

DEATH, SOLITUDE, AND BEING-WITH

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Abstract

The insistence on singularity, individuality and authenticity in existential philosophy seems to lead inevitably to some form of solipsism, rendering authors such as Sartre and Heidegger incapable of doing anything more than briefly sketching out a theory of *Mitsein*. This paper will suggest that the problems inherent in thinking being-with in existential philosophy stem from an erroneous understanding of the role of death and solitude with regard to the constitution of subjectivity and, by extension, intersubjectivity, and that a return to Kierkegaard's analyses of these themes can offer a new perspective on the possibility understanding *Mitsein* in existential thought.

Keywords: death, solitude, mitsein, Kierkegaard, existential philosophy.

The yet-unresolved problem for existential philosophy is that of thinking the Other as existing “for me,” of situating the individually existing subject within the ethical relation of being-with. For if we seek to abandon an essentialist viewpoint and take existence as the starting-place of philosophy, we can only do so, it would seem, from the perspective of our own individual existence and fall necessarily into some form of solipsism. And if Sartre's affirmation that “hell is other people”² is certainly reductive, it points to the major problem of the existentialist rethinking of ethical relation, despite Sartre's claim that “existentialism is a humanism” and that thereby “the man who reaches himself directly through the *cogito* also discovers all other [human beings], and discovers them as the condition of his existence. He realizes that he can be nothing (in the sense that one says that one is spiritual, or that one is mean, or that one is jealous) if others do not recognize him as such.”³ Sartre's analysis evokes a major difficulty for thinking the ethical, for if recognition is certainly an important element of life in the shared social sphere, such recognition, *as determination* (one is what one is because others *see* one as such), not

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² J.-P. Sartre: *Huis clos*, in *Théâtre complet*, Paris: Gallimard 1945 (2005), 128 (translation – M. Fox-Muraton).

³ J.-P. Sartre: *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*, Paris: Gallimard 1946 (1996), 58–59 (translation – M. Fox-Muraton).

only excludes true thinking of intersubjectivity, but also undermines the reality both of ethical judgment and of individual personality. Can we really admit that the individual is nothing, that there is no reality to one's ethical character independent of the evaluations and judgments given of that character through others? While Sartre would certainly admit that value judgments have merely social reality, and therefore no actuality in themselves, it would seem nevertheless that this attempt to reintroduce the ethical sphere into his existential thinking of the individual undermines his own project – for if one is determined how one is perceived, then it is questionable whether it is possible at all to construct one's identity – i. e., to maintain the idea that the individual constructs himself through the choices that he makes – and to maintain the affirmation that “existence precedes essence.”⁴

The problem is not, of course, specific to Sartre's existentialism. Rather, it seems to be a recurring problem throughout all of existential thought, despite the fact that the existential paradigm should, at least theoretically, offer the surest means of arriving at a solid understanding of ethics – both in the sense of moral character and in that of the individual's responsibilities in the shared social sphere – since existential thought seeks its starting-point in the existing human perspective, which we might understand as fundamentally concerned about itself (care of the soul) and its relations to others and the world. Sartre does indeed recognize the danger of falling into solipsism implicit in the fact of identifying the relation to the other through the “modality of the exteriority of indifference,”⁵ which would entail the impossibility of a subject's being affected by another, and thus that the only manifestation of the other would be *as an object*. Sartre insists, to the contrary, on the fact that the other is not merely an object, but is first and foremost “the indispensable mediator between me and myself,”⁶ the one who reveals to me the very possibility of my actions and myself being seen, recognized and judged in the world. The example of shame, which Sartre offers – the feeling of shame which only appears when it is clear that one is being observed; thus, that the individual's existence and actions are situated within a shared social sphere – gives rise to the understanding of individual actions as subject to moral evaluation, awakens the individual to an understanding of his non-isolation or non-indifference to the world and the other human beings that comprise it. And Sartre suggests indeed that:

“a positive theory of the existence of the other should be able at once to avoid solipsism and to get by without recourse to God if it were to envisage my original relation to the other as an interior negation, that is, as a negation which poses the original distinction of the other and myself to the exact

⁴ Sartre: *Existentialisme*, op. cit., 26.

⁵ J.-P. Sartre: *L'être et le néant*, Paris: Gallimard 1943 (1998), 270 (translation – M. Fox-Muratton).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 260.

extent that this relation determines me through the other and determines the other through me”⁷

Nevertheless, it would seem that Sartre fails to develop such a theory. As he writes: “the we-object is never *known*,”⁸ which is to say that “[w]e are never *we* except in the eyes of others [... the] effort to salvage human totality cannot occur without positing the existence of a third party, distinct in principle from humanity.”⁹ And if the we-object is pure external construct, the we-subject is likewise, for Sartre, pure internal construct: “the experience of a we-subject is a pure psychological and subjective event in a singular consciousness.”¹⁰

