

## **Gadamer on Death's Unintelligibility and the Overflow of Life**

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### **Introduction**

In his short 1975 essay entitled “Death as a Question,” Hans-Georg Gadamer offers rich, contemplative reflections on death that encourage one to spend time puzzling over the phenomenon of death and to accept and even embrace the unintelligibility of death. Given death’s unintelligibility, there will always be more questions than answers when dealing with this topic, which is not to say that one cannot fruitfully *think* about death. Gadamer’s thinking about death and his conclusion regarding death’s unintelligibility is in many respects indebted to Martin Heidegger, especially the latter’s reflections on anxiety and death. Since key aspects of Gadamer’s own position on death become evident—to the extent that death’s intelligibility can be made clear—in his dialogue with Heidegger, the penultimate section of this essay focuses on a Gadamerian reading of “What Is Metaphysics?” The final section turns to what I call the living-dying I in living-dying others, which, I argue, is a theme that Gadamer develops in his commentary on *Der Gevatter Tod* by the Brothers Grimm. In his reflections, Gadamer emphasizes both our individual lives and the fact that our lives are always and ever lived in relation to others. Similarly, death is experienced and, in so far as it can be understood, is likewise understood in relation to others. Stated otherwise, the living-dying I is recognized through living-dying other(s).

## Death as a Question

In light of the significant loss of life worldwide due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, not to mention the time many people have spent socially distanced or isolated in lockdown, a dialogue with Gadamer's essay on death is both fitting and, as I hope to show, life-enhancing. That is, thinking alongside Gadamer about death and coming to a better understanding of it enriches our life, as we come to see and accept death as integrally tied to life and yet that which always involves mystery. Underscoring death's connection to life, Gadamer writes, with a nod to Rainer Maria Rilke, death is "the other side of life. Just as the moon has an unilluminated side that still belongs to the totality of its being, so death would belong to the being of the living. . . . If we only possessed the same equanimity toward death as we display when contemplating any other life process!"<sup>1</sup>

Even so, for all that we think we know about it, "[d]eath remains a question," to which we have no adequate answer.<sup>2</sup> That is, we cannot fully comprehend death and its meaning. That we might *be* no more, swallowed in non-existence, seems unintelligible in light of our daily experience of our own self-consciousness. We know, however, that we will die and that ultimately we cannot avert death. Death is inescapably bound with life, and yet we recoil from death, longing to avoid what is inevitable. Why such resistance to death? Why are we haunted by the thought of living no more, of losing our life? The expression "to lose one's life" implies that life is something valuable and worth holding on to. When one's life is lost through death, one is overtaken by an unrepeatable event—an event that ultimately each individual must *as an individual* be "taken up in." I cannot die your death and you cannot die mine, even though someone might choose to die in my place or on my behalf. Even so, someday *I* must die—that is, I must enter into *my own* death; I must lose *my* life.

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<sup>1</sup> Gadamer, "Death as a Question," in *Hermeneutics Between History and Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Pol Vandavelde and Arun Iyer (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 59. Gadamer acknowledges early on that his reflections about death will be limited by his own historical situatedness within the Western intellectual tradition and will especially draw from his familiarity with the Ancient Greek and Christian traditions.

<sup>2</sup> Gadamer, "Death as a Question," 59.

### Burial Practices and Death's Concealment

Turning first to ancient civilizations and then to Christian and Islamic practices, Gadamer discusses their emphases on human rituals for burying the dead. He marvels at the emotions, thoughts, and creative energy invested in burial practices. Commenting on Viking grave-ships, Egyptian pyramids, Christian graves marked with crosses, and geometrically ornamented Islamic graves, he wonders whether these elaborate practices and magnificent expressions of art and artisanship actually answer the question: what is death? His musings on human burial practices seem to give rise to more questions than answers. For instance, he raises the following questions: “What do all these graves tell us? Are they answers to the question of what death is? Or is it the case that the answers to this question want to proclaim that death is not or should not be? Is it that these answers do not want to acknowledge death? But death is. What is it? And yet we know death from where and how?”<sup>3</sup>

