

Chapter 6

BEING'S POEM: DEATH AND THE PHILOSOPHERS

Death is not an event. It is an existential phenomenon.

Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

Being's poem just begun is man. Heidegger

Freud published *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in 1920. There were two other significant texts on death published in that decade. The more well-known one was the famous chapter on "Being-Towards -Death" in Heidegger's great work of existential philosophy, *Being and Time*.ⁱ Heidegger, regarded by many, not without controversy, as the pre-eminent philosopher of the modern age, opens *Being and Time* with a quotation - in Greek - from Plato's *The Sophist* which he kindly translates for us:

For manifestly you have long been aware of what you mean when you use the expression *being*; we, however, who think we have understood it have now become perplexed.ⁱⁱ

For Heidegger perplexity is the distinguishing feature of modernity.

Heidegger distinguished between the "ontic" being of identifiable entities - which language could name and know - and ontological Being. This may seem like the age-old philosophical split between appearance and reality but Heidegger conceived Being not as a Platonic Realm of archetypal forms but as the ineffable and unknowable ground of everything. For him experience of Being makes us question the world of forms and substance and consider whether things are really as they appear to the eye or the mind. Heidegger was of the view that, not only are we out of touch with ontological Being but we are unaware or have forgotten that we are.

He wished to raise again the question of its meaning for us, but understood that this was not a popular project in our scientific age! As he famously remarked, “We are too late for the gods and too early for Being” but it may be that the ecological dangers we now face, and which Heidegger was also sensitive to, mean the question of Being - who we are and “that we are” - is now only too timely. The prospect of our extinction raises these fundamental ontological questions for us in a new and urgent form.

Whether Heidegger and Freud gave thought to each other I do not know but Heidegger believed, like Freud, that “we are ourselves the entities to be analysed” rather than the metaphysical ideas we entertain, though what was in question was not so much the human personality as the ground from which it emerges. For him, ontology, the science of being, went deeper than psychology or epistemology and in his 1948 essay “*Letter on Humanism*” he attempted to distance himself from efforts to understand ourselves that do not go beyond both. In that, he differentiated himself in particular from an existentialism that he considered anthropocentric as he felt Sartre’s was.

Freud’s perplexity, as evinced in writing such as *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, may have been very understandable to Heidegger. For the philosopher the meaning of our being involves the questioning of it. Who we are is, in Heidegger’s words, “an issue for us”. So when Freud ponders the mystery that “the goal of all life is death” he is asking a question that Heidegger would say cannot really be answered by analysis, whether philosophical or psychological, because it is an ontological issue and goes beyond conceptual thought. This does not mean that it has no implications for psychology.

On the contrary, by hypothesising *the unconscious* Freud had necessarily introduced an ontological dimension into psychology. Suggesting how we might analyse it in relation to ourselves was his great achievement. However, only to analyse it neglects the consideration that from an ultimate point of view it is beyond rational thought. Analysis can only go so far, as all the writings on *negative capability* - poetic, philosophic, psychoanalytic, or otherwise - attest. Negative

capability - Keat's notion - suggests that we can sometimes be at our most creative in the face of uncertainty and the absence of knowledge. ⁱⁱⁱ *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and its ambivalent professional reception within the psychoanalytic movement, suggest that though the psychoanalytic community value the idea of "not knowing" when it comes to the analysis of the unconscious mind this does not extend to the great unknown of death.

Heidegger's word for a person as a being is *Dasein*, which in German means "being there", being there in the everyday circumstances of time and space - in other words embedded in the context in which we find ourselves and which is forever changing. This concept of being goes beyond personal identity. Heidegger does not think of us so much as individuals - entities - in time and space, but that we are time and space. We are the *umwelt*, the context, we inhabit. We are not *in* history, we *are* history. But this is not just a history of the past, for we are as much determined by our future possibilities - what we can become as well as what we have been. Insofar as we are constantly moving between the past and the future we can never stand still. In fact we always have a horizon in view towards which we strive. As the philosopher Richard Kearney, in the chapter on Heidegger in his account of modern European philosophy, puts it:

Precisely as existence, man never truly understands himself simply as a fixed object amongst objects, a self-identical entity; he is a being who is perpetually reaching beyond himself towards the world, towards horizons of meaning beyond his present given condition. Human existence is, in brief, an activity of endless transcendence. *Existenz is Transzendence*". ^{iv}

The two poles of life are birth and death. Birth brings us into this world while death - the horizon of transcendence - continually promises to take us beyond it.