Beyond the difficulties inherent in thinking how the individual subject could have access to other subjectivities, and beyond that to a collective consciousness, it would seem, in addition, that existential thought seems to presuppose that otherness, or the other, fundamentally represents a danger to the individual. Sartre’s radicalization (following Alexandre Kojève’s reading of Hegel) of the Master-Slave dialectic is certainly symbolic of this danger, but beyond this radicalization existential thought seems to see the other as a source for loss of self or despair, as Kierkegaard (Anti-Climacus) puts it: “another kind of despair seems to permit itself to be tricked out of its self by ‘the others.’”¹¹ Kierkegaard’s critique is aimed, of course, not at others *qua* others, but rather as others seen in their worldliness, in their non-reflective engagements in worldly matters and social conventions. Should we however assume that to “die to the world” (*afdøe*)¹² necessarily means rejecting all understandings of ourselves as moral beings in the world, as beings for whom being-with matters? Kierkegaard’s appeal to solitude seems to suggest this; it would seem that the only means by which the individual could strive to arrive at the subjective truth of existence would be through abstracting himself from the engagements with others in the world which pervert our own self-consciousness and dissuade us from the earnest task of our own spiritual upbuilding. The individual who truly seeks himself – and seeks the truth – must do so in solitude, it would seem. And Kierkegaard/Anti-Climacus suggests that:

“On the whole, the longing for solitude is a sign that there still is spirit in a person and is the measure of what spirit there is ... in the constant sociality of our day we shrink from solitude to the point (what a capital epigram!) that no use for it is known other than as punishment for criminals.”¹³

A life lived in constant sociality would be a life in which the individual spiritual quest could not be fulfilled. And while Kierkegaard certainly does not mean thereby to indicate that absolute solitude and isola-

⁷ Ibid., 271.

⁸ Sartre, *L’être et le néant*, op. cit., 458.

⁹ Ibid., 463.

¹⁰ Ibid., 466.

¹¹ SKS 11, 149 / SUD, 33.

¹² See *The Sickness Unto Death*.

¹³ SKS 11, 178-79 / SUD, 64.

tion from others would be the highest good to be strived for, he suggests nevertheless that “silence is the condition for cultured conversation between man and man.”¹⁴

Kierkegaard of course does not suggest that dying to the world, retiring to the monastery, is the end in itself; to the contrary, he suggests that dying to worldliness is necessary *in order to engage in life* in the right type of way. Such engagement is, however, certainly spiritual in Kierkegaard’s thought, and the movement out of solitude, the movement into community (or at least communion with others), requires Christianity – requires the existence of a God capable of re-establishing the Christian community of the spirit and of allowing individuals to move beyond modes of interaction where they “mutually turn to each other in a frustrating and suspicious, aggressive, leveling reciprocity.”¹⁵ Only Christianity can enable the individual to escape the dangers of aggressive modes of interactions with others, only Christianity can found an understanding of being-with, since only through the asymmetry between man and God can the symmetry of human existences be posited – only through God’s love, Kierkegaard affirms, do we escape the perils of objectifying relationships to others, where our own self-interest and demands for reciprocity inherent in worldly, preferential relationships, dominate; where even in love, our encounter with the other is nothing but “demand (reciprocal love is the demand) and being loved (reciprocal love) ... an earthly good.”¹⁶ True being-with, requires to the contrary that we see others not as objects (either in the world, or of our demands for reciprocity), but rather as *neighbors* (*Næsten*):

“It is in fact Christian love that discovers and knows that the neighbor exists and, what is the same thing, that everyone is the neighbor. If it were not a duty to love, the concept ‘neighbor’ would not exist either; but only when one loves the neighbor, only then is the selfishness in preferential love rooted out and the equality of the eternal preserved.”¹⁷

Outside of Christianity, Kierkegaard suggests, others, and more especially the “public,” represent a danger to the individual’s selfhood, a danger of losing oneself in the world. If the other represents a danger to the individual, it is because the most common modes by which the individual engages with others – be they aesthetic or ethical – lead one away from oneself, and represent therefore the possibility of failing to become an agent or a person. The aesthete remains purely drawn in by the immediacy of his worldly engagements, the philosopher uniquely oriented toward the exteriority of speculative reflection, but neither realizes that true selfhood and true freedom must be an *orientation toward oneself, and toward the question one must answer*, in solitude, on one’s own, *as*

¹⁴ SKS 8, 94 / TA, 99.

¹⁵ SKS 8, 62 / TA, 63.

¹⁶ SKS 9, 238 / WL, 237.

