

One Beat More: Existentialism and the gift of mortality

Kevin Aho, 2022. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Making Death Thinkable

Franco De Masi. 2004. London: Free Association Books.

*No one sees death,
No one sees the face of death,
No one hears the voice of death,
But cruel death cuts off mankind.*

The Epic of Gilgamesh

Surely, by now, a few thousand years after the Mesopotamians started writing about it, we must be running out of things to say about death. Amazon suggests there are over 60,000 books that have something to do with death. Google offers a more daunting 302 million books. Even if you weed out those just using the word metaphorically or incidentally, it is a very big number. And of course, that does not include all the academic papers, magazine articles, poems and podcasts. Or book reviews.

This started me wondering if there might come a time when, as a species, we have nothing more to add to death literature. Perhaps that will be in the year...let's say...5317. It may be that by then there are 681 million books about death. Or thereabouts. The last book, or blog, or TikTok on the subject will be published and humanity will finally just give up on it. Of course, by then, perhaps people will not die anymore; or we will be eternal ghosts in some machine; or we will have long since become extinct following a catastrophic global event.

Well, we are not there yet. And death remains enough of a universal preoccupation to keep us writing and publishing words about death as if there were no tomorrow.

The two relatively slender books reviewed here represent different approaches to thinking about death. In Kevin Aho's case, he weaves together a personal account of his own heart attack with other individual stories of death and dying, framed by the perspectives of the usual suspects of existentialism, as well as other writers and thinkers. For Franco De Masi, the style is not personal (though he brings in several case studies) and his conceptual universe is largely psychoanalytic, even though Nietzsche, Heidegger and Jaspers make some brief appearances. Together, they offer the contrasts one might expect from the phenomenological and psychoanalytic discourses.

Aho's book, *One Beat More*, considers his heart attack in the context of a human living, embedded in our frequent preoccupations with control, activity, identity, aloneness, physical health, meaning and time. His writing

flows naturally from one topic to the next in a gentle river of wisdom culled from everyone from the Buddha to other cardiac patients. It is like floating slowly downstream on a warm summer's day, an impression which I suspect misrepresents what was an acute and distressing lived experience at moments.

The grip of death only really comes to life, if I can put it that way, in his descriptions of his hospital experiences, such as when a dangerous blood clot was found a week after the heart attack: "Each night was a din of buzzers, beeps, blood tests, and vital sign checks. I slept in fits and starts" (p2). Or after waking up from a panicky dream of being strapped to a hospital bed and then realising he is just that: "I was alone in the dark, immobile, strapped to a hospital bed. A desperate feeling of loneliness washed over me, and I was terrified" (p84). In reading about these moments, so was I.

Otherwise, for a book arising from an unexpected sudden brush with death, it is a surprisingly soothing and erudite meditation. Its drifting currents carry us past encouragements for living life as if it were to die for: enjoying the "ripe fruit of the here and now" (p12); living each day earnestly as if it were the first and last of our lives (Kierkegaard); letting go of our ego-driven stories in favour of an openness to the mystery of existence (Heidegger); slowing down, stilling ourselves and befriending our own boredom (Pascal, Marcel and just about everyone else); and practising gratitude and humility (Nietzsche and Dostoevsky). He considers the diminishments and choices we face in old age while "the space of our lives begins to shrink" (p58), and asks us (alongside de Beauvoir, Camus, Nietzsche and others) to rebel against the conventional ageist narratives of Western society. And with the help of Arendt, Fromm and Buber, he describes the feelings of aloneness and isolation that death may bring into the foreground.

In the end, it is the denial of death that Aho points to as the most debilitating of human diseases, as exemplified by Tolstoy's Ivan Ilych, in which emotionally and medically we attempt to ignore "that we are no longer, in Sartre's words, 'the being who hurls himself toward the future' because the future is gone" (p117). And Aho quotes a sentence you may not want to find yourself saying, as Ilych does, towards the end of your days: "Maybe I did not live as I should have" (p118).

In the later stage of life, the better option, suggests Aho, is to ignore Dylan Thomas' raging against the dying light and to follow Heidegger, Oliver Sacks, Hindus and a group of eighty-year-old Finnish gerontological study participants on a path of detachment and merger with nothingness, to accept "the underlying mystery and unsettledness of existence" (p123).

All in all, I found Aho's book to be a warm and comforting book related

to a personal experience that sounds anything but that. Ironically perhaps, it may be that his writing helps me to postpone my death in some way, at least by soothing my death anxiety with a variety of potential strategies from a wide range of sources. It is a little odd that his account of death, while it arises from a sudden and shocking incident at a relatively young age, is mainly concerned with the process of ageing slowly towards death in old age. I wonder about experiences and strategies for the rapid, painful or too-early death that some face (perhaps in the wars in Ukraine or Myanmar, or in the meaner streets of Memphis or Detroit). And as the title also hints at, in the idea of the ‘gift’ of mortality, it does not address the ‘choice’ of mortality: suicide.

Suicide, as one manifestation of Freud’s death instinct, is never far from the psychoanalytic mind. Franco De Masi’s *Making Death Thinkable* is less personal in tone but wider in scope than Aho’s, bringing in not only the impulse towards self-annihilation but topics such as midlife crisis, mourning, psychoanalysis in old age and the psychotic’s awareness of death, as well as briefly touching on some existentialist ideas.

De Masi sets out to explore psychoanalytic theory on death, especially in the unconscious, and the inner resources we might use to think about it and face it. He also brings in the way it “pervades our relationships, all of which are marked by separation and mourning” (p21). As with Aho’s search for ‘releasement’, De Masi’s desire for “a way to free ourselves partially from the mystery and pain of solitude *vis-à-vis* death” (p26) may itself reflect our human inability to face death square on, rather than looking just a little bit to the side of it.