He goes on to ask, what does knowledge of death mean? He even speculates that to know death is for humans as essential as our ability to think.<sup>4</sup> Do we only know of death, as he puts it, “from the outside”—that is, from our experiences of losing a loved one, or of knowing a friend who has lost someone dear to them? Not just adults but children seem to have knowledge of death thus understood. (This is a point to which he returns at the end of his essay and to which we will return in the final section of the present essay.) Yet, such knowledge of death is, nonetheless, incomplete and marked with unintelligibility. Continuing his inquiry, Gadamer asks: “Does anyone among us know what one knows when one knows that one must die? Is our question about death not always and necessarily a concealment [*Verdecken*] of what we know, a concealment of something unthinkable, of non-being?”<sup>5</sup> If death means that we *are* no more, then are we no-thing or a non-being? But how can we make any sense of being a non-being? Yet, our wrestling with the question of death is more than a philosophical abstraction, and Gadamer, of course, recognizes that our puzzlement with death is a deeply existential, embodied, cultural, social, and personal matter. For example, although he continues to grapple with whether burial rituals manifest their own acts of concealing when it comes to death, he acknowledges that human traditions—

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<sup>3</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 60.

<sup>4</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 60–61.

<sup>5</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 61; “Der Tod als Frage” (1975) in *Gesammelte Werke* Bd. 4 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987), 163.

especially religious traditions—*hope* to be reunited with loved ones who have died. We hope to see “again those to whom we belong.”<sup>6</sup>

Is this longing to see again those who have died just another attempt to conceal or obfuscate the reality of death? Gadamer cites Plato, who draws upon the earlier Greek tradition’s notion of Hades. In Hades, one could see again those who had been lost. Gadamer reminds us that in the *Apology*, Socrates eagerly anticipated a conversation about true virtue with the departed heroes in Hades. The Christian tradition also proclaims that we will see again our departed loved ones. Again, Gadamer wonders whether this longing to see again in both Greek and Christian stories and teachings is just another way of covering over death’s reality—or to put it more philosophically, “of not wanting to think non-being.”<sup>7</sup> Turning again to Plato, and this time to his doctrine of *anamnesis*, Gadamer considers whether our puzzlement with death might be understood within the framework of recollection, remembering, or recalling. First, he offers a concise definition of philosophy or rather its objective—namely, “the task of philosophy is to want to know what we know without knowing that we know it.”<sup>8</sup> Thus stated we find obvious resonances with Plato’s *anamnesis*, which Gadamer describes as “a bringing out of the interior and a raising to consciousness.”<sup>9</sup> So our task at hand is to ask what it is that we know, without knowing that we know, when we know (about) death. For Gadamer, this means that we consider what key figures and movements in the Western philosophical and religious traditions have said about death.

### Greek and Christian Reflections on Life and Death

Gadamer points to two Greek words, *zōē* and *bios*, both of which are translated into English as “life”; however, while in certain respects their meaning overlaps, they also describe life in different senses. *Zōē* indicates what is living and is set in opposition to what is not living. For the ancient Greeks, that which is living is animated with *psuchē* (soul) and is distinguished by self-movement; however, *zōē* does not designate individuality; rather, it specifies that which is alive as opposed to that which is dead or lifeless. *Bios*, in contrast, denotes “a being in the specific manner of its being animated.

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<sup>6</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 61.

<sup>7</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 61.

<sup>8</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 62.

<sup>9</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 62.

This is so in all the instances where we mean a specific mode of life.”<sup>10</sup> According to Gadamer, human beings are the only living beings who know themselves as living beings—that is, humans are aware that they are alive and not dead; consequently, they find themselves in a unique relationship “to their own animatedness,” which manifests in the particular choices they make (both consciously and unconsciously).<sup>11</sup> *Bios*, thus, speaks of the “life that people lead and through which they distinguish themselves from everything else that is also alive, through their mode of living and in particular through their own life history and their own life destiny.”<sup>12</sup> With the concept of *bios*, we move into the realm of self-knowledge and the desire to know. More importantly, we enter into a kind of thinking that elevates the knowledge of one’s own life and death over knowing of *zōē*—that is, knowledge of being animated as opposed to being dead. However, just as, perhaps, the Homeric shades signal the unintelligibility of death, our thinking about *bios* ultimately hits the same brick wall and is incapable of making non-being intelligible—especially *our own* non-being or death.