¹⁷ SKS 9, 51 / WL, 44.

a single individual.¹⁸ The *Christian Discourses* underscore this point; as Kierkegaard writes, the true dilemma is the one which engages each of us personally, despite the fact that it seems not to be a question at all:

“Yet you know very well that the most terrible, the most earnest question is the one of which it must be said: There is no one who is asking the question, and yet there is a question – and a question to *you personally*.”¹⁹

Such a question is not one which we freely ask, and may not even be one which we freely answer. For Kierkegaard, however, freedom does not, of course, mean absolute liberty of action, nor the idea that we can always choose otherwise. It may not even mean that we can choose any of our acts at all. What it is that our freedom enables us to choose is not our acts, but our selves; or, as Kierkegaard affirms already in *Either/Or*, with regard to the ethical: “The greatness is not to be this or that but to be oneself, and every human being can be this if he so wills it.”²⁰ Such a choice is the one which must be made *alone*, the one which others cannot help us to make, the one which is radically individuating. Seen in this sense, the ethical is thus not the sphere of shared social existence, but rather very simply the act itself of self-determination. Personhood is thus essentially defined as possibility: possibility to become, openness toward what will be. Despite the tendency to see the ethical as merely a step on the way to the religious, this form of openness is perhaps a prerequisite to faith, as it places the individual before the anguishing idea that he is not ever already himself. None of our past choices, none of our present circumstances or social roles, no institution or higher being can ever replace the absolutely individuating and radically isolating act whereby we must take full responsibility for our own freedom. This is why the aesthete prefers to remain in the instantaneous, why the philosopher prefers to dwell in speculation. But the risk, as Kierkegaard points out, is that by these means we may gain the whole world, yet we will lose ourselves.

It would seem, then, that becoming a self requires that one *distance* himself from the world of others, whose engagement with the individual is always necessarily objectifying: becoming a self or a subject seems to be at odds with the notion itself of being-with. The origin of the problem seems to be situated, as Merleau-Ponty points out in an indirect critique of Heidegger, in the fact that existential philosophy remains to a large extent intellectualist, and forgets or rejects an understanding of the individual person as an incarnated being. As Merleau-Ponty affirms:

“We do not blame reflexive philosophy merely for having transformed the world into a poem, but also for having disfigured the being of the

¹⁸ Recognizing, of course, that Kierkegaard does posit that the choice that one finally makes is not itself indifferent, and that the individual who chooses rightly will ultimately choose the Good – i. e., the Christian.

¹⁹ SKS 10, 243 / CD, 236.

²⁰ SKS 3, 173 / EO2, 177.

thinking 'subject,' understanding it as 'thought,' –and, finally, rendering its relations with other 'subjects' in their shared world unthinkable."²¹

In order to dissociate subject and thought, to think subjectivity as other than pure intellectuality, Merleau-Ponty develops the notion of "flesh" in his unfinished manuscript *The visible and the invisible*. Such an understanding allows for the construction of an understanding of the subject which is fundamentally engaged in the sphere of intersubjective relations, where the solitude or alienation of the objectified/isolated individual proves to be a purely theoretical concept. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, it is essential to understand that "what I am all in all goes beyond what I am for myself, my universality of nothingness is only presumption on my part."²² As such, it is essential to understand that while "there is no positive experience of the other ... there is an experience of my total being as involved in the visible part of myself."²³ But if the *visibility* of our internal existences necessarily leads down to the solitude, if not the solipsism, of isolated selfhood, understanding the individual as a "locus of experiences" (*champ d'expériences*)²⁴ opens up to a way of understanding the world and others as *presence* in which the distinctions between self and other become purely abstract, and in which "the self and the non-self are like the two sides [of being], and that, perhaps, our experience *is* this reversal which situates us far from the 'we,' in the other, in things."²⁵

The question, then, is how we can best arrive at an understanding of the subject or the self as "flesh," how one might best understand the problem of subjectivity outside of or beyond the domain of visibility and thought. And we would suggest that that the best way for rethinking the existential standpoint on subjectivity and its place in the ethical sphere must pass through limit-experiences such as death. As Heidegger points out, the *Sein-zum-Tode* is the limit of being, a form of quotidian but also ultimate alienation with which we are all ultimately confronted. As such, death reveals us to ourselves in our authenticity, but also requires us to rethink the status of being-for and being-with. However, by thinking the *Sein-zum-Tode* from an individual perspective, Heidegger only manages to briefly sketch out a theory of *Mitsein*, without being able to demonstrate how being-with could be anything more than a purely theoretical construction.

Would not the problem, then, be the fact that philosophy itself, as a whole, seems unable to understand death as an experience – since, as an experience which either *is not* experience as such or as the very limit of experience, death does not offer any possibility for conceptualization? While Hegel sees death and negativity as that which links the individual to the universal, the finite to the infinite, and thereby renders

²¹ M. Merleau-Ponty: *Le visible et l'invisible*, Paris: Gallimard 1964, 66 (translation – M. Fox-Muraton).

²² Merleau-Ponty, op. cit., 86–87.

²³ Ibid., 87.

²⁴ Ibid., 147.