De Masi’s book is less of a flowing river and more a series of small ponds; he takes a quick dip in many waters. In one he is considering our tendency to ignore or deny our own death; in the next he is distinguishing dread and panic as forms of death anxiety; and in the next he discusses Freud’s and Klein’s views on the death instinct, and more recent views on self-annihilation as a response to trauma or defence against depressive pain.

For the existentialist reader, De Masi professes an affinity for Heidegger’s understanding of death as the closest possibility to living and death anxiety as an emotion that accompanies our authenticity. Jaspers gets a mention in the context of our thirst for eternity as a form of hope or inspiration, and Merleau-Ponty is quoted briefly without comment: “Neither my birth nor my death can feel as my own experiences” (p119). He also refers to Nietzsche’s vision of humans as chained to their past in a way that other animals are not. Otherwise, the book is mainly concerned with the work of Freud, Klein, Winnicott and their more recent successors. Like Aho, De Masi makes use of Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilych* in a chapter that is only a summary of the story, with a brief suggestion at the end that the

novel is a metaphor for the anxiety of the mid-life crisis.

De Masi concludes that psychoanalysis may help us confront our finitude by finding meaning, reappraising and integrating our past, mourning, tolerating our aloneness, accepting life's mystery and finiteness, and projecting our individual potential into hope for the collective potential of the people, institutions and values close to us that will live beyond our death. While I experienced the analytic theorising as arcane and unfounded, and the structure of the book as disjointed and lacking in a cumulative impact, De Masi does bring together a wide range of psychoanalytic thought to bear on the many ways in which death will make an appearance in therapy, which may be helpful for those who practice in that way.

As I have suggested at the start, these two books certainly won't be the last words on death – we need at least another few thousand years for that – but they do offer some ideas, stories and provocations to help and distract us on our own way towards that silent, invisible and faceless end.

Andrew Miller

Dialogues on the Renaissance of Daseinsanalysis: What does 'existential' really mean?

Prof. Miles Groth & Prof. Tamás Fazekas. Kyle Glover (ed). 2021. London: SEA.

In 1921, Martin Heidegger wrote a letter to the philosopher, and his former student, Karl Löwith, saying that his philosophical way of working came out of the “lived experience” that is accessible to him, as he put it, and that it came “from out of my ‘I am’”. I mention this because it raises one of a number of issues. A central one is the question of how to approach the reading of letters, correspondences and conversations, whether personal and private, or public and open, and how to place them. For one thing, Heidegger's language in 1921 was different to that of the language with which we are familiar in his 1927 publication of *Being and Time*. That is to say, the above quotes sound very Cartesian and incongruent when compared with his subsequent writings in that same decade. Nevertheless, it still strikes me as important to note that Heidegger expressed himself differently in his letters than he did in more formal philosophical texts and lectures. Perhaps this is no great surprise. But we also take into account that his correspondent, in this case, Löwith, was a relevant factor in what (and how) Heidegger wrote in his letters to him. I had these thoughts in mind as I read Miles Groth and Tamás Fazekas' correspondence over twenty-five email dialogues.

As a more recent addition to the several dialogues that have already been published by the SEA, here we follow two prominent Daseinsanalysts

pondering the questions and challenges that Daseinsanalysis now faces in our time. This is perhaps a reflection of the fact that every psychotherapy is historical, rather than being a set of eternal, timeless facts and truths, and that it too needs to, amongst other things, absorb and reflect on the enormous changes and upheavals that mould, shape and reconfigure factual life as it is lived. As our current epoch's technological understanding of being progressively erodes, or corrodes, Earth in its necessary strife with world, the crucial and central question of what it 'means' to be our kind of being is urgently pressing upon us. This, in case we have forgotten, and, furthermore, have forgotten that we have forgotten, is the very question that re-turns us again to the beginning of *Being and Time*.

In their reflections, Groth and Fazekas cover a vast range of ideas and concerns that preoccupy them, entering into both agreement and respectful disagreement throughout the exchanges that complete this short publication. They each venture, much like Hölderlin did in his journey to 'far-off lands', in offering their own interpretations on topics that relate to Daseinsanalysis, and then waiting in anticipation for the other's response. They agree that Daseinsanalysis needs to undergo its own renaissance, and here they try to put this to work through their own shared attempts to think aloud, and to see where this might take them. As a reader, I found myself moving between a reading of these dialogues as introductory summaries of Heidegger's thinking, mainly from the 1927 text but also from the *Zollikon Seminars*, and at other times reminding myself that these are letters, dialogues and that I should be more relaxed in my overall approach. For example, Fazekas uses the term 'authenticity' a number of times in his offerings, which made me wonder whether to hold him to task for his seeming use of it in a more everyday sense (as honest, principled, sincere, consistent, for example), than Heidegger's *vorlaufende Entschlossenheit* (1962 [1927]: 370). But this is an example of the very challenges that we all face if we claim ourselves to be drawing on Heidegger's ideas and language as therapists or Daseinsanalysts.

My own numerous pencil markings in the margins throughout this text include the difficulty of holding in view the ontological-existential and ontic-existential, and not confusing the two, nor – and here is the real difficulty – overlooking the fact that they are inseparable. But overall, I am grateful to both authors that they ventured into something that feels timely and also precarious.

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References

Heidegger, M. (1962 [1927]). *Being and Time*. Trans. Macquarrie, J. & Robinson, E. Oxford: Blackwell.