Having provided a sketch of Homeric and Presocratic views on life and death, Gadamer offers a brief commentary on Plato. Plato’s Ideas and his teaching about *nous*, which “is constantly present and represents,” builds on this earlier Greek understanding of “‘being animated’ on the basis of self-knowledge.”<sup>13</sup> Yet, for all its progress, Gadamer intimates that Greek philosophical thought—chiefly with Plato in mind—missed the mark when it comes to death and what, for us humans, is most important about it. In the *Phaedo*, Plato has Socrates present several proofs for the soul’s immortality. Cebes, whom in the dialogue is depicted as a skeptic, responds to Socrates’s rather sardonic quip that he was caught up in childish fear about death. Cebes, perhaps with a little sarcasm of his own, says that we each have a “child in us who has these fears” and that Socrates’s task, should he be up to it, is to calm these fears.<sup>14</sup> Gadamer intimates that the “skeptical” Cebes was on to something and should not be so easily dismissed. No alleged proof for the immortality of the soul gives us the knowledge that we seek about death—that is, to quote Gadamer: “none of the proofs for the immortality of the soul that we find in Greek thinking is even close to being able to tell us what we want to know when we want to think death from what

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<sup>10</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 62.

<sup>11</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 62.

<sup>12</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 62–63.

<sup>13</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 63.

<sup>14</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, in *Plato’s Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997), 77e.

we know as *our own* life. The child in the human being is right and Greek philosophy fails before the question of what death is.”<sup>15</sup>

Christianity, Gadamer says, rather than providing an answer to the question of what death is, offers a promise—that is, a promise of life after death. Here the idea is that death is not the final word and that from death, or rather through the passage of death, one can receive new life. But again, Gadamer asks, does this “transformation of death into life” fail to adequately think what death *is*? In his “Hymns to the Night,” the poet Novalis presents this transformed view of death. As Gadamer explains, “in Novalis there is a new valuation of the night, which is not the withdrawal, the darkening of the bright pleasurable day, but the ground and origin of a higher and more spiritual brightness.”<sup>16</sup> The darkness of the night is not final nor completely separate from the brightness of the day, but instead there is a Light, which is the source and origin of all that lives and moves and has its being, whose blinding brightness is for us an impenetrable darkness. Yet, in the Christian account, the passage through death, for those who believe, brings with it a better—albeit always incomplete—grasp of these intermingled aspects while, nonetheless, affirming that Life and Light, as metaphors for the Christian God, are ultimate and ultimately conquer death and darkness.

Still questioning whether with the Christian no less than the Greek account we are actually thinking death properly and taking it seriously as its own phenomenon, Gadamer muses on two metaphors—sleeping and dreaming—both of which serve as metaphors of death that offer insights worth lingering upon. Thinking, for example, is often associated (figuratively or otherwise) with being awake, in control, and self-consciousness. In contrast, sleeping and dreaming “impose themselves on thinking.” When considered “from the standpoint of the inner certainty proper to waking self-consciousness, sleep is as little intelligible as death.”<sup>17</sup> The sleeper’s distance or absence from us—that is, their “unreachability,” foreshadows “the ultimate unreachability with which the dead terrify us.”<sup>18</sup> The metaphor of dreaming seems to be tied to the concerns, hopes, and longings with which we fill our waking hours. Here the analogy intimates that just as the state of dreaming takes us out of daily life and into another world, so too we can fill our waking life with “the images of our imagination and of our worldliness that the question of the nothing, the question that goes beyond our

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<sup>15</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 63. Italics added.

<sup>16</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 64.

<sup>17</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 64.

<sup>18</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 64.

own certainty of living, can longer be asked.”<sup>19</sup> Gadamer’s point is not that our longings, imaginings, and concerns are frivolous and to be avoided, but rather that they can so consume our time and thinking and distract us that we fail to think seriously about death.

He brings his excursion on dreaming and sleeping to a close by pointing out that both are connected with the idea of being awake. He goes on to add that these two metaphors of death, in being linked with our waking life, have a similar structure with a notion of life as *zōē*, which is thought in conjunction with death. Thus, we have an emphasis on the ongoing cycle of life and death as found in the reproduction of living beings. Gadamer appears to have Plato’s *Symposium* in mind with this allusion. That is, in the *Symposium*, we read of different senses of immortality, the lowest or least sophisticated is that of the reproduction and the continuation of the species, in which both humans and non-humans engage. If death must be understood in connection with an ongoing cycle of life and reproduction, then once again Gadamer wonders whether this (Greek) philosophical thinking is “nothing more than a not-willing-to-admit death.”<sup>20</sup>