²⁵ Ibid., 210.

it possible to speak of being, he simultaneously understands it as an absolute rift.²⁶ In response to Hegel, we might ask whether the negativity of death really ought to be conceptualized, whether we ought not to see that death is itself integrated into life, into lived experience – certainly, as the limit of our experience, or as a limit-experience. For death is not simply a thought experience, part of the life of spirit; it is to the contrary integrated into the ontological structure of life, and is present before our attempts to examine it. And we would suggest as well that if Heidegger seeks to rethink the ontological structure of death, making it into a “phenomenon of life,”²⁷ and suggesting that being-towards-death is the most individuating and authentic experience of our existence, since “[n]o one can take the Other’s dying away from him,”²⁸ it becomes, however, necessary to take the reflection one step further than Heidegger does – as his analysis finally disincarnates even death itself, making it into a mere step on the path of being-towards. Despite his insistence on the fact that the death of others affects us, because we do share a world with them and their simple demise does not constitute an end to this shared experience, Heidegger’s understanding of death reveals itself to be finally non-relational – since death is precisely, in his terms, that through which individualization and totalization of the Dasein become possible. Death is thus, for Heidegger, the ultimate possibility which each Dasein must face *on its own*; as he writes: “death reveals itself as that *possibility which is one’s ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped.*”²⁹

The difficulty, of course, is the fact that death, and more especially one’s own death, not only is not an event for the individual, as Heidegger points out, but more importantly is precisely the limit beyond which thinking the individual in terms other than those of dualism (mind and matter, infinite and finite, spirit and body) seems impossible. Death is the point where the individual ceases to be a “subject” – at least, if we accept the general understanding of subjectivity. Yet we might suggest that this is because we have too often sought to think subjectivity itself from a subjectivist standpoint. And if we assume that a person’s own death is indeed a moment of rupture – after which the person is no longer a thinking, reflective being, capable of desiring, willing, projecting, remembering – we might wonder whether it is simultaneously a moment of rupture in the *intersubjective sphere*. Do we really stop seeing the other lying dead before us as a subject, as a person who perhaps no longer desires and wills but who at the very least had desired and willed, and whose past desires and volition, whose former lived existence, still have a hold on us – a moral duty, might we say, an appeal to our humanity, and an appeal to us as individuals? The lifeless body before us

²⁶ See GWF Hegel: Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, transl. Yirmiyahu Yovel, Princeton: Princeton UP 2005, 128–129.

²⁷ M. Heidegger: *Being and Time*, transl. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, Maiden: Blackwell 2007, 290.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 284.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 294.

does not suddenly become just another object in the world³⁰ – or those who observe it, it is just as much a person as it had been the moment before. And the lifeless body poses a problem both for ontology and for ethics: if for a given individual, one’s own death marks a separation between being and non-being, this separation is valid merely in terms of those qualifications that can be ascribed to being (being *alive*, being a *thinking subject*...), but not definitively – for being dead is still *being*, the dead body is *still present* and existing: being dead is not yet non-being, despite the fact that Kierkegaard and Heidegger both point to the idea that death is an end to the individual’s living, breathing and conscious presence. And this ontological difficulty underscores a fundamental problem for and understanding of *being-with*, as well: the dead who still *are*, and who still *are present*, still engage us in relations of moral reciprocity and duty, still solicit us in many respects – and not merely, as one might suggest, because they hint at our own mortality and our own ultimate end and fate. Heidegger does admit, of course, that though the dead are no longer *with* us, in the sense of still-being in our community of the living, we nevertheless remain with them to some extent through our continued shared remembrances. We would suggest, however, that this is only a superficial understanding of our relation to death and to the dead; if we do have duties to the dead, it is not merely because in some sense they are still-present to us, but rather because their past existence as members of our shared world implies a continued, continuing engagement.

We may note that while Heidegger affirms that *Sein-zum-Tode* reveals the individual’s ownmost potential, and is perhaps the only experience whereby one becomes fully conscious of one’s being-there in the isolation of unshareable experience, Freud suggests to the contrary that it is not our own death that marks us the most, but rather that of others, of those who are near to us. Not only does the death of others mark us, Freud affirms—it also reveals our authenticity and our ethical duties:

“What came into existence beside the dead body of the loved one was not only the doctrine of the soul, the belief in immortality and a powerful source of man’s sense of guilt, but also the earliest ethical commandments.”³¹

In other words, the encounter with death is the origin of the duty not to kill, which Freud sees as the first ethical commandment. In his reflections on man’s understanding of death in modernity, Freud remarks a fundamental discord between the ways in which we speak about death (as necessary ultimate end), and the reality of our engagements with

³⁰ To be fair, Heidegger does note that: “This something which is just-present-at-hand-and-no-more is ‘more’ than a *lifeless* material Thing. In it we encounter something *unalive*, which has lost its life.” (Ibid., 282, § 47). (“Das Nur-noch-Vorhandene ist ‚mehr‘ als ein lebloses materielles Ding. Mit ihm begegnet ein des Lebens verlustig gegangenes Unlebendiges” (p. 238).)