Death Awareness Makes Us Free

Our ultimate horizon and the ultimate context of all life is death, or death awareness. For Heidegger death is not so much a once and for all event at the end of life but an

ever-present possibility, and awareness of this is an integral part of life. This is a theme taken up by the philosopher Graham Parkes who explores the common ground between modern existentialism and Zen Buddhism, two traditions which share this conception of death. ^v Heidegger was known to have had discussions with contemporary Japanese philosophers who were conversant with the traditions of western philosophy, and particularly modern existentialism. Zen Buddhism has its roots in classical Chinese Taoism, a system of thought which considered life and death to be interdependent opposites. In the Inner Chapters of the ancient *Zhuangzi* death and life are, for instance, “a single strand”. As Lao Tsu, the other great Taoist sage, put it: “Simultaneously with being alive one dies”. ^{vi}

This is also a theme taken up by later Japanese Zen Buddhist masters. In the thirteenth century Dogen Kigen, for instance, held that death and birth - or rebirth - conditions every moment of each human life: “Life arises and perishes instantaneously from moment to moment”. And Suzuki Shosan in the seventeenth century considered the engagement with death central to his teachings. He taught that there is a “death energy” – *shiki* in Japanese. *Shi* means death and *ki*, energy. *Ki* (*ch'i* in Chinese) is the energy that sustains the entire universe and, therefore, *shiki* is a force for transformation rather than annihilation. ^{vii}

Nietzsche warned against opposing life and death and seemed to suggest that it is life rather than death which calls for an explanation: “Let us be wary of saying that death is opposed to life. The living is merely a species of the dead, and a very rare species”. Freud thought of death as “a return to the inorganic” and while Nietzsche also took this view he did not think it a cause for despair – as a number of notes from the time he was writing *The Gay Science* illustrate;

The “dead” world! eternally in motion and without erring, force against forceIt is a *festival* to go from this world into the “dead world” Let us see through this comedy (of sentient being) and thereby enjoy it! Let us not think of the return to the inanimate as a regression *Death* has to be reinterpreted! We thereby *reconcile* ourselves with what is actual, with the dead world. ^{viii}

According to Parkes, from Nietzsche's perspective as from that of Heidegger and Buddhism "the return to the inanimate is not a regression that takes place at the end of life but rather a recurrence going on at every moment". Nietzsche also reminds us that we – human beings - are composed mostly of "the inorganic" since we have all of nature's elements within us. We should think carefully before we differentiate between ourselves - as sentient and conscious beings - and a world that is "inorganic" - and therefore considered inanimate.

Angst and "Nothingness"

For Heidegger, again following Nietzsche, death awareness is not a cause only for fear, and certainly not for morbid sentiment, for it is knowledge of our mortality - our finitude - and the existential *angst* that accompanies it which gives life meaning and authenticity. Heidegger - as well as Sartre and Camus - insisted that it is this knowledge that makes us free. The *angst* - anxiety or dread - of existentialism is to be distinguished from fear. *Angst* is awareness of mortality and transience while fear often leads us to seek an empty immortality.