### Prometheus’s Fire and Celan’s “Tenebrae”

Drawing again upon the riches of Greek thought, Gadamer turns to the myth of Prometheus as depicted in Aeschylus’s drama, highlighting and riffing on those parts of the myth that relate to our present topic. Prometheus, as Gadamer recounts and interprets the story, rebelled against Zeus and gifted human beings with fire stolen from the heavens. Explaining further, he adds: “It is not exactly how it is said, but everybody knows this and, at any rate, he taught human beings how to use fire. The use of fire is without question one of the unequivocal distinctions of human beings among the things that live.”<sup>21</sup> Yet, as Gadamer underscores, the context in which Prometheus proclaims his accomplishments is his self-defense against his critics—that is, he declares his “infinite merit among human beings” because “he has made it so that they do not know about their own death. Clearly, what is meant is that they do not know when they must die. And now Prometheus continues: with this I have transformed their whole life to the extent that I have taught them to observe the stars,

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<sup>19</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 64.

<sup>20</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 65.

<sup>21</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 65.

to the extent that I taught them numbers, craftsmanship, and techniques, and so on.”<sup>22</sup> For Gadamer, the question that the myth raises is how ought we make sense of these two claims—namely, that Prometheus has, on the one hand, hidden or concealed the knowledge of death from humans, and on the other hand, gifted them with craftsmanship, techniques (technology), and the like? In other words, what is the connection between the concealment of the knowledge of (one’s own) death and the revelation of new technologies? Does technological progress involve a kind of ongoing concealment of death, not only our own but also particular people groups (e.g., the poor, marginalized, etc.), non-human animals, and ecosystems? Or is there a more hopeful note to be found in this “curiously enigmatic mythical overcoming of the certainty of death through a belief in the future?”<sup>23</sup> Here Gadamer begins to make explicit the direction his thinking will take by way of an insight that he discovered in Georg Simmel’s work—namely, “the transcendence of life,”<sup>24</sup> which means that human life is characterized by excess; the nature of human life is to exceed itself. As Gadamer puts it: “Is the life of human beings in the truest sense of the word not a constant overflow, such that the source of life, which any individual is, overflows?”<sup>25</sup>

Another way to think of this overflow and transcendence of life is the example of a sacrificial death, and Gadamer is especially interested in the case of martyrs who die for their faith. Rather than interpreting such acts as nothing more than the ultimate expression of nihilism, Gadamer highlights the ambiguity that characterizes sacrificial death, which can be understood both as an expression of the excess of life as well as an escape from life. At this point, Gadamer brings Paul Celan’s poem, “Tenebrae,” into the dialogue. The poem is, on Gadamer’s reading, a provocative and profound reading of the story of Jesus’s suffering on the cross. The “we” referred to multiple times in the poem—for example, in the repeated line “we are near”—points to a solidarity of humans with Christ and one another in the experience of suffering and in feeling abandoned and left to die alone. Explaining this point, Gadamer writes, “This is precisely what ‘we’ are. The suffering of death is already granted to everyone. Here we see an intrinsic link between the weakness of human beings and the experience of death. The fact that Jesus feels abandoned on the cross is, as it were, the pre-figuration

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<sup>22</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 65–66.

<sup>23</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 66.

<sup>24</sup> See Georg Simmel, *The View of Life: Four Metaphysical Essays with Journal Aphorisms*, trans. John A. Y. andrews and Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), esp. 1–18.

<sup>25</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 67.

or paradigm of the abandonment felt by all human beings. The anxiety of life and the anxiety of death are thus intermingled.<sup>26</sup>

In Celan's poem, the unintelligibility of death is allowed to stand; the genuine sense of abandonment that Jesus experiences on the cross and which he expresses in his anguished cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46) is an archetype of what every individual human being, in varying degrees, must suffer when they suffer death—namely, they must die their own death and in so doing come to realize that no one can save them from what must come to pass. Jesus himself exhibits anxiety about his death, and this experience of anxiety, rather than an instance of "thinking death away," points us to what Gadamer calls a "more appropriate manner of thinking about death"—namely, a mode of thinking that recognizes "anxiety itself as thinking."<sup>27</sup>

### Death and Anxiety

This anxiety in relation to one's own death, of course, recalls Martin Heidegger's reflections in *Being and Time* as well as his essay "What Is Metaphysics?" For Heidegger, anxiety is a mood (*Stimmung*) that discloses one's world as a whole in a particularly poignant way. Yet, while moods, no doubt, involve emotions, they are more than our subjective emotions and speak of different ways in which we are oriented to the world. Moods, as it were, disclose our situation holistically and affect how the world and entities within the world appear to us; that is, moods color our experiences of the world and are all-pervasive, like an atmosphere. In "What Is Metaphysics?" Heidegger discusses three moods: boredom, joy, and anxiety. When I experience, for example, profound boredom or boredom as a mood, the world as a whole is disclosed to me *as* boring. Moods are neither chosen by us nor can we make them happen; rather, they overtake us such that we find ourselves in a profound mood of boredom, joy, or anxiety.