³¹ S. Freud: Thoughts on war and death, in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, transl. J. Strachey et al., Vol XIV, London: The Hogarth Press 1991, 295.

death, which we seek to eliminate from our lives and thought. Despite this, however, Freud insists on the fact that while our own death is something in which we cannot really, truly, believe, the deaths of those near to us reveal that death *acts on our lives*, on life itself: the way in which we relate to the death of others determines the ways in which we relate to ourselves, to others and to the world. In order for this to be the case, however, death has to be seen not as an abstract possibility, neither as an event occurring to some unknown individual, but rather within the concrete context of human relationships. It is the deaths of those that matter to us which enable us to develop some understanding notion of *Mitsein*. And it should be noted that this is true not because the death of others reveal our own mortality, but rather because the death of others is that which affects us the most and reveals the importance of shared experience and intersubjectivity in the constitution of ourselves as selves. Contrary to the inherent subjectivism of the Heideggerian *Sein-zum-Tode*, the death of others reveals to us that we exist as singular and authentic beings *only* within the context of a shared world, and *only* insofar as others exist and matter to us.

Freud thus seeks the origin of moral sentiment, of other-consciousness, outside of rationality, but inherently enrooted in shared intersubjective experience. In this sense, he seems to take up the positions elaborated by Schopenhauer on ethics, an ethics rooted not in rationality or understanding, but rather in the notions of harmony and sympathy naturally existing between living beings. In his chapter “On Ethics” in the *Paralipomena*, Schopenhauer effectively affirms that a true morality can have no other basis than sympathy:

“If one only observes [another’s] suffering, his need, his anxiety, his pain – then we always feel related to him, we sympathize with him – and rather than hatred or contempt, we feel compassion for him, which is the only *agape* (love).”³²

Need, anxiety, pain, suffering: these are, according to Schopenhauer, moments which can open us up to the other, enable us to move beyond our individual perspectives. And insofar as need, pain and anxiety are at once individual and thereby unshareable experiences, but also experiences which are common to all men, they not only *can* be understood as experiences, but can also open us up to an understanding of the Other. If illness, misery and death are determining/determinate conditions of our lived existence, they do not necessarily entail an absolute determinism or isolation within our individual selves. Schopenhauer is often taxed with extreme pessimism in his thinking of the human condition, of course; but we might suggest that this critique is quite unjustified – if Schopenhauer does see material, physical existence as a state of suffering, he also remarks that: “[The idea] that the world only has physical, and not moral, signification, is the greatest, the most pernicious, the fundamental error,

³² A. Schopenhauer: *Parerga und Paralipomena II, Sämtliche Werke*, B. V, Suhrkamp 1986, 240 (translation – M. Fox-Muratton).

the true perversity of the mind.”³³ What suffering, death, and alienation should enable us to understand is that we exist within a moral world, a shared sphere which gives meaning to our existence – not, as Sartre will later affirm, in the sense that it is the value-judgments of others that make us what we are, but rather in the sense that the very fact that our experiences are *not* absolutely unique and singular proves that there is something *more than* our existence as singular individuals: that there is a reality to the notion of community, a reality that is not merely a fictitious social construct, but which is intrinsic to the nature of life itself.

What Schopenhauer, Freud, and others bring to the forefront, is essentially that the foundation of ethics or of *being-with* are of course dependent upon our ability to see or perceive others – and yet, at the same time, that the concept of recognition, in its traditional sense, often comes down to *not seeing*: not seeing the other in his otherness. Merleau-Ponty makes a similar point in his critique of traditional philosophical models; as he remarks:

“For a philosophy which situates itself in pure vision, quick overview, there can be no encounter with others – since the glance dominates, it can only dominate things, and if it falls on men, it transforms them into dummies moved only by springs.”³⁴

Visibility cannot, Merleau-Ponty suggests, be assimilated purely with vision – seeing requires a more comprehensive model of understanding the individual as an embodied being, within a shared intersubjective space. And we might suggest precisely that though suffering, death and alienation often situate the individual within the limits of his singular experience, it is precisely for this reason that they offer us a means of opening up to a new understanding of personhood – as limit-experiences, they oblige us to rethink our understanding of the notion of subject itself.

Levinas makes a similar argument, in his understanding of the face (*le visage*) as that which immediately implies the ethical relation of being-with. For Levinas, seeing the face of the Other is an immediate act of perception of the other in his otherness – otherness which becomes however communication or communicability, positioning of the individual within the sphere of shared existence. Yet Levinas’s analysis also falls under the critique offered of Heidegger and existential philosophy in general – if Levinas insists on the possibility of immediate perception of otherness, he nevertheless suggests that language offers the only possibility of moving beyond our individual enrootedness in our subjective positions. What ought we to make, then, of situations in which communication through language acts becomes impossible? What happens when we are confronted with death, alienation and pain – experiences which render us incapable of speaking? As interesting as Levinas’s rethinking of ethics may be, the problem they pose is that of what to

³³ Ibid., 238.

