


Death: One's Ownmost Possibility (Freedom) or a Social Event? An Exploration of the Works of Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas

Anthony Kwaku Boakye ¹ 

¹ Department of Philosophy and Classics, University of Ghana.



ABSTRACT

This study explored the works of Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas and how they both approached the subject of death, as to whether death should be understood in the context of one's ownmost possibility or just a social event. This paper examined the notion of death as construed by both Levinas and Heidegger and how it might help to understand the nature of the world, especially the question of how one dies. The methodology used in this study is qualitative. The understanding of death according to Heidegger has been grounded in his concept of *Dasein* the basic fact of our existence. Due to this, *Dasein* must live an authentic life through the recognition of mortality. Levinas strongly argues that to be responsible for the Other is deep-rooted in one's subjective makeup. Hence, to meet the Face of the Other is to have the notion of meeting a Being in eternity. This is when one philosophizes beyond oneself by going beyond the limits of what the mind can tell. That goes beyond what Edmund Husserl and Heidegger emphasized, the phenomenon of being (the being of subjects and objects). In a sense, one goes beyond history and consciousness where even in death it is not only the I that dies but also the Other. This means death now becomes a relational activity. The death of the Other is the death of the entire community. This study will contribute to the scholarly understanding that one dies alone.

Correspondence

Anthony Kwaku Boakye
Email: aboakye@ug.edu.gh/
aboakye82@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

It can be said that from Plato to current thinkers like Albert Camus, death is a necessary condition of passing from one state to another, which is an essential component of human experience. Several thinkers have expressed different perspectives on death. Despite this, it is also a challenging, complex reality we must accept as a natural phenomenon. The reality of death has always been a concern for humanity. This has led mankind to resort to finding out the secret of immortality as a way of avoiding death. Martin Heidegger can be considered the most prolific thinker who addresses death, immortality, life after death, and more importantly, the kind of death one goes through. He believes that one becomes aware of one's finitude. Humankind is fatally worried and affected by this original possibility of life's reality which threatens humanity.

Undoubtedly, Emmanuel Levinas is one of the greatest contemporary thinkers; his thoughts have been profound even beyond the scope of philosophy. Careful consideration and deliberation are normally taken for granted in a daily encounter with the Other. At the heart of Levinas' philosophy is the "Other."

This can best be accomplished on the subjective level between the “other” and the “Other” as individuals. Levinas aims to find out the place of the Other and this can be possible, only at the manifestation of the Face where the infinite meets the “I”. The infinite now becomes the beginning of ethical discourse. It is the exterior part of the Other’s being which is completely and wholly Other that needs the attention of the I. Based on this background, this paper seeks to explore the meaning of death. This will be done by comparing the thoughts of Heidegger and Levinas and critically analyzing which would be more meaningful to contemporary society. The study will decide which of the two concepts of dying could be meaningful for humanity. This the author calls dying with a purpose.

Death as Interpreted by Martin Heidegger

Martin Heidegger initiated a radical way of thinking different from traditional thinking or philosophizing.¹ His way of thinking challenged the fundamental basis of Western philosophy, especially the long-accepted conception of logic and truth. By this he focused on asking not about its content of existence, but the primordial condition that enables existence to be. He calls this “Being” the condition for all life to be. Hence, Dasein means “the to be” or “being there or there being.”² So, the question of the meaning of being also means to question what it means to be. Being must not be construed to mean God or abstract noun or entity, the universe, or anything in it. Since we cannot have a day without night, so also, cannot have the notion of Being without beings. In the end, each needs the other to make sense.

Primarily, death means to die or an act of dying. The understanding of death implies giving meaning to one’s existence. According to Heidegger, an understanding of death entails an understanding of what it means to exist as a Being, where to exist authentically and inauthentically becomes the concern of Dasein. These two figures are profoundly in Heidegger’s work on death. The existence of Dasein depends upon how Dasein is thrown out into the world and of course, it projects itself. The projection that Dasein makes could be falling. However, what is important here is that whenever Dasein makes such a projection upon himself, it is just a matter of being aware of itself. This is due to the fact it sees itself as incomplete. It is therefore death that brings to completion the existence of Dasein. What this means is that when one can understand the relation of Dasein’s death, it will help one to understand the entirety of Dasein. But the philosophical question here is can Dasein experience its death? In other words, is death one’s ownmost possibility or a social event? This is possible when one understands his or her death through an encounter with others. The experience of the death of others is usually born out of mourning, and sorrow partly because there is a complete absence of the departed friend or neighbour. Can such an experience be an experience of being with the person who had died?