Although Heidegger discusses boredom and joy as moods that disclose the world, he claims that anxiety alone discloses the nothing. Anxiety, as the fundamental or most profound mood, should not be identified with fear, which, for Heidegger, is always about something—that is, fear has a particular object to which one can point and identify. For example, one might have a fear of snakes or heights. Profound

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<sup>26</sup> Gadamer, "Death as a Question," 68.

<sup>27</sup> Gadamer, "Death as a Question," 69.

anxiety, in contrast, has no particular object but is rather an experience of anxiety in which, as Heidegger explains, “‘one feels ill at ease’ [*es ist einem unheimlich*]. What is ‘it’ that makes ‘one’ feel ill at ease? We cannot say what it is before which one feels ill at ease. As a whole it is so for one. All things and we ourselves sink into indifference.”<sup>28</sup> Not only do we experience the indeterminate, or better, the nothing in anxiety, but we also have a sense of being *unheimlich*, which we can also translate literally as “homeless” (*Heimat* in German means “home,” and here the prefix *un-* signifies a lack of “being at home”). So what is it about this profound anxiety that makes one feel *unheimlich*, ill at ease, or homeless? In the experience of anxiety, beings as a whole recede and slip away. In other words, they are now disclosed to us *as* meaningless or without significance. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that normally things in the world such as equipment—for example, tools—are understood within a referential totality or what he calls “significance” (*Bedeutbarkeit*). Thus, we understand what a hammer is in relation to nails, saws, sandpaper, wood, and a carpenter’s workshop. The workshop forms a referential whole or totality and each item gets its meaning in relation to the other items and the workshop as a whole. However, in anxiety this significance is lost, and we are, as Heidegger puts it, left hanging. Describing our lack of “hold on things,” Heidegger says: “in this very receding things turn toward us. The receding of beings as a whole that closes in on us in anxiety oppresses us. We can get no hold on things. In the slipping away of beings only the ‘no hold on things’ comes over us and remains.”<sup>29</sup>

This “slipping away of beings” does not mean that beings are annihilated; rather, they are nihil-ated or nothing-ed. In slipping away and receding they are disclosed to us *as if* absent—that is, they are no longer present to us as meaningful in the way in which we normally experience them, yet they are there. This lack or absence of meaning is, as a result, felt as a kind of oppressive presence because the beings are there but are experienced *as* meaningless, as *nihil-ated*. Thus, in being overtaken by the profound mood of anxiety, we experience this ill-at-ease homelessness—this a lack of grounding and rootedness as the world and things in it become *unheimlich*. As the nothing is disclosed to us in anxiety, we likewise sense our very selves as slipping away. Describing this loss of self, Heidegger writes: “Anxiety reveals the nothing. We ‘hover’ in anxiety. More precisely, anxiety leaves us hanging because it induces the slipping away of beings as a whole. This implies that we ourselves—we humans who are in

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<sup>28</sup> Martin Heidegger, “What Is Metaphysics?” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1993), 100–101.

<sup>29</sup> Heidegger, “What Is Metaphysics?” 101.

being—in the midst of beings slip away from ourselves. At bottom therefore it is not as though ‘you’ or ‘I’ feel ill at ease; rather, it is this way for some ‘one.’ In the altogether unsettling experience of this hovering where there is nothing to hold on to, pure Dasein is all that is there.”<sup>30</sup> For Heidegger, it seems, in this “hovering” and “homelessness” of anxiety, we lose the sense of ourselves as individuals and are left only with the experience of our sheer existence, of being-there but not being-there as a particular, unique, individual. But what does it mean to be there in this de-worlded, non-individualized way? After all, *I* must die my own death, not *das Man*.<sup>31</sup>