³⁴ M. Merleau-Ponty: *Le visible et l’invisible*, Paris: Gallimard 1964, 107 (translation – M. Fox-Muratton).

make of situations when experiences of immediate perception fail; in other words, Levinas is unable to think “beyond the face” (*au-delà du visage*).³⁵ For Levinas presupposes that our ability to perceive others and to thereby be projected into the ethical sphere depend on the fact that we, as individuals, are already self-sufficient, developed subjects. When Levinas describes the “*au-delà de l'éthique*,” he only does so, however, in terms of the erotic – which is, as he remarks:

“Neither knowledge, nor power. In sensual delight, the other – the feminine – withdraws back into its mystery. The relation to him is a relation to an absence.”³⁶

It would seem, then, that beyond the face, there is nothing – only the absence of relation given through desire and sensual delight – or as Heidegger affirms, the individual’s “ownmost possibility is *non-relational*.”³⁷ Delight or death – the contrast is striking, and the distance separating Levinas from Heidegger radical, and yet in both cases, it would seem that extreme experiences necessarily lead back to the radical isolation of the individual, the impossibility of thinking being-with as other than a mere accessory, an inessential addition to the necessarily singular nature of authentic subjectivity.

We would suggest, then, that a return to Kierkegaard might enable us to move beyond this contradiction, and to rethink the role of ethics in a more satisfactory manner. This may seem surprising, as Kierkegaard himself is often cited as the thinker of radical subjectivity, of the Individual (*den Enkelte*), and even more so since Heidegger’s reflections on death are largely inspired by Kierkegaard’s works. However, we may note that there is a major difference in the way in which Kierkegaard and Heidegger get at the topic. Indeed, Heidegger makes a reverse move from that offered in Kierkegaard’s works – whereas Kierkegaard *begins*, in his writings on death and the relation to the dead, with a portrayal of singularity to move *toward* a notion of communion with others,³⁸ Heidegger, in his thinking of death, begins with the collective to move toward the singular. The result is that Heidegger closes the door to an understanding of *Mitsein*; being-with appears only to have value in our pre-singularized, if not anonymous, worldly engagements – it is something to be moved beyond if we are to strive toward authentic existence. Kierkegaard’s works, and particularly his reflections on death and on our relations to the dead, offer a radically different way of understanding “authentic” subjectivity. While singular individuality is certainly important, a move beyond our pre-subjective pure engagement in worldly mat-

³⁵ Title of section IV of *Totalité et infini*.

³⁶ E. Levinas: *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l'extériorité*, Paris: Kluwer Academic 2008, 309 (translation – M. Fox-Muratton).

³⁷ Heidegger, op. cit., 308.

³⁸ This is particularly apparent in relation to Kierkegaard’s two main analyses of death: on the one hand, the Graveside discourse (1845), on the other, the penultimate discourse in *Works of Love*, “The Work of Love in recollecting One Who is Dead” (1847).

ters, Kierkegaard's Christian perspective incites him to make a further move, and to think personhood in terms of the individual's engagement *with others in the world*. For Kierkegaard, it is of course a communion of spirit, more than a worldly community of human individuals. And yet, this communion of spirit is determinate in the individual's reappropriation of proper modes of engagement in the world. Such engagement enables us to rethink the ethical stance, and the theories of value themselves that enable us to engage with others. As Kierkegaard writes in the *Christian Discourses*:

“Thus the goods of the spirit are in themselves essentially communication; their acquirement, their possession, in itself a benefaction to all. ... This is the humanity of spiritual goods in contrast to the inhumanity of earthly goods. What is humanity [*Menneskelighed*]? Human likeness [*menneskelige Lighed*] or equality [*Ligelighed*]. Even at the moment when he most seems to be working for himself in acquiring these goods, he is communicating; it lies in the very essence of the goods, their possession is communication.”³⁹

As opposed to mere worldly goods, the goods of spirit are those that found the possibility of being-with others, and found our ethical relations to others through the recognition of the ideals of humanity and equality.

How, then, does death or alienation enable us to arrive at such a notion of being-with? While Kierkegaard's first discourse on death, “At a Graveside,” insists on the fact that the confrontation with death leads us to a higher understanding of ourselves – “Death can expressly teach that the earnestness lies in the inner being, in thought, can teach that it is only an illusion when the external is regarded light-mindedly or heavy-mindedly or when the observer, profoundly considering the thought of death, forgets to think about and take into *his own death*”⁴⁰ – the point of view he elaborates in *Works of Love* demonstrates to the contrary that it is through the act of recollecting, by “go[ing] to the dead once again, in order *there* to take an aim at life” that one may come to an understanding not merely of oneself and one's inner being, but also of life itself.⁴¹ What is to be learned through such an excursion? Kierkegaard's response is precisely that the dead teach us something about human nature and human kinship:

“If you are dizzy from continually looking at and hearing about life's dissimilarities – among ‘the kin of clay’ there is no distinction, but only the close kinship. That all human beings are blood relatives, that is, of one blood, this kinship of life is so often disavowed in life; but that they are of one clay, this kinship of death, this cannot be disavowed.”⁴²

What the dead reveal is finally the equality of our human condition, that despite the facticity (biological or social) which differentiates us in

³⁹ SKS 10, 128 / CD, 117.

⁴⁰ SKS 5, 444 / TDIO, 73 (our emphasis).

⁴¹ SKS 9, 339 / WL, 345.

