how to relate to the public world as it has already been established through history.⁴² We are only able to do this when we do not try to conceal death or make it into something available in the world for us to experience, or fall in the illusion of death as something that is graspable or only experienced by others and never as something possible for me at every moment. Accordingly, we must not transform anxiety in the face of death into a fear of demise, the literal ending of our lives.⁴³ The distance from the world that is brought on by being-toward-death and anxiety shows Dasein the authentic and inauthentic possibilities of its being, and gears it towards authenticity.⁴⁴

³⁷ Heidegger, 254.

³⁸ Heidegger, 254; Carel, ‘The Double Meaning of Death,’ 545.

³⁹ Carel, ‘The Double Meaning of Death,’ 549.

⁴⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 253.

⁴¹ Heidegger, 253.

⁴² Karademir, ‘Heidegger and Foucault,’ 378.

⁴³ Carel, ‘The Double Meaning of Death,’ 544.

⁴⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 184.

In conclusion, death for Heidegger is an existential phenomenon that structures our lives and the meaning we attribute to it. By formulating death as a mode of being which we can conceal or recognize and which impacts our understanding of ourselves into an understanding of ourselves as groundless, it opens us up for freedom with regards to the meaning and possibilities of our existence. Grounded in anxiety, being-towards-death shows us the world in its meaninglessness and attributes us with the responsibility to be authentically free.

Chapter Two

Comparative analysis

Now that we have acquired an understanding of Heidegger's concept of death, how does this compare to Gadamer's view? Gadamer having been Heidegger's long-time pupil, it is to be expected that there are significant similarities between the views of the two philosophers. Unlike Heidegger, who extensively investigates death in *Being and Time*, Gadamer's notion must be reconstructed out of short treatises and essays. Di Cesare has already provided us with a reference to the texts where Gadamer specifically contemplates death.⁴⁵ Therefore, the primary sources I use for providing an account of Gadamer's philosophy on death are his essays 'Death as a question' (1975)⁴⁶ and 'The Experience of Death' (1983).⁴⁷ I will supplement this with Gadamer's 'Anxiety and Anxieties' (1990)⁴⁸ for it also explicitly considers the notion of death. Both 'The Experience of Death' and 'Anxiety and Anxieties' have been republished by Gadamer in his book *The Enigma of Health* (1996) in which Gadamer researches the practice of healthcare and the art of medicine, investigating consequently the limits to human life provided by illness and death. In 'Death as a Question' Gadamer adopts a more hermeneutical approach by investigating the possibility of the question of death.

In this chapter I will first focus on what I consider the fundamental similarities between the two philosophers' notions on death, after which I will discuss significant differences with regards to the structural foundations of freedom, anxiety and authenticity.

Similarities

Heidegger's influence can first of all be seen in Gadamer's fundamental beliefs about human beings. Where Heidegger states the distinction of human beings as having future projects and a freedom to make themselves, Gadamer confirms this by noting that it is not possible for humans to think without a future. The capacity to anticipate the future is characteristic of man, he states.⁴⁹ Gadamer illustrates this through the myth of Prometheus. Prometheus was said to have descended to earth to bestow the gift of fire upon humans. Gadamer argues via the ancient Greek tragedian Aeschylus that through the gift of fire Prometheus directed human being's thinking 'toward something distant in helping them create enduring works through their planned effort.'⁵⁰ Because of this, the knowledge of death, which before had rendered men hopeless, was concealed and human beings could formulate a future for themselves.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Di Cesare, 'Hermeneutics as Philosophy,' 181.

⁴⁶ Gadamer, 'Death as a Question,' 60-70.

⁴⁷ Gadamer, 'The Experience of Death,' 61-69.

⁴⁸ Gadamer, 'Anxiety and Anxieties,' 152-162.

⁴⁹ Gadamer, 157.

⁵⁰ Gadamer, 'Death as a Question,' 66.

⁵¹ Gadamer, 'Death as a Question,' 66; Gadamer, 'Anxiety and Anxieties,' 156.

