

Being-toward-death in the Anthropocene

On the possibility of contributing-toward-the-death-of-others*


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ABSTRACT “No one can take the other’s dying away from him,” as Martin Heidegger famously claimed, but what he was significantly silent about was that beings, both human and non-human, can mutually contribute to each other’s death. By focusing on the interrelatedness of deaths, this paper presents a reversal of the Heideggerian perspective on the relation between Dasein’s mineness and “being-toward-death.” Drawing upon the structural meaning of death, which consists in the fact that no one can replace me in that I will die, I show that the phenomenon of contributing-toward-the-death-of-others individuates Dasein as well. This will allow us to reread the threat of the They in the context of the Anthropocene, elucidating the non-transferable character of my share in others’ death. Finally, the paper aims to deepen our understanding of the change in the character of death which has been brought about by technology in the Anthropocene.

KEYWORDS annihilation; Anthropocene; death; Heidegger, Martin

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Reasons cannot be given for why the people now populating the planet and destroying it in every possible way should continue to exist without end.
(M. Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars*)

INTRODUCTION

The concept of the Anthropocene is not only a diagnosis of the harmful impact of human activity on the planet, but also a prophecy: due to the devastation of nature, life on the planet will stop existing. For some species, it is already happening—the sixth extinction is underway. Human beings know that they as a species will, rather sooner than later, share their fate.

There is, however, a shred of hope in the concept of the Anthropocene. We can still change the catastrophic course. If it is not a reversal, it can at least be a change in our behavioral patterns, a change that would effectively decrease the damage. This calls for revisiting the conceptual frameworks that underlie our practices. In this paper, I shall return to Martin Heidegger's concept of being-toward-death.

The implications of Heidegger's thought remain ambiguous with respect to anthropocentrism, one of the key theoretical problems of the age in question, largely due to the Heideggerian account of death (Tonner 2011; Calarco 2008; Derrida 2008; Agamben 2004; Krell 1992). I argue, however, that we can employ Heidegger's insights into death, and explore the potential of his approach to the structural meaning of dying, to grasp the meaning of our contribution toward the death of others (or, to put it in a more Heideggerian idiom, contributing-toward-the-death-of-others), both human and non-human.

Identifying such a phenomenon enables the individuation of Dasein and, simultaneously, illuminates the interrelatedness of all beings. Even though the mechanism of ageing or decay is not fully explained by science, our everyday experience informs us that beings can have their share in the death of others: exposure to environmental factors and causing pollution, spreading viruses, not to mention killing on purpose or by accident, are examples of how interactions between beings may turn out to be fatal for them. Human beings as instances of Dasein—self-aware of how they are entangled in the network of relations with other beings—can and must think through this possibility.

Such a claim does not undermine the unique position of human beings, and neither does it reinforce the negative consequences of anthropocentrism. Conversely, it should be of help in grasping how technology has changed the character of death in the Anthropocene.

The paper is divided into five sections. First, I outline the theoretical landscape of the Anthropocene and its most pressing issue—anthropocentrism. Second, I discuss Heidegger’s account of death as the disclosure of ownness. Third, I reconstruct the sense of separateness evoked by Heidegger’s concept of death, not only between human and non-human beings, but also between beings in general. In the fourth part, I revisit the idea of being-toward-death in terms of how it points to the connectedness of all beings in their dying. The fifth part then draws upon Heidegger’s concept of annihilation to address the question of contributing towards the death of others in the Anthropocene.

THE ANTHROPOCENE AND ANTHROPOCENTRISM

The idea of the Anthropocene originates in the claim (made at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries) by Paul Crutzen (the Nobel prize-winning chemist), later supported by Eugene Stormer (the lake biologist), that in the current age—estimated by some as starting with the colonization of the Americas (in the sixteenth century) or with the industrial revolution (in the eighteenth century)—humankind has come to play a central role in geology and ecology. The collective impact of human (*Anthropos*) activity in recent centuries can be compared to the glacial force that determined the face of Earth. This is not a cause for pride, however; the changes that have occurred are negative, with global warming and the extinction of biodiversity the most pressing issues (Pieter Lemmens et al. 2017).