⁴² SKS 9, 339 / WL, 345.

life from others, all of these differences (being rich or poor, healthy or sickly) all come down to nothing; that the end is the same for all, that our final resting place is the same, that the particularities which distinguish us in our worldly existences, and to which we attribute so much import in our everyday lives, are merely futile and passing attributes.

Death, then, seems to found the possibility for ethical relation, for an understanding of human kinship fundamental to engaging with others in the right type of way. For though Heidegger certainly takes up Kierkegaard's reflections when analyzing how death *discloses* individuality, reveals the Dasein to itself in its ownmost possibilities and authenticity, Heidegger neglects the fact that when Kierkegaard insists on the fact that, when recollecting the dead, it is "the one who is living [who is] disclosed,"⁴³ the way *in which* the living one is disclosed is *not* to himself, but rather to those observing him who are able to determine thereby the quality of his modes or relating to others.⁴⁴ Relating to the dead reveals us not merely as singular individuals, but first and foremost as individuals engaged in the sphere of collective engagements and duties. "We certainly do have duties also to the dead," Kierkegaard writes.⁴⁵ These duties are not higher, of course, than our duties toward the living – Kierkegaard insists on the fact that "it is our duty to love the people we do not see but also those we do see"⁴⁶ – nevertheless, their disclosure is perhaps more fundamental, since only in relating to the dead, in assuming our duties to the dead, can we arrive at the certainty that our engagements are disinterested. Only in relating to the dead, who cannot reciprocate, cannot answer back or give us guidance, can we be certain that our actions are not merely selfish demands for repayment that we do not act out of our own self-interest, as we often do in worldly interactions. Only in relating to the dead can we be sure that we are, first and foremost, intersubjective beings for whom *being-with* matters, and matters absolutely. And as such, Kierkegaard suggests that contrary to the *earnestness* of death which teaches us to know our own singularities, to see ourselves as isolated individuals – which he describes in "At a Graveside" – there is a higher form of earnestness, which resides not in death itself, but rather in our ways of relating to the dead, in our love for those who are deceased (as well as for the living). As he writes in *Works of Love*:

"Death is not earnest in the same way as the eternal is. To the earnestness of death belong that remarkable capacity for awakening, this resonance of a profound mockery that, detached from the thought of the eternal, is an empty, often brazen jest, but together with the thought of the eternal is just what it should be and is utterly different from the insipid earnestness that least of all captures and holds a thought that has the tension the thought of death has."⁴⁷

⁴³ SKS 9, 341 / WL, 347.

⁴⁴ SKS 9, 341 / WL, 347.

⁴⁵ SKS 9, 341 / WL, 347.

⁴⁶ SKS 9, 351 / WL, 358.

⁴⁷ SKS 9, 346-347 / WL, 353.

Death's earnestness is indeed, as the Graveside discourse attests, the knowledge that we are: "Alone because that is indeed what death makes [us] when the grave is closed."⁴⁸ Yet there is something higher than this knowledge of our solitude or aloneness, there is something higher than the earnestness of death – and that is the earnestness which stems from the knowledge that we *are not alone*, that we are not isolated existences thrown blindly into the world and forced thereafter to struggle toward death for our own authenticity (Heidegger) or to our deaths for recognition (Sartre).

If death, or alienation, are thus able to open us up to intersubjective experiences, to a notion of being-with, it is important to note that these are however not important so much in themselves, as they are relevant to what they reveal about those who understand them in the right type of way. As Kierkegaard notes, what death reveals is finally none other than love – the ways in which one (who is living) relates to those who are dead reveal the capacity for love that resides in the person. Gabriel Marcel makes a similar point, linking love to death: "To love someone is to say: you will not die."⁴⁹ For Marcel, love is that act whereby one refuses to recognize, or perhaps becomes incapable of recognizing, death's annihilating power. And in that sense, death is not the revelation of individuality or of singularity, the manifestation of the Dasein's ownmost potential, as Heidegger suggests, but rather that which founds an understanding of being-with as a promise for eternity. And such promise is not merely oneiric wish: it is, first and foremost, the opening up of the notion of subjectivity – openness to new ways of seeing others as counting absolutely within the sphere of shared existence.

Beyond solitude, then, there is love – beyond solitude, there is togetherness. And for Kierkegaard, togetherness and being-with are necessary for one to engage in existence in the right type of way, since only togetherness and kinship can help us understand that human existence, for all its difficulties, is not merely a trial we must withstand, a source of pain and suffering, but is also, first and foremost, the possibility of joyous investment in the world. Those who live in solitude, or those persons who merely seek the companionship of the suffering, like the "Συμπαρανεκρώμενοι" community,⁵⁰ may see solitude as the highest good, since solitude appears at least to be more hidden, more interior, more difficult to attain than joy. As Kierkegaard/"A" writes in the first book of *Either/Or*, "Joy is communicative, sociable, open, wishes to express itself. Sorrow is inclosingly reserved [*indesluttet*], silent, solitary, and seeks to return into itself."⁵¹ Yet the privilege that the community of those who wish to die award to solitude remains ambiguous, since while there is certainly truth to the fact that solitude, isolation and death

⁴⁸ SKS 5, 458 / TDIO, 89.