Furthermore, in quoting the Greek physician Alkmaion, Gadamer emphasizes how this capacity to anticipate the future distances human beings from the rest of nature. Alkmaion states that ‘human beings cannot connect the end again with the beginning, and for this reason must die.’⁵² According to Gadamer, this signifies that, contrary to non-human animals, human beings are not identical with their vegetative life and the ongoing cycle of reproduction within the species.⁵³ In this way our lives are not endlessly circular, and we cannot connect our beginning to our end. Consequently, we all must die and die our own deaths as individuals.⁵⁴ This corresponds to Heidegger’s distinction made between perishing and demise: Gadamer states that humans reflect on their vegetative lives and their final end, and are therefore not identical with the species. Furthermore, according to Alkmaion, our living is defined from the perspective of our end.⁵⁵ This corresponds to Heidegger’s view that death structures life not only literally, but also ontologically and existentially.⁵⁶ Because humans are aware and reflective of their possible death, their living is executed with a wariness of this knowledge. However, this knowledge differs from the knowledge that was supposedly concealed by Prometheus. For both philosophers, death is certain, but remains indefinite and unintelligible.

In accordance with Heidegger, Gadamer argues that this consciousness and reflectiveness of death is to be related to the notion of anxiety, and that it is therefore anxiety that separates mankind from the natural world.⁵⁷ In fact, in ‘Anxiety and Anxieties’ Gadamer admits to adhering to Heidegger’s starting point on the subject of anxiety,⁵⁸ therefore a great point of similarity can be found in this concept. Gadamer describes anxiety as a mode of unrest, of being distant from oneself by referencing Heidegger: ‘Heidegger described this in a powerful way: we are anxious about nothing. The uncanniness of being anxious about nothing is precisely the true anxiety. Anxiety is like a thinking of oneself as outside and beyond all beings, beyond everything to which one can cling, to think oneself into nothingness.’⁵⁹ Although, in another sense, Gadamer explicates that anxiety is also the reason for why we want to flee from what we are anxious about and that this tendency of humans is quite a natural thing, in fact refers to ‘the sovereign wisdom of nature.’⁶⁰ This denotes to a thinking of death that thinks death away. This seems to clash with Heidegger’s notion of authenticity in relation to the final end, because for Heidegger thinking death away is precisely inauthentic in that it does not acknowledge the ever-present possibility of death. We will investigate this difference in the next section.

⁵² Gadamer, ‘Bodily Experience,’ 78.

⁵³ Gadamer, ‘Life and Soul,’ 151.

⁵⁴ Gadamer, 150.

⁵⁵ Gadamer, ‘Bodily Experience,’ 79.

⁵⁶ Carel, ‘The Double Meaning of Death,’ 549.

⁵⁷ Gadamer, ‘Anxiety and Anxieties,’ 157.

⁵⁸ Gadamer, 152.

⁵⁹ Gadamer, 69.

⁶⁰ Gadamer, ‘The Experience of Death,’ 64.

Differences

Via the myth of Prometheus Gadamer argues that ‘We can be said to have a future for as long as we are not aware that we have no future.’⁶¹ Therefore, the similarity between Heidegger and Gadamer in which they hold having a future as a distinctively human characteristic, seems to divert into a difference when Gadamer infers from this that the concealment of death is necessary in order to have a future. Gadamer consequently proposes, in accordance with the interpretation of the myth of Prometheus, the human ability and opportunity to forget death: ‘This myth signifies the forgetting of death so that he no longer has to reckon with it. And yet, since no reckoning with death is possible and since death can never be overcome, this forgetting of death is never a real forgetting or overcoming, but rather constitutes life itself.’⁶² In accordance with this view he dedicates quite a few words in *The Enigma of Health* to pointing to ways in which human beings try to repress death.⁶³ He states: ‘the repression of death must be conceived as an elementary human reaction to death and one which each human being takes up with respect to their own lives.’⁶⁴ He supports this attitude of forgetting, repressing and concealing because to him this shows the will to live and is therefore the attitude that ‘constitutes life itself.’⁶⁵ This is denoted by Heidegger as inauthentic because of its concealing of death through an absorption in everyday life.⁶⁶ This is further taken up in Di Cesare’s article in her claim that for Gadamer there is no authenticity or appropriation with regards to the final end.⁶⁷ This seems to be a significant difference between the two philosophers’ views on death. However, the investigation of anxiety and thinking in Gadamer’s ‘Death as a Question’ might bring these two stances with regards to authenticity closer together.