The above changes are undeniable, but due to the different time scale—normally a geological epoch would encompass tens of millions of years rather than just several hundred—it has not yet been approved as an official subdivision of geologic time. Nonetheless, the concept of the Anthropocene has become a great source of inspiration for scholars working in various fields, in particular the humanities and social sciences.

Research in the latter has focused on the issue of anthropocentrism, which seems to be a key to understanding the advent of the Anthropocene. “Anthropocentrism” is, however, an umbrella term that covers several theories. First, we need to distinguish between normative and descriptive approaches. The latter argue that we always see things from the standpoint of a human being, and that this is an irreducible component of our perception (Attfield 2011, 29–33). Normative anthropocentrism, meanwhile, implies that the natural order itself is human-centered, and exists to serve human interests. The strongest form of this is referred to as “human chauvinism,” as it holds the arrogant belief that human interests are invariably superior to those of other beings (Jonge 2011). The opposite of such a stance

is non-anthropocentrism, which rejects the sovereignty of human beings over the rest of the world—though this is not to say that all advocates of this view deny the special character of human beings. They rather emphasize that human beings are not entitled to subordinate all non-human beings to human goals, or to treat all other beings merely as means to human ends (Naess 2005).

When discussing the issue of anthropocentrism in the context of the Anthropocene, we should make another distinction—namely, the one relating to the scope of the *anthropoi* who have participated in the devastation of the planet. Many scholars emphasize that the latter is not attributable to humankind in general, but only to the most privileged portion of it, meaning those living in developed countries in the historical period associated with capitalism. Sadly, the first victims of the ecological crisis will be those who are underprivileged (Chakrabarty 2018).

Regardless of whether we identify philosophical anthropocentrism or capitalism as leading to the destruction of nature, the Anthropocene-related critique is targeted at the mechanisms of exploitation, hierarchy and exclusion, and the cult of individuality (Kopnina et al. 2018). As a matter of fact, all of these factors can be referred to as egoism, reaching up to the species level and resulting in human chauvinism, which is what has brought us to the edge of the abyss. A blessing in disguise is that now we have at last become aware of the “history of both humankind and the Earth, when natural forces and human forces became intertwined so that the fate of one determines the fate of the other” (Zalasiewicz et al. 2010, 2231). Recognition of this connectedness can signal a change of attitude toward our planet, which could in turn spark an impulse to transform our deleterious behaviors into restorative and regenerative ones (Peter Lemmens and Hui 2017). Damage done to the Earth is irreversible (Hailwood 2015, 6), but there is still a chance—albeit only the slimmest one—that all is not lost.

In the ensuing sections, I discuss, respectively, how Heidegger’s concept of being-toward-death can be reexamined to enhance the above efforts to battle human arrogance and unfold the interconnectedness of all beings in their dying.

DEATH AND OWNNESS

Recent scholarship on Heidegger has added several possible ways of theorizing the Anthropocene to this rich and varied field (Hamilton 2019; 2016; Wood 2019; Bengtsson 2019; Holy-Luczaj 2019; Zwier, Blok 2017). Some of the works in question are preoccupied with the relevance of Heidegger’s concept of “being-toward-death” for our epoch (Bengtsson 2019; Baucom

2014). These draw, for instance, on its educational potential, as death can lend insight into one's potential, thereby enabling one to learn more fully (Bengtsson 2019, 77–80). They do not, however, elaborate on the interactions between beings that seem to be essential for understanding the transformation of death in the Anthropocene. This is also the case for some works that employ such Heidegger-inspired notions as “planetary being-toward-death” (Baucom 2014, 140), but that do not question the way in which Heidegger's approach skips over the problem of the connectedness of beings in their dying. To see this omission more clearly, it is worth first reconstructing the core ambiguity inherent to death as identified by Heidegger himself—one which mirrors the tension intrinsic to being itself.

In a nutshell, Heidegger is concerned with the hiddenness of being, which leads us to forget about it. According to him, the way that metaphysics asks what beings are, or what it means for beings to be, places the focus on beings themselves, neglecting to inquire into what it means to *be* and thereby reducing being to something self-evident: the mere presence of objects. Heidegger claimed that being is different from beings; one cannot say it is a “thing,” indeed, being hides behind or within things/beings—being is not as easily accessible as beings are. It conceals itself and thus always has yet to be revealed—dis-closed.