⁴⁹ G. Marcel: *Le mystère de l'être: Foi et réalité*, vol. 2, Paris: Aubier 1981, 154–155 (translation – M. Fox-Muraton).

⁵⁰ See SKS 2, 137ff / EO1, 137 ff.

⁵¹ SKS 2, 167 / EO1, 169.

reveal one to oneself, disclose one's interiority or innermost being, they can only do so at a loss; as the aesthete acknowledges:

“If the individual is isolated [*Er Individet isoleret*], then either he is absolutely the creator of his own fate, and then there is nothing tragic anymore, but only evil ... or the individuals are merely modifications of the eternal substance of life, and so once again the tragic is lost.”⁵²

Beyond solitude, however, there is communion – beyond solitude, there is communication. And if solitude may then be a necessary step on the path to kinship and communication, Kierkegaard insists on the fact that it is merely a step. For contrary to the affirmation made in *Either/Or* that joy is immediately disclosed whereas sorrow hides from observation, in the discourse “The Lily of the Field and the Bird in the Air” Kierkegaard suggests that becoming joyous is a task, requires learning, and is thus not immediate, but rather that which needs to be strived for. Becoming joyous must be learned through observation – through observation of others, through observation of the lily or the bird, who can teach us “what it is to be a human being and what religiously is the requirement for being a human being.”⁵³ Yet such lessons are obviously not ones that can simply be transmitted and indoctrinated – to the contrary, Kierkegaard insists on the fact that no truth about what is essentially human can be taught or transferred from one generation to another; as he/de Silentio notes in *Fear and Trembling* – “Whatever one generation learns from another, no generation learns the essentially human from a previous one.”⁵⁴ No one can learn from another, no one can learn the essentially human from past generations, no useful textbooks can be written that can instruct us on how we ought to act, that can teach us “the essentially human [which] is passion.”⁵⁵ And yet we do learn, to learn is indeed our highest task. And moreover we learn from others. What we learn is however not learnt “all at once,” but is rather that which we can only learn “little by little,” again and again, the task of our lives’ efforts.⁵⁶ And what we learn by observing – what it is to be human – Kierkegaard defines through three essential modes of relating (to oneself, to the truth, to the world, to facticity, to God): “silence, obedience, [and] joy!”⁵⁷

Silence, obedience, joy – what it is to be a human being is to be engaged upon a path, a path leading to understanding, and which can only arrive at full comprehension if one accepts to follow it according to its own inherent structure. For there can be no coming into existence, Kierkegaard suggests, if one does not first take the necessary step of forgetting oneself, becoming as nothing, dying to the world, so that one might afterward learn to obediently submit to the facticity of existence and (in

⁵² SKS 2, 158–159 / *EOI*, 160. (Danish added.)

⁵³ SKS 11,10 / *WA*, 3.

⁵⁴ SKS 4, 208 / *FT*, 121.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ SKS 11, 10 / *WA*, 3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

the Christian sense) the duty toward God, which is the freeing servitude whereby we can begin anew, joyously engage in a world where our senses are engaged in the pure presence of the present. In other words, it is only by dying to the world, to our first immediacy (of the aesthetic-ethical spheres) that a new immediacy of inwardness or interiority becomes possible, where “you” fully understands: “that you came into existence, that you exist, that *today* you receive what is necessary for life; that you came into existence, that you became a human being; that you can see, bear in mind that you can see, that you can hear, that you can smell, that you can taste, that you can feel.”⁵⁸ Yet such an immediacy of inwardness, for Kierkegaard, is not solitude. Rather, it is the joy which stems from the understanding that we are not alone in the world, that we exist before God *and* before others, that we do have duties to others – those we do not see, but also those we do see – and that our engagement in the world, with others, is the highest good of human existence. Solitude, isolation, or confrontation with death may, then, lead to authentic selfhood, but they cannot lead to *authentic existence*. For such authentic existence is only possible, Kierkegaard suggests, because we do exist in a world with others, because we can engage joyously in our lives, because the presence of the present is shared experience. Should we neglect this primordial fact, we would indeed be condemned to solipsism. Yet Kierkegaard encourages us not to look inward for meaning, but rather to look outward. He encourages us not to look vaguely at the nothingness that apparently surrounds us, as Frater Taciturnus describes the act of vain soul-searching.⁵⁹ As opposed to this move of thinking’s redoubling upon itself, which is indeed the meaninglessness or triviality of the contemplation of nothingness, Kierkegaard encourages us to the contrary to become as nothing so that our sight may move away from ourselves and toward God, toward communion and kinship, toward the world. What is to be discovered, if we are able to do so, is the richness of a world filled with the works of love, the joys of existence, the communicative possibilities, and the promises of the present, which are there for us, which are disclosed in the sphere of shared existence, and which are visible, if only we first understand that we are not alone in the world.

⁵⁸ SKS 11, 10 / WA, 3.

⁵⁹ See SKS 6, 331/ SLW, 356–357.