As Heidegger explains further: Death does certainly show itself as a loss, but such a loss is experienced by those who remain. In suffering this loss, however, we have no access to what loss one suffers from. Genuinely, one does not experience the dying person, rather one is just there alongside one’s death.³ This shows that Dasein's lostness means that one has no access to that Being anymore because of the person’s suffering. Heidegger’s move suggests that Dasein cannot experience its death but rather a possibility that awaits or sets itself before it. Death, therefore, becomes an unavoidable possibility that everyone must encounter.⁴ Therefore, awareness of death presents itself from the very day a person is thrown into the world. This stops the phenomenological analysis simply because it is inseparably linked to the being of each person. In this case, one’s death sorely belongs to the person and not the other. It puts an end to one’s relations with others. Heidegger uses the non-relationality of one’s death as ‘ownmost’ to mean that one dies his or her death.⁵ This awareness of one’s ownmost possibility exposes to Dasein whether Dasein is authentic to itself or not. That is a self that only the “I” have supreme power over or a self that is mine and not for the other. It is because of this awareness that likening one with one’s Dasein is an inevitable possibility.

¹ Michael Watts, *The Philosophy of Heidegger* (Routledge, 2014), 13.

² Watts, *The Philosophy of Heidegger*, 24.

³ Martin Heidegger, John Macquarrie, and Edward Schouten Robinson, *Being and Time... Translated by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson. (First English Edition.)* (London, 1962), 282.

⁴ Watts, *The Philosophy of Heidegger*; 95; Heidegger, *Being and Time... Translated by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson. (First English Edition)*, 307.

⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 294.

In Heidegger's view, being-toward-death brings about two modes of being that are authentic and inauthentic modes of being. As regards the authentic mode of being, one projects the possibilities upon oneself with full awareness of creating a personal agency to be. By this, the authentic way of death occurs through anticipation. In other words, by anticipation, one is aware of the possibility of death. That is why Heidegger says that: Anticipation discloses to Dasein its lostness in the they-self and brings it face to face with the opportunity of being itself as well as freedom towards death.⁶

Usually, it is least considered how the anticipation is revealed. Mankind only anticipates death when one is struck down by a serious disease such that there is no avenue to reverse the situation, only then does one anticipate one's death. Since death authentically shows itself and not in projection this can be seen as the first dimension of care and the second dimension of care will be the thrownness. The impossibility of death is born out of anxiety which Heidegger is interested in. This is because of the lack of awareness of its authentic possibilities, making Dasein not of itself.

Inauthentic occurs when one is unable to create his or her meaning, but rather lives according to what others dictate and it becomes evident the moment Dasein is thrown into the world. The fear of death discloses one's death to the possibility of the world in which the self is not. For instance, if one expects the taste of an ice cream, the person expects it to taste in a certain kind of way. The mere fact of expecting such a taste means that one actively and consciously is aware of and is ready to have such a taste. By this, one possesses the taste accepted based on the desired expectation. In the same vein, an expectation of dying is to own one's death. As finite beings, it is this existential characteristic that defines one's existence. And so, the fundamental element to live authentically is the confrontation of one's being as a finite being that is always on a journey towards death. Whenever Heidegger talks about death, he means to be a way of being that is always towards death.⁷ As a way of being, death is not an event; but rather a singularity that needs to be understood.⁸

Care is another element of Dasein which is grounded in mortality, for, "*as regards its ontological possibility, dying is grounded in care.*"⁹ In this case, both care and mortality are equiprimordially interdependent, a possibility that hinges on my present and future possibilities. And so, to die authentically has nothing to do with mere acceptance of death as construed by most societies in the world. Noticeably, the authentic awareness of death is embedded in fear. Despite this, neither authentic Dasein is afraid of death, nor worried about events yet to happen. As a result, Dasein admits that its possibilities are limited by death. There is nothing like a near-death experience that will even help Dasein to understand, since, what is needed is a proper understanding of its finitude. And so, with a perpetual threat of death, Dasein's everyday life ceases.