As Gadamer reads Heidegger, the experience of anxiety moves one out of oneself and creates the necessary distance from our immersion in the world so that we can begin to truly think about death. Toward the end of “What Is Metaphysics?” Heidegger goes on to say that the experience of the nothing in profound anxiety is distinctive of Dasein and brings Dasein to itself: “Only in the nothing of Dasein do beings as a whole, in accord with their most proper possibility—that is, in a finite way—come to themselves. . . . Only because the nothing is manifest in the ground of Dasein can the total strangeness of beings overwhelm us. Only when the strangeness of beings oppresses us does it arouse and evoke wonder. Only on the ground of wonder—the revelation of the nothing—does the ‘why?’ loom before us.”<sup>32</sup> The nothing disclosed in anxiety allows us to articulate what, for Heidegger, is a fundamental metaphysical question: “Why are there beings at all, and why not rather nothing?”<sup>33</sup> The disorienting de-worlding that one experiences in the grip of profound anxiety creates the possibility for wonder at the mystery of existence and, especially in Gadamer, for one’s own existence.

This movement beyond beings and oneself that Heidegger describes when one is overtaken by the nothing signals, for Gadamer, human freedom, which is intimately tied to our thinking and interpreting activities. As one thinks through and tries to make sense of a profound experience of anxiety, one can come to an acceptance of death as a mystery, as that which cannot be fully thought or grasped—an unknown at the core of our understanding of who and what we are. Here Gadamer offers his thesis: “the freedom of thinking is the true ground for the fact that death has a necessary

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<sup>30</sup> Heidegger, “What Is Metaphysics?” 101.

<sup>31</sup> Gadamer’s reflections here and throughout his essay have certain resonances with passages from Søren Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: NJ, Princeton University Press, 1992). See especially Climacus’s musings on “*what it means to die*,” 165–70. Many thanks to John James for drawing my attention to these connections.

<sup>32</sup> Heidegger, “What Is Metaphysics?” 108, 109.

<sup>33</sup> Heidegger, “What Is Metaphysics?” 110.

unintelligibility. It is the freedom that consists in the fact that I can and must think beyond myself, that I can and must think myself away.” And yet, he acknowledges that we are still baffled with how to think our death or not-being: “how should I understand the fact that I, an I in which now in this moment there is a thinking activity, one day will not be? Thus, the fact that we are thinking beings seems to be the ground for the unintelligibility of death and, at the same time, seems to include the knowledge of this unintelligibility.”<sup>34</sup>

In the experience of anxiety, humans as interpreting beings experience a world-collapse in which its meaningfulness is nihil-ated. According to Gadamer, such an experience, even though painful and disorienting, opens up a space for us to think about the mystery of existence as well as our own existence, of our life and death and the intimate interconnection between the two. In this thinking birthed from world-collapse, the I that thinks about its own possible non-existence is confronted with the unintelligibility of death—that the one who *can* think about their own non-existence and can *think* themselves away and thus think beyond themselves—can, at the same time, never fully grasp their own non-being. But this is not a mere intellectual exercise to demonstrate the principles of logic. Rather, in our inability to make death fully intelligible, we come to a deeper understanding of our finitude. The freedom of thinking allows for the possibility of thinking death *as a mystery* and life as a gift; the interconnection of the two is made manifest even as death eludes us. Death is an ever-haunting specter animating life, whose absent-presence is felt—and even in rare moments thought—but never fully known or grasped. That death’s unintelligibility can be revealed as such presupposes the human capacity for “the freedom of thinking.”

### Discovering the Living-Dying I in Living-Dying Other(s)

As we recall, earlier in his essay, Gadamer states that each of us must die their own death, and as we have seen, this claim resonates to a certain degree with early Heidegger. At the end of his essay, Gadamer returns to and develops this point by way of a brief commentary on one of the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales, “The Godfather Death” (*Der Gevatter Tod*). The fairy tale attempts to teach children about death through the image of candles burning. In the story, a poor man whose thirteenth child has just been born is seeking a godfather for his son. The man eventually settles on Death,

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<sup>34</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 69.

personified as a withered yet powerful figure, to be his newborn son's godfather. He chooses Death over both God and the Devil because Death is the great equalizer, favoring neither poor nor rich, old nor young. The boy eventually becomes a famous physician, because Death had promised to appear before his patients and to signal whether the patient would live or die, depending upon whether Death stood at the head or foot of the bed. If Death stood at the foot of the bed, the patient would live when given a special herb by the physician. If Death stood at the head of the bed, the patient would die.