In ‘Death as a Question’ Gadamer denotes that it might not even be possible to seriously ask the question of death, as our thinking of death seems to transform death into something it is not. We either bring death back to something biological and seem to therefore not be willing to admit its existential significance for us, or we transform death into a portal to another life, namely in the case of religious belief in salvation or punishment at the limit of death and the promise of an afterlife.⁶⁸ He concludes that all our thinking of death is tied to a state of being awake: ‘Must the thought of death thereby not contain an ultimate existential lack of seriousness because this thought must be endured by the living?’⁶⁹ Gadamer even goes as far as to say that death and thought seem to exclude each

⁶¹ Gadamer, 65.

⁶² Gadamer, ‘Anxiety and Anxieties,’ 157.

⁶³ Gadamer, ‘The Experience of Death,’ 61-69.

⁶⁴ Gadamer, 64.

⁶⁵ Gadamer, 64; Gadamer, ‘Anxiety and Anxieties,’ 157.

⁶⁶ Gadamer, ‘Anxiety and Anxieties,’ 157; Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 245.

⁶⁷ Di Cesare, ‘Hermeneutics as Philosophy,’ 181.

⁶⁸ Gadamer, ‘Death as a Question,’ 65.

⁶⁹ Gadamer, 65.

other.⁷⁰ He further illustrates this idea by his account of a poem by Paul Celan about Jesus dying on the cross.⁷¹ At the cross, Jesus cries out to his father why he has been abandoned by him. However, before, on the Mount of Olives, Jesus had declared himself ready to be sacrificed. Thus, concludes Gadamer: 'Even being ready to be sacrificed is still a possibility of the certainty of one's own being alive.'⁷² This unthinkability of death is essentially what makes it ungraspable to human beings, which is an essential part of Gadamer's notion of death. That even the supposed son of men would feel forsaken in the face of death reflects in Gadamer's understanding the idea that 'a knowledge by which death would become conceivable and bearable should never be presumed.'⁷³ Furthermore, precisely because death is something we will never grasp, the anxiety in the face of it can never be taken away.

Through the notion of anxiety Gadamer seems to develop a stance on what attitude towards death one should take which seems to contradict his aforementioned 'inauthentic' forgetting of death. According to him we are only grasping traces of death in thinking death away and in thinking of death within the certainty of our own life. The closest we can come to grasping death is through the distance felt in anxiety: 'What remains an appropriate manner of thinking about death seems to be nothing other than thinking anxiety itself or better: recognizing anxiety itself as thinking.'⁷⁴ He supports this statement by claiming that thinking itself is also 'taking a distance', and a practice outside the sphere of natural life just as anxiety is.⁷⁵ It is in the thinking of not-being and never grasping its concept, that human life is defined in anxiety as opposed to other animals for whom this existential anxiety is not 'the "there" of existence.'⁷⁶ Thus Gadamer argues: 'it is in the anxiety of life and of death, and not in the thinking beyond and the thinking away of what makes one anxious, that the experience of death coincides with the proper determination of the human being to be the one who thinks.'⁷⁷ Gadamer acknowledges this as a sort of freedom. Not the kind of freedom that points to a freedom in behaviour, but an inescapable freedom for humans to transcend their natural lives⁷⁸: 'It is the freedom that consists in the fact that I can and must think beyond myself, that I can and must think myself away, that I must constantly extrapolate the inner activity of my intellectual existence.'⁷⁹ Thus, while one should not think beyond death in the sense of thinking it away, properly thinking of death through anxiety results in a thinking beyond oneself into incalculable futures. For Gadamer this freedom of thinking causes death to be unintelligible for us. A thinking being cannot understand how one day he would not be able to think anymore. But this thinking also includes the knowledge of this

⁷⁰ Gadamer, 65.

⁷¹ Gadamer, 68.

⁷² Gadamer, 69.

⁷³ Gadamer, 68.

⁷⁴ Gadamer, 69.

⁷⁵ Gadamer, 69.

⁷⁶ Gadamer, 'Anxiety and Anxieties,' 155.

⁷⁷ Gadamer, 'Death as a Question,' 69.

⁷⁸ Gadamer, 69.