Simultaneously, being grounds beings in what they are—being appropriates beings to themselves. This probably becomes clearer if we look into the semantics of *eigen* that underlies Heidegger's conceptualization of being and is manifested in his choice of vocabulary. The adjective *eigen* refers to “own,” “particular,” “strange,” etc. The derivatives of *eigen* include *eigenste* (“ownmost”), *eigentlich* (“really,” “actually,” “truly,” “authentically”), *Eigentlichkeit* (authenticity, ownness), as well as *er-eignen* (“to appropriate,” “to make one's own”) and *Er-eignis* (“the event,” or “the event of ap-pro-pria-tion”). Seeing how these words interrelate allows us to say that appropriating beings is the event of disclosure of what which is ownmost for them.

We are dealing here with an irreducible tension: that which is the most quintessential to beings—their being—tends to be concealed. How, then, can we approach it? To answer this question, Heidegger introduces the idea of *Dasein* (literally “being-t/here”), which is not the subject, nor any kind of being, but rather an ontological structure. It is our *Dasein*, our being-(t)here, that enables us to understand the process of concealment and disclosure that is inherent to being.

To illustrate the way this unfolding happens and to describe the non-substantial presence that constitutes *Dasein*, Heidegger refers to the category of “possibility.” More precisely, he focuses on the peculiar possibility which,

according to him, gives a specific coherence, or direction, to all *Dasein*'s other possibilities: death. It is death, Heidegger claims, that allows *Dasein* to comprehend itself as a whole despite not being a present object (Thomson 2013).

When unpacking the specificity of death, we should stress that Heidegger differentiates the ontology of death from its biology or psychology. Aiming to locate death within the terrain of being, Heidegger, in his work *Being and Time*, holds that death, as a possibility, "is" only insofar as *Dasein*'s being is "being-toward-death." For Heidegger it is crucial to understand that death is not something outstanding (*Ausstand*), as an inherent part of us, but something that stands before us (*Bevorstand*), impending, about to happen. Inasmuch as death is certain, it is a necessity, but due to its indefinite character, it is simultaneously merely a possibility (Heidegger 1985, 285–8).

The result of the overlapping of these two aspects is that death is the end of existence—in the sense of its horizon. That is to say, death may be the end of my life, but it is not its goal or *telos* (Pattison 2015, 60). We do not aim or strive to die (except in exceptional cases, such as suicide or euthanasia). Death, as a matter of fact, is a kind of misfortune—not because, as Taylor Carman aptly comments, being dead is somehow unpleasant, but because the loss of (our own) life is a loss we genuinely suffer, depriving us, as it does, of the ultimate condition (Carman 2015, 135).

Heidegger elaborates on the "horizontal" aspect of death, emphasizing that death is constantly possible rather than approaching as a point in linear time. The primary meaning of "toward" in the expression "being-toward-death" is "in the face of." Hence, the movement implied by this proposition refers, in Heidegger, not to the idea that death is getting closer with every second of my life, but to the thought that in order to understand my being, I have to orient myself toward this "necessary possibility." As such, constituting a point of reference, death is a kind of meta-possibility that pertains to all other possibilities and thereby structures existence.

This unavoidable character of death coinciding with its non-substantiality generates anxiety (McManus 2015, 164). The latter is objectless—we are concerned with nothing palpable. It makes us feel uneasy; drawing again on the German, the word for uneasy (*unheimlich*) contains the word for home (*Heim*), which speaks of not feeling at home with this vision, not being able to settle into this perspective. Hence, Heidegger spoke of the uncanniness (*Unheimlichkeit*) of being (Thomson 2013, 261).