Angst is also an awareness of the possibility of our not being - our "nothingness" - and has led many to link it with the nihilism that has been such a powerful theme of modern literature and thought. But modern nihilism in the West is in its annihilationism a mirror or reversed image of the vain eternalism that tries to conjure a permanent heaven or earth. Keiji Nishitani, one of the prominent figures of the modern Japanese Kyoto School of philosophy, distinguishes between a relative nihilism which defines itself over against existence – its opposite - and an absolute nihilism - the Buddhist *sunyata* or "emptiness" – which is an integral and affirmative part of existence. If we all come from nothing and return to nothing then our existence - "in between" these nothings - is all the more remarkable and amazing. Amazement at the phenomenon of life is accompanied by the eternal delight that characterises Buddhism and is also present in the spirit of Nietzsche's writings.

Parkes compares Nishitani to Heidegger in suggesting that Being and Nothing are equivalent and nearer to us than anything else. According to Nishitani, nothingness - as "the field of emptiness" was - opens up on the "absolute near side of human

existence” by which he means that nothing is closer to life than death:

From the very outset life is at one with death. This means that all living things, just as they are, can be seen under the Form of death.... The aspect of life and the aspect of death are equally real, and reality is that which appears now as life and now as death. ix

Nishitani, like Heidegger, is not easy to read but he belongs in the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism which looks beyond the dualistic belief that things either exist or do not exist. In Buddhism there is a middle way that integrates the two - as interdependent. “The middle way” lies beyond both existence and non-existence. In his book on Heidegger George Steiner also took up the theme of angst as death awareness:

Angst is the taking upon oneself of the nearness of nothingness, of the potential non-being of one’s own being. “Being-towards-death is, in essence, anxiety” (Heidegger), and those who would rob us of this anxiety - be they priests, physicians, mystics or rationalist quacks - by transforming it into either fear or genteel indifference, alienate us from life itself. Or, more exactly, they insulate us from a fundamental source of freedom. x

Being, Beings, and Non-Being

It may be that part of our difficulty as a culture - and in a conflict-analysing discourse such as psychoanalysis - in attempting to entertain an existential approach to life is that we see “opposites” merely as opposites so that their interdependence is invisible to us. xi Interestingly, in *The Sophist* - the dialogue that deals with “the Pre-Socratic philosophers and their puzzles” - and from which Heidegger quotes at the beginning of *Being and Time*, the Stranger who is accused of being a sophist and pretender to wisdom says that, “in self-defence, I must test the philosophy of my father Parmenides, and try to prove by main force that in a certain sense not-being is, and that being is not”. xii

Heidegger's ontology is aimed at demonstrating the truthfulness of the Sophist's paradoxical assertion. And Jowett, in his introductory remarks to the dialogue, suggests that the question asking how "not-being" can exist was to Plato and his contemporaries a real philosophical difficulty. He adds that Plato "proceeds to show that the separation of the spheres of the absolute and relative, of being and not-being, which have been taught by Parmenides and his followers, could not be maintained".^{xiii}

It is difficult to write anything about Heidegger without a reference to the troubling issue of his membership of the Nazi Party, his initial support of Hitler, and his silence about this after the war. This is discussed in some detail by George Pattison who points out that Heidegger claimed his lectures on Nietzsche were a refutation of the Nazis. He quotes an interview in *Der Spiegel* from 1966 but only published after his death in 1976. Heidegger asserted: "In 1936 I began the Nietzsche lectures. Anyone with ears to hear heard in these lectures a confrontation with National Socialism".^{xiv} But his previous silence still remains an issue.

Walter Kaufmann, in the introduction to his *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, refers to the sense in which in his later writings Heidegger felt he was getting close to saying the unsayable – Rilke's *unsa"glich* – and "going to the roots while others stay on the surface". But in pointing us back to the early Greek thinkers he was raising expectations of radicalism and excitement that Kaufmann feels he never seems to satisfy:

As layer upon layer of misunderstanding is exposed, the reader feels that something glorious is about to come to view. Alas, it usually remains to come to view. It is as if night had fallen when Heidegger is at last ready to translate the dicta of the pre-Socratics. The great discovery is made, but we cannot quite see it, not because his version looks like what we knew before – it does not – but because it is so very dark.^{xv}

Heidegger could never, like Nietzsche, have written a book with joy in the title.^{xvi}

He may have underlined the importance of “care” but his work lacked the animating spirit of joy that we often see in Nietzsche. We might wonder whether the singular nature of Heidegger’s dark ontological “Being” needs the infinite variety of “beings” to breathe life into it.