⁷⁹ Gadamer, 69.

unintelligibility of death, and thus equates the existential anxiety.⁸⁰ Furthermore, Gadamer states that we should not conceal the unintelligibility of death from ourselves:

We have this distinction that death is something for us. The ontological honour of human beings, that to which they unconditionally adhere and which preserves them, so to speak, from the danger of losing themselves and, in the process, of losing also their own capacity to be free, consists in this that they do not conceal from themselves the unintelligibility of death.⁸¹

Once more, acknowledging the inconceivability of death, which happens through anxiety, will preserve human being's freedom and the honour of being a creature to which death means something.

In conclusion, the two philosophers share many insights, such as the notion of anxiety and the distinctiveness of human beings in being able to anticipate a future. However, there is some ambiguity in Gadamer's notion on death as to what he advises human beings to do in light of this phenomenon. In light of this analysis and the revealed ambiguity, what remains to be said about the compatibility between the two philosophers? I will take up this question in the following chapter.

⁸⁰ Gadamer, 69.

⁸¹ Gadamer, 70.

Chapter Three

A case for compatibility

So far, I have acquired an analysis of the differences and similarities between Heidegger's and Gadamer's notion on death and the related notions of freedom, anxiety and authenticity. I have also established there to be ambiguity within Gadamer's notion of death as presented through the three essays. Let me bring our attention back to the question we aim to answer:

To what extent remains Di Cesare's proposed degree of compatibility between Gadamer's and Heidegger's notion of death supported when we investigate Gadamer's notion of death exclusively on the basis of his three essays on death?

In order to provide an answer to this question, let me recapitulate Di Cesare's claim. In Di Cesare's philosophical portrait of Gadamer she states the following: 'Gadamer does not share Heidegger's Being-towards-death, because for him there is neither authenticity nor appropriation in the relation with the final end.'⁸² Di Cesare supports her claim primarily through Gadamer's concept of 'the Other' and the beyond.⁸³ According to Di Cesare, Gadamer claims that the encounter with the other makes one's own finitude perceptible: 'Only when the limit is perceived and understood as other, and not as one's own limit that can be appropriated, but rather as the limit of the other, which refers and turns toward the other, then the limit is open and becomes the opening point of newer possibilities.'⁸⁴ Thus, relating to death in Gadamer's sense does not provide a moment of individuation but has everything to do with an 'other'. This limit of an 'other' is a point of entrance towards a beyond for newer possibilities. Therefore, Gadamer's limit of death opens up to a beyond. She contrasts this with Heidegger by stating that for him 'the limit proves to be an insurmountable wall' and Dasein 'remains absolutely alone in its thrownness' as well as in its thrownness in relation to death.⁸⁵ It is by implementing these other Gadamerian notions into his philosophy on death that she concludes that there is no notion of authenticity or appropriation in relation to death within Gadamer's philosophy. However, following the analysis in chapter one and two, at least the refutation of there possibly being a notion of authenticity in Gadamer's notion on death is not as clear as Di Cesare claims it to be.

First of all, Gadamer never explicitly refutes the notion of authenticity. The only time Gadamer explicitly writes about authenticity at all within the three essays is shown by the following: 'The anthropological basis of anxiety testifies to a specifically human characteristic, that is, that a person has a distance from their own self. Heidegger saw in this the inauthenticity of an existence

⁸² Di Cesare, 'Hermeneutics as Philosophy,' 181.

⁸³ Di Cesare, 184.

⁸⁴ Di Cesare, 184.

⁸⁵ Di Cesare, 184.

permanently absorbed in life, and contrasted it with authentic existence, which is prepared to face anxiety. But this inauthenticity also belongs to human nature.’⁸⁶ In this excerpt Gadamer does not explicitly speak against the possibility of authentic existence and even supports the prevalence of inauthenticity by denoting it as a fundamental human tendency. Heidegger himself would also not refute the idea that inauthenticity is a natural inclination of human beings. He may not consider it an absolutely necessary constituent of human nature, but he does state the following: ‘Factically, Dasein maintains itself initially and for the most part in an inauthentic being-toward-death.’⁸⁷ Heidegger thus acknowledges inauthenticity as at least a fundamental human default. Therefore, the idea of a refutation of authenticity in relation to death by Gadamer is weakened on account of it not explicitly being stated in his primary essays on the notion of death. Furthermore, his acknowledgement of inauthenticity might actually point to an attitude towards the notion of authenticity that is at the least not ambivalent.