One can say that being-towards-death is both unsettled and unsettling. However, matters become complicated, as we find in death the same

ambiguity as in being: despite it being different from what we are familiar with, it is what exposes our most genuine essence (McManus 2015, 164). This is probably the reason Heidegger claimed that “death is a way to be” (Heidegger 1985, 289)—meaning, perhaps, that facing death can reveal what is ordinarily not readily visible: in the attempt to face death as our irreducible, constant possibility (or necessity), we make death our own and come closer to our own authentic essence—that which is “ownmost” for us.

This constitutes the second demarcation brought about by death: it is that which delineates one’s own individuality. According to Heidegger, death is utterly one’s own: “No one can take the other’s dying away from him” is the key claim in this regard (Heidegger 1985, 284). Even if someone sacrifices his or her own life to rescue another (which is the core of Emmanuel Levinas’ philosophy), it at best postpones the death of the other rather than making him or her immortal. As such, by its very essence, death is in every case my own (*je meines*) (Heidegger 1985, 284). This pure “mineness” (*Jemeinigkeit*), belonging obviously to the semantics of “owning,” radically individuates Dasein (Thomson 2013, 272). Hence, one must understand death in order to understand authenticity/ownness (Thomson 2013, 261).

By this token, death also allows Dasein to be freed from the sphere of “the They/One” (*Das Man*), which refers to how things are publicly interpreted without in-depth consideration, superficially, making us indifferent to any issue discussed. Conversely, when we (re-)gain an awareness of being we become engaged with what really matters (Heidegger 1985, 163–8).

Being-toward-death is the phenomenon that shows this most clearly. The “They” alienates us from death, aiming at tranquilizing and trivializing the fact that “we (will) all die (one) day” (Heidegger 1985, 296–8; see O’Brien 2021, 6). As Babette Babich observes, one’s death is not a death for others and has in fact nothing to do with them: things continue just fine, like a happy dinner party, with or without our being there (*Da-Sein*) (Babich 2017, 19–20).

To recapitulate: death outlines the dimensions of *my* existence: it enables me to grasp the sense of mineness, or of what is ownmost for being. It appears, as Taylor Carman holds, that the most relevant insight into death offered by *Being and Time* is that it is a possibility onto which Dasein projects itself, in contrast to the more traditional and familiar categorial notion of contingency or potentiality (Carman 2015, 138). For Heidegger, however, dying “authentically” does not mean “really” dying or dying resolutely, in line with one’s own decision, but as William Blattner (2006, 146) puts it, dying “ownedly”—that is, becoming aware of the fact that it involves me alone, and no one can replace me in this

regard (Carman 2015, 138). Death is nontransferable and, as such, grounds our singularity and oneness.

DEATH AND SEPARATENESS

When we consider the sense of individualization relating to death in Heidegger, it is hard to avoid the countervailing fact that it absolutely separates us from others and, in doing so, makes us lonely, trapping us in a kind of solipsistic void (MacAvoy 1996).

According to Heidegger, one's perspective on one's own death is unconditionally different in kind from the possibility that someone else can die. In Heidegger's view, this divide can be captured by distinguishing between passing away (*ableben*) and dying (*sterben*) (Heidegger 1985, 291). The former entails understanding one's death from the third-person perspective, the latter from the first-person standpoint (Winkler 2020, 9–10).

Heidegger has been widely criticized for the strictness of the above distinction. Scholars such as Daniel Dahlstrom have argued, for instance, that I can only authentically project the possibility of my impossibility because I experience the absence of those I love and have lost (Dahlstrom 2015, 158).

Heidegger, however, discarded such a possibility. He claimed that the death of others can only appear on the horizon of my concern in two ways. Firstly, on the ontic plane, which Heidegger holds in low regard—as when we are involved with funerals, the cult of graves, etc. (Heidegger 1985, 282). Secondly, the ontological dimension of the death of others is in play when I care if they live authentically (Heidegger 1985, 344–5)—or I let them be so—and consequently let them die authentically. In the same vein, just as others cannot take away my death from me, I cannot take their death away from them. It seems that what Heidegger is suggesting is that the only ontological contribution to others' death I can make is to encourage or discourage them from facing this particular possibility appropriately. Mourning or commemorating those who have gone, regardless of how genuinely one feels it, does not give us an idea of what it means to die and reach the end. The Heideggerian gap between my own and others' death cannot be bridged.