At this point, Dasein therefore realizes that there is no meaning to escape from dying. This inevitability is known to Dasein. This is because it becomes the only truth that cannot be doubted anymore, regardless of how Dasein struggles to conceal it from itself. In essence, death authenticates and discloses the inescapable truth that the meaning of life is grounded in time where all the possibilities of one's life have meaning when one freely approaches death.

The Position of Emmanuel Levinas on the Issue of Death

In the researcher's readings about Emmanuel Levinas, it was not systematically seen how Levinas talks about death against the Heideggerian notion of death. What can be ascertained is that he challenges Heidegger's main theme such as death as one's ownmost possibility. For instance, all relations are canceled out at the point of death; that one can run towards one's death; that one can be firm when death comes upon me. Levinas does not see this view of Heidegger as the best way to approach death. In his book *Time and Other*, Levinas was not just a Jew, prisoner, but someone who was forced into labour. Levinas does not accept understanding death as an event of one's freedom, instead, death should be construed as a social event where one dies for the Other.¹⁰

⁶ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 311.

⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 291.

⁸ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 284.

⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 296.

¹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, "Time and the Other," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. S. Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 40-41.

Since death cannot be a freedom one seeks out, death for Levinas is a relationship. By this he entirely rejects the Heideggerian idea that death does not correlate; one encounters death alone and that being towards death brings one into being. The idea that every person dies for himself or herself is an alienation, because, as an “I,” the “I” exists not in isolation but constantly in relationships with others that affect them. Levinas believes that Heidegger’s ideas will lead to the dissolution of all relations.¹¹ By this, the point of Levinas is that when one encounters death, it is always an encounter with the exterior Other. In other words, dying is something relational that occurs to any other person despite how it threatens a person. In a sense, this approach to death shows that at any point one should be concerned about something that one cannot completely understand who takes priority over mankind. There is nothing in death to be experienced making death a murder for Levinas. One does not die in the Heideggerian sense by being isolated or alienated but encounters the Other face-to-face with one’s enemy. This enemy remains invisible to the “I” and yet the “I” does not fight back. “In death, we are seized without the possibility of retaliating against our attacker. We are exposed to ‘absolute violence, to murder in the night.’”¹² He stresses that death is an encounter with a complete alterity. So, what lies in the authenticity of death? Does one run toward death as argued by Heidegger or does death run toward a person? It is only in death that one loses itself as a subject.

Death is always the Death of the Other.

In *Time and Other*, Levinas argues that “contrary to the view of contemporary philosophy which remains attached to the self’s solitary death, death is the death of the Other.”¹³ What is good about what Levinas saying is that one needs to open oneself to the death of the Other. It is something that is not known to me, a possibility beyond one’s possibilities and this idea therefore compels one to consider the relation one has with the Other. Levinas believes that any human experience ought, to begin with the Face of the Other that is why Levinas says “To begin with the face as a source from which all meaning appears, the face is poor, it is that which “I” cannot reduce to my categories of understanding.”¹⁴ It is only in the Face of the Other that there could be the recognition of the death of the Other. In the Face of the Other is the cry *Thy shall not kill* which one cannot just allow the Other to die alone. Such a kind of death cannot be symmetrical because, with the Face, it is the irregularity that affirmed that the relation is one-directional, where the “I” bears responsibility.¹⁵ By and large one’s death becomes a responsibility for the Other.

The death of the Other puts me into being responsible for one’s death. This is because the “I” is held hostage for the sake of the Other hence, the “I” is called to respond. So instead of allowing the Other to die alone, “I” show responsibility for the death of the Other. Since the concern is for the Other it means that before the death of the Other, “I” am awakened to respond to it without remaining indifferent.”¹⁶ The most important thing here is that one’s responsibility for the Other is such that the Other does not die alone. There is a command from the Face of the Other that tells me not to let the Other die alone. This expression from the Face orders me to answer for the life of the Other. There is an urgent need to respond once the death of the Other manifests itself. It is only “I” who can answer this invisible demand. It is not meant for somebody else. In the end, the responsibility for the Other is a responsibility to holiness as stressed by Levinas. No wonder for Levinas any thinking of the Holocaust is the thinking of the death of the Other, “I am thinking of the death of the other man.”¹⁷ For him, it is not a matter of authenticity that must be stressed here, but rather a call to holiness “but what human depravity itself cannot obliterate: the human vocation to holiness.”¹⁸ This becomes the main point of departure when one considers the difference between Levinas’ philosophy from Heideggerian ontology which is man is not the only entity who understands what being means, as argued by Heidegger, but rather the entity who already