Furthermore, there are certain clues in Gadamer’s writing that seem to clash with the implementation of the philosophy of the other in Gadamer’s notion on death. This might not take the conflict with the idea of the other away, but at least points to ambiguity in Gadamer’s philosophy, demanding further investigation and interpretation and thus weakening Di Cesare’s claim. As aforementioned, according to Di Cesare the deciding difference between Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s view is that Dasein is either completely alone in relation to death or that this limit of death can only become perceptible by engagement with the other. However, there are multiple instances in Gadamer’s essays on death where he stresses the singularity of Dasein in relation to death. This is hinted at, for example, in his description of Alkmaion’s claim that human beings are not able to connect their beginning to their end and that therefore ‘each and every one of us, as an individual, must die their own death.’⁸⁸ Furthermore, in ‘Death as a Question’ the singularity and aloneness of Dasein in the face of death is proclaimed through the explanation of anxiety: ‘The uncanniness of being anxious about nothing is precisely the true anxiety. Anxiety is like a thinking of oneself as outside and beyond all beings, beyond everything to which one can cling, to think oneself into nothingness.’⁸⁹ Since Gadamer proposes in ‘Death as a Question’ standing in anxiety, or thinking, to be relating properly to death, this seems to raise a problem for Di Cesare’s claim.

Apart from the way the aforementioned excerpts from Gadamer’s essays challenge Di Cesare’s claim, there is another approach which can support our thesis. This is provided by the fact that the different essays in which Gadamer presents us his notion on death are sometimes in conflict with each other, and therefore strongly subject to interpretation. The most prevalent ambiguity concerns Gadamer’s

⁸⁶ Gadamer, ‘Anxiety and Anxieties,’ 157.

⁸⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 249.

⁸⁸ Gadamer, ‘Bodily Experience,’ 79.

⁸⁹ Gadamer, ‘Death as a Question,’ 69.

recommended attitude towards death. In *The Enigma of Health*, he supports the attitude of forgetting death as representative of life itself.⁹⁰ Although this forgetting is not a real forgetting, it does point to a concealment of death in order to live. In 'Death as a Question' he argues however for the attitude of standing with anxiety in the face of death and never concealing the unintelligibility of death as well as not concealing that what we are anxious about, which also includes death. These views seem to point to an inconsistency in Gadamer's philosophy on death, because one advice cannot simultaneously acknowledge the other to be of equal weight when they both concern the relation towards death but are different from each other.

What consequences could this inconsistency have for our investigation into the compatibility between Gadamer and Heidegger with regards to their notions on death? One way Gadamer's views differ from each other is that in the first recommendation there seems to be a definite clash with Heidegger's notion of authentic being-toward-death, while the second proposed attitude from 'Death as a Question' shows the possibility of affinity with Heidegger's notion of authenticity. Therefore, one consequence of this ambiguity would be that it could bring the notions of death in Heidegger's and Gadamer's work closer together via the concept of authenticity if it turns out that the second view is most correspondent with what Gadamer actually means to advise. While we cannot claim that this advice has more weight than the other recommendation, the ambiguity does at least support this as a possibility due to the consequential susceptibility to further interpretation.

In what way could the proposition in 'Death as a Question' provide room for an implementation of the Heideggerian notion of authenticity and thus point to a greater compatibility between the two philosophers? First of all, with this recommended attitude Gadamer seems to claim that there is a more or less proper way of relating to death, with the proper way consisting of standing in anxiety and not thinking the objects of anxiety away and thus also not concealing the unintelligibility of death. Heidegger's authentic being-toward-death is also a determination of a supposed proper way to relate to death. The 'improper' way Heidegger marks as inauthentic. Does the presumption that Gadamer has an idea of what is a better or worse way of relating to death for a human being not leave some space for a possible connection with the notion of authenticity?