What is of importance, given the perspective of the Anthropocene, is that for Heidegger these others are only human beings. When he discusses varieties of “ending,” he distinguishes not only between the aforementioned “passing away” (a terminal collapse, and the third-person “perspective”) and “dying” (an authentic grasp of the sense of the end, and one's “own” first-person perspective), but also between the latter and “perishing,” which refers to the ending of biological life (see Thomson 2013, 261, 4). According

to Heidegger, that kind of death is proper to living beings (*Lebendigen*) with a non-Dasein-type structure (Heidegger 1985, 284–5; O’Brien 2021, 6; Winkler 2020, 4). He explains that animals are not capable of making sense of death—they cannot open up to it and be oriented toward the horizon it sketches. This claim echoes Heidegger’s more general distinction between human and non-human beings, of which only the first possess a Dasein-type structure and thus are able to disclose (understand) being.

The lack of kinship with animals is, then, another sense of separateness that stems from Heidegger’s account of death. It is also the subject of the most serious allegation in the debate over his anthropocentrism. What could be seen as grounding the affinity between humans and non-humans instead reinforces the strong divide and hierarchical relationship obtaining between them (Calarco 2008; Agamben 2004; Krell 1992).

The famous “Turn” (*Kehre*)—i.e. the transition from the early existential analytic of Dasein to the later preoccupation with being (*Sein*) itself (observable in Heidegger’s works in the 1930s)—did not change much in this regard, even though this period is seen as having strongly non-anthropocentric implications. Despite the fact that Heidegger is not concerned later on with how Dasein discloses being, but how being is disclosed to Da-sein, and the fact that he emphasizes that there are no stages of beings (Heidegger 1999, 193), he still claims that only human beings are Dasein. That is to say, he asserts that being essences non-human being, but remains hidden in the latter, while the role of humans is to disclose it, as only they are capable of that (Heidegger 1999, 207).

Heidegger’s later works, such as *On the Origin of the Work of Art* (written in 1935/36 and published in 1950), repeat such claims from the earlier lectures (such as *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* from 1929/30): e.g., that animals are “poor in the world,” implying that they are unable to reveal or make sense of being.

It seems that this is the reason why Heidegger did not alter his stance on the exclusivity of the human relationship with death. In his later works (from the 1950s), he started to call human beings “mortals” (Heidegger 1971), where this emphasizes the essential significance of death for understanding the human condition (Demske 1970) and seems to be a clear parallel to the view from *Being and Time* that dying is the most proper, the “ownmost” way of being for Dasein. Another connection between Heidegger’s *magnum opus* and the later essays is that animals are not referred to as mortals. This choice remains unexplained by Heidegger (Krell 1992). We can only assume that it is because he still holds the view that they cannot be faced with it as the horizon of their life. In other words, the lack of awareness of death

in animals, according to Heidegger, does not make it insignificant, but indicates that animals do not refer to it in trying to understand themselves.

Is this view concerning animals' non-awareness of death actually valid? I would argue that we are unable to answer this question, either negatively or positively. The current state of the art of the cognitive sciences does not provide us with a clear answer as to whether, and in what sense, animals (which are a very heterogeneous group) are aware that they will die, but neither can we completely rule it out (see Kellehear 2007, 11–5) as Heidegger himself did.

Summing up, Heidegger's account of death still seems, in equal measure, inspiring and one that calls for criticism. This outline of Heidegger's ontology of death—presenting death as inducing the sense of oneness as well as separateness—will, in the ensuing section, be transposed into thinking this phenomenon, as Jürgen Habermas advised us to do, *with* Heidegger but also *against* him. I shall argue that the mineness that characterizes the relation between dying and a human being can be disclosed in its inter-relatedness: that is, in understanding that it is I who can contribute to the fact that other human and non-human beings are dying and that those others can contribute to the fact that I will die.

INTERRELATED DEATHS

The view that individuality need not imply separateness is no stranger to Heidegger: it is, in fact, the crux of his concept of being-in-the-world: that only when a given being is related to some other can it reveal its identity—as with, for instance, a pencil, which requires a writing surface (e.g., paper) to disclose its essential being as a “writing utensil” (Heidegger 1985, 96–7). Yet, in thinking death, Heidegger seems to make this perspective obsolete, ignoring the fact that entities mutually contribute to each other's death.