¹¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *The Other, Utopia, and Justice, Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other* (Columbia University Press New York, NY, 1998), 226.

¹² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, vol. 1 (Springer Science & Business Media, 1979), 233.

¹³ Levinas, “Time and the Other,” 164.

¹⁴ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, 299.

¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *The Philosopher and Death, Alterity and Transcendence* (Columbia University Press New York, 1999), 104-105.

¹⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, 161.

¹⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, “Violence of the Face,” in *Alterity and Transcendence*, ed. P. Hayat (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 162.

¹⁸ Levinas, “Violence of the Face,” 180.

understands the command coming from the face of the other man.¹⁹ The call to holiness can be considered as that which precedes existence such that instead of one dying alone the I dies for the Other by sacrifice. At this point, one can realize and actualize the concern for the Other in dying.

Dying with a Purpose

Based upon the existential nature of death irrespective of Levinasian death or Heideggerian death, there is a separation of body and soul (Spirit) death marks the definitive cessation of one's biological existence. Certainly, the body is left to decompose but since the soul is immortal and continues to live on, it never ceases to exist, once it has been created. This becomes the reality of death such that no one can escape it, but the question that this paper tried to answer is how a person dies. Does one consider death as an opportunity to enter another unknown reality? Better still what is good about death? Dying with a purpose is the ability and the willingness to accept one's death, especially as a potentiality for Being.

Undeniably, death in its purely human understanding is very frightening. It is something no one would like to talk about, partly because no one under normal circumstances would like to die, perhaps due to the circle of friends one has established. The authenticity seen in death is the recognition that each person understands his or her death and does not see it as caused by another. This does not preclude some untimely deaths like accidents and armed robbery. Such kinds of death have no authenticity, in such instances there is no freedom, and one just succumbs to the pressure making it inauthentic. Though it is one of the possibilities of death, such kind of death is detrimental to Dasein's ownmost possibility because there is no choice in this sense and so cannot be responsible for such kind of death.

The good thing about death or dying with a purpose is letting go so that those who are left behind can have meaning in the death of a person. This can be realized when one considers death a journey to continue what humans were living for, not just a point of departure. Since every journey needs preparation so also death demands preparation. This preparation seems authentic because there is conscious awareness of it, but above all one considers it as one's ownmost decision. In other words, one becomes peaceful at the point of death. This idea is important not just now of death, but throughout the dying process. Dying with a purpose also occurs when one accepts it as a potentiality for being. The ability to recognize these needs at the point of death is what the author means by dying with a purpose.

Furthermore, to die with a purpose connotes an experience that becomes particularly known to each person. Considering this, one can ponder the Heideggerian concept of death as more purposeful than that of Levinas. Heidegger's notion of death does not exclude ethics. Among Christian existentialists, Heidegger is an important figure who occupies an important place in the field of theologians like Bultmann, Karl Rahner, and Francis Moloney. This shows that one can trace the connection between Heidegger's thought and Christian theologians like Karl Rahner, Bultmann, Raymond Brown, and Francis Moloney. This connection has to do with the relationship with death. It is here that dying for oneself becomes a potential possibility for being resolved.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger's explanation of death is construed as an 'existential ontological.' This means that death as an existential reality must be understood in its ontological sense making it authentic. Heidegger defines death: "*as the end of Dasein's ownmost possibility- which is non-relational certain ... in the Being of this entity towards its end.*"²⁰ This implies that death ends the existential nature of Dasein. As an ontological reality, death cannot be ready at hand, rather it gives Dasein a chance to live as a potential entity that must go through it. This also implies that the moment one comes to this world or is thrown into this world that marks the beginning of one's death. It is a life-death process. It is a possibility that Dasein cannot avoid, that is a possibility of an impossibility.