Toward the end of the story, the physician begins to test Death and devises a way to rob Death of those for whom he has come. He does this by reversing the position of the person lying in the bed as soon as Death begins to appear. Death is, of course, infuriated and warns his godson the physician not to tempt death or he will be his next victim. However, the godson becomes infatuated with one of his patients—a beautiful princess—whose father, the king, has promised both riches and her hand in marriage to anyone who was able to cure her. After the physician saves her life, Death, keeping his word, appears to him. Enraged, Death seizes his godson by the neck and takes him to an underground cavern, where he shows him thousands of candles of various sizes, flickering and burning at different rates and producing varied amounts of light. The fairy tale depicts the scene as follows: “There the Physician saw thousands upon thousands of [candles; *Lichter*] burning in immeasurable rows, some large, others small, and others yet smaller. Every moment some were extinguished, but others in the same instance blazed out, so that the flames appeared to dance up here and there in continual variation.”<sup>35</sup> Death then turns to his godson and explains that these lights are the “life-lights” of human lives (*die Lebenslichter der Menschen*). While, generally speaking, the large flames belong to children, the medium flames to middle-aged people, and the smallest flames to the elderly, he quickly adds that some children and younger people have small flames.

As Gadamer recounts the fairy tale, he notes that the burning of each candle represents the extinguishing of an *individual* life. Gadamer's emphasis conflicts with ancient Greek views and similar modern variants—whether of Spinoza or Hegel—which present human beings as modes of the Divine or participants in the Divine who, upon death, become one with the Divine in such a way that individuality and

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<sup>35</sup> Brothers Grimm, “The Godfather Death,” in *Household Stories. Collected by the Brothers Grimm*, trans. and illustrated E.H. Wehnert, 132–33. London: David Bogue, 1857. [<https://ia800207.us.archive.org/28/items/householdstories01grim/householdstories01grim.pdf>]. I have slightly altered the English translation from “lamps” to “candles” in order to be consistent with Gadamer's essay. The German word is *Licht* (plural, *Lichter*), which literally means “light.”

personhood are obscured or obliterated. Instead of describing humans as participating in or being consumed by one flame, Gadamer stresses that we each have our own light—that is, our own life; yet our lives are always and ever lived in relation to others. We are living (human) beings intimately connected with other living (human) beings—which, I would add, includes both human and non-human animals. In recognizing that our own light, like the other candles around us, is growing dimmer, we are gripped with anxiety, as the physician was when Godfather Death in the underground cavern pointed to his godson's small, barely flickering flame. That recognition comes about when an individual burning candle realizes that it is surrounded by other burning “life candles” and is then moved to reflect on their own “life candle.” Commenting on the fairy tale and referring to those who, by Death's force are taken to the underground world, Gadamer says that those who go there “look around themselves, astonished and afraid, [and] eventually also ask about their own life candle—and are struck with terror.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, when one observes the other candles' flames with their varied sizes and strengths burning and flickering at different rates, one is overcome with *Angst* and is compelled—as the physician in the fairy tale was—to ask “Death” about one's own life. Such an experience discloses the reality of one's own death through witnessing the living-dying of others. Put otherwise, the living-dying I is recognized through living-dying other(s). Through seeing the flame's light and flickering—which signifies self-movement and movement through life-stages—and feeling its heat, our own sense of being alive is palpable and perhaps even intensified; but that same flame by which we come to see and feel that we are alive likewise makes us aware that we are finite and dying—that is, with each passing day we move closer to death, just as the burning, flickering flame, in its burning slowly brings about the candle's demise. Self-understanding—even the limited, spectral self-understanding we have when it comes to death—is attained always-and-ever for the hermeneut through dialogical engagement with others.

Just as Gadamer's essay begins with death's incomprehensibility, it ends on a similar note with the claim that “the unintelligibility of death is the brightest triumph of life.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, the kind of serious existential questioning that our questioning about death involves—questioning which never yields a final, definitive, certain answer and always gives rise to more questions—can motivate living a more full, appreciative, and thankful life, one that does not take anything for granted and increasingly recognizes and takes to heart the fragility, brevity, and wonder of the

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<sup>36</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 70.

<sup>37</sup> Gadamer, “Death as a Question,” 70.

living-dying I through engagement with living-dying others who comprise both the lights and shadows of our world. In contemplating death and the ongoing interplay of *Lichter* and *Tenebrae*, of revealing and concealing, the mystery of being is disclosed and made palpable—namely, that there is something rather than nothing as well as the mystery of *my* being and the unintelligibility of what it might mean “to be” no more.