Indeed, the problem runs deeper in Heidegger, as I have argued elsewhere (Hoły-Łuczaj 2019), because his ontology remains strikingly silent about the idea that I always affect others beings (and that others affect me). He emphasizes that we are always in the world, but does not elaborate on the inevitable mutual influence of beings. Very telling in this regard is the passage from *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935) in which he describes a piece of chalk: “The possibility of being drawn along the blackboard and used up is not something that we merely add onto the thing with our thought. The chalk itself, as this being, is in this possibility; otherwise, it would not be chalk as a writing implement” (Heidegger 2000, 32).

Heidegger's analysis primarily aims to demonstrate that what the chalk “is” extends beyond simply stating that the chalk is “present” or “actual”

(O'Brien 2019, 5). But on the other hand, he creates an image of possibilities belonging to the pen as purely 'inner', for which interactions with other beings do not have any significance. This seems to be inaccurate, however, for in fact, if the interactions with other beings (the board, the pupil, and so on) had not taken place, the possibilities of a certain being (a piece of chalk in this case) would not be revealed. Thus, I would argue, the interactions contribute crucially to the way in which the being of the given entity discloses itself. Yet, at the same time, as a result of contact with other beings, a given thing changes necessarily, significantly and durably. What is of essential importance for our general inquiry is that these interactions may even lead to the possibility of the impossibility of some being: its end or death.

Take, for instance, our shoes. Walking in them, I cannot prevent their gradual deterioration (deforming, discoloration, simply becoming worn out). Such a destructive potential concerns not only relations with artifacts (technical, non-natural beings), but also with natural beings, even though in the case of the latter it may be less visible since it is often indirect. It is a truism to say that the production of artifacts requires the use of natural resources, and by this token I do contribute to their utilization and consumption. The same holds true for the production of food: regardless of our diet (including vegetarian and vegan ones), some beings (plants, in the case of non-carnivorous diets) will end their life so that I can be fed.

Eating is, however, not merely a whim on my part: like wearing shoes, it is a necessity, dictated by our specific evolutionary condition. That is to say, I use other beings because I need them. Interestingly, the German verb *brauchen* stands for both "use" and "need." This double meaning underscores the inherent connection between these two phenomena, which may even be seen as one. However, such a dependency on other entities embedded in a relationship of need and use does not change the fact that my use of them contributes to the shortening of their existence.

Lastly, we can observe one more correlation. Namely, beings that we use (and need) can bring us closer to death. The air appears to be a clear example. Air, which is indispensable for living, is at the same time the cause of various mutations and degenerations at the cellular level; it contributes to aging and, in the long run, to the death and decay of the body, since air carries free radicals and various pollutants. In this sense, air contributes to my death.

One might argue that this mutual affecting should be located at the ontic or physical/biological level; however, another example of affecting could well be the psychological stress generated by certain people (family,

co-workers, etc.), which may cause cardiological diseases resulting in premature death, or psychosomatic ones, such as depression, which may push someone to commit suicide.

The point of this last example is not to remind us that onticity in Heidegger goes beyond the biological condition and entails the sphere of the psyche: after all, he found the dualism of body/mind questionable (Heidegger 1985). What is required here is that we unpack the ontological—structural—sense of our contribution to the deaths of others. This ontological sense consists in the fact that the contribution in question grounds our singularity and ownness in a manner analogous to how death itself does so. I cannot dis-own the fact that I can cause some being to stop existing. It is *my* possibility, which I cannot cede. My death is non-transferable and non-delegable, and so is the possibility of my contribution to the death of others. By the same token, I cannot immunize myself against the fact that other beings can cause my death. Becoming aware of this singularizes me (or my Dasein) in line with the Heideggerian concept of delineating one's irreducible individuality—as what is ownmost for oneself.