Another thing is that one's death cannot be authentically experienced by another person. This is because one's death is such that it must be experienced authentically by the person. This is experienced uniquely. It means that there can be an existential analysis of death which can be seen as a real authentic way of being toward death. There can also be an experience of death in everydayness. This could be an inauthentic way of dying. Whereas Heidegger begins the concept of death as being towards death, for Levinas it is a murder of the Other. His experience with the Holocaust affected his whole idea about

¹⁹ Levinas, "Violence of the Face," 180.

²⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 303.

death. As a living witness of the Holocaust, his concern is about the manner of murder. Death cannot be anything since it involves a relationship with others.

CONCLUSION

This discussion ends by posing this question: What can be asked of Heidegger and what can be asked of Levinas to Heidegger? During the analysis, it was revealed that death for Levinas is the death of the Other. This resulted from the fact that it is a relation. By relation, one does not die alone. The death of one also affects the Other. In the end, Levinas believes that to die is to die for the one who is exterior to the "I." On his part, Heidegger argues that death is proper and unique to one's ownmost possibility. This will be based on how a person finds himself or herself in a world he or she did not choose. That is the thrownness of Dasein will determine Dasein's authenticity and inauthenticity of dying. In other words, Dasein will know the kind of life he or she has led.

The reality of death has preoccupied humanity and its inquiry into the meaning of life is quite fascinating and interesting. Death is an inevitable phenomenon that has been disturbing the human mind. By this, it forms an integral part of our existence as it forms the goal and end of life. To untie the mystery of death, the paper examines and analyzes the concept of death according to Heidegger and Levinas's philosophy. It is an experience that each person must go through or face it. This is a normal human existence and must not be seen as bad. Regardless of how one construes it, we must face it even though it may prevent us from realizing the greatest potential in life.

Death therefore is the last thing human beings encounter. It can be seen as an enemy since there is nothing to overcome it. Death could have some basic descriptions such as the end of earthly life. This means that every life is measured by time so also human existence. As human beings get older their destination is death which awaits all humans. Thus, to die authentically involves the need to consider spiritual death and physical death. Everyone dies a physical death. Heidegger's understanding of death is too personalistic and individualistic since he strongly believes that death is not only a natural phenomenon of human existence but an element that we go through which we must not fear. Although Heidegger's notion of death could be construed as glaringly individualistic and ignores the collective experience of human existence, the paper believes that it brings decency into one's life and is not devoid of moral direction. Humans must embrace it irrespective of how it appears. By and large, Heidegger wants humans to understand that death could be seen as freedom from the limitations of life to realize their full potential by projecting possibilities upon themselves. This makes one appreciate death as an essential component of life and understand the purpose of life. This understanding brings about finitude, which is the understanding of one's existence based on his or her facticity which is the feature of past experiences.

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ABOUT AUTHOR

Rev. Fr. Anthony Kwaku Boakye, FLP, Ma.Th., Ph.D., currently lectures at the University of Ghana's Department of Philosophy and Classics. His research career began by enrolling at the Spiritan University College in Kumasi Ghana to study Philosophy. In 2009, he moved to the Adamson University Philippines

to continue his philosophical studies as a member of the servants of the Paraclete congregation and graduated in 2014 (magna cum laude). After Adamson University he joined the Franciscans of Our Lady of the Poor (FLP). He took his theological formation at the Don Bosco Centre of Studies: an affiliate of the Salesian Pontifical University in Rome at Paranaque City Philippines and simultaneously had a master's in philosophy from the University of the Philippines Diliman in 2014. He obtained a master's degree in philosophy in 2017 and 2018 obtained another two degrees, that is, a bachelor's degree in ecclesiastical theology and a master's degree in sacred scripture (magna cum laude). While still studying theology he also gained admission to take his doctorate in philosophy at De La Salle University Taft in 2017 and finished in 2021 with the doctoral dissertation entitled, "Levinas' Ethics and the Phenomenon of Dignity," soon to be published as a book with a new title, "Ethics of Transcendence." His main research interests are in the areas of Metaphysics, Epistemology, Continental philosophy, Feminist philosophy, Analytic philosophy, Phenomenology, and Existentialism.