This supposition is further justified by the fact that Gadamer largely adopts Heidegger's notion of anxiety. For Heidegger, Dasein's fundamental possibilities of authenticity and inauthenticity introduce themselves in anxiety.⁹¹ Since Gadamer takes over Heidegger's notion of anxiety and uses it as the ground for his advice, it is probable that some notion of authenticity is transferred as well. The prevalence of other essential similarities as discussed in chapter two also points to this idea. Both have the same notion of anxiety. Both hold unintelligibility as a defining element of the notion of death. Both advise to face death or its ungraspability unconcealed. Both point to a freedom in this

⁹⁰ Gadamer, 'Anxiety and Anxieties,' 157.

⁹¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 184.

unconcealment and the facing of death, which they consider to be fundamental to human beings. So far, via this route, there seems to be ample room for Gadamer's philosophy to implicitly entail a notion of authenticity in relation to death and thus be more compatible with Heidegger than considered at first glance.

This argument for a probable prevalence of the notion of authenticity in Gadamer's view on death does not attempt to show Gadamer's philosophy on death to be completely compatible with Heidegger's authentic being-toward-death. It shows, by providing space for this proposal, that the views of the philosophers might be more compatible than thought at first or as suggested by Di Cesare. Thus, this proposal combined with the weakening of Di Cesare's argumentation at the beginning of this chapter leads me to conclude that there are significant obstacles to Di Cesare's claim when analysing an isolated notion of Gadamer's stance on death by solely referencing the three essays.

Conclusion

In conclusion, through a comparative analysis of Gadamer's notion on death as formulated in his three essays 'The Experience of Death', 'Anxiety and Anxieties' and 'Death as a Question' to Heidegger's notion of death as formulated in *Being and Time*, I have signalled ambiguity in Gadamer's philosophy on death, leaving his notion susceptible to different interpretations. By only referencing this isolated version of Gadamer's notion of death I have been able to show how Di Cesare's claimed degree of compatibility between the two philosophers may be incorrect. The present investigation shows a probable higher degree of compatibility between the two authors than is claimed by Di Cesare. I have substantiated this by providing excerpts from Gadamer's work that show a singularity in the face of death and an at least minimal openness to the notion of authenticity.

Where Di Cesare interpreted the relevant essays by using other fundamental Gadamerian concepts, this project has had to stay close to Gadamer's actual words on the notion of death. While this was partly an issue of the limited space available, it can also be seen as not so much a limitation but as a way to take a step back with regards to Gadamer's notion on death and examine what interpretations arise when we only refer to Gadamer's specific words on this subject. The degree of susceptibility to interpretation that has been grasped through this project gives us further insight into Gadamer's notion of death and the prevalent obstacles in obtaining such insight. It therefore also shows how Gadamer's notion on death could benefit from much more research, considering the prevalent ambiguity. One such interesting route of future exploration would be Gadamer's stance on the Heideggerian notion of authenticity. With this investigation I have provided an incitement to this route of future investigation by showing possible ways in which a compatibility between Gadamer's notion of death and the Heideggerian notion of authentic being-toward-death could be possible.

It is important to note that there was limited space available to formulate this research. This naturally had consequences for the completeness of the investigation. Due to the limited space I could not take into account all elements relevant to Heidegger's notion of death. I have formulated the three structural foundations of freedom, anxiety and authenticity next to a general account of the meaning of death in Heidegger's *Being and Time* from a belief that the interdependence of these concepts to each other and to the topic of death reveals a coherent and adequately complete overview of Heidegger's notion on death. However, further research should reveal how other components of Heidegger's philosophy in *Being and Time* could influence the present conclusion. Accordingly, I have extracted Gadamer's notion of death from the aforementioned essays through the belief that these are the only texts in his work where he specifically addresses the topic of death and in which death is the main subject. However, I cannot eliminate the possibility that other information, specifically on the subject of death and written by Gadamer, exists. Therefore, this could also be a departure point for further research into the subject.

Nevertheless, this project has revealed important points of ambiguity in Gadamer's notion on death, added to its interpretation and suggested in accordance with this interpretation that the notion of death in Heidegger's and Gadamer's work might be more compatible than was assumed beforehand. Furthermore, I hope my project has provided the reader insight into the concept of death as formulated by Gadamer and Heidegger, as well as provided him or her with an increased insight into the importance of death for our own individual lives.

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