Furthermore, Heidegger held that death is a meta-possibility pertaining to all other possibilities of my existence. The present account redirects this claim to all possible scenarios of my contacts with other beings—ranging from murders, to accidents, to any indirect worsening of their condition that turns out to be fatal for them. Beings find themselves interrelated within a network of affectivity and, as such, the constant possibility of their death is included in this same mutual affectivity.

The examples featuring in our considerations demonstrate that the phenomenon of contributing toward the death/end of others concerns both human and non-human beings. This challenges Heidegger's claim regarding the ontological separateness of, respectively, human and non-human dying/ending. I can contribute to the death of beings from both of these groups. We may observe this to be more or less avoidable, but nevertheless, such a possibility exists.

How I participate in or affect another's death is often beyond my will, but that does not undermine the "mineness" of this phenomenon. It forms a parallel with the ownness of my dying in Heidegger's being-toward-death, which does not imply that the inevitability of our deaths is up to us. We have to confront the inevitable end and deal with it. The way we come to terms with it (or *that* we do so) discloses what is ownmost for us. The same applies to contributing-toward-another's-death: I cannot get around the fact that I can contribute to another's death—I have to try to accept that I cannot avoid such a possibility. This is how it becomes our own.

Simultaneously, accepting this can free us from a “paralyzing belief.” In the case of being-toward-death, the latter may consist in the sense of the contingency and indeterminacy of our projects and choices that arises in the wake of the inevitability of our death—that nothing matters (McManus 2015, 165–9; Thomson 2013). When taking into account our contribution toward the death of others, this paralysis may translate into the panicked fear that there is a chance that I can always kill or destroy some other being. This reveals the uncanniness of (my) being, which refers to the fact that, as such, it is beyond my jurisdiction. Yet, just as I make plans for the future while keeping in mind that I do not control it totally, I can try to limit those of my activities that may lead to another’s death, despite not being able to fully eliminate such an eventuality.

This observation regarding the limits that bear on our contribution to the deaths of others can prompt us to want to depict the Anthropocene as an age that has touched upon the very essence of the phenomenon in question: it has changed the character of death for non-human as well as human beings.

THE ANTHROPOCENE AS ANNIHILATION

The period of the Anthropocene is generally assumed to have started during the Industrial Revolution (phase 1), accelerated after World War II (phase 2), and ended in our current situation, in which the Earth’s existence is threatened due to climate change (phase 3) (Pieter Lemmens, Blok, and Zwier 2017). The latter is also marked by a growing awareness of the ecological crisis we now face. As Babette Babich aptly observes, until recently, talking about the weather constituted meaningless idle chit-chat, Heideggerian *Gerede*. Now it appears to have transformed into a meaningful expression of being concerned with the undesirable direction of climate change (Babich 2019, 51).

Yet, as Babich points out, such a reorientation might also be seen as a part of *Ge-Stell*: i.e., as a mobilizing of popular opinion that is as totalized as what Heidegger recognized in the context of his own political era (Babich 2019, 51). Indeed, it seems that the overwhelming range particular to this mass extinction of biodiversity, which is increasingly rapidly bringing about the collapse of the ecosystem, has become a major theme in public debate. While on the one hand it raises awareness of the ecological issues involved, on the other it can immunize us against thinking about death in ontologically appropriate terms. The informational noise hinders our ability to hear the message: that we are living at the edge of catastrophe and have to confront this.

The threat of the “They” lurking behind the ongoing torrent of discouraging news is not to be ignored. We are likely to think that it is only “they” who devastate the planet (i.e. other people). But we should, in fact, include ourselves: each person contributes to it on a daily basis (see Chandler 2008). The fact that others do so as well does not change the fact that I *cannot transfer* my footprint to others, for my footprint remains *my* footprint. No one can take from me my affecting—it is I who is affecting, impacting and influencing other beings. Many of my activities, or those I am involved in (traveling, heating houses, producing food for my diet), produce CO₂, which can interfere with the functioning of natural beings.

Thus, instead of thinking that air “is getting polluted” or that “they” (other people) pollute it, I should make clear to myself that I also contribute to it: *I* pollute the air, thereby shortening the lifespan of many individuals, human and non-human alike. In that way, I am entangled in their death. To deny this is to be guilty of anthropocentric arrogance.