Pattison also suggests that ever since the Greek philosopher, Thales, fell down a well while looking up at the stars it is customary to regard philosophers as impractical characters whose absorption in “higher” things often blinds them to everyday and social and political realities. Perhaps “Being” is not so intelligent when it comes to its manifestation. Perhaps it needs “beings” to make sense of it or interpret it to itself just as Heidegger needed the analysis of others to make sense of his ontology. Certainly many have felt that the later Heidegger retreated into obscurantism. xvii

Notes

i The other text, published coincidentally the same year as *Being and Time*, 1927, was *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which is the subject of chapter 8 below.

ii Martin Heidegger *Being and Time* Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson Oxford: Blackwell, 1962. P 1.

iii The notion of *negative capability* comes from Keats who refers to it in a letter to his brother, Thomas, in 1817. In trying to define wherein the potency of poetry lies and wondering what ‘quality went to form a man of achievement, especially in literature and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously’, Keats writes, ‘I mean “Negative Capability”, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.’

iv Richard Kearney *Modern Movements in European Philosophy* Manchester University Press, 1994, 1986. P 32.

v Graham Parkes ‘Death and Detachment. Montaigne, Heidegger, Zen, and the Rest’ in Jeff Malpas and Robert C. Solomon (Editors) *Death and Philosophy* London: Routledge, 1998. Chapter 9 pp 83-97. Parkes has been particularly interested in the connections between Heidegger and East Asian thought, hence his interest in the Japanese philosopher Nishitani, as referred to this chapter.

vi Parkes *ibid* p. 84. The two great classical texts are the *Daodejing* of Lao Tse and the *Zuangzi*, otherwise known as the *Chuang Tzu*. Parkes draws on A.C. Graham *Chuang Tzu. The Inner Chapters*, Allen and Unwin 1981. This has been republished in 2001 by Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis.

- vii Parkes, *ibid.* p 84-85.
- viii Quoted in Parkes, *ibid* p 86. The passage comes from Nietzsche's *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1880-1882, Samtliche Werke* Vol IX Section 11:70 (1881)
- ix Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness* Translated and with an Introduction by Jan Van Bragt, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982. Pp 50 – 52. Quoted in Parkes. The Kyoto School, founded by Kitaro Nishida, the teacher of Nishitani, explored the connections between European existentialism and the Zen Buddhist tradition. They are the only Asian school to have extensive and direct knowledge of Western philosophical traditions. Nishitani, for instance, attended Heidegger's lectures in Germany from 1936-39 after which he returned to Japan.
- x George Steiner *Heidegger* London: Fontana, 1978, p 102
- xi Nor do we see that a middle way between the extremes of opposite positions may lead beyond anxiety, as the ageless wisdoms, such as Buddhism, suggest, to a more agreeable sense of contentment, happiness, joy, or even ecstatic bliss.
- xii Plato *Sophist* in *The Essential Plato* Translated by Benjamin Jowett, Introduction by Alain de Botton, The Softback Preview, 1999. P 1181.
- xiii *Ibid.* p 1179.
- xiv George Pattinson *The Later Heidegger* London: Routledge, 2000, p 104
- xv Walter Kaufmann (editor) *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1956, 1963. P 38.
- xvi Friedrich Nietzsche *The Gay Science, with a prelude in rhymes and an appendix of songs.* Translated, with Commentary, by Walter Kaufmann, New York: Vintage Books, 1974. *The Gay Science* was originally published as *Die frohliche Wissenschaft* in 1887. The title of the first English translation was *The Joyful Wisdom*.
- xvii See Chapter 22, 'Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, and Karl Jaspers after the War' in Ruediger Safranski *Martin Heidegger. Between Good and Evil* Translated by Ewald Osers. Harvard University Press 1998.