On the other hand, it is rather naïve to believe that my personal decisions will save the world. The Anthropocene-related condition is bigger than any set of individual human beings—it is a paradigm of technology. Heidegger’s critique of the latter was not targeted at particular technological devices, but at the way they frame (*gestellen*) the world. Every kind of being is reduced to raw material, which can be exploited to increase production for its own sake (Zimmerman 1990, 348). Aiming at just this, modern technology “drives beings beyond the sphere of their possibilities into things that are impossible to them—not proper” (Heidegger 2003, 109).

In doing so, technology exceeds *the possibilities of beings*. Heidegger contrasts human and non-human beings in this regard, stating that only we humans can do this (“The birch tree never oversteps its possibility. The colony of bees dwells in its possibility” [2003, 109]); but it is not something to be proud of, for we lack an awareness of the balance or symmetry in how beings mutually affect each other due to the technological means at our disposal (Zwier and Blok 2019). We possess and use those tools to step beyond the intrinsic possibilities that are the “measure” (*Maß*) of what is ownmost for a particular entity, and that determine the range over which it can properly reveal itself (Holy-Łuczaj 2019, 227; Zimmerman 1990).

This echoes the observation made in the *Country Path Conversations* (Heidegger 2010). The Guide, who advocates a “different thinking,” distinguishes between destruction (*Zerstörung*) and annihilation (*Vernichtung*). The former can be thought of as elimination or disappearance, but annihilation is more encompassing than that—it is total obliteration. As the Guide underlines: “The annihilation to be thought here is in no way merely

a higher or the highest grade of destruction. Annihilation is essentially different than destruction” (Heidegger 2010, 12). It breaks the decorum of being. It renders flawed what is ownmost for beings and violates their being (Heidegger 2010, 11–2).

Interestingly, Heidegger diagnosed this transgression a few decades ago, claiming that the “process of annihilation encompasses the Earth” (Heidegger 2010, 11). By this token, the Anthropocene can be referred to as the age of annihilation. The distortion of beings and their essencing in this epoch results in their *impossibility to be*. The point here is that it is not only that we contribute to their death directly by consuming them or using them as material to create artifacts, but that we humans also indirectly kill them through our impact on the planet, which decreases not only their life span but also their ability to fulfill their potential.

The horizon of the possibility of death has been pushed to its limits, shifting into the lack of an ability to *be*. Countless species are struggling to continue to live or exist, where this has dire consequences for their potential offspring as well. And this would also seem to concern future generations of human beings, too. The impact of human technology has deprived our future generations of certain opportunities. The Anthropocene, and this annihilation, have resulted in death no longer being an indefinite possibility—some beings will not have the possibility to die, because they will be unable to commence living.

CONCLUSIONS

Heidegger’s ontology portrays death and being as inseparable: death defines existence in its non-substantive character, elucidating the potential character of extant beings. It does so by constituting a framework for the existence of each one, drawing the boundaries of its scope and individual character. Heidegger claims, further, that the non-transferable character of death makes us uniquely ourselves, as opposed to anyone else.

Unfortunately, he did not elaborate on the fact that human and non-human beings can, owing to the complex interrelatedness of all beings, directly or indirectly cause each other’s death. This is often beyond my will, but it nonetheless behooves me to recognize that it is *me* who contributes to their death. I (can) cause another’s death, and I have to try to accept that I cannot avoid such a possibility. This recognition, albeit missing from Heidegger’s work, seems not to contradict his approach—oriented towards the individuation of Dasein—but rather to complement it.

Rereading “being-toward-death” as “contributing-toward-death” also enables us to reflect on the threat of the “They” in the Anthropocene: the

fatal condition of the planet and the role of human beings in it can be seen in a different light when we explore the implications of thinking about our own share in that annihilation. Yet we cannot forget that the latter is rooted in productivity—namely, the paradigm of constant growth, and in particular the role that technology plays in that paradigm. That is what has resulted in the transgression of the measure of the (im-)possibilities of being and dying of both future human and non-human beings. Reconsidering our own part in such death and annihilation, though, can be the first step to regaining such